Aporias of Survival: Kafka’s Alien Incursion

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“Is This Thing Able to Die”?

The Hausvater, title-giving character of Kafka’s *Cares of the Family Man*, in existential distress, wonders: Is this thing, this thing in front of him, dwelling in his house, indefinable but undeniably present, is this thing – whose thingness, to be sure, is not at all secured, determined – is this thing – the question keeps pressing, repeats itself incessantly – is this thing ultimately able to die? Captivated by the exigencies of the uncanny, the family man undergoes a moment of estrangement in his own home and faces a tender threat posed by an unclassifiable invader. The father of the house, steadily surrendering the firm grounds of his authoritative grasp as paternal potentate, finds himself thrown into life’s end-zone where apposite responses become increasingly impossible, and mortality becomes a question: *Kann er denn sterben?*

According to Levinas (2000: 113), death posits a question without content, thus a question as question: essentially unanswerable, it does not refer to anything given and lies spread apart way beneath the sense-making grid of representation. The question formulated in Kafka therefore remains what we call open and cannot be endowed with, let alone completed by dint of an answer – it rests untouchable for explanatory stratagems or power-grabs of any sort. The creature responsible for the Hausvater’s existential disquiet might not be able to die, it might live on. For how long, whether forever, we cannot say. The housefather’s disquiet, anxiety, or care (the most plausible or workable translation for Kafka’s *Sorge* will be subject of our close reading) finds its origin in the lost or barred response to the question of mortality – in the fact that mortality appears to challenge and put into question answerability as such. The phenomenology of dying, as calibrated by Levinas, forestalls responsivity in order to perform an opening toward responsibility. The question remains and repeats, persists in survival, tracing a lifeline whose point of termination remains engulfed by a cloud of vagueness. Dumbstruck, the reader sits stranded before a question that defies and withholds the conditions of responsiveness. Yet, is he able to die?

This is how Kafka configures the experimental disposition of narrated life: His narrative ends on a dare, a daring question that forever suspends and
refuses an answer. Our hermeneutic impulses are easily seduced and misled, and readers are tempted to produce a univocal response to Kafka’s finitude-in-question. *Is he able to die?* A whole squad of readers won’t hesitate to disavow and kill off the anxiety provoked by the unanswerable, responding: *No, he’s not able to, he’ll survive.* The question of finitude, or, more precisely, finitude-become-question, seems to elicit an attitude of irresponsible, thereby all-too-responsive, reading that sets out to destroy the question. Let me, instead, imagine a reading that would adhere to an ethic of protecting the question’s *demande,* and endure the without-response of the other’s infinitely deferred demise. For narrating life, in Kafka’s sense, means to abide the unanswerable, the immeasurable orifice of the question in question: *Kann er denn sterben?*

For the moment, and to start off the exploration of an infinite narrative, let me propose the following premise: Kafka’s scene of questioning secures the problem of life’s finitude as an encounter with alterity. Thorough readers of Heidegger, in the wake of Levinas’ appropriation, have brilliantly elucidated this entanglement, as they engaged Dasein’s thrown Being-toward-death and its relation to otherness. Avital Ronell (1989: 57), for one, has importantly emphasized that Dasein’s uncanny experience of “anxiety, fascination, and guilt” coincides with its originary encountering “an anonymous Other”. Facing down Heidegger’s ontology of death from within its own lexicon, Ronell moreover illuminates the inherently problematic relation between Thing and Other, which, in Heidegger, “can […] be seen to assume a clean ontological separation” (1962: 24) yet, in Kafka, becomes essentially scrambled. Kafka provokes his family man with a sheer range of ontological transgressions as he stages his alien invader as a being that entertains contradictory traits of thingness, animality, as well as humanness – while all the time functioning as the messenger of death, standing as the target of finitude’s defiant question.

The reader’s impossible task therefore manifests as a tracing of the blurred ontological distinctions put forth by Kafka, and as an exploration of how their precarity relates to a shattered phenomenology of death, instituted by a question without response. Thus, I repeat the question for lack of a solution. In fact, if there is something that can be proven or demonstrated, if there is an insight I find myself offering, if there is a purpose to this address, it’s to foreground and underscore the importance of the question – the question *as* question, in its radical openness, cause of so much hermeneutical frustration and misguided scholarly resolve: *is he able to die?* The threads of my investigation will lead me, finally, to also zone in on the oddity of death conceptualized as capacity. What does it mean to render dying in terms of a capacititation, even bearing a shadow of agency? And how does the ability to