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Inhuman Rationalism, or Human Sentimentalism: How Kafka's *Metamorphosis* reveals to us what is and isn't human.

One of the most interesting aspects of the human experience is simply the varied ways in which it can be contextualized and understood. Many writers, for example, have captured poignant aspects of being human through unconventional and surprising stories. Franz Kafka, in his classic work *The Metamorphosis* explored deeply human themes surrounding alienation, family, and identity – but he explored such themes through a thoroughly surreal narrative. *The Metamorphosis* opens with its main character, Gregor Samsa, waking up in the body of a giant insect; the entire rest of the story centers on him, and his immediate family, dealing with such a change. Such a setup may appear, to some readers, to be too absurdist and unrealistic to be of any value for understanding the human person. Indeed, Gregor's experiences are very detached from common human experiences. But does that mean that his story is unable to comment on broad human experience? I do not believe that to be the case. In this essay, I will argue that Gregor's metamorphosis ironically emphasizes and heightens his humanity, while the reactions of his family reveal their inhumanity.

Some readers may believe that Gregor becomes less human after his transformation; such readers will consequently believe that the story as a whole has little value in commenting on the human experience, as it does not center on a thoroughly human character. Gregor does spend the

entire story in the distinctly inhuman body of an insect, and we do see his tastes and habits change after his body changes. Early in the story, Gregor finds that he no longer enjoys the taste of milk – which was previously his favorite drink; he later finds that he cannot enjoy any fresh food, but prefers old cheese and meat (Kafka, Pages 1006, 1007). His new tastes appear to be very animalistic. Readers might also find some of his new habits to be distinctly animalistic. For example, Gregor grows to find it pleasurable to hang from his room’s ceilings. He finds that doing this makes him feel a “happy absentmindedness” (Kafka, 1012). Later, after he accidentally induces a panic attack in his mother and escapes from his room, Gregor becomes incredibly anxious, and satiates his anxiety by crawling about the house (Kafka, 1015). Though we would not typically attribute anthropological verbiage of ‘happiness’ or ‘anxiety’ to describe insect experiences, all these habits of Gregor can be contextualized as purely animalistic. Insects will often rest on ceilings, as such places are generally safe from predators. Insects will also scamper about quickly when afraid. Though the narration makes it clear that Gregor still possesses rational thought after his transformation, it does seem at some points that he is more guided by his animalistic instincts than he is by his rational capacities. Some readers may conclude, then, that *The Metamorphosis* has little value in exploring the human experience, since its main character does not even behave like a human.

While it is inarguable that some aspects of Gregor’s character changes as a result of his metamorphosis, I do not believe that such changes substantially deemphasize his inhumanity. Most of his behavioral changes are very superficial, and some of his ‘insect’ habits are equally analogous to human habits. Tastes in food are very superficial and say little about one’s overall character. In fact, Gregor “shed... tears of gratification” while eating the food he enjoys (Kafka, 1007). Insects are physically incapable of crying, and only humans cry as a way of expressing

emotions. So, this scene ultimately serves to emphasize Gregor's humanity, more than undermining it. Gregor also enjoys hanging from the ceiling for purely sensual reasons: it is said that being up there allowed him to "breath more freely" and that a "gentle swaying motion rocked the body." (Kafka, 1012). Sensual enjoyment is, likewise to taste, largely superficial. Finally, it is not just insects that scamper about when scared, such actions are equally common among humans. So, Gregor's panicked crawling after his mother fainted can be equally attributed to his inward humanity as it can be to his insect body. This is just one example of a very common motif throughout *The Metamorphosis*: Gregor's actions may be somewhat-colored by his insect-body, but they still remain, fundamentally, guided by his inner humanity. For example, late in the novella, the Samsa family develops the habit of opening the door to Gregor's room late at night, so he could listen to their discussions. When one of these discussions turned to an argument, Gregor became so displeased that he "hissed loudly in fury" while listening – this was because his family did not think to shut his door to save him from the sight (Kafka, 1019). Loud hissing may appear strikingly inhumane and animalistic, but the guiding reason for Gregor's hissing is inarguably sentimental and human: he does not want to see his family suffer. So it is clear that Gregor remains, throughout the entire story, a thoroughly human character. Some superficial parts of his identity do change, but, as we shall see, those changes ultimately serve to emphasize his humanity, rather than undermining it.

