

FRANK RUDA

Kafka's Proof: The Impossibility to Live

"Incidentally, his [Kafka's] unlimited pessimism is free from any tragic sense of destiny."

Walter Benjamin¹

"A first indication of glimmering understanding is the desire to die. This life seems un-endurable, another unreachable. One no longer feels ashamed of wanting to die; one petitions to be moved from one's old cell, which one hates, into a new one, which one will come to hate. A last vestige of belief is involved here, too, for during the move might not the prison governor by chance walk down the passage, see the prisoner, and say: 'Don't lock this man up again. He's coming with me.'"

Franz Kafka²

How to Prove (It)?

What is a proof? Clearly, it is an essential part of certain discourses. Religion, for example, does not require it. Otherwise, there would be no religious belief.³ The discourse of law, the legal discourse, cannot but rely on

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 111.

² Franz Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, 13.

³ There are obviously many proofs of the existence of God that seem to be religious proofs. Yet, as Kant has already demonstrated, they are not as such religious in

proofs. The same holds for the discourse of science. Proving ultimately proves to be a legal or scientific practice. Proofreading is an example of a legal kind of practice,⁴ proving one's love to someone could appear to have a scientific quality.⁵ Legal and scientific proofs are both essentially constructive. But in quite a different manner. A legal proof is constituted by operations that assemble and arrange a set of material such that it is formed into a consistent whole (for example into an intelligible objective scenario). The aim of such a proof is to allow for the formation of a conviction about the very totality that the proof constructs. This conviction is articulated in the form of a judgment. A proof thus constructs what is judged but thereby latently enables in its construction precisely the very form of judgment it is supposed to allow for. A juridical proof establishes the basis that is required (when it is needed) to form a judgment (of a situation) by forming not only the basis for but by also forming the actual judgment. Any legal proof is therefore anticipatory. It enables to form a judgment by allowing for already forming a judgment. Legal proofs imply a judgment and necessitate a second judgment that concerns the consistency and coherence of the proof's constitutive and constituting operation. Legal proofs entail in their very constitution a normative standard by means of which they can be judged. The normativity of this standard lies in the immanent coherence and consistency of their very ordering and organizing

nature but are rather part of classical metaphysics. Their discourse is philosophy and they seek to be either juridical or scientific (recall Descartes' proof of the existence of God that clearly seeks to be scientific) but ultimately do not prove anything – at least if Kant was right. There is also in “rabbinic fashion” in “every interpretation” of the Talmud a juridical element, because it “is followed by the citing of a proof-text from the original legend, always introduced by phrases such as, *for he says*.” Iris Bruce, “Kafka and Jewish Folklore,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, 154. In the following there will be no such clear markers, and I will thus not be dealing with a proof in the rabbinic sense.

- 4 One should recall that Kafka was “correcting ... proofs” of an edition of his own writing “on his death-bed.” Osman Durrani, “Editions, Translations, Adaptations,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, 208.
- 5 To prove oneself in the face of a certain threat is obviously another way of proving. Yet, it either allows for forming a judgment (even if it is one's own judgment about oneself) or brings forth one's true character, thus it is either juridical or scientific.

operation. This means that in the legal discourse there is no proof without judgments (and the plural is essential). Legal proofs judge and are judged.⁶ Because legal proofs imply judgments that are themselves judged, that is, second order judgments, legal proofs are essentially – even if they do not appear to be – open to interpretation. This is why the very functioning of legal proofs inscribes the necessity of interpretation into the center of the juridical discourse. Legal proofs immanently necessitate a second-order judgment. Decisions in court follow from proofs, yet they are fundamentally judgments of judgments and hence interpretations (that may frequently not seem to be what they are).

