Munich Social Science Review, vol. 1 (2017)

The Meaning of Meaning of Kafka: A Comment on „Nowhere to Go Kafka, A Philosophical Study", by Timo Airaksinen

Cătălin Avramescu

Department of Political Science, University of Bucharest
Bucharest 030774, Romania
avramescu@me.com

Abstract: The paper examines Kafka's elements of a theory of meaning. It presents evidence Kafka's construction of meaning is, indeed, problematic and that, as Airaksinen has pointed out, the text breaks open an open horizon of interpretations. It argues, at the same time, that the proper context to understand the experimental and negative approach on meaning in Kafka is that of the philosophies of meaning developed at the end of the 19th century.

Keywords*:* meaning, recognition, ambiguity, rhetoric, guilt, punishment

1. The problem with Kafka

The problem with Kafka, in plain words, is this: how to understand individuals who do not appear to understand themselves. There are two possible strategies. One is to uncover meaning where there seems to be none or little, to find it above or alongside the text, to read between the lines. Meaning is always expected in the author or the reader, even when we do not anticipate it from characters of the plot. It is a species of desire, an "interpretive urge" (Milman 1993: 270), not to give up, to search for meaning.

ISSN 0170-2521
ISBN 978-3-88278-310-0
www.accedoverlag.de

The other strategy is to abandon this search for meaning altogether. Or, at the very least, to consider the concept as problematic in the respective context. This is what Timo Airaksinen does in his penetrating essay on Kafka. This approach belongs to an interpretive paradigm illustrated, among others, by Albert Camus: "It is the fate and perhaps the greatness of that work [*The Tria*l] that it offers everything and confirms nothing" (Camus 1991 [1942]: 138).

There is evidence in Kafka's main works, I believe, that supports this approach. His characters seem to have a hard time understanding their situation and the significance of their own actions. The traveller had "little interest" (Kafka 2009c:74) in the explaining of the execution machine employed in the *Penal Colony*. The soldier was "paying no attention" either (Kafka 2009c:77) – why should he? He did not understand French anyway. When the mechanism is in motion, one can hardly make oneself understood because of the squeaks. The body of the condemned man is tied face down, so that no facial expression is visible. He does not know the sentence, he will only feel it. The problem is that nobody seems to know the rationale of the sentencing. The punishment is decided by the mysterious "diagrams" left by the old commandant, a "maze of crisscrossing lines" (Kafka 2009c:82). The machine breaks down in the end, its smooth operation has been entirely an "illusion" (Kafka 2009c:97). The traveler could find no meaning in this: "not a sign of the promised deliverance was to be discovered; what all the others had found in the machine, the officer had not found" (Kafka 2009c:98).

2. Misunderstandings

The Trial, as one critic has formulated it, betrays Kafka's despair of the "impotence of the written word" (Dowden 2011: 100). The whole process is a charade. The merchant complains to K about the meaningless work done by his five lawyers: "'I suspect you don't understand that?' 'No, I don't,' said K." (Kafka 2009b:126). Communication between characters is in tatters. Conversing with an Italian, K realized that he could only understand bits and pieces (he speaks a regional dialect). Disorderly eroticism is everywhere, even in contexts which are most inappropriate. A woman is molested in court (though, curiously, the public does not seem to mind). Absurdly, there are lewd scenes in a judge's book. In this confusion, K arrives at a point where even he is unsure about his innocence: ""I'm guiltless or at least not quite as guilty as they thought" (Kafka 2009b:23).

In *The Castle*, there is a "stupid, ordinary misunderstanding" (Kafka 2009a:30) that K falls victim to. The visual representation is constantly

blurred. The Castle has no clear, stable, contours, while Klamm, the secretary, has an elusive physical appearance (Duttlinger 2007: 238-239).

Airaksinen argues, on strength of this evidence, that Kafka's text is structured by ambiguity and, as such, does not allow for a "consensual interpretation". Instead, each reader can approach the text without committing to a "given interpretation". Kafka's strategy, accordingly, is a studied attempt to steer clear of a fixed meaning.

