

The failure of genuine self-expression in Kafka's *The Trial*

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Those who read Kafka's *The Trial* will not make it far without getting an eerie feeling of inescapability. *The Trial* reads as a spiderweb, drawing K. ever closer to the inevitability of something terrible happening. Although K. seems to protest his predicament to an almost irritable extent, this essay will argue that throughout the entirety of the novel there is one essential thing K. doesn't do: embrace his human capacity of genuine self-expression. It will be explored whether K. could have escaped his predicament by doing so and as such escape the bureaucratic evil that was put upon him. To do this, I will draw on ideas from existential philosophy, in particular Camus' idea of the absurd.

Although always trying to refute the claim himself, Albert Camus has by many been identified as an existentialist (Aronson, 2022). In his famous work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus (1991) formulates his concept of the absurd, which Aronson (2022) summarises as follows: "Since existence itself has no meaning, we must learn to bear an irresolvable emptiness. This paradoxical situation, then, between our impulse to ask ultimate questions and the impossibility of achieving any adequate answer, is what Camus calls *the absurd*". The absurd, as such, can be seen as the continuous hunger for meaning, for explanation, juxtaposed with the absence of any of meaning or meaningful answers.

Throughout *The Trial*, K. is confronted with this notion of the absurd. What makes K. predicament so cruel is that the absurd is imposed on him by the court. Every time he tries to make sense of a situation, his hypotheses are explained away by other characters in the book, with almost everyone trying point out that is K., who is the weird one. However, when he asks questions to clarify his situation, instead of receiving clarifying answers, he only seems to get answers which lead to more and more questions. As such, an epitomised example of K.'s confrontation with the absurd is when K. has his first interaction with members of the court in the first chapter:

'How can I have been arrested? Especially in this manner?' [K. said] 'There you go again,' the guard said, dipping a slice of bread and butter in the honey pot. 'We don't answer questions like that.' 'You will have to answer them. Here is my identification, now show me yours and, above all, your warrant.' [K. said] 'Good Lord!' said the guard, 'why can't you just accept the situation instead of pointlessly insisting on trying to annoy us; at this moment we're probably closer to you than anyone else in the world.' (Kafka, p.8, 2009)

The last part of this quote is significant, as it touches on a theme that reoccurs throughout the novel: K. is expected to play along according to the rules of the court. This connects to the fact that K. is continuously reminded of the necessity of everything that is happening. The court, as seen by its members, is not evil, *it is necessary*. All the members of the court seem to accept this reality as a given as they all act almost mechanically, programmed to do their job without ever questioning why their job needs doing.

In the light of existentialism, this touches upon the work of Killinger (1961), who explores the work of multiple existentialist philosophers in the light of human freedom. Killinger describes a question originally posed by Sartre: who is freer, a prisoner

awaiting execution or a waiter serving tables in a restaurant? The existentialist would say that this depends on the attitude of the waiter, as Killinger (p.304, 1961) explains:

The waiter [...] is not in a prison - at least, not in a visible one. But secretly, invisibly, in his inner being, the waiter has never been free. He has long since surrendered his freedom, his personal integrity, to the image of being a waiter. He enters the room a little too much like a waiter. He carries his tray with an expertness that betrays the fact that he is a waiter, that more than anything else in the world he is a waiter. He is a waiter before he is a man.

The members of the court all seem a bit too much like Killinger's waiter, as they all seem to have given up on their ability for genuine self-expression. The guards in the first chapter of the book seem unaware of this, as they proclaim: "You have not treated us as our obliging attitude deserved, you have forgotten that, unlike you, we, whatever we may be, are at least free men, and that is no small advantage." (Kafka, p.9, 2009). Dern (2004) points out, however, that they seem to have confused physical freedom with existential freedom, as the guards are blindly following orders. Something that is apparent from their unquestioning reverence for their superiors and the law: "That is the law. Where could there be an error?" (Kafka, p.9, 2009).

K., in contrast, appears as the only true free agent in the book, the only one capable of making meaningful decisions. As such, he seems to be the only character in the book capable of genuine self-expression. The idea that genuine self-expression is the only true answer towards the questions existentialism poses can be found back in the ideas of many existential philosophers (Killinger, 1961). Genuine self-expression is something one can always achieve, as even in the face of death one can decide to face it head on (think of Sartre's prisoner and waiter). What makes *The Trial* arguably so existentially dreadful, however, is that K. doesn't seem to embrace his capacity much.

At first K. tries to return into what Camus (1991) would call “the chain of daily gestures” by following the procedures, by going to court when summoned, visiting the law offices, and discussing his options with his lawyer (Dern, 2004). However, it is only when he discovers that all these options will not solve his confrontation with the absurd (in contrast: they worsen it) that K. fully starts to feel existential nausea. For Camus (1991) this could represent the beginning of consciousness. As Dern (p.95, 2004) explains:

At this point, the incipiently absurd man has two choices: the "gradual return into the chain" or the "definitive awakening" (Camus 13). If one chooses the "awakening," then another dichotomy ultimately presents itself: "suicide or recovery" (Camus 13), and "recovery" depends upon the absurd man's ability to live in a state of never-ending revolt. To commit suicide, on the other hand, is to resign oneself to the absurd, to give in [...].

Whilst K. contemplates the idea of suicide early on in the novel, he gives up on the idea quite quickly: “It would have been so pointless to kill himself that, even had he intended to do so, the pointlessness of the act would have made it impossible for him to carry it out.” (Kafka, p.10, 2009). K. never revisits the possibility of suicide again and he therefore closes one of the two doors that follow from his potential “awakening”.

Ultimately, however, K. also closes the other door and retreats back into “the chain”. Because instead of revolting, in the last chapter of *The Trial*, K.’s protests against the court quickly become more and more quiet until he seems to have accepted his faith and has given up. This becomes clear from the way K. ponders about how his killers are handling their weapon of choice. At this point, K. seems to have internalised it as his duty to carry out the final act of his murder himself, seeming to forget that at any point he still has the ability choose meaningfully, to not accept the necessity of the law:

Now the odious polite exchanges began again, as one handed the knife across K. to the other and he handed it back. K. knew very well that it would have been his duty to grasp the knife himself as, going from hand to hand, it hung in the air above him, and plunge it into his own body. But he didn't do that, instead he turned his neck, that was still free, and looked around. That final test was beyond him, he could not do all the authorities' work for them, the responsibility for this last failing lay with the one who had refused him the necessary strength to do that. (Kafka, p.164, 2009).

In conclusion, the representation of evil in Kafka's work is one of necessity: a world in which we are pushed towards less meaningful decisions and less self-expression. Many existentialists' answer to this evil would be similar as how they would revolt against Camus' absurd, by genuine self-expression. Whilst K. struggles until the final chapter to figure out his position regarding the absurd, he ultimately fails to embrace it. As such, K.'s final death is a double tragedy, as it is not only the death of a man, but also the end of his genuine life.

Word count: [1495]

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