One of the great challenges when interpreting Kafka’s texts is to describe correctly the difficulties they pose for their reader. Another is to respond to these difficulties in a way that allows them to play a role in the texts’ rhetorical design and communicative effect. Having discussed the problems arising from relying on “allegorical equations of Kafka’s figures with abstractions drawn from other systems, be they theology, philosophy, psychoanalysis or ‘textual self-reflexivity,’” Ronald Speirs and Beatrice Sandberg settle for a way of reading Kafka’s three novels that takes them “as far as possible, at face value” (1997, 28). Taking this approach—with its important qualification “as far as possible”—as a guide to the reading of “Die Verwandlung” (“The Metamorphosis”) (Kafka 1994) one may ask: Just how far does this face-value approach take us? How is the reader supposed to respond to the features of the text that show resistance to such a reading? Is there a way of responding to such features of the text as a part of its rhetorical design without resorting to an allegorical reading?

Let me start by outlining a reading that follows Speirs and Sandberg’s example and progresses through the text intent on seeing it as “a description of the experience of one individual in his dealings with others” (1997, 28). The opening paragraph of the story is designed to involve the reader immediately, and with no preparation, in a huge crisis in Gregor

THE HUMAN BODY AND THE HUMAN BEING IN “DIE VERWANDLUNG”

Anniken Greve
Samsa’s life: he wakes up in his bed and finds himself transformed into some form of insect. The event destabilizes the entire life of the Samsa family, and the dramatic action revolves around the various ways in which Gregor and his family respond to and try to deal with this crisis. All the members of the family—Gregor’s father, mother, and his sister, Grete, in addition to Gregor himself—seem to share one overall project: to re-establish normality by healing the rupture that the metamorphosis has caused. However, if the project is essentially shared, Gregor’s and the family’s strategies are markedly different and in conflict with each other. Gregor aspires from the first minute to heal the rupture by seeking to communicate his humanity to his family despite his new non-human bodily form so as to secure his place in the family as son and brother, while the other members of the family seek to re-establish normality by protecting themselves and their ordinary life from the social and emotional consequences of the outbreak of abnormality at the heart of family life by locking Gregor in his room. The conflict between divergent strategies in dealing with the rupture of normality develops into a “territorial” struggle within the flat, a struggle that structures the dramatic action of the story. Each of the first three parts sees a build-up of dramatic tension that reaches its climax when Gregor tries to break out of his room, only to be driven back into this confined space. After his third attempt, he gives up, returns to his room, and lies down to die, finally to be swept up and disposed of as litter by the cleaning lady.

This reading of the story as a family drama is supported by the flashbacks in the opening sections of the story, through which we get a sense of Gregor’s resentment prior to the metamorphosis—his resentment, more specifically, at the restrictions imposed on his social life and his love life by his role as the breadwinner of the family after his father’s bankruptcy. The metamorphosis certainly offers no improvement of his situation; on the contrary, it ruins any hope of a wider and more satisfying engagement with other people. The metamorphosis also reinforces the pattern of power struggle and oppression that seems well established among the male members of the family. It is hardly a coincidence that the authoritarian father is the only one who never enters into the transformed Gregor’s room, that he plays the most violent role in preventing Gregor from breaking out into the rest of the flat, and that he delivers the final blow to Gregor’s deteriorating health. The suppressed sexual longings that fuel Gregor’s general dissatisfaction with life before the transformation are brought out in a cruder form after his transformation, in his clinging to the picture of the woman with the fur boa, while the
connection between the father’s oppression of Gregor and Gregor’s sexual needs is suggested by the apple the father throws at him and which slowly decays in the wound on his back.

The transformation also throws an unbearably ironic light on Gregor’s willingness to make such sacrifices in his life prior to this catastrophic event. Now that he is unable to provide for the family, it appears not only that the economic situation was not as bad as Gregor was led to believe but also that his sacrifices have inhibited the rest of the family and prevented them from flourishing. They are liberated and revitalized by Gregor Samsa’s death; they are able to realize capacities they did not recognize before. If he was the victim of their needs, they seem to have been the victims of his support. They all seem to have been locked in the destructive workings of family life, with its characteristic patterns of dependence and power, guilt and suppressed longings, sacrifices and mutual victimization.

