'Remember Leonard Shelby.' Memento and the double life of memory

'In both fiction and in real life narratives, emotional closure, like narrative closure in this respect, is something of an ideal: closure, however much aspired to, is never really reached, and remains illusory.' (Goldie 2012: x)

As the title suggests, Christopher Nolan's startling *Memento* (2000) is about memory. Its protagonist Leonard Shelby has lost some of his ability to remember. As he tells anyone who will listen, while he doesn't have amnesia (since he can remember who he is and what happened to him up to 'the Incident', an attack that left him with brain damage), he 'can't make new memories'. The people he now meets, what he learns from and about them, and his own reasons for being somewhere all slip from his grasp over the course of a few minutes. His situation is, as he puts it, like that of someone constantly waking up, unsure where he is, and why. The movie's structure gives the viewer some sense of what life for Leonard might be like. Just as he is thrown into the midst of situations as his memory of them lapses, so we are thrown into the middle of them as the story unfurls. For half the tale is told in leaps backwards, each scene in colour revealing the events leading up to the colour scene that preceded it. Indeed, this is the film's most striking feature – a tour de force of cinematic story telling that rightly made Nolan's name as a director. However, I am not going to concentrate on this display of technique or the insight it gives us into what it might be like to be Leonard. Instead I want to explore a related aspect of the movie. We have what Leonard lacks – the ability to make new memories. But what difference does it make to us that we can do this? Comparing our position with Leonard's is one way to investigate this question.

Memento and the workings of memory

I'll explore this theme in two parts. In the second, I ask about the wider role of memory in human life: what difference does it make to our lives that, unlike Leonard, we can make new memories? But let me start with another question. Leonard attempts to compensate for his inability through his 'system', a set of substitutes for the memories he cannot retain. The system's job is to enable him to pursue his one project in life: to wreak revenge on John G., the violent assailant who not only

brought about Leonard's 'condition', but also, Leonard believes, raped and murdered his wife. The story of the film is, in effect, the story of the failure of this system. It is open to manipulation and error, with terrible results – we are shown Leonard executing two people who are not John G, and it is clear there may be more. Beneath this indictment of Leonard's system, however, lurks a question. Our memory and his system do the same job: both are there in order to enable us to retain information. If Leonard's system lets him down so badly, how does ours do better?

This is a question the film itself frames. Consider the discussion in the diner:

Teddy: 'Lenny, you can't trust a man's life to your little notes and pictures.'

Leonard: '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, that's how you investigate.'

(Nolan 2001: 135)

Here we are invited to compare Leonard's system with normal memory. And something similar happens at the close of the movie, when Leonard deliberately records Teddy's licence number as that of John G., consoling himself with the thought that 'we all lie to ourselves'. If the film asks the question, what does it offer by way of answer?

To find out, let's start by comparing a little more closely Leonard's system and ordinary memory. As I said, the point of memory is to retain information. If we only knew at any given moment what we then perceive, or have the time to work out, our grip on the world would be very tenuous indeed. Suppose you were watching television, but lacked all memory. The television wouldn't look familiar, since to look familiar is to look like something you have encountered before, and you'd have no sense of earlier having encountered anything. (It wouldn't look unfamiliar either, for that matter.) You wouldn't recognize it as a television, since that involves remembering what televisions are. The action on screen would lack any continuity with what had gone before, since you'd constantly lose all sense of there being a

'before' to which this the 'after'. And if this fragmentary spectacle irritated you, you'd have no idea how to get rid of it, since you would not remember how to turn the thing off. In sum, lacking any grip on the past, you would be a prisoner of the present.

We are lucky not to be in this situation. What saves us from it is memory, in its various forms. One form is *semantic memory*, the ability to remember facts, such as the fact that televisions are devices for receiving images transmitted over distance. Another is *episodic memory*, the ability to remember particular episodes in our lives, such as your memory of settling down earlier to watch the show, tea in hand and curiosity in your heart. And a third form is *habit memory*, the ability to learn how to perform particular actions with sufficient ease that you can do them without thinking. It is this third form of memory that is at work, for instance, in remembering how to ride a bike; and in knowing how to turn off a TV.

