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# I

# KAFKA'S "THE TRIAL": AN INTERPRETATION THROUGH DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

If a man does not judge himself, all things judge him, and all things become the messengers of God.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslau

## 1

### THE COURT

Joseph K. has been arrested. The whole thing is enigmatic. The prosecutor and the charge are unknown. It is not even certain that a charge has been made. Proceedings have been instituted: that is all. By a person unknown versus Joseph K. Nobody knows what has

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"Franz Kafka: Das Gericht; Eine tiefenpsychologische Deutung," *Analytische Psychologie* (Berlin), v:4 (1974). The forenote is extracted from foreword to the same publication. For other details, see the editorial note to the present volume.

Quotations from *The Trial* are based on the translation of Edwin and Willa Muir (New York: Knopf; and London: Secker and Warburg, 1937; revised by E. M. Butler, 1956).

happened. The warders who have been sent out and the Inspector who duly informs K. of the arrest are none of them responsible. They act and carry out instructions, but have no idea why this should have happened to K. The way K. accepts the arrest is as enigmatic as the arrest itself. The surprising thing is that he gives in. He holds up his coat "as if displaying it to the warders for their approval"—it is as if he has "in a way admitted the strangers' right to an interest in his actions." After suddenly becoming the center of a completely unintelligible happening, which was in flat contradiction of all normal reality, he says, "Certainly, I am surprised, but I am not by any means very surprised."

He protests, he is ironical, he regards the whole thing as a joke, he is quite sure it must be a mistake; yet more astonishing than anything that happens is the way in which Joseph K. recognizes and accepts the trial, and even to some extent realizes what he is doing. He does not want to dress, yet he does so, he wants to call an advocate, yet he does not do so, he protests against everything—and then gives in.

He is always concerned to retain his superiority, yet underneath he is permeated by a growing fear. But that is not true! *He* is not afraid. He, Joseph K., is convinced that you have only to clear away the disorder in the household and "every trace of these events would be obliterated and things would resume their usual course." And yet secretly something in him *is* afraid, something is in a state of such panic fear that when the warders leave him alone, he is surprised, because he "had abundant opportunities to take his life."

Admittedly, K. never loses control. He always knows

immediately when his thoughts are absurd; he also knows, in relation to Frau Grubach, how he really ought to have behaved, and what really ought to have been done; he is very conscious and superior—yet at the same time he is surprised that the events of that morning should have made him consider giving notice to Frau Grubach, and he is frightened by the house-porter's son in the street doorway. What shows him up more than anything, though, is the sympathy shown him by Frau Grubach and the tears in her voice as she begs him, "Don't take it so much to heart, Herr K."

Yet the strangest thing of all is not K.'s unconscious fear, but his feeling of guilt, which breaks through over and over again. It is true that K. says—and we have no reason to doubt his sincerity here—that he "cannot recall the slightest offense that might be charged against him"; yet unexpectedly, out of some deep level inaccessible to his conscious awareness, the cry breaks out in his conversation with Frau Grubach, "If you want to keep your house respectable you'll have to begin by giving me notice!" And then in a flash the thought struck him, "Will she take my hand?"

The relationship with Fräulein Bürstner, too, which is initiated so abruptly that it is almost like an assault, is really an attempt to escape and an appeal for help and protection. The scene of his arrest, which he has just said he regards as "a pure figment," in fact haunts him to such an extent and is so "horrible" that he feels obliged to repeat it as though he were under a compulsion. He broods more and more over the warders' statement that there can be no question of the Court's making a mistake; yet we are also told that "before going to sleep he

thought for a little while about his behavior; he was pleased with it, yet surprised that he was not still more pleased."

Again and again we meet with the same kind of division. We never hear of K. taking steps of any kind to throw light on the nature of the events which have overtaken him. We are told, it is true, that "he was always inclined to take things easily, to believe in the worst only when the worst happened, to take no care for the morrow even when the outlook was threatening"; yet his complete indifference about the nature of his arrest, the lack of interest, which permits of no attempt to gather information or to make enquiries, is conspicuous. Corresponding to this impassivity but in a more active mode is the matter-of-fact way in which K. sets out to keep his appointment with the Examining Magistrate. He mobilizes all the usual protests and cynical defenses—but he goes. Just on the decisive issue, he accepts. Everything else is an arabesque around the basic fact of his obedience, while at the same time K. himself remains unconscious of this basic fact and his conscious attitude is still obsessively negative.

