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Research article

“Be just”: Human, Machine, Punishment

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Abstract

The works of Franz Kafka arouse constant interest and debate, which is due to their semantic complexity, the paradoxical nature of situations described, and the unusual nature of characters. The purpose of the essay is to determine the connection between machine and human in the system of punishment and “judicial proceedings” in Kafka’s story “In the Penal Colony” in the context of issues of philosophy of technology. The analysis of Kafka’s story allows us to focus on the complexity of the relationship between human and machine, which manifests itself, among other things, in entrusting the machine with the mission of “objective punishment,” performing a special act of justice. The essay compares the ideas of this story with the ideas of Ivan Turgenev’s “The Execution of Troppmann.” Turgenev’s story describes the public execution of the murderer of seven people, Jean Baptiste Troppmann, in Paris. The emotional background of the execution is the mood and behavior of the public, which, according to the writer, confirm the attractiveness of violence for the crowd. The method of Troppmann’s execution was guillotining; the history of its use is associated with the principle of “equality” of punishment, the desire to spare a convict from torment due to the fault of an unqualified executioner. The death machine in Franz Kafka’s story performs the task of “purifying” the criminal with punishment by “reading” the bloody inscription applied to the body by the machine, which gradually kills the criminal. According to the officer, the machine is perfect. Its destruction does not mean abandoning the principle of “guilt is always beyond a doubt” and similar deadly mechanisms. The mission of technology is determined by society, the interests of different states, social groups and political communities.

Keywords: Death Machine; Punishment Mechanism; Human and Machine; Kafka

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Научная статья

“Будь справедлив”: человек, машина, наказание

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Аннотация

Произведения Франца Кафки вызывают неизменный интерес и дискуссионные оценки, это связано с их смысловой сложностью, парадоксальностью описываемых ситуаций, необычностью героев. Целью эссе является определение связи машины и человека в системе наказания и “судопроизводства” в рассказе Кафки “В исправительной колонии” в контексте вопросов философии техники. Анализ рассказа Кафки позволяет акцентировать внимание на сложности отношений человека и машины, которая проявляется, в том числе, в возложении на машину миссии “объективного наказания”, совершения особого акта справедливости. В эссе идеи этого рассказа сравниваются с идеями рассказа Ивана Тургенева “Казнь Тропмана”. В рассказе Тургенева описывается публичная казнь в Париже убийцы семи человек Жана Батиста Тропмана. Эмоциональным фоном казни выступает настроение и поведение публики, пришедшей на казнь, которые, по мнению писателя, подтверждают притягательность насилия для толпы. Способом казни Тропмана было гильотинирование, история использования гильотины связана с принципом “равенства” наказания, стремлением избавить осужденного от мук по вине неквалифицированного палача. Машина смерти в рассказе Франца Кафки выполняет задачу “очистения” преступника наказанием путем “прочтения” кровавой надписи, наносимой на тело машиной, постепенно убивающей преступника. По мнению офицера, машина совершенна. Её разрушение не означает отказ от принципа “виновность всегда несомненна” и подобных смертоносных механизмов. Миссия техники определяются обществом, интересами разных государств, социальных групп и политических сообществ.

Ключевые слова: Машина смерти; Механизм наказания; Человек и машина; Кафка.

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INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka's story was written two months after the outbreak of World War I, the time when people started using new military machines and technologies, chemical weapons, and the creation of the first concentration camps. It is the time of the triumph of technology and the crisis of humanism. It is no coincidence that the philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev connected the origins of the October Revolution in Russia with this war that changed the life of Europe at the beginning of the 20th century.

The works of Franz Kafka arouse constant interest and debate, which is due to their semantic complexity, multi-layered meanings, the paradoxical nature of described situations, and the singular characters. Usually, researchers associate all these features with the characteristic “absurdism” of Kafka.

What is the special connection between machine and human in the system of punishment and the “judicial proceedings” in Kafka's story “In the Penal Colony”?

GUILT IS ALWAYS BEYOND A DOUBT

The Traveller who arrived at the penal colony attends an execution, which must be carried out using a “peculiar apparatus” invented by the former Commandant of this colony. The Officer servicing the killing machine enthusiastically shows the structure of this mechanism to the Traveller: the Bed, the Inscraper, special cotton wool, a prong, and, most importantly, the Harrow – and describes in detail the process of its work to carry out the sentence:

Our sentence does not sound severe. The law which a condemned man has violated is inscribed on his body with the Harrow. This Condemned Man, for example,” and the Officer pointed to the man, “will have inscribed on his body, ‘Honour your superiors. (Kafka, 1919/2014).

