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“How Can One Take Delight in the World Unless One Flees to It for Refuge?”: The Fear of Freedom in Erich Fromm and Franz Kafka

Abstract

Erich Fromm points to a tendency whereby the numerous freedoms gained by the citizens of modern democracies have been accompanied by widespread feelings of loneliness and disconnection. The loosening of traditional social structures leads some individuals to seek out restrictions, for example in order to counteract the feelings of being alone. This essay uses Fromm’s thesis as a lens through which to examine two of Franz Kafka’s novels in which the protagonists exemplify the “fear of freedom” proposed by Fromm. Society in these novels is perceived as a prison cell in which one must comply with social regulations, but also a fortress to which one can retreat from the chaos of the outside world, albeit at the cost of one’s psychological health.

Keywords

Franz Kafka, Erich Fromm, Freedom, Individual

In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato suggests that society has much in common with a prison, its members forced to sacrifice their individuality and submit to rigid rules in order to ensure social stability. Using an image that uncannily foresees the modern world’s enthrallment by the screens of the media, he describes society as a vast subterranean cave, whose inhabitants: “lie from childhood, their legs and necks in chains, so that they stay where they are and look only in front of them, as the chain prevents them from turning

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their heads round" (1932, 235). The inhabitants are forced to subscribe to the only reality available to them, the shadows cast on the wall in front of their eyes. Plato does not report of any dissatisfaction among the inhabitants, emphasizing on the contrary their ability to make the best of the meagre resources available to them by offering prizes for those best able to identify the shadows as they pass (1932, 237). Problems only arise when one of their number, having been freed and allowed to sample the delights of the real world on the surface, is forced to make a choice between a life of freedom and possible loneliness above and one of bondage, but also of security and companionship, below (1932, 238).

Erich Fromm, in his book *Escape from Freedom*¹ (1941), traces the evolution of the individual from the strictures of earlier societies to the apparent freedom of the modern world and discovers, like Plato's protagonist, that this development has been a very mixed blessing. The main characteristic of medieval societies, he notes, was the absence of any concept of individual freedom. Life was predetermined by one's status in the social order and all aspects of life, personal, economic and social, were structured by rules and obligations (Fromm 1942, 34). Repressive though this was, the distinct and unquestioned social roles held by members of the community, whose identities were synonymous with their occupations, gave their lives a sense of meaning and stability which left no place for the doubt and insecurity which characterizes the modern world: "The social order was conceived as a natural order, and being a definite part of it gave man a feeling of security and of belonging" (1942, 34). The modern worker, by contrast, is beset by what Fromm calls the "paradox of freedom", the fact that freedom from "the economic and political bonds of pre-individualistic society" also simultaneously "liberated" individuals from the ties that gave them their identities (1942, 52). Individuals may now be free to choose their own destinies but they have lost their sense of being integral to their communities and thus find themselves alone.

The dilemma mooted by Fromm is succinctly echoed by Franz Kafka in his aphorism "My Prison-Cell, My Fortress" (1991, 111), which comments both on the restrictions to individual freedom caused by the presence in society of repressive mechanisms such as bureaucracy and the judiciary, while simultaneously acknowledging that these restrictions provide the individual with a sense of his place in society and that their absence can precipitate a feeling of panic. Society, according to this formulation, is both

¹ *Escape from Freedom* was published under the title *The Fear of Freedom* in the UK in 1942. All references are to this edition of the book.

a prison cell in which one must comply with social regulations, but also a fortress to which one can retreat from the chaos of the outside world. This essay will discuss Kafka's attempts to explore what Fromm has defined as the paradox of 20th century life, that the numerous freedoms gained by individuals have left them feeling lonely and disconnected from the surrounding society. Instead of revelling in the loosening of traditional religious and familial bonds, Kafka's characters surround themselves with restrictions and rules in order not to feel so alone. Josef K., the protagonist of *The Trial* (1925) submits to an arrest, trial and eventual execution on unspecified charges and by a court whose authority is never verified; while K., his counterpart in *The Castle* (1926), allows himself to become embroiled in the machinations of an invisible bureaucracy whose control over his destiny is both intangible and absolute. Although these characters experience immense physical and mental oppression, the novels suggest that they are themselves complicit in creating many of these sources of persecution. Like the inhabitants of Plato's cave, the uncertainties of a life of freedom is more terrifying a prospect for Kafka's protagonists than a life of bondage and so they seek out sources of repression to which they can submit.