Externally, this division reveals itself in the way in which K. "knows" the time of his appointment, although he has not been directly informed about it. He "wants" to arrive late, without noticing that this intention clearly implies an exact knowledge of the time when he is in fact expected. He does not notice that his faulty intention corresponds to an enigmatic knowledge of the appointed time. Typical of K. is the feeling of innocence to which he clings; he is convinced that he has not been told when he ought to come. His "knowledge" is not real; how can

he know when he has not been told? K. does not suspect for a moment that this "unreal" knowledge actually determines, although negatively, his intention to arrive late. Here the split psychology produces a grotesque compromise: K. finally *runs* in order to arrive "on time"! In this act of running, his knowledge of the right time has broken through once again; he obeys neither his knowledge nor his counterintention to disobey it.

The curious way in which K. finds the Interrogation Commission provides us with another enigma. As he wishes "to get a chance of looking into the rooms," he enquires after a nonexistent "joiner called Lanz." He rejects the idea of asking for the room occupied by the Interrogation Commission because that might injure his reputation. The result is a long and pointless expedition through the house. The plan which at first seemed so practical declares its independence of his purpose. "In this way" K. was finally "conducted over the whole floor." He already intends to go home, but turns back again, for the first time with real resolution, and the watchword "a joiner called Lanz," with which he now knocks on the door of the first room, leads him, surprisingly and inexplicably, to the Interrogation Commission. He is not told that a joiner called Lanz really lives there, yet in answer to his question he is immediately shown the right way. It is as if his intention, which is now genuine, to find the Interrogation Commission has made the watchword "a joiner called Lanz" transparent, so that, in spite of this question and in fact directly *through* it, his meaning is understood and he is shown the way he is trying to find.

On his arrival, K. is informed that he is an hour and

five minutes late; and it turns out that the appointment has in fact been fixed at the time which was "known" to K. The way in which K. finds the Interrogation Commission as soon as he really looks for it, and the agreement between the time fixed by the Court and his own inner knowledge actually belong to the same context. In the first place, we have the remarkable phenomenon of the "adaptability of the trial." The trial seems to fit in with K. When he is not really looking for the room and his reputation is more important to him than finding it, the room is not to be discovered, though K. wanders right through the house; yet the moment he starts looking in earnest, he finds the Commission behind the first door. On the other hand, though no appointed time has been given K., it turns out that the time he himself has fixed as "correct," the time which he "knew," is in fact "valid" for the authorities. It is quite clear that if K. had fixed a later hour, that too would have been valid for the Court.

At first sight this may sound improbable, but in fact it is the only conceivable way in which it is possible for us to explain how K. succeeded in locating the Commission at all by the use of such a watchword as "a joiner called Lanz." In itself, the verbal formula is completely irrelevant: it is simply a symbol for K.'s intention "to find or not to find" as the case may be. The only reality here is his own inner attitude; this is what shines through the transparency of the watchword. The adaptability of the Trial means precisely that it turns up wherever K. is looking for it and is not to be found wherever he does not look for it. And vice versa, this same adaptability implies that the Trial is always to be found where K.

inwardly "places" it, "knows" it to be, "looks for" it, and "wills" it to be. The procedure of the Trial fits in with the accused. The location of the room is just as much determined by K. as the time of the interrogation. K. even suspects this when he plays with the notion that if the Court is attracted by the guilt of the accused, the Interrogation Commission ought really to be located on the particular flight of stairs which he himself happens to choose. This knowledge of K.'s is also derived from that layer of his mind which in some quite unspecified sense knows him to be guilty. As long as he obeys the dictates of his reputation, his ego-consciousness, this knowledge possesses no validity and is in fact false—and so he wanders through the house. But when he really looks for the Interrogation Commission, he is obeying the deep layer in himself and knows that he is accused and that he is guilty; and then the correctness of his knowledge is at once confirmed and the Commission is behind the first door that he happens to choose.

The delay involved in K.'s arriving too late corresponds to his failure to take the Trial seriously. If K. had arrived at what he "knew" was the right time, and if he had at once really tried to find the Interrogation Commission, the Interrogation Chamber would certainly have been located on the particular flight which K. had happened to choose, behind the first door which he had happened to open. The phenomenon of the "adaptability of the Trial" also provides us with evidence that the Court "overlaps" the ordinary workaday world of outer reality; it does not collide with it, but is in a strange way "resident in its midst." In spite of all its concreteness the

Trial does have an air of "unreality" about it, in the sense, that is, that there is a marked discrepancy between it and "ordinary" reality. No doubt that is what Frau Grubach meant when she said, "This arrest . . . gives me the feeling of something very learned."

The intermediate sphere in which the Trial takes place is determined by the behavior of the accused; yet the Court again carries the day against the accused precisely because the accused "gives in." The adaptability of the Trial and the reality of K.'s inner knowledge are interdependent. K. has an inkling of this as he implies when he tells the Interrogation Commission later on, "It is only a Trial if I recognize it as such." As we have just seen, the Trial is "there" when K. recognizes it, and is not there when he only pretends to look for it, i.e., when he does not take it seriously or recognize it.

