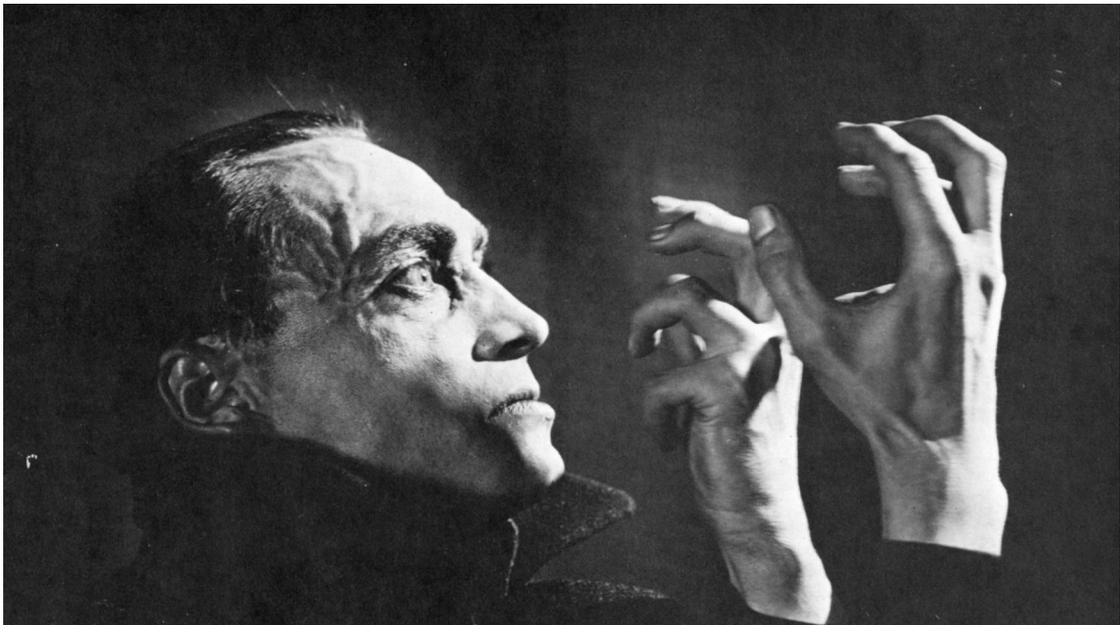


# Personal identity in the movie "Orlac's Hände"

Thomas König  
June 7, 2016



## 1 Introduction

Ask anybody interested in philosophy what constitutes a person and you will fire up a debate that has enthralled mankind since its beginning. At the same time, as Descartes and many others have noted, nothing seems more evident and undeniably true than the existence of a personal self, and few would deny that self-awareness is a particular, and very strong form of knowledge. Nevertheless, this knowing is particular, because self-awareness seems to resist the classical analysis of knowledge as a justified true believe. Interestingly, this is not because of the typical concerns that we lack access to truth [4], but because we seem to fail to provide justifications that are up to the strength of our believe. It may thus be reasonable that we attempt to come to terms with personal identity not by providing some sort of definition of a person by the presence of a set of necessary and sufficient features of a person, but by an analysis of the justifications we may have to know our selves.

Proposals for such an analysis exist, and have evolved through a fruitful interaction among researchers and philosophers. For the purpose of this essay, I will base my arguments upon the concept of what Shaun Gallagher termed, an "atomic self" [2]. The basic facility for self-awareness (and thus the justification for the believe of self-being) is thereby proposed to arise as follows:

1. An organism comes, by factors irrelevant for the argument, to perform a basic action [1],
2. The organism has the capacity to predict the consequences of the particular action, and does so,
3. The organism perceives the consequences of the action.

Gallaghers thesis says that for an atomic sense of self, it is necessary and sufficient that 2) and 3) are contingent: The experience that an intended basic action produces the predicted consequences justifies not only that "I" have performed this action, but, as a consequence, the believe that this "I" exists at all.

The scope of the present essay does not permit a critical evaluation of this theory. It is however important to point out that personal identity, in this "atomic" sense, has implications for a series of philosophical domains, namely:

- The ontology of our self (as beings that produce contingency between actions and expectations),
- The epistemology of our self (as the being that experiences this contingency),
- The morality of our self, because contingency between a beings action and a beings expectations about the actions consequences implies responsibility of that being for that action in the scope of these expectation.

