

# KAFKA'S *ZURAU APHORISMS*

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## NUMBER ONE

*Der wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist, sondern knapp über dem Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt stolpern zu machen, als begangen zu werden.*<sup>1</sup>

The true way is along a rope that is not spanned high in the air, but only just above the ground. It seems intended more to cause stumbling than to be walked along. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The true path is along a rope, not a rope suspended way up in the air, but rather only just over the ground. It seems more like a tripwire than a tightrope. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Interpreting aphorisms is stupid because you can't exhaust their meaning and reducing them to "meanings" destroys them. They are aphorisms because they make meaning by standing apart

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<sup>1</sup> Kafka extracted these aphorisms himself, from journals he wrote between 1917 and 1919. The order and numbering are Kafka's. Eight of the aphorisms were written later, in 1920 or so, and do not occur in the original notebooks. Kafka took up residence with his sister Ottla in Zurau, a small town in northern Bohemia, shortly after being diagnosed with tuberculosis in early September, 1917. It seems likely most of the aphorisms were composed at Zurau, even though some material does originate later. By all accounts, this sojourn of eight months was the happiest period in Kafka's life. Sources: *The Zurau Aphorisms*, trans. Geoffrey Brock & Michael Hofmann (New York: Schocken, 2006); *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Ernst Kaiser & Eithne Wilkins (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1991).

and intimating a context, and that only to the extent as is necessary for them to be at all intelligible. But refusing to interpret aphorisms is stupid too, because this is to refuse to read them at all. Aphorisms have to be played like pieces of music.

In this case, the point seems to be that there's a way to know whether or not you are on the true path, whatever that is supposed to be or wherever it's supposed to be leading you. If the pathway feels shaky, it's the right one.

Why is the rope low? If it were high, you would have to stay on it, whereas a low rope you can walk away from whenever you like or, more importantly, by an oversight. You can also blunder over the true way by oversight, tripping and falling over it rather than from it. Perhaps the true way is often misperceived as an obstacle? Or do people trip over it because they're looking for it in the wrong place, up high?

### NUMBER TWO

*Alle menschlichen Fehler sind Ungeduld, ein vorzeitiges Abbrechen des Methodischen, ein scheinbares Einfählen der scheinbaren Sache.*

All human errors are impatience, the premature breaking off of what is methodical, an apparent fencing in of the apparent thing. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

All human errors stem from impatience, a premature breaking off of a methodical approach, an ostensible pinning down of an ostensible object. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Impatience is the *only* cause of human error. This means no human error cannot ultimately be traced back to anything but impatience. Impatience is a topic Kafka returns to throughout the aphorisms.

Why be impatient? It suggests the desire to be done and to move on is greater than the desire for the correct result; and that, as a method becomes more thorough, and therefore presumably more accurate, it becomes correspondingly more exasperating to use.

Method is designed to exhaust the possibilities, to miss nothing; taking absolutely everything into account is the key to

reasonable planning and understanding, and at the same time it's a maddening exercise in frustration. You begin to realize people don't use words like "exhaust" just by chance when they talk about this.

But then, doesn't the thinker care at all about the result? He must, and yet he seems too content to plod methodically on—unless of course he really only loves the method, and is disinclined to set much stock in results.

Ostensible objects—they may be illusory or they may be able to be constituted in a variety of ways: the flower and the bee may be two objects from one point of view and only one object from another. It isn't just a matter of labelling an object, but of distinguishing the boundaries of each object.

Kafka seems preoccupied with methodical procedures, especially with all the ways they can go wrong, but nothing ends. The error isn't an end nor does it finish anything, but it marks the point in the development of a line of inquiry beyond which nothing useful can be expected.

The method defines what constitutes an error, but in general, error is abandoning method (usually without noticing, like falling off the rope in Number One). But how well does the method do when it comes to providing a satisfactory notion of success? The method is designed to identify and avoid *error*, and it may be that it can only define success in terms of scarcity of error; that minimization of error (accuracy) is equivalent to truth is taken for granted.

Error is breaking off method prematurely, but how do you know when to break off method maturely?

Error arises when one breaks off method prematurely, because this leads to an inessential understanding based on mere appearances. One settles for what seems to be true, and then reasons from that appearance. Kafka's fiction is replete with examples of this.

From this, we may infer that truth, for Kafka, is less a result and more a way of remaining true, by patient application of method.

### NUMBER THREE

*Es gibt zwei menschliche Hauptsünden, aus welchen sich alle andern ableiten: Ungeduld und Lässigkeit. Wegen der Ungeduld sind sie aus dem*

*Paradiese vertrieben worden, wegen der Lässigkeit kehren sie nicht zurück. Vielleicht aber gibt es nur eine Hauptsünde: die Ungeduld. Wegen der Ungeduld sind sie vertrieben worden, wegen der Ungeduld kehren sie nicht zurück.*

There are two main human sins, from which all the others derive: impatience and indolence. It was because of impatience that they were expelled from paradise; it is because of indolence that they do not return. Yet perhaps there is only one major sin: impatience. Because of impatience they were expelled, because of impatience they do not return. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

There are two cardinal human vices, from which all the others derive their being: impatience and carelessness. Impatience got people evicted from Paradise; carelessness kept them from making their way back there. Or perhaps there is only one cardinal vice: impatience. Impatience got people evicted, and impatience kept them from making their way back. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Kafka cancelled this aphorism, perhaps in favor of Number Two, which seems to be an extension of the line of reasoning evident here.

Impatience means being unwilling to wait, but the fruit of the tree of knowledge wasn't prohibited for a limited time only; it was forbidden forever and altogether, so how is the Fall a crime of impatience? If we assume the Fall was a crime of impatience, wouldn't we also have to assume that Adam and Eve mistook God's permanent ban for a temporary delay? If so, then that mistake sets up the impatience which leads to the transgression, making that confusion, rather than the act of disobedience, the origin of sin. However, it is for the disobedience they were punished, unless we assume that the confusion is included somehow in the punishment as well, even if it isn't mentioned. This doesn't seem to be Kafka's point, so perhaps he cancelled this aphorism not only because of the superfluity of indolence to his idea, but also because the Fall is out of place in it as well.

Perhaps, by impatience, Kafka means taking the rules too lightly. Adam and Eve had only one rule. You would think they could have remembered it. But, if you have to live with many rules, while you may not remember them all in particular, you are

constantly aware of the existence of rules, and so you might develop a reflex causing you to check for a rule before undertaking certain kinds of actions. Someone with only one rule to follow doesn't really live according to rule in the usual sense, and might well be more likely to forget it than someone bound by many rules.

In the second aphorism, impatience is failure to follow method. Methods are caught in a double bind; on the one hand, they have to take all relevant possibilities into account, while, on the other hand, in order to function, they have to reach a conclusion that isn't arbitrary. Where the possibilities are very numerous, it becomes more and more difficult not to set an arbitrary end to methodical operations.

Then—going back. This means that the expulsion from paradise is not permanent. But, from identifying impatience as the main, the only, human sin, it doesn't follow necessarily that patience will restore paradise. In this aphorism, Kafka only says that impatience and paradise are mutually exclusive. The first aphorism speaks of a “true way;” if that isn't also the “way back,” I don't see what else it could be. Perhaps the first aphorism explains that patience is the true way, the true way back; this would make going back the non-arbitrary result of the method, unless patience itself is paradise.

Paradise is not endless procedure, unless paradise is the trial. Is Bloch patient? Or is he no longer waiting for anything? Is faith just waiting? Is patience possible where there is no anticipation of a result? Or perhaps patience is only the refusal to act, despite a strong impatience.

#### NUMBER FOUR

*Viele Schatten der Abgeschiedenen beschäftigen sich nur damit, die Fluten des Tötenflusses zu belecken, weil er von uns herkommt und noch den salzigen Geschmack unserer Meere hat. Vor Ekel sträubt sich dann der Fluß, nimmt eine rückläufige Strömung und schwemmt die Toten ins Leben zurück. Sie aber sind glücklich, singen Danklieder und streicheln den Empörten.*

Many shades of the departed are occupied solely in licking at the waves of the river of death because it flows from our direction and still has the salty taste of our seas. Then the river rears back in disgust, the current flows the opposite way and brings the dead

drifting back into life. But they are happy, sing songs of thanksgiving, and stroke the indignant waters. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Many of the shades of the departed busy themselves entirely with lapping at the waters of the Acheron, because it comes from us and still carries the salt tang of our seas. This causes the river to coil with revulsion, and even to reverse its course, and so to wash the dead back to life. They are perfectly happy, and sing choruses of gratitude, and caress the indignant river. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

This one I find both especially troubling and especially mystifying.

The river of death comes from us. It would not be inconsistent with what seems to me to be the tenor of Kafka's thinking to think of mourning and grief as a way of driving the dead off and emphasizing the barrier between life and death, for all that they appear to originate in a desire to avoid a separation. One the one hand, no one wants to be separated from the lost one, but retaining the corpse can only increasingly underscore the loss; the body has to be put away in order to set the memory free for safekeeping.

The topic of the aphorism seems specifically to be the nature of the difference between alive and dead. I'm reluctant to think of the river as death itself because it seems to be only a part or element of death. Hofmann translates "Totenfluss" as Acheron; the underworld has rivers, or one crosses rivers to reach it, but the underworld is not just a river. The barrier between life and death is not hard in all places; in some ways the barrier is hard, like the surface of the earth between the domain of mortals and the classical underworld. In other ways, however, the barrier is soft, more like water, in that someone believed dead for one or another reason, absence or catalepsy, may turn out to be alive after all. People frequently continue to see their lost ones, owing to a kind of psychological persistence of vision.

We have the avidity of the dead, the bathetic miracle of their restoration, a kind of stunt, and the indignation and disgust of the river. The river carries the dead away from life, no matter how people may cling to the dead; then it carries the dead back again, not in response to the petitions of the living, but in disgust and indignation.

The river seems to be giving the dead what they want, but their activity seems mindless. Only the reservation that many, but not all, engage in licking the river suggests otherwise, and the suggestion seems unimportant to me. If the river is giving the dead what they want, they receive it not because they deserve it, but because the river is exasperated with them and it rejects them in a spasm of impatience.

The yearning of the dead for life is unseemly. I don't think this is because Kafka thinks it is unseemly to love life, but only to cling to half-measures, the dead licking the river for the taste of life, and so it's better to restore them to life entire.

## NUMBER FIVE

*Von einem gewissen Punkt an gibt es keine Rückkehr mehr. Dieser Punkt ist zu erreichen.*

Beyond a certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

From a certain point on, there is no more turning back. That is the point that must be reached. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Hofmann makes the second sentence a distinct imperative, while Kaiser/Wilkins allows for the idea that this point is not stumbled across, that it has to be reached, which might mean it will not come to you.

This is certainly one of the most important and well-known of the aphorisms. It is interesting to think of this as an extension of the previous aphorism; it brings to mind those other dead, not included among the "many," who do not lap at the river of life and are not brought back ... *rückläufige Strömung und schwemmt die Toten ins Leben zurück* ... the particle *rück* repeats here and in *Rückkehr* above. Perhaps they've reached that point.

In the third aphorism, Kafka writes that mankind is not allowed to go back to paradise, *kehren sie nicht zurück*. This split verb is the same noun as is employed above: *Rückkehr*.

The point of no return is not passed, but only reached. There's no indication that one goes on past this point, but the point is not reached if one can still go back. From one point of view, this

point could be like the South Pole; leaving in any direction one goes North. Leaving this point in any direction would be going back, which would mean one must remain. On the other hand, it might be possible simply to leave that point without going back. Going back is possible up to this point, but not beyond. It may be the moment of unbreakable commitment, but I think the meaning is less occasional and more fundamental to experience than that.

He may be discussing the genesis of the present moment as an irreducible difference from the past. In that case, this would be the moment the new appears, or a sort of natural selection. So the path would be like Herakleitos' river, with an added imperative and the possibility of not quite managing to reach this becoming.

### NUMBER SIX

*Der entscheidende Augenblick der menschlichen Entwicklung ist immerwährend. Darum sind die revolutionären geistigen Bewegungen, welche alles Frühere für richtig erklären, im Recht, denn es ist noch nichts geschehen.*

The decisive moment in human evolution is perpetual. That is why the revolutionary spiritual movements that declare all former things worthless are in the right, for nothing has yet happened. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The decisive moment of human development is continually at hand. This is why those movements of revolutionary thought that declare everything preceding to be an irrelevance are correct—because as yet nothing has happened. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

The stinger is in the last clause, which seems to deflate everything that comes before it. However, the spirit of the aphorism is plainly in sympathy with revolution, so that deflation doesn't seem to be the intended effect.

I think this is a statement of the messianic point of view; everything is preparatory to the arrival of the judgement, which is not happening yet, but which might happen at any moment. If the decision hasn't come yet, it is not because the moment has been withheld. It is always the right time for the decision. Time never resists or impedes it.

If human error is always impatience, and impatience is understood to mean acting prematurely, then—assuming that the ideas of one aphorism are meant to carry over into another (and we shouldn't assume that, because it shouldn't be taken for granted that Kafka had a system in mind)—that would mean human error is the attempt to act decisively, or simply stated, to act. This would mean all human activity is error.

What about animal activity? Many of Kafka's characters are animals, and their activity seems no less erroneous, so it doesn't seem that his choice of animal characters should be considered an escape from error.

If all activity is error, and action is unavoidable, then error is unavoidable. I don't think this is Kafka's meaning.

The real crux of this aphorism is Kafka's affirmation of the idea that the past is not relevant where change is concerned. The moment in which things change is now. What is called the routine operation of things is not change but the circulation of a set of familiar variables from a closed repertory. Change is the appearance of a new variable, and nothing new can arise merely by the extension or rearrangement of the old.

## NUMBER SEVEN

*Eines der wirksamsten Verführungsmittel des Bösen ist die Aufforderung zum Kampf.*

One of the most effective means of seduction that Evil has is the challenge to struggle. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

One of the most effective seductions of Evil is the call to struggle. [Hofmann]

## COMMENTARY

The Hofmann translation appends the eighth aphorism, “It is like the struggle with women, which ends up in bed,” to the seventh, but I want to look at the seventh alone. It is interesting to note that both translators chose to retain the capitalization of Evil.

The struggle with evil, the idea that evil must be struggled with, is part of its seduction. The image of the good that this implies is that of effortless innocence. It does not seem that Kafka believes one can become innocent, at least, not by any effort with

innocence for a goal. His protagonists struggle with the Court and the Castle, but they invent much of the struggle, and much of it is a matter of opinion, or point of view. This may be why so much of Kafka's fiction describes a pantomime of conflict by a solitary figure.

Struggle could be a kind of sloth: the struggle appears to act or to work, but achievements in a struggle are always mysterious. This idea of struggle couldn't be more diametrically unlike Hitler's "kampf." Someone struggles, but the situation keeps changing. Who can determine winners and losers?

If all human sin is impatience, then Evil might mean the inclination to impatience. If so, then impatience and struggle may be the same thing. The messiah doesn't come to struggle, but to end struggle.

### NUMBER EIGHT

*Er ist wie der Kampf mit Frauen, der im Bett endet.*

It is like the struggle with women, which ends in bed.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

#### COMMENTARY

Hofmann's translation is identical, except that he chooses to begin less formally—"it's."

The most conspicuous thing in this brief line, "struggle," is not the most important thing about it. I don't think Kafka is putting on a worldly, caddish air, suggesting that women seduce men they've already decided they want to sleep with by putting up false resistance. Evil doesn't seduce people by offering them phoney struggles; the struggle is real. A cad would say that the struggle is won when the woman is bedded, but I think Kafka is saying that the struggle is the end, that is, the intention, and the bed. It's not that the struggler becomes evil as he struggles, resorting to cheating or becoming increasingly ruthless; it's that the struggle is the evil.

### NUMBER NINE/TEN

*A. ist sehr aufgeblasen, er glaubt, im Guten weit vorgeschritten zu sein, da er, offenbar als ein immer verlockender Gegenstand, immer mehr*

*Versuchungen aus ihm bisher ganz unbekannten Richtungen sich ausgesetzt fühlt.*

A. is very puffed up, he thinks he is far advanced in goodness since, obviously as an object that is ever seductive, he feels himself exposed to ever more temptations from directions hitherto unknown to him. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

A. is terribly puffed up, he considers himself very advanced in goodness, since he feels himself magnetically attracting to himself an ever greater array of temptations from quarters with which he was previously wholly unacquainted. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This is the ninth of the Kaiser/Wilkins aphorisms, while, in Hofmann, it is the first half of the tenth, the preceding being numbered eight and nine, and consisting of an aphorism (see next post) not found in Kaiser/Wilkins at all. Hofmann's tenth unites ninth and tenth Kaiser/Wilkins.

The idea of seduction is sustained with what seems like a familiar sort of a warning, pointing out that pride in one's virtuous attainments is still vanity. His sin of vanity is however prompted by the great many temptations he vanquishes, which shows how victory in the struggle against the seductions of evil is a false victory.

But A. is not resisting seduction, he's the seductive one.

#### NUMBER ELEVEN

*Die richtige Erklärung ist aber die, daß ein großer Teufel in ihm Platz genommen hat und die Unzahl der kleineren herbeikommt, um dem Großen zu dienen.*

The proper explanation is however this: that a great devil has taken up residence in him and countless throngs of smaller ones come along to serve the great one. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The true explanation for his condition, however, is that a great devil has taken up residence within him, and an endless stream of smaller devils and deviltons are coming to offer the great one their services. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

I don't see where Hofmann gets "devils and deviltons." Kafka speaks only of "kleineren," little ones. You see this all the time in versions of Kafka; people often want to doll him up with gargoyles and theatrical grotesquery for some reason. They want their Kafka "wet," not "dry."

A. is the seductive one because he is actually playing host to the greater evil. The foreign-ness of the lesser devils he mentioned earlier is part of this evil; they appear foreign to A. because he preserves his goodness by pretending to be a stranger to all evil. By refusing to allow evil to have any place in him or part of him, he inadvertently cultivates a greater devil.

The lesser evils are drawn by the greater, and they seem to be the ones seduced into struggle with A. The struggle with women ends with both combatants in bed, not just one. The evil do not stand outside evil. Evil is never other.

### INTERCALARY APHORISM

*Eine stinkende Hündin, reichliche Kindergebärerin, stellenweise schon faulend, die aber in meiner Kindheit mir alles war, die in Treue unaufhörlich mir folgt, die ich zu schlagen mich nicht überwinden kann, vor der ich aber, selbst ihren Atem scheuend, schrittweise nach rückwärts weiche und die mich doch, wenn ich mich nicht anders entscheide, 'in den schon sichtbaren Mauerwinkel drängen wird, um dort auf mir und mit mir gänzlich zu verwesen, bis zum Ende ehrt es mich?—das Eiter- und Wurm-Fleisch ihrer Zunge an meiner Hand.*

A smelly bitch that has brought forth plenty of young, already rotting in places, but that to me in my childhood meant everything, who continue [sic] to follow me faithfully everywhere, whom I am quite incapable of disciplining, but before whom I shrink back, step by step, shying away from her breath, and who will end up—unless I decide otherwise—forcing me into a corner that I can already see, there to decompose fully and utterly on me and with me, until finally—is it a distinction?—the pus- and worm-ravaged flesh of her tongue laps at my hand. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

This aphorism is omitted in Kaiser/Wilkins. Hofmann has translated *schlagen*, to beat, with the softer and more abstract word

“discipline,” and *erht es mich?* as “is it a distinction?” although I had to check the meaning of the verb before I could be sure it meant “honor” or “salute,” not “difference” or “qualification.”

Recoiling in hopeless passivity before the desecrated childhood companion and in particular the blind persistence of its love for him. The dog is importunate like the assistants in *The Castle*.

The aphorism is one drawn-out, breathless sentence like the culmination of a horror story. The horror seems to be all the things a child sees once it becomes an adult, and the trap that pity is, but, while he sees the corner he's being backed into, he doesn't have to enter it. This is often true of Kafka's characters.

Is this an image of death? It isn't like Kafka's typically statuesque depiction of death; it has a gross quality that reminds me of the tongues of the dead lapping at the river of death, and that seems to have more to do with still being alive than with being dead.

Is the problem that his pity isn't strong enough? Put the animal out of its misery, yes, but is he sympathetic to the dog? It's imaginable that someone might put an end to the life of a suffering animal selfishly, so he won't have to see it. Is it suffering that ineptly stalks after Kafka in the form of this dog?

The problem is not that he can't escape, that would be easy to understand; the problem is that he won't escape.

Escape what? The dog wants to lick him, maybe the way the dead want to lick the river of death, with its lingering savor of life. It will rot on and with him, but it's not a harbinger of death so much as it is coincidentally there with him in death. There is something deeper in this than mere uncertainty about death or wanting to live, because you live whether you want to or not. Not wanting to live is not the same as wanting to die. The doom in this short passage keeps steadily escalating and that licking is going on all throughout.

Animals in Kafka have a point of view that isn't low or high, they lose their point of view. The dog in “Investigations of a Dog” is devoted to empirical research, but he doesn't know anything, knows less and less.

Overall this aphorism is a description of a type of existential condition, rather than a lesson.

### NUMBER ELEVEN/TWELVE

*Verschiedenheit der Anschauungen, die man etwa von einem Apfel haben kann: die Anschauung des kleinen Jungen, der den Hals strecken muß, um noch knapp den Apfel auf der Tischplatte zu sehn, und die Anschauung des Hausherrn, der den Apfel nimmt und frei dem Tischgenossen reicht.*

Differences in the view one can have of things, for instance of an apple: the view of a little boy who has to crane his neck in order even to glimpse the apple on the table, and the view of the master of the house, who takes the apple and freely hands it to the person sitting at table with him. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The variety of views that one may have, say, of an apple: the view of the small boy who has to crane his neck for a glimpse of the apple on the table, and the view of the master of the house who picks up the apple and hands it to his guest. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This aphorism is given a dual number in all the versions I've seen, although it's not clear to me exactly where the break occurs.

The views are not angles but really different lives or modes of life, since the boy might grow up to be a paterfamilias himself. The one eyes the apple with longing or with curiosity, the other gives it away without a second thought, or even a look. His view is not looking. The meaning of the apple varies with the desires that are brought to bear on it, and also the lack of desire, perhaps, if the host doesn't value the apple or sees it as only one of a store of apples each of which is at his command and available for his use. Perhaps the child wants the apple and the host wants what the apple can help him to acquire, that is, the good will of his guests.

There's the view of the one who seems to have no power over the apple, and that of the one who has complete power over the apple. So power affects this difference also. The child may have a hunger and a secretiveness—they both might. If the boy isn't supposed to take the apple, and he takes it, thoughtlessly, he has done wrong from an external point of view only. From an internal point of view, there was no opportunity for thinking to prevent the act, no struggle against the impulse. There's evil only if he stops to think about it, to struggle with the impulse to take it; then,

apparently, there will be evil there even if he doesn't take the apple.