According to such a reading, the narrative invites a readerly response that is based on the mimetic aspect of the characters, Gregor included: We relate to them as people. Their conflicts and the story’s inherent ironies make sense of and cast light on life as we know it. However, there is one serious snag to this way of responding to the story. It seems to depend on our forgetting or ignoring just how unheard of, how unacceptable and in effect unthinkable the metamorphosis is, how deeply and fundamentally it constitutes a breach with the world as we know it and with the logic of life. Being struck and puzzled by the metamorphosis as a rupture of the logic of life, the reader should ask: What claims to understanding Gregor’s fate are we entitled to? Are we actually making sense of his situation, or are we just under the illusion that we are doing so? In order to normalize his situation, Gregor struggles to remain a member of the family inside the human circle. But is it not the case that he has also fallen outside human society as far as the reader is concerned?

At second thought, the face-value approach seems to run into trouble at the very beginning of the narrative. We are clearly invited to engage the story as a family drama, but this engagement leads to a frustration of the sense-making effort of the reader. The event of the metamorphosis constitutes an instance of ontological fuzziness that requires an effort of naturalization on the part of the reader, an effort of “bring[ing] it into relation
with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and legible” (Culler 1980, 138). So what routes to naturalization are available to the reader of “Die Verwandlung”? Rimmon-Kenan distinguishes between two kinds of models of coherence available to the reader of narratives: the reality models, which “help naturalize elements by reference to some concept (or structure) which governs our perception of the world,” and the literary models, which “make elements intelligible by reference to specifically literary exigencies or institutions” (2002, 125). Neither of these, however, is of much help in attempts at giving coherence to this particular story. First, the metamorphosis appears as the result of unknown forces or an agency that has no place in any model of reality as we perceive it. Second, even though the event of the metamorphosis has a rich array of literary forebears in fairy tales, folklore, and pre-realistic texts such as Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, it is a salient feature of the metamorphosis as it is presented in Kafka’s story that it is located in a world that otherwise operates according to the laws of the world as we know it. We are not in the world of fairy tales; nevertheless, fairy-tale events seem to happen here.

In its discursive treatment of the event, the text clearly and self-consciously acknowledges this. If we look at how the metamorphosis is described, we find that it is not in fact described. We are not told what happened; only the situation consequent to the event is presented to the reader. This indeterminacy is a logical necessity, given the nature of the event. It cannot be made determinate within the human universe on which it is projected. To regard it as a dream would be a way of bringing it within the logic of life as we know it, but that possibility is rejected immediately by the protagonist himself: “Es war kein Traum” ([KAF, 1:93] (“It was no dream” [Kafka 1996, 3]). This instance of free indirect thought, reflecting and participating in Gregor’s struggle to come to terms with his situation, has a function also on the axis of communication between implied author and reader. Marking the authorial recognition of the attentive reader’s attempts to naturalize the event, the authorial message seems clear: the central event in “Die Verwandlung” defies explanation and refuses naturalization, at least along such tracks.

This message runs counter, however, to the spirit in which the story is told by the narrator, who is loyal to Gregor’s attempt to play down the consequences of the transformation and relates the story in a fashion that assumes that there is no problem whatsoever connected with the logic of the event. This attitude is clearly fundamental to our initial engagement in the drama. We are invited to forget the shock of the metamorphosis as

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soon as it occurs and to give ourselves over to the narrative flow, which allows us to participate in Gregor’s brave but eventually failed attempt to reintegrate himself in the normal life of the family despite his new conditions. However, the attitude of the narrator, his covering up the ontological fuzziness of the metamorphosis, is also fundamental to our growing sense of distrust in the sense we are invited to make. In his reporting function the narrator relates in an untroubled fashion something we simply cannot accept. Even if we follow the action primarily through Gregor’s perspective, and even if his thoughts and aspirations are those of a human being, the reader is constantly reminded through the detailed description of his movements as an insect of Gregor’s separation from human life as we know it, and thus his separation from us.

