Freedom from the Free Will

On Kafka's Laughter

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Preamble

Kafka's Laughter

When I was invited to write a short piece for the catalog of a staging of *The Trial*, I argued that Franz Kafka's laughter enacts a critique of the prevalent concept of freedom as the free will of the individual, which has dominated both the political and the philosophical tradition in the Occident.[1] I had not anticipated the reaction this position would provoke. Several posts on blogs as well as personal communications informed me in no uncertain terms that the idea is preposterous: Not only is Kafka's world so overdetermined by tragedy that humor has no place in it, but Kafka's is a world of imprisonment where freedom is totally absent. This book is not so much a direct reply to these protestations against my short piece in the theater catalog, as a response to certain ingrained presuppositions about Kafka's work—and especially its "tragic" aspect, of which the replies to my short piece were symptomatic. I continue to maintain, and I develop here in some detail, that Kafka's humor is a response to the Western conception of freedom, which he tirelessly presents in this narratives, and that this response implies an alternative conception of freedom.

It is not unusual to talk about Kafka's humor. Those who knew him personally draw attention to the humor that characterized the person and that subsequently informed the work. There are, for instance, several references to Kafka's humor in Max Brod's biography. The most famous one is the following description of Kafka's reading of *The Trial* at a literary salon in Prague: "When Kafka read aloud himself, his humor became particularly clear. Thus, for example, we friends of his laughed quite immoderately when he first let us hear the first chapter of *The Trial*. And he himself laughed so much that there were moments he couldn't read any further. Astonishing enough, when you think of the fearful earnestness

of this chapter. But that is how it was. Certainly it was not entirely good, comfortable laughter."[2] Brod is typical of Kafka scholarship in that he cites references that support a kind of laughter in Kafka, but he has no idea of how to integrate this laughter into the analysis of the texts themselves, other than by transforming its significance into a "higher" or "deeper" register. Thus, Brod subjugates this "not entirely comfortable laughter" to his own theological interpretation, which views Kafka as a kind of saint of modernity—as I will show in more detail in chapter 2.

A second, good example of this same maneuver is Felix Weltsch's *Religion und Humor im Leben und Werk Franz Kafkas*. Weltsch, who knew Kafka personally, introduces humor by saying that it is "totally impossible" to ignore it for anyone who knew Kafka. Soon, however, Weltsch qualifies this humor by saying that it is not lighthearted entertainment, but rather a "serious" humor that can thereby be linked to religion without any contradiction.[3] At the end, humor becomes a symptom of something else that is more profound. Kafka's laughter is presented as a reaction to something else that is more important, and never as producing ideas with literary as well as political import.

A significant advance over this uncomfortable transformation of laughter into theology is the argument that Kafka collapses the distinction between comedy and tragedy. Thus, for instance, Milan Kundera writes: "In the world of the *Kafkan,* the comic is not a counterpoint to the tragic (the tragi-comic) as in Shakespeare; it's not there to make the tragic more bearable by lightening the tone; it doesn't *accompany* the tragic, not at all, it *destroys it in the egg* and thus deprives the victims of the only consolation they could hope for: the consolation to be found in the (real or supposed) grandeur of tragedy."[4] And yet, despite its significance in relation to the earlier interpretations of Kafka's laughter, this insight does not say much more than that Kafka is a modernist author in the sense that modernism is concerned with the erasure of what is traditionally categorized as high art and fascinated with the mixing of genres. After all, as Mikhail Bakhtin shows in his study of Rabelais, laughter has always destabilized hierarchies, of both genre and power—notwithstanding the difficulty of drawing a demarcation line between the two.

More fruitful approaches to Kafka's laughter are concerned with the broader philosophical and political significance of laughter. I am thinking here, for instance, both of Walter Benjamin and of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who place a significant emphasis on laughter—as I will show in chapters 1 and 2. To understand such broader philosophical

significance, we can recall Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), which dramatizes the repression of laughter in Western metaphysics. The reason this repression takes place can be easily gleaned by turning to Zarathustra's thunderous laughter. This laughter that Nietzsche describes had a determinative importance for his French interpreters precisely because of its metaphysical significance. To put it very simply, one can laugh at the idea that something transcendent determines our being. Simon Critchley puts it thus: "What makes us laugh . . . is the return of the physical into the metaphysical, where the pretended tragical sublimity of the human collapses into a comic ridiculousness which is perhaps even more tragic."[5] We can already glimpse the resonance of this conception of laughter within Kafka's stories. *The Metamorphosis* depicts the transformation of a human into a filthy insect. Such a transformation laughs at the idea that we—in our bodily existence—are made "in the image of God," while it remains tragic because of the transvaluation that the human has thereby undergone.