Reach-out of reach, barely, and within easy reach. There is a world of difference between those two. The boy may be able to take the apple, but does not dare to.

I don't want to read this as an allegory of the fall, particularly because Kafka says nothing about the boy taking the apple, but why would he want to look at it if not because he wants it for himself?

### NUMBER THIRTEEN

*Ein erstes Zeichen beginnender Erkenntnis ist der Wunsch zu sterben. Dieses Leben scheint unerträglich, ein anderes unerreichbar. Man schämt sich nicht mehr, sterben zu wollen; man bittet, aus der alten Zelle, die man haßt, in eine neue gebracht zu werden, die man erst hassen lernen wird. Ein Rest von Glauben wirkt dabei mit, während des Transportes werde zufällig der Herr durch den Gang kommen, den Gefangenen ansehen und sagen: »Diesen sollt ihr nicht wieder einsperren. Er kommt zu mir.«*

One of the first signs of the beginnings of understanding is the wish to die. This life appears unbearable, another unattainable. One is no longer ashamed of wanting to die; one asks to be moved from the old cell, which one hates, to a new one, which one will only in time come to hate. In this there is also a residue of belief that during the move the master will chance to come along the corridor, look at the prisoner and say: "This man is not to be locked up again. He is to come with me." [Kaiser/Wilkins]

A first indication of glimmering understanding is the desire to die. This life seems unendurable, another unreachable. One no longer feels ashamed of wanting to die; one petitions to be moved from one's old cell, which one hates, to a new one, which one will come to hate. A last vestige of belief is involved here, too, for during the move might not the prison governor by chance walk down the passage, see the prisoner, and say: "Don't lock this man up again. He's coming with me." [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

The desire to die shows understanding is only just beginning. This is entirely equivocal, but I believe it means that a desire for

death is a kind of maturity, like accepting death, and it comes about in part because one despairs of changing life. If “another life” refers to the beyond, then the desire to die arises not because one wants to reach the new life but because one believes one can’t. Unreachable—this could mean that the new life beyond ... and we should not assume this is what’s meant but only include the possibility that it is ... doesn’t exist, but what is unreachable usually exists, but is out of reach. Perhaps, as Kafka discussed in the previous aphorism, it is a matter of point of view.

Is it that one tries to find a new life but despairs that it will be really new, is all too sure it will only be as painful as the old? Being ashamed of the desire to die is here understood as resignation, accepting a painful life and refusing to try to alter it, so the change of cells does seem to mean death and not simply a change of life. The belief in actual change is the residue of something fuller, almost certainly the illusion or fantasy that one is beginning to know for what it is. Perhaps, by some chance, there is another life after all. The motives of the governor cannot enter into consideration, grace or works. I don’t think the governor’s own confinement to the prison is relevant either, because he belongs to a wholly different, messianic order.

Why doesn’t the prisoner petition for his release, or an end to prisons? Is the wish to die actually a meager wish? Perhaps the problem with this wish is that it isn’t a real wish at all. Wanting a new cell, this implies the one who wants death dares not ask for freedom but only for something that is more or less the same, not real change. Another arrangement of familiar old factors, nothing new.

### NUMBER FOURTEEN

*Gingest du über eine Ebene, hättest den guten Willen zu gehen und machtest doch Rückschritte, dann wäre es eine verzweifelte Sache; da du aber einen steilen Abhang hinaufkletterst, so steil etwa, wie du selbst von unten gesehen bist, können die Rückschritte auch nur durch die Bodenbeschaffenheit verursacht sein, und du mußt nicht verzweifeln.*

If you were walking across a plain, had an honest intention of walking on, and yet kept regressing, then it would be a desperate matter; but since you are scrambling up a cliff, about as steep as you yourself are if seen from below, the regression can only be

caused by the nature of the ground, and you must not despair.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

If you were walking across a plain, felt every desire to walk, and yet found yourself going backward, it would be a cause for despair; but as you are in fact scaling a steep precipice, as sheer in front of you as you are from the ground, then your backward movement can be caused only by the terrain, and you would be wrong to despair. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This one of the aphorisms Kafka struck out, but which editorial obstinacy includes in these editions and this commentary anyway.

Your despair is a mistake. It would make sense if you were trying and failing to make progress, but, as it is, the difficulties arise from without. So the error lies in mistaking the mountain for the plain, and what is outside you for what is inside you.

The despair in the initial example is dreamlike, because there is no accounting for your going backward as you plainly move forward. Your intention is honest, so there is no question of anything like subconscious resistance. If you face bewildering setbacks, then despair is a reasonable reaction, isn't it? On the other hand, if there is an obvious and natural reason for your difficulties, then despair is unreasonable, because no one else could do what you're trying to do either.

Where are you going? If walking is all you want to do, then walking backward is as good as walking forwards. If this is the true way mentioned in the first aphorism, then this would be another representation of precariousness, instability or uncertainty, presented in combination with going back imagery from the fourth and fifth aphorisms. You have to keep going until you stop going back.

This aphorism also touches on point of view, since the cliff is as steep as you are seen from the ground. It's strange that Kafka chooses you for the simile of something steep, and implies for this purpose another person, looking up at you from below, as if you were the cliff he were climbing. This kind of reflecting-back is really typical of Kafka. He claimed he could never accuse anyone of anything without having it rebound back and attach itself to him

instead. It might be that this aphorism is cancelled, because he doesn't really believe the steepness is in the ground.

### NUMBER FIFTEEN

*Wie ein Weg im Herbst: Kaum ist er rein gekehrt, bedeckt er sich wieder mit den trockenen Blättern.*

Like a path in autumn: scarcely has it been swept clear when it is once more covered with dry leaves. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Like a path in autumn: no sooner is it cleared than it is once again littered with fallen leaves. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Perhaps this is offered in preference to the fourteenth aphorism; in this case, the problem is not some enigmatic backsliding, but that the path keeps disappearing. The method, to return to that idea, would be perennial sweeping.

You can't follow someone else down this path, because the leaves erase it behind each one who takes it. The leaves fall steadily as you yourself go down this path, and so, when you turn around, you see no path, only an ocean of leaves. The only bit of the path you can see is the bit directly before you, which you keep clear of leaves with your sweeping, and maybe the last few steps as well, but you don't see where it's going. You can, however, see which direction it seems to be taking.

This is a little like the common idea of time, that is, a moving point of view in the present, rolling down a line, with unavailabilities before and after. But first of all, you can walk wherever you like; this isn't a tightrope high off the ground. Second, there is the added element of methodical effort involved in being at all aware of the path. Did you know where to start sweeping, or did you just sweep here and there until you discovered it?

What are those leaves? Forgetting, not bothering, letting slide.

NUMBER SIXTEEN

*Ein Käfig ging einen Vogel suchen.*

A cage went in search of a bird.

COMMENTARY

This one is translated identically in both editions.

The search is paradoxical. A bird is free, and if its freedom is considered a part of its essence, then a bird deprived of its freedom isn't the same bird anymore. I don't think the primary point here is that one may have an idea of some thing only to find that possessing that thing isn't the same as possessing that idea. Kafka is pointing out how the search for something pushes it away from you.

You want the bird, but why do you want the bird? Because it's free. So you catch a bird. Now it isn't free any more. How do you "have" a free bird?

The cage is formed around the bird, roughly in keeping with its dimensions, needs, and habits. Kafka may be saying that certain ideas are like this; they are attempts to trap something.

Searching, the cage becomes more like a bird; it would have to go where birds go, flying from branch to branch. So the cage may end its search by turning into a bird. Then again, it may turn into something entirely new, neither a bird nor a cage.

This means that the search does not always push the object away, but that when it doesn't, it also does not result in capture.

NUMBER SEVENTEEN

*An diesem Ort war ich noch niemals: Anders geht der Atem, blendender als die Sonne strahlt neben ihr ein Stern.*

This is a place where I never was before: here breathing is different, and more dazzling than the sun is the radiance of a star beside it. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

I have never been here before: my breath comes differently, the sun is outshone by a star beside it. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Kafka is probably talking about Zurau; “Ort” can mean town or village, as well as place. This isn’t an example of travel writing, though; he’s describing his experience of the place as someone who came from elsewhere, and who remains a person from elsewhere in the new place. This is what it means to discover oneself in a new life; “new life” isn’t paradise, the point of no return, or the point beyond the point of no return, but it is possible to see those places from a new life.

In the usual life, where you have been before, your breath comes in the same way, there’s no glimpse of becoming and no reason to think there are any other stars but the sun.

### NUMBER EIGHTEEN

*Wenn es möglich gewesen wäre, den Turm von Babel zu erbauen, ohne ihn zu erklettern, es wäre erlaubt worden.*

If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without climbing it, it would have been permitted. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without having to climb it, that would have been sanctioned. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

This aphorism is a model exercise in baffling pious argument.

There’s no ban on building, even on a grand scale. The problem with the Tower wasn’t its construction or even its height, but that it entails a misconception, like the cage going in search of the bird.

In the usual interpretation of the parable, the Tower is a blasphemous attempt to rival or to reach God, and man is punished for this presumption. Kafka doesn’t present an opposing interpretation, he qualifies the existing one in a way that utterly shifts its footing when he suggests blasphemy arises wherever God’s presence is mistaken for a barrier or a distance.

The task, like sweeping the leaves in the fifteenth aphorism, is not to take the path but to find it and keep on finding it. This is analogous to building a tower without climbing it.

NUMBER NINETEEN

*Laß dich vom Bösen nicht glauben machen, du könntest vor ihm Geheimnisse haben.*

Do not let Evil make you believe you can have secrets from it.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

Don't let Evil convince you you could keep any secrets from it.  
[Hofmann]

COMMENTARY

A cancelled aphorism, possibly slated for revision.

More good advice; William S. Burroughs used to say “nobody does more harm than people who feel bad about doing it.” Why? Because they harm from a position of official justification, which is the same as saying they harm officially.

The misconception Kafka wants to clear up is that it's possible to do evil without being evil, or to do just a little evil, or to manage evil somehow; his point is that this idea is already fully evil. It's not evil you can keep secrets from, it's you, or rather, you have the power to deny or obfuscate or rename things about yourself or things you've done. Evil afflicts you by turning you into a false image, and that might be the falseness to which the trueness of the true way is opposed. The true way isn't something claimed and owned, it's a method of patient checking and attention.

NUMBER TWENTY

*Leoparden brechen in den Tempel ein und saufen die Opferkrüge leer; das wiederholt sich immer wieder; schließlich kann man es vorausberechnen, und es wird ein Teil der Zeremonie.*

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Leopards break into the temple and drink all the sacrificial vessels dry; it keeps happening; in the end, it can be calculated in advance and is incorporated into the ritual. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

The repetition of the depredations of the leopards happens presumably despite the efforts of the temple custodians. Kafka has a persistent interest in impersonal, spontaneous alteration over time, although here it doesn't seem to matter whether or not the inclusion of the leopards in the ritual happens as a consequence of a decree, a decision with a particular moment in time, or as a result of a habituation.

Calculation prevents loss. In fact, once they become part of the ritual, the appearance of the leopards is necessary, and the ritual is vindicated when they arrive.

The leopards are innocent, so how can this be defilement?

Religion is like the leopard; both eat the same goods, both act in the same way—all effects. The doctrine that esteems peace and love as its highest values is used to justify violence and no one thinks twice about it. No one thinks once about it. Ritual only seems to be the most rigid mindset, when it's actually the most flexible.

### NUMBER TWENTY-ONE

*So fest wie die Hand den Stein hält. Sie hält ihn aber fest, nur um ihn desto weiter zu verwerfen. Aber auch in jene Weite führt der Weg.*

As firmly as the hand grips the stone. But it grips firmly only in order to fling it away all the further. But the way leads into those distances too. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

As firmly as a hand holding a stone. Held, however, so firmly, merely so that it can be flung a greater distance. But there is a path even to that distance. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

No matter how far you throw the rock, you can't throw it so far away from you that you can't go find it again. The last line represents a way back, the kind that so often appears in Kafka's stories and which gives inconclusive freedom of action to his characters. You can throw this, whatever it is, very far away from yourself, but there's nothing to prevent you from going and getting it again. Do you want more limits than there are?

You firmly grasp things in order to throw them away from you. You can do it, but that doesn't necessarily change much. It's not as if you'd thrown your rock into a bottomless pit, or over an unclimbable, uncrossable wall. So it remains available to you, like a part of you, even if you reject it.

#### NUMBER TWENTY-TWO

*Du bist die Aufgabe. Kein Schüler weit und breit.*

You are the task. No pupil far and wide. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

You are the exercise, the task. No student far and wide. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Aufgabe can mean duty, assignment, or problem, as well as task or exercise. It may be that the reference to a student in the second part conditions the translation of the first toward a meaning more like homework.

If a lesson is meant, what is it preparing you for?

Kafka uses the intimate *du* in this one. Is he addressing himself?

You are the problem. This is true of the main characters in many of Kafka's most important works. Their problems are not distinct from themselves. Even Josef K.'s problem cannot really be described as a misfortune that falls on him from outside, and he is not without a role to play in the determination of his fate. And, in *The Castle*, K. brings everything on himself.

No student. Only teacher?

#### NUMBER TWENTY-THREE

*Vom wahren Gegner fährt grenzenloser Mut in dich.*

From the true antagonist illimitable courage is transmitted to you. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

From the true opponent, a limitless courage flows into you. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Your opponent must also derive comparable courage from you. What matters is that the opposition be true. A false opposition gives no courage because there is nothing to overcome. Where the opposition is true, the courage is limitless, perhaps because true opposition is limitless. It may take limited forms, or run its course in time, but the opposition of directions is strict.

This means that you—and again Kafka uses the informal *dich*, possibly addressing himself—generate your opponent by adopting a contrary position. Josef K. insists that the Court is his adversary, even in the absence of any hostilities.

I am only defeated where there is no fight, even though the struggle is an impasse. The impasse is a kind of success, because victory, which abruptly clears away all signs of struggle, is indiscernible in this respect from defeat or from there never having been any struggle.

### NUMBER TWENTY-FOUR

*Das Glück begreifen, daß der Boden, auf dem du stehst, nicht größer sein kann, als die zwei Füße ihn bedecken.*

Grasping the good fortune that the ground on which you are standing cannot be larger than the two feet covering it.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

Grasp the good fortune that the ground on which you stand cannot be any bigger than the two feet planted on it. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Is this nonsense? Deleuze pointed out in *The Logic of Sense* that nonsense is more than the mere absence of sense—which would be only gibberish—it’s the simulation of sense. I mistrust all the various ideas this aphorism gives me, because they seem uselessly prosaic.

Arguably, the most important word in the aphorism is “bedecken,” which means “to cover.” Hofmann’s translation involves a nuance of stability or resolution that is not entailed in covering. The good fortune is that the ground is covered by the feet; what is to be grasped firmly is the good fortune.

Why fortunate? Because this means that things are scaled to your size and no larger. You are not and cannot be out of your depth.

#### NUMBER TWENTY-FIVE

*Wie kann man sich über die Welt freuen, außer wenn man zu ihr flüchtet?*

How can one be glad about the world except if one takes one's refuge in it? [Kaiser/Wilkins]

How is it possible to rejoice in the world except by fleeing to it? [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This is not a rhetorical question.

Hofmann's "fleeing to" is closer to the German than Kaiser/Wilkins' "taking refuge in." The pronoun "ihr" is in the dative, which is usually locative in sense, but the combination of the verb "flüchten" and the preposition "zu" gives us a sense of motion better translated as "fleeing to."

This is important because it underscores the idea that one rejoices in the world while separate from it and seeking to join with it, rather than simply from within it. Kaiser/Wilkins conjures a Buddhistic image of self-identification with the world, while Hofmann emphasizes instead the notion of someplace to be reached.

What is there to flee or to take refuge from, if not the world? Taking refuge in the world is like renouncing the idea of refuge; it means being as tranquil in the midst of the flames as you would be in your mother's lap.

Escape and rejoicing are linked. To rejoice in something is to escape to it. One has to take the approach one is normally encouraged to take in escaping from the world into the mystical beyond, but use it to escape to the world.

#### NUMBER TWENTY-SIX

*Verstecke sind unzählige, Rettung nur eine, aber Möglichkeiten der Rettung wieder so viele wie Verstecke. Es gibt ein Ziel, aber keinen Weg; was wir Weg nennen, ist Zögern.*

Hiding places there are innumerable, escape is only one, but possibilities of escape, again, are as many as hiding places. There is a goal, but no way; what we call a way is hesitation. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

There are innumerable hiding places and only one salvation, but the possibilities of salvation are as numerous as the hiding places. There is a destination but no way there; what we refer to as way is hesitation. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

This is another cancelled aphorism, very reminiscent of “Before the Law.”

Briefly, it says that hiding places and possible avenues of escape or rescue are numberless, but only one of them is true. In parallel, there is somewhere to go, but no way to get there at all. In other words, there are countless wrong pathways and only one right one, from one point of view, whereas from another point of view there is not even one right pathway, because the mistake lies in thinking in terms of pathways. There is an aim that is not achieved yet, and which is simply to be achieved. To come up with a way to achieve it is to postpone that achievement.

If we begin with the supposition that all of us are elements of a single transcendent consciousness mistaking itself for an infinite number of discrete beings, then the student approaching the guru and asking to be liberated is actually one consciousness asking itself for freedom. The guru looks at the student and says in effect, “you’re not fooling me, Visnu, I know it’s you, but if you want to play this game, act the part of a hapless student, and invent laborious and elaborate procedures for your own liberation instead of simply liberating yourself right now, by all means, why not?”

This aphorism does not seem to be consistent with the idea of the true way, since he says there is no way to the one aim. However, there need not be a contradiction, and clearing up contradictions isn’t necessarily tidying up where untidiness is called for. The true way isn’t about going somewhere, it’s about staying on the rope or brushing the leaves away continually, keeping pointed in the right direction, not about how much distance you’ve managed to cover. You cover no more ground than you are currently standing on, which is what he said in the twenty-fourth aphorism.

You can't spread out becoming, you can only train or practice or wait until it happens. The moment of becoming something truly new may or may not arise out of the old, but it isn't just the rearrangement of the old. The new may happen because you've arranged enough old stuff out of its birth canal, so there is something to be done with the old stuff, but the new, to be new, must be discontinuous with what went before. The paradox of the "way" is that you're trying to invite the new because there does seem to be some way to induce it to come from among all the old stuff, but what comes will come out of nothing old.

#### NUMBER TWENTY-SEVEN

*Das Negative zu tun, ist uns noch auferlegt; das Positive ist uns schon gegeben.*

Doing the negative thing is imposed on us, an addition; the positive thing is given to us from the start. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

We are instructed to do the negative; the positive is already within us. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Hofmann takes greater liberties here than Kaiser/Wilkins, and loses the sense of "noch," which is that the negative is added to us. The implication, then, is that the positive, being opposed to the negative, must be the opposite of what is added, that is, what is innate, and hence already within us, but doesn't this entail an assumption? I don't think we should conflate what is given to us from the start with what we are.

The negative thing is not given to us from the start but imposed later; does this mean there are no imposed positives, and therefore any positive thing is given at the beginning only?

I think the emphasis here is on the idea of the negative as alien deviation from any previously-determined direction. If this is taken as an axiom, it does not necessarily follow that any change in direction is negative. It may negate the direction taken up to now, but if this happens because you are opting for a new direction, then this would be a new positive, and hence, by this definition, a new beginning. The positive, then, would necessarily be the beginning

of something. Therefore the negative is a deviation that does not begin anything new.

The negative might be sloppiness, but then that doesn't explain the idea of imposition. Who imposes? Perhaps it doesn't matter who. But no one thinks of sloppiness in terms of an imposition, do they? Imposed sloppiness. What would that be? Confusion, induced by circumstances? This negative is far more general, and should be treated as any interference; perhaps especially as self-interference.

### NUMBER TWENTY-EIGHT

*Wenn man einmal das Böse bei sich aufgenommen hat, verlangt es nicht mehr, daß man ihm glaube.*

When one has once accepted and absorbed Evil, it no longer demands to be believed. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Once we have taken Evil into ourselves, it no longer insists that we believe in it. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

The first verb is the tricky one, since it means to receive, specifically to receive persons (as opposed to acts). Receiving someone, and here evil is clearly personified, and taking someone or something into oneself are not quite the same. If I take evil into myself, then I become evil, don't I? Whereas what is under discussion here seems to be knowing and accepting evil, rather than doing or being evil.

It is a characteristic of evil that people do it while claiming not to be doing it. When you are unaware of it, it demands to be received. Once it is received, it hides.

This aphorism is also telling us that evil does demand we believe in it, so long as we do not receive it. Evil does not allow itself to be passively ignored, and, if it is actively ignored, that means it has been "received."

If this evil is the same as the imposed negative of the previous aphorism, then receiving it would be the flipside of having it imposed on you. This may mean that one cannot be subject to this imposition without first allowing the negative.

NUMBER TWENTY-NINE

*Die Hintergedanken, mit denen du das Böse in dir aufnimmst, sind nicht die deinen, sondern die des Bösen. Das Tier entwindet dem Herrn die Peitsche und peitscht sich selbst, um Herr zu werden, und weiß nicht, daß das nur eine Phantasie ist, erzeugt durch einen neuen Knoten im Peitschenriemen des Herrn.*

The ulterior motives with which you absorb and assimilate Evil are not your own but those of Evil. >> The animal wrests the whip from its master and whips itself in order to become master, not knowing that this is only a fantasy produced by a new knot in the master's whiplash. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The reservations with which you take Evil into yourself are not yours, but those of Evil. >> The animal twists the whip out of its master's grip and whips itself to become its own master—not knowing that this is only a fantasy, produced by a new knot in the master's whiplash. [Hofmann]

COMMENTARY

The section after the >> arrows is cancelled.

The first section, which I think tends to be overshadowed by the second: If you reject evil there is no need for argument about it. If you argue or struggle, you are already playing the game, bargaining, temporizing, parsing out your entitlements. The impulsive act is innocent, if not harmless, like the leopards entering the sanctuary. To reason about the wickedness of a possible act requires you to begin planning it.

The second section is like a rerendering of the slave rebellion as Nietzsche described it, although here it is the master who prevails. The point is that the slave doesn't overcome the master by force, because, in so doing, the slave becomes the master and the master the slave. Instead, the slave paralyzes the master with guilt and disgust, so the master doesn't act even though he can.

Linking these two sections together seems to require us to think of Evil as the master position, and that scourging ourselves is only another way to serve Evil, because we scourge ourselves in order to become our own Evil.

### NUMBER THIRTY

*Das Gute ist in gewissem Sinne trostlos.*

In a certain sense the Good is comfortless. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Goodness is in a certain sense comfortless. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

The Hofmann indicates this aphorism is cancelled, while Kaiser/Wilkins does not. Perhaps there is some uncertainty whether it falls under the cancellation of the second part of the previous number.

