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Kafka on the Loss of Purpose and the Illusion of Freedom

Abstract

I argue that Kafka's writings express the idea that our sense of freedom is deceptive. It is deceptive because we cannot discern any proper purpose or destination that would allow us to make truly meaningful choices. Kafka's thought here relates to the existentialist view of Kierkegaard, but it radicalizes that view by depriving it of its teleological dimension.

Keywords

Franz Kafka, Søren Kierkegaard, Freedom, Meaning

Introduction

This paper discusses Kafka's treatment of human purpose and freedom. My main thesis is that, even though one can find in Kafka a quasi-existentialist emphasis on our freedom to shape our own destiny via self-conscious reflection, a further recurring theme in his writing is that we cannot discern any finality or purpose that would render our free choices meaningful. As a result, our sense that we are genuinely free is an illusion. Likewise, our capacity for self-conscious reflection is not something that privileges us over the animal condition. Rather, Kafka portrays this capacity as a burden of which modern individuals seek to relieve themselves with distractions that help eclipse their loss of orientation and their resulting sense of self-disgust and suffering. In section 1, I consider Kafka's remarks concerning our loss of a true purpose. In section 2, I trace some of the implications of that loss for our (lack of true) freedom.

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As a philosophical foil for my discussion of Kafka, I will frequently refer to the views of “the first existentialist” Kierkegaard.¹ This is fitting because Kafka’s later aphorisms are influenced by his reading of Kierkegaard, and because it is (as I shall argue) illuminating to contrast Kafka’s view that our freedom and self-consciousness lacks a meaningful direction with Kierkegaard’s religious teleology. However, I must emphasize right away that a detailed consideration of Kierkegaard’s philosophy in its own right or of the relation between Kafka and Kierkegaard is impossible in such a short essay.² Consequently, I will consider only some basic key ideas in Kierkegaard insofar as they relate to Kafka’s philosophical thoughts.

I

Kafka is not a philosopher in the narrow sense of that term: he does not argue that some conclusion follows logically from certain premises, and he does not construct a system of abstract principles. But some of Kafka’s writings fit into one traditional philosophical genre, namely the genre of aphorisms whose practitioners include Pascal and Nietzsche. Max Brod published some of these aphorisms in 1931 under the title, “Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope and the True Path” (Stach 2014, 255).³ In these reflections Kafka is grappling with fundamental ethical and religious issues, no doubt under the influence of recent catastrophic events in his personal life.⁴ He told Brod that in these aphorisms he tries to gain clarity concerning “the last things” (“Über die letzten Dinge klar werden”) (Stach 2014, 252). One source of influence on these reflections is Kierkegaard, whose writings Kafka had studied around the time when he wrote most of his aphorisms.⁵ I want to suggest some ways in which Kafka’s reflections take up and transform Kierkegaardian themes.

Here I want to begin by considering a central Kierkegaardian idea. Kierkegaard argues that despair is the universal condition of mankind. He does not share the “customary” view according to which despair is a self-

¹ For this label, see Kaufmann 1972.

² For an extensive treatment of this relation, see Nakazama 2016.

³ Brod’s selection is reprinted in Kafka 2004c, 228–248 (this is the text I have consulted).

⁴ The majority of Kafka’s aphorisms can be dated to late 1917, when Kafka recoiled from the final break-up with Felice Bauer and from being diagnosed with tuberculosis. See Stach 2014, 240–242, 251–268.

⁵ See Stach 2014, 252, 256, 259–262; and see Nakazama 2016 for extensive discussion.

transparent mental state, a kind of mental pain of which one is necessarily aware whenever one is in that state. Rather, for Kierkegaard the qualitatively lowest kind of despair is one where we are altogether ignorant of being in despair because we keep ourselves busy with petty trivialities and secular tasks so that we can conveniently ignore questions about the overall meaning or purpose of our existence, especially in relation to our finitude.⁶ We fill up the small chamber of consciousness with impersonal routines and tasks so that our attention is constantly diverted from the crippling suffering that we harbor inside.⁷

Kafka echoes a related sentiment when he writes: "Life is a continuous distraction, which does not even allow for consciousness of what it distracts from" (2004d, 160). This aphorism captures why the distraction that we call our way of living is so uncompromisingly effective: it is a mechanism designed to numb the very consciousness of what it distracts from. By not allowing us to grasp what it seeks to conceal from us, the distractive mechanism guarantees its uninterrupted self-perpetuation. The aphorism seems to entail that Kafka himself cannot grasp what it is that life distracts from: the general truth expressed in the aphorism applies to Kafka's particular life as well, and thus Kafka, just like the rest of us, is systematically precluded from recognizing what our life is supposed to conceal from us. Since the distraction is *continuous*, every thought that we think (even the one expressed by the aphorism) is part of the distractive mechanism; thus, it is strictly impossible for us to get behind the distractive device and to grasp what it is meant to hide. If this the right way of reading the aphorism, then it contains a radicalization of the view held by Kierkegaard: for on that view, it is crucial that careful, honest self-reflection carried out "in good faith" *does* have a positive teleology, since it allows us to grasp our true purpose.⁸ By a 'true purpose' (that grounds a 'positive teleology'), I understand a purpose that gives our life a fundamental meaning and direction: it does so by justifying our suffering and (on this basis) allowing us to affirm ourselves and our lived experience on the whole, including our sense of finitude, without any need to suppress unwelcome memories, feelings, or truths (e.g. that our earthly life leads inevitably towards our death). What is essential to the consciousness of having found and realized (or being on the way towards

⁶ See Kierkegaard 1983b, 22–29, 33–35, 39–42, 42–47.

