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The Philosophy of Suffering in Narrative Form: Franz Kafka and the Realisation of Absurdity, Alienation, and Affliction

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of the philosophy of suffering as it has been articulated across diverse philosophical traditions, and subsequently traces its narrative instantiation in the literary oeuvre of Franz Kafka. The philosophy of suffering constitutes one of the most enduring and multifaceted domains of human inquiry, encompassing perspectives ranging from the Buddhist conception of *dukkha* as the fundamental truth of existence, through Schopenhauer's pessimism regarding the ceaseless striving of the *will* to Nietzsche's transformative affirmation of suffering as a vehicle for self-overcoming, and the twentieth-century existentialist and absurdist frameworks that locate suffering within the structural tension between human meaning-seeking and cosmic indifference. Despite the richness of this philosophical heritage, its articulation has largely remained confined to a specialised academic vocabulary that renders it inaccessible to a broader readership. Literature, by contrast, functions as the medium through which philosophical abstraction is translated into lived experience, narrative action, and affective engagement. Franz Kafka emerges as the preeminent literary figure who realises the philosophy of suffering in narrative form, dramatising affliction not as an isolated personal misfortune but as a structural feature of existence. Through close readings of Kafka's five key works, this paper demonstrates how his fiction constitutes a sustained and profound narrative meditation on suffering as alienation, as absurd persecution, as endless deferral, as institutionalised cruelty, and as self-imposed existential identity. The paper argues that Kafka's achievement lies in his capacity to render philosophical abstraction into the concrete textures of human experience, thereby making the philosophy of suffering accessible to the vast majority of readers who would otherwise remain excluded from its specialised discourse.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The question of human suffering stands as perhaps the most persistent and intractable problem in the history of philosophy. From the earliest recorded meditations on the nature of existence to the most contemporary inquiries into the human condition, philosophers across civilizations and traditions have grappled with the phenomenon of suffering—its origins, its meanings, its purposes, and its proper response (Malicse, 2026). The universality of this inquiry reflects the universality of the experience itself: suffering is the common inheritance of conscious existence, the shadow that accompanies every moment of awareness, the condition that defines the human predicament in its most elemental form.

Yet for all the profundity of philosophical reflection on suffering, there remains a fundamental gap between the philosophical articulation of this phenomenon and the lived experience of those who endure it. Philosophy, by its very nature, operates through abstraction, generalisation, and technical vocabulary—a mode of discourse that, however rigorous and insightful, inevitably distances itself from the concrete realities of human pain. It is here that literature assumes its distinctive and irreplaceable function. Where philosophy offers analysis, literature offers experience; where philosophy provides concepts, literature provides characters, situations, and narratives that embody those concepts in all their complexity and contradiction. Literature, in this sense, does not merely illustrate philosophical ideas but realises them, bringing them to life in the imagination of the reader and thereby making them accessible in ways that philosophical discourse alone cannot achieve.

Franz Kafka occupies a unique position at the intersection of philosophy and literature. His fiction constitutes nothing less than a sustained narrative meditation on the nature of suffering, dramatizing affliction across multiple registers—the personal, the social, the bureaucratic, the metaphysical (Kafka, 1915, 1925, 1926, 1914, 1922). Kafka's characters do not merely suffer; they inhabit suffering as a condition of existence, a structural feature of the worlds they occupy. The suffering in Kafka is never merely incidental or episodic; it is, rather, the very texture of reality itself, the medium through which his protagonists must navigate their impossible situations. It is for this reason that Kafka's work has proved so fertile for philosophical interpretation, inviting readings that draw upon existentialism, absurdism, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and theology, among other frameworks (Weil, 1947; Sartre, 1943; Foucault, 1975).

This paper proceeds in two major movements. The first part offers a comprehensive survey of the philosophy of suffering as it has developed across multiple traditions—Asian, African, and Greek in origin, and extending through the modern period to the present day. This survey is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to establish the philosophical context within which Kafka's literary achievement must be understood. The second part undertakes close readings of five of Kafka's major works—*The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, *In the Penal Colony*, *and A Hunger Artist*—demonstrating how each dramatizes a distinct dimension of suffering: alienation, absurd persecution, endless deferral, institutionalised cruelty, and self-imposed existential identity. Through these readings, the paper argues that Kafka's fiction constitutes the narrative realisation of the philosophy of suffering, making accessible to a vast readership what philosophy has too often confined to specialised discourse.