A scientific proof on the other hand does not unfold by reconstructing and organizing a given (not yet fully structured) matter. It often rather posits and constructs its very own terrain (and matter) and even the way in which it is constructing its way. Real scientific proofs are generic in this sense. Yet, if a scientific proof is a real proof there is no interpretation needed or even possible – it is essentially non-negotiable. And this also holds for proofs that prove that what needs to be proved is impossible to prove. Scientific proofs thereby do not enable or rely on judgments and their normative standards. Scientific proofs in their purest form take the guise of demonstrations (for example in pure mathematics), in their impure form they need experiments (in the natural sciences). They block any possibility of interpretation but imply the possibility of being repeated (by anyone). Without repeatability, there is no scientific proof.⁷ Scientific proofs, because of their repeatability, are universal and exclude the particularity of interpreting opinions or evaluating judgments. What such a proof demonstrates is the necessity of specific coherent consequences that are derived from specific axioms – this concatenation is the proof itself.

⁶ Which is why one can claim with Deleuze – although he is here referring to judgment in general – that “they judge and they are judged at the same time ...” Gilles Deleuze, “To Have Done with Judgment,” in: *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 129.

⁷ One should here remark that when one has understood a proof, it is not necessary to repeat all of its phases. The principal repeatability of a proof does not necessitate an actual repetition, as soon as one gets the point. As Badiou remarked: “When you’ve understood a mathematical proof ... you’ve understood something that’s concentrated in a point.” Alain Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, 123.

Both legal and scientific proofs can use a range of different *modi operandi*. Formally, they can work inductively, deductively, apodictically or in an *ad absurdum* manner. Proofs in the empirical natural sciences and in criminal law often work inductively, in pure mathematics (and maybe also in questions of constitutional law) proofs are constructed either *ad absurdum*, deductively, or apodictically. *Deductive proofs* entail the consistently inferred consequences that are derived from a specific set of axioms. *Apodictic proofs* are proofs that assert what is absolutely necessary or absolutely impossible such that if one starts to doubt them one also doubts the very building blocks of human knowledge tout court (for example by questioning that $2 + 2 = 4$). The construction of proofs by means of an *ad absurdum reduction* operates in such a manner that the proof demonstrates that an untenable or absurd consequence necessarily springs from the denial of the proof and thereby demonstrates its internal consistency. Why start a text on Kafka with such highly abbreviated classification of different concepts of proofs? The answer is: because Kafka once wrote a proof.

Before the Beginning: A Proof

Franz Kafka, possibly the modern writer most obsessed with the functioning of the law, once at the beginning of his literary life wrote a proof. It appears in the first version of the first narrative (a kind of novella) that is still preserved from his very early days, namely in the posthumously published and rather rarely commented upon "Description of a Struggle."⁸ It is commonly known that Kafka himself understood his birth as a literary writer to have taken place when in the night from the 22nd to the 23rd of September 1912 he finished "The Judgment." This means that, before Kafka was born as a writer, he wrote a proof. Kafka: being a prover before being a writer. For Kafka, before his beginning and thus before the beginning of Kafka, there was a proof. And this proof disappears, since it is not contained in the

⁸ There are obviously some articles and even book chapters dealing with this text; yet compared with the attention that was devoted to Kafka's later prose, it nonetheless appears to be rarely discussed properly.

highly modified and transformed second version of the “Description of a Struggle” that Kafka prepared after he was born as a writer. It is a proof that was written before Kafka’s proper beginning and vanished with it.