The central aim of Fromm's book is to interrogate how freedom, as it pertains to twentieth-century society, can be defined and explained. His central argument is that the escape from the strictures of medieval society have not, as might be expected, led to the celebration of individual agency, what he defines as "positive" freedom and is found when the individual can express "his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities" (1942, x). Instead, although freedom has made the individual independent, it has also increased feelings of isolation, anxiety and powerlessness. Fromm's concern throughout his book is to define what freedom means in the healthy psychological growth of the person. A number of questions he poses are particularly central to the concerns of this essay and will be used to structure the analysis of Kafka's protagonists:

Is freedom only the absence of external pressure or is it also the *presence* of something—and if so, of what? Can freedom become a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from? Is there not also, perhaps, besides an inmate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission? Is submission always to an overt authority, or is there also submission to internalized authorities, such as duty or conscience, to inner compulsions or to anonymous authorities like public opinion? Is there a hidden satisfaction in submitting and what is its essence? (1942, 3–4)

An important element in Fromm's analysis of the individual's response to freedom is that it relates not only to the obvious example of a totalitarian regime, in which individuals are either persuaded or coerced to give up their individual freedoms in the name of communal strength or enrichment, but more interestingly to freedom as it pertains to the functioning of democracy. In other words, even in societies defined as free, individuals go to often extreme lengths to give up this freedom in order to submit to the kind of control and regulation more often associated with repressive regimes: "Aloneness, fear, and bewilderment remain; people cannot stand it for ever [...]. The principle social avenues of escape in our time are the submission to a leader, as has happened in Fascist countries, and the compulsive conforming as is prevalent in our own democracy" (1942, 115–116). This is a significant observation in the context of Kafka's novels, where the protagonists are themselves culpable of seeking out and entangling themselves within repressive bureaucracies, seemingly desperate to sacrifice their individual freedom for a life of conformity and obedience.

Fromm equates freedom with the attainment of individuality, a state which marks the progression from the medieval to the modern world. Freedom did not really exist as a concept in medieval society, he explains, because everyone was tied to their role in the social order. Nor was this structure perceived as repressive because the: "social order was conceived as a natural order, and being a definite part of it gave man a feeling of security and of belonging" (1942, 34). The process of what he calls "individuation" only begins when the individual moves on from the pre-modern "state of oneness with the natural world," and experiences the freedom to make choices, a freedom that is ironically the source of much of the anxiety characterizing the contemporary dread of finding oneself "completely alone and isolated" (1942, 15). There are, he suggests, two ways of overcoming this isolation. One is to embrace individuality in its positive sense of engaging with the surrounding world on one's own terms: "unite [...] with the world in the kind of spontaneity of love and productive work" (1942, 78). Another more negative solution is to seek to regain a sense of security through immersion into a new submission, such as religion, or "the development of a frantic activity and a striving to do *something*" (1942, 78). The latter, he suggests, is what Capitalism claims to offer the worker, although its real impact is its: "subordination of the individual as a means to economic ends" (1942, 96). Fromm, in fact, is critical of the role of both the Reformation and Capitalism for imbuing individuals with the knowledge of their insignificance, the former through its focus on a higher plane of being at the expense

of the present, the latter through its privileging of economic success: "This readiness for submission of one's self to extrahuman ends was actually prepared by Protestantism, although nothing was further from Luther's or Calvin's mind than the approval of such supremacy of economic activities. But in their theological teaching they had laid the ground for this development by breaking man's spiritual backbone, his feeling of dignity and pride, by teaching him that activity had no further aims outside of himself [...] Once man was ready to become nothing but the means for the glory of a God who represented neither justice nor love, he was sufficiently prepared to accept the role of a servant to the economic machine—and eventually a 'Führer'" (1942, 95–96).