2. THE PHILOSOPHY OF SUFFERING: A SURVEY OF TRADITIONS

2.1 Eastern Foundations: Buddhist Conceptions of *Dukkha*

The philosophical meditation on suffering finds perhaps its most systematic and influential articulation in the Buddhist tradition, which elevates suffering to the status of the first noble truth (The Four Noble Truths, n.d.). The Pali term *dukkha*, conventionally translated as "suffering," encompasses a far broader range of meaning than its English equivalent suggests. It denotes not merely acute pain or distress but the fundamental unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence—the pervasive sense of incompleteness, instability, and frustration that characterises all phenomenal experience. As Seung-Jin Choi observes in a comparative philosophical analysis, the First Noble Truth (Dukkha) is examined in light of Schopenhauer's concept of the ceaseless striving of the will and Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence, "elucidating the structural inevitability of suffering in human life" (Choi, 2026, p. 4).

The Buddhist analysis of suffering is remarkable for its psychological precision. The Second Noble Truth identifies craving (tanha) as the origin of suffering, locating the source of human distress not in external circumstances but in the mind's habitual patterns of attachment and aversion. As one commentator notes, "Suffering is the affective reaction to impermanence. According to general Buddhist causal analysis, the causes of suffering are desire and ignorance. We desire permanent pleasures because we are ignorant of the fact that all is impermanent, empty of eternal selfhood" (Buddhist Philosophy, n.d.). This diagnosis carries profound implications: if suffering originates in the mind's misapprehension of reality, then liberation from suffering is possible through the cultivation of insight and the transformation of consciousness.

The Third and Fourth Noble Truths articulate this possibility, proposing the cessation of suffering (nirodha) and the path to its achievement (magga), respectively. The Noble Eightfold Path—encompassing ethical discipline, meditative cultivation, and wisdom—offers a practical framework for the transformation of consciousness and the eventual liberation from the cycle of suffering. As Choi's interdisciplinary study demonstrates, this framework integrates "Buddhist Vipassana insights with Nietzschean ideas of the Übermensch and absolute affirmation (Amor Fati)", suggesting unexpected convergences between Eastern and Western approaches to the problem of suffering (Choi, 2026, p. 12).

2.2 The Greek Heritage: Stoicism, Epicureanism, and the Therapeutic Function of Philosophy

The ancient Greek philosophical traditions approached suffering from a perspective that, while differing markedly from the Buddhist framework, shared its emphasis on the therapeutic function of philosophy. Epicurus famously declared that "There is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul", articulating a conception of philosophy as fundamentally practical in orientation, concerned not with abstract speculation but with the alleviation of human distress. The Epicurean school maintained that "every bodily pain or pleasure has a mental corollary or component," and that "the mental aspect of pleasure and pain is so much more significant for our total experience than our bodily or sensory experience, that we can, by focusing our attention, transform our experience of suffering" (Surrender, n.d.).

The Stoic tradition offered a complementary but distinct approach, emphasizing the cultivation of rational self-sufficiency in the face of adversity. The Stoic sage, ideally situated, remains happy even under conditions of extreme torture—a doctrine that has provoked extensive philosophical

debate. As one scholar notes, "Prominent in Hellenistic philosophy is the debate over whether the sage is really always happy even if tortured" (Nausea, 2019). The Stoic position, modified by Indian philosophical traditions with their techniques of meditation, maintains that "the sage is always happy even if tortured", not because suffering is denied but because the sage's happiness is understood to be independent of external circumstances.

The ancient Greek traditions thus established a framework within which suffering could be approached not as a problem to be eliminated but as a condition to be understood and, through understanding, transformed. This therapeutic orientation would prove enormously influential for subsequent philosophical traditions, including the existentialist movements of the twentieth century that would, in turn, inform literary responses to suffering.

2.3 The Modern Turn: Schopenhauer and the Pessimistic Tradition

Arthur Schopenhauer represents a watershed in the philosophical treatment of suffering, offering a systematic pessimism that identifies suffering as the fundamental condition of existence. For Schopenhauer, the world is the manifestation of a blind, ceaselessly striving will—a will that, by its very nature, can never achieve satisfaction. As he writes, "Awoken to life from the night of unconsciousness, the will finds itself as an individual in a world without end or limit, among countless individuals who are all striving, suffering, going astray; and it hurries back to the old unconsciousness, as if through a bad dream" (Schopenhauer, 2022, p. 89). This vision of existence as a kind of bad dream from which one cannot awaken captures the essence of Schopenhauer's pessimism: suffering is not an accident of existence but its very substance.

