

KAFKA'S ACCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Jesus Ramirez (Gilroy, CA)

Abstract

Franz Kafka's "Before the Law" distills his longer works, like *The Trial* and *The Castle*, into a single theme: Access. In "Before the Law," the main character seeks entrance into the law. The doorkeeper apathetically refuses while instigating the man's need. Often, in Kafka's works, the main character seeks access to some part of his life, but is prohibited, sometimes in a material way and, at other times, in an epistemic way. This paper will explore this access problem using Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. It will phenomenologically interrogate the concept of "access" within Kafka, using an early Heideggerian distinction between ready-to-hand and present-at-hand, the former marked by thoughtless availability (thereness) and the latter by a sustained and thoughtful suspension, the result of a break from the regular availability of life's tools (the lack of thereness), forcing Kafka's main characters to dwell in the negation of access.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, Martin Heidegger; Kafkaesque; access; availability; epistemic; phenomenology.

1. Introduction

What does "access" mean in an absurd situation in which the main character of your story is constantly blocked from getting to the next part of the story? To examine such a question, we will ponder Franz Kafka's characters from a handful of short stories and novels he has written to locate the meaning of access. With this paper, I hope to provide a path for a phenomenology of access using Kafka's works. For example, in his most famous work, "The Metamorphosis," the main character Gregor Samsa can barely leave his bed because he wakes up as a large insect. His family forbids him from stepping outside. Yet, none of this stops Gregor from planning his trip to work and continuing to support his family. Sure, he doesn't succeed because he's an insect, but he remains tenacious. In both "Before the Law" and "An Imperial Message," the characters are trying to either gain

entry (the former) or trying to deliver a message (the latter). Kafka writes both as an unceasing series of obstacles that the main character is willing to endure. "In the Penal Colony," Kafka shows an explorer, the actual main character, witnessing a brutal method of punishment in which a machine with needles inscribes a law into the back of a law breaker. The catch is that the victim does not know what law they have broken until realizing this through a mystical epiphany that comes right before dying from their wounds. In one of Kafka's incomplete novels, *Amerika* the main character, Karl, immigrates to America, and has trouble connecting with others in a meaningful way, particularly expressed in the first chapter "The Stoker." In *The Castle*, the main character, K., is not allowed into the castle even though he was sent to work for the castle's count as a land surveyor. Finally, *The Trial* shows us Josef K., a man who is suddenly arrested at the beginning of the novel and is technically assumed to be guilty by the authorities, but still must go to trial to effectively confirm the assumption. Yet, Josef K. is left in the dark as to what law he's transgressed. Just in these quick summaries, we see that there are two types of access emerging: physical access and epistemic access. In this paper, I will examine the notion of epistemic access more than physical access. I will demonstrate that the most significant of the two is the epistemic one, such that it becomes the foundation for the material access. I will use a basic phenomenological understanding of access that I take from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Heidegger's use of ready-to-handness and present-at-handness show that the former is about the automatic availability of the tools around us and that the latter is about the stagnancy of that availability that emerges when there are obstacles to it. My main point will be that if we analyze a phenomenology of access in Kafka's works, then we will notice a breakdown in the availability of the world and its tools in which the main character is repeatedly confronted with a static concept of the epistemic and material access that he is trying to achieve.

2. The Absurdity of Access in a Kafkaesque World

What does 'Kafkaesque' mean? Franz Kafka biographer, Frederick R. Karl, said the following:

'Kafkaesque' is when you enter a surreal world in which all your control patterns, all your plans, the whole way in which you have configured your own behavior, begins to fall to pieces, when you find yourself against a force that does not lend itself to the way you perceive the world.

You don't give up, you don't lie down and die. What you do is struggle against this with all of your equipment, with whatever you have. But of course you don't stand a chance. (Cited after Edwards 1991)

With Karl's explanation, Kafkaesque is a Sisyphean endeavor, but this does not quite hit the mark, though it captures the drama that a Kafka character exhibits. Something is missing. Perhaps Martin Heidegger can help. The best line from Martin Heidegger that summarizes what scholars like Karl have said of Kafkaesque would be from the following sentence in *Being and Time*: "It reveals itself as something just present-at-hand and no more, which cannot be budged without the thing that is missing" (Heidegger 1962, 74/103). The "it" in this sentence is the item I need for my world's uninterrupted functionality. Stuff must function well so that I can work uninterrupted without needing to think about it. It is like when your automobile works so well that you do not think twice about needing an oil change until your car "cannot be budged without the thing that is missing," oil. The "present-at-handedness" of something means that when a regular process and functioning of a thing breaks down, the process just stands before you, the individual, or in Heidegger's jargon, *Dasein*. For something to be Kafkaesque, you need an aspect of life to not budge, to just be there while the character insists on its functioning.

