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# Movies and the Meaning of Life

## Philosophers Take On Hollywood

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## We All Need Mirrors to Remind Us Who We Are: Inherited Meaning and Inherited Selves in *Memento*

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The movie *Memento* (2000) broaches several interrelated philosophical questions concerning human knowledge, personal identity, and the human search for meaning. For example, is our knowledge based mainly on conclusions reached through our own reason, or is it based instead on habituation and conditioning brought about by forces outside of us? What is the role that memory plays in our knowledge? Furthermore, what is the relationship between memory and personal identity? And what is the relationship between memory, personal identity, and the human search for meaning? Can one meaningfully pursue projects in life that one has not chosen for oneself? While *Memento* does not resolve all of these issues, it does suggest some provocative answers that are bound to make us think differently about human knowledge, personal identity, and the meaning of life.

Many of *Memento's* segments are presented in reverse chronological order, and for good narrative, cinematic, and even philosophical reasons. First, on a narrative level, the reverse ordering allows the film-maker (Christopher Nolan) to withhold from the viewer the very same information that Leonard (Guy Pearce) is also withholding (until the end of the film) from us and even from himself; the information being withheld is the fact that it is Leonard himself who has deliberately set himself up to kill Teddy (Joe Pantoliano). Secondly, on a cinematic level, the reverse ordering draws us viewers into the movie more fully. Like Leonard, we viewers are forced to make infer-

ences and decisions about the trustworthiness of various characters in the movie, for example, Teddy, Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss), and Leonard himself. And also like Leonard, we must draw our conclusions on the basis of radically incomplete information. Finally, on a philosophical level, the reverse ordering forces us—like Leonard—to struggle with our memory of events in the movie, and thus forces us to realize that Leonard's condition is not just his condition alone, but is in fact—though in a less severe form—our very own condition as well.<sup>1</sup>

### What If Each of Us Is Really Made Up of Several, Consecutively-Existing Selves?

Leonard explains throughout the movie that he has a "condition" which prevents him from forming new long-term memories. He tells us that he retains his long-term memory of events prior to and leading up to the assault and killing of his wife ("the incident"), but that he has been unable to form new long-term memories of events since then. As a result, he is now unable to experience the passage of time beyond the usual ten-minute segments available to him through his impaired memory. Thus the center of experience that constitutes Leonard's personal identity lasts only for about ten minutes, and when this brief time period is over, Leonard forgets what he has just experienced, and begins having new experiences afresh, as if his immediately preceding experience did not happen at all. Leonard really does not experience himself as a single, unified self that endures unbroken over time, but rather as a series of different selves. Each of his separate, consecutively-existing selves comes into being and passes away in segments of about ten minutes.

<sup>1</sup> Only the movie's color segments are presented in reverse order, while all of the movie's black-and-white segments are presented in correct chronological order. More specifically, the movie alternates between color segments and black-and-white segments, with all the black-and-white segments being presented in correct chronological order, and all the color segments being presented in reverse chronological order. Thus, if one wanted to see all of the segments in correct chronological order, one would first have to see all of the black-and-white segments (skipping the color ones) in the order in which they are presented, and then see all of the color segments (skipping the black-and-white ones) in reverse of the order in which they are presented.

What Leonard's broken experience suggests is that his personal identity over time—or for that matter, anyone's personal identity—is not based simply on physical or material continuity over time, but depends rather on the “continuity of consciousness” that unites the various sensations, thoughts, memories, and ideas that make up one's experience. In other words, the conditions of an individual's personal identity over time seem to be different from the conditions of the identity of an inanimate object, or the conditions of the identity of a living thing that is not a person. An inanimate object such as a table maintains its identity over time simply so long as it maintains a continuity of material parts over time. Similarly, a living being that is not a person, such as a plant, maintains its identity over time simply so long as it maintains a continuity of life-processes over time. Unlike inanimate things and unlike living things that are not persons, persons seem to depend on altogether different conditions of identity over time. One's identity as the same person over time seems to depend on the contents of one's conscious experience. Thus if a person's living, physical body were to remain the same, but if he or she were to be given an entirely separate set of conscious experiences, then it would apparently be wrong to say that he or she was still the very same person. There would be no change in his or her identity as a physical being or as a living being; but there would be a change in his or her identity as a person, since that which seems to constitute his or her personhood (the contents of consciousness) would be altogether different and discontinuous with the preceding segments of consciousness.

