Kafka and Wittgenstein

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Published by Northwestern University Press

Schuman, Rebecca.
Kafka and Wittgenstein: The Case for an Analytic Modernism.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/42794.

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Chapter 3

“The Judgment,” Ethics, and the Ineffable

So far, rather than solve two of the problems that have faced Kafka readers for a century—Josef K.’s guilt, what Gregor Samsa’s body “means”—we have, in the spirit of Wittgenstein, dissolved them by uncovering the illusions that came with the posing of each one. In the case of *The Trial*, the illusion was that of the necessity of a “guilt or innocence” structure. In the case of *The Metamorphosis*, the illusion was the misapprehension that there is such a thing as metaphorical content at all. As Wittgenstein says, the world is all that is the case—all true pictures at once. Because I have only so far presented two cases on behalf of Kafka as exemplar of analytic modernism, it should be apparent that these two major instances of illusory “problems” in Kafka’s stories are far from “all that is the case” in his world—and, accordingly, the complex and surprisingly literarily relevant examples of logical form are far from all that is the case in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Indeed, most readers of the *Tractatus* are primarily concerned with how it ends—with the conceit of philosophical language meeting its end and would-be philosophers resigned instead to silence (*TLP* 7). Fittingly, the way in which the end of the *Tractatus* exposes logical modernism in Kafka’s work comes as we witness another end: that of Georg Bendemann, protagonist of “The Judgment.”

When, at the story’s climax, Georg’s father pronounces his son a “teuflischer Mensch” (“devilish person”), and thereupon “condemns” him to death (“Und darum wisse: ich verurteile dich jetzt zum Tode des Ertrinkens!” [“And now hear this: I sentence you to death by drowning!”] [GW 1:52]), we would be right to assume that Herr Bendemann has come to this conclusion based on an ethical judgment. This is especially understandable given the content of the elder Bendemann’s preceding rant about Georg’s neglect of his family and expatriated friend, not to mention the alleged wantonness of his fiancée Frieda Brandenfeld (“Weil sie die Röcke gehoben hat!” [“Because she lifted up her skirts!”] [1:49]). Georg takes this ethical proclamation to heart, executing what any reasonable person might consider an uncalled-for jump off a bridge, one that Uta Degener has recently summed up nicely, saying that it results in neither Georg nor his father having our sympathy, and thus an ending “less tragic than absurd”.

1
He swung himself over, as he had in his youth as an outstanding gymnast, the pride of his parents. As he held on with weakening hands, he made out an omnibus between the handrails that would easily obscure the sound of his fall, and called out quietly: “Dear parents, I have always loved you,” and let himself fall away.

In this moment an endless stream of traffic went over the bridge.

Indeed, it is because Georg actually does jump to his presumable death that the central act of judgment in “The Judgment” has been, and continues to be, the source of reader consternation: Herr Bendemann is not a professional jurist, and so his son’s heeding the “sentence” doesn’t really seem to make much sense. To be sure, several decades’ worth of Kafka critics describe quite aptly the conundrum of this ending. Stanley Corngold perhaps set the standard by declaring, simply, that “there would seem to be no plausible motivation for Georg’s death”; J. P. Stern has phrased similar concern in a different manner, wondering “how acceptable we find the verdict of death at the end; what narrative connection we may discern between the bulk of the tale and its catastrophic conclusion; what Georg Bendemann has done to deserve such a verdict; or more generally, what is the manner of Kafka’s motivation.” Russell Berman has simply explained: “All seems right in the world of Georg Bendemann, until suddenly, and without a fully compelling explanation, all seems wrong.” Ritchie Robertson has asked: “Why is Georg so helpless when faced with his angry father? And why does the father condemn his son to death?” And Walter Sokel, quite recently, writes of Georg’s “instantaneous and utterly surprising obedience to his father’s verdict.”

Further complicating matters, “The Judgment” is in many ways Kafka’s most perfect and most flawed piece of work. It is perfect, in that Kafka himself believed it so: it came out of him “like a proper birth” (“wie eine regelrechte Geburt”), in one night of labor, the fully formed literary offspring that solidified the dedication of his “organism” to literature at the expense of everything else (GW 9:264): “Nur so kann geschrieben worden,” he wrote in his journal in euphoria and exhaustion, “nur in einem solchen Zusammenhang, mit solcher vollständigen Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele” (“One should only write like this, only in such a state of continuity, with such a complete opening of the body and soul”) (GW 10:101). This is a moment
in Kafka’s autobiography that seems to entrance the critical world. It is unsurprising, then, how many theoretical—and above that metaphysical—implications we have taken away from the story that “begins the work of [Kafka’s] maturity,” as Stern has described it, that “usher[ed] in the series of works that has become central to modernist world literature,” as Berman has put it.6 The continuation of Sokel’s train of thought from above, for example, is that “The Judgment” is Kafka’s “Dionysian text par excellence,” one that “was written in a Dionysian vein, in a single uninterrupted stream of words, a flow, the act of writing exactly reflecting its idea, the flow filling the space-time of one night, without break, without interruption, in a single continuous whole.”7 And Peter von Matt describes the single night that changed world literature: “In dieser Nacht hat sich die Gestalt der Weltliteratur verändert und der neuzeitliche Begriff von Literatur überhaupt” (“On this night the entire shape of world literature changed, and the modern concept of literature altogether”).8

Complicating matters, however, is the nagging realization that “The Judgment” is simultaneously Kafka’s least perfect story: its climax is so perplexing and so uniquely commanding of critical attention, but, unlike much of Kafka’s canon it has no pretensions of being “unfinished” to excuse this; its climax is intentionally perplexing, perhaps the purest example of what Adorno calls a puzzle with no key.9 Nearly a century of critical reactions to the story as “problem” are understandably varied in offering a “solution,” though some, like James Phelan, strive to “respect and hold onto the story’s strangeness rather than trying to master it.”10 This is certainly not the usual case, however: Corngold, already lamenting critical overload in 1977, claims the work nevertheless “invites reflection on its distinctive power to compel interpretation.” And this Corngold does, explaining, “a work that invites so much interpretation can have inspired the production of meaning only as a function of its refusal of meaning.”11

Indeed, the central “problem” of “The Judgment” seems obvious and yet we come back to it again and again: why does Georg obey? That his father can offer an unsubstantiated “charge” and “sentence” (literally “judgment”) is one matter; why Georg obeys it is another altogether. With no prior knowledge of Kafka’s literary reputation or that of his most famous critics, this moment should strike a reasonable reader as wholly nonsensical in the technical sense; Georg’s actions seem, without the solution of psychoanalysis, biographical grafting, or literary intertextuality, wholly inexplicable. But this original assumption—that we should unearth a reason behind the nonsense—is the critic’s big mistake.