The problem with such an approach to Kafka's laughter is that it remains too broad. By contrast, my own approach narrows down the scope of laughter. This is to deny neither the generic implications of laughter noted by Kundera and others, nor the use of laughter in countering the Western metaphysical tradition. Rather, it is to show that laughter functions as a technical device with important discursive implications—in particular, implications that relate to how freedom is thought of in Kafka's writing.

In sum, my approach places humor at the center of Kafka's technique, which relies on plots in which the protagonists are seemingly totally deprived of their freedom. I argue that if there is political thinking in Kafka, this is only possible because of his laughter.[6] The reason is that Kafka's laughter is the tool he uses to deconstruct power. One of the most critical ways in which power is constructed depends on how we understand our freedom. As Foucault puts it, "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. . . . [F]reedom must exist for power to be exerted."[7] Freedom can be the means of our entrapment by power. The key to the exercise of power through freedom is the free will. We think that we have the freedom to exercise our will only by forgetting that power is exercised not simply by delimiting our freedom, but by confining our will to power's own operation and perpetuation. The more we exercise our free will, the more power proliferates. Hence, it is an illusion to think that we are free because we have a free will.

Kafka—I argue in this book—laughs at our illusion that we have a free will. And he also laughs at the correlate of the free will, namely, the separation between a world of ideal freedom and a fallen world of confinement. This separation corresponds to the metaphysical assumption that there is a spiritual realm that is separate from, and higher than, the material or corporeal realm. The question of the free will is always about how to connect these two worlds or these two realms—it is always about how our conceptions of "what we will" can come into being. The transcendence of an ideal world of freedom or of spirit is necessary for the free will to operate. As such, and pace interpreters such as Brod and Weltsch, Kafka's laughter performs also a critique of transcendence as the linchpin of both Western metaphysics and theology.[8] At the same time, this laughter is not only critical, but has a constructive aspect. Kafka's laughter suggests a different sense of freedom. This is a situated freedom—or *mediated freedom*, as I call it—that does not rely on ideals separated from the here and now. It is a *freedom from the free will*.

Let me describe the main idea in a different way. Mladen Dolar makes an astute observation about the presence of freedom and unfreedom in Kafka. After noting that "there is unfreedom everywhere in his [Kafka's] universe," Dolar insists that, nevertheless, "freedom is there at all times, everywhere, it is Kafka's *fin mot,* like the secret word one doesn't dare to utter although it is constantly on one's mind. The freedom that might not look like much, that might actually look wretched, but is there at all points, and once we spot it there is no way of going away from it, it is a possession to hold on to, it is the permanent line of flight, or rather the line of pursuit."[9] The present study can be understood as developing this observation by breaking down the question of freedom in Kafka into three distinct questions. First, what kind of unfreedom enchains Kafka's characters? The answer I will propose is that unfreedom is inextricable from the free will. Second, what kind of freedom is present in Kafka? The answer is a freedom from the free will—or as I also call it, mediated freedom. Third, how is the interaction between freedom and unfreedom presented? My contention is that laughter provides the means for this interaction and thus is central in how—technically—Kafka presents freedom and the free will.

My reading of this idea of the freedom from the will in Kafka rests on one important insight, namely, that the idea of the free will is tightly connected with the idea of the separation between an ideal world of free-

dom and a fallen world in which the human is imprisoned. This insight organizes the structure of the book:

I will show in chapter 1 how the conjunction between the idea of the free will and the separation of a paradisiacal world of freedom from a fallen world is developed by Augustine in his relating of the Fall. Kafka's own persistent return to narratives of confinement—narratives in which the protagonist is completely trapped and unable to exercise his free will—is counterbalanced by the idea of a space of complete freedom, best exemplified by the Nature Theater of Oklahoma in the last chapter of *Amerika*. Nevertheless, as I will show, Kafka actually laughs at the actors who are supposedly liberated. This will provide an *ontological* setting for the ideal of freedom from the free will.

Chapter 2 approaches Kafka's laughter from Maurice Blanchot's suggestion that Kafka resembles a comic presentation of Abraham, according to which Abraham is stranded in the desert because he is called by God to sacrifice his son, whereas in fact he is childless. I show how Kafka exploits the comical elements of the impossible task of pleasing a transcendent entity by reading closely "The Judgment" and *The Metamorphosis*. Chapter 2 will explore how the idea of the freedom from the free will also provides an *exegetical* matrix for reading Kafka.