Here we encounter an extremely significant relationship of interdependence between the arrested man and the prosecuting authority, which will occupy us at length later on. Yet no less striking, in the same context, is the split in K.'s own psychology, which is responsible for his half-conscious, half-unconscious recognition of the Trial, and also for a diametrically opposite attitude. This opposite attitude, which regards the whole thing as an incredible and improbable joke, is the ruling constellation that dominates K.'s ego-consciousness, and is shown quite clearly by his behavior before the Investigating Commission.

He completely fails to recognize his real situation, appears in the guise of a reformer, an accuser and even a chairman, and finally strikes the table with his fist and

declares, "I beg you to postpone until later any comments you may wish to exchange on what I have to say, for I am pressed for time and must leave very soon." He tries to intervene when the washerwoman is embraced by a man at the back of the hall, and it is not until the end, when he is detained by force, that he recognizes that the forum before which he has spoken does in fact belong to the Court. It is only the badges worn by the officials which finally convince him that he has not been addressing a party meeting, with friends and enemies, an audience and a public, but that he has in fact been standing before a great Investigation Commission.

K.'s speech is a matchless example of public abuse, powered by an affect which contrasts in the most astonishing way with his normal indifference to the Trial. All his doubts and uncertainties, secret fears and feelings of guilt are unloaded in an outburst which is in equal measure brutal, reckless, and panic-stricken. "Keep off or I'll strike you," cried K. to a trembling old man who had pushed quite close to him. No one would have imagined that the "junior manager of a large bank" who is a stickler for good form would be capable of such conduct. "Scoundrels" and "corrupt band"—such are the expressions used by a man who is so sensitive that he will be disturbed by a colleague's smile at the office. This violent emotion is all the more remarkable if we remember that no one compelled K. to go to the Investigation Commission and that he has in fact taken great pains to find it. After he himself has said that the Trial stands or falls with his recognition of it, he does emphatically recognize it "for the moment" and in so doing places

himself within the jurisdiction of the Court. And then he behaves in this senseless manner! But assuming that the task of the Investigation Commission is to examine K. and to find out "who" he is, then we must admit that the Commission succeeds in enticing the accused man out of his fortress with uncanny and unholy speed. And if we adopt the standpoint of the judges, which is that "the high authorities—before they would order such an arrest as this—must be quite well informed about the reasons for the arrest and the person of the prisoner," then precisely in this context the Examining Magistrate's strange question, "Well, then, you are a house-painter?" appears in a new and peculiar light. This apparently harmless and nonsensical question in fact provokes K.'s outburst, the speech in which he so fatally exposes himself. In order to realize how far this question actually takes the Examining Magistrate—whether or not it was a deliberately selected stimulus question or an "accident"—we have only to picture what a different person K. would have had to be if he had given a quick and objective answer. It is significant that there is a passage in *The Castle* which informs us that accidents are always on the side of the authorities.

It would be a mistake to read into this question some malicious intent, quite apart from the fact that in his capacity as an official the Examining Magistrate is obviously doing his duty—which is to examine! On the contrary, the Trial is characterized from the outset by a remarkable spirit of friendliness. The warders and the Inspector are not only forthcoming beyond the require-

ments of their official duties, but the advice, information, and guidance which they offer would have been extremely helpful to K. if he had considered them worthy of his attention. The way in which the time for the appointment is arranged and the willingness of the Examining Magistrate to interrogate K. in spite of his lateness are evidence of an unusual degree of consideration for him. All this is summarized in the principle laid down by the Inspector at the time of the arrest: "You won't be hampered in carrying on in the ordinary course of your life."

Yet that is not the whole story. All the people with whom K. comes into contact are particularly friendly towards him—Frau Grubach and Fräulein Bürstner, the Manager and the Deputy Manager, and the people in the house who help him to look for the joiner called Lanz. Everyone in fact is ready to help him, the "world" is not hostile, but kind and helpful, although—as is clear from the case of the joiner called Lanz—they are not in a position to give him real help. Without knowing it, these people in the house are dominated by K.'s will to arrive late; they are unsuspecting tools of his faulty attitude. For them, the joiner Lanz is a human being whom he is looking for and whom they are helping him to find, not a symbol behind which his will to find the Court or not to find the Court is the effective agent. They are simply concretizations of his negative will, and their helpfulness towards him is not and cannot be really effective. In spite of all their helpfulness he is living, as it were, in empty space, since the question at issue is

his recognition or nonrecognition of the Trial, and this is a conflict which cannot be touched by the helpful attempts of these people to find a "real" "joiner Lanz."

