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# LESSONS FROM KAFKA

Philosophical Readings  
of Franz Kafka's Works

Barthelme's

Discourse

Guilty Plea

Freedom's

Demands for

Justice

Justice

Justice

Justice

Justice

A Committee

The House

of Uffizi

Kafka's

Justice

Justice

Justice

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# AGENCY IN THE SPACE OF REASONS

## A Comment on *The Castle*

Josep E. Corbí

The received view about rationalizing explanations divides our psychological states into two kinds: beliefs and desires. Rationalizing explanations – that is, explanations that uncover “the agent’s rationale for the action”<sup>1</sup> – will thus consist of a suitable combination of these two kinds of psychological states, which in turn have two opposite directions of fit. Whereas beliefs have a mind-to-world direction of fit, desires involve a world-to-mind direction of fit.<sup>2</sup> In *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Talbot Brewer makes a case against this view. He argues that it neglects an essential aspect of our agency, namely: that an agent’s rationale for her actions must consider the value of what she desires beyond her merely desiring it. In other words, rationalizing explanations must refer to the fact that an agent regards a certain action as

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<sup>1</sup> Brewer, T., *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 14, see p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> See Anscombe, E., *Intention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1957; Dunn, R., *Values and the Reflective Point of View. On Expressivism, Self-Knowledge and Agency*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2006; Smith, M., *The Moral Problem*, Blackwell, Oxford 1994; and Stroud, B., *The Quest for Reality. Subjectivism and the Metaphysics of Colour*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000.

valuable in a sense that does not reduce to its contribution to bringing about a state of affairs that she desires. On this basis, Brewer elaborates an alternative account of our agency and, in the end, of the conditions under which we may seek to make sense of our lives. His endeavor is presented as culturally relevant because, as he sees it, the received view is not simply a theoretical stance that some scholars in the analytic tradition might defend but inspires the institutions and practices that weave our social and personal life. The hope is that a more adequate philosophical psychology may significantly contribute to recover those crucial, missing aspects of our agency and thus favour some sort of cultural recovery.

In this paper, I will examine our experience as readers of *The Castle* by Franz Kafka to support Brewer's critical program, that is, his challenge to the received view.<sup>3</sup> I will argue, however, that a proper analysis of this experience poses a serious problem to Brewer's alternative approach, that is, to his attempt to retrieve our agency thanks to a proper understanding of the role of the good in rationalizing explanations.<sup>4</sup> And, for this dual purpose, a reflection on the divide between the agent's experience and the external world, between the inner and the outer, will play a crucial role. The received view regards the agent's experience and the external world as split by an unsurmountable metaphysical gulf; while an agent's desires belong to the inner and motivate her to act in one or another way, the outer is presented as a domain deprived of any evaluative properties. Brewer's approach presupposes, however, that we can hardly make sense of our agency if the inner and the outer are thus kept apart, since an agent's motivations must be sensitive to the good and the good must be placed on the outside; it must be experienced as something she confronts. In this paper, I will stress that, despite K.'s efforts to the contrary, there is no way in which he might succeed in separating the inner from the outer; far from being split by a gulf, the inner

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<sup>3</sup> Kafka, F., *The Castle*, transl. by A. Bell, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See the last paragraph of section 1.1 for a few remarks as to how a work of fiction, such as *The Castle*, may contribute to our understanding of agency.

and the outer will emerge as densely interwoven in his life. It follows that the received view can hardly account for the way K. inhabits the world. The interconnection between the inner and the outer certainly fits with Brewer's alternative approach but, as we shall finally argue, the precise way in which the novel conceives of this interconnection hardly benefits Brewer's aspiration to retrieve our agency.

This paper will develop as follows. In section 1, I will present the received view about rationalizing explanations in some more detail, and stress how certain elements in *The Castle* may provide some grounds for this view, such as the fact that K. presents himself as a land surveyor. In section 2, we will soon see that the castle and the village are not simply a territory for the land surveyor to map, but a rather more complex object whose identity conditions include some normative constraints to be ascertained and interpreted in light of scarce evidence. This is, after all, the world that K. and the villagers inhabit, that is, a world whose contours include some normative constraints that are subject to continuous examination and reinterpretation. I will thus dismiss the idea that the outer they confront could have a structure utterly independent of the inner. On the other hand, the intensity of K.'s craving to reach the castle is envisaged by the reader as peculiar unless connected to some inkling of the good, that is, to some feasible reason why reaching the castle could be so central to K.'s life. This is, in fact, a question that persists throughout the novel, a hunger that is never satisfied, a question that emerges as crucial to our understanding of K.'s agency. In section 3, I will introduce a fundamental concept in Brewer's alternative approach, namely, the notion of "dialectical activity". Dialectical activities constitute, according to him, a sort of activity where human agency is fully deployed and manifested. Some conversations, which Brewer terms "full-hearted conversations", come up as a model or paradigmatic case of dialectical activity. I will examine various conversations in *The Castle* to determine how they fare in relation to the idea of dialectical activity. It will soon become clear that most conversations in this novel do not qualify as full-hearted; still, I will suggest that a certain conversation – namely, the long dialogue between Olga and K. about the disgrace that has fallen upon Barnabas's family – does convey the kind

of intimacy and understanding that is proper of full-hearted conversations. And, yet, I will argue that the eventual ability to engage in this sort of conversation does not allow Olga and K. to fully recover their agency. At most it allows them to feel temporarily relieved from their disgrace by the common recognition of the arbitrariness of the world they are condemned to inhabit. I will finally exclude the availability of a Kantian move, that is, of an attempt to recover one's agency by letting one's life be inspired by some set of principles that one autonomously and consistently endorses. I will thus suggest that this alternative presupposes a divide between the inner and the outer that is inconsistent with the world that Olga and K. inhabit.