Even then, this is not enough because a second element works itself into the idea of Kafkaesque. The main character's association to the immovable and indifferent object or process remains. Here too, an early Heideggerian point captures the relation, with Heidegger saying, "Dasein is ontically 'closest' to itself and ontologically farthest; but pre-ontologically it is surely not a stranger" (Heidegger 1962, 16, 37). By ontically, we mean the material aspect of life. In a material sense, for example, my phone is close to me. In *The Castle*, the castle is always "over there" in some way, but in a more important way, it is far from K. Similarly, my phone may be close to me, but if the battery dies than it is far from me. By ontological, we mean the Being of a thing. By "ontologically farthest" we mean that the Being of something is inaccessible to us. The castle might be in front of K., "yonder" or "over there." However, without practically realizing this access, it might as well be on the other side of the world. And here is the key point about this second element as it relates to Kafka's characters: The immovable and indifferent object or process is enmeshed with them, such that his characters become this dichotomy of being close yet far from themselves.

Kafka's characters repeatedly cannot get to an object they need or want. Whether need or want, either one constitutes the meaning of whatever it is they wish to attain. In "The Hunger Artist," the artist's fasting is meaningful to him, but only he understands why. No one else cares like he does. This lack of care highlights the apathy of an audience when it comes to the artist's commitment. The binding feature of virtually all his characters is their encounters with an absurd situation of being so close to something yet being far away, which in my view, is crucial to understanding the meaning of Kafkaesque. It's not that someone becomes a bug in the morning and that's just weird or someone can't get through the gate or not know the accusations against him in an ongoing trial. By themselves, that's just life. The essence of what we call 'Kafkaesque' is that a character is surrounded by a lack of entry, whether it is material or epistemic. The world does not budge for Kafka's characters, yet his characters are unphased. They stubbornly persist. Their expectations hardly matter. Being this way, his characters are often duty-bound (Gregor of "The Metamorphosis," the messenger in "An Imperial Message," and K. from *The Castle*). Yet, the world they are stubborn about becomes indifferently stubborn in return.

3. "An Imperial Message"

To get us started on our phenomenological analysis of access within a Kafkaesque world, it would be best to start with a very short story, "An Imperial Message." In this piece, an emperor wants to send you, the reader, a message. For the story to function, we must imagine ourselves in the time of emperors. This shouldn't be a problem for an imaginative reader. Simply imagine your country's leader(s) are about to send you a message. However, Kafka takes a simple action and discusses all the benign and arduous actions that need to be in place for the message to get to you. About the messenger, Kafka writes that "if he encounters resistance he points to his breast, where the symbol of the sun glitters; that way is made easier for him than it would be for any other man. But the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end" (Kafka 2011, 5).

In two sentences, we sense something is wrong and it gets worse for the messenger with "But instead how vainly does he wear out his strength; still, he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them," (Kafka 2011, 5). Kafka discusses this arduous task as if

it were impossible to achieve. Superficially, it seems easy to send a message: You need only send a messenger, but upon further analysis, a lot more goes on. It becomes a journey, then a difficult quest, and finally something almost impossible, especially if the messenger does not have the physical strength and mental will to incessant obstacles. Though this is a short story with a clear premise, what started out as an easy action of sending a message becomes something more evasive. Kafka elaborates on the issue of accessing this point, and then that point, and then another point, and so on. The short story becomes a short meditation on *not* getting the message.

The final line of the story encapsulates the theme of no access that runs throughout Kafka's works: "But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself" (Kafka 2011, 5). The final sentence places the reader in a state of resignation to this lack of delivery. That which you seek is unavailable. You, as part of this story, romanticize all of this as a dreamy adventure, not seeing that the emperor's message will likely not get to you, but that at least you can take solace in the idea that the emperor wanted to tell *you* something, sending his messenger into never-ending obstacles where we must imagine that another challenge, and yet another challenge awaits.