The “Description” (in its first version) was written at some point between 1903 and 1906. Kafka later singled out some parts of it for separate publications, notably the so-called “Conversation with the Supplicant” and the “Conversation with the Drunk,” both published in 1909, and also a chunk of text that became known as “The Trees,” published in 1913. He also tried to rewrite this early text later on in his life, in 1909, but failed to do so. It remained a fragment, even a fragmented – cut, rewritten and failed – fragment. Today it exists, so to speak, in two different versions that understandably could not but engender a struggle of interpretations. The text therefore not only describes a struggle – it embodies what it describes and generates struggling effects. Because of its fragmentary, divided nature, it is still a matter of discussion whether it should be included into Kafka’s oeuvre or not. If the “Description” seems to be something that even for Kafka remained weirdly impossible to integrate into his proper life(s work) as a literary writer,⁹ does this nonetheless mean that it was written by someone who – at least latently – already was Kafka before the real becoming-Kafka of Kafka? By a Kafka before Kafka? Is the Kafka before Kafka not the Kafka *par excellence*? Or did Kafka become the real Kafka of the letter when he completely left behind the literal Kafka *avant la lettre*? Is the proof of Kafka overcoming Kafka’s only proof? Is overcoming the proof the proof that Kafka is now finally Kafka? Some saw in the early text only “contortions both psychological ... and physical” which amounted to “something of adolescent posturing.”¹⁰ But, to cut a long (juridical background) story short: does this early text belong to Kafka or not?¹¹

⁹ The “Description” exists in different versions – Kafka omitted subheadings – that were once sought to be integrated into the supposedly unified single harmonious whole of Kafka’s oeuvre. This motivated some quite harsh editorial interventions by Max Brod. For details, see Franz Kafka, “Beschreibung eines Kampfes,” in: *Franz Kafka-Ausgabe*, 1999.

¹⁰ John Updike, “Foreword,” in: *The Complete Stories*, 7–8.

¹¹ If the proof were a legal proof, the impossibility to live would come with a prohibition to live, which would ignore the fact that Kafka lived a life, or at least

In any case, the proof that Kafka – or someone with the same name who maybe should not be confused with the famous author – wrote before he officially became Kafka appears in a text bearing a surprising title: it is called “Diversions, or Proof that it’s Impossible to Live.” Before the beginning of Kafka’s literary life, there is a proof of the impossibility of beginning, sustaining, continuing and living a life (for example as Kafka). If this proof is really what it says it is and it proves what it claims to prove, there might be a good reason as to why it is so hard to integrate it into the life(-work) of an author whose life began afterwards. If the proof proved what it says it proves, Kafka afterwards seems to have done (at least at first sight) what was proven to be impossible. Maybe Kafka’s later literary life is nothing but an attempt to come to terms with what he has proven before his life had begun; maybe Kafka’s life (as an author and of his work) is a repeated attempt to come to terms – that is also: to terminate – what was proven impossible in the first place. And maybe one could here also be reminded of another of Kafka’s fragmented texts, namely the short story about the hunter Gracchus,¹² for whom it became impossible not to live, but to die? After the proof of the impossibility to live there appears also a figure of the impossibility to die. Could one not see in this the two extreme pillars of Kafka’s literary universe? A life being stretched between an impossibility to live and an impossibility to die, or: Kafka.

When later in his life, Kafka noted that for him all there is, is “the misery of having perpetually to begin, the lack of illusion that everything is only a beginning and not even a beginning,”¹³ this can be read as an expression linked to the peculiar early proof. If Kafka began his literary life, before beginning it properly, by proving that life is impossible, does his success not turn out to be his failure and equally his failure a success? Is this a failed beginning? There is a beginning which makes all beginnings

tried to, as an author afterwards. To comprehend the specific mode of the deemed to be impossible life and gain a perspective on treating this impossibility, one has to read the proof in a scientific manner.

¹² One should here bear in mind that *gracchio* is the Italian word for “jackdaw” whose Czech translation is “kavka,” that is, “Kafka.”

¹³ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries, 1910–1923*, 24; translation altered.

impossible and is thus not even a beginning (and it then leads to the impossibility of ending that which had never begun properly). Here the failure to begin and the beginning properly become demonstrably indistinguishable, a beginning before beginning is the beginning, whose success lies in the act of making beginning impossible. If the proof is a real (scientific) proof, early on, Kafka proved the very impossibility to live a life, and this means – taking the quoted remark into account – that there are only perpetually failed attempts to begin to live. Life in this sense is the perpetuated failed beginning to live – this might be one conceptual outcome of the proof that demonstrates life’s impossibility.¹⁴ And as a part of a “Description of a Struggle,” does this not suggest not only that life is a struggle, or that life is a struggle that is always already lost, but rather that the struggle is a struggle with life that is always already lost, because one is unable to begin with it? Maybe the proof demonstrates that there is only a life under the condition that the impossible qua impossible happens.