If evil is already inside, admitted and absorbed, and goodness does not consist in struggling with it, but with a kind of vigilant ignorance of it, then there is no respite for goodness. Goodness, knowing that evil stops drawing attention to itself once one has granted it admittance, must take evil's presence for granted. Even if that evil is induced to leave, goodness has no choice but to mistrust the apparent absence of evil, to mistrust itself. This means that goodness can't know itself; the recognition of evil, and its opposition to good, makes it necessary that the good be known, but goodness can never be taken for granted. Evil comes to you, but goodness is perennially elusive.

In that case, it's tempting to adopt the idea that goodness consists of the search for the good, rather than its discovery and possession, but then this requires us to accept the unsatisfactory notion of a hunt for something that doesn't exist. It may be a better statement of the case to say that goodness is attentiveness to direction, while evil is inattentiveness to direction or worse, self-deception about direction.

### NUMBER THIRTY-ONE

*Nach Selbstbeherrschung strebe ich nicht. Selbstbeherrschung heißt: an einer zufälligen Stelle der unendlichen Ausstrahlungen meiner geistigen Existenz wirken wollen. Muß ich aber solche Kreise um mich ziehen, dann tue ich es besser untätig im bloßen Anstaunen des ungeheuerlichen Komplexes und nehme nur die Stärkung, die e contrario dieser Anblick gibt, mit nach Hause.*

Self-control is something for which I do not strive. Self-control means wanting to be effective at some random point in the infinite radiations of my spiritual existence. But if I do have to draw such circles round myself, then it will be better for me to do it passively, in mere wonderment and gaping at the tremendous complex, taking home with me only the refreshment that this sight gives e contrario. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

I do not strive for self-mastery. Self-mastery is the desire—within the endless emanations of my intellectual life—to be effective at a certain radius. But if I am made to describe circles around me, then I had better do it without action: merely contemplating the whole extraordinary complex and taking nothing away with me but the strength that such an aspect—e contrario—would give me. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

The two translations diverge on numerous points. Hofmann's "self-mastery" makes this aphorism an extension of the preceding, presenting this approach as the preferable alternative to self-flogging.

Infinite radiations or endless emanations?

Spiritual existence or intellectual life?

Wonderment and gaping or merely contemplating?

The Hofmann translation favors more passive language, which might be more consistent with the non-active approach the aphorism describes. There is more energy in wondering and gaping than in merely contemplating, and, to me, radiating seems more dynamic than emanating. Urine can be *emanated*.

Hofmann also selects intellect rather than spirit, I imagine because his translation is intended to distance these aphorisms from the more or less exaggerated religiosity with which Brod first presented them. Either term is equally acceptable, which means that the two ideas, mind and spirit, are both present in the German term, so the alternate meaning should be remembered when this term is translated into English.

The difference between "some random point" and "at a certain radius" is glaring. Hofmann is clearly trying to strengthen the connection between this statement and its sequel about circles, but the original text plainly says that the moment of effectiveness is a chance occurrence.

*Wirken* means to act, while *untätig* means inactive. There is a contrast here that should not be missed: self-mastery means wanting to act, but Kafka prefers to be inactive.

Perhaps most important, is it refreshment or strength? While refreshment is a legitimate translation, strength is the more immediate meaning of Stärkung. The inactive, receptive approach gives you strength to take home with you, but this puts the emphasis on the idea of retaining, finding and carrying away strength, rather than simply being strong. You carry the strength back home with you, which means you can't get it at home.

Very suggestive: the strength is both nehme, taken, actively, and gibt, given, in which the action comes to you. You must act, leave home, go get this strength, but getting it entails being in the right place and having the right frame of mind in which to receive it. Actually, the distinction between activity and passivity in this aphorism is not sharp at all.

The strength is not some abstract power inserted into you, it is the contrast between your usual condition and another. Nietzsche, Deleuze, both insist that it's a mistake to think of power as a possession or like the charge in a battery; power, they say, is a relationship, like a gradient. Kafka, who read Nietzsche carefully, might be thinking of power in the same way, tying it to the contrariness. This is not struggle; struggle wears you out. I think this strength springs from an encounter with an alternative to your normal way of living.

You receive strength in a way that isn't wholly active or passive. The desire for self-mastery or control is to want to act or to want to be able to act. Wanting to be able to act and acting aren't the same thing. You can prepare for action interminably and never act, and you can act without any preparation. Deleuze writes that action is never conscious; our motive for acting is always an interpretation. Action doesn't spring from interpretations, even if the interpretation precedes the act. "This is what my action will mean" is not the same thing as acting nor does it make us act.

### NUMBER THIRTY-TWO

*Die Krähen behaupten, eine einzige Krähe könnte den Himmel zerstören. Das ist zweifellos, beweist aber nichts gegen den Himmel, denn Himmel bedeuten eben: Unmöglichkeit von Krähen.*

The crows maintain that a single crow could destroy the heavens. There is no doubt of that, but it proves nothing against the heavens, for heaven simply means: the impossibility of crows. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The crows like to insist that a single crow is enough to destroy heaven. This is incontestably true, but it says nothing about heaven, because heaven is just another way of saying: the impossibility of crows. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

The purpose of this aphorism might be to set dialectical reasoning running round in circles until it falls exhausted.

I don't know how to approach this aphorism without taking the stupid interpretation as my starting point.

Stupid: the crows are the doubters who deny heaven, but, since heaven is faith-in-heaven, they end up denying it to themselves. So, believe etc.

What does Kafka do to prevent a stupid interpretation? For one thing, the crows aren't denying heaven, they are asserting they can destroy it. For another thing, why crows? The hallmark of bad readings of Kafka is the assumption that he writes allegories. The crows are crows, and he must have chosen crows because they live in the sky. The word *Himmel* means both heaven and sky.

From the point of view of the crows, they coexist with heaven. From heaven's point of view, there's no such things as crows. This is another stab at a model of good and evil, or the positive and the negative, of the kind Kafka has been working on in other aphorisms. He's trying out different terms for these two sides, and experimenting with alternative renderings of their relationship. Evil insists on its parity with good, but good does not insist on its parity with evil, in fact, good is the absence of evil, but only in thought.

#### NUMBER THIRTY-THREE

*Die Märtyrer unterschätzen den Leib nicht, sie lassen ihn auf dem Kreuz erhöhen. Darin sind sie mit ihren Gegnern einig.*

Martyrs do not underrate the body, they allow it to be elevated on

the cross. In this they are at one with their antagonists.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

Martyrs do not underestimate the body, they allow it to be hoisted up onto the cross. In that way they are like their enemies.  
[Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Kaiser/Wilkins marks this aphorism cancelled.

Martyrs are at one with their tormentors, whether the tormentor likes it or not. Martyrs are tactical.

Physical suffering is celebrated from two directions; as the vindication of the tormentors on the one hand, the tormented on the other. One has the power to inflict suffering, the other has the power to volunteer for it. This seems to me to proceed from the thirty first aphorism, involving the self-flagellation of the beast.

Suffering is strongly associated with the idea of recompense. The martyr is more or less creating his own posthumous recompense by suffering, using suffering as a way to compel it. The tormentor is trying to stop and destroy, while the martyr is trying to use this very act of destruction to create or redistribute something. It is not a confrontation of two sides, any more than there is a confrontation between the master and the animal that whips itself, not its master, or between the crows and the sky. One side confronts, the other does not. Time and again Kafka returns to asymmetry in values.

### NUMBER THIRTY-FOUR

*Sein Ermatten ist das des Gladiators nach dem Kampf, seine Arbeit war das Weißtünchen eines Winkels in einer Beamtenstube.*

His exhaustion is that of the gladiator after the fight, his work was the whitewashing of one corner in a clerk's office. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

His exhaustion is that of the gladiator after the combat; his labor was the whitewashing of a corner of the wall in his office.  
[Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Hoffman writes as if Kafka meant to specify himself; this is certainly true, but the reader should know that Beamtenstube does refer to a specific kind of office, belonging to a clerk or a civil servant, as opposed to a medical doctor or a private eye.

Two images of struggle. It seems to me that there is more and more evidence here pointing to a fixation on struggle in these aphorisms, which bears out a similar fixation in the fiction. This one refers to the disproportionate exhaustion that can be induced by ordinary tasks, their unseen heroism, describing the relationship to the world as a struggle. It isn't that even something as minor as this is a struggle; it's that precisely this kind of thing is at the heart of the struggle. Battles are typically decisive, but a mundane task like whitewashing, while it may be done or left undone, is not historic because nothing concludes or begins with it. You whitewash now and then. The moment the whitewash is freshened up it becomes a blank canvas to be smudged and sootied all over again. In a battle, men are killed, and while more men will probably come along, those dead men can't be restored to life.

So the effort involved is the same, even if the outcomes vary wildly in significance. If we value things according to the amount of effort they cost, then this would tend to level these two things, battling and whitewashing. But if we value things according to what was won or lost, then these two things are as far apart as possible. The contrast between the former equivalence and the latter incomparability is the object of this aphorism.

On the one hand, it's a dry joke about tedious workaday chores. On the other hand, it seems to elevate, in a way, that work—unless the intention is to compare the gladiator with the whitewasher. If that's Kafka's idea, then the point is that the whitewasher is at the same time capable of a maximum effort, just like the gladiator, and yet this maximum effort gives a result that falls bathetically short of the accomplishment of the gladiator (glory doesn't necessarily enter into the question—the gladiator may be a monster, but the result of his fighting is death, permanent and consequential and hence unlike whitewashing). There is an equivalence and an incomparability in this comparison as well.

### NUMBER THIRTY-FIVE

*Es gibt kein Haben, nur ein Sein, nur ein nach letztem Atem, nach Ersticken verlangendes Sein.*

There is no having, only a being, only a state of being that craves the last breath, craves suffocation. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

There is no possessing, only an existing, only an existing that yearns for its final breath, for asphyxiation. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This one sounds like a poem when you read it aloud.

Possession is a relationship, not a thing. Philosophy overflows with the topic of “to be,” but it’s stingy with its attention when “to have” comes up.

The idea is the exhaustion of being, but this could be read two ways, it could point to something negative, it doesn’t matter whether it be the world overwhelming the self or simply ennui, or it could point to something else, and something more than a mere inversion of the negative. All these aphorisms have tended in the same direction in this respect, that the positive is not the inversion of the negative, that their opposition is different.

Kafka says that to be is to yearn; to be is to yearn for the last breath, which could mean that to be is to yearn not to be. By mentioning breath, he implicitly conflates being and living.

It could also mean that to be is to yearn to be until the end, which would mean suicide only if you meant willing your own life in its entirety, death included, by the word suicide. It might mean that the longing of the living is to be overcome by life, that death is being overcome by life and not a force that overcomes life. When I imagine the condition that craves the last breath, I imagine the overstimulated condition of someone at the limit of their endurance, whether that limit is as extensive as an athlete’s or as narrow as an invalid’s. When you are at that limit, begging for relief, you are also living at the summit of life’s intensity.

There are two other things I notice. First, that being and having are strictly abstract, while the idea of yearning, the last breath, and suffocation, draw these abstractions into a particular, personal instant. Second, I wonder why he felt it necessary to negate having, and how that led him to being. Was he trying out

the idea, “I have my life,” and then did he reject it, with the thought, “I don’t have my life—I live” and then go on to say what life meant?

## NUMBER THIRTY-SIX

*Früher begriff ich nicht, warum ich auf meine Frage keine Antwort bekam, heute begreife ich nicht, wie ich glauben konnte, fragen zu können. Aber ich glaubte ja gar nicht, ich fragte nur.*

Previously I did not understand why I got no answer to my question; today I do not understand how I could believe I was capable of asking. But I didn’t really believe, I only asked. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Earlier, I didn’t understand why I got no answer to my question, today I don’t understand how I presumed to ask a question. But then I didn’t presume, I only asked. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Both this and the previous aphorisms must have something to do with Felice Bauer. How stupid of me not to notice earlier! On the other hand, these are gathered together among a set of numbered aphorisms, which suggests to me that there is a generalizable kernel in these passages. Kafka does not seem to want to answer a question of this magnitude using only this or that part of his being, but with his whole being, which includes his unparalleled ratiocinative power.

In number thirty-five, he must be speaking of Felice when he speaking of a Being. Marriage is not about “having a spouse,” it is the presence of a being whose existence is fundamentally merged with your own. In that case, perhaps the desire for the last breath might be hers, and the aphorism would express his fear of destroying her in a marriage. Or that last breath, the Being, might be Kafka after all, anticipating his own destruction in marriage.

The Kaiser/Wilkins translation is more strictly literal. Hofmann conflates being able to ask with presumption, which is not necessarily the same thing. As far as a marriage proposal is concerned, it does however seem to be the same.

What matters, though, is the difference over time. Back then, it was the lack of an answer that I didn’t understand, now it’s my

own asking that I don't understand. Kafka returns to the difficulty that arises when you try to relate two points of view. Kierkegaard, whom Kafka read, came back again and again to the idea that having a point of view entails having a blind spot. The presumption is an interpretation after the fact, not the motive.

### NUMBER THIRTY-SEVEN

*Seine Antwort auf die Behauptung, er besitze vielleicht, sei aber nicht, war nur Zittern und Herzklöpfen.*

His answer to the assertion that he did perhaps possess, but that he was not, was only trembling and palpitations. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

His answer to the accusation that he might possess something but didn't exist, consisted of trembling and heart palpitations. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Asphyxiation is the symptom of being without having, and trembling and palpitations are the symptoms of possessing without being, or at least being told that this latter might be the case. This aphorism revisits both having and being on the one hand, and answering on the other.

There are two micro-scenes that could be spun out of this aphorism. In one, someone in a position of authority is making a statement about someone else. (*Behauptung* does not primarily mean accusation.) The former person could be a future father in law, a judge, the latter's own father. The other micro-scene is purely introspective; a man thinks this about himself, and the thought induces trembling and palpitations.

In either case, the idea of possessing without being elicits physical signs of distress, either fear or indignation, which indicate a visceral desire or need to reject it, but no refutation. He remains silent. The idea of inverting aphorism thirty-five might have prompted Kafka to try to imagine having without being, and then to see how he might go about dramatically framing the introduction of that idea. To possess without being would mean that there is no being, at least in his case, but only a kind of registered relationship to those things we think of as part of our being. If I do not exist, but only possess, then I'm like a demon

inhabiting a body, living a life, that is mine only because of some kind of contract or receipt. It would mean that everything remains as it is, or seems, but that there is no basis for what is. There would be having, but no one to have.

## NUMBER THIRTY-EIGHT

*Einer staunte darüber, wie leicht er den Weg der Ewigkeit ging; er raste ihn nämlich abwärts.*

A man was amazed at how easily he went along the road to eternity; the fact was he was rushing along it downhill. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

A man was astounded by the ease of the path of eternity; it was because he took it downhill, at a run. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

This suggests not only that there are different ways to take the path of eternity, but that the metaphorical topography of the path is a function of the way you take it, and not the path's own fixed property.

Kafka might mean only that the downward, and hence presumably evil, way is easier than the comfortless way of virtue, but it's still the path of eternity either way. So the way the path is taken, and not the destination, is what's good or evil? Or is there a good eternity and an evil one?

That he is running shows impatience, but also a lack of resistance; when you're facing down the slope, the lay of the land almost compels you to run. You have to lean back against the grade to avoid running. People don't stage races on downhill slopes because a slope would make anyone run faster than their strength alone would permit; arguably, the strongest runner would be the one who could manage to come in last.

Taken by itself, this aphorism gives us no reason to assume that there is another, upward way. It might be that the path to eternity is always a downward slope; if that were true, then the less impetuous and therefore probably more virtuous way would be to go downwards resisting, rather than heedlessly barrelling on.

Rushing towards eternity doesn't make sense, so perhaps this is the mistake we're being warned about: mistaking eternity for clock time.

### NUMBER THIRTY-NINE (A)

*Dem Bösen kann man nicht in Raten zahlen - und versucht es unaufhörlich. Es wäre denkbar, daß Alexander der Große trotz den kriegerischen Erfolgen seiner Jugend, trotz dem ausgezeichneten Heer, das er ausgebildet hatte, trotz den auf Veränderung der Welt gerichteten Kräften, die er in sich fühlte, am Hellespont stehen geblieben und ihn nie überschritten hätte, und zwar nicht aus Furcht, nicht aus Unentschlossenheit, nicht aus Willensschwäche, sondern aus Erdenschwere.*

One cannot pay Evil in installments—and one always keeps on trying to. It could be imagined that Alexander the Great, in spite of his youthful triumphs in warfare, in spite of the superb army he built up, in spite of the energies he felt in himself that were directed to transforming the world, might have halted at the Hellespont and not have crossed it, and this not from fear, not from irresolution, not from weakness of will, but from the force of gravity. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

It is not possible to pay Evil in installments—and still we always try. It is conceivable that Alexander the Great—for all the military successes of his youth, for all the excellence of the army he trained, for all the desire he felt in himself to change the world—might have stopped at the Hellespont, and never crossed it, and not out of fear, not out of indecisiveness, not out of weakness of will, but from heavy legs. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

One often reads about people sinking into evil, but Kafka seems to be saying that the cost is paid in full at the outset, when evil is first admitted, and that whatever degeneration that might follow is only the aftermath. Sometimes in these aphorisms Kafka speaks of evil as a destination, and elsewhere, as in this case, evil is a starting point—although in either case evil is a cause rather than an effect.

Even Alexander the Great, conjured up as a figure of maximum power and as the famous knot-cutter, stops before the

decisive step because it is basically too heavy. As in the previous aphorism, the question is: are the “uphill” or the “downhill” within me or outside me? In this aphorism, the problem is logistical, the weight is in the problem, not in the solver. He wonders if he can't conquer the world a piece at a time, but this is like trying to 5%-marry someone today, add another 1-2% a month later, and build up to a full marriage. It seems that Kafka is saying that this approach is like trying without doing, or noncommittally committing, and identifying that with evil.

Evil must be paid for with action, and piecing action out in installments means trying to act in the least active way, as close to inaction as possible, which is like turning away from action even as you supposedly do it. Installment action is like a passive imitation of activity. It's interesting to remember here that Kafka generally tried to write his stories all in one sitting, and, when interrupted, would often start all over again, even if that meant rewriting the beginning verbatim. This suggests that a story written bit by bit would have lacked a wholeness he was looking for, like trying to break the ice with the axe by swinging the axe a few inches over the ice every day. Bergson noted that a movement cannot be subdivided; if you break a movement up into a series of movements, then you have replaced one movement with many.

Kafka's novels weren't written at one sitting, but perhaps Kafka, every time he worked on them, plunged as far as he could go in that episode. In that case, he wouldn't have been breaking up one act into a series of lesser acts, but the novel would have been a series of unique, maximal efforts, like trying to launch himself over a chasm again and again. If this is true, then it might help to explain why Kafka never completed any of his three novels, because it would mean that the novel itself is not a single act broken into parts but a collection of acts, hence open-ended.

#### NUMBER THIRTY-NINE (B)

*Der Weg ist unendlich, da ist nichts abzuziehen, nichts zuzugeben und doch hält jeder noch seine eigene kindliche Elle daran. »Gewiß, auch diese Elle Wegs mußt du noch gehen, es wird dir nicht vergessen werden.«*

The way is infinitely long, nothing of it can be subtracted, nothing can be added, and yet everyone applies his own childish yardstick

to it. “Certainly, this yard of the way you still have to go, too, and it will be accounted unto you.” [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The road is endless, there are no shortcuts and no detours, and yet everyone brings to it his own childish haste. “You must walk this ell of ground, too, you won’t be spared it.” [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

The Kaiser/Wilkins is closer to the text, although in both translations the English ending is slightly unlike the German, which says (as far as I can tell) “this will not be forgotten of you.” This is a real ambiguity in the original; it could mean “it will be remembered that you did this,” or it could mean “it will not be forgotten that you should do this.”

Hofmann’s translation emphasizes impatience, where Kaiser/Wilkins pays more attention to the idea of measuring and dividing. Again, the mistake seems to be the one identified by Bergson, the source of Zeno’s paradox, the idea that motion can be divided into segments, the confusion that arises when measuring is mistaken for movement.

On the one hand, you can say that this means no cheating, no aggrandizing. On the other hand, not being able to subtract or add to the way, which is the more literal translation of the verbs, could be underscoring what eternity means. It doesn’t mean the largest imaginable heap of seconds or the longest imaginable distance; it isn’t measurable.

If the way is endless, that doesn’t give you room to fool around. You still have to take every one of the endless steps, which more or less means you have to keep to the way at all times. You don’t accumulate merit a crumb at a time; in fact, merit doesn’t seem to enter into it. The merit is in being underway and maybe in heading in the right direction, if there’s a difference, not in how far along you get. If we introduce “how far,” we’re talking in relative terms, specifically relating me to you, and now it’s a race. The way isn’t a racetrack.

### NUMBER FORTY

*Nur unser Zeitbegriff lässt uns das Jüngste Gericht so nennen, eigentlich ist es ein Standrecht.*

It is only our conception of time that makes us call the Last Judgment by this name. It is, in fact, a kind of martial law. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

It's only our notion of time that allows us to speak of the Last Judgment, in fact it's a Court Martial. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

The Hofmann marks this aphorism cancelled, the Kaiser/Wilkins does not. No idea why.

Martial law seems to be the likeliest translation of Standrecht; the usual term for Court Martial is *Kriegsgericht*. *Gericht* alone means court, not judgement, so perhaps Hofmann wanted to extend this idea, from Latest Court to Court Martial. The use of "allows" instead of "makes" seems more true; the concept we have of time is not compelling us to do something but only permits for this mistake.

What is the difference between Latest Court and martial law? One is the end of all judgement, the other is the suspension of ordinary legal procedure. Ordinary legal processes are conducted in the name of the Law, which is transcendent; the last judgement is the manifestation of a transcendent principle in experience. Is it simply that what is transcendent in the first case is present and active in the latter, or is there a higher idea of Justice that has the same relation to Law as the Law has with us? If there is Justice above Law, then wouldn't the Last Judgement be the manifestation of Justice? In either case, however, whether it's Law or Justice that appears in the Last Judgement, how can Kafka equate these transcendent ideas with martial law?

The idea seems to be that martial law makes no appeal to anything higher than itself; it simply acts, without reference to a model. It doesn't act randomly or shapelessly; the operation of the army conditions it, but that military organization is a self-structuring, internal principle that doesn't seek to manifest some transcendent idea. The army may draw on ideas like the Nation, but soldiers don't fight for the Nation they fight for their country; it may invoke values like Valor and Honor but these are values, while the Law is not exactly a value.

