

Lesson: Personal Identity in *Memento*

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Tools: Film, Philosophy of Mind (Personal Identity)

Designed for: High School

Estimated Time Necessary: 3-5 days

[Insert *Memento* trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIMzDxrB58g>]

Personal Identity

I ask students to bring their baby or early childhood pictures to class. After they try matching names with images of their classmates, I ask a question about their own picture: Are you the same person today that you were at the moment captured in your photo. Students readily admit that their physical appearance and mental life have changed dramatically. They concede that they are not **qualitatively identical** today with the person in the photo, but most insist that that the adolescent they see in their selfie is **numerically identical** with the child in the photo. Childhood and adolescence are two stages in the life of one person, not two distinct persons that might bear a family resemblance.

What justification can be given for this conclusion? In other words, what persistence conditions are necessary and sufficient for (numerical) personal identity over time? Discussion leads to three candidates for personal identity: 1) soul (same soul, same person), 2) body (same body, same person), and 3) psychological continuity (or, more narrowly, memory as the right glue to bind temporal stages to the same person).

I assign John Perry's "Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality") for a lively, accessible introduction to arguments for and against the three candidates for personal identity. The dialogue is available online at [http://www.humanscience.org/docs/Perry%20\(1978\)%20A%20Dialogue%20on%20Personal%20Identity%20and%20Immortality.pdf](http://www.humanscience.org/docs/Perry%20(1978)%20A%20Dialogue%20on%20Personal%20Identity%20and%20Immortality.pdf). I also assign a short primary source reading from John Locke, a seventeenth century philosopher who famously defended the memory criterion by arguing that personal identity extends as far back as consciousness (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book II, Chapter 27, "Of Ideas of Identity and Diversity"*). The essay is available online at http://www.uvm.edu/~lderosse/courses/intro/locke_essay.pdf.

Memento and the Memory Criterion for Personal Identity

In his 2000 film *Memento*, Christopher Nolan conducts a cinematic thought experiment that tests the memory criterion for personal identity. Leonard Shelby, the central character, suffers from a rare form of amnesia that prevents him from forming new memories that last for more than a few minutes. Leonard believes his personal identity is intact. He insists that memory is in any case unreliable and that he has forged stronger links between past and present episodes of his life through annotated polaroids, notes, and tattoos on his body. Knowing that Leonard's memory will quickly

fade, Teddy, a crooked cop who exploits Leonard's condition, openly expresses his skepticism:

Teddy: You do not know who you are.

Leonard: I'm Leonard Shelby. I'm from San Francisco.

Teddy: That's who you *were*.

Teddy later confronts Leonard with the inconvenient truth that even his remote links to the incident and his pre-incident life are unreliable. Leonard believes that his wife's killer escaped. The mementos keep alive Leonard's mission of avenging his wife's murder. But Teddy hints that Leonard's wife didn't die in the attack and insists that Leonard already found and killed the "John G." who broke into his home, attacked his wife, and stole his memory. Teddy, whose given name is John Gamel, says Leonard should "cheer up because there are plenty of John G.'s out there." Leonard decides to make Teddy his John G. As he writes down Teddy's license plate number, Leonard says to himself, "Do I lie to myself to give my life a sense of purpose. In your case, Teddy, yes I will." The film begins with Leonard killing Teddy. It ends with him arriving at the tattoo parlor with Teddy's license plate number. These crucial scenes suggest that even Leonard has a fleeting recognition that his mementos fail to secure personal identity. At the moment he writes down the license number, it appears that Leonard knowingly sends the message not to himself but to some future person occupying his body.

By moving backward in time, the film cleverly creates for the viewer the same experience of disorientation that torments Leonard. Because we don't yet know what happened earlier, each scene is puzzling. Only when we use our own reliable memories to reconstruct the story do the seemingly disconnected fragments fit together. For example, we see Leonard sitting in a room holding an empty bottle. He thinks, "Funny, I don't feel drunk." In the next scene, we learn that Leonard is wielding the bottle as a weapon. The scene suggests that without historical context, even present moments can't be experienced as meaningful.

Discussion Questions on *Memento* and the Memory Criterion

1. I ask students to keep their own "mementos" as they watch the film by jotting down all references to memory and personal identity. Notes are helpful when we later discuss the film.
2. I begin our discussion by asking students to reconstruct the actual sequence of events without venturing beyond what we can *know*. Then I ask students what we can't know even after reconstructing the story. This exercise invites consideration of the reliability of memory and personal testimony. Some philosophers say that memory is genuine only when it is caused in the right way. What does "caused in the right way" mean in the context of the film?
3. Natalie tells Leonard that they're both survivors. She has survived the death of her boyfriend, and Leonard believes he has survived the death of his wife. But has Leonard survived the incident if he is no longer able to connect post-incident episodes through memory?

4. No matter how much time passes, Leonard will suffer the loss of his wife as if the incident just happened. "How can I heal," he asks, "if I can't feel time"? Even if his memory is faulty and his mementos misrepresent the past, could it be argued that the psychological continuity of Leonard's persistent beliefs, mood, and emotions do secure his personal identity?

5. Let's say that Leonard's ability to remember is not impaired and that his memories have been duplicated in another body. If the memories are qualitatively identical, it seems arbitrary to say that Leonard's identity resides in one set of memories but not the other. But saying that Leonard resides in both also won't do for numerical identity since two can't be one. The duplication problem, which is addressed in the Perry reading, poses a serious objection to the memory criterion. Derek Parfit's bold reply to the duplication problem suggests the possibility of survival without personal identity. See Derek Parfit and Godfrey Vesey, "Brain Transplants and Personal Identity: A Dialogue." The dialogue is available online at http://www.thinking-differently.com/phil001/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/parfit_vesey_personal_identity.pdf.

6. The eighteenth century philosopher David Hume argued that memory creates the fiction of a unified, enduring self. When we watch a film, our imagination associates discrete sensory impressions for the experience of seamless action on the screen. Each frame is really distinct, but we willingly indulge the illusion for our viewing pleasure. In the same way, we don't directly perceive an enduring self, but our memories generate the feeling of identity. Does *Memento* support Hume's skepticism about personal identity by showing the fragmentary nature of experience as well as the fictive character of our mementos? Or would you say the film supports Locke by showing how anterograde amnesia or Alzheimer's robs its victims of the personal identity afforded by genuine memory? See Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, Book I, Part IV, Section VI. Section VI is available online at <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/pi.htm>

For further reading on personal identity in *Memento*, see Mary Litch, *Philosophy Through Film* (Routledge, 2002).