But just as the innocence of helpful people—in a way that is uncanny and by no means innocent—subserves the purpose of K.'s will to procrastinate without his becoming aware of the fact, so too when he stands before the Interrogation Commission he sees nothing but "members of the public" in the uniformed officials who in fact belong to the Court. He never senses what lies behind things, he is never in touch with what is "really" going on, and it is precisely this that confuses him so much and leads him astray the whole time. He himself lives in an innocent relationship with his ego-consciousness, which is in stark contrast to the deeper knowledge possessed by the other side of his nature. He really knows that whether or not he finds the room depends upon himself and not upon strange people hunting around for a nonexistent "joiner called Lanz"; and he also knows that an appearance before an Investigation Commission is a challenge which requires caution and presence of mind.

K.'s behavior before the Investigation Commission would be understandable if it were really true that the Trial had not yet made the slightest emotional impact upon him. In fact, however, his train of thought while he was looking for the Commission and his remark about the necessity for a recognition of the Trial by himself contradicts that. And his comment later on about the "great organization" which exists behind everything is equally striking. Even though his negative attitude, with its aggressiveness and protest, usurps the foreground, and

now as always, the great organization is only an object of abuse, the point we have to bear in mind in this context is that K. is not "ignorant." Part of him knows perfectly well what is going on and what lies hidden behind the façade—for example behind the particular official who is confronting him at the moment. And this part of K.'s nature is equally well-informed about the legitimacy of what is happening. K.'s conscious behavior must obviously be viewed in a more serious light for this reason, since he makes absolutely no use of his other "knowledge" and in fact carries on as if it did not exist. In this sense, too, K. is not "innocent." In any case, as the Examining Magistrate put it, K. has "flung away with his own hand all the advantages which an interrogation invariably confers on an accused man." The Trial has now entered on a new stage. It will undoubtedly continue—that has been certain from the outset, but owing to K.'s behavior it has taken on an even more uncanny atmosphere than before. In future, there will be no recurrence of the kind of clear-cut situation in which K. appears before an Interrogation Commission. Precisely when he is not thinking about it and is in fact entirely unprepared, the Interrogation Commission will be able to observe him, which means that he has also flung away the protection which is always afforded by a knowledge that the crucial moment is precisely the present. Characteristically, K.'s first attempt to make a real contact with the Court involves a relationship with a woman. K. makes up his mind to triumph over the Court by enticing the wife of the Law Court Attendant away from a student of the Law. This attempt is not only pointless and ridiculous;

it is a total failure. The woman betrays him and leaves him in the lurch. K. is not even startled for a moment. He completely fails to understand that however strange her way of showing it may be, this woman, by giving herself to the student, is really devoting herself to the great organization and that her aim is actually to serve it. K. does not even gain an insight into the power structure of the Court as a result of this incident. The Law Court Attendant indicates to K. that even the student is extremely influential and that K. can only risk everything because he is in any case lost, since "none of our cases can be regarded as capable of failing." K. takes no notice of this. Neither his own experiences nor the information he has received about the thoroughness of the proceedings and the tireless industry and serious-mindedness of the Examining Magistrates make the slightest impression on him. He remains foolish and cynical and exposes his egotism only too obviously when he, the supposed reformer, without hesitation declares that "he wouldn't have lost an hour's sleep over the need for reforming the machinery of justice" in the Court if it hadn't been a matter of life and death to himself.

As he makes his way into the Law Court offices the situation of the accused is demonstrated to him in the most cruel terms, but K. relates none of this to his own case. In the Law Court offices K. is for the first time fully exposed to the atmosphere of the Court. For a while he passes through the ranks of the accused unsuspectingly, as a stranger, and is only disconcerted by the incomprehensibility and pointlessness of their behavior, but very soon he too is caught up in it.

The girl in the Law Court offices whose face has "that severe look which the faces of many women have in the first flower of their youth" and the man who "has an answer to every question," the Clerk of Inquiries, come to meet him, without K. having taken any initiative. They are living witnesses to the truth of what the girl herself is concerned to explain to him—i.e., that the Law Court officials are not hard-hearted. They help him, they actually invite him to consult the Clerk of Inquiries, but the effect on K. is exactly as if not a word of all this had been spoken. Never throughout the course of the Trial does he remember either the Clerk of Inquiries or the tenderness and kindness of the girl, who is an official of the Court. The admonition of the Clerk of Inquiries, who told an overzealous accused man, with an unmistakable reference to K., "When one sees so many people who scandalously neglect their duty, one learns to have patience with men like you," goes over K.'s head without producing the slightest impact.

For a moment, it is true, it does occur to K. to wonder whether he ought to enquire about the next interrogation, and for a moment it does look as if he means to revise radically his attitude to the Interrogation Commission and the Court—and for a moment the girl, the Law Court Attendant and the Clerk of Inquiries (who is now approaching) look at him hopefully, "as if they expected some immense transformation to happen to him the next moment, a transformation which they did not want to miss"—but it was only a physical feeling of malaise. As the Clerk of Inquiries ironically remarks, "It's only here that this gentleman feels unwell, not in other places."