⁷ Similarly, Nietzsche diagnoses that in modern society the device of "mechanical activity," "the blessing of work," is used to divert our conscious attention away from our suffering. See Nietzsche 1993, 382–384. Kafka was an enthusiastic reader of Nietzsche too (Alt 2005, 92–94), but discussing this connection is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁸ See, for instance, Kierkegaard 1983b, 47–49.

realizing) a true purpose is the (honest, true) conviction that we are achieving (or are on the way towards achieving) something good that makes our strivings, sacrifices, pains, losses and finitude truly worthwhile. For Kierkegaard, our true purpose is, ultimately, to overcome despair (and self-alienation) by finding salvation in Christian revelation: conscious self-reflection has the definite goal of allowing us to enter into a (proper) relationship with God. By contrast, Kafka's aphorism suggests that self-reflection cannot bring us any closer to grasping our purpose (whatever that would be)—rather, it is a distractive device that only further prevents us from coming to true consciousness (whatever that would involve).

I suggest that this reveals a general pattern in Kafka's reflections: they take on board certain aspects of a Kierkegaardian view but radicalize that view by depriving it of its teleological, purposeful component. In support of this suggestion, I first want to consider Kafka's two *Mauerassel* (common woodlouse) reflections (Kafka 2004d, 160). In the first of these, a guardian is addressed with questions pertaining to his purpose ("What are you guarding? Who appointed you?") that receive no answer; the reflection concludes that the guardian is "richer than" the woodlouse watching under an old stone only in one respect: insofar as he feels self-disgust. In the following aphorism, it is said that if one were to make oneself (qua human) comprehensible to the common woodlouse by teaching it the question about the purpose of its laboring ("die Frage nach dem Zweck ihres Arbeitens"), this would be enough to extirpate their people ("das Volk der Mauerasseln"). These two reflections imply that while our reflective grasp of the question, 'what purpose are we pursuing in our endeavors?' is indeed (as Kierkegaard insists) what sets us apart from animals such as the woodlouse, this is not (as for Kierkegaard) a positive characteristic that affords us the opportunity to discover our true (for Kierkegaard, religious) destiny. Rather, it is a mere source of self-disgust. The privilege of the unreflective animal condition, the secret to its flourishing, is that it is driven by instinct and not plagued by the need to ponder a true purpose.

Here one may wonder: are we at all capable of pursuing, and thus responsible for failing to pursue, a true purpose (that gives our lives what I called a positive teleology)? Kafka is characteristically vague about this issue. He gives us an intriguing but indeterminate clue in a reflection where a speaker addresses someone (perhaps themselves) in an apparently encouraging manner: you have this task, you have precisely as many powers as are necessary for executing this task, you have a sufficient amount of free time, and you have the requisite good will (Kafka 2004d, 145–146). Then the speaker asks: "Where is the obstacle for the succeeding of the immense

task?" And the answer is: "Do not spend time looking for the obstacle, perhaps there is none." The nature of this "task" is not explained any further, but elsewhere Kafka elucidates "my task," "the most original task," which "has certainly been set already oftentimes" through the imperative *to create ground* ("Boden... schaffen"). The duty to create ground is not based on a need to catch up on missed opportunities (Kafka mentions family life, friendship, marriage, job, literature)—rather, one must create a ground so that *nothing has been missed* ("damit ich nichts versäumt habe") (Kafka 2004c, 215). Perhaps we can conceive this "ground" as a firm, foundational sense of what I called a true purpose: a conception of meaning which allows us to affirm our life in an uncompromising, cohesive manner that leaves no room for regret or the thought of missed opportunities, since everything, including our suffering and our seeming losses, makes sense (i.e. has a point and meaning) in the context of the whole (a point that vaguely calls to mind Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence).

In a related reflection, Kafka (2004c, 218) says that every human being faces two questions of faith ("Glaubensfragen"): one regarding the faithworthiness ("Glaubenswürdigkeit") of this life, the other regarding the faithworthiness of this life's destination ("Ziel"). Kafka remarks that every human being gives an immediate and firm affirmative answer to both questions, but he adds that the immediacy and firmness of the response make it uncertain whether the questions have been properly understood. Kafka obviously thinks that these questions are *not* properly understood by those who immediately and unreflectively take—perhaps under the influence of various 'distractions'—their life and its destination to be 'faithworthy:' he states that one must, first of all, work through towards one's own 'basic yes,' *Grund-Ja* ("Jedenfalls muß man sich nun zu diesem seinem eigenen Grund-Ja erst durcharbeiten"), and he intimates that we are a long way away from completing this task, before the reflection breaks off ("...denn noch weit..."). If one could, without self-deception, distraction or suppression, give an affirmative answer to the questions of whether one's life and its destination are worthy of faith, then one would be able to "create a ground" for oneself. Standing on this ground would enable one to affirm one's life as a whole in a fundamental, all-inclusive, all-redeeming sense through an uncompromising *Grund-Ja*.

Let us bracket, for the moment, further questions concerning the precise nature of "the immense task" and the "Grund-Ja" that would crown its completion. I want to consider another important aspect of Kafka's view. This aspect comes up in the above mentioned reflection which ends with the admonition that in the pursuit of one's immense task one should not look

for an obstacle where “perhaps” there is none. This reflection suggests that there is no tangible outside force that prevents individuals from pursuing their destination or from succeeding in their task. It seems as if it is entirely up to us to proceed with our task, and if we fail to do so this is entirely our own responsibility—a point that is central to Kierkegaard (1983b, 14–17). The most famous expression of this point in Kafka is the gatekeeper parable that Kafka incorporated into *The Trial* (2004a, 211–212). One crucial aspect of that inexhaustible parable is that although the gatekeeper denies the man from the country permission to enter the law, he does not strictly prevent the man from entering by exercising any kind of physical force. The gatekeeper even, mockingly, tempts the man from the country to enter the law, but not without stressing that he (the gatekeeper) is *powerful* and that there are larger and larger obstacles that await the man from the country if he enters, namely, more and more powerful gatekeepers. That is enough to deter the man from the country from entering the law: he instead “decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to go inside.” He waits in vain until the day he dies, when he learns that this entry to the law was destined only for him.

