How to read Kafka: part II

by John M. Ellis

The second in a two-part series on the writer who transformed our view of modern rationalism.

In part I of this essay I suggested that most of Kafka’s stories fall into two categories. In the first, overconfidence in reason leads to breakdown when it encounters areas of life that reason can’t manage. In the second, characters misuse and subvert Enlightenment forms of behavior even as they live by them. There is no better example of the second kind than Kafka’s well-known “Das Urteil” (“The Judgment”), which gives us civilized kindness and responsible behavior used in pursuit of good old-fashioned nastiness.

Three people form the world of “The Judgment”—Georg, his father, and a friend who lives in Russia—but everything is seen through Georg’s thoughts. The text is cast in Kafka’s familiar mode of obsessive reasoning, with Georg continually rehearsing the rationale for all that he is doing. He begins with a long internal monologue on the subject of his friend. Georg is concerned for him: the poor man appears to be a dismal failure, both in business and in love. At first these thoughts can plausibly be seen as the musings of one friend wondering how he can help the other, but soon there appear disturbing signs that something entirely different is going on.

Georg doesn’t just ponder regretfully the sad state of his friend in Russia—he wallows in it. He wonders how to write to him:

What should one write to such a man, who had obviously gone wrong, whom one could pity but could not help. Should one not perhaps advise him to come home, to transfer his life here, to take up all the old friendships again—there was nothing to stand in the way of that—and for the rest to trust to the help of his friends? But that would mean nothing less than that one would at the same time be telling him, and the more tactfully the more injuriously, that everything he had tried to do hitherto had been a failure.

This already looks too much like Georg’s delighting in his friend’s misfortunes, and that impression only grows stronger. Georg imagines his friend returning home, and what his reception would be: he’ll have to be prepared to be gaped at by everyone, thinks Georg, and to realize that he is just an immature child compared to his friends who unlike him knew what they were doing. Having begun by saying that there is nothing standing in the way of his friend returning home, he spells out, in the very next sentence, exactly what will stand in the way: being
patronized and pitied by his friends. What starts out as a show of sincere concern for an errant friend has turned into an orgy of self-congratulation and malicious glee. Georg has weaponized compassion: he uses the language of kindness to destroy.

Why is he doing this? Just as part of the point of “The Burrow” lies in its implied contrast to the related story of the “Three Little Pigs,” so “The Judgment” has a related story with a meaningful contrast: the parable of the prodigal son. Georg’s harping on the reception that his friend would get if he returned home reminds us of the resentment of the son who stayed home at the warm reception given to the son who had dared to leave the safety of home. Georg is the son who lacked the courage to strike out by himself, and he evidently fears being judged adversely when the two are compared. And so he fantasizes endlessly about how badly things have gone for his friend, and how embarrassing his return will be.

Georg continues in his mode of feigned kindness when he tells his fiancée that he must protect his friend’s feelings by keeping from him the news of their engagement and their happiness. The girl’s irritation at this, however, easily persuades him to tell all immediately. Now Georg can do what he really wants to do while hiding behind the need to be considerate of his fiancée, and so he writes a letter to his friend that rubs as much salt into the friend’s imagined wounds as he possibly can. The letter makes sure to mention that she is from a rich family and that he will gain a new friend in Georg’s bride, “which is quite important for a bachelor.” The implication is that his friend must be a social misfit without meaningful relationships of his own. Georg’s letter is full of spite, condescension, and competitiveness, all dressed up as kindness. The dark side of human nature has not been overcome—it has simply been given new ways to express itself. If you want to destroy a rival, you must now do it with magnanimity. It helps to give yourself an alibi: when Georg wants to open up the subject of his being now engaged to a rich woman, he simply mentions somebody else’s engagement repeatedly in his letters until the friend bites on the issue of engagements, and the next step is then much easier. But the underlying reality in all of this is that this friend’s more adventurous life choices have left Georg feeling inadequate and resentful, and so Georg wants to destroy him.

But now another actor enters the story: Georg’s father. Georg goes to him and begins to rehearse once again his obsessive sequence of thoughts about his friend. His father responds with a simple challenge: “Do you really have this friend in Petersburg?” The simplicity makes this ambiguous: his father could be questioning whether the man exists at all, or whether he is Georg’s friend. But Georg immediately grasps the more fundamental meaning: his father is questioning the entire way in which he is framing his friend’s situation. The father is therefore now a danger to the elaborate mental world that Georg has constructed to defend himself against his feelings of inadequacy.