Schopenhauer's analysis of suffering is grounded in his metaphysics of the will. The will, as the thing-in-itself, is characterised by endless striving, and this striving, when reflected in consciousness, manifests as desire, craving, and ultimately suffering. As one commentator summarises, "According to Schopenhauer, the rare moments of happiness we experience consist only in the absence of suffering" (Schopenhauer, 2022, p. 112). Happiness, on this view, is merely the negative condition of suffering's temporary cessation—a fleeting respite rather than a positive state of fulfilment. "Because of inevitable suffering, according to Schopenhauer, our only moral solution to the problem of suffering will be to deny suffering, consequently, life itself" (Schopenhauer, 2022, p. 134).

The Schopenhauerian framework has profound implications for the understanding of human existence. If suffering is the fundamental condition of life, then the pursuit of happiness is not merely difficult but fundamentally misguided—a chase after an illusion that can never be caught. The only authentic response to the human condition, on this view, is the recognition of suffering's ubiquity and the cultivation of attitudes—compassion, aesthetic contemplation, ascetic renunciation—that can offer some measure of relief from the will's endless demands.

2.4 Nietzsche: Suffering as Affirmation and Transformation

Friedrich Nietzsche's relationship to the problem of suffering is complex and, in many respects, constitutes a radical departure from the Schopenhauerian tradition from which he emerged. While Nietzsche shared Schopenhauer's recognition of suffering as a fundamental feature of existence, he rejected the pessimistic conclusion that suffering must be negated or denied. Instead, Nietzsche proposed a transformative affirmation of suffering—an embrace of pain, struggle, and adversity as essential conditions for human growth and self-overcoming (Nietzsche, 1887).

The Nietzschean concept of amor fati—the love of fate—encapsulates this affirmative

stance. As one scholar observes, "To love our fate we must come to terms with the human condition, with its suffering and finitude, and overcome all forms of ressentiment" (Nietzsche and Amor Fati, 2009, p. 215). This is not a passive resignation but an active embrace—a willingness to affirm not only the pleasurable aspects of existence but also its pains, its losses, its defeats. The challenge of amor fati lies in its demand that we love an object that may be repellent to us: "it requires us to love a potentially repellent object (as fate entails significant negativity for us) and this, in the knowledge that our love will not modify our fate" (Nietzsche and Amor Fati, 2009, p. 218).

Nietzsche's affirmation of suffering is closely connected to his concept of the eternal return—the thought that one must be willing to live one's life over again, in every detail, for all eternity. This thought serves as a test of one's affirmation of existence: only those who can embrace even the most painful aspects of their lives are truly capable of the unconditional affirmation that Nietzsche valorises. As one scholar notes, "Nietzsche indicates that 'a full and powerful soul not only copes with painful' experiences but actively incorporates them into a life of creative self-overcoming" (Nietzsche and Amor Fati, 2009, p. 220).

It is important to recognise that Nietzsche's affirmation of suffering does not amount to a glorification of pain for its own sake. Rather, it represents a recognition that suffering, when properly integrated into one's life, can serve as a stimulus for growth, creativity, and self-transformation. As one analysis puts it, "suffering is not merely an obstacle but a force that can be transformed into strength" (Nietzsche and Amor Fati, 2009, p. 222). This perspective offers a powerful alternative to both the Buddhist emphasis on liberation from suffering and the Schopenhauerian emphasis on its negation—an alternative that finds suffering not as something to be escaped but as something to be embraced and transformed.

2.5 Existentialism and the Absurd: Kierkegaard, Camus, and the Meaning of Suffering

The existentialist tradition, emerging in the nineteenth century and flowering in the twentieth, approached suffering from a perspective that emphasised the individual's confrontation with the fundamental conditions of existence. Soren Kierkegaard, often regarded as the father of existentialism, located suffering at the centre of the human condition, understanding it as inseparable from the task of becoming a self. As one scholar notes, "for Kierkegaard, genuine faith is essentially characterised by suffering, and this suffering is manifested in a variety of forms" (Kierkegaard and Trauma, 2026, p. 3; see also Philosophy of Suffering, 2023).