The atmosphere of the Court produces a kind of disturbance of balance, a feeling of dizziness, but in K.'s case the shift in balance is by no means in the direction of the "knowing" part of his nature. His ego-consciousness is almost paralyzed, but all that "is" nothing and means nothing.

K. can scarcely shut the door quickly enough which separates the normal world from the world of the Law Court offices and the Court. It was nothing but a physical feeling of faintness: in a way that is typical and characteristic of all K.'s, everything is sidetracked and projected onto something that is "real" and uncompromisingly external. No insight, no reflection, no fruitful doubt remains. The sole result of K.'s first visit to the world of the Court is a misgiving about the integrity of his physical health, and the notion that he should consult a doctor at the earliest opportunity.

So it seems. And yet when he wonders, "Could his *body* possibly be meditating a revolution and preparing to spring a new Trial on him, since he had borne with the old one so effortlessly?" something far more uncanny is looming behind this reflection. His uncertainty is really the outcome of an obscure intuition, which senses how deeply the split has already penetrated within him. His mistrust of his own body, the most real and actual part of a man, is only a symbol that shows how keenly K. feels the real ground of his existence, his very foundation, quaking beneath him. This strangeness and mistrust in relation to his body is proof positive of the split and alienation which divide K.'s ego-consciousness from the "knowing" foundation of his nature. It is proof positive

that the Court has "arrested" his body, his foundation, and that the Trial is advancing within K. and is steadily gaining ground in his own country.

In spite of this, however, K. is not entirely wrong in his charge against the authorities. Is it not a fact that he has denounced genuine abuses? For example, is it really possible to defend the conduct of the warders at the time of K.'s arrest, when they ate up his breakfast and made no secret of their intention to enrich themselves by annexing his personal belongings?

In the chapter entitled "The Whipper," this question is given a very strange answer, which introduces us at the deepest level into the inner situation of Herr K. and into a discussion of the whole problem of guilt and justice.

When K. opens the storeroom door at the office, he does not suspect that the Trial has extended its sphere of activity and has forced its way into the office where he works. He has not the slightest idea what is going on, and it is only the complaints of the warders and the information supplied by the Whipper that acquaint him with the actual state of affairs. The warders are being whipped because K. has, justifiably, complained about them to the Examining Magistrate. K., however, takes no interest in what is happening, it does not seem to concern him in the least, he does not notice that the Court, which is supposedly so negligent, has taken immediate steps to punish the warders, nor does he realize that he is the cause of this whipping. We are no longer surprised when the warders' remark about the disaster of being an accused man does not cause K. any anxiety.

However, K.'s attempt to buy the release of the

warders is certainly curious. Among other charges that he has cast in the teeth of the administration of the Court is precisely corruption—but of course *his* attempt at corruption is part of his battle against the corrupt administration of the Court. Though he himself has informed against the warders and demanded their punishment and the warders themselves have actually admitted their guilt, K. suddenly argues that the warders are not to blame, but that "it was the organization, it was the high officials who were to blame."

Yet what is the truth about the great organization, what is its attitude towards its subordinate functionaries, towards the warders and the Whipper?

Already at the time of the original arrest the warders had displayed some remarkable qualities. They had combined an awareness of their subordinate status with an absolutely firm grasp of the infallibility of the high authorities and of the inadequacy of K.'s line of argument. They not only showed themselves excellently informed about the Law and the nature of the Court, they also tried to help K., to instruct him and to enlighten him about the attitude that he ought to adopt towards the Trial and towards himself. Their negative private behavior, the way they scrounged K.'s breakfast and tried to walk off with his clothes, is of entirely secondary importance. This was a "trespass" on the negative side just as their friendly behavior was a trespass on the positive side, and it is by no means impossible that the habitual toleration of these abuses by the organization actually takes this into account. It is true that such conduct is forbidden by the authorities, yet the point of view ex-

pressed by the warders when they ask, "What importance can such things have for a man who is unlucky enough to be arrested?" may also, though not openly admitted, hold good of the authorities, for whom such things are "insignificant." In spite of this, however, the warders have to be punished if K. complains about them. Their punishment, as the Whipper says, is "as just as it is inevitable."