Bringing time into it, I think Kafka means that we see the last judgement as final not because it is final, capable of rendering absolute decisions, but because we continue to think of time in

metrical terms as something that ends. If we think of eternity, then what becomes of finality in any form, including final judgements? There were many church fathers, Origen for one, who believed that eventually even Satan himself would be redeemed, so where is finality of judgement? This would mean that martial law or the Court Martial is Kafka's conception of the principle of this kind of judgement under the aspect of eternity. It would also mean that the transcendent and the non-transcendent are already crashing into each other.

### NUMBER FORTY-ONE

*Das Mißverhältnis der Welt scheint tröstlicherweise nur ein zahlenmäßiges zu sein.*

It is comforting to reflect that the disproportion of things in the world seems to be only arithmetical. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The disproportion of the world seems fortunately to be merely numerical. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Again, this one is marked cancelled in Hofmann but not in Kaiser/Wilkins.

What is a non-numerical disproportion? A qualitative disproportion would mean some truths are truer or some beauties more saturated with beauty, but, in order to conceive of this, it would be necessary to come up with a way of thinking in terms of more or less without thinking of number at the same time. If motion is indivisible, then there can be no disproportion there unless we think in terms of higher and lower. I'm not sure Kafka is thinking much about high and low.

### NUMBER FORTY-TWO

*Den ekel- und haßerfüllten Kopf auf die Brust senken.*

Letting the head that is filled with disgust and hate droop on the breast. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

To let one's hate- and disgust-filled head slump onto one's breast.  
[Hofmann]

COMMENTARY

It's unclear to me whether or not it would be legitimate to identify the head with thinking and the breast with the heart and therefore with feeling; I don't think so, because there is nothing essentially rational about hatred.

The image of the head sunk on the breast indicates submission, contrition, or exhaustion. The head is weighed down with a burden of hate and disgust, and to let it sink is to stop supporting it. Hate and disgust are a burden. Allowing the head to drop is not the same as banishing hate and disgust, but perhaps it is a necessary first step in that direction.

NUMBER FORTY-THREE

*Noch spielen die Jagdhunde im Hof, aber das Wild entgeht ihnen nicht, so sehr es jetzt schon durch die Wälder jagt.*

The hunting dogs are still romping in the yard, but the prey will not escape them, however much it may be stampeding through the woods even now. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The dogs are still playing in the yard, but the quarry will not escape them, never mind how fast it is running through the forest already. [Hofmann]

COMMENTARY

The prey can't escape because it is prey, already. Kafka's stories return to the image of this kind of cancelled action, like the country doctor being whisked away from his house, and then hurtling through space at the story's end.

In a way, the prey is bringing its capture about, because you can't chase what isn't running away. By running away, it makes itself prey. The dogs would kill it even if it weren't running away, but this isn't about killing, it's about being hunted. If the quarry stays put, or even tries to fight, then, whether or not it's killed, it hasn't quite been hunted, because hunting means tracking down and catching in flight. This aphorism treats this as if it were a magic

spell, that what is running therefore makes itself vulnerable to whatever runs down running things. Trying to avoid something still entails getting into a relationship with it.

### NUMBER FORTY-FOUR

*Lächerlich hast du dich aufgeschirrt für diese Welt.*

A ridiculous way you have girded yourself up for this world.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

You have girded your loins in a most laughable way for this world.  
[Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Is this an aphorism or only a bit of wry self-deprecation? It's interesting to note that in both cases the translators felt obliged to add the word way, making the manner of the girding into the topic, rather than the girding itself. This would mean that there is a non-laughable way to gird yourself up for this world.

Girding up, protecting yourself. Is this laughable because it's been badly done, or because you're fooling yourself, imagining that you can get through life without pain, or at least without serious injury?

I think the gist of this is self-reflexive; look at how you see yourself as separate from the world, standing off to the side in a little sanctuary, readying yourself to go out and face life like a soldier strapping on armor. It isn't clear from this, though, whether the problem is a mismatch between the attitude and the one taking it, or the attitude alone. Is it ridiculous for someone like Kafka to come at life this way, but not for someone else? Or is it always ridiculous? In the first case, this is an objection intended to restore someone from delusion to self-knowledge, while in the second case, this is a comment about life.

### NUMBER FORTY-FIVE

*Je mehr Pferde du anspannst, desto rascher gehts - nämlich nicht das Ausreißen des Blocks aus dem Fundament, was unmöglich ist, aber das Zerreißen der Riemen und damit die leere fröhliche Fahrt.*

The more horses you harness to the job, the faster the thing goes—that is to say, not tearing the block out of its base, which is impossible, but tearing the straps to shreds, and as a result the weightless merry journey. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The more horses you put to, the faster your progress—not of course in the removal of the cornerstone from the foundations, which is impossible, but in the tearing of the harness, and your resultant riding cheerfully off into space. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

The more you strain to move the block, the faster you'll go when the straps break. So more force means more speed, but not more effectiveness.

It's comical to think of someone gaily zooming along, thinking he's dragging the block behind him all the while. What you really want here: that's the question. If you want to move the block, that's impossible, so why try? Only to prove impossibility? If you want to fly, why bother with the block? The desire, then, must be to be released from the block, to feel the maximum effort has been made. Wouldn't that be the same as achieving the point of no return? Having made the greatest possible effort, you are now free. The only question then is, whether or not you have made the greatest possible effort, or if you might be able to do more. How much is enough?

What is the block holding up? Why are you trying to pull it down? If the block is only an abstraction representing any arduous task, then the aphorism is more or less saying that the harder you try, the sooner you'll be done, one way or the other.

The addressee is the informal "you," so I imagine Kafka saying this to himself. You keep making these supreme efforts, he seems to be saying, but is that really because you want to succeed, or is it because you want to break down and be done with it finally? In that case, wouldn't the more correct course of action call for less effort rather than more? Even though the task is impossible anyway? Or is it that you need to think of effort differently, not in terms of greater force, more struggle, but some other way? Perhaps the greater effort is not made by pulling harder, but by paying more attention, and finding the right route?

### NUMBER FORTY-SIX

*Das Wort »sein« bedeutet im Deutschen beides: Dasein und Ihmgehören.*

In German, the word *sein* stands both for the verb *to be* and for the possessive pronoun *his*. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The German word *sein* signifies both “to be there” and “to belong to Him.” [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This is a reflection on the German language, perhaps implying that it tacitly equates existence with a kind of slavery, or at the very least that it conjures up for itself the idea of being in the form of a relationship to another. We have to wonder if one meaning is meant to subside beneath the other, if they are being strictly equated, or if they are two different meanings to be held side by side. If they are equated, then does that mean that the usual idea of being is somehow deconcretized into a relationship only, or that the relationship is made concrete?

As I said earlier, there are really serious quagmires to be waded into when it comes to the idea of “having.”

What does belonging to him (or Him) entail? Duties, responsibilities, expectations ... But is this only a one-way relationship, or is there something binding on the other side, whatever that is? This aphorism noses a little in the direction of God without losing any ambivalence; Kafka knew Czech as well as German. There are other languages.

### NUMBER FORTY-SEVEN

*Es wurde ihnen die Wahl gestellt, Könige oder der Könige Kuriere zu werden. Nach Art der Kinder wollten alle Kuriere sein. Deshalb gibt es lauter Kuriere, sie jagen durch die Welt und rufen, da es keine Könige gibt, einander selbst die sinnlos gewordenen Meldungen zu. Gerne würden sie ihrem elenden Leben ein Ende machen, aber sie wagen es nicht wegen des Diensteides.*

They were given the choice of becoming kings or the kings' messengers. As is the way with children, they all wanted to be messengers. That is why there are only messengers, racing through

the world and, since there are no kings, calling out to each other the messages that have now become meaningless. They would gladly put an end to their miserable life, but they do not dare to do so because of their oath of loyalty. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

They were offered the choice between being kings and being royal envoys. Like children, they all wanted to be envoys. This is why there are so many envoys chasing through the world, shouting—for the want of kings—the most idiotic messages to one another. They would willingly end their miserable lives, but because of their oaths of duty, they don't dare to. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Why is this childish? Don't children play-act at being kings all the time? But maybe that's the point; the messenger play-acts at being king insofar as he speaks the king's words in the name of the king. This reminds me of Nietzsche's criticism of Hegel's idea of power; Hegel wrote that man wants acknowledgement of his power by other men, that this basically is power. Nietzsche said this is to mistake the emblems of power for power itself, as if snatching the crown from off the king's head and clapping it on yours would mean everyone had to do as you say. It would mean that power had to ask permission from someone else, or to put it more accurately, from everyone else, in order to be power. Childish people, and there are no other kind, don't want real power but only its trappings. They turn going through the motions into the only form of motion, but it's a pointless dispersal of energy.

Who offered them the choice and extracted the oath from them? The oath is part of the emblems of power—in adhering to it they are choosing to have no choice; they want to escape this life by committing suicide, but not by simply walking away. Their mistake is clinging to the emblems of power instead of giving it up. They're weirdly insisting on a subordination that doesn't exist, like religious fanatics who claim they act for God, not themselves, and so make God the author of all their misdeeds.

There is also a parallel with the law, which used to be considered a codification of God's will, and which came to be an independent power in its own right. The law as such is just an empty word that is used to justify the implementation of certain rules, but what justifies law as such is a mystery, or just a sham.

### NUMBER FORTY-EIGHT

*An Fortschritt glauben heißt nicht glauben, daß ein Fortschritt schon geschehen ist. Das wäre kein Glauben.*

Believing in progress does not mean believing that progress has yet been made. That is not the sort of belief that indicates real faith. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Belief in progress doesn't mean belief in progress that has already occurred. That would not require belief. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Post hoc ergo propter hoc. This disengages the idea of progress from the past entirely, showing how “progress” is a judgement, an interpretation, rather than an empirical observation. Simply because things have developed in the past, it does not follow that things will continue to develop in the future. This might then mean that belief in progress has to address all of time.

Applied to the idea of wayfaring, this means that going along the way is not a matter of clearing distance and making a certain amount of progress, but of being oriented in what one believes is the direction of improvement.

### NUMBER FORTY-NINE

*A. ist ein Virtuose und der Himmel ist sein Zeuge.*

A. is a virtuoso and heaven is his witness. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

A. is a virtuoso, and Heaven is his witness. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

We could take this as an observation one person makes about another, but in that case, how would we be in a position to designate heaven a witness? I assume that virtuoso means more than an expert musician, but a virtuous person. For the Greek philosophers and mythologers, any excellence was the signature of some god or other; if we think of virtuosity this way, then you can't be a virtuoso unless the gods allow it. This is much like the weird Christian idea of grace. It amounts to saying that even moral

excellence can't be imputed to you, but only bestowed on you from its source, which, at least to me, eliminates you from consideration altogether. You can't even argue that you received excellence because you deserved it, since deserving it would mean being excellent on your own; if it's possible for you to be excellent on your own, then any divinely-bestowed excellence would be superfluous, and if you can't be excellent on your own, then heaven bestows excellence on some other basis, or no basis.

How can you know that you are virtuous? You can try to be good, but how do you know if you're succeeding? Kafka doesn't say "virtuous," he says "A. is a virtuoso," which implies skill. If heaven witnesses skill, and if witnessing implies approval, then what matters isn't moral attainment but skillfulness, which is consistent with other aphorisms.

#### NUMBER FIFTY

*Der Mensch kann nicht leben ohne ein dauerndes Vertrauen zu etwas Unzerstörbarem in sich, wobei sowohl das Unzerstörbare als auch das Vertrauen ihm dauernd verborgen bleiben können. Eine der Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten dieses Verborgenbleibens ist der Glaube an einen persönlichen Gott.*

Man cannot live without a permanent trust in something indestructable in himself, though both the indestructable element and the trust may remain permanently hidden from him. One of the ways in which this hiddenness can express itself is through faith in a personal god. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

A man cannot live without a steady faith in something indestructable within him, though both the faith and the indestructable thing may remain permanently concealed from him. One of the forms of this concealment is the belief in a personal god. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Kaiser/Wilkins marks this one cancelled.

What is necessary in order to live, the practical, will be true from a human point of view, but whether or not it amounts to objective truth is not something that can be made to depend on its being necessary.

The word *dauernd(es)* is used first to express the constancy of belief, and then to express the constancy with which both the object of this faith and the faith itself are concealed. This might remotely imply a common actor in each case, making the belief and its concealment the work of one actor, “man.” If not, then one would be doing the believing and another the hiding.

Both translators choose to keep god in the lowercase, although I believe the original wording would justify a capitalized God just as well; the lowercase god would be any god, while uppercase would indicate the God of monotheism.

This aphorism appears to say that man projects what he needs to believe indestructable about himself into another being, perhaps in order to put it out of reach of destruction; this also masks the true nature of the belief. One thinks one believes in God, but really believes in the self. What changes is made to depend on what doesn’t change, while depending on change itself is apparently too alarming an idea.

Bergson wrote extensively about this problem, but I have no reason to think Kafka had read Bergson. In brief, Bergson maintained that the self exists solely as a continuous flux, but that it is more practically expedient to ignore this and think of it as fixed; change is understood as a succession of fixed impressions, rather than as a continuous flow, and so the continuity of one moment to the next, past and present, has to be supplied by another means, which is the fiction of the stable self as a kind of stage on which these fixed impressions come and go. The stage is beyond the reach of change, and so it is indestructable.

This is ultimately what is meant by the idea of the soul, and with that idea comes God too. Just as there are fixed impressions succeeding each other on a stage in the soul, so there are fixed souls succeeding each other in the greater unfolding of time, and the “stage” on which that happens is God. God is to the many distinct human souls, from this point of view, what the soul is to the many different fixed impressions of life. Same scheme.

This aphorism doesn’t bear directly on the existence of God or even of what is indestructable since it only deals with what people need to believe.

## NUMBER FIFTY-ONE

*Es bedurfte der Vermittlung der Schlange: das Böse kann den Menschen verführen, aber nicht Mensch werden.*

The mediation by the serpent was necessary: Evil can seduce man, but cannot become man. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

It took the intercession of the serpent: Evil can seduce a man, but not become human. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Both translations mark this aphorism cancelled.

So the indestructable part mentioned in the previous aphorism is actually what is human, and precisely this would be the divine endowment. Evil is never total, but must coexist with good.

This aphorism suggests to me that Kafka was trying to make sense of the story of the fall, specifically to account for the involvement of the serpent. If man falls through his own failing, then why include a seducer as well? Why complicate matters by making man the accomplice of an inhuman agency? It must be because goodness can't be goodness, nor can it be as innocent of any concept of evil as Adam and Eve were, and yet give rise to evil somehow. Evil requires contamination from an external source.

It's interesting that the word used here was *Vermittlung*, which can mean arrangement, and even translates to office on some occasions. Mediation or intercession are words that strike me as pretty strictly geometrical and abstract, touching only on the position of the serpent, but these other possibilities put the serpent in the position of an arranger or official. It is interesting to speculate what this perhaps unintended nuance might mean when we think of Kafka's courts and castles. There is in each case a mediation between a foreground figure, albeit one whose availability to us as readers should not be taken for granted simply on that account, and another agency so remote that it can't even be included in the farthest reaches of the background: the law, the judge, the castle. Between the attenuated foreground and utterly obscure background yawns a boundless middle ground of mediation, offices, messengers, specialist amateurs, other clients, support staff ...

It's tempting to say that everything gets lost in mediation, until you try to get a handle on the foreground or background figures; then you find they are so entirely lacking in anything of their own that it is only in mediation that they begin to take on outlines. Obviously, what lies beyond the court or the castle is so far off and obscure that its existence can only be taken on faith, but who was Josef K. before he was accused? Even the details of his former life are revealed only in the oblique light of the court, and his existence after the accusation was made is understood entirely in terms of his connection to the court. The K of *The Castle* is even more of a sphinx; there is nothing even remotely like a satisfactory "psychological" accounting for his actions. Any adaptation of either novel that insists on casting these characters as protagonists in any way will fail.

Why was this aphorism cancelled? I think it must have been because Kafka doesn't want to make such a strong connection between the folkloric figure of the devil and the mediation that so interests him. Is mediation evil? Even if it doesn't set itself the task of destroying others, doesn't exhibit any malice? So perhaps this is something he wanted to work out a bit further.

### NUMBER FIFTY-TWO

*Im Kampf zwischen dir und der Welt sekundiere der Welt.*

In the struggle between yourself and the world second the world.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

In the struggle between yourself and the world, hold the world's coat. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Kaiser/Wilkins marks this one cancelled, while Hofmann does not. Huh?

The superficial and not particularly interesting meaning is obvious enough: the world is more powerful than you are, so a fight with the world is one you're bound to lose.

In a duel, however, the second's task is to bear witness; he is there to make sure the fight is conducted fairly. With that in mind, the aphorism would mean instead that, in your struggle with the

world, it's your own cheating, not the world's, that you have to watch for.

### NUMBER FIFTY-THREE

*Man darf niemanden betrügen, auch nicht die Welt um ihren Sieg.*

One must not cheat anyone, not even the world of its victory.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

It is wrong to cheat, even if it is the world of its victory. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This seems to be a clarification of the point Kafka wished to make in the previous aphorism; here the idea of struggling with the world is less conspicuous and dominating.

What would cheating be, and what's wrong with it? To me, it seems as if cheating, in this case, is falseness. On the one hand, this might be taken in a conventional sense to mean that one must not be selfish, but on the other hand, it might mean that presenting yourself falsely, playing yourself rather than being yourself, is wrong.

What is the victory of the world, and why do I assume—previous aphorism notwithstanding—that its victory is a victory over me? Is the court victorious when Josef K. is killed? Is the castle victorious to the extent that it keeps K. from entering it? Is the gatekeeper victorious when he shuts the door to the law? In *The Trial*, Josef K. is apparently in a contest with the court, but it isn't clear that the court in any way recognizes him as an opponent it wishes to destroy. The conflict seems to be largely Josef K.'s own invention, but not entirely. Even when he is killed, he seems to have compelled the court to take drastic measures by his own actions, and the executioners pass the knife back and forth over him apparently with the expectation that he will seize it and kill himself. It isn't all in Josef K.'s head—he is arrested, the court is real, the executioners are real. Would he have been cheating if he had tried to conduct his case in the usual way, as a client or defendant? He does not cheat in his resistance to the court; it would be playing along that would have been cheating.

The court has to destroy a real person, not a phantom. If it didn't, it wouldn't be a court. To exist, the world needs victories, and therefore needs losers.

### NUMBER FIFTY-FOUR

*Es gibt nichts anderes als eine geistige Welt - was wir sinnliche Welt nennen, ist das Böse in der geistigen, und was wir böse nennen, ist nur eine Notwendigkeit eines Augenblicks unserer ewigen Entwicklung. Mit stärkstem Licht kann man die Welt auflösen. Vor schwachen Augen wird sie fest, vor noch schwächeren bekommt sie Fäuste, vor noch schwächeren wird sie schamhaft und zerschmettert den, der sie anzuschauen wagt.*

There is nothing besides a spiritual world; what we call the world of the senses is the Evil in the spiritual world, and what we call Evil is only the necessity of a moment in our eternal evolution. || One can disintegrate the world by means of very strong light. For weak eyes the world becomes solid, for still weaker eyes it seems to develop fists, for eyes weaker still it becomes shamefaced and smashes anyone who dares to gaze upon it. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The world is only ever a constructed world; what we call the sensual world is Evil in the constructed world, and what we call Evil is only a fleeting necessity in our eternal development. || With a very strong light, one can make the world disappear. Before weak eyes it will become solid; before still weaker eyes, it will acquire fists; and to eyes yet weaker, it will be embarrassed and punch the face of anyone who dares to look at it. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Kaiser/Wilkins marks the section represented here as following the two vertical lines (||) cancelled, while Hofmann preserves the separation into parts without any indicated cancellation.

I always have the same problem with formulations like these, that X is evil and that what we call evil is Y. Does this mean that senses and senses alone are really evil, and that what we call evil is actually only a necessity? Or does it telescope, one into another, so senses are evil and evil is necessity, hence senses are necessity? I think the former is meant, although it's hard to say why. Being able to say why will entail being able to understand the aphorism.

The world is a generalization not found in experience, rather it is the presumptive stage on which a series of experiences is supposed to unfold. The sensual, and the word has the same connotations in German as in English, is Evil, which is to say, what carries us away. What we call evil is a necessity, something that can't be avoided and consequently can't be considered evil in consistency with the usual ideas of morality. In our endless process of maturation, there arise these moments that flash by too quickly to see, and our reflex reactions to these sudden moments are what we call evil. So the real evil is the sensual, becoming lost to oneself in the sensory world, and not the reflex adjustments to sudden events.

The word translated moment above is *Augenblick*, which borrows from the rapidity of glances and blinks of the eye; the eye comes back again on its own in the separated section. The world, which can only be a mental world, is dissolved in strong light. It's a curious idea; at first he seems to be saying that the world looks different to progressively weaker eyes but by the end he seems to mean that the world reacts to being looked at differently by weaker eyes. The world might seem passive at first, but takes an active role and an affect by the end.

Strong light, the strongest, might be divine, or it might be the light of the strictest reason or self-consciousness, which dissolves the sensual world because it recognizes it as a representation. The light being truth or understanding, something like that, will take apart that world and perhaps render it down to its constituent elements, reversing an unconscious world-fashioning. The weak are not deprived of the light, but of the eyes to see it. The light makes the mental world seem solid to weak eyes, and the word for solid, *fest*, which foreshadows *Fäuste*, can also mean fixed. So it may be that the weak eyed thinker is using unchanging generalities or perceives the sensual world as unchanging. Weaker still are those who conflict with their sensory worlds, and weaker still are those who imagine that they can fight with their own sensory world as if it were not their own creation but an inimical external presence.

The difficulty in the cancelled section is the idea of weakness, which seems to have no lower limit. There doesn't seem to be a correspondingly clear position of strength.

### NUMBER FIFTY-FIVE

*Alles ist Betrug: das Mindestmaß der Täuschungen suchen, im üblichen bleiben, das Höchstmaß suchen. Im ersten Fall betrügt man das Gute, indem man sich dessen Erwerbung zu leicht machen will, das Böse, indem man ihm allzu ungünstige Kampfbedingungen setzt. Im zweiten Fall betrügt man das Gute, indem man also nicht einmal im Irdischen nach ihm strebt. Im dritten Fall betrügt man das Gute, indem man sich möglichst weit von ihm entfernt, das Böse, indem man hofft, durch seine Höchststeigerung es machtlos zu machen. Vorzuziehen wäre also hiernach der zweite Fall, denn das Gute betrügt man immer, das Böse in diesem Fall, wenigstens dem Anschein nach, nicht.*

Everything is deception: seeking the minimum of illusion, keeping within the ordinary limitations, seeking the maximum. In the first case one cheats the Good, by trying to make it too easy for oneself to get it, and the Evil by imposing all too unfavorable conditions of warfare on it. In the second case one cheats the Good by not striving for it even in earthly terms. In the third case one cheats the Good by keeping as aloof from it as possible, and the Evil by hoping to make it powerless through intensifying it to the utmost. What would therefore seem to be preferable is the second case, for the Good is always cheated, and in this case, or at least to judge by appearances, the Evil is not cheated. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Everything is deception: the question of whether to seek the least amount of deception, or the mean, or to seek out the highest. In the first instance, you will cheat goodness by making it too easy to acquire, and Evil by imposing too unfavorable conditions on it. In the second instance, you cheat goodness by failing to strive for it in this earthly life. In the third instance, you cheat goodness by removing yourself from it as far as you can, and Evil by maximizing it in a bid to reduce its impact. Accordingly, the second option is the one to go for, because you always cheat goodness, but—in this case at least, or so it would seem—not Evil. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Hofmann seems to have decided that Kafka should have an anachronistically modern tone here, with “going for” this and “impact” that.

