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FRANZ KAFKA

A Hunger Artist
and Other Stories

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APHORISMS

I

1. The true way passes over a rope which is not stretched high up, but just above the ground. It seems to be intended more for stumbling than for crossing.

2. All human flaws are impatience, cutting off systematic thought prematurely, seemingly fencing off the seeming issue at stake.

3. There are two cardinal human sins, from which all the others derive: impatience and apathy. On account of impatience they were driven from Paradise; on account of apathy they do not return. But perhaps there is only one cardinal sin: impatience. On account of impatience they were driven out; on account of impatience they do not return.

4. The shades of many of the departed are busy only with lapping up the river of the dead and its tides because they flow from us and still have the salt taste of our seas. The river recoils in disgust, flows backwards, and its current carries the dead back into life. They, for their part, are happy, sing hymns of thanksgiving, and gently stroke the horrified waters.

5. From a certain point on there is no return. This is the point to reach.

6. The decisive moment of human development is everlasting. That is why the intellectual revolutions that declare everything which has gone before to be null and void are right, for as yet nothing has happened.

7. One of the Evil One's most effective means of temptation is a challenge to do battle. It is like the battle with women, ending in bed.

8/9. A stinking bitch, mother of many pups, parts of her already rotting, who nevertheless meant everything to me when I was a child, a creature I cannot stop myself from thrashing, but shrink back from, step by step, even avoiding her breath, and who will, if I don't decide differently, drive me into a corner, already in sight, and with me and on top of me rot away completely, until the end—is it to my honour?—with the suppurating, worm-infested flesh of her tongue upon my hand.*

10. A has a very high opinion of himself. He believes he is far advanced in virtue because he feels that, as an increasingly attractive target, he is exposed to an increasing number of temptations from directions previously unknown to him. But the true explanation is that a great devil has taken up residence within him, and the monstrous number of smaller ones turn up to serve the great one.

11/12. Disparity of views it is possible to have of, say, an apple: the view of the small boy, who has to crane his neck just to see the apple on the table-top, and the view of the master of the house, who takes the apple and freely offers it to his guest at table.

13. One of the first signs of the beginnings of knowledge is the wish to die. This life seems unendurable, another life unattainable. One is no longer ashamed of wanting to die: one begs to be removed from the old, hated cell to a new one that one has yet to learn to hate. A remnant of faith also plays a part; during the removal the Lord will chance to come along the corridor, see the prisoners, and say: 'You are not to lock this one up again. He's coming to me.'

14. If you were crossing a plain, with the good will to get across, but all the same your steps took you backwards, it would be a matter for despair; but as you are clambering up a steep slope, as steep, say, as you yourself are viewed from below, it could also be that your steps backward are only caused by the nature of the ground, and you do not have to despair.

15. Like a path in autumn, it has hardly been swept clear before it is covered in dry leaves once more.

16. A cage went in search of a bird.
It might be conceivable that Alexander the Great, despite the successes of his youth in war, despite the splendid army he had built up, despite the powers he felt within him to change the world, might have stopped short at the Hellespont and never have crossed it, not from fear, not from indecision, not from weakness of will, but from earthly weight.

39a. The way is infinite; there is nothing to subtract, nothing to add, yet everyone still measures it by his own childish yardstick. 'Assuredly you also have this yard of the way still to walk; it will not be forgotten you.'

40. Only our concept of time makes us call the Last Judgement by that name; actually it is a drumhead court-martial.

41. It is a consolation that the imbalance of the world seems only to be numerical.

42. Sinking a head full of revulsion and hate onto one's chest.

43. The hounds are still playing in the yard, but their quarry will not escape them, however fast it is now speeding through the forest.

44. Ridiculous, the way you have put on your best harness for this world.

45. The more horses you hitch up, the faster it goes—I mean, not tearing the block out of the foundations, which is impossible, but tearing the reins and so travelling empty and joyful.

46. In German the word 'sein' means both 'being' and 'belonging to him'.

47. They were given the choice of becoming kings or the messengers of kings. As children do, they all wanted to be messengers. That is why there are nothing but messengers. They race through the world and, as there are no kings, shout their proclamations, now meaningless, to one another. They would gladly put an end to their miserable lives, but they dare not because of their oath of loyalty.