The consequence is a remarkable verbal fencing match between the two. On Georg’s side it is conducted by means of apparent consideration and concern for his father, but by now we easily grasp that it is really designed to patronize and neutralize. His father, on the other hand, uses only
simple, direct, and well-aimed statements of fact. Neither side seems particularly aggressive, and yet the fencing turns out to be deadly.

Georg’s riposte is rather like his way of dealing with the danger he sees in his friend: “Let’s leave my friends be. A thousand friends can’t replace my father. Do you know what I think? You don’t look after yourself enough. But old age needs to be respected. You are irreplaceable to me in the business, that you know well enough, but if the business were to threaten your health I’d close it tomorrow for good. This won’t do. We’ll have to make a change in your way of life. A radical one . . . now put yourself to bed, you absolutely need rest.”

The language is that of devotion to his father, but the real purpose is to contain the threat that his father’s having seen through his destructive rivalry poses to him. To counter Georg’s obsessive length of speech, his father strikes again at the foundation of Georg’s fabricated reality with devastating brevity: “You don’t have a friend in Petersburg.”

The brief counter-thrust sends Georg into another attempt to shore up the spurious reality that he has created with an elaborate account of his father’s history with the Petersburg friend. His father had never liked him, he says; how proud Georg had been when nevertheless his father made an effort to be civil. All the while Georg undresses his father to get him ready for bed. Georg had contained the threat from his enterprising friend by imagining him a failure, and now he contains the threat from his father by infantilizing him.

The fencing continues. His father asks twice: “Am I well tucked up?” Georg replies, “Yes, you are well tucked up.” The meaning of the exchange is once more not what it seems to be. Translated from its “loving-son” mode into the language of the tense duel that is taking place, its meaning changes radically. His father is taunting him: “So you think you’ve contained me?” and Georg’s reply is wishful thinking: “Yes, I’ve got you contained.” And so when his father suddenly shouts “No,” throws off the covers, and stands upright, that is his reply to the underlying meaning of their exchange.

At this point Georg suddenly abandons the protective cocoon of words that he had built for himself and begins to talk more briefly and realistically. He understands that his attempt to meet the threat of his father by treating him as a helpless old man has failed, and he now begins to admit to himself what is really happening: “A long time ago he had made a firm resolve to observe everything carefully so that he would not be surprised in some way from behind or from above, by circuitous means.” He knew all along that the house of cards he had built was fragile and vulnerable, and that his father would be a danger to it. But he has one last fantasy: he imagines that his father will solve his problem by simply self-destructing: “now he’ll lean forward . . . what if he topples and is dashed to pieces!”

His father begins to pronounce his judgment: “How long you have taken to reach maturity! Your mother had to die, she could not live to see the happy day.” Georg’s reply is no longer evasive and full of covert aggression, but instead simple and direct: “So you were lying in wait for me.” He
understands now that his father always knew what Georg was doing.

The judgment continues:

“Now you know what existed apart from yourself, up to now all you knew was yourself. You were to be sure an innocent child, but in a deeper sense you were a devilish human being! And so, know this: I now sentence you to death by drowning.”

Georg accepts the rightness of the sentence and runs off to fulfill it by jumping off a bridge. What does it mean that he feels compelled to do so? Something that is beyond reason is involved. A father’s total condemnation has enormous force—it is an emotional death sentence. As he jumps, the story concludes: “at that moment an absolutely endless flow of traffic went across the bridge.”

What does this final sentence mean for the whole story? A whole world of events was going on outside of Georg’s consciousness, a world of people and things from which he was cut off by living only in the world of his own obsessive and self-serving thoughts.

