Personal Identity, Personae, Faces, and Masks

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(Teshigahara, 1966)

In my philosophical downtime between sleeps, I explore the byways and highways of Japanese cinema from the 1930s through the 1960s. But recently I watched a movie from that tradition and era that, for some strange reason, I'd never seen before, or even heard of—although I'd seen at least one other flick, the famous/notorious *Woman in the Dunes*, by the same director, Hiroshi Teshigahara. In any case, it truly amazed me. It was Teshigahara's 1966 sci-fi noir/horror film, *The Face of Another*.

Production-wise, it features two first-rate actors familiar from several of Kurosawa's best works and many other excellent Japanese films of that period: Tatsuya Nakadai (who plays the King-Lear-counterpart in *Ran*, for example) as Okuyama, and Michiko Ryu (who, for example, plays the third corner of the ravisher-husband-wife triangle in *Rashomon*) as Okuyama's wife. Cinematically and/or literarily—if that's actually a word—*The Face of Another* clearly echoes *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Invisible Man*, and Robert Wiene's 1920 *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. It also reminded me of three other very good films on closely similar themes, Robert Florey's

1941 *The Face Behind the Mask*, Georges Franju's 1959/60 *Eyes Without a Face*, and John Frankenheimer's *Seconds*, also from 1966. But as good as Florey's and Frankenheimer's films are, *The Face of Another* makes them look like two episodes from *Mr Rogers' Neighborhood* by comparison. Only *Eyes Without a Face* approaches *The Face of Another* in the intensity of its at-once visceral and visual impact; but Franju's film is less philosophically interesting than Teshigahara's.

As you've no doubt already guessed, *The Face of Another* is all about personal identity, personae, faces, and masks. Plot-wise, it's the story of a chemical engineer, Okuyama, whose face has been grotesquely disfigured in a preventable industrial accident, and whose Caligari-like psychiatrist is also brilliantly proficient at constructing prosthetics, including highly lifelike masks, one of which he fashions for Okuyama. (I use "Caligari-like" in both senses here: first, in the sense of *Caligari*'s inner-narrative, according to which Dr C. is a nihilistic amoralist/immoralist doctor who murders by means of his somnambulist proxy Cesare, and second, in the sense of *Caligari*'s outer-narrative, according to which Dr C. is in fact a dutiful, benevolent doctor who's been treating Cesare for delusional paranoid schizophrenia.)

Okuyama has been wearing *Invisible Man*-style bandages that he never takes off, even at home with his wife, who, although she's clearly trying very, very hard to get used to the (as it seems to *him*, at least) repulsively disabled person who once was the husband she loved, rejects his awkward, sudden sexual advances. There's also a parallel plot about a young woman with a similarly grotesque disfigurement on *one side* of her face, although the rest of her face is extremely beautiful. Okuyama is doubly obsessed with the horror of his mangled face and the beauty of his mask—which of course gives him the appearance of Nakadai, a very good-looking actor in real life—and cannot reconcile his belief that he is the very same person he always was, *inside*, with the duality between his horribly disfigured face and his highly handsome mask. Okuyama eventually experiences a complete fragmentation of his personality into two distinct individuals using the same body—the conventional, moralistic Dr Jekyll-like Man in the Bandages, and the nihilistic, amoralist/immoralist Mr Hyde-like Man in the Mask—and then seduces his own wife as The Man in the Mask, and under the same guise ultimately murders his Caligari-psychiatrist. Okuyama even rents two different apartments in the same building, one for each personality.

The Man-in-the-Mask's seduction of his own wife is particularly bizarre and poignant. She recognizes him almost instantly, and plays along passionately without saying anything; and, as The Man in the Mask, his love-making is confident and smooth, utterly unlike his fumbling, frustrated Man in the Bandages. Yet, after what seems to have been very good sex, he's disgusted by her "infidelity" and angrily berates her—then, in

counter-anger, she reveals her prior knowledge of his "real" identity, a complete mess of angry misunderstandings!, which only drives them further apart. In the parallel plot, the young woman seduces her own brother—the only person who truly accepts, understands, and loves her, even despite, and indeed *at least partially because of*, her half-disfigured face—thereby committing incest with him: and then she commits suicide by walking into the ocean.

Teshigahara was an avant-garde experimentalist; and in addition to everything else that's cinematically and philosophically amazing about *The Face of Another*, there are two exceptionally mind-blowing images: (i) just before Okuyama kills the psychiatrist, as they walk together, they're suddenly engulfed by a crowd of people, in what appears at first to be a familiar Tokyo street scene, but then we see that all of them are wearing *featureless* masks (see the image at the top of this essay), and (ii) as the young woman's devastated, intensely ashamed brother helplessly watches her walk into the ocean, from the high window of the room of their oceanside inn, too far away to do anything, he's suddenly seared by the sun's rays and transformed into a slaughtered, cooked, non-human animal (a boar?) hanging from a hook:

(Teshigahara, 1966)

I suppose that, nowadays, either Okuyama or the young woman, especially the latter, could have been significantly helped by reconstructive plastic surgery. But that's almost completely irrelevant to the existential-metaphysical themes that Teshigahara is so brillantly exploring. What, more precisely, are these themes?

