

'Kafkaesque' is typically used in a way to denote something frustratingly and pointlessly bureaucratic, or a nightmarish kind of totalitarianism. On that definition, something like the Soviet Union, or Communist East Germany, or North Korea today, are Kafkaesque worlds.

That said, the word is a bit of a misnomer. The full scope of Kafka's writing encompasses much more of the human experience than that. In my view, there's a vastly overlooked playful and comical side to the work, even to the point of slapstick and sheer absurdist humor. Honestly, I think Kafka is one of the funniest writers that ever lived, despite the work not being easily recognizable as comedy, per se.

Also, there's a very touching and sad aspect to some of the stories. The struggles of the characters are external as much as they are internal, and perhaps even more so on the internal side. And that's why it's misleading to think of 'Kafkaesque' as referring to an outside kind of oppression — that is, as it's usually thought as.

The Kafkaesque nightmare

Franz Kafka was a philosophical novelist whose name has become eponymously connected with a genre of writing which captures a feeling we have all experienced when struggling against a bureaucratic system where we have no empowerment, filling out a poorly designed government form, or that hopeless situation where we're expected to do something, but lack the information, authority, or autonomy to act. The term 'Kafkaesque' refers to that nauseous and belittling sinking feeling that leaves us diminished, lost and hopeless when dealing with an unseen malevolent bureaucracy.

Kafka despised his day job in a bureaucratic insurance office but managed to find a way to indulge his passion for writing novels on the side. Several years ago I read Kafka's "The Trial", possibly the most frustrating and sickening of novels I've encountered. Kafka immerses

the reader into the hellish experience of Josef K, a man arrested and forced through a series of tortuously bureaucratic interrogations for a crime that is never revealed to him or the reader. Kafka torments the reader, just as Josef K. is tormented by some hidden and manipulative authority, his futile efforts to understand his predicament confounded by his total lack of autonomy in the situation.

Josef K. simply has no access to any reliable source of information. He is tormented by his ignorance of what is really going on. He cannot make any sense of his circumstances so he cannot act, cannot make an informed decision.

We have all felt this to some degree. Being left out of gossip circles; discovering that you've deliberately been left out when a decision has been made which will have an impact on you; Trying to make sense of a world where lies, cover-ups, and bullshit are the norm — just look out at our current political environment and the lack of trust in democracy...

Kafkaesque antonym

The opposite of the Kafkaesque nightmare is freely flowing information and the absence of interrogations and blame.

I would have formerly used the word ‘transparency’ to describe this feeling of being fully informed, but have found that people have different perspectives on transparency. For some, it has very negative

connotations and implies a level of openness and vulnerability that a substantial number of humans would be uncomfortable with.

By freely flowing information I'm referring to an information eco-system and a culture that makes the right information available to the people who need it, and avoids polluting the eco-system with lies, bullshit, gossip, bias, secrecy, politics, obfuscations, omittance, and conspiracies.

We are human, we are messy and complex. Avoiding Kafkaesque tendencies in our personal lives or an organisation is no easy task.

What is Autonomy?

Autonomy means that we are able to make informed decisions by ourselves. It's the feeling of being in control, self-directed and self-governed.

In the work environment, you feel able to make your own decisions on what you should be working on and how you are working. You feel trusted to do invest your time and energies into the things which are in the best interests of your team or the goals of the organisation you work for because you can tap into the stream of information necessary to make wise decisions.

Nothing is deliberately concealed from you, communications are fluid and you have easy access to the resources you need. You are working in

a culture of psychological safety where you know that you won't be unduly interrogated and blamed for making the wrong decision with the best intentions.

Autonomy and motivation

As described by the Self-Determination Theory of motivation (Edward Deci and Richard Ryan) there are 3 constituents to intrinsic motivation, that inner desire to act as opposed to extrinsic motivation, acting in response to the promise of a carrot or the threat of the stick.