To see why, Wittgenstein can again be of help to us. It is precisely his characterization of “nonsense” in the Tractatus, and his subsequent assertion that nonsensical language cannot be judged, that will hold the key not to the solution, but to the dissolution of the problem of “The Judgment.” I certainly agree that the eponymous judgment of this story doesn’t make much
sense—but not for the reasons previously articulated. Instead, I am reminded of Wittgenstein’s elucidation in the final sections of the *Tractatus* about the nonsensicality—and subsequent unjudgeability—of certain alleged “propositions” that actually are not: riddles and enigmas; aesthetics; and, most of all, ethics. For according to the end of the *Tractatus*, the very idea of an “ethical judgment” in language is impossible.

Phelan has purported to investigate this story’s “underlying logic.” Here I would like to take that impulse further and with more terminological strictness, and in so doing show that there is no “underlying” special logic of “The Judgment,” but rather that the story displays, overtly and clearly, in its adherence and its rebellion, formal logic, which as we already know Wittgenstein was instrumental in developing at almost precisely the moment Kafka wrote this story. What this discovery will show us is that the real problem of “The Judgment” deals not with Herr Bendemann’s specific act of judgment. Rather, the chief problem of “The Judgment” is the act of ethical judgment itself—a contradiction in terms.

### Facts, Possible Facts, and the State of Georg’s Affairs

As it was with *The Metamorphosis*, the easiest way to see how a Tractarian view of nonsense helps elucidate the otherwise confounding climax of “The Judgment” is first to see how—or if—the story displays any moments that could be defined as having sense in the Tractarian fashion. It turns out that the vast majority of the story does make sense in this way: indeed, the easiest way to look at it would be to say that anything in the story that does not create or attempt to “solve” an enigma, or attempt to make an aesthetic or ethical pronouncement, is the depiction of a true, false, or potentially true “fact,” and thus makes sense. The slightly less easy way to solidify this theory is to show exactly how and why most of the prose in “The Judgment” successfully depicts a possible state of affairs. To see why the less-easy way is rewarding nevertheless, let us examine Wittgenstein’s remarks about the concept of a possible state of affairs (*möglicher Sachverhalt*) in greater detail. As the second section of the *Tractatus* begins, he explains to us what a fact is: “Was der Fall ist, die Tatsache, ist das Bestehen von Sachverhalten” (“What is the case, the fact, is the existence of states of affairs”) (*TLP* 2).

First, the origin of the phrase “state of affairs” in English: the first standard translation of the *Tractatus*, C. K. Ogden and Frank Ramsey’s 1922 edition (for which Ogden bears sole credit), translates *Sachverhalt* as “atomic fact,” and in doing so places the *Tractatus* within both the linguistic and philosophical context of Russell’s atomism. However, as we have seen, the preferred current standard, Stephen Pears and Brian McGuinness’s 1961 version, translates *Sachverhalt* as “state of affairs.” Unlike the positivist-leaning “atomic fact,” “state of affairs” has literary implications, especially
when we consider connections with “The Judgment,” given Georg’s alleged romantic situation—in fact, this exact phrase is used in some of Corngold’s most famous criticism of the story. He describes Herr Bendemann’s pseudo-juridical sentence and Georg’s jump thusly:

To sentence Georg to death is to set in motion a relentless process which brings about the state of affairs designated in the sentence.

The sentence is in effect a performative. It does not aim in its utterance to designate a state of affairs that is taking place and is extrinsically caused. It aims instead to bring into existence a state of affairs of which it is the sole cause.\(^{13}\)

This is technically true, and in the second sentence Corngold seems himself to be pointing to a Tractarian conception of language as designating states of affairs, before arguing instead on behalf of a more late-Wittgensteinian or Austinian version (“a performative”). What I would like to show here is that Corngold’s early work can be refined even further: the sentence (meant in both senses of the English word) may be a “performative,” but that is not why it doesn’t designate: it doesn’t designate because it can’t.

To see why this is, let us return to the concept of \textit{Sachverhalt} as Wittgenstein explains it. The word itself is easily divided into its constituent parts, each of which has a vital place in Wittgenstein’s picture theory of logic and language: \textit{Sache}, “things,” “objects,” and \textit{Verhalten}, or “behavior,” itself a compound of \textit{halten}, “to hold,” and the multivalent prefix \textit{ver}, which can both strengthen and negate the verb it modifies (in this case, it strengthens). Indeed, Wittgenstein describes a \textit{Sachverhalt} as “eine Verbindung von Gegenständen (Sachen, Dingen)” (“An association of objects [things]”) \cite{tractatus_2.01}. For any speaker of German, the synonymy of \textit{Sachverhalt} (the behavior of objects) and \textit{Tatsache} is also apparent: the “behavior” of things is another way of expressing the \textit{deeds} of things.

Thus, according to Wittgenstein, the world is made up of facts, which themselves are the existence of states of affairs, or “das Bestehen von Sachverhalten.” And, further, as we have already seen from examples in previous chapters, the way we are able to think, speak, and otherwise communicate about that world is because we think by picturing facts to ourselves: “Wir machen uns Bilder der Tatsachen” (“We make pictures of facts to ourselves”) \cite{tractatus_2.1}. Therefore: a picture in our minds is a fact \cite{tractatus_2.141}. But how does such a picture come to \textit{be} in our minds? Again, it depicts a model of the reality around us (“Das Bild ist ein Modell der Wirklichkeit” \cite{tractatus_2.12}).\(^{14}\)

But how does language do this? The answer to this returns us again to the important distinction in the \textit{Tractatus} of form from content. That is, a “model of reality” has the ability to depict reality only because they share a common pictorial form (“Form der Abbildung” \cite{tractatus_2.17}). Again, this pictorial form is
“die logische Form, das heißt, die Form der Wirklichkeit” (2.18). Thus, when Wittgenstein repeats in 2.22 how a picture in our minds depicts reality, he adds one crucial word, “logical”: “Das Bild hat mit dem Abgebildeten die logische Form der Abbildung gemein” (emphasis mine). The pictorial form, which is the form of reality, is logical. This conception (and independence) of form is what allows Wittgenstein to progress from what facts are to how our minds conceive of and express them: in the form of a proposition that makes sense: “Der Gedanke ist der sinnvolle Satz” (“A thought is a sensical proposition”) (4).