4. "Before the Law"

In the Schocken publication of Kafka's *Complete Stories*, "An Imperial Message" is paired with "Before the Law." Like "An Imperial Message," the main character of "Law" can be anyone. This time, the character is a man from the country who is tasked with going before the law. We're not told why he must do this, just that he is doing it. This basic plot is like a micro-version of *The Trial* where Josef K. is arrested for and accused of something he knows nothing about. The whole story centers on his futile attempts to find out what the trial is about in terms of what he's been accused of. In "Before the Law," the main character encounters the doorkeeper who tells the man that he "cannot grant admittance at the moment" (Kafka 2011, 3). The doorkeeper is perpetually indifferent to the man, though he gives our man hope when stating, "It is possible, but not at the moment" (Kafka 2011, 3). To make a short story even shorter: It's impossible.

The reader gets the sense of this futility when the doorkeeper explains that all the subsequent doorkeepers that the man will encounter will be increasingly

difficult to deal with, seemingly encouraging the man to not even bother with it. Nevertheless, our man persists. He stays around. The doorkeeper even asks the man questions about his country life, but Kafka describes this in such a manner that the doorkeeper seems to represent a bureaucrat, getting frivolous and inconsequential details from a customer for the sake of placating him as he awaits service. The situation becomes worse for the man as he realizes that perhaps he can bribe the doorkeeper with all his valuables. Seemingly motivated, our man gives all that he has, only to get the following response by the doorkeeper, "I am only taking it to keep you from thinking you have omitted anything" (Kafka 2011, 3). It may appear as if the doorkeeper toys with the man, but Kafka presents this interaction in such a matter-of-fact manner that the doorkeeper sounds like he's just making sure the man does not mentally suffer so much from his commitment to go before the law.

Phenomenologically, what could "Before the Law" mean? I do not want to say that Kafka deliberately takes us through a kind of phenomenological bracketing, but something of the kind is happening because Kafka pushes the reader into curiously wanting to know what is past that doorkeeper. Let us start there: "What does it mean to go 'before the law' if the man never goes before the law?" Such questions can be posed as a phenomenological analysis about what it means to 'be before anything at all.' For example, *you* are before this essay. *You* are engaging in an activity that is necessarily the object of your intention, however pleased you are with it. Kafka clues the reader into this when the doorkeeper says at the end of the story, "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it" (Kafka 2011, 4). The gate is *for* the man, no one else. So, if this gate is *for* the man, yet his attempts to go through the first doorkeeper are futile, only to be followed by more doorkeepers, then we must ask again, "What does it mean to go before the law?"

At this point, it is important to briefly restate the use of Martin Heidegger's phenomenology for this analysis. I have been using Heidegger's analysis of ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. Using these tools allows us a basic categorizing method: We can distinguish what it means for something to be accessible versus inaccessible. "An Imperial Message" was our first use of these tools; they allowed us to see that Kafka's characters are constantly faced with the present-at-hand of Being. If we throw their mental state into it, the more they want something, the more they cannot get that which they seek. The converse is not true though. The

less they want does not necessarily mean the more access they have. Yet, I suspect that even a casual reader sees how much the present-at-hand Being of things almost oppressively hovers over the story. We return to the Kafkaesque definition from earlier, wherein the presencing of a thing makes something there and not there, close yet far away. It is there, but such a thereness is not enough because the character has no access. For "Before the Law," this means that the law is simultaneously there and not there.

In what sense is the law *there*? In the phenomenological sense of *present-at-hand*. The more it is inaccessible, the more the man wants it, the more he needs it, even being reduced to a childish state, as Kafka explains in the story. If what makes a thing stand out is that it becomes a break in the flow of routine engagement, then the law fulfills the description, representing that which the man cannot get to, though it is exclusively *for* him. Kafka supports this phenomenological Being of the law, saying, "Yet in his darkness he is now aware of a radiance that streams inextinguishable from the gateway of the Law" (Kafka 2011, 4). For the man, the law is there to the point of being a path illuminating before him, hearkening to *his* presence so that he may fulfill *his* being before *it*. For the law to be there, the man must be there, but right where he is: nothing more, nothing less.

