

Class 11 - February 23
Kafka, "Metamorphosis"

I. Personal Identity and Material Constitution

In philosophy, we look for true answers to difficult questions.
The evidence for our answers may be difficult to establish.
Our answers remain debatable.
Sometimes, we decide that the questions are poorly formed, as Wittgenstein says about the skeptical question.

We are starting a unit on personal identity.
The questions we are pursuing concern the nature of our selves.
Who are we?
What makes us the same people that we were when we were young?
What makes us the same as we grow older?
Is there a core set of properties that are consistent over our lives?
Is there even something called the self, or are we just a bundle of properties, with no unifying thing?
Haecceity: thisness

One answer that we could try to give, that would be consistent with our general, contemporary preference for materialism, is that we are identical with our bodies.
The problem with that answer is that our bodies are changing all the time.
We lose skin and hair all the time (dust).
Every seven years, all the cells in our bodies are replaced.
So, if we identify ourselves with our bodies, we are not the same person we were, say, a moment ago.
(And, my son is made out of bologna and noodles.)
The problem underlies the debtor's paradox: I am not the same person who took out the loan, so I can't be held for it.

The problem of personal identity is related to a more general problem called the problem of material constitution.
Consider the ship of Theseus.
Replace all the planks.
We still have Theseus's ship, even though all the material is different.
Further, reconstruct the ship with the planks you removed.
Which one is Theseus's ship?
One solution is to say that they both are.
Then, the same material object can exist in two places at once.

Consider the general principle that no two material objects can be in the same place.
Now, consider Chrysippus's example of Dion and Theon.
Dion is a normal person.
Theon is all of Dion except the right foot.
Now, remove Dion's right foot.
Theon remains, since we didn't touch him at all.
Dion only lost his foot, so he should remain.
But, if he does remain, then we violate the principle that one place can't house two different objects.

Consider a lump of clay.
Make it into a statue, of, say, Joan Stewart; call it Joan.
Is Joan different from the lump?
On the one hand, we want to say so.
On the other hand, Lump and Joan have different properties.
They were created at different times.
Lump isn't destroyed, when Joan is.

One response to the Lump problem is to admit coincidental objects.
We won't pursue that solution here.
But, these considerations might make us wonder about our own constitution, and the view that our selves are connected to our bodies.

II. *Metamorphosis*

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, we encounter a metaphor.
Metaphors are tricky for philosophers.
Everything is like everything else, in some way.
The point of philosophy is not to illustrate or illuminate as much as it is to get the right answer.
So, we have to be careful about our uses of metaphors.
"Philosophers...should abstain from metaphors" (*De Motu* §3).

Still, if we want to understand Kafka's work, we have to have a good grasp of the symbols he uses.

Who is Gregor Samsa? What does he do?
How does Gregor respond to his metamorphosis? (Initially, and long-term)
How do the members of Gregor's family respond to his change?

How and what does Gregor eat?
What is life like outside the Samsa's apartment?
How does Gregor's sister treat him differently from the way he is treated by his parents?
Why doesn't Gregor want his furniture moved out? Why does he change his mind?
Does Gregor's attitude toward his family change?
What role do the roomers play in the story?

How does Gregor die?
How do his family members react when they hear that Gregor is dead?
What is Kafka's central theme?

Why does Gregor change into a vermin?
Is Gregor Samsa the same before and after the metamorphosis?
Is there a deep meaning to the *Metamorphosis*, or is it just a story?