III

Seen thus, “Die Verwandlung” appears as a narrative with a rhetorical design that is rich in inherent contradictions. On the one hand, we are invited to forget the ontological fuzziness of the metamorphosis in our attempts at making sense of the story. On the other hand, our sense of puzzlement at this very event is stimulated by the text itself. How do we resolve these inherent contradictions in the response the story invites? Perhaps the best way to bring the story within the reader’s comprehension is the most confrontational: to take what seems to be destructive of sense to be a potential source of its construction. Rather than ignoring the transformed Gregor’s ontological fuzziness, we should take the deviation from mimetic demands to be central to the story’s thematic concern and rhetorical effect; we should see the metamorphosis itself, the transformation of Gregor, as that which allows his fate to speak to us, albeit in terms that go beyond the mimetic aspect of his character.

To see this possibility more clearly, we have to return once more to the opening of the story, in which the nature and the immediate consequences of the metamorphosis are exposed. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of it is not the metamorphosis itself but rather the fact that the narrator’s account assumes Gregor’s inner human life to be unaffected by the transformation of his human body into some verminous creature. He wakes up thinking, believing, fearing, wishing, resenting, remembering, pondering, and planning in the manner of a human being, but he has a non-human body.

Looked at from the point of view of the history of philosophy, however, this thought does not seem shocking at all. Philosophical dualism
sees the human being as divided between an outer and an inner being, a bodily being on the one hand and a mental or spiritual being—a soul—on the other. Whatever terms we prefer to use to denote the difference between the human body and the inner human life, dualism seems to assume that the inner human life constitutes the real human being, and that there is in fact no necessary relationship between the (outer) human body and the inner life. One’s body is incidental to one’s humanity. This idea may be theorized in various ways, the most famous and influential, perhaps, being that of René Descartes, whose distinction between the two substances—the immaterial res cogitans and the material res extensa—may be easily dismissed by most modern thinkers, but whose conception of the human being nevertheless continues to haunt us and to shape our coming to terms with what it is to be human.3

Taking the dualistic assumptions underlying the event of the metamorphosis as the starting point for another readerly progression through the text, it seems that the story invites the reader to engage in the narrative’s exploration of the ontological repercussions of the metamorphosis. A major compositional feature of “Die Verwandlung” is the pattern of alternation between Gregor Samsa’s being alone in his room and his facing the other family members. This allows for a dual perspective on the ontological repercussions of the metamorphosis: it creates a rhythmic shift between the first-person perspective and the third-person perspective through which the implications of Gregor’s bodily change are explored.

How does the assumption of an external relationship between the inner and the outer human being hold up when it is explored through the first-person perspective in the narrative? In one sense it is confirmed, for Gregor does experience his body as external to his humanity. From the second he wakes up in his bed transformed into a new shape, his bodily being emerges as something out there, as something he first familiarizes himself with by looking at:

Er lag auf seinem panzerartig harten Rücken und sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch, auf dessen Höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum gänzlichen Niedergleiten bereit, kaum noch erhalten konnte. Seine vielen, im Vergleich zu seinem sonstigen Umfang kläglich dünnen Beine flimmerten ihm hilflos vor den Augen. (KAF, 1:93)

He was lying on his back as hard as armor plate, and when he lifted his head a little, he saw his vaulted brown belly, sectioned by arch-shaped
ribs, to whose dome the cover, about to slide off completely, could barely cling. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, were waving helplessly before his eyes.) (Kafka 1996, 3)

The distance between Gregor and the body he surveys is expressed in his tendency to view his body as having a life of its own. He watches it with concern: the legs are pitifully thin and are waving helplessly. That is, his body has become an object that he reaches out to through his thoughts; he has to learn to use his body in the way that one has to learn to handle a tool. This is made all the more difficult by the fact that the things around him—the tools (“die Zeuge,” to use Heidegger’s term from Sein und Zeit) that suit the human body perfectly—are sheer obstacles to him in his new bodily shape. He experiments with ways of moving his body out of bed and with ways of using his new mouth to turn the key: “Es schien leider, daß er keine eigentlichen Zähne hatte,—womit sollte er gleich den Schlüssel fassen?” (KAF, 1:106) (“Unfortunately it seemed that he had no real teeth—what was he supposed to grip the key with?” [Kafka 1996, 11]). Only with the greatest effort and concentration does he manage to maneuver his body out of the room and make himself visible to the others.