5. "The Metamorphosis"

Gregor Samsa wakes up as a big insect. This is the crux of Franz Kafka's "*Metamorphosis*," arguably his most popular work. The oddest part of the beginning of this story is that being a big bug is the least worrisome aspect of Gregor's day. He's more worried about work and catching the train so he's not late. After discovering he has an insect body, Gregor ponders the following:

Oh God, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out. It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the office, and on top of that connections, the bed and irregular meals, casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends. That devil take it all! (Kafka 2011, 89)

It goes on like this. At this point, Kafka's readers may be the only ones concerned for poor Gregor's unfortunate mutation. That is, until we are presented with a contrast between his new bug-infused voice and his mother's gentle voice. He becomes more aware of his state as he must interact with his family.

Gregor displays in immense and stalwart capacity to simply bear obstacles because he thoughtfully categorizes them as inconveniences. Any interruption to his day, at this point, is not even really conceived as anything more than a slight alteration to the regular flow of the day. This belies the phenomenological status I've attributed to Kafka's works so far. I have discussed how his characters experience breaks from the flow of their lives and that such interruptions become eruptions. However, "*The Metamorphosis*" presents an interesting change to this idea: What happens when the individual doesn't care about interruptions and simply continues to experience a break-less flow of reality? What will it take for Gregor to face the present-at-handness of his situation? Heidegger points out that the Being of presence-at-hand is already there, but that the individual (Dasein) engages with its world in such a way that *such presence* will emerge for Dasein when there's tumult in the normalcy. Whatever normal and regulated way that Gregor thinks of his situation, the phenomenological background of presence-at-hand is still there.

In Gregor's case, we already know he's a bug; he seems to even know it, but he simply doesn't care in the way a "normal" person would. As the reader, you might even think to yourself, "Come on, man! Lose your mind a little bit more!" This presents us with an unusual addendum to our phenomenological analysis: The division between what is normal and abnormal. Everyone else in Gregor's life has what could be considered a normal response to the unusual circumstances of the situation, while he becomes abnormal, not in the fact that he has become an insect overnight, but that he, in the span of a few pages, is smiling and meditating about his situation, with the only real worry emerging because his superior has come to check on him.

Here, Kafka makes a vital point about experience in general: The significance of your situation depends on how you epistemically regard it. Whether it *is* a tragic and weird situation is not the point. The tragedy of phenomena situates around you and your evaluation of what is normal or abnormal to you. That normal/abnormal evaluation then informs us of what constitutes the break from the flow of engagement that comprises how we basically live. Look at your reaction to anything that happens out of the norm: Let's say you've been going all your life to one cafe and then one morning, you order your coffee, and the barista says, "Sorry. We're all out of coffee beans." This is abnormal only because of the repetitive, thoughtless, and unconscious normality that comprised your daily morning visits to the coffee shop. However, if you were the type of person that hasn't normalized any of this,

then the coffee shop not having coffee beans is not abnormal, though you may chuckle at the irony. Kafka highlights the significant difference between the normal and abnormal when stating,

He meant actually to open the door, actually to show himself and speak to the chief clerk; he was eager to find out what the others, after all their insistence, would say at the sight of him. If they were horrified then the responsibility was no longer his and he could stay quiet. But if they took it calmly, then he had no reason either to be upset, and could really get to the station for the 8 o'clock train if he hurried. (Kafka 2011, 98)

Gregor's assessment demonstrates what Kafka may be saying about the dependency that "normality" and "abnormality" has on one's point of view. Firstly, in none of what is said above is there any worry about being an insect. Gregor's issue is more about how he'll get around and whether he'll get fired. Only those aspects of his life matter to him. Secondly, waking up a bug is only cause for concern if others care about it. In the subsequent pages, almost everyone around him goes bonkers at witnessing this creature before them, while Gregor regards everyone's antics as funny reactions to what, for him, is a mere crack in an otherwise solid day of needing to catch the train to get to work on time and pay his parents' debts.

