

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

**Memory and Morals in *Memento*:
Hume at the Movies****George Bragues**

University of Guelph-Humber

One February night in San Francisco, a man named Leonard Shelby walks into his bathroom to find his wife being sexually assaulted. In the ensuing confrontation, he kills the assailant, but sustains a head injury that renders him unable to form new memories. He can only remember what happened up to the point of the attack on his wife, who subsequently dies. Reflecting on the attack, he concludes that a second man must have been present in the bathroom that night, but the police do not believe him. Though his memory problem hampers his ability to sustain lengthy undertakings, Leonard manages to focus his energies on searching for the second assailant and avenging his wife's rape and murder, reminding himself of relevant facts by carrying a police file of the crime, taking notes and pictures, and even going so far as to tattoo the most essential details about his mission throughout his body. Along the way, a couple of individuals take advantage of his vengeful and forgetful state of mind, tricking Leonard into murdering several people other than his wife's assailant. When he discovers this, he eventually kills the man, who goes by the name of Teddy, behind most of the manipulative schemes. But before this deed is done, Teddy suggests that it was Leonard who actually killed his diabetic wife by injecting her with too much insulin. Teddy insists that Leonard has since reconstructed his memory of the events

to veil a terrible truth about his past and lend purpose to his existence. The problem is that Teddy's credibility is questionable owing to his exploitation of Leonard as an unwitting assassin, as is Leonard's because of his mental disability. So what the truth actually is – whether it was the rapist that killed Leonard's wife or Leonard himself – becomes difficult to tell.

Such is the story, though much of it told chronologically backwards, in *Memento*, a mind-bending film noir directed by Christopher Nolan (2000). Based on a short story entitled *Memento Mori* written by Nolan's brother (Nolan, J, c. 2000), the film explores the issues of memory, personal identity, time, truth, moral responsibility, meaning, and the longing for justice. Soon after its release, *Memento* generated a torrent of discussion on the Internet as fans hotly debated what actually transpires in the tale. Making the puzzle all the more tantalizing was the director's insistence that the film, beneath its complexity and ambiguity, discloses which of the two accounts of the rape and its aftermath, whether Teddy's or Leonard's, is true (Timberg 2001, cited in Klein 2001). Audiences, however, evidently saw in *Memento* something more than a beguiling riddle to be solved, appreciating how the film engaged and illuminated profound questions regarding the human condition. A leading movie database website (Internet Movie Database, 2008) ranks the film as the twenty seventh best of all time, putting it in the company of classics like *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959), *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), and *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). Among the movies produced since 2000, *Memento* ranks fourth.

Various scholars have given *Memento* their stamp of approval by publishing articles on the film. Melissa Clarke (2002) argues that the uncertainty in the movie about what is really happening at any given point expresses a philosophic principle advanced by Henri Bergson, to wit, that time is the co-presence of various pasts in the current moment instead of a series of succeeding "now" points. Jo Alyson Parker (2004) focuses on the film's depiction of time as well, by reflecting on the implications of its backward sequencing of events. William G. Little (2005), on the other hand, interprets *Memento* as leading its viewers to experience aspects of trauma, while Rosalind Sibielski (2004) contends that the film undermines Enlightenment notions of objectivity and rationality in favor of postmodernism. Viewing film as a form of philosophic practice, and not just a site for the

exemplification of philosophic themes, Phil Hutchinson and Rupert Read (2005) hold that *Memento* is a Wittgensteinian critique of the picture theory of language.

It is a common lament that people, the young especially, are increasingly shying away from books and instead turning for intellectual sustenance to video games, film, and television - that is, images are displacing words, with the result that the culture is becoming less tolerant of cognitive complexity (Postman, 1985).¹ Instead of vainly trying to reform, or negate the influence of, popular entertainments, it might be better to embrace them, making selective use of them to cultivate an interest in philosophic topics among young minds. Perhaps we can lead them to the words of the great philosophic texts by showing them how some of the actions and dialogues portrayed in the images they avidly consume exemplify and explore themes, concepts, and arguments otherwise dealt with by the likes of Plato, Descartes, and Hume. Guided by this pedagogical hope, this paper aims to plumb the philosophic significance of *Memento*.

While touching upon the themes dealt with in the *Memento* scholarship up to now, we emphasize instead the moral dimensions of *Memento*, interpreting the film as a thought experiment conducted according to the principles of David Hume that illuminates the role of memory in our moral projects. Accordingly, the main character's thoughts and actions are seen to operate in line with Hume's epistemological and psychological teachings. Also dovetailing with Hume, the film subverts common-sense conceptions of our mental condition, raising the frightful spectre of our not being able to obtain the truth needed to bring our moral projects to fruition. Yet this complete skepticism is ultimately avoided in the film, again along Humean lines, with the message that we must simply forget the inherent feebleness of our minds before the challenge of truth and submit to the necessity of believing in an objective order.