Kierkegaard's analysis of despair, developed most fully in *The Sickness Unto Death*, offers a phenomenology of suffering that anticipates many of the concerns of twentieth-century existentialism. For Kierkegaard, the self is "a relation that relates itself to itself," and when this relation becomes disordered, the result is despair—" an existential and spiritual distortion in the self's relation to itself, others, and God" (Kierkegaard, 1849, p. 45; see also Manis, n.d., p. 12). This conception of despair as a structural condition rather than a merely psychological state resonates with Kafka's depiction of suffering as a feature of existence rather than an episodic experience.

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of absurdism as a distinctive philosophical response to the problem of suffering. Albert Camus, the most prominent exponent of this tradition, identified the absurd as the fundamental tension between the human demand for meaning and the world's indifference to that demand. As one scholar observes, "Camus' absurd feeling is not emotionally fixed, but ... its outcome depends upon the way reflection is directed. While the absurd itself is the structural tension between

the human demand for meaning and the world's indifference, the absurd feeling is the lived experience of becoming conscious of that tension" (Holmes, 2019, p. 56).

Camus's philosophy of the absurd is intimately connected to the problem of suffering. "In more general terms," one commentator notes, "the fundamental problem posed by Camus may be described as that of suffering. It is suffering in the most general terms which results in 'nausea' and a sense of the absurd" (Holmes, 2019, p. 58; see also Nausea, 2019). The experience of absurdity arises when the ordinary routines of life are disrupted by the intrusion of the question "why?"—a question that, in the absence of any satisfactory answer, reveals the groundlessness of human existence. As Camus himself writes, "One day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement" (Camus, 1955, p. 12).

The absurdist response to suffering is neither to deny it nor to seek escape from it but to embrace it as the condition of authentic existence. The absurd hero, in Camus's formulation, "takes no refuge in the illusions of art or religion" but rather confronts the absurd directly, living with full awareness of the meaninglessness of existence while nonetheless continuing to live (Camus, 1955, p. 45). This stance—at once defiant and resigned—finds its most powerful literary expression in the figure of Sisyphus, who, condemned to push a boulder up a mountain for eternity, nonetheless finds meaning in the struggle itself.

3. LITERATURE AS THE REALISATION OF PHILOSOPHY

The relationship between philosophy and literature has been a subject of enduring debate. Philosophy, in its classical self-conception, offers systematic analysis of fundamental questions, proceeding through argument, definition, and logical demonstration. Literature, by contrast, offers narrative, character, and the concrete particularity of human experience. The difference is not merely one of form but of function: philosophy aims at understanding, while literature aims at experience; philosophy seeks to explain, while literature seeks to show.

Yet this distinction, however useful, risks obscuring the profound ways in which philosophy and literature can illuminate one another. Literature, at its most philosophical, does not merely illustrate philosophical ideas but embodies them, giving them the texture of lived experience. Philosophy, at its most literary, does not merely analyse human experience but enters into it, making the abstract concrete and the general particular. The relationship is not one of subordination but of complementarity: each offers what the other cannot provide, and together they constitute a more complete response to the questions that define human existence.

This is particularly true of the philosophy of suffering. Suffering is, by its nature, an experience that resists abstraction. However, sophisticated the philosophical analysis of suffering may be, it cannot capture the existential reality of pain—its immediacy, its intensity, its capacity to overwhelm the structures of meaning that ordinarily organise human life. Literature, precisely because it operates through narrative and character, can approach suffering in ways that philosophy cannot, offering readers an experience of suffering that is at once vicarious and transformative.

Franz Kafka occupies a unique position in this regard. His fiction constitutes a sustained meditation on suffering that is at once philosophical and literary—philosophical in its engagement with the deepest questions of human existence, literary in its realisation of those questions in the concrete particulars of narrative. Kafka's achievement lies in his capacity to render philosophical abstraction into the textures of human experience, making accessible to a vast readership what philosophy has too often confined to specialised discourse.

4. KAFKA'S NARRATIVE REALISATION OF SUFFERING

4.1 *The Metamorphosis*: Suffering as Alienation and the Loss of Human Value

The Metamorphosis opens with one of the most startling premises in all of literature: Gregor Samsa awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a "monstrous vermin" (Kafka, 1915, p. 3). The transformation is never explained, never justified, never even thematised as a problem to be solved. It simply is—the given condition of Gregor's existence, the fact from which all subsequent events follow. This narrative strategy is itself philosophically significant: the transformation functions as a kind of existential given, the fundamental condition of Gregor's existence that he must simply accept and to which he must somehow adapt.