This consciousness-centered notion of personal identity was expounded by the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>2</sup> *Memento* makes use of this notion in order to raise several philosophical questions, and eventually to question this very notion of personal identity altogether. According to Locke, one's identity as the same person over time is determined by the continuity of one's conscious experiences; because of this, one and the same physical, living human being could actually be connected with

<sup>2</sup> See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Book II, section xxvii, “Of Identity and Diversity.”

multiple persons or selves. And so according to the Lockean notion, two unconnected, discontinuous segments of consciousness are not part of the same person, but belong instead to two different persons. *Memento* employs this consciousness-centered notion of personal identity in order to suggest that we should perhaps not think of Leonard as a single person, but rather as a set of several different, consecutively-existing persons. After all, Leonard's experience is not a single, continuous unified experience, but rather the experience of many disconnected segments of consciousness—or many selves—that come into being and pass away every ten minutes.

Along these lines, Leonard explains to the motel clerk, Burt, that his experience “is like waking; it's like you just woke up.” This is significant for two reasons. First of all, the experience of “just waking up” is an experience that we all have. In other words, it's not just Leonard, but we ourselves, whose experience seems to be the experience of several, disconnected persons or selves. This point is reinforced in the short story, “Memento Mori,” on which the film *Memento* is based. In the short story, we read:

Every man is broken into twenty-four-hour fractions, and then again within those twenty-four hours. It's a daily pantomime, one man yielding control to the next: a backstage crowded with old hacks clamoring for their turn in the spotlight. Every week, every day. The angry man hands the baton over to the sulking man, and in turn to the sex addict, the introvert, the conversationalist. Every man is a mob, a chain gang of idiots.<sup>3</sup>

The lesson here is that Leonard's condition is not different in kind from our own condition; it is only different in degree. Leonard's condition is simply an exaggerated version of our own condition. Whereas Leonard “wakes up” and comes into being as a new self every ten minutes, we do the same thing, but usually just once and not several times each day.

Secondly, Leonard's comparison of his experience to the experience of “just waking up” is significant because it makes clear that we need to distinguish between two types of memories. First

<sup>3</sup> The short story, “Memento Mori,” by Jonathan Nolan, was first published in the March 2001 issue of *Esquire* magazine. The short story is available online at: [www.esquire.com/features/articles/2001/001323\\_mfr\\_memento\\_1.html](http://www.esquire.com/features/articles/2001/001323_mfr_memento_1.html)

of all, there are relatively short-term memories that I form from within the present segment of consciousness that is my present self. Secondly, there are relatively long-term memories that I have not formed within my present experience, but that my present self *inherits* from a previous segment of conscious experience (from a previous self). My present self is dependent on an other self (a previous self) for its long-term memories, and as a result, the inferences and decisions made by my present self depend on the reliability of the memories that it inherits from the other (previous) self.

In accordance with the image of “just waking up,” the short-term memories that the present self forms within its own experience can be called “post-waking memories,” since these short-term memories are formed by the present self after it has “woken up.” By contrast, the long-term memories that the present self inherits from a previous self can be called “pre-waking memories” or “inherited memories.” Leonard tells us that ever since the time of “the incident,” he has been unable to form any new long-term memories, and that all of his long-term memories are inherited from a previous self. Even though this description of Leonard’s experience seems to make him unique, it is clear—upon further reflection—that this characterization is also meant to describe our own experience. Within our own experience, we always seem to find ourselves with “inherited” memories that have simply been given to us by a previous self, but also with the ability to form our own short-term, post-waking memories.