Memory

Memento begins with a hand holding a photograph of a body lying on a tiled floor with blood splattered on a wall, sprayed there apparently from a wound to the head – or, rather, that is where the story that the movie tells ends, thanks to the reverse chronology adopted in the script. Initially signaling this atypical plot movement is the subsequent

¹ For a counter-argument to Postman's thesis, see Johnson (2005)

shaking of the photograph, which, rather than rendering the image clearer, makes it fade away into nothing, the opposite of what one would expect if time were moving forward. Among the vast majority of people, their past being known, and therefore resolved in a sense, their minds are left to take primary concern in the present and future. This is one reason why almost every story in film, television, theatre, and literature attempts to create audience interest and suspense by tending to move chronologically forward. The predominant orientation of present to future is illustrated in a conversation that Leonard has with Burt, a motel attendant fascinated with the main character's forgetfulness. Burt tells Leonard: "you gotta pretty good idea of what you're gonna do next, but no idea what you just did. I'm the exact opposite" (Nolan, 115). For Burt, just like most of us, it is the future that is uncertain and, hence, of greater concern. In a flashback scene, Leonard also finds it strange that his wife reads the same book over and over again noting, "the pleasure of a book is in wanting to know what happens next." (Nolan, 163) By cutting against this mental grain and moving backwards in time, the film brings the theme of memory to the fore, mimicking the process of recollection in taking the mind from the present to the past, while simultaneously generating audience suspense about what has already happened, rather than what might end up happening. A consequence of this, too, is that the audience shares in Leonard's memory disability, unable to use their power of recall over previous scenes in the film to remember previous elements of the story being presented.

That memory is the overriding theme, the lens through which other issues are explored, is also indicated by the leading character's constant reference to his condition, as well the fact that the other characters relate to Leonard primarily as someone defined by his lack of remembrance, with one of them calling him "Memory Man" (Nolan, 211). Telling, too, is the director's decision to open the film with the shaking of the photograph, wherein images are perceived in the present but then very quickly and irretrievably decay, an apt metaphor of Leonard's memory deficit. Then, most obviously, we have the title of the film, referring to an object that serves as a reminder of the past. The role of memory in human affairs, it turns out, will be evaluated by envisioning what happens when it is absent, very much like a scientist might test the causal efficacy of a certain variable by experimentally removing it and keeping every other relevant factor equal.

To accomplish this, the film needed to identify these other relevant factors. More specifically, it had to advance a coherent and plausible picture of how the human mind works. This was necessary, in any case, not just to satisfy the logical requirements of the enquiry into memory, but also to serve the aesthetic imperative of crafting a compelling plot. While a storyteller is permitted to begin with an unlikely or fictitious premise – in this case, a rare memory disorder known as anterograde amnesia – the sequence of events and character sketch developed out of that premise must be such as to be plausible (Aristotle 1984, pp. 234-236). The following sorts of questions must be addressed: Does the mind primarily function through images or words? Does the human mind come equipped with innate ideas? Does it organize experience through a fixed schema? Does it intuit fundamental realities? Or is the mind originally a blank slate entirely reliant on experience for its contents? However these questions are answered must logically affect the movie's portrayal of Leonard's memory problem. The less native and intuitive capacity that happens to be attributed to the mind, the more elaborate will Leonard's coping strategies have to be in order for him to pursue his vendetta against his wife's killer and rapist.

Leonard's Humean Mind

The empiricist answer to the questions above is that the mind has no inborn intellectual content or structure, encodes information and thinks via images gained from experience, with language serving both as a collection of signifiers of images and a mechanism by which to quickly and efficiently recall them for the purposes of thinking (Locke 1975, 43-105 & 402-408; Hobbes 1968, 100-110). David Hume, arguably the most logically consistent and rigorous exponent of the empiricist view in the history of Western philosophy, maintained that mental events, which he referred to as perceptions, are divisible into impressions and ideas. Included under the category of impressions are sensations, emotions, desires, and passions, whereas ideas are made up of the mental images we form of our impressions after experiencing them (Hume 1978, 1-2). Seeing *Memento* or feeling angry is an impression, whereas thinking about that movie or reflecting on our having been angry is an idea. What chiefly distinguishes the two is that impressions are more mentally striking and lively than the latter. Watching a hurricane out of a window is on a different order of vivacity than merely contemplating it from an account in the newspaper. As for memories, Hume implies that they lie on a continuum

between pure ideas and impressions. They are not purely ideas because, though they involve images of earlier impressions, they impact the mind more forcefully than the general run of our thoughts. They are not simply impressions either because memories are usually less animated than the original experience. Accordingly, Hume refers to memory as both an impression and an idea depending on the circumstances— though on the continuum between the perfect manifestations of these perceptions, memory evidently lies at the point at which it is an idea equivalent to an impression (Hume 1978, 82).

