

## **02.001 World Texts and Interpretations Final Paper Essay**

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*How can Kafka's beast fable be regarded as a critical meditation on Descartes' Meditations? What might Kafka be indicating about the relationship of body and mind?*

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### **Introduction**

Over the last few centuries, we have always wondered on whether we are just merely comprised of atoms and electrical impulses in our brain or whether we are something more. How does the rapid firing of electrons in our brain every second translate to our consciousness and our mind? In fact, there are neuroscientists and artificial intelligence experts worldwide today that struggle with this question daily. This question spans all the way to Descartes' *Meditations* in the 1500s regarding the mind-body duality. This constant wrestling with this idea of mind-body duality has led to questions about our reality and has produced fantastic thought-provoking stories that strike deep into the fundamentals. One such captivating example is Frank Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, which strangely seems to be both in agreement with and in opposition to Descartes' arguments. *The Metamorphosis* has even inspired some people to make video games that expand upon the story that Kafka presented.<sup>1</sup> In this short paper, I would be exploring more about some of the ideas that Kafka potentially suggested through his story and the implications of such proposals in relation to Descartes' *Meditations*.

### **Unending Dream**

Kafka began by questioning Descartes' premise that we would always be able to clearly and distinctly perceive complete things. The story began with Gregor Samsa, our

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<sup>1</sup> Works, O. (n.d.) *Metamorphosis*. Steam.

protagonist, being woken up “from unsettling dreams.”<sup>2</sup> He seemed to be momentarily unable to distinguish between dream and reality. In fact, this idea reverberated throughout the centuries all the way from Plato and Aristotle, with media products such as *The Matrix* that perpetuates this idea in our society. This also seems to echo Descartes’ ponderings in his *Meditations*, to which Descartes countered with his point that “the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God.”<sup>3</sup> However, this justification seems to be quite dismissive and not so convincing as Descartes assumed God’s attributes to be not deceitful. Kafka continuously engages with this idea by seemingly ‘prolonging’ the dream and grounding the idea in reality with the contexts of workplace and financial difficulty, which are less ‘dreamy’. For instance, Gregor’s manager looking for Gregor even in his personal bedroom showcases that it is as real as reality can be. This relates back to Descartes’ first premise of clear and distinct perceptions. If Gregor was unable to clearly and distinctly perceive the differences between dream and reality, even with a working conscious mind, it would be quite difficult to continue the argument that Gregor’s mind and body exist separately. Indeed, this is extensible to all of us. We might believe that we are living in the reality, but we might never know if the universe just exists as a virtual construct in our minds. In that case, our ability to clearly and distinctly perceive things are severely undermined. This would lead to the possibility that the mind-body duality concept is not entirely true.

An appropriate example to illustrate how the border between reality and dreams could blur is the thought experiment of the experience machine. Proposed by Robert Nozick in 1974, he utilized the thought experiment to attempt to refute ethical hedonism. The experience machine could, hypothetically, allow anyone using it to experience whatever desirable and pleasurable experiences he/she could want through psychological stimulation of the brain. In such a scenario, would anyone prefer real life to the machine? By putting forward this thought experiment, Nozick wanted to question the existence of

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<sup>2</sup> Kafka, F. (1915). *The Metamorphosis*, 1. Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, R. & Cottingham, J. (1996). *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, 37. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

values other than pleasure. If real life was actually just a “dream” that we are experiencing, would we be able to differentiate it from an actual reality? Inside such an experience machine, we would just be oblivious to the fact that it is not real. For those who have the knowledge and awareness that it is not real, they might even prefer to live in the ‘dream’. Such an example would be Cypher from *The Matrix*.



Figure 1: Cypher enjoying his steak in the Matrix while conversing with Smith.

In the case of Cypher, he knew that the Matrix was not real. However, he prefers to live inside it since the Matrix allows him to live a wealthy life, instead of the harsh life that he has outside the Matrix. Cypher even mentioned that “ignorance is bliss.” A deeper question that we could probe further is how would Cypher know that the supposedly ‘real life’ is the actual reality? It could also be a dream with the Matrix being a dream within a dream. The loop could continue forever and thus, we would never be completely certain if the reality that we currently experience is a dream or not. Thus, if everything encapsulated within a perceived reality could be just an element of a dream, do clear and distinct perceptions exist in the first place? This is linked to the main flaw of Descartes’ argument. One clear and distinct perception that Descartes mentioned is that “I think”. However, the first part of the statement “I think, therefore I am” assumed that “I” already exists and thus would be able to think. If the “I” element was stripped from it, we would end up with the statement “there are thoughts” (or more accurately, “there are doubts”). However, we could not conclude anything about our existence from such a statement as we cannot know the subject that is doing the thinking. In such a case, would we even be

able to have clear and distinct perceptions? Hence, it follows that if we were to experience a dream, it is virtually impossible for us to differentiate it from an actual reality (if such a thing even exists), even if we are somehow able to exit or enter a reality to or from its parent reality at will. The ability to locate the fundamental level of reality is, by principle, out of our reach.

