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## ABSTRACT

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*Keywords:* memento, leonard, film analysis, memory, goals, sisyphus, camus, locke.

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# Do We Need Memory to Set Goals?

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*Based on the narrative complexity of Memento, this essay delves into Leonard's condition of being unable to form long-term memories. Despite this limitation, Leonard's capacity to set and pursue goals remains intact, fueled by his unwavering quest for vengeance following his wife's murder. Drawing parallels between Leonard's situation and Albert Camus' description of Sisyphus, the essay argues that both characters acknowledge, embrace, and rebel against absurdity by maintaining a persistent goal.*

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## I. ESSAY

This essay is an analysis of Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, and particularly of its main character Leonard, through the lens of Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. I argue that Leonard is a Sisyphean character because of the endless nature of his task and the way in which both Leonard and Camus's Sisyphus embrace absurdity.

In order to defend that thesis, I will argue that memory is not essential to goal setting because Leonard still has a persistent aim in life, which is to take revenge. He sticks to this aim through recognizing the absurdity of a life in which many of his actions are manipulated by those around him and even by his past self. But what makes the protagonist's persistent goal possible is the fact that he is able to carry certain information across episodes through his system of leaving notes for himself. This way of remembering is not considered a form of memory with regards to this essay because "memory" is defined as a continuous form of internally recalling past events, at least partially. For example, when we retrieve information that we do not remember from a diary, we would not consider this to be a

form of memory. We would expect someone with a normal memory to have no significant gap in between their memories. However, John Locke would consider memory to be essential for goal setting because memories allow us to be considered as a person. With Locke's argument, Leonard would not be considered as a person as he is unable to formulate memories, so the main character cannot have a goal in life. After comparing Sisyphus with Leonard, I will consider this Lockean objection. I ultimately conclude that this argument can be undermined by the fact that under the current legal code we would judge that he ought to be held accountable for his murder because his past self is not a completely different person to his present self.

In *Memento*, Christopher Nolan depicts Leonard, as a person whose life is centered around taking revenge for his wife. According to the protagonist, his wife was raped and killed by a man called John G. During this event, Leonard was knocked out on the head by the assassin, which led to his development of anterograde amnesia. This condition causes him to be unable to form any memories after his wife's death. As he is unable to have any short-term memories, he developed a system of remembering, which consists of tattooing clues for finding John G all over his body, taking polaroid of people who are involved in his life and writing down notes of mundane chores. Through creating his way of "recalling" the past, he is still able to gather evidence for his revenge on John G, which he ultimately believes to be a man named Teddy.

We, as human beings, look for values and meaning in the universe, because it gives us a sense of purpose and happiness, and provides us with a direction to achieve greater good in life. *Memento* demonstrates this with an extreme case: Leonard's whole life revolves around his goal. Albert Camus believes that there is an absence of value in the world and we should experience

disquiet about the lack of value, which he labels as “absurdity.” This reasoning stems from his belief that one can only obtain freedom and gain meaning in life when they recognize and embrace absurdity. We gain insight into Leonard as a character and, through the protagonist, humanity as a whole by considering *Memento* alongside the word of Camus.

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states that “there is only one really serious philosophical question, and that is suicide.”<sup>1</sup> He claims that people are acting in bad faith when they perform suicide, because they are rejecting freedom of the world. Those who commit suicide see no hope or need to continue living in a meaningless world, which Camus believes to be a natural response to the absurd reality of the world. However, he argues that it is essential for us to revolt against the lack of value despite the fact that our lives are meaningless because there is a lack of freedom in the also absurd afterlife and revolt allows us to affirm a better existence through finding “values, dignity, and solidarity.”<sup>2</sup>

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus is famous for his eternal punishment in the underworld, where he is condemned to roll a rock up a mountain continuously despite the fact that it would fall back down again when it reaches the summit. Thus, he was presented with a task that will never be able to be accomplished.