Although both of Kafka's protagonists initially regard their jobs as the source of the status and social security noted by Fromm, it becomes clear over the course of the novels that their jobs provide them only with the illusion of security and that their identities are eroded rather than enriched by their contact with the institutions that employ them. Josef K. initially bemoans the fact that his arrest happened at home rather than at work where he is certain that the authority conferred upon him as "the junior manager of a large Bank" (Kafka 1996, 32) would have protected him from prosecution; while K. invests much of his sense of identity in his role: "I am the Land Surveyor whom the Count is expecting" (1996, 278). However, both protagonists learn to their cost that the perceived status and security they attribute to their roles as employees is illusory at best. Josef K. finds himself surrounded in the Bank by the same shadowy figures he sees in the Court, while K. learns that his journey to the village has been in vain: "You've been taken on as a Land Surveyor, as you say, but, unfortunately, we have no need of a Land Surveyor" (1996, 309). In fact the more time and energy the protagonists devote to their pursuit of the authorities they wish to serve, the less stable their own identities become until eventually they lose any sense of agency or autonomy, descending to: "an unofficial, totally unrecognized, troubled and alien existence" (1996, 308).

That the workplace functions as a source of alienation rather than enrichment is attributed by Marxist critics to the systematic destruction under Capitalism of the links that unified workers together in the past. Karl Mark argues that the success of Capitalism is predicated on its determined sundering of the links between workers and the natural world. Workers now work to fulfill the external demands of industry, rather than to satisfy their own innate needs, a condition that leaves them enslaved and ultimately alienated: "External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-

sacrifice, of mortification [...] it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another [...] it is the loss of his self" (1844, chpt. XXII). Friedrich Engels cites the lack of interaction between workers and the "dissolution of mankind into monads" (2010, 48) as central to Capitalism's success as it effectively isolates workers from each other thus making them easy to control. The regulatory function of the workplace is best exemplified by the bureaucracy, whose very *raison d'être* appears to be ensnare its subjects with its endlessly generating regulations. Roman Karst proclaims that the: "chains of tormented mankind are made of red tape" (1975, 80); while Baron de Grimm goes so far as to declare that: "bureaucracy [...] (is) not appointed to benefit the public interest, indeed the public interest appears to have been established so that offices might exist" (de Grimm in Albrow 1970, 16).

Kafka's novels similarly indict a bureaucratic system whose primary function is to entrap rather than serve the citizens unfortunate enough to be under its control. This is perhaps best illustrated in *The Castle*, where K. discovers that his arrival in the village in the role of Land Surveyor is due to an administrative error. The problem is that having issued the directive to employ a Land Surveyor, the cancellation of the contract requires communication back and forth between various departments, the resulting deluge of paperwork ensuring that the bureaucratic system becomes completely overwhelmed. The Superintendent's search for K.'s original contract is indicative both of the ludicrous volume of correspondence his case has generated and the lack of care with which it is treated: "The cabinet was crammed full of papers. When it was opened two large packages of papers rolled out, tied in round bundles, as one usually binds firewood" (Kafka 1996, 310). As K. himself remarks, the scene would be comical except that the papers crammed carelessly into the cupboard govern the fates of the people whose lives they document: "it gives me an insight into the ludicrous bungling which [...] may decide the life of a human being" (1996, 311). Josef K. reaches a similar conclusion when trying to ascertain exactly what charges are being brought against him, only to be told that the Law never makes such information available to the defence: "the legal records of his case, and above all the actual charge-sheets, were inaccessible to the accused and his counsel, consequently one did not know in general, or at least did not know with any precision, what charges to meet in the first plea" (1996, 69).

Both *The Trial* and *The Castle* can be read as critiques of totalitarianism. However, what is most intriguing about Kafka's portrait of such regimes and their ludicrously rigid rules is the degree to which the victims themselves

