

## Kafka's "categorical imperative" and his sense of "being and non-being"

Ross Crisp

### *Abstract*

In this article, I begin with Kant's notion of a "categorical imperative" as a framework from which to discuss the ontology of Franz Kafka's writing. Since Kant's *moral law* is a device for reflecting on our responses to challenging circumstances rather than one that tells us what we should always do in every situation, I draw inferences concerning Kafka's own descriptions of his sense of being a writer in opposing phenomenal and spiritual worlds. Since Kafka cannot be understood exclusively from a Kantian perspective of autonomous will, I discuss Kafka's experiencing in terms of the reciprocal interplay of being and non-being, and his awareness of finitude and the possibility of transcendence. I argue for a humanistic-existential vision of the reading of a literary text as an encounter that responds to the alterity of the Other and which, consistent with Kafka's oeuvre, privileges being faithful to one's own experiencing.

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I begin this article with Immanuel Kant's (2005) great moral principle as a framework from which to explore Franz Kafka's resolute stance of *being* a writer. I first provide a brief overview of Kant's central idea of a "categorical imperative" that will be discussed in relation to the ontology of Kafka's writing that he articulated in his letters, diaries and notebooks (Kafka, 1977, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1999, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Kafka cannot, of course, be understood exclusively from a Kantian perspective. As Buber (2002) and others (e.g., DeLue, 2006; Gaita, 2010; Kaufmann, 2015) have argued, Kant's philosophy did not address the *wholeness* of persons, their place in the cosmos, their relation to the phenomenal world, their dialogical encounters with others, and their awareness of their finitude. Therefore, I will discuss Kafka's own sense of his internal struggle with two conflicting inner and social selves that were

attuned to opposing spiritual and phenomenal worlds. I then discuss Kafka's experiencing in dialectical terms of being *and* non-being, his awareness of finitude and striving for transcendence. Finally, I will argue for a humanistic-existential vision of the reading of a literary text as an encounter that acknowledges that there are multiple ways of interpreting Kafka and which, consistent with Kafka's oeuvre, privileges being faithful to one's own experiencing.

### *Kant's "categorical imperative"*

Crucial to Kant's (2005) *moral law* is the notion of a "categorical imperative." Kant argued that we have the capacity for reasoned moral deliberation and self-constraint that may oppose our desires (e.g., happiness, compassion, avoidance of fear) and empirical incentives (i.e., personal advantage or profit). Kant believed that, as agents who are self-directing, we can step back from our natural desires, forsake our own happiness or advantage and follow self-imposed "objective laws" that are valid for others as well as ourselves (Kant, 2005, 4:414).<sup>2</sup> A "categorical imperative" is unconditional for rational persons who value their own existence as an end in itself and who *always* treat others as ends and *never merely* as a means (Kant, 2005, 4:429).

There may, of course, be occasions when we do act on our desires as a means to achieve our ends, and which provide the basis for a rational process of self-direction. Kant called this principle a "hypothetical imperative" that is conditional on our desire and skills to achieve an end. We may, however, be confronted with conflicts and unusual situations that render us uncertain about what is morally right. Kant's *moral law* is a device for reflecting on our responses to these circumstances rather than one that tells us what we should always do in every situation (DeLue, 2006; Gaita, 2010; Kaufmann, 2015; Wood, 2006). It cannot, therefore, be expected that we always adopt a "categorical imperative" and bracket our desires and empirical incentives. On the contrary, both imperatives are an integral part of living, as will be discussed below in relation to Kafka.

### *Kafka's "categorical imperative"*

I have adopted Kant's "categorical imperative" to convey the ontology of Kafka's "writerly *being*" and the resoluteness of his stance in being a writer. While Kafka often wrote to his interlocutors about his fears and

desires, he emphasized the importance of his writerly *being*, the act of writing as something that he *ought* to do, and that commanded or compelled obedience to a “law” (Kant would say a moral law). Kafka’s reason for being a writer was least concerned with many of the personal desires that we might expect from writers; for example, he infrequently wrote of earning a living from writing (independently of his career as senior civil servant), of writing for pleasure, or of writing for posterity (cf., Cohen, 2015). He regarded his writerly *being* as a self-governing entity of unconditional worth. At the age of 20, he wrote to a friend:

God doesn’t want me to write, but I – I must. So there’s an everlasting up and down; after all, God is the stronger, and there’s more anguish in it than you can imagine. So many powers within me are tied to a stake, which might possibly grow into a green tree. Released, they could be useful to me and the country. But nobody ever shook a millstone from around his neck by complaining, especially when he was fond of it. (November 9, 1903; Kafka, 1977, p.10)

Kafka was both innately compelled to write and desirous of it. Writing was not an activity that he had to conjure or manufacture into existence to attain happiness: it *already* existed in the form of his writerly *being* that was “driven by an ontology of writing” as opposed to what existed in his everyday phenomenal world (Corngold, 2004, p.206). He told Felice Bauer that writing “is a part of my nature, and not due to temporary circumstances ... [and] has its centre of gravity in depth, whereas the office is on the surface of life” (June 26, 1913).

Apropos Kant’s dictum that we value the existence of ourselves and others as ends in themselves, Kafka’s “categorical imperative” embraced two kinds of ends: his own perfection being a writer and the happiness of others (Kant, 2005, 4:423, 430; see also Wood, 2006, pp.348-354). It was, however, at odds with how others (in particular, his father) expected him to live. I will discuss Kafka’s dilemma in terms of the battle of his two selves: self as writer and his social self.

### *Self as writer*

For Kafka, it was vital that his father and *inter alia* Felice Bauer understood the primacy of his work as a writer. Kafka’s *Letter to Father* (Kafka, 2011) attests to his unfulfilled desire of having his life as a writer appreciated by his father. To Felice Bauer, shortly after their first

engagement was broken, he wrote:

You were unable to appreciate the immense power my work has over me; you did appreciate it, but by no means fully ... you were not only the greatest friend, but at the same time the greatest enemy, of my work, at least from the point of view of my work ... *it had to resist you with all its might for the sake of self-preservation ... in me there have always been, and still are, two selves wrestling with each other.* One of them is very much as you would wish him to be ... The other self, however, thinks of nothing but work ... The first self is dependent on the second ... And yet they are locked in combat, and yet they could both be yours; the trouble is that they cannot be changed unless both were to be destroyed (late October – early November, 1914; italics added).

These two selves, that Kafka deemed to be essential parts of his *being*, may have been dominated by what Corngold (2004) saw as Kafka's "great and central experience: an abundance of creative things rising up in him and ... vanishing away – a marked experience of creation and destruction" (p.140) that occurred repeatedly as part of his creative process. Similarly, we may see this process apropos Heidegger's *Dasein* ("Being-there") that "manifests and conceals itself, yields itself and withdraws" (Heidegger, 1975, p.271). In Heidegger's (1962, 1975) view, we are unable to fully disclose or unveil our own being; in our existential-ontological *uncanniness* we have the possibility of knowing ourselves, but we cannot fully or conclusively grasp the condition of our own essence. It is a constant process of unconcealment and concealment that remains mysterious and a puzzle for which we continually seek the possibility of unveiling what we do not know about ourselves, our "self-opacity" (Withy, 2015, p.242).

Perhaps Kafka was telling Felice that his awareness of *being* was characterized by a constant interplay of presence and absence in which an ontological hiddenness *in his being* could not be entirely revealed. If and when it was revealed, he told Felice, "*it had to resist you with all its might for the sake of self-preservation.*" Kafka knew this because it resisted him too. For Kafka himself, his state of *being* was difficult to unveil and communicate, as he later told Milena Jesenka (Kafka, 1992b, pp.160, 175).<sup>3</sup>

Like several of the protagonists in his fiction, Kafka "always remained on the threshold of things that eluded him" (Calasso, 2005, p.150). Both Kafka and his protagonists in, for example, *Before the Law* (also a chapter

in *The Trial*) and *The Castle* search for what is concealed in their spiritual world and which is allusive and ambiguous (Calasso, 2005; Citati, 1990; Karl, 1991; Sokel, 1985). His stories were written as parables of non-arrival (Corngold, 2004; Zilcosky, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

### *Inner self versus social self*

For Kafka, his own perfection as a writer and the happiness of others were difficult tasks to achieve. His letters and diaries are rife with self-accusations and despair over his struggle to develop his literary life, and his failure to act in the way expected by both himself and significant others in his life (e.g., his parents, Felice Bauer).