Strictly speaking, toleration of the private freedom of its executive functionaries by the great organization is a concession to the accused. Trespasses of this kind make it far easier for him to orientate himself. Yet every trespass, every deviation from the prescribed path of duty in the procedure of the Trial represents a risk for the trespasser. If the accused rejects the trespass and thrusts the officials back, as it were, within the limits of the Law and of the exact mechanism of the Trial, then he must be obeyed, since for this purpose he is the highest authority in the Trial. The accused is entitled to insist on his formal right that the officials shall in fact do their duty, even when the trespass has been committed out of feelings of friendship towards him, but particularly of course when these friendly feelings have resulted in some form of material reward. Equally obvious, however, is the consequence of K.'s behavior. The Whipper actually draws this consequence when in answer to K.'s attempt at bribery he says, "So you want to lay a complaint against me too and get me a whipping as well? No, No!" And then, "What you say sounds reasonable enough, but I refuse to be bribed. I am here to whip people, and whip them I shall." That is the clear, cold performance of

duty, without transgression and without any form of partial private freedom. In Kant's language it is "the official an sich," the official "in himself," so that it represents what K. had really demanded. And at this stage it suddenly becomes clear that if the Trial were in fact as K. had demanded, it would be cruel and inexorable beyond all hope, a machine without joints that would crush the accused and deny him the slightest chance of escaping, of prolonging the Trial, or even of living.

That K. should fail to fathom the real state of affairs is not perhaps surprising; what is astonishing is his failure to grasp the connection between his complaint and the Whipper; he simply does not want to know about it. When he evades this problem and maintains that it was not the warders who were to blame, but the organization and the high officials, he is right, though without having right on his side. That is what is so strange and confusing. K. often says something that is correct without correctly grasping its full significance; he "knows" about basic and crucial realities, yet at the same time he interprets them wrongly.

The high authorities have in principle permitted the partial private freedom of their executive functionaries and are therefore in fact partly responsible for their misbehavior. K. is intelligent enough to realize this, yet consistently he only sees the negative side of everything, so that, for example, he completely fails to recognize this is really a concession, a friendly action, towards himself.

Our mention of this characteristic of K.'s does perhaps bring us closer to his own real guilt and the circumstances that resulted in his indictment, or rather

arrest. What the father said to his son Georg in *The Judgment* could equally well be applied to Joseph K. "You were really an innocent child, but more really still, a devilish human being."

It is already quite clear that K. is irresponsible, arrogant, vain and, in relation to himself, untruthful; yet all these negative qualities might also, in a certain sense, be no more than childishly unconscious. There are, however, numerous facts that throw a very different light on K.'s character. His inability to appreciate friendliness and helpfulness in others directs our attention to his relationship to people in general; and at this point something very striking does emerge. His deliberately brusque and intimidating behavior towards Frau Grubach, the way in which he proposes to take advantage of Fräulein Bürstner, while completely disregarding her existence as a human being ("he knew that Fräulein B. was an ordinary little typist who would not resist him for long"), his negligent attitude towards his clerks' fate ("one of whom I shall dismiss at the earliest opportunity"), his relationship with the wife of the Law Court Attendant, of whom he also proposes to take advantage (he finds her "not altogether worthless" and thinks, "Probably there could be no more fitting revenge on the Examining Magistrate and his adherents than to wrest this woman from them and take her himself")—it is the same story all along. K.'s bright idea of involving the Law student in a liaison with Elsa and his pleasure at the thought of the situation that would arise "if this wretched student, this puffed-up child, this bandylegged twiddle-beard, had to kneel by Elsa's bed wringing his

hands and begging for favors" is another instance. In fact, it is possible to multiply examples of qualities which prove how "bad" K. really is, how callous, brutal, narrow-minded, and egoistic. He never thinks of other people, but always and exclusively of himself. His inability to appreciate kindness and humanity in other people, his own hard-heartedness and coldness, and his inability to learn anything or to relate anything to himself are closely interdependent characteristics.

Although K. is "more really still a devilish human being," he is not a villain or an exceptional human being or even an exceptionally bad human being. What matters is that he is a human being like other human beings. He is like us all, and no one is entitled to wax indignant at his expense. The basic fact that Joseph K. is "one of us" is nowhere stated by Kafka; it is, however, an essential feature of his method of presenting his story. Every reader identifies himself with K.; he is compelled to do so for the time being. Everyone feels "injustice" whenever K. feels it and exclaims "Infernal nonsense!" whenever he does. With K., everyone feels sick in the dust of the Law Court offices and, with K., is only too glad to slam the door that keeps this embarrassing intermediate world at a distance. This too is the source of the endless misunderstandings which were revealed by the differing interpretations of the Trial. Owing to his identification with K., the reader experiences the events of the Trial in his own person; that is, in fact, the precise meaning of this "novel," for the basic situation of Joseph K., as a result of which he is arrested, is our own.

K. is never simply bad, he is always "a mixture." He desires the wife of the Law Court Attendant—and plans to obtain something by means of her. He seeks maternal comfort and aid from Fräulein Bürstner—and plans to take advantage of her. K. does nothing which is unexpected or out of the ordinary; in fact you might almost say that his behavior is "natural" and in a certain sense innocently childish, whereas what is required of him is something "learned," as Frau Grubach said.

