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Memento

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MEMENTO

Andrew Kania

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The sleeper-hit *Memento* (2000), directed by Christopher Nolan, is a brilliantly structured contemporary film noir that is focused through the main character, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), who has a debilitating memory condition. Hit on the head during a home invasion – ‘the incident’ – Leonard can remember his life as an insurance claims-investigator before the incident, but he cannot form new long-term memories. Thus, every fifteen minutes or so, he partially becomes a *tabula rasa* afresh. This condition is explained to the audience through Leonard’s recounting the story of Sammy Jankis (Stephen Tobolowsky) to explain his condition to others and himself. (Sammy was the subject of one of Leonard’s pre-incident investigations who apparently suffered from a similar condition.) One of the main narrative drives of the movie is Leonard’s quest to find ‘John G’ – the mysterious second assailant in the incident, who supposedly raped and murdered Leonard’s wife – and exact his revenge by killing him.

Nolan’s stroke of genius, and the initially most striking feature of the film, is its structure, which places the audience in much the same epistemic position as Leonard, and

contributes strongly to our identification and empathy with him. The majority of the film consists of scenes of about five minutes that are presented in reverse chronological order. Thus, with each scene we are thrown *in medias res*, and only at the end of the *next* scene does the action get put into context, as we come to understand the events that led up to it. Thus, unlike in most films, we are constantly witnessing events without knowing what has happened earlier. Of course, this means that, unlike Leonard, we soon know some things that will happen *later* than the fictional events now unfolding.

Memento's structure is more complicated even than this, though. The film contains 44 scenes, and covers a period of approximately 36 hours in the fictional world. (When I talk about the fictional world represented in the film, I will talk about 'fictional time' and the 'fictional world'. When I am talking about the film itself, the representation or artwork, I will talk about 'film time' and 'the film'. Thus, in *Memento*, though breakfast precedes lunch in the fictional world, lunch might well precede breakfast in the film. This distinction has various labels in narrative theory. Rough synonyms for what I call 'the fictional world' include 'story', '*histoire*', and '*fabula*', while what I call 'the film' also goes by the general names of 'discourse', '*récit*', and '*syuzhet*'.) 21 of the scenes are relatively short (averaging under one minute) and shot in black and white. Their chronological order is the same in the film and the fictional world; that is, anything you see in a black and white scene fictionally occurs after anything else you have already seen in a black and white scene in the film (ignoring flashbacks). These scenes cover the first, much shorter period of fictional time covered in the movie (perhaps an hour or two). 21 of the scenes are longer and shot in color. The fictional events they represent all occur after those of the black and white scenes, yet in the film they occur in reverse fictional

chronological order, and are interleaved with the black and white scenes. Labeling the black and white scenes 1-21, and the color scenes B-V, the fictional chronology can be represented as follows (Klein 2001a):

1, 2, 3, ..., 19, 20, 21, 22/A, B, C, D, ..., T, U, V, Ω ,

while the order of scenes in the movie runs as follows:

Ω , 1, V, 2, U, 3, T, ..., 20, C, 21, B, 22/A.

There are two scenes in the above sequence that I have not yet discussed. 22/A is a pivotal scene, right in the *middle* of the fictional events, as divided into scenes (though quite *early* in the fictional time covered by the movie, since the black and white scenes are so short), and at the very *end* of the film. As its name suggests, scene 22/A begins in black and white and unobtrusively fades into color partway through, as one of Leonard's Polaroids develops (1:39:36-42). (I make a few references to the film by time elapsed in hours:minutes:seconds.) Scene Ω is another unique scene, the last fictional event represented, but the first scene in the movie – the credit sequence, in fact, which alerts the viewer to the 'backwards' structure of the movie. It is shot in color, and, unlike any other scene in the movie, it is actually shot in reverse; that is, fictional time is represented as flowing backwards during this first (film time) and last (fictional time) scene. Blood oozes up walls, a pair of eye-glasses begins to tremble before flying up onto someone's face, and a bullet flies back into a gun, pulling the victim's brains back into his skull.

