

The Forget-Me-Not Letters: II

Pseudo-Tiresias

1 Prelude

His cat flicked its tail at the hem of my dress. He was a tall man, dark-browed and empty—when the light passed over the surface of his eyes they were without conception, without judgement, unprojecting, merely groping. The warmth of a few shots tingled in my cheeks, and I knew—like God’s own knowledge—that I should not be there, yet he had my hand in his and a gravity hanging over him, so that I felt minute, some meager comet spiraling into the sun. I’d accepted the drinks he had bought me. I’d given him my number. There, under the streetlight, he’d been laughter and charm and a comfort I had never known. A comfort I will never know. I’d chosen this. I’d chosen this. And I ought to enjoy it. He said: “go in.” I replied: “I don’t—” And then he was behind me, hand up around my throat, and I was empty. The world was empty. There was no warmth nor coolness kneeling by his bed. No brush of air from the fan overhead, no breath in my throat. He had a mirror on his wall, a great narcissistic mirror in which I watched myself rock gently with his thrusts. Without pain, without misery. I was not there to experience pain. There was nothing there to experience pain. Only bodies moving within bodies moving and my quiet cries. After he went to shower, I gathered my things. Found my dress where he had discarded it, abandoned my underwear, and slipped out past his cat, who left a wet little kiss on my ankle.

My pain, like my femininity, is not real. I am not to be loved. I ought not be loved. I am an object to fuck. I am to be used and discarded for a real woman, a real wife, capable of creating life. I am empty, and I will never know what it is like to hold my child in my hands. I dream some nights that there is an invisible mark upon me which cannot be cleaned away, lying immutably upon my soul: you will never be a real woman. You are a crude mockery of nature’s perfection. You will never be happy. You are unmistakably male.

You do not know me. You cannot know me. My nature lies beyond being. I am not only of this world. I am the tension at the heart of everything, a trembling aggregate of divinity. My life is an act of play. All being is an act of play. I dance with existence, its lover, its bride, and together we give birth to beauty.

2 An Epistemology

In the last letter, I described an “ontology,” but on reflection it should really be called an epistemology. My claims don’t really describe the world but our ability to access truths about it. I am going to try to explain certain features of this epistemology in more intuitive ways, using the notions of structural and meta-structural truths.

Firstly, I should say that the “account” of the way that we build our internal model of the world out of objects is not meant to be a beat-by-beat description of the actual

developmental pathways of children. The actual neurology and psychology is obviously vastly more complex, but I used this model in order to illustrate a point about our relationship to knowledge about the world.

The physical sciences all operate over the domain of structural truths. As humans, we receive certain sensory experiences which—by picking out patterns—we may build up into models of the dynamics of the world. We learn how things interact, how they relate to one another, and ultimately we begin to build models to predict future states. However, all of this knowledge is necessarily structural: it describes the internal relationships of the universe. All properties and beings which we describe exist solely in relation to one another and not independently, so that we are incapable of accessing truths which do not in any way relate to things already incorporated into our model. If you were to come into contact with a thing which in no way related to anything you had seen before, you could not understand it. I'm not talking coming into contact with foreign cultures or anything like that but instead things above and beyond mere being.

Imagine the universe as an impermeable box. We find ourselves on the inside, and while we can feel our hands across its interior and see its walls and hear the echo when we strike one side, we can never see the box from the outside. Thus, while we are capable of acquiring knowledge about the structural truths of the box, we can never acquire knowledge about its meta-structure. We can never really know what the universe is made out of (because we cannot relate it to any other meta-substance), why it came into being (because we cannot relate it to any other meta-event), and so on.

There is only that which is (the world) and the theories about its internal relations induced from sensory experience (which themselves exist within and are inseparable from the world). We fundamentally cannot access that which is not the world. And therefore we cannot obtain knowledge of the world's nature since we cannot relate it to anything else. Anything truly immaterial, divine, transcendent is beyond us. It lies on the other side of the veil. Yet, the world in its fullness, undifferentiated being, straddles this imaginary division. We are all a touch divine.