Instead, I will try to put the theory to work to investigate the phenomenology of personal identity in the context of philosophy of film: "Orlac's Hände" ("The hands of Orlac") is an Austrian horror silent movie from 1925 [6] that is an excellent exemplification of our thesis. The story begins like this: Orlac, a famous piano-player, loses his hands in a train accident, but receives donor hands from the body of someone who has just been executed for murder. Orlac begins to experience himself as horrific, because he feels murderous intentions in these hands that are now part of what is supposed to be himself. The horror he goes through and the existential despair he ends up in can be explained by his feeling that the actions of his hands as he perceives them are incompatible with his intentions, which fundamentally interferes with his atomic sense of self. Importantly, this breakup of personal identity is displayed as a physical phenomenon: The actor, (Conrad Veidt) employs a very expressive body language to embody what "Orlac" has become after the transplantation, and the movie goes at great length to capture his acting using equally expressive means of art-film and photography, such as dramatic lighting, lengthy close-ups, and carefully constructed, sparse, but atmospherically dense, dream-like sceneries.

The movie may thus serve to cast some light on the three issues mentioned above; the ontology of personal self, the epistemology of personal self, and the moral role of the personal self. I intend to pick particular scenes to illustrate these points and see if the acting and mise-en-scène in this silent movie conveys something that is relevant in the philosophical debate about personal identity.

## 2 The breakup of Orlacs atomic self, and its impact on personal identity

### 2.1 The ontological aspect



Figure 1: Orlac learns about the murderous past of the hands that are now his. He is horrified, and experiences forces that are physically centrifugal from himself, take him off his ground in a bizarre dance, and destroy him as a person. This is dramatically enacted by Conrad Veidt and anticipates (as the shadow on the door) the development of Orlac in the time to come (27:45).

"Orlac's Hände" shares particular features with fairy-tales. The main protagonists of the film are figures without a past and future, and we get to know very little about them: Orlac plays the piano and loves Yvonne, Yvonne loves Orlac, Yvonne and Orlac depend on Orlac's income as piano player and Orlac has a difficult relationship with his father, for reasons unknown. At the same time, the movie is very preoccupied with showing, in great detail, what drives and befalls Orlac, and how that relates to what he is. Contrary to diachronic theories of personal identity [5] that live on psychological continuity, what

makes (and destroys) Orlac's essence is something physical and instantaneous. Orlac naturally and continuously identifies himself, in the atomic sense, as the site of contingency between experienced intentions, actions and their effects. This contingency is broken by the replacement of his hands, that seem to have intentions of their own. They are thus simultaneously part, and not part of Orlac's self. Thus, in philosophical terms, the person Orlac becomes an ontological contradiction, with disastrous consequences for his capability to understand himself (see Fig. 1). Interestingly, this experience, and the ontology of our self this is experience is about, is phenomenologically similar to nightmares, where we are typically without past and future, where our used means to act unexpectedly fail, and where we feel existentially threatened.

## 2.2 The epistemic aspect

In the very first scenes of the film, Orlac is portrayed almost only by the actions of his hands. First, his beloved Yvonne happily holds a hand-written letter announcing that he will soon return to her, and how he will relate to her through the physical contact of his hands. Next, we meet Orlac performing, which ends in a shot that has reduced him to only his hands playing, and the sound of the music (Fig. 2).

At a later stage of the film, Orlac attempts to play the piano with his new hands. The film precisely repeats the initial portraying of Orlac by his isolated hands playing, but instead of the smooth and confident appearance of the hands in Fig. 2, his hands now appear as monstrous claws incapable of producing something like music (Fig. 3).

From a philosophical point of view, these scenes give us an understanding of what it is to be Orlac in an immediate sense: In these scenes, his self is solely defined by his actions, and the presence or absence of contingency between what they produce and what he expects them to produce, namely music and, in another context shown in figures 4 and 5, mutual experience of love. Orlac's and our understanding what it makes him the person he is is thus, in these scenes, necessarily and sufficiently explained by the presence of an atomic self that is constituted through the experience of such a contingency.

## 2.3 The moral aspect

The horror and profound despair that Orlac is suffering receives an additional dimension by Orlac's experience that "his" hands continue to have morally wrong intentions. Despite his strong repulsion, Orlac seems to be unable to contain the evil intentions of what has become part of him, and slowly yields (Figs. 6 and 7). Orlac feels of himself as a monster that is to be morally condemned, despite the fact that he has neither done something morally wrong, nor can be held responsible for the situation he finds himself in.

From the philosophical perspective, the concept of an atomic self implies that our intentions are an essential and defining part of what we are. We are typically held responsible for those results of our actions that we can foresee: Thus, we perceive our atomic self selectively for that part of our doing that we appear responsible for, and responsibility for some action implies the presence of an agent that has an atomic self and experiences contingency between his intentions, actions and their effect. In this



Figure 2: The essence of Orlac as a musician is in his hands, what they do with the piano, and what we hear. It is, at that moment, only through his hands that he acts. Thus, his "atomic self" forms solely in his hands. The scene conveys this by omitting everything else (03:23).



