

Kafkatrapping

by Eric Raymond

Good causes sometimes have bad consequences. Blacks, women, and other historical out-groups were right to demand equality before the law and the full respect and liberties due to any member of our civilization; but the tactics they used to “raise consciousness” have sometimes veered into the creepy and pathological, borrowing the least sane features of religious evangelism.

One very notable pathology is a form of argument that, reduced to essence, runs like this: “Your refusal to acknowledge that you are guilty of {sin,racism,sexism, homophobia,oppression...} confirms that you are guilty of {sin,racism,sexism, homophobia,oppression...}.” I’ve been presented with enough instances of this recently that I’ve decided that it needs a name. I call this general style of argument “kafkatrapping”, and the above the Model A kafkatrap. In this essay, I will show that the kafkatrap is a form of argument that is so fallacious and manipulative that those subjected to it are entitled to reject it based entirely on the form of the argument, without reference to whatever particular sin or thoughtcrime is being alleged. I will also attempt to show that kafkatrapping is so self-destructive to the causes that employ it that change activists should root it out of their own speech and thoughts.

My reference, of course, is to Franz Kafka’s “The Trial”, in which the protagonist Josef K. is accused of crimes the nature of which are never actually specified, and enmeshed in a process designed to degrade, humiliate, and destroy him whether or not he has in fact committed any crime at all. The only way out of the trap is for him to acquiesce in his own destruction; indeed, forcing him to that point of acquiescence and the collapse of his will to live as a free human being seems to be the only point of the process, if it has one at all.

This is almost exactly the way the kafkatrap operates in religious and political argument. **Real crimes – actual transgressions against flesh-and-blood individuals – are generally not specified. The aim of the kafkatrap is to produce a kind of free-floating guilt in the subject**, a conviction of sinfulness that can be manipulated by the operator to make the subject say and do things that are convenient to the operator’s personal, political, or religious goals. Ideally, the subject will then internalize these demands, and then become complicit in the kafkatrapping of others.

Sometimes the kafkatrap is presented in less direct forms. A common variant, which I’ll call the Model C, is to assert something like this: “Even if you do not feel yourself to be guilty of {sin, racism, sexism, homophobia, oppression...}, you are guilty because you have benefited from the {sinful, racist, sexist, homophobic, oppressive,...} behavior of others in the system.” The aim of the Model C is to induce the subject to self-condemnation not on the basis of anything the individual subject has actually done, but on the basis of choices by others which the subject typically had no power to affect. The subject must at all costs be prevented from noticing that it is not ultimately possible to be responsible for the behavior of other free human beings.

A close variant of the model C is the model P: “Even if you do not feel yourself to be guilty of {sin,racism,sexism, homophobia,oppression...}, you are guilty because you have a privileged position in the {sinful,racist,sexist,homophobic,oppressive,...} system.” For the model P to work, the subject must be prevented from noticing that the demand to self-condemn is not based on the subject’s own actions or choices or feelings, but rather on an in-group identification *ascribed by the operator of the kafkatrap*.

It is essential to the operation of all three of the variants of the kafkatrap so far described that the subject's attention be deflected away from the fact that **no wrongdoing by the subject, about which the subject need feel personally guilty, has actually been specified.** The kafkatrapper's objective is to hook into chronic self-doubt in the subject and inflate it, in much the same way an emotional abuser convinces a victim that the abuse is deserved – in fact, the mechanism is identical. Thus kafkatrapping tends to work best on weak and emotionally vulnerable personalities, and poorly on personalities with a strong internalized ethos.

In addition, the success of a model P kafkatrap depends on the subject not realizing that the group ascription pinned on by the operator can be rejected. The subject must be prevented from asserting his or her individuality and individual agency; better, the subject must be convinced that asserting individuality is yet another demonstration of denial and guilt. Need it be pointed out how ironic this is, given that kafkatrappers (other than old-fashioned religious authoritarians) generally claim to be against group stereotyping?