Albert Camus uses Sisyphus' story to explain the reasons behind the presence of absurdity in the universe. In the story, we are able to tell that Sisyphus' life is absurd because he is assigned with an unaccomplishable task as his punishment. However, he does not perform “suicide”, which means giving up in this context, in spite of the acknowledgment of the reality of the world, where he is never able to roll the rock to the top of the mountain. Instead, he embraces the absurd punishment and revolts against the lack of value in the universe. This intense action of revolt, according to Camus, is considered as a triumph: “his scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, he advocates

Sisyphus to continue to revolt, because absurdity brings about happiness. This is demonstrated by Camus' claim that “happiness and the absurd[ity] are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable,” suggesting that people acknowledge absurdity as means of life and accept human frailty when they revolt, which are all components to keep us fully alive. Sisyphus demonstrates happiness in his punishment because it is the struggle to get the rock to the top of the mountain which completes one's heart. This implies that Sisyphus is happy.<sup>4</sup>

I will argue that Leonard shares three similarities with Sisyphus in regards to goals. First, both Leonard and Sisyphus live in absurd worlds because they have unachievable goals. For Sisyphus, it is through the punishment of the underworld and for Leonard, it is through the manipulation performed by other characters in the film. They recognize Leonard's condition and use this to their advantage by tricking the protagonist into believing that he is finding John G when he is merely performing dirty tasks for others. This is demonstrated by the scene when Natalie uses Leonard to eliminate Dodd. Leonard was persuaded to beat Dodd up and drive him out of town because he believes that Natalie was assaulted by Dodd and she was providing useful clues about John G. In reality, it was Leonard who hit Natalie because she purposely angered Leonard in order for him to help her with Dodd.<sup>5</sup> A similar situation occurs for Teddy in using the protagonist to catch criminals. This indicates that the main character is being manipulated because others are using his condition to their own advantage.

In addition, Leonard manipulates himself by controlling his future thoughts and actions through noting down his feelings towards people. When he does not desire to remember certain opinions, he writes it in a different handwriting, which is shown in the case of Teddy telling him to not trust Natalie.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, if he does not want to remember certain events, he simply burns the polaroid taken in the aftermaths of the real John G's and Natalie's boyfriend's deaths, whilst saying, “Can I just let myself forget what you made me do?.”<sup>7</sup> Leonard experiences all kinds of absurdity

in this film, because he is constantly being manipulated. As he is unable to remember, he is coerced into living in a world where his life is meaningless and irrational with no power to escape because he is not able to act in his own interest and his own values.

Secondly, Sisyphus shares a similar value to Leonard in that they both embrace absurdity. Sisyphus demonstrates this through accepting the fact that he is performing a meaningless act that will never be accomplished. Likewise, Leonard does not note down that he had already killed John G when Teddy informed him about this information, which indicates that he would not be able to remember it, so he will continue to be manipulated because of his condition and his belief that he is yet to find the assassin. When there is no meaning in life due to absurdity, Leonard sets out a goal to create a life that is worth living for because he has a persistent aim. The protagonist follows Camus' logic of "living is keeping the absurd alive" closely by leaving his chest empty for a final tattoo.<sup>8</sup> This tattoo is going to indicate that he accomplished his goal. So by deliberately leaving it blank despite already completing this task, he is embracing absurdity. This is because he is accepting others' manipulation and allowing it to continue. Only through manipulation could he fill a sense of meaning because he believes his actions are contributing to his goal, which gives him a sense of purpose. In addition, the backward ordering of scenes further enhances the fact that embracing absurdity is enough to have a goal because the audience does not possess the background information of Leonard when we acknowledge his aim for life at the beginning of the film. Thus, suggesting that remembering past events is not essential to formulating a goal. Therefore, through keeping absurdity alive by contemplating it in the form of manipulation, Leonard is able to revolt and avoid suicide.

The last similarity between these two stories is that both characters revolt in order to find happiness and "gives life its value" in their absurd worlds. In the story of Sisyphus, he continues to push the rock up the hill despite acknowledging the fact that he will never be able to reach the

summit. This act is an example of revolt because he does not give up. Also, Camus states that we should consider Sisyphus to be happy because "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Leonard does not give up finding John G despite knowing the fact that he will never remember that he had accomplished his goal. This is because the goal of finding a person to take revenge on gives him a sense of purpose and happiness because his last piece of memory is of his wife being sexually abused and then killed. Through constantly seeking to accomplish this aim, he feels satisfied and happy because he loves his wife greatly and the aim fulfills him by taking revenge for his wife all the time. Therefore, it can be concluded that Leonard is using his condition to help him sustain a goal of life, which allows him to avoid suicide and to become happy.

However, some may argue that the protagonist does not have a goal and therefore cannot be a Sisyphean figure because his life does not have the kind of continuity required for that to make sense. For instance, John Locke states that one's "consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that, that makes everyone to be, what he calls self."<sup>10</sup> This would suggest that Leonard in the present is a different person to Leonard in the past because they do not share the same consciousness, so the main character can neither have a persistent aim nor embrace absurdity. Therefore, they would believe that the comparison between Leonard and Sisyphus to be incorrect.