Gregor’s object-relation to his new body, however, is clearly a consequence of the metamorphosis, and as such the transformation cannot confirm the assumption that there is no logical connection between the inner human life and the human body. Rather, the transformation seems to have severed the logical connection between Gregor’s inner life and his body. Even if his inner life has survived his metamorphosis, the characteristic way in which the inner human life is related to the human body has not. The spontaneous flow of movement, the flow of intentional action and bodily movement that characterizes the human way of being in the world, has stopped. In Gregor’s first attempt to withdraw to his room in response to his father’s despair and fury, “und so begann er . . . sich nach Möglichkeit rasch, in Wirklichkeit aber doch nur sehr langsam umzudrehen” (KAF, 1:112) (“he began to turn around as quickly as possible, in reality turning only very slowly” [Kafka 1996, 15]. In this clause we see the working of the mind that is in effect detached from the working of the body.

In other words, Gregor’s difficulties in making his body move in accordance with his will and intentions, the way in which his body has become objectified, sheds light on the way our body under normal circumstances evades objective thought. Being confronted with Gregor’s
thought-dependent movements, we are shocked into seeing what we normally take for granted. We see that we are not the decision-makers for our own bodies, manipulating it with our intellect into the right position in relation to things in the world. It is not because we have an intellectual grasp of the dimensions of the space and our body’s size and position that we know how to move in inhabited space; our wanting something, intending something, thinking something—this is a bodily stance toward the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a philosopher who has explored this problem in great detail, uses the term subject-body to indicate the way in which the inner human being is logically connected with the human body: “Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (1989, 138–39). The ability to act in and on the world is grounded in our being a subject-body. As such we project ourselves toward the things in the world in a way that does not leave room for a purely instrumental relation to one’s own body: “In the action of the hand which is raised towards an object is contained a reference to the object, not as an object represented, but as that highly specific thing towards which we project ourselves, near which we are, in anticipation, and which we haunt” (Merleau-Ponty 1989, 138). Gregor is no longer a body-subject in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, and this very concept holds up a mirror in which we can see the distortions of Gregor’s relation to his body. We see more clearly that the metamorphosis constitutes a departure from the characteristic human way of relating to one’s own body, a fall from being a subject-body.

By positing the human being as a subject-body, Merleau-Ponty also criticizes the intellectualism inherent in Cartesian dualism: “Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (1989, 137). The whole process of accessing the world is connected with this “I can”:

Our bodily experience of movement . . . provides us with a way of access to the world and the object, with a “praktognosia” [practical knowledge], which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary. My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my “symbolic” or “objectifying function.” (Merleau-Ponty 1989, 140–41)

Far from having a body that “has its world,” Gregor has a body that has lost its world, that no longer “understands” it. His inner life has become a matter of “I cannot”; the severing of the logical relation between consciousness and body is matched by a severing of the logical relation
between body and world, and a loss of the bodily at-home-ness in the world that goes with the “I can.”

We see this all the more clearly in Gregor’s relation to his room as the story progresses. To some extent he manages to establish a relation to his new body that in turn makes him more at home in the world: he learns to crawl on the walls and enjoys hanging from the ceiling: “es war ganz anders, als das Liegen auf dem Fußboden; man atmete freier; ein leichtes Schwingen ging durch den Körper” (KAF, 1:126–27) (“it was completely different from lying on the floor; one could breathe more freely; a faint swinging sensation went through the body” [Kafka 1996, 23]). And even when he loses control of his upside-down body in the state of “fast glücklichen Zerstreutheit” (KAF, 1:127) (“the almost happy absent-mindedness” [Kafka 1996, 23]), his acquired at-home-ness in his new body is such that he is not hurt by the fall.

However, as Gregor gradually becomes more united with his new non-human body, he simultaneously becomes more detached from his humanity, and this affects his relation to his room. An important stage in his deterioration takes place when the furniture is removed from his room so as to simplify his moving about. Initially, he foresees this change as a change for the better, but he realizes soon that it is catastrophic to his sense of being human. It not only means that he becomes even more isolated in his room: “Denn in einem Raum, in dem Gregor ganz allein die leeren Wände beherrschte, würde wohl kein Mensch außer Grete jemals einzutreten sich getrauen” (KAF, 1:130) (“Into a room in which Gregor ruled the bare walls alone, no human being beside Grete was ever likely to set foot” [Kafka 1996, 25]). He also realizes that without the human room with its furniture he will no longer be able to remember his human past, and it seems absolutely clear to him that retaining the room in its former state is crucial to his survival:

*Nichts sollte entfernt werden; alles mußte bleiben; die guten Einwirkungen der Möbel auf seinen Zustand konnte er nicht entbehren; und wenn die Möbel ihn hinderten, das sinnlose Herumkriechen zu betreiben, so war es kein Schaden, sondern ein großer Vorteil.* (KAF, 1:129)

(Nothing should be removed; everything had to stay; he could not do without the beneficial influence of the furniture on his state of mind; and if the furniture prevented him from carrying on this senseless crawling around, then that was no loss but rather a great advantage.) (Kafka 1996, 25)
In other words, this characteristic feature of inner human life—that one relates to past events, that one’s human past lives on in one’s conception of oneself as a person and as a human being—is dependent on Gregor’s relation to the human body he no longer has. The logical connection between being human and having a human body is confirmed, now mediated through the significance of “ein richtiges, nur etwas zu kleines Menschennzimmer” (KAF, 1:93) (“a regular human room, only a little on the small side” [Kafka 1996, 3]) that he looked at with appreciation the first morning he woke up as an insect.

Thus, rather than having survived the transformation, Gregor’s inner life is transfigured into a consciousness in deterioration. Instead of confirming dualistic assumptions about the human being, the progression of the story is geared toward revealing dualism’s philosophical distortion of it. In so far as we think it has survived, it may be because our own thinking suffers from the same distortion.

IV

If the scenes in which Gregor battles with his new bodily form bring out the logical relation between the human body and the inner human life, the scenes of confrontation between Gregor and his family explore the ontological repercussions of his metamorphosis by highlighting the connection between ontology and ethics in our dealings with one another. The story seems to reveal the potential conflict between psychological reactions and ethical demands: The members of the family know the verminous creature is Gregor; indeed, the fact that they know this is part of the horror of seeing him in this bodily form.

Grete’s response to Gregor carries a huge moral weight. She continues to treat the creature as a human being and as her brother, as someone to whom she owes care and love. Is her response grounded in dualistic assumptions? Does she continue to treat him as a human being because she thinks his inner self is unscathed by the metamorphosis? Not necessarily. We may take her to accept that the vermin is Gregor, her brother, in virtue of his history; that is, she responds to the vermin as her brother not because she can recognize her brother in the creature, nor because she is able to give a plausible explanation for what has happened to him, but simply because she acknowledges that this transformation is something that has happened to him, her brother Gregor. This non-dualistic and non-reductive conception of the identity of the human being brings
out the continuity in the demands other people make on us quite inde-
pendently of what changes they undergo, in ways we are familiar with in
connection with people who undergo severe physical or psychic damage,
for instance. In Grete’s initial response, then, there seems to be no room
for the thought that he is outside the human circle of care and concern.
In his new bodily form, Gregor may not meet the ontological standards
of human beings, but that is morally irrelevant because he did not qualify
for her moral concern in the first place.

Viewed in this light, Grete’s final denunciation of the vermin as
Gregor, the son and the brother—“Ich will vor diesem Untier nicht den
Namen meines Bruders aussprechen [. . .]. Du musst bloss den Gedanken
loszuwerden suchen, dass es Gregor ist” (KAF, 1:149, 150) (“I won’t pro-
nounce the name of my brother in front of this monster. . . . You just have
to try to get rid of the idea that it’s Gregor” [Kafka 1996, 37, 38])—is to
be regarded as a moral failure. But can the question be so easily settled?
First, this view seems hardly to recognize the deep connection between
the ethical and the psychological strands of our response: we develop our
ethical responses to other people who have a recognizable human form,
and although it is clearly a mistake to turn this recognizable human form
into a criterion for moral concern, it is difficult to imagine a moral con-
cern of the kind we owe human beings that is completely divorced from
the habitual response toward beings with a recognizable human body.
Second, there are important differences between the severely deformed
person and Gregor Samsa. In the first case, there is a story of deformation
that can be told. The story of Gregor’s metamorphosis, however, cannot
be told. The ontological fuzziness that is an obstacle to sense in the story
pops up again, but now as an obstacle to holding on to the thought that
the vermin is Gregor.