MEMENTO AS NEO-NOIR

This structure, together with the lighting of the black and white scenes, Leonard's intermittent voice-over, the sleazy locations, sordid events, and so on, places *Memento*

firmly within the category of ‘neo-noir’ – films that draw heavily on elements of the classic film noirs of the 1940s and ’50s. One classic film noir structure is the extended flashback: the film begins with the protagonist in some sorry state, followed by a flashback that comprises the rest of the film, showing how this came to pass. Through the protagonist’s memories, the audience is introduced to characters who turn out to be quite other than they seemed at first, and the perpetrator of a central crime (legal, moral, amorous, or otherwise; often all three) is revealed (e.g., *Detour*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Murder, My Sweet*). Literally every second scene of *Memento* is a microcosm of this classic structure. But there are idiosyncrasies in how the structure is fleshed out in *Memento* that amount to a reconsideration of some recurrent film noir themes.

First, the protagonist of a classic film noir has typically learned something through his travails, even if it has cost him his peace of mind, livelihood, or even life. By contrast, it is not clear that Leonard is capable of learning anything of the sort. This is in part due to his condition, but the constant parallels drawn between Leonard’s condition and the epistemic position we all inhabit perhaps imply a vision of our potential for enlightenment even more pessimistic than that of traditional film noir.

Second, there is typically a central betrayal of the protagonist, or a series of such betrayals. In *Memento* the protagonist is betrayed *by himself*, fooled into thinking that Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) is John G. One might say this metaphorically of traditional noir protagonists (betrayed by their hubris, for instance), but in *Memento* the self-betrayal is more literal (though see the discussion of personal identity, below, regarding the coherence of this claim). Together with the structure, which leads us to identify very strongly with Leonard, this confuses our emotional responses to Leonard. On the one

hand, we sympathize with him as the betrayed vulnerable protagonist; on the other, we detest him as the betrayer. Thus there is an intensification of the usual ambiguity we feel towards noir protagonists.

Third, Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) seems to be the film's femme fatale, and most first-time viewers see her as a cold, self-seeking, manipulative character. She initiates a fight with Leonard by insulting his dead wife and manipulates him to escape a dangerous situation. However, the structure of the film conceals that (i) she is in this situation only because of Leonard's actions, and knows it, (ii) that she initiates the fight only to extricate herself from the situation, and (iii) that she helps Leonard much more than is necessary to achieve her ends. In light of the fact that she has just learnt that her partner is dead and that Leonard is somehow responsible for this, she is remarkably generous in offering him a place to spend the night. (Though this place is her bed, it seems unlikely that Leonard and Natalie had sex, contrary to most people's initial inferences.)

IS *MEMENTO* A FILM?

One of the reasons for *Memento*'s success is the challenge of simply figuring out what goes on in the film. Audiences went straight from theatre to coffeehouse to try to answer the film's main narrative questions: Who is John G? Is Leonard Sammy Jankis? What is the true nature of his memory condition? Part of the difficulty of answering these questions is due to the film's confusing structure, but part of it is due to the under-determination of the fictional facts by the movie. That is, the movie is ultimately ambiguous about some of these central questions, such as whether the tale Leonard recounts of Sammy Jankis is really about himself. Equally coherent and compelling

interpretations provide mutually exclusive answers to these questions. (See Klein 2001a, 2001b, Zhu 2001, Mottram 2002: 21-77, and Duncker 2003 for some consideration of different interpretations.)

How coherent and compelling an interpretation is, though, depends on how much of the relevant data it accounts for. Like many recent movies, part of *Memento*'s release publicity was a website (<http://www.otnemem.com/index.html>). The website is even more enigmatic than the movie, since, of course, one of its prime functions was to intrigue people enough to buy a ticket to the film. But though the website was thus similar in function to the theatrical trailer, it was very different in one notable respect: the website provides a relatively large amount of new information about the fictional world – information that is not imparted, even implicitly, by the film. The main addition is the fictional truth that Leonard spent some time in a mental institution, beginning apparently nine months after the incident, and then escaped from it. There are fictional newspaper clippings, parts of psychological reports on Leonard from the institution, excerpts from Leonard's journal, and so on, all attesting to this additional piece of fictional information.