Kafka’s “Ein Hungerkünstler” (“A Hunger Artist”) is yet another story in which reason fails. It’s about a man who makes fasting an art form. He sits fasting in a small barred cage, on public display during the day, and looked after by professional watchers at night. This is the way in which the hunger artist hopes to give his life meaning and purpose, to confer on it dignity and integrity. The attempt to give one’s life a focus and meaning takes different forms for different people, but the broad intent is seen everywhere. Both painters and cancer researchers seek to make their lives meaningful through the legacy they leave behind them. Probably the most common way of achieving the feeling that you have done something with your life that mattered and that will remain after you are gone is to raise children. But in this story Kafka chooses a way of giving meaning to a life that few have ever understood as such: fasting. He chooses what seems a nonsensical version of the idea precisely because he has something to say about that idea itself.

To be sure, fasting is occasionally used for both political and religious purposes, but Kafka’s hunger artist would consider that demeaning to his art. His concern is with fasting for its own sake. Kafka gives his hunger artist all the habits of speech and thought that we find in more familiar real-life achievement obsessives: mountain climbers, English Channel swimmers, artists, long-distance runners, and so on. He speaks the language of all those people: he is angry if someone challenges the integrity of what he is doing, and he contemptuously rejects both commercialism of his art and any notion of that art being a fad or fashion. He speaks with the inner glow of high achievement, and believes that he could set a record for fasting that would astound the world.
What matters most to him is his integrity as an artist, and so he is furious when the professional watchers needed to guarantee that he has not faked his fasting by surreptitious eating don’t take their job seriously. Sometimes the watchers play cards and thus are too distracted to be able to guarantee that he has truly fasted.

It might seem that Kafka is poking fun at the hunger artist when he gives him all the trappings of people of real achievement. But that is the exact opposite of Kafka’s purpose: he uses the hunger artist to put all obsessive meaning and purpose seeking under the microscope. Everyone is familiar with the dead-end response that mountain climbers give when asked why they climb mountains: “because they are there.” Mountain climbers display a rare honesty in this respect. But Kafka’s story makes the point in more general terms: “Just try to explain hunger-artistry to someone,” says Kafka’s narrator. “If someone doesn’t feel it, you can’t make them understand it.” That’s actually a better answer than the mountain-climbers’ “because they are there,” because it applies equally to all kinds of obsessive ambition in human life.

But is the hunger artist only a caricature of the drive to excel? In that case it should be possible to point to features of what he does that set him apart from other achievement obsessives. And that is difficult to do. Is it that what he does is completely pointless? Surely no more so than the man who recently climbed the sheer face of El Capitan in Yosemite Valley without any climbing equipment. Is it that he’s just a narcissistic attention seeker? But that’s common enough too. Is it that he needlessly risks his health? Donald Campbell lost his life attempting to break the water speed record in 1967: that was needless self-endangerment—except to people who care about the water speed record.

The Enlightenment wanted to make everything in human life reasoned. But Kafka’s story is about the fact that in one of the most important areas of human life—the attempt to give one’s life meaning—reason is not really available. What people bring to the effort is belief and commitment, even obsession, but not reason. Helping others seems to be a rational choice, and it is certainly one that is emotionally satisfying, but only because it shifts the basic question of meaning in human life to someone else: the people that one helps must be assumed to have some kind of meaning in their lives too. If they don’t, what has the helper achieved?

At the end of the story, the hunger artist adds another layer to the story’s skepticism about obsession and achievement. He admits that he could never find any food he liked. He then wastes away and dies, but he had already been forgotten long before his death. He has no legacy after all. In the story’s last paragraph, his cage is cleaned out, and he is buried. In his place a beautiful young panther is introduced, the very picture of life and health. The animal seems to carry its freedom about with it, and the joy of life flows from its jaws. Why close the story with this image?
The point is surely that only human beings get tied up in knots trying to find meaning in their lives; the panther is a magnificently healthy animal because he has no such worries. And, of course, he is the polar opposite of the hunger artist, since he is conspicuously sleek and well fed. Obsessive ambition drains the life out of the hungerer, but the creature who is immune from this all-too-human concern is full of life and beauty.

Kafka’s novel Der Prozess (The Trial) is the story of a man, Josef K., who is summoned to court but never learns what the charge against him is. This is the work that is most associated with the adjective “Kafkaesque,” probably because of the sense of confusion in a process that is never understood. Once more, the limits of reason are a factor: we expect the law to be a highly rational structure, but in The Trial it isn’t. What should be its rational structure is always being eaten away by the haphazard interventions of disorganized human nature.

