

Film and Philosophy: *Memento* and Personal Identity

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The film

Structure

There are two sequences of scenes, one black and white and the other colour, and they are interwoven. If you wanted to view events in the order in which they happened, you would start by viewing all the black and white scenes in the order that they were shown, then all the colour scenes in the reverse order to that shown. The first scene that we see, a colour one, is shown in reverse to remind you of this. The last scene that we see, which links the black and white scenes to the colour scenes, changes from black and white to colour without breaking the narrative.

The black and white scenes show Leonard alone in a motel room, communicating with Teddy by telephone and by notes pushed under the door. In the course of this, we are told about the background and the case of Sammy Jankis. Within these scenes, Leonard's flashbacks to his wife are in colour. The colour scenes show events after Leonard has come out of the room to meet Teddy.

Characters

Leonard Shelby. Some time in the past, he and his wife were attacked at home. His wife was killed, and he suffered anterograde amnesia. He can remember events up to the attack, but he cannot form new memories, so he has no idea what happened more than a few minutes ago. He is searching for his wife's killer. He uses notes, tattoos and photographs to make up for his own lack of memory. He used to work as an insurance investigator, when he tackled the case of Sammy Jankis.

Teddy (John Edward Gammell), a policeman. Leonard shoots him in the first scene that we see, which is the end of the events as they happened. Earlier in those events (but later in the film), he uses Leonard and then wants to get Leonard out of town.

Jimmy Grantz, a drug dealer.

Dodd, involved in the drugs business.

Natalie, Jimmy Grantz's girlfriend. She also uses Leonard, against Dodd and against Teddy.

Sammy Jankis, who also suffered from anterograde amnesia, and his wife, who tested his condition by repeatedly asking him to inject her insulin.

Leonard's wife. Teddy suggests that she died from an insulin overdose that Leonard administered, and that he is confusing his own history with that of the Jankis's.

Personal identity – the problems

What makes person X some time ago the same person as person Y now? Possible answers: continuity of body, of personality (as defined by you or by others?), of memory.

What is it to be a self? What is it to be recognised as a person by others?

The method of thought experiments. Normally there is no problem of identification. Atoms, personality traits and memories only change gradually. So we invent bizarre cases that include rapid changes, or that include breaks that destroy continuity, or that separate bodies, personality or memories from one another. We can read the film as a thought experiment of this nature.

John Locke

1632-1704, a British empiricist like George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776).

Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), book 2, chapter 27.

We cannot ask what makes this thing today the same as that thing yesterday. We must specify the type of thing. Something could be the same plastic, but a different utensil (a vase, a plate).

Same mass – you need the same atoms, but you can jumble them up.

Same plant or animal – such as an oak – you can change the atoms, or lop off a branch, but you preserve the same organisation, and you do so in one body (so that a duplicate is not the same). We can identify the same man or woman in this way.

Same person. A person is a thinking, intelligent being that has reflection, and sameness requires continuity of consciousness. If the soul of a prince transfers to a cobbler, we hold the cobbler-body-person responsible for all of the prince's actions.

Arguments for Locke's view

If I remembered Noah's flood, I would be sure that I was the same person as one who saw it. I am concerned for the future of the person who will be continuous in consciousness with me. It seems to identify the right people to praise or to punish.

Leonard Shelby

During waking hours, he has continuity given by overlapping periods of a few minutes each. But the sequence is broken during sleep.

He does have a link to memories from before the attack on his wife and himself. So is he now (N) the same person as before the attack (B), but not the same person as an hour ago (H)? Then we would have $N = B$ and $H = B$, but not $N = H$.

Are the actions of H the actions of N? Should N be held responsible for them? Or are they actions for which someone who no longer exists was responsible?

Natalie: Even if you get revenge, you're not gonna remember it. You're not even gonna know it happened.

Leonard: My wife deserves vengeance. It doesn't make any difference if I know about it. Just because there are things I don't remember ... doesn't make my actions meaningless. The world doesn't just disappear when you close your eyes.

The world outside Leonard's head is changed by his actions. He, inside his head, is not, at least not by acquiring memories. But his external memory, his collection of notes and photographs, is changed by his actions because he often records what happened straightaway. Could that external memory supply the continuity of memory that Locke wants us to have?

Some philosophers, such as Andy Clark at Edinburgh, think that we should regard our computers, and even our pens and notepads, as extensions of ourselves, not as separate tools.

Bernard Williams

1929-2003, a professor at Cambridge, Berkeley and Oxford.

"The Self and the Future" (1970)

A and B swap bodies, so the A-body has B's memories, character, etc and vice versa

Before doing this, ask A to think in a selfish way and then ask him who he will care about most afterwards. One is going to have a good time, and the other is going to be tortured. A will probably say he will care most about the B-body-person.