There is almost nothing in the movie itself to suggest that Leonard has spent time in a mental institution. There is a highly suggestive cut in one scene that shows Sammy Jankis in a mental institution. For a split second, Sammy is replaced by Leonard in the shot (1:29:56). But *throughout* the movie, parallels are being drawn between Sammy and Leonard. Without the additional materials from the website, an interpretation that claimed Leonard spent time in a mental institution following the incident – let alone that that time began long after the incident – would be unjustifiable. There is simply no information given in the movie about this fictional period. The action takes place over three days and

two nights. Flashbacks and recollections of various characters give us information about two other periods: (1) the period before the incident, when Leonard was an insurance-claims investigator following Sammy's case, and (2) the night of the incident itself. (There are additionally a few short 'projective' shots, which represent scenes Leonard is only imagining or entertaining.) The website gives information almost exclusively about the period between the incident and the 'present' of the movie, and, if taken into account, makes much more plausible the interpretation that there is in fact no Sammy Jankis as Leonard describes him, that Sammy's story is really a way Leonard (or some psychological part of him) has devised of representing parts of his past he cannot fully acknowledge. This has further ramifications for any interpretation of the film.

The question, then, is whether the information on the website has status equal to that of the contents of the film, and must thus be taken into account in any interpretation of *Memento*. Of course, the website might reasonably be taken into account even if it is *not* part of the artwork. Understanding any work of art requires more than simple sensory experience of it. However, two things should be noted: First, the website is unlike other background material (general knowledge of cinematic conventions, reviews of the film, even the short story on which the film is partly based, and so on) in that it seems to contribute to the content of the fictional world of the film. Second, whatever one's views on the relevance of background materials to the interpretation of a work, if the website is *part of the work itself* it should surely play a more central role than if it were just background material.

There are good reasons to consider the possibility that the website is part of the artwork we call *Memento*. First, the creation of the website was overseen by the director,

who, for instance, seems to have removed some references to the date of Leonard's wife's death from earlier versions (Andy Klein, quoted in Zhu 2001). Second, in some interviews Nolan endorses the view that *Memento* is an extended artwork comprising website and film (Mottram 2002: 73). Third, not only is the website material included on all DVDs of the film, but the special edition DVD comes packaged as Leonard's file from the mental institution, and a psychological-test conceit governs its design. Even to get the movie to play, you need to select the right word from a selection of fifty formatted to look like a psychological test.

But there are also good reasons to reject the website material as part of *Memento*. For one thing, Nolan is inconsistent in how he regards the material. Sometimes he endorses it, but at other times – including an interview included on the DVDs – he says that you can figure out what happens in the fictional world simply by watching the movie closely (Mottram 2002: 26). More importantly, though, there are reasons to think that an artist is not in sole control of the kind of thing she produces, especially in a popular mass artform such as narrative film. Theories of art interpretation tend to fall along a spectrum according to the extent to which they take the artist's intentions about the meaning of a work into account. Most fall somewhere in between the extremes of simply equating the meaning of the work with whatever the artist intended and taking no account of the artist at all. However, when it comes to determining what kind of thing the artwork is (painting, symphony, etc.) most theorists, if not silent, are 'actual intentionalists,' claiming that the artist gets to determine what counts as the artwork, whatever their views on the implications of artists' intentions for interpretation (e.g., Levinson 1992: 232-3).

In most cases such a theory works well. After all, you do not get many painters insisting that the canvas in front of them is, literally, a string quartet. But it is the extraordinary cases that test a theory. If all educated audiences read some novel as a work of dark nihilism, for instance, it is difficult to defend a theory of interpretation according to which the novel's central theme is that love conquers all, simply because the author intended that reading. Cases like this suggest that an author's intentions only go so far in determining a work's meaning. Similarly, if all suitably backgrounded audiences take *Memento* to be simply a film, that is some evidence that it is, and that the kind of work an artist creates has to do with more than just the artist's intentions.