48. To believe in progress is not to believe that any progress has already happened. That would not be a belief.

49. A. is a virtuoso, and Heaven is his witness.

50. Man cannot live without an enduring trust in something indestructible in himself, though both the indestructible as well as the trust may remain for ever hidden from him.* Remaining hidden has one possible expression in the belief in a personal god.

51. The mediation of the serpent* was needed: evil can seduce man, but not become man.

52. In the duel between yourself and the world, act as second to the world.

53. One should cheat no one, not even the world of its victory.

54. There is nothing else apart from a world of the spirit; what we call the world of the senses is the evil in the spiritual world, and what we call evil is only the requirement of a moment in our eternal growth.*

By the strongest light one can dissolve the world. Seen with weak eyesight she becomes firm; with weaker, she acquires fists, seen with even weaker sight she becomes bashful and shatters the one who dares to gaze on her.

55. Everything is a cheat: trying for the least degree of deception, remaining stuck in the usual ones, trying for the highest degree. In the first instance one is cheating the good by wanting to make it easy for oneself to acquire it, and cheating evil by setting it far too unfavourable terms of battle. In the second instance one is cheating the good by not aspiring towards it, and so not even in earthly things. In the third instance one is cheating the good by removing oneself as far away as possible from it, and cheating evil by hoping that raising it to its highest pitch will make it powerless. To judge from this, the second instance is to be preferred, for one always cheats the good, but in this case not, at least so it appears, evil.
56. There are questions we couldn’t pass over, if we hadn’t been freed of them by our nature.

57. To express anything outside the world of the senses, language can only be used by way of hints and intimations, but never in any way even approaching metaphorically, for, as it corresponds to the world of the senses, it deals only with possession and its associations.

58. One lies least only when one lies least, not when one has least opportunity for lying.

59. A tread on a stairway that has not been worn down by footsteps is in its own eyes only a piece of dreary wooden carpentry.

60. Anyone who renounces the world is bound to love humankind, for he is renouncing their world too. That is how he begins to have some inkling of humankind’s true nature, which cannot but be loved, assuming that one is its equal.

61. Anyone within the world who loves his neighbour is doing no more and no less wrong than anyone who loves himself. There would remain only the question whether the first is possible.

62. The fact that there is nothing else but the world of the spirit robs us of hope and gives us certainty.

63. Our art is one of being blinded by truth; the light cast on the distorted face as it shrinks away is true, nothing else.

64. The expulsion from Paradise is in its main part eternal: so the expulsion from Paradise is indeed final, and life in the world inescapable, but the eternity of the process nevertheless makes it possible not only that we could remain in Paradise for ever, but that in fact we are there for ever, whether we know it here or not.

65. He is a free and safely tethered citizen of the earth, for he is tied by a chain which is long enough to give him free run of all earthly spaces, but only long enough for nothing to drag him across the borders of earth. But at the same time he is also a free and safely tethered citizen of Heaven, for he is also tied by a heavenly chain with similar dimensions. If he wants to reach earth, he is choked by the heavenly collar, if he wants to reach Heaven, by the earthly. And in spite of this, all possibilities are open to him, and this he can feel, indeed, he refuses to ascribe it all to an error when he was first shackled.

66. He chases after facts like a beginner learning to skate, and what is more, one who is practising on forbidden ground.

67. What is more joyful than a belief in a domestic god!

68. In theory there is one possibility of perfect happiness: to believe in the indestructible in oneself and not to strive towards it.

69. The indestructible is one; it is every individual human being, and at the same time it is common to everyone, hence the uniquely inseparable union of all humanity.*

70/71. In the same person there are insights which though utterly divergent, nevertheless still have the same object, so that the only inference that has to be drawn is that there are divergent subjects in the same person.

71. He devours the scraps that fall from his own table; that is how for a while he is more full up than everyone else, though he forgets how to eat from the table above; but that is how the scraps stop falling too.

72. If what is supposed to have been destroyed in Paradise was destructible, then it was not crucial; but if it was indestructible, then we are living in a false belief.

