

MEMENTO AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

John McAteer

filmphilosopher@gmail.com

“We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are.”

In *Memento* (Nolan, 1999), Leonard Shelby has anterograde memory loss, a mental disability in which he can't make new memories. I find it interesting, that whenever Leonard talks about his memory problems, he refers to it as his "condition". I'm sure its a sign of nothing so much as my own insanity, but when I hear the term "condition", I can't help but think of the philosophical concept of "the human condition".

Leonard has the words "Remember Sammy Jankis" tattooed on the back of his hand. Leonard says he tells people about Sammy "to help them understand. Sammy's story helps me understand my own situation." In the last lines of the film, Leonard claims, "We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are." In his essay in *Movies and the Meaning of Life*, Michael Baur argues that *Memento* is one of the mirrors that can remind us who we are. Just as Sammy's condition is Leonard's condition, so Leonard's condition is our condition. Baur convincingly reads the film as an exploration of the problem of personal identity, in particular giving a Heideggerian critique of Locke's memory theory of identity. I highly recommend Baur's essay. *Movies and the Meaning of Life* is one of the best anthologies of film-philosophy out there, and Baur's essay is one of the best in the book. I don't wish to challenge his reading. But I do want to add an additional reading. I propose that *Memento* can also be read as an exploration of what

Lyotard called "the postmodern condition". (Again, it's probably just my own insanity, but I can't help hearing a verbal connection between the names *Leonard* and *Lyotard*.) Jamie Smith has already explored some of *Memento's* connections to postmodern philosophy in his book *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, but he focused specifically on themes from Derrida. I'd like to take a more general approach to postmodernism, borrowing a familiar narrative about modernity as the quest for certainty and postmodernity as the acceptance of human finitude. (On this narrative, see the work of Richard Rorty, Stephen Toulmin, Nancy Murphy, *et al.*)

Let's start at the beginning – which, in *Memento* is actually the end. The first image in the film is a polaroid photograph. But the shot is played in reverse so that the image gradually fades away before being reinserted into the camera. I take this shot to be a summary of the entire film. One of Leonard's tattoos reads "Buy film. Camera doesn't lie. Notes can be lost." In one scene, Leonard tells Teddy: "Facts, not memories. That's how you investigate. ... Memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the color of a car. And memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation, they're not a record, and they're irrelevant if you have the facts." So I take Leonard's polaroids as a symbol of *objective evidence* – he thinks of them as pure, uninterpreted access to the Truth. But the film gradually undermines this view. *On the reading advocated here, the opening shot of the fading photograph symbolizes the loss of objective evidence: the postmodern condition as the awareness that all facts are mediated by the perspective one brings to them.*

If Leonard's photographs suggest a modernist desire for objective evidence, perhaps we can read Leonard's memory problem as another symptom of modernity: the loss of tradition. Modernity, especially in its radical Enlightenment form, was the rejection of the authority of tradition in favor of, as Kant put it, "daring to know" for oneself. (Hence the Protestant

Reformation.) Leonard's condition requires us to "learn to trust your handwriting. ... You have to be wary of other people writing stuff for you that is not going to make sense or is gonna lead you astray." Hence modernity involves radical individualism and autonomy. Moreover, as Leonard says, in a world without memory, "You really need a system if you're going to make it work", recalling the desire of early modernists like Descartes and Francis Bacon to find the proper scientific and philosophical "method" by which to generate a perfect system of knowledge. Descartes's version of the method involved radical doubt, questioning anything that couldn't be proven with certainty. What he found using this method was that the only indubitable foundation of knowledge is one's own consciousness: "I think, therefore I am." (On this point, consider how much of the dialogue in *Memento* is Leonard's subjective thoughts in voiceover.)

The problem then becomes how to build a bridge from the subjective to the objective, to prove that as Leonard puts it at the end of the film, "a world outside my own mind." But *Memento*, following postmodern philosophy, argues that this is impossible. The problem is not just that it is impossible to overcome Cartesian skepticism about the external world, but that there is no such thing as "the" external world. Reality is not "given" to us, but must be interpreted by the knower. The structure of the film reveals this fact to us. We are shown a scene and then are shown what happened just before that and then what happened just before that, etc. With each scene we are "thrown" (as Heidegger might put it) into the middle of an event and forced to interpret what's going on along with Leonard: "Ok, what am I doing? I'm chasing this guy. ... No, he's chasing me!" But with each new scene we are forced to reinterpret the previous scenes -- every interpretation is revisable, and certainty is impossible.