Trying to counter the deep-seated dualistic tendency in our thought
about human beings, Wittgenstein says, “The human body is the best
picture of the human soul” (2001, 152). How are we to understand “the
best picture of”? Stanley Cavell offers us help in this gloss on the remark:
“The human body is the best picture of the human soul—not, I feel like
adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it.
The body is the field of expression of the soul, the body is of the soul; it
is the soul’s; a human soul has a human body” (1982, 356).

Without a human body that is the field of expression of his soul,
Gregor fails to communicate with his family. Thus, contrary to the
assumptions behind the dualistic conception, human understanding seems
to depend on the live expressive human body. The meeting of minds is
not so much hindered by the body as the dualist induces us to believe, but rather is made possible by or conditioned by the human body. The meeting of minds depends on the human being’s natural expressiveness. To say that it is natural is not, however, to deny that it is conventional in some sense. The point is rather that we tend to work with a misleading conception of the relation between the natural and the conventional. In Cavell’s words, “very little of what goes on among human beings . . . is merely conventional” (1982, 119).

V

If this progression through the text captures something important in the story, it still seems unclear how these philosophical concerns relate to the story as a family drama. Is it an allegorical reading of the text I have offered, the actual dramatic action being merely a vehicle for the discussion of philosophical problems? Such a conclusion seems to miss the communicative point of the interdependence and interaction of the two readerly progressions, the one engaging in the story as a family drama and the other exploring our ontological assumptions about the event that sets the drama in motion.

To see how deeply the ontological “drama” is embedded in the family drama, we need to return once again to the beginning of the story. As already mentioned, there is no description of how the metamorphosis took place, and this indeterminacy follows from the nature of the event: it simply cannot be made determinate within the world as we know it. However, the opening clause of the story is marked by another indeterminacy that at least allows the possibility of a causal connection between the metamorphosis and Gregor’s life prior to it. The sequence of events referred to in the opening paragraph—his unsettling dreams and his waking up to find himself transformed into an insect—is in fact indeterminate between a consecutive and a consequential reading. His transformation may simply come after his unsettling dreams (x happened, then y happened) or there may be a causal connection between his unsettling dreams and the state in which he wakes up. Even if the first is the only reading with an indisputable basis in the text, the second is not ruled out.5

But how are we supposed to make sense of a causal connection between the unsettling dream and the metamorphosis? What kind of causal connection could there possibly be? One possibility is to see the
metamorphosis itself as the result of an escape fantasy on the part of Gregor. There are several textual indications of a tie between the metamorphosis and Gregor’s desire to escape. His deep dissatisfaction with his professional life, family life, social life, and love life lends credibility to the idea that he has entertained the thought of escaping it all. The image of a verminous creature is well suited to capture the combination of aggression toward a dominating father, suppressed sexual desire, and self-contempt that seems to make up his frame of mind prior to the metamorphosis. Fantasizing and escapism both belong to the world of dreams, but in this case the dreamer finds on waking up that the escapist dream has taken on the form of a nightmarish reality. This is perhaps the ultimate nightmare, or nightmare turned daymare: to wake up from acting out suppressed wishes in one’s dreams and find oneself changed in accordance with those dreams.

The temptation to escape by means of bodily withdrawal also appears in the other piece of writing in which Kafka experiments with the motif of a man transformed into a vermin, the fragment “Wedding Preparations in the Country.” The protagonist Raban imagines that he can send his human body into a situation that he is dreading. He remains in his bed and becomes a giant beetle. “Die Verwandlung” may be seen as the fantasy in which this fantasy takes on the form of reality.