Our ideas, Hume further observes, are almost always reflective of our impressions, for even our most fanciful notions, such as that of a human being with wings, though never having been seen, ultimately breaks down into separate elements we have experienced that the imagination has put together (Hume 1978, 3). Since ideas come after their corresponding impressions – we cannot think of red without first having seen it – Hume concludes that we cannot, with very few exceptions, distinctly conceive of anything unless we have experienced it, or its elements, through sensation or feeling. Hence, linguistic terms are only meaningful if they can ultimately be referred to matters that can be sensed or felt: “When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that idea derived?*” (Hume 1977, 13). Insofar as Hume understands reasoning to consist in the analysis of relationships amongst separate ideas (Hume 1978, 73), it also follows that a person cannot lucidly pursue a train of thought unless each of the connecting links has been given substance via their experience.

Consider how Leonard would have to be drawn to fit the Humean theory. He could, of course, rely on the experience he acquired before the accident to form clear ideas and use these as materials for reasoning. Linguistic terms that call forth aspects of his previous existence would also help him to classify and make sense of the world. Notes could thus be taken to preserve new information, at least for those bits analogous to word referents established before his head injury. Such notes would also be useful in recording the results of an extended chain of reasoning to compensate for the fact that Leonard could not mentally grasp and follow every step in such a chain from beginning to end, being liable to forget where he started partway through his reflections. However, to record new information, for which words could not summon relevant details from the past, Leonard

would have to somehow create physical embodiments of his experience, a tangible form of an idea mirroring an impression, to give meaning to what he writes down.

Yet Hume's theory does point to a mental aptitude by which Leonard could attain a measure of liberation from his imprisonment to the pre-accident and present order. As part of his famous claim that cause and effect relations cannot be deductively or inductively inferred, Hume posits that people only believe that A invariably gives rise to B because of mental habit, or what he more formally calls custom (Hume 1978, 102-103). This custom or habit is formed when a person repeatedly sees A being followed by B. So ingrained does this become that we need only be cued by beholding A to instantaneously think of B, without our having to remember all the times we saw A preceding B. As Hume admits: "we can reason upon our past conclusions, without having recourse to those impressions from which they first arose. For even supposing these impressions should be entirely effac'd from the memory, the conviction they produc'd may still remain" (Hume 1978, 84). On the Humean view, therefore, someone like Leonard could fix new principles in his mind by constantly re-enacting the same experience.

The depiction of Leonard closely follows the implications of Hume's cognitive psychology. In the film's first scene of black and white sequences, which periodically interrupt the reverse movement of the story, we find Lenny waking up in a room and looking around. Unable to figure out how long he's been there or how he arrived at this place, he is able to make use of his pre-accident experience and determine that he is in a motel room. Indeed, his professed ignorance regarding his location and the period spent in the room point to his recognition of space and time in the abstract, again concepts that could have been obtained before. The other, specific objects he is able to identify also harken back to his past life, namely the bedside drawer and the Gideon Bible inside it. He reveals a continuing grasp of the notions of money, exchange, and transactional fairness, as evidenced by his interactions with Burt, the motel attendant, who attempts to cheat Leonard by renting him two rooms. Similarly, he retains an understanding of the services that hookers provide, as well as how to look for one in the phone book under "Escort Services", calling for a blond woman to help relive the night of the attack.

Leonard's dealings with Natalie lead to the most vivid illustration of his reliance on the pre-accident store of his memories. Natalie is the boyfriend of Jimmy, a drug dealer whom Leonard is tricked into killing by Teddy, a murder that takes place at the beginning

of the story, that is, the end of the film. After confirming Leonard's memory problem, she befriends him and uses him to retaliate against Teddy by handing him automobile registration documents matching the license plate number tattooed on his thigh. She also manipulates him to protect herself from an associate of Jimmy's named Dodd who happens to suspect her. Thus induced to go after Dodd, Leonard breaks into his apartment and hides in the bathroom armed with a liquor bottle in his hand. Once some time goes by and he forgets why he is there, he looks at the empty bottle and tries to make sense of it by recalling what it typically connoted in his previous life. "Don't feel drunk", he says (Nolan, 156).

The most obvious way in which Leonard is consistent with Hume's epistemology is that he does not merely rely on written notes, but supplements these by carrying around a Polaroid camera. As directed by one of his tattoos, the camera is used to take pictures of his residence, car, along with his friends and enemies, all instances in which the appropriate word signifiers do not necessarily refer to the same thing that they did before Leonard's impairment and in which the signified objects continue to be susceptible to change over time. The pictures conveniently serve the function of Hume's ideas in replicating impressions, not just because of their capacity to represent the original event, but inasmuch as they can readily bring past information to mind at any future time and place due to their portability and durability.² Leonard always has his pictures available in his pockets and he does mention to Natalie that they cannot be ripped but that one must go to the trouble of burning the photo in order to destroy it. Granted that Leonard always writes explanatory notes in the white area below the photo, or on the back of it, which may be taken to suggest the counter-thesis that images are less vital in processing thought than language. Actually, what this shows is that language happens to be useful in helping

² Without explicitly mentioning Hume, Hutchinson and Read (2005, 82) acknowledge Leonard's Humean mind in remarking: "A conception of mind as an inner realm populated by mental representations ... which we access on the input of sensory data is precisely that which is being represented externally in *Memento*".