comply with and even seek out their authority. This echoes Fromm's suggestion that individuals in democratic societies are just as likely to search for ways to assuage feelings of isolation by voluntarily subjecting themselves to repressive regulatory systems. Reflecting on the reasons people support totalitarian regimes even when it is obvious that such regimes are not in their best interests, Fromm suggests that we all possess: "beside an innate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission", and that for many people: "freedom becomes a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from" (1942, 4). Fromm's comments are reflected in Kafka's novels, in which both protagonists reject opportunities they are given to escape from the sources of their persecution, expressing a sense of satisfaction, maybe even relief, to find themselves subject to the scrutiny of a higher authority. K. acknowledges that he could live a "pampered" life if he was happy to fully submit to the control of the Castle (1996, 308), and in fact *The Castle* is cited by Fromm as a particularly insightful account of the theme of "the powerlessness of man" (1942, 15). Josef K. similarly admits to feeling "a certain inexplicable satisfaction" (1996, 75) that his arrest is now widely known among his family and friends. Ingeborg Henel suggests that it is possible that the trial in which Josef K. is embroiled is entirely in his own imagination, offering as evidence that when he arrives for his Court appearance and asks for the home of a fictitious joiner named Lanz, his nonsensical inquiry is correctly interpreted and he is ushered into the Courtroom (Henel in Rolleston 1976, 47). Henel's suspicion is certainly hinted at early on in the novel when Josef K. declares: "It is only a trial if I recognize it as such" (1996, 33). Erich Heller points out that one of Josef K.'s warders is called Franz, the author's name thus split between accuser and accused. The schizophrenia suggested by this "laceration" is reflective of the interrelationship between the Law and its subjects throughout the novel: "at every point it reflects the patient's contempt for the persecuting powers and, at the same time, his eagerness inwardly to bow to their authority" (Heller 1974, 98).

This motif of a divided self illuminates a key question in relation to Kafka's protagonists, namely why they are so eager, even determined, to escape from the relative freedom that defines their everyday lives into the torturous machinations of the institutions whose authority they seek out. The most common consensus among critics is that the protagonists manifest an innate sense of guilt that drives them to seek absolution from the very sources of their repression. In his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud explains that one of the most vital tasks of any civilization is to find a way to persuade individuals to limit their personal desires for the good of

social stability. The natural aggression of an individual must be checked so that it does not come into conflict with the needs of the state. Freud suggests that this aggression is rendered harmless by turning it inwards, against the ego, where in the form of the super-ego it now functions as the conscience (1994, 51). Most unfortunately for the individual, because the agent of repression is now watching from within the mind itself, all differences between committing a crime and merely thinking about it disappear as even thoughts cannot be hidden from the super-ego: “Civilization therefore obtains mastery over the dangerous love of aggression in individuals by enfeebling and disarming it and setting up an institution within their minds to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city” (1994, 52).

Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977) offers a useful visualization of this internalization of repression, as it outlines the evolution of the penal institution from a dungeon-like enclosure established on the edges of society to a more subtle disciplinary mechanism, which: “improves the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective—a design of subtle coercion for a society to come” (1977, 209). Foucault’s argument that punishment becomes the most hidden part of the penal process, leaving the “domain of more or less everyday perception” in order to enter “that of abstract consciousness” (1977, 9), is reminiscent of Freud’s theory that external discipline has become internalized in the form of the super-ego. A similarly claustrophobic and repressive atmosphere of permanent scrutiny pervades many of Kafka’s novels, inevitably reducing the observee to a state of blind submission. Commenting on *The Trial*, Heller declares that there cannot be another novel “as thoroughly pervaded by the sense of nightmare and paranoia,” composed as it is of: “a plethora of scenes [...] involving faces across the street, looking with intense curiosity into Josef K.’s room; ears, real or imagined, pressed against doors; figures suddenly discovered standing and watching in the shadow of gateways; eyes peering through keyholes” (Heller 1974, 97). The start of Josef K.’s nightmare unfolds with the incursion into the private space of his bedroom by the warders, who further intrude on his personal space as if to reinforce the lack of autonomy that will characterize his life from this point onwards: “the belly of the second warder [...] kept butting against him” (Kafka 1996, 14). His ordeal is further heightened by the surveillance of his neighbours, who unashamedly gather to witness his discomfort: “Through the open window he had another glimpse of the old woman, who with truly senile inquisitiveness had moved along to the window exactly opposite, in order to see all that could be seen” (1996, 14). This intrusiveness is also evident in *The Castle*, where K. must contend not

only with the curiosity of the villagers: "Hardly had K. shown his face when the peasants got up and gathered around him" (1996, 290); but he must also exist in full view of the "maniacal glitter" of the windows of the castle tower (1996, 281) and the "downward-pressing gaze" of its main official, Klamm (1996, 341).