The word translated here as illusion or deception, *Betrug*, really means cheating. There is no avoiding it.

Refusing to cheat makes being good too easy, which is to say that goodness needs to prevail over temptations or trials, which does not mean to win the trial (in that case the victory belongs to the self), but to endure the trial and play the game without any possibility or thought of winning or losing. No trial, nothing for evil to work with or to be good about. The good becomes “too light an acquisition.” The value of the good is in the labor. Meanwhile, you've made yourself too hard for Evil to get. One must be fair to Evil. Perhaps ruling out deception makes you too passive; you're a “good fellow,” but automatically, not by choice.

Sticking to ordinary levels of cheating (literally, “to go on as usual”) means accepting that cheating happens. That means you aren't even trying to achieve what the world defines as good. Doing less than all you can in order to be good is not good, because the good is an absolute that demands total commitment.

Cheating as much as possible is another form of cheating, since it is something one does willingly only in order to try to overcome it anyway, but it can't be done without excessive neglect to the good. It's an attempt to out-cheat cheating. Both this extreme and the extreme minimization of cheating are forms of impatience, trying to have done with the problem rather than living with it.

If cheating is evil, then goodness must not cheat. If cheating is avoided, that cheats the cheaters and makes goodness ungood. To be good, goodness must forgo all cheating and allow itself to be completely cheated. Everything evil does is cheating, even to the extent of cheating itself.

So, the middle way is better, because it allows the good to remain the good without abolishing evil.

## NUMBER FIFTY-SIX

*Es gibt Fragen, über die wir nicht hinwegkommen könnten, wenn wir nicht von Natur aus von ihnen befreit wären.*

There are questions we could not get past if we were not set free from them by our very nature. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

There are questions we could never get past, were it not that we are freed of them by nature. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

*Hinwegkommen* can mean to get over, as in getting over a disappointment; *Natur* can mean character or disposition.

Questions stop us from going on, but it is possible to get past a question. You can be freed of it by your nature—so what does that mean? It might refer to the way that some questions or problems are resolved more by time than by thinking or by making decisions; it might mean that your power to be affected by a certain question might change. It might mean that your nature answers for you. But while these common sense ideas are there in the thought-background, they don't seem to me to get the point.

How does the question stop me? A missing clue or link in a chain of speculative reasoning is one sort of barrier to further progress, but then there are questions you can't answer, such as the question of marriage. Kierkegaard wrote: get married, and you will regret it; stay single, and you will regret it; get married or stay single, you will regret it either way. So is marriage the problem or is it regretting? Assuming regret has a point at all, it must be to warn you away from a something that will lead to bad consequences; here, bordering on nonsense, you have only a hairsplitting choice between two kinds of regret.

While such questions may stop you, you don't need to come up with an answer to keep moving again; and moving on is not necessarily just quitting, giving up on the question. This means that resolving the question is not necessary for getting past it or over it; you can go on without resolving it. In that case, going on doesn't mean leaving the question behind, but going on with it somehow. The man from the country is stopped by the *open* door of the law, which is closed only when he dies.

### NUMBER FIFTY-SEVEN

*Die Sprache kann für alles außerhalb der sinnlichen Welt nur andeutungsweise, aber niemals auch nur annähernd vergleichsweise gebraucht werden, da sie, entsprechend der sinnlichen Welt, nur vom Besitz und seinen Beziehungen handelt.*

For everything outside the phenomenal world, language can only be used allusively, but never even approximately in a comparative way, since, corresponding as it does to the phenomenal world, it is concerned only with property and its relations. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Language can be used only very obliquely of things outside the physical world, not even metaphorically, since all it knows to do—according to the nature of the physical world—is to treat of ownership and its relations. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

I prefer the conservatism of the Kaiser/Wilkins translation of this one. *Sinnlich* refers to the senses, which makes phenomenal the closer translation. The sensory world can include things that are not physical, if I can be said, for example, to sense images in my imagination. One can use language to describe extrasensory things only indirectly, by suggestion, not by comparison, because language answers to property. Metaphor is not comparison, it is identity. The lake is a mirror. The passion is a fire. The two are one. Here, the two are not one, and not even connectable by means of some common trait, the way a simile might connect them.

The sensory world is the world of having, and even in the simplest sense of having an impression, a view, a hearing, a taste. The nonsensory world includes what? Is it only what can't be possessed, which would mean (I think) the world of being, rather than having?

The problem arises directly from the instrumental root of language; if language develops principally as a practical tool, then it will be entirely bound to potential action for practical ends, particularly acquisitive ends. Language designates what is but it arises out of what we want. Remove potential action from consideration, as Bergson says, and everything settles back into a single undifferentiated continuity of existing.

#### NUMBER FIFTY-EIGHT

*Man lügt möglichst wenig, nur wenn man möglichst wenig lügt, nicht wenn man möglichst wenig Gelegenheit dazu hat.*

One tells as few lies as possible only by telling as few lies as possible, and not by having the least possible opportunity to do so. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The way to tell fewest lies is to tell fewest lies, not to give oneself the fewest opportunities of telling lies. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Both translations mark this aphorism cancelled. It seems entirely straightforward, which might have made it too one-sided to be worthwhile. I wonder if telling lies is equivalent to cheating in the preceding aphorisms. If so, then the idea of avoiding or burning out evil would be a matter of giving oneself fewest opportunities, rather than simply not telling lies.

### NUMBER FIFTY-NINE

*Eine durch Schritte nicht tief ausgehöhlte Treppenstufe ist, von sich selber aus gesehen, nur etwas öde zusammengefügtes Holzernes.*

A stair not worn hollow by footsteps is, regarded from its own point of view, only a boring something made of wood.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

To its own way of seeing, a wooden stair moderately hollowed out by people's footfalls is just some knocked-together article of wood.  
[Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

This aphorism is marked cancelled in both translations. Does this mean that only the used stair knows it's a stair? Or that the unused stair despises itself for being useless? Kafka's fiction is full of inanimate things that seem to be parts of other things, or parts of a system, about which it has only secondhand or otherwise sketchy information. It is an example of a thing that is stripped down apparently to nothing but function, which is then also stripped of function. Odradek, the odd wooden thing, might be one of those nameless, ad hoc machine parts you sometimes come across in the entrails of a car or a clock; it isn't an artifact with a real name, like a cog or a gear, it may not be an artifact.

This aphorism is cancelled, and I think I see why. There's some activity in it, but not enough.

### NUMBER SIXTY

*Wer der Welt entsagt, muß alle Menschen lieben, denn er entsagt auch ihrer Welt. Er beginnt daher, das wahre menschliche Wesen zu ahnen, das nicht anders als geliebt werden kann, vorausgesetzt, daß man ihm ebenbürtig ist.*

Anyone who renounces the world must love all men, for he renounces their world too. He thus begins to have some inkling of the true nature of man, which cannot but be loved, always assuming that one is its peer. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Whoever renounces the world must love humanity, because he is also renouncing their world. Accordingly, he will begin to have a true sense of human nature, which is incapable of anything but being loved—assuming, that is, that one is on the same footing as it. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This says that, when someone renounces the world, he or she doesn't give up only his or her world, but the world of humanity as such. This means that the renunciate doesn't retire to a private world, but either gives up any world, or enters into some higher, superhuman world that is not his or hers. Perhaps this means that renouncing the world is not just giving it up, but giving it as a gift; which would mean in turn that the renunciate doesn't turn from the world as a worthless mistake or an illusion. The world would therefore be renounced even as it is acknowledged to be a true value.

It could be that Kafka means the world may depend in part on renunciates, because they contend with the whole world as such and so bring the whole world into experience. The result of this is a better understanding of what humanity is, presumably by seeing how humanity understands the world, which can only be a concept, being too big and old to fit into human experience.

Being a peer of mankind—and *ebenbürtig* can mean evenly matched as well, so this equivalence is not necessarily a peaceful one!—is necessary if one is to be in a condition of loving mankind. That means that the renunciate, who loves humanity, must continue to be human or at least at a human level. The renunciation doesn't make him an angel, it makes him or requires of him that he be a lover of mankind. Mankind can only be loved, but only by a peer, which might not mean another human, it need only mean someone at a human level. Loving mankind doesn't make you human, but only a peer of humanity, as it makes it possible for you to renounce the world. Kafka seems to be saying that every lover of mankind must renounce the world. I don't think he means that you have to renounce mankind in order to love it,

but that it if you love it, you must renounce it in order to be its peer, which is necessary in order to go on loving it.

Why can't you hate mankind? Is it because hating mankind is still very human, while loving mankind seems to be superhuman? Why can't you be indifferent to mankind? Is it because that indifference is only a kind of subhumanity, which puts you below the level of mankind? There might be overtones here of the previous aphorism about cheating, too much, too little, in the middle.

### NUMBER SIXTY-ONE

*Wer innerhalb der Welt seinen Nächsten liebt, tut nicht mehr und nicht weniger Unrecht, als wer innerhalb der Welt sich selbst liebt. Es bliebe nur die Frage, ob das erstere möglich ist.*

Anyone who loves his neighbor within the limits of the world is doing no more and no less injustice than someone who loves himself within the limits of the world. There remains only the question whether the former is possible. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Whoever in this world loves his neighbor does just as much and just as little wrong as who in this world loves himself. Remains the question whether the former is possible. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Both translations mark this aphorism cancelled.

“... innerhalb der Welt” is the component that seems to require the most attention. It is important enough that Kafka insistently repeats it, so his topic is not love, but loving within the world. This might link up with the previous aphorism; so that loving within the limits, in an ordinary way, is not really different in character from self love.

He touches on, but I think unintentionally, the idea that we can mistake self love for love of others. The main idea here, though, is that loving the self and loving others within the world is neither here nor there, if the latter is even possible. Loving outside the world, I assume here as a renunciate, is the variation in love that would get the one beyond this indeterminate state of value, neither more or less unjust. Put another way: favoring you is not that different from favoring me, if we're both elements in the

world. Perhaps, only when leaving the world behind for good do you move on to the level of loving all mankind, and so to a kind of love in which self-love and love of the neighbor are different in an important way?

#### NUMBER SIXTY-TWO

*Die Tatsache, daß es nichts anderes gibt als eine geistige Welt, nimmt uns die Hoffnung und gibt uns die Gewißheit.*

The fact that there is nothing but a spiritual world deprives us of hope and gives us certainty. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The fact that the only world is a constructed world takes away hope and gives us certainty. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Namely, I suppose, the certainty that all we see is coming from within us, and therefore nothing can be that isn't somehow already figured in us. Hope and certainty are not compatible, and there is plainly an exchange of them implying equivalency. Being before the law one hopes for law, but without certainty. The constructed world is a closed set, but being constructed and being spiritual are not exactly the same although the difference may not matter here.

Hope seems to belong to another world which must be inaccessible in order to belong to hope; any accessible place is not hoped for, it's only farther away. Going there will not satisfy your hopes but only alter your location. Satisfying your hopes is a miraculous and incalculable thing that cannot be accounted for even if it happens.

#### NUMBER SIXTY-THREE

*Unsere Kunst ist ein von der Wahrheit Geblendet-Sein: Das Licht auf dem zurückweichenden Fratzengesicht ist wahr, sonst nichts.*

Our art is a way of being dazzled by truth: the light on the grotesquely grimacing retreating face is true, and nothing else. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Our art is an art that is dazzled by truth: the light shed on the rapidly fleeing grimace is true—nothing else is. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Only the light is true; the grimace or face are not, and perhaps neither is its yielding or backward motion. It's interesting that both translators feel the need to insert an adverb of their own before *zurückweichenden*, which means to yield backwards or behind. Kafka directly invokes neither rapidity or grotesqueness. By choosing to emphasize the grimace itself, Hofmann discards the face, *-gesicht*, which makes it. The light shed on the grimace itself might be, at least, the registration of some suffering, if we include in suffering other such negative possibilities as disgust or anger. Whereas, the idea here seems to be that the face itself is yielding as it grimaces, being drawn away from the hypothetical witness, not so obviously in flight, but only going back. What I see as I read this is the grimacing face retreating without turning away, whereas, with a rapidly fleeting grimace it is the expression that moves across the stationary face.

Is this light on the grimacing face the same dazzling light mentioned in the first half of the aphorism, or is it a contrast? We in our art, or skillfulness, are only good at dazzling ourselves with a truth whose light we can't really see by, and so it is all too much like blindness. The real light is a faint light that only momentarily illuminates an expression of pain or rejection, which, as it pulls away from us, denies us any opportunity to address it or otherwise enter into some exchange with it. Perhaps it retreats not from the witness but from the light; this could mean that the truth is that disappointment or unpleasantness of reality—not viciousness, just nastiness—which comes out when you look for it. There may be here a tacit criticism of the sort of art that ostentatiously aims at the heights, instead of more humbly, but perhaps on the other hand more arrogantly, probes the depths.

Truth is supposed to grant sight, not deprive or injure sight, and the analogy to light is made plain in the second half—our skill is to be blinded by truth, perhaps to show truth in all its brilliance even as it overwhelms us and therefore cannot be fully seen, or seen at all—there is another analogy, between truth as blinding light and law as the open but impassible door.

NUMBER SIXTY-FOUR/SIXTY-FIVE

*Die Vertreibung aus dem Paradies ist in ihrem Hauptteil ewig: Es ist also zwar die Vertreibung aus dem Paradies endgültig, das Leben in der Welt unausweichlich, die Ewigkeit des Vorganges aber (oder zeitlich ausgedrückt: die ewige Wiederholung des Vorgangs) macht es trotzdem möglich, daß wir nicht nur dauernd im Paradiese bleiben könnten, sondern tatsächlich dort dauernd sind, gleichgültig ob wir es hier wissen oder nicht.*

Expulsion from Paradise is in its main aspect eternal: that is to say, although expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in the world unavoidable, the eternity of the process (or, expressed in temporal terms, the eternal repetition of the process) nevertheless makes it possible not only that we might remain in Paradise permanently, but that we may in fact be there permanently, no matter whether we know it here or not. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The Expulsion from Paradise is eternal in its principal aspect: this makes it irrevocable, and our living in this world inevitable, but the eternal nature of the process has the effect that not only could we remain forever in Paradise, but that we are currently there, whether we know it or not. [Hofmann]

COMMENTARY

I don't know, but I guess that number sixty-four ends at the colon, and number sixty-five is the expansion after it.

If paradise as a condition is eternal, and therefore outside ordinary clock time, then to be there once is to be there always. So there is eternal presence in paradise, and eternal expulsion from Paradise. In that case, the question would not be how to find the way back, but how to realize the extent to which you are still there.

To be in paradise without knowing it is not expulsion, and if that is possible, then it shows paradise is not only a state of mind. Paradise might be defined as an eternal place you get expelled from. The door is open and the man doesn't go through; in this case, you are in paradise but you must leave, forever be leaving it. This is like the inverse of the castle, isn't it? Or is it that the way to belong to the castle is to try to get inside it, without success?

### NUMBER SIXTY-SIX

*Er ist ein freier und gesicherter Bürger der Erde, denn er ist an eine Kette gelegt, die lang genug ist, um ihm alle irdischen Räume frei zu geben, und doch nur so lang, daß nichts ihn über die Grenzen der Erde reißen kann. Gleichzeitig aber ist er auch ein freier und gesicherter Bürger des Himmels, denn er ist auch an eine ähnlich berechnete Himmelskette gelegt. Will er nun auf die Erde, drosselt ihn das Halsband des Himmels, will er in den Himmel, jenes der Erde. Und trotzdem hat er alle Möglichkeiten und fühlt es; ja, er weigert sich sogar, das Ganze auf einen Fehler bei der ersten Fesselung zurückzuführen.*

He is a free and secure citizen of this earth, for he is attached to a chain that is long enough to make all areas of the earth accessible to him, and yet only so long that nothing can pull him over the edges of the earth. At the same time, however, he is also a free and secure citizen of heaven, for he is also attached to a similarly calculated heavenly chain. Thus, if he wants to get down to earth, he is choked by the heavenly collar and chain; if he wants to get into heaven, he is choked by the earthly one. And in spite of this he has all the possibilities, and feels that it is so; indeed, he even refuses to attribute the whole thing to a mistake in the original chaining. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

He is a free and secure citizen of the world because he is on a chain that is long enough to allow him access to all parts of the earth, and yet not so long that he could be swept over the edge of it. At the same time he is also a free and secure citizen of heaven because he is also attached to a similar heavenly chain. If he wants to go to earth, the heavenly manacles will throttle him, if he wants to go to heaven, the earthly manacles will. But for all that, all possibilities are open to him, as he is well aware, yes, he even refuses to believe the whole thing is predicated on a mistake going back to the time of his first enchainment. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Free and in chains; doubly free, on earth and in heaven, and doubly chained by each. His freedom in either domain is limited by the length of the chain, which luckily is no longer or shorter than is necessary to cover the entire earth right on up to but not over the edge. Since the heavenly chain is similar, that means he

can go all over heaven, too, right up to the edge. It's unusual to think of heaven with an edge, but it must have at least one, to divide it from the earth.

The word citizen has a sterile, abstract quality that doesn't do justice to the parochial nuance associated with *Bürger*. The word suits the limitations of the chain. He has all the possibilities, even if he has no way of realizing them.

This state of affairs, it seems to me, is the most characteristic of Kafka. It isn't just about being neither here nor there, because the person in question is always also both here and there, both already and neither one yet. Kafka's writing has far less to do with now and then, and deals almost exclusively with already and not yet. Again and again he divorces possibility and accomplishment, so that what is accomplished happens without apparently realizing any possibility, and what is possible will never happen, and yet not cease to be possible.

What is possible can never happen, because it ceases to be a possibility the moment it is realized, but this is just a stupid logic trick. I don't believe Kafka wanted to waste his time pretending that reality abides by logic. Instead, I think he returns to this divorce because it is his experience, and readers return to Kafka because this is their experience as well; possibility becomes an endless game of keep-away.

Mistake is another idea that looms over Kafka's writing. Mistakes are much less important than sins to the usual way of thinking, but in Kafka this seems to be reversed. Unnoticed and unconscious oversights are far more serious in their consequences than deliberate sins. Ordinarily, sin is attributed to man's failure to use his free will correctly, because man's will is corrupted. But to this other way of thinking, the problem isn't with man's will, or rather the problem isn't that man wills to have wrong things, but instead that man doesn't will consistently enough to pay sufficient attention to what he's doing so as to avoid mistakes.

#### NUMBER SIXTY-SEVEN

*Er läuft den Tatsachen nach wie ein Anfänger im Schlittschuhlaufen, der überdies irgendwo übt, wo es verboten ist.*

He runs after facts like a beginner learning to skate, who,

furthermore, practices somewhere where it is forbidden. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

He runs after the facts like someone learning to skate, who furthermore practices where it is dangerous and has been forbidden. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Nothing about danger in the original.

The novice skater travels in a series of headlong plunges or by scooting doggedly along in one direction. He particularly lacks lateral mobility. This suggests a way of moving that consists in identifying a series of points and connecting the dots.

The ice may be forbidden because it is thin and therefore dangerous, but I think this buys us a link to Kafka's famous ice axe at the cost of too patent an explanation of the ban on skating. The problem isn't that the skater might or might not break the ice, but that he has already broken the rules. He might be more like Prometheus, who sees only the gift of fire he will make to humanity, but not the lateral possibilities of discovery and punishment; he is punished because his forethought failed. His foresight failed not because he did not anticipate his future torture, but because he allowed immediately present compassion to prompt his action without a thought for the future.

Maybe the fact skater doesn't realize the facts are not the point or the end.

## NUMBER SIXTY-EIGHT

*Was ist fröhlicher als der Glaube an einen Haust Gott!*

What is gayer than believing in a household god? [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Is there anything as blithe as believing in one's own household god? [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Presumably because household gods are human-sized, both particular and tribal, specifically attentive, and overall so far from the absolute. They are also found at home, rather than on a pilgrimage. It isn't necessary to follow a way to find them.

But isn't the true way just as much the path between one room of the family home and another as it is the path between the town square and the sacred shrine? Don't those household gods take on a serious look sometime, and not the bathetic seriousness of a dog or a cat, but surprising seriousness? They're saying, 'I may be small, but even I come from the infinite.'

#### NUMBER SIXTY-NINE

*Theoretisch gibt es eine vollkommene Glücksmöglichkeit: An das Unzerstörbare in sich glauben und nicht zu ihm streben.*

Theoretically there is a perfect possibility of happiness: believing in the indestructable element in oneself and not striving towards it. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Theoretically, there is one consummate possibility of felicity: to believe in the indestructability in oneself, and then not to go looking for it. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Theoretically, which is to say not only that Kafka does not claim to believe this himself, but that he is only willing to grant that it is provisionally possible. Kafka cannot fail to detect any gulf between theory and practice.

Believing there is something in you that cannot be destroyed, rather than trying to achieve a measure of indestructability, is happiness, even perfect happiness. Not immortality; he says indestructability. Immortality is an existence without death, whereas a indestructable thing may meet with deadly adversity, but it shrugs it off or survives it. That happiness isn't neverending life, but confidence.

#### NUMBER SEVENTY/SEVENTY-ONE

*Das Unzerstörbare ist eines; jeder einzelne Mensch ist es und gleichzeitig ist es allen gemeinsam, daher die beispiellos untrennbare Verbindung der Menschen.*

The indestructable is one: it is each individual human being and, at the same time, it is common to all, hence the incomparably

indivisible union that exists between human beings.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

The indestructable is one thing; at one and the same time it is each individual, and it is something common to all; hence the uniquely indissoluble connection among mankind. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Individuality is the property, common to all, of difference, and our difference is what binds us together, since, if we were not different, there would be no reason to bind us together; we would not be bound to each other, we would be endless images of each other.

