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Article

The Dignity of Weapons

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Abstract
In this article, I wish to ask about the dignity of weapons, the kind of elevated worth weapons appear to have acquired despite (or because) of their role in the production of indignity, a worth which, perhaps not as paradoxically as it may otherwise appear, constitutes (or rather de-constitutes) human dignity. I shall not take Kant as my guide, though, but the other K, namely, Franz Kafka.

Keywords
weapons, death penalty, human dignity, Kafka

> What must man be, what is proper to man, the right of man proper to what is proper to man, the history of the right of man proper to what is proper to man for this machine not only not to be the instrument of what has been called for fifty years a crime against humanity but to be interpreted as a machine that serves the dignity of man?
>
> —Jacques Derrida[1]

It might be hard to believe these days, but "not all dignity is *human* dignity." Which certainly does not mean, as Michael Rosen explains, that, were it "asserting that plants," for instance, "have the same kind of dignity that humans do," the Federal Ethics

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty, Volume 1*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 193; the machine Derrida is here discussing is the guillotine.

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Committee would not be "claiming something laughable," God forbid. Only that it is possible that – Rosen says: "perhaps" – "plants have an intrinsic value to be defended too."[2] Concern for the environment and endangered species notwithstanding, the dignity of inanimate beings, more frequently, of positions – what used to be called the dignity of office (think: dignitaries) – and of non-human entities at large, seems remote from us, almost implausible, and difficult to imagine in such, well, dignified, times, I mean, terms. Still, if dignity can (and perhaps must) be found where it has *not* been formulated and conceptualized, it may very well be that it *is* found, where it seems less relevant, indeed, where it is most implausible. Thus, although "human history is a slaughter-bench," admits George Kateb, "the scene of uninterrupted crimes and atrocities, human dignity must be affirmed, even the dignity of those who assault the dignity of others through wrongdoing, and thereby injure their own dignity also, implausible as that notion may seem."[3] No doubt, the recent and "strikingly meteoric rise" of dignity in academic publishing has something to do with that imperative ("human dignity must be affirmed").[4] It demonstrates, in any case, a clear and, basically, exclusive concern with *human* dignity and with the question of human rights. As Kateb further puts it, "the subject of human dignity" (but note that Kateb does not really consider any other kind) "is the worth of human beings or their high rank, or even their special place in nature."[5] Which is why the "core idea" of dignity, "the core idea of human dignity is that on earth humanity is the greatest type of beings" (3). This superlative worth is what makes it unlikely we would recall, as Sam Moyn nonetheless recommends we do, that "as late as the 1930s, in tune with its millennial prior trajectory, dignity attached to a huge range of objects, humanity rare, and individual humanity extremely rare, among them."[6]

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2. Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 18–19.
3. George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 5.
4. Samuel Moyn, "The Secret History of Constitutional Dignity," *Yale Human Rights & Development Law Journal* XVII (2014), 64.
5. Kateb, *Human Dignity*, p. ix; and compare B.F. Skinner who sought to move us "beyond freedom and dignity," and who, marveling that "the amount of credit [read: dignity] a person receives is related in a curious way to the visibility of the causes of his behaviour," never questions the anthropocentric view of dignity (B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971], p. 49). Skinner did suggest a different focus ("a scientific analysis shifts both the responsibility and the achievement to the environment" [p. 30]), from which I ambivalently borrow an interest in "dangerous and painful things." "Our age is not suffering from anxiety," Skinner wrote with typical confidence, "but from the accidents, crimes, wars and other dangerous and painful things to which people are so often exposed" (20). He later quotes approvingly from the Supreme Court (today quite unimaginable) that "the power to confer or withhold unlimited benefit is the power to coerce or destroy" (p. 42).
6. Moyn, "The Secret History," 45; Moyn describes "the epoch-making reassignment of the concept from *groups* to *individuals*" at a time when "dignity still attached primarily to collective entities like workers and religious sacraments like marriage" (46). He also mentions how in some instances, "it was family or labor that was dignified" (ibid.); in an email exchange,