This description of the mysterious Castle closely resembles the internal repression of the superego suggested by Freud, deriving its absolute control over its inhabitants in spite—or perhaps because—of its intangibility. The citizens of the village are ever-aware of its brooding presence, but can never clearly see it: "The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness" (Kafka 1996, 278), so that the source of its power can neither be fully understood nor challenged. In this way, it resembles the legal process in *The Trial*, as the closer Josef K. examines the system, the more fleeting, ephemeral and, crucially, impenetrable it appears. Indeed, the effective disappearance of those who operate the penal process further increases its efficiency for, as Josef K. finds out to his cost in *The Trial*, it is impossible to fight against a system one cannot identify. The more abstract and less corporal the prison becomes, the less likelihood there is of effecting a successful escape. It is surely far more possible to flee a cell of bricks and bars than to break through the indefinable barriers with which Kafka's protagonists find themselves surrounded. This leads to the mental paralysis noted in one of Kafka's aphorisms "He:" "The prisoner was actually free, he could take part in everything, nothing that went on outside escaped him, he could even have left the cage, after all the bars stood yards apart, he was not even imprisoned" (Kafka 1991, 105). The paralysis noted here is not because the prisoner wishes to be incarcerated but rather because he longs to have his presence acknowledged by the authorities, an act that will then affirm his place in the world.

There are many examples within Kafka's novels which mirror the scene described in the aphorism. Towards the end of *The Trial*, as he is about to leave the Cathedral, Josef K. has a moment of realization that it is in his power to determine whether or not to continue engaging with the process of his trial:

For the moment he was still free, he could continue on his way and vanish through one of the small, dark, wooden doors that faced him at no great distance. It would simply indicate that he had not understood the call, or that he had understood it and did not care. But if he were to turn around he would be caught, for that would amount to an admission that he had understood it very well, that he was really the person addressed, and that he was ready to obey (Kafka 1996, 118).

The priest does not call Josef K.'s name again, so there is no coercion involved in his decision to turn around and stay in the Cathedral. Reflecting on why, like Josef K., we are so quick to respond to the call of authorities and thus become the subjects of their ideology, Althusser suggests that "guilt feelings" and those who "have something on their consciences" (2004, 56) are at least partly to blame. This is an interesting idea in relation to Josef K. who is reprimanded by the priest for seeking to blame external authorities for his predicament rather than examining his own conscience: "The Court makes no claims upon you. It receives you when you come and it relinquishes you when you go" (Kafka 1996, 124).

The alacrity with which both Josef K. and K. attempt to enter into a relationship with their repressors corresponds with what Foucault pinpoints as the key to the power of such systems of control, the fact that the constraining forces have in a sense: "passed over to the other side—to the side of its surface of application" (1977, 202). In other words, it is the repressed who takes the role of repressor upon itself: "he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjugation" (1977, 202). This comment echoes Freud's argument that the external authorities function by erecting a garrison for themselves in the mind, in the form of the superego, thus ensuring the ultimate adherence to their regulations. The resulting tension between the ego and super-ego creates "what we call the sense of guilt," and furthermore: "manifests itself as the need for punishment" (Freud 1994, 51). One of the few unambiguous statements in *The Trial* is articulated by the arresting warder about the role of the Law: "Our officials [...] never go hunting for crime in the populace, but, as the Law decrees, are drawn towards the guilty" (Kafka 1996, 15). Thus Josef K. must be guilty, for if he were not, he would not have been pursued by the Law.