While Gregor always retains his inner sense of humanity, the primary way the novella displays his humanness is somewhat surprising. Gregor, consistently and constantly, manifests his humanity to the reader through his emotions and sentiments. A striking example of this occurs midway through the novella, when Gregor's sister, Grete, asks her mother for help removing furniture from Gregor's room. Grete presumes that this will make Gregor happier, as

he will have more space to crawl around freely. While Gregor initially likes this idea, he changes his mind upon hearing his mother argue that moving the furniture would dehumanize Gregor's room. Something about his mother's reasoning clearly resonated deeply with Gregor:

Hearing his mother's words, Gregor realized that the absence of all direct human address... must have muddled his understanding..., for he could not otherwise explain to himself how he could seriously have wished to have his room emptied out. Did he really want to have this warm room, comfortably furnished with family heirlooms, transformed into a cave or den...? (Kafka, 1013)

Gregor's thoughts here are very understandable and relatable – what person would find an unfurnished room to be more livable than a furnished one? But, it is important to note, his thoughts here are much more sentimental than they are rational. A preference for furnished rooms is, ultimately, an aesthetic preference; one would be hard-pressed to give a rational reason for why furnished rooms are 'better' than unfurnished rooms. Traditionally, the dividing line between man and animal has been set as our unique capacity for rational thought. Human emotions are then regarded, at least subconsciously, as being base and animalistic. Kafka subtly upsets these traditional notions, however, by allowing Gregor's emotions to be the primary illuminator for his humanity. It is impossible to imagine any animal displaying the emotional depth that Gregor does here. A very similar scene occurs near the end of the novella, when Gregor is drawn out from his room by the sound of his sister playing her violin. Again, thoroughly sentimental language is used to show Gregor's humanity: "[Gregor's] sister's playing was so lovely. Her face was tilted to one side; searchingly, sadly, her eyes followed the lines of the notes... was [Gregor] a beast that music so moved him?" (Kafka, 1022). This scene is clearly written from Gregor's perspective, so it was he who was focusing on the emotional state of his

sister. Once again, Gregor's capacity for feeling and perceiving emotions illuminates his humanity. Even an affectionate dog could not be expected to perceive the emotional state of his master in the same way that Gregor does here with his sister. That he questioned if his desire for the music was beastlike is surprising, however. No beast could be moved by music like Gregor was. That he thinks this, then, suggests that he was raised with a different notion for what is 'base' and what is 'human.'

Gregor's family frequently serves to contrast the sentimental humanity of Gregor. Whereas Gregor displays an emotional depth that is unmistakably human, his family displays a rigid degree of rationality that, paradoxically, ends up appearing animalistic. The aforementioned scene involving Grete's music serves as a perfect case study of this contrast. Whereas Gregor is drawn outside simply by his love of the music and his sister, his family sees the music in purely pragmatic terms. At this point, due to impoverishment, the family was forced to sell rooms in their apartment to lodgers. It is heavily suggested that Grete's violin playing was thought of, at least by her father, as a way to appease these lodgers. He states to the lodgers before Grete starts playing that if the lodgers were disturbed by the playing "it can be silenced at once." (Kafka, 1021). Even after they agree to hear her play, the father continues to anxiously observe them, presumably worried that they will be disappointed by it (Kafka, 1021). The contrast between how Gregor sees the music, and how his father sees it, could not be greater. Gregor sincerely loves his sister and is drawn to her talents. His father uses her talent as merely a way to appease lodgers. Carroll Cantrell, author of the essay "The Metamorphosis: 'Kafka's Study of A Family'" summarized the violin scene in this way: "For a brief moment [Gregor] experiences a bliss which lies outside the Samsa realm of possibility—**he enjoys something for its own sake.**" (Cantrell, 583) [Emphasis Added]. Gregor's family shows this hostility towards this type of enjoyment

throughout the entire story. They clearly exploit Gregor's good-will and willingness to provide for them (Kafka, 1006). Their chief concern, immediately following his metamorphosis, is how to financially respond to it (Kafka, 1008). Their utility-centric mindset is even more evident with Grete, however. After the metamorphosis, Grete takes a leading role in feeding Gregor. This prompts her parents to regard her with more respect than they previously did:

During the first fortnight. Gregor's parents could not bring themselves to enter his room, and often he heard them expressing their heartfelt appreciation of his sister's labor, whereas earlier they had often been annoyed with her, since she had seemed to them a rather useless girl. (Kafka, 1011)

