A Consideration of Kafka’s
*Metamorphosis* As A Metaphor For
Existential Anxiety About Ageing

Ciaran O’Connor

Abstract

This paper considers Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* in light of a dichotomy between age as a font of wisdom and experience, and, conversely, as a gruesome fate for those that survive youth. It is inspired by my counselling work with disability and infirmity.

Key words

Age, metamorphosis, death, time, youth, old.

Portrayals of age

The movie *Bill & Ted’s Bogus Journey*, a mid-nineties, fantasy romp, sees the unlucky protagonists hurled into Hell and forced to face up to their deepest, darkest fears. For Bill, this is the prospect of a kiss from his hairy-chinned grandmother who appears misshapen and looming over him. The camera cuts back and forth with increasing zoom and pace between a fish eye on the diminutive young Bill and a close up on the hairy, drooling maw of his assailant. With Bill as one of our ‘heroes’ of the story, we are shown that something about her age terrifies and repulses him.

By no means does this film stand alone in presenting this as a societal depiction of age – our comedy regularly springboards its humour off the perceived negatives of ageing. Consider the following: the bed-ridden Ma in *The Royle Family* (Mylod et al., 1998-2006), the boring and oft-ridiculed Albert in *Only Fools and Horses* (Sullivan, 1981-2003), Father Jack in *Father Ted* (Linehan and Matthews, 1995-1998) and Simon Pegg’s *Shaun of the Dead*, where a particularly cruel comparison is made between the movements of the aged and the image of the flesh-eating zombie (Wright, 2004). Within fairy tales, the youthful beauty of the princes and fairies are often pitched against the aged crones that are the wicked witches. Furthermore, children’s literature is rife with the portrayal of age as an object of horror and evil.

But for all these instances there are plenty of representations to the contrary; that is to say, depictions of characters as influences made positive by virtue of their age. Consider the powerful and wise Prospero of *The Tempest* or the unfailing fellow Falstaff from Shakespeare’s Henrys.
Returning to the world of fairytales, such as portrayed by the Brothers Grimm – while there are the wicked witches, there are also the fairygodmothers.

**Old age – the dichotomy**

Old age has bad press (Meyer, 2007). We have grown accustomed to the term ageism, or ‘age discrimination’, after it was first introduced by Butler in 1975; a concept that was introduced to combat the stigma around those over a certain age. It is five years since the British government deemed it inappropriate to ask for ‘enthusiastic’ staff in job adverts, on the grounds that such a claim de-selected older people (an ironic failure to eradicate ageism on their behalf).

But there are at least two sides to this story. The psychologist Alice Heim decided to use part of her retirement to write many of her friends and ex-colleagues with a view to receiving their perceptions of growing old. She received replies from 160 out of 180 letters sent out, and compiled them into the coffee table book entitled *Where Did I Put My Spectacles?* What she ended up with was a compilation of views so varied and diverse that it was difficult to try and identify many patterns amongst them. However, what she did discover was that overall, the comments were very contradictory. Heim ended up identifying nine contradictions about old age. Of these there was the belief that confidence diminished with age versus a belief that confidence grew as the years advanced; others drew a picture of the world as going to waste and the youth of today as having no regard, which was opposed by a marvelling at the wonders of modern living and the joy of being able to relate to grandchildren and youths with the advantage of years. The summary of the book is that views of old age are a mixture of extremes and that there appears to be little in the way of a middle ground. This seems to chime with the fairy godmother/witch dichotomy mentioned earlier, and appears to be a theme of ageing: that is to say, it seems largely to be viewed from extremes. Bromley, in his book, *The Idea of Ageing: An Historical and Psychological Analysis*, traced this disunion back as far as the ancient world:

> Egyptian writings reveal an ambivalence towards growing old. On the one hand, ageing is accompanied by a variety of undesirable degenerative changes; on the other, ageing has some compensations and rewards including those associated with increased wisdom and social status. These give rise to contrasting attitudes and ambivalent feelings that persist today.  
> *(Bromley, 1988: p34).*
Metamorphosis as a metaphor for old age and infirmity

To what extent was Franz Kafka’s Metamorphosis intended as a parable or analogy of old age? Probably none; the themes of alienation and rejection are far more likely inspired by his being a Jew in an increasingly anti-Semitic Prague. However, such experiences tapped into the fundamentals of stigma, allowing Kafka to write poignantly about infirmity and the effect upon the family (The Sharp Side 2007). There are many ways in which Gregor Samsa’s story could be compared with an interpretation of old age. Firstly, he has undergone a physical change that has left his mind and thoughts largely unchanged. Secondly, he lives in his own annexe where he is supported by his family, while not being able to economically contribute. Thirdly, the story concludes with the striking image of the daughter, Gregor’s sister, stretching ‘her nubile, young body’ (Kafka, 2007: p146), a moment, which, through its contrast to the awful fate of her brother, suggests her own vulnerability to age and degeneration.