Hutchinson and Read argue that *Memento* mimics Wittgenstein's example in the *Philosophical Investigations* of the shopkeeper obtaining five red apples by looking up the referents of the words "five", "red", and "apples". Like this example, it is argued that *Memento* externalizes the idea of thinking as a matter of dealing with representations. In the process, this vision of the mind is allegedly undermined because Leonard fails to resonate as a person, despite externally manifesting the kind of thinking a person is supposed to do. To this, one may respond that Leonard's personhood is diminished because his attempt to artificially construct rationality cannot replicate what our natural faculties execute internally.

us distinguish the vast sea of objects that regularly strike the mind. Language is a handy tool, rather than an essential material, for thinking, as is obvious when one considers that an individual can ascertain an object in all its relations to other facts from a picture alone, if their memory is up to the task. Leonard's memory is not, and that is why he needs to provide accompanying notes. Notice that when confronted with objects associated to a time that he can still remember – his wife's stuffed toy, book, bra, hairbrush – he does not require any notes to distinguish them. Keeping in mind that we all, to a smaller degree, share in Leonard's memory problem, his writing notes beside pictures serves to clarify one reason why human beings need language: We cannot, purely through our mental devices, possibly retain, nor promptly call forth, all the separate facts of our experience so as to render these of service to our minds in the future.

The Humean priority of images over words is also indicated when Natalie asks him to describe his wife. Wanting him to enjoy the reminiscence, she then says: "Don't just recite the words. Close your eyes, remember her" (Nolan, 125). Words just do not move the mind the way images do. With a stream of images going through his head, Leonard replies that he can just recall details, "[b]its and pieces which you didn't even bother to put into words ... enough to know how much you miss them, and how much you hate the person who took them away"(Nolan, 125). There are certain things for which words are not necessary to express. Bear in mind, too, one of the contrasts Leonard makes between himself and Sammy Jenkis, a semi-retired accountant Leonard came across prior to his injury. As the result of a car accident, Jenkis suffered a similar condition to Leonard, disabling him from working. Unable to cope with mounting bills, Sammy's wife filed an insurance claim, which Leonard was called to investigate during his former existence as a claims adjustor. Reflecting on the case, he concludes that Sammy was never able to cope with his condition, in part, because the latter, "wrote endless notes ... he'd get mixed up" (Nolan, 121). Words, it seems, can be a cumbersome way of recording events. Noteworthy as well is that Leonard is leery of speaking over the phone, enough to have arranged a tattoo stating "NEVER ANSWER THE PHONE" (Nolan, 84, capitalization his), because it places him in a condition where he cannot visually gauge the trustworthiness of his interlocutor, a condition in which he is at the complete mercy of the spoken word. The person, who turns out to be Teddy, with whom he speaks on the phone in the black and white scenes can only establish his bona fides by slipping a picture of Leonard under his motel room door. Nor

should we forget that, to protect himself from being misled, Leonard has to verify that the set of notes he is examining were actually written by him. To do this, he must retain an image of his handwriting to evaluate any notes at his disposal, which is how he discovers that Burt at the motel has been trying to rent him two rooms. Words must pass before the tribunal of the image.

Also consistent with Hume's teaching is that Leonard is forced to summarize the findings of his search for his wife's killer and rapist. During his conversation on the phone, he admits that he cannot, all at once in his mind, grasp the import of the police file that he possesses. A list of conclusions are written on the back of the file, as are six enumerated facts tattooed on his body, namely that the culprit is a male, white individual named John or James G, who is a drug dealer and drives a vehicle with the license plate "SG13 7IU". Helping Leonard stay focused on the hunt for John or James G is his cultivation of Humean custom, for in comparing himself to Sammy Jenkis he explains: "I've got a more graceful solution to the memory problem. I'm disciplined and organized. I use habit and routine to make my life possible" (Nolan, 121). The power of mental habit is used to explain how Sammy Jenkis could still complete intricate tasks, like giving his wife an insulin shot, but only if he had repeatedly done them before losing his memory. Nothing but habit can account for why Leonard continually manages to have the presence of mind to consult his notes and pictures as well as recognize on the spot that he needs to take them in the first place. Evidently, doing these things over and over again has rendered it automatic.

