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‘Moral Distance’ in organizations: An inquiry into ethical violence in the works of
Kafka

By

Christian Huber, Helmut-Schmidt University, Hamburg, Germany

Iain Munro, Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle, UK

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Abstract

In this paper, we demonstrate that the works of Franz Kafka provide an exemplary resource for the investigation of “moral distance” in organizational ethics. We accomplish this in two ways, first by drawing on Kafka’s work to navigate the complexities of the debate over the ethics of bureaucracy, using his work to expand and enrich the concept of “moral distance.” Second, Kafka’s work is used to investigate the existence of “ethical violence” within organizations which entails acts of condemnation and cruelty purportedly in the name of ethics. Kafka’s work provides insight into the processes of moral distancing across a range of organizational contexts including highly formal as well as more informal settings. The paper enriches the concept “moral distance” by identifying the existence of

facilitators of moral distance beyond the mechanisms of formal rationality that have been the focus of existing studies. We argue that Kafka's intense portrayal of "ethical violence" points to an aporia at the very heart of organizational ethics.

Keywords: Moral distance, Ethical violence, Kafka, Bauman, Literature, Bureaucracy

The aim of the present study is to develop a critical evaluation of the concept of 'moral distance' in organizational ethics (Bauman, 1991; Du Gay, 1999, 2000). Existing studies of 'moral distance' have outlined a powerful critique of the ethics of bureaucracy and formal rationality (Bauman, 1991; Jones et al., 2005; Zyglidopoulos and Fleming, 2008). This paper builds upon this work by identifying the existence of facilitators of 'moral distance' that go beyond the current focus of the debate on 'moral distance' which has been narrowly restricted to a critique of the bureaucratic process. We draw upon the work of Kafka (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007) to navigate the key issues that have characterized the debate thus far, where Kafka's work provides insights into processes of 'moral distancing' across a range of organizational contexts including highly formal as well as more informal settings. We thus show that 'moral distance' is not exclusively dependent on the formal rationality associated with bureaucracy, but is apparent even in informal personal relationships such as between friends and within the family, and may be even implicit in the notion of ethics itself. Drawing on Butler's (2005) discussion of Kafka we also consider whether ethics itself

can become a facilitator of ‘moral distance’, where ethical principles can serve to justify condemnation and cruelty in the name of ethics.

We argue that the work of Kafka is of importance to the study of organizational ethics because it provides a unique perspective on the emergence of moral ambiguities within organizations and particularly on the phenomenon of ‘moral distance’ (Bauman, 1991; Jones et al., 2005; Zyglidopoulos and Fleming, 2008). The concept of ‘moral distance’ suggests that techno-rational forms of control have taught us to have ethical concerns only for those who are ‘near’ to us. This enables us to behave unethically towards others who are ‘far’ from us without guilt, where the formal rationality associated with early modernity functions as a ‘moral sleeping pill’ (Bauman, 1991). Kafka himself lived at the dawn of modernity and was one of the first to comment on modern institutions, such as bureaucracy, during their advent. The study of Kafka’s work can advance the on-going debate on ‘moral distance’ in two ways. First, it illustrates well that ‘moral distance’ does not only depend on formal rationality as originally suggested by Bauman (1991) but may also occur in other non-bureaucratic institutions. Second, Kafka’s work allows us to identify facilitators of ‘moral distance’ thereby extending the debate on ‘moral distance’ to include informal and non-bureaucratic relationships.

Over the past two decades the use of literary sources and literary theory within management and organization studies research has grown dramatically (Burrell, 1997; Czarniawska, 1998, 1999; De Cock and Land, 2006; Gabriel and Giffiths, 2004;

Knights and Willmott, 1999; Land and Sliwa, 2009). Literature has been employed in a variety of different ways. Organizational scholars have proposed the use of literature for “complementing, illustrating and scrutinizing logico-scientific forms of reporting” (Czarniawska, 1999, p.23). The fictional aspect of literature can complement other empirical approaches to the study of organization by “extending the virtual tendencies of the given world...” (De Cock and Land, 2006, p.526). Others have recommended the use of literature as a “symptomatology of society” (Beyes, 2009) which can help management scholars to “engage reflexively with the lived experience of work” (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p.397). Despite its development in the field of management and organization studies, literature has not received the same level of scholarly interest in business ethics research. When literature has been referred to in business ethics research, this has been overwhelmingly proposed as a tool for teaching, but has yet to be taken up as an object of research in its own right.