Gregor's suffering in *The Metamorphosis* unfolds across multiple registers. There is the physical suffering of his new body—the discomfort, the vulnerability, the loss of human capacities. There is the psychological suffering of his isolation, his inability to communicate with his family, his growing awareness of their disgust and rejection. And there is the existential suffering of his gradual loss of identity, his recognition that his value to others was contingent on his utility, his dawning understanding that he is, finally, disposable.

The trajectory of Gregor's suffering is marked by a progressive alienation from his family and from his own humanity. Initially, his family attempts to maintain some semblance of normalcy, but as the reality of his condition sinks in, their efforts give way to neglect, disgust, and finally active rejection. The transformation that was initially a physical fact becomes a social fact: Gregor is no longer Gregor but an insect, a thing, an object of horror and shame.

This pattern of alienation is illuminated by Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of shame, as explored in one scholarly reading of the text. The article reveals that "shame and alienation may occur when a person realises that one is judged by others and sees oneself through the eyes of others" (Minar & Sutandio, 2017, p. 45). Gregor, transformed into an insect, "cannot help but seeing himself from his family's point of view. Instead of fighting for himself, he is made to believe that he deserves to be alienated" (Minar & Sutandio, 2017, p. 47). This internalisation of the other's judgment—this seeing oneself through the eyes of those who reject one—represents the deepest form of alienation, the point at which external rejection becomes internal self-rejection (Sartre, 1943).

The novel's treatment of value is particularly devastating. As long as Gregor's body could still function for others—as long as he could work, earn money, contribute to the household—he had value. His transformation, however, renders him incapable of productive labour, and with the loss of productivity comes the loss of worth. His family's initial tolerance gives way to active hostility, and finally to the wish for his death. When Gregor dies, his family experiences not grief but relief—the relief of being freed from a burden, of being able to resume their lives without the encumbrance of his existence (Kafka, 1915, p. 87; see also El Hajj, 2025, for a psychoanalytic reading of this dynamic).

This treatment of value resonates with the philosophical tradition that locates human worth in utility. From a Schopenhauerian perspective, Gregor's fate illustrates the contingency of human value on the satisfaction of the will—a contingency that leaves individuals vulnerable to disposability when they can no longer serve (Schopenhauer, 2022). From a Nietzschean perspective, Gregor's fate illustrates the dangers of a morality that values individuals only insofar as they serve the interests of others, a morality that reduces human beings to functions rather than affirming them as ends in themselves (Nietzsche, 1887).

4.2 *The Trial*: Suffering as Absurd Persecution

The Trial presents a different but equally devastating vision of suffering. Josef K., the protagonist, is arrested one morning for reasons that are never explained, tried by a court whose procedures he can never understand, and finally executed in a manner that offers neither justice nor meaning (Kafka, 1925). The novel is a sustained meditation on the nature of bureaucratic power, the experience of persecution, and the existential condition of being subjected to forces one cannot comprehend.

The suffering in *The Trial* is distinctive in several respects. Unlike Gregor Samsa's suffering, which is rooted in a physical transformation, Josef K.'s suffering is rooted in a social and institutional condition—the condition of being caught up in a legal process that is at once omnipresent and incomprehensible. K. is arrested, but he is not imprisoned; he is tried, but he does not know the charges; he is sentenced, but he does not understand the crime. The court that judges him is everywhere and nowhere, its procedures arcane, its logic impenetrable.

This condition has been described as fundamentally absurd. As one scholar notes, the novel presents "the absurdity with which Franz Kafka has treated the element of Law and Justice in *The Trial*. It is through the character of Josef K., the protagonist, that one comes across the fragility of a citizen's fundamental human rights and how one tragically succumbs to the inevitable trial and execution implemented by the bizarre judicial system" (Ghosh, 2024, p. 112). K. is "trapped in a labyrinthine network of bureaucratic traps", his fate determined by forces that are at once arbitrary and inescapable (Ghosh, 2024, p. 115).

Albert Camus recognized *The Trial* as exemplary of the absurdist vision. Camus describes it as a "work that is absurd in its principles": "Nothing is lacking, neither the unexpressed revolt (but it is what is writing), nor lucid and mute despair (but it is what is creating), nor that amazing freedom of manner which the characters of the novel exemplify until their ultimate death" (Camus, 1955, p. 98). The novel, on this reading, dramatizes the absurd condition—the condition of beings who seek meaning in a world that refuses to provide it, who demand justice from a system that operates according to its own inscrutable logic.

