

“People Don’t Like Traveling Salesmen” – Kafka's Concept of Alienated Labor and its Delusions in the *Metamorphosis*

Matthew Raphael Johnson
Johnstown, PA

Franz Kafka's well known (1915) *Metamorphosis* is a tale of alienation.¹ The overall idea is that the transformation of man into a machine, a right-less, semi-human mechanism. This transformation is the gateway to delusion. It is a delusion in itself. It animalizes man and reduces him to a thing. Gregor's transformation is the result of the socially induced hallucination that anyone without money is inherently inferior to those possessing it.

Gregor's job as the main focus of his anxiety since it is often the very definition of man. Alienation is the estrangement of the empirical human self to human nature. Capitalism, competition and the deification of money does this rapidly. Regardless of the nature of alienation, it at least contains the fact that the work the “market” demands is totally foreign to the worker. In this case, it is forced upon Gregor due to his father's own failed business. Thus, it all amounts to Gregor reaching such a point of estrangement that he comes to believe he is non-human.

The story itself is a simple one. Gregor is a traveling salesman, though not by choice. He wakes one morning to discover that he has been transformed into a giant beetle of some sort. He can trust only his sister, Grete, who treats him with a pity. Otherwise, Gregor is subjectively aware that his monstrous appearance would frighten anyone away and possibly lead to his extermination. The ending of the story sees Gregor dead, partly due, bizarrely, to apples thrown at him by his father, but importantly, from his lack of any purpose or accomplishment.

The story is social and deals primarily with the question of revolt. As WH Sokel states: “the metamorphosis fulfills Gregor's desire for revolt without implicating his conscious mind.” Thus, Gregor is deeply alienated and his revolt, while not quite socialist, derives from the same causes. His rebellion is repressed by the demands of duty and moral scrupulosity, but it is a revolt all the same.

Thus, the story can be grasped in two complimentary ways. First, that the transformation is a symbolic act of subconscious rebellion that prevents him from going to work. Second, that this is a psychotic break, one where Gregor is, of course, perfectly normal in appearance, but delusion has warped his perception of himself and how others react to him. These are both the results of a repressed desire to rebellion. Even better, the repressed knowledge that his life is one of deep estrangement from what it is to be human.

While the plot is of no real import, the details Kafka describes are of prodigious social and economic significance. The story would make no sense except for the fact that he is treated harshly at his job, loathes it, and he is so employed in the first place due to his father's debt and the need to support his family. In other words, he is forced into this line of work because his father owes a great sum of money to the owner due to an earlier business failure.

Shortly after the change in appearance occurs, the management of the sales firm appears

¹ All citations from the story can be found here: Kafka, F. *The Metamorphosis*. Ian Johnston, trans. Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, BC, Canada, 2014

at the house because Gregor has not arrived to work that morning. The chief clerk of the company begins threatening Gregor with termination if he does not show up at once. The details of the story, however, are that Gregor has been accused of embezzlement and his job performance is very poor. He is on the verge of termination regardless. This only adds to his stress and anxiety.

The context is that, about five years earlier, the business Gregor's father owned collapsed, and the debts incurred needed to be paid off. The job was a means to support the family, but not himself, since Gregor muses that he keeps only "one or two crows" from his salary. Early in the story, it is clear that not only does this job dehumanize him, but he is hated by management equally in turn. It is more or less obvious that this stress has created a psychotic break.

Gregor's labor is deeply alienating because it is not his own. It is forced upon him and leads to his ill-treatment. Gregor is not a good salesman. Gregor's father is not working at all. Tersely, we read that he is "old." This seems insufficient to explain his inability to work since he is depicted as strong and sharp. It seems that the collapse has also collapsed his mind and self-image. Gregor, while he loathes this job, refuses to do anything about it.

These facts are essential in understanding what the transformation really is. It is a form of passive rebellion rather than just a psychotic episode. It is both things. Such a break would be motivated by a repressed desire to rebel under the intense pressure of his miserable existence. In either case, repressed rebellion is the key.

In a purely conscious sense, Gregor does not want to create a situation where he can no longer work. Yet, he hates how he is treated for a job that he does not want. In a way, becoming a bug is a means of rebellion from which Gregor can distance himself. Sokol writes:

It accomplishes, as we can see, in part at least, the goal of Gregor's longed-for rebellion. It sets him free of his odious job. At the same time, it relieves him of having to make a choice between his responsibility to his parents and his yearning to be free. The metamorphosis enables Gregor to become free and stay "innocent," a mere victim of uncontrollable calamity.²

Few would not sympathize with Gregor. Yet, this labor is not alienating in Marx's sense. For Marx, alienation was a technical term concerning the direct relationship (or lack thereof) between the worker and the other entities that are oppressing him. On this topic, Marx writes in his early manuscripts:

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself.³

This first criterion does fit Gregor, but only in the sense that this brand of forced labor is not about him, but is a family obligation. There are other elements, however, that make Gregor's

2 Sokel, WH. Kafka's Metamorphosis: Rebellion and Punishment. Monatshefte 48, (1956), 205-206

3 Marx, Karl. Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. Martin Mulligan, trans. Progress Publishers, 1959:

extreme form of alienation even more acute than Marx's condemnation. For Marx, alienation also comprises the idea that any product that a worker will create, or a part of it, will not be his. It is alien in the sense that it must be given over to be sold, and, in addition, that it is forced labor to begin with. This means the coercion at the root of employment will be manifest in the product: it will confront him as the product of exploitation.

In capitalism, the Darwinist idea is that those who can adapt faster and more efficiently to market demand have the "right" to absorb the assets of those defeated. The humiliation and dejection that Gregor's father experiences is justified in this respect. The reader has no idea if this is true, nor does the reader know if Gregor's ill-treatment is deserved or even connected to his father's earlier failure. There is also no reason to believe that Gregor is properly interpreting people's reaction to him. That too, might be a part of his delusional complex.