Fromm agrees that we are often blind to the true source of the restrictions imposed on our lives, our fascination with "the growth of freedom from powers *outside* ourselves" causing us to underestimate: "the fact of *inner* restraints, compulsions and fears, which tend to undermine the meaning of the victories freedom has won against his traditional enemies" (1942, 91). He goes so far as to insist that: "the rulership of conscience can be even harsher than that of external authorities," for the simple reason that: "the individual believes its orders to be his own: how can he rebel against himself?" (1942, 144). However, Fromm is less interested in the suggestion that individuals have an innate sense of guilt that drives them towards repression at the hands of higher authorities, than he is in exploring the underlying

fear of isolation that he insists is what drives individuals to try to escape from freedom. A key element in the surrender of one's freedom is the sacrifice of one's individuality and subsequent assimilation into a communal identity, a condition achieved through what he calls "mechanisms of escape." The first of these, "authoritarianism," involves giving up one's own independence in order to: "fuse one's self with somebody or something outside oneself in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking" (1942, 122). Authoritarianism is predicated on the conviction that life is controlled by external forces and that the only possible happiness lies in complete submission to these forces. Sadomasochism is one particularly effective means of achieving this abrogation of freedom, as it aims to destroy the individual self completely and with it "all its shortcomings, conflicts, risks, doubts, and unbearable aloneness" (1942, 132). Fromm offers the example of a man trapped in a burning building who chooses to wait to be rescued rather than saving himself as an example of this desire to be noticed by the authorities even at a catastrophic cost to one's life.

Even without going so far as to claim that the trial is entirely imagined by Josef K., the significant role he plays in turning it into an overwhelming burden is undeniable. Apart from his initial appearance before the Court of Inquiry, he initiates all further contact with the Court himself. He takes it upon himself to return to the Court the following week, indeed is alarmed and disappointed when no summons arrives for him: "During the next week, K. waited day after day for a new summons, he would not believe that his refusal to be interrogated had been taken literally" (Kafka 1996, 37). At times, it appears that it is only when Josef K. arrives looking for the Court that it is hastily convened: "an attraction existed between the Law and guilt, from which it should really follow that the Interrogation Chamber must lie in the particular flight of stairs which K. happened to choose" (1996, 30). The "perverse pride" he takes in being singled out for judgement is apparent, as Walter H. Sokel explains, in the chapter in which he visits Titorelli, the Court painter. He rejects Titorelli's suggestions of compromise, such as "ostensible acquittal" and "indefinite postponement" (both of which would allow him to continue with his life, albeit under the constant shadow of the Court), insisting instead on seeking a "definite acquittal" despite Titorelli warning him that he has never encountered even one such verdict (1996, 89). His insistence on being heard by the "highest Judges," according to Sokel, is important because it: "amounts to a full recognition of their supreme authority over him and, beyond that, implies his wish to be accepted and approved by them" (Sokel in Rolleston 1976, 59). This determi-

nation to absolve oneself from personal responsibility through subjugation to a governing structure is exactly how Fromm explains the escape from freedom into authoritarianism.

Another example of this “dependency” is the individual whose every decision is made with a view to pleasing an external force. It makes no difference if this external force is real or imagined, only that individuals live their lives in its shadow. Fromm suggests that “automaton conformity” is one common manifestation of this dependency, the individual ceding individuality in favour of the comfortable invisibility that results from complete assimilation:

[...] the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be [...]. The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him, need not feel alone and anxious any more. But the price he pays, however, is high: it is the loss of his self (Fromm 1942, 160).

This embrace of conformity is in evidence in *The Castle*, in which K., who having arrived in the village to fulfil his duties as a Land Surveyor, never ceases in his attempts to receive official confirmation of his position. His mission, as Heller points out, is: “to penetrate to the very centre of authority and wring from it a kind of ultra-final evidence of his claim” (1971, 217). K’s dilemma exemplifies what Karst describes as “the paradox of *The Castle*”: the fact that K. fights against the administration—but only to ally himself with it (1975, 81). His ultimate aim in overcoming the intransigence of the Castle is to settle in the village and become fully united with its inhabitants: “I’m going to marry her and become a member of the Community” (Kafka 1996, 386). It is interesting to note that Fromm cites this perceived role of love as an example of the sadomasochism that sees the individual consciously undermine the self: “Love is based on equality and freedom. If it is based on subordination and loss of integrity of one partner, it is masochistic dependence, regardless of how the relationship is rationalized” (1942, 137). In brief, what K. really wants is to belong completely to the community of the Castle—and for the Castle to acknowledge this so that he can outsource any responsibility for his own actions. This reading of the novel is reminiscent of one of the key questions Fromm poses about freedom in the modern world, namely whether freedom is: “only the absence of external pressure or is it also the *presence* of something—and if so, of what?” (1942, 3–4). It is clear that neither of Kafka’s protagonists possesses the resources or the determi-

nation to grasp their freedom in the positive sense defined by an active engagement with the surrounding world, choosing instead to evade opportunities for such engagement by focusing on eliminating their individuality through a variety of sadomasochistic behaviours. Underlying this choice, according to Fromm, is a wish to regain the unity with the natural world that was lost when individuality became a guiding principle of modern life.