The use of literature as a resource for teaching business ethics has been widely advocated (e.g. Chatterjee, 2000; Garaventa, 1998; McAdams and Koppensteiner, 1992; Shepard et al., 1997; Small, 2006; von Weltzien Hoivik, 2009). Michaelson (2005, p.359) notes that literature is frequently used as a form of case-based teaching, enhancing the usual “war stories” from the business world “thereby expanding our vision beyond our parochial interests”. The benefits of teaching business ethics by drawing on literature are argued to be manifold. Classic literature is heralded as an “alternative source of insights” which “allow[s] the reader to observe a wide range of motives, emotions, and traits” (Garaventa, 1998, p.535). Chatterjee (2000, p.326) views literature as a “provocative instrument for raising a variety of enduring

ethics/values themes” such as moral growth, societal developments and moral imagination. Von Weltzien-Hoivik (2009, p.5) argues literature to be superior to the case study approach explaining that: “Better than business case studies, literature offers portraits of characters as leaders, employees, consultants, and other professionals, as ordinary human beings with conflicting desires, drives, and ambitions. Literary texts offer excellent descriptions of the circumstances or the organizational settings in which people find themselves.” Given the advocacy of literature as a rich source of material for teaching organizational ethics it is surprising that it has not yet received much scholarly attention as a research object in its own right (the few exceptions include Carson, 1994; McAdams, 1993; Michaelson, 2005). In this paper, we address this gap by arguing that the works of Franz Kafka offer a suitable starting point for developing such a project.

Within the field of management studies the work of Franz Kafka has already attracted numerous commentaries on the relevance of his stories for management and organization studies (Beck Jørgensen, 2012; Feldman, 1998; Hodson, et al., 2012; Munro and Huber, 2012; Warner, 2007). For instance, Hodson et al. (2012) have drawn upon Kafka’s fiction to generate hypotheses about the nature of bureaucratic organization and then tested these hypotheses with reference to a library of 160 ethnographic studies of real bureaucracies. This study revealed the characteristics of bureaucracy that we find in Kafka’s fiction are widespread in real world bureaucracies, particularly the ambiguity of rules, the existence of informal networks within organizations, and systemic corruption. Munro and Huber (2012) have drawn on Kafka’s work in a critique not only of bureaucracy but also of the existing theories

of organizational sensemaking. Several authors have commented that Kafka's fictional accounts of organization serve as a useful counterpoint to enrich Weber's (1991, 2005) exemplary study of the historical development of organizational forms (Beck Jørgensen, 2012; Warner, 2007). In the present paper we argue that Kafka's work is particularly insightful in its portrayal of the ethical issues and conflicts that arise within organizations.

The paper is structured as follows: we begin by discussing Weber's (1991, 2005) ethics of bureaucracy, which provided grounds for the subsequent debate and critique of 'moral distance'. Following from this we outline the different positions in this debate contrasting Bauman's (1991) original concept of 'moral distance' with the critique of his argument by du Gay (1999, 2000, 2005), and successive attempts to develop the concept for business ethics (Jones et al., 2005; Zyglidopoulos and Fleming, 2008). The argument then draws on Kafka's work which complicates the notion of 'moral distance' in important respects, especially by questioning the role of formal rationality and widening the concept's application to non-bureaucratic institutions. In the final section of the paper, we draw on Kafka's (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007) works to develop this concept further by discussing how ethical principles can themselves create 'moral distance' between people and lead to certain forms of ethical violence. We show that his work should not be reduced solely to a critique of bureaucracy but is concerned with a more fundamental critique of social institutions and organizations that are ostensibly meant to help us, and the questionable role of ethics itself within these institutions.

The Ethics of Bureaucracy

Kafka's name is as closely linked to the notion of bureaucracy as Weber's, which has led scholars to speak of a "Kafka/Weber axis" (Warner, 2007, p. 1020). Weber (1991, 2005) argued for the virtues of an impartial bureaucratic process, which provided an important impetus for the later debate on 'moral distance'. In fact, according to Weber (1991) a certain level of bureaucratic distance is precisely what makes it possible for the bureaucrat to behave justly and impartially towards all those under his or her supervision. It is the actual effect of this bureaucratic distance that is later criticized in the debate on 'moral distance' (Bauman, 1991). We will now explore those aspects of Weber's (1991, 2005) argument that are relevant to the aims of our present inquiry.

Bureaucracy is a system, which, according to Weber's (1991, 2005) original work, should provide fairness and predictability through legal rationality and the proper ethos of the official (the *Beamtenethos*). In current management theory bureaucracy is commonly associated with convoluted rules and obstructive procedures and is occasionally referred to as being 'kafkaesque' (du Gay, 2000; Hodson et al., 2012). When going back to Weber's (1991, 2005) original conception of bureaucracy it is, however, very much a system designed to positively foster democratic values such as justice, fairness and predictability. In fact, much of its ethical worth rests, for Weber, on its ignorance of personal traits such as gender, age or race, making all equal before the law and ensuring social justice. According to Weber's theory of bureaucracy, principles serve as structuring elements, which guarantee predictability and an ethic

of fairness. Weber's theory of bureaucracy relies not only on rules, but also on their interpretation in the spirit of legal authority. The individuals whose task it is to execute those principles develop a *Beamtenethos*, the ethos of the bureaucrat, which entails a sense of public duty.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to settle the dispute over whether Weber was a proponent or an opponent of bureaucracy. What we do know, however, is that Weber saw at least some potential for ethical behaviour in bureaucracy. The impersonality of bureaucratic rationality was, for Weber, a significant improvement over the previous system which was based on feudal privileges and traditional patriarchal rights bestowed by birth, superstition and custom. In Weber's own words:

“The administrative ideal is impartiality (‘sine ira et studio’) without any motives of personal or emotional influence, free from arbitrariness and unpredictability, and in particular, strongly formalistic according to rational rules without regard to respect of person: and where these are lacking the ideal [official] operates according to an objective outlook defined by effectiveness.” (Weber quoted in Whimster, 2004, p.134)

Weber compared this form of legal authority with the charismatic authority of a leader and the traditional authority of customs and heritage (Spencer, 1970; Weber, 2005). In

comparison to other organizational forms, it is the impartiality of bureaucracy which offers some level of fairness. Not only does one set of rules apply to everybody, irrespective of class or income, but these rules also follow a legal and rational order, making the outcome of a bureaucratic process predictable for those subject to it. This view of bureaucracy, however, has not been shared by all. We will now discuss Bauman's (1991) influential argument on the role of bureaucracy in the creation of what he called 'moral distance'.