1. Autonomy: Self-governed, as described above
2. Relatedness: Feeling connected to an environment, situation or meaningful purpose
3. Competency: The appropriate skills and ability to act

So autonomy is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient for personal motivation, we also need a sense of relatedness and the appropriate level of competency.

If we're working in Kafkaesque environment, our motivation and therefore the value we can provide is severely diminished.

The Kafkaesque nightmare as a continuum

In everyday situations and especially in the work environment we will rarely achieve that sense of total autonomy. Equally, thanks to

improvements in corporate culture as well as the safety net of the legal framework, we are unlikely to encounter the absurdly horrific nightmares portrayed by Kafka, although anyone having their strings pulled by a mendaciously malicious manager may disagree — remember the warning of Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his Gulag Archipelago:

“The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being”.

When you delve into the fractal sub-hierarchies in any organisation, you'll find varying degrees of behaviour along the entire Kafkareseque spectrum.

We are likely to find our everyday experience places us on a continuum, somewhere between autonomous freedom and the Kafkaesque nightmare. By being aware of where we lie between the two extremes in any given situation, we should find opportunities to improve autonomy for ourselves and our work colleagues.

What is optimal autonomy, and can you have too much autonomy?

Autonomy will undoubtedly be more important to some people than others. For example, given the Big 5 Model of Personalities traits, the widely accepted methodology to assess people for Conscientiousness; Agreeableness; Neuroticism; Openness; and Extroversion one might

conclude that those who score highly in the trait Openness and low in Agreeableness would have a high need for autonomy.

It's difficult to imagine that there was ever a time without the word "Kafkaesque." Yet the term would have meant nothing at all to anyone alive at the same time as [Franz Kafka](#) — including, in all probability, Kafka himself. Born in Prague in 1883, he grew up under a stern, demanding, and perpetually disappointed father, then made his way through college and entered the workforce. He ended up at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, where he was "subject to long hours, unpaid overtime, massive amounts of paperwork, and absurd, complex, bureaucratic systems," says the narrator of [the Pursuit of Wonder video above](#). But it was during that same period that he wrote *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Amerika*.

Of course, Kafka didn't actually publish those eventually acclaimed books in his lifetime. After his death, that task would fall to [Max Brod](#), the writer's only real friend, and it entailed violating the author's explicitly stated wishes. On his deathbed, Kafka "instructed Max Brod to burn all of his unpublished manuscripts"; instead, Brod "spent the following year or so working to organize and publish his notes and manuscripts." Now that he's been gone more than a century, Kafka's reputation as one of the greatest literary figures of the twentieth century is more than secure, and it would take a dedicated contrarian indeed to argue that Brod did wrong not to toss his papers onto the bonfire.

Perhaps Kafka's reputation would have found a way to grow one way or another, respond as his writing does to a psychological discomfort we've all felt to one degree or another, in one setting or another: doing our taxes, waiting in airport security lines, calling tech support. On such occasions, we reach for the term "Kafkaesque," which "tends to refer to the bureaucratic nature of capitalistic, judiciary, and government systems, the sort of complex, unclear processes in which no one individual ever has a comprehensive grasp on what is going on, and the system doesn't really care." Typical Kafka protagonists are "faced with sudden, absurd circumstances. There are no explanations, and in the end, there is no real chance of overcoming them."

These characters are "outmatched by the arbitrary, senseless obstacles they face, in part because they can't understand or control any of what is happening." They feel "the unyielding desire for answers in conquest over the existential problems of anxiety, guilt, absurdity, and suffering, paired with an inability to ever really understand or control the source of the problems and effectively overcome them." Yet "even in the face of absurd, despairing circumstances, Kafka's characters don't give up. At least initially, they continue on and fight against their situations, trying to reason, understand, or work their way out of the senselessness, but in the end, it is ultimately to no avail." To Kafka, it was all part of another day in modernity. Here in the twenty-first century, it seems we may need to start looking for an even more powerful adjective.