I will want to return to the object lesson dignity might have to teach us still, but before doing so, it seems important to acknowledge that "controversy about the meaning of dignity rules now," that "the theoretical disarray and political dispute around human dignity is so intense that the sole defense of its role available currently is on the slender grounds that it 'keeps agonists in conversation'."[7] It seems important, that is, to acknowledge that dignity is embattled, contested, that it itself has become something like a fighting word. One might even say, but it might be going too far, that dignity is or functions as a weapon in a larger theater of struggle, a global *Kampfplatz*. On another occasion, I would therefore have wanted to argue that dignity is akin to the proverbial last bullet. Or perhaps dignity is another name for name, in Hannah Arendt's famous account, a defensive weapon of sorts. For dignity is that by which one's life chances are improved, "just as a dog with a name has a better chance to survive than a stray dog who is just a dog in general."[8]

For the time being, I would begin by arguing that the tensions and conflicts that *surround* dignity today find their deeper, or more intrinsic, sources and resources in the concept itself as it has been philosophically formulated. Regardless of Immanuel Kant's actual role in the dissemination of the concept (and Moyn's objections to the part Kant has been made to play in the narrative of dignity's rise seem to me well taken), there is in the superlative element that adheres to dignity something that cannot but recall the original association made by Kant between dignity and sublimity ("that is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small," is the way Kant phrases it).[9] The sublime, it is well known, is articulated around a certain superiority, an incommensurability and an inadequacy (with respect to the mind), as well as a discrepancy (with respect to the senses), a discord between reason and the imagination, between pleasure and displeasure, attraction and repulsion. Memorably, when it comes to nature (as an object of fear), "it is mostly rather in its chaos or in its wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation, if only it allows a glimpse of magnitude and might, that it excites the ideas of the sublime."[10] If dignity and sublimity are partaking of a similar conflict, as Kant (and after him, Rosen) seems to show, it is probably nowhere better manifest than in George Kateb's assertion of this "pathetic fact," namely, that "the only enemies of human dignity

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Moyn kindly referred me to *Laborem exercens*, the 1981 John Paul II Papal encyclical, much of which is devoted to "the dignity of work" ("the dignity and right of those who work," but also the, as it were, inherent, "dignity of work"). I aim to consider the dignity of un-work, the undoing of work, the work of destruction.

7. Moyn, "The Secret History," 67; Moyn goes on to explain that "the practice of political combat" has made the concept of dignity close to useless. Yet, its appeal is perdurable, as is the contestation. Kateb, whose avowed "aim is to defend the idea of human dignity" (Kateb, *Human Dignity*, p. 1), identifies his own intervention as a "countercontention" to the barrage of criticisms launched at dignity (p. 4).
8. H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), p. 287.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), § 25, p. 134; and see Moyn, "The Secret History," 40; Rosen, *Dignity*, pp. 28–31.
10. Immanuel Kant, *Critique*, § 23, p. 130.

are human beings."[11] Just like the tension that inheres to the sublime, and regardless of the "violent obfuscation of the grounds on which dignity is built," conflict and opposition, contestation, are intrinsic to dignity.[12] Dignity cannot but be, as it were, steeped in *indignity*. As Ranjana Khanna phrases it,

> If dignity – inherent and incommensurable value and autonomy, as opposed to value, means, instrumentalization – is at the core of Kantian notions of humanness, it does not follow that it is an undeconstructible guarantor of justice. To measure dignity as the ground of moral action, or indeed of any notion of the subject and ontologization, is, rather, to perpetuate a fundamental problem in the concept of responsibility in the face of indignity.[13]