A professor of philosophy influenced by the analytical school, Timo Airaksinen displays a constant preoccupation with the analysis of meaning and ambiguity. In *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (1991), he analyses the "ambiguity of vice" and the "grammar of violence". In the Sadean universe, "although man is part of nature, man and nature are totally independent of each other… the contrast between creation and destruction is taken up and found to be meaningless. A natural ethic leads man to desperation and apathy" (Airaksinen 1991:62). In the essay on Kafka, he tackles a similarly paradoxical task: to uncover the "structures of ambiguity".

Two linguistic tropes define, according to Airaksinen, these structures – Meeting and Visiting. This points towards a philosophy of recognition, a field that was developed, among others, by Paul Ricœur in *The Course of Recognition* (2005), or by Axel Honneth, in *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (1995). The three writings of Kafka, as interpreted here, remind us of the possibility and the failures of recognition. The social network is revealed as a parody of itself, as social life becomes a series of irregular meetings laden with anxiety that are so strange that there are hardly words to describe them. Airaksinen could have added that this anxiety is not limited to the characters: it extends to the reader, who is left to reconcile the cognitive dissonance produced by the conflict between the feeling of extreme unreality and the extreme precision of representation. This is a possible definition of horror (Sizermore 1977: 381-385 and 388).

3. The visits

Three "visits" are analyzed, in turn, by Airaksinen, who is distinctly fascinated by the logic – or the lack of it – of the collisions between characters who reveal a serious lack of inner consistency. The first visit is that of Sortini, the castle official who visits the valley. A high official descends to the level of the peasants. While so doing, he creates anxiety and disturbs in subtle ways the lives of others. The encounters are brief; therefore, the peasants cannot recognize for sure whom they met and why.

The relationship with Amalia is especially interesting. Sortini's visit is the origin of a succession of false acts of recognition which led to the

precarious restructuring of the social world of Amalia's family. The story reveals itself in the end as fundamentally ambiguous, since the village and the villagers belong, literally, to the castle. They, as belongings, cannot have any desire towards the high official.

The second visit analyzed by Airaksinen is that of Klamm, the "monstrously ambiguous character without an identity". The villagers cannot be sure even that the character in question is indeed Klamm. The signs he leaves behind are confusing. The bottle of cognac K found in his sleigh seems an appropriate drink for such a high official. Tasted by different individuals, the drink appears to have no fixed properties. In the end, it appears to have been just a bottle of cheap booze, not exactly suitable to the character of Klamm. His behavior is similarly confusing, as confusing are also the impressions and the reactions of the villagers. The episode is framed by Kafka, I think, as a sample of pseudo-judicial reasoning. Airaksinen could have pointed out here the influence of the newly emerging science of criminology in the construction of Kafka's *écriture*. Ritchie Robertson shows, in his Introduction to *The Trial*, that Kafka attended, at the University of Vienna, the lectures of the Austrian criminologist Hanns Gross (Kafka2009b:xxii). The great text of the new science of the criminal is, of course, *L'uomo delinquente* (Criminal Man, 1875) of Cesare Lombroso. The criminal character, the scientists claim, is betrayed by a set of traits that can and should be deciphered. Except that for Kafka the abundance of interpretation amounts to a persistent uncertainty about the indentations of the characters.

The third visit is that of Josef K of *The Trial*. Here, the crucial ambiguity is that of the name of the crime Josef K allegedly committed. The only certainty is the guilt. Punishment is never mentioned. It is not even clear to whom Josef K should speak to, therefore he visits a series of individuals who turn out to be the wrong people. My inclination, unlike Airaksinen who is concerned at this turn mostly with the meaning and the strategies of the interactions between the actors of the social drama, is to focus on the problem of the nature of the crime. The lack of definition is the key. Guilt, sin, punishment: these all require a set of representations. Representations, in turn, rely on names. Or do they always? Aristotle claims that there are crimes "so great and terrible that no living man could be suspected of them; here too no precautions are taken… but no one takes precautions against a disease that nobody has ever had" (*Rhetoric* I, 12). Josef K experiences the guilt, but he cannot spell out – nobody can, as it turns out – the name of the crime. One of the women, Fräulein Bürstner, an aspiring law secretary, observes: "It must be a serious crime if they set a commission of inquiry on someone straight away". (Kafka 2009b:23).

