

The Chrysanthemum Letters: I

Pseudo-Tiresias

1 The Sleeves of the Divers at Ojima

行く河の流れは絶えずして、しかも、もとの水にあらず。淀みに浮ぶうたかたは、かつ消えかつ結びて、久しくとどまりたる例なし。世中にある人と栖と、またかくのごとし。

“While the coursing river may flow ceaselessly, there is no prototypical water. As for the bubbles which rise to the surface of a pool, they are none of them long-lived. The people and places of this world are just like this.”

– Kamo no Chōmei, *Hōjōki*

1. *Point to me something that is not experienced.* There is no experience independent of matter; there is no matter independent of experience. Furthermore, arguments for the emergence of experience are nonsensical. No categorically new phenomena may emerge from the combination of prior phenomena. That is, the behaviour of higher-level phenomena must be perfectly describable by the behaviours of lower-level phenomena. Anatomy is perfectly reducible to interactions in biology; biology, to interactions in chemistry; chemistry, to interactions in physics. Yet, experience is categorically different than (how we typically describe) matter. The traditional physicalist stance is untenable.

1.A. *Mind is emergent.* Note that I am not saying that “mind,” as we typically understand it, is fundamental. Memory, cognition, and the senses are perfectly reducible to lower-level phenomena. Only experience is fundamental.

1.B. *Sentience is not universal.* Because of our faculties of memory and preference, we may construct models of the world and find meaning within them. A being’s sentience is easy to misjudge, but it may be approximated as its ability to build a worldview, construct an idea of “self,” and thereby value some experiences over others. Yet, sentience may also be slow and subtle.

2. *Point to me something that is independent of all other things.* We construct knowledge by inducing patterns from experience, combining them recursively into mental objects, and comparing these to one another. We project distinctions onto the world. This does not mean that they are not useful heuristics and, in a certain limited sense, “true.”

3. *Point to me something that is utterly unchanging.* The existence of substance separate from process is an abstraction we create in order to help us think about the world, yet it is not actually extant in the world. It too is a helpful heuristic.

- 3.A.** *Anything with causal power is transient.* If something acts in the world, then it is changing, different from one moment to the next, predicated on particular conditions, and thus liable to end. If something is unchanging, eternal, then it cannot have causal power and thus is utterly inaccessible to us; we might as well believe no such thing exists.
- 4.** *Point to me something that is entirely explicable.* As all knowledge is induced, projected onto the world, we cannot arrive at a fundamental understanding of it. We must resort to circular reasoning, infinite regress, or dogma.
- 4.A.** *Conventional reality is rooted in the inexplicable which we might call the Divine, the Absolute, the Ground of Being.* The underlying nature of the world is unknowable, devoid of particular qualities.
- 5.** *There are two truths: conventional and unknowable.* The first is the causally-deterministic process of experience within which we construct and onto which we project our knowledge, yet this is founded upon the second, an unknowable truth—the Divine, the Absolute, the Ground of Being—where logic and language fail.
- 5.A.** *All dualisms are false.* The mind-body, subject-object, and substance-process dualities are all constructed. Even our notion of two truths—conventional and divine—are constructs, neither of which alone express the full nature of the world.
- 5.B.** *Self is a construct.* The mind creates (and comes in-built with) certain models of the world in order to help it survive. One of these is the Self. However, like all other mental objects, it is only a tool and does not exist in the way we typically imagine it to. There is no “you” that persists after death, just as there was no “you” before birth.
- 5.C.** *Property is a construct.* Since there is no independent “self,” there is no (supernatural) grounds for private property. The enforcement of private property laws is the enforcement of an illusion—the notion that there is a magical “you” that has a magical “right” to restrict access to land, natural resources, etc.
- 5.D.** *Human Rights are a construct.* The modern notion of human rights rests on the fallacious concept of the individual; it is a tool for our entrapment. The State promotes this notion to separate us from our communities, to mask economic inequality, and to justify our exploitation and the exploitation of our environment.
- 6.** *Reality is like an ocean.* On the surface are waves, forms, apparently causally-deterministic processes which constitute the conventional world. Underneath is a vast, sightless void—it is the ground of waves, yet no wave in particular. It is the unknowable mystery: the Divine, the Absolute, the Ground of Being. Still, only the waves and the deep together constitute the full nature of the ocean. Neither can be without the other: form and void, void and form.

