

# **“Only Seeming”: Locating Adorno’s Bourgeois Society in Franz Kafka’s Meditation**

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**Abstract:** This essay applies aspects of philosopher Theodor Adorno’s work to stories from Franz Kafka’s work *Betrachtung* (*Meditation*) to elucidate how the short story collection indicts late capitalist society. I first explore how Adorno’s conception of bourgeois ideology is located and developed in the childhood imagery of “Children on The Highway.” I then analyze how this concept is developed further via Kafka’s adult narrators from “The Way Home,” “Unmasking a Confidence Man,” and “The Small Businessman,” all stories that confront Adorno’s assertion that a moral life under capitalism is unfeasible.

*It is the sufferings of men that should be shared: the smallest step towards their pleasures is one towards the hardening of their pains.*

— Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*

In his introduction to *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, Ritchie Robertson notes that “isolation is a recurrent theme” in the sixteen short pieces that comprise Franz Kafka’s *Betrachtung* (*Meditation*) (Kafka xiv). These brief, impressionistic stories “begin with the relative happiness of childhood and end with the unhappiness of an adult persona” (xiii). This passage from youth to adulthood is marked by two key aspects of what philosopher Theodor Adorno called “bourgeois society,” or the conditions of life under late capitalism: the assimilation of dominant cultural norms as a method of self-formation, and the inability to live a moral life in an evil world (Pickford and Zuidervaart). This essay will apply

aspects of Adorno's work to stories from *Meditation* to elucidate how Kafka's collection indicts late capitalist society. I will first explore how Adorno's conception of bourgeois ideology is located and developed in the childhood imagery of "Children on The Highway." I then analyze how this concept is expanded upon in Kafka's adult narrators from "The Way Home," "Unmasking a Confidence Man," and "The Small Businessman," all stories that confront Adorno's assertion that a moral life under capitalism is unfeasible. Finally, I note how two of *Meditation's* shorter pieces, "Wish to Become a Red Indian" and "Trees," reveal a desire to emancipate oneself from such an immoral existence, and to find immaterial freedom from the isolation of capitalist society. Contra Adorno's own assertion that Kafka's oeuvre rejects interpretation, (Robertson xii), *Meditation* can be seen as a collection of parables warning the reader of both late capitalism's capacity to isolate, and of the difficult task of imagining freedom from said isolation.

## I

For Adorno, an emblematic feature of self-development under capitalism is the formation of personality through the assimilation of cultural norms reinforced by peers, i.e. "the other kids at school or the kids in the block," rather than by parental relationships (Johnson 121). Further, Adorno highlights that these cultural norms are the product of a society whose scale is under the total control of financial interests, what he calls the "totally administered society" (121). Thus, "the bourgeois individual [is] the bearer of a private will," meaning that individuals living under late capitalism (i.e. that which encompasses contemporary society) unconsciously internalize the ideology of the bourgeois (121). Nowhere in *Meditation* is this understanding of identity construction more apparent than the opening piece, "Children on The Highway." Through fragmented prose, the reader sees the narrator—a child from a village—engage in escapist play with a group of peers. The narrator's parents are a non-presence, mentioned only in passing, and Kafka sets the children's play in opposition to "the grown-ups [who]

were still awake in the village, mothers making the beds ready for the night” (Kafka 5). By distancing the narrator from the spectre of their parents, Kafka allows the reader to see how bourgeois ideology has attached itself to the former’s thoughts.

Kafka then provides clues that reveal the young narrator’s bourgeois personality early in “Children on The Highway.” From their fenced garden, the narrator notes “workmen ... coming from the fields, laughing quite disgracefully” (3). That the narrator deems the workmen’s laughter disgraceful is conspicuous, and suggests a sanctimonious conception of labour as something not to be enjoyed, but performed rigorously and without respite. Announcing this disdain from the comfort of their private property, the narrator unwittingly adopts the role of a supervisor reprimanding their subjects, isolating themselves from others through an imagined hierarchy. This relationship is repeated in miniature when the narrator states that, if a man asked them something from outside their window, “I would look at him as if I were gazing at the mountains or into the empty air—and a reply from me wouldn’t matter very much to him either” (3). Again, the narrator’s possession of private space allows them to construct an imagined hierarchy between themselves and those outside it. Conceding that their answer would not matter anyhow, the narrator implies that this feeling of bourgeois individualism is pervasive and intersubjective. Both examples illustrate Adorno’s description of alienation in *Introduction to Sociology*, “where the totality of society maintains itself not on the basis of solidarity ... but only through the antagonistic interests of human beings” (Adorno 43). When the narrator does decide to leave the house and play with other children, the degree to which their peers generate this alienation becomes apparent: One of the children chides the narrator for using the term “No quarter;” exclaiming “What a way to talk!” (Kafka 4). That the narrator’s pompous diction is chastised as they join the other children does not signify that they are entering a more communal environment, but instead demonstrates how readily children will impose dominant cultural norms

upon one another. Kafka reinforces this point when the narrator compares the act of singing with other children to “being drawn along by a fish-hook” (5). However, the narrator still describes themselves as “be[ing] alone”, because this is a community of alienated individuals (4). The children are not described as playing cooperatively, but instead begin a game where some “[stand] like strangers ... looking down” and pushing others into a ditch (4). Again, Kafka shows the reader an inherent desire for conflict and hierarchical control, and the narrator expresses a certain comfort in the arrangement, eventually wanting “to fall into a deeper ditch” (4). This comfort signals a desire to maintain hierarchical relationships, and by extension, an internalization of bourgeois ideology. In opening *Meditation* with “Children on The Highway,” Kafka locates bourgeois ideology in the realm of childhood. It is in “The Way Home,” “Unmasking a Confidence Man,” and “The Small Businessman” that Kafka explores how—for his adult narrators—this worldview makes living a moral life impossible. Kafka’s shorter pieces, “Wish to Become a Red Indian” and “Trees,” play on the possibility of freedom from such a life.