One way of philosophically framing them is in terms of Thomas Hobbes's highly original doctrine in the *Leviathan* that a human person is wholly constituted by the *personating activity* of the human animal they are—which, for Hobbes, is a wholly material and essentially mechanical being that is somehow endowed with an egoistic rational psychology—insofar as it effectively mediates between itself and the highly antagonistic larger world. It does this by either creating-and-projecting, or otherwise authorizing, either (i) a single dominant sociofunctional guise/role, a *persona*, or (ii) an organized repertoire of distinct *personae*, or (iii) a mere successive medley of *personae* (Hanna, 1983). Moreover, one human animal can also personate another human animal, as when the sovereign personates all of the subjects of his kingdom via the social contract. In any case for Hobbes, a human person is nothing more than, and diachronically identified with, either its single dominant *persona*, or a certain organized repertoire of *personae*, or a mere successive medley of *personae*. Or otherwise put: as human persons, we are nothing more than, and diachronically identified with, *some or all the social masks of the egoistic mechanical beast that is our particular human animal*.

Hobbes's mechanistic-egoistic-sociofunctionalist theory of persons and their identity over time is philosophically offbeat and weird, even by *post*-modern standards, and all the moreso by *early*-modern standards, hence it is, in effect and paradoxically, *post*-post-modern; and above all it is sharply different from the classical substance-metaphysical views of persons and personal identity that diachronically identify a person either (i) with its persisting or continuing body (*somatic* views, as per Hobbes's *materialist metaphysics* of human beings, although not as per his mechanistic-egoistic-sociofunctionalist theory of persons and personal identity), or (ii) with its persisting or continuing mind (*mentalistic* or *psychological* views, as per John Locke, David Hume, Thomas Reid, and Derek Parfit), or (iii) with its immaterial immortal soul (for lack of a better term, let's call these *psycho-noumenal* views, as per Plato in *The Phaedo*, the medieval Scholastics, and Judaeo-Christian theology). René Descartes, of course, held that our persisting or continuing rational mind and our immaterial immortal soul *are one and the same thinking substance*, which is essentially different from our material or physical body, a deterministic machine whose movements are describable by mathematical physics, hence, his view would be the conjunction of a mentalistic/psychological view, a psycho-noumenal view, metaphysical mechanism, and metaphysical materialism or physicalism. In any case, now back to Teshigahara and *The Face of Another*.

The Caligari-psychiatrist is *clearly* a neo-Hobbesian. For example, he worriedly (or perhaps: only pretend-worriedly, and with malign intent) thinks out loud to Okuyama about the possible disastrous moral and sociopolitical consequences of his masks. More specifically, he thinks out loud that, like the *Republic*'s thought-experimental user of a Ring of Gyges, and like the protagonist of *The Invisible Man*, everyone would begin to use

his artificial masks to commit all sorts of wicked acts, without fear of their identities being revealed, and without fear of legal punishment, thus returning society to *the state of nature*, and *the war of all against all*. In other words, behind everyone's "natural" masks—that is, their human faces and their social roles—are nothing but mechanical egoistic beasts under the coercive sociopolitical control of the sovereign or government: so, if you give them *artificial* masks, then they'll immediately revert to being nihilistic amoral/immoral beasts. But of course, whether unintentionally or intentionally, this only serves to plant *firmly* the very idea of neo-Hobbesian nihilistic, amoral/immoral mayhem-&-murder-without-fear-of-punishment in Okuyama's Man-in-the-Mask personality.

More explicitly now, my philosophical reading of *The Face of Another* is this. Okuyama is a man who has unreflectively absorbed the hegemonic philosophical ideology of a classical *Cartesian* theory of persons and personal identity; yet after his catastrophic injury, and also perhaps triggered by his Caligari-psychiatrist's intentionally insidious suggestions, Okuyama finds himself traumatically thrown into an essentially *neo-Hobbesian* theory of persons and personal identity, epitomized by his Man in the Bandages mask on the one hand, and his handsome Nakadai-mask on the other hand. Okuyama is clearly a somewhat inflexible personality, a conformist, and a conventional-rule-following thinker and agent—for example, he says that he had raised no worries at all about the clearly highly dangerous operating procedures that led to his preventable accident. And there is further cinematic evidence of his being somewhat of a control freak, in the fussy way he organizes his two new apartments. In any case, for whatever reason or reasons, Okuyama simply cannot reflectively, emotionally, or pragmatically reconcile his sharply contrary Cartesian/Dr Jekyll and neo-Hobbesian/Mr Hyde ways of thinking and feeling about himself, and falls apart, incommensurably, into The Man in the Bandages and The Man in the Mask.