For, (Kafka’s) life begins – or tries to begin – after its impossibility was proven. Yet this “misery of having perpetually to begin” is not only the result of proving life’s impossibility. For the title of the proof-section of the text is also called “diversions,” *Belustigungen*. The German term is ambiguous, as it can mean amusement, mockery but also to make somebody laugh.¹⁵ The proof is thereby framed as being entertaining and diverting (maybe a very peculiar waste of time – life?), ridiculing and mocking or just amusing and funny (*lustig*) – it also entails the notorious German term *Lust*, which literally opens up the floodgates of desire and lust. *Lust* is, as

¹⁴ And one can see here why the Gracchus story can be taken to depict the other side of this “structure” that is no structure.

¹⁵ The diverging meanings – of “diversion,” which at the same time in German is rarely used as a noun in the plural – seem to mirror the meanings of the Latin *delectare* (that is one etymological root of the German term). One can thereby recognize a peculiar, because inverted reference to Horace’s famous “*Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae, aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae,*” which is rendered in English as: “To teach – to please – comprise the poet’s views, Or else at once to profit and amuse.” Horace, *The Episodes, Satires, and Epistles of Horace*, 238. The only thing they teach for Kafka is a very particular lesson, yet one that remains amusing without creating any profit.

many have noted, what Hegel might have called a speculative word, yet regarding Kafka's term *Belustigungen*, let me briefly note in passing that it collapses the distinction between active and passive. It is not that there is something funny (*lustig*) but that one is amused (*belustigt*) by something, by the proof, and there is something actively pleasurable (*Lust*) about being the passive object of amusement (*Belustigung*). There is a funny, a comic kind of lust emerging from a proof that life is impossible, because it seems to mock the very subject of the proof (both what is subjected to the proof and the subject unfolding the proof). A lust that springs from amusingly mocking oneself to the point of demonstrating the impossibility of one's own position. This does not mean that life is a joke, but maybe rather that there is something *belustigend*, some comic kind of lust in the proof that life is impossible – not only because this leads to failed beginnings, but because there always already was a failed beginning when the proof starts its course. But how to prove what the proof is supposed to prove?

Reading Kafka to the Letter

Roberto Calasso aptly remarked that “Kafka can't be understood if he isn't taken literally.”¹⁶ This means – although the present article will not be able to fulfill this task in any exhaustive manner – that “each word demands attention”¹⁷ and that, as Adorno observed, “each sentence is literal and each signifies...”¹⁸ Taking Kafka and his proof literally means also to bear in mind Mladen Dolar's perspicacious observation that “Kafka is perhaps the first utterly non-metaphorical author.”¹⁹ Methodologically this implies, as Hegel stated in the beginning of his *Science of Logic*, that we have to “take up what is before us,”²⁰ precisely as it is before us. Thus far – to the best of my knowledge – this has not been done with Kafka's proof. Rather,

¹⁶ Roberto Calasso, *K*, 42.

¹⁷ Calasso, *K*, 271.

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” in: *Prisms*, 245.

¹⁹ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 174.

²⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 69.

it remained nearly completely unnoticed. Such ignorance is not necessarily surprising, for the most obvious is sometimes the hardest to see. Badiou for example once noted with regard to Spinoza's *Ethics* that its most prominent and influential readers did not care much (if at all) about the very form in which Spinoza presents his arguments, that is, in the form of proofs.²¹ Proofs seem to have a peculiar invisibility due to their very form. Badiou's point was that without any reference to its form, without reading it to its formal letter, readers were able to take the *Ethics* to be a lot of different things: a materialist manifesto, a pre-Marxist-Marxist treatise, a treatise on rationalism, an expression of the relation between the creative power of life and the structuring power of concepts, a book of pure spirituality, or a manifestation of the fetishistic power of scientific deduction. Ignoring the literal form allowed readers to act as if "the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things," that is, the "demonstrations [the proofs] themselves,"²² were blurred.