Leonard isn't a pure prisoner of the present either, since he doesn't lack memory altogether. His can remember things for brief periods – the problem is that it all slips away after a few minutes. Beyond that brief window, he does have a memory for facts, but only for those learned before the Incident. That's how he knows his name, that he used to be an insurance investigator, and so on. He also has memory of past events in his life, though again only for episodes up to and including the attack. However, while he's lost the ability to make lasting new memories of either of these forms, he hasn't lost the ability to make new habit memories (what he calls 'muscle memory'). Thus, while he can still drive a car (because he hasn't forgotten), he has also learned to do new things, such as to search his pocket for Polaroid snaps whenever he wants to know if he's met someone before.

Habit memory is central to Leonard's 'system', his way of coping with his condition. But there are other elements to the system too. There are his Polaroids, and the little notes he writes on them. ('Natalie: she too has lost someone. She will help you out of pity.') There are his tattoos, which remind him of his project ('John G. raped and murdered your wife') and of the 'facts' he takes to be most important to pursuing it ('Fact 5: Drug dealer', etc.). There is the wall chart he unfolds whenever he sets up camp in a new motel room. And there is the police file on his case, with some of its pages missing.

Leonard uses all this to direct his activities, to help give purpose and shape to what would otherwise be a completely unstructured existence. In his own estimate, it is what saves him from the fate of Sammy Jankis, a fellow victim of 'anterograde amnesia', whose case Leonard himself investigated, before his own life fell apart. The image of Sammy is indeed chilling. He sits at home able to do little more than watch adverts on TV (they are short enough for him still to remember the beginning by the time they end). We can only admire the resourcefulness and application Leonard demonstrates in saving himself from that fate. Gruesome as his project is, and clumsy as his system might be, at least together they allow him to escape the present to a far greater extent than Sammy did.

Or do they? In the end, Leonard's system is his undoing. He kills Teddy, he kills Jimmy Granz. While neither is blameless (Jimmy is a drug dealer, Teddy has been using Leonard to pursue his own criminal ends), neither attacked Leonard's wife. If Teddy is to be believed, Leonard had his revenge on the real John G. some time ago. Since then, he's been living a lie, pursuing a fantasy of vengeance that can never be attained, since it already has. Things might be worse still: Teddy offers us an account of Leonard's past that is radically at odds with Leonard's own. According to Teddy, Leonard's wife survived the Incident. She met her end at Leonard's own hand, putting his 'condition' to the test by asking him to administer sufficient injections of insulin to create a lethal dose. (In Leonard's version of events, it is Sammy who is tested in this way by *his* wife, with equally fatal results.) If Teddy's version is true, Leonard need look no further to find his wife's killer. True or not, Leonard's continued pursuit of revenge is futile – if not wicked.

There is certainly pathos in all this, but is there a lesson for us? Is real memory vulnerable in the way Leonard's system turns out to be? Of course, our memory works more smoothly, and allows us to retain a great deal more information than does Leonard's *ersatz*. He can only take so many Polaroids, and can only look through so many when confronted with a face he doesn't recognize. We, in contrast, can instantly recognize hundreds of people, if not thousands. He faces a similar problem with his tattoos: only the most central 'facts' can be recorded, and they must all be laboriously rediscovered every few minutes. We, on the other hand, can store countless facts, and

memory has the remarkable knack of bringing them to mind when needed. Leonard must summarise the results of studying the police report, if he is not to start from the beginning when he next opens it. We can remember both what we think about an issue and why.

However, these are all differences of degree. The various parts of Leonard's system enable him to retain essentially the same kinds of information as us: it's just that we can retain more, and retrieve it more easily. Perhaps this is enough to save us from Leonard's fate – though it is worth noting that a long and detailed fairy tale that trips off the tongue is none the less a fairy tale for that. But there is one threat to gaining a grip on the past to which *Memento* gives particular prominence, and that is a threat we cannot so easily evade.