73. Test yourself against mankind. It makes the doubter doubt, the believer believe.

74. This feeling: 'I shan’t drop anchor here,' and immediately feeling the surging, heaving tide around one.

In reverse. Watchfully, anxiously, hopefully, the answer creeps round the question, in despair searches her unapproachable face, follows her
on the most meaningless paths, that is, the paths that lead as far away from the answer as possible.

77. Having to do with people is a temptation to self-scrutiny.

78. The spirit will only become free when it stops being used as a support.

79. Sensuous love is a deception to divert us from heavenly love; it could not do this by itself, but as it unconsciously has the element of heavenly love within it, it can.

80. Truth is indivisible, so it cannot know itself; whoever wants to know it cannot but be Lie itself.

81. Nobody can desire what deep down ultimately harms him. If nevertheless it has this appearance in certain individuals—and perhaps this is always the case—then the explanation is that somebody within the person desires something that is certainly useful to the latter, but severely harms a second somebody, who is drawn in partly to judge the case. If the person had sided with the second right at the start and not only when the judgement was made, the first somebody would have been eliminated, and with him the desire.

82. Why do we complain about the Fall? It is not on that account that we were driven out of Paradise, but on account of the Tree of Life, so that we would not eat of it.

83. We are not sinful merely because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life. It is our condition that is sinful, independently of guilt.

84. We were created to live in Paradise; Paradise was destined to serve us. Our destiny has been changed; it is not stated whether this has also happened with the destiny of Paradise.

85. Evil is an emanation of human consciousness at certain points of transition. It is not actually the world of the senses that is illusion, but its evil aspect, which, it is true, in our eyes forms the world of the senses.

86. Since the Fall we have in essentials been equal in our capacity to know good and evil; nevertheless this is the very issue where we look for our own particular points of advantage. However, it is only beyond this knowledge that the true distinctions begin. The appearance of the contrary is produced as follows: no one can be satisfied with this knowledge by itself, but has to endeavour to act in accordance with it. However, we have not also been given the strength to do this, so he has to destroy himself, even at the risk of not receiving the necessary strength even by these means, but there is nothing else left to him except this last resort. (That is also the meaning of the threat of death when it is forbidden to eat of the Tree of Knowledge; perhaps it is also the meaning of natural death.) Now, he fears this attempt; he would rather undo his knowledge of good and evil (the term 'the Fall' derives from this fear), but what has happened cannot be undone, only clouded over. It is to this end that rationalizations arise. The whole world is full of them, indeed perhaps the entire visible world is nothing else than the rationalization of humankind, desiring for the space of a moment to be at peace. An attempt to falsify the fact of knowledge, to turn knowledge only into the goal.

87. A faith like a guillotine, so heavy, so light.

88. Death is before us, rather like a picture of Alexander's battle* on the schoolroom wall. It depends on our actions in this life whether we darken or even wipe out the picture.

90. Two possibilities: to make oneself infinitely small, or to be so. The first is perfection, implying inactivity, the second beginning, implying action.

91. Towards avoiding a verbal error: what is to be destroyed by an action must have previously been held quite firmly; what crumbles away, crumbles away, but cannot be destroyed.

92. The earliest idol-worship was certainly fear of things, but related to that, fear of the necessity of things, and related to that, fear of the responsibility for the things. This responsibility seemed so vast that mankind did not dare burden even one single non-human with it, for mankind's responsibility would not be relieved sufficiently by the
mediation of merely one being; an encounter with merely one being would still be far too tainted by responsibility, and that is why they gave each thing responsibility for itself, and more than that, they also gave these things a commensurate responsibility for humankind.

93. For the last time psychology!* 

94. Two tasks set at the beginning of life: limiting your circle more and more, and constantly scrutinizing whether you haven't gone into hiding somewhere outside your circle.

95. Evil is sometimes in the hand like a tool: recognized or unrecognized, it yields without contradiction to being laid aside, if one has the will.

96. The pleasures of this life are not its own fear, but our fear of rising to a higher life; the torments of this life are not its own, but our self-torment on account of that fear.

97. Only here suffering is suffering. Not so as to suggest that those who are suffering here will be lifted up to another place on account of this suffering, but in such a way that what is called suffering in this world will, in another world, and liberated from its opposite, be bliss.