Kafka's artistic *inner* self battled with his practical *social* self both of which Kafka believed to be impaired. He agonized over the disparity between these two selves. His artistic self attempted to strive for transcendence towards a spiritual world while his other self was confined to an earth-bound prison (Citati, 1990; Corngold, 2004; Sokel, 1975).<sup>5</sup> Kafka wrote in his diary that he is "without an earthly goal" (January 29, 1922). Kafka's preferred option resided in maintaining his existence in *being* a writer that entailed "a higher type of observation" in which "the more independent it becomes, the more obedient to its own laws of motion, the more incalculable, the more joyful, the more ascendant its course" (Diary, January 27, 1922). Yet, he wrote in his diary (29-30 January, 1922) that he experienced the conflict and the discord of living in two worlds:

But I live elsewhere ... the attraction of the human world is so immense, in an instant it can make one forget everything. Yet the attraction of my world too is strong; those who love me love me because I am 'forsaken' ... they sense that in happy moments I enjoy on another plane the *freedom of movement* completely lacking here ... *the two worlds do exist* ... (italics added).

Apropos *the two worlds*, Kafka stated that "the division seems to me to be much too definite, dangerous in its definiteness, sad, and too tyrannical" (Diary, 30 January, 1922). It was, as Calasso (2005, p.23) observed, a "commixture" in which the "social order" of Kafka's empirical experience continually threatened to devour his writerly, spiritual world. His *two worlds* recalls the abovementioned *two selves* that he described to Felice. The tyranny, fear and sadness he experienced in the existence of the two

worlds ran parallel to the combat between, and ontological givenness of, the two selves.

Kafka's disposition to fulfil his "categorical imperative" (to write) required a moral strength, a striving to face his own inner conflict (i.e., to endure the tension between his two selves) and to transcend the "social order," or the phenomenal world, and enter his spiritual world. Two important points need to be made here. First, Kafka would have preferred to not be beholden to something like Kant's notion of the *sensus communis* that "takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of everyone else" (Kant, 2007b, 293-4) and which is analogous to Heidegger's contention that *being* entails a primordial familiarity with others, "those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself – those among whom one is too" (Heidegger, 1962, p.154; original italic). In an ontic sense, Kafka distinguished himself from others and the social mores of his time and place. Second, Kafka would have preferred that his spiritual world oppose and overpower the phenomenal world. Quoting Kierkegaard, he wrote:

Granted, the religious relationship wishes to reveal itself, but cannot do so in the world; therefore striving man must oppose this world in order to save the divine element within himself ... However the world is, I shall stay with my original nature, which I am not about to change to suit what the world regards as good. The moment this word is pronounced, a metamorphosis takes place in the whole of existence ... and everything comes to life: the whole of existence becomes sheer attentiveness (Letter to Max Brod, end of March, 1918; Kafka, 1977).

This moment may have been one in which Kafka experienced a surge of self-confidence and a sense of *freedom* (as suggested by Stach, 2013, p.243). For Kafka, however, freedom was a paradox at the heart of his short parables such as *Before the Law* and his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* (Calasso, 2005; Karl, 1991; Kaufmann, 2015). It entailed an immediate awareness of being unfree:

*Your will is free* means: it was free when it wanted the desert, it is free since it can choose the path that leads to crossing the desert, it is free since it can choose the pace, *but it is also unfree* since you must go through the desert, unfree since every path in labyrinthine manner touches every foot of the desert's surface (Kafka, 1991, pp.49-50; italics added).