## NUMBER SEVENTY-TWO

*Es gibt im gleichen Menschen Erkenntnisse, die bei völliger Verschiedenheit doch das gleiche Objekt haben, so daß wieder nur auf verschiedene Subjekte im gleichen Menschen rückgeschlossen werden muß.*

In one and the same human being there are cognitions that, however utterly dissimilar they are, yet have one and the same object, so that one can only conclude that there are different subjects in one and the same human being. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The same person has perceptions that, for all their differences, have the same object, which leads one to infer that there are different subjects contained within one and the same person. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

This aphorism is cancelled in each translation.

It is the plurality of perceptions or cognitions within the same person (one could also say discoveries or realizations, so this should not necessarily be read with only simple understanding in mind), that compels us (we *must* deduce this, he says) to acknowledge a plurality of subjects within the same person. This means that every different state of mind is a different configuration of the same subject.

I think this aphorism was cancelled because Kafka might have seen an undesirable contradiction in asserting the sameness and the

serial differentiation of the subject at once. He might have decided that it would be more right to discard the idea of the same subject as a container for multiple subjects. Moreover, if there are multiple mind states discerning the object, then how is it possible to speak with confidence about it being the same object?

### NUMBER SEVENTY-THREE

*Er frißt den Abfall vom eigenen Tisch; dadurch wird er zwar ein Weilchen lang satter als alle, verlernt aber, oben vom Tisch zu essen; dadurch hört dann aber auch der Abfall auf.*

He gobble up the leavings and crumbs that fall from his own table; in this way he is, of course, for a little while more thoroughly sated than all the rest, but he forgets how to eat from the table itself. In this way, however, there cease to be any crumbs and leavings. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

He scavenges the leftovers from his own table; that makes him better fed than the others for a little while, but he also forgets how to eat at table; and so the supply of leftovers dries up. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This one is more mysterious to me. The problem is not that he creates waste, or even that he eats it, but that he forgets the source of the waste, and so loses the waste as well. Could this be a warning about becoming too preoccupied with reflections or commentary, so as to lose sight of experience? Then, having no experiences of any heft to speak of, like the stereotypical bookish student who has replaced life with reading, there is nothing left to comment on. I could also imagine this referring to someone who has become so vigilantly self-aware and self-questioning that he becomes paralyzed. The overall pattern seems to be one in which the secondary and dependent activity is mistaken for an end in itself. There is also the idea here of one who goes from creating and consuming to doing nothing but consuming.

### NUMBER SEVENTY-FOUR

*Wenn das, was im Paradies zerstört worden sein soll, zerstörbar war, dann war es nicht entscheidend; war es aber unzerstörbar, dann leben wir in einem falschen Glauben.*

If what is supposed to have been destroyed in Paradise was destructable, then it was not decisive; but if it was indestructable, then we are living in a false belief. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

If what was supposed to be destroyed in Paradise was destructable, then it can't have been decisive; however, if it was indestructable, then we are living in a false belief. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This seems to be a return to Sixty-Four/Sixty-Five. Normally, one does not speak of destruction so much as of a fall, so it's the use of destruction that sets up the question. Is the point that the false belief is what keeps us from getting back? Kafka's writing is not full of false beliefs, because this would entail identifying the true belief; instead he returns obstinately to the uncertainty and provisionality of any belief. The difficulty he has pinned down in this aphorism is the Hobson's choice between an indecisive paradise and a false belief.

### NUMBER SEVENTY-FIVE

*Prüfe dich an der Menschheit. Den Zweifelnden macht sie zweifeln, den Glaubenden glauben.*

Test yourself on mankind. It is something that makes the doubter doubt, the believer believe. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Test yourself against mankind. It teaches the doubter to doubt and the believer to believe. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This is marked cancelled in both versions.

Perhaps the one who eats his own table scraps is not testing. Testing or checking is a constant puzzle in Kafka's writing; his characters are often brought up against another character with a

completely different perspective on the same events he is dealing with. And yet this checking is never conclusive of anything.

Artistic editing and selection are tests, as is evident in this case since it is marked for deletion; and yet these inconclusive tests are at the same time decisive and critical, because a decision is going to happen somehow. In some ways, Kafka's fiction consists of tests.

#### NUMBER SEVENTY-SIX

*Dieses Gefühl: »hier ankere ich nicht« - und gleich die wogende, tragende Flut um sich fühlen! Ein Umschwung. Lauernd, ängstlich, hoffend umschleicht die Antwort die Frage, sucht verzweifelt in ihrem unzugänglichen Gesicht, folgt ihr auf den sinnlosesten, das heißt von der Antwort möglichst wegstrebenden Wegen.*

This feeling: “Here I shall not anchor”—and instantly to feel the billowing, supporting swell around one! \*A veering round. Peering, timid, hopeful, the answer prowls round the question, desperately looking into its impenetrable face, following it along the most senseless paths, that is, along the paths leading as far as possible away from the answer. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The feeling: “I'm not dropping anchor here,” and straightaway the feeling of the sustaining sea-swell around one. // A reversal. Lurking, fretful, hoping, the answer creeps around the question, peers despairingly into its averted face, follows it on its most abstruse journeys—that is, those that have least to do with the answer. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Kaiser/Wilkins marks the first half of this one cancelled, while Hofmann simply notes a break.

It is a relief to be provisional.

The answers do not eliminate the questions but only accompany them. Questions are eliminated when they are shown up as false questions; a real question does not get eliminated. They can be dropped, but they don't fade like abandoned things. After eight hundred years they are every bit as fresh and dewy and painful and humiliating as ever. Becoming a question is a key to immortality.

Here's how I would translate the opening of the second part: "A drastic change. Lying in wait, anxious, trusting, the answer pads along beside the question, gazing earnestly into its aloof face ..." The idea here is that the answer is the question's dog. There is no search for the answer, actually the answer is searching out the question, but when it finds its question, there must be an acknowledgement. Instead, the question simply goes on about its business like always, because it is a part of things, and can't be dismissed by an answer.

### NUMBER SEVENTY-SEVEN

*Verkehr mit Menschen verführt zur Selbstbeobachtung.*

Association with human beings lures one into self-observation.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

Dealings with people bring about self-scrutiny. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

If I'm not nuts, this one could be translated: intercourse with people seduces one into self-observation (with a distant idea of masturbation behind it?). Even if this is too much of a reach, there is something similar, the relationships, in the original. What I do with others, I learn to do to myself. This kind of reversal onto oneself happens all the time in Kafka. The accuser, especially, becomes the accused just like that.

The simplest explanation would be that I watch myself so as to avoid looking as bad as the person next to me. Every new set of social circumstances remeasures me with its own yardstick. I also have to consider the effects that my actions will cause them to feel.

### NUMBER SEVENTY-EIGHT

*Der Geist wird erst frei, wenn er aufhört, Halt zu sein.*

The spirit becomes free only when it ceases to be a support.  
[Kaiser/Wilkins]

The spirit only becomes free at the point where it ceases to be invoked as a support. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

The aphorism seems to be addressed to someone who is looking to become a free spirit, and it seems to be saying that you can't be a free spirit if you are all the time calling yourself a free spirit and trying to be one, and coming up with definitions of free spiritedness, otherwise turning it into a mechanical posture. To be a free spirit, you have to forget. It would be interesting to translate Halt here as "prop," because this would give us both the idea of propping up (supporting), but also the idea of a stage property, a mock-up of something real used in performances. A prop gun doesn't fire, and an idea of free spiritedness used as a prop is not emancipating nor is the spirit free.

#### NUMBER SEVENTY-NINE

*Die sinnliche Liebe täuscht über die himmlische hinweg; allein könnte sie es nicht, aber da sie das Element der himmlischen Liebe unbewußt in sich hat, kann sie es.*

Sensual love deceives one as to the nature of heavenly love; it could not do so alone, but since it unconsciously has the element of heavenly love within it, it can do so. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Sexual love deceives us as to heavenly love; were it alone, it would not be able to do so, but containing within itself, unknowingly, a germ of heavenly love, it can. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

*Sinnliche* can mean sensual, but it can also mean simply sensory, which in this case would indicate a love of outward appearance, sense impressions. I don't know that it makes sense to assume that heavenly love is its opposite, especially since Kafka claims the one contains an element of the other. To call this a "germ" implies that the heavenly develops out of the sexual, which is not what Kafka is saying.

How is one deceived? What is the wrong thing that sensual love causes us to think about heavenly love? It seems to involve overextending a comparison between the two.

What is "heavenly love"? Whatever it is, it is not wholly unlike sexual love. It could be that the heavenly attribute attaches to the subject or to the manner of loving, which in this case amount

to the same thing, namely, unselfish love. If, on the other hand, it is the object, then this would mean one loves heavenly things. Kafka does not say that heavenly love has an element of sensual love in it; is the formula reversible? Is sensual love de facto selfish?

It could be that Kafka means to draw the distinction between heavenly love, which is not apparent but an object of faith, and sensual love, which is apparent and which attaches to appearances. If sensual love has an element of heavenly love in it, then this would mean it does not respond entirely to appearances. If sensual love appears as heavenly love, this might mean that heavenly love has a way of appearing that can be mistaken for sensual love. If these are true, then heavenly love must not be a matter of faith and sensual love not just a matter of appearances.

### NUMBER EIGHTY

*Wahrheit ist unteilbar, kann sich also selbst nicht erkennen; wer sie erkennen will, muß Lüge sein.*

Truth is indivisible, hence it cannot recognize itself; anyone who wants to recognize it has to be a lie. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The truth is indivisible and is therefore incapable of recognizing itself; whatever claims to recognize it must therefore be a lie. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Hofmann marks this once cancelled, but Kaiser/Wilkins do not.

The Hofmann translation, by saying “incapable,” deprives truth of the ability to recognize itself, whereas Kaiser/Wilkins could be read to mean that the truth is circumstantially prevented from exercising a power of recognition that might exert otherwise.

Truth could only recognize itself if it were divisible, which would make it possible for one part to encounter another part and, by dint of some kind of comparison, to a model or image, or measurement according to some other criteria, most likely the criteria by which the truth was divided up, recognize it as another piece of the truth.

This is a little like the point Bergson makes in *Creative Evolution*, that, owing to our limitations, humans can only manage

to take it a bit of nature at a time, and so humanity has to put together its picture of nature a piece at a time, knowing that, since all of nature is interconnected and basically one, we have to try to bring all our theories into a single consistency, and keep revising the overall model, which itself is too large for any one person to see, every time a new theory appears.

What is more radical here is the idea that truth can only be known from falsehood. Is the reverse true? The difference between a lie and the truth is intention; I can say something unwittingly true while I think I'm lying and, morally speaking, I will still be a liar. I can know with greater assurance, greater truth, when I'm lying, because a lie must be accompanied by an intention to lie. If I say something untrue without meaning to, that's not a lie, but a mistake.

I don't need to know the truth in order to lie, because the lie is tailored to the situation, not measured against knowledge. But in order to know the truth, I have to know the difference between truth and untruth, although it's a stretch to call all untruth "lies." Besides, Kafka isn't talking about how a person knows a difference, but how truth knows itself. It can't, only the lie can know the truth and recognize it as object whose shadow it is.

This to me hearkens back to the aphorisms in which good cannot know itself as good, in which only the evil can know good, such as Number Twenty-Seven and Number Twenty-Eight.

#### NUMBER EIGHTY-ONE

*Niemand kann verlangen, was ihm im letzten Grunde schadet. Hat es beim einzelnen Menschen doch diesen Anschein - und den hat es vielleicht immer -, so erklärt sich dies dadurch, daß jemand im Menschen etwas verlangt, was diesem Jemand zwar nützt, aber einem zweiten Jemand, der halb zur Beurteilung des Falles herangezogen wird, schwer schadet. Hätte sich der Mensch gleich anfangs, nicht erst bei der Beurteilung auf Seite des zweiten Jemand gestellt, wäre der erste Jemand erloschen und mit ihm das Verlangen.*

Nobody can desire what is ultimately damaging to him. If in individual cases it does appear to be so after all—and perhaps it always does so appear—this is explained by the fact that someone in the person demands something that is, admittedly, of use to someone, but which to a second someone, who is brought in half in

order to judge the case, is gravely damaging. If the person had from the very beginning, and not only when it came to judging the case, taken his stand at the side of the second someone, the first someone would have faded out, and with him the desire. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

No one can crave what truly harms him. If in the case of some individuals things have that appearance—and perhaps they always do—the explanation is that someone within the person is demanding something useful to himself but very damaging to a second person, who has been brought along partly to give his opinion on the matter. If the man had taken the part of the second person from the outset, and not just when the time came to make a decision, then the first person would have been suppressed, and with it the craving. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Spinoza found suicide a special conundrum, since he also maintained that the self acts in its own best interests, and that all action is by definition rational (Spinoza regarded most of human behavior as an irrational reflex, and so did not dignify it with the name of action). This may be Kafka's shot at a reply.

The second translation gives I think a better rendering, taking the imperious position of judging away and replacing it with opinion, although perhaps a slightly more urgent word is needed there. Also the use of "half" in Kaiser/Wilkins is unsatisfying to me; it prompts me to wonder about the second half.

The answer would seem to be that no person can crave what is destructive to him, which is asserted not as a conclusion drawn from appearances but as a conclusion that is imposed despite appearances, which all tend to the contrary conclusion; however, this disagreement, which is very typical of Kafka, is then explained. There is an assertion that no person can will self-destruction, then an observation that this kind of self destructive will seems ubiquitous, and then this disagreement is resolved by recourse to an argument whereby a person is assumed to contain other persons; self-destructiveness is therefore an illusion that arises out of a conflict of utilities between intrapersonal persons.

The problem left untouched by this solution is the status of the person who contains these other persons—is he or she just another one of this crowd of persons, or does he or she have some

special importance? It seems as if the person is something like a judge or a monarch, since it is his or her side-taking which seems to determine whether or not any of this other category of second-class inner people will continue to exist. They come into existence apparently on their own recognizance, which may be why the Main Person need take no responsibility for them; whether they continue to act upon the Main Person is up to that Main Person, but not entirely. The Main Person does not suppress one of the second class types directly, but by siding with another second-class person.

With respect to Kafka, I tend to shun the word “paradox” and, if I have been speaking of “contradictions” then I won’t any more, because “disagreement” is the better word. A paradox and a contradiction are both examples of a merely logical snafu; there’s something mechanical about them. A disagreement immediately conjures up the atmosphere of Kafka; the disagreement is a living, slippery contest between unpredictable actors, who want to be right and who want to win. Where there is both being right and winning, we are already well away from any scenario that can be understood monoschematically.

## NUMBER EIGHTY-TWO

*Warum klagen wir wegen des Sündenfalles? Nicht seinetwegen sind wir aus dem Paradiese vertrieben worden, sondern wegen des Baumes des Lebens, damit wir nicht von ihm essen.*

Why do we complain about the Fall? It is not on its account that we were expelled from Paradise, but on account of the Tree of Life, lest we might eat of it. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Why do we harp on about Original Sin? It wasn’t on its account that we were expelled from Paradise, but because of the Tree of Life, lest we eat of its fruit. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

The word *Sündenfall* means the Fall, not Original Sin, which is *Erbsünde*. The Fall is the loss of Paradise by Adam and Eve, while Original Sin is the consequence of that Fall, and hence distinct from it.

So this one seems to say that complaining about the Fall is like a murderer complaining about his sentence. The Fall is not the reason for expulsion from the garden, it is the expulsion. Is there a bathetic joke here, that blame is being laid now here, now there, but decidedly not taken by oneself?

Or is the point that we should complain about the Tree, and blame it for our trouble? Or perhaps that the complaining is pointless?

The purpose of the expulsion, then, might be to preserve the Tree of Life for us to continue to desire, rather than to have, since it is desiring and going in a direction, rather than having and staying put, which seems to be intended. It seems axiomatic that humanity is meant to be on path, wayfaring, rather than remaining.

### NUMBER EIGHTY-THREE

*Wir sind nicht nur deshalb sündig, weil wir vom Baum der Erkenntnis gegessen haben, sondern auch deshalb, weil wir vom Baum des Lebens noch nicht gegessen haben. Sündig ist der Stand, in dem wir uns befinden, unabhängig von Schuld.*

We are sinful not only because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life. The state in which we are is sinful, irrespective of guilt. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

We are sinful, not only because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life. The condition in which we are is sinful, guilt or no guilt. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

This seems to be saying that eating from the Tree of Life will undo the sin of the Fall. But eating from the Tree of Life can't be our redemption, only something our redemption leads to, since, I assume, it isn't possible to get back into Paradise, and hence get to the Tree of Life to eat from it, without being redeemed first.

I suppose the question of guilt is waived because, being pure and innocent, Adam and Eve couldn't have known what they were doing when they ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, since it was just that type of knowledge they could only get as a result of the

act. They sinned, but they didn't know what they were doing, so there was sin without guilt. Sin and guilt are therefore two different things, and it's sin that will apparently be undone when we eat from the Tree of Life. This means we can eat from the Tree of Life and become free from sin, or at least absolved of sin, without necessarily ceasing to be guilty. So it's possible to be saved and guilty, and to sin in innocence.

#### NUMBER EIGHTY-FOUR

*Wir wurden geschaffen, um im Paradies zu leben, das Paradies war bestimmt, uns zu dienen. Unsere Bestimmung ist geändert worden; daß dies auch mit der Bestimmung des Paradieses geschehen wäre, wird nicht gesagt.*

We were created in order to live in Paradise, and Paradise was ordained to serve us. What was ordained for us has been changed; it is not said that this has also happened with what was ordained for Paradise. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

We were created to live in Paradise, and Paradise was designed to serve us. Our designation has been changed; we are not told whether this has happened to Paradise as well. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

So Paradise may no longer be suited to us, putting us in the position of striving for what would not serve us any longer. Does this mean that we must restore ourselves through striving to what we once were, or that we have to wait for a re-ordination of Paradise, or re-ordinate it ourselves? We must not take the destination for granted.

This reminds me of Klossowski's idea of the phantasm. Like a mirage, the phantasm is a destination, understood in a general way to mean the object of any desire, that we pursue, but which we never reach. This is not because the universe likes teasing us, but because we can't know the object of desire until we get it. Supposing we get it, now we have something that we can compare with our prior idea of it, and usually we find that the two are very different. Actually, the term "phantasm" is a typically pessimistic and sullen misnomer, since we do find something real at the end of our search; if we are inclined to call it a phantasm or otherwise dismiss it, that's only because we're disappointed it didn't turn out

more like what we expected. It's wrong to think that there is nothing there, when what we mean is that there's nothing there that concerns us.

### NUMBER EIGHTY-FIVE

*Das Böse ist eine Ausstrahlung des menschlichen Bewußtseins in bestimmten Übergangsstellungen. Nicht eigentlich die sinnliche Welt ist Schein, sondern ihr Böses, das allerdings für unsere Augen die sinnliche Welt bildet.*

Evil is a radiation of the human consciousness in certain transitional positions. It is not actually the sensual world that is a mere appearance; what is so is the evil of it, which, admittedly, is what constitutes the sensual world in our eyes. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Evil is an emanation of human consciousness at certain transitional points. It is not really the physical world that is illusion, but the Evil of it, which to our eyes constitutes, admittedly, the physical world. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

One of the tricky elements to this one is the use of *sinnliche*, which means the world of sense. Sensual has a sexual aspect that isn't exactly right, but physical world might be a term that makes more assumptions than are necessary. Clearly the point of the aphorism is that Evil is absolute and relative; it is in our eyes, not in things, but it is in all our eyes, it is like an inevitable aspect of human-all-too-human thinking.

### NUMBER EIGHTY-SIX

*Seit dem Sündenfall sind wir in der Fähigkeit zur Erkenntnis des Guten und Bösen im Wesentlichen gleich; trotzdem suchen wir gerade hier unsere besonderen Vorzüge. Aber erst jenseits dieser Erkenntnis beginnen die wahren Verschiedenheiten. Der gegenteilige Schein wird durch folgendes hervorgerufen: Niemand kann sich mit der Erkenntnis allein begnügen, sondern muß sich bestreben, ihr gemäß zu handeln. Dazu aber ist ihm die Kraft nicht mitgegeben, er muß daher sich zerstören, selbst auf die Gefahr hin, sogar dadurch die notwendige Kraft nicht zu erhalten, aber es bleibt ihm nichts anderes übrig, als dieser letzte Versuch. (Das ist auch der Sinn*

*der Todesdrohung beim Verbot des Essens vom Baume der Erkenntnis; vielleicht ist das auch der ursprüngliche Sinn des natürlichen Todes.) Vor diesem Versuch nun fürchtet er sich; lieber will er die Erkenntnis des Guten und Bösen rückgängig machen (die Bezeichnung »Sündenfall« geht auf diese Angst zurück); aber das Geschehene kann nicht rückgängig gemacht, sondern nur getrübt werden. Zu diesem Zweck entstehen die Motivationen. Die ganze Welt ist ihrer voll, ja die ganze sichtbare Welt ist vielleicht nichts anderes als eine Motivation des einen Augenblick lang ruhenwollenden Menschen. Ein Versuch, die Tatsache der Erkenntnis zu fälschen, die Erkenntnis erst zum Ziel zu machen.*

Since the Fall we have been essentially equal in our capacity to know Good and Evil; nevertheless it is precisely here we look for our special merits. But only on the far side of this knowledge do the real differences begin. The contrary appearance is caused by the following fact: nobody can be content with knowledge alone, but must strive to act in accordance with it. But he is not endowed with the strength for this, hence he must destroy himself, even at the risk of in that way not acquiring the necessary strength, but there is nothing else he can do except make this last attempt. (This is also the meaning of the threat of death associated with the ban on eating from the Tree of Knowledge; perhaps this is also the original meaning of natural death.) Now this is an attempt he is afraid to make; he prefers to undo the knowledge of Good and Evil (the term ‘the Fall’ has its origin in this fear); but what has once happened cannot be undone, it can only be made turbid. It is for this purpose that motivations arise. The whole world is full of them: indeed the whole visible world is perhaps nothing other than a motivation of man’s wish to rest for a moment—an attempt to falsify the fact of knowledge, to try to turn the knowledge into the goal. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Ever since Original Sin, we are basically all alike in our ability to know Good and Evil; even so, this is where we seek a particular advantage. Actually, it’s only after knowledge that the real differences begin. The appearance to the contrary is provoked in the following way: No one can be satisfied with understanding alone but must make an effort to act in accordance with it. He lacks the strength to do so; therefore he must destroy himself, even at the risk of not receiving the necessary strength; it is simply that he has no option other than to undertake this final effort. (This is the

meaning of the penalty of death for eating of the Tree of Knowledge; it may also be the original meaning of natural death.) The effort is daunting; one would rather reverse the original knowledge of Good and Evil; (the term “Original Sin” refers to this fear) but what was done cannot be undone, only muddied. To this end motivations appear. The entire world is full of them—yes, the whole visible world may be nothing more than a motivation of a man wanting to rest for a moment. An attempt to forge the fact of knowledge, to make of the knowledge an end in itself. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Resting for a moment; if reality is continuous becoming, then knowledge is all too often, as Bergson pointed out, an attempt to get a handle on it by taking a few still photos of certain movements and then plotting out the dimensions of this activity using a kind of logical model. The result is an image of things always frozen or at rest, and the assumption is that everything proceeds along cast iron chains of causation back to an initial condition that determines all forthcoming events, so that the present is determined by the past, the future by the present, and so on. This might be what is meant above when Kafka speaks of knowledge becoming the goal.

