

Angels and a Critical Dialog on Human Nature

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Non-philosophical stimulus: Dialog in a car between the two angels, protagonists in *Wings of Desire (Der Himmel über Berlin)*, a film by Wim Wenders.

ANGEL 1: (Damiel)

Each time we took part in something, it was pretending. Wrestling, allowing a hip to be put out, pretending... catching a fish in pretence. We have pretended to be sitting at tables, drinking and eating. Only pretence.

Having roasted lambs and wine served. Out there in the desert tents. Only pretending.

I don't want to have a child, or to plant a tree... But it would be nice, to come home after a long day... to feed the cat like Philip Marlowe.

To have fever.

Fingers stained black by reading the newspaper.

To be excited not only by spiritual things, but by a meal. By a neckline, by an ear.

To lie, through one's teeth.

Being able to feel your bones moving along while walking.

At last to guess instead of always knowing everything. To be able to say: "Ah, oh and hey" instead of: "Yes and Amen".

ANGEL 2: (Marion)

Yes.

To be able to enthuse for evil.

To draw all the demons from the pedestrians that pass. And finally plunge into the world.

ANGEL 1: (Damiel)

Shhhhhhhh

ANGEL 2: (Marion)

To become a savage.

ANGEL 1: (Damiel)

Or to feel how it is to take off your shoes under the table...

And to move your toes, barefoot, like that.

Source:

Wings of Desire, car scene – Wim Wenders,
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmSu1vJhKAw>)

Translation: subtitles from video sequence.

Angels and a Critical Dialog on Human Nature

Watching *Wings of Desire* directed by Wim Wenders, I was amazed. I repeated the opening words of the film: “Als das Kind Kind war, wußte es nicht, daß es Kind war” (English: “When the child was a child, it didn’t know it was a child”) over and over again, and wondered what this film was all about.

I have chosen a scene from this masterpiece as my non-philosophical stimulus: the car scene, in which two angels, Daniel and Marion, exchange their observations of the day. Their conversation depicts the differences between being an angel and being human. Daniel is craving to become humane; e.g. to be able “to have fever” (stimulus), to get “[f]ingers stained black by reading the newspaper” (stimulus). In conclusion he says: “At last to guess instead of always knowing everything. To be able to say: ‘Ah, oh and hey’ instead of: ‘Yes and Amen.’” (stimulus). By watching Daniel’s astonished observations of human beings and their ways of living, I raised the question:

To what extent does the ability to feel surprised engage philosophical conceptions of human nature?

This question touches on a core topic discussed throughout the history of philosophical thinking. In order to pursue this discussion underlying the scene in Wim Wenders’ movie, I shall delve into two positions recalling the situation in the angels’ dialog. On the one hand, I will explore Plato’s world of pure forms, which corresponds to the world of the angels. On the other hand, a critical evaluation of Plato, present in Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche, may support the angels’ fascination with ordinary humans’ ability to be surprised in mundane life.

Man and reason – Plato

When man is viewed as a rational being, it is crucial to understand what is meant by rationality. Conceptually, rationality involves objectivity. Therefore, rationality implicates the ability to consider something without biases and subjective perspectives.

This is the case in Plato, who describes rationality as involving objectivity.¹ As the Greek forefather of philosophical rationalism, Plato considers man a rational being; and the capacity to be rational should dominate human nature. He claims that all humans have a soul, which consists of three parts: emotion, desire and reason.² This theory of soul is described in his chariot analogy, where two horses represent the instincts of human nature. The first horse, Thumos, is a symbol of man's emotional desires, while the other horse, Epithimetikon, illustrates our mundane impulses as appetite. The two drives are parts of the human soul, where their internal battles lead life towards the strongest desire. However, Plato implements a third component of the soul unique to humans. This component, pictured as a charioteer named Logistikon, controls the two drives by reason to achieve goodness. Plato argues that Logistikon is the centre of the self, and the core of human nature. Hence, by this analogy, Plato identifies humans as rational beings because of Logistikon's ability to take rational decisions and, thus, in human beings' capability of self-control.³

Let's take an example: If you don't drink a poisonous drink even though your drives desire a drink at that moment, you show knowledge about the world; you are able to predict future events much better than instinct-driven animals, who would drink the

¹ Nezet, Williams, Lee, White, p. 19

² Frede, Dorothea, "Plato's Ethics: An Overview", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

³ Nezet, Williams, Lee, White, p. 19ff

poisonous drink. Due to insight and self-control, man is able to act objectively and to apply rationality.