### **Two Types of Memory, Two Types of Knowledge, and Two Sources of Meaning**

In addition to suggesting that each person might really be made up of multiple selves, Leonard’s story also suggests that there is an important difference between two types of knowledge, which are based on two different types of memory. For example, when I rely on long-term, inherited memories, I must rely on a source (a previous self) that is external to my present self. My pre-waking, inherited memories give me knowledge that has been formed in me outside the scope of my (or my present self’s) own conscious awareness; as a result, such knowledge is knowledge that is “implanted” in my present self. It is knowl-

edge that I simply must “wake up” with, and about which I apparently have no choice but to accept. The problem with inherited knowledge is that it is knowledge that the present self did not arrive at on its own. When the present self relies on inherited knowledge, it is always in danger of being misinformed, misled, or manipulated by some other, previous self. By contrast, when I rely on short-term, post-waking memories, I am evidently not relying on any source that is external to my present self. Knowledge based on my short-term, post-waking memories is knowledge that I myself have arrived at through my own experiences and inferences. Of course, the problem with such post-waking, short-term memory is that the time period within which I am able to have my own experiences and form my own short-term memories is usually very brief. It’s about sixteen hours in the case of ordinary human beings, who are unconscious (asleep) for about eight hours of every twenty-four-hour cycle; and it’s about ten minutes in the case of Leonard, who loses all of his short-term memories roughly every ten minutes. As a result, any knowledge that is based only on post-waking, short-term memories is radically incomplete, fragmentary, and thus of limited use. It follows that Leonard’s condition, which is meant to represent our own condition, seems to present us with a fundamental dilemma: If I rely only on the memories and inferences formed by my present self, then I will be very limited in the knowledge I can gain and the decisions I can make; on the other hand, if I want to expand my knowledge and my capacity for decision-making, then I must rely on inherited memories and knowledge, in which case I run the risk of being misled or manipulated by an unreliable, external source.

Let us recall that the new, short-term, post-waking memories that Leonard is able to form on his own (within his present experience) last only about ten minutes. Once the ten minute period is over, the short-term memories and knowledge that Leonard himself has formed (along with his present self) are extinguished. Once Leonard’s previous self is extinguished, a new Leonard “wakes up” and begins at the same “starting point” from which all of his previous, short-lived selves had to wake up and begin their conscious experience. That is, he wakes up with the memory and knowledge that “I am Leonard Shelby of San Francisco, former insurance investigator, whose wife has been raped and killed, and whose death I must now avenge.”

In one respect, this inherited memory and knowledge is what gives each of Leonard's present selves a meaning: each time a new Leonard "wakes up" with his inherited memories and knowledge, he immediately knows that his purpose and goal in life is to avenge the death of his wife. Every waking moment of Leonard's present self is consumed by, and dedicated to, the project of avenging his wife's death. His present self can have no meaning apart from this goal.

Now it would seem that the very thing that gives Leonard his purpose in life (namely, his pre-given set of inherited memories and knowledge) might also undermine his quest for genuine meaning. For Leonard's problem is not just that he must pursue his purpose in life (avenging his wife's death) in periods of only ten minutes each; as Leonard himself realizes, this logistical problem can be addressed through a system of tattoos and notes.<sup>4</sup> The more serious problem for Leonard is that his meaning in life is not based on a goal *that he has chosen for himself*, but is rather derived from a purpose or goal that he has *inherited*, or that has been *implanted* in him, from a previous self. Leonard's problem—and by implication, our own problem—is not just that a person has a limited time within which to pursue the projects that give meaning to one's life. The deeper problem is that the projects that give meaning to one's life never really seem to be chosen by that person's own (present) self, but are always inherited from another (previous) self. But how can a person's own life really be meaningful, if such meaning is supposed to be derived from goals that have been dictated by some other (previous) self? Don't my most cherished goals in life have to be chosen by me (my present self) if they are to have meaning for me (my present self)?

In the movie's final segment, Teddy touches upon this issue of meaning when he tries to convince Leonard not to worry over the fact that he may have just killed the wrong person (Jimmy Grantz). In effect, Teddy argues that the meaning that Leonard's present self derives from the killing of Jimmy Grantz should not be based on any external events involving Leonard's past life or

<sup>4</sup> Leonard writes copious notes and tattoos information on his skin, in order to record the clues that he has gathered and thereby preserve them for a future self. Leonard must do this, since his present self cannot be trusted to remember anything beyond a brief, ten-minute period.