What many readers seem to take away from The Trial is that there is a sinister hidden conspiracy against K.: an unfortunate individual is beleaguered by forces he doesn’t understand. But if we look carefully at what actually happens in the novel, that is not really its major focus. The two people who come to arrest him have no idea why they are doing it, and the only thing that seems to interest them is eating K.’s breakfast, which they devour with gusto. K. behaves as any reasonable person would: “Here are my identity papers,” he says, “show me yours, and especially the arrest warrant.” The two men brush his formally correct approach aside: “What do we care about papers? . . . Do you think you’ll bring your whole damned process to a speedy end by arguing with us, the guards, about papers and the warrant? We are just lowly employees, who don’t even know what papers are, and who have nothing to do with your case except to get paid for guarding you for ten hours a day.”

There is no sign here of any coherent and malevolent force at work, though a very real problem has surfaced: K. is going to find it hard to get through the dense phalanx of ordinary, ill-informed, and not very interested people who stand between him and the ostensibly rational legal system. The law operates by means of a series of magnificent abstractions and processes: warrants, rulings, evidence, and finally justice. But between K. and the law stand far too many people who care mostly about immediate, everyday concerns, like getting a breakfast or making a living. The grandeur of the law never seems to impress those people, yet they are a large part of its implementation. They can be distracted, hungry, tired, or bored, but one thing they are not is the embodiment of the law’s artificial concepts.

K. notices first one, then two, and finally three people in the house opposite his own who are looking through their windows at what is going on. They distract K., just as they themselves are distracted by the visit of the two bailiffs. What do they add to Kafka’s story? They are simply people who are curious about something that is unusual. They are not concerned about the justice of what is happening; in fact, they are not taking any attitude to it at all. When legal proceedings are involved, the reader expects careful distinctions and precise explanations. Instead we get only mundane confusion: gawkers who are bored with their own lives and bailiffs who are going through the motions. They all have no idea what is going on or why, and this sets a pattern that
is told to come to court on the next Sunday, but he is not given the time of day. He is told the address of the building, but not which room in that building. Law courts are commonly situated in structures that are dedicated to that one function, and they are usually dignified and impressive. They are designed precisely to generate respect for the majesty of the law. But the place that K. is directed to is an apartment complex, and there is no indication just where the law court might be within that complex. He knocks on apartment doors to find where it might be, until at last when he knocks at one on the fifth floor the young woman who answers points to an adjoining door that is already open. Instead of being separated from ordinary life by an imposing structure that emphasizes its uniqueness, it’s hidden among ordinary dwellings. The room in which he finds the court doesn’t even look like a court. An unruly crowd of all kinds of people form the backdrop for K.’s court proceedings, undermining the solemnity of the law. In one corner there is even an impromptu sexual liaison going on, as a crowd gathers round. Justice is set in the context of everyday life, and it’s just as disorganized.

A merchant whom K. meets during his quest gives him a brutally frank account of what happens in the search for justice: “you must remember, that in this procedure many times things are spoken of that the mind can’t really handle, people are just too tired or distracted for much of it, and they turn to superstition instead.” Worse still, the people who work in the law court seem to have been damaged by it; they are so used to the stale air of the offices that fresh air coming in from the stairway seems to upset them.

Kafka’s German title Der Prozess is usually translated as The Trial, but it can have the broader meaning of a process, and that is surely one of the ways in which we should understand it. The book gives us an account of a lengthy process, but never a real trial. During this process we see Kafka’s recurring theme of a highly rational structure eaten away and changed out of all recognition because it is run by people who are easily sidetracked and prone to miss the point.

Kafka seems not to be at his best or most typical in The Trial. That’s because while his take on reason and prudence in “The Burrow” is startling and unique, as is his commentary on human ideals in “The Hunger Artist,” the insights of The Trial are more familiar. That human factors interfere with the law’s abstract notions is a commonplace idea—well known to people who study how juries decide cases, for example. But perhaps the central issue of the book is that K. never learns the charge against him, and, “being ignorant of the actual charge and even its possible extensions, one’s whole life in all its smallest actions and events must be remembered, presented and examined from all sides.” What Kafka says here is precise and devastating. It’s the very frightening thing about being subjected to a process without specific charge. But it is also thoroughly familiar to anyone who knows the legal history of the English-speaking world. For this was the modus operandi of the infamous Star Chamber of seventeenth-century England, and its critics put their finger on what made it so evil in much the same terms.