### 1. The received view:

#### The inner and the outer

##### 1.1 The received view

The received view about rationalizing explanations can be stated in terms of three interwoven dogmas about desire:

In contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, the world-making conception of agency has been captured and perpetuated by three interwoven and mutually supporting theses about desires – where the term “desire” is used in a broad sense to encompass the various motivational sources of human actions. The first of these rather technical theses is that desires are attitudes towards propositions.<sup>5</sup> The second is that desires are distinguished from other propositional attitudes by the

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<sup>5</sup> See Brandom, R., *Making It Explicit*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1994, p. 5; Smith, M., *The Moral Problem*, p. 107; Sumner, L. W., *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, p. 124; and Velleman, D., *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 24 and 182.

typical or proper direction of fit between the world and the desirer's mind (or, more exactly, the propositional object of the desire).<sup>6</sup> The third is that we can formulate a rationalizing explanation of any action by tracing it to a belief/desire pair consisting in a belief that the action will bring the world into conformity with some proposition and a desire that takes the same proposition as its object.<sup>7</sup> I call these three theses the *dogmas of desire*.<sup>8</sup>

From this perspective, rationalizing explanations must appeal to a certain combination of beliefs and desires. One might adopt a third-person perspective, in whose case one may leave aside the question as to whether the agent's beliefs are true or justified, for a false belief can certainly contribute to a rationalizing explanation inasmuch as the agent regards it as true or at least justified; and the same holds regarding the agent's desires: there is no need to determine whether what she desires is actually valuable or worth-desiring, but only that the agent regards it as such.

But rationalizing explanations can also be elaborated from a first-person perspective and, in this case, we must focus on an agent's deliberation about what to do or, in other words, on the considerations in light of which she may make up her mind. It is clear that, in this case, she must examine the world to check whether her beliefs are true or, at least, justified. But what happens with regard to her desires? Should she regard her desires as just a fact about herself or instead examine them to see whether what she desires is worth-desiring? The received view excludes this question insofar as it appeals to

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<sup>6</sup> See Smith, M., *The Moral Problem*, pp. 11–19; Sumner, L. W., *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics*, pp. 124–125; and Velleman, D., *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, pp. 24 and 182.

<sup>7</sup> See Brandom, R., *Making It Explicit*, p. 56; Davidson, D., *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1980, ch. 1, 2, 4, 5, 12; Dennett, D. C., *Kinds of Minds. Toward an Understanding of Consciousness*, Basic Books, New York 1996, ch. 2; and Smith, M., *The Moral Problem*, pp. 115–116.

<sup>8</sup> Brewer, T., *The Retrieval of Ethics*, p. 14, see p. 12.

some facts in the world that allegedly determine whether a desire is valuable or worth-desiring. But the world, as the received view conceives of it, is dispossessed of evaluative properties, whereby any value we may ascribe to it must be the outcome of a projection and, in the end, of our desires and dispositions; there is, hence, no way in which we could ultimately distinguish what is worth-desiring from what we actually desire. If we could make room for this contrast within the received view, it should be relative to the specific conception of human life that the agent might actually endorse, but this endorsement or commitment should in turn be construed as ungrounded, as a matter of whim or personal choice.

We may now turn to *The Castle* to see whether the received view fits with our experience as readers of this novel, that is, with what we must presuppose and the kind of questions that we must raise to understand various aspects of the novel, including its characters' actions and motivations. This reflection should, indeed, be construed as a contribution to the complex process of reflective equilibrium to which all philosophical views and theories about our agency are subject for their assessment and evaluation.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, it could be argued that our questions and presuppositions as readers may uncover deeper aspects of our practices and attitudes towards the world than our explicit intuitions regarding the kind of counterfactual situation usually contemplated in thought experiments. Firstly, because the design of a thought experiment may be seriously shaped by numerous philosophical assumptions and, secondly, because our intuitions regarding a counterfactual situation may significantly differ from our actual response when confronted with the situation; by contrast, our attitudes as readers of a novel are themselves elements of a practice, although it is certainly our task as philosophers to discern the view of the world that they may actually express or presuppose.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Goodman, N., *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1983; Rawls, J., *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed presentation of my view on this issue, see Corbí, J. E., *Morality, Self-Knowledge and Human Suffering*, Routledge, New York 2012, ch. 1. For fur-



## 1.2 The inner

We may now examine K.'s craving to visit the castle and put his affairs in order with the authorities.<sup>11</sup> The way this wish is presented in *The Castle* seems to support the received view; after all, K.'s craving seems to constitute his ultimate motivation, what ultimately accounts for his actions and decisions. The reader may see this passion as peculiar or obsessive, she may even regret the devastating effects it may have on K.'s life, but K.'s craving is taken for granted in the novel and the question never arises as to whether it could be challenged except on account of its unattainability. The strangeness of K.'s craving may thus highlight an unnoticed feature of our ultimate motivation, so that K.'s story – seemingly so idiosyncratic – may end up revealing a fact about us. From this perspective, K. stands out for his self-transparency since, unlike most of us, he knows from the very beginning what his fundamental motivation is, namely: reaching the castle and putting in order his affairs with the authorities. *The Castle* seems thus to confirm the received view about the inner. There are, besides, some elements in the novel that may complementarily reinforce a conception of the outer as entirely non-evaluative, that is, as a world to be mapped regardless of our specific desires or interests.

## 1.3 The outer

K. presents himself as a land surveyor who has been hired by the castle. As such, he is supposed to make a map of the territory; after all, one might assume that, if there is a world, one can make a

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ther discussion, see Walton, K., *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1990, ch. 7; and Currie, G., *Imagining and Knowing. The Space of Fiction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020.