'Moral distance' and the Critique of Formal Rationality

The concept of 'moral distance' was originally proposed by Bauman (1991) in his work on *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Bauman's (1991) argument is that techno-rational forms of control have taught us to have ethical concerns only for those who are 'near' to us. This enables us to behave unethically and without guilt towards those who are 'far' from us, where bureaucracy functions as a 'moral sleeping pill' (Bauman, 1991, p. 26). His idea of 'moral distance' was itself heavily influenced by Milgram's (1963) study of obedience to authority, where he discovered that apparently normal people could be induced to inflict immense cruelty on others if they believed that a scientific authority had taken responsibility for that action. Bauman extended Milgram's findings regarding the diffusion of moral responsibility to his inquiry into rational bureaucracy which he argued created the 'moral distance' that was a key precondition for the Holocaust (Bauman, 1991; Munro, 1998).

Bauman's (1991) work on the Holocaust has been highly influential within the field of management studies (Burrell, 1997; du Gay, 2000) and more recent critical commentaries on the concept of corporate social responsibility (Roberts, 2003). The concept of 'moral distance' has also been picked up by scholars of business ethics to explain the development of unethical business practices (Jones et al. 2005; Zyglidopoulos and Fleming, 2008). Zyglidopoulos and Fleming (2008) have explained the significance of 'moral distance' in terms of the role that organizations play in creating an 'inhuman context' which can transform people into unethical actors. This concept entails a critique of bureaucracy, which it is argued, creates a 'moral distance' between the bureaucrats who implement the rules and the 'victims' of these rules. These victims are dealt with as faceless individuals within bureaucracies and are thus dehumanized and alienated. Jones et al. (2005, p.90) have described a number of strategies for the creation of 'moral distance' "to stretch the distance between an action and its consequences" such as the use of euphemistic language to dehumanize the victims of the process. Zyglidopoulos and Fleming (2008) have also proposed that 'moral distance' can be created by both temporal distancing of one's actions from their consequences as well as the kind of structural distancing that is provided by an organization's hierarchy. They explain that 'moral distance' can provide a vocabulary of rationalizations that help turn innocent bystanders into active participants in organizational misdeeds. The works of authors such as Milgram (1963) and Bauman (1991) are cited in support of this account of how unethical behaviour is an essential and systemic feature of the bureaucratic form itself.

However, the 'moral distance' hypothesis has itself received substantial critique from proponents of the ethical values of bureaucracy, most notably in the work of du Gay (1999, 2000, 2005). Du Gay (2000) argues that Bauman is wrong to see the Holocaust as a necessary outcome of bureaucracy, and in contrast, it was the corrupt influence of the Nazi regime that undermined much of its impersonal ethos, infecting it with cronyism, exceptionalism and a feudal-like loyalty to the Führer. Du Gay (2000) therefore rejects Bauman's thesis that the bureaucratic mechanism serves to distance us from our moral sensitivity. He argues that Bauman has misread Weber who actually proposed a distinctively bureaucratic ethos grounded in the principle of impartiality. Du Gay (1999, p.579) explains that, "The 'objectivity' required of bureaucrats and bureaucratic decision making... entails a trained capacity to treat people as 'individual' cases, i.e. apart from status and ascription, so that partialities of patronage and the dangers of corruption might be avoided." In this light, the bureaucratic ethos is not a corrupting, immoral force, but one designed around the requirement for impartiality and the "formal equality of treatment" (Du Gay, 1999, p.580). This procedural rationality may be seen as being 'dehumanizing' to the extent that it removes personal bias, and Weber (1991, p.216) freely admits this. However, this kind of dehumanization does not necessarily entail cruelty, but rather entails the subordination of one's self to a procedural rationality, based on the principle of impartiality.

Concluding the current state of the 'moral distance' debate, we might argue that du Gay (1999, 2000, 2005) is correct in his defence of bureaucracy as an impartial ideal type, but equally Bauman is correct in his critical assessment of the operation of

bureaucracies in practice. However, Bauman is not simply arguing that the ideals of bureaucracy are not achieved in practice, but that the mechanism of removing personal bias itself leads to the gas chamber rather than to a fair treatment. Recent empirical research has revealed that Bauman's assessment of bureaucracy is not too far from reality. A review of over 160 ethnographic studies of real bureaucracies in the light of Kafka's own pessimistic views has come to a similar conclusion finding that, "The genius of Kafka's critique of bureaucracy lies not in identifying that such corrupt elements exist in formal organizations... but rather in the implicit argument that such features are a normal and foundational part of organizational functioning." (Hodson et al., 2012, p.4). We will now contrast this debate with the stories of Kafka whose works illuminate a number of elements that are pivotal to the 'moral distance' debate.