Moreover, in his epistemological theory of forms Plato conceives reason as a powerful part of human nature insofar as it allows humans to go beyond immediate appearances. Plato gives little credit to the physical world. Empirical impressions of the world cannot be trusted from Plato's standpoint. The chair I am sitting in, writing this essay, will decay over many years. Accordingly, the chair is only a temporary reflection of the real chair, which is the universal form of all chairs. Only things that are eternal and unchangeable can be recognized to be real and true.⁴

Human beings' reason provides a kind of "seeing" into the true world. However, man's nature, according to the soul's three conflicting parts, also prevents reason from fully reaching the perfect world of Ideas. While man is capable of logical thinking, such as mathematics ($2+3=5$ will always be true), reason is both less and more than logic. It remains constrained by the other parts of the soul, and by the mind's entanglement with the body. Therefore, complete autonomy is not reachable.

However, what matters to Plato is the role that reason plays in human nature. After all, human beings' ability to reason is powerful. And since Plato, reasoning has become a defining characteristic of man as conceived from a rationalist's point of view.⁵

In many ways, the angels in Wim Wenders' movie seem to have access to the world of ideas outlined and praised in the philosophy of Plato.

⁴ Balaguer, Mark, "Platonism in Metaphysics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

⁵ Kraut, Richard, "Plato", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/plato/>>.

The limits of reason – Nietzsche and Foucault

If reason is essential to human nature in rationalism, this is certainly not the case from an empiricist point of view. However, instead of pursuing classical empiricist arguments against rationalism, I shall concentrate on two philosophers from the 19th and 20th centuries who question the power and certainty of reason: Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche.

French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) challenges Plato's view on reason and ideas by examining how cultures and social structures change throughout history and thus entail multiple conceptions of rationality. He uses the term *episteme* in order to point out the particular frameworks through which humans view the world and use rationality at limited historical epochs: "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge."⁶ Foucault claims that the dominant knowledge is related to the particular social norms of a given society and therefore cannot be objective and achieve an ideal status across the differences that characterize the history of humanity.

Forms of reasoning have changed throughout history. Before modern science, the phenomenon of sunrise was explained teleologically by reference to the purpose of sun. Sun enables us to see and enables life on earth. With Enlightenment, the rise of the sun was explained mechanistically by gravitational forces of the earth in the solar system.⁷ It is apparent that both explanations use reasoning. However, the different forms of reasoning reach different truths. Accordingly reasoning itself does not lead to truth as Plato described, but to different convictions, that depend on the epoch in question. Nonetheless, Foucault's argument can also be doubted. It can be argued that

⁶ Foucault, Michel: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, p. 183.

⁷ Nezet, Williams, Lee, White, p. 36f

different ways of reasoning may also provide insight in smaller parts of a bigger truth that comes to the fore beyond and despite the differences between particular historic periods. Nevertheless, it is hard to claim that one really knows the world, insofar as every argument is part of its own particular epoch.⁸

Many of Foucault's ideas are based on Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), German philosopher and founder of perspectivism. Nietzsche is the first philosopher to state the changing forms of rationality and objectivity. After 2500 years of philosophy, there is still no philosophical truth. Everyone who seeks truth is driven by their own prejudices. After all, universal Truth may not be reachable. Just as Foucault later introduces the concept of *episteme*, Nietzsche had already argued that each and every person's conception of the world remains an *interpretation* of the world, which has been filtered by particular and limited perspectives and values. As he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886): "the greater part of conscious thinking of a philosopher is secretly influenced by his instincts, and forced into definite channels."⁹ He argues that claims of objectivity imply the possibility of viewing something from an elevated nowhere. Instead, Nietzsche claims that people view the world and everything within their own perspective, and no one else's; not from another philosopher's.¹⁰ Nietzsche does not necessarily deny the existence of truth or facts, but he states that all facts result from interpretations.

