

PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS

THE MEANINGS OF LIFE

**Existentialism in Kafka and
Dostoevsky
Week 7. 6th June 2018**



What we'll cover today

- Introduction to existentialism
- Crises of meaning in Kafka's "Before the Law"
- Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor"
- Individualism, faith and absurdity



Existentialism

- How would we begin characterising some of the approaches we've come across so far?

Existentialism

- Emphasis on the thinking, feeling, acting, desiring individual – what's it like to *be me*
- Confusion, anxiety or uncertainty in a meaningless world
- Life has no intrinsic meaning or value (*nihilism*), at least as far as we know...
- But – each of us has the power to give meaning to our own lives. We can make the leap of faith, revalue our values, etc.

Franz Kafka



- What do you know about Franz Kafka, and the word '*Kafkaesque*'?





YES, IT'S A VERY
KAFKAESQUE
SITUATION OVER
THERE RIGHT
NOW...

HOW
TERRIBLE!

HM!



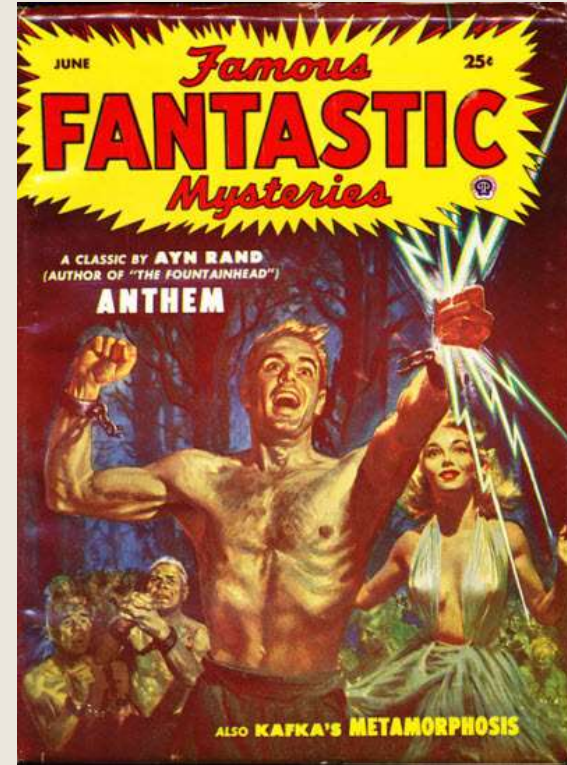
Franz Kafka

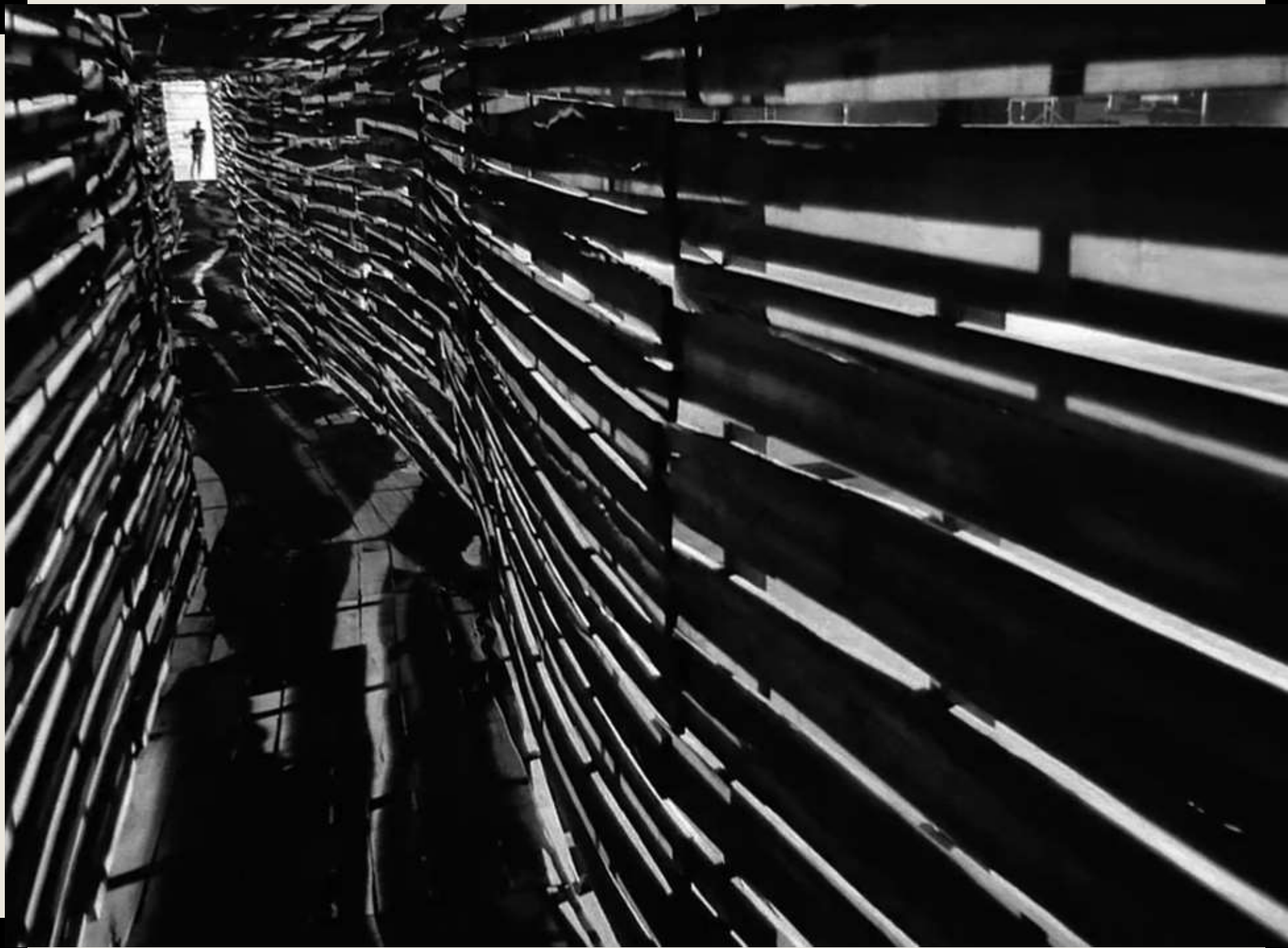
- Novelist and short story writer, born and lived in Prague for most of his life (1883-1924)
- Little-known in his lifetime, worked as an insurance clerk while writing at night
- Tortured life, defined by broken off marriages, difficulties with his father and an untimely death by TB
- Ordered all his writings to be burnt
- Author of *The Trial*, *The Castle* and “The Metamorphosis”



Kafkaesque

- Kafka's novels are defined by discomfort, alienation and uncertainty
- In "Metamorphosis", Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman, mysteriously turns into a large insect, and struggles to keep up normality
- In *The Trial*, K. is arrested and sentenced by a mysterious, inaccessible authority for a crime neither he (nor the reader) ever discovers.
- In *The Castle*, Josef K. arrives in a remote village as a land-inspector but is denied all contact or cooperation from the local authorities in the castle







“Before the Law” (1916)

- Take a look at the parable “Before the Law”
- This was written as a separate piece on its own, then later incorporated into *The Trial* (1925)
- Read through on your own and then discuss in pairs...

What do you think this parable attempts to communicate?

“Before the Law” (1916)

- What do you think the doorway, the place beyond it, and the doorkeeper might represent?
- “It is possible... but not at the moment” – what kinds of feelings does this delay evoke?
- Why is the Law no longer accessible to him?