The lack of strength necessary to live in keeping with knowledge would also apply to the action of ending one’s life or destroying oneself in some other way, presumably by being “torn apart” as one goes in two different ways at once, or something equally abstract and strange. One dies after eating from the tree of knowledge because one can’t live with that knowledge, it demands that you abide by it even though you can’t.

Again, Hofmann translates as “Original Sin” what is more properly “the Fall.” To get away from the fearsome burden of knowledge, we muddy the waters and pretend not to understand, maybe even achieving genuine confusion. We do this by turning from Good and Evil actions to Good and Evil intentions, hoping to get lost in the thicket of psychology I guess.

### NUMBER EIGHTY-SEVEN

*Ein Glaube wie ein Fallbeil, so schwer, so leicht.*

A belief like a guillotine—as heavy, as light. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

A faith like an axe. As heavy, as light. [Hofmann]

COMMENTARY

I think Hofmann uses the word “axe” here to establish a connection to Kafka’s famous words about breaking the ice, but idiomatically the word *Fallbeil*, which is “falling axe,” refer to the guillotine.

Heavy as it falls and light as it rises?

Hard to lift and easy to drop?

A faith or belief that severs, which is an execution machine separating people fatally from their heads.

A weight that is a menacing potential rather than a burden.

What does it mean that faith is understood here as something that is not a part of you or of any one person? Who owns their own guillotine? It is a property of no one and everyone, it stands, in theory, above everyone.

Is this simile extended to all faith, or to a certain kind; if so, how else can we identify this certain kind, and what value are we to place on it? Is this the purer kind of faith, the kind of purity that every religion, one way or another, demands? Meaning, I suppose, a faith that efficiently overcomes every doubt.

If that’s the idea, then we have to think about how faith deals with doubt. There is the kind of faith that rejects doubt reflexively, without thinking, like a poison. This kind of faith may seem more naive or crude, but then again, it may be that this kind of faith is the kind that really takes doubt seriously, that sizes it up as a dangerous opponent.

The other variety of faith, which admits doubt without any sense of scandal, and deals with it by a weighing and measuring, may seem more sophisticated or mature, but there’s also something about it that seems to fall short of the total commitment that faith requires. Faith isn’t supposed, generally speaking, to be understood in terms of probabilities.

NUMBER EIGHTY-EIGHT

*Der Tod ist vor uns, etwa wie im Schulzimmer an der Wand ein Bild der Alexanderschlacht. Es kommt darauf an, durch unsere Taten noch in diesem Leben das Bild zu verdunkeln oder gar auszulöschen.*

Death is in front of us, rather as on the schoolroom wall there is a

reproduction of Alexander's Battle. The thing is to darken, or even indeed to blot out, the picture in this one life of ours through our actions. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Death is ahead of us, say in the way in our classrooms we had a picture of Alexander the Great in battle. What must be done is by our actions to blot out or obscure the picture, in our lifetimes. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

In the Kaiser/Wilkins edition, this aphorism is followed by another, much longer one, numbered 89, while, in the Hofmann translation, this aphorism is marked 88/89 and the longer aphorism is presented as number 104.

This one seems to say that we go through life with some ideal before us, and that our life's purpose is to efface that goal insofar as it is a matter of imitating some hero of the past, by achieving some accomplishment which is heroic in its own right, and so may stand on its own as a new painting on the wall for the generation that comes after.

The difficulty with that reading is that the image is not replaced by a new image but darkened and blotted out, which invokes the idea of forgetting more readily than it does the idea of memorializing.

*Es kommt darauf an* means something like, the thing that really matters is ... There is no "must" in the sense of a moral imperative or practical necessity. The issue is what matters, and what matters is not the battle or the Alexandrian ideal, but taking action.

### NUMBER EIGHTY-NINE

*Ein Mensch hat freien Willen, und zwar dreierlei: Erstens war er frei, als er dieses Leben wollte; jetzt kann er es allerdings nicht mehr rückgängig machen, denn er ist nicht mehr jener, der es damals wollte, es wäre denn insoweit, als er seinen damaligen Willen ausführt, indem er lebt. Zweitens ist er frei, indem er die Gangart und den Weg dieses Lebens wählen kann. Drittens ist er frei, indem er als derjenige, der einmal wieder sein wird, den Willen hat, sich unter jeder Bedingung durch das Leben gehen und auf diese Weise zu sich kommen zu lassen, und zwar auf einem zwar wählbaren, aber jedenfalls derartig labyrinthischen Weg, daß er kein Fleckchen dieses Lebens unberührt läßt. Das ist das Dreierlei des freien*

*Willens, es ist aber auch, da es gleichzeitig ist, ein Einerlei und ist im Grunde so sehr Einerlei, daß es keinen Platz hat für einen Willen, weder für einen freien noch unfreien.*

A man has free will, and this is of three kinds: first of all he was free when he wanted this life; now, of course, he cannot go back on it, for he is no longer the person who wanted it then, except perhaps in so far as he carries out what he then wanted, in that he lives. Secondly, he is free in that he can choose the pace and the road of this life. Thirdly, he is free in that, as the person who will sometime exist again, he has the will to make himself go through life under every condition and in this way to come to himself, and this, what is more, on a road that, though it is a matter of choice, is still so very labyrinthine that there is no smallest area of this life that it leaves untouched. This is the trichotomy of free will, but since it is simultaneous it is also a unity, an integer, and fundamentally so completely integral that it has no room for any will, free or unfree. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Man has free will, and of three sorts: First he was free when he wanted this life; now admittedly he cannot take back his decision, because he is no longer the one who wanted it then, he must do his own will then by living. Second he is free inasmuch as he can choose the pace and the course of his life. Third he is free in that as the person he will one day be, he has the will to go through life under any condition and so come to himself, on some path of his own choosing, albeit sufficiently labyrinthine that it leaves no little spot of life untouched. This is the triple nature of free will, but being simultaneous, it is also single, and is in fact so utterly single that it has no room for a will at all, whether free or unfree. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

The Hofmann translation occurs as number 104 in his edition, while Kaiser/Wilkins identifies this one as number 89. The corresponding number in Hofmann, as noted in the previous post, is combined with number 88.

The first freedom is responsibility or even guilt, setting oneself on a path. The second freedom is in degree of application and in direction of path, but does not extend to the possibility of ceasing

to continue down any path. Does this mean that we are not free when we commit suicide?

The third freedom involves a choice of route that is indifferent from the point of view of the terrain, since every route covers the terrain entirely and consequently varies from every other route only in terms of things like order in which various locations are visited, number of times revisited, rate of travel and so on, which seem to fall under the second freedom. This third freedom seems to invoke the idea of eternal recurrence, that I freely choose myself with the understanding or at least as if I understood that I would one day have to be this one again, because choosing to be myself once, if I am really being myself and not just playacting, means committing to being myself in a way that affirms that choice for all time. When I choose something forever, or with maximum commitment, then I am choosing never to make any other choice, choosing to renounce further choice.

These freedoms are necessarily the case, which means we can't choose not to have them, nor can we say that the choices are determined by anything outside us. So we have no choice but to choose, but the choice we make is our own choice.

### NUMBER NINETY

*Zwei Möglichkeiten: sich unendlich klein machen oder es sein. Das zweite ist Vollendung, also Untätigkeit, das erste Beginn, also Tat.*

Two possibilities: making oneself infinitely small or being so. The second is perfection, that is to say, inactivity, the first is beginning, that is to say, action. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Two alternatives: either to make oneself infinitesimally small, or to be so. The former is perfection and hence inaction; the latter a beginning and therefore action. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Both translators mark this one cancelled.

Kafka here understands action to be movement in the direction of inaction, as a goal realized. He also equates acting with growing smaller, which follows from the idea that action moves toward inaction, as long as we assume that inaction is a reduction.

If these are both possibilities, then it must be possible simply to choose to be perfect, utterly small, inactive. You can either choose to be in this state, or you can choose to be trying to be in this state.

So, if I try to make myself endlessly big, then I would be moving from action to action. The more I do the more imperfect I am. This would be a stupid observation if Kafka only meant that more activity means more opportunities for mistakes. He isn't talking about possibilities or occasions, he's talking about all times. Therefore activity is imperfection by definition, and this could have two interpretations at least; one is cynical, and I don't assume that Kafka would never write a cynical word, namely that action is always a hallmark of some insufficiency in the actor. The other interpretation would be that all real action is unrecognizable at first because it's so new. The imperfection of an action would be that incommensurability of the action to any expectation, while the perfection of inaction would be its easily circumscribable smallness.

#### NUMBER NINETY-ONE

*Zur Vermeidung eines Wortirrtums: Was tätig zerstört werden soll, muß vorher ganz fest gehalten worden sein; was zerbröckelt, zerbröckelt, kann aber nicht zerstört werden.*

Towards the avoidance of a piece of verbal confusion: What is intended to be actively destroyed must first of all have been firmly grasped; what crumbles away crumbles away, but cannot be destroyed. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

To avoid the solecism: Whatever is to be entirely destroyed must first be held very firmly: if something crumbles, it crumbles, but resists destruction. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Both translators mark this aphorism cancelled. While I think there is something of interest in number ninety, which might have been cancelled because of cynical overtones that were not intended, here I think I can see why this aphorism was discarded.

Kafka distinguishes between two kinds of selection. One is artificial selection of something to be destroyed, while the other is a

natural selection. Destruction is designated as exclusively active, which produces a reversal very characteristic of Kafka's thinking: what crumbles is immune to destruction. What falls apart of its own decrepitude or weakness can't be destroyed. So Bloch the tradesman will go on dragging out his days in court forever, while Josef K., who tries to do battle with the court, must be killed, although even then he seems to be given the opportunity to kill himself as the knife is passed to and fro between his executioners, and the killing is entirely unceremonious and unlike an official execution, carried out in a nondescript place.

Kafka seems to be intrigued by the idea that weaknesses can become strengths without ceasing to be weaknesses; weakness, failure, waiting, hesitating, all have their rights, too.

This aphorism also reminds me of the Penal Colony story, which depicts this kind of seizing and active destroying.

The problem is that there is a kind of active destruction that sweeps away old rubbish without noticing or caring what it's doing. It's a scandal, but it's also for that reason more innocent, because it isn't negating an existing thing so much as it's entirely preoccupied with presenting something new, like someone who dashes this and that off a table in order to set down a new acquisition on it and show it off.

Meanwhile, crumbling is distinct from the kind of vigilantism needed to maintain a stable identity, which can only be done by suppressing inevitable changes. Crumbling is not all that simple and unambiguous. Matter crumbles, but it remains matter and can be reorganized into something else. People crumble differently, although they don't stop being people, but, if crumbling is understood as a metaphor for the loss of some important aspect of self, then it is a way for the self to stop being the self. So matter can crumble and stay matter, while the crumbling self ceases to be a self at all.

### NUMBER NINETY-TWO

*Die erste Götzenanbetung war gewiß Angst vor den Dingen, aber damit zusammenhängend Angst vor der Notwendigkeit der Dinge und damit zusammenhängend Angst vor der Verantwortung für die Dinge. So ungeheuer erschien diese Verantwortung, daß man sie nicht einmal einem einzigen Außermenschlichen aufzuerlegen wagte, denn auch durch Vermittlung eines Wesens wäre die menschliche Verantwortung noch nicht*

*genug erleichtert worden, der Verkehr mit nur einem Wesen wäre noch allzusehr von Verantwortung befleckt gewesen, deshalb gab man jedem Ding die Verantwortung für sich selbst, mehr noch, man gab diesen Dingen auch noch eine verhältnismäßige Verantwortung für den Menschen.*

The first worship of idols was certainly fear of the things in the world, but, connected with this, fear of the necessity of the things, and, connected with this, fear of responsibility for the things. So tremendous did this responsibility appear that people did not even dare to impose upon it one single extra-human entity, for even the mediation of one being would not have sufficiently lightened human responsibility, intercourse with only one being would still have been all too deeply tainted with responsibility, and that is why each thing was given the responsibility for itself, more indeed, these things were also given a degree of responsibility for man. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The first case of idolatry was surely fear of things, and therefore also fear of the necessity of things, and therefore also of responsibility for them. This responsibility seemed so vast that people didn't even dare to lay it at the feet of a single divine being, because the intervention of one such being would not sufficiently lighten the weight of human responsibility, the negotiation with one being would have remained too much stained with the responsibility, and therefore each thing was given the responsibility for itself, or more, the things were also given a measure of responsibility for the human. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Fear not simply of disasters, but of the idea that these disasters had some kind of reason behind them, and were not merely random happenstances—man cannot accept the idea that he suffers for nothing, but this introduces the terror of a will behind the greatest disasters, which in turn means that man must fear also that this will does not act capriciously, which would not be so much different from randomness but only a displacement of that randomness onto an agency outside nature, but rather that this inimical will is only reacting to human actions, thus ultimately making human beings liable for what happens to us—hence the idol, which is therefore a technology by means of which we solace

ourselves with the idea that we are ultimately in control of our own destinies.

So God is an intensification or collection, like a focal point, for man's responsibility, but also a free agent who acts without being susceptible to human influence. To have only one God to handle everything would mean mankind has an intercessor, and this makes things too easy to be plausible. This also roots religion in fear, weakness, and reproach.

Responsibility seems to require proliferation and the existence of channels, tiers, a whole system, which has the attributes Kafka gave to the court and the castle. The implication is that this byzantinism must be seen as something the people subject to these institutions seem to require or have a use for; so Kafka is never well understood if all we see is a burlesquing of bureaucracy in his work. The institutions produce these elaborated systems of themselves; there is no corrupt master official in either case, no center, and no outside, no place from which to view the bureaucracy as a means to an end.

### NUMBER NINETY-THREE

*Zum letztenmal Psychologie!*

Never again psychology! [Kaiser/Wilkins]

No psychology ever again! [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Both translators mark this one cancelled.

Sometimes I wonder if the cancellation isn't part of the meaning, as in this case, which seems to capture a gesture that renounces and then renounces that renouncement. That's probably over-subtle, but it doesn't refuse to work.

Dostoevsky was consistently skeptical of psychology because it stripped humanity of its responsibility. He saw directly that this was a clash of two world orders, and a historic development in the works. I think Kafka may have some similar idea here, that psychology tends to deprive us of ultimate responsibility for what we do, making us generic figures re-enacting a biologically inevitable dramaturgy, or otherwise laying our actions at the end of

a protracted series of causes and effects that originates somewhere in the remote past and which unfolds into us through our parents.

So why cancel this one? The only way is the way forward, which would entail taking psychology to its end, causing it to evolve into something new, at which point the old psychology would drop away. Or one could create an alternative, but it would still have to involve the issues and problems of psychology in order to function as an alternative. Simply banishing pyschology is not only impossible, as what's done can't be wished away, but it would also mean an attempt to go backwards, which is always impossible in Kafka.

Kafka is all about getting to the point of no return. This is why no one ever goes back in Kafka. All his departures are final.

#### NUMBER NINETY-FOUR

*Zwei Aufgaben des Lebensanfangs: Deinen Kreis immer mehr einschränken und immer wieder nachprüfen, ob du dich nicht irgendwo außerhalb deines Kreises versteckt hältst.*

Two tasks at the beginning of your life: to narrow your orbit more and more, and ever and ever again to check whether you are not in hiding somewhere outside your orbit. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Two tasks of the beginning of life: to keep reducing your circle, and to keep making sure you're not hiding somewhere outside it. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

This seems to be a rewriting of Number Ninety, and, as it isn't cancelled, it seems safe to assume that this is to be preferred to the latter. Kafka seems to have dispensed with the distracting possibility of simply being as small as possible. I find this one especially cryptic.

Is Kafka changing his model from a line (path, rope) to a circle? Keeping the circle narrow is like keeping balanced on the rope, however. Kreis is circle, and it can also mean district or area as well as circuit, so either orbit or circle are likely translations. In both cases, there seems to be an idea of centering, since the narrowness of a circle or orbit is a matter of how far away it is from its center. Perhaps the idea here is that you need to make sure, if

we are to think of the circle as an orbit, that you are doing the orbiting, rather than being its center, but that seems a more clever than profound idea.

Is the narrowness a matter of concentration? In Number Ninety, Kafka identified smallness with activity. This could mean “keep things simple” or “beware hubris” or “don’t bite off more than you can chew” but it hardly seems necessary to devote an aphorism to commonplaces like these.

That this should be done at the outset of life to avoid big deviations is obvious, but does life have only one start or does it keep on starting? Is narrowing the circle like trying to reach the point of no return?

### NUMBER NINETY-FIVE

*Das Böse ist manchmal in der Hand wie ein Werkzeug, erkannt oder unerkannt lässt es sich, wenn man den Willen hat, ohne Widerspruch zur Seite legen.*

Evil is sometimes like an instrument in the hand; recognized or unrecognized, it lets itself be laid aside without protest if one so wills. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Evil is sometimes like a tool in your hand; recognized or unrecognized, you are able, if you have the will to do it, to set it aside, without being opposed. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

If it's your will, who could oppose you? What is being laid aside? The desire to harm others, selfishness, indifference, or some other motive or psychological state? Or is it an action, or a state of affairs? Kafka might be pointing to the moment of decision, when one really renounces something; then, there is no struggle, the act is simple and easy. Where there is a struggle against evil, there is evil. Evil is not separable from the struggle against Evil. I'm not sure that Kafka would say that the absence of struggle necessarily means the absence of Evil, though.

Perhaps contracting the circle involves not straying from the vigilance, which is not only about keeping watch, but about making sure that what there is to keep watch over doesn't become so ungainly, oversized, complicated, murky, that you can't see it. I

think Kafka was intrigued by things, particularly man-made things, like the Law, which become so vast that no one person can know them anymore. Individual specialists may know a corner very well, but no one can know what all those corners add up to. So contracting the circle is mainly, I would say, about not losing track.

## NUMBER NINETY-SIX

*Die Freuden dieses Lebens sind nicht die seinen, sondern unsere Angst vor dem Aufsteigen in ein höheres Leben; die Qualen dieses Lebens sind nicht die seinen, sondern unsere Selbstqual wegen jener Angst.*

The delights of this life are not its own, but our fear of the ascent into a higher life; the torments of this life are not its own, but our self-torment because of that fear. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The joys of this life are not *its* joys, but *our* fear of climbing into a higher life; the torments of this life are not its torments, but our self-torment on account of that fear. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Our fear of a higher life is our delight in this life, and without that higher life, this life would have no delight; the latter translation clarifies matters by making it clear the delights are our own no less than the torments. Sounds a bit Swedenborgian. What makes it arresting is the idea that our delight in this life is rooted in fear of our own salvation, rather than the more common ascription of the cause to negligence, lack of faith.

In fact, this superficially conventional admonition hides a very serious malfunction: it makes our delight in this world, which is always regarded as a distraction at best, into a consequence of belief in salvation. It follows that someone who doesn't believe in a higher life takes no delight in this one either.

## NUMBER NINETY-SEVEN

*Nur hier ist Leiden Leiden. Nicht so, als ob die, welche hier leiden, anderswo wegen dieses Leidens erhöht werden sollen, sondern so, daß das, was in dieser Welt leiden heißt, in einer andern Welt, unverändert und nur befreit von seinem Gegensatz, Seligkeit ist.*

Only here is suffering suffering. Not in such a way as if those who suffer here were because of this suffering to be elevated elsewhere, but in such a way that what in this world is called suffering in another world, unchanged and only liberated from its opposite, is bliss. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Only here is suffering really suffering. Not in the way that those who suffer here are to be ennobled in some other world for their suffering, but that what passes for suffering in this world is, in another world, without any change and merely without its contrariety, bliss. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Again I don't think it's wrongheaded to see something wilfully perverse in this interpretation. The answer to the problem of suffering is not to eliminate suffering, but to eliminate its opposite or contrariety, which is what—nonsuffering? Is nonsuffering bliss, or pleasure, a positive element, or is it only the negation of suffering? In any case, salvation delivers us from non-suffering, so that we can enjoy our suffering without having to feel bad about it, since there's no choice.

This is a highly perceptive rendering of a masochism.

### NUMBER NINETY-EIGHT

*Die Vorstellung von der unendlichen Weite und Fülle des Kosmos ist das Ergebnis der zum Äußersten getriebenen Mischung von mühevoller Schöpfung und freier Selbstbesinnung.*

The notion of the infinite expanse and copiousness of the cosmos is the result of the mixture, carried to the extreme limit, of laborious creation and free self-determination. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The conception of the infinite plenitude and expanse of the universe is the result of taking to an extreme a combination of strenuous creativity and free contemplation. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

Marked cancelled in Kaiser/Wilkins only.

Conception here implies that Kafka is speaking of people, and not the creator. If this is so, then Kafka is here trying to account for

the idea among mankind that the cosmos is infinite (as opposed to, for example, trying to explain the guidelines along which the cosmos was formed by its creator).

This means that human beings attribute to the cosmos an infinity that we necessarily find in ourselves, as we interminably produce different explanations and possibilities. This is not to say that the universe is not physically infinite, but infinity is not something that we can see as such. It's only the absence of anything we would want to recognize as a limit. If we go looking for the medieval crystal boundary of the universe, and don't see it, we say there's nothing there. In fact, it may be there, for all that direct observation can tell us. In order to tally up the plausibility of the existence of such a thing, it's necessary to turn to theory, which is always an anticipation and a generalization from the perspective of experience. What needs to be determined here is whether there exists any relationship between the infinity we conceive and the infinity we perceive, and what kind.

#### NUMBER NINETY-NINE

*Wieviel bedrückender als die unerbittlichste Überzeugung von unserem gegenwärtigen sündhaften Stand ist selbst die schwächste Überzeugung von der einstigen, ewigen Rechtfertigung unserer Zeitlichkeit. Nur die Kraft im Ertragen dieser zweiten Überzeugung, welche in ihrer Reinheit die erste voll umfaßt, ist das Maß des Glaubens.*

*Manche nehmen an, daß neben dem großen Urbetrug noch in jedem Fall eigens für sie ein kleiner besonderer Betrug veranstaltet wird, daß also, wenn ein Liebespiel auf der Bühne aufgeführt wird, die Schauspielerin außer dem verlogenen Lächeln für ihren Geliebten auch noch ein besonders hinterhältiges Lächeln für den ganz bestimmten Zuschauer auf der letzten Galerie hat. Das heißt zu weit gehen.*

How much more oppressive than the most inexorable conviction of our present sinful state is even the weakest conviction of the coming eternal justification of our temporality. Only strength in the endurance of this second conviction, which in its purity entirely comprehends the first, is the measure of faith.