Here is the crucial element of this theory: in order to make sense, a proposition need not be true—it only needs to be possibly true. The idea of “possibly true” relates back to Kafka’s story because both “actual” facts and “possible” facts take important roles in the buildup to the Bendemanns’ fatal argument. For example, there are several elements that many of Kafka’s best critics have argued we can take as true facts in “The Judgment”: Georg lives with his father; his mother has been deceased for two years; since Frau Bendemann’s death, Georg has taken an active, and successful, role in the family business. But if we look at the story closely, we will find that none of these “facts” are true facts; they are all merely possible facts. Although when it comes to the story’s sense this actually doesn’t matter, it is worth admitting that it is uniquely difficult to come across pictures in this story we can trust as “true facts”: the closest we get is the primary narrative that doesn’t come from Georg’s or his father’s thoughts or memory. But the primary narrative comes courtesy of Kafka’s curious omniscient-obtuse narrator, one Berman has aptly described as exhibiting a “subversion of realistic description”; Greenberg adds, “Kafka’s narrative mode eliminates every trace of the traditional hauteur of detachment of the narrator from his narration.”

And yet we have no choice but to accept that the obtuse-omniscient third-person (sort of) provides a vital service: he presents the closest thing we have to the actual facts of the story, the only facts that are impossible to dispute if we are to understand any of the story as prose narration rather than outright gibberish. First: Georg finishes some sort of document, puts it in an envelope, and looks out the window (1:39–40); then, Georg enters his father’s room, presumably to converse about said document (1:42). Thereafter, Georg speaks with his father and adjusts Herr Bendemann’s bedclothes, during which time Herr Bendemann becomes agitated (1:45–48); the men argue, and Herr Bendemann performs the “sentence”; Georg runs out of the family apartment and to a nearby bridge, off of which he jumps, almost certainly to his death (1:52); and, finally, an “endless stream of traffic” (“unendlicher Verkehr,” with all of its sexual connotations) crosses the bridge postmortem (1:52).

These and only these are the true facts of “The Judgment,” or as close as a story like “The Judgment” can get to true facts, because they are given to us directly by the (albeit unstable) narrator, and do not come filtered through Georg’s dubious memory, nor do they come skewed through his father’s rage.
Everything outside of the primary narration is technically up for dispute—but that does not mean it makes any less sense than the “true facts,” for its very ability to be up for dispute denotes what Wittgenstein scholars call truth-functional bipolarity: we may never know if Georg’s fiancée Frieda really made such a fuss about not knowing his friend in Petersburg, but the fact that the description is rendered in such a way—a group of declarative sentences—that we can make a true-false judgment about it gives it sense. The same applies to the other instances of possible fact.

These include, for example, the initial description of Georg’s friend in Petersburg. We see here what Georg “sees” in either his memory or his imagination, but we do not and cannot see any deeper into Georg’s motivations or deeper feelings. What Georg “sees” (and what we, thus, also see) is, due precisely to its correct syntactical German, as well as the truth conditions, the technical ability to match up with a real thing in reality, picturable: a sallow, disillusioned man, both alienated from his homeland and uncomfortable in his new environs, said discomfort apparent in the awkward way he wears the facial hair that is in fashion in pre-revolutionary Russia:

So arbeitete er [der Freund] sich in der Fremde nutzlos ab, der fremdartige Vollbart verdeckte nur schlecht das wohlbekannte Gesicht, dessen gelbe Hautfarbe auf eine sich entwickelnde Krankheit hinzuweisen schien. (1:7)

So he toiled uselessly abroad, his foreign-style beard doing a poor job of covering up that well-known face, whose yellow hue seemed to betray the onset of a worsening illness.

Here, the picture Georg gives us is remarkably telling: the friend is disguised and estranged, and yet apparently still quite well known; he also appears to be ill. This picture, in fact, is indicative of two vital currents in this story. First is the “unhealthy,” with respect to the father’s condition and in narrative terms; we can think of this as the unreliability or “off” aspect of the secondary or tertiary narration. Second, we have the disguised; like the friend’s face, the instability of said friend’s very existence is at this early point in the story disguised, here by the first in a compelling set of vignettes and a descriptive style exactly as intense and blasé as the primary narrative. The importance of the friend in Petersburg has not been understated in the critical tradition: for Greenberg, in fact, it constitutes the “puzzle of the story,” the “one failure in a story of vivid, succinct art.” And it is precisely in this puzzling nature that the picturability and thus sense of the story begins to drop off—but, since the veracity of the friend, the story’s chief enigma, does not come into question until later in the story, let us treat the reader’s initial reception of his visage as a proper picture, as a possible fact. We will address the mystery that develops later as it appears.
The astute reader might still be unconvinced that the unsubstantiated “possible facts” of “The Judgment” abide by the same logical rules as the “real facts” do. After all, if Georg (or his father) could be making things up, does that not mean their fabrications abide only by the “limits” of the imagination, which we have been told time and again are none? Here is why the imagination is not exempt: in TLP 5.61, Wittgenstein takes the picture theory to its logical conclusion: since a thought is a fact we picture to ourselves, if something is unpicturable it cannot be thought either (“Was wir nicht denken können, können wir nicht denken. Wir können auch nicht sagen, was wir nicht denken können” [“We cannot think what we cannot think, and we also cannot say what we cannot think”]). This applies to anything we are trying to picture, think, or say, anything at all—true or not.