<sup>11</sup> “His eyes fixed on the castle, K. went on, paying no attention to anything else. But as he came closer he thought the castle disappointing; after all, it was only a poor kind of collection of cottages assembled into a little town [...]” Kafka, F., *The Castle*, p. 11, see pp. 12 and 13. “Getting my affairs with the authorities in order is my dearest, indeed, my only wish.” *Ibid.*, p. 150.

map of it. A map depicts a region of the world with a certain degree of accuracy. It may be wrong in some particular respects and must then be amended; it must also be periodically updated to track any relevant changes in the world. A map is made, though, from a certain perspective; it depicts how the world looks like from a certain point of view. The particular perspective from which a map is drawn may be decided rather arbitrarily or for some idiosyncratic reasons; everyone must agree, however, about how it is to be projected onto the world. There is room for disagreement insofar as every map has a limited degree of accuracy and, therefore, fails to settle any issues beyond it; people may also disagree as to whether the map depicts all the relevant aspects of a territory. But any other disagreement is to be explained away as the product of a confusion or a misunderstanding. There is, hence, no room for flawless disagreement except for issues concerning accuracy and relevance. This conception of a map squares with the idea of an absolute conception of reality,<sup>12</sup> namely: the outer as a world ultimately dispossessed of evaluative properties and the inner as a peculiar view about the outer; which is, in turn, the conception of the relation between the inner and the outer defended by the received view.

Not every perspective will equally do for a map, though. A perspective from above should be preferred, that is, the perspective of someone who surveys a land from the top of a mountain or like a bird.<sup>13</sup> Some may think that everything can be spotted from a bird's

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion about the absolute conception of reality, see Nagel, T., *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, New York 1986; Putnam, H., *Renewing Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, ch. 5; Stroud, B., *The Quest for Reality*, ch. 2; Williams, B., *Descartes. The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Penguin, London 1979, ch. 2; Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1985, ch. 8; Williams, B., Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline, *Philosophy* 75, 2000, p. 477–496; and Williams, B., *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2002, ch. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Klamm, the castle officer whom everyone in the village fears, is occasionally compared with an eagle: “Klamm was far away; the landlady had once compared Klamm to an eagle, which had struck K. as ridiculous at the time, but not anymore; he thought of Klamm’s remote distance, his impregnable residence, his silence,

eye view and, therefore, the right spatial relations established. This is the reason why this perspective is regarded as privileged. A sort of panopticon; those on the top of the mountain have the power to know; the castle is certainly on the top of the mountain while the village spreads downhill. But one can also draw a map without having a bird's eye view; piecemeal, so to say. The goal is to depict what could be seen from a bird's eye view without being able to fly over the land and, therefore, on the basis only of what can be measured by walking on it. Measurements must then be made very carefully to avoid distortions. As a land surveyor, K. must leave aside any personal bias and try to make accurate measurements to find out the facts as they are perceived from above. So, it seems that K.'s task as a land surveyor corroborates the received view of the outer. Still, a closer examination of the world that K. and the villagers inhabit will invite a revision of the received view about the gulf between the inner and the outer. I will elaborate on this challenge in the next section.

## 2. A challenge to the received view

### 2.1 The inner revisited

The received view conceives of the inner as an isolated domain, as a realm on its own. To challenge this view, let me go back to our initial impression that K.'s craving to reach the castle is strange and disproportionate. K.'s attitude may sound similar to that of someone who – following up on Elizabeth Anscombe's example<sup>14</sup> – wanted a saucer of mud for no further purpose, that is, just for the sake of it. Could

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perhaps interrupted only by such screams as K. had never heard. He thought of Klamm's piercing glance on high that would brook no contradiction and couldn't be tested either, of the immutable circles in which he soared, free from any interference by the likes of K. down below, moving by inscrutable laws and visible only for brief moments – Klamm and the eagle had all this in common.” (Kafka, F., *The Castle*, p. 103)

<sup>14</sup> Anscombe, E., *Intention*, pp. 70–71.

a mere appeal to the fact that she has this peculiar desire count as a rationalizing explanation of her carrying a saucer of mud? Wouldn't there be something missing to reach the kind of understanding that we are looking for? This is the sort of perplexity that we experience when facing K.'s persistent craving to reach the castle. His life seems to hang on this craving but, as it stands, it sounds too trivial to lie at the heart of a human life. This perplexity relies, however, on a contrast between the trivial and the important, between what is worth the effort and what is not, between what is worth-desiring and what is not so, that the received view cannot make room for except relative to the set of values that a particular individual may actually feel identified with. Still, the sense in which the reader finds K.'s craving trivial or, at least, disproportionate, is not experienced as relative to the reader's specific outlook but as a fact that she is confronted with but K. is unable to perceive. K.'s blindness regarding this fact is, nevertheless, central to the sort of perplexity that *The Castle* produces; the question as to how this trivial craving may have become so crucial to K. lies at the core of the story we are being told. The centrality of this question comes, however, as a challenge to the received view insofar as it is concerned with a notion of what is valuable that goes essentially beyond what K. may actually desire and strive for. But the question itself suggests that it is only in terms of an inkling of the good associated with a certain action that we can regard his actions as intelligible.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of such an inkling, we fail to make sense of what the agent is doing or even to identify her as an agent at all. In other words, we may conclude that rationalizing explanations cannot provide the kind of understanding we are looking for unless they are guided or inspired by a certain idea of what the agent regards as good or valuable in the action at hand:

This world-making conception of agency [i.e., the received view] represents a fundamental break with an earlier tradition

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<sup>15</sup> An argument to this effect is carefully developed in Stroud, B., *Estrangement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*, ch. 4.

of thought about human activity, its motivational sources, and its point. [...] On this conception, to view a bodily motion as intentional activity is to trace it to some intelligible conception of what is good or fitting for human beings to do or to be.<sup>16</sup>

It is essential to this idea of the good that it is not relative to what any particular agent might think or desire; it must instead come up as an aspect of the world she confronts and such that she may be able – or fail – to discern and acknowledge. The received view claims that whatever we may know about the world is necessarily non-evaluative. An alternative conception of the world is then required. A conception that allows for evaluative properties. But what does this world look like? To address this question, I will examine the world K. confronts and inhabits.