Personal Identity and Moral Responsibility

With the psychological underpinnings of *Memento's* thought experiment set on a Humean framework, the film delves into the significance of memory through the actions of a man who understands himself to be engaged in a moral project. That Leonard understands himself as a moral agent is made clear when, upon being asked by Natalie to kill Dodd, he replies that he is no hired assassin. Asked why, then, he is willing to kill for his wife, Leonard's response is: "That's different" (Nolan, 186). While Natalie suggests it is different simply because of the love he bears his wife, this feeling is really the symptom of a more fundamental concern driving Leonard. For what is truly distinctive in the case of avenging his wife is that Leonard is not furthering some interest, as he would in killing Dodd for money – he is attempting rather to correct an injustice. At issue is what Hume

calls the “vulgar definition of justice”, to wit, “a constant and perpetual will of giving everyone his due” (Hume 1978, 526). As to what “due” precisely entails, Leonard evokes the Old Testament principle of “an eye for an eye”. Just before he kills the man he thinks is John G., namely Teddy, he screams: “YOU PAY FOR WHAT YOU DID!” (Nolan, 107; capitalisation his).

Teddy tries to save himself by insisting: “You don’t know me, you don’t even know who you are” (Nolan, 4). To Leonard’s rejoinder that he is Leonard Shelby from San Francisco, Teddy says: “Lemme take you down in the basement [where Jimmy’s dead body is located] and show you what you’ve become” (Nolan, 108). The audience is thus left to wonder whether Leonard maintains a single identity throughout the story. Also brought into question, as a result, is his moral project, its legitimacy tied to the question of how memory is connected to personal identity. The conundrum of his identity presents itself again in a subsequent scene, wherein Teddy, attempting to turn Leonard away from Natalie, remarks: “You haven’t got a clue, have you? You don’t even know who you are?” (Nolan, 176). Teddy says this amid a conversation in which he is trying to make Leonard question why he is wearing a designer suit and driving a Jaguar. Leonard explains that he obtained the necessary money from insurance coverage triggered by his wife’s death, but then we discover that this is false, as the clothes and car have been taken from Jimmy. A signal is given, by virtue of the difference in his clothing and car that Leonard’s identity has indeed changed. As if to command us to reflect on this after viewing the movie, *Memento* concludes with Leonard asking: “Now ... where was I?” (Nolan, 226)

Personal identity refers to that sense we have of being the same individual amidst the myriad of different sensations, thoughts, emotions, actions, and circumstances that befall us in the passing of time. In everyday understanding, the elements of similarity and difference connected to ourselves are integrated by refusing to identify a person with the diversity of their attributes and experiences; rather, the person is distinguished from that diversity, being defined as the single entity that happens to have numerous attributes and experiences, the latter thus being construed as accidental to a person’s essential character. This view is implicit in our language through which we use a person’s name as a subject and then proceed to predicate any number of things of it. Another common tendency is to equate a person’s identity to their mind. Hence, in his investigation of Sammy Jenkis, Leonard concludes that he has changed because, though physically still

capable of forming new memories, he has become mentally disordered. Meanwhile, Jenkis' wife looks into Sammy's eyes, the windows of his soul, and cannot bring herself to believe that he is a different person.

Of merely theoretical interest as the philosophic debate about personal identity might appear to be, the truth is that it has momentous implications. If common sense notions about personal identity are wrong, if the existence of a continuous being cannot be established, then it follows that we cannot hold people morally responsible for their actions. Anything they did in the past would be attributable to a different person in the past, not the one that they are now. An individual who pulled the trigger in murdering someone three days ago could literally say: "that may have been this hand on the gun, but it wasn't me". In believing Leonard to have lost a stable identity, Teddy is consistent in deducing that he is responsible for Leonard's actions: "I'm the one that has to live with what you've done" (Nolan, 222).

Among Hume's skeptical positions, none is more shocking than his argument that we cannot verify the objective existence of a self. Given the magnitude of this verdict, his reasoning is surprisingly straightforward, deduced from his epistemological teaching concerning the relation of ideas and impressions: we can only conceive of that which was initially impressed on our minds as a sensation, feeling, or emotion; the idea of the self must then arise from an impression; the idea of the self, though, is supposed to refer to something that remains identical over time; but as none of our impressions persist, our sensations and emotions always shifting, we cannot intellectually grasp anything continuous; and therefore, we have no clear and distinct idea of the self; what we call the self amounts to nothing more than a bundle of separate mental perceptions. As Hume famously stated it:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain of pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception (Hume 1978, 252).

What the removal of memory in Leonard does is bring into sharp relief the discreteness of our mental life. Leonard incessantly experiences the world as a new and different scene without an obvious common ground; he is the Humean bundle of perceptions in its starkest form. In watching him, it dawns on us that this flux is the ultimate reality about

ourselves, hidden from us only because of our normally functioning memory capacities. *Memento* thereby advances the notion that our ordinary sense of self as a simple unity, seamlessly assimilating the differences of felt reality, is a fiction that is imposed on our experience through our memory.