Fromm reads the Eden myth as depicting the moment in which "the original harmony between man and nature is broken" (1942, 28). By defying the direct order of God, humanity took its first steps towards individuality. The myth emphasizes the suffering resulting from this first act of freedom: "The newly won freedom appears as a curse; he is free *from* the sweet bondage of paradise, but he is not free *to* govern himself, to realize his individuality [...]. 'Freedom from' is not identical with positive freedom, with 'freedom to'" (1942, 28). In other words, gaining freedom from an authoritarian regime will not result in fulfillment or happiness unless the individual actively seeks to utilize this freedom in a positive way. Kafka reflects this theme most clearly in his parable "Paradise," which reflects on the Fall from Paradise and the consequences of a life thus lived in eternal separation from the unity once enjoyed in heaven. He challenges traditional readings that locate original human sin in the moment the Tree of Knowledge was tasted, suggesting on the contrary that real sin comes from not using the knowledge gained in this moment, a knowledge after all that puts people on par with God: "We are sinful not merely because we have eaten of the tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the tree of Life" (1975, 29). Being cast out of Paradise deepened our understanding of goodness precisely because it also opened our eyes to the presence of evil: "Since the Fall we have been essentially equal in our capacity to recognize good and evil" (1975, 31). The problem is that recognizing the right path and choosing to follow it are two very different things, with people lacking the strength necessary to do the right thing. Faced with the threat the difficult path poses, the individual surrounds itself with reasons not to act: "man is filled with fear; he prefers to annul his knowledge of good and evil [...]. It was for this purpose that our rationalizations were created. The whole world is full of them, indeed the whole visible world is perhaps nothing more than the rationalization of a man who wants to find peace for a moment" (1975, 33).

In the light of Kafka's parable, Josef K.'s dogged pursuit of his case becomes not an act of heroism but rather an attempt to avoid facing up to his shortcomings by distracting himself with paperwork. Robertson suggests that Josef K.'s trial could be interpreted as a literal expression of "moral law"

and that the primary concern of the Court is thus with the “moral accountability” of the individual: that is to say, the ability not only to distinguish between good and evil, which has been instinctual since the Fall, but the determination to live one’s life accordingly. Because such a life is “suicidally difficult,” people opt out and try to obscure their knowledge of good and evil by devising “motivations” or excuses for their actions (Robertson 1985, 103). Josef K.’s bid to avoid addressing his own agency through a concentration on the workings of the Court means, according to Robertson’s evaluation, that far from being victimized he is shown to be “morally at fault” (1985, 98).

Josef K.’s final opportunity to take control of his fate comes when he encounters the prison chaplain in the Cathedral and hears “The Legend of the Doorkeeper.” This parable—which relates the story of a man “from the country” seeking admittance to the Law who, having been refused entry by the Doorkeeper, sits by the side of the door for many years only to learn when he is dying that the door was only meant for him alone—is regarded by many critics as the key to the text as a whole. The function of the parable is to demonstrate to Josef K. that he has made an error in privileging the perceived role of the Law above his own responsibility. Like the man from the country, he is in danger of wasting his whole life trying to get the Court to acknowledge him and thus confer his existence with meaning. A similar warning is in fact reiterated throughout the novel by various Court officials who try to convince Josef K. to occupy himself less with the external authorities and concentrate instead on his own role in the proceedings: “I can at least give you a piece of advice; think less about us and of what is going to happen to you, think more about yourself instead” (Kafka 1996, 18).