As the story moves out of its surprising opening, we are retrospectively introduced to Gregor’s former role as the family provider; not only does his sales job financially support the others, he was responsible for finding the flat in which the family are staying. After realising the incapacitation of Gregor, the family are indeed in such dire need that they have to resort to having lodgers in a place that is clearly (owing to its diminutive size and unnatural occupant) unsuitable. Kafka perhaps picks this unusual set-up in order to best contrast Gregor as switching so violently from a role of being the central cog in the family machine, to being the crippled load that the family ends up grudgingly dragging. This could well be analogous to the often uncomfortable role-reversal that occurs when parents switch from carers to cared for – a situation notoriously difficult for all to adapt to (Thompson et al., 1990: p104).

Gregor’s family make some modicum of effort to continue looking after him. Kafka briefly explores these reasons – ‘for sure, none of them wanted Gregor to starve’ – suggesting that some shred of humanity remains in the family. Later in the tale, when deciding whether or not to sell off Gregor’s furniture, the mother objects to the idea on the grounds that... ‘by taking away his furniture, we would be showing him we were abandoning all hope of an improvement in his condition, and leaving him utterly to his own devices?’. This line betrays the family’s more central reasons for looking after Gregor; that he might get better. In this they also show themselves as having no interest to try and engage with or grow more attuned to him as he is.

Kafka’s Metamorphosis presents us with something that we instinctively see as truly horrifying, that of being changed into a beetle in one’s sleep, and presents it in such a way as to suggest that this, in itself, is not nearly as horrifying as the reactions of others to this transformation. This is
conveyed in a number of ways, most notably in the opening line of the book: ‘When Gregor awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed.’ (Kafka, 2007: p87) What is so notable about this opening is that it presents the situation of being turned into a cockroach as the exposition of the story when one might expect it to be the complication. In doing this, Kafka swiftly and cleverly forces us to accept the unacceptable.

Throughout the story, Gregor is portrayed as growing accustomed to his new form with remarkable ease and speed. In fact, at points he seems to relish the process of discovering the capabilities of his new form, something he is alone in appreciating.

Gregor is portrayed as physically disabled following his transformation; in trying to leave his room he is near on unable to turn the key in the lock. Strikingly, he does not see why these changes should obstruct his way of life, as he explains to the chief clerk:

> It seems I’m not as much improved as I’d hoped. But I feel better just the same. How is it something like this can befall a person!...It’s just that one always imagines that one will get over an illness without having to take time off... I mean to get the eight o’clock train, these couple of hours rest have done me the world of good... I’ll be at my work presently.

(Kafka, 2007: p97)

This sounded remarkably similar to some of the tales of working past retirement age found in Thompson et al. where older people have found themselves adjusting to their physical age far better than the world around them appreciates, and having a disproportionate desire to work and be useful that seems at odds with the low expectations of others. Thompson writes of the impact of this:

> In imposing retirement as a universal goal for all at work, contemporary industrial societies not only have unwittingly extended poverty among their older citizens, but also are throwing away an economic contribution to their general prosperity which many of them would gladly make. The dream of retirement makes good sense to many, but there are an almost equal number to whom it seems an empty reward for a useful life.

(Thompson et. al.,1990: p142)

**Old age as being a curse of the young not the old**

It would appear that the truly deformed characters are the supporting cast of *Metamorphosis*. Indeed, the hero of the story contains more pathos and
more human qualities than any of the other characters who are free of being transformed into cockroaches. The true ironic horror of Kafka’s tale is not in the transformation of Gregor, but that which the world around him undergoes following his physical alterations. Gregor is acutely aware of the change in his family following his own shift, in looking at his father he notices;

_He really hadn’t imagined him the way he was, he had been distracted of late…and had neglected to pay attention to goings-on in the rest of the flat, as he had previously, and so really should have been prepared to come upon some alterations. But really, really, was that still his father?_  
(Kafka, 2007: p124)

As the reader, we are very much able to associate with Gregor, and we join him in rage and humiliation in the face of his family’s refusal/inability to engage with him, ‘Ooh Gregor!’ cried his sister, brandishing her fist and glowering at him. Since his metamorphosis, they were the first words she had directly addressed to him’, (Kafka, 2007: p122). Nabokov, in his lecture on _Metamorphosis_, depicts the family as having lost their humanity in the process, describing Gregor’s plight as follows;