The pivotal moment in the story comes outside the derelict building, in a scene that lies near the film's end but in the story's middle. Teddy has just told Leonard his version of events. This includes not merely the claim that Leonard killed the real John G. some time back, but also the revelation that since then Teddy has been using Leonard. He has simultaneously been pandering to Leonard's need for a purpose, by playing along with the ongoing search for vengeance, and using Leonard as a weapon against various criminal types, pocketing the proceeds on the way. Furious and perhaps afraid, Leonard sits in his truck and commits two crimes against his own system. He wilfully enters into the system information that he knows to be false, recording Teddy's licence number as John G.'s. (This will soon take the form of his latest tattoo – 'fact 6'.) And he wilfully erases the best evidence he has that his project has completely lost its way. He burns the Polaroid Teddy took of him, rejoicing over the death of the real John G. And he burns the Polaroid he has just taken of the body of Jimmy Granz.

In the terms of Leonard's system, these are, in effect, acts of deliberately remembering what he knows to be false, and deliberately forgetting what he knows to be true. One important difference between his system and our memory is that we do not directly control what we remember and forget in this way. (Try making yourself remember something you know not to have happened, and try making yourself forget something you know did occur.) However, this important difference is not enough to

protect us from the threat to which Leonard succumbs. As he himself says as he writes Teddy's number down, 'we all lie to ourselves sometimes'. It hardly matters that we cannot deliberately remember lies, if we can nonetheless end up believing what we once knew to be plainly false. Our methods might have to be a little more indirect than Leonard's, but what consolation is that, provided they are just as effective, are available to us, and are ones we really do sometimes use?

But how do we do this? What are these methods for indirectly getting ourselves to remember what we know to be false? Leonard himself provides an example, as has become terribly clear in the immediately preceding scene. Confronted with Teddy's version of his past life, Leonard invokes the name of Sammy Jankis, whose story so defines his own conception of himself. Teddy's reaction is direct:

Teddy: "'Remember Sammy Jankis, remember Sammy Jankis.' Great story. Gets better every time you tell it. So you lie to yourself to be happy. Nothing wrong with that – we all do. Who cares if there's a few little things you'd rather not remember?"

(Nolan 2001: 218)

Teddy is surely right to imply that the story is too good (as a story) to be true. Consider, for instance, the way in which Sammy is twice undone by habit memory. His inability to acquire new habit memories, in failing to learn to avoid the electrified objects in the psychologist's test, is what enables Leonard to argue that his condition is not physical. This sows doubt in Mrs. Jankis's mind that her 'old Sammy' is still in there somehow, doubt that prevents her accepting that he is gone, and turning to the task of loving the 'new' Sammy. This in turn leads her to set Sammy his 'final test' with the insulin, a test in which habit memory undoes Sammy a second time. His muscle memory for how to administer the injections, which he unwittingly repeats to the point at which the dose is fatal, costs him his loving companion and wife. The old Sammy stays resolutely hidden in the body that administers the dose, while the wife who sought to force him out of hiding retreats for ever into her own body, first in a coma and eventually in death.

The perfect symmetries of this tale, coupled to the pathos that even Leonard's matter of fact way of telling it cannot hide, strongly suggest that it is just that, a perfectly honed story. It is as if Leonard, who seems largely blind to the considerable pathos of his own story, has poured all his feeling into Sammy's tale. This reinforces Teddy's claims about the fate of Leonard's wife, giving them a plausibility that they otherwise lack. (Teddy is hardly the most reliable witness.) It thus casts doubt, not just on Leonard's system, but on what he takes to be genuine memories from his pre-Incident life. The films shows us rival flashbacks – to the wife lying dead on the bathroom floor, versus her blinking with faint life; to Leonard pinching her thigh, versus his injecting it with insulin. At one moment, in the scenes of Sammy in his home, a frame shows, just for a moment, Leonard in his place.

The thought the film offers us is that we are all potential victims of our own fabrications. Given enough emotional pressure, we too can tell ourselves stories often enough, and with sufficient feeling, to end up taking them for memories. Just as Leonard, in need of a purpose and unable to accept his own role in his wife's death, has probably told the story of Sammy so many times that he's forgotten it is fiction; so we, with enough at stake, might come to believe what we once knew we'd invented. And what goes for 'remembering', goes doubly for the ability to forget.¹

The emotional influence of the past

So far I have concentrated on memory's role as a store of information. In any of its forms, memory's job is to enable us to know later what we know now: facts, how to do things, or what happened in the episodes that make up our own lives. Our discussion has raised questions about how well it does that job, but we have taken for granted that the job description is the right one. In this, we are in good company. Many philosophers and psychologists who have written about memory have assumed that retaining information is all there is to its role. However, there is another aspect to memory. As well as allowing us to keep hold of the past, it allows the past to exert

¹ The threat here is that we fabricate our past by the stories we repeatedly tell ourselves about it. This is just one of several dangers that autobiographical narrative poses to truth. For discussion of some others, see Goldie 2012, ch.7.

influence over our present and future. Leonard's case again provides a way to explore this thought. We can highlight what we have by examining what he lacks.

