

Tomáš Koblížek,  
Petr Koťátko (eds.)

LESSONS  
FROM KAFKA  
Philosophical Readings  
of Franz Kafka's Works



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## Lessons from Kafka



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Petr Koťátko (eds.)

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Philosophical Readings  
of Franz Kafka's Works

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Jerrold Levinson, Richard Müller, Anders Pettersson, Göran Rossholm,  
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## Preface

Given the vast amount of Kafkian literature, it seems daring or even pretentious to come up with another book on this author. Here are some reasons why we still hope for reader's interest. Our book collects original articles approaching Kafka's work from the perspectives of several philosophical disciplines (ontology, epistemology, philosophy of language, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of literature and aesthetics). Needless to stress, their authors' achievement cannot consist in a mere subsumption of the "Kafkian material" under the conceptual schemes of these disciplines: the very nature of this "material" would resist such a treatment. Hence the starting point cannot be theoretical aspirations stemming from the authors' long-term work in these disciplines but creative reading of Kafka's texts. On this basis, the articles collected in this volume offer original, sometimes polemically focused views both on Kafka's work and on influential interpretations or tendencies prevailing in the Kafkian interpretive tradition.

The thematic and methodological variety of the articles is no less noticeable than the diversity of the research profiles of their authors. They include detailed interpretations of particular works (*The Burrow*, *The Judgement*, the aphorism *Before the Law*, *The Castle*) as well

as thorough analyses of characteristic features of Kafka's texts: their fragmentariness (and resistance to closure); the function of elaborate explanations of the system and detailed situation analyses provided occasionally by Kafka's characters and, as the other side of the coin, permanent demonstrations of the unsurmountable limits of rationality and understanding; the role of animality and of the motif of „becoming-animal“ in the presentation of the states or situations in which Kafka's heroes find themselves; the specific nature and functions of indeterminacy and incompleteness in (and of) Kafka's fictional worlds, etc. A prominent role in some of these analyses is reserved for confrontations with other writers (such as Beckett, Bernhard or Balzac), with influential Kafka's interpreters (including Derida, Foucault or Deleuze), with a renowned adaptation of Kafka's work (Welles' movie *The Trial*) or with ongoing debates on related topics in various disciplines (current discussions about rationalizing explanations in ethics and theory of action, dealing with narrative gaps in the fictional worlds theories, discussions about the relevance of the law of the excluded middle in various kinds of discourse, the role of the concept of „noise“ in semiotics and information theory, the Quinean thesis of the inextricability of meaning as a model for dealing with other phenomena).

The editors highly appreciate the opportunity to publish a volume on Kafka's work in a publishing house located in the very centre of the Old Prague, where Kafka spent a substantial part of his life (his birth house is a two-minute walk from there and the house of his closest friend Max Brod is just across the street). We hope that the reader will feel this closeness to Kafka's world whenever she opens the book.

*The Editors*

PART 1

THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORLD  
AND THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE



KAFKA'S UNDERGROUND MAN  
Reflections on *The Burrow*

Jerrold Levinson

1

Kafka's unfinished story, *The Burrow* (1923),<sup>1</sup> is an enigmatic and suggestive work, as enigmatic and suggestive in its own way as the better known narratives, *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*. My objective is not to wholly dispel its enigma, or to detail all of its suggestions, but more modestly, to sketch some approaches to interpreting it, to situate it in relation to three other literary works, one by Kafka, one by Dostoyevsky and one by Oliver Wendell Holmes, and lastly, to highlight what seems to me the most central of the themes with which it engages.

Let me begin with a brief description of the story, as it is not one of those which everyone at all familiar with Kafka will know. Its form is that of a first-person interior monologue, one which we overhear in the usual unexplained manner, delivered by an unnamed protagonist who seems to be some sort of animal, though one possessed of

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<sup>1</sup> All references to this work are to the English edition of the story in the volume Kafka, F., *The Great Wall of China. Stories and Reflections*, transl. by W. and E. Muir, Schocken Books, New York 1970, pp. 44-82 (= Kafka, F., *The Burrow*).

a recognizably human consciousness and repertoire of psychological responses. In other words, though the Burrower, as I will call him, is clearly an animal in terms of the physique and actions attributed to him, he is just as clearly all-too-human in terms of manifested psyche, with hopes, fears, and insecurities equal to those of the most neurotic among us. There are no other characters, and thus no dialogue, except of the internal sort wherein the protagonist poses questions to himself and entertains answers to them.

One's first impression of the Burrower is of self-satisfaction with his dwelling and the skill that went into its construction. But one quickly senses a deep insecurity underneath that self-congratulatory veneer. In the story the Burrower describes, with a spectrum of emotions going from evident pride to smug satisfaction to nagging worry to bitter regret, the burrow he has laboriously created as his bulwark against the world. He describes the phases of its building, its many chambers and passageways, his motivations for undertaking its construction, his greatest successes and worst setbacks, his false starts and happy accidents, his visions for future improvements. Described in greatest detail is the burrow's largest chamber, the Castle Keep, a sort of combination throne room and food depository, on which the Burrower places the utmost importance, and which took the most out of him. Building that stronghold, he notes, required the most wearying labor of all, since for the hardening of loose earth in order to make its thick walls the only tool the Burrower possessed was his forehead. We might see in this a reminder of how comparably poor and only marginally adequate are the tools that human beings possess for battling and comprehending nature.