For these and other reasons, among which is the focus on law and justice to the detriment of means of enforcement (punishment, execution, destruction), it might be important to recall that Kant himself thought of power, of fearless warriors and "even war" as having "something sublime" about them.[14] And surely we can agree that what binds dignity to indignity today is often enough *weapons*. In a not untypical description, Adriana Cavarero thus explains that "the body undone (blown apart, torn to pieces) loses its individuality. The violence that dismembers it offends the ontological dignity that the human figure possesses and renders it unwatchable."[15] In what follows, I want to pursue these lines of thought and ask about the dignity of weapons, the kind of elevated worth weapons appear to have acquired despite (or because) of their role in the production of indignity, a worth which, perhaps not as paradoxically as it may otherwise appear, constitutes (or rather de-constitutes) human dignity. I will not take Kant as my guide, though, but the other K, namely, Franz Kafka.

I. Words and Swords

The honor (*Ehre*) of officers, if not quite the dignity of office, stands at one center of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," a story that takes place exclusively in a military, and colonial, context, and where the main characters are explicitly identified as military

11. Kateb, *Human Dignity*, p. 11.
12. Ranjana Khanna, "Indignity," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16(1) (Spring 2008), 56.
13. Khanna, "Indignity," 44.
14. Kant, *Critique*, § 28, p. 146; as the quote I placed in epigraph was meant to indicate, I will be adhering to Derrida's argument that we must attend to "those very numerous apparatuses for legally putting to death that men have ingeniously invented, throughout the history of humanity as history of techniques, techniques for policing and making war, military techniques but also medical, surgical, anesthesial techniques for administering so-called capital punishment" (Derrida, *The Death Penalty*, p. 2). Derrida recalls that for Kant "access to the death penalty is an access to the dignity of human reason and to the dignity of man . . . the death penalty marks the access to what is proper to man and to the dignity of reason or of human *logos* and *nomos*" (p. 8).
15. A. Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 9.

personnel (*Offizier*, *Kommandant*), with much attention given throughout to uniforms and martial gear.[16] The condemned man is himself a soldier (*Soldat*), "who had been condemned for disobedience and insulting behaviour towards his superior," a fact that seems to be omitted from many a critical reading (where he mostly appears, no doubt following Kafka's own language, as "the prisoner" or "the condemned man"). The lesson – which is also the death sentence, the words to be inscribed on the body of the accused – is after all "Honour [*Ehre*] thy superior!" (79). And it follows from military imperatives, as the traveler accurately understands ("he had to tell himself that this was a penal colony; that special measures were necessary here, and that they had to act along military lines to the last [*daß hier besondere Maßregeln notwendig waren und daß man bis zum letzten militärisch vorgehen mußte*]" [81]). More importantly, I think, the story testifies to the "monstrous literalization" Stanley Corngold attends to in Kafka, "the rhetorical equivalent of the political, where the political – in this our painful modernity – has come to mean the construction of types of men and women by the application of force and the constructive destruction of men and women as persons as good as dead: vermin, outlaws, rogues."[17] The history of this destruction, which here cannot be but the history of weapons (means of inscription and means of destruction, "the long one is for writing, and the short one sprays water to wash away the blood and keep the inscription clear at all times" [81]), does not have to be directly tied to the time of writing,[18] and yet there is room to reflect, as John Zilcosky persuasively does, on the fact that "Kafka's 1914 penal apparatus is not simply a train in disguise, but neither is it, as scholars have asserted, a planning machine, a phonograph, or even a new weapon from the First World War. As a symbol of mechanical violence, however, the machine's screeching wheels and vibrating frame connect it to an over-determined atmosphere of technological brutality that culminated in the Great War."[19]