past self. More generally, Teddy is claiming that the goals that give meaning to one's life should not be goals that are imposed on one's present self by some other (previous) self; rather, the only goals that are truly meaningful are simply those that one's own present self chooses. What matters, Teddy says, is only that Leonard's *present* self enjoys the experience of having avenged the death of his wife. According to Teddy, then, the fact that Leonard may have just killed the wrong person is irrelevant, since Leonard will soon enough forget about what he has done. But Leonard will have none of this. He insists that the finding and killing of the right person is crucial to the very goal that his present self aims to achieve. After all, his present self would not even try to kill another human being, if it never were the case that some other human being had at some previous time destroyed his memory and murdered his wife. In other words, Leonard insists that the meaning experienced by his present self is inescapably dependent on a goal that his present self did not directly choose on its own, but rather inherited from a previous self. As Leonard had tried to explain to Natalie earlier in the movie, the meaning of one's present actions must refer to something beyond the scope of one's present consciousness: "Just because there are things I don't remember, it doesn't make my actions meaningless. The world just doesn't disappear when you close your eyes, does it?"

So is Teddy right to say that the meaning experienced by one's present self should not depend on goals inherited from a past self? Or is Leonard right to insist that the meaning experienced by his present self is inescapably connected to the goals that he has inherited from a previous self or a previous state of affairs? In one respect, Teddy seems to have a good point, since it is clear that Leonard's present self is always free to interpret the meaning of the evidence presented to it from a previous self or selves. As an example of this, Leonard's present self remains unconvinced by the Polaroid photograph which apparently depicts him celebrating after having successfully avenged his wife's death. It seems that Teddy is therefore right to claim that it is Leonard's present self alone that can decide what is meaningful or not within the scope of its present experience. On the other hand, Leonard also seems to have a good point. For it appears that Leonard's present self has no choice but to derive its meaning and purpose from the memories and knowledge

that it inherits from a past self. Precisely because he cannot form any new long-term memories, Leonard cannot move beyond the pain of his wife's death. As Leonard explains it, the last long-term memory that his present self retains is always the memory of his wife being killed. As a result, Leonard cannot learn to "forgive and forget," and thus cannot avoid the purpose that is freshly imposed on him every ten minutes. Along these lines, he asks (while sitting in bed with Natalie): "How am I supposed to heal, if I can't feel time?" Because he cannot experience sufficiently long passages of time, it seems that Leonard is perpetually condemned to "wake up" every ten minutes with the same goal or meaning that he inherits from another (previous) self.<sup>5</sup>

### The Role of the Future Self and the Possibility of Self-Conditioning

Now even if both Teddy and Leonard seem to make valid points, the lesson of *Memento* is that both of them are wrong: Teddy focuses too much on the present self's ability to make its own decisions about what is meaningful, while Leonard focuses too much on the present self's dependence on goals and meaning inherited from a previous self or previous state of affairs. In their exchange, both Teddy and Leonard focus on the past self, the present self, and the possible relations between them, but they both overlook the crucial role of the *future self*. Contrary to Teddy's claim, the present self that I am at any given moment does not acquire meaning by entirely ignoring or denying its dependence on a past self or on past events. And contrary to Lenny's claim, my present self does not gain meaning by just uncritically accepting the goals that have been dictated to it by a past self. Rather, the truth of the matter is that my present self achieves meaning by *looking forward* and by making decisions in the midst of its present experience with an eye towards creating a *new past* for the *future self* that it is yet to become.

<sup>5</sup> In the short story, "Memento Mori," the difficulty is expressed in this way: "And as for the passage of time, well, that really does not apply to you anymore, does it? Just the same ten minutes, over and over again. So how can you forgive if you can't remember to forget?" The text can be found online at: [www.esquire.com/features/articles/2001/001323\\_mfr\\_memento\\_1.html](http://www.esquire.com/features/articles/2001/001323_mfr_memento_1.html)

Even though Leonard is not quite clear about it, he is vaguely aware of this solution when he discusses his ability to "condition" himself. The key to such self-conditioning does not have to do with the past self or with the present self alone, but rather with the future self that Leonard is to become. Through self-conditioning, Leonard's present self neither denies its own past, nor simply ignores it, but rather forms new memories that will be forgotten by the *present self* that it is, but nevertheless retained as the seemingly unchosen past that its *future self* will inherit. Through such self-conditioning, the present self chooses or "sets up" the past that will have to be inherited by a future self. The fundamental philosophical lesson implied by the possibility of self-conditioning is this: *The past that you seemingly have no choice but to inherit is the past that you yourself have set up for yourself, but through the actions of your now-deceased previous self.* *Memento* deliberately provides evidence that such self-conditioning (the setting up of one's own past) is possible. For example, it is through his post-incident self-conditioning that Leonard learns that Polaroid photographs have to be burned in order to be destroyed; and it's also through his post-incident self-conditioning that Leonard learns how to "fake it" when he does not recognize the people he encounters.