But over all this, even the ostensibly joyful portions of the Burrower's ruminations and recollections, hangs a pervasive sense of anxiety and gloom. And what is its source? Jumping ahead, what I propose as its source is the Burrower's unceasing demand for epistemic certainty and the ontological security that is expected to provide – a demand that can in principle never be satisfied. On a more mundane level, the Burrower exhibits a bundle of psychopathologies – most prominently paranoia, megalomania, narcissism, and obses-

sion-compulsion – that might also be said to account for the aura of oppressive angst that the narrative exudes.

As already noted, the identity of the animal protagonist of *The Burrow* is to a certain extent indeterminate. Although a variety of animals create burrows, including rabbits and foxes, many details of the descriptions in the story, especially those concerned with the making of the burrow and the Burrower's imagined encounters with possible intruders, point to mammals of a different order – squatter, bulkier, more powerful, more pugnacious. Something like a mole or a badger, or perhaps a marmot or groundhog. But why refer to the creature as him and not her? Its gender is no more indicated than is its specific animal nature, yet it is almost impossible not to conceive of the creature as male. This has perhaps two justifications. The first is the natural default identification of Kafka's protagonists with Kafka himself. The second is the coarse, aggressive, reckless, and violent character the Burrower most often displays in his thoughts and recollections, which one thinks of as more male than female. For instance, the Burrower admits to occasionally indulging in episodes of gluttony, wildly falling on his stores and gorging himself to the limit, riskily exposing himself to danger while in the lethargic state that results from such indulgence.

The original German title of Kafka's long story is *Der Bau*. But while "Bau" can mean "burrow", in the sense of an underground dwelling such as various animals are given to making, "Bau" is also inherently more abstract than "burrow", meaning in most cases something like "building" or "construction" or "structure". This greater abstractness of "Bau" as opposed to "burrow" should be borne in mind, since it reinforces the aptness of the more metaphorical and metaphysical readings that Kafka's story invites.

Note that a burrow – a house or dwelling that is under and of the earth, unlike a house or dwelling of the more usual sort – has no natural boundary or limit. The whole earth is in effect comprised within the burrow. Otherwise put, the Burrower's house is continuous with the earth and blends into it, whereas a human house, at least since the beginning of recorded history, is normally discontinuous with

and set off from the earth. What significance might one attribute to this in interpreting Kafka's story? Perhaps that it was composed in the final, darkest period of Kafka's life, when he was beset by terminal illness, thus making thoughts of the earth – or as the Bible has it, dust – from which we spring and to which we must return especially prominent. Perhaps also that feature of a burrow, its continuity with the earth as a whole, adds to our license to see the burrow in symbolic or metaphysical terms, as in effect a world or universe.

## 2

Consider now what a burrow literally is at the most abstract level of description. At such a level the burrow in *The Burrow* might be characterized as:

- a) a construction or structure;
- b) consisting of many parts or components;
- c) with differing functions or uses;
- d) whose overall purpose is one of shelter, security, and storage;
- e) and which is indefinitely expandable and thus uncompletable.

In light of that abstract characterization, what might the burrow conceivably be seen as an image or symbol? Some options are these: a) a self or psyche; b) an individual set of beliefs; c) human knowledge as a whole; d) a religious system or worldview.

Let's see how this could be developed in the case of the first option, the burrow as self or psyche. First, a self or psyche is something constructed, over time, though not out of whole cloth, since certain materials and constraints are given at the outset and must be accepted and exploited, just as the burrow assumes a shape in part due to the choices of the shaper and in part due to fixed features of the terrain. Second, a self or psyche has parts or divisions, some of them more accessible than others, some of them more central and some of them more peripheral, something manifestly applicable to the burrow as well. Third and fourth, the parts of the self have dif-



ferent functions, ones that assure the overall purposes of the self, which purposes can be correlated – albeit roughly – with those of the burrow: shelter is provided by the ego, which organizes and preserves the self as a whole, storage of experiences is afforded by the memory, while the security of the self is assured, naturally enough, by psychic defense mechanisms. And lastly the self, like the burrow, is a continual work-in-progress, constantly evolving, but always bearing traces of its checkered history.

Moreover, the burrow was not built *solely* for reasons of shelter, security, and storage. Rather, it seems clearly to underwrite the Burrower's identity and to justify his existence, and constitutes an inalienable source of pride: „here is my castle, which I have wrested from the refractory soil with tooth and claw, with pounding and hammering blows, my castle, which can never belong to anyone else and is essentially mine”.<sup>2</sup> The Burrower's identity seems indissolubly tied to the burrow, with the distinction between dweller and dwelling blurring to some extent, inviting us to regard the burrow as an extension or externalization of the Burrower's self, in something like the sense that contemporary theory of intelligent agents enshrines as the embodied mind. Although later in the story the Burrower berates himself for thinking primarily of defending himself and not the burrow, this self-accusation is unfair. For the Burrower and the burrow are effectively one and the same, inseparably united, and stand or fall together.