The idea that memory has this second role is explored in the work of Richard Wollheim (1986: Lectures II & III). Wollheim concentrates on only one of the three forms of memory introduced above, episodic memory, the memory we have for particular events in our own lives. (Wollheim calls this 'event memory'.) This kind of memory is not, however, marked out only by the things it allows us to remember. After all, we could remember facts about past episodes. I could, for instance, remember that a given family celebration was not a happy affair. Although it concerns a past event in my life, this is merely fact memory. What is special about episodic memories is twofold. First, they stem from our own experience of the event in question. And second, they express themselves in a memory image. If I am to have an episodic memory of the unhappy family reunion, I must have witnessed it; and I must now be able to picture the event. In contrast, I could have a fact memory that the reunion was unhappy even if I wasn't there myself – perhaps I was told about it by someone who was; and, whether I was there or not, my fact memory need only take the form of a belief that the event was not successful – I need not be able to picture it at all.2

Because episodic memories stem from experience and are expressed in images, they are, says Wollheim, closely connected to emotion. In fact, emotion comes in twice over. First, when we experienced the original event, it may well have prompted certain feelings. I might, for instance, have been bitterly disappointed that the celebration went so badly, or angry at those I took to be responsible. When I later remember the event, I will probably not merely picture the event itself, but will also remember how it made me feel. But, second, as I remember it, new feelings may be stirred up. Perhaps these will simply repeat those felt at the time – perhaps the anger

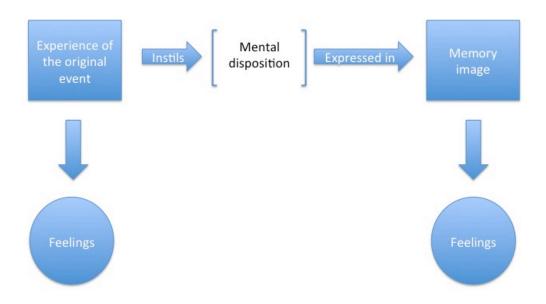
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² The claims of this paragraph need qualifying. While the usual expression of episodic memory is a memory image, in my view other expressions are possible (Hopkins forthcoming b).

Of course, other states have their usual expressions in imagery: anticipation and experiential imagining are the most obvious examples. One might wonder how these various imagistic states relate. Peter Goldie carefully noted some of the important parallels between episodic memory and anticipation (Goldie 2011: ch.4). I would go further. It is surely commonsense that anticipation expressed in imagery is a matter of imagining how the future will be. (Goldie certainly assumes it is.) In my view, episodic remembering expressed in imagery is likewise a matter of imagining. One imagines how the past was, in a way guided by one's own past experience of those events. (Hopkins forthcoming a.)

will come flooding back, not just in memory, but so that I now feel angry all over again towards those who ruined the occasion. However, it is also possible that I will now feel differently. Perhaps over time I have come to understand that they had their reasons for what they did, so that the disappointment is no longer mixed with anger. Perhaps I have come to realize that I too was partly responsible for the debacle, so that now I am moved to feel shame. Perhaps intervening experience has simply left me more resigned to the difficulties of connecting with one's loved ones than inclined to blame anyone for past failures.

We can summarise Wollheim's ideas in a diagram:



The experience I originally had of the party caused me then to feel certain emotions. So does the memory image I can now call to mind, and which expresses my memory of the event. But that image cannot itself be all there is to the memory. For I don't remember the reunion only while I'm consciously picturing it to myself. If you ask me whether I remember it, I can reply truthfully that I do even if I'm not picturing it

at this very moment. (It's not as if, when I cease to picture it, I *forget* it.) So at the heart of episodic memory, as at the heart of many other mental states, lies a disposition, or capacity: I remember it in virtue of the fact that I *can* picture it, if I choose to; irrespective of whether I currently *do*.