In der Strafkolonie” (“In the Penal Colony”) is a story in which Enlightenment values again seem to have been turned upside down, but this happens somewhat differently from what
we have seen so far. Here those values keep getting mixed up with their opposites, and as a consequence they often appear to point in different directions at once. And that is because they contain a crucial ambiguity that really amounts to a contradiction.

The story concerns a machine that executes prisoners in a way that fits their crime. The machine has a rational basis, but it is also more painful and cruel than, say, a firing squad would be. Yet it is this rational idea that makes the machine the pride and joy of a particular officer in the penal institution. It was invented by, and so is the legacy of, a former Commandant of the colony, and so appears to point back to an unenlightened past. The new Commandant appears to be a skeptic regarding the machine, and that makes the officer fear that it will soon be abandoned.

The story begins with a traveler visiting the penal colony and being given a tour of it, with particular attention to the machine. The officer fears that this is a setup: he guesses that what the new Commandant really wants is for the traveler to register disgust at the sight of the machine and so provide the occasion for abolishing it. The value system inherent in all of this seems clear enough: the cruel and primitive past of the machine together with the officer who champions it will probably be swept aside by the more enlightened future represented both by the new Commandant and the traveler.

Things don’t quite work out that way, however, because the two sides of this opposed pair of value systems keep getting mixed up with each other. The first problem is that the language of idealism is monopolized by the wrong side—the officer. He regards his machine as a wondrous thing. It writes the condemned man’s crime on his back, and the officer believes that there is a beauty and justice in this that even the condemned man understands. The writing, however, is not done with ink but with needles: it is cut into the condemned man’s body.

The officer is also enamored of the technical perfection of the machine. (Once more, a theme from “The Burrow,” and a sign that reason is veering off in an irrational direction.) The reader sees its cruelty, but the officer’s way of describing the machine always seems to get in the way of a major Enlightenment theme: that reason and knowledge make us better people, thus more able to comprehend serious moral issues and to behave with compassion and decency. Here things seem to be the other way around, because the officer has too many virtues. He is loyal (to the old Commandant), devoted to a cause, displays integrity in that devotion, values technology, shows patience and understanding as he explains with great care the way the machine works, and has a sense of honor which nobody else displays—certainly not the traveler, as we shall see. He has an almost religious devotion to the cause of the machine, and as a final act of devotion to it he is even willing to sacrifice himself.

All of this seems to prevent the officer’s fitting neatly into the role of the unenlightened primitive to which the general plot outline obviously wants to consign him. To make things worse, the traveler doesn’t fit into his assigned role as the bringer of more enlightened ways either. Rather than displaying the horror at the machine’s cruelty that we expect from his presumed place in the plot, he seems bored with the whole thing: “The traveler didn’t have much of a sense for the
apparatus, and just walked to and fro behind the condemned man almost visibly uninterested in it.” He is more interested in the fact that the uniforms being worn by the officer and men seem too heavy for the tropics.

To be sure, as the traveler begins to understand the machine, he turns against it. But his reaction is conspicuously weak: the officer’s explanation had not satisfied him, he thinks, but “nevertheless he had to tell himself that he was dealing with a penal colony, that here special kinds of measures were necessary, and that one had to do things in a completely military way.” He is trying to find a reason not to intervene.

The traveler finds his excuse for inaction in the respect for other cultures that is one of the marks of the Enlightenment—and one of its pitfalls: “the traveler thought: it is always problematic to intervene drastically in other people’s affairs. He was neither a member of the colony nor a citizen of the state to which it belonged. If he wanted to condemn this execution or intrigue against it, people could say to him: you are a foreigner, be quiet.”

The traveler is apparently to be the moral arbiter, but that can only work if he is the voice of a common humanity that transcends a particular locality. He sounds tolerant, but his is really the tolerance of someone who doesn’t want to take a stand that might make life difficult for him. He has no doubt that the machine is inhuman and the judicial procedure unjust, but when he is asked to commit himself he always prevaricates.