### **Real or Fake Metamorphosis?**

At first glance, it seems that Kafka agreed with Descartes that mind and body exist as two separate substances. When Gregor first woke up, he was not concerned over his insect form. Rather, he was concerned with his work attendance. This is interesting since Gregor's indifference toward his body's condition might suggest that he lacked any sense of self. However, this could also suggest that Gregor considered his mind and his body as two separate entities. We could argue that Gregor believed that, as long as he still has his mind and has the capacity for thought, he is still Gregor, despite of the different appearance of his physical body. Gregor's indifference also implied that Gregor goes about his existence as an insect as if this were his primary condition. He never questioned or felt any concern about his 'transformation'. This might be due to the fact that Gregor have always felt alienated from his body and his family. Hence, through the story, Kafka might have implied that Gregor actually did not undergo any metamorphosis, but instead, a truer manifestation of Gregor was born. When Gregor 'transformed' into an insect, the context of his existence changed. His family rejected him and even his basic appetite for food had changed. This can be reconciled by the fact that our body is an avenue to a certain type of the world. Thus, Kafka might suggest a more nuanced stand compared to Descartes'. While Descartes merely claimed that if someone thinks, he/she exists, Kafka goes on further to suggest that the state of our body might lead to a certain type of existence. Depending on our bodily constitution, we could have different experiences in a specific kind of existence. While our mind exists independently of our body, our body puts limits on the level of our existence. In this lens, it seems that Kafka agrees with and even goes on to extend Descartes' mind-body duality argument.

On the other side of the coin, however, we could see Kafka trying to highlight the struggles and inabilities of both Gregor and the people around him to accept his existence as a human being. When Gregor went out of his room for the first time after the transformation, Gregor's father drove "the loathsome insect" back into the bedroom. Notice that the words used are impersonal by referring to Gregor as "[the] insect" instead of "him", hinting that Gregor's personality was starting to be questioned. Rational persuasion was deemed as inappropriate as however humbly Gregor pleaded, "his father merely stamped his foot more forcefully." This is interesting as Gregor's father actually still had hope that Gregor would be able to understand them at the end of the story. As the story progressed, Gregor himself started to question whether he is still Gregor. He still maintained some of his past essence such as his memories, but his newfound insect-related instincts such as the appetite to eat insect food or the desire to live under the furniture are in conflict with the idea of his 'human' self in his mind. For instance, Gregor started to question whether he is becoming less sensitive to his family's emotions. This conflict is ever-present in the story until the point where Gregor listened to the violin music played by Grete, his sister, and felt touched. This is an excellent demonstration of Kafka's argument against mind-body duality. If the mind and the body were to be disparate, Gregor would still technically exist. However, the fact that conflicting instincts arise within Gregor, as well as the change in Grete's behavior and treatment of him over time invite us to question whether Gregor still truly 'existed'. The fact that Gregor's mind seemed to degrade over time as his insect instincts overtook him might suggest that his state of existence was slowly vanquishing. At the end, Grete gave up on taking care for Gregor, stating that they should "try to get rid of the idea" that the insect is Gregor. Grete did not persist in her belief that the insect is Gregor. This seemed to suggest that our physical appearance and behavior ultimately defined our identity, regardless of what our mind was capable of thinking. Thus, Kafka seemed to suggest that the mind-body duality is ridiculous and that our existence solely relied on the social belief that we exist. It follows from there that since the only concrete feedback that others get from us is our physical

body, our body dictates our existence, not our mind. Gregor's fate was not defined by "Cogito, ergo sum", since he was still thinking, but he was denied of his existence. By ending the story with Gregor dying and Grete developing into a young woman, Kafka indicated that both metamorphosis are complete, as well as cheekily suggesting that the metamorphosis of the reader's way of thinking was also complete and that the reader would have then been convinced that our minds and our bodies might not be so dual anymore.

### Simulation Argument

Philip K. Dick once said that "we are living in a computer-programmed reality and the only clue we have to it is when some variable is changed and some alteration in our reality occurs."<sup>4</sup> Gregor's transformation might just be the manifestation of the change of a variable in the simulation's system. This argument is closely related to the dream argument. The argument states that our perceived reality could just be a computer simulation, just like in the game *The Sims*.



Figure 2: The diversity of Sims from the game, *The Sims 4*.