## 2.2 The outer revisited

The castle, as a physical object, is distinct from the village. It' is placed above and its buildings, even if disappointingly similar to ordinary buildings, are slightly more manorial:

His eyes fixed on the castle, K. went on, paying no attention to anything else. But as he came closer he thought the castle disappointing; after all, it was only a poor kind of collection of cottages assembled into a little town [...].<sup>17</sup>

Still, the village is “so to speak” part of the castle. It belongs to the castle; permits to stay in the village must be issued by the castle. This provides a normative sense of being in the castle. K. is, from a normative point of view, already in the castle, even though the castle is also above both from a normative and a spatial perspective:

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<sup>16</sup> Brewer, T., *The Retrieval of Ethics*, pp. 12–13, see pp. 23 and 35.

<sup>17</sup> Kafka, F., *The Castle*, p. 11, see pp. 12 and 13.

The village belongs to the castle, so anyone who stays or spends the night here is, so to speak, staying or spending the night at the castle. And no one's allowed to do that without a permit from the count. However, you don't have any such permit, or at least you haven't shown one.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, the castle as the ruler that determines the normative space does not overlap with the castle as the geographical space upon which it rules. The phrase "the castle" is then ambiguous. It may refer to the castle as a ruler or to the castle as the region subject to the norms and decisions issued by the castle as a ruler. But is there such a clear distinction? Aren't the mayor and the teacher part of the castle not only as villagers but also as rulers with regard to people like K. himself whom they look down as inferior?

The castle as a spatial and a normative space resonates heavily within K.'s emotional landscape. These three domains disorderly intermingle in K.'s experience:

The castle up above, now curiously dark, the place that K. had hoped to reach today, was retreating into the distance again. As if suggesting that this was only a temporary farewell, however, a bell rang there with a lively, cheerful note, although the sound was painful too, and made his heart quail momentarily as if threatened with getting what it vaguely desired. But soon the clang of this great bell died away, to be succeeded by the faint, monotonous sound of a smaller bell, perhaps also up at the castle or perhaps in the village. Its note was certainly a more suitable accompaniment to their slow progress with the feeble but implacable driver.<sup>19</sup>

In this quotation, spatial (darkness, distance) and temporal (it is getting late in the day, a temporary vs a final farewell) features contribute to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 5, see p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

K.'s emotional response, but also the sound of a bell that brings together three normative spaces: the castle, the church and the village. These normative domains seem to reinforce each other and weave the intricate web that constitutes the normative space K. confronts. The world that K. inhabits does comprise numerous normative – and, therefore, evaluative – features. It is then at odds with the outer as it is conceived of by the received view. But what about the inner? Can it be disentangled from the outer? I have already presented an argument to the point that K.'s experience is inextricably intertwined with the world he confronts, but now we are in a position to articulate a second argument to the same effect.

The narrator depicts K.'s experience in free indirect speech. There is no experience entirely independent of one's self-conception but the former may certainly exceed the latter. The narrator does have access to some nuances of K.'s experience that may betray the distortions of the latter's self-conception, but the narrative must still be anchored to K.'s experience and the narrator must thus refrain from trying to unify it beyond a certain point. As readers, we may be entitled to go beyond the narrator's perspective but up to a limit too and, in this respect, we may say that philosophical reflection allows us to see certain patterns in a clearer light, although it can also mislead us, typically by indulging in an excess of consistency that may, in turn, mask our tendency to project our own self-conception onto the story.<sup>20</sup> It follows that there may not be a unified point of view that brings consistently together all of K.'s cravings and aspirations; one craving may favour a certain experience of a situation, whereas some other fears and aspirations may push in a different direction.

K.'s agential experience is quite often the experience of this tension, which he struggles to bury under the wings of a certain self-conception that unifies his quest. K. explicitly claims to be a free, rational, well-meant and responsible person. The robustness of this unifying self-conception is often at odds with the conflicting nature

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<sup>20</sup> See Butler, J., *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, New York 2005.

of his experience. To preserve his sense of unity and integration, K. must indulge in a certain amount of self-denial and self-deception. He thus strives to rationalize his experience by providing reasons, analysing situations, attributing intentions, making assumptions, being scrupulous and suspicious. But unity and meaning are always at risk insofar as they rest on a denial of how the world is actually experienced. An integrated world beyond one's experience must then be stipulated to preserve and legitimize a sense of unity; a world behind a veil that one struggles to uncover. This world must lie beyond one's experience but can only be reached on the basis of it, that is, by approaching it as evidence of something beyond, a world which, unlike one's experience, is entirely consistent and, therefore, ready to be mapped. K.'s experience is thus depicted as plagued with tensions, with conflicting narrative strands and points of view, while his self-conception is preserved by appeal to the idea of a map to be drawn from a privileged point of view that K. will never access.