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16. F. Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," trans. Joyce Crick, in Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 75; further references to the story will be given parenthetically in the text.
17. S. Corngold, "Allotria and Excreta in 'In the Penal Colony'," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Franz Kafka – New Edition*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010), p. 112.
18. Kafka did later write to his editor, by way of clarifying "In the Penal Colony," that "the painfulness is not peculiar to it alone but that our times in general and my own time as well have also been painful and continue to be, and my own even more consistently than the times" (Letter to Kurt Wolff, October 11, 1916, in *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston [New York: Schocken Books, 1977], p. 189).
19. J. Zilcosky, "'Samsa war Reisender': Trains, Trauma, and the Unreadable Body," *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, eds. (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), p. 191; Ernst Pawel hyperbolically concurs, asserting that Kafka's "fantasies, running only a few decades ahead of his time, evoked the impersonal twentieth-century technology of torture with the same graphic precision with which he had described the intricacies of the mechanical planes and trimmers in his insurance reports. And the figure of the head torturer himself is a prescient portrait of Adolf Eichmann, drawn from life" (E. Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* [New York: Vintage, 1985], p. 328).

No doubt Kafka is better remembered for his interest in law and justice than for his preoccupation with war or destruction. And yet, if it is true that "the form of the law in general is inseparable from an abstract, self-destructive machine," this is also because the mechanical in Kafka is inseparable from conflict and war, with wounding and with destruction.[20] More broadly, Kafka was relentlessly "confronted with that reality of ours which realizes itself theoretically, for example, in modern physics, and practically in the technology of modern warfare."[21] It is, on the other hand, hardly news that Kafka was interested in weapons, himself "a devotee of the apparatus" (75), of a class of objects – "receptacles of the forgotten" – that may have to be extensively rethought because of him.[22] "I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us," he famously wrote to Oskar Pollak. "If the book we're reading doesn't wake us with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? . . . A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us [*ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns*]."[23] In a further, no less significant, expansion, "weapon" becomes "exactly what [Kafka] calls his illness: *eine Waffe*."[24] Not unlike the commandant himself, perhaps, about whom the traveler asks: "Did he unite everything in himself, then? Was he soldier, judge, engineer, chemist, draughtsman all in one?" (79), Kafka had "a sense of dismantling that is simultaneously that of a judge and that of an engineer."[25] A few months after completing "In the Penal Colony," at any rate, Kafka was still thinking about weapons. In what can only be described as a strange and abbreviated rendering of "The Metamorphosis," he wrote the remarkable story of a becoming-sword, another "strange molecular or machinic system" and one of those "technical inventions" attended to by Deleuze and Guattari.[26]

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20. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 48; engaging with Kleist's "influence" on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari assert that "Kleist's question isn't, 'What is a minor literature and, further, a political and collective literature?' but rather, 'What is a literature of war?' This is not completely alien to Kafka, but it is not exactly his question" (p. 55). Not completely. Not exactly.
21. W. Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka," trans. Harry Zohn, in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Schocken, 2007), pp. 142–3.
22. The phrase "receptacles of the forgotten" is used by Benjamin to describe Kafka on animals, but it seems appropriate to consumptive instruments of oblivion as well (Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 132).
23. F. Kafka, letter to Oskar Pollak, January 27, 1904 in *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 37.
24. Jeff Fort, *The Imperative to Write: Destitutions of the Sublime in Kafka, Blanchot, and Beckett* (New York: Fordham, 2014), p. 141; in his own compelling reading of "In the Penal Colony," which attends to the transformation of the machine into "a kind of wrathful and ravenous animal" equipped with the most emblematic of weapons, teeth (115–16), Fort explains that the story "reveals the violent ground of a projected transcendent justice as being, at the same time, *the grounding violence of the sublime drive to write* – or of the drive to write sublimely" (p. 104).
25. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 46.
26. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 37; "Kafka distinguishes two series of technical inventions: those that tend to restore natural communication by triumphing over distances and bringing