Let us illustrate this with another example: we reenter Georg’s imagination/memory to “witness” the very exchange between Georg and his fiancée whose veracity itself is actually in doubt (even the engagement is introduced as a secondary aside: “daß er selbst vor einem Monat mit einem Fräulein Frieda Brandenfeld, einem Mädchen aus wohlhabender Familie, sich verlobt hatte” [“that he himself had been engaged for a month to a Miss Frieda Brandenfeld, a girl from a good family”]) (1:42). In the exchange, Georg explains to Frieda that it would be in poor taste to invite his friend to their wedding, given the prohibitive expense of travel and, apparently, the unfairness of celebrating one’s good fortune in the face of another’s growing misfortune. (The same goes for Georg’s fortune in the family business: “Georg hatte keine Lust gehabt, dem Freund von seinen geschäftlichen Erfolgen zu schreiben, und jetzt nachträglich hätte es wirklich einen merkwürdigen Anschein gehabt” [“Georg had had no desire to write to his friend about his business successes, and now in hindsight it would have appeared very strange”] [1:41].) To which Georg’s depiction of his fiancée replies: “Wenn du solche Freunde hast, Georg, hätttest du dich überhaupt nicht verloben sollen” (“If you have such friends, Georg, you shouldn’t have gotten engaged”). To which Georg himself allegedly replies, “Ja, das ist unser beider Schuld; aber ich wollte es jetzt nicht anders haben” (“Yes, it’s both of our faults, but I wouldn’t have it any other way”). At this point the secondary picture takes the story’s first (but not last) turn toward the explicit: “Und wenn sie dann, rasch atmend unter seinen Küs-

While the imagined/remembered picture of Georg’s friend might strike us as hyperbolic but possibly accurate, this interchange appears less so, or even downright implausible. The fiancée’s first remark, which seems playful, also seems comparatively realistic. To be sure, Georg’s response is tone deaf; however, it still seems somewhat probable. Further, their following moment of passion, itself hinting at exactly the kind of premarital relations to which the
father alludes in his obscene rant later, also seems understandable. But her final remark is truly perplexing. And yet, it is still above all the narrative portrayal of a possible fact, of a Sachverhalt that is picturable in either Georg’s memory or imagination, and this is also equally picturable to us. The moment may seem absurd, but in fact it makes perfect sense. However, as we will now see, the same cannot be said for several other pivotal elements in this story, namely: Herr Bendemann’s assessment of Frieda; the surprising debate about the friend in Petersburg’s existence; Herr Bendemann’s shocking final decision; and the so-called logic of why Georg obeys his father at all.

Enigmas, Ethics, and the Logic of Georg’s Death

Although it is interesting to note that even the most dubious “facts” from Georg’s memory make perfect sense, it is far more interesting to realize that the most memorable conflicts of the story make no sense at all. These are moments that demand judgment of things that cannot be judged: it’s suggested that we ought to “solve” the mystery of the friend in Petersburg, that we side with or against Herr Bendemann in declaring Frieda Brandenfeld wanton, that we agree or disagree that Georg is a “teuflischer Mensch,” that we come up with a system in which Georg heeding his father’s sentence is a valid conclusion to anything. In looking at these moments, we will discover both exactly why each is nonsensical—and, thus, why most alleged “judgments” in “The Judgment” cannot actually be.

First let us illuminate the enigma of the friend. Herr Bendemann mimics Georg sarcastically when the subject of the friend is first broached between them (“Ja, deinen Freunde” [“Oh yes, your friend”] [1:45]). The elder Bendemann chides his son for withholding “the whole truth” (“die volle Wahrheit”), and implies that he, the father, is in possession of this “whole truth,” and said truth is being willfully covered up (“gut zugedeckt”), just like the elder Bendemann’s aging body (1:45–48). He insists, “du hast keinen Freund in Petersburg” (“You have no friend in Petersburg”); Georg is “immer ein Spaßmacher gewesen” (“You’ve always been such a joker”) (1:47). As Georg protests, Herr Bendemann admits that there is indeed an individual by this description in Petersburg, but he is more the father’s friend than Georg’s, and that they have been conspiring together this whole time; that, in fact, to facilitate this conspiracy Georg’s father hasn’t actually been reading the newspaper at all, but in fact just “lying in wait” pretending to:

“For years I have been expecting you to come with this question! Do you think I have been doing something else? Do you think I’ve been reading the papers? Here!” and he threw at Georg a page that had been with him somewhere in the bed. An old paper, with a name that Georg had never seen.

The relative veracity/friend-ness of the friend in Petersburg seems to be, as Greenberg has said, “the puzzle of the story.” Further, accounting for him “in a way that is convincing,” in a way that “can be justified,” is for Greenberg impossible; the friend, he argues, is “the one failure in a story of vivid, succinct art,” and this precisely because of the centrality of his mysterious nature. Greenberg goes on to suggest, after Kate Flores, that the friend represents another, hidden side not of Georg but of Kafka the author; I agree with his first assertion, that the friend’s “puzzle” is a failure, but find his second irrelevant to its justification. For it is true that the “puzzle” of the friend fails, but that is not necessarily (or not only) because of some irreconcilable tension in the author’s own biography—it is because of the problem inherent in the form of the puzzle.

For the enigma—das Rätsel—is for Wittgenstein itself a misnomer. This is because any question that can be asked (properly, with language that makes sense) can also be answered; thus, what we think of as a riddle, enigma, or puzzle does not actually exist as such:

6.5  Zu einer Antwort, die man nicht aussprechen kann, kann man auch die Frage nicht aussprechen.

Das Rätsel gibt es nicht.

Wenn sich eine Frage überhaupt stellen lässt, so kann sie auch beantwortet werden.

For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed.

The riddle does not exist.

If a question can be put at all, then it can also be answered.

It’s not even that riddles or enigmas can’t be solved, it’s that they do not actually exist—and this because the very idea of a question without an answer is a misnomer. Any question that makes sense has itself either a true/false answer, or as an answer a proposition that itself can be judged true or false. Anything else is simply an illusion. This certainly goes for the apparent enigma in “The Judgment”: is the friend in Petersburg a real person, and, if so, is he friendlier with Georg or with Herr Bendemann? I may have just typed that “question” out, but Wittgenstein would say that I cannot actually ask it. Thus, the first problem in “The Judgment” is indeed a failure, but not for the reasons we initially thought it was: the mystery of the friend in
Petersburg is a failure because all mysteries allegedly expressed in language must be. But what is particularly interesting about this is that despite its ineffability, the problem of the friend is not simply the central “puzzle” of the story, but the reason for the central conflict. This is, to my mind, the primary reason this story is so confounding.

From the impossibility of “solving” mysteries Wittgenstein moves on to the impossibility of aesthetic propositions. The most interesting alleged aesthetic judgments in “The Judgment” are two separate proclamations of dirtiness. The first follows the narrated picture of Herr Bendemann’s room, squalid and suffocating:

Georg was astounded at how dark his father’s room was, even on this sunny morning. The tall wall that surrounded the small courtyard cast such a shadow. His father sat at the window in a corner, which was decorated with various remembrances of his late mother, and read the paper, which he held before his eyes and to one side, in the hopes of compensating for his weakening eyesight.