Figure 3: Orlac trying to play the piano with the transplanted hands. All he is able to produce is dissonance and horror (36:24). His atomic sense of self as a musician is lost. The film conveys this by the body language and physical appearance of Orlac's hands alone.



Figure 4: Orlac fearing to touch his beloved Yvonne with his murderous hands, which leads him into despair and isolation. (38:13).



Figure 5: At the end of the film, Orlac has regained control over his entire physical self. Only now, he is capable to connect with Yvonne (1:44:09).



Figure 6: Orlac, being a patient in the hospital, comes to know his new hands. He is morally still intact. (24:07).



Figure 7: The evil intentions of the hands have invaded Orlacs moral self. He yields to his murderous intentions (48:09).

way, the evil intentions of Orlacs hands invade him as a person; the actions of his hands are contingent with the intentions, and they are his hands, so these become also his intentions. Orlacs existence as a person is conditional on his physical presence: He cannot merely make use of his new hands, his new hands are suddenly part of him, down to his moral understanding of himself. The film therefore also offers a provocative thesis in the ongoing debate about the ethical implications of medical conditions and interventions in moral agents.

### 3 How does the film relate to philosophy?

"Orlac's Hände" is a film that fits several, and very different genres: It is a horror movie, by the uncanny atmosphere and spooky events, it is an art-film by the "goth" interiors, lightening and expressive, sometimes even ballet-like acting, it is a detective story, by the content of the plot and a hero threatened by a mysterious fiend to be unmasked during a show-down, it is a classical story of two lovers that grow through the overcoming of an existential threat to their love, and it contains several elements of science-fiction. And while the film does not explicitly refer to philosophy, many of the above aspects "live" on a particular view of what we are, that can be fleshed out in philosophical terms.

The philosophy in the film comes as part of a broader package of themes that can also be found in other movies of that time (e.g. the man-machine problem in *Metropolis*). It is the time when Heidegger wrote "Sein und Zeit", in an attempt to redefine the philosophy of who we are and to defend this being against the thread of a merely technical understanding of ourselves. It is exactly that misconception of our essence as something technical that is at the origin of Orlacs horror. Furthermore, as in the film, Heideggers project investigates the relation of our experience of being-there ("Dasein") to our physical being in a physical world ("In-der-Welt-Sein"). Access to an understanding of ourselves requires, according to Heidegger, the experience of fear as an essential component [3, §40, p. 184ff], which is again a main motive of the movie. It is even so that

Heidegger seems to imply that our hands have a privileged role in our access to the world, he coined the particular relation that we have to physical objects as "Zuhandenheit" [3, §15, p. 66ff]. Thus, while "Orlac's Hände" appeared shortly before Heidegger's "Sein und Zeit", it is obviously soaked with philosophical topics that were of common interest at that time. However, in contrast to Heidegger, the film addresses these issues not through a lengthy, elaborately worded text, but, being actually a silent movie, through a body language that intends to make us feel, in an immediate way, what "being our selves" may consist of, and using catchy means that are accessible, and even entertaining, for a broad public. The quest to understand what and who we are is thus, if we consider the movie in its full scope, not only a philosophical question: It can also be a fairy tale, a detective story, science fiction, a love affair, a nightmare, or an act of art.



Figure 8: Orlacs murderous intention reach for the audience (46:30)

## Bibliography

- [1] DANTO, A. C.: Basic Actions. In: *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965), Nr. 2, S. 141–148
- [2] GALLAGHER, S. : Philosophical conceptions of the self: implications for cognitive science. In: *Trends Cogn Sci* 4 (2000), Jan, Nr. 1, S. 14–21
- [3] HEIDEGGER, M. : *Sein und Zeit*. 19. Ausgabe. Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 2006
- [4] KAPLAN, M. : It's not what you know that counts. In: *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), Nr. 7, S. 350–363

- [5] PARFIT, D. : *Reasons and Persons*. Clarendon Press (Oxford paperbacks).  
<https://books.google.it/books?id=S1gY93k936UC>. – ISBN 9780198249085
- [6] WIENE, R. ; NERZ, L. ; KRAMPF, G. ; ANDROSCHIN, H. ; VEIDT, C. ; SORINA, A. ;  
STRASSNY, F. ; ASKONAS, P. ; CARTELLIERI, C. ; HOMMA, H. u. a.: *Orlacs Hände*.  
Filmarchiv Austria, 2013