Reading with the open eyes of the mind is not only appropriate to Spinoza's *Ethics* but also to Kafka's proof. What to do with the paradoxical consequence that immediately emerges with Kafka's proof, namely the following one: if it is possible to prove the impossibility to live, there are only two options for the act of proving itself, namely it is either part of the set of life activities and hence has to be considered to be impossible itself, or proving is something that exceeds life as we know it (and as object of the proof). The first option proves the impossibility not only of life but also of proving this very impossibility, at least if proving implies living. The proof then would also prove the impossibility to prove the impossibility of life and thus could never prove what it seeks to prove. It would be a second-grade impossible proof. Kafka's proof would then disappear as a proof, precisely as it did after Kafka became Kafka. If one can prove the impossibility of life because proving it does not rely on life, nor is proving a way of being alive in an ordinary sense of the term, there can be – life or Kafka.²³ Let us consider the proof.

²¹ Alain Badiou, "What Is a Proof in Spinoza's Ethics?", in: *Spinoza Now*, 40.

²² Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, 388.

²³ For an instructive exploration of the link between scientific investigation and other "forms of life," see Aaron Schuster, *How to Research Like a Dog. Kafka's New Science*.

Almost Proving

The proof occurs in the end as the second part of the first version of the “Description.” It is divided into several sub-parts, or stages that successively bear the following titles: “A Ride,” “A Walk,” “The Fat Man: a) Address to the Landscape,” “b) Beginning of a Conversation with the Supplicant,” “c) The Supplicant’s Story,” “d) Continued Conversation between the Fat Man and the Supplicant,” and “Drowning of the Fat Man.” Kafka’s proof unfolds from a ride to a walk, to four episodes related to the fat man, that again start with an address to a non-personal entity, moves from a conversation to a story and then continues the conversation. It ends with the drowning of the fat man.²⁴ To contextualize all this, it is instructive to reconstruct what happens before the proof begins: the story begins when two men meet at party in Prague. The narrator’s “new acquaintance”²⁵ approaches the former and starts to tell him about a very recent erotic adventure with a girl, Anna. Feeling uncomfortable when their conversation is noticed by other guests, the narrator stages an escape from the party by suggesting taking a walk to the Laurenziberg. As soon as he and his acquaintance leave the party, peculiar things start to happen. At first the narrator feels “very gay,” shouting “a name down the street,” throwing his “hat in the air,” his “acquaintance, however, walked on beside [him], unconcerned”²⁶ and remained silent. Puzzled by this mood-difference, the narrator falls silent and feels a certain unease when he notices that “it was impossible ... keeping step with [his] acquaintance”²⁷ – the couple is fundamentally out of rhythm and form.

This dilemma seems, as we learn from the narrator’s introspection, to necessitate that the two should part ways again, because they somehow already have. Yet, it is impossible for him to decide if he ought to say goodbye on leaving or not, a problem that prevents him from actually

²⁴ Benno Wagner, a true Kafka connoisseur, reads the “Description” as a “parody of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* at all levels (frame plot, scenic detail, and logic of development).” Benno Wagner, “Insuring Nietzsche: Kafka’s Files,” 92. Yet, even Wagner does not mention the proof-aspect of the novella.

²⁵ Franz Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” in: *The Complete Stories*, 16.

²⁶ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 17.