It is significant that Josef K. misinterprets, perhaps wilfully, the central message of the parable, insisting that the door-keeper is at fault for failing to inform the man from the country that he is the only possible entrant through the door: “the door-keeper deluded the man” (1996, 121). On the contrary, as the priest tries to show him, the deluded figure is the door-keeper who fails to realize that his sole purpose is to serve the man from the country: “although he is in the service of the Law, his service is confined to this one entrance; that is to say, he serves only this man for whom alone the entrance is intended” (1996, 123). Although the doorkeeper enjoys the stability and status that comes from his connection to the Law, this comes at the cost of his own freedom. He is after all confined to that one position at the door, allowed neither to “strike out into the country” nor to “enter into the interior of the Law” (1996, 123). Frustrating though it is for the man from the coun-

try to be refused admittance through the door, he can at any point leave: "Now the man from the country is really free, he can go where he likes [...]. When he sits down on the stool by the side of the door and stays there for the rest of his life, he does it of his own free will; in the story there is no mention of any compulsion" (1996, 123). Of course, as Henel points out, being free also entails assuming full responsibility for one's actions: "In the legend and the novel, the free man and the unfree official confront one another, and in both cases the man would like to shrug off his responsibility onto the official" (Henel in Rolleston 1976, 46). In a conversation with Gustav Janouch, Kafka suggests that one source of human unhappiness is that we have subordinated our natural instinct to seek "a free natural life" to our determination to shackle ourselves together in the name of security: "Safe in the shelter of the herd, they march through the streets of the city, to their work, to their feeding troughs, to their pleasures [...]. Men are afraid of freedom and responsibility. So they prefer to hide behind the prison bars which they build around themselves" (Janouch 1985, 23). This statement confirms the central thesis of this essay: that the propensity among Kafka's characters is to give up the freedom they have to sample the delights of the world in favour of the "security" of a prison cell.

In Aphorism #25, Kafka asks: "How can one take delight in the world unless one flees to it for refuge?" (1991, 83). This question could be articulated by a large number of his characters, intent as they are on escaping from the chaos of the world by submitting to some form of (usually self-generated) control and discipline, a situation which results in the blurring of distinctions between imprisonment and security. In spite of the attempts his characters make to return to the safety of past bondage, however, the blissful ignorance they seek is not attainable for as Kafka explains: "the expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in this world irrevocable" (1975, 29). We are now aware of our imprisonment, unlike the inhabitants of Plato's cave. This awareness, combined with an obsessive desire to know the truth, has caused the walls of the cave to be covered with mirrors which, owing to their curved surfaces, distort what they reflect: "Now the prisoner sees lurid pictures, definite shapes, clearly recognizable faces, an inexhaustible wealth of detail. His gaze is fixed no longer on empty shades, but on a full reflection of ideal reality. Face to face with images of truth, he is yet doubly agonized by their hopeless distortion" (Heller 1971, 200). The hopeless distortion of the mirrored walls makes the quest for knowledge doubly agonizing, a fact reflected in K.'s futile search for a solid contact with the Castle: "You haven't once until now come into real contact with our authorities. All those authorities of

yours have been illusory, but owing to your ignorance of the circumstances you take them to be real” (Kafka 1996, 316). K.’s plight can be effectively summarized by Fromm’s maxim that “freedom from” the bondage of complete ignorance is not identical to the positive “freedom to” govern oneself and realize one’s individuality (1942, 28). Freedom cannot merely be the absence of external, or indeed internal, pressure but must also be the presence of something—the strength to assert our individuality, the courage to stand up and walk out of the cave (1942, 4). This, Fromm believes, can only come about when a “positive freedom” is achieved: a society in which the growth and happiness of the individual are the principal aims; the individual is not subordinated to or manipulated by any power outside himself; and, finally, in which his conscience and ideals are not the internalization of external demands but are his, and his alone (1942, 233). None of the characters examined in this essay seem willing or able to rise to the challenge of defining their own destinies. On the contrary, as Kafka suggests, they are paralyzed by both their fear and inability to imagine any alternative to the limited lives they lead. In his aphorism “He,” Kafka summarizes the dilemma of the individual who hates the fact that he is a prisoner and yet lacks the courage to seek an alternative: “if he is actually asked what he actually wants, he cannot reply, for—this is one of his strongest arguments—he has no conception of freedom” (1991, 105).

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