4. Philosophies of the meaning of words and actions

My modest proposal, then, is that Kafka's highly experimental work should be understood in the context of the formation of the philosophies of the meaning of words and actions. Perception, understanding, intention and other concepts are challenged through innovatory analytical tools such as the analysis of language and various thought experiments.

Around the time Kafka wrote *In the Penal Colony* (1914), *The Trial* (written 1914-1915) and *The Castle* (1926), the exploration of the meaning of meaning was already underway. Gottlob Frege introduced, in 1892, the distinction between Sense (*Sinn*) and Reference (*Bedeutung*). In *On Denoting* (1905), Bertrand Russell proposed the theory of description which included a discussion of the problem of non-referring descriptions. "The present King of France is bald" is a phrase that may be denoting, but in fact it does not denote anything (Russell 1905:479). In *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), William James advances a theory of truth rooted in the relativity of the individual experience. For James, "truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events" (James, 1909:2-3). *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) of C.K. Ogden and I.A Richards add a theory of context.

Phenomenology also played a visible role in these developments. Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*, 1900; 2nd edition, 1913) explores themes like mental states, intentionality or evidence. In the field of the philosophy of language Alexius Meinong studies, in *Über Gegenstandstheorie* (1904), the status of non-existing objects such as the unicorn. Jaakko Hintikka will later note: "If you ask 'Where are the non-existent objects?' the answer is, 'Each [one] in its own possible world.'" (Hintikka 1989:40).

Possibly the most significant name for our purposes is that of Wittgenstein. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), he formulates a naming theory of meaning: "A name means [*bedeutet*] an object. The object is its meaning" (Wittgenstein 1922:3.203). Wittgenstein has also investigated the subject of the limitations of the language. In literature, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), written by Lewis Carroll (alias of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, professor of formal logic), announces a period of a creative interplay of words and objects. In his influential *Principia Ethica* (1903), G.E. Moore insists on the indefinability of "good" and criticizes the "naturalistic fallacy" (Moore 1903:38).

Kafka is known to have displayed an interest in the new philosophy since he was a law student in Prague. He was a member of a circle, originally meeting at Café Louvre, where the theories of Franz Brentano were examined. The meetings were attended, among others, by Albert Einstein and Christian von Ehrenfels, the founder of the *Gestalt*

psychology. In addition to philosophy, the new science of the analysis unconscious developed by Sigmund Freud was also discussed (Ryan 1991:100-101).

Airaksinen steers his inquiry in an altogether different direction, towards the micro-analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed by Kafka. He further sub-divides the visit of Josef K in three other events. One is that of the Preliminary Hearing, where the central issue is revealed to be that of unknowability of the legal system. His file is on the table of the magistrate, but Josef K is unable or unwilling to do anything but pick it up with the tips of two fingers and then drop it; he calls it "a closed book to me" (Kafka 2009b:34).

5. Kafka's universe of exceptions

What is described here by Kafka is a universe without rules. Or, rather, one where the only rule is the exception. Josef K is late and therefore the magistrate is no longer obliged to question him. "Exceptionally", though, he consents to do so. Symmetrically, Josef K replies he only recognizes the (irregular) proceedings "out of pity" (Kafka 2009b:33-34).

Secondly, is the meeting with the Court Painter. Titorelli explains to Josef K the legal strategies available. The result adds another layer of ambiguity: genuine acquittal, apparent acquittal, and protraction of the proceedings. The problem is, the first one is not feasible, therefore Titorelli advises not to aim for it. Taking a leaf from analytical philosophy, Josef K points out that Titorelli contradicts his own narrative. What the painter suggests is that the court might be convinced of Josef K's innocence only outside the framework of the trial. "It's quite a different matter with things of that kind that are tried behind the back of the public court, so to speak, that is, in the interview rooms, in the corridors, or, for example, here in the studio" (Kafka 2009b:108). In the end, however, the judges Titorelli is speaking about do not have the right to release the accused from the charges. The judicial system, then, is characterized by undecidability.