"Since my awakening," the narrator says recalling Gregor Samsa's own, "I had felt something preventing me from bending back my head, and I now groped for it with my hand. My friends, who had grown somewhat calmer, had just shouted 'Be careful, don't hurt yourself!' when my hand closed behind my head on the hilt of a sword."[27] The sword, "a large, ancient knight's sword with a cross-shaped handle," turns out to have been inserted in the back of the narrator, "driven with such incredible precision between my skin and my flesh that it had caused no injury. Nor was there a wound at the spot on my neck where the sword had penetrated" although "there was an opening large enough to admit the blade, but dry and showing no trace of blood." Indeed, by the time the friends pull out the sword, "I did not bleed, and the opening of my neck closed until no mark was left save a scarcely discernible slit." The sword, "a splendid weapon," becomes an external possession as easily as it had become a part of the narrator's body. "'Here is your sword,' laughed my friends." The narrator then receives "the splendid weapon" with a measure of admiration. "Crusaders might have used it." Obviously, this is and this is not about the sword, about the nature of weaponry. I would venture that the text nevertheless directs our attention to one of these "technical machines," that Kafka was and was not interested in, that he had and did not have admiration for. "Kafka had no admiration for simple technical machines, but he well knew that technical machines were only the indexes of a more complex assemblage that brings into coexistence engineers and parts, materials and machined personnel, executioners and victims, the powerful and the powerless, in a single, collective ensemble."[28] Hence, there are questions to be asked (one long and intricate question, really), for violence did occur and weapons have been carelessly wielded. In its impressive summary of Actor-Network-Theory (with a touch of Object Oriented Ontology), Kafka's elaborate question seems particularly (if also funnily) *indignant*. "Who tolerates this gadding about of ancient knights in dreams, irresponsibly brandishing their swords, stabbing innocent sleepers who are saved from serious injury only because the weapons in all likelihood glance off living bodies, and also because there are faithful friends knocking at the door, prepared to come to their assistance?"

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people together (the train, the car, the airplane), and those that represent the vampirish revenge of the phantom where there is reintroduced 'the ghostly element between people' (the post, the telegraph, the telephone, wireless telegraphy)" (p. 30). But Deleuze and Guattari seem to think poorly of the apparatus of the Penal Colony. It is, they say, "too transcendental, too isolated and reified, and too abstract" (pp. 39–40; but see pp. 86–7 for a different point of view).

27. F. Kafka, January 19, 1915 entry, trans. Martin Greenberg, in Franz Kafka, *The Diaries 1910–1923*, Max Brod, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 385–6; all further quotations are from page 386; and compare how "In the 'Penal Colony,' the machine seems to have a strong degree of unity and the man enters completely into it" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 8).

28. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 57; and later: "And certainly, in Kafka's work, it is not only a question of technical machines in themselves or of the juridical statement in itself; rather, the technical machine furnishes the model of a form of content that is applicable to the whole social field, whereas the juridical statement furnishes the model for a form of expression applicable to any statement" (p. 83).

II. Welcome to the (Killing) Machine

"Kafka's fictive worlds are worlds of things."[29] From the outset, in "In the Penal Colony," there are indeed lots of things at play (at work, or at war). There are, for instance, chains (heavy chain, small chains, connecting chains) and there are ladders; there is oil and grease and a bucket of water; a towel and a wicker chair, excavated earth and an accompanying rampart; I also counted "two delicate ladies' handkerchiefs," which keep being brought up (75, 95), and a few uniforms ("too heavy for the tropics" [ibid]); at least one "tight uniform, weighed down with epaulettes and hung with cords" (77); there are other articles of clothing as well, shirts and trousers, some worn and taken off, some slashed up, some treated meticulously; and there is "this electrically heated bowl" (83), which may well be part of the machine, just as that "screwdriver on a screw here or there" (77). But there are more immediately recognizable weapons too: a rifle, a knife, a bayonet, a whip, a short sword (in its scabbard, with its belt, later broken into pieces). And then there is the *pièce de résistance* (more adequately, pièce de offense), namely, "the apparatus," which, for the officer at least, should elicit quite precisely a sense of human dignity (in German, *Menschenwürde*). As he tells the traveler, in a language that has become familiar since the invention of the guillotine at least, "in the light of your profound insight, you consider it to be the most human, most humane [*menschenwürdigste*]; you also admire this machinery" (89).