The normal/abnormal dichotomy extends to his family's reactions to him. For Gregor, bug body or no bug body, a man works to support his family. It is with this background that Gregor's sister becomes an interesting feature of the story. Gregor's sister creates a flight of various food items, some old, some new, mostly bread-related items for Gregor to choose from, since her original idea of giving him his favorite, milk, along with bread, had failed to satisfy his insect taste buds. Gregor also recognizes how people are treating him, his father chased him back into his room with a newspaper and stick. The chief clerk left in a fearful state. His mother was exasperated. The sister bridges the divide of access and no access by continuing to be compassionate toward her brother. The parents are at a loss. Gregor doesn't want to be a burden. He seems dedicated to being a good son, brother, and employee. Yet even though his sister is a bastion of hope for a little bit of time, she becomes increasingly repulsed by his new appearance. He notices this and goes so far as to work for four hours to cover a portion of the couch with a white sheet so he can go under the cover whenever she walks in. He notes that she seems appreciative of this act. All of this happens after Kafka shows how Gregor has gained enlightenment regarding his issue. With respect to his sister, he's been accustomed

to her benevolence, and he realizes that she hit a pressure point. This recognition is interesting because it looks as if now there's been a break from Gregor's sense of normalcy.

We have a disproportionate response, yet again, between Gregor's dedication to his family and what his family, friends, and employer offer to him. For Kafka's phenomenology of access, this difference is a big deal. For Gregor, it means no access, wherein his family confines him to his room, leaving him to look out at the window and hide under a sheet when his sister comes in to tidy up and feed him leftovers. One gets the sense that Gregor's commitment to his community (family, friends, and employer) is so resolute that he would be benevolent if it were them that turned into big bugs: He'd give them anything they wanted, so long as they didn't make him late to work. Thus, there's an understanding that Kafka grants to Gregor but not to everyone else.

It is understandable at first that the main character ought to be afforded the most understanding, that such a person who is beset with an insect transformation needs our sympathy for us to continue to read, but it's doubtful that this was Kafka's intent. More likely, Kafka desired to show us how, like Gregor, we change during adversity and how those suffering and undergoing change can sometimes be stalwart and even stubborn in their perpetual idealistic commitments to community.

6. *Diaries Detour*

Selections from Kafka's diaries bolster this phenomenology of access. For example, an entry from October 1921 demonstrates his sense of solitude apart from everyone else:

I don't believe that there are people whose inner condition is similar to mine, nonetheless I can imagine such people, but that around their head as around mine the secret raven constantly flies, that I cannot even imagine. (Kafka 2022, 460-1)

He can imagine people like him to an extent but doesn't believe they actually exist because he would have to imagine that, like him, they have a raven flying around them. Obviously then, Kafka thinks his condition is unique. Though he can imagine people with a similar type of being, the degree to which his problems persist seem exclusively unique. We can see this type of thinking in "The Metamor-

phosis" where Gregor's condition is special, not just because he's an insect, but because he doesn't see why he should be outcasted given that everyone is human, meaning that we all have torments.

Kafka has a predilection to show characters that are misunderstood and even prohibited from the most basic connections to their lives. Even his diaries demonstrate that he thinks of himself in a comparable way to the characters he creates. Family turns on you. Your boss turns on you. You're lucky if anyone sticks up for you to help you achieve your aims. Kafka shows us characters that are in a world that is either antagonistic or apathetic towards the misunderstood ones. Kafka's evaluation has phenomenological commitments though. In Kafka's works, entry means people are allowed access by either the conditions set around them that penetrate their everyday life or they are absurdly prohibited, that is, without reason. Things simply just happen, and you can accept them or not.

In Kafka's "*Metamorphosis*," the transformation just happens, so the reader automatically understands that, in terms of access, Gregor will face physical obstacles throughout, but as you read the story, these are treated as minor setbacks to overcome, only dependent on Gregor's unfaltering will. The real access issue turns into how Gregor will deal with the epistemic prohibition placed before him by the very people he loves and works for.