98. The idea of the infinite breadth and abundance of the cosmos is the result of the combination, driven to its utmost, of laborious creation and free self-contemplation.

99. How much more depressing than the most implacable conviction of our present sinful condition is even the weakest conviction that our temporality will be justified in eternity. Only the strength to bear this second conviction, which in its purity fully embraces the first, is the measure of faith.

There are many who assume that as well as the original great deceit there is in every case a small particular deceit set up especially for them, so that if a drama of love is being performed on the stage, the actress will also have, besides the false smile meant for her lover, another special smile behind his back intended for the quite specific spectator in the furthermost gallery. That is going too far.

100. There can be such a thing as knowledge of the diabolical, but not a belief in it, for there cannot be more of the diabolical than does exist.

101. Sin always comes openly and can be grasped immediately with the senses. It strikes at their roots and is not to be torn up.

102. All the suffering around us we too must suffer. We all have not only a body but a development, and that leads us through every pain, in one form or another. Just as a child develops through all the stages of life until old age and death (and deep down, each stage seems unattainable to the one before it, whether in fear or longing), so we develop likewise (no less deeply bound to humanity than to ourselves) through all the suffering of this world. There is no place for justice in this connection, nor for fear of suffering either, nor for interpreting suffering as merited.

103. You can withdraw from the suffering of the world. You are free to do so and it is in keeping with your nature. But perhaps this very withdrawal is the one suffering you could avoid.

104. Mankind has free will, of three kinds:

First, he was free when he willed this life; now, however, he cannot undo what he has willed, for he is no longer the person who willed it then, unless he could do so to the extent that he carries out what he willed then by living.

Secondly, he is free in being able to choose his life's path and the way he walks it.

Thirdly, he is free as the one he will once again be, who has the will to make his way through life under all circumstances, and in this manner come to himself; that is a way, it's true, which can be chosen, but in any case it is so labyrinthine that it would leave not a spot of this life untouched.

Those are the three kinds of free will, but because they are simultaneous, they are also one kind, and it is so fundamentally one kind that it has no place for a will, neither free nor unfree.
105. The means this world uses to seduce us, as well as the sign guaranteeing that this world is only a crossing-place, are the same. Rightly so, for this is the only way this world is able to seduce us, and it corresponds to the truth. But the bad thing is that after a successful seduction we forget the guarantee, and so in fact the good has led us into evil, the woman's glance has tempted us into her bed.

106. Humility gives everyone, even the lonely and despairing, the strongest relationship to his fellow man, and that immediately, though only if the humility is total and lasting. It is able to do this because it is the true language of prayer, both worship and the firmest commitment. The relation to one's fellow man is the relation of prayer, the relation to oneself is the relation of striving; it is from prayer that the strength to strive is drawn.

Is it possible then for you to know anything else but deception? Once the deception is destroyed, you will not be permitted to look at it else you will be turned into a pillar of salt.*

107. Everyone is very kind to A., rather in the way one tries to protect a billiard table even against good players, until the great player comes, examines the table keenly, refuses to put up with any hasty mistake, but then, when he begins to play himself, goes at it with utter recklessness.

108. 'But then he went back to his work as if nothing had happened.' That is a remark we are familiar with from an immense, vague number of old stories, although perhaps it does not occur in any of them.

109. 'One cannot say that we lack faith. On the other hand the simple fact of our life is utterly inexhaustible in its religious value.'

'This, you say, is a religious value? But one cannot not-live.'

'It is in this very "cannot not" that the crazy power of faith is hidden; it finds its form in this negation.'

It is not necessary for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait. Stay completely still and alone. The world will offer itself to you for unmasking; it can't help it; it will writhe before you in ecstasy.

6.1.20.

Everything he does seems extraordinarily new to him. If it didn't have this fresh vitality, it would, he knows, to judge from its intrinsic value, inevitably have come from the old slough of hell. But this freshness is deceptive, makes him forget it, or take it lightly, or admittedly see through it, but painlessly. After all, it is today, without doubt, this very day, when progress sets out to progress further.