As surprising as it may seem (this is Kafka we are reading), the humanity of the machine is inscribed throughout. Surely, it is a mechanical object, and most assuredly it is a military weapon, a means of execution, an instrument of destruction ("Your mind is trapped in European attitudes," says the officer to the traveler, "perhaps out of principle you oppose the death-penalty in general and this kind of execution by machine in particular" [88]). It is much more than that since it seems to have been integrated by the old commandant in "the organization of the entire penal colony" (76). But the machine is also something that is repeatedly said to work of its own accord, autonomously. "Up to this point it needs to be adjusted by hand, but from now on it will work quite of its own accord" (76, 88, 96).

Everything is therefore as if we were being asked to witness the dignity, the all-too human dignity, of the machine; at the very least to reflect on its humanity. As if we too, we readers, could become, like the officer, devotees, enthusiastic followers (in German, *Anhänger*) of the apparatus and of its worth, its dignity (75). It is true that the machine appears to be made of parts, each strangely akin to body parts (upper parts, lower parts, pulsating parts), parts that have even acquired "popular names" for themselves (76). "The lower part is called the Bed; the upper part is called the Marker, and this pulsating [*schwebende*, floating or hovering] part between them is called the Harrow" (76). Why the Harrow? "The name fits," says the officer as he goes into more details. "The needles are arranged as spikes as in a harrow, and the entire part moves like a harrow" (77). More important is the way in which the machine and its proliferating parts (brass rods, strips of steel, electric batteries, wheels and cogwheels, countless straps, two kinds of needles,

29. Malynne Sternstein, "Laughter, Gesture, and Flesh: Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony,'" *Modernism/modernity* 8(2) (April 2001), 318.

pipes and channels for the mingling of fluids, and a drainage pipe) are explicitly said to "correspond" to a human shape. "As you see," the officer says, "the Harrow corresponds [*entspricht*] to the shape of a human being; this is the harrow for the upper torso; these are the harrows for the legs; only this small spike is intended for the head. Is that clear?" (80). The machine finds its accomplishment in a certain humanity, in the way in which it enfolds the human in an unmistakable image of sexual intercourse, where arms and hands, straps, heads, mouths and fluids mix, mimic, and mingle, easily as well as forcefully, in a space of indistinction.[30] "The condemned man is placed on the Bed," which is "entirely covered with a layer of padding . . . The condemned man is laid on this padding face-down, naked, of course; straps for his hands are here, for his feet here, for his neck here, to bind him fast. Here at the head of the Bed, where the man, as I said, is at first lying face-down, you have this small stump of felt which can easily be adjusted so that it is forced straight into the man's mouth" (77). One could very well find oneself soon "screaming and biting his tongue" (ibid.).

By the end of the story, the intimacy of man and machine (unambiguously gendered as male and female) becomes perfectly manifest. "The officer himself had turned towards the machine. If it had been clear before that he was expert in the ways of the machine [*daß er die Maschine gut verstand*], now it was almost astounding to see how he dealt with it and how it obeyed him [*wie er mit ihr umging und wie sie gehorchte*]" (96). Soon, the machine begins to operate on its own again. It is no doubt a peculiar sort of being. That must be one of the reasons why Jane Bennett counts "In the Penal Colony" among those "tales that confound the boundary between animate and inanimate."[31] But is it worth the dignity the text clearly grants it? We are, as we already saw, repeatedly told that the machine acts on its own. So much so that by the time the officer and the machine come together – for they do – it is unclear which of the two is acquiescing to the imperative to "Be Just!" and how death (and destruction) constitutes its logical conclusion. Commenting on dignity, B.F. Skinner asserted that "we stand in awe of the inexplicable, and it is therefore not surprising that we are likely to admire behaviour more as we understand it less. And, of course, what we do not understand we attribute to autonomous man."[32] But what are we to make of an autonomous machine?