The officer tries to force the moral issue by appealing for the traveler’s support, but the latter doesn’t respond. When the officer tries again, there is still silence. And now the officer shows us that he understands the ambiguity in the European traveler’s value system: “you are in the grip of European ways of thought, perhaps you are an opponent of capital punishment in general . . . . of course you have seen and learnt to respect many peculiarities of many peoples, so you probably won’t speak vehemently against this procedure as you might do in your own country.” What the officer grasps is that enlightened Europe embraces two propositions that contradict each other: on the one hand, its cultural tolerance teaches that all cultures deserve respect, but on the other hand it is firmly convinced that its morality is the only correct one. (Modern political correctness didn’t invent this contradiction, as so many seem to think.)

The traveler continues to make excuses for his unwillingness to commit himself. He has little influence with the Commandant, he says, and thus can neither help nor hurt the officer. Only when the officer begins to rehearse aloud his imagined triumph if and when the traveler sides publicly with him does the traveler finally say: “I am against the procedure.” But even now he hastens to return to a more neutral position by telling the officer that he has been impressed by the latter’s honest conviction, and that accordingly he will not announce his opinion publicly, but only tell the Commandant what he thinks in private.

What follows next is almost a reduction to absurdity of themselves by these two characters. The officer prepares to give the machine one last triumphal outing by immolating himself upon it, while the traveler tells himself that “he had no right to stop the officer from doing
anything. If the judicial procedure that meant so much to the officer was really about to be abolished . . . then the officer was behaving completely correctly; the traveler would not have acted differently in his place.”

The Enlightenment can try as much as it likes to demand higher and better standards of behavior from us, but it can’t change who we are.

In Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” the plot seems at the outset to assign the two main characters roles that suggest what attitudes the reader should take to them. First, there is the backward-looking, cruel, sadistic torturer, and, second, the voice of more enlightened and humane times to come.

The trouble is that Kafka gives the right traits to the wrong people. The officer is conscientious, rational, idealistic, and principled, while the traveler is unprincipled, selfish, and inattentive to the duty he knows to be his. At the story’s end the traveler is about to board the ship that will take him away from this strange penal institution when a lowly soldier who had accompanied the officer and a man who had been condemned to a death on the machine come racing down the gangway to escape with him. They meet grim resistance: “They could have jumped into the boat but the traveler picked up a heavy knotted rope and threatened them with it, and stopped them from jumping.” And so after the struggle between two systems of morality is over, what finally prevails is a motive that is much older than either: the instinct for self-preservation.

In an inversion of Enlightenment principles, in this story the one who is most guided by reason and principle is the one who causes the most suffering, and the one who should be the bringer of a more just and humane world is corrupted by the oldest and most powerful human motive of all. And to make matters worse, it is the Enlightenment value of tolerance that gives this ancient force new cover. The Enlightenment can try as much as it likes to demand higher and better standards of behavior from us, but it can’t change who we are.

“E in Landarzt” (“A Country Doctor”), like “In the Gallery,” is a short text that works by juxtaposing the enlightened world with that which it tries unsuccessfully to tame and contain. The story opens with a country doctor in a quandary: he needs to reach a sick patient, but has no horse to pull his carriage because his own horse has died. In his distress he kicks the door of a disused pigsty, and the door opens. Inside are two huge horses, their bodies steaming. With them is a man who is crouching low.

Already we have the familiar pair of opposed forces: on the one hand, a doctor, the civilized man of knowledge, reason, and compassion, one devoted to helping other people. And on the other, the force he will call on to transport him is his polar opposite: it emerges from the dark depths of an unclean place, a pigsty. It is menacingly bestial. The doctor may be a man of reason, but his carriage will be powered by an animal force that has emerged from a dark and disgusting place—a force without a conscience. Civilization tries to tame that force, but can’t ever abolish it.

The man who accompanied the horses crawls out of the sty on all fours. The doctor’s decision to
accept his help and his horses very soon seems like a pact with the devil. The horseman pulls the
doctor’s servant girl to him and bites her cheek. At first the doctor is angry, calls the horseman an
animal, and threatens to whip him, but then sinks back into the even-handedness and absence of
judgmentalism that calmly rational thought is always vulnerable to, as he thinks: he’s a stranger; I
don’t know where he comes from; and he is willingly helping me out when nobody else would.
The man of reason and goodwill tries to believe that the world and all that it contains is like
himself.