3 On Morality

True morality, being meta-structural, is inaccessible. We simply cannot know what is really right or wrong. We can only (in our usual state of mind) discuss what we want to be true and what means achieve our desired ends. Whenever I say that something "should" be or "ought" to be, understand that I am saying that I presently believe this path to be effective towards a particular outcome: the cessation of suffering. I can be persuaded that other paths might be better, but I cannot be dissuaded from this ultimate goal. This ideal arose out of my acculturation and my socialization and the particulars of my upbringing and, yes, through some amount of reasoning (which itself was conditioned by all the aforementioned factors and more) but also through my subjective experience of reality. All this is to say that the cessation of suffering has no objective value in itself but as incarnate beings we are induced to grant it subjective value.

Most people have imbued a million contradictory mental objects with value and, in trying to act towards a particular goal, continually collide with paradoxes and incompatibilities. We are irrational and unpredictable precisely because our goals are irrational and unpredictable and we are incapable of perfectly reasoning about them. I am trying, as much as I am able, to divest myself of all that is not this singular ideal.

4 The Nature of Suffering

When there arises the sensory experience of pain, we react to it with aversion; when there is sadness, we react to it with aversion; and so on. Suffering is an aversion to reality. A cessation of suffering does not necessarily mean a cessation of pain or sadness but instead a cessation of an aversion to pain or sadness. Still, this does not mean that we need to want either of these things or even that we cannot try to avoid them but that, when they come, we must not experience mental anguish over their being. The driver of aversion is ignorance: we are averse to these experiences precisely because we are attached to particular mental objects to which these run counter, the most prominent of these being the Self. We are averse to pain, we are averse to sadness, we are averse to all manner of things because they are perceived as threatening our Self. Empty the Self and pain becomes just another experience. Similarly, our incompatible values of higher-order mental objects lead to tension and distress—an entirely mental suffering, of which something like anxiety can be a manifestation.¹

It is important to note that just because one wants to cease suffering does not mean they must run willy-nilly into the sources of suffering. In fact, suffering makes it considerably harder to think about effective counter actions. Someone in constant pain is going to have more immediate things to think about than some floaty, high-minded consideration of aversion and liberation. Thus, in pursuit of the cessation of suffering, the obvious remains obvious: minimize your sources of suffering. Being as we are, we cannot totally eliminate them, but reduction of pain and misery allows us to better consider the paths we might take towards total liberation.

5 On Suicide

In the absence of reincarnation, which I do not believe in, I cannot give you an argument against suicide. It would subjectively end your suffering. And yes, I could make all the usual arguments about how it would only push that suffering onto others and how you'd be robbing yourself of future joy, but I have experienced the pit. I have sat there in that black nothing. I won't insult your intelligence or your dignity as a human being. I can only offer my own experience.

I attempted suicide (or got near to it) more than once: jumping, cutting, hanging, and so on. And since then I have never been able to shake this deep sense of understanding for those who take their own lives. I get it. There is a world not too unlike our own where I am dangling on the end of a rope. But in the years since, I have been able to recover dramatically. In my situation, I was able to address the source of my suicidal ideation—being forced to live as someone I was not—and I want to believe that for most people the same is possible, whether that involves therapy, medication, transcranial magnetic stimulation, or altering (as much as able) one's life situation. Maybe, like me, you just need a healthy dose of estrogen. I cannot know whether, in your life, there is a path out. All I can say is that for me and many I know, there was. And if your anguish comes from the state of the world, remember the tired line: "it is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society." We cannot surrender to it. There is work to be done.

Personally, I have arrived at the point where to die would take away my opportunity to experience all the beauty and love I have come to cherish. I want to spend time with

1. Obviously, this is not to deny the biological underpinnings of some forms of anxiety and other mental disturbances. However, this notion of aversion still holds.

my sister. I want to see the rich diversity of the world. It is hard to explain, but it is as if being itself has been suffused with bliss, as though a new light has percolated through every atom of every thing and, when I search for it, all radiates with joy. I want to hold on to this little piece of divinity which I have been given.