'So we have before us a mystery which we cannot comprehend. And precisely because it is a mystery we have had the right to preach it, to teach the people that what matters is neither freedom nor love, but the riddle, the secret, the mystery to which they have to bow – without reflection and even against their conscience.'

– Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death”.

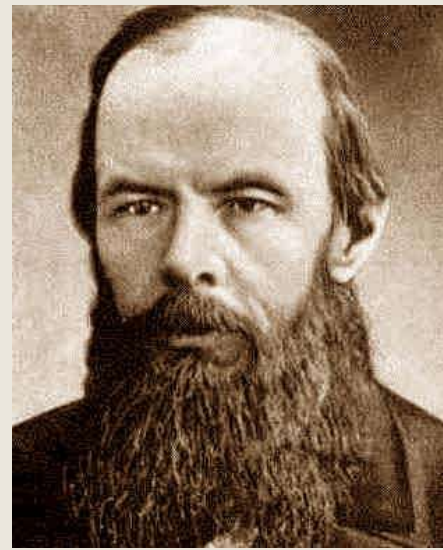
'I ran past the first watchman. Then I was horrified, ran back again and said to the watchman: 'I ran through here while you were looking the other way.' The watchman gazed ahead of him and said nothing. 'I suppose I really oughtn't to have done it,' I said. The watchman still said nothing. 'Does your silence indicate permission to pass?...'

– Kafka, “The Watchman”

“Before the Law” (1916)

- Although a parable, Kafka knowingly brings up key existentialist problems
- God is dead, and access to the Law is no longer possible for us, at this moment
- Instead we're trapped in an absurd, anxious condition which we can at best try to accept
- In *The Trial*, the characters K and the priest argue over the parable's meaning
- ‘it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary’
- *Does this conclusion satisfy you?*

Dostoevsky: a quandary



- *'God is dead: all things are permitted'...*
- Sartre famously drew this line out of the parable of the "Grand Inquisitor"
- One problem: it's a mistranslation
(*'if the soul's not immortal, there's no virtue, either, and that means all things are lawful'*)
- As we'll see with Dostoevsky, things are murkier

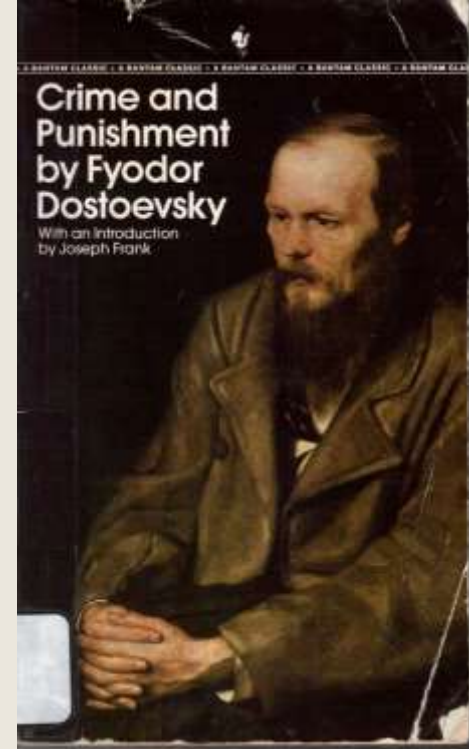
Dostoevsky

- What do you know about Dostoevsky?



Dostoevsky

- Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-81), a Russian novelist, journalist and short-story writer
- Very eventful life: father murdered, revolutionary involvement and pardon moments before death, exile in Siberia, literary prodigy, gambling addiction, epilepsy, religious conflicts
- Author of *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov*
- *Notes from Underground* considered one of the first works of existentialism







Grand Inquisitor

- The parable of the “Grand Inquisitor” appears in *The Brothers Karamazov*
- It tells the story of Jesus Christ returning to Seville, during the time of the Spanish Inquisition
- He performs miracles to astonished crowds, but is arrested and sentenced to death by the Church the next day
- The Grand Inquisitor visits Christ in his cell and explains to him why the modern Church no longer needs him...