The most obvious example of this is the scene where Natalie manipulates Leonard. First we see Natalie crying and telling Leonard that a guy named Dodd has beaten her up and Leonard

agrees to go "get rid of" Dodd for her. Then we see what took place just before this: Natalie provokes Leonard into beating her up. She takes all the pens with her and leaves the room so that Leonard can't write down what happens. Then when he forgets what he has done, she returns and pretends to cry, etc. What we took to be self-evident, unmediated observation of the scene has been shown to be just one interpretation. The point is *not* that there is no such thing as truth (as some modernist philosophers claim postmodernists believe). Clearly, not all interpretations are equally good. But what we need if we are to make better interpretations is *context*. Leonard points out that, "If people scratch their nose a lot experts will tell you they're lying. It really means they're nervous. People get nervous for all kinds of reasons. It's all about context." The problem is that without memory, we have no context: "How am I supposed to heal if I can't feel time?"

The first line of the film is "So, where are you?" and the last line is "Now, where was I?" In order to understand who we are, we need to know where we are, how we got here, and where we're going. In other words, we need to be able to tie our present to a past and a future: we need to reconnect to traditional *narratives* (without necessarily turning them into what Lyotard calls "metanarratives"). As Teddy tells Leonard says, "You should start investigating yourself". In a world without memory, "You don't know who you are" or "what you've become". Without a narrative context in which to interpret our lives, we are left with no "meaning" of life. But in modernity we have rejected all traditional narratives. The only way to give our lives meaning is through *self-deception*, creating a narrative and then pretending it is simply a self-evident uninterpreted fact and not a narrative (a process Lyotard describes in *The Postmodern Condition*). This is exactly what Leonard does. He gives himself "a reason to make [life in his condition] work" – *revenge*. But at the end of the film, we realize that Leonard's revenge-

narrative is based on a self-deception. Leonard spoke more than he realized when he said "Sammy's story helps me understand my own situation." It turns out that Sammy's story is Leonard's own situation. And hence as Leonard says of Sammy, "His condition was psychological not physical." In other words, Leonard is repressing his memory due to psychological trauma – he doesn't actually have brain damage.

On one level, Leonard's psychological trauma is the rape of his wife. But on another level, his trauma is nothing less than *the problem of evil*. The injustice he has experienced makes it impossible for him to fit his world into a morally intelligible narrative. The universe just doesn't make sense to him. Life seems meaningless, and so he creates a false sense of justice to give his life purpose and meaning again: "I'm not a killer," Leonard says, "I'm just someone who wanted to make things right." Note the multiple levels of self-deception here: Leonard *is* a killer; revenge is not justice; things are *not* right, but neither are they wrong in the way Leonard thinks they are (his wife wasn't murdered; she died of a semi-intentional insulin overdose); Leonard is now killing relatively innocent people, not trying to "make things right"; etc.

In order to give his life meaning, Leonard needs to find a life-defining project around which to construct his life-narrative. And in a postmodern world without objective evidence, the more resistant to contingency's project, the better. Teddy says Leonard wanted "to create a puzzle you could never solve." Thus Leonard creates an unsolvable murder mystery for him to investigate and covers up this self-deception with the further self-deception of Sammy Jankis, a fiction in which he hides his own knowledge of the truth.

After telling Leonard that "You don't want the truth. You make up your own truth", Teddy adds "So you lie to yourself to be happy. There's nothing wrong with that. We all do it." But if we reject modernity's equation of truth with objectivity and its suspicion of narrative, then

Teddy is wrong. We don't have to lie to ourselves to be happy. We can find happiness in *life together*, connecting our own life-stories to a communal narrative in which we serve as "mirrors" to remind one another who we are, guarding each other from self-absorption, self-deception, and self-destruction.