The game series of *The Sims* provides players with the ability to create a life simulation, just like a "virtual doll house." While it is true that these characters are pre-programmed with certain behavior, it is not too far-fetched to imagine that a super-computer with

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, J. (2014, February 3). *Philip K. Dick Theorizes The Matrix in 1977, Declares That We Live in "A Computer-Programmed Reality"*. Open Culture.

enough processing power and memory would be able to simulate whole universes (just like another game, *Universe Sandbox*). The interesting thing about *The Sims* is the fact that it imitates our real human life quite well. By putting ourselves in the shoes of a Sim, we would not be able to check whether we live in the fundamental reality or not (albeit with a lower graphical resolution). In such a situation, we could argue that the Sims exist, but only within the boundaries of the game's realm. To us as humans, the Sims are just mere characters controlled by us and thus, an extension of our existence. They do not have their own independent minds insofar as we are concerned. This idea goes far back to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, which claimed that reality was just mere shadows of real objects on a cave wall. It suggested the possibility that everything that we have ever perceived in life is not part of the fundamental level of reality. This is in agreement with Descartes' claim that our senses could potentially deceive us. The material world that we perceive as real might not be real at all. As such, Descartes claimed that we can only be sure that our minds exist, per his "*Cogito, ergo sum*" argument. Some scientists actually suggested that we should look into discrete patterns in the universe, since computer simulations would be able to render discrete forms of matter, energy and information, not continuous (unless the super-computer is very advanced beyond our imaginations). So far, observations conducted by astronomers, scientists and researchers still indicate that we live in a continuous universe, which might suggest that we do not live in a computer simulation. However, we still cannot be entirely sure of this claim.

Another relevant, and perhaps more relatable, example would be the video game *Portal*.



Figure 3: GLaDOS, the central AI character from the game Portal.

In *Portal*, we are introduced to the artificial intelligence running the whole Aperture Science facility, GLaDOS. GLaDOS is obsessed with testing. She would treat the protagonist as a test subject and nothing more. Every comment that she makes about the player is an insult. She mocks the player constantly. This is a reflection of Descartes' "evil demon" or whatever demon in Kafka's story that initiated Gregor's transformation through possibly some kind of curse. Since GLaDOS have control over the whole facility, she is also a reflection of some kind of God in the player's perspective. GLaDOS is the only that talked with the player in the game. She claimed that the protagonist was "adopted" and "abandoned at birth". In the game, the player was given a chance to shutdown GLaDOS, breaking free from the compound in a more Nietzschean approach. However, the truth still remains shrouded in mystery. Was the protagonist adopted? There is no point of reference to check against since the protagonist's whole journey was within the lens of GLaDOS in the Aperture Science compound. This reflects how there is no way to check whether the reality that we experience now is real or not. This is echoed by *Portal's* famous quote, "the cake is a lie." Even after 'killing' GLaDOS, the protagonist did not receive any enlightenment or revelation regarding her past or on what to do after her escape from Aperture Science. The end goal, in this case attaining the knowledge of the



protagonist's past, is misguided and impossible to obtain, just like how it is virtually impossible for us to detect whether we live in the fundamental level of reality or not.

### **Does it even matter?**

After all of this discussion, we might end up with a nihilist view and ask whether all of this even matter. We might not see the point of this discussion since we would arrive at a pointless conclusion of uncertainty of our reality. For this question, we could seek guidance from the example of Elon Musk. Musk believed that we actually live in a computer simulation. He knows that that implies that even himself and his loved ones are just mere illusions. Yet, Musk spends his days working hard to reduce carbon emissions through Tesla and enabling humanity's access to other planets such as Mars through SpaceX. Why would Musk so hard on behalf of simulations? This is because insofar as a deception is perfect, it cannot matter. If we were to be told that the universe and all of its contents are upside down, we might feel mind-blown for a minute, but it does not concretely impact us at any level. Based on how we perceive, the universe would be exactly the same whether it is upside down or not in absolute terms. This is because we perceive the relative effect. If everything is not real, it would not make any difference. By abandoning certainty and embracing probabilities, we let go of the pursuit of the fundamental reality. By seeing beliefs as tools to help us do things instead of as abstract representations of what is, we could be more in agreement with philosophies and concepts that actually have implications for our lives and behavior. By adopting this pragmatist view, we could live more peacefully, knowing that we exist, at least in relation to other things in this current reality that we inhabit. Thus, even though our perceptions and senses might deceive us on whether we truly exist or not, they might be the only way that we can make sure that we relatively exist. On some level, the world is real in the only way that matters.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, Kafka presented a convincing and critical reassessment of Descartes' claims, particularly with respect to his concept of mind-body duality. Perhaps, some of the shortcomings of Descartes' arguments were not caused by an oversight on Descartes' part. Descartes was a brilliant thinker, after all. We need to remember that Descartes lived during a time when religion was the answer to everything. Inevitably, Descartes would have been heavily influenced by the church and he seems to attempt to satisfy the theological thinkers during his days with his philosophy. By trying to placate and find this compromise between the church and science, Descartes might have ended with some holes in his arguments. Thus, we should appreciate Descartes' courageous initial attempts in tackling the issue of mind-body duality. In fact, because of his efforts, the metaphysics field were formed to allow us to continue wrestling with his ideas, with the hope that we could understand more about our body and our mind with a truer and more useful worldview as we explore deeper. To a similar extent, we should appreciate Kafka who has taught us that this mind-body duality issue is not so black-and-white after all. By poking around the stories that he built to evoke these questions, we are invited to ponder together on the real-ness of reality and on whether it matters or not, hoping that we would be able to make more sense of the world around us, improve our skills, learn from lessons as well as to find meaning in what we do in our daily lives.

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