Grand Inquisitor

- There is a good modern take on the parable in the X Files....
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt5nekpMuEs>

The burden of freedom

- Take a look at page 4 of the excerpt...
- Why does the Inquisitor say that he (and the Church) have finally conquered freedom?
- What kind of freedom is he rejecting?
- Why is he angry that Christ 'come to get in our way'?

Anything new that you divulge will encroach upon people's freedom to believe, for it will look like a miracle and their freedom to believe was what mattered to you most even back then, fifteen hundred years ago. Was it not you who so often used to say back then: 'I want to make you free'? Well, but now you have seen those 'free' people," the old man suddenly adds with a thoughtful and ironic smile. "Yes, this task has cost us dearly," he continues, looking at him sternly, "but we have at last accomplished it in your name. For fifteen centuries we have struggled with that freedom, but now it is all over, and over for good. You don't believe that it is over for good? You look at me meekly and do not even consider me worthy of indignation? Well, I think you ought to be aware that now, and particularly in the days we are currently living through, those people are even more certain than ever that they are completely free, and indeed they themselves have brought us their freedom and have laid it humbly at our feet. But we were the ones who did that, and was that what you desired, that kind of freedom?"

The burden of freedom

- What is the particular kinds of freedom that humanity has given up? ('Enslave us if you will, but feed us' – page 5)
- And what does the Inquisitor mean by this, on page 6?

'For the secret of human existence does not consist in living, merely, but in what one lives for'.

The burden of freedom

And that was what we did. We corrected your great deed and founded it upon *miracle, mystery* and *authority*. And people were glad that they had once been brought together into a flock and that at last from their hearts had been removed such a terrible gift, which had brought them so much torment. Were we right, to teach and act thus, would you say? Did we not love mankind, when we so humbly admitted his helplessness, lightening his burden with love and allowing his feeble nature even sin, but with our permission? Why have you come to get in our way now? And why do you gaze at me so silently and sincerely with those meek eyes of yours? (8)

Grand Inquisitor: rounding up

- What would happen if Christ or another messiah-like figure came down to Earth today?
- What do you think Dostoevsky's lasting points are with this parable?



Grand Inquisitor: rounding up

- According to Dostoevsky's character Ivan (who wrote the parable), organised religion might try to crush them
- The Inquisitor believes that people are not capable of the freedom and moral choices Christ symbolises
- The Church has struggled with the task of helping the people find happiness against the immense weight of the responsibility of freedom bestowed on them through Christ's sacrifice – but, at last, 'now it is all over'.
- The Church relieves the burden of choice, because men are more likely to do evil than good, and seek some authority to bow down to and relieve them

Grand Inquisitor: rounding up

- But do we need to be saved from ourselves?
- The parable however shows up the hypocrisy of this 'bread and circuses' thinking
- Christ, like the spiritual character Alyosha, forgives the Inquisitor with a kiss and is allowed to leave
- Interestingly, what has made Ivan lose his faith is the suffering of children – the problem of evil we encountered earlier in this course
- The strength of Alyosha, which Dostoevsky favours, is to retain one's faith and innocence amid suffering

Challenges for us

- What common threads can we draw between “Before the Law” and “The Grand Inquisitor”?

Challenges for us

- The struggle of the individual against authority
- The collapse of traditional ideas about morality and God, be it the 'Law' or role of religion in society
- The emphasis on the individual's self-determination to be who they are *despite* the uncertainty or absurdity of their condition
- But is this all about the *death of God*, or the *birth of human freedom*?
- Can we make meaning in a meaningless world?

Next week...



- We turn to Camus!
- Look out for: the absurd, suicide, rebellion, and role of the outsider
- We'll contrast Camus' 'absurdism' with Seneca's Stoic consolations on the shortness of life
- If you want to read further, take a look at the *Myth of Sisyphus*
- Any questions, do email me
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