A theory that developed this idea might appeal to the social, public nature of art. One of the reasons that people work within a well-defined artistic category, such as painting, is that, due to a tradition of people producing objects of the same sort, and appreciating objects of that sort, there is a shared sense of what doing something with paint on a canvas amounts to. Such conventions often both provide an artistic language and restrict what an artist can meaningfully do (Davies 2003). In the twentieth-century, avant-garde artists expanded the boundaries of art in such a way that, notoriously, now anything can be art. Philosophers have tended to focus on avant-garde and 'high' art, but it may be that the popular mass arts, such as film, are more 'conventional' in the sense that what is possible in an art gallery may not be possible in a cinema. Suppose, for instance, that Nolan insisted in a series of interviews that *Memento* was not just a film, but a film and a small pile of wood shavings in his garden shed. Though it would certainly be possible for an avant-garde artist to produce such a work for the artworld, it

is not obvious that Nolan can do so, given the overwhelming evidence that he is working within the tradition of popular narrative film.

PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES IN *MEMENTO*

Whatever the ontological nature of *Memento*, it does not contribute to any philosophical debate about the ontology of art, except by being an interesting *example* – part of the domain of inquiry. There has been some debate about whether, how, and the extent to which films can ‘do philosophy’ (e.g., Livingston 2006, Wartenberg 2006, and Smith 2006). I tend to be sympathetic to Livingston’s and Wartenberg’s moderate views that some films can be insightful and useful pedagogical and heuristic illustrations of philosophical issues and theories. *Memento* is remarkable for the number of philosophical issues it raises. Unfortunately there is only space here to indicate some of those issues briefly. (I give few references in the text below; I refer the reader instead to the list of further reading at the end of this chapter.)

Mind and Memory

Something that is very important to Leonard about Sammy Jankis’s condition is that it is ‘mental’ rather than ‘physical’. Assuming, as is the majority view in contemporary philosophy of mind, that one’s mind is, in some sense, simply one’s brain – a physical organ – does this distinction amount to anything? That it does can be illustrated by the fact that exactly how to spell out the sense in which the mind is the brain is still a matter of much debate. This is not the place to recapitulate that debate. One way to think about it in connection with the distinction Leonard draws, however, is to think about the way the

mind *represents* things. For instance, when you think about your mother, something in your head represents your mother in some way, just as her name written in your address book represents her in some way. Moreover, the representational system of your mind must be highly systematic, so that you can use your ‘mother-representation’ in thinking about different aspects of your mother, other people’s mothers, and so on. How physical things can ultimately ‘be about’ other things is one of the deepest mysteries about the mind, the problem of ‘intentionality.’ Taking intentionality for granted, though, we can consider two kinds of ways a mind or brain can malfunction. There are brute physical defects, such as those caused by massive physical trauma, like being hit in the head with a sap. Such an injury might simply stop your mind from functioning at all. But it might stop only part of your mind from functioning, such as your ability to read, to recognize familiar objects, or to form new long-term memories, particularly if such functions are localized in one part of the brain. Another kind of problem involves the representational content of your mind. For instance, some psychologists believe that in the face of horrific events, people sometimes involuntarily repress their memories of those events. The mechanism responsible for such repression would have to be sensitive to the representational content of whatever encodes the memory in the brain in order to repress *only* the memories of the horrific event.