The primary women characters in the movie—the half-disfigured young woman and Okuyama's wife—are much better philosophers, and indeed far saner, than either Okuyama or the Caligari-psychiatrist.

The young woman clearly has an integrated, sane personality. It's just that the only person she knows who truly accepts, understands, and loves her, even despite, and indeed at least partially because of (this is revealed in the incest scene), her half-disfigured face, is her own brother, and *incest is taboo*. So, as per the radical psychiatrists R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz—whose work Teshigahara had no doubt read, or at least knew about—*it's contemporary morals and society that are fucked-up, essentially disintegrated and insane*, not the young woman and her brother.

Correspondingly, Okuyama's wife also clearly has an integrated, sane personality.

She continues to live with Okuyama, despite everything, and also struggles to live a reasonably normal life, has hobbies, etc. She also philosophizes about the first-personal and sociopolitical functions of women's make-up, applies these ideas to herself in the seduction episode, and goes through with the seduction in a perfectly self-aware, willing way, intensely hoping that it will bring them both closer together again—as I've mentioned above. She also frankly admits that her single integrated personality contains many different aspects, which seems undeniably true. Correspondingly, here's a plausible counterfactual: had Okuyama been allowed (or had allowed himself) to live with his wife after the accident, even with the mask, but *without* the Caligari-psychiatrist's further interference, then eventually he would have been OK.

I've briefly spelled out the early-modern and (in effect and paradoxically) post-post-modern Hobbesian mechanistic-egoistic-sociofunctional theory of persons and personal identity, and also the classical substance-metaphysical views: somatic, mentalistic/psychological, and psycho-noumenal. But now what do *I* think about persons and their personal identity; and how does this relate to *The Face of Another*?

On my view, *The Minded Animalist* view, as I spell it out and defend it in *Deep Freedom and Real Persons*, (i) human persons are *essentially embodied minds* and *rational minded animals*, and (ii) they're identical with each and all parts of their "human, all-too-human" rational lives, that is, they're identical with the individual dynamic, forward-directed, spatiotemporal processes of their lives, from the inception of conscious experience in the third trimester of pregancy through (if they're lucky) infancy, childhood, youth, and rational adulthood, all the way to their inevitable deaths (Hanna, 2018). At the same time, their lives are also *saliently shaped and partially—but not wholly—determined by the social institutions they belong to* (Maiese and Hanna, 2019). So, roughly speaking, if you combined the disfigured young woman's fundamental way of thinking about herself and encountering her world—her existential metaphysics—with Okuyama's wife's existential metaphysics, then the result would be The Minded Animalist view.

But what are Minded Animalism's existential-metaphysical *payoffs*? The Minded Animalist view construes human persons *neither* as nothing but personae or social masks, *nor* as nothing but their animal bodies, *nor* as nothing but their minds/psychologies, *nor* as nothing but immaterial eternal souls, but instead as their *whole lives as a single dynamic conscious, rational essentially embodied process, shaped but not necessarily determined, by all their social interactions*. Therefore, it's a huge mistake for people either to *reduce* themselves to nothing but a single static substance of some sort or an atomistic series of such substances, or to *externalize* themselves by fetishizing a single social mask or by melting away into a repertoire or successive medley of different social masks. Indeed, Okuyama

is impaled on the horns of this *reduce/externalize* dilemma about human personhood and personal identity.

From the standpoint of Minded Animalism, however, as difficult as it might have been in actual practice, Okuyama should have found a way of not merely *reconciling* himself to his mangled face, bandages, and mask, but *affirming* them all, and living *at least with his wife, in a way that's freely acceptable to both of them.* And perhaps he could have negotiated his domestic world and the larger social world by sometimes using his bandages and sometimes his mask, depending on context. Whatever. The point is that he himself, and his wife, and the two of them together, could have somehow *managed* it. Then in turn, all these experiences, individual actions, and collective actions in a thoroughly nonideal natural and social world, would have essentially belonged to Okuyama, to his whole life-process, and to no else, just in case he could also freely take full responsibility for each and all of them. So in that sense, according to The Minded Animalism theory, human persons and their identities, against the backdrop of the social institutions that shape them, are existential-moral-rational achievements, and always in some sort of solidarity with others. Otherwise put, we are the sole authors, and yet also to some extent the collaborative co-authors, of our own lives, their meaning, and their value.

But of course, if Teshigahara had tried to say and show *all that*, then *The Face of Another* would have been very good philosophy, but also a *very, very* boring movie, instead of the absolutely brilliant and deeply disturbing, existential-metaphysical-themed cinematic masterpiece that it is.

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