So seeing the burrow as an image of the self, one whose vulnerabilities and potential fractures are on full display, or as the Burrower writ large, his extended body-mind, has a lot to be said for it. The same might be said for the burrow as a religious worldview or system, one aimed at quieting the fear of mortality and achieving a measure of reassurance about the cosmos and our place in it. But I will not pursue those interpretations further, instead choosing to foreground the middle options above, those that see *epistemic* concerns as at the heart of the interiorized drama of *The Burrow*. For what end is served by a coherent set of beliefs or even the whole of

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<sup>2</sup> Kafka, F., *The Burrow*, p. 61.

human knowledge? Above all, that of survival, of coming to terms with the world, of successfully managing it, of dominating nature if at all possible, rather than being forever at its mercy. And that is more or less the Burrower's deepest need. But it is a need, we learn, that is ultimately unassuageable, since coherent beliefs and real knowledge are only chimeras at which we grasp in vain.

## 3

Before developing in detail the epistemic concerns at the heart of the narrative on my reading of it, I want to relate *The Burrow* to two other literary works that it calls to mind. The first of these is Dostoyevsky's novella *Notes from Underground*. There is evidence from Kafka's private library and other sources that Kafka was well-acquainted with Dostoyevsky's works. In a 1913 letter to his fiancée he wrote that "four men, Grillparzer, Dostoyevsky, Kleist, and Flaubert" were the four authors he considered "to be his true blood-relations".<sup>3</sup> So though I have not been able to confirm whether *Notes from Underground* (1864) is explicitly mentioned anywhere in Kafka's extant writings, it seems highly probable he was familiar with that work.

In any event, there are marked similarities between Kafka's Burrower and Dostoyevsky's Underground Man. Most obviously, both are subterranean, the Burrower literally and the Underground Man metaphorically. Second, the two protagonists share a pervasive anxiety about their situations. Third, they are both ceaseless excavators, the Burrower of his never-ending burrow, which inherently resists completion, and the Underground Man of his hyperactive mind, which finds no resting place in its endless search for some sort of volitional or motivational bedrock. Fourth, they are both inveterate second-guessers, never sure they have made the right move or chosen the right action, never secure in the defenses they have erected

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<sup>3</sup> Kafka, F., *Letters to Felice*, transl. by J. Stern, Schocken Books, New York 1973, p. 201.

against what threatens them from without. Finally, relating *The Burrow* to *Notes from Underground* is not a mere literary conceit, as *The Burrow* might very well also have been titled *Notes from Underground*, since that is precisely what it is.

Here is one clear parallel in *The Burrow* to Dostoyevsky's novella, concerned with the mysterious sound that so occupies the mental life of the Burrower, and which we will dwell on at length later on. The Burrower at one point resolves to construct a trench aimed directly at the apparent source of the sound, in order to get at the truth about its nature, for better or worse. But at the very same time the Burrower admits he has no faith in that endeavor, and cannot bring himself to begin. Nothing is more characteristic of Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, perhaps, than the inability to settle on a course of action and stick to it, due to over-thinking that saps the force of any resolution provisionally adopted. The *Underground Man's* incessant undermining of his agency by questioning the rightness of his motivations, burrowing beneath any and all tentative decisions to act, issues finally in wholly impulsive action, "against the laws of reason", "against one's own advantage", and "in spite of everything".<sup>4</sup> The paranoid reflections and opposing suppositions of Burrower may be compared to the obsessive ruminations and ceaseless self-questioning of *Underground Man* in his attempt to act truly freely, and not as a machine or organ stop or piano key. Both are clearly hamstrung by their obsessive thought processes, paralyzed into inaction by their overactive, restless minds, for which every conclusion, every decision, every resolve with an appearance of stability is soon swept aside and discarded, having been countered by alternatives just as plausible.

Here are some other examples of the Burrower's inability, reminiscent of that of *Underground Man*, to persist in or fully embrace any position or assessment once arrived at. Reflecting on the inadequacy of an early labyrinth constructed near the burrow's entrance, "a little

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<sup>4</sup> Dostoyevsky, F. M., *Notes from Underground*, in: *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, transl. by D. Magarshack, Random House, New York 2001, pp. 113, 116, 121.

maze of passages” intended to confuse would-be intruders, the Burrower now dismisses that effort as a frivolous “tour de force”, incapable of averting a serious attack, and engages in back-and-forth, inconclusive reasoning on the advisability of attempting to reconstruct and strengthen his youthful creation. In a similar vein are his obsessive, fruitless ruminations regarding the pros and cons of being out of the burrow; on the one hand, this gives access to better food and fresher air; on the other hand, it involves greater danger and requires the effort of hunting. Lastly, the Burrower regularly assumes an external perspective on his dwelling by exiting it and contemplating it from without, both in order to reassure himself of the security it affords and to relish from the outside the sanctuary it represents. But once more inside the burrow that reassurance and relish fades, and he is assailed by doubts that surge up anew and cannot be suppressed.

## 4

There is a resonance worth noting between Kafka’s *The Burrow* and Oliver Wendell Holmes’s poem *The Chambered Nautilus* (1858), though it is highly unlikely Kafka was alluding to or even aware of Holmes’s poem. The chambered nautilus is an unusual mollusk, found mainly in the South Pacific Ocean. As it grows in size it inhabits different segments of its nacreous shell, continuously constructing new and larger chambers, into which it moves its internal organs as it matures. The smaller chambers, once uninhabited, are used by the nautilus to descend or ascend at will through control of the density and volume of the liquid within them. Now for the resonance I wish to put in evidence. The Nautilus, like the Burrower, is engaged in extending and elaborating his home, his bulwark and defense against the world, but with many differences between them.