The legal system depicted in *The Trial* has been described as "a legal system that is alienated from the existence of actual human beings and follows its own arcane rules" (van den Berge & Gaakeer, 2025, p. 210). This alienation is the source of K.'s suffering: he is subjected to a process that refuses to acknowledge him as a subject, that treats him as an object to be processed rather than a person to be heard. The system's "irrational, unjust, and deliberately clandestine and capricious nature" creates a condition in which suffering is not merely incidental but structural—not something that happens to individuals but something that defines the very texture of their existence (van den Berge & Gaakeer, 2025, p. 215).

Contemporary scholarship has found *The Trial* remarkably prescient in its depiction of bureaucratic power. One analysis compares K.'s situation to modern institutional failures such as the UK Post Office Scandal, the Australian Robodebt Scheme, and the Dutch Childcare Allowance Scandal, in which individuals were "unjustly accused of fraud outside of their doing" by systems that proved incapable of recognising their innocence (van den Berge & Gaakeer, 2025, p. 220). These parallels suggest that Kafka's vision of suffering as institutional persecution remains as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the early twentieth.

4.3 *The Castle*: Suffering as Endless Deferral

The Castle extends the themes of *The Trial* into a different register. Where *The Trial* depicts a protagonist caught in a system he

cannot understand, *The Castle* depicts a protagonist trying, and failing, to gain access to a system that governs his life. K., the protagonist, arrives in a village dominated by a castle whose authority is unquestioned but whose nature is inscrutable (Kafka, 1926). His quest to gain access to the castle—to understand its workings, to secure its recognition—occupies the novel, but it is a quest that can never succeed.

The Castle functions as both literal structure and metaphysical presence—unreachable yet omnipresent, governing everything yet remaining eternally distant. As one analysis notes, "K.'s struggle to gain access becomes an allegory for the human condition: our quest for meaning in an indifferent universe, our desire for recognition from powers that won't acknowledge us, our helplessness before systems we cannot comprehend" (Goldman, 2009, p. 34). *The Castle*, in this reading, represents the elusiveness of objective meaning: "it can never be reached yet governs the lives of the characters who believe in it" (Goldman, 2009, p. 36).

K.'s suffering in *The Castle* is the suffering of endless deferral. Every attempt to gain access to the Castle, to secure recognition from its authorities, to understand its workings, ends in failure. The authorities are always just out of reach; the answers are always just beyond comprehension; the recognition is always just short of being granted. This pattern of endless deferral constitutes a distinctive form of suffering—not the acute pain of persecution, as in *The Trial*, but the chronic pain of unfulfilled longing, the exhaustion of perpetual striving without satisfaction.

The novel's treatment of power is particularly insightful. As one analysis puts it, "K.'s struggle to penetrate this system exposes how modern authority maintains itself not through force but through endless deferral and misdirection" (Krauss, 1993, p. 78). Power, on this view, operates not through overt coercion but through the management of access—the creation of barriers that can never be fully breached, the establishment of authorities that can never be fully engaged. This is a form of power that produces suffering not through violence but through frustration, not through punishment but through the denial of resolution.

The philosophical resonance of *The Castle* is extensive. The novel can be read as an illustration of the absurd condition, the situation of beings who seek meaning in a world that refuses to provide it (Camus, 1955). It can also be read as a meditation on the nature of bureaucracy, how modern institutions produce suffering through their very operation (Foucault, 1975). And it can be read as an existential allegory, a depiction of the human condition as a perpetual striving for something that can never be attained.

4.4 *In the Penal Colony*: Suffering as Institutionalised Cruelty

In the Penal Colony offers perhaps Kafka's most direct treatment of suffering—a story that centres on a torture machine designed to inscribe a prisoner's sentence into his flesh over the course of twelve hours, culminating in death and, supposedly, enlightenment (Kafka, 1914). The story is a meditation on the relationship between suffering, punishment, and law, exploring how institutions can aestheticize cruelty and dress it up as meaning.

The machine at the centre of the story is a grotesque invention, a device that "slowly executes a prisoner by repeatedly writing his sentence on his body" (Kafka, 1914, p. 8). The officer who operates the machine explains its workings with a kind of loving attention to detail, describing the process not as torture but as justice, not as cruelty but as education. The condemned man, meanwhile, does not even know his sentence—he is subjected to a process whose meaning he cannot understand, a punishment whose justification he cannot grasp.