Dehumanization and 'Moral Distance' in Kafka

In his accounts of bureaucracy Kafka (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007) problematized the ethical dimension of this organizational form because it can separate procedural bureaucratic rules from the values they were originally intended to serve. He highlighted an ambiguity at the heart of this form of organization. At its most extreme this has been observed in the Nazi death camps where bureaucracy was directed towards the destruction of human beings rather than towards their aid. In certain respects, Kafka's critical stories may be seen to echo Bauman's (1991) critique of bureaucracy and the exponents of his work within management studies and business ethics (Burrell, 1997; Clegg, 2006; Jones et al., 2005; ten Bos, 1997). Kafka's tales

provide some excellent descriptions of the dehumanizing effects of the bureaucratic apparatus on the very individuals who are supposed to be their beneficiaries, and in this respect Kafka's stories provide a literary counterpart to Bauman's own critique of bureaucracy. And indeed, Bauman's (1991) study of the dehumanizing effects of the Nazi bureaucracy makes direct reference to Kafka's *Trial*, observing that within this regime a mere accusation effectively convicted the innocent and the guilty alike. However, such a reading of Kafka would be highly partial and reveal only one dimension of his ethics. In stories such as *The Castle* and *The Trial*, it is not bureaucracy *per se* that leads to immorality and corruption, but the informal networks of patronage that pervert the normal course of the bureaucratic apparatus. In this sense, Kafka would seem to have more in common with du Gay's (2000) *In Praise of Bureaucracy*, which argued that Bauman's assertion that bureaucratic processes are essentially immoral is misdirected.

Kafka is perhaps the first great writer to comment on the phenomenon of 'moral distance' where the institutions that are supposed to help us, such as the law, confront us as an inhuman and alienating force. The most salient example of this concept in Kafka's work is his remarkable essay *The Metamorphosis* (or *The Transformation*), where Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a huge insect. The story recounts Gregor's own shock at this unfortunate accident and the violent reaction of his family who first isolate him and eventually kill him. The process of 'moral distancing' begins even before his family become aware of his transformation when his boss comes to visit him to ask him to explain why he is late for work. When Gregor explains that he is sick his boss merely brushes away this

reason stating that, “businessmen are... often obliged for business reasons to shrug off some mild indisposition.” (Kafka, 1999a, p.83). However, Gregor’s alienation is greatly intensified when the family discovers the true nature of his condition and then gradually increase their cruelty towards him. Shortly before he dies with a rotting apple embedded in his inflamed back he overhears his sister explaining to their parents, “You must try to get rid of the idea that it’s Gregor. That’s our real disaster, that we’ve believed for so long. But how can it be Gregor... this animal plagues us. It drives away the lodgers, will obviously take over the entire apartment, and leave us to spend the night in the lane.” (Kafka, 1999a, p.120). There are fewer more eloquent descriptions of phenomenon of ‘moral distancing’ either in fiction or in empirical case studies. This story is also poignant because not so many years later the Jews were being vilified by the Nazis in Europe as vermin and insects and Kafka’s own sisters were to die in the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

Existing accounts of ‘moral distance’ (Bauman, 1991; Zyglidopoulos and Fleming, 2008) tend to emphasize the role that formal rationality and bureaucracy play in this process, but we can see from Kafka’s stories that ‘moral distancing’ can occur not only in bureaucracies but in a variety of social institutions, even in the family. Our study therefore goes beyond the current focus of the debate on bureaucratic rationality and extends the scope of the concept of ‘moral distance’ into other social domains and organizational forms. In Kafka’s *The Trial*, the process of ‘moral distancing’ begins with a mere accusation even before the formalities of the trial itself. Without disputing the force of the concept of ‘moral distance’ we argue that Kafka’s critique of the moral life of organizations extends far beyond this concept, questioning the

very possibility of organizational ethics as such. For Kafka the bureaucratic process is not the only way to create ‘moral distance’ between people, and it is more closely bound up with the cruel enforcement of ethical ideals than with bureaucracy *per se*. In fact, his stories give us examples of where moral principles are themselves used in a cruel fashion by moral individuals against others. This point has already been developed in the work philosophers and social theorists who have been critical of the social order, including Adorno (1997) and more recently Butler (2005), who have themselves been strongly influenced by Kafka’s works.

Whilst we would not deny the force of the moral critique of bureaucracy by Bauman (1991) and others, following Kafka, we have extended the concept of ‘moral distance’ beyond the realm of bureaucracy to apply to ethics itself. In contrast to existing studies of ‘moral distance’ in organizational ethics, Kafka’s (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007) works shows that this process can occur even in face to face relationships that do not necessarily require the bureaucratic separation and isolation of tasks. Suggesting that ‘moral distance’ does not rest on formal rationality alone raises the question as to what other factors or situations facilitate ‘moral distance’. We shall discuss what Kafka’s works have to contribute to answering this question in the following sections.