7. "In the Penal Colony"

"In the Penal Colony" reflects a more sinister and foreboding expression of what I'm taking to be Kafka's phenomenology of access. Here, the issue is clearly epistemic inaccessibility. In this story, an explorer comes upon a penal colony in which there is a clear punishment structure in place for all to reckon with as possible victims. This reckoning is important for the reader to understand, as the rule they've broken is not clear to the victims until their last moments. The "Harrow," the colony's instrument of punishment, is a machine with needles that painfully and slowly inscribe the law you broke into your skin for twelve hours until you die. The Harrow is made of glass so any onlookers can clearly view the victim's suffering. This way, everyone witnesses the torture one incurs from breaking the rule. "So that the actual progress of the sentence can be watched, the Harrow is made of glass" (*Kafka 2011*, 147). Morbidly, the Commandant, who explains this process to the explorer, asks, "And now anyone can look through the glass and watch the inscription taking form

on the body. Wouldn't you care to come a little nearer and have a look at the needles?" (*Kafka* 2011, 147). It is interesting that the Condemned's law breaking is epistemically inaccessible to him because he literally does not know why he's suffering. We can assume, that if he understands the punishment schema of the penal colony then he will infer, just by living as a colonist, that he broke a law. Yet, exactly what rule he broke would be unknown to him. More epistemic accessibility is granted to spectators but not the true victim of the story. The reader begins to understand that everyone else is more "in the know" and that the main person affected, the person who *should* know the most, is prohibited from learning more, until it is too late.

In "In the Penal Colony," this epistemic transition from unknown to known is exhibited in what the Harrow typically (when it works) provides for the victim: Enlightenment. Kafka writes the following:

Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers with his wounds. (*Kafka* 2011, 150)

What an extraordinary way to realize why you suffer. In the penal colony, it is not enough to be told why you are suffering. You must have an epiphany. It is as if Kafka understands that an authentic realization of what you've done cannot be known in a normal way one learns. The implication is that I cannot just tell you that you have done wrong, then you concede, and then I punish you to deter you from committing the same infraction again. Pertaining to epistemic inaccessibility, Kafka shows us that the present-at-hand conception of punishment, laws, and law breaking is deficient. It may be that we cannot truly know why we suffer as we do. Why can we not know the reasons for our suffering?

By looking at Kafka's works through the lens of access, we get closer to an answer, and this helps us figure out the meaning behind the enlightenment expressed within "In the Penal Colony." Before we get to our Kafkaesque answer, let us examine the assumptions we need to even formulate the question. Perhaps we assume that we are *supposed to know* why we suffer. Perhaps one of the issues with accessibility is that we bring our attitudes about how we think the world works and should work with respect to life's problems. When one tries to locate a superficial

happy ending or even just a tragic resolution, we do so with the idea that there needs to be a reason as to why something happened as it did. We seek a present-at-hand concept of what something is rather than admitting that life is available to us whether we accept it as ready for us or not. The answer to the question is as follows: As we are, the reason for our suffering is not accessible.

Even Kafka's explanation of the enlightenment doesn't guarantee knowledge why the suffering takes place, although it might help. Life, and all that happens with it, is simply the case, whether we understand why or why not. Fundamentally, for Kafka, we cannot even have a chance to understand without some type of suffering. Even then we are not guaranteed. This much is evidenced when the officer, after explaining and heralding the Harrow to the explorer, sees that the explorer is not at all convinced of the machine's power, decides to use it on himself, with the inscription of "BE JUST!" The machine malfunctions and literally needles him to a bloody death, not allowing him to have his enlightenment, and leaving the explorer aghast at the whole event. Thus, the extraordinary way to realize enlightenment turns into a tragic and horrific failure that itself evinces a truth only known to the explorer and the reader of this story.

8. *The Trial*

The theme of epistemic inaccessibility for one's punishment and death continues in Kafka's *The Trial*. This piece is an amalgamation of the themes we have discussed in the fact that the main character, Josef K., is thrown into an uncontrollable situation ("The Metamorphosis") arrested for reasons unknown to him ("In the Penal Colony") and, as he attempts to investigate, he encounters obstacle after obstacle ("An Imperial Message") only to be obstructed with finality, with a system that is simply not allowing him to speak to the individuals who can actually tell him what's going on ("Before the Law").