There are, of course, other variants. Consider the model S: "Skepticism about any particular anecdotal account of {sin,racism,sexism,homophobia,oppression,...}, or any attempt to deny that the particular anecdote implies a systemic problem in which you are one of the guilty parties, is itself sufficient to establish your guilt." Again, the common theme here is that questioning the discourse that condemns you, condemns you. This variant differs from the model A and model P in that a specific crime against an actual person usually is in fact alleged. The operator of the kafkatrap relies on the subject's emotional revulsion against the crime to sweep away all questions of representativeness and the basic fact that *the subject didn't do it.*

I'll finish my catalog of variants with the version of the kafkatrap that I think is most likely to be deployed against this essay, the Model L: "Your insistence on applying rational skepticism in evaluating assertions of pervasive {sin,racism,sexism,homophobia, oppression...} itself demonstrates that you are {sinful,racist,sexist,homophobic,oppressive,...}." This sounds much like the Model S, except that we are back in the territory of *unspecified* crime here. This version is not intended to induce guilt so much as it is to serve as a flank guard for other forms of kafkatrapping. By insisting that skepticism is evidence of an intention to cover up or excuse thoughtcrime, kafkatrappers protect themselves from having their methods or motives questioned and can get on with the serious business of eradicating thoughtcrime.

Having shown how manipulative and psychologically abusive the kafkatrap is, it may seem almost superfluous to observe that it is logically fallacious as well. The particular species of fallacy is sometimes called "panchreston", an argument from which anything can be deduced because it is not falsifiable. Notably, if the model A kafkatrap is true, the world is divided into two kinds of people: (a) those who admit they are guilty of thoughtcrime, and (b) those who are guilty of thoughtcrime because they will not admit to being guilty of thoughtcrime. *No one can ever be innocent.* The subject must be prevented from noticing that this logic convicts and impeaches the operator of the kafkatrap!

I hope it is clear by now that the particular flavor of thoughtcrime alleged is irrelevant to understanding the operation of kafkatraps and how to avoid being abused and manipulated by kafkatrappers. In times past the kafkatrapper was usually a religious zealot; today, he or she is just as likely to be advancing an ideology of racial, gender, sexual-minority, or economic grievance. Whatever your opinion of any of these causes in their 'pure' forms may be, there are reasons that the employment of kafkatrapping is a sure sign of corruption.

The practice of kafkatrapping corrupts causes in many ways, some obvious and some more subtle. The most obvious way is that abusive and manipulative ways of controlling people tend to hollow out the causes for which they are employed, smothering whatever worthy goals they may have begun with and

reducing them to vehicles for the attainment of power and privilege over others.

A subtler form of corruption is that those who use kafkatraps in order to manipulate others are prone to fall into them themselves. Becoming unable to see out of the traps, their ability to communicate with and engage anyone who has *not* fallen in becomes progressively more damaged. At the extreme, such causes frequently become epistemically closed, with a jargon and discourse so tightly wrapped around the logical fallacies in the kafkatraps that their doctrine is largely unintelligible to outsiders.

These are both good reasons for change activists to consider kafkatraps a dangerous pathology that they should root out of their own causes. But the best reason remains that kafkatrapping is *wrong*. Especially, damningly wrong for anyone who claims to be operating in the cause of freedom.

UPDATE: A commenter pointed out the Model D: “The act of demanding a definition of {sin,racism,sexism,homophobia,oppression} that can be consequentially checked and falsified proves you are {sinful,racist,sexist, homophobic, oppressive}.”

UPDATE2: The Model M: “The act of arguing against the theory of anti-{sin,racism,sexism,homophobia,oppression} demonstrates that you are either {sinful,racist,sexist, homophobic, oppressive} or do not understand the theory of anti-{sin,racism,sexism,homophobia,oppression}, and your argument can therefore be dismissed as either corrupt or incompetent.”

Model T: Designated victims of {sin,racism,sexism,homophobia,oppression} who question any part of the theory of {sin,racism,sexism,homophobia,oppression} demonstrate by doing so that they are not authentic members of the victim class, so their experience can be discounted and their thoughts dismissed as internalized {sin,racism,sexism,homophobia,oppression}.

Thoughts on “Kafkatrapping”

1. Dave on said:

Beautifully said, and exactly right.

2. [Ted Walther](#) on said:

Another kafkatrap:

You: Some of my best friends are X.