Now, one central difference between the gatekeeper parable and the abovementioned reflection (where one is admonished not to look for obstacles when perhaps there are none) seems to be that the latter has an encouraging, optimistic tone, which the gatekeeper parable decidedly lacks: it gives the impression that although the man from the country is in a sense free to enter the law, he is nevertheless bound (or perhaps binds himself) not to proceed. But there is reason to be suspicious about whether we can take the seemingly encouraging tone of the above reflection at face value. After all, the reflection begins by saying that it *sometimes seems as if* you have as many powers as are needed for executing your task (“Manchmal scheint es so:...”), and it ends by saying that *perhaps* there is no obstacle (“vielleicht is keines da”). Moreover, the very fact that the speaker raises the question of where the obstacle lies implies that their interlocutor (perhaps, their own self) is already looking for an obstacle rather than proceeding with their task (much like the man from the country); and the speaker’s designation of the task as an *immense* one suggests a very low likelihood of success.

The issue of whether our destination lies within our reach is also raised in the following remarkable aphorism: “There is only a [or “one”: *ein*] destination [*Ziel*], no path. What we call path is hesitation.” This may seem like a paradigmatic case of the paradoxical anti-logic that is often called

'kafkaesque.' If there is a destination, how can there be no path? However, it is also possible that Kafka intends no paradox here at all. Sure, all of our ordinary, mundane destinations or goals require a determinate path or means. But suppose that when Kafka writes, "Es gibt nur ein Ziel," he means that there is only *one* destination: in that case, he would be referring to a rather special type of end or purpose, which truly deserves the title of a final, ultimate destination. This would correspond to Kafka's notion that his aphorisms seek clarity concerning *the last things*. Perhaps all the other things that we call our goals in ordinary life are only "distractions" from that one destination or from our *true* purpose, so that we are not really pursuing *any genuine* destination that would yield a sense of completion or finality, of having arrived and needing to go no further, of having created the "ground" that allows us to affirm our life as a whole through a "Grund-Ja." It seems hard to believe that we are taking any path towards *such* a destination in our daily routines, for those routines characteristically involve the experience of reaching a certain goal (e.g. getting a fancier job in a hipper location) only to find out that we are immediately beset with a new desire for something else (e.g. getting an *even fancier* job, or moving back to the peaceful countryside). Kafka was familiar with this experience, which is made clear by a brilliant fragment where an officer at the magistrate recounts all the advantages that come with this post: little work, high salary, high standing everywhere, etc. The officer states that if he vividly imagined the situation of an officer at the magistrate, then he would inevitably have to envy that person; but he concludes that as someone who now actually *is* an officer at the magistrate he would, if he could, give all these advantages including the high standing to the bureau cat for eating (Kafka 2004c, 113–114).

If that is an accurate description of the human situation, then it looks as if all of our so-called destinations are only paths that are part of a longer path which does not really lead anywhere, which lacks the kind of finality that would bring a satisfying completion or a true purposiveness to the whole enterprise. We busy ourselves by rushing from one path to another, just so that we can avoid considering where these paths are ultimately supposed to lead. This mindset could well be interpreted as a systematic *hesitation* to consider our final destination. So, what we call paths towards our goals is really just a euphemism for our systematic hesitation to focus on what might be our one final destination properly speaking. It is worth noting that the aphorism clearly states that there *is* such a destination ("Es gibt nur ein Ziel"), even if there is no path for reaching it. It also implies that we are re-

sponsible for not pursuing that destination, since we are too much caught up in the hesitation game of exploring paths and goals that are mere distractions. However, Kafka never specifies or clarifies what this destination is supposed to be. Echoing what I suggested above, this may be because the fatal logic of his analysis of our modern predicament applies to Kafka himself: thus, if this analysis is accurate, then it follows that Kafka himself is also caught up too much in the hesitation or distraction game to grasp or pursue his (one, true) destination.

In another reflection Kafka compares our situation, viewed from a standpoint stained by our finite earthly position (“mit dem irdisch befleckten Auge gesehen”), to railroad travelers who have crashed in a long tunnel (2004d, 163). We cannot see the light indicating the beginning of the tunnel anymore. We may catch a tiny glance of a light seemingly indicating the end of the tunnel, but our glance must constantly search for that light, constantly loses track of it, and is not even certain of where the beginning and the end of the tunnel lies. Due to confusion or oversensitivity of our senses, there are monsters surrounding us, as well as a kaleidoscopic play that is experienced as either charming or tiring, depending on the mood and the wounds of the individual person. If we interpret the light indicating the end of the tunnel as a metaphor for our one real destination or true purpose, then this reflection emphasizes that while such a purpose does exist it is in a deep sense irrelevant to us since our handle on where this destination lies is so elusive and confused that we have no way (no *path*) of getting there; instead, we keep ourselves busy with charming, tiring distractions that fill the narrow chamber of our consciousness and divert our attention from the wounds and suffering that we have incurred, as well as from our failure to catch a lasting glance of a final destination that might redeem these wounds and losses.

Also relevant to these themes is a fragment that consists of a dialogue between two persons (call them A and B). A first addresses B by declaring that “it” is not a desolate wall, but rather, the sweetest life pressed together, raisin against raisin. B says they don’t believe it. A asks them to taste it. B says that their disbelief prevents them from raising their hand. A offers to put a raisin into their mouth. B says their disbelief prevents them from tasting it. A now has had enough and declares, “Sink, then!” (“Dann versinke!”), which B takes as confirmation that one *must* sink when faced with the desolateness of this wall (Kafka 2004d, 155). There are obviously different (not necessarily incompatible) ways of interpreting this dialogue, but one interpretation which is congenial to my overall line of reading focuses on the inter-

play between: (1) the seeming objective availability of an opportunity to attain relief from our suffering and to truly affirm our lived experience (as an experience of “the sweetest life”); (2) the seeming subjective incapability of seizing this opportunity. While it seems clear to A, and perhaps to the reader, that the experience of “sweetest life” is readily available to B, from B’s own lived perspective the opposite is equally obvious: for what it would take for B to share A’s experience of the sweetest life is to *believe in* that sweetest life, whereas B believes only in the desolate wall. It seems that they could only start believing in the sweetest life if they could taste it, but in order to taste it they would need the strength to believe in it first. There is, from B’s own perspective, no way out of this vicious circle. It may seem clear to A who has already tasted the sweetest life that B has all the freedom in the world to avoid sinking in view of the desolate wall, so that B is solely responsible for sinking. However, since B’s entire subjective life experience involves no taste of sweetest life but only the view of the desolate wall, sinking in that view and being unable to experience life’s sweetness seems inevitable to B.