At the same time, the basis of the verdict is the principle “Guilt is always beyond a doubt.” Executions in the penal colony were public. The Officer recalls with nostalgia how interesting the functioning of the machine was during the administration of the former Commandant-inventor. It is important to highlight that public execution performed two important functions in the history of humanity: intimidation and entertainment.

Thus, the autobiographical story of the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev “The Execution of Troppmann” (1870) describes the public execution in Paris of Jean-Baptiste Troppmann, murderer of seven people. The onerous background of the execution is the mood and behavior of the crowd of twenty-five thousand people who came to this execution. According to the writer, this only confirms the deep-rooted appeal of the exhibition of violence. The author remembers a young man who is senselessly shouting “blouseboy.” Turgenev is convinced that this young man is unlikely to take up work that day as “a man who hates vice and idleness more than ever” (Turgenev, 1870/1922).

In fact, the method of Troppmann's execution was guillotining; the history of its use is associated with the ideas of “equality” of punishment, the quick death of the convicted person even if the executioner is insufficiently qualified.



WORD AND BODY

The machine in the story “In the Penal Colony” simultaneously performs the functions of announcing the sentence to the convicted person and executing the murderous punishment. The letters that are drawn deeper and deeper into a body by the machine’s Harrow do not kill the Condemned immediately, but only after about twelve hours. And at the “turning” in the sixth hour, the Officer says, a certain enlightenment of thought occurs; it “starts around the eyes.” The Officer assures the Traveller that this expression is so attractive “that it could tempt one to lie down under the Harrow.” The Condemned opens to the inscription-sentence through his wounds; literally, the word is connected to the body with the help of the machine.

The mechanism indirectly performs the function of an executioner, thereby punishment acquires an objectified meaning, and the process of the machine’s operation is given spiritual content. This here is not just the execution of the decision by a human court, but this is a death penalty as a way of realizing guilt for the convicted person. In the penal colony, this machine not only carries out execution, but also “cleanses” and “enlightens” the criminal, it is his final “correction.” This mechanism is a means for a criminal to comprehend his guilt by “reading” it through his own body; the death machine contributes to the complete connection of word and body.

Methods of special designation and branding of criminals have undoubtedly existed since ancient times, but this was not only a humiliating punishment for robbers and murderers, but also an important sign of danger of these people to society. The words that the machine writes on the body of the Condemned in Kafka’s story are, first of all, a message to the person being punished. These are the last words that the Condemned will “read” before death, these are the words that kill.

This plot situation in the story can be considered in the context of determining the place of the word in culture, the role of language in human life and society. The “murderousness” of the word, its functions as punishment and exposure can be associated with the logocentricity of human civilization as a whole, in which the Word is understood as the source of reality and the ontological basis of all being (Pelipenko, 2015).

According to the Officer, the machine is perfect. However, despite the character’s conviction in this ideal act of justice, the mechanism collapses precisely when he uses it for the last time – on himself. The Officer dies without receiving the desired inscription “Be just” on his body.

TECHNOLOGY AND HUMANISM

The ideal killing machine, which was invented by the deceased and almost forgotten Commandant, has collapsed and, according to the plot, is becoming a thing of the past. However, this does not mean at all that there will be no penal colonies with the principle “guilt is always beyond a doubt” and other machines for punishment.

Philosopher, scientist, engineer-inventor Pavel Florensky believed that technology is the way to overcome the Fall of humanity from God. This path is paved by culture, technology is a part of it (Bernyukevich, 2021). Florensky’s ideas are close to the concepts of the philosopher of technology Friedrich Dessauer and are generally



associated with the humanistic orientation of philosophy of technology, also developed in the studies of Ernst Kapp, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Nikolai Berdyaev, Lewis Mumford, and others.

However, technology may have a different mission, which has been clearly demonstrated throughout the 20th century and at the present time. It is determined by society, the interests of different states, social groups and political communities.

Kafka's story “In the Penal Colony” is a brilliant artistic vision of this murderous mission. Hannah Arendt wrote: “Kafka's world is without a doubt a scary world. The fact that it is worse than a nightmare, that in structure it is terribly adequate to the reality that we had to endure, we now, perhaps, know better than twenty years ago. The most remarkable thing about this art is that it shocks us today no less than then, that the horror of the story ‘In the Penal Colony’ did not lose its spontaneity even after the reality of gas chambers” (Kantor, 2015).

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