>> Many people assume that besides the great primal deception there is also in every individual case a little special deception

provided for their benefit, in other words that when a drama of love is performed on the stage, the actress has, apart from the hypocritical smile for her lover, also an especially insidious smile for the quite particular spectator in the top balcony. This is going too far. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

How much more oppressive than the most implacable conviction of our current state of sin is even the feeblest contemplation of the once eternal justification for our ephemerality. Only the strength fixed in bearing the second conviction—which in its purity completely encloses the first—is the measure of faith. There are some who assume that next to the great original deception, another, smaller deception was practiced specifically for them. It's as if, when a romantic comedy is performed on stage, the actress, in addition to the lying smile for her beloved, keeps a further, particularly cunning smile for a certain spectator in Row Z. This is going too far. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

The second half of this aphorism is marked cancelled in Kaiser/Wilkins only.

There is a real mystery here around the use of *einstigen*: our former, eternal justification—before what? In any case, the idea here is straightforward: that faith has a much heavier task in bracing up against time than against faithlessness. Faith is perseverance in belief through time, and it is a way of facing up to the fact that we are creatures with a finite amount of time. It's contemplation of eternity, and of consequences through time, that frame moral calculations.

But what does this have to do with the idea of deception, which is not denied, and the idea that there is an additional, personalized imposture? Perhaps the *Ur betrug* is the former idea of eternal justification, while the second deception is a pose of indifference projected by the crafty selfishness of a human being, who wants to believe they are favored, and that justice or some other good reason requires that the cosmos not reveal who its pets are. This would be an example of hiding yourself outside your own orbit.

NUMBER ONE HUNDRED

*Es kann ein Wissen vom Teuflischen geben, aber keinen Glauben daran, denn mehr Teuflisches, als da ist, gibt es nicht.*

There can be knowledge of the diabolical, but no belief in it, for more of the diabolical than there is does not exist. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

It is possible to know of the devilish but not to believe in it, because there is no more devilishness than exists anyway. [Hofmann]

COMMENTARY

One can only believe in what is beyond our experience. This would be a backhanded way of saying that the diabolical is entirely confined to our experience, and is not transcendent. This would also mean that believing in something, whatever that might be, means believing there is more of it than there is, or that it is greater than it is, which is a contradiction, a kind of mistake. The only way to salvage something from this that is not just a goof, as far as I can see, would be to say that believing in something means believing it can be somehow greater, whether in quantity or in quality, than it currently is. The addition of the idea of current state and possible future state would also bring this aphorism more close to the stream of thought in some of the other adjacent aphorisms. If this is the case, then that would mean devilishness can't be greater than it already is. Is Kafka saying things can't get any worse? Or is he simply saying that, devilishness being the worst, it can go no further in that direction? In that case, we would not have angelicism to believe in either, since it can't get any better. Then we would have only what could get better or worse, larger or smaller, left to believe in, which I suppose would be us.

If this is what Kafka thinks faith is, then Kafka's work is saturated with faith, obsessed with faith. In all his work, Kafka seems to want to maximize the amount of room around every particular, giving it all the leeway he can manage, in which to inflate or contract, get better or worse. His directions telescope indefinitely. Faith, in this case, would then precisely be the tendency in Kafka to reject finality and make everything as provisional as he can.

This may be the only thing in all my commentary on Kafka's aphorisms that has any actual worth.

### NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND ONE

*Die Sünde kommt immer offen und ist mit den Sinnen gleich zu fassen. Sie geht auf ihren Wurzeln und muß nicht ausgerissen werden.*

Sin always comes openly and can at once be grasped by means of the senses. It walks on its roots and does not have to be torn out. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Sin always comes openly, and in a form apprehensible to the senses. It walks on its roots and doesn't need to be plucked out of the ground. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

So does this mean that sin is not a matter of interpretation? Perhaps virtue is the task of interpretation, and sin is not, or is somehow beneath or unable to achieve that level.

We are not talking about a plant, so the attribution of roots is deliberate. A root is what is fixed, so what does it mean to say something walks on its roots? Wouldn't what you walk with be a foot, not a root? How can you move with a root? How can a root be a root if it moves? Perhaps this is what makes it sin, that its roots move, and yet are roots. It abuses its roots. I think the gesture is what counts here, and not some allegory.

If interpretation is an analogue to uprooting something, then does this suggest something potentially sinful in it? Interpretation doesn't make something walk on its roots, but it does tear up roots, and if that's the case, then isn't it unrooting? Destroying roots? You interpret a thing, and end up with an idea of what something is, but to the thing's cost. And yours, since there is no use you can make of it once it's torn out of the ground. Even if the thing doesn't die, now that it's out of the ground, it might get up and start walking on its roots.

### NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND TWO

*Alle Leiden um uns müssen auch wir leiden. Wir alle haben nicht einen Leib, aber ein Wachstum, und das führt uns durch alle Schmerzen, ob in*

*dieser oder jener Form. So wie das Kind durch alle Lebensstadien bis zum Greis und zum Tod sich entwickelt (und jenes Stadium im Grunde dem früheren, im Verlangen oder in Furcht unerreichbar scheint) ebenso entwickeln wir uns (nicht weniger tief mit der Menschheit verbunden als mit uns selbst) durch alle Leiden dieser Welt. Für Gerechtigkeit ist in diesem Zusammenhang kein Platz, aber auch nicht für Furcht vor den Leiden oder für die Auslegung des Leidens als eines Verdienstes.*

We too must suffer all the suffering around us. We all have not *one* body, but we have *one* way of growing, and this leads us through all anguish, whether in this or in that form. Just as the child develops through all the stages of life right into old age and to death (and fundamentally to the earlier stage the later one seems out of reach, in relation both to desire and to fear), so also do we develop (no less deeply bound up with mankind than with ourselves) through all the sufferings of this world. There is no room for justice in this context, but neither is there any room either for fear of suffering or for the interpretation of suffering as a merit. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

All the sufferings we occasion we must also suffer. We don't all share one body, but we do share growth, and that leads us through all pain, whether in this form or in that. As the child grows through all its phases and becomes old and dies (and every stage seems unattainable to those before, whether from desire or from dread), so we develop (no less connected to others than to ourselves) through all the sufferings of the world. There is in this context no room for justice, and not for fear of suffering either, or for the presentation of suffering as merit. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Kafka dispenses with the complex of suffering, merit, justice, and fear that is so essential to both Judaism and Christianity. Suffering is set apart as an element of life and evolution in what looks to me like a Bergsonian way, and is divorced from merit or justice in a way that is basically Nietzschean in tendency. I don't think Kafka is conflating suffering with life, but I think it's clear he sees them intertwined, just as he sees all mankind intertwined in one continuous unfolding of growth. There seems to be consistency between growth understood in this way, will to power, elan vital, and becoming.

This aphorism gives us a look at life from this perspective, in part to show us how ideas like salvation through suffering and justice appear in it. I don't say Kafka is tossing justice or merit aside; he is saying that it is inappropriate to connect them to suffering as a cosmic condition of life. I don't think there is necessarily a contradiction between maintaining this disconnection while requiring people to indemnify anyone they may hurt; the consequence of the disconnection in that context is only to point out what most people would probably already concede, namely that justice and merit are social conventions grounded in manmade institutions, and not cosmic principles.

### NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND THREE

*Du kannst dich zurückhalten von den Leiden der Welt, das ist dir freigestellt und entspricht deiner Natur, aber vielleicht ist gerade dieses Zurückhalten das einzige Leid, das du vermeiden könntest.*

You have to hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world: this is something you are free to do and is in accord with your nature, but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering that you might be able to avoid. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

You can withdrawn from the sufferings of the world—that possibility is open to you and accords with your nature—but perhaps that withdrawal is the only suffering you might be able to avoid. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

If suffering is an inevitable aspect of life, then fearing and avoiding it is like fearing and avoiding life. Kafka appears to be following more a Stoic line than an Epicurean line. It's interesting to note that he says the tendency to avoid suffering in life is not unnatural, but natural; this is in keeping with the general trend of his thought in these latest aphorisms toward a complex idea of volition.

### NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR

*Der Mensch hat freien Willen und zwar dreierlei: Erstens war er frei, als er dieses Leben wollte; jetzt kann er es allerdings nicht mehr rückgängig*

*machen, denn er ist nicht mehr jener, der es damals wollte, es wäre denn insoweit, als er seinen damaligen Willen ausführt, indem er lebt. Zweitens ist er frei, indem er die Gangart und den Weg dieses Lebens wählen kann. Drittens ist er frei, indem er als derjenige, der er einmal wieder sein wird, den Willen hat, sich unter jeder Bedingung durch das Leben gehn und auf diese Weise zu sich kommen zu lassen und zwar auf einem zwar wählbaren, aber jedenfalls derartig labyrinthischen Weg, daß er kein Fleckchen dieses Lebens unberührt läßt. Das ist das Dreierlei des freien Willens, es ist aber auch, da es gleichzeitig ist, ein Einerlei und ist im Grunde so sehr Einerlei, daß es keinen Platz hat für einen Willen, weder für einen freien noch unfreien.*

#### COMMENTARY

This aphorism is identical to Number Eighty-Nine, except that, where the earlier aphorism opens with *Ein Mensch*, this one opens *Der Mensch*.

Kaiser/Wilkins deals with this duplication by omitting Number One Hundred and Four altogether, while Hofmann collapses Number Eighty-Nine into the preceding number and presents the second version under this number. His translation can be found under Number Eighty-Nine

#### ONE HUNDRED AND FIVE

*Das Verführungsmitel dieser Welt sowie das Zeichen der Bürgschaft dafür, daß diese Welt nur ein Übergang ist, ist das gleiche. Mit Recht, denn nur so kann uns diese Welt verführen und es entspricht der Wahrheit. Das Schlimmste ist aber, daß wir nach glückter Verführung die Bürgschaft vergessen und so eigentlich das Gute uns ins Böse, der Blick der Frau in ihr Bett gelockt hat.*

This world's method of seduction and the token of the guarantee that this world is only a transition are one and the same. Rightly so, for only in this way can this world seduce us, and it is in keeping with the truth. The worst thing, however, is that after the seduction has been successful we forget the guarantee and thus actually the Good has lured us into Evil, the woman's glance into her bed. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

The seductiveness of this world and the sign that warrants its transitoriness are one and the same. And rightly so, because only

in this way can the world seduce us, and accord with the truth. The grievous thing is that after falling victim to the seduction, we forget the warranty, and so the Good has led us into Evil, the woman's smile has led us into bed with her. [Hofmann]

### COMMENTARY

What is happening when I am seduced by the world? The convention is that being seduced by the world is a more or less excusable or even innocent first step, while sin and guilt are the second step. Being seduced by the world means giving it too much attention, while neglecting what lies beyond it.

But the idea that we should not pay too much attention to the world is grounded in the belief that the world is transitory, and that there is something more lasting beyond. Kafka says this is the right idea, but that it can lead to evil consequences, since, once I know this world, which includes whatever I might do in it, is transitory, then I might be inclined to think that what I do won't matter very much, and so excuse my transgressions to myself.

What might these two worlds be? Convention, dating back at least as far as Ancient Greece, tells us that the world we see is not that important, and change is the reason for that. What changes, what is impermanent, has no essence of its own, can't be relied on, and so it isn't real. It would have been more honest to say, it is not what we want to find when we go looking for reality. There's no reason we can't identify reality and change, instead of identifying reality with permanence, and when we make that other identification, then, not surprising, the resulting outlook is correspondingly very different. It is especially enlightening to look back at the conventional way of thinking from this new point of view; it suddenly seems pretty timid, conservative, suspicious, resentful.

The problem in this aphorism is the failure to take change seriously enough, and the inconsistency in relying on change to save you by transposing you to another realm where you will be miraculously preserved from change

### NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND SIX

*Die Demut gibt jedem, auch dem einsam Verzweifelnden, das stärkste Verhältnis zum Mitmenschen, und zwar sofort, allerdings nur bei völliger und dauernder Demut. Sie kann das deshalb, weil sie die wahre*

*Gebetsprache ist, gleichzeitig Anbetung und festeste Verbindung. Das Verhältnis zum Mitmenschen ist das Verhältnis des Gebetes, das Verhältnis zu sich das Verhältnis des Strebens; aus dem Gebet wird die Kraft für das Streben geholt. Kannst du denn etwas anderes kennen als Betrug? Wird einmal der Betrug vernichtet, darfst du ja nicht hinsehen oder wirst zur Salzsäule.*

Humility provides everyone, even him who despairs in solitude, with the strongest relationship to his fellow man, and this immediately, though, of course, only in the case of complete and permanent humility. It can do this because it is the true language of prayer, at once adoration and the firmest of unions. The relationship to one's fellow man is the relationship of prayer, the relationship to oneself is the relationship of striving; it is from prayer that one draws the strength for one's striving,

>> Can you know anything other than deception? If ever the deception is annihilated, you must not look in that direction or you will turn into a pillar of salt. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Humility gives everyone, even the lonely and the desperate, his strongest tie to his fellow men. Immediately and spontaneously, too, albeit only if the humility is complete and lasting. It does so because it is the language of prayer and is both worship and tie. The relationship to one's fellow man is the relationship of prayer; the relationship to oneself is the relationship of striving; out of prayer is drawn the strength with which to strive.

Can you know anything that is not deception? Once deception was destroyed, you wouldn't be able to look, at the risk of turning into a pillar of salt. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

Kaiser/Wilkins mark the second section of the aphorism cancelled. Hofmann marks a break only.

People can see themselves in the low and humble. This reminds me of Agamben's idea of the baseline human, that the humanity in an individual becomes the more apparent the more stripped and wretched he is. I suppose this is because the sense of humanity is generally a sense of universal suffering or liability to suffering, and therefore an aspect of compassion. Nietzsche on the

one hand considered human beings abject enough, but on the other hand he was wary of the sort of approach that makes compassion the basis of our relations with others, since this suggests that humans are only human when they're miserable. When confronted with someone happy, strong, beautiful, will that compassion still abide, or will it turn to resentment? Are the compassionate really interested in seeing others become happy, or are they miserable people who want to make sure no one else is any happier than they are, who want to console themselves with the idea that no one is ever really happy?

This might clarify the connection between the two elements in the aphorism.

Making room for others, which could be another way of contracting your circle. Humility has to be permanent: I think this means, no congratulating yourself on how humble you are! One strives with oneself, not with others. One draws strength to strive with oneself with others. This is exactly the opposite of what we usually hear everywhere.

The idea that humans relate to each other in a prayer-like way immediately reminds me of Amalia in *The Castle*, the way her family is ostracised largely on her account, and yet they are still members of the community in a way that K. can never be. Has Amalia been too proud in rejecting Sortini? Is the Castle really distinct from the community, or is it necessary in some way to make it possible for the community to pray to itself? K. is constantly petitioning throughout the novel; maybe coming to the village is his way of establishing himself in a position of strictest humility, one that is not just an affectation but a social position that is binding on him for as long as he chooses to stay. This puts him in an attitude of prayer toward other people whether he likes it or not.

Deception: the difference between truth and error is notoriously elusive, but the difference between truth and a lie is something else. It may be that difference is a bit thornier than Kafka expected, which might be why he cancelled the second bit of the aphorism. After all, you might unwittingly tell the truth while believing you're lying, if you don't know the truth. This is mainly a language problem; there's truth in the sense of what is the case, and then truth in the social sense, meaning there is no difference between what the speaker says and what he thinks.

NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN

*Alle sind zu A. sehr freundlich, so etwa wie man ein ausgezeichnetes Billard selbst vor guten Spielern sorgfältig zu bewahren sucht, solange bis der große Spieler kommt, das Brett genau untersucht, keinen vorzeitigen Fehler duldet, dann aber, wenn er selbst zu spielen anfängt, sich auf die rücksichtsloseste Weise auswütet.*

Everyone is very kind to A., more or less as one tries to guard an excellent billiard table even from good players, until the time when the great player comes, who will carefully examine the table, will not put up with any damage done to it previously, but then, when he himself begins to play, lets himself go wildly, in the most inconsiderate manner. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

Everyone is very friendly to A., in roughly the way one might seek to protect an excellent billiard cue even from good players, until the great one comes along, takes a good look at the table, will tolerate no precocious mistakes, and then, when he starts playing, rampages in the wildest way. [Hofmann]

COMMENTARY

A cue is a *Billiardstock*, typically, so I think Kaiser/Wilkins makes more sense here, especially since the proprietor of a billiard table will usually have many cues and so can go ahead and play even if one is kept on reserve, but, if the table itself is reserved, then no one can play at all. The good players must have acquired their skill practicing on a different table; either that, or they are naturally good at the game.

In any case, this isn't an aphorism about billiards, but about how a certain person is treated, and specifically how the preservation of a person inviolate has less to do with consideration for that person than it does with the imperious demands of the other one, who has a claim on that person. So, sparing someone may simply be a matter of setting them up for something worse.

To me, this aphorism seems to have little in common with the others preceding it, unless you decide that the great one to come is a messiah. When the messiah comes, everything is put right, but this may involve a lot of wrecking. Is it our task to preserve things for the messiah to wreck?

### NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHT

»Dann aber kehrte er zu seiner Arbeit zurück, so wie wenn nichts geschehen wäre.« Das ist eine Bemerkung, die uns aus einer unklaren Fülle alter Erzählungen geläufig ist, obwohl sie vielleicht in keiner vorkommt.

“But then he returned to his work just as though nothing had happened.” This is a remark that we are familiar with from a vague abundance of old stories, although perhaps it does not occur in any of them. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

“And then he went back to his job, as though nothing had happened.” A sentence that strikes one as familiar from any number of old stories—though it might not have appeared in any of them. [Hofmann]

#### COMMENTARY

I think Hofmann hits this one more squarely, because it’s hard to imagine an abundance being vague in any really meaningful way.

The point here I think is that this sentence is familiar because it’s something we need, and so it isn’t like a familiar aphorism or saying. You may not know who said “a rose by any other name blah blah blah,” but you know it’s a quotation from somewhere and that it’s in circulation because it sums up the idea that what something is called is only a convention. But the idea “as if nothing had happened” belongs to another category, reserved for ideas that seem indispensable and obvious. Inventing “as if nothing had happened” is like inventing clothing or cooking; it’s something so basic that it is not only too remote in the past to be traced to this or that person, but it’s something that you wouldn’t think people would have to invent at all.

So it would seem that this idea, that something can happen and yet have no effect, is fundamental somehow. What does that say about people? About the idea of work? As if work were a purposeless, eternal duty that no event can do more than interrupt.

### NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND NINE

»Daß es uns an Glauben fehle, kann man nicht sagen. Allein die einfache Tatsache unseres Lebens ist in ihrem Glaubenswert gar nicht

*auszuschöpfen.« »Hier wäre ein Glaubenswert? Man kann doch nicht nicht-leben.« »Eben in diesem “kann doch nicht” steckt die wahnsinnige Kraft des Glaubens; in dieser Verneinung bekommt sie Gestalt.« Es ist nicht notwendig, daß du aus dem Hause gehst. Bleib bei deinem Tisch und horche. Horche nicht einmal, warte nur. Warte nicht einmal, sei völlig still und allein. Anbieten wird sich dir die Welt zur Entlarvung, sie kann nicht anders, verzückt wird sie sich vor dir winden.*

“It cannot be said that we are lacking in faith. Even the simple fact of our life is of a faith-value that can never be exhausted.” “You suggest there is some faith-value in this? One cannot not-live, after all.” “It is precisely in this ‘Cannot, after all’ that the mad strength of faith lies; it is in this negation that it takes on form.” >> There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don’t even listen, just wait. Don’t even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can’t do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe before you. [Kaiser/Wilkins]

“It cannot be claimed that we are lacking in belief. The mere fact of our being alive is an inexhaustible font of belief.” “The fact of our being alive a font of belief? But what else can we do but live?” “It’s in that ‘what else’ that the immense force of belief resides: it is the exclusion that gives it its form.”

>> It isn’t necessary that you leave home. Sit at your desk and listen. Don’t even listen, just wait. Don’t wait, be still and alone. The whole world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can do no other, it will writhe before you in ecstasy.

#### COMMENTARY

Our being alive gives us faith or requires faith of us, since life is not mathematical and impossible to know in advance. Likewise knowledge is a matter of faith, albeit faith grounded in certain guarantees that are lacking when it comes to things like religious belief. To the skeptical question, the one that is inclined toward disbelief or thinks it is, that there doesn’t seem to be anything beyond life, that life is not a choice and hence faith, understood as a choice, can’t be tied to life, the answer is that it isn’t possible, on the contrary, not to believe things, and that the questioner always questions from some vantage point or implied value. The skeptic may claim to believe or value nothing, but, apart from wondering

if that isn't more a belief itself than a fact, the skeptic usually claims to believe nothing because nothing satisfies his or her idea of truth, which is a value and hence believed.

Hofmann goofs, I think, when he loses the idea of madness associated with belief. Belief is prescriptive madness, insisting on something come what may. That may be the only possible certainty or ground for belief, apart perhaps from mathematics which I don't comment on either way except to say that as yet it doesn't seem that everything can be founded on mathematics. This is more or less the heart of the modernist problem with values; that values rest on affirmation only, so that, at the heart of even the most beautifully rational and ramified philosophies and systems, there is a crude, rustic, stupidly donkey-like intransigence on some point or other.

Kaiser/Wilkins marks the second half of this aphorism cancelled. Evidently Kafka is supposed to have recoiled from so Buddhistic a statement as this. I think again of the activity of narrowing the circle.

*Entlarvung* can also mean expose, which suggests to me an image of the world presenting itself as a seduction, stripping for you. *Verzückt* is like ecstasy in that it preserves the idea of being drawn out, transported. *Winden* is related to our word wind (as in what you do to a watch, not what blows) and can also mean writhe.

This suggests to me the idea that the world is an experience, and that we can see this all the more clearly the more we reduce the distractions of external events to a minimum. The world that most affects and matters to you, almost certainly will be the one with which you have the most to do. This is how Beckett wrote, this effect is familiar to any reader of Beckett. It is like the Buddhist idea of meditation, but Buddhists don't meditate to cause the world to throw itself at them like Potiphar's wife, naked, bare-faced, undulating seductively like a serpent. This may happen, but Buddhist teachings warn against taking this kind of manifestation seriously; you're supposed to just shine it on. Kafka here is not, I think, as Buddhistic as he might seem, because, for the Buddhist, the desire is supposedly coming from me; the lascivious writhing of the world is only the rewinding of my own desire back on myself. But I think Kafka is saying that the world does exist, does desire things, and desires you and me. He says that the world can't help itself; our stopping seems to be something like an escape, so the

world rushes to us and really lays it on, trying to win us back. But where else is there to go?

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