The Trial begins ominously with the sentence, "Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything, he was arrested" (Kafka 2008, 3). As discussed before, Kafka throws our main character into an impossible situation, made such by the fact that the protagonist tends to not know why things are happening. Josef K. is, by all lights, a well-to-do thirty-year-old banker who lives in a fair and routine manner. He expects breakfast at eight in the morning and lives worry free. Should the need to worry strike, he heeds the call. Only now,

two guards show up at his home and they're annoyed at his yearning to know the reasons for the arrest. Answering to K.'s question as to why he's being held, one of the guards strangely says:

We weren't sent to tell you that. Go to your room and wait. Proceedings are under way and you'll learn everything in due course. I'm exceeding my instructions by talking to you in such a friendly way. (*Kafka 2008*, 5)

This is an unusual circumstance: Two guards come to your house and act as if you are the weird and imposing one for not accepting your arrest. You will naturally want to know why, of course. However, Kafka writes Josef K. to be a deferential character. Of K. he explains, "After all, K. lived in a state governed by law, there was universal peace, all statutes were enforced; who dared assault him in his own lodgings?" (*Kafka 2008*, 6). If all that is true then how can he be under arrest? This predicament may inspire *The Trial* reader to wonder if this 'universal peace' comes at an insidious price. However, let us not go in that direction because what most concerns us now is the veneration of 'the law.'

We have already seen a type of reverence for the law in 'Before the Law' when the country man was trying to get past the doorkeeper. That character is compelled to come before the law but there is no such volition in *The Trial*. Here, Josef K. finds himself under arrest. He has been thrown into guilt. As if he already has some sort of reputation in the "department."¹ The guards explain that the department "is attracted by guilt and has to send us guards out" (*Kafka 2008*, 9). This implies that K. is guilty and the trial is already directed to not finding out if he's guilty, but to confirm his guilt. Yet, we mustn't forget, K. does not know why any of this is happening. Thus, in keeping with the analysis in this paper, *The Trial* begins with a lack of epistemic access. K. doesn't have access to the reasons why he's guilty. By the time he meets his sharp end, K. still does not know.

9. *The Castle*

K. is a land surveyor tasked with going to the castle and, well, survey the land. The only problem is that he gets the run around. The people in this town do not want him to speak to the Count (supposedly K.'s real boss) for varied reasons, with the justifications lacking consistency:

¹ Kafka equivocates both "the department" and the "higher authorities," which the reader should take to mean the vague legal process that some of his characters must reckon with.

It wasn't consistent, some passages treated him as a freeman and conceded that he had a will of his own, such as the initial greeting and the passage concerning his wishes. There were other passages, though, that treated him openly or indirectly as a lowly worker who was barely noticeable from the director's post. (Kafka 1998, 23-24)

Like Gregor in "*The Metamorphosis*," K. just accepts constant rejection and contradictory statements. He doesn't quite know his station. The reader will likely glean that most people have a superior position to K. or that his position does not matter. It does not seem like he is needed. He knows who he is outside of this context, but not within it because it is unclear given how people relate to him, which is with a mixture of apathy and annoyance.

All is made clear in *The Castle* when K. finally speaks to the chairman who tries to locate the files in which a request for a land surveyor was originally made. By the time we get to the chapter, "At the Chairman's," K. already has a fiancée, Frieda, has been given assistants that appear to be bumbling security guards, and has just finished arguing with the landlady. and summarily thrown out. K. has his chance to find out the byzantine nature of the land surveyor request, the form itself that would explain why he's there in the first place. The clarity is not so much the type of lucidity one gets after learning a muddled process, but more of an explanation about how confused the town's bureaucratic process is, only without accountability.

Like *The Trial*, three points emerge in *The Castle* that lend weight to the problem of access in Kafka: 1) confusion of bureaucracy; 2) lack of accountability; 3) loss of self within the system. For the first point, the chairman says

In an administration as large as the Count's, it can happen at some point that one department issues an order, another a second, neither department knows of the other, the higher-ranking control agency is indeed extremely precise, but by nature it intervenes too late, and so a little confusion can nonetheless arise. (Kafka 1998, 60)

Suffice to say that this explanation came after the chairman said that they "don't need a surveyor" (Kafka 1998, 59). The chairman convolutedly explains how, sometimes, paperwork comes too late from one department to another, and in the case of K., it came too late, and no one really cared. The chairman says:

One of the operating principles of the authorities is that the possibility of error is simply not taken into account. This principle is justified by the excellence

of the entire organization and is also necessary if matters are to be discharged with the upmost rapidity (Kafka 1998, 64).