9.1.20

Superstition and principle as means of making life possible: by way of the heaven of vice the hell of virtue is won. Superstition is simply*

A segment has been cut out of the back of his head. With the sun, the whole world can see inside. It makes him nervous; it distracts him from his work; and it annoys him that he is the one excluded from the spectacle.

The presentiment of ultimate release is not refuted if the next day one's captivity still remains unchanged or is even harsher, nor yet if it is expressly declared that it is meant to have no end. All this may form the necessary prior condition of ultimate release.

There is no occasion when he is adequately prepared, but he cannot even reproach himself with this, for where in this life, which so painfully requires us to be ready at any moment, might there be time to prepare oneself; and even if there were time, is it possible to prepare oneself before knowing the test, that is, is it possible to come through a natural test, not artificially constructed, at all? That is why he has long since been utterly ground down; it is remarkable, but also consoling, that he was prepared for that least of all.

He has found the Archimedean point,* but has used it against himself. Evidently it was only on this condition that he was allowed to find it.

13 [January 1920]

Everything he does seems to him to be extraordinarily new, but also,
in keeping with such an impossible wealth of new things, extraordinarily amateurish, scarcely tolerable even, incapable of becoming part of history, breaking the chain of the generations, interrupting for the first time the music of the world down to its deepest depths, though up till now it had always been faintly sensed, down to its deepest depths. Sometimes in his arrogance he is more afraid for the world than for himself.

A prison he could have come to terms with. To end as a prisoner, that would be a goal for a life. But it was a cage with bars. Indifferently, imperiously, as if at home there, the roar of the world flowed in and out through the bars. The prisoner was actually free; he could take part in everything; nothing outside escaped him; he could even have left the cage, after all, the bars were yards apart; he wasn't even imprisoned.

He has the feeling that by being alive he is blocking his own path. In turn he takes this block to be proof that he is alive.

14 [January 1920]
Himself he knows; the others he believes. This contradiction saws everything he has to bits.

He is neither bold, nor careless. But he is not timid either. He would not shy away from a life of freedom. Life has not turned out like that for him, but that does not worry him either, just as he does not worry about himself. However, there is a Somebody, utterly unknown to him, who is deeply, persistently worried about him, only about him. Sometimes at a quiet moment these worries of Somebody's concerning him, particularly their persistence, cause him an agonizing headache.

He lives with wits scattered. His elements, a free-living gang, fly about the world. And it is only because his room belongs to the world that he can sometimes see them in the distance. How is he to take responsibility for them? And can it still be called responsibility?

Everything, even the most ordinary things like being served in a restaurant, he has to take for himself by force with the help of the police. This makes life very uncomfortable.

17.1 [1920]
The bone in his forehead obstructs his way (he rams his forehead bloody against his own forehead).

He feels a captive on this earth. The sadness, weakness, diseases, delusions that prisoners suffer break out in him, no consolation can console him because it is all mere consolation, delicate, head-aching consolation in face of the crude fact of his captivity. But if you ask him what he really wants he is unable to answer, for he has—it is one of his strongest pieces of evidence—no idea of what freedom looks like.

Many deny their misery by referring to the sun. He denies the sun by referring to his misery.

He has two opponents; the first puts him under pressure from behind, from his origins; the second blocks his way forward. He does battle with both. Actually, the first is supporting him against the second because he wants to press forward; likewise the second is supporting him against the first, because he is driving him back. But this is only in theory, for it is not only the two opponents who are present, but he himself as well, and who really knows what his intentions are?

He has many judges. They are like an army of birds sitting in a tree. Their voices are confused; questions of rank and jurisdiction cannot be disentangled, and they are constantly changing places. Individuals, however, can be picked out and recognized.

There are three kinds:

He is tormented by the surging movement of all life, of others and his own, self-tormenting, sluggish, faltering, because it carries with it the never-ending compulsion of thinking. Sometimes this torment seems to him to precede the events. When he hears that his friend is to have a child, he recognizes that in his thoughts he has already suffered on account of it.