It is no secret that these have long been invented. Grégoire Chamayou calls them "political automata" (others speak of "lethal autonomous robotics") and he credits Theodor Adorno rather than Kafka for his foresight.[33] Yet Chamayou, whose meticulous

30. "The literary antecedents of *The Penal Colony* have been persuasively traced to *Le Jardin des Supplices*, a rather lurid 1899 novel by the French playwright Octave Mirbeau that combines a sado-anarchist assault on bourgeois morals with explicit sexual imagery" (Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason*, p. 327).
31. J. Bennett, "Kafka, Genealogy, and the Spiritualization of Politics," *The Journal of Politics* 56(3) (August 1994), 654; Bennett goes on to ask: "who can be called to account for the machine?" (661) and laments the absence of "any moral condemnation of the machine or of torture as a form of punishment" (662).
32. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, p. 56.
33. G. Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: New Press, 2015), p. 208.

analyses I rely on in the remaining pages, also keeps the actuality of such machines suspended, and precisely when he invokes "human dignity." Chamayou writes that "to endow mechanical agents with the same right to kill that is enjoyed by combatants in warfare would be tantamount to setting homicide on the same level as the destruction of a purely material object, and that would certainly constitute a radical negation of human dignity."[34] Writing as if that did not already happen, Chamayou nonetheless elaborates on Adorno:

> Having emphasized that in this armed violence that involves no combat, the enemy is now relegated to the role of a ''patient and [a] corpse'' to which death is applied in the form of ''technical and administrative measures,'' he goes on to say: ''Satanically, indeed, more initiative is in a sense demanded here than in old-style war: it seems to cost the subject his whole energy to achieve subjectlessness.'' The nightmare that takes shape on the horizon is one in which weapons themselves become the only detectable agents of the violence of which they are the means.[35]

So what is a political automaton? What is the machine, the weapon Kafka is describing? "Admittedly, it is hard work" (84). It is a machine that is at once judge and executioner, jury and educator, inscription and execution; a "mechanism that is arranged according to the design that the sentence requires" (82), a machine that "can be programmed to respect the law"[36] and that once operative, signifies by the utmost necessity that "guilt is always beyond question" (80), which is true for all involved, including for the witness. "It's very elaborate," says the traveler, "but I can't decipher it" (82). Perhaps it is because "the weapon and the combatant, the instrument and the agent, the thing and the person become strangely fused into a single entity without a status."[37] Or worse, for "in the last analysis, when the lethal decision is purely automatic, the only human agent directly identifiable as the efficient cause of death would turn out to be the victim himself, who, as a result of making inappropriate physical movements, was unfortunate enough to set off the automatic mechanism that results in his own elimination."[38]

Chamayou makes clear that we are becoming more and more familiar with the "apparatus" Kafka described in "In the Penal Colony," for what Kafka appears to have heard and discerned in the tradition is the possibility of a very intelligent machine, one that would be deemed worthy of respect for its superiority, an apparatus full of human dignity

34. Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, p. 209; it would, and I would venture that it has. Unless one grants dignity to death and wound by "collateral damage," that is. Oh, "the look of transfiguration from the suffering face" (p. 87) or, as Kafka also puts it, "understanding dawns upon even the most stupid" (p. 84), as stupid as an intelligent machine.
35. Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, p. 206; quoting Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. Adorno himself credited Kafka, of course, for having foreseen "the false abolition of death" brought about by technical and administrative means (T. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott [London: Verso, 2005], p. 233).
36. Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, p. 208.
37. Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, p. 210.
38. Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, p. 211.

that would be superior to the superior species itself.[39] Now what could that machine be if not the dream a genial officer, another polymath (or group thereof) who promises the war to end all wars, the ultimate and superlatively superior weapon, the final and technologically guaranteed preservation of dignity for all? What could it be if not the superweapon?[40]

39. "There was no far-sightednesss or 'prophetic vision.' Kafka listened to tradition, and he who listens hard does not see" (Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka," p. 143).
40. H. Bruce Franklin, *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).