This distinction allows us to think more closely about two aspects of *Memento*. First, it makes sense of the mental/physical distinction that Leonard and the insurance company he represents appeal to in considering Sammy’s case. Second, it gives us one way to explain apparent inconsistencies in certain interpretations of the film. It seems that the explanation Teddy gives of Leonard’s situation in the final scene – namely, that the

story Leonard tells about Sammy is really about himself – cannot be correct, since if it were, Leonard would remember that his wife was diabetic, as she would have been diabetic prior to the incident. This assumes, though, that Leonard’s condition is as he describes it throughout the film – a ‘physical’ condition brought about by being hit on the head during the incident. If, rather, Leonard is repressing memories, his memories from before the incident may not be as reliable as he claims. This interpretation makes sense of some puzzling aspects of the film, such as the fact that none of Leonard’s memories of his wife are happy. He even says twice that his wife called him ‘Lenny’ and he hated it (0:17:43-52, 1:11:37-46). But it raises further questions, such as what his psychological condition was between the incident and his killing his wife, and how this could cohere with the repression of his memories of killing her.

Whatever the true nature of Leonard’s condition, it is thankfully one not many of us suffer from, though the relief at this fact reminds us how much we rely on memory to make it through our everyday lives. On the other hand, Leonard claims that his ‘system’ allows him to deal with his condition, often implying it is superior to ordinary memory, at least for certain purposes, such as his detective work. This is due in part to the alleged unreliability of memory, as opposed to other forms of evidence, such as Leonard’s photographs and notes. There has been surprisingly little work on the epistemology of memory. Philosophers have been more concerned with the formation of beliefs than their maintenance (Senor 2005). Recently, however, it has been argued that the elements of a system like Leonard’s (photographs, notes, etc.) qualify as parts of his memory – provided the system meets certain criteria, such as being reliable, accessible, and typically invoked (Clark and Chalmers 1998, Clark forthcoming). According to this

‘extended mind’ hypothesis, one’s mind need not end at the boundary of one’s brain. A big question in Leonard’s case, of course, is how reliable his system is. But the fact that someone’s biological memory is malfunctioning does not disqualify it from being part of his mind. Memory impairment is a psychological condition, after all. So if the extended mind hypothesis is correct, it might be that Leonard’s system is part of his mind after all, though it may be as faulty as his biological memory.

Freedom, Personal Identity, and Moral Responsibility

Teddy’s death in the opening scene is one of the horrific results of the fallibility of Leonard’s system. It seems clear that even if John G, the second assailant, exists, Teddy is not him. Yet we come to realize that Leonard kills Teddy *thinking* Teddy is John G. This raises a number of moral issues. Some revolve around the nexus of justice, punishment, and revenge: What punishment is appropriate for rape and murder? Is it ever acceptable to seek ‘vengeance’ for a crime outside the law? Others revolve around Teddy’s manipulation of Leonard: What is the relative culpability of someone who induces others to commit crimes? Can justice be served unintentionally? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is plausible that Teddy does not deserve to die at Leonard’s hands. Does the fact that Leonard’s actions are largely due to his false belief that Teddy raped and murdered his wife affect the extent to which Leonard is morally responsible for his actions?

Many people believe that you can only be responsible for actions performed of your own free will. If someone commits homicide robotically, as the result of hypnotic suggestion, for instance, we do not hold that person responsible. The nature of free will,

though, is one of the most difficult and perennial of philosophical problems. Many philosophers take some sort of rationality to be a necessary criterion of free will. That is, if your actions are not counterfactually dependent on *reasons*, in other words if you would have done what you did no matter what other reasons presented themselves to you, you are not free. Leonard's condition is cause for concern with respect to this criterion, since it prevents him from developing a coherent picture of the world that is sensitive to his experiences. If you first encountered someone with Leonard's condition you might consider him irrational, since he might, for instance, innocently offer you a cup of coffee fifteen minutes after you had told him you are fatally allergic to it. Learning about his condition would help explain this irrationality, but it would not make such behavior rational.

Another recurring theme in the discussion of free will is the relation between action and desire. Some philosophers hold that you act freely if your actions follow from your desires (e.g., Hume 1748/1999). Others argue that the relationship is more complex, for instance, that you act freely only if you act on a desire that you endorse at some fundamental level (Frankfurt 1971). Whatever the details, it seems questionable that Leonard meets any acceptable version of such a criterion. In a sense he is acting on his desire to kill Teddy – no one is holding a gun to *Leonard's* head – but in another sense he *has* been forced, or at least dishonestly led, to perform this action. For he has been tricked into thinking that Teddy raped and murdered his wife, and we might think that that is a mitigating circumstance, or at the very least that the person who so tricked him is partially morally responsible for Teddy's death.