He can see two things: the first is calm reflection, judgment, scrutiny, outpouring, filled with life, and impossible without a certain ease. Their number and possibilities are endless; even a woodlouse
needs a fairly wide crack for shelter, but no space at all is needed for these activities; even where there is not the smallest crack, they are able to interpenetrate one another and live on in their thousands upon thousands. That is the first thing. But the second is the moment when one is summoned to account for oneself, when one is unable to utter a sound, and is thrown back on the reflections, etc., but now faced with a hopeless future, one cannot paddle in them any longer, one becomes heavy, and sinks down, cursing.

2.11.20
He recalls a picture representing a summer Sunday on the Thames. The entire breadth of the river was filled far and wide with boats waiting for a lock to open. In all the boats there were high-spirited young people in bright, light clothes, lying almost right back, surrendering freely to the warm air and cool water. As they were all sharing it, their friendliness was not confined to the one boat; jokes and laughter were being passed on from one boat to the next.

He imagined that in a meadow on the bank—the banks were barely hinted at in the picture, where everything was dominated by the assembly of boats—he himself was standing. He was observing the party, which wasn’t really a party, but could surely be called one. Of course he wanted very much to take part in it, he was practically reaching out to it, but he was obliged to tell himself frankly that he was excluded; it was impossible for him to fit in there; it would have demanded so much preparation that not only this day, this Sunday on the river, but many years too, and he himself, would have passed by; and even if time had stood still here, it would have had no other outcome; his entire lineage, upbringing, and physical development ought to have been conducted differently.

So that is how far he was from these trippers, but equally, how close, which was harder to understand. After all, they were human beings like him, nothing human could be entirely alien to them, so if one investigated them fully, one could not but discover that the feeling that overwhelmed him and excluded him from the river-trip was also alive in them—though it’s true, it was far from overwhelming them, but ghost-like only lurked in dark corners somewhere.

15.11.20
This is what it was about: once, many years ago, I was sitting on the slopes of the Laurenziberg,* sadly enough, to be sure. [I was looking closely at what I wished for my life. It emerged that the most important or the most attractive, was the wish that I might develop a view of life (and—this was necessarily bound up with it—was able by my writing to convince other people of it) in which life would keep its natural grave falling and rising but at the same time be acknowledged no less clearly as a nothing, as a dream, as a floating. A beautiful wish, perhaps—if I had wished it properly. Rather like wishing to hammer a table together tidily, meticulously, with a craftsman’s skill, and at the same time do nothing. But not so that they could say: ‘Hammering is nothing to him,’ but rather ‘Hammering is real hammering to him, and at the same time it is nothing too,’ which would of course make the hammering become even bolder, even more resolute, even more real, and, if you like, more crazy. But he couldn’t wish in that way at all, for his wish wasn’t a wish, it was only a defence, a decent domestication of nothing, a breath of cheerfulness he wanted to give to nothing, which, though he had scarcely taken his first conscious steps into it at the time, he already felt to be his element.] He was bidding a kind of farewell then to the illusory world of youth, which, by the way, had never deceived him directly, but only allowed him to be deceived by what all the authorities around him had told him. That is how the ‘wish’ inevitably came about.

His only evidence is himself; all his opponents defeat him immediately, but not by refuting him—he is irrefutable—but by being their own evidence.

The basis of human unions is that the strong self of one appears to have refuted other individuals, in themselves essentially irrefutable; for these individuals that is a sweet consolation, but it lacks truth, and so will never last.

Once he was part of a group monument. Around some raised centre there stood, in well-thought-out array, symbolic figures representing the military estate, the arts, the sciences, the crafts. He was one of this number. Now, the group has long ago been dispersed, or at least he has left it, making his way through life alone. He no longer even has his old profession, indeed he has even forgotten what he represented then. Iris probably this very forgetting that produces a certain sadness,
insecurity, restlessness, a certain longing for past times which clouds the present. And yet this longing is an important element of vital energy, or perhaps vitality itself.

He does not live for the sake of his personal life, he does not think for the sake of his personal thinking. He feels as if he were living and thinking under the pressure of a family for which, even though it has itself more than abundant energy for living and thinking, he nevertheless signifies, according to some law unknown to him, some formal necessity. For the sake of this unknown family and these unknown laws he cannot be discharged.