Organizations and the Corruption of Transcendental Values

Kafka (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007) shows us how ‘moral distance’ can occur in relations in which formal rationality is not its primary cause. His stories and novels also present other facilitators of ‘moral distance’. In this section we will discuss two such facilitators. The first theme we identify here concerns the disconnection of organizational rules and principles from their original purpose and the transcendental values on which they were initially based. The second theme deals with the corruption of formal rules by informal rules, which echoes du Gay’s (1999, 2000, 2005) argument concerning the corruption of bureaucracy as a root cause for the power of the Nazi regime. Both facilitators show how ethical bureaucratic values become corrupted in practice.

Weber’s (1991, 2005) conception of *Beamtenethos* focuses on the ethical attitude of the bureaucrat. Kafka complements this view by emphasizing the perspective of those subject to bureaucratic procedures. In contrast to Weber, Kafka shows that the values underlying bureaucracy exist primarily in the expectations of the protagonists, which are over-optimistic and frequently pursued with ruinous consequences. The mismatch of expectations with reality points us to an underlying problematic in Kafka’s conception of organization, which can be broadly understood in terms of the necessary corruption of transcendental values. No matter how earnestly higher values are pursued within Kafka’s stories, they are only ever realized in a partial and corrupted form. This can be seen, for instance, when Josef K. is arrested at the beginning of *The Trial*. He does not comprehend how this could have happened, because – as Kafka (1999b, p.7) tells us in the very first sentence – “without having done anything wrong he was arrested”. This abrupt interruption of his daily life

baffles K. because he “lived in a country with a legal constitution, there was universal peace, all the laws were in force; who dared seize him in his own dwelling?” (Kafka, 1999b, p.10). This is only the start of an ultimately fatal series of actions by K., which are invariably followed by the contradictory measures of those on whose help he is reliant. As Josef K. is continually presented with the possibility of escape the reader’s sense of hopelessness is increasingly compounded as they are led from one false hope to another. However, we can see a basic misconception in K.’s expectations because he mistakenly presumes the existence and eventual success of transcendental values such as justice, fairness and respect. Adorno (1997, p.270) emphasized exactly this problem in his commentary on Kafka’s work when he observed that, “The heroes in the *Trial* and the *Castle* become guilty not through their guilt—they have none—but because they try to get justice on their side.” Higher principles thus serve as a seductive device in drawing naïve victims further into the corrupt bureaucracy, rather than serving as substantive values that will ever materialize in actual practice. In stark contrast to the Weberian ideal, Kafka’s parables show that when put into practice they become corrupted and the original ideals remain necessarily abstract and ultimately transcendental.

One of the key problems that Kafka raises is that the rules are themselves often unclear and ambiguous. In *The Castle* it takes a long time for K. even to begin to grasp the various organizing principles of the castle, some of which are formal and others rather informal relating to the villagers’ everyday dealings with the castle. Likewise in the novel *Amerika*, Karl begins to appreciate a whole world of informal rules that may be subject to sanction, where he reflects that, “There was probably no

actual rule..., but that was only because the unimaginable was not expressly forbidden.” (Kafka, 2007, p.114). A key mechanism that facilitates the operation of formal systems of organization within his stories is the role of informal networks of communication. For instance, in *The Trial* the Defence is not even a part of the formal legal system: “... the Defence was not actually countenanced by the Law, but only tolerated... Strictly speaking, therefore, none of the Advocates was recognized by the Court...” (Kafka, 1999b, p.128). If you want a defence at all, then you must by necessity appeal to informal means to obtain it. Kafka’s protagonists are often confronted with formal systems of organization that are realized only by means of an evasive, sometimes imaginary informal system that functioned through a widespread complicity.

Another example of the crucial role of informal systems of organization is the social exclusion of Amelia and her family in *The Castle*. After declining a sexual offer by the official Sortini, the townsfolk push her family’s business into bankruptcy, her father towards insanity and they stigmatize her and her family in fear of retribution by the officials of the castle. However, no official or unofficial attempts to exact punishment are made by the members of the castle, casting doubt over whether there is any genuine reason for the villagers’ anxiety beyond their own paranoia. Women play a distinctive role in this informal network where K. becomes engaged to Frieda because ‘spider that she was, she had connexions of which nobody knew’ (Kafka, 2000, p. 286). In Kafka’s stories, the formal and informal systems of organization are often very closely interwoven. The important role of these informal systems has the effect of amplifying both the power and the extent of the formal systems of organization, where for instance, in *The Trial*, there is nothing outside of the trial,

which appears to be omnipresent, extending throughout all aspects of social life. The informal system appears to be necessary for the functioning of the formal one, but at the same time, it has a corrupting effect upon the formal system.