Kafka: That proves you are prejudiced and insensitive toward X!

3. Shenpen on said:

I think you are right, but one should go deeper. It is late here so I’ll make this comment very short: in kafkatrapping the roots of Marxist “false consciousness” theory are obviously showing: you cannot be right because you do belong to a certain group and thus your circumstances have programmed your consciousness to filter out certain things.

Of course it if was truly impossible to get over one’s social programming then argument in itself would be pointless, this is where the weakness of the “false consciousness” theory lies.

Actually there is an interesting kind of doublethink going on with it – you actually can fix your “false consciousness” but it requires completely severing your connection to the group you belong to – you must condemn the whole group, deny it and be “born again” (i.e. remake your identity as someone who is not a member of that group, but a member of the elect group who do see the light) – and this almost obviously, has religious origins and I think (with Eric Voegelin) that it has Gnostic roots.

4. [ConceptJunkie](#) on said:

Another aspect of kafkatrapping is that the sin in question is one that you can never disprove. It’s impossible to disprove one is a racist, etc. because it’s impossible to prove what you think. I think that is one of biggest reasons why these charges are made. There is no defense against the charge, and few people acknowledge the utter fallaciousness of the charge itself. It’s a win-win situation in the court of public opinion because the only proper response is to ignore the attacker, which is difficult to do. Truly our public discourse has devolved to the level of the playground.

5. [esr](#) on said:

>ignore the attacker

Ignore? My response to kafkatrapping has generally been extreme, intentional rudeness. The verbal equivalent of a kick in the teeth.

One of the purposes of this essay is to give people a more precise language with which to object. Now you can say “Oh, I see. That’s a Model P kafkatrap. Go fuck yourself.”

6. [Puggg](#) on said:

esr:

Related, but with this NAACP vs Tea Party controversy, that the NAACP is a cathedral, and the Tea Party movement is a bazaar, so the NAACP is lashing out at the TPM because that’s the apprehension that any cathedral has for a bazaar.

7. [Patrick Maupin](#) on said:

I like this meme and will do my best to help its spread. Perhaps your model A should be re-christened the model T; it is, after all, the most “transparent” of kafkatraps.

8. [JB](#) on said:

Finally, a label for this despicable social phenomenon.

Of course, the weakness of such a political strategy is readily apparent: it only takes one prominent member of the aggrieved group to let whitey/male/heterosexist off the hook, and the marketplace of the mind surely has such niches to fill.

9. [Nancy Lebovitz](#) on said:

There's at least one more piece to kakfa-trapping: ignorance (whether of real injustices or the current rules about what may or may not be said) is culpable in itself.

10.[esr](#) on said:

>Of course, the weakness of such a political strategy is readily apparent: it only takes one prominent member of the aggrieved group to let whitey/male/heterosexist off the hook, and the marketplace of the mind surely has such niches to fill.

I'm surprised at your naivete. What actually happens in these cases is that the grievance peddlers read the traitor out of their group and continue as before.

Cf. the feminist who actually said that [Sarah Palin is only pretending to be a woman](#).

11.[esr](#) on said:

>There's at least one more piece to kakfa-trapping: ignorance (whether of real injustices or the current rules about what may or may not be said) is culpable in itself.

Quite.

Nancy, in case you were wondering: yes, your stories about the "race fail" flame-wars and my skim of the LJ thread were substantial sources for this essay.

12.[prof](#) on said:

So one variety of this argument is, "You must be racist because all people of your race are?" ???

13.[JB](#) on said:

"Related, but with this NAACP vs Tea Party controversy, that the NAACP is a cathedral, and the Tea Party movement is a bazaar, so the NAACP is lashing out at the TPM because that's the apprehension that any cathedral has for a bazaar."

Tactically, I see it as a last-ditch attempt to influence public opinion before Tea Party-friendly non-whites (such as Nikki Haley and Tim Scott in SC and Col. Allen West in Florida) win major public offices and blow up the narrative.

Warming up in the bullpen: the Uncle Tom card.

14.[prof](#) on said:

This is related to a form of silly argument that C. S. Lewis called Bulverism. The story is, one day Mrs. Bulver remarked that the angles of a triangle always add up to 180 degrees, and Mr. Bulver retorted, "You say that because you're a woman!"