When confronted with this scene, Georg proclaims the room “unerträglich dunkel” (“unbearably dark”), an obvious aesthetic judgment (1:44). And the second, and in some way parallel, aesthetic judgment I’d like to revisit is the moment wherein Herr Bendemann attributes his son’s negligent behavior to the sexually impure Frieda Brandenfeld, who “lifted her skirts” for Georg, who is a “widerliche Gans” (“strumpet”):

“Because she lifted up her skirts like this, you had to have a go at her, and that’s how you could have your way with her without serious disturbance—and you have disgraced Mother’s memory, betrayed your friend, and stuck your father in bed so that he can’t move. Or can he after all?”
Here it is easy to see why Wittgenstein insists that ethics and aesthetics are the same thing (6.421: “Ethik und Ästhetik sind eins”); in deriding Frie-da’s sartorial actions Herr Bendemann is of course really deriding her virtue. Further, it will be unsurprising to discover that Wittgenstein believes that aesthetic “judgments,” like ethical ones, do not actually exist. To see why this is, we must then discuss what is by far the most interesting moment of unJudge-ability (that is still stubbornly treated like a working “judgment”) in this story: the father’s alleged ethical proclamation and ensuing titular judgment.

Directly out of the “skirts” screed comes Herr Bendemann’s primary ethical judgment: “Ein unschuldiges Kind warst du eigentlich, aber noch eigentlicher warst du ein teuflischer Mensch!” (“You were actually an innocent child, but more actually you were a devilish person!”) (1:52). The strange designator of “noch eigentlicher” is the first indication that something in this declaration is seriously off, although it is not as odd if we think back to the beginning of the argument, wherein Herr Bendemann insists that Georg is not telling him “the whole truth”:


“Georg,” said his father and pulled his toothless mouth open, “listen! You came to me about all of this for my advice. That is without a doubt to your credit. But it is nothing, it is worse than nothing, if now you don’t tell me the whole truth.”

And it is indeed this self-proclaimed expertise in “the whole truth,” the one that allows Herr Bendemann even to possess differing grades of actuality, that also seems to allow him to “sentence” Georg to death:

“Jetzt weißt du also, was es noch außer dir gab, bisher wußtest du nur von dir! Ein unschuldiges Kind warst du ja eigentlich, aber noch eigentlicher warst du ein teuflischer Mensch! – Und darum wisse: Ich verurteile dich jetzt zum Tode des Ertrinkens!” (1:52)

“No now you know what exists outside yourself; until now you knew only of yourself! You were an innocent child actually, but even more actually you were a devilish person! And now hear this: I sentence you to death by drowning!”

If we are to buy into Herr Bendemann’s system, “die volle Wahrheit” would then correspond to the “more actual,” “noch eigentlicher”; regular-actual,
“The Judgment”

“eigentlich,” then becomes secondary (and corresponds, then, to Georg’s lesser and not-as-correct perspective), and the two grades of actuality seem contradictory. I would like to posit again the idea that while the impulse to take a side in the “reality” debate between the Bendemanns is compelling, and the many differing theories equally so, that we are once again looking at the problem all wrong—it is indeed impossible to determine whose version is “more actually” the “whole truth,” but not for the reasons we think.

Again, our impulse is to side with either Herr Bendemann or Georg, to judge for ourselves the story’s titular judgment. Berman’s account of why this act may both draw us in but inevitably fail us is particularly compelling, as he reminds us, “proper judgment is presumed not to be arbitrary, but must instead be based on adequate evidence and its proper evaluation, according to established rules of judgment.” The problem in “The Judgment” is, however, that “most evidence is indicated . . . to be corrupt and inconclusive, open to such a range of interpretation that it turns out to be useless for the cases at hand.” This is quite true; and what’s more, Georg’s facility for interpretation seems crucially lacking. For Berman later argues that (juridical) judgment is impossible because Georg lacks control over his own language: “Language gets the better of him, remains beyond his grasp, sometimes erratic, sometimes recalcitrant, but never fully under his control. Without an effective command of language, he is hardly in a position to argue his own case.” I agree to a certain extent with Berman here: specifically, that language remains beyond Georg’s grasp—but this is not the case through any fault or shortcoming of Georg’s grasp. The real reason that neither side of the Bendemann argument regarding the relative good or evil of Georg’s conduct is ultimately justifiable or convincing is that there is no such thing as ethical language at all.

The first reason Wittgenstein gives for the impossibility of “ethical propositions” takes us back again to why and how propositions make sense. We have already learned that a proposition cannot say its sense, that the sense of a proposition thus cannot be in it. It must instead show that it has sense by way of its form and its truth functionality. Therefore, because a proposition cannot say its sense, and because the limits of language are the limits of the world (TLP 5.6: “Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt”), said world, being “alles, was der Fall ist” (i.e., all true propositions at once), contains only what the true propositions say. What these propositions show, their sense, cannot be within them, and it is with this idea that the _Tractatus_ veers into a “hybrid document” of semi-mysticism and truly confounding pseudo-propositions Monk has discussed so compellingly. As the _Tractatus_’s penultimate section—by far its most interesting and its most severely “hybrid”—draws to a close, Wittgenstein reveals that because the sense of the world cannot be in the world, there is only one other place for it to be: outside it. And because of this, what lies in all sentences is equal—it is the possibility to depict a state of affairs, nothing beyond that:
6.41 Der Sinn der Welt muss außerhalb ihrer liegen. In der Welt ist alles, wie es ist, und geschieht alles, wie es geschieht; es gibt in ihr keinen Wert - und wenn es ihn gäbe, so hätte er keinen Wert.

Wenn es einen Wert gibt, der Wert hat, so muss er außerhalb alles Geschehens und So-Seins liegen. Denn alles Geschehen und So-Sein ist zufällig.

Was es nichtzufällig macht, kann nicht in der Welt liegen, denn sonst wäre dies wieder zufällig.

Es muss außerhalb der Welt liegen.

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value, and if there were, it would be of no value.

If there is any value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental.

What makes it nonaccidental cannot lie in the world, for otherwise again this would be accidental.

It must lie outside the world.