On the other hand, it is clearly indicated, and is in fact constantly being urged upon K., that he should not behave as he actually does. Yet the tremendous stubbornness of his nature and of human nature in general—this slothfulness of the heart in the most threatening sense of the term—impedes all change or insight. A single sentence from the Trial might serve as a headline for K.'s entire life: "Before he fell asleep he thought for a little about his behavior, he was pleased with it, yet surprised that he was not still more pleased."

This problem comes to a head in the Whipper chapter, immediately after K.'s attempt to avert the punishment of the warders by bribery.

When the Whipper makes a cut at the warder Franz, "Then the shriek arose from Franz's throat, single and irrevocable, it did not seem to come from a human being but from some tortured instrument, the whole corridor rang with it, the whole building must hear it. 'Don't yell,' cried K., he was beside himself, he stood staring in the direction from which the clerks must presently come running, but he gave Franz a push, not

a violent one but violent enough to make the half-senseless man fall and convulsively claw at the floor with his hands."

After K. has slammed the door of the whipping chamber, the clerks come along, ask him what he wants, and go away again. And then K. falls into a dreamily oppressive state, a tired twilight mood. He is looking down into a dark courtyard, and a strange interior discussion takes place in his mind.

He is assailed by torment, a torment of guilt because he has not been able to prevent the whipping. Immediately he tries to tear out the evil thing by the roots. It is not his fault, Franz's shriek has destroyed everything. We may ask ourselves, and K. does in effect ask himself, how this shriek is supposed to have made the annulment of the penalty impossible when it is actually only an expression of the torture caused by the penalty. But "K. could not afford to let the attendants and possibly all sorts of other people arrive and surprise him in a scene with these creatures in the storeroom."

What we have here is not just one of K.'s many egoistical character traits; something more had happened on this occasion. Wherever the Intermediate World appears, the Trial appears—and that may involve examination. K. did not intervene, he did not prevent the execution of the penalty—whether it could, objectively, have been averted is beside the question—and he failed to do so for the crassest egoistical reasons, quite blatantly to preserve his own reputation. His whole reasoning, his whole line of argument for the liberation of the warders, is suddenly

unmasked; all at once he is guilty of the punishment of the warders in an entirely new sense, which has nothing to do with the fact that as a complainant before the Interrogation Commission he had actually brought about the punishment of the warders.

Once again, we observe the uncanny and illuminating ambiguity of the situation. If, as the Whipper said, the punishment is "just and inevitable," then the authorities are really in the ultimate analysis responsible, K.'s complaint works itself out within this whole system, and K. is really not "guilty" of the judgment. The action takes place exclusively in the legal sphere and the penalty cannot be charged to K.'s account. Since, however, the Whipper—in K.'s eyes, at any rate—also possesses a partial private freedom and is open to influence by K., even if only in the form of bribery, it follows that K. too is free within this system, in the sense that the penalty has been made dependent upon his conduct. And now, as if this situation was also somehow "intended" by the authorities, something happens that radically alters K.'s position. Franz's shriek deprives K. of the power to help the warders simply by using his checkbook. He is confronted by the consequences of his own intervention.

If he intervenes, he has to be prepared to risk his reputation. The liberation of the warders demands a genuine act of human commitment. Faced with this situation, K. repudiates the warder and slams the door. He has completely failed the test.

This incident makes it clear that it is possible to incur an obligation—e.g., a duty to intervene—even in a situa-

tion which in point of fact is beyond the scope of human intervention and interference. The illusion of free will is sufficient to create a valid moral responsibility.

So it is the consciousness of his own moral failure that is the real subject of his inner discussion; and its starting point is a feeling of torment.

K. takes the view that the sacrifice which the situation demanded should not really have been required of him. Yet there is something inside him that seems to desire nothing less than this sacrifice, and K.'s whole debate within himself has no other purpose than to silence this inner voice.

"If a sacrifice had been needed, it would almost have been simpler to take off his own clothes and offer himself as a substitute for the warders."

It is extremely startling to see this thought suddenly emerging in K.'s conscious mind. Although the argument that the Whipper would not have accepted him as a substitute serves the purpose of repressing this thought once again, we cannot help noticing how instinctively K. is already thinking "in terms of the system" and how profoundly he has really entered into the strictness and justice of the proceedings, which guarantee the immunity of the accused in relation to all the functionaries of the Court. It is this immunity that makes K.'s behavior possible in the first place, though it also entices him to expose himself, since there is no resistance against which he can regulate his conduct. It would almost appear as if this notion of sacrifice which springs up so quickly and is at once rejected might represent a crucial turning point in the proceedings. K.'s strange objection, "though of

course ordinary standards might not apply here either" supports this conjecture. Perhaps a way of escape from the Trial might have been found in this direction. If K. had offered himself to the Whipper as a substitute, would he not, by taking over the punishment in this way, have raised himself above the level of the proceedings of the Trial? Would he not by this action have transcended his status as an accused man and by this resolution have created an entirely new basis for his life?