²⁷ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 17; translation altered.

managing to leave. The two are neither together nor can they separate. A conversation starts. The acquaintance claims that on a night like this, one should kiss girls and not go to sleep to smother one's erotic dreams in the warmth of one's bed. The narrator replies that he "neither smother[s] nor warm[s] anything," whereupon the new acquaintance proclaims: "Oh, go on! ... You are a humorist [*Komiker*]." ²⁸ This leads the narrator to reflect: "From these words I imagined that my acquaintance suspected in me something which, although it wasn't there, made me nevertheless rise in his estimation by his suspecting it" and it is this thought which leads him to conclude "he must always remain with me, always." ²⁹ The acquaintance, with whom he is fundamentally out of tune, seems to detect something comic in the narrator and it is this something, which, although it is not there, makes the narrator stick to his acquaintance. It proved impossible to leave him anyway.

Already in the beginning of the story, there is literally a comic course of impossibilities. It is impossible to keep walking (in rhythm), impossible to properly go on, impossible to leave, yet there is – at least for the new acquaintance – something comic about his neighbor that proves to have a binding force. A comic impossibility, something impossibly comic, which, although it is not there, makes the narrator cling to his new companion. One seems to get here a peculiar depiction of incapacities, the incapacity of leaving that is linked to the incapacity of staying together, which then generates a proper peculiar kind of comic impossibility. Yet, things change – not because of a sea-, but due to a river-change – when they pass over the river Moldau.

The narrator feels drawn away from his acquaintance and seeks to resist. He writhes and forms a curve to stay with him for longer, whereupon the acquaintance gets angry because of that "nonsense" ³⁰ that seems to unnecessarily interrupt the common stroll. Because of the anger in the air, the narrator feels "a certain anxiety" ³¹ and assumes that he soon will

²⁸ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 18.

²⁹ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 18.

³⁰ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 20.

³¹ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 21; translation altered.

be killed by his acquaintance (“Now is the time for the murder”) and contemplates if he should start to flee, yet abruptly concludes that the “end had come”³² anyway. If staying with him is as impossible as leaving him, it seems that the ultimate logical outcome is that the situation has to end. But the narrator decides – as if he had contemporary pragmatism in mind – that he “couldn’t afford [his] last remaining seconds looking for reasons”³³ and nevertheless attempts to break logical impossibility by exiting it. He starts to run away from his companion when the first opportunity to do so arises. But during this attempt, he slips on the icy sidewalk and falls. His companion, who first did not even notice his absence, comes to his rescue and, helpfully, leans over him. Although the narrator’s “anxiety was beginning to return,”³⁴ there also emerged the insight into “a third way of perishing.” He is convinced he “could simply throw [himself] into the air.”³⁵ Out of the confrontation with the incapacity to stay together or to leave and after the failure of breaking this incapacity, another option, a new possibility arises. It will take a very surprising course. This is what the next part of Kafka’s text will depict. After now reassuring his companion that he should accompany the narrator further to the Laurenziberg, the first part of Kafka’s text ends and the proof begins. It has different stages and components.

Proving

1. It begins with a surprise. For, the narrator “leap[s] onto the shoulders of [his] acquaintance, and by digging [his] fists into his back [he] urged him into a trot.”³⁶ He starts to ride his acquaintance, who, in Deleuze’s terms, experiences a peculiar becoming-horse. The narrator is thrilled and trembles “with courage” as he seems to have radically transformed the whole

³² Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 21.

³³ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 21.

³⁴ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 21.

³⁵ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 22.

³⁶ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 22.

situation. But his new horse collapses and he therefore “whistle[s] down a few vultures which ... settle down on him in order to guard him.”³⁷

2. Then the narrator continues walking “unperturbed” and transforms by the sheer power of thought the steep slope into a valley such that his walk is facilitated. He also creates a wooded mountain on the other side of the street and when night falls, he starts to rest in the trees. He sleeps “deep and dreamless,”³⁸ but his “sleep was not free from continuous slight disturbance. All night long [he] heard someone talking beside [him]”³⁹ – yet he was unable to decipher the actual words, mostly he heard “the special kind of emphasis placed on them,”⁴⁰ which brings him pleasure. He starts – or did already start – talking to himself, stating that his “life was monotonous” before and he “deserve[s] some diversion,” which is why it was important “to be taken somewhere else,”⁴¹ an exodus was necessary. An exodus of such a far-reaching kind that the narrator tries to avoid all thought and movement – because they are always “forced” – and seeks “stubbornly to forget.” Yet, his peaceful exodic rest is interrupted by someone sobbing softly and again “it seemed impossible to escape from my suffering.”