Let me now summarize the main themes that I have expounded in this section. In the reflections I have examined, the emphasis on the opportunity to achieve a true purpose and a positive, life-affirming teleology (in the senses sketched above) is characteristically coupled with an emphasis on the subjective conviction that this opportunity is beyond our reach because we lack the means (the “path”) to seize it. Although the responsibility for not seizing that opportunity lies with the individual who is (or so it seems) free to pursue it (at least there is no obvious *obstacle* preventing them from pursuing it), for the individual themselves whose entire life experience enforces the conviction that this opportunity is beyond their reach; the failure to seize it seems inevitable. The conviction that we cannot achieve a true, life-redeeming purpose manifests itself in the failure to clearly discern what this purpose would amount to. Our sense that we do not ever catch more than a fleeting, confused glimpse of our final destination in turn gives rise to a sense of self-disgust over our situation as a creature who is stuck with a question of purposiveness that it fails to answer. Our only way to escape that painful sense of inadequacy is to fill our life with a kaleidoscopic play of charming, exhausting “distractions” that fill the narrow chamber of our consciousness.

One crucial similarity between the way in which Kafka and Kierkegaard arrive at their respective diagnosis of our human situation is that both present that diagnosis not as an impersonal conclusion that follows logically from a set of premises, but as the upshot of their deeply, irreducibly personal

experience. The crucial difference is that Kafka's experience involves the subjective conviction that we are incapable of, or have rendered ourselves incapable of, discerning or seizing the kind of final destination that is required for Kierkegaard's idea of a *teleological* suspension of the ethical. For Kierkegaard, our radical break with prevailing social norms is fully, if only subjectively, justified because it is required for the meaningful pursuit of our true individual purpose (1983a, 54–81). For Kierkegaard, a proper suspension of "the ethical" (the secular norms of human society) is not arbitrary because in such a suspension the ethical is subordinated under a higher telos, namely, the finite individual's uncompromising relation to the divine. Thus, Abraham's isolation and alienation from his human peers is compensated by the fact that he, as the "Knight of Faith," achieves an existentially decisive commitment to God. By contrast, Kafka has lost track of what his final destiny or true purpose (which might justify his suspension of prevalent social norms, such as the expectation to marry and raise a family) is supposed to be. This is, at least in part, due to his disbelief in the possibility of religious salvation: "I have not been led into life by the albeit heavily sinking hand of Christendom, like Kierkegaard..." (Kafka 2004c, 215).

As I have repeatedly stressed, Kafka does not specify in any detail how he conceives of our "one" true destination. He speaks of an "immense task" to "create ground" and to affirm our life as a whole through a fundamental, all-inclusive "Grund-Ja," but he never gives any concrete content to these intriguing but generic ideas. It is not clear whether the true destination is one and the same for every human being or (as seems suggested by his phrase that every human being must work towards *its own* basic self-affirmation, "zu *seinem eigenen* Grund-Ja") peculiar to each individual. Likewise, it is not clear whether for Kafka the one true destination must have, as in Kierkegaard, some other-worldly, religious dimension. These (and similar) unclarities are, in part, due to the abovementioned fact that Kafka is not a philosopher in the traditional sense who lays out his ideas with great precision or who traces the systematic implications of his ideas. But furthermore, I believe—though I cannot argue this point here in any detail—that Kafka also felt that nothing very specific, clear or systematic *can* be said with regard to our questions concerning "the final things." The reflections I have analyzed in this section suggest that it would be inaccurate to say that for Kafka our lives *have no* positive telos or that we *lack* a true purpose—it rather seems (though this may amount to much the same thing) that we have lost our capacity for discerning this purpose, that we are hopelessly stuck in our way of working towards a *Grund-Ja*. Since this diagnosis also

applies to Kafka, he cannot specify the true purpose with the kind of clarity that he would possess only if he did already grasp his *Grund-Ja*. It may be—though I am not sure about this—that Kafka thinks that some kind of positive religious faith would be needed to arrive at this *Grund-Ja*, and that our modern malaise is our inability to find such faith. The kind of faith or religious teleology would not need to be specifically Christian: in the abovementioned reflection where Kafka traces his failure to “create ground” to the fact that he has not “been led into life by the albeit heavily sinking hand of Christendom,” he adds that he likewise failed to catch the last tail of the flapping-away Jewish prayer coat.

Perhaps Kafka thinks that what we would need to create a meaningful ground for ourselves is not some specific religious doctrine, but some positive way of overcoming our sense of finitude (other than through merely suppressing that sense or distracting ourselves from it). He says that human beings cannot live without a lasting trust (“dauerndes Vertrauen”) that there is something indestructible inside of them. He adds that the faith in a personal God (which for Kierkegaard is our only proper way of integrating our finitude with our sense of the infinite) is but one way of expressing that both this indestructible element and our trust in it remain permanently concealed from us (Kafka 2004c, 236). This suggests that faith in a personal God *cannot* create a lasting trust in our infinitude (where such trust is, perhaps, in turn a condition for creating ground and articulating a *Grund-Ja*)—rather, such faith is but another distraction, another way of losing our grip on our true purpose. But it is unclear whether the inadequate religious faith Kafka mentions here is *any religious faith as such* or merely the pseudo-faith of those who came so late that they failed to latch onto the flapping-away prayer coat (and who flatter themselves with mere delusions of faith, as Kierkegaard’s pseudo-Christians). Likewise, it is unclear what precisely Kafka has in mind when refers to ‘something indestructible’ inside us: some kind of afterlife? Some metaphysical substance? Or just some potential to create something of lasting value, e.g. through art (a possibility I shall consider in the conclusion)? These and similar questions would need to be answered to get a clearer sense of Kafka’s positive conception of teleology. I cannot pursue this issue here any further, but I suspect that the vagueness and indeterminacy of Kafka’s positive teleology might well be intentional or (better) inevitable since they reflect an existential predicament: namely, a crippling loss of focus, clarity, and even proper words. If the true purpose Kafka envisages through the vague ideas of creating ground and working towards a *Grund-Ja* does point something indestructible beyond this life and this