Once again, this is in keeping with Hume, at least the one at the time *The Treatise of Human Nature* was being written. Later, when he reviewed his philosophic system in the *Appendix* to the *Treatise*, Hume confessed to being dissatisfied with the account he gave to explain how people manage to subjectively connect their disparate perceptions and speak of personal identity (Hume 1978, 633). Hume originally argued that individuals perceive a bond to exist between their successive mental perceptions in part because memory regularly calls forth images that naturally resemble objects previously experienced, rendering it psychologically easy for the mind to connect the two sorts of perceptions. A more important part is played by the mind's customary disposition to link repeatedly succeeding events in cause and effect terms, a process in which memory is indispensable by bringing to mind past regularities in thought, sense, and emotion. Once memory establishes this bond, we then project our identity onto periods and situations we cannot remember on the inference that the causal chain uniting our mental states necessitates that it always be in operation, regardless of whether it is under our notice (Hume 1978, 260-262).

Here we have *Memento's* rationale for why Leonard retains a sense of personal identity. This retention is not just indicated by the frequent invoking of his name or his always being able to acknowledge his name when other people address him. It is primarily evidenced in the pangs of guilt he feels at the thought of having committed a wrongful act in his unremembered past. He says, "with my condition, you don't know anything, ... you feel angry, guilty, you don't know why" (Nolan, 200). Then, too, there is Leonard's belief that he remains accountable for avenging his wife's rape and murder. Neither of these matters is chalked off as someone else's moral affair. Able due to his pre-injury store of memories to causally tie experiences from before to the present (i.e., my wife was killed and now I am in pain), Leonard figures that he has always remained the same person, despite his inability to recall his existence at different junctures. "The world doesn't disappear when you close your eyes, does it?" (Nolan, 124) It is true that a more explicit explanation is offered in Leonard's assertion: "We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I'm no different" (Nolan,

226). The point here is that our identity is a product of other people's recognition of us. But this is no departure from Hume, who also remarks that people often assure themselves of their qualities by the way others react to them. People who esteem themselves virtuous, for instance, will feel greater pride to the extent that another acknowledges it. "In general", Hume says, "the minds of men are mirrors to one another" (Hume 1978, 365) *Memento's* contention, in any case, is that memory, far from discovering or reminding us of moral responsibility, actually produces it through an interpretation of our mental states. At the same time, memory need not work perfectly to sustain a consciousness of our accountability.

Memory and Truth

Leonard's endeavor to balance accounts and restore the moral order can only succeed, of course, if it is tied to a consciousness of the truth. To begin with, the act to which he is trying to respond must have actually occurred in line with his understanding of it. This understanding, in turn, must be perfectly retained in some way so as to be recallable whenever necessary. It cannot be forgotten – hence, why the victims of atrocities, such as the Armenian genocide or the Holocaust, place so much importance on preserving the memory of what happened to them. The responsible parties, along with their proportionate shares in the wrongdoing, must be correctly identified. Any penalty meted out must be recognized as having taken place and be recorded somehow in order to preclude the whole process from starting over again and potentially going on *ad infinitum*. Thus, we arrive at the most profound issues in *Memento's* thought experiment, namely the extent to which memory is up to the task of validating the truth necessary to satisfactorily fulfill our moral imperatives.

Strangely enough, the need to recall the wrongful act is rendered easier in Leonard's case by his very memory condition, albeit in combination with his Humean experience of time. According to Hume, the idea of time, rather than being the comprehension of an objective fact, arises subjectively out of the awareness that our mental perceptions, our impressions and ideas, continually succeed each other. Should a change come about, then, in the manner in which this succession is perceived, a change in one's sense of time will inevitably follow. "A man in a sound sleep, or strongly occupy'd with one thought, is insensible of time; and accordingly as his perceptions succeed each

other with greater or less rapidity, the same duration appears longer or shorter to his imagination" (Hume 1978, 35). In Leonard's case, what would be affected would not be the rate at which the succession of perceptions occurs, but instead the extent of the series that he could grasp in any single mental act. Compared to ordinary people, it would be a smaller series because it would just include all the ideas corresponding to his pre-injury state in addition to his current situation, without a record of the intervening events. We would thus expect Leonard to always have his wife's attack as the last instance of time prior to the current one, always feeling as if it happened recently and consequently impossible to forget. Our expectations are not dashed when we witness Leonard burning his wife's personal effects, trying to forget her, but then realizing: "Probably tried this before. Probably burned truckloads of your stuff. Can't remember to forget you" (Nolan, 164). Of course, if he could recall newly occurring events, the succession of ideas perceivable by his mind would continuously place her further back in the series from the current moment and hence more and more out of mind. Thus does the capacity to forget make certain things unforgettable.