_In…Kafka the absurd central character belongs to the absurd world around him but, pathetically and tragically, attempts to struggle out of it into the world of humans – and dies in despair_  
(Nabokov, 2009)

Kafka, in the aforementioned opening of his book, brilliantly conveys the family as being the ‘problem’ of the story. By making his transformation the exposition against which the story is played out, we are then made to see the reaction and rejection by his family as the complication of the tale. This is perhaps the comparison that is most startling with old age – do we turn our backs on the aged as Gregor’s family turn their backs on him? Is _Logan’s Run_ (Anderson, 1976) a science fiction tale with a little more truth in it than perhaps we would like?

Perhaps it is in this way that _Metamorphosis_ works as an analogy for old age; in its suggestion that if there is a chief concern with being old, it is not so much the age itself, but other’s view of age. What is remarkable is why younger generations do have this view of the old. Is this a biological instinct designed to be economically efficient as a species, such that only those who are seen to be able to put back into society are chosen? Or are we caught in the backlash of our own medical advances; now able to extend life to almost double what it once was but unable to, as a collective, find a place for those who are now outliving expectations (Kastelle &

An unavoidable association can be made between age and death; consider the titling of the 1990s British sitcom One Foot in the Grave (Renwick, 1990-2000). The concept of death is analytically contained within the concept of age; the latter refers to the time of something’s existence – time being something itself infinite that is measured out by the finiteness of all things existing within it. For us, finiteness is death. It seems self-evident that much of any fear of age comes out of a fear of death – perhaps the most primal and fundamental of fears (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005; Heidegger, 1927). For the younger generation, this fear of death is potentially repressed and repackaged as a revulsion towards age, which inherently reminds them of that which they have shut out. The American pop teen-sensation Kesha had a hit album containing the song, ‘DINOSAUR’ which displays this ‘revulsion’,


An O – L – D – M – A – N / You’re just an old man

Hittin’ on me what? / You need a CAT scan.’

(Sebert, 2010).

An existential view of age

Human development, and consequentially old age, is relatively under-discussed in existential writings (Adams, 2006). In The Dictionary of Existential Psychotherapy (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005), it is not an entry. In Existential Perspectives On Human Issues (van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005), death is considered within the context of aging before one’s time (Adams, 2005), but aging does not itself constitute an issue. Why is this?

Perhaps it is for the very reasons suggested by the comparison made between Kafka’s Metamorphosis and becoming elderly; becoming old is, in itself, not nearly as much of a difficulty or a shift as we might expect. In the ‘Do You Feel Old’ survey, (Thompson et. al., 1990) over 70 per cent of the elderly people asked reported that they did not, in fact, ‘feel old’. The dearth of literature on old age in existentialism is perhaps due, in part, to the fact that, in a way, it is assumed ground within the philosophy. Old age is simply a manifestation of facticity (Heidegger, 1927).

Old age is another way in which we find ourselves ‘bound up…within the world’. We are constantly moving into and out of our awareness of the thrownness of our existence – in this way, old age is just another
constituent of the world we live in. I read a particularly poor series of articles on the internet describing the trials and difficulties of being a young man; is it the case that every stage of our lives imprisons and limits us, and old age is no exception – Sartre said that we are condemned to our freedom; he did not say that we were more condemned when we were young, single, able and not in jail; simply that being alive had freedom and choice built into the very fabric of it. Growing old, dying, or being the defenceless Christmas getting murdered on the street corner (as described by Faulkner and recounted by Sartre), does not take that away from us (Sartre, 1943: p427).

Adams describes how categorizing a life span into stages works counter to an existential-phenomenological understanding. To consider the span of years in terms of divisions such as child/middle-aged/old age is perhaps to play into the hands of a socially constructed frame that fails to acknowledge the unique moments of development that define us (Adams, 2006). While category errors (Ryle, 1949) are as much a risk here as they are anywhere in language, it would seem to be equally an error to dilate the aging process down to individual experiences and pass over the later years of aging as a concept – a concept that is here defined as old age. We run the risk of becoming academically muzzled from engaging in any discussion of such a concept for fear of the inevitable imperfections of our conclusions.

Adams also makes the point that, for the most part, those that write academically tend to be the middle generation, neither elderly, nor a child. Consequentially, few academic writers, at the time of writing, have any direct experience of old age; this goes some way to explaining its under-representation in existential literature:

> Old age is usually viewed from the point of view of an adulthood which has no direct experience of it, only second hand, imaginative and inferred. It is not immediate, nor is it reconstructed. No one knows anything about the part of life to come, because they have not been there.