This disconnect between punishment and understanding is central to the story's philosophical significance. As one analysis notes, the story is "a meditation on the relation between suffering of punishment, transgression and law" (Korean Citation Index, 2025, p. 45). For Kafka, the modern condition is characterised by "the incapacity of linking suffering of punishment and transgression (sin)" (Korean Citation Index, 2025, p. 48). In the old order, the relationship between suffering and transgression was understood as fundamental and functioned as "a principle of readability of reality" (Korean Citation Index, 2025, p. 49). In the modern order, this readability has been lost, and punishment has become detached from any comprehensible justification.

The story draws upon Michel Foucault's analysis of modern punishment, as articulated in *Discipline and Punish*. One scholarly reading situates the story within the context of "the theatricalisation of pain and violent modulation of the body which lead up to agonising mortality", arguing that Kafka's depiction of the penal procedure "critique[s] the discourse of progress and civilisation in the age of modernity" (Chan & Chan, 2024, p. 112). The machine, on this reading, represents the dark underbelly of modern rationality—the capacity of institutional power to inflict suffering in the name of order and to aestheticize cruelty in the name of justice (Foucault, 1975).

The officer's devotion to the machine is particularly significant. He is not a sadist in any simple sense; he genuinely believes in the justice of the procedure, the meaning of the suffering it inflicts. When the machine breaks down, and the old order is threatened, the officer offers himself as a sacrifice, submitting to the machine he has served. His death is depicted as a kind of enlightenment—the moment when the suffering he has inflicted on others is finally visited upon himself.

This pattern of identification between punisher and punished raises profound questions about the nature of institutional power. As one analysis observes, when reading *The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony* together, "we read about the logic of law, crime, punishment, and guilt" and come to understand that "you always are your own judge and executioner" (Chan & Chan, 2024, p. 118). The officer's fate suggests that those who administer institutional cruelty are themselves caught up in the logic of the system, subject to the same forces they impose on others.

4.5 *A Hunger Artist*: Suffering as Self-Imposed Existential Identity

A Hunger Artist presents perhaps the most complex and ambiguous treatment of suffering in Kafka's oeuvre. The story depicts a performer who starves himself as an art form, fasting for extended periods before audiences who eventually lose interest (Kafka, 1922). The hunger artist's suffering is self-imposed—he chooses to fast, chooses to endure the privations of hunger, chooses to make his suffering the substance of his art. Yet his suffering is also existential, a condition of his identity rather than merely a means to an end.

The hunger artist's relationship to his suffering is complex. He fasts not because he enjoys it but because he cannot find anything else to do—because, as he admits at the end, he "couldn't find the food I liked" (Kafka, 1922, p. 45). This confession strips away any pretence of spiritual or aesthetic justification for his fasting, revealing it as a kind of existential default—the only identity available to him, the only way of being in the world that makes sense.

This reading of the story is supported by scholarship that interprets it "through the lens of asceticism. Initially interpreted as a critique of self-destructive fasting, the story is reread as an elegy for the loss of genuine ascetic ideals and the transcendent meaning they once embodied" (Graiver, n.d., p. 3). The hunger artist's suffering, on this view, is not simply self-destructive but represents a longing for a kind of meaning that the modern world can no

longer provide—a longing that can only be expressed through the negative form of self-denial.

The story's treatment of public interest is equally significant. The hunger artist's fasting initially attracts crowds, but as public fascination fades, he is left to perform for diminishing audiences, eventually relegated to a circus where he is largely ignored. His death, when it comes, is unnoticed—a final confirmation of the indifference of the world to his suffering. This pattern of fading interest resonates with Kafka's broader exploration of the relationship between suffering and social recognition: suffering is only meaningful when it is witnessed, only validated when it is acknowledged.

The hunger artist's final confession—that he fasted because he could not find food he liked—has been interpreted as a devastating comment on the nature of identity. As one analysis notes, the confession "strips away the spiritual and" pretensions that had previously given meaning to his fasting (Graiver, n.d., p. 7). The hunger artist's identity, it turns out, was not the product of a noble spiritual quest but the result of a simple inability to find satisfaction—an inability that, in the absence of any alternative, became the basis of his entire existence.

This vision of suffering as self-imposed existential identity resonates with the philosophical tradition that locates identity in suffering. From a Nietzschean perspective, the hunger artist's fasting can be understood as a form of self-overcoming—a way of transforming the self through the embrace of difficulty (Nietzsche, 1887). From an existentialist perspective, it can be understood as a form of bad faith—a way of evading the responsibility of authentic self-creation by embracing a predetermined identity (Sartre, 1943). The story, characteristically, refuses to resolve this ambiguity, leaving readers to determine for themselves the meaning of the hunger artist's suffering.