The way in which rules become distorted and corrupted in practice has been the subject of some of the earliest research within organization theory into the latent functions of rules and other 'bureaucratic dysfunctions' (Gouldner, 1954; Merton, 1957). The detachment of rules from their ostensible purposes can be found in this early research, but it found its classic expression in Weber's (2005) distinction between *Dienstwissen* and *Fachwissen*. Whilst the former refers to knowledge of bureaucratic rules and procedures and how they can be interpreted and manipulated by the bureaucrat, the latter refers to forms of expert scientific knowledge, i.e. the specific technical content with which the bureaucracy deals, be it educational, legal, economic or other (Weber, 2005, p.219-225). The bureaucratic system perpetuates itself and produces its own rules, which it needs to function, but there is a tendency for these bureaucratic rules to become disconnected from the original purposes and higher ideals of the institution. In Weberian terms we might call this a corruption of the ethos of the bureaucrat where values remain formal abstractions and are not translated in actual practice. This is not simply a literary conceit on Kafka's part and Barker (2002) has observed that even business ethics programmes can become preoccupied with rule following, lacking a genuine sensitivity to ethical concerns.

In Kafka's stories actual organizations never realize the transcendental values upon which they are based. This eternal mismatch results in the struggle in which Kafka's characters are continually engaged. However, Kafka's characters fail to understand

the impossibility of a reconciliation between ideal values and their realization. It is exactly this mismatch which draws K. from one authority to another, in the hope that he will eventually find a way out of the injustice of his situation. Kafka thus abandons the attempt to reconcile transcendental values and their practical materializations, while at the same time acknowledging the human motivations that lead us to appeal to these values in order to make sense of our social world. In practice, the bureaucratic organization becomes corrupted by i) the detachment of its own rules from its original purpose (e.g. justice), and ii) by the informal system upon which it is reliant for its realization. Both forms of corruption undermine the ethical potential of bureaucracy and formal rationality more generally. Using Kafka's work, we have shown that formal rationality may not be the root cause for 'moral distance' and that the personal interpretation of rules has distorting effects related to the detachment of rules from their ostensive goals and their corrupt application by cronyism. As we shall now demonstrate, Kafka's stories have the potential to extend this insight by discussing more extreme forms of the corruption of transcendental values when ethical rules and principles are used to justify unethical behaviour.

Ethical Violence and the Tyranny of Principle

Many of Kafka's works show how the formal rational rules of bureaucracy can be corrupted and can facilitate 'moral distance' (especially Kafka, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007), but Kafka's stories highlight that ethical principles are also subject to the same corrupting forces. In what could be called the 'tyranny of principle' Kafka anticipates the concept of ethical violence developed by Butler (2005). In the novel *Amerika*, a recurrent theme is the disproportionately harsh punishments that are meted out to Karl

Roßmann when he breaks organizational rules and other commitments. When Karl decides to spend a night at the house of one of his rich uncle's business partners, he inadvertently upsets his uncle who decides to abandon Karl forever. Karl had already been exiled by his own parents from his home in Europe after an unfortunate affair with a maid, and is then rejected by his uncle in America, not so many days after he had first met him. This is especially tragic as his uncle was his sole stable point of reference in the United States. The uncle's letter to Karl justifies this drastic decision in the following way: "... I am a man of principle. That is a very disagreeable and a very sad thing, not only for those around me, but for myself as well, however, I owe everything I am to my principles, and no one has the right to ask me that I deny myself out of existence ..." (Kafka, 2007, p.62). As is so often the case in Kafka's stories, principles overrule compassion in the treatment of the infraction of rules – even when these are only perceived infractions.

Precisely the same theme can be found in the story *In the Penal Colony* where Kafka teaches us how the rule of principle can have drastically violent consequences. In this short story a peculiar kind of apparatus is described, which serves no other purpose than the preservation of the tyranny of principle. It is a killing machine designed to execute death sentences, which uses a large array of needles to inscribe a judgment on the body of the condemned, eventually killing them after a period of prolonged agony. After six hours the criminal begins to decipher the lethal message etched into him, which describes the nature of his crime. The officer tells us that a glorious enlightenment dawns upon the condemned man. This is the tyranny of pure principle as no reform of the prisoner is intended the prisoner cannot learn from his mistakes nor take any corrective action since he has been condemned to die. Whereas the

spectacular punishments and public executions of past times served as a warning to other potential criminals, in this story a scene is portrayed in which the witnesses simply enjoy the show. No moral lesson whatsoever can be taken into the future – it is even said to be hard “to decipher the script with one’s eyes”, so a witness can understand nothing of the nature of how justice is served. Kafka does not stop there. When a traveller who has been asked to give an account of the penal colony tells the officer that he will recommend that the use of the apparatus be discontinued, the officer who is responsible for the executions puts himself into the machine, killing himself and destroying the machine at the same time. When the traveller looks into the dead officer’s eyes he finds that “no sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found [...]” (Kafka, 1999a, p.166). In *In the Penal Colony*, the enforcement of the law is reduced to a cruel ceremony in which the rule of principle reforms people simply by killing them.