The contrast between absolute imprisonment and absolute freedom is most clearly presented in the two short stories where the protagonists are literally encaged, "A Report to an Academy" and "A Hunger Artist," which I will discuss in chapter 3. I will show how they form a critique of the Western metaphysical tradition of the thinking of freedom by making Kafka's laughter resonate with the thought of Levinas and Spinoza and thus how it can be inscribed in an *ethical* register.

The function of the law in Kafka's writings, especially those from around 1914, the year of the broken engagement with Felice Bauer as well of the writing of *The Trial*, is often viewed as paradigmatic of the fallen, imprisoned world in Kafka. This does not preclude, however, the eruption of the Kafkaesque laughter in the moment of the greatest—seemingly—deprivation of freedom, as I will demonstrate in chapter 4. Laughter is also operative in the *legal* domain.

Ultimately, as I will argue in chapter 5, Kafka's reconceptualization of freedom as freedom from the free will has profound implications for how power is conceptualized. I will demonstrate this by contrasting Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" to Michel Foucault's description of the execution of

Damiens at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*. The laughter at the illusion of the free will is, finally, situated in the *political* sphere.

This trajectory does not present Kafka as a political philosopher per se—since he did not develop a systematic theory, as would be expected from a philosopher. Rather, I show that Kafka offers invaluable insights to political philosophy about the function of freedom—insights that the disciplinary demands for systematic presentation may actually obstruct, occlude, and obscure.[10] And this makes it all the more valuable to recognize what Kafka laughs at: namely, the conjunction between the free will and the separation of a world of absolute liberation from a fallen world. And, further, it makes it more valuable to ponder the Kafkaesque insight that freedom may only be possible when we liberate ourselves from the free will.

I should note here that several attempts have been made to present Kafka's "politics." These have been aptly documented by Bill Dodd.[11] For the most part, they attempt to situate Kafka within the political debates of his time. The questions typically asked are what historical events and theoretical works may have influenced his political views and his thought—an exception here is Adorno's masterful "Notes on Kafka." Further, as Dodd observes, "much of this 'political' reading of Kafka has been engaged in the task of rescuing him from the aura of a *homo religiosus* with which Brod influentially announced him to the world."[12] I would like to point to two important articles that do not fit Dodd's observation in a straightforward way, but at the same time do not contradict it. First, as Peter Fenves has shown in a brilliant reading of the short fragment "Die besitzlose Arbeiterschaft"—a favorite with many political readings—the political interpretation of Kafka has the capacity to radically affect the way that the religious itself is thought of in his work. In this context, the religious is not simply opposed to the political.[13] This implies a premise of the present study, namely that the religious is not innocently separated from political commitments. Consequently, as I show, Brod's metaphysical reading has political repercussions, which include the construction of freedom, a central political concept par excellence. Second, as Judith Butler has demonstrated, the "political" in relation to Kafka cannot avoid tackling questions about the ownership of the proper name "Kafka," especially in the context of his manuscripts. Differently put, the political in Kafka is not confined to his political opinions or thoughts, but also relates to how the proper name "Kafka" has been mobilized in different political contexts.[14] I agree with this insight, even though the approach adopted in the pres-

ent study is different, not only in that it concentrates in discovering the political in Kafka's texts themselves, but also in that I am concerned with one question—the issue of the presence of the free will in the midst of the most suffocating plots of confinement.

As the above suggests, I will present this idea of mediated freedom, or the freedom from the will, by reading selected Kafka texts in conjunction with the way that freedom has be theorized about in philosophy. Three caveats are necessary at this point: First, I do not intend to conduct here a holistic interpretation of Kafka. I am not offering a "key" that "unlocks" any "deeper" meanings of his entire oeuvre. Instead, I trace one idea—how Kafkaesque humor is tied up with political thinking, and in particular with thinking of freedom as free from the free will. And I do so by concentrating on a relatively small number of texts by Kafka. Second, I do not suggest that the entirety of Kafka's oeuvre needs to be read from the perspective of the interplay between laughter and freedom. There are innumerable other ways to approach his writings. I am contending, however, that a reading of Kafka's text that is concerned with their political significant cannot avoid dealing with Kafka's laughter. Third, I do not propose here a comprehensive theory of freedom. There are several philosophical issues that I have chosen to ignore. The reason is that I choose to concentrate on the constellation that laughter and freedom construct—a constellation that is illuminating about certain aspects of freedom but far from exhaustive of a philosophy of freedom.[15]