There is something almost comical about Grete's parents regarding their young daughter as useless. All young children are useless! One severely misunderstands the proper beauty of parenthood by regarding that as a bad thing. But it is important to note that, in at least one sense, the Samsa parents' selfishness can be understood as being *rational*. They can give a reason for why they are exploiting Gregor, for why they are so concerned with finances, for why they are annoyed with Grete. In fact, the ability *to give a reason for* seems to be their automatic test for gauging a thing's worth. This needs to be contrasted with Gregor's sentimental experiences with beauty. Gregor appears deeply human because of his emotional depth. The Samsa parents appear deeply animalistic because of their cold-hearted rationalism. Animals will exploit each other, and worry entirely about their own survival. While animals clearly cannot think rationally, they do appear to *act* rationally. The Samsa parents, then, end up acting animalistically. Gregor's emotional depth, however, is unfounded in the animal world. Kafka is then turning around the traditional paradigm of emotion and reason. The truly human character in his novella is deeply emotional in his actions, while the truly brutish characters act from cold reason.

While Gregor's sentimental depth contrasts starkly to his parents' cold rationality, there is one character who seems to exist at the crossroads of the two extremes: Grete Samsa. At different points in the story, she reveals a capacity for living both realities, and the story's conclusion seems to hinge, at least in one sense, in which reality she will choose to adopt as her own. Soon after Gregor's metamorphosis, Grete seems to volunteer as the one to feed him. She is first attentive to bring him milk – his favorite food in his previous body, and then brings out “an assortment of foodstuffs” to help gauge his newfound tastes (Kafka, 1007). Such a move is a strong display of simple, childlike goodwill. As time goes on, however, and as the situation worsened, Grete begins to behave differently. She takes on a job as a salesgirl and begins studying stenography and French “so as to possibly move up in the world.” (Kafka, 1017). This fixation with finances is all too familiar for a Samsa family member. Her treatment towards Gregor begins to change dramatically too. Now:

“[w]ithout bothering to consider how she might give Gregor particular pleasure, his sister would quickly thrust some randomly chosen foodstuff into his room with her foot on her way to work in the morning or at midday, only to sweep it out again at night with a quick swipe of the broom.” (Kafka, 1018-19)

Note the way her feeding Gregor now revolves around her work shifts. The narrator makes it explicit that she feeds Gregor quickly before going to work, whether it's morning or midday. Feeding Gregor is no longer a personal act for her, but a part of her work routine. The reader feels a sense of betrayal when she is the one to finally and definitively dehumanize Gregor, calling him an “it” and declaring that he should be gotten rid of (Kafka, 1023). Of course, Gregor resigns himself to her wish. While it is ambiguous as to whether Gregor committed suicide, or died naturally, it is explicitly said that he agreed emphatically with his sister that he needed to go

for his family to flourish (Kafka, 1025). While Gregor's metamorphosis does allow him some brief moments of emotional bliss that his family could not conceive of, he is still a product of his family, and will put their utility above his own life. Grete is also a product of her family. Contrasted to Gregor's bodily transformation, her character experiences a more complete transformation from an innocent 'useless' girl to a young woman aligned with her family's ideals. This is felt most explicitly at the story's conclusion, when Grete's parents realize that Grete had "recently blossomed into a beautiful, voluptuous girl.... [T]hey thought about how it would soon be time to find her a good husband." (Kafka, 1027). These closing lines feel somewhat unfitting with the grotesque narrative that precedes it. Criss Dante, in his essay "Animal Bachelors and Animal Brides: Fabulous Metamorphosis in Kafka and Garnett.", argues that this lack of fittingness is intentional. He writes:

The problem is that Greta's apparently natural transformation into a vivacious young woman might not eclipse the monstrosity of Gregor's, **because it might not in fact be of a different order to Gregor's.** [emphasis added]. The ending disturbs because it is an utterly unconvincing attempt at catharsis. (Dante, 135)

The ending is set up to be cathartic by having, and emphasizing, traditional tropes for a 'happily-ever-after': Grete – the character who has undergone the most character development – conquers what was hindering her, rides into the sunset (Kafka, 1027), and sees the prospects for romance ahead of her. But Grete's personal transformation might be just as monstrous as Gregor's physical transformation. The reader will also suspect that the Samsa family will not consider Grete's future marriage as an opportunity for love, but simply as an opportunity for economic development. By ending the story on Grete's metamorphosis, Kafka is suggesting that a change



far more monstrous than the one we see in his absurdist text might be happening in reality, when young children are trained to reject wholesome warmheartedness for cold rationality.

In this essay, I have argued that Gregor is, in fact, not the most inhuman character in *The Metamorphosis*. I have shown how he his humanity comes on display through his emotional range, and how such displays contrast with his family's cold, and ultimately inhuman rationalism. Finally, I used the striking example of Grete's metamorphosis to show how the Samsa family's cold rationalism can realistically spread across generations.

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