Firstly, and most obviously, the Nautilus builds his home, his expanding, many-chambered shell, out of his very own substance, while the Burrower builds his out of the surrounding earth extrinsic to himself. Secondly, the Nautilus’s successive expansions are magnifications of his dwelling, and necessary to his biological growth,

while the Burrower's continuing additions to his realm are only more of the same, and afford him no real reassurance of being safe from threat or invasion. Thirdly, the ethos of Kafka's story and that of Holmes's poem are almost diametrically opposed, the one evincing an untamable existential dread and claustrophobic atmosphere, the other a noble and uplifting optimism. Plus their literary styles could hardly be more contrasting, Kafka's pithy and matter-of-fact, Holmes's flowery and impossibly high-minded.<sup>5</sup> And yet it is interesting to juxtapose the two works.

## 5

A last work I will put into relation with *The Burrow* is one of Kafka's, namely the story entitled *The Great Wall of China*, composed shortly before *The Burrow* (in 1917). Its central idea, the incompleteness of the Wall and the piecemeal nature of its construction, is most likely intended as an image of the incompleteness of the enterprise of human knowledge, the piecemeal nature of whose pursuit is undeniable, and emblemized in the proliferation of scientific disciplines, a something-ology for every conceivable aspect of the world, with little hope of a unifying theory encompassing them all and intelligibly relating them to one another.

The themes of a task that is in principle unending and in which progress becomes difficult to measure, of the increasing estrangement between the center and the periphery of a domain, of the impossibility of certainty about one's world and its inhabitants, and of the unattainability of an objective god-like viewpoint on one's situation, are also front and center in Kafka's elegant Asiatic parable. The overlap

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<sup>5</sup> This excerpt from Holmes's poem gives an idea of its grandiloquent style: "Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul, as the swift seasons roll! Leave thy low-vaulted past! Let each new temple, nobler than the last, shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast." Holmes, O., *The Chambered Nautilus*, in: *English Poetry*, III, *From Tennyson to Whitman*, XLII, ed. by Ch. W. Eliot, P. F. Collier & Son, New York 1910.

in explicit concerns between *The Burrow* and *The Great Wall of China* lends support to an interpretation of the former in which epistemological and ontological themes are taken as central.

## 6

And now for what I see as the heart of *The Burrow*. As mentioned already, the Burrower's overriding practical concern in the story is a new, or at least newly noted, whistling sound in the burrow, one about which the Burrower strives unceasingly to attain knowledge. And the basic dilemma that the Burrower confronts, in terms familiar from philosophy of science, is that of *observationally equivalent hypotheses* about his situation that no evidence, no perception, no closer attention to what is perceptually given can resolve. What follows is a broader sketch of the epistemic quandary in which the Burrower finds himself and the existential distress that that occasions, in which clear cases of this basic dilemma may be noted.

The idea of a potential invader of the burrow, or Enemy, which the whistling sound raises the possibility of, is invoked by the Burrower almost from the start, though the Burrower claims to be able to live in peace despite that troubling idea when in the innermost chambers of his home. This is partly due to an assumed epistemic equivalence between Burrower and Enemy, to the effect that Enemy's knowledge of Burrower and Borrower's knowledge of Enemy are on a par, perhaps in both cases amounting to nothing. Still, as the Burrower reflects, there is no limit to what he doesn't know about the Enemy he is driven to posit, the thought of which progressively overtakes his mind and brings him to the brink of despair. It bears underlining that the Burrower's only way to gather information about potential threats to the Burrow is through the senses of hearing and smelling, since vision is of little use in such a dwelling, and if one assumes the Burrower is something like a mole, his sense of vision is probably relatively undeveloped.

However, prior to becoming wholly preoccupied by an Enemy or Enemies operating on more or less his own plane and responsible for

the sound, the Burrower alludes in an offhand manner to enemies that might possibly threaten the burrow from below, enemies of an almost unimaginable sort, deeply subterranean (or "internal") as opposed to superficially subterranean (or "external") enemies. Though he can form no conception of such "internal" enemies, the Burrower is certain that if they exist they would have complete dominion over him and his dwelling, the burrow being in effect an illegitimate structure erected in their territory without permission. This fantastic hypothesis, one neither suggested nor supported by anything in the Burrower's experience, has a chilling effect on the Burrower entirely out of proportion to its plausibility. But fortunately it makes no further appearance in the Burrower's thoughts and conjectures, which are henceforth relatively more down to earth.

The Burrower's first less-than-fantastic hypothesis about the source of the whistling sound, call this Hypothesis 1, is that animals of a kind the Burrower labels „small fry" have burrowed a new channel somewhere, intersecting existing ones and making a new connection to the surface, where these "small fry" seem to be something on the order of mice or shrews. This hypothesis has a bad side, since it promises the continuation of the sound, but also a good side, since it means increased ventilation in the burrow. This is quickly followed by an observation that adds to the Burrower's difficulty in figuring out what is going on: the sound seems to shift both its perceived quality, as between a whistling and a piping, and its apparent location, while remaining equally loud everywhere in the burrow. The Burrower prides himself on his fine ear, allowing him to distinguish all the nuances of the sound and so form a clear image of it, and also on his powers of inference, capable of deducing the cause of the sound from its perceivable character. But again and again this goal proves elusive, once other hypotheses consistent with the perceptual data come to mind and impose themselves.