6 An Intermission

Love is an identification with another. It is seeing two bodies as sharing one soul. In this sense, luminous love is the reification of the *anima mundi*, the world soul. Love treats all things as imbued with a divine essence which manifests in their being and becoming. By holding this mindset we may break down, slowly at first and then rapidly, the boundaries we place between our Self and others. The Buddha once described his teachings as a raft which bears adherents to a far shore but need not be carried further. In this way, love is a raft which bears us unto liberation. But looked upon from another perspective, the ideal of love ends in liberation. They are inseparable: one necessitates the other. Liberty is the state which minimizes the sources of suffering. Liberty is the state which maximizes the potential for love. Love desires the liberation of all beings. Love desires the cessation of suffering.

While I have certainly been influenced greatly by Buddhist thought (and I feel a little silly wording it this way given how diverse a set of beliefs that entails), I am not a Buddhist. I do not believe in reincarnation, which I know is not necessarily a strict requirement given that certain thinkers hold complex views on its nature, nor do I believe in the miracles attributed to Siddhartha Gautama or any subsequent practitioners. I am dubious even about the notion of enlightenment, which again I know is a concept with about as many interpretations as there are individual Buddhists. Yet, Buddhism's insights into the nature of suffering, the Self, and the interdependent nature of all things are supremely important.

Similarly, I have drawn a great deal from various Christian mystics, but I am not a Christian. I do not believe in the incarnation, the virgin birth, the resurrection, nor any of Jesus's supposed miracles. Yet, my influences from the likes of Simone Weil and Meister Eckhart should be obvious. I am also not a Muslim. I do not believe in the prophethood of Muhammad nor in the inerrancy of the Qur'an. Yet, I was initially thrust into my monistic view of the world by Ibn Arabi's *Wahdad al-Wujud*, the Unity of Being, and my conception of love has certainly been colored by the works of Sufi literature I've since consumed. I spent much of my late teens and early twenties studying Jewish history and religious thought, yet I am not Jewish. I lived for a time in a Hindu-majority country and attended my share of temples and ceremonies, to say nothing of my fondness for the concept of *lila*, yet I am not Hindu.

All this is to say that I am not an adherent to any particular religion. I am immediately skeptical of any doctrine which claims knowledge of meta-structural truths. Yet, I yearn deeply to access them, to catch some glimpse, to know. So I read much and I doubt more. Maybe we can part the veil, even if for a moment, to see the other side where language fails.

7 Vows

We live in a profoundly ignorant society. Ignorant to the conditions of our luxury, ignorant to the consequences of our consumption, ignorant to the myriad ways in which

we perpetuate suffering. We have erected a great cathedral to opulence and excess and the majesty of its stained glass and the beauty of its vaulted ceilings allow us to ignore that it is built on the backs of the poor, the marginalized, victims of colonialism and globalization, those who will suffer most the effects of climate change, those whose hands wear not a fraction as much blood as our own. I have tried, as much as able, to take my aim of liberation to its logical conclusion and thus arrived at the following vows:

1. I will live simply in all ways which I am able.
2. I will not feast while there is famine.
3. I will not live in luxury while others live in poverty.
4. I will buy no thing I do not need to simply survive unless it directly, clearly, and incontrovertibly aids in liberation.
5. I will eat only meals prepared by myself or those I am in direct community with.
6. I will wear only clothes created by myself or those I am in direct community with.
7. I will eat no meat.
8. I will drink no alcohol.
9. I will love all others as I love those closest to me.
10. I will observe no differentiation between myself and others, or one person and another, in my concern for their wellbeing and my treatment of them.
11. I will harm no one except in defense of others.

These are my silly little vows: make of me a nun without a nunnery. I have, for a time, lived by them and intend to do so for so long as there remains inequity and injustice of which I am a part. I will have as small a role in the perpetuation of suffering as I am able. For the benefit of all. For my community. For my peace of mind. So that I may sleep at night.