world, then there can be (for the modern individual) no adequate way of putting this purpose into words, for our language is, as Kafka stresses, entirely unsuited for clearly articulating what lies beyond the sensible world (Kafka 2004c, 237).

II

In the previous section, I have argued that Kafka gives expression to our modern loss of a true purpose (or, what may amount to the same, to our modern failure to grasp such a purpose). In this section, I want to connect this issue to Kafka's conception of human freedom.

There is one striking reflection where Kafka deals, in his own characteristic way, with the idea that we have freedom of will. This reflection is so difficult that I cannot analyze it in any greater detail here, but I can present the gist of it: The reflection begins with the assertion that human beings have free will, and even in three respects. However, the first of these respects sounds more like a denial: we were once free when we wanted this life, but now we cannot reverse the direction that our life has taken, since we are no longer the same persons as those who once wanted that direction. The second respect in which we are free is that we can choose the pace (*Gangart*) and the path of this life—though if our freedom to choose how to proceed attaches to a past personality which is no longer our own, then it is not clear in what sense our pace and path is currently up to who we now are. The third respect in which we are free is very difficult to make out; it seems to revolve around the idea that we have the capacity *to let us come to ourselves* (“...sich...zu sich kommen zu lassen”) by walking a path that we can choose but (here is yet another restraint) that is also a maze (“labyrinthisch”) which spans every single aspect of our life. The reflection concludes by noting that these three respects in which we have free will really amount to one single respect, in a way that leaves no room for any will at all, neither a free nor an unfree will. So, while we initially seem to possess free will, on closer reflection the very idea of a will that would allow us to truly determine who we are and want to be in our life turns out to be elusive—at least from the lived perspective of someone pacing through the maze of life, trying to let them come to themselves and to retrieve the personality of the person who once freely chose this particular way of living. By contrast, for Kierkegaard our human freedom can, if exercised properly, lead us out of the maze of our secular distractions towards our proper “destination:” namely, towards the grace of God who offers us salvation, thereby letting us “come to ourselves” and realize our true purpose.

Although Kafka is by no means clear about it, I propose that we can fruitfully understand his notion that having a free will would involve 'letting us come to ourselves' in terms of the ideas that I sketched in the preceding section. The lack of free will (or of any will at all) is here portrayed as a pacing through the maze of life in search of a personality and direction that, though once chosen by us, is no longer truly our own. This clearly echoes the idea that we face an "immense task" to "create ground" which would allow us to articulate an honest (non-deceptive) "Grund-Ja"—namely, to affirm our live and our lived experiences as a cohesive, meaningful whole (rather than as a confusing maze of endless distractions), by finding that our constant strives including the massive suffering they occasion lead to (or constitute) something truly worthwhile. The inability to create such a ground and to find our true purpose mirrors our failure to come to ourselves and to live according to our own free will (Kafka 2004c, 212–213).⁹

I want to confirm the link between the loss of a true purpose and the loss of free will by considering some of Kafka's fictional writings. Since my space is limited, I want to focus on one story in particular which, I believe, nicely illustrates these themes: the *Report for an Academy* (Kafka 2002, 322–337; compare 2004a, 234–245).

The protagonist in this story is an ape called Red Peter. After his capturing, he has miraculously become almost-human: he can speak and reason in ways that strike us as familiar. Red Peter is giving a report to an Academy which is curious about his process of humanification. In his description of this process, Red Peter says that the first imperative he recognized was to abandon his past existence as a free ape ("free ape as I was") and to submit himself to the human yoke. During that process, "the strong wind that blew after me out of my past began to slacken; today it is only a gentle puff of air that plays around my heels" (Kafka 2002, 322). He concludes that our life as apes in our distant past is about as far removed from us as his past existence as a free ape is removed from his current humanified way of living. This is not to deny that we or he sometimes feel an inkling of that long-gone distant past: "Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the small chimpanzee and the great Achilles alike" Kafka 2002, 323).

⁹ I should note that Kafka never considers the precise meaning of 'free will,' e.g. whether freedom is or is not compatible with determinism. It may be that Kafka automatically assumed an incompatibilist notion, since that is the only notion at issue in his intellectual influences (e.g. Kierkegaard is an uncompromising anti-determinist). It may also be that Kafka judged these issues to be of secondary importance: what really matters is not whether we are free *from* this or that but, rather, whether we can articulate a sense of what our freedom is *for*.

(Perhaps that gentle tick around his heels was precisely what killed Achilles.) Red Peter further explains that his opportunity to return to this distant past as a free ape decreased further and further in proportion to the increase in his humanity: in his spatial metaphor, the opportunity was first a gigantic archway which shrunk and shrunk, grew narrower and narrower, until all that is left was a tiny little hole (through which the gentle puff is creeping).