Which brings us to Hypothesis 2, that there are two new sounds, at some distance from Burrower, whose combined effect is roughly the same as he moves around the burrow so long as he doesn't get significantly closer to one rather than the other. But this hypothesis would be more likely if Burrower could discern a difference in tone

between these putative two sounds, which unfortunately he cannot. All he can affirm at this point is that the sound or sounds have made it impossible for him to enjoy the “murmurous silence” of the Castle Keep, his principal glory and refuge. Then a third possibility presents itself, Hypothesis 3, that the sound or sounds is that of the small fry tunneling away, and not that of newly created channels of air. But if so, then why has he never heard such a sound or sounds before? Hypothesis 4 arises in response to that question, which is that, contrary to the usual course of nature, perhaps his hearing has become more acute with age. Then a thought of a different sort occurs to him, Hypothesis 5: Perhaps some animals intermediate in size between the “small fry” and the Burrower are the source of the sound or sounds. Then a contrasting supposition is entertained, Hypothesis 6: Perhaps the source are animals even smaller than “small fry” but capable of making louder sounds.

Before recounting the further hypotheses, the Burrower’s restless mind generates, consider how many and various are the dimensions of the Burrower’s uncertainty: Does the sound signify a threat or not? If a threat, is it an animate or an inanimate one? If animate, does it emanate from familiar or unfamiliar enemies? Whether of familiar or unfamiliar sorts, how many are there? Where is this enemy or these enemies located? What is the size of this enemy or enemies? What powers does this enemy or enemies possess? Are the threatened intrusions into the burrow of a purposeful or an accidental nature? If purposeful, what are the intentions of the intruder or intruders? There is no end of possibilities to entertain, most of them unsettling, and so no way to stem the tide of rising angst.

At some point Burrower has the impression that the sound has grown louder. This leads to a new round of hypotheses, such as Hypothesis 7: the source is animate, and is coming closer. But equally likely is Hypothesis 8: the animate source is no closer, but is producing a louder sound. This is perhaps the clearest instance of the problem of observationally equivalent hypotheses for our bedeviled Burrower. If the annoying sound grows louder, as it sometimes seems to do, is this because (1) the Enemy remains at the same distance from the Burrower, but is making a louder sound? Or because (2) the En-



emy is making the same sound but reducing his distance from the Burrower? It is impossible to tell, and maddeningly so.

The Burrower, becoming increasingly distraught, now entertains the thought that in order to assure his safety he should reconstruct the burrow from scratch, but quickly sizes that up as hopeless, and proposes to just accept what fate has in store. The Burrower next revisits the opposition between the supposition of a single large animal and the supposition of a band of numerous small animals. But how can one decide between these hypotheses, on which one's life may depend? And now a further conjecture, Hypothesis 9, is offered in passing: Perhaps the troubling noise is neither a whistling nor a piping nor a tunneling, but instead a gurgling, from some burst water pipe.

Towards the end of his inconclusive reflections the Burrower finds himself increasingly favoring the hypothesis of a single, large, advancing beast, one with possibly malevolent intent, the most unsettling of the possibilities his epistemic situation allows him, one he comes to regard as almost inevitable: "Had I hoped, as the owner of the burrow, to be in a stronger position than any enemy who might appear? Simply by virtue of being owner of this great vulnerable edifice I realize I am defenseless against any serious attack."<sup>6</sup> At the end of his rope, so to speak, the Burrower finally reaches the stage of seeming no longer to wish to have certainty about the annoying noise or its source. He then decides, though always provisionally, to just freely enjoy his store of food as long as possible. And on the supposition of a single, powerful, steadily approaching creature – the long-feared Enemy – as the source of the sound, the Burrower entertains various possibilities about its motives, and envisages what might happen if and when it finally breaks into the burrow and encounters the Burrower: peaceful sharing; cautious negotiation; uneasy standoff; or mortal struggle. Not wanting to lull himself with false assurances, the Burrower regards the last of these upshots as the most likely. Yet maybe a confrontation with this supposed Enemy is not inevitable? Maybe the creature is simply constructing its own burrow in the same

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<sup>6</sup> Kafka, F., *The Burrow*, p. 77.

neighborhood? Maybe it knows nothing of the Burrower and his burrow, has not detected him at all? Unanswerable, all these questions... And here Kafka's narrative breaks off.

## 7

Let me now ask, as I near the end of my own reflections, perhaps no less inconclusive than those of Kafka's protagonist, whether the epistemic quandary of the Burrower and its implied lesson about the limits of human knowledge is just that, or does it have a further significance? It is tempting to think so. What I am inclined to suggest in that vein is that the Burrower's manifest epistemic quandary is at the same time also a trope for the more fundamental human condition of unavoidable uncertainty about what attitude to adopt to the world, about what one should commit oneself to, about how one should act or conduct oneself – uncertainty, in short, about how to live. The degree of anxiety manifested by the Burrower – *notre semblable*, in Baudelaire's memorable phrase – seems commensurate with doubts and concerns of this broader and more profound sort, not only those of the narrower and relatively superficial sort with which the narrative is explicitly concerned.