With the attack on his wife always fresh on his mind, one would think that Leonard's chief obstacle would revolve around the collection, accumulation, and retention of evidence concerning the identity of John G. In other words, the search for the culprit would appear most challenging and, certainly, much of Leonard's efforts are devoted to that task, with the audience captivated throughout by the popular "who-dun it?" script. When, however, we reach the beginning of the story at the end of the film, we are led to suspect that what seemed the most solid aspect of his case, his first-hand account of the second assailant present at the attack, is actually the weakest. The defect is disclosed in the very foundations of his reasoning. All this comes to a head, as everyone who has seen the movie will easily remember, when Teddy alleges Leonard is actually the Sammy Jenkis he persistently talks about, at least in this one decisive respect: Sammy's wife decided one day to test whether he was faking his memory problem by repeatedly adjusting her watch and reminding him it was time for her insulin shot; his wife receives confirmation that Sammy was no pretender, but dies as a result of the multiple insulin shots. To Teddy's accusation, Leonard counters that his wife was not diabetic: "You think I don't know my own wife?" (Nolan, 220)

Is there any way Leonard could possibly be mistaken about this? He should, after all, be expected to remember whether his wife suffered from diabetes, since he can remember everything up to the attack. Hume hints there is a reason why even his good memory can fail. He points out that memory is akin to the imagination in that both involve ideas that replicate what the mind previously sensed or felt as impressions. The difference is that memory retains the original order and composition of experiences, whereas the imagination arranges and mixes aspects of our past as it pleases (Hume 1978, 8-9.) That still leaves the question, though, of how to tell whether a particular set of ideas exactly correspond to the past or creatively assemble it. To distinguish the two possibilities, we cannot directly consult the past datum by reviving it. The past is, and will always be, no more. Echoing this in the film is the pathetic scene in which Leonard arranges for a hooker to come to his motel room so that she can play his wife and relive their final night together. With no appeal to the past available, Hume declares that we distinguish memory from imagination through feeling; what we remember is felt more intensely and lively than what we imagine (Hume 1978, 85). "Something feels wrong" (Nolan, 143), Leonard says in Humean fashion when trying to recall the circumstances that led him to Dodd. No evidence exists for a memory claim other than the fact that the person making it is convinced of its being true. Where past events are but felt lukewarmly, or a false account of them is repeatedly impressed on the mind as to render the thought of it lively, or better yet, where strong feelings against certain previous occurrences create a keener sensibility towards a reconstruction of them, Hume's account readily allows the possibility of someone mistaking a product of their imagination for a memory. No surprise, then, that Teddy explains Leonard's delusions by observing how the latter has told the Sammy Jenkis story so many times to anyone who will hear it that he has come to believe it. "So you lie to yourself to be happy", Teddy adds, "[n]othing wrong with that. – we all do" (Nolan, 218).

This last comment, that we all alter our memories to suit our purposes, signals that the uncertainty that Leonard confronts is not peculiar to him because of his disability, but applies to everyone. Note that the doubt is raised about Leonard's pre-accident memory. To complete its thought experiment, the film checks the results gleaned in abstracting the ability to generate new memories against a normally functioning memory, a control group as it were, and finds no difference in their respective powers to withstand doubt. Leonard

underlines the deficiencies of human memory in defending the reliability of his notes to Teddy:

Memory's not perfect. It's not even that good. Ask the police, eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The cops don't catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They collect facts, make notes, draw conclusions. Facts, not memories ... Memory can change the shape of a room or the color of a car. It's an interpretation, not a record. (Nolan, 135)

Right though he is about memory, Leonard turns out to be wrong in distinguishing it from facts. After all, his notes and tattoos marked as facts did not stop him from being manipulated by Teddy. The only facts whose validity does not depend on memory refer to objects and circumstances currently before our senses; and even these quickly enter into the past, as they do for Leonard, and come under the purview of memory. Any objects kept related to that sense-experience, and any pictures or notes taken to record it, are only seen as denoting a set of facts for three reasons: we trust the memories of those originally present; we trust that their claim to be providing their memories is made in good faith, that is, that they are not lying about what they remember; and we reckon that the account offered accords with, or at least does not fundamentally contradict, our own memory of analogous events. Where the incident in question took place a long time ago, so that the report of it had to be passed along from one person to another, its status as a fact would then additionally depend on our confidence that everyone down the chain faithfully remembered the information they received.³

The case is similar where a fact is established about something that no one witnessed based on objects or circumstances subsequently found at the scene. If we find a dead body in a room, with physical signs that the victim resisted, along with four gun shot wounds to the chest, we infer that a murder occurred. But this reasoning, as we have already pointed out in describing Hume's theory of causal inferences, is only possible because we remember past instances of dead bodies similar to the one we are witnessing occurring upon a homicide. We deploy causal inferences, too, in our encounter and managing of future facts, in predicting, for example, that penicillin will cure bacterial diseases or that a car built without seatbelts will give rise to more deaths. That means

³ The argument in this paragraph is very much in the spirit of what Hume (1978, 82-83) says in explaining the ultimate foundations of our belief that Julius Caesar was assassinated on the ides of March.

memory is implicated in our thinking about the future. In strict logical terms, we share Leonard's fate in being imprisoned to the present, our minds having to struggle to preserve the past and deal with the future – the thought experiment that Leonard represents serves the purpose of highlighting this struggle.