Precisely because of this—because all propositions that make sense are of equal value (of truth value, specifically)—no proposition can express something “higher”: how one ought to live; what is the best way to be; the meaning of life. Because a true proposition can express only a state of affairs and higher things cannot be contained within that state of affairs, there can simply be no such thing as an ethical proposition: “Darum kann es auch keine Sätze der Ethik geben. Sätze können nichts Höheres ausdrücken” (“Hence there can be no ethical propositions. Propositions cannot express anything higher”) (6.42). There being no such thing as ethical propositions, however, does not mean that there are no such things as ethics themselves—indeed, Wittgenstein insisted that the entire point of the Tractatus was “an ethical one,” and that its inability to express ethics, its “unsaid” and inexpressible section was its most important purpose. Wittgenstein had, he insisted, an entire ethical corpus—and anyone who understood the Tractatus would understand immediately and clearly that said corpus simply could not be put into words. And this was because ethics are not of this world—by not being of this world, they are thus transcendental: “Es ist klar, dass sich die Ethik nicht aussprechen lässt. Ethik ist transzendent” (“It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics are transcendental”) (6.421). If we find Wittgenstein convincing, then the “solution” to an ethical “problem”—say, for example, “Is my son actually a terrible person who deserves to die?” is actually to recognize that said problem cannot be put into words correctly or clearly,
and thus of course cannot be solved; it can only be dissolved: “Die Lösung des Problems des Lebens merkt man am Verschwinden dieses Problems” (“One notices the solution to a problem upon the dissolution of this problem”) (6.521). If we then render all “ethical problems” only dissolvable and thus all “ethical questions” unaskable, what is left? Is it, simply, an austere silence as apparently commanded by the Tractatus’s final proposition? Not necessarily, if one is to adhere to the “standard” readings of the text—also, called the “metaphysical” readings, because of exactly what appears in these sections, and largely because of 6.421 and this remark: “Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische” (“There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical”) (6.522).

“The mystical,” the transcendental, what does not lie in the world, what can be shown but not said—all of this, according to this particular reading of Wittgenstein, still exists, but it is simply nowhere our language can reach. With all of this in mind, it should now be clearer that what Herr Bendemann actually says when proclaiming Georg “devilish” and “sentencing” him to death (the weight of ethical judgment contained clearly in the word “beurteilen”) is nothing; he may be trying to express the ethical, but that is impossible. This still, however, fails to address what I see as the central problem of “The Judgment.” We may have dissolved the problem of why Herr Bendemann’s proclamation makes no sense, but since we never really thought it did, what does that help? After all, most critics agree that the truly confounding moment in the story is Georg’s obedience.

As with The Trial, however, there is “logic” and then there is logic—and before Wittgenstein determines ethics and enigmas to be mystical or transcendental (because they are outside the world), he does this with logic when he proclaims that the sense of the world lies outside it. The logical form of reality is the “was” in 4.1212’s “Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden”; logic is not only ineffable, but its ineffability is what makes possible the ineffability of ethics and the rest of the “Unaussprechliches,” or “das Mystische.” So again, it is not that Phelan’s or any other critic’s breakdown of the “logical” progression of Herr Bendemann’s excoriation and Georg’s obedience is errant; it is that said “logic” first of all cannot actually be logic because it contains too much pure nonsense (as opposed to contradiction or tautology, which is still allowed to participate), and second of all the actual logic of it, like the ethics of it, cannot be put into words. Thus, try as we might with theories about Georg’s family troubles (which is usually code for Kafka’s family troubles), we cannot map out a logic to Georg’s jump; we cannot justify it, we cannot give a good reason for it—or any reason at all. And again, this is not because Herr Bendemann has not provided adequate evidence for his “judgment” (though obviously he has not), but because even if there were some logic to Georg’s jump, we still would not be able to explain it using language.
All of this still leaves a major problem untouched, however: does it really matter that Herr Bendemann’s proclamation is unproclaimable, and no reason for Georg’s jump can ever be given, when Georg appears to both understand and heed this proclamation? This is where another parallel surfaces between the Kafka and Wittgenstein texts, as perhaps the hallmark gesture, the most memorable moment at any rate, of both works is that they both do things that have been specifically precluded by previous events. In Wittgenstein’s case, the remarkable trick he accomplishes at the end of the *Tractatus* is to reveal its own nonsensicality through this meticulous progression: he shows us how the world is arranged (into facts; *TLP* 1–2); then how we are able to think about the world (3); then, how we are able to speak about possible facts in the world (4–5); and then, finally, how we are not able to picture, think about, or speak about anything else, including and especially the philosophy of the *Tractatus* itself. As we have seen before, at the end of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein determines that what philosophers have heretofore been calling “philosophical propositions” are contradictions in terms; that the alleged propositions of philosophy are nonsensical (6.54).

I would like to reexamine this revelation in the context of the act of judgment. The act itself is not obscured in the least in the *Tractatus*, but forms of the word *Urteil* (which translates as both “judgment” and “sentence”) appear only four (albeit important) times in total. The first is in Wittgenstein’s introduction, when he explains that it is of no concern to him how this work fits in with his philosophical peers: “Wieweit meine Bestrebungen mit denen anderer Philosophen zusammenfallen, will ich nicht beurteilen” (“I do not wish to judge the extent to which my aims coalesce with those of other philosophers”) (introduction 2, emphasis mine). What appears, however, to be Wittgenstein’s trademark glibness is simply yet another instance in which he follows his own rules: he does not want (*wollen*) to judge the disciplinary verisimilitude of his *Tractatus* because he cannot. Such a thing cannot be judged, because this exact work is about to determine that the language of both his philosophical peers and the *Tractatus* itself is only pseudo-propositional nonsense, and therefore unjudgeable. This in turn is exactly the point of both times a form of the word *Urteil* appears in the body of the *Tractatus* itself, first at 4.063, as Wittgenstein explains the importance of truth conditions (which he modifies from Frege’s *Wahrheitswert*, truth value) to the logical form of the proposition (i.e., the logical form of reality, the form of a picture):

Ein Bild zur Erklärung des Wahrheitsbegriffes: Schwarzer Fleck auf weißem Papier; die Form des Fleckes kann man beschreiben, indem man für jeden Punkt der Fläche angibt, ob er weiß oder Schwarz ist.
Der Tatsache, dass ein Punkt schwarz ist, entspricht eine positive—
der, dass ein Punkt weiß (nicht schwarz) ist, eine negative Tatsache.
Bezeichne ich einen Punkt der Fläche (einen Fregischen Wahrheits-
wert), so entspricht dies der Annahme, die zur Beurteilung aufgestellt
wird, etc. etc.