Finally, let us ask whether *The Burrow* would be a better story with a continuation, and in particular, one recounting a confrontation of the Burrower and some powerful Enemy, which as the story stands, is only one plausible continuation among others? There's little reason think so. For one, the openness and indeterminacy of the Burrower's situation where the text stops gives the narrative a certain quality – a quality which strengthens the theme of epistemic uncertainty and its broader variant, the impossibility of definitively resolving the problem of life, of how to live and for what. For another, it is far from clear how continuing the story could have been accomplished technically within the basic framework of the narrative, which is that of a first-person interior monologue, since formulating and conveying intelligible thoughts and reflections is incompatible with engaging in a fight-to-the-death combat.

I have long been struck by Kafka's memorable image of a successful work of literature as one that can serve as „an axe for the frozen sea within us". But not until recently had I come across the full passage in which that image occurs, in a letter written to a friend, with which I would like to conclude. Here it is.

If the book we are reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy even if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. We need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be an axe for the frozen sea inside us. That is my belief.<sup>7</sup>

I'm not sure I've managed to convey as much in my somewhat flat-footed approach to *The Burrow*, but that singular narrative, as much as *The Trial*, *The Castle*, *The Judgment*, and *The Metamorphosis*, undoubtedly possesses that shattering power.

#### Appendix: Additional observations

The burrow has a false entrance as well as a true entrance. The former is easily visible and designed to mislead potential invaders, being merely a hole that soon ends in a cul-de-sac, while the latter is well disguised, entirely covered with moss, and hard to spot from outside. The Burrower notes that a more solid or more substantial door

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<sup>7</sup> Kafka, F., *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, transl. by R. and C. Winston, Schocken Books, New York 1990, p. 16.

to his burrow was not possible, since it had also to serve as a quick means of exit if necessary.

The burrow contains many small, round cells, good for curling up and napping in. The Burrower congratulates himself on having a comfortable, extensive, well-hidden home, while others are at the mercy of the elements and the good will of their fellows.

The Burrower experiences unavoidable angst, each time he is faced with ending an above-ground vigil, about unavoidably exposing himself to attack once his back is turned to reenter the burrow, leading him invariably to postpone those returns.

The Burrower expresses fear of the possible existence of one of his own kind, a fellow burrower, who would like nothing more than to co-opt the burrow for his own without having labored to construct it. He also entertains the idea of a reliable confederate who could watch over the entrance for him, but realizes this is unworkable, a chimera, and soon put aside.

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KAFKA'S EXCLUSION OF THE LAW  
OF THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE  
Prolegomenon to any Kafka Interpretation

Göran Rossholm

In the first chapter of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello. Six Lessons* the writer Elizabeth Costello receives a literary award. Her obligatory acceptance speech is announced as being about realism, but surprisingly it commences with an analysis of a short story by Franz Kafka, *A Report to an Academy* (Ein Bericht für eine Akademie), representing a lecture given by the speaking ape Red Peter. Costello stresses the unanswered and unanswerable questions about the identity of the protagonist that the story gives rise to:

We don't know. We don't know and will never know, with certainty, what is really going on in this story: whether it is about a man speaking to men or an ape speaking to apes or an ape speaking to men or a man speaking to apes (though the last is, I think, unlikely) or even just a parrot speaking to parrots.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Coetzee, J. M., *Elizabeth Costello. Six Lessons*, Vintage Books, London 2004, p. 19.

In Costello's reading, we are not sure whether the protagonist is an ape, a human or something in between, and whether the members of the academy addressed are humans or apes. And worse still, we will never know, nor can we ever construe a method for finding out which alternative is the right one. The very idea that the protagonist is either an ape or not seems to lack sufficient support. Using logical jargon, we may say: the law of the excluded middle does not apply in this case. Costello does not use this terminology, but this is the essence of her argument – and I agree. Her lecture on realism ends in radical scepticism, with particular stress on identity issues.

In what follows, I will give similar examples from several of Kafka's narratives, but I will not interpret them as amounting to a declaration that Kafka is a radical sceptic. Costello (and Coetzee) are writers with a licence to take the bold step from text to truth and reality with less hesitation than a literary scholar. I have a more cautious attitude towards questions about realism and reality, preferring a more roundabout way, via logic and the theory of fiction, to characterize Kafka's way of making literature.

Kafka's prose is characterized by polarities similar to the ape-human dichotomy in *A Report to an Academy*. In the Kafka scholarly literature his works are described as filled with conflicts, contrasts, paradoxes, contradictions, contraries and ambiguities. In this paper they are studied under two headings: violations of the law (or principle) of the excluded middle and instances of incompleteness. The alternatives are not so apt, being too weak or too strong. On the one hand, almost any writer uses contrasts and ambiguities frequently, and conflict is often regarded as the essence of literary narrative; on the other hand, far from all observations in the following text can be regarded as contradictions or contraries or paradoxes. Several works will be used to provide illustrations. In addition to *A Report to an Academy*, I will present examples from the novels *The Trial* (Der Prozess) and *The Castle* (Das Schloss), and the short stories *The Judgment* (Das Urteil), *The Burrow* (Der Bau), *In Our Synagogue* (In unserer Synagoge), *A Crossbreed* (Eine Kreuzung), *The Metamorphosis* (Die Verwandlung), *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk* (Josefine, die Sängerin

oder das Volk der Mäuse), and *The Village Schoolmaster* (Der Dorfschullehrer), *Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor* (Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle) and *Before the Law* (Vor dem Gesetz) in the novel *The Castle*. The feature in focus in this essay is certainly not confined to these twelve texts, but I do not claim that it is a characteristic of everything Kafka wrote.<sup>2</sup>