2 The Dolphins of Naniwa Bay

八雲立つ 出雲八重垣 妻ごみに
八重垣作る その八重垣を

“In Izumo, where eight clouds rise, an eight-fold fence to hold my wife,
building an eight-fold fence — oh, that eight-fold fence.

– Kojiki

7. *The only good is a good for.* It is nonsensical to make statements of the kind “it is good to...” unless they are followed by “in order to....” Ethics that is not based in teleology is aesthetics.

7.A. *It is good to recognize the impermanence of all things,* in order to cope with the realities of life: suffering, decay, and death. The person who has internalized the impermanence of things finds it easier to let the pain of petty or small-minded issues simply pass over them; similarly, they find beauty in impermanence itself as the necessary condition for the world.

7.B. *It is good to recognize the dependent origination of all things,* in order to contend with things as they are in their true nature and to better foresee the outcomes of our actions. It is useful to appreciate the intertwined nature of all things, to recognize our own inseparability from our community, our environment, our world. It helps to maintain a more wholistic worldview and keep our more myopic tendencies at bay. Compassion comes naturally when you recognize yourself in everyone you see and everyone you see within yourself.

7.C. *It is good to recognize the nature of knowledge,* in order to avoid delusion. We often elevate the mental objects we have constructed to privileged positions in our worldview. We treat something as true not because we have substantial evidence but instead because it accords with particular narratives. We do not satisfactorily deconstruct the values we’ve received from our culture, our family, etc. We play word games about morality or justice or religiosity. We tangle ourselves in insoluble knots and cause ourselves pain struggling to get free.

8. *All teloi are conventional.* Since purposes based on our mental constructs are themselves constructs, they are all relative, all particular, all subjective.

9. *The world is a canvas for meaning.* In order to have meaning, there must be particular, changing but logically-consistent form to derive it from and project it onto, and form is in turn contingent upon the void, so that the nature of reality as a whole may be taken to serve as the ideal (and only possible) canvas for the creation of meaning.

10. *Our function is to become.* We could not be, yet we are, so there is value in our being; if we ought to be at some final, fixed state, then we would have been made so; yet, we are and we are like this, changing and free. If it can be said that we were “made,” then we were made to be so.

3 Lost, as the Chrysanthemums Are

この児のかたちけうらなる事世になく、屋のうちは暗き所なく光り満ちたり。翁心地あしく、苦しき時もこの子を見れば、苦しき事もやみぬ、腹立たしきことも慰みけり。

“The girl’s beauty was not of this world, unsurpassed, and her light filled the dark corners of the room. Whenever the old man was feeling illness or pain, he had just to look at the girl and these troubles vanished, so too if he was angry, he would be calmed.”

– *Taketori Monogatari*

11. *Love is the investment of being.* We love a person, act, or thing when we invest it with intrinsic value, rendering it a good in itself, an end in itself. To love something is to find it beautiful.

11.A. *Love is uncoerced, unrewarded, and honest.* If love was coerced, it would be fear; if love was rewarded, it would be greed. Love must be freely given, vulnerable. For this reason, it cannot be a moral obligation.

11.B. *Love is a contraction.* To love someone, you must contract your own being so that they may be an end in themselves and not a means. The conventional world is divine love as contraction.

11.C. *Love is a manifestation.* To love someone, you must expand your own being so that you may view yourselves together as one inseparable end. Ultimate reality is divine love as manifestation.

11.D. *Faith is love; love, faith.* Love of any particular in its true nature is love of the world from which it is inseparable and, further, love of the Divine which is the ground of being.

12. *To love someone is to desire their freedom.* To be made unfree is to have someone else decide what you are or what you ought to be. In other words, when we restrict another’s actions, we are decreasing them, replacing their being with our own. To love someone is to want them to be entirely their self, so that to love someone is to want them to be free.

13. *Existence is divine love.* The Divine, the Absolute, which is the Ground of Being—it contracts itself to give rise to particular being, an act of love by which it deems us beautiful. It desires only that we be, freely.

13.A. *The Divine does not act in the world.* Firstly, as the conventional world is contingent upon its contraction; and secondly, as to do so would be to diminish our freedom, make us less ourself.

14. *I am choosing to love.* I am becoming. I am sacred by virtue of my becoming. I am loved by virtue of my becoming. I am loved so that I might love. I want to believe that a better world is possible. I want to believe that we can build a future where all may live freely as themselves. I want to believe in love. I am writing these letters not to anyone but myself—as a creed, a promise, a vow. I love you.