Taking the metamorphosis to be the fatal outcome of an escape fantasy has the effect of embedding the ontologically fuzzy metamorphosis in the dramatic action, but it also requires a reconfiguration or reconstruction of the plot structure in “Die Verwandlung.” One of the assumptions that governed the first progression through the text was that the opening of dramatic action coincides with the beginning of the discourse (i.e., that the first destabilizing event is the event of the metamorphosis). This assumption does not hold if we accept a consequential rather than a consecutive reading of the opening connective clause: it implies that we are faced with an in medias res opening in “Die Verwandlung,” leaving the reader with the task of reconstructing the part of the plot that reaches back into the past. What is presented as background to the unfolding drama (Gregor’s discontent and frame of mind) is in fact part of the causal chain of events. Again the reader is misguided by the narrator: while we are given the impression that we are entering the dramatic action exactly when it gets going, it turns out that we enter the dramatic action at a point when it is in fact far into the process of complication. The real start of the dramatic action, in this case, is Gregor’s response of entertaining the escape fantasy.
It follows from this reconfiguration of the plot that Gregor has a considerable part in, and therefore responsibility for, his own misery. It is not the result of a hidden external agency but rather internally related to his handling of his life. The reconfiguration also sheds light on his curious and seemingly inappropriate response to his transformation. He is certainly distressed by his new bodily form, and he reflects on how he will be responded to, but quite absurdly he seems even more concerned with being too late for work. His refusal to recognize the seriousness of his situation makes sense if we see it in light of his unwillingness to acknowledge his responsibility: escapist, wishful thinking that prompted the metamorphosis carries over into the way his mind works after his temptation to depart from his human body has taken on the form of a nightmarish reality.

VI

Does my interpretation, with its postulation of a causal connection between Gregor’s previous life and the metamorphosis, restore the face-value approach to the text? It clearly does not solve the problem of naturalization. According to our understanding of how the world normally works, we simply do not wake up from a dream and find ourselves transformed in accordance with those dreams. The crucial event in the story remains unacceptable and unheard of, and no psychological explanation of the escape wish (the wish to escape from obligations, an outbreak of suppressed sexual desire, a wish for revenge on his father, etc.) is able to do away with the ontological fuzziness of the metamorphosis.

However, perhaps naturalization is not the route to follow when trying to make sense of this story; seeing the significance of the story’s resistance to sense is a better alternative. We seem to gain sense by allowing the story to revolve around the ontological problematic it contains. We should not take the story to be a vehicle for reflection on issues in philosophical anthropology, but rather see the unfolding of the dramatic action as an enactment of or fleshing out of the temptation of dualism. The temptation of dualism resides not only in the history of philosophy but also in us. I guess most of us have sometimes woken up hoping that Descartes was right—that the bodily creature we are, uneasy as any one of us may feel about it, is external to the human being that we are; that there are no essential connections. This may be due either to self-contempt or to an unwillingness to stand by human life as essentially shared
with other bodily human beings. Exactly because dualism is conceived of in this story not primarily as a philosophical idea, but rather as a human temptation, or as an idea that is existentially grounded, we are able to find our feet with the transformed Gregor.

By acknowledging that dualism is an idea that resonates deeply with any human being who is alert to life’s complexities and anxieties, we can see that Gregor’s extraordinary ontological situation, his being human and yet not a human being, emerges as a fictional dramatization of the rather more ordinary and familiar struggle of coming to terms with the human condition and a reflection of our often half-hearted commitment to it. The image of Gregor transformed into something verminous is particularly suited to capturing the aspects of the temptation of dualism noted above: the aggression toward other people, the resentment of their demands on us, and the self-contempt that is likely to result.

In the fictional dramatization of this wish in “Die Verwandlung,” the denial of the human condition turns out to be fatal, not least because Gregor is deprived of a comprehensible human language. Initially, he is unaware of his exclusion from linguistic communication. He thinks he speaks to his family in words, he hears his own sounds as words, but they can’t hear words in the sounds he utters. He clearly recognizes the importance of conversation in order to stay human: his attempt at communicating is essentially an attempt at communicating his humanity to them, assuming that the inclusion in the human conversation sustains his inclusion “in den menschlichen Kreis” (KAF, 1:106) (“into human society” [Kafka 1996, 11]), and he regards his progressively lowered awareness of what is important to him as a human being to be a consequence of his being excluded from the human conversation. But contrary to the assumption on which the fantasy of dualism rests, this conversation—“Seit ein Gespräch wir sind,” to use a phrase from Hölderlin—is a conversation the whole human being participates in. If we take conversation and communication as crucial to our being human, there is in no logical room for divorcing the human being that we are from our human body.