3. Four naked men appear carrying “a monstrously fat man”⁴² on a wooden litter. Yet, after the fat man reshuffles the landscape, because its beauty diverts his attention, moving trees and mountains, his men drown in the now stronger river through which he was carried and he, still on his litter, is carried away by the flow of the water like a “wooden idol which had become useless and so had been cast into the river.”⁴³ The narrator follows the litter along the bank and assumes that he truly loves him – like

³⁷ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 23.

³⁸ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 24. This is an important remark, for some readers saw in what happens next a manifestation of the logic of the dream. Yet, if it is a dream, it begins by exclaiming: *This is not a dream* – somehow akin to the analysis and stating *This is not my mother*.

³⁹ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 24.

⁴⁰ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 24.

⁴¹ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 25.

⁴² Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 25.

⁴³ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 27.

an image of God, "which once seemed obsolete" but "lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."⁴⁴

4. The fat man starts to tell a story. There was once a time when he went to church to see a girl he fell in love with. Yet, when once the girl was not present in church, he noticed a young man, praying in a very exaggerated manner. He felt the duty to confront, better: interpellate him and the latter exclaimed: "I don't know what you suspect me of, but I'm innocent."⁴⁵ Yet, the fat man grabbed him and insisted that he will follow him wherever, because he wants to ask him a question, namely why he prays in the manner in which he does. The supplicant finally answers that he has the desire to be watched by the people and that he always hoped for the fat man to address him, because he wanted to tell his own story.

5. He tells the fat man of a party to which he went the night before, where his kneecap loosened and where he started having a conversation with a girl who criticized him for not being attached to truth enough, as he finds this desire too tiresome.⁴⁶ And, as if wanting to prove to her that this was correct, he asked the piano player of the party to let him play. When after some reluctance he finally did and the supplicant sat down, he was carried away by two men, while everyone agreed he played nicely. He was consequently complimented out of the party. For obscure reasons, he was filled with joy, met a drunk, tried conversing with him, but ended up guiding him to a place where he could spend the night.

7. Now the fat man continues to report from his conversation with the supplicant, in which he raised the question as to why he prays in the ways he does – and if it "ought not to be possible to live differently?"⁴⁷ The supplicant denies this option and describes the general human condition in the following way: "We build useless war machines, towers, walls, curtains of silk, and we could marvel at all this a great deal if we had the time. We tremble in the balance, we don't fall, we flutter, even though we may be uglier than bats. And on a beautiful day hardly anyone can prevent us

⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3.

⁴⁵ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 29.

⁴⁶ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 33.

⁴⁷ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 37.

from saying: 'Oh God, today is a beautiful day,' for we are already established on this earth and live by virtue of an agreement."⁴⁸ Human beings are ugly fluttering bats, producing useless cultural inventions with such to praise the beauty of the day – a silent agreement of the human species. This means that "after all, we're not aiming at any definite purpose or at the truth, but simply at making jokes and entertainment."⁴⁹ Life is diversion and there seems to be no truth in and to it and no purpose.

8. At this point everything speeds up. "The fat man could not go on talking, he was forced to turn and disappear in the loud roar of the waterfall."⁵⁰ The narrator looks at this scene, which seems to swallow everything – as if even the insight that life is nothing but diversion (*Belustigung*) is a diversion of the fact of life.