John Locke defines a person as "a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places."<sup>11</sup> This supports the argument that Leonard is not a person because Locke's way of thinking requires a person to have the ability to define his present self. In the film, Teddy accuses Leonard of only being able to define his past self, but of being unable to present himself as he is now because all of his recent actions are forgotten. Therefore, he cannot be considered as a person because he does not fulfill all of Locke's requirements. If Leonard is not a person, the comparison between the protagonist and Sisyphus will not be valid,



indicating that memory is essential to goal setting because without memories, one cannot embrace absurdity and revolt against it.

A true Lockean might further claim that the present Leonard is different to the Leonard in the past. This is because “consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it,” meaning that as long as one has memories of the past event, they should be considered to be the same person.<sup>12</sup> This would mean that the present Leonard is not the same person as the past Leonard because he does not have any memories of the recent past. By not possessing the same consciousness at present as he does in the past despite being in the same body, it suggests that memory is a crucial aspect of goal setting.

Locke's argument presents several cogent points; however, its complete validity in this particular case may be subject to scrutiny. He is right that personhood is a “forensic term appropriating actions and their merit” in terms that we care about this topic mostly to determine when we should blame someone or hold them accountable.<sup>13</sup> However, if this Lockean notion is applied to *Memento*, we should not hold the main character accountable for murder, because they would consider the Leonard who killed John G to be a different person to the present Leonard. Thereby, for a strict believer of Locke, it would be morally incorrect to arrest the protagonist. However, the majority of us would still believe that Leonard should be punished for his acts because we would not believe him to be a completely different human being under our societal legal codes. His tattoos, polaroid and notes mean that he carries intentions across his experiences even when he loses memory, and he can still make plans to kill people using that system. Thus, we would still hold him accountable for his murder despite his condition. This suggests that, though Locke is right that we hold memory to be closely related to our conception of personhood, a Lockean analysis of Leonard not being the same person because he does not share the same consciousness with his past self cannot

be applied to the main character's situation. As a result, Leonard can still be considered as similar to Sisyphus and the argument that there is no requirement of memory for goal setting.

We need to have a goal in life because it allows us to pursue an aim in this absurd world. Only when we have a goal can, we embrace absurdity and revolt against it, which would ultimately create happiness for the individual in this meaningless world. Therefore, memory is not essential in goal setting, especially for Leonard, because without a persistent aim of taking revenge, the protagonist would most likely have taken his life, which Camus strongly opposes as it rejects the freedom of people.

As Albert Camus does not explicitly state the role of memory on Sisyphus, I interpret this as memory is not a component that Camus consider when setting goals. Therefore, a persistent aim can be formulated, in order to create meaning in this meaningless life, by recognizing, embracing, and fighting against absurdity. The character of Leonard is highly compatible with Sisyphus in terms of goals, so I argue that Leonard has a goal despite his condition. However, strict Lockean reject this comparison because they do not believe that the main character of *Memento* is a person due to his lack of memory. Nevertheless, we would judge that Leonard should be held accountable for his murder of John G under the current law, at least in part, because he can carry information through time. Thus, rejecting John Locke's theory that you need to be in the same consciousness as our past self in order to be considered as the same person. Therefore, my claim that memory is not an essential component of goal setting remains valid.

In regards to the film, *Memento*, memory is not essential to goal setting because he is able to maintain a persistent aim through embracing manipulation and acting upon it despite his disability of remembering. However, Leonard is only able to achieve this by setting up his own system of remembering moments to act as memorandums, which is not considered as memory in this essay.

## Endnotes

1. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 3.
2. Ronald Aronson, "Albert Camus," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, December 13, 2021.<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/camus/>.
3. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 120.
4. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 123.
5. Nolan, *Memento*, 1:10:11-1:17:24.
6. Nolan, *Memento*, 1:09:07.
7. Nolan, *Memento*, 1:47:36 - 1:48:00.
8. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 54.
9. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 123.
10. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke)*, Peter H. Nidditch ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), book 2, chapter 27, section 9.
11. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book 2, chapter 27, section 9.
12. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book 2, chapter 27, section 9.
13. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book 2, chapter 27, section 26.

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3. Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke)*. Nidditch, Peter H., ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
4. Nolan, Christopher, director. *Memento*. United States: Newmarket Films, 2000. 1hr., 56 mins.

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