This focus on the importance of the human conversation also carries over to the text itself, as an act of communication. By taking such pains to frustrate the reader’s attempts at making sense of the story, Kafka runs the risk of failing to communicate with his reader at all. Even so, the chief difficulty of “Die Verwandlung” is the nature of the story’s concern—its probing into the role of the human body in our being human and our unwillingness to confront this issue, to participate in these probings. Hence the elusiveness of the communicative content of the story: the
anguish connected with the temptation of dualism, with its reference to our wavering between acknowledging the human condition and our all too human wish to escape it, indicates the sense of anguish that the story gives voice to and the kind of truth it expresses. Speirs and Sandberg say of Kafka’s fiction in general, “Such elusive, only intuitively graspable and yet indubitable ‘truth,’ rather than some rationally demonstrable ‘sense,’ is what Kafka hoped his fiction, at its best, could achieve” (1997, 18). For the reader of “Die Verwandlung,” this communicative effect is captured not by abandoning the face-value approach but by following it to its limit and by seeking to recognize and optimize the significance of this limit. However, if the particular kind of anguish given expression in “Die Verwandlung” does not resonate with us, it is unlikely that we can see ourselves as spoken to by the story in this way. No matter how important the textual design is in shaping the reader’s relation to the text, the readerly interaction with that design is still dependent on who the reader is and the sense of existence that is within the reader’s reach. In that respect “Die Verwandlung” is a highly risky act of communication.

Its riskiness, however, does not detract from its importance as a contribution to a philosophical discussion. Participating in the fictional dramatization of the temptation of dualism, the reader is invited to experience the connection between the thesis of dualism and the ontological-existential anguish of the Samsa family: that of Gregor in particular, but also of the father, mother and sister. Such connections between ontological and existential issues are seldom vibrant in philosophical discussions, even if they are crucial to understanding what is at stake; why the discussion matters. Thus, experiencing the thesis fleshed out in the form of a narrative is also philosophically important in that it helps us reconnect the thesis with the anguish. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge that the narrative form of “Die Verwandlung” is crucial to the reader’s engagement with and grasp of its philosophical concerns.

Notes

1. Note the nuances within the family’s response: Grete accommodates for the fact that Gregor is still Gregor longer than do the mother and the father.
2. I employ the term “mimetic” here in accordance with James Phelan’s use of the term. He distinguishes between three aspects of the literary character—the mimetic, the thematic, and the synthetic—and defines the mimetic aspect of the character as “that component of character directed to its imitation of a possible person” (2005, 216). Generally, the reading strategy adopted in my interpretation of “Die
Verwandlung” is indebted to Phelan’s rhetorical approach to narrativity, especially the significance attributed to the progression of the story and to the readerly sense-making engagement in this progression.

3. The idea that there is only an external relation between the inner human being and the outer human body may be imagined in at least two ways. We may envisage the possibility that the human body is merely an automaton. What looks like a human being is in fact not that at all: despite the smile, the devious glance, the seemingly wholehearted dedication to other human beings, and other human characteristics, there may be in fact no inner life there to support the bodily and verbal expressions. Conversely, we may be asked to imagine that inside the body that does not look like a human being at all there is a rich inner human life unfolding—complete with intentions, hopes, and the capacity for planning, calculation, and dismay in the face of severe trouble—with no way of expressing this inner life in the concentration of a face, the hopeful glance, the beaten looks or, for that matter, in the posture of the human body, in dragging one’s feet in despair. All these human feelings and cognitions are there, inside the non-human body, and the absence of a human body for them to be expressed in seems not to be detrimental to their reality. The way Gregor’s transformation is described is premised on the second version of this dualistic picture of the human being.

4. For an extensive discussion of this conception of the identity of human beings, see David Cockburn, Other Human Beings (1990). My discussion of dualism owes a lot to Cockburn’s work.

5. Our attitude to this indeterminacy may depend on our view of the reading process. Is it a matter of choice on the part of the reader whether we see a causal connection between the two events? Rimmon-Kenan seems to think so. In her comment on Forster’s famous distinction between plot and story and his example of the latter (“The king died and then the queen died”), she holds that “there is nothing to prevent a causally-minded reader from supplementing Forster’s . . . example with the causal link that would make it into an implicit plot” (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 17). A more rhetorically oriented reader, however, will assume the possibility that this indeterminacy may be part of the rhetorical design of the text, assuming that our response to it should be constrained by considerations of the potential connections between this aspect of the text and others that together may contribute to the text’s overall communicative effect.

Works Cited