In other words, we are free to act because we have the capacity to be self-organizing and guided by intuition and reason. But, our freedom is restricted because to act involves interaction with that upon which we act. There can be no division between self and world in which self and world are both mediated one through the other. Freedom, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) observed, “brings into being the obstacles to freedom [p.439] ... The idea of situation rules out absolute freedom at the source of our commitments, and equally, indeed, at their terminus” (p.454). For Kafka, freedom could never be fully realized within or beyond the phenomenal world. It co-existed with his experience of alienation, “the feeling of being foreign or extraneous” (Calasso, 2005, p.149). He wrote of being outcast within family in short stories such as *The Metamorphosis* and *The Judgment*, and in the wider community in which K in *The Castle*, for example, wanders in a labyrinthine social maze, an outcast whose being in the world is precarious:

... it seemed to K as if they had broken off all contact with him, but as if he were freer than ever and could wait as long as he wanted here in this place where he was generally not allowed ... as if nobody could touch him or drive him away, or even speak to him, yet – and this conviction was at least as strong – as if there were nothing more senseless, nothing more desperate, than this freedom, this waiting, this invulnerability (Kafka, 1998, p.106).

While this passage has socio-political implications, it suggests an inner tension “beneath or beyond consciousness” (Karl, 1991, p.701). K experiences something like an implicit, ontic-ontological sense of being and non-being.

### *Being and non-being*

Tillich (2014) lauded Kafka’s writing as “an outstanding expression of the courage to be as oneself” (p.133) in which courage was defined as “the self-affirmation of being in spite of non-being” (pp.158-9). It required Kafka’s courage to confront the ontological anxiety rooted in his existence that involved the inseparability of *being* and *non-being* that necessitated a realization of finitude. At about the same time that Kafka quoted Kierkegaard to Brod, he wrote in his notebook:

Living means being in the midst of life, seeing life with the gaze in which I have created it ... The decisively characteristic thing about this world is its transience ... centuries have no advantage over the present moment ... *the fact that new life blossoms among the ruins proves not so much the tenacity of life as that of death.* If I wish to fight against this world, I must fight against ... its transience (Kafka, 1991, p.47; italics added).

His awareness of his own finitude and transcendence recalls Kierkegaard's (2004) view of personhood as a "synthesis of possibility and necessity" (p.70) where possibility requires imagination, and necessity involves restraint and the strength to yield to one's limits. His experiencing as a writer was exemplified by his repeated striving for the textual illumination of his existence *and* veering towards death (Corngold, 2004). In a letter to Felice, he described it thus:

What will be my fate as a writer is very simple. My talent for portraying my inner life has thrust all other matters into the background; my life has dwindled dreadfully ... I waver, continually fly to the summit of the mountain, but then fall back in a moment ... it is not death, alas, but the eternal torments of dying (August 6, 1914).

Kafka constructed images and metaphors to convey his being-towards-death in his fiction (see Corngold, 2004, pp.84-93) and in his letters, diaries and notebooks. In February 1918, Kafka (1991) wrote that an end was "an apparent end" registered by the "cruelty of death" that "brings the real sorrow of the end, but not the end" (p.53). It is, perhaps, similar to Heidegger's (1962) *being-towards-death*, that refers to the *anticipation* of the possibility of death that is not a way of being that brings us closer to our end. On the contrary, it refers to the closing down of possibilities that we may experience at any time during our lives. It requires a resoluteness to attune to an ontological mood of anxiety that unveils a pre-existing truth and demands that we understand that we are constantly vulnerable to the loss or disruption of our lives.

But for Kafka, "an apparent end" paradoxically co-existed with a "mad strength of faith" that he "*cannot not-live, after all*" (Kafka, 1991, p.54; original italics) and which may have echoed his reading of Kierkegaard's (2004) ontological despair that is "an aspect of spirit" (p.47) in which "he cannot consume himself, cannot be rid of himself, cannot become nothing" (p.49).



*Inner conflict, transformation and faith*

Kafka might have agreed with Kant (2007a) that the “discipline of pure reason ... should be in conflict with itself” (A740/B768) and that “it is our duty at all times to look for a real opponent within ourselves ... The objections which we have to fear live in ourselves” (A778/B806). Kafka faced his inner conflict and anxieties, and attained a new awareness of self and his existence. He wrote:

From a certain stage of knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] on, weariness, insufficiency, constriction, self-contempt, must all vanish: namely at that point where I have the strength to recognize as my own nature what previously was something alien to myself that refreshed me, satisfied, liberated, and exalted me ...