An illustration to explain the concept of truth. A black spot on white
paper; the form of the spot can be described by saying of each point
of the plane whether it is white or black. To the fact that a point is
black corresponds a positive fact; to the fact that a point is white (not
black), a negative fact. If I indicate a point of the plane (a truth value
in Frege’s terminology), this corresponds to the assumption proposed
for judgment, etc. etc.

Wittgenstein goes on that in order to be able to say (to judge) whether a
point on a beflecked paper is white or black, one must first know under what
conditions a spot can be black or white; that is, one must have a common
understanding of “white,” “black,” and probably “surface” or “paper,” and
probably “spot” as well. We must be given these conditions before the point-
ing begins, else the gesture makes no sense:

Der Punkt, an dem das Gleichnis hinkt ist nun der: Wir können auf
einen Punkt des Papiers zeigen, auch ohne zu wissen, was weiß und
schwarz ist; einem Satz ohne Sinn aber entspricht gar nichts, denn
er bezeichnet kein Ding (Wahrheitswert) dessen Eigenschaften etwa
“falsch” oder “wahr” hießen; das Verbum eines Satzes ist nicht “ist
wahr” oder “ist falsch”—wie Frege glaubte—, sondern das, was
“wahr ist,” muss das Verbum schon enthalten.

The point at which the simile breaks down is this: we can indicate a
point on the paper, without knowing what white and black are; but
to a proposition without a sense corresponds nothing at all, for it
signifies no thing (truth value) whose properties are called “false” or
“true”; the verb of the proposition is not “is true” or “is false”—as
Frege thought—but that which “is true” must already contain
the verb.

Another way of looking at this is that the fact of “being true” or “being
false” does not give a proposition sense in the Fregean definition (or, for
that matter, Bedeutung, “reference” in the same)—rather, sense, which is the
quality of being able to be true, must be present in the propositional struc-
ture to begin with. This again emphasizes the divorcing of logical form from
linguistic content, for if the fact of truth or falsehood gave the proposition
sense, that would mean its logic was somehow contained within it, instead of
it being contained within logic. Instead, because the proposition inhabits the
form, and indeed must inhabit it in order to be a proposition, any proposi-
tion that makes sense must make sense regardless of its truth; the fact that it
can be either true or false is what gives it sense in the first place: “Jeder Satz
muss schon einen Sinn haben; die Bejahung kann ihn im nicht geben, denn
sie bejaht ja gerade den Sinn. Und dasselbe gilt von der Verneinung, etc.”
(“Every proposition must already have a sense; it cannot be given a sense by
affirmation; indeed its sense is just what is affirmed. And the same applies to
negation, etc.”) (4.064).

The inevitable conclusion of this line of thinking is that since any propo-
sition that makes sense must have the capacity to be judged true or false,
anything that looks like a proposition but does not have said capacity for
judgment is not a proposition at all, but rather nonsense. Any legitimate
analysis of the form of any proposition that claims that one thing judges
another must, then, also show definitively that only sensical propositions
can be judged, and nonsense cannot. This is the full implication of remark
5.5422, the second and last time a form of the word Urteil appears in the
body of the Tractatus: “Die richtige Erklärung der Form des Satzes ‘A urteilt
p’ muss zeigen, dass es unmöglich ist, einen Unsinn zu urteilen” (“The proper
explanation of the form of the proposition ‘A makes the judgment p’ must
show that is impossible to judge a piece of nonsense”).

Since Wittgenstein’s conception of sense as providing the space for, rather
than being contained by, the proposition is in conflict with Frege’s earlier
Begriffsschrift, his insistence that only a sensical proposition can be judged
has its roots in breaking from Frege as well; it is in a footnote quoting Frege’s
earlier formal logic that the word Urteil appears in the Tractatus for the final
time. For in the Begriffsschrift Frege employed a curious mechanism that
was one of the first symbols dropped from what we now know as first-order
logic: the Urteilsstrich, or “judgment stroke.” This was to appear above all
propositions written in the Begriffsschrift and to signal that a judgment was
being made in that proposition; Wittgenstein points out that such a stroke
is redundant, as anything that can be judged can be judged obviously and
clearly, and anything else is unjudgeable and no symbol can help it (4.442).

This then ties in perfectly to the Tractatus’s remarkable ending, in which
Wittgenstein determines that since all philosophical “propositions” are non-
sensical and thus also unjudgeable, so is the Tractatus itself. And yet, we just
read it, it contained all sorts of developments in logic that logicians still use
today, and the vast majority of the philosophical community believes that the
text still contains unsayable truths (that we have thus judged true and thus
can judge true) about the logical form of reality, and about language’s abil-
ity and inability to portray said reality. Let us compare this to what I believe
to be a remarkably similar gesture at the end of “The Judgment”: we have
discovered the major “judgments” in this story to be unjudgeable—and yet
they have tangible, mortal results. Thus, both texts stubbornly do exactly
that which they are not supposed to be “able” to. Wittgenstein, for his part, has given us little choice but to apply, retroactively, to his own “nonsensical” propositions the scrutiny of their own allegedly nonsensical rules. We are to throw the ladder away, but the only reason we know this is because we have climbed it, and as we were doing so the rules enunciated on those “rungs” were (allegedly) easy to understand and obey—so are they really nonsensical? Indeed, the soundness of Wittgenstein’s own proclamations on the logical structure of language, many of which are still taught in logic classrooms around the world, seem to make this possible.

And Kafka, in a similar gesture, has all but dared us to find motivation and sense in a series of events whose structure explicitly prevents these things from ever being found. It is actually most helpful to examine these gestures—defiantly self-negating (or in Kafka’s case, self-preventing), yet stubbornly proceeding in spite of or even because of that self-hampering—against the backdrop of a debate surrounding the very status of the act of self-negation at the end of the Tractatus, of what that gesture actually means (or, more accurately, does not mean).

As we have discussed previously, interpretation of the end of the Tractatus often finds its way into two main camps: the standard or metaphysical readings and the “resolute” readings. This is immensely important because of each reading’s vastly divergent opinion on what exactly Wittgenstein means when he relegates something to the unsayable. In one case, we can take “das Mystische” or the transcendental at face value, and in the other we cannot, as we must recognize the sentences that contain those words as utterly meaningless.