5. CONCLUSION

Kafka and the Philosophy of Suffering

The philosophy of suffering, as this paper has demonstrated, constitutes one of the most enduring and multifaceted domains of human inquiry. Across traditions and centuries, philosophers have grappled with the nature of suffering, its origins, its meanings, and its proper response. The Buddhist tradition identifies suffering as the fundamental truth of existence and offers a path to its cessation (Choi, 2026; Buddhist Philosophy, n.d.). The Greek tradition approaches suffering as a problem to be managed through rational self-cultivation (Nausea, 2019). Schopenhauer offers a systematic pessimism that identifies suffering as the condition of existence itself (Schopenhauer, 2022). Nietzsche proposes a transformative affirmation that embraces suffering as the stimulus for self-overcoming (Nietzsche, 1887; Nietzsche and Amor Fati, 2009). The existentialist and absurdist traditions locate suffering within the structural tension between human meaning-seeking and cosmic indifference (Kierkegaard, 1849; Camus, 1955; Holmes, 2019; Manis, n.d.).

Despite the richness of this philosophical heritage, its articulation has largely remained confined to specialised discourse. The technical vocabulary of philosophy, its modes of abstraction and generalisation, its commitment to systematic analysis—these features, however valuable they may be for certain purposes, inevitably distance philosophical reflection from the concrete realities of human experience. The philosophy of suffering, in its philosophical articulation, risks becoming a discourse about suffering rather than an engagement with suffering itself.

It is here that literature assumes its distinctive and irreplaceable function. Literature, operating through narrative and character, can approach suffering in ways that

philosophy cannot. It can render the abstract concrete, the general particular, the conceptual experiential. It can offer readers not merely an understanding of suffering but an experience of it—a vicarious engagement that transforms the reader's relation to the phenomenon.

Franz Kafka occupies a unique position in this regard. His fiction constitutes a sustained and profound narrative meditation on suffering that is at once philosophical and literary. Across his major works, Kafka dramatizes different dimensions of suffering—alienation, absurd persecution, endless deferral, institutionalised cruelty, self-imposed existential. His characters do not merely suffer; they inhabit suffering as a condition of existence, as the very texture of their worlds. The suffering in Kafka is never incidental or episodic; it is, rather, structural—a feature of the worlds his characters inhabit, the medium through which they must navigate their impossible situations.

Kafka's achievement lies in his capacity to render philosophical abstraction into the concrete textures of human experience. The philosophy of suffering, in Kafka's hands, becomes not a discourse about suffering but a narrative engagement with it—an engagement that makes accessible to a vast readership what philosophy has too often confined to specialised discourse. This is not to suggest that Kafka's fiction is merely philosophy in another form; rather, it is to suggest that Kafka's fiction achieves something that philosophy alone cannot: the realisation of philosophical insight in the lived experience of narrative.

The relevance of Kafka's vision has not diminished with time. In an age of technological advancement and fast-changing cultural values, the philosophy of suffering has not lost its academic relevance. If anything, the bureaucratisation of modern life, the proliferation of institutional power, and the persistent challenge of finding meaning in an indifferent world have only made Kafka's vision more pertinent. His fiction continues to speak to readers because it addresses something fundamental about the human condition—the experience of being subject to forces one cannot control, of seeking meaning in a world that refuses to provide it, of enduring suffering that resists any easy justification.

Kafka, in the end, offers no solutions to the problem of suffering. His fiction does not propose a way out of suffering, does not offer consolation or redemption. What it offers, rather, is a kind of recognition—the recognition that suffering is not an accident of existence but its condition, not something to be escaped but something to be inhabited with full awareness. This recognition, however bleak it may seem, carries its own kind of liberation: the liberation that comes from seeing one's situation clearly, from understanding the forces that shape one's existence, from finding, in the very experience of suffering, a kind of authenticity that would otherwise be impossible.

The philosophy of suffering, in its philosophical articulation, offers understanding. Kafka's fiction, in its narrative realisation, offers experience. Together, they constitute a more complete response to the question of suffering than either could provide alone—a response that acknowledges the depth of human pain while affirming, with Kafka, the necessity of continuing to live, to strive, to seek meaning even in the face of meaninglessness.

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