The first term, “violation of the law of the excluded middle”, is borrowed from logic, referring to one of Aristotle’s logical laws; the second term, “incompleteness”, sometimes used in the theory of fiction, refers to a presumed state of affairs in fictional worlds. The interest in this latter issue has two philosophical backgrounds: Roman Ingarden’s phenomenology and, more recently, the incorporation of possible-worlds semantics into the theory of fiction.<sup>3</sup> As I will argue, in the present context, violation of the law of the excluded middle and incompleteness are only different aspects of the same phenomenon. For reasons of convenience, I will also use a third term, “indeterminate” (and “indeterminacy”), as synonymous with the two already mentioned, but neutral between the two aspects of classical logic and of possible-worlds theory.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The English citations are from the translations by Tania and James Stern (*Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor* and *A Report to an Academy*), Willa and Edwin Muir (all the other short texts and *The Trial*) and Anthea Bell (*The Castle*).

<sup>3</sup> See Lewis, D., Truth in Fiction, in: *Philosophical Papers*, I, Oxford University Press, Oxford - New York 1983, pp. 261-275; Ryan, M.-L., *Possible Worlds. Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1991; Ronen, R., *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994; Doležel, L., *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore - London 1998.

<sup>4</sup> One more philosophical context announces itself: Søren Kierkegaard’s existentialism. Most of the present essay may be summarized as being about how Kierkegaard’s “either-or” is transformed into “neither-nor” by the Kierkegaard reader Franz Kafka.

## 1. The law of the excluded middle

The law of the excluded middle, stating that any proposition is either true or false, is generally recognized as the third and final of the basic laws of classical logic. The earliest known discussion of the law is found in Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, Chapter 9. However, this text is not only the first known formulation of the law of the excluded middle as a valid foundational principle of logic; it also presents the first articulated questioning of its universal validity. Aristotle's problematic example is a statement about a future event:

A sea-fight must either take place tomorrow or not, but it is not necessary that it should take place tomorrow, neither is it necessary that it should not take place, yet it is necessary that it either should or should not take place tomorrow.<sup>5</sup>

A little later he rephrases the case in terms of potentiality and actuality:

It is therefore plain that it is not necessary that of an affirmation and a denial, one should be true and the other false. For in the case of what exists potentially, but not actually, the rule which applies to that which exists actually does not hold good.<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle's comments cannot be called a repudiation of the third law of logic. More radical questionings appeared during the first three decades of the twentieth century, that is, during Kafka's adult life. In 1920 the validity of the principle of the excluded middle was rejected by the logician Jan Łukasiewicz. With a reference to the passage in Aristotle's *On Interpretation* quoted above, he created a non-classical,

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, transl. by E. M. Edghill, in: *The Works of Aristotle*, I, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago - London - Toronto 1952, 19a.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19a-b.



many-valued logic, a system admitting an “excluded middle”. More than a decade before that, L. E. Brouwer denied the principle of unlimited application in mathematics in his dissertation *Over de Grondslagen der Wiskunde* (On the Foundations of Mathematics), and, somewhat later, his pupil Arend Heyting did the same with regard to logic. Logical positivism (or “logical empiricism”), emerging in the same period, is normally not associated with any general repudiation of the principle of the excluded middle. However, the verificationism of logical positivism – the idea that a meaningful statement is always an empirically provable or disprovable statement – may inspire examples in conflict with the principle. It might be argued that several categories of statements may express unprovable propositions – in addition to Aristotle’s statements about future events, counterfactual statements, statements about dispositions – and that these statements, being impossible to affirm or deny convincingly, constitute counterexamples to the law of the excluded middle. Later, the linguistic turn of philosophy has put more focus on the ambiguities and vagueness of language as it is actually used, and the latter term, vagueness, has sometimes be conceived of as a threat to the law of the excluded middle; in certain cases we can neither affirm nor deny that the person we meet is bald, and this lack of certainty cannot be cured by more information.

The reason for this brief exposé is twofold: firstly, to remind us of the fact that a repudiation of the law of the excluded middle cannot be considered a clear sign of irrationalism, as it can often be taken as an increased critical intellectual attitude; and, secondly, to point to the fact that Central Europe was the main scene for these ideas during the first decades of the twentieth century. Kafka’s closeness to these movements in time and space is illustrated by the fact that his chemistry teacher was a pupil of Ernst Mach, one of the founding fathers of logical positivism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Stach, R., *Kafka. The Years of Insight*, transl. by S. Frisch, Princeton University Press, Princeton – Oxford 2013, p. 257.

## 2. Incomplete fictional worlds

The third law of classical logic and the idea of world completeness are closely tied together. If every imaginable meaningful statement is either true or false, then our world is complete; if there are meaningful statements that are neither true nor false, our world is incomplete. The same can be said about fictional worlds. This means that the law of the excluded middle and world completeness are exchangeable locutions.

