

The Value of Not Knowing

What does it mean to be human? Is there a fundamental quality or condition of human existence? In asking what is most fundamentally characteristic of what it means to be human, it is implied that the answer must not merely rely on distinctions but rather must ultimately get to the heart of that without which human existence ceases to be what it is and becomes something *different*.

Whereas possible answers often posit reason or the capacity for complex emotion as that which defines what it means to be human (I've also heard it suggested that cooking, or even using utensils to consume food, may be truly and essentially human), perhaps a fundamental quality of human experience is something that tends toward both reason and complex emotion while transcending the specificity of either to approach something greater; perhaps what it means to be human is suggested in the capacity for *wonder*.

In the 1987 film *Der Himmel über Berlin*, writer/director Wim Wenders suggests the primacy of wonder as the essential 'human' characteristic through his portrayal of an angel who longs to become human. The film presents two angels as they silently follow, watch over, and listen to various inhabitants of East Berlin. Their task is to observe and record everything that humans do; it is made apparent later in the film that these two angels, Damiel and Cassiel, have been at this task since the beginning of time.

The film begins with the angels taking turns recounting their observations from the day that has just ended. Cassiel begins:

Sunrise and 7:22 a.m. Sunset at 4:28 p.m.
Twenty years ago today a Soviet jet fighter
crashed into the lake at Spandau. Fifty years ago
there were the Olympic Games. Two hundred
years ago Blanchard flew over the city in a
balloon.... And today, on the Lilienthaler

Chaussee, a man, walking, slowed down, and looked over his shoulder into space. At post office 44, a man who wants to end it all today pasted rare stamps on his farewell letters, a different one on each. He spoke English with an American soldier — the first time since his schooldays — and fluently. A prisoner at Plotzenzee, just before ramming his head against the wall, said: “Now!” At the Zoo U-Bahn station, instead of the station’s name, the conductor suddenly shouted: “Tierra del Fuego!” ... In the hills, an old man read *The Odyssey* to a child. And the young listener stopped blinking his eyes.

What is most striking about Cassiel’s account here isn’t so much its precision but rather the complete absence of questioning. Although the description of each event is clear, the listener/viewer cannot possibly understand *why* any single one of the recounted events has occurred in the manner that it has. The uniqueness — the *oddness* — of each event demands further explanation, but none is given; worse still, there is not even a hint of a single question in Cassiel’s account.

When Cassiel has finished, Damiel responds with his own observations:

A woman on the street folded her umbrella while it rained and let herself get drenched. A schoolboy who described to his teacher how a fern grows out of the earth, and the astonished teacher. A blind woman who groped for her watch, feeling my presence.

Yet once he has finished listing his observations, Damiel goes further; he wants to do otherwise than he has always done, so say “Now!” instead of “Eternity.” He longs to feel love, weight, connection, humanity. He wants to *participate* rather than merely observe:

It’s great to live only by the spirit, to testify day by day, for eternity, to the spiritual side of people. But sometimes I get fed up with my spiritual existence. Instead of forever hovering above I’d like to feel there’s some weight to me. To end my eternity, and bind me to earth. At

each step, at each gust of wind, I'd like to be able to say: "Now!" "Now!" and "Now!" And no longer say: "Since always" and "Forever." To sit in the empty seat at a card table, and be greeted, if only by a nod. ... [I]t would be quite something to come home after a long day, like Philip Marlowe, and feed the cat. To have a fever. To have blackened fingers from the newspaper. ... To feel your skeleton moving along as you walk. Finally to *suspect*, instead of forever knowing all.

Damiel knows that there is something more valuable than absolute knowledge; he knows that it is precisely the perfect knowledge that he possesses which ultimately makes it impossible for him to participate in actual *life*. He longs to participate *with* those whom he observes, to feel the things they do and to experience things as they do. This is not the angels' task, however, and so Damiel must decide whether he will remain an angel and stay true to his task or forsake his immortality to become human.

Throughout the film it is suggested that what separates the angels, the *non*-human, from the reasoning, feeling, loving, and suffering human beings over whom they watch is the angels' incapacity for *wonder*. This point is emphasized through the recitation of Peter Handke's "Song of Childhood" at various stages, in which the child is portrayed as the 'ideal' of the human capacity for, *and active engagement in*, wonder:

When the child was a child,
 It was the time for these questions:
 Why am I me, and why not you?
 Why am I here, and why not there?
 When did time begin, and where does space end?
 Is life under the sun not just a dream?
 Is what I see and hear and smell
 not just an illusion of a world before the world?
 Given the facts of evil and people,
 does evil really exist?
 How can it be that I, who I am,
 didn't exist before I came to be,
 and that, someday, I, who I am,
 will no longer be who I am?

Childhood, according to the poem, was the time of constant questioning; and although such questioning can be vexing, it is only through such questioning that one can fully participate in existence and better know oneself and the world. Likewise, this questioning is only possible in the *absence* of absolute knowledge; thus the child, as one who has yet learned little, is in fact the hero, the paradigm of the human capacity for wonder. Just as the poem contends that the child is driven by, and a willing participant in, wonder, so too the film ultimately contends that it is the presence and allowance of wonder that defines the human condition itself: within wonder, one most fully exists as a human being; without wonder, one simply cannot be human.

Ultimately, Damiel chooses to forsake his perfect and immortal existence and become human. Ironically, his first experiences on becoming human are painful: the transition has left him with a bloody wound to his head, and the mortal woman for whom he had pined from above has left town without knowing that he exists. And so near the end of his first day as a human being, we find Damiel walking in slow circles around the vacant fairgrounds, physically and emotionally damaged, yet still smiling — still happy. He does not know what will happen to him next, but he's certain that it will be amazing, *precisely because it will be something that he does not already know*. With a confident smile Damiel thinks to himself (though also to Cassiel, who he knows will be listening), "Other wings will grow in place of the old wings, wings that will astound me."

Given the choice between a 'perfect' existence — immortality and absolute knowledge — and an existence defined by pain, confusion, and loss, Damiel chose the latter. What's more, despite what has happened or may yet happen to him, he remains irrevocably happy with his choice. As the film closes, Damiel's final lines make this profoundly and compellingly clear: "I learned astonishment. ... [Being] free to the amazement...has made a human being out of me. I know what no angel knows." And what Damiel now knows is a unique joy that can only be a *human* experience; what Damiel now knows is *wonder*.