Some might reply that, even though K.'s view of the outer derive from his need to preserve his sense of unity, this is due to a temporary state of ignorance and confusion that he will eventually overcome; in fact, this is the point of his struggle, that is, to reach the castle and have his status as a land surveyor recognized. Yet, his struggle is as obscure and confused as anything could be. K. is certainly eager to know how he is conceived of by the castle; he needs his place within this complex spatial, normative and emotional territory to be acknowledged and determined by the highest authority. But he longs for recognition on the authorities' side as much as he is trying to escape from their surveillance. He denies being frightened by them -he just confesses to feeling a slight frisson-, but it seems to be fear that leads him to endow the castle with so much authority or, more precisely, it is fear to the arbitrariness of the powerful that induces the villagers and K. himself to construe an arbitrary space of domination as a consistent and proportionate normative domain. Thus K.'s discursive attempt to disentangle himself from the dense web woven by the castle only plunges him deeper into it. We may thus conclude not only that the world K. *actually* inhabits amalgamates the inner and the outer, but also that there is no way in which he



could disentangle himself from it. It follows that the way K.'s agency is featured in *The Castle* is ultimately at odds with the received view insofar as the inner and the outer are inextricably blended in the world K. confronts.

In the next section, I will present Brewer's alternative approach to our agency on the basis of his notion of "dialectical activity". He regards conversations of a certain kind, that is, those where the interlocutors are fully present, as paradigmatic cases of dialectical activity. I will compare this kind of dialectical activity with some conversations in *The Castle*. I will conclude that, even though most conversations in the novel do not qualify as dialectical activities, there is a certain conversation between Olga and K. where some degree of mutual understanding and intimacy is obtained, so that they may reasonably be regarded as engaged in a dialectical activity. I will argue, though, that an experience like this can hardly allow them to free themselves from the shackles that chain them to the castle. Yet, I will maintain that Brewer's approach provides a good framework to describe the bars of the cell they are locked in.

### 2.3 Dialectical activities and the world we are trapped within

The received view is so deeply entrenched in our culture that it shapes the way our actions are conceived of and experienced. Brewer argues, however, that some activities that lie at the heart of our agency are entirely alien to this model. He names those activities as dialectical; given the cultural prevalence of the received view, it will be hard to specify what a dialectical activity may consist of or even to point out an activity that we could ultimately recognize as genuinely dialectical. As an initial approximation, we may say that, when an agent is engaged in a dialectical activity, she pursues a good whose exact content cannot properly be discerned from the outside; it is only through one's actual engagement with this activity that its value may gradually be apprehended.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Brewer, T., *The Retrieval of Ethics*, pp. 37-39 and 41-45.

The value we are concerned with cannot be merely instrumental upon some further value or good, for dialectical activities are experienced as valuable regardless of some further, independent goal or motivation. This sort of activity certainly includes a sense of an ongoing commitment and, therefore, a perception of an intimate relation between the present activity the agent may be engaged in and some other activities that she – or some other – may have developed in the past or will deploy in the future. The crucial point is that this experienced relation between past, present and future activities is to be regarded as constitutive of one's present activity and not as relying on a merely instrumental link between them. Of course, given the deep cultural entrenchment of the received view, we will be systematically tempted to make sense of any given activity in merely instrumental terms and, more specifically, in terms of a certain combination of desires and beliefs. We will thus be reluctant to accept that there should really be any activity that could be properly identified as dialectical. This is why Brewer makes an effort to elaborate on a number of cases that – at least, at first sight – may resist a merely instrumental evaluation. One such case is the experience of being fully present in a conversation.<sup>22</sup> Let us examine what this experience may look like and how it relates to the lengthy conversations that are so abundant in *The Castle*.

The first chapters in this novel include a number of extended conversations between K. and one or another villager. These conversations are mainly presented in direct speech, as if the narrator would like to withdraw and place the reader in a position to judge by her own lights.<sup>23</sup> In such conversations K. is always alert, suspicious of his eventual interlocutor, whose attitude he always interprets as manifesting a devastating blend of ill-will, stubbornness and stupidity. By contrast, he regards himself as a free, rational agent that generously displays his reasons before whoever happen to be his interlocutor.<sup>24</sup> But people in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 40, 84–88 and 92–96.

<sup>23</sup> See the various conversations that are related in chapters 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7.

<sup>24</sup> K. replies to the landlord of the Bridge Inn: “First I must find out what kind

the village also mistrust K.; after all, he is just a stranger who quite arrogantly dares to challenge their views about the procedures and laws that rule the life in the village and, in the end, in the castle.<sup>25</sup>

K.'s claims in these conversations are not based on any specific empirical evidence concerning what he might have seen or experienced either in the castle or in the village, since he was just a new arrival. The points he makes and the views he defends rely on logic together with a number of assumptions about human and social life that he apparently regards as relevant to this new, unknown context and, therefore, to any context.<sup>26</sup> The innkeeper, the mayor, the

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of wok they want me to do. For instance, If I'm to work down here, then it would be more sensible for me to stay down here too. And in addition, I'm afraid that living up in the castle wouldn't agree with me. I always prefer to be a free agent." (Kafka, F., *The Castle*, p. 9) K. considers the letter that Barnabas has just delivered to him: "It was not all of piece; there were passages where he was addressed as a free agent whose autonomy was recognized, for instance in the opening greeting and the part about his requirements. But then again, there were passages in the letter where he was openly or by implication addressed as a common labourer, hardly worthy even to be noticed by the chief executive of Office X." (ibid., p. 24) Similarly: "Such apparent helpers as these, however, putting on a little masquerade so as to take him to the bosom of their family rather than the castle were distracting him whether or not they meant to, working to destroy his powers." (ibid., p. 31)