As the short story, "Memento Mori," makes clear, the possibility of self-conditioning can be a good thing or a bad thing. After all, each of us is deemed to be a chain of multiple selves. And the present self that sets up the past for a future self can be a genius or a dolt. The tragedy of life is that our better and more insightful selves must frequently give way to lesser selves. The key to finding meaning in life is to ensure that my present self—in its fleeting moments of clarity—takes steps to bequeath to its future selves a better past than it has inherited.

That's the miserable truth. For a few moments, the secrets of the universe are opened to us. Life is a cheap parlor trick. But then the genius, the savant, has to hand over the controls to the next guy down the pike, most likely the guy who just wants to eat potato chips, and insight and brilliance and salvation are all entrusted to a moron or a hedonist or a narcoleptic. The only way out of this mess, of course, is to take steps to control the idiots that you become. To take your chain gang, hand in hand, and lead them.

The best way to do this is with a list. It's like a letter you write to yourself. A master plan, drafted by the guy who can see the light, made with steps simple enough for the rest of the idiots to understand. . . .<sup>6</sup>

If one's present self does not act with wisdom and foresight, then one risks condemning one's future selves to a limited, meaningless existence—an existence in which one is increasingly conditioned to crave only potato chips. In other words, one is conditioning oneself to forget about the future and to live only in the present moment, as a dumb animal lives. And by now it should also be clear that the boundaries that properly define a "present self" don't depend on some pre-ordained segment of time (such as ten minutes for Leonard or sixteen hours for us). The boundaries that distinguish one self from another depend on the insights that each self has (no matter how long these last), and not on some fixed measure of time.

The possibility of self-conditioning also reveals that the Lockean, consciousness-centered notion of personal identity is ultimately wrong, or at least very misleading. For the possibility of self-conditioning implies that the future self's own self-understanding will depend on the previous choices made by the present self. And since any present self is really just a "future self" in relation to a "past self," it follows that the present self's own self-understanding will also depend on the previous choices made by the past self. Because of this, the present self doesn't come to know itself simply by looking inward, but rather must depend—even for its own self-understanding—on sources external to itself. These external sources may include not only the past selves that are "external" to the present self, but also other selves altogether (such as Teddy and Natalie, on whom Leonard depends for crucial information and insight into his own situation). As Leonard poignantly observes at the end of the movie, we need to look outside of ourselves in order to have our very own purposes and goals reflected back to us: "We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are."

<sup>6</sup> "Memento Mori."

### What If Long-term Memories Could Be Altered by Short-term Memories?

The present self depends on past selves and other external sources for its own self-knowledge and for its sense of purpose in life. But this does not mean that the present self is not responsible, or cannot be held accountable, for its self-understanding or for its sense of purpose in life. This is because the boundaries that allegedly separate a present self from a past self are not airtight or impermeable. And so just as *Memento* leads us to question Locke's consciousness-centered notion of personal identity, it also leads us to question the seemingly obvious and clear-cut distinction between past selves and present selves, and between long-term memories and short-term memories. By the end of *Memento*, we're led to see that—contrary to initial appearances—the pre-waking, long-term memories that a present self inherits from the past are not immune from the influence of the short-term, post-waking memories that the present self forms from within its own experience. So what appear to be unchanging, long-term, inherited memories can actually be modified or altered by the decisions and inferences that a present self makes within its experience. Accordingly, we come to realize that some of the seemingly fixed, long-term memories that Leonard's present self has apparently inherited may have in fact been altered—or perhaps even created—because of the memories formed and decisions made by the present selves that Leonard has become. For example, in the prostitute scene, Leonard wakes up after hearing the bathroom door being slammed, and upon waking he believes that his wife is still alive (we know this, because he wakes up saying, "Honey, it's late—is everything okay?"). But how can he have forgotten that his wife is dead—and how could he believe that his wife is still alive—if the last truly reliable, long-term memory that he has (the last memory that he acquired before suffering his head-injury) is that of his wife dying?