Kafka’s conception of justice raises an important point concerning the impossibility of the realization of transcendental values within organizations. When discussing *In the Penal Colony*, Bennett (1994, p.659f) notes that “[b]y depicting the perfect realization of the desiderata of judicial closure, Kafka’s story again foregrounds the internal multiplicity and idiosyncrasy of the judge and points to the dissonance between him and any final judgement”. The officer in the story dreams of a perfect penal colony in which justice is done to the guilty automatically, excluding any possibility of human intervention or human error. What the officer fails to see is that in his colony everybody is immediately perceived as guilty. Ironically, what is excluded in this system is the point of entry of the value of justice into the judicial system, as Bennett (1994, p.659) explains, “Kafka brings the dream of closure to

fulfilment in a legal system with a single judge who refuses to doubt an accusation and who heeds only one of his internal voices, the one that shouts ‘guilty as charged!’”. We find another revealing example of this phenomenon in *The Trial*, when K. is called to his first hearing and by delivering an elaborate and emotional explanation of his particular circumstances he is told that in so doing he has effectively put paid to his chances of being given a fair hearing later in the proceedings. Kafka’s judges are not the careful interpreters of transcendental values, such as justice or fairness, but the merciless and sometimes idiotic enforcers of a bureaucratic mechanism.

Butler (2005) has explained the moral significance of Kafka’s work in terms ethical violence, where ethics itself entails that cruelty be inflicted upon either oneself or another. She explains this concept in the following way: “in the name of ethics we (violently) require that another do a certain violence to herself, and do it in front of us by offering a narrative account or issuing a confession...” (Butler, 2005, p.64). Violence is seen as a means by which an individual can achieve the level of self-mastery necessary for becoming moral. Kafka provides us with numerous stories where ethical violence is clearly directed by a purportedly moral actor against a supposedly immoral one. In particular Butler (2005) highlights the role played by moral condemnation in the execution of ethical violence. She argues that, “... condemnation is very often an act that not only ‘gives up’ on the condemned but seeks to inflict a violence upon the condemned in the name of ‘ethics.’ Kafka offers several instances of how this kind of ethical violence works.” (Butler, 2005, p.46). Butler (2005) discusses the example of Georg in Kafka’s story *The Judgment*, where a man is driven to kill himself to fully demonstrate his love for his father. We can find

ethical violence in other works of Kafka as well. In *Amerika* it happens when Karl's uncle, "a man of principle" disowns him because he was late to a meeting. In *The Trial*, the ethical violence is the trial itself, which constitutes a form of cruelty carried out on the innocent and guilty like. In *The Trial*, the best that even an innocent man can hope for is perpetual judgment. The story *In the Penal Colony* takes the logic of condemnation even further, where the sentence inevitably kills those subject to it, eventually the prison warden himself. In some of these stories, such as *The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony* it appears that there is some 'moral distancing' at work, where those judged under the legal mechanism are utterly helpless and incapable of defending themselves. However, the concept of 'moral distance' only captures part of Kafka's cutting critique of the social order. For instance in his stories *Amerika*, *The Judgement* and *The Metamorphosis*, the perpetrators of ethical violence are not corrupt bureaucrats, but are close family members. Kafka ably demonstrates how 'moral distance' not only occurs in situations in which formal rationality plays a role but also when transcendental values become corrupted in their actualization in any setting. This also holds true for ethical principles which can be used to legitimate 'ethical violence'.

The tyranny of principle is so potent within Kafka's ethics that the identity construction of many characters is based solely on these principles. The relationship between ethics and identity work has already been developed by Kornberger and Brown (2007). This shows very clearly the way that ethical principles can become an important discursive resource for identity work, however, it does not explore the potentially tyrannical aspects of these kinds of relationships. If the principle is seen to

fail, then so do the human beings invested in it. This is why the disciples of the apparatus, like the officer, feel that it must be protected by any means, not only because of transcendental values like justice, but because to accept any fault would undermine their entire being. This point finds exemplary expression in the parting words of Karl's uncle in *Amerika*: "... I owe everything I am to my principles, and no one has the right to ask me that I deny myself out of existence..." (Kafka, 2007, p.62). Kafka's extraordinary conception of ethics is not aimed narrowly as an attack of the bureaucratic ethos, but is aimed at ethics itself. It is the 'man of principle' who tyrannizes over others whether in the office or in his own family.

For the debate on 'moral distance' Kafka's work has significant implications. As we have shown, du Gay's (1999, 2000, 2005) point that formal rationality entails some potential for ethical behaviour cannot be easily discarded. Neither, however, can be Bauman's argument that in practice bureaucracy has led to unethical behaviour. Weber (1991, 2005) was aware of this problem of the actualization of the virtues of bureaucracy when emphasizing the ethos of the bureaucrat (*Beamtenethos*). Kafka provides us with in-depth discussions of the actualization of transcendental values. His stories show that 'moral distance' can occur even in situations in which ethical principles are evoked. The present analysis extends the original debate on 'moral distance', which was restricted to a discussion of the role of formal rationality in the development of unethical behaviour (Bauman 1991; du Gay, 1999, 2000, 2005). Our analysis supplements the existing debate by moving beyond bureaucratic mechanisms of moral distancing and identifying additional facilitators of 'moral distance' related to the corruption of values by informal rules and slavish adherence to principles.

Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed selected works of Kafka (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007) and their implications for the current debate in business ethics on ‘moral distance’. The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we have shown how ‘moral distancing’ can take place across a range of organizational contexts including more informal settings as well as the highly formal. Using Kafka’s work we have shown that formal rationality is not the only facilitator of ‘moral distance’ and that such distance can also be created within even close personal relationships. Second, we have identified the existence of facilitators of ‘moral distance’ that go beyond the bureaucratic process such as an informal system of rules and the disconnection of rules from their intended transcendental values. By drawing on Butler’s (2005) discussion of Kafka we have shown that, at the most extreme, ethics can itself become a facilitator of ‘moral distance’, where ethical principles can serve to justify cruelty and condemnation in the name of ethics. By drawing on literary resources for making these two contributions, we have shown that literature is not merely a teaching tool for organizational ethics but is an important object of research in its own right.