Its influence extended further, raising me then to this higher level. It did not cease to be alien, but merely began *also* to be Myself (Kafka, 1991, p.44; original italics).

Kafka was here alluding to a transformation that signified a stronger sense of self. A year later, he told Milena Jesenska that his inner conflicts “these so-called illnesses, sad as they may appear, are *matters of faith*, efforts of souls in distress to find moorings in some maternal soil ... Such moorings ... are *pre-existing in [our] nature* and continue to form [our] nature” (Kafka, 1999b, p.173; italics added). Similarly, in his fourth blue octavo notebook, Kafka (1991) referred to a *commandment* that was not attributable to psychopathology, but which was immanent:

Is it a continual or only an occasional commandment?  
... I cannot be sure. I believe, however, it is a continual commandment, but that I hear it only occasionally ... *I don't know whose command it is and what he is aiming at* ... it finds me unprepared, descending upon me as surprisingly as dreams descend upon the sleeper ... *it makes me happy or frightens me, both without cause*, though admittedly it does the first much more rarely than the second; it is not communicable, because it is not intelligible, and for the same reason demands to be communicated (Kafka, 1991, pp. 44-5; italics added).

In Kafka's rendering, the *commandment* is mysterious and illusory. Kafka was unclear about the source or purpose of the “commandment.” Similar,

perhaps, to Heidegger's (1962) uncanny *mood/affect*, it was sometimes "covered up", inconspicuous or outside of immediate awareness. In disclosing his ontological anxiety to Milena Jesenska, Kafka defined his experiencing as a pervasive feeling of uncertainty, a "subterranean threat" that he described to Milena as "*my way of participating in life*; if it ceases I abandon life, as easily and naturally as one closes one's eyes" (Kafka, 1992b, p.160; italics added). He told her that he was "trying to convey something unconveyable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell of something which I have in my bones and which can be experienced only in these bones" which he defined as "fear extended to everything, fear of the greatest as of the smallest" (Kafka, 1992b, p.175).

The immediacy and primacy of Kafka's ontological mood (being frightened "without cause") may have been a fluctuating awareness of finitude analogous to the "passion" experienced by Kierkegaard's (2003, pp. 68-76) "knight of faith" reconciled to the pain and distress that arose from his self-awareness of the limits of his existence. On the one hand, the "knight of faith" represents the "ideal of mental health, the continuing openness of life out of the death throes of dread" (Becker, 1973, p.258). But, on the other, the "knight of faith" is a person "kept in constant tension" and who "has the pain of being unable to make himself intelligible to others but feels no vain desire to show others the way" (Kierkegaard, 2003, pp.106-7). Kierkegaard depicted the experiencing of faith as an "absolute duty to God" that cannot be made intelligible to anyone (pp.98-9).

In a similar manner to Kierkegaard, and reminiscent of Kant (2007a), Kafka postulated the existence of God in a noumenal realm that could not be comprehended in the language of practical reason. In letters to Max Brod, Kafka wrote: "Granted, the religious relationship wishes to reveal itself, but cannot do so in the world; therefore striving man must oppose this world in order to save the divine element within himself" (end of March 1918; Kafka, 1977, p.203); and must "believe in the determining divine principle and not strive toward it ... as it is unattainable" (August 1920; Kafka, 1977, p.242).<sup>6</sup>

*"Not-knowable" Kafka: "there is no one who understands me in my entirety"*

Kafka's letters and diaries indicate a person who regularly engaged in interpersonal relationships (of varying degrees of intimacy with lovers, friends, acquaintances) and who sought to be attuned to these

relationships. However, his diary entry of May 4, 1915 suggests a person who did not believe that he was fully understood: “there is no one who understands me in my entirety.<sup>7</sup> To have someone possessed of such understanding, a wife perhaps, would mean to have support from every side, to have God.” Wry humor aside, might Kafka have been referring to his situation in the phenomenal world that is always given in ambiguity and uncertainty; and beyond, in the noumenal world, to something that is unattainable and hidden?

