
Existential Philosophy In The Metamorphosis By Franz Kafka

Existentialism is defined as “a family of philosophies devoted to an interpretation of human existence in the world that stresses concreteness and character” (Existentialism, 1). The movement rejects traditional attempts to ground human knowledge in the external world and claims the self emerges from experience. Overall, existentialism declares that humans make themselves what they are through their own choices (Farahmandian and Haonong, 334). Arguably, one of the most intriguing writers who can be identified as an existentialist is Franz Kafka, who most notably wrote *The Metamorphosis*. In *The Metamorphosis*, the main character Gregor Samsa spontaneously awakens one morning having been transformed into a “monstrous vermin” (Kafka, 3). There are at least sixteen themes and subcategories of existentialism, including the importance of the individual, the importance of choice, meaning and absurdity, authenticity, social criticism, the importance of personal relations, and atheism and religion (Minar and Studio, 124). Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* employs several of the aforementioned themes. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor’s eventual death results from his inability to confront the world and defend his own existence, the stripping of his humanity, and the rapid deterioration of his body; in other words, *The Metamorphosis* is an existentialist novella because Gregor’s fate is determined by the choices he makes.

Kafka employs a component of existentialist philosophy, ‘existential angst,’ in *The Metamorphosis* to facilitate Gregor’s development. Existential angst is defined as “the internal conflict experienced by every conscious individual due to the fact that the world is not a rational place and existence can be maintained only by constant struggle” (Wilfred, 226). The idea of existential angst encompasses finding the means to survive or attempting to establish meaningful relationships with other humans and other creatures. Briefly, existential struggles represent the conflict that naturally opposes the original state of human existence. (Farahmandian and Haonong, 335). The character of Gregor experiences existential angst and struggle even before his metamorphosis. From the beginning of the novella, Kafka offers evidence that Gregor does not have a particularly exceptional relationship with the members of his family. For example, the narrator expresses that the door to Gregor’s room is locked and his family is unable to enter his room to check on him, which symbolizes just how isolated Gregor is from his family (Kafka, 6). Additionally, Gregor becomes unable to communicate normally with his family after his incidental metamorphosis. Gregor’s attempts to speak have turned into “insistent distressed chirpings... which left the clarity of his words intact for only a moment... before so badly garbling them” (Kafka, 5). Due to Gregor’s speech being garbled and distorted, he is greatly isolated from everyone, not just his family. The manager who came to check on Gregor is repulsed by his speech and appearance; “During Gregor’s speech he did not stand still for a minute but... backed toward the door, yet very gradually”. Gregor’s inability to communicate with his family and others after his transformation is undoubtedly an existential struggle, as he is no longer able to maintain any of the meager relationships he has fostered with his family and colleagues. The inability to foster meaningful relationships with other humans instills angst in Gregor throughout the novella. According to existential philosophy, lack of meaningful relationships results in angst, which Kafka demonstrates through the character of Gregor.

Alienation is another basic theme of existentialist philosophy that is present in *The Metamorphosis*. Existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, defines the concept of alienation; "The seed of alienation is hidden in the experience of shame itself. In shame I experience a different self, the self of which I am ashamed does not exist prior to my encounter with the Other. It is the gaze of Other that confers this new self on me" (as quoted in Sharma, 61). The alienation Sartre describes also involves shame, which is a form of consciousness in an individual. To feel shame is to be aware of the presence of others. Shame is an acknowledgment that others exist and has the capability to look at an individual and judge (Sarte, 252). Briefly, shame and alienation go hand in hand. The feeling of shame leads to alienation or the distancing of a person from themselves or others or vice versa. When Gregor unexpectedly transforms into a vermin he experiences great shame because he can no longer work for his family. His own characteristics instill shame in him and cause alienation. He endures a miserable job in order to support his family, and even when he has transformed into a vermin, he is entirely focused on getting up and going to work. Also, Gregor is extremely focused on the happiness of his sister and planned to send her to a music school. He suppresses his desire to quit his job because he knows he needs to work to make Grete's dreams a reality. Gregor's willingness to work a job he hates in order to make his family happy results in his alienation from them. The only connection Gregor has with his family is earning money for them. The family is so accustomed to Gregor being the breadwinner that they do not consider the possibility of Gregor being unhappy or discontented with his life, which explains why the family cannot see him as a complex human being with personal needs. As a result, Gregor is alienated from both his family and himself. Existentialism stresses the need for connection. Kafka further explains the imperativeness of connection by creating a character who does not have any connections with others.

Overall, Gregor makes himself who he is based on his own choices to alienate himself from his family and others, devote his life to a job he hates, and act in such a selfless way as to not care for himself. Gregor is the sum of his choices. Therefore, *The Metamorphosis* is an existentialist novella. Along with possessing the most basic qualities of existentialism, *The Metamorphosis* can also be classified as absurd, a philosophical category that falls under existentialism.

Kafka employs absurdist philosophy in *The Metamorphosis*. As mentioned previously, absurdism is a philosophical subcategory that falls under existentialism. In fact, the absurd has roots in French existentialism, which claims "humans are destined to fail in their search for meaning because life has no meaning" (Duncan, 237). Whereas the fantastic asserts that life has meaning and that meaning simply lies beyond the grasp of the human conscience, existentialism states life is inherently and utterly meaningless. To elaborate, "absurdity is related to the human condition in which humans face nothingness" (Davachi, 87). Going deeper, existentialism states that there is no absolute good or evil in the world, all is relative and based on humans attempting to rationalize the world (Bressler 124). In *The Metamorphosis*, the absurdist philosophy presents in the way that there are seemingly no moral repercussions for the reprehensible actions of the family. The Samsa's are not chastised for their maltreatment of Gregor. In fact, towards the end of the novella, even Grete - who was hospitable towards Gregor immediately after his metamorphosis - desperately wants him out of the family's lives because she simply cannot comprehend the fact that Gregor is a vermin and losing his humanity. Grete tells her father, "If it were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that it isn't possible for human beings to live with such a creature... as things are, this animal persecutes us..." (Kafka, 49). Here, Grete attempts to rationalize what has happened to Gregor. She suggests that the creature actually is not Gregor, because her brother would never do such a thing as to transform into a vermin and ruin the family's lives. Additionally, after Gregor's

death, the family is presented as freed from their burdens and is not presented with any malice. In fact, Gregor is the one who is depicted as pathetic for dying to lessen the burden he placed on his family (Farahmandian and Haonong, 336). The use of the words, “without his consent” and “weak” (51) Kafka uses when describing Gregor’s death portray him as pathetic and unable to stand up for himself to his family. Kafka employs absurdist ideology to supplement the broad existentialist philosophy in *The Metamorphosis* through the family’s attempt to rationalize Gregor’s metamorphosis and through how Gregor reacts to his family’s repulsion.

Through the character of Gregor in *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka shows that human beings, by nature, are existential. Existentialism encompasses the importance of choice, the importance of the individual, and the importance of personal relationships. Gregor, as a character, becomes what he is through the choices he makes in his life and his personal relations. Gregor’s death results from a culmination of his inability to confront his own existence as a vermin, his own extreme selflessness, and letting others strip him of his humanity.

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