Wollheim says that the dispositions at the heart of our event memories 'have histories'. By this he means that the effects those memories have alter with the wider psychological context in which they occur. That is how my feelings on remembering the family party can differ from those I had when it originally took place. Because I have mellowed, or because I now understand my relatives, or human relations in general, better than I did then, what formerly provoked anger now provokes resignation, and so on.

How exactly is this shift in feeling expressed in memory? After all, if I now simply remember as inevitable what I earlier found infuriating, my earlier perspective on the event seems condemned to being effaced by my change of heart. As Peter Goldie argues, using a nice series of examples, things need not go this way (Goldie 2012: ch.3). It is possible now to feel differently towards an earlier episode while nonetheless remembering how one then felt: indeed, one's current feeling might be precisely a response to that earlier emotion. In one of Goldie's examples, someone now remembers with shame the pride he took in what he mistakenly conceived as his comic triumph. How does this occur? How is there room, as it were, for both current and earlier feelings in a memory state? We might try various answers. If episodic memory is accompanied by semantic memories, we could try appealling to the idea that the subject remembers *that* he felt pride at the time, while now feeling shame instead.³ We could also try saying that feeling now felt and feeling remembered can co-exist quite happily, even when they take the same object and are bound up with conflicting evaluations of it. After all, only one need now be *felt* – feeling remembered is not, on this view, feeling currently undergone. But Goldie sketches a

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³ Since Goldie's topic is 'autobiographical memory', by which he means something that combines episodic memory with memories of other kinds, this answer is certainly open to him. However, he rejects it, at least as the only possibility (2012: 48-9), and surely he is right to do so.

The involvement of various kinds of memory is one of the key features of Goldie's notion of autobiographical memory. The other is that it essentially involves narrative: telling oneself how the past was in a way that is coherent, meaningful and has evaluative and emotional import (2012: 43-44).

more interesting possibility. He draws on an analogy with free indirect style in literary writing: style in which events are described so as simultaneously to capture the protagonist's attitude to them and to convey the rather different perspective on them of the author or narrator. Episodic memories, he says, can exhibit a similar ambiguity. Our subject can episodically remember the pride he felt in his comic display, while simultaneously remembering the display and his feeling as shameful – as meriting the shame he now feels in recollecting it. He might do so by adopting an 'observer' perspective on the remembered event: picturing himself up there, playing to the gallery and flushed with what he saw as success, but risibly failing to merit their laughter. Or he might do so while retaining a 'field' perspective, remembering the event from the point of view he occupied at the time: picturing the faces that prompted the pride as bearing expressions of what he now realizes to have been, not amusement, but mockery. (Goldie 2012: 52-3. On observer vs. field perspectives, see Nigro & Neisser 1983.)

These interesting questions of psychological implementation aside, Wollheim's main thought is that, as a result of the various connections the diagram captures, episodic memories play a special role in our lives. There are three aspects to this role. First, episodic memories allow past events to exert influence far into the future. That influence is primarily emotional: an event long past can through memory affect how I feel now. To say that the influence of past episodes takes this form is not, of course, to belittle it, for emotions are among the most effective motors of action. If, looking back on the family party, I now realize my own role in its failure and feel shame as a result, what more powerful motive could there be to encourage me to behave better in future? Second, as well as being emotional, this influence is also personal. By this I mean that it involves us. Memory allows the past influence on our present, but does so in a way that is tempered, modified and channelled by our personality, experience and beliefs. (That was the point about dispositions having histories.) As a result, the influence is not brute – in contrast with, say, the influence of having in the past lost a kidney. If I lost a kidney, that would curtail what I could do, whatever I happened to think or feel. The influence events exert through memory, in contrast, is shaped and tempered by my current thoughts and attitudes, habits of acting and feeling – in short, it reflects the sort of person I now am. Third, and finally, in virtue of being both emotional and personal, the influence memory allows the past plays an important role

in giving shape to our lives as a whole. It connects past events to those in the present and future in such a way that our responses to past events are both preserved and modified in our responses to present and future events. Since what is preserved and what modified reflects the rest of our psychology, the events making up our lives as a whole come to display a pattern, a pattern that reflects who we are. But exhibiting such a pattern is precisely the difference between a life, something someone leads and shapes, and a mere collection of episodes, strung across time. Since episodic memory is key to there being a pattern in the events in which we participate, it plays a key role in our leading a life, and not merely drifting through time.⁴

But what, then, if someone could not do this? What if, lacking episodic memory, or at least any memory for new events, he could no longer allow what happens to him now to influence how he will be, act and feel in the future? Precisely this, of course, is Leonard's position.