The argument of the paper acknowledges the importance of previous ground-breaking research into the concept of ‘moral distance’ by Bauman (1991). However, this paper suggests that it is not enough to simply criticize bureaucracy and we thus call for further research into facilitators of ‘moral distance’ and ethical violence in non-

bureaucratic organizations and in more informal forms of organizing. The concept of ‘moral distance’ is an important direction for future research into business ethics and can be further developed by drawing upon both empirical case studies and literary sources. There has been a dearth of empirical research into the existence of ‘moral distance’ in non-bureaucratic organizational forms and future research might usefully explore the presence of such processes in more flexible and informal kinds of organization. For instance, the recent financial crisis would provide fertile grounds for the investigation of entrepreneurs and experts who have flouted professional guidelines perceiving themselves to be apart and above others in terms of their expertise, wealth or social status (Lewis, 2006; Ferguson, 2012).

The development of Kafka’s work as a research object for organizational ethics is part of the small yet growing stream of business ethics research which explores the potential of literature in contributing to research on business ethics (Carson, 1994; McAdams, 1993; Michaelson, 2005). While using literature as a resource for teaching business ethics is more commonplace, deploying literature as a means of research is a less developed project. In one of the most extensive contributions to this debate Michaelson (2005) argues that literature might stimulate our moral imagination and, crucially for him, “expand our vision beyond our parochial interests” (p.359, 360, 371). Others have proposed that novels such as Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (McAdams, 1993) and Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (Carson, 1994) can be used to challenge and improve the quality of the readers’ moral thinking. In the present paper we have looked to Kafka’s (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007) texts to investigate the dark side of organizations and to access the lifeworlds of the victims of injustice

within organizations. We have thus shown how Kafka's work can help us to navigate and extend the debates on ethical violence and 'moral distance' within organizations.

We understand our study as a step towards exploring the potential of literature as a resource for research on business ethics, which opens up a number of directions for future research. In particular, the paper poses research questions concerning the role of 'moral distance' in organizations as well as the investigation of literature as an object of study for organizational ethics. The works of important authors such as George Orwell, Joseph Conrad and Joseph Heller yield insights into the moral ambiguities of modern forms of organization and the kinds of moral conflicts that they engender. Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* is in many respects comparable to Kafka in its moral critique of bureaucracy. His conception of the *Catch 22* may be particularly suitable for opening up an inquiry into those kinds of rules that have a strong corrupting tendency, which rather than serving as a guide to responsible action, function instead as a platform for the development of morally ambiguous situations and intractable moral conflicts. The issue of 'moral distance' and ethical violence, which we have explored here, is also apparent in the work of other noteworthy novelists such as Joseph Conrad. Conrad's accounts of early colonial business ventures reveal the civilizing mission of Western business to be little more than the murderous plunder of weaker countries by the stronger. Conrad forces us to ask to what extent is the moralizing vision of liberal capitalism a mask for something rather less innocent? Here we see the 'virtual tendencies' of fiction explode into the actual world, where Conrad's own experience of piloting a river boat down the Congo in 1890 served as a basis for his shocking descriptions of colonial business affairs in his

novel *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad himself commented that, “*Heart of Darkness* is experience... pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case.” (quoted in Hochschild, 2006, p.143). In our own paper we have revealed similar moral ambiguities through an investigation of the evolution of incidents of ethical violence within Kafka’s distinctive account of organizational life. Ultimately, by extending the ‘virtual tendencies’ (De Cock and Land, 2006) of the given world through drawing on works of literature business ethics scholars can extend our insight into on-going moral debates and offer fresh views and reflections.

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Glossary of Terms

Aporia: A philosophical puzzle or impasse.

Beamethos: The ethos or attitude of a bureaucrat to interpret formal rules faithful to their intentions as outlined by Weber (2005). For him, the interpretation of rules should not be influenced by the personal desire of the bureaucrat or the appearance, traits, etc. of the person subject of the rule but should always rest on the values and intentions underlying the rule.

'Moral Distance': According to Zygmunt Bauman's (1991, p.192) pioneering study, "moral inhibitions do not act at a distance. They are inextricably tied down to human proximity. Commitment of immoral acts, on the contrary, becomes easier with ever inch of social distance.... With the growth of distance, responsibility for the other shrivels, moral dimensions of the object blur, till both reach vanishing point and disappear from view."

Moral Ambiguity: situations in which the ethical way to behave is not easy to identify. In Kafka's stories the protagonists often lack crucial information for deciding which further action would constitute the ethically most desirable option thus creating morally ambiguous situations.

Sine ira et studio: a Latin term meaning 'without anger and fondness'. Weber (1991, p.215-216) makes specific reference to this idea when discussing the 'fully developed' bureaucracy that is governed by formal rules, 'eliminating from business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation.'