Yet Leonard persists in trying to obtain the truth that will complete his moral project, just as Hume does in continuing his philosophic quest in spite of analyzing the mind to the point of radical skepticism. Hume felt so impelled by his passion for philosophy, so uneasy at the thought of not correctly understanding the human condition, that he calculated the benefits of proceeding even with the flawed tools of reason was worth the risk (Hume 1978, 271-272). Leonard is so driven by his passion for justice, so distressed at the prospect of his wife's crime going unavenged, that he must embark on the search for her rapist killer even with his mental condition. Hume held that, for all practical purposes, we are rightly convinced of what the mind fundamentally pronounces – that a meaningful and intelligible world exists independently of us – because our natural inclinations have left us no choice in the matter. "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel" (Hume 1978, 183). Leonard, meanwhile tells Natalie that, "there are things you know for sure", that he is sure of, "the feel of the world" (Nolan, 144), of how it will sound when he knocks on a piece of wood, of the texture of a glass he is about to hold. *Memento's* culminating philosophic observation is Leonard's statement that, "I have to believe in the world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world's still there" (Nolan, 225). Another way out of the skeptical morass is offered in this passage from Hume:

As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on these subjects, it always encreases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason, I rely entirely upon them ... (Hume 1978, 218)

Simply stated: we should let ourselves forget about it. The inherently forgetful Leonard is thus revealed as a model for coming to terms with our deficient minds. Still, though we are not to dwell on our imperfections as to become Hamlets, too hesitant to act, we are advised by Hume to proceed carefully, ever mindful of how our enquiries can lead us astray and ready to revise our thinking should new evidence demands it. One of the things that

Teddy imparts to Leonard in the film's last scene is that he already killed the second assailant named John G., who had in fact raped, though not murdered, his wife. Perhaps figuring that Teddy had no incentive to confess his exploitation of him, perhaps swayed by the photograph showing him pointing to his heart where he planned to mark the completion of his mission, Leonard writes a reminder to tattoo, "I'VE DONE IT" (Nolan, 223, capitalization his) before ripping it up to go after Teddy. Fitting his Humean character, Leonard readily admits his mistakes.

Bibliography

- Aristotle (1984) *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*. Trans. Ingram Bywater. New York: Random House
- Clarke, Melissa (2002) "The Space-Time Image: the case of Bergson, Deleuze, and Memento". *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, v. 16, n. 3: 167-181
- Hobbes, Thomas (1968) *Leviathan*. Ed. C.B. Macpherson. New York: Penguin
- Hume, David (1977) *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Eric Steinberg. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company
- Hume, David (1978) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hutchinson, Phil & Read, Rupert (2005) "Memento: A Philosophical Investigation" in *Film as Philosophy*. Ed. Rupert Read & Jerry Goodenough. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 72-93
- Internet Movie Database (2008), *IMDb Top 250* [<http://www.imdb.com/chart/top>] Accessed 7 May 2008
- Johnson, Steven (2005) *Everything Bad is Good for You*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Klein, Andy (2001) "Everything You Wanted to Know about Memento". *Salon* [http://archive.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/2001/06/28/memento_analysis/] Accessed 7 May 2008
- Little, William G (2005) "Surviving Memento". *Narrative*, v. 13, n. 1: 67-83
- Locke, John (1975) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Nolan, Christopher (2001) *Memento and Following*. New York: Random House
- Nolan, Jonathan (c. 2000) *Memento Mori*,
<http://www.impulsenine.com/homepage/pages/shortstories/memento_mori.htm
> Accessed 7 May 2008
- Parker, Jo Alyson (2004) "Remembering the Future Memento: the Reverse of Time's Arrow and the Defects of Memory". *Kronoscope*, v. 4, n. 2: 239-257
- Postman, Neil (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking Press.
- Sibielski, Rosalind (2004) "Postmodern Narrative or Narrative of the Postmodern? History, Identity, and the Failure of Rationality as an Ordering Principle in Memento". *Literature and Psychology*, v. 49, n. 4: 82-101

Filmography

Hitchcock, Alfred (1959) *North by Northwest*. USA

Kubrick, Stanley (1964) *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. USA

Nolan, Christopher (2000) *Memento*. USA

Welles, Orson (1941) *Citizen Kane*. USA