15.[JB](#) on said:

"I'm surprised at your naivete. What actually happens in these cases is that the grievance peddlers read the traitor out of their group and continue as before."

Oh, I absolutely agree that this is what happens, as I wrote above before seeing your reply. I'm just not sure that it's very effective, especially if the person in question takes the fight head on. These types of strategies appear to work best when ranks are tightly closed.

16. [Nancy Lebovitz](#) on said:

Eric, I'm not sure if both sides of what I said registered– I believe strongly that RaceFail was an emotionally abusive effort to address real issues, and even if my emotional emphasis was on the emotional abuse (I'm still fried about it), I think that low grade prejudice is fairly common, and it adds up to substantial costs for people on the receiving end of it.

17. Patrick Maupin on said:

There's at least one more piece to kakfa-trapping: ignorance (whether of real injustices or the current rules about what may or may not be said) is culpable in itself.

You've only discussed forbidden ignorance, but with ignorance as with other things, that which is not forbidden is mandatory. God forbid anybody point out any systemic injustices against the oppressors.

18. [esr](#) on said:

>So one variety of this argument is, "You must be racist because all people of your race are?"???

No, kafkatrapping is more specific than that. The common feature of kafkatraps is the form of the argument is constructed so that they're unfalsifiable. This claim isn't.

19. [esr](#) on said:

>Eric, I'm not sure if both sides of what I said registered: " I believe strongly that RaceFail was an emotionally abusive effort to address real issues, and even if my emotional emphasis was on the emotional abuse (I'm still fried about it), I think that low grade prejudice is fairly common, and it adds up to substantial costs for people on the receiving end of it.

I got both sides all right. One of the points of my essay is that kafkatrapping is wrong and corrupting and abusive *even when it's enlisted to combat a real problem*.

Though perhaps I would be helping you more if I asked you to consider why you're still identifying with your oppressors....

20. [esr](#) on said:

>I think that low grade prejudice is fairly common, and it adds up to substantial costs for people on the receiving end of it.

On reflection, I think I have a different response to this. It's in two parts.

1. You're right.

2. I'm still not interested in discussing the matter with kafkatrappers. Their tactics condemn

them. The correct response to such abusers and mindfuckers is not to try to understand their point of view, it's to do as much violence to them as you can get away with.

21. [Nancy Lebovitz](#) on said:

[A Unitarian opposes anti-racism](#)— of interest, not that I think you'll agree with all of it.

22. [esr](#) on said:

>A Unitarian opposes anti-racism - “ of interest, not that I think you'll agree with all of it. I don't. But some of it is brilliant, especially her description of “privilege” as a negative.

23. [strongpoint](#) on said:

well-expressed, esr — thanks for the addition to the lexicon.

the kafkatrap was a favored tactic of those at my university who were peddling — and later, justifying — multicultural studies. i saw this weapon used ruthlessly against a lot of impressionable undergrads who (unlike me, as i was a bit older than either side) didn't have the proper logical or linguistic tools at hand to mount an effective defense.

24. [Daniel Franke](#) on said:

Let's play kafkatrap metabingo!

http://axisofevil.net/~xtina/blog/?page_id=630

(Link safe for work, but maybe not safe for your sanity)

25. [Daniel Franke](#) on said:

There's a hybrid of what you label model A and model P which I think is more common than either pure form. It goes, “it's essentially impossible for anyone who has grown up as a member of [privileged class] to not be a [classification]ist”. I think anyone with enough experience at model-A kafkatrapping has moved to this hybrid, since it avoids the pitfall of people “noticing that this [model A] logic convicts and impeaches the operator of the kafkatrap”, provided that the operator is a member of [victim class].

26. [Darrencardinal](#) on said:

How about the argument that black people cannot be racist, or if they are it does not count, because they have historically not had the power to keep whites or others own?

I also love how the MSM is constantly ringing their hands about the racism and violence of the tea partiers, while the real violence comes almost exclusively from union goons.

This article is posted on the internet:

<http://esr.ibiblio.org/?p=2122>