<sup>25</sup> Thus, the landlady tells K.: "You spend a few days here, and already you think you know better than those who are born in the village, better than me, old woman that I am, better than Frieda who has seen and heard so much at the Castle Inn. I don't deny that it may be possible to do something that transgresses the rules and the good old customs [...] although it certainly isn't done in the way you would set about it, by saying no, no, all the time, relying on your own mind and ignoring advice, however well intended." (ibid., p. 49, see p. 52) The mayor insists on a similar point: "'Very easily,' said the mayor. 'You have never really been in contact with our authorities. All your contacts are only apparent, but as a result of your ignorance you think that they are real.'" (ibid., p. 66, see p. 62)

<sup>26</sup> "'I have nothing to hide,' said K. 'But first let me point something out to you. Klamm forgets at once, you said. First, that seems to me most unlikely, and second, it can't be proved and is obviously nothing but a legend invented by the girlish minds of those who have been in favour with Klamm. I am surprised that you believe such a downright invention.' 'It isn't a legend,' said the landlady, 'It derives from general experience.'" (ibid., p. 77)

teacher and everyone else he meets certainly oppose his views. They are convinced he is profoundly confused about the laws that govern the life in the village and its connection with the castle and, in the end, about what is possible or impossible in each case. Still, K. straightforwardly dismisses those opposing views as the product of either confusion or ill-will. He never feels tempted to seriously ponder what his interlocutor may say, to give him or her the benefit of doubt or to question his strong convictions, for this move would have required a certain amount of trust on K.'s side and, at this stage, this seems to be alien to his position in the world.

Both parties mistrust each other regarding their good will and also their epistemic abilities. The absence of trust does not deter them from elaborating complex and often twisted lines of arguments.<sup>27</sup> One should say that mistrust fuels the stream of reasons, apparently as an attempt to overcome their mistrust by reaching a common understanding about some crucial issue. In fact, the rational artefacts that are thereby constructed hardly favor any such understanding; they contribute instead to making the situation the more confused and to increasing their mutual mistrust. A sense of normativity persists, though; they are all apparently in the game of giving and taking reasons. *We could say that the space of reasons outlined in these conversations is as entangled as the normative space emanating from the castle. In fact, these conversations seem essential to the fabric of that normative space.*

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<sup>27</sup> The numerous discussions regarding where is the castle and what is part of it have this twisted structure, at least from K.'s perspective. Whenever he is convinced that he is away from the castle, he is told that he is already in the castle; yet, when he invites people to take him to the castle, people curtly reject this possibility. Thus, Barnabas is at K.'s service and goes mysteriously to the castle in the morning but cannot take K. there (*ibid.*, pp. 16-17 and 30). The conversation where K.'s assistants are first introduced is also remarkably twisted. Are they K.'s old assistants or are they new ones? Does K.'s finally, contrary to evidence, that they are his old assistants? Are they really assistants? (*ibid.*, p. 19) These ambiguities persist over all other conversations where K.'s assistant are present or alluded too (*ibid.*, pp. 50, 112 and 120). The same applies to several fragments of K.'s conversations with the landlady and the mayor.

At first sight, one might think that these twisted arguments only take place between K. and the villagers but not among the villagers themselves, since they appear to have quite definite views about all matters concerning their life in the village, so that the detailed accounts they indulge in when conversing with K. only make sense because they are addressing a stranger who, despite his arrogance, manifests a complete ignorance of the most basic facts. At a certain stage, however, we come across a different kind of conversation. A conversation where we can get a hint that the meandering thoughts that weave K.'s initial encounters with the villagers also occupy a central role in the concerns and worries of the villagers themselves. Yet this conversation itself has a more promising structure; it points to some kind of mutual understanding and it may qualify as a full-hearted conversation, as a dialectical activity K. and Olga have engaged in.

Barnabas is allegedly K.'s messenger and Olga's brother. At some point, K. goes for a second time to Barnabas' place in order to further his interest in visiting the castle, but he is not home. He is in the castle trying to get some message for K.; while waiting for Barnabas, he initiates a long conversation with Olga, who narrates the hardships of Barnabas's job and wonders whether her brother has really achieved anything at all after so much struggle. At the beginning, K.'s attitude towards Olga is similar to his attitude regarding his previous interlocutors; he interrupts Olga constantly, he challenges her views as nonsense.<sup>28</sup> Still, Olga does not feel upset by K.'s remarks and keeps telling her story in detail. Unlike the innkeeper or the mayor, she does not express strong, general opinions, but carefully explores the nuances of each particular situation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Olga's detailed reflection on whether Barnabas will ever get an official suit (*ibid.*, pp. 153-154) or on the nature of Barnabas' dealings with the castle and, more specifically, with Klamm (*ibid.*, pp. 157-158). At some point, K. explicitly praises Olga's analysis as extremely clear: "Well, you are right in everything you tell him," said K., "you have summed it all up extremely well. How remarkably clearly you think!" (*ibid.*, p. 160)

The pains of Barnabas' job as a messenger are the consequence – as we come to know – of some incident concerning her sister Amalia. Olga relates how Amalia was sighted by an official from the castle in a festival, the way every family member behaved in the situation and how unaware they all were of what was going on until a messenger brought a letter to Amalia with a rude proposal from the official that she utterly rejected. This was the beginning of their disgrace: the messenger returning to the Castle Inn with a letter torn into scraps. In her conversation with K., Olga reflects about how else Amalia could have responded without compromising her dignity and emphasizes that no other girl in the village would have reacted like her. At this stage, we begin to hear K. listening attentively to Olga's words; throughout their long conversation, his interventions becoming shorter and shorter, almost limited to points of clarification and always in a rather cooperative mood.<sup>30</sup> It seems as if K. had finally come across someone who is ready to reveal the actual facts, the way life is actually experienced in the village, with all its uncertainties and worries, with its dependency upon the will of the authorities and the fear of being tarnished with any attitude or behavior that might be problematic in their eyes.<sup>31</sup>

Their conversation dwells then on Amalia's punishment and the difficulties in having it named and acknowledged, which is itself an essential part of the punishment insofar as it makes forgiveness impossible. This is not to say that nothing could have been done to improve the situation. Something as foggy and intangible as the punishment itself could have helped them to leave their disgrace behind, but Amalia did not allow them to accept it and no one in the family dared challenge her. She ruled over her family with her silence. This attitude contrasts with the torrents of words that seem to flood the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153, 162–163, ch. 17.