Here again the point should be made that such an action, though astonishing, would have been in a sense altogether possible; it was by no means simply out of the question. The thought comes entirely from K.'s own mind; it occupies his attention and he discusses it with himself for quite a long time.

In the Law Court offices the girl and the official had gazed expectantly at K. as if something surprising might suddenly happen, and it almost seems as if at that moment they were waiting for something which usually plays a great part in all trials, but which in this case is never mentioned and appears never to have been considered at all—i.e., a confession.

The sacrifice that would have been involved if K. had offered himself as a substitute for the warders would have been more than a simple confession, but a confession would have been necessary as the basis of this act, and this would have been a confession of guilt, even if only of guilt for the punishment of the warders.

At the end of this inner discussion, K.'s moral failure is repeated. He says, "Even that action had not shut off all danger," and realizes, "It was a pity that he had given

Franz a push at the last moment." As always, K. has "dealt with" every aspect. "They were past help by this time, and the clerks might appear at any moment; but he made a vow not to hush up the incident and to deal trenchantly, so far as lay in his power, with the real culprits, the higher officials."

Previously, though rich in inner happenings, the Trial has always been self-contained; it has never broken out of the prescribed framework. The bizarre events of the Whipper scene find their parallel in other scenes which are no less extraordinary. But K.'s uneasiness on the following day shows quite clearly that he has not recovered from it, and that his experience with the warders preoccupies him more than the other events of the Trial. And then something uncanny happens, something monstrous and horrifying. As he passed the storeroom, "he could not resist opening the door. And what confronted him, instead of the darkness he had expected, bewildered him completely. Everything was still the same, exactly as he had found it on opening the door the previous evening. . . . The Whipper with his rod and the warders with all their clothes on were still standing there, the candle was burning on the shelf, and the warders immediately began to cry out: 'Sir!' At once K. slammed the door shut and then beat on it with his fists, as if that would shut it more securely. He ran almost weeping to the clerks. . . . 'Clear that storeroom out, can't you?' he shouted. 'We're being smothered in dirt!' " And then we are told, "He sat down for a few moments, for the sake of their company," and later, "went home, tired, his mind quite blank."

We have quoted this passage at length because it is instructive in every respect. It is a remarkable continuation of the inner discussion of the previous day. If any kind of doubt still remained as to whether K. had failed in his duty in this situation, that doubt is no longer tenable now. If K. had been surprised by the suddenness of Franz's shriek and had only slammed the door in his initial alarm, then a very generous, very kind Court might not find it necessary to count this particular "examination situation" against him and might order the examination to be repeated.

Perhaps it was not intended that the opportunity implicit in K.'s idea of sacrifice should be allowed to go by without use being made of it; if the same situation was offered to him once again and he was given time to think it over, perhaps he would seize the opportunity.

But if this repetition of the event is to bear the meaning we have suggested, how can such a practice possibly be reconciled with the basic presuppositions of the Trial? Is not this kind of repeat performance, especially staged, as it were, for K., in flat contradiction to the whole ethos of the Court? And what would become of the "objective side" of the Whipper scene? After all, the warders are not simply "philosophical fictions."

We can only answer these questions if we bear in mind the extraordinary ambiguity and equivocalness of these happenings, which are still, however, in our view by no means beyond the range of our understanding. There is no evidence that this repetition scene was "arranged" for K. It is by no means impossible that the punishment of the warders by the Whipper has to be

carried out on several different days, but that in spite of this the relationship between K. and the warders is also taken into account by the authorities. Justice would require that the warders should also be given the benefit of the chance that K. might ransom them by his self-offering, just as they had only been sentenced to their punishment as a result of his accusation in the first place. This means that the situation K. finds himself confronted with may be entirely "objective" in the sense that it is independent of K.'s subjective conception of the circumstances. Moreover, although, as on the first occasion, the situation may be, in subjective terms, beyond the range of K.'s power to exert any influence, the attitude he adopts towards it may still be the decisive factor on which the future course of the Trial will depend. We have seen how K. may be ethically responsible for an event whose occurrence is in itself necessary (and therefore in point of fact beyond the scope of his free will); in the same way an event can, in relation to K., be there "for him," although its occurrence is in itself necessary and it would happen even if K. was not required to take up an attitude towards it.

There is, however, one further aspect which demands our attention and which at first sight seems to be at variance with everything else. How are we to understand the extraordinary part that is played by "the door"? This was already a decisive factor when K. first visited the Law Court offices, and then as now the world that it cuts off from K. is very curiously located in the normal world. Then it was situated in the attics at the top of a tenement building; now it is in a storeroom. On both



(continued...)

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