This suggests that Locke is right. But I would also care about the future of myself after total memory loss, with no body swap. So maybe Locke downplayed the body too much.

Leonard cares about the attack on his wife and himself. Can he care about what has happened since then? How far can he care about his future self? Would there be any argument against his taking crazy risks with his life?

The importance of the body

My shape, size and mannerisms are an important part of me. Are they a non-verbal memory of who I am?

Leonard needs to be linked to his body and his notes and photographs. They contain all the information that he has. A notebook that was somewhere else would be no good. He would not remember that it existed.

Could I have a sense of myself as a person in a world if I did not have a body? Perhaps I can only get that sense if I act, at a particular place which is close to some places and distant from others. I can get to the close places, but not the distant places, quickly.

Could Leonard have a proper sense of where he was in the world if he had always been unable to form long-term memories? (In fact he was not always like that. He can still use his pre-attack sense of location. He seems to know what he means when he says “I’m Leonard Shelby from San Francisco”.)

Being a self – reflexive self-consciousness

I am aware of myself in the world, and I project myself into a future or imagined world. I am aware of my own agency. I can change things, and can imagine *my* changing things in the future.

This self-awareness is very important to how we live, as shown by John Perry in “The Problem of the Essential Indexical” (1979). An indexical is a word like “I”, “you”, “here”, “today”. If you are pushing a trolley round and round a supermarket, and you notice a trail of sugar on the floor which gets thicker as you pursue the person who is leaving it, you have to realise that it is *you* who must act and turn the sugar packet the right way up.

Self-awareness also motivates. You think about what is not present, so you plan to act, and you act in advance of time, because the future world will be your world (even though you may not be around, as when you plant trees for future generations).

Leonard is motivated that vengeance be obtained, and he acts in order that it be obtained. But is he, inside his head, motivated that *he* should obtain it? Or is he plus his notes, photographs and tattoos a single organism which is motivated that it should obtain vengeance?

Being a self – a practical sense of time

We have a practical sense of time in relation to our own lives: “That was quick”, “It is a long time until my holiday”.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951): “A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow?” (*Philosophical Investigations*, part II, section i).

Could Leonard expect that Teddy would come the day after tomorrow? He could mark on a calendar that Teddy would come on Monday, turn on the television and hear an announcer say that today was Saturday, look at the calendar and work out that the gap was two days. But would that be the same thing? Is being able to check where you are in a sequence of events just as good as knowing your current place directly? And how important to your sense of self is it to know your place directly?

It does seem that you ought to be directly aware of what you are doing, not just your current action but how it fits into a sequence. You ought to be directly aware that you are putting the dinner in the oven now because this morning, your guests telephoned to say that they would be half an hour late, so that you will want the dinner to be ready one hour from now. Otherwise, your actions won't look like a chunk out of a life that you lead, under your own control.

Does Leonard's lack of direct awareness of the context of his current actions mean that we should not just say that Leonard equals the human being plus the notes, photographs and tattoos? He can only reliably consult the external material if he consciously decides to do so. (He can unreliably consult the material by accident, as when he finds a beer mat with a note from Natalie in his pocket).

Being a self – having a personal narrative

Your life is a story, part already settled, part yet to be written. You can look back and make sense of it all, even though you cannot be sure what will happen next.

Leonard can make sense of what he does now in relation to the time up to the attack on his wife and himself, but he cannot construct a narrative to fill in the gap between the attack and now. Does that matter? Can your current life make sense even if you can only relate it to something that happened a long time ago?

“It is quite true what philosophy says, that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other principle, that it must be *lived forward*” (*Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks* volume 2 (Princeton University Press, 2008), JJ:167, page 179).

Being a person among other people

We are aware of other people as people, not as objects in our own private worlds. We have respect and empathy.

Peter Strawson (1919-2006), a professor at Oxford, wrote “Freedom and Resentment” (1962). He said that we have a participant attitude to others, rather than an objective attitude. Some feelings are only appropriate to have towards other people. For example, you can resent someone who annoys you, but you cannot resent a paving stone on which you stub your toe.

Carol Rovane defines persons as agents who can engage in agency-regarding relations. These are relations in which people may try to influence one another, but aim not to hinder one another's agency (*The Bounds of Agency*, 1998). You may try honest rational persuasion, but you do not use force, trickery or lies.

Can others recognise Leonard as a person and engage with him rationally? It would get very difficult if they wanted to engage him in extended projects. They in fact manipulate him disgracefully, but could they involve him in their plans using any other method?

Natalie also shows Leonard great disrespect just for the fun of it, when she insults him and his wife. In so doing, does she treat him like an object? And is she culpable, given that he will not remember?