The lack of accountability assumes a premise of perfect functioning to the point where the chairman questions if there's an error when it comes to K. situation. Epistemic inaccessibility reveals itself as the result of not being part of a perfect bureaucratic process. No one can provide a sensible explanation of the current situation. You only know if you already know. You are only part of the system if you are already part of the system. None of that is the case for K. Lastly, when you are not "in the know" as we see here with K. then this may result in you not knowing your position, status, and function. K. is a surveyor, but he's not needed. He's treated as such, and he's told this so many times. He's even reminded by the landlady in the previous chapter that he should "always keep in mind how ignorant you are" (Kafka 1998, 55). Essentially, the K. of *The Castle*, like the Josef K. of *The Trial*, is always epistemically behind.

10. Conclusion Via *Amerika* ("The Stoker")

In an essay about the phenomenology of inaccessibility in Kafka's work, it seems necessary to conclude by discussing his first attempt at a novel that he never completed, *Amerika*. Kafka tried writing *Amerika*, felt dissatisfied with it, and left instructions before his death to publish its first chapter, "The Stoker," alongside "The Metamorphosis," and "The Judgment" under the title of *The Sons*. Ultimately, this happened through the Schocken publication, but *Amerika* was still in its incomplete form. Simply reading the first chapter "The Stoker," the reader may be left with a sense of forlornness at the fact that (within the story, of course) Karl must leave behind his new friend, the stoker, to stay with his prestigious senator uncle. At the end of this piece, Kafka writes of Karl, "It was as if the stoker ceased to exist. Karl took a closer look at his uncle, whose knees were almost touching his own, and he began to doubt whether this man could ever take the place of the stoker" (Kafka 2008, 34). Right when Karl is close to establishing some camaraderie with a new friend, the stoker is verbally dressed down and Karl must leave.

We should remember that accessibility can phenomenologically be framed as ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. In the case of the stoker's relation to Karl,

the stoker moves from an accessible individual for Karl, to an external and inaccessible entity; first, by the accusatory harangue the stoker receives from his superiors; and second, by the very fact that they separate. The present-at-hand inaccessibility of the stoker is made apparent to the reader when he is orally objectified before everyone in the processing room. What is ironic about all this is that such an objectification begins by glances and mistreatment and then Karl, seeing how others mistreat his new friend, feels compelled to defend him. Essentially, had Karl not been a friend to the stoker, he would have had more time to be a friend to the stoker. However, this inevitably is all for naught because Karl's uncle ends the connection.

Even in this relationship-centered opening to Kafka's incomplete novel, we see how the rising complexity of apathetic elements signal to the reader that the main character is about to encounter parts of his world pulling away from him. In "Before the Law" it was no entrance; "An Imperial Message" made the message impossible to deliver; "The Metamorphosis" demonstrated how family and work pulls away no matter your indifference to your bodily state; "In the Penal Colony" showed how knowledge of one's death can even be out of one's control; *The Trial* explained how guilt can be thrust upon us from outside and how we can be forced to *not* understand why; *The Castle* shows us, vividly, how society can be both indifferent at times and harsh in its commitment to not let us function as we think we're designed to function; finally, *Amerika*, in particular, "The Stoker," shows us that at the smallest level, something like friendship is subject to inaccessibility, where we're so close to phenomenologically accessing it, yet so far away from its practical realization.

*Dr. Jesus Ramirez, Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences,
Gavilan College [jesusramirez\[at\]gavilan.edu](mailto:jesusramirez[at]gavilan.edu)*

References

- Edwards, Ivana. 1991. "The Essence of 'Kafkaesque.'" *New York Times*, December 29, 1991. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/29/nyregion/the-essence-of-kafkaesque.html>
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Kafka, Franz. 2008. *Amerika*. Translated by Mark Harman. New York: Schocken Books.

Kafka, Franz. 2011. "Before the Law." *The Complete Stories*. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books.

Kafka, Franz. 1998. *The Castle*. Translated by Mark Harman. New York: Schocken Books.

Kafka, Franz. 2022. *Diaries*. Translated by Ross Benjamin. New York: Schocken Books.

Kafka, Franz. 1971. "In the Penal Colony." *The Complete Stories*. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books.

Kafka, Franz. 1971. "An Imperial Message." *The Complete Stories*. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books.

Kafka, Franz. 1971. "The Metamorphosis." *The Complete Stories*. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books.

Kafka, Franz. 1998. *The Trial*. Translated by Breon Mitchell. New York: Schocken Books.