In addition, I want to allude to a further aspect, which I cannot take up here—not only because it would have made for an entirely different book but more crucially because I do not pretend to comprehend its implications. This has to do with the importance of the figure of confinement within the institution of literature. If we take a step back to contemplate some of the foundational texts of the literary canon, we cannot help but be struck by the crucial position of confinement plots. Thus, for instance, such a plot can be found in some of the first novels, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*—where ten people narrate stories while they are confined to a villa for ten days to shelter themselves from the plague. Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, the narrative that inaugurates Hispanic literature, can also be read as a narrative of confinement, as Kafka's own reworking shows—a fragment that I discuss in chapter 1. And we can go much further back, all the way to the Homeric epics, first with the Greek army stranded at Troy and then with the desire for the *nostos*, which determines all of Ulysses's actions while his wife, Penelope, is trapped in

the Ithacan palace waiting for his return. There is certainly something significant that connects plot development and confinement. And even if it is not the place here to investigate this relation, the crucial role of the plots of confinement historically suggests that the choice to concentrate on Kafka's plots of confinement is not a marginal issue in a modernist author from a provincial city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but a significant aspect of the institution of literature.

This brings me to the most significant, as well as the thorniest, methodological issue. It concerns the relation between literature and philosophy. I do not believe in the idea of "philosophical fiction" if what is meant by this is that there are certain fictional texts that can give us privileged access to certain ideas that in turn can enrich our lives or teach us how to live. There are various reasons why I reject this position. First, it reproduces the separation that characterizes the Western idea of freedom between a fallen world and an ideal world unalloyed with the vicissitudes of being. In this conception, the truth-seeking philosophy always occupies the position of the ideal, while fiction is harnessed to philosophy's truths like a servant—or a slave. Second, I hold that it reproduces a particular philosophical preoccupation, which seeks to unify the conceptual and the particular. In this conception, fiction can become the vehicle of this unification. Quentin Meillassoux recently described something like that under the concept of correlationism.[16] I describe it elsewhere under the concept of immediacy.[17] In any case, the figure of Kafka's cages questions and problematizes the assumption that thought and being can be separated. It is no wonder that the greatest critic of this metaphysical assumption, Baruch Spinoza, also arrives at a conception of freedom from the correlate of this metaphysical separation, namely, the separation of freedom and unfreedom. As Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens put it, in Spinoza "freedom fundamentally is the emergence from the illusion of freedom—that is, from the illusion of free will."[18] It is for this reason that I will return to Spinoza on several occasions throughout this book.

One further implication ought to be noted, one that provides further reason for rejecting the possibility of "philosophical fiction": no concept is complete or autonomous. This suggests what Peter Szendy calls a "philosofiction"—which is to be strictly distinguished from a "philosophical fiction." According to Szendy, a philosofiction is the fictional element that "comes to haunt even the most formally rigorous philosophical works."[19] In other words, a philosofiction challenges the claim of concepts to occupy a space that is outside or beyond where they enjoy complete autonomy.

This point resonates with Kafka's cages. The fictional element dismantles the concept's autonomy in the sense that the concept remains anchored to particularity and dependent on singularity. In this sense, philosofiction is the freedom *from* the aspiration toward idealized values that are universal, or of an analysis that produces concepts thoroughly abstracted from experience, or the pursuit of truth at the expense of and by rejecting myth, or the insistence of a rational capacity that absolutely separates the human from the animal—and so on. Ultimately, a philosofiction is the liberation from the illusion that thought and being can be separated. No wonder that Deleuze insists on a Spinozan laughter that arises from the fact that "Spinoza is one of the most cheerful authors in the world."[20] This is a laughter in the face of all those sad emotions that arise from the separation of spirit and being.[21] The present book can be read as an invitation to join the chorus of this laughter.

Notes

Preamble

1. Dimitris Vardoulakis, "Kafka's Other Freedom," essay for the program of the play *The Trial*, based on Franz Kafka's novel, adapted by Louise Fox, directed by Matthew Lutton. The Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, August 13 to September 4, 2010. The Sydney Theatre Company, Sydney, September 9 to September 30, 2010.

2. Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (New York: Schocken, 1960), 178. This is not an isolated testimony about the laughter that Kafka's readings provoked. Another well-known example comes from a letter to Felice dated March 1, 1913. The letter, written at two in the morning, narrates how he had read a story—probably the *Metamorphosis*—to a group of friends at Brod's house earlier in the evening. In Kafka's own words, he "read himself into a frenzy" and "we let ourselves go, and laughed a lot." Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, eds. Erich Hellen and Jürgen Born, trans. James Stern and Elizabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken, 1973).

3. Felix Weltsch, *Religion und Humor im Leben und Werk Franz Kafkas* (Berlin: Herbig, 1957), 78, 79.

4. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Grove, 1986), 104–5, emphasis in the original.

5. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 43.

6. I should note that in this context I am using the words "homor" and "laughter" interchangeably, and in a narrow sense as responses to the illusion of the free will, as I explain shortly.

7. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed., eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 221.

8. When I refer throughout the book to a "Western" conception of freedom, I mean a conception of freedom that relies on this separation, as I will also

explain in chapter 1. The key in such a metaphysics of freedom is the free will. I argue that Kafka's laughter is directed against this metaphysics, and its product, the free will, as a way to confine my inquiry to the Western conception of freedom, but I do not thereby suggest that there are no other ways of conceiving of freedom that Kafka may or may not have been aware of.

9. Mladen Dolar,"Kafka's Immanence, Kafka's Transcendence," in *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond*, ed. Regina Schwarz (New York: London, 2004), 192–93.

10. In taking Kafka's work as a provocation to think philosophically, I follow in the footsteps of several significant philosophers. For some, this is explicit, because they have devoted books or essays to Kafka; I will be referring to the most important of these throughout the present book. In other cases, the connection may be more obscure, as with Judith Butler, who reveals in the Preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* that the inspiration for the notion of performativity was Kafka's parable "Before the Law," as well as Derrida's reading of the same parable. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xiv. It is neither possible nor the aim of the present book to survey all the philosophical approaches to Kafka, but after even a cursory perusal of the material it is still possible to say that Kafka is one of the philosophers' writers par excellence.

11. Bill Dodd, "The Case for a Political Reading," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. Julian Preece (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 131–49.

12. Ibid., 133.

13. Peter Fenves, " 'Workforce without Possessions': Kafka, 'Social Justice,' and the Word *Religion*," in *Freedom and Confinement in Modernity: Kafka's Cages*, eds. Kiarina Kordela and Dimitris Vardoulakis (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 107–26.

14. Judith Butler, "Who Owns Kafka," *London Review of Books* 33.5 (March 3, 2011), 3–8.

15. These decisions make more sense if viewed from my own personal trajectory. The present book is, in one sense, a rewriting and expansion of the last chapter of my book *The Doppelgänger*. At the same time, these ideas percolated while I was writing my two subsequent books, *Sovereignty and Its Other* and *Stasis: On Agonistic Democracy*. My reflections on Kafka are embedded in the thinking recorded in these books. But this also means that I am forced either to briefly summarize arguments from these books or, more often, to state the conclusion and direct the reader to where the argument is developed. This is an inevitable effect of the contingent process through which the present book was conceived and developed.

16. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009).

17. See, for instance, chapter 1 of *Sovereignty and Its Other*. See also Dimitris Vardoulakis, "A Matter of Immediacy: The Artwork and the Political in Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger," in *Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis (New York: SUNY Press, 2015), 237–57.

18. Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999), 51.

19. Peter Szendy, *Kant in the Land of the Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosofictions*, trans. Will Bishop (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 46.

20. Gilles Deleuze, "Power and Classical Natural Right," seminar conducted on December 9, 1980, transcribed by Simon Duffy, available at www.webdeleuze.com.

21. The other philosopher of laughter is, of course, Nietzsche. Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner draw attention to the connection between Nietzsche and Kafka in their *Ghost in the Machine*. As they put it, "we have spoken of Kafka as Nietzsche's stringent interlocutor . . . [and] we have taken . . . the position that scarcely a line in Nietzsche's published works went unread or uncommented by Kafka." Corngold and Wagner, *Franz Kafka: The Ghost in the Machine* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 151.

1. Kafka's Cages: Laughter and the Free Will

1. I am referring to narratives that have at least the rudiments of a plot, even though Kafka does not follow plots faithfully because he often takes writing to extremes. Thus, the letters and diaries, for instance, will not be the focus of my attention—which of course does not mean that I will not have recourse to them in seeking material related to the argument at hand.

2. Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (New York: Schocken, 1960), 178.

3. The examples here can easily proliferate, but I will mention only one more: Henry Sussman observes in "The Burrow" the "blunt literality" characteristic of cartoons. See his *Franz Kafka: Geometrician of Metaphor* (Madison, WI: Coda, 1979), 154.

4. I therefore disagree with Bill Dodd, who asserts that "once we accept that irony and travesty are part of Kafka's treatment of religious themes, it becomes possible to conceive of the social and political dimensions of his critique of metaphysics." Dodd, "The Case for a Political Reading," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. Julian Preece, 146. The problem with irony and travesty is the assertion of a position of superiority, which ends up reaffirming the very politics of metaphysics that it is supposed to overcome. If we substitute "irony and