The first explicit expression of the idea that fictional narratives portray incomplete worlds was, as far as I know, made by Roman Ingarden. He says that if a table is mentioned in a fictional narrative without any information about the material of the table, then it is not made of any particular material.<sup>8</sup> If the same text is factual, the reader is not informed about the material, but it goes without saying that the table is made of some unmentioned material. Thus the truth of a sentence applying the principle of the excluded middle, for instance “The table is made of oak or it is not made of oak”, is not questioned. The real world referred to by the factual narrative is not incomplete in the sense of containing a table made of no material.

Petr Kořátko argues that this idea about fictionality in general is wrong.<sup>9</sup> He gives us a question about a character in Balzac’s novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*: Was Mme d’Espard’s gall bladder (at a certain time) in good condition? Since nothing is stated or presupposed about the condition of her gall bladder, it follows from Ingarden’s idea that this organ was in no condition at all. Kořátko comments: “A novel whose world would be inhabited by such bizarre creatures ought to aspire to some genre rather different from

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<sup>8</sup> Ingarden, R., *Das literarische Kunstwerk*, Max Niemeier Verlag, Tübingen 1960, pp. 264 f.

<sup>9</sup> Kořátko, P., Who is Who in the Fictional World, in: Kořátko, P., Pokorný, M., Sabatés, M. (eds.), *Fictionality - Possibility - Reality*, aleph, Bratislava 2010.

‘scenes from Parisian life.’<sup>10</sup> I agree; the very idea that Balzac’s fictional worlds are inhabited by incomplete persons is absurd. Our knowledge about them is incomplete, but they are not incomplete themselves. Incompleteness is epistemic, not ontological; in Kořátko’s words: “It is [then] right to say that our *construction* of the character is incomplete – but the incomplete construction of a character is something very different from the construction of an incomplete character.”<sup>11</sup>

Kořátko points to a circumstance in connection with Balzac’s fictive world, a circumstance which has bearing on the present essay. He says that even if we – that is, the readers – get any information about the condition of Mme d’Espard’s gall bladder, we have so to speak counterfactual access to relevant facts in the case. If a skilled medical doctor, with a modern medical education and with modern medical equipment, were to examine Mme d’Espard’s gall bladder, he or she would be able to tell whether it was healthy or not.<sup>12</sup> Balzac’s world is like our own world in that respect.<sup>13</sup>

The same can be said in terms of indeterminacy. A description of Mme d’Espard may leave out any specification of the condition and the existence of her gall bladder, but this does not mean that her inner organs are themselves undetermined in the strong sense: they are not *in principle* undetermined; we, and maybe everyone else, just don’t know.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 97 ff.

<sup>13</sup> There is no general agreement among literary theorists about this question. According to Lubomír Doležel (*Heterocosmica*) fictional worlds are incomplete possible worlds, while Marie-Laure Ryan (*Possible Worlds*) argues contrariwise.

<sup>14</sup> Most of this brief exposé of fictionality and (in)completeness is drawn from Rossholm, G., Contribution to Fictional Epistemology, *Organon F* 22, 2015, Supplementary issue, pp. 133–144.

### 3. *The Trial* and *The Judgement*

However, Kořátko admits that there are incomplete fictional worlds; he mentions the universe of Beckett's trilogy (starting with *Molloy*) as an example.<sup>15</sup> The same can be said about Kafka's fictional worlds.

According to most commentators, the protagonist Josef K. of Kafka's novel *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*) is arrested at the beginning of the first chapter of the book. But how does this happen? Only one utterance made by a man – obviously, or should we say, seemingly an employee of the Court – provides the appearance of an arresting procedure; he says: “Sie sind ja verhaftet.” Nevertheless, such a formulation rather presupposes that K. is already under arrest; to perform the speech act of arrest, one should say “Sie sind verhaftet” and nothing more. Moreover, after this scene, that is, after having been arrested – if he is – Josef K. is free to go. Observations of this sort give support to an interpretation according to which it is neither true nor false that he is under arrest.<sup>16</sup>

If we try to apply a counterfactual reasoning in line with Kořátko's suggestion with respect to Mme d'Espard's gall bladder about the arrest – or non-arrest – in the first chapter of *The Trial*, we will fail. No counterfactual procedure, no thought experiment available (that is, imaginable) will decide the question about the arrest/non-arrest. And it might be argued that this amounts to saying that this incompleteness is ontological. So there is a fundamental difference between Kafka's and Balzac's worlds. There are many other examples of indeterminacy in *The Trial*, for instance the death of Josef K. A common

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<sup>15</sup> Kořátko presents an elaborated version of this idea in his Beckett essay *Narrator in Decay*, in: Koblížek, T., Kořátko, P. (eds.), *Chaos & Form*, Litteraria Pragensia Books, Prague 2016, pp. 229–247.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kafka, F., *Die Romane. Amerika. Der Prozess, Das Schloss*, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1965, p. 4. The English translation made by Willa and Edwin Muir runs just “you are arrested”. To convey the same implications as the German original, an English translation has to be much more wordy and also circumscribed, as in expressions like “you are arrested, as you know/as is generally known/as follows from what is already said etc.”