Thirdly, there is the Priest in the Cathedral. The door functions as metaphor: Josef K is in search of forgiveness, while at the same time he stands accused to have crossed a threshold, the law, that he still cannot understand. It emerges that this understanding is not necessary, though. The priest explains: "You misunderstand the situation… the verdict does not come all of a sudden, the proceedings gradually turn into the verdict" (Kafka 2009b:152). The loss of meaning is total. Josef K is doomed: "The court does not want anything from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go" (Kafka 2009b:160). In the end, he is stabbed in the heart by the executioners.

This episode of the door must have had a special significance for Kafka, as it was the only section of *The Trial* published during his lifetime, as a separate text (*Vor dem* Gesetz, "Before the Law", 1915), in the Jewish weekly *Selbstwehr* ("Self-Defense"). This is the journal most frequently referred to by Kafka himself (Binder 1967:135). The door functions as a sort of illogical operator scattered in the text of *The Trial*. The lawyers, unable to attend the proceedings, wait outside the door to gather from the defendants "very hazy reports" that might appear useful (Kafka 2009b:82). The door at Titorelli's studio is "brightly lit" (Kafka 2009b:101); it is used by hybrid beings – a group of girls whose expressions showed "a mixture of childishness and depravity" – to spy on Josef K.

Airaksinen reconstructs this sequence as a step by step transformation from self-confident rage to self-doubt and, finally, the acceptance of one's fate. Josef K finds himself in a position of radical strangeness. He does not belong to the law; therefore, he is unable to comprehend what happens. The philosophically-laden concept of "comprehension" is thus essential to Airaksinen's analysis. Josef K oscillates, in his ambiguous identity, between the comprehending the form and non-comprehending the substance of his guilt.

At the end of this process, Airaksinen claims, there is "a kind of solution, which is resignation and felt indifference… The solution to the metaphysical ambiguity is indifference learned through *mimesis*". In this state of apathy, Josef K is killed, in his own words, "like a dog" (Kafka 2009b:165). Death – social death for Amalia and actual death for Josef K – is the (unknowable) solution to this riddle.

References

Airaksinen, T. (1995), *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade*, London: Routledge.

Aristotle (1954), *Rhetoric*, trans. by Rhys W. Roberts, in *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol.11. Oxford: Clarendon.

Binder, H. (1967), *Franz Kafka and the Weekly Paper "Selbstwehr"*, *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 12 (1): 135–148.

Camus, A. (1991), *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. by J. O'Brien, London et al.: Vintage.

Dowden, S.D. (2011), *Sympathy for the Abyss. A Study in the Novel of German Modernism: Kafka, Broch, Musil, and Thomas Mann*, Berlin: De Gruyter.

Duttlinger, C. (2007), *Kafka and Photography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hintikka, J. (1989), *The Logic of Epistemology and the Epistemology of Logic*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

James, W. (1909), *The Meaning of Truth*, New York: Longmans, Green and Company.

Kafka, F. (2009a), *The Castle*, trans. A. Bell, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kafka, F. (2009b), *The Trial*, trans. B. Mitchell, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kafka, F. (2009c), "In the Penal Colony," in: *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. by J. Crick, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Milman, Y. (1993), "The ambiguous point of view and reader involvement in Kafka: A reader oriented approach to the castle and "in the penal colony," *Neophilologus* 77: 261-277.

Moore, G.E. (1903), *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sizemore, C.W. (1977), "Anxiety in Kafka: A Function of Cognitive Dissonance," *Journal of Modern Literature* 6: 380-388.

Russell, B. (1905), "On Denoting," *Mind*, N.S.14: 479-493.

Ryan, J. (1991), *The Vanishing Subject. Early Psychology and Literary Modernism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wittgenstein, L., (1922 [1921]), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by C. Ogden, London: Routledge