Of course, one of the most chilling things about the dénouement of *Memento* is that we discover it is *Leonard* who has tricked *himself* into believing that Teddy is John G, knowing full well that he is not. This points to, among other things, the irony that it is precisely the condition that his system is supposed to compensate for that renders it fatally unreliable in the end. (You might wonder whether this is the right characterization of what is going on here, since Leonard obviously wants to kill Teddy, or he would not knowingly set himself up to kill him. But of course, Leonard could just as easily (and perhaps more securely) write himself a note initiating a new quest to kill Teddy for what he really has done, or simply shoot him then and there, rather than setting himself up to kill Teddy as John G.)

The fact that Leonard can be tricked by an earlier ‘temporal part’ of himself raises a further question about the requirements for moral responsibility. Suppose Leonard had an identical twin brother. It would be grossly unjust to punish Leonard’s twin for killing Teddy, since he is a different person from Leonard. The fact that they look the same is irrelevant. Given the nature of Leonard’s condition, however, you might wonder whether the person we call ‘Leonard’ the day after Teddy’s death is any more Teddy’s killer than Leonard’s hypothetical twin. To settle this question we need a theory of ‘personal identity’ – a theory of what makes one person (say, someone you point to on the street) the very same individual as ‘another’ person (say, a child in a photograph).

The most popular kind of theory of personal identity is that the numerical identity, or sameness, of a person across time is a matter of a particular kind of psychological continuity. That is, the person you are right now is the same person as, for instance, the person in your high school yearbook if, and only if, your current mental state – your

emotions, beliefs, desires, and so on – depends in a certain way on the mental state of the person in the yearbook. How to spell out the exact nature of the connection is (again!) a matter of considerable debate. But this is enough to see what a strange position Leonard is in. Every time his memory ‘refreshes,’ he becomes the psychological continuant not of the person inhabiting his body ten minutes ago, but of Leonard Shelby the insurance investigator, as he was on the night of the incident. Thus Leonard’s psychology is continually branching. The person ‘he’ is every fifteen minutes is continuous with the person he was before the incident, but none of these continuants is continuous with any other!

There is *some* continuity between each post-incident ‘Leonard’, however. For one thing, his pre-incident memories are somehow preserved continuously through the serial wipings of his short-term memory. For another, if he has been very active, and his memory is wiped, he still feels tired. Also, his emotional states seem continuous. As he says, ‘you feel angry, you don’t know why; you feel guilty, you have no idea why...’. One thing *Memento* provides us with, then, is an interesting test case for theories of personal identity. Does Leonard have the right sort of psychological continuity throughout his post-incident life to be considered a single person, in the sense that he can be held morally responsible for ‘his’ earlier actions, such as killing Teddy?

As with many of the issues raised by *Memento*, it pays to reflect on the extent to which Leonard’s situation is just our own, taken to the extreme. If you commit to achieving some goal, such as gaining a degree, you might feel obligated by that commitment to trying to reach that goal, even if you can’t quite reconstruct the reasoning that led you to embrace the goal in the first place. But why should you? Why not rather

see the goal as something imposed by someone you no longer are? As people go through their lives they can change their goals in quite radical ways, and they do not feel bound by their earlier desires. Leonard goes through this process at a greatly accelerated rate, thus leading us to question whether we might be as psychologically fragmented as he is, albeit on a larger scale.

CONCLUSIONS

Memento is a fascinating film on many levels. It is a compelling example of a puzzle film in the neo-noir tradition. The question of how we ought to solve its narrative puzzles raises questions about the ontology and interpretation of popular cinema, and philosophical questions about the nature of the mind, moral responsibility, freedom, and persons. Here, I have only been able to make explicit some of the questions the film raises; answering them will require the continuation of philosophical debate.

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