

Dear Mr. Chiang,

This is a love letter. It is a love letter to you, to your writing, to philosophy, and to the curiosity in each of our readers.

Philosophy is sometimes introduced as “the love of wisdom”, but that is not so much misleading as unhelpful—what is wisdom? What does it mean to love wisdom? And would we know it if we saw it? –And how do we know if we’re right about that? Socrates said that it’s easy to love the appearance of wisdom, but that wisdom requires a lot more out of us than most of us are prepared to give.

And how is such a problematic word supposed to clarify something else? Instead of this somewhat canned definition, I like to think of philosophy as the study of what is, what must be, and what could be.

Take logic, for example—to some, the quintessential philosophical study. Logic can help us answer some of these questions, in some ways. Logic tells us what can’t be—because it’s contradictory—what must be—because it’s logically necessary—and what could be—because it’s neither of these.

If we know that something is possible, how do we know whether it’s not just logically possible, but possible for people like us, in our world, now? How do we envision something that *isn’t*, and never has been? This question is all the more necessary in times that require us to imagine a just and sustainable future—to imagine, for the first time, something we have not seen.

Sometimes imagination is like faith, in a very Kierkegaardian sense. Like many other philosophers, Kierkegaard thought (roughly speaking) that nothing in our world indicates that the Christian God is possible. It is the apparent impossibility of God that Kierkegaard thought reveals the value of faith; we must have faith despite, or even because of, the impossibility. Faith has value in proportion to the difficulty of believing.

Our imagination of what is possible may be like this in some ways. Scientists and philosophers have worked hard to reveal the world to us—to reveal what is and what could be. Writers of speculative fiction—among whom I count Chiang as one of my favorites, along with NK Jemisin and Ursula K LeGuin and Ken Liu—can succeed where philosophers and scientists fail, can reveal to us possibilities that somehow we didn’t think were really possible.

In “Story of Your Life”, you ask us to imagine a language that doesn’t distinguish between past and future, and that therefore lets us see them as happening at the same time! ‘Impossible!’, I might say!

Philosophers and linguists debate the extent to which language shapes what we see and constrains what we can think. Many of us know from experience that learning a new language can change the way we think, to some extent. But your “Story of Your Life” goes even further, claiming that learning a new language can change fundamental features of the way we experience the world. The extent to which you succeed in this thought experiment is the extent to

which we are able to concretely imagine ourselves speaking this language, seeing the past and future as both lying behind us and in front of us.

And what about wisdom? Can speculative fiction teach us anything about wisdom? We might think that wisdom is the same as knowledge, that the nearly omniscient main character in “Understand” sees all that there is to see about the world. But philosophers would disagree. Wisdom is not merely knowing facts—not merely knowing what is—and not merely knowing what could be, but rather the ability to see what should be. What future can we all create together? What future should we all create together? Envisioning what is possible, envisioning our ideals coming to life, helps us see how our current world falls short of what it should be. It helps us see how we all can and should do better, should see better, should think and act and love better. This kind of imagination can change the world.

So, for your imagination, I thank you.

Warmly,
Susan Blake