Perhaps Kafka was saying that the ontological nature of the human condition renders it impossible for us to fully understand self and others. He said as much to Milena Jesenska: “You can’t properly understand . . . I don’t even understand myself” (Kafka, 1992b, p.160). He was referring to his experiencing deep within himself that I had earlier discussed as a form of ontological anxiety that is an integral part of the human condition but which is only ever partially available to self-awareness.

The “unknowability” of Kafka has been brought into sharp relief in recent legal proceedings in Israel. Since the death of his literary executor Max Brod in 1968, Kafka’s manuscripts have been the subject of contentious debates about Kafka’s “moral right” to destroy them, Max Brod’s decision to preserve them (contrary to Kafka’s wishes?), and recent claims for legal ownership. Kafka, the author of *Before the Law*, would probably not be surprised by the conflicting legal arguments of the past 40 years concerning the uncertainty surrounding his and Max Brod’s intentions about how to preserve or dispose of his manuscripts (Cohen, 2015). In his short parable *Before the Law*, the meaning of “the law” is ambiguous, beyond reach, and invites many different interpretations.

Reading Kafka may be made meaningful in a variety of ways. We can regard his fiction as insightful parables about himself, and his letters and diaries as a faithful and trustworthy rendering of his immediate, moment-to-moment experiencing (Canetti, 1974). Interpreting the meaning of his fiction is, however, difficult. We may perhaps inhabit and integrate it within the domain of our own experiences and circumstances. We might read beyond Kafka’s situation, or beyond our own conditions, complete his text and place it in a larger context that helps us to discover our own way of being and enhance our awareness of lived experience (De Visscher, 2001).

My particular challenge in reading Kafka’s letters and diaries was in bracketing my tendency to judge and evaluate Kafka’s own self-critical,

explicit evaluations of his physical and mental health. My task, therefore, was to put aside assumptions about “psychopathology” in relation to, for example, Kafka’s account of having “suffered something like a breakdown” in January 1922. He interpreted the “breakdown” in two ways:

First: breakdown, impossible to sleep, impossible to stay awake, impossible to endure life ... The clocks are not in unison; the inner one runs crazily on at a devilish or demoniac or in any case inhuman pace, the outer one limps along at its usual speed ... two worlds split apart, and they do split apart ... in a fearful manner ... the wild tempo of the inner process ...

Secondly: this pursuit, originating in the midst of men, carries one in a direction away from them ... it may lead to madness ... the pursuit goes right through me and rends me asunder ... ‘Pursuit,’ indeed is only a metaphor. I can also say, ‘assault on the last earthly frontier’ ... launched from below, from mankind, and ... I can replace it by the metaphor of an assault from above, aimed at me from above. (Diary, January 16, 1922).

This passage, with its vivid metaphor, again highlights Kafka’s self-awareness of two disparate but essential selves, of living in “two worlds split apart.” While he feared that the “wild tempo” of his intense experiencing “may lead to madness,” it was followed by a period of intense and productive creativity that yielded his third novel *The Castle*.<sup>8</sup> The writing of this novel was arguably a fruitful albeit painful self-organizing, self-healing process. It was also emblematic of Kafka’s relentless, innate drivenness to actualize his writerly *being* (Corngold, 2009).

From a humanistic-existential perspective, Kafka was *always* in the “process of becoming” that entailed a fundamental obligation to be responsive to the Other.<sup>9</sup> It was Stach (2005, pp.153-4) who pointed out that Kafka’s voluminous letter writing was itself an experience that arose “from a consciousness focused on itself” and which Kafka believed “expressed and generated closeness” with the recipients of his letters. His letters were a dialogical expression of his experiencing in which he communicated and revealed self, sharing in being and co-existing with the Other, most notably, Felice Bauer, Milena Jesenska and Max Brod (Kafka, 1977, 1992b, 1999).

This process is analogous to a psychotherapeutic relationship in which

individuals seek to experience their *own existence* as fully as possible and, in the process, become aware of their ability to *act* on their potentialities (see May, 1986, p.167). Both Rollo May and Carl Rogers believed, despite their differences, that this process was achieved with the therapist's *presence* in which the therapist was focused upon *understanding* and co-experiencing the experiencing of the Other. For both the therapist and the reader of a literary text, the challenge is to work towards understanding the Other's frame of reference, to expect the unexpected, to be curious and as unconditionally open as possible to whatever the Other discloses. Emphasis is upon the primacy, and the alterity, of the Other's (client's/author's) experiencing. It is less concerned with a quest for certainty, or with finding a solution to a problem, than about being in a process of engaging with the Other and upholding an ethically responsive obligation to encounter the Other (e.g., Crisp, 2014; Robbins, 2005; Starr, 2014, 2015).