Original sin, the ancient wrong committed by man, consists of the accusation man makes and never ceases to make, that a wrong was done to him, that the original sin was committed against him.

18.11.20
Two children were hanging around in front of Casinelli’s shop window, one a boy about six years old, the other a seven-year-old girl, dressed expensively, talking about God and sin. I lingered, standing behind them. The girl, Catholic perhaps, thought that only telling lies to God was an actual sin. Stubborn, as children can be, the boy, a Protestant perhaps, asked what telling lies to people, or stealing, were. ‘A very great sin too,’ said the girl, ‘but not the greatest. Only sins against God are the greatest; for sins against people we have confession. When I confess, the angel comes straight away and stands behind me, only you don’t see him.’ And, getting tired of being half-serious, for fun she spun round and looked behind her. ‘You see, nobody is behind me.’ The boy turned round just as fast, ‘Look,’ he said, not caring that I was bound to hear him, and not giving any thought to it either, ‘the devil is standing behind me.’ ‘I can see him too,’ said the girl, ‘but I don’t mean him.’

He does not want consolation, but not because he doesn’t want it—who wouldn’t want it—but because seeking after consolation means dedicating one’s life to this work, on the edge of his existence, always living almost outside it, scarcely knowing any longer for whom one is seeking consolation, and so not even being capable of finding a consolation that works (consolation that works, not one that is true consolation, for that does not exist)

He guards himself from being fixed by his fellow humans. (A human being, even if he is infallible, sees in the other only that part for which the strength of his sight, and the nature of his sight, is adequate. But like everyone, only to an extreme, he is obsessed with restricting himself to the limits set by the strength of his fellow man’s sight.) If Crusoe had never left the highest, or, more correctly, the most visible point of the island, out of defiance, or humility, or fear, or ignorance, or longing, he would quickly have come to grief, but when he began to explore his whole island and to enjoy it without considering the ships and the weakness of their telescopes, he kept himself alive and in the end—though to common sense it did not in logic necessarily follow—he was actually found.

19.II. [1920]
‘You are making a virtue of your necessity.’
‘In the first place, everyone does so, and in the second it is exactly what I am not doing. I let my necessity stay necessity; I’m not draining the swamp, I live in its fever-laden miasma.’
‘And that is just what you are making into a virtue.’
‘Like everyone, as I said. Besides, I am only doing so on your account; so that you stay kind to me, I do my soul harm.’

My prison cell—my stronghold.

Everything is permitted him—except forgetting himself; and with that everything is forbidden him again, down to the one thing that is at the moment necessary for the whole.

A narrow mind is a social requirement. All virtues are individual, all vices social; what are regarded as social virtues, such as love, unselfishness, impartiality, self-sacrifice, are only ‘astonishingly’ diluted social vices.

The difference between the ‘Yes and No’ he says to his contemporaries and the one that he actually should say, might correspond to the difference between death and life; that too he can only grasp as a faint awareness.

The reason the judgement of posterity on an individual is more right than that of his contemporaries lies in the dead man himself.
He reveals himself in his true nature only after his death, only when he is alone. Being dead is for the individual what Saturday evening is for chimney-sweeps: they wash their bodies clean of soot. Then it becomes visible whether his contemporaries have harmed him more than he has harmed his contemporaries. In the latter case, he was a great man.

The power to say no, this most natural expression of the continuously changing, renewing, dying, reviving, human fighting-organism, is something we always have, but not the courage; all the same while to live is to say no, it follows that to say no is to say yes.

With his dying thoughts he does not die. Dying is only a phenomenon within the inner world (which will continue to exist, even if it too were only a thought), a natural phenomenon like any other, neither joyful nor sad.

'He is prevented from rising by a certain heaviness, a feeling of being secured against any event, a dim sense of a resting-place made for him and belonging only to him; but he is prevented from lying there by a restlessness that drives him from his bed, he is prevented by his conscience, by his endlessly beating heart, by the fear of death and the desire to prove it false, all this prevents him from lying back, and he rises up again. This up and down, and a few accidental, fleeting, obscure observations made along these ways, are his life.'