## II

The narrator in “The Way Home” describes themselves as “responsible, and rightly so,” for surveying a variety of scenes and sensations common to life in their modern town, from “the toasts drunk” to “all the loving couples in their beds” (Kafka 11). Considering their past and future, this narrator finds the only injustice in their life to be that of “Fate, which has favoured [them] so greatly” (11). The story ends with a reversal: In their private life at home, the narrator remains pensive, but for nothing “worth being thoughtful about” (11). That is, the narrator’s personal fulfillment extends only to professional affairs. The ennui afflicting Kafka’s narrator is comparable to a description of life under late capitalism outlined by Adorno in his work *Minima Moralia*: “What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption ... without autonomy or substance of its own” (Adorno and

Jephcott 15). Fabian Freyenhagen expands on how this type of life—also absorbing the description of alienation seen in “Children on The Highway”, notably—precludes the possibility of living morally:

One way to describe [Adorno’s] conception [of life] is to say that the modern social world ... is radically evil. This is not to invoke theology, where talk of “radical evil” traditionally had its place, but to express this twofold claim: (1) late capitalism is evil to the root (evil is not accidental to it, or only a surface phenomenon); and (2) this evil is particularly grave (it does not get more evil than this) ... Adorno says that right living is not possible because, in a radically evil social setting, whatever we do short of changing this setting will probably implicate us in its evil (100).

The narrator in “The Way Home” knows that they are implicated in an evil world of bourgeois ideology, and the restlessness they experience outside of their work suggests a futile desire to escape the very evil that their labour represents. The reader sees this dynamic again in “Unmasking a Confidence Man.” Here, the narrator laments how experiences with con men introduced them to “a ruthlessness which now [they] cannot imagine the earth to be without, so much so that [they were] already beginning to feel it” (Kafka, 8). Just as in “The Way Home,” the narrator in “Unmasking a Confidence Man” demonstrates an awareness of how drastically bourgeois ideology has shaped their environment. However, by existing in this “radically evil social setting,” they cannot avoid reinforcing the dominant ideology from which this society arises. Like the children in “Children on The Highway,” this narrator also finds fulfillment in the assumption of power over others: The story ends with their arrival at a social gathering, where they admit that “the blind loyalty on the faces of the servants gave [them] as much pleasure as a delightful surprise” (7). With regards to “The Small Businessman,” Robertson notes that “the speak-

er ... feels his isolation with particular acuteness. Living in a world of abstract commercial dealings, he is linked only by monetary transactions to the people who buy his wares" (xiv). In other words, this speaker experiences a more pronounced form of the same dejection described in the prior examples by "serving and maintaining a social system that often relies on people acting in [their own self-interest]" (Freyenhagen 102). In each example, the reader observes how a pervasive bourgeois ideology has created an "evil," self-perpetuating social structure that forces its subjects to behave in "evil" ways, regardless of whether or not they recognize this. It is in two of Kafka's shorter pieces that a desire to escape this evil is communicated.

Describing Kafka's "Trees" as an "aphorism" (xiv), Robertson asserts that when the short work is read in the context of isolation, it "looks ... like a reflection on the individual's relation to society: superficially one seems unconnected to society; on a closer look, one is rooted there; but even that is an illusion compared to the undisclosed ultimate truth" (xiv). To place this analysis within the context of Adorno's evil society, Kafka's titular plants are "rooted" in bourgeois ideology. However, like the narrators in "The Way Home" or "The Small Businessman," this rootedness is "only seeming"; trees and humans alike are tethered to greater structures—physical and social, respectively—yet cannot escape the "ultimate truth" that these structures come at the cost of potential freedoms (15; xiv). For the small businessman, imagining a life devoid of bourgeois ideology is tantamount to imagining a tree uprooting itself. To envision such a freedom is to construct an unrealizable fantasy, as Kafka does in "Wish to Become a Red Indian." Robertson states that the speaker in this piece "combines the strength of the adult male with the freedom of the child and the appeal of the exotic, transforming them into pure onward movement" (xv). To expand on this point, the "onward movement" sublates the bourgeois ideology infecting children's play and adult's work into something immaterial, without "any reins" attaching it to an evil reality (15). Otherwise said, the individual's material conditions generate

evil, and thus only in the realm of the immaterial, the space behind “seeming” reality, can freedom be imagined (15).

Themes of isolation in Kafka’s *Meditation* are often inextricable from the markers of bourgeois society. Attempting to play, the figures in Kafka’s “Children on The Highway” reproduce the hierarchical ideology that shapes their community. The speakers in “The Way Home,” “Unmasking a Confidence Man,” and “The Small Businessman” each confront the moral decay inherent to a society that has so thoroughly attached itself to such an ideology. “Trees” and “Wish to Become a Red Indian” are Kafka’s attempts to identify and realize an immaterial world free of this decay. Thus, when Robertson describes “Trees”—and by extension “Wish to Become a Red Indian”—as an aphorism, he identifies *Meditation* as a *Minima Moralia* avant la lettre: *Meditation* is a collection of aphoristic works concerning the contradictions of life under late capitalism, and Kafka’s style transforms the general truths contained in these aphorisms into fictions.

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