<sup>31</sup> “K. was indeed affected by all this disturbing information from Olga, but he felt it was a considerable compensation to find people here who, at least apparently, had much the same experience as he did, so that he could ally himself with them, striking up an understanding in many points, not just some, as with Frieda.” (*Ibid.*, p. 156, see pp. 203–204).

village but matches with the significant role that silence plays in the way the castle rules over the village. Silence feeds all sorts of interpretations, which are in turn articulated in terms of reasons. From time to time, a messenger delivers a letter. Some words are conveyed that, as a drop in an ocean of silence, call for further reasoning and interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Amalia's authority over the family seems to stem from her curt decision to dismiss the messenger and her subsequent silence. What else? She is also a caring daughter. This fact is repeatedly emphasized. Why should Barnabas, Olga and their parents be afraid of such a loving creature? This perplexity emphasizes the overwhelming power of silence, namely: the silence that feeds endless thoughts and conversations in the village.

What brings Olga and K. together in a conversation that advances their mutual understanding is not an initial state of reciprocal trust, but the nature of Olga's narrative that dwells in the details and does not refrain from confessing her weakness and her family's helpless actions and attitudes. This account fits quite nicely with what the reader might have already guessed about the actual relation between the villagers and the castle but K. had not yet dared confess to himself. He was eager to see order and consistency where only arbitrariness prevailed, for, otherwise, his struggle to visit the castle would have appeared as unjustified and his own position in the village the more vulnerable. But, now, we have reason to suspect that deep down in his experience K. had already perceived the sort of arbitrariness that permeates the dictates emanating from the castle and how the villagers tried to protect themselves by avoiding those who might fall in disgrace. In other words, what brings Olga and K. together is their common acknowledgement of the fundamental miseries of the life in the village or, more specifically, *the mutual recognition of how arbitrariness and fear weave the web of normative relations that constitute the space of reasons that they inhabit.*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 23–25, 162, 202.

<sup>33</sup> At the end of their conversation, K. acknowledges the bond that Olga's lucid narrative has created between them and with her family: "He declined Olga's

The question now is whether they have a chance to leave this normative space, once its arbitrariness has been mutually confessed. In this respect two questions must be raised: (a) whether it is possible to determine, from within that castle's normative space, the existence of an alternative normative space where one might breath more easily and (b) whether, in case it existed, such alternative space would be accessible from where one stands. In fact, the sense in which K. and Olga have managed to transcend the existing normative space is by engaging in a cooperative conversation where they temporarily succeed in trusting each other. Even though they are able to look at it from a certain narrative perspective that shows the perversity of the castle's normative space, their lives are, nevertheless, trapped within it. They are unable to get rid of the impact that this space has had upon their agency.

So, we may conclude that Olga's conversation with K. presupposes an intimation of the good that transcends the details of any particular normative space and in terms of which the latter may be assessed, and also that they engage in an activity that we may recognize as dialectical insofar as it recreates a space of mutual understanding and cooperation inspired by this inkling of a good that transcends the specific normative space they inhabit.<sup>34</sup> But the intimation of this transcendent good is not powerful enough to engender an alternative normative framework for their lives. Their conversation allows them to point out and share the inadequacies of the normative space they inhabit, but this seems to be – there is no hint in the novel that it

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suggestion that he might stay the night here and wait for Barnabas; so far as he was concerned he might have accepted, for it was late, and it seemed to him that now, whether he liked it or not, he was so bound to this family that even if it might be awkward for other reasons, staying the night here was the most natural thing in the world for him because of the bond between them.” (Ibid., p. 203, see p. 204)

<sup>34</sup> An independent conception of the good is also presupposed in K.'s dealings with the villagers about the rules that govern the different aspects of their life in the village; otherwise, there would not be any basis for interpretation. Still, the idea of a conception of the good that might serve to challenge this normative space emerges in K.'s conversation with Olga.



could be otherwise – the only normative space they *can* inhabit. At this stage, it is clear that a Kantian attempt to articulate one's agency in terms of one's faithfulness to some set of principles, to a normative space, that one autonomously endorses, will be of no avail, for it presupposes the existence of a gulf between the inner and the outer that the previous remarks have called into question.<sup>35</sup> Kantian approaches contrast, on the one hand, the outer that natural sciences study with the inner where our agency is supposed to have its site and, in this respect, they seem to honour the absolute conception of reality as much as the received view does. Kantian approaches differ, however, from the latter in the way the inner thus demarcated is to be conceived of, for Kantian approaches, unlike the received view, are assumed to rely on some normative constraints to individuate our agency. A crucial issue is that such normative constraints must differentiate an autonomous from a heteronomous law, that is, a law that comes from one's agency from a law that is imposed from the outside. My previous emphasis on the idea that the inner and the outer are inextricably interwoven in K.'s experience should thus be interpreted as a challenge to the availability of this distinction so crucial to a Kantian approach. In any event, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of this issue.