Impossible Life: A Measure

What is the lesson of this proof? It ends with the following lines: "Please, passers-by, be so kind as to tell me how tall I am – just measure these arms, these legs."⁵¹ What life – at this point – appear to lack is a measure. Neither a conversation nor prayers, neither cultural inventions nor an – explicit or implicit – intersubjective agreement, neither a diversion nor a proof can provide a measure that would make living an oriented life possible. The proof proves some measure needed – for the arms and legs that allow us, as Kant famously argued, to distinguish between right and left. If the proof proves the impossibility of life, it is an impossibility that derives from lacking orientation – and Kafka's novella is certainly a literary embodiment of such a lack of orientation. Kierkegaard is supposed to have once claimed that courage is life's only measure and Kafka's proof seems to suggest that this is actually true. Yet, there is no courage without anxiety (and therefore without an instance of the superego) – and without an idea

⁴⁸ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 37.

⁴⁹ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 38; translation altered.

⁵⁰ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 38.

⁵¹ Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 39.

of justice.⁵² Kafka's proof shows that the first thing to assume to even have a proper concept of life is that life as such is impossible and that working with this impossibility is what it means to invent a life that could never be just a given, but it is a diversion from life just being a diversion. In other words, one ought to assume that there will never be any life (not only worthy of that name, but at all), which is what might allow for a proper life to emerge. Only by assuming the outcome of the proof there arises an anxiety – and “only anxiety excites you”⁵³ – which one will be able to work with; one will be able to raise the incapacity of living a life to a true point of impossibility. Kafka's early text, of a Kafka before himself, an impossible Kafka, treats such a point. This could be a starting point for an examination of Kafka's concept of life.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodore W. “Notes on Kafka.” In: *Prisms*. Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson and Samuel Weber. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Badiou, Alain. *Theory of the Subject*. Trans. Bruno Bosteels. London: Continuum, 2009.
- . “What Is Proof in Spinoza's Ethics?” In: *Spinoza Now*. Ed. Dimitris Vardoulakis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- . *Philosophy and the Event*. Trans. Louise Burchill. Malden: Polity Press, 2013.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Understanding Brecht*. Trans. Anna Bostock. London: Verso, 1998.
- Bruce, Iris. “Kafka and Jewish Folklore.” In: *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*. Ed. Julian Preece. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Calasso, Roberto. K. Trans. Geoffrey Brock. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005.
- Deleuze, Gilles. “To Have Done with Judgement.” In: *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. London and New York: Verso, 1998.

⁵² A longer elaboration of how these concepts hang together can be found in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 156 ff.

⁵³ Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 40.

- Dolar, Mladen. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2006.
- Durrani, Osman. "Editions, Translations, Adaptations." In: *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*. Ed. Julian Preece. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Ebook.
- Hegel, G. F. W. *The Science of Logic*. Trans. A. V. Miller. New York: Humanity Books, 1969.
- Horace. *The Episodes, Satires, and Epistles of Horace*. Ed. Charles Howes. Trans. Francis Howes. London: William Pickering, 1845.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Diaries, 1910–1923*. Trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir. London: Penguin Books, 1964.
- . "Description of a Struggle." In: *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, 15–63. Trans. Tania Stern and James Stern. New York: Schocken, 1971.
- . "Beschreibung eines Kampfes." In: *Franz Kafka-Ausgabe*. Basel: Stroemfeld, 1999.
- . *The Zürau Aphorisms*. Trans. Michael Hoffman and Geoffrey Brock. London: Harvill Secker, 2006.
- Schuster, Aaron. *How to Research Like a Dog: Kafka's New Science*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2024.
- Spinoza, Benedict de. *Ethics*. Trans. Edwin Curley. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Updike, John. "Foreword." In: *Franz Kafka. The Complete Stories*, 1–14. Trans. Tania Stern and James Stern. New York: Schocken, 1971.
- Wegner, Benno. "Insuring Nietzsche: Kafka's Files." *New German Critique* 33, 3 (2006): 83–199.