The doctor soon experiences the cost of thinking calmly and rationally when faced with raw
animal force. The servant girl runs away from her attacker and locks herself in the house, but the
man from the pigsty claps his hands and the horses bolt, taking the doctor with them. As the
horses gallop away he can hear the door to the house being broken down: the girl will have no
defense, she is at the mercy of this creature. The doctor’s life is now out of control, and in an
instant his carriage stands before the patient’s house. A civilized man is now overwhelmed by the
uncivilized forces that he himself has unleashed because he refused to understand their nature.

When the doctor enters his patient’s room, the two black horses push open the windows and poke
their heads in: they dominate the scene. The patient is a boy, and his family looks on as the doctor
examines him. At first the doctor thinks he looks perfectly healthy and all is well. It takes a second
look for him to see that everything is not well after all: the lad has a huge wound in his side. And
now the whole scene descends into primitive ritual as the family strips off the doctor’s clothes and
lays him in the bed beside the boy. Superstition and ancient folkways suddenly push aside
modern medical knowledge. The doctor rushes outside to make his escape, still naked, thinking
that the horses will carry him home in an instant, just as they did when he came. Instead, the
horses go at a snail’s pace, and the doctor now understands the hopelessness of his position:

I’ll never get home like this; my thriving practice is gone; a successor is stealing it, but to no purpose,
because he can’t replace me; the disgusting horse-minder wreaks havoc in my house; Rosa is his victim; I
can’t think about it. Naked, exposed to the frost of this most unhappy of all times, with an earthly trap
and unearthly horses, I am an old man stumbling around. . . . Tricked! Tricked! If you just once follow the
false ring of the night bell, it can never be put right.

“A Country Doctor” is a powerful story about the constant undertow of forces in human life that
reason can never completely tame, and that always threaten to take control. The doctor’s
rationality makes him blind to it, and so he acts incautiously, not grasping how dangerous the
situation really is.

Faced with what seem like bewildering stories, readers and critics have often taken refuge in
the idea that these can’t be understood as others can, or that they can be understood in many
different ways, or even that they are like dreams. The simple answer to this abdication of reading
to understand is that if something can mean anything, then it means nothing. The inevitable
consequence of the notion that Kafka can mean anything has been much wild metaphysical
speculation that has no basis in what he actually wrote. But far from being vague and
indeterminate, Kafka’s stories are actually tightly focused thematic studies.
Another escape from coming to grips with what Kafka writes about is the destructive idea that his work is just the record of his own despair at modern life; this, it seems, explains the prevailing gloom and grotesqueness. But, to the contrary, there are many reports that Kafka would burst into laughter when reading his work: he didn’t find it gloomy, and there is no reason why we should. There are certainly grotesque elements in Kafka, but this is the grotesqueness of the caricaturist. Caricature distorts the reality of a face, for example, so that it can highlight its most salient and interesting characteristics. In a similar way, the creature that Gregor becomes in *The Metamorphosis* caricatures his relationship to his family, and there are many other such cases in his work.

Far from being dominated by emotional gloom, Kafka’s work is a witty and highly intellectualized commentary on particular aspects of human life—mainly human folly. If Kafka’s world seems bizarre, that’s because his people seem often at sea in a post-Enlightenment world. It’s as if they have not yet learned what to do with reason. The animal in “The Burrow” insists that the power of reason must prevail, but can’t stop himself from constantly spinning new webs of argument that only confuse and disorient him. The surveyor in *The Castle* wears himself out trying to understand an institution that can never be understood in the way he wants to understand it. Georg in “The Judgment” composes complex sequences of argument that he uses not to understand the world, but as the offensive and defensive weapons that are still available to people who have abandoned the club as their way of settling things.

In the history of ideas and of morality, the Enlightenment represents a turning point, a distinct innovation that attempts to make human life something different to what it had been, and something better. But in the evolution of human beings, there is no comparable break point, no point at which we suddenly became different. That discrepancy is what so much of Kafka’s witty commentary focuses on—and what he was probably laughing at.

1. This is part II of a two-part series. Part I appeared in October 2018.