Here we must notice the tight connection between the sense of freedom Red Peter had in his apish, pre-humanized way of life and the experience of a “strong wind” that he then enjoyed. It seems plausible to construe this wind as some kind of motive force, something that propels the one experiencing it to move forward by providing a sense of direction: the strong wind that “blows after” a subject thereby indicates *where* to go, and this indication is grasped by the subject through its feeling of the strong wind’s impact. Given this correlation between feeling the moving force of the strong wind and a sense of freedom, we can expect that if the strong wind slackens to a gentle puff, i.e. if the strong motive force and sense of direction wanes until it is barely noticeable, there must be a corresponding loss of the sense of freedom. This expectation will be confirmed by the contents of Red Peter’s humanized reflective self-awareness.

Red Peter states his motive for humanizing himself when he was stuck in a cage:

For the first time in my life I could see no way out; at least no direct way out; directly in front of me was the locker, board fitted close to board [...] Until then I had had so many ways out of everything, and now I had none. I was pinned down [...] I had no way out, but I had to devise one, for without it I could not live (Kafka 2002, 325–326).

And he tells us precisely what he means by *a way out* (*Ausweg*) in contrast to *freedom*:

I fear that perhaps you do not quite understand what I mean by ‘way out.’ I use the expression in its fullest and most popular sense—I deliberately do not use the word ‘freedom.’ I do not mean the spacious feeling of freedom on all sides. As an ape, perhaps, I knew that, and I have met men who yearn for it. But for my part I desired such freedom neither then nor now. In passing: may I say that all too often men are betrayed by the word freedom. And as freedom is counted among the most sublime feelings, so the corresponding deception can be also sublime. [...] No, freedom was not what I wanted. Only a way out; right or left, or in any direction; I made no other demand; even should the way out prove to be an illusion; the demand was a small one, the disappointment could be no bigger. To get out somewhere, to get out! (Kafka 2002, 326–327)

Here we can see the significance of Red Peter's initial self-characterization that he lived as a free ape. Kafka's prose rarely uses important words casually: when Red Peter referred to his past existence as a free ape, he was already anticipating a decisive contrast with his later humanized self. Red Peter explains that the feeling of freedom that he may have had as an ape is lost and cannot be retrieved in his humanified existence, just like the strong wind that once blew from his free past has slackened into the gentle puff around his heel. The sense of freedom is a "most sublime" illusion that human flatter themselves with. The ape who has a however distant memory of true, genuine freedom knows that such freedom is not to be found within a human way of living. All that remains for humans, and for the humanified ape, is *a way out* rather than freedom. If true freedom, as opposed to a way out, requires the experience of a strong wind qua motive force that allows for unhesitating progress in the wind's direction, then the human loss of feeling this wind—its slackening into a barely noticeable gentle puff around the heel, a mere intimation of what has been lost and cannot be retrieved—must go along with a loss of true freedom. This is precisely Red Peter's experience of what is involved in becoming human, in coming to (self-)consciousness.

Red Peter further explains why he did not seek to escape from his cage (on the ship where he was held after his initial capture) even though he believed that "it must have been possible" since "for an ape it must always be possible" (Kafka 2002, 328). He could have bitten through the lock of his cage, but when he thought about pursuing that route all that he could see were potential risks such as: being "caught again and put in a worse cage;" or, being killed by the other animals like the pythons: or, in the unlikely case where he would actually succeed to sneak out to the deck to leap overboard, drowning in the sea. "Desperate remedies. I did not calculate in this human way, but under the influence of my surroundings I acted as if I had been calculating" (ibidem).

Thus, under the influence of his human surroundings, Red Peter starts doing what Kafka's protagonists, like the man from the country in the gatekeeper parable, characteristically do: they calculate risks and outcomes, and thereby they persuade themselves that trying to escape from an untenable situation faces too many obstacles and is thus only a sign of desperation that has a very low likelihood of succeeding. Even supposing one succeeds on the initial path, one will have to enter another path where one shall run into another obstacle. Even supposing that one can overcome that further obstacle, the next obstacle waiting on the ensuing path is surely going to be in-

surmountable. So, one concludes, better not risk escaping the cages that hold us. It is better to arrange oneself with these cages and to look for something other than an ultimate escape: namely, for *a way out* that makes life moderately tolerable. This sad compromise is reflected in the looks of the men on the ship whom Red Peter watched day in, day out from his cage: “No, these men in themselves had no great attraction for me. Had I been devoted to the aforementioned idea of freedom; I should certainly have preferred the deep sea to the way out that suggested itself in the sad looks of these men” (Kafka 2002, 328–329). Floating in the deep sea is one of the risks or obstacles that, in Red Peter’s calculation, would eventually arise if he should try the escape route. Here he declares that this escape route, away from the influence of humanity, is the only route that would have led to freedom, even if that had also meant drowning in the deep sea. By contrast, what lies in the way of humanity is not an *escape*, not *freedom*, but only the *way out* that suggested itself to Red Peter in the sad looks of his human capturers. These sad looks in contrast with the instinctive, unreflective apish freedom can be compared to the self-disgust that alone makes the human guardian “richer” than the instinct-driven and blissfully unreflective woodlouse.

This exemplifies Kafka’s denial that the acquisition of a reflective self-consciousness affords us (as it does in Kierkegaard) a human privilege, a freedom to discover and realize true meaning and purpose. Red Peter’s report suggests that our reflective self-consciousness *submerges* our sense of freedom, because it forces us to conceive of our existence as fraught with endless risks, problems, and obstacles, so that we become first and foremost a doubting, hesitating creature who uses its heightened powers of consciousness to calculate ways of avoiding rather than facing its basic challenge (its “immense task”). Our reflective “way out” is to acquiesce to our prisons, where these include, centrally, the social expectations, norms and sanctions that seek to confine us within the bounds of what everyone does and feels. For Red Peter, this means conforming to the way of life he witnesses in his capturers, including their sad looks. Consequently, as self-conscious calculators we live with a diminished sense of opportunity and fulfillment, with an accordingly diminished sense of freedom—even though we may fool ourselves with the sublime illusion that we are truly free.