According to Nietzsche, the rationalist theories cannot possibly be true, because philosophers develop concepts and interpretations according to their own perspective. The rationalists reduce the world so that it mirrors their philosophical systems; thus,

⁸ Nezet, Williams, Lee, White, p. 34

⁹ Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1974, pp. 435–450. JSTOR.

they simplify the world. Moreover, Nietzsche describes rationalists as “despisers of the body” because they make “thinking more important and living less important.”¹¹ In fact, human beings do not seek truth for its own sake. Instead, they chase concepts, which reflect their interests and viewpoints. Therefore, according to Nietzsche, pure philosophical truth is hardly possible, and it may even be undesirable.¹²

To be sure, a rationalist may not be convinced by Foucault and Nietzsche. A modern rationalist would object that we cannot deny certain facts, such as a table I am sitting at. Already, Plato maintained the power of rationality and argued for the existence of a world of perfect pure forms. Yet, Nietzsche doesn't deny the existence of the empirical table as a fact we can establish by our senses, he would still reject the ideal truth in Plato as idealism.

At this point, it is time to remember the two angels discussing their fascination with human life in the modern world. After all, what they imagine as excitement and surprise in everyday life, may indirectly represent the multiplicity of values and interests present in particular forms of human life, that Nietzsche and Foucault favour by way of arguments against universality and ahistorical truth.

Conclusion: Is there a link between the dreamy angels in *Wenders and two moments in the history of philosophy?*

The angels in *Wings of Desire* may become really interesting, because they seem to look down on humanity from a world similar to Plato's pure world: A world of eternal, unchangeable, true Ideas, which resembles that of the two angels drifting beyond time and space.

¹¹ Nezet, Williams, Lee, White, p. 40

¹² Nezet, Williams, Lee, White, p. 39ff

But this non-human condition may also explain their frustration and secret desire of being part of a real human life. Their lack of surprises is a result of their over-human capacity of rationality, which claims to give insight in the complete and objective truth about life on Earth.

Paradoxically, the angels have reached the situation, which Plato saw as a perfect world to reach for reason, but in the discussion taking place in the car, they also seem to be ready to give up their own immortality to the benefit of a fugitive human life in modernity.

This is precisely how they may contribute to our discussion about human nature. By showing what they are lacking, the two angels point to vital forces in human nature. In the passage quoted from the film, the angels are fascinated with human beings and their openness to surprise and differences that also result from the limited knowledge of human beings themselves: “To be excited not only by spiritual things, but by a meal. By a neckline, by an ear.”. Here they may communicate with Nietzsche when he praises the beauty of human life in its bodily and emotional depth.

Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s philosophical critiques of rationalism challenge Plato’s idea of Man’s rationality. However, Plato’s chariot analogy actually pays attention to the complexity of human nature. Yet, by making the charioteer Logistikon, thus reason, way more prominent than the drives, Plato seems to downplay the role of emotional life in human nature. He certainly makes “thinking more important than living”, as Nietzsche observes. Also, Logistikon who was charged to obtain “Goodness” is shown by Nietzsche to serve his own self-interest or perspective. According to Nietzsche, Logistikon’s interpretation does not necessarily provide access to truth.

Furthermore, against Plato's conception of rationality as eternal and pure, Foucault demonstrated how human rationality changes over time and is fashioned differently in different societies. As a result, human rationality gives insight into conceptions of truth that depend on time and place.

Nietzsche's valorisation of life above pure reason may be at play in the angels' wish to become human. In the metaphorical language of Wenders' English title, they are precisely "Wings of Desire". So, in a sense, they demonstrate how Plato's world of forms, which he viewed to be perfect and desirable, may not be as desirable as he portrays it. They illustrate how the joys of being alive may indeed be viewed as more valuable than mere universal truth.

In this view, the opening words of *Wings of Desire* regarding the child make sense. The child is the one who unites curiosity, freedom and play. A similar humane curiosity, makes Daniel choose a human life instead of a life similar to one that remains in Plato's pure world. Even Plato may have experienced the possibility of such a feeling; in order to turn an upward glance towards the pure world of forms, man has to be moved by something, to be surprised and initiate the journey towards truth. Thus, human life and its uncertainties are necessary in order to enable those surprises that also belong to human nature.

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