Leonard directly tells Natalie that the last fixed, long-term memory he has is that of his wife dying. And throughout most of the movie, we viewers are led to believe that Leonard is correct about this. But the prostitute scene shows that Leonard's post-waking, present self is actually able to forget that his wife is dead. This implies that Leonard's memory of his wife's death

is actually *not* a fixed, unchanging, long-term memory that each of his present selves must passively inherit from his earlier, pre-injury self, but might be a memory that was formed in him *after* the time of his memory-impairing injury. Now if this is the case, then it is possible that Leonard's wife did not die at the time of the assault but rather survived the assault and was killed some time later. And if this is the case, then Teddy might be telling the truth when he suggests that the story that Leonard tells of Sammy Jankis (Stephen Tobolowsky) is really Leonard's own story. In other words, it is possible that Leonard's wife survived the assault, became frustrated with Leonard's memory-loss, "tested" Leonard (as Sammy's wife allegedly tested him), and died when Leonard unwittingly injected her with a lethal dose of insulin.

Before addressing the question of whether Sammy's story is really the story of Leonard himself, it will help to make a further observation about the idea of self-conditioning. As we've just observed, the seemingly fixed and unchanging long-term memories that one inherits from a past self are not hermetically sealed off from the influence of the short-term memories that one forms within one's present experience. A present self can have experiences and form new memories that will change one's seemingly fixed memories of a long-gone past. Thus the meaning of the past and the grip that it has on a person can be altered by the decisions one makes within one's present experience. Stated differently, the meaning of the past that one must inherit is actually not fixed for all time, but can be transformed indirectly through one's present decisions. As a result, one is inescapably responsible not only for the decisions one makes as a "present self," but also—indirectly—for the meanings one inherits from "past selves."<sup>7</sup> "In his disagreement with Teddy, Leonard was right to say that we must always inherit or "wake up" with a past that gives meaning to our life. However, Leonard was wrong to suggest that our present selves must simply accept and live out the projects that have been given to them by an entirely external (past) self. Though he was not quite aware of it, Leonard's own activity in self-conditioning was gradually and retrospectively transforming the meaning of his own past.

<sup>7</sup> Conversely, one is also responsible for the purposes and goals that one bequeaths to "future selves."

Interestingly, our own viewing of the movie shows just how such retrospective transformation can take place. Throughout most of *Memento*, we are led to believe that Leonard is speaking truly when he says that, just prior to his injury, he formed a fixed and reliable long-term memory of his wife dying. By the end of the movie, however, we have doubts about this, and our doubts cause us to recollect the movie's earlier scenes in a very different light. In this respect, we are again like Leonard: our subsequent insights transform the meaning of our past experience. Of course, we are inescapably dependent on the meanings and purposes that the past bequeaths to us. But we are never just purely passive victims of what the past has given to us. Rather, we always have the freedom to transform the meaning of the past—and transform the hold that it has on us—through the decisions we make in the present. The twentieth century German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), refers to this kind of freedom as "thrown projection." For Heidegger, even though we are always *thrown* into the world with a past that defines who we are and what is meaningful for us, we are nevertheless also free to transform the meaning of the past by *projecting* ourselves into the future.<sup>8</sup>

### Is the Story of Sammy Jankis Really the Story of Leonard Himself?

We can now return to our final question. Is the story of Sammy really an altered and transmuted story of Leonard's own past self? There are good cinematic reasons for believing so. For example, early in *Memento* Leonard explains that Sammy's poor memory prevented him from watching anything but commercials on TV. But when Leonard himself is alone at Natalie's house, we see him changing the TV channel to watch a commercial for Cal Worthington Ford. Furthermore, the film-maker presents us with a consistent and revealing system of flashbacks.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), pp. 182–88. Richard Polt explains Heidegger's point very nicely when he says: "Our lives are always a process of taking over who we have been in the service of who we will be." See Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 96.