Red Peter’s induction into human society, through his first utterance of human language, occurs after he gets drunk on a bottle of schnapps. Consuming the schnapps signals his final victory over his apish nature, for as long as he was still in the grip of this nature he found the smell and the prospect of drinking schnapps so disgusting that he could not bring

himself to do it. Overcoming this disgust and drinking schnapps is thus his entrance ticket into human society. Red Peter stresses that he found no delight in imitating human beings by getting drunk; the only thing that led him to do so was the need for *a way out*. Thus, getting drunk or achieving states of consciousness that are analogous to being drunk is here regarded as the distinctively human manner of finding a way out. Towards the end Red Peter summarizes his fate as follows: "As I look back over my development and survey what I have achieved so far, I do not complain, but I am not complacent either. With my hands in my trouser pockets, my bottle of wine on the table, I half lie and half sit in my rocking chair and gaze out of the window..." (Kafka 2002, 332). That image, we can assume, is the ultimate illustration of what it means to take *the human way out*. Red Peter says that his effort towards humanification "has helped me out of my cage and opened a special way out for me, the way of humanity. There is an excellent German idiom: *sich in die Büsche schlagen* [roughly: secretly getting away by hiding in the bushes], that is what I have done [...] There was nothing else for me to do, provided always that freedom was not to be my choice" (ibidem).

So, summarizing Red Peter's stance, we get a central contrast or divide. On the one side of the divide, we have his former apish nature, a genuine non-deceptive sense of freedom, a strong wind blowing behind the apish way of living, propelling it to move forward without any *hesitation*. Then, there is imprisonment, exposure to the human way which lies at the other side of the divide. What humanity offers is not freedom, not the strong wind that properly directs the unhesitatingly forward-moving apish way of living, but only a way out where one feels, with sad eyes, at most a slackened gentle puff and tickle at the heel. What Red Peter portrays as distinctively human is, first of all, calculation, rationality, consciousness, the so-called higher intellectual faculties which make us think about risks and obstacles that lie in the way of proper escape or freedom from the social cages that confine us, and which persuade us that such an escape is too desperate and risky so that we should seek more a modest goal: the way out. The distinctively human way out is achieved through *distractions*: distractions such as getting drunk on schnapps (for the working-class men on the ship) or (in the more refined existence of humanified Red Peter) getting drunk on red wine, sitting in a rocking chair and idly gazing out of the window.

The *Report for an Academy* illustrates some of the key philosophical motives that Kafka also engages with in his (later) reflections or aphorisms. For instance, the *Report* is focused on the idea that a human way of life characteristically involves a strong sense of *hesitation* to approach our one true

destination, given the manifold obstacles and risks that we are prone to see or that we suspect would arise once we tried out such an approach. The *Report* further highlights the idea that in order to avoid questions about our true destiny or purpose we have become adept at filling our life with (“charming or tiring”) *distractions* that designate our *way out*. According to the *Report’s* protagonist, our human sense of freedom is based on an illusion, a “most sublime deception”: if such freedom once existed, it belongs to a distant past long gone. This point also comes up in the reflection which I considered at the beginning of this section, where Kafka seems to suggest that while we once had the freedom to choose our own path of life, we are now lost in a confusing maze without a genuine will of our own since we are no longer the persons that we were when we chose our path. The *Report’s* notion that true freedom can perhaps be ascribed to animals like the ape before his capturing, which are not plagued by the human mode of calculating risks and finding obstacles, is reminiscent of the point that Kafka makes in the ‘common woodlouse reflections’: the bliss of the woodlouse consists in its ignorance of questions regarding the purpose of its laboring, whereas for us the awareness of such questions is a mere source of self-disgust. That is why such awareness has to be dimmed or extinguished via “distractions” like schnapps or red wine or the idle gaze from the rocking chair. Finally, the *Report* depicts the ambiguities that figure centrally in Kafka’s reflections: e.g. the clash between (on the one hand) the idea that nothing prevents us from seizing the opportunity to escape our cages and (on the other hand) the subjective conviction, emanating from our lived experience and our resulting emotionally charged perspective on the world, that a true escape seems too desperate to yield a genuine option for us (because we will be captured again, or will be eaten by pythons, or...).

In all this, the *Report* can be seen as illustrating Kafka’s tendency to deprive the honorific ideas of freedom and self-consciousness (as he encountered them in Kierkegaard) of their dignity and their teleological dimension.¹⁰ When his protagonist Red Peter contemplates “the way of humanity,”

¹⁰ A question that I cannot address within the confines of this short essay concerns the question of how and when this tendency developed in Kafka. To be clear, my claim is *not* that Kafka’s degradation of freedom and self-consciousness is formed in response to his awareness of Kierkegaard. This degradation is a constant theme already in his early and middle fiction, whereas the serious study of Kierkegaard that influenced his philosophical aphorisms (which I considered in section 1) begins, arguably, only around 1917. It is therefore probably more appropriate to conjecture that his encounter with Kierkegaard deepened his treatment of themes that he had long been preoccupied with.

he arrives at wholly unflattering conclusions: Red Peter faintly remembers “the spacious feeling of freedom on all sides” as a relic of his animal past and diagnoses that, by contrast, “men are betrayed by the word freedom.” To engage in self-conscious reflection is to “calculate in the human way” where this involves enumerating obstacles and persuading ourselves that our attempts to truly escape the cages that hold us are only “desperate remedies” so that we must rather compromise and seek the human “way out” instead of true freedom. Thus, to the extent that we do consider ourselves as free, this is only a “sublime deception,” and while our reflective human nature indeed does set us apart from the animal condition, this is more like a curse than a blessing for us: for it burdens us with doubts and hesitations and self-imposed obstacles that are unknown to the instinctively driven, forward-moving animal. Hence, the humanized Red Peter can only bemoan the loss of the freedom that he once enjoyed in his pre-reflective animal state (“free ape as I was”).