Leonard: 'Can't remember to forget you.' (The fire scene. Nolan 2001: 164)

Leonard: 'How can I heal if I can't feel time?' (Natalie's bedroom. Nolan 2001: 147)

Leonard has episodic memories (if Teddy is right, only partly accurate ones) of his past life, and, above all, of the Incident. However, he is incapable of forming new episodic memories, memories of what has happened to him since. This is damaging for him in various ways. As we've seen, it prevents him from realising that his project of revenge has become a sick sham. It also prevents him from grasping the real motives of the people he's dealing with. (Think of the poignant and darkly comic scene in which he loses all knowledge of Natalie's plan to use him, because he can't retain the episodic memory, and she has hidden all the pens he might use to write it down.) But, if Wollheim is right, the damage goes much deeper. Because he can't engage with what has happened since the Incident, Leonard cannot escape its hold over his present, he cannot move on. He cannot place the Incident in a wider picture

⁴ Compare Debus 2007: §V.

of his life, moderating its influence by forcing it to compete against, and be reconciled with, the influence of later events. Of course, that event, as he remembers it, is terrible: his wife was raped and murdered, and he was irreparably harmed. He is right to treat it as of overwhelming, perhaps even unique, importance for his life. But, in a healthy life, even the most significant events should take their place in a larger picture. Even terrible grief can come to be so positioned: not downplayed, but put in perspective of life's larger passage and shape. Leonard isn't the only one to fail to do this. Even those with functioning memories can come to be dominated by grief – as, apparently, was Queen Victoria for twenty years after the loss of Albert. Leonard's problem is in some ways more fundamental: he *cannot* lay down memories for new events, and so cannot come to set the influence of later episodes against that of the one event that dominates him. But the effects are much the same. The result is that the emotion (for Victoria grief, for Leonard grief coupled to the desire for revenge) is disproportionate, bending the victim's life out of shape. This is what makes Leonard, in cinematic terms, a sort of caricature of the classic avenger. He lives for revenge alone, in his case because he quite literally cannot live for anything else.

I think *Memento* is sensitive to these ideas. This comes out nicely in the quotations above. Leonard utters the first while burning mementos of his wife on a small fire he's made on waste ground. He 'cannot remember to forget' not just in the sense that he forgets he has burned such trinkets before in order to leave her behind; but also in the sense that his inability to lay down new memories leaves the incident and his grief in total control of his present. He cannot make new memories in order to be less in thrall to the memory he does have. And, turning to the second quotation, the time he needs to 'feel' is not just time in which the incident recedes into the past (or in which the memory of it *fades*). Rather, it is the time of an ongoing life, in which new things happen and come to shape the future, moderating and altering the influence of other events.

Thus the mechanisms Wollheim describes have gone wrong in Leonard, with terrible results. The Incident dominates his life, deforming it to the point at which we might wonder whether it is any longer recognisable as a *life* at all. Of course, we're not like Leonard. We have the ability to form event memories of new episodes, and thus can let the influence of past events be tempered by those of new ones, in ways

that offer us the chance to impose a less extreme pattern onto the events in which we participate. In this respect, *Memento* offers us reasons to be thankful. However, we should beware smugness. As the case of Queen Victoria shows, it does not take the loss of the ability to form new event memories for the influence of an event to grow unreasonably. Moreover, the film's investigation into the workings of memory at least raised the question whether our grasp on the important features of our past is that much firmer than Leonard's. I have not discussed whether the role of episodic memory in shaping a life requires that the memories that influence us be accurate. It would be surprising, though, if some of the benefits such influence brings don't depend on our remembering how things really were, not just how it is convenient for us to think them.

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