In any event, Brewer may be right in pointing out how our agency -and, therefore, the corresponding rationalizing explanations- require a certain conception of the good and the valuable, and also that this conception goes beyond what any normative space may have actually

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<sup>35</sup> See Corbí, J. E., *Morality, Self-Knowledge and Human Suffering*, 2012, pp. 41–42, for a detailed characterization of what I understand by a Kantian approach. There, I focus mainly on constructivist views such as: Rawls, J., *A Theory of Justice*; Rawls, J., *Justice as Fairness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2001; Rawls, J., *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005; Korsgaard, C., *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996; and Korsgaard, C., *Self-Constitution. Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009. But some of my fundamental points apply to Scanlon, T., *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1998; and Darwall, S., *The Second-Person Standpoint*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2009 as well.

determined as such, as K.'s conversation with Olga suggests. Still, it is unclear whether this understanding may suffice to let our lives be inspired by this transcendent conception of the good rather than be confined to the normative space we actually inhabit.

Moreover, if this normative space is articulated the way Olga's conversation with K. suggests, some may reply that the received view about rationalizing explanations is after all correct, at least inasmuch as the third-person perspective is concerned. In fact, fear has come up in our analysis as the touch stone of the way we weave our normative space. It is fear that fuels the stream of reasons and induces us to engage in a continuous interpretation of the authorities' silences and short messages. But, if it is fear that ultimately accounts for our behaviour in the normative space, the received view seems to be right after all. This line of reasoning neglects, though, two crucial points that have already been highlighted. Firstly, that the received view of the outer, that is, the idea of an entirely consistent world beyond one's experience, can also be construed as the product of K.'s need to preserve his self-conception as a free agent. And, secondly, we must remember rationalizing explanations involve some fundamental asymmetries between the first-person and the third-person perspectives. And it is part of the genealogy of the castle's normative space that Olga and K. outline that fear itself induces us to keep it out of sight, that is, to disguise it under the shape of our credulity to the authorities; in other words, we create a normative space in an exercise of self-deception fed by our own fear. So, it seems that fear cannot be the way agents themselves make sense of their actions, even if it were true that fear is the ultimate motivation behind their need to believe that they inhabit a reasonable normative space. But it is only in this space that we recognize our own agency contrary to what the received view claims.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Moran, R., *Authority and Estrangement. An Essay on Self-Knowledge*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001, p. 79; and Sartre, J.-P., *Being and Nothingness*, transl. by S. Richmond, Routledge, London 2003, part II, sec. 1.

#### 4. Conclusion

The received view about rationalizing explanations regards the inner as split from the outer. An agent's motivational states are exclusively composed of her desires and no room is left for the question as to whether what she actually desires is worth-desiring, since the world -as the received view conceives of it- is dispossessed of any evaluative properties. In section 1, I have sketched how some elements in *The Castle* may favor this view about our agency. Firstly, because K.'s craving to reach the castle may appear as ultimately unmotivated and, secondly, because K. presents himself as a land surveyor, that is, as someone whose job presupposes the idea of a world that can be mapped. Moreover, the idea of a map allows a number of perspectives that can be projected onto each other and this squares quite nicely with the idea of a world deprived of evaluative properties and, therefore, with a conception of the outer as entirely independent of the inner.

In section 2, a more careful examination of *The Castle* has led me to revisit the gulf between the inner and the outer. Regarding the inner, I have argued that the peculiarity of K.'s craving to reach the castle calls for an explanation, that is, for an inkling of the good that he might thereby obtain, for, otherwise, we would perceive K. as rather limited in his agency. In fact, part of what keeps the story alive in *The Castle* is the search of this explanation that, in turn, presupposes a notion of the good or the important that the agent confronts or encounters. It follows that K.'s agency cannot be fully apprehended without an encounter or confrontation with a sense of the good that lies outside the agent, in the outer. Regarding the latter, I have stressed how the castle does not simply designate a certain physical space, but also a normative and an emotional domain in ways that are inextricably intermingled. It follows that there is no way in which we could neatly differentiate the inner from the outer in the world K. inhabits. His attitudes, fears and deliberations are structured by the world but the world, insofar as it is composed of an amalgam of physical, normative and emotional domains is also shaped by the fears and aspirations of its inhabitants. I thus concluded

that, contrary to what the received view assumes, in the world that K. inhabits there is no way in which the inner and the outer can be kept apart. It follows that, if rationalizing explanations are to be articulated for his actions, they cannot intelligibly square with the received view about them.

In section 3, I have introduced Brewer's notion of dialectical activity and argued that, even though most conversations in *The Castle* do not qualify as such, a certain conversation appears to meet the demands that are specific of this kind of activity, namely: the dialogue between Olga and K. over the disgrace that has fallen upon Barnabas' family. The mutual understanding that they reach springs from their readiness to confess their misery and confusion or, more specifically, from their capacity to acknowledge that misery and fear weave the web of normative relations that constitute the space of reasons that they inhabit. And, yet, their confession does not allow them to leave this normative space, not even to have a proper view of what an alternative way of life may consist in. So, it seems that the notion of dialectical activity may help us to have an inkling of what is missing in their lives, but engaging in this kind of activity does not suffice to pave the way towards an alternative normative space where agency could be more fully developed. And, in this respect, Brewer's alternative approach does favour an understanding of a notion of the good that exceeds what any particular normative space may establish, but provides no way out for the normative space where Olga and K. are trapped.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> I must thank Edgar Maragat for his detail remarks on an earlier version of this paper. I am also indebted to the audience in *The XII. Prague Interpretation Colloquium on The Power of Analysis and the Impossibility of Understanding. Lessons from Kafka* (Prague, April 24–26, 2017) for their insightful questions. I am finally pleased to acknowledge that research for this paper has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (PID2019-106420GA-I00, FFI2016-75323-P, and FFI2014-55256-REDT).

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