Returning to the concept of rebellion, the comments above serve to justify a few important ideas: first, that Gregor has a desire, albeit repressed, to destroy the life that he has inherited. The reader can imagine what he has to give up in order to pay a debt that he did not incur. His devotion and strict virtue make it impossible for him to do anything but work and be treated badly.

Second, that his transformation is the perfect solution: he can no longer work, the insect visage is strongly suggestive of how he feels, and there is no direct desire for it to come about. Therefore, given his devotion, he can get out of this trap without being responsible for it. It is reasonable to assume that such an event would quickly lead to his death. Therefore, this is also a suicide attempt.

Third, that the transformation into a beetle is not just an act of protest, nor merely a means of assuring his own death, but it also manifests the truth of the matter. Regardless of family ties and clearly manifest virtue, Gregor has become an "it." Near the end of the story, his sister sobs:

"We must try to get rid of it," the sister now said decisively to the father, for the mother, in her coughing fit, was not listening to anything. "It is killing you both. I see it coming. When people have to work as hard as we all do, they cannot also tolerate this endless torment at home. I just can't go on any more."

In this passage, the total separation of Gregor from society and family is complete. Not only is "it" not human, but it needs to die. This is not science fiction. Gregor has not really become a bug. His life and its pressures are such that he actually is deluded into believing that he has taken on this appearance. Alienation affects the mind and can easily become a fully manifest psychosis.

It is conceivable that the shame of being unable to perform in society, to be connected with a business failure and to be failing oneself, has created this extremely distorted image. This notion might be at work here in that the sheer injustice and the weight of stress has convinced Gregor that he is simply not fully human; that is truly not possessed of rights or dignity. He is not just an animal, but a horrible one.

His transformation is based on a psychotic episode triggered by a host of stresses and traumas stretching back years. Gregor muses to himself:

The stresses of selling are much greater than the actual work going on at head office, and, in addition to that, I still have to cope with the problems of traveling,

the worries about train connections, irregular bad food, temporary and constantly changing human interactions, which never come from the heart. To hell with it all!”

The stresses and trauma associated with such psychotic delusions are present: Gregor is sensitive, he is under immense stress, he feels responsible for the family (and likely much else), he is accused of crimes, he is accused of “abandoning” his family, he is on the verge of panic most of the time, and is forced to a job where his humanity is regularly repressed. When a man's “worth” is purely understood in quantitative terms, again, mental illness and delusions are not too far off. Sokol writes:

Kafka states in the first sentence that Gregor wakes up to find himself changed into a giant kind of vermin (“Ungeziefer”). The term “vermin” holds the key to the double aspect of the metamorphosis. Vermin connotes something parasitic and aggressive, something that lives off human beings and may suck their blood; on the other hand, it connotes something defenseless, something that can be stepped upon and crushed.⁴

It would not make sense that he believe himself to be a lion. They are majestic and powerful creatures. He is not just non-human, but what he thinks he is normally is perceived as disgusting. The issue here is that, being denuded of rights, dignity and even the basic sense of security, a psychotic breakdown manifest as an ugly bug. This is mirrored in Marx as he writes:

His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification.⁵

The connection here is that labor under capitalism is purely to make ends meet. It is drudgery rather than real work. Alienation turns man into a machine, seen only as a lump of physical force that should be driven to its limit. It is no accident that Darwinism arises and is widely accepted during the height of the British empire and industrial dominance. Given what it implies, it was music to the ears of the ruling class. All nature behaves as they do.

Discipline is harsh for anyone under the rule of the machine. The “machine” can be seen as both a metaphor for the system as a whole as well as an actual piece of capital. Over time, the intense pace of modern production does damage to the nervous system and even the physical health of the worker.

On money, Marx writes in his early manuscripts:

Money as the external, universal medium and faculty. . . for turning an image into reality and reality into a mere image, transforms the real essential powers of man and nature into what are merely abstract notions and therefore imperfections and tormenting chimeras, just as it transforms real imperfections and chimeras –

4 Sokol, 212

5 Marx, 23

essential powers which are really impotent, which exist only in the imagination of the individual – into real powers and faculties. In the light of this characteristic alone, money is thus the general distorting of individualities which turns them into their opposite and confers contradictory attributes upon their attributes.⁶

Here, Marx explicitly connects mental illness and capitalist fetishes. That things “only in the imagination” are thought to be real. Money creates a false world. Gregor's ugliness does not exist in reality, but, given the social belief that money creates beauty and knowledge by its mere possession, so too the lack of it leads to the opposite: ignorance and ugliness. To fetishize money is itself a mental illness.

Social life is based on alienation, where the images of things have no relation to the actual things. Darwin is both a materialist and a nominalist. Nominalism separates language from reality. At all levels, from the act of production to social hierarchy, image is radically distinct from any reality, any existing referent. Money is identical with success, manhood and human existence as such. It might even be acceptable to claim that a fortune earned from helpful inventions is well earned, but this is not the case here. Money has power in and of itself, the very definition of idolatry – and mental illness.

Gregor wants to rebel, to abandon his condition and the system that makes it so common. He hates both. It is a suppressed desire. It is suppressed under the rubric of moral duty and family obligation. Under this pressure, Gregor has finally snapped. His belief that he has turned into a bug is the result of the pressures of life, specifically the dehumanizing pressures of social norms, the power of money and the ability of capitalist success or failure to decide what is real and what is not. It is not just his life, but that of a system that, willfully or not, fetishizes money into a god.

6 Marx, 42