In the more standard conceptions, what remains after the seventh remark’s call to “silence” are, as we have seen before, pseudo-propositions. These have been revealed to be nonsensical, but they are still supposed to show what they cannot say: indescribable truths about the logical form of language and reality. In this more commonly accepted canon of Tractatus interpretation, the reader who “understands” Wittgenstein “correctly” no longer suffers from the illusion that philosophy says anything, but recognizes that it shows us why that actually is the case. This leaves ample room for “the mystical” really to be mystical, and for the Tractatus to be the truly “hybrid” document Monk, for example, argues that it is.

The faction of “new” or “resolute” readers, most prominently Cora Diamond and James Conant, argue on the other hand that the Tractatus cannot actually show anything about language, and thus the nonsense that Wittgenstein insists the book is in 6.54 is just that, “plain nonsense.” While the metaphysical reading argues that the act of conquering, overcoming, or transcending these sentences, of recognizing them as unsinnig, is predicated on the discovery that in not saying, they show their form, Diamond dismisses this action as “chickening out.” If, she asks, in 6.54 Wittgenstein says that all of the Tractatus should be read as unsinnig and that the ladder must be
thrown away, does that not also apply to 4.1212, which claims that what can be shown cannot be said, and 2.18, which explains the logical form of reality? What is supposed to be keeping the phrases “Die Logische Form . . . der Wirklichkeit” and “Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden” from being read as nonsensical and thrown away? And, were that to be the case, what is left of the idea that something can be shown but not said with logical form?

The most crucial recognition we undergo as the result of a “resolute” reading of the *Tractatus* is that of what Diamond refers to as Wittgenstein’s “transitional vocabulary.” This is what enables the resolute reading of the *Tractatus* (or any other text) to differ from never reading it at all. Diamond envisions a transitional vocabulary as a specific proposition or set of propositions that can, even if they prove themselves invalid as a result of their own rigid application, be necessary and useful as part of a transition. And, further, it is this transition that constitutes the most vital part of the discovery about these statements’ processes of proving themselves invalid. The “transitional vocabulary” discussion validates the new readers’ designation of the *Tractatus* as “plain nonsense.” In Diamond’s conception, it is the reader’s responsibility to take 6.54 as seriously as possible. This means we are not to “chicken out” and hold onto concepts allegedly “elucidated” in the body of the work, such as, for example, the argument in 4.1212. For Diamond, the very “notion of something true of reality but not sayably true is to be used only with the awareness that it itself belongs to what has to be thrown away.” The more traditional view that the “wo” and “da” in “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen” actually refer to something is, in Diamond’s conception, an illusion, and a reader who truly understands Wittgenstein will come to see this illusion for what it really is. The real reward of reading the *Tractatus* carefully is to understand how confused we have been to believe that there is such a thing as a philosophical vocabulary in the first place.

In this view, then, we succeed in reading the *Tractatus* when we come to distinguish the difference between perspective “and the illusion that there has to be perspective” at all. What Diamond is trying to make us see is that with the resolute reading, once the transitional language has been made unnecessary and we can look back on it as pure nonsense, we have been liberated. Liberated, that is, from the pressure of trying to communicate something philosophical—and all the way liberated, more liberated than we would be were we simply to acknowledge that we can’t communicate anything philosophical because our language precludes this kind of expression. Diamond’s view is at once more extreme and more optimistic: for if, according to her, we read the *Tractatus* correctly, we “see the world correctly” as Wittgenstein says in 6.54, we are freed not just from the pressure of communicating philosophy when we can’t, but also from the illusion that there was any philosophy to communicate in the first place. Through analysis of the transitional vocabulary concept, we can now see that the supposed breakthrough of the resolute
reading of the *Tractatus* is the realization that if “Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden” is plain, austere, non-elucidatory nonsense, then nothing it says about showing can be taken seriously, and thus all insights gleaned from the say/show distinction disappear.

The resolute approach to the *Tractatus* is a compelling choice for literary critics, especially those interested in Kafka—as we have seen, recent scholarship by Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé uses the idea of “the resolute” in Kafka to quite successful effect. For the question of judgeability in “The Judgment,” however, I see undeniable potential in both approaches. Each would address the problem of Herr Bendemann’s death sentence making no sense, and then reconcile that with the seemingly irreconcilable action Georg takes in response. In the metaphysical view we are left with a nonsensical proclamation followed by a suicide whose logic is impossible to articulate (and, again, not actually because of the nonsensical proclamation)—but with this we are also left with room for the transcendental, “das Mystische,” a vastly important ethical presence that simply does not reside in our world.

**Conclusion**

As Kafka seemed to spend his entire career striving to cheat this dichotomy by writing the impossible (chargeless arrests, senseless metaphor-vermin, etc.), it is only fitting that he continue to do so by creating a story where the characters seem to be able to understand and access “ineffable” truths about each other in spite of their complete failures in the linguistic realm. Indeed, in a different context remark 6.44 of the *Tractatus* feels like it could have been written by Kafka himself: “Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern dass sie ist” (“The mystical is not how the world is, rather that it is”). With this in mind, it would at first seem that the metaphysical approach to the dissolution of the problem of “The Judgment” is the obvious choice.

And yet: what is more senseless, more defiant of a justification, more profane—really, more anti-transcendent—than a filial suicide? And what’s more, one whose profanity is exacerbated by a sexual entendre in the story’s final two words: “unendlicher Verkehr” (“endless intercourse [of traffic]”)? Does this moment, jarring and obscene (itself preceded by Herr Bendemann’s “skirt lift,” also jarring and obscene), portend, deserve, or even act like it wants a metaphysical or transcendent significance? In the resolute view, Georg is simply dead, and it does not matter why—it is in fact our discovery of why it does not matter why that matters. This view would both fit well with and slightly reconceive the original conclusion I have just put forth about *The Metamorphosis*, where I have taken great pains to argue that Kafka takes something we all take for granted—metaphor—and twists it into impossibility so that we can see its limits and how it works. In a “resolute” view of “The Judgment”—or even in a partially resolute view—we can see that here
Kafka has described and undermined the very act of (ethical) judgment in the same way.

Wittgenstein, in his initially failed search for a publisher for the *Tractatus*, insisted that the “point of the book was an ethical one”—that the most important part of the treatise, the ethical “section,” was the part that was necessarily left unsaid (presumably coming after remark 7’s command of silence). Similarly, what we could call the point—the narrative climax—of “The Judgment” is also an ethical one, but, not unlike the *Tractatus*, the most important thing this climax should reveal is that the very ethical proclamations that constitute its core conflict are actually impossible to proclaim.