(Adams, 2006: p265)

**Application to psychotherapy practice**

Recently I saw a 24-year-old client who found herself continuously concerned with the passing of time and the fear that she might be wasting it. I asked her how she felt about death. She told me that she never thought about it, it didn’t bother her and she wasn’t scared of it. I then asked her how she felt about age – a few fumbling sentences into her response and the tears had begun. The subject visibly locked down her thinking – she became nearly overcome with distress while we considered the subject.
Death is of crucial importance to us (Yalom, 1980; Heidegger, 1927) but is often, particularly with younger clients, very difficult to access directly in the therapy room. Resistance to talking on the subject is frequently high, while at the same time it is something that we are made aware of from as young as nine (Nagy, 1959) and which colours so many aspects of our lives: crossing the road, health and safety, when to go to the doctor, which foods to eat... to name but a few of the most obvious. I would propose that finding a way to consider concepts of old age and death can be a useful inroad with clients who consider themselves very much on the young side of their own young/old divide.

Specific numerical ages are useful phenomena to work with in such instances. What a client thinks about being 40, 50 or 60 years old often unpacks a plethora of thoughts based on significant template people that they have known and deadlines that have gradually been internalised and reinforced. Sartre observed that our projects for the future shape our present and our past (Sartre, 1943); for the younger client that objectivises and removes themselves from older generations, a close look at how they intend to move into these future years will often throw light on the pressures and anxieties they feel around those both current and past. The above 24-year-old client disclosed a horror around the failure of passing 50 with no children and no chance of grandchildren. This had led to desperation in relationships whereby each row and lovers tiff with a man led her to mourn for her lonely, family-less aged self.

**Conclusion**

During a group supervision session some few years ago, someone suggested asking a client, ‘What would you like to be when you’re older?’ The therapist then retracted this when they realised that the client was indeed over 60 years of age. There were a few smirks from others about the inappropriateness of this question. But after that the group did a strange U-turn, suddenly asking if this was such a bad question? What became clear was that we, as a culture, prioritise the ambitions of the young, but not the old. Sartre tells us that we all move with a project in mind, such that we might fill the nothingness within us (Sartre, 1943). This project diminishes no less with age, even if, in the extremes of illness, the project is as fundamental as to survive the next day. What we found empowering about this question is that it breaks down these assumptions for older clients; why should they not plan for when they are older? Many tell us that they do not feel old, so why not treat them in accordance with their lived experience? This intervention would perhaps need its own essay, but the discussion provoked emphasised how much we prioritise the future of youth over the future of the elderly.
It is perhaps a quirk of our society today that we appear to have such
genreained fears and negative illusions about old age. This is largely the
effect of a very different life prognosis from what we have hitherto been
used to; people today live far longer, and we are largely expected to live
into old age (Walsch, 2003). As a result the older generation are often seen
by the younger generation as more of a reminder of an inevitability of their
future, rather than a rare exception to be venerated, as older people have
been, in times past and within other cultures (Morgan, 2011).

*Metamorphosis* makes a troubling parable about old age, for it warns us
that there are those in the world that will make the assumption that a
change in our situation in some way removes us from them as human
beings. A sense of self is built precariously on houses of card, and to
engage on a human level with those that threaten this by reminding us of
the transience of youth and/or able bodiedness can be too much risk-taking
for some; distance and discrimination remain the simplest solutions. We
feel this fear in Gregor’s sister, as she struggles to avoid her
unrecognisable brother, and we are reminded of her youth, and thereby her
own upcoming transformations, both into the beauty of young adulthood
and then on into the uncertainty of old age.

Kant posited the passing of time as our way of understanding the world
and thereby a concept so fundamental that no other conception could exist
outside of it (Kant, 1998). While there are few clients with whom this
would not be a useful topic, it is perhaps particularly of use to the younger
client, that finds themselves internally transforming older generations into
cockroaches to be annexed away and forgotten about. Considering
themselves through the lens of the future may reveal the frailty they feel in
the present; it may even open them up to a more open and balanced
impression of old age that is closer to the lived experience of those that
have a direct understanding

**Ciaran O’Connor** is an existential psychotherapist working in private
practice. He’s also an honorary counsellor with the Federation of Disabled
People and trains across the UK in mental-health awareness. Ciaran also
designs games for a media company in Brighton.
Contact: 62 Palmeira Practice, Palmeira Avenue, Brighton & Hove
BN3 3GF
Email: info@counselling-brighton.co.uk www.counselling-brighton.co.uk

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