### *Conclusion*

I have discussed Kafka's "writerly *being*" in terms of Kant's "categorical imperative" and his experiencing in terms of the reciprocal interplay of being *and* non-being, and his awareness of finitude and the possibility of transcendence. In so doing, I drew parallels with the thinking of Tillich, Kierkegaard and Heidegger that, in some instances, seem to mirror Kafka's ideas or highlight the distinctiveness of his thinking.

Kafka believed that he was not fully knowable to several of his most significant interlocutors who may have struggled to understand the complexity of his experiencing that informed his writing. His parables about himself in his fiction, and his letters and diaries suggest that his existence in the phenomenal world was often characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty; and beyond, in the noumenal world, by something that he considered unattainable, hidden and not adequately communicable. It is acknowledged that there are multiple ways of interpreting Kafka including those that are more theistic in their focus than in this article. What is the value of reading Kafka? His letters and diaries are an exemplar of being faithful to one's own experiencing that is, after all, a fundamental teaching of humanistic psychotherapy. Further, the therapist/reader needs to adopt a not-knowing attitude that is attuned to the alterity of the Other.

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*Notes*

1. I will quote from Kafka's letters, diaries and notebooks. Since *Letters to Felice* (Kafka, 1999), letters to Max Brod (Kafka, 1977) and Kafka's diaries (Kafka, 1992a) have been published in multiple languages and revised editions, page numbers will not be cited. Instead, the dates of quoted extracts will be cited to enable easiest access for those readers who wish to refer to these sources. On the other hand, page numbers will be cited for *Letter to father* (Kafka, 2011) and *Letters to Milena* (Kafka, 1992b) since specific dates were not provided in these books. Likewise, for *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* (Kafka, 1991) that is known to have been written in late 1917-1918.
2. Since Kant's work has been published in multiple languages and editions, I will cite the original paginations that were the standard method of citing his work in most current editions.
3. I will return to what Kafka told Milena Jesenka (Kafka, 1992b, pp.160, 175) in the latter part of this article.
4. Many different interpretations have been offered concerning Kafka's parables of non-arrival. Corngold (2009), for example, saw K's relentless attempts to meet the higher officials of *The Castle* as a metaphor for Kafka's own ongoing search for entry into his work as a writer. Citati (1990), on the other hand, viewed K as a pilgrim in search of God whereas Kaufmann (1975) saw K as being remote from *The Castle* that he defined as a Nietzschean, godless place devoid of sense.
5. Many commentators have provided different explanations concerning Kafka's religious and spiritual life that are outside the scope of this article. See, for example, Citati (1990, pp. 179-196) who linked Kafka with monism and Manichean beliefs; Corngold (2004, pp. 8-12) and Sokel (1985) who discussed Kafka's gnosticism; Bruce's (2002) discussion of Kafka's use of Jewish folklore and mysticism; and Stach's (2013, pp. 117-121, 235-243) exposition of Kafka's thinking in relation to the religious-socio-political issues that were debated in his lifetime. In general, Kafka referred to theological issues in an oblique manner that may have signified an unspecified affirmation of God (see Calasso, 2005, p.299; Mendelowitz, 2009, pp.332-3).
6. See also Calasso (2005, pp.301-2) and Sokel (1975).
7. Kafka made a similar comment about his relationship with close friend Max Brod in a letter to Felice Bauer (June 16, 1913).
8. See, for example, Citati (1990, pp.221-6), Karl (1991, pp.666-81) and Stach (2013, pp.418-22) for further details of this period in Kafka's life.
9. See, for example, discussions regarding the "process of becoming" of being (May (1986, p.138), the self (Rogers (1961, p.201) and the temporal structure of phenomena perceived in the natural world (Robbins, 2005, pp.120-1).