'Your description is bleak, but only with regard to the analysis, where it reveals a fundamental flaw. It is indeed the case that man rises, falls back, rises again, and so on, but it is also at the same time, and with greater truth, not the case at all. He is one person, hence his flying includes resting, his resting includes flying, and both are again united in each individual, and the union of the union in each and so on, up to, well, up to real life, and anyway this description too is just as false, and perhaps even more deceptive than yours. From this region there is simply no way to life, though there must have been a way from life to here. That is how lost we are.'

The stream you swim against rages so wildly that in some absence of mind you despair sometimes at the desolate stillness you are paddling in, so infinitely far have you been driven back in one moment of failure.
Gracchus to life and in any case Gracchus does not wish to be restored but rather to die properly.

earthly waters: Lake Garda is connected with the sea via the rivers Po and Mincio (Hartmut Binder, Kafka Kommentar zu sämtlichen Erzählungen (Munich: Winkler, 1975), 200).

on the move: after this Kafka has stoked out the following passage: 'The huntsman has turned into a butterfly. Don't laugh.' 'I'm not laughing,' the Mayor protested. 'Very perceptive of you,' said the huntsman. 'I'm always on the move.' The butterfly is an ancient symbol of the immortal soul.

Julia: perhaps a reminiscence of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet (Romeo und Julia in German), which is set in Verona, some forty miles from Riva. Juliet, wearing her wedding-dress (cf. p. 117: 'I slipped into my shroud like a girl into her wedding-dress'), is cast into a death-like sleep; Romeo, thinking she really is dead, commits suicide; Juliet, on awaking and finding Romeo dead, does the same. See Frank Möbus, Sünden-Fälle: Die Geschlechtlichkeit in Erzählungen Franz Kafkas (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1994), 23–6.

No one will read... help me: this fragment seems to fuse the identities of the Huntsman Gracchus and of Kafka the writer.

bushman: a native of what was then a German colony, South-West Africa (now Namibia), who seems to be reversing colonial power-relations by pointing his spear at a European. See John Zilcosky, Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 180.


Is it really true: this fragment in dialogue form comes from a later notebook: Kafka, Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I, 376–84.

INVESTIGATIONS OF A DOG

aerial dogs: the original, 'Lufthunde', seems to be a pun on 'Luftmenschen', people who live by their wits. There may be a more specific implication that Western Jewish writers are too detached from the solid ground where the narrator-dog and most of his fellows live: the journalist Anton Kuh, whom Kafka knew personally, described many contemporary Jewish writers as 'Luftgaukler', aerial jugglers (quoted in Binder, Kafka Kommentar, 280).

THE BURROW

unchanged, the: Kafka's manuscript breaks off in mid-sentence.
Explanatory Notes

that the human individual perishes, whereas the human race remains and continues to live. But in the being-in-itself of things which is free from these forms, the whole difference between the individual and the race is also abolished, and the two are immediately one. The entire will-to-live is in the individual, as it is in the race, and thus the continuance of the species is merely the image of the individual's indestructibility. 'The World as Will and Representation, ii. 496.

197 Alexander’s battle: Kafka may have in mind Albrecht Altdorfer’s painting The Battle of Alexander at Issus (1529), on display in Munich, which he had visited in November 1916.

198 psychology: probably not psychoanalysis, but the psychology of Franz Brentano (1838-1917), with which Kafka was familiar. In Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint (1874) Brentano advocated introspection as a means of psychological knowledge. Kafka’s note is therefore a warning against excessive self-examination.

200 pillar of salt: in Genesis 19: 26, Lot’s wife, fleeing with her husband from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which the Lord is destroying, disobeys the divine command by looking back, and is turned into a pillar of salt.

201 is simply: Kafka’s sentence breaks off here.

Archimedean point: the Greek mathematician Archimedes (287–212 BC) is supposed to have illustrated the power of the lever by saying: ‘Give me a firm spot on which to stand, and I will move the earth.’

203 three kinds: Kafka did not complete this sentence.

205 Laurenziberg: a hill, called Petrin in Czech, on the left bank of the Vltava (Moldau) in Prague; it is covered with parks and was a favourite place for Kafka to take walks.

206 Casinelli’s shop window: a lending-library in Prague.