All of the flashbacks about Sammy are in black-and-white, while all of the flashbacks about Leonard's wife are in color. In one color flashback, we see an insulin needle being prepared, obviously implying that it was actually Leonard's wife who had diabetes. Finally, in a flashback depicting Sammy's institutionalization, we see—just for a split second—Leonard sitting in the chair where Sammy had been sitting.

Now in addition to these cinematic suggestions, there is also a good *logical* reason for believing that Leonard may not be giving an “objectively true” account of Sammy and his wife. The logical reason is this: the only two witnesses to the “insulin test” that Leonard describes were Sammy and Sammy's wife. But how could Leonard have known about this test? The only two witnesses to the test would have been unable to tell Leonard about the test. One witness (Sammy's wife) was killed as a result of the test, and the other witness (Sammy) did not know that he was being tested. And besides, even if Sammy did know about the test, he now remembers nothing about it. Does this suggest that the “insulin test” was actually a test that Leonard knew about through his *own* experience, and not from Sammy or Sammy's wife? Should we conclude that it was *Leonard's* wife who became frustrated with Leonard after “the incident,” and that it was Leonard himself who killed his wife through an “insulin test”? It is tempting to draw these conclusions, but there is an important question that should give us pause: How could Leonard know about the insulin test, if it were *he himself* who was tested and who killed his wife? If Leonard himself really were tested in this way, and if he really did kill his wife because of his faulty memory, then Leonard could not have learned about the test from his own experience. In other words, the idea that Leonard was tested by his wife is just as questionable as the idea that Sammy was tested by his wife. In either case, there are simply no remaining witnesses who would be in a position to inform Leonard about the test.

So now we come upon a final philosophical lesson to be drawn from *Memento*. Because there are no remaining, reliable, “expert” witnesses to the “insulin test,” we must learn to live without a final and definitive answer to the question of whether Sammy's story is really Leonard's story. That question simply cannot be answered once and for all. But what we have just said about the insulin test can also be said about the meaning of the

past in general. That is, *Memento* shows us that the meaning of the past and thus also the meaning of our future goals in life are not externally imposed on us once and for all. Because of this, we must learn to be unlike Sammy's wife, who—according to Leonard's story—turned to Leonard in order to know definitively whether Sammy was “faking it” or not. Sammy's wife did not care which answer she received: she simply wanted an answer—any answer—because she sought certainty and direction in her future relationship with Sammy. She simply wanted the testimony of an “expert” (she wanted the testimony of Leonard, the “expert” insurance investigator) so that she could escape the responsibility of making her own difficult decisions in life. But *Memento* teaches us that Mrs. Jankis's quest is misguided. While our quest for meaning in life always depends initially on the memories and testimony that we have received from past selves and from other external sources, we should not pretend that this dependence can eliminate our responsibility for making difficult decisions and seeking our own meaning in life. While we always need mirrors to know who we are and to know what we seek in life, we are nevertheless inescapably responsible for what we have made of ourselves, and thus responsible even for what we behold when we look into the mirror.

## TO THINK ABOUT

1. Is it possible to have a personal identity without having a past that one can consciously remember? Conversely, is it possible to have a personal identity without having a future that one can consciously anticipate? Finally, is it possible to have a personal identity if one's conscious awareness is restricted to the present moment alone?
2. Is it possible to find meaning in life without having a past that one can consciously remember? Conversely, is it possible to find meaning in life without having a future that one can consciously anticipate? Finally, is it possible to find meaning in life if one's conscious awareness is restricted to the present moment alone?
3. Some philosophers have observed that there is an important connection between memory and personal liability. More specifically, they have argued that one cannot be held liable for that which is entirely absent from one's memory. Is this theory of personal liability a good one? Why or why not?

## TO READ NEXT

- Daniel C. Dennett. *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981.
- Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962. Especially Section 31 ("Being-there as Understanding").
- John Locke. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. Especially Book II, Section xxvii, "Of Identity and Diversity."
- Frederick A. Olafson. *What Is a Human Being? A Heideggerian View*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Richard Polt. *Heidegger: An Introduction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- John Perry, ed. *Personal Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

# Take Three

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## Am I Alone?