I want to confirm these points by considering a remarkable passage from *The Castle* (Kafka 2004b, 133). Some brief contextualization must suffice. The passage occurs after the protagonist, K., has made a failed attempt to meet someone he believes to be a powerful castle official, Klamm. K. has been able to advance into a courtyard where Klamm’s carriage was waiting for Klamm, even though he has been told that this is forbidden territory for him. In that regard, K. is remarkably more dashing than, say, the man from the country. But K.’s dashing victory is empty because Klamm simply does not show up. While he is waiting in the courtyard,

[...] it seemed to K. as if [...] he was more of a free agent than ever. He could wait here, in a place usually forbidden to him, as long as he liked, and he also felt as if he had won that freedom with more effort than most people could manage to make, and no one could touch him or drive him away, why, they hardly had a right even to address him. But at the same time—and this feeling was at least as strong—he felt as if there were nothing more meaningless and more desperate than this freedom, this waiting, this invulnerability (Kafka 2004b, 132–133).

A full interpretation of this episode would need to consider (among other things) K.’s backstory, motives, and development.¹¹ But for the purposes of this essay, it is perhaps sufficient to stress the ambiguity between the idea that in a way K. is free to do anything and to go anywhere he likes, and the

¹¹ For my take on these issues, see Kohl 2006.

idea that his sense of freedom is in a deep sense merely an illusion: the only freedom that K. can ascribe to himself is a *meaningless, desperate* one because it consists entirely in waiting for someone who is not coming, in waiting for something that does not happen. That is not the genuine kind of unreflective freedom that Red Peter traces to his distant animal past, nor the freedom that Kafka says (in the reflection considered at the end of section 1) we “once” possessed to choose the life we now lead. At least part of the reason why K. has a mere pseudo-freedom, a “sublime” illusion of freedom, is that his sense of freedom is entirely detached from any proper sense of meaning or purpose that would allow K. to articulate, if only to himself, what he is really waiting or hoping for in the courtyard: what his freedom is *for*.

Conclusion

I have suggested that one can extract from Kafka’s aphorisms (or reflections) and fictional writings philosophical ideas concerning (the loss of) purpose and freedom in human life, ideas which relate to, but also transform (and radicalize), the account one finds in Kierkegaard. I want to conclude by considering two important questions about the kind of view I have attributed to Kafka here.

First, one might wonder whether *aesthetic* activity and purposes might not yield a viable candidate, in Kafka’s view, for shaping our sense of a true purpose, for articulating one’s own “Grund-Ja,” and (thereby) for giving a proper meaning and direction to our human freedom. Kafka’s (evolving) self-conception as an artist is a complex topic that I cannot adequately consider here. However, it seems clear that in the end, Kafka does not conceive his authorship as a meaningful exercise of human freedom that brings him closer to a true purpose where that would involve a fundamental affirmation of his life as a whole. This is strongly suggested by his pessimistic portrayal of artist types such as the Trapeze Artist, Josefine the Singer, or the Hunger Artist: as Stach remarks, “life passes over” these figures as precarious, superfluous and dangerous curiosities (Stach 2014, 509). When Kafka reflects (in a 1922 letter to Brod) on his role as an author, he does not portray this role as a source of meaning or self-fulfillment, and he does not portray his art as flowing from his own free will. Rather, he characterizes his experiences of creative outbursts—characteristically in the middle of sleepless, fearful nights—as involving a “dark power” that works *against* his will and that

destroys his vitality, so that “the final word in such nights is always: I could live and do not live.”¹² Kafka’s modern artistic self-image is not the self-confident awareness of a person whose “immense task” allows him to “create ground:” instead, it is an awareness of living “above a weak or not at all existent ground.”¹³ The complexity of the artistic task is too immense for our fragile human powers. Kafka does not seem to doubt his artistic talent so much as the vital powers that he would need to put this talent to proper use. “I possess a strong hammer, but I cannot use it because its shaft is glowing” (Kafka 2004d, 171). The attempt to truthfully portray the labyrinthic maze of human existence eventually leads to artistic failure that Kafka saw exemplified in his inability to complete any of his major novels, and that no doubt (partly) motivated his instruction that Brod must destroy all his remnant writings. If Kafka really conceived his writing as “a form of prayer” (ibidem), then the prayers remained unanswered, perhaps unheard, certainly unfulfilled. It is not clear to me whether, at the end of day, Kafka thought of his art as more than just another “distraction” and, if so, as one that is better or worse than other distractions like schnapps.

There is a second issue I briefly want to comment on. As I noted, both Kierkegaard and Kafka present their philosophical ideas as deeply personal reflections arising from their life experience. This invites the question of why we should think that these reflections portray a universal truth rather than some purely idiosyncratic stance. I need to limit myself to just one concluding remark here. Kierkegaard’s dictum that truth is subjective concerns the inevitably personal, engaged manner in which one can arrive at truths that existentially matter to us—he does not mean to deny that these truths have a truly universal import that addresses our shared human situation. Likewise, if Kafka’s ideas capture something about the typical situation of the modern individual—or at least of the sort of individuals who enter the stage too late for faith, too early for *creating their own ground* and for arriving at their own *Grund-Ja*—then these ideas have universal import as well. This is so despite the fact that these ideas can be grasped only from the personal experience of individuals who catch themselves perpetually hesitating, looking for obstacles when “perhaps” there are none, and who finally resign themselves to a lifestyle with their hands in their trouser pockets, their bottle of wine on the table, half lying and half sitting in their rocking

¹² Here I am drawing on Stach’s citation of a late (1922) letter to Brod (Stach 2014, 510–511).

¹³ Again I am drawing on Stach’s citation of Kafka’s 1922 letter to Brod (2014, 510).

chair, gazing out of the window or at their smartphone or TV screen: their consciousness consumed by charming, tiring distractions that help eclipse their sense of self-disgust and suffering.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Translations of Kafka's writings are my own except for the *Report for an Academy*, where I have used the translation of Tania and James Stern. For helpful discussion, I am grateful to Stephanie Basakis. For helpful written comments, I am grateful to the referees of this journal.