



7-19-2019

# Identity and Memory

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## Recommended Citation

Hinton, Ryley, "Identity and Memory" (2019). *Philosophy Summer Fellows*. 15.

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# Identity and Memory

Ryley Hinton

## Project Description

Self-Identity is a topic that we have a very loose grasp on and is typically studied psychologically. I decided to research self-identity in a philosophical way. The goal was to see the different ways self-identity is constituted, and how memory was involved in this process. My method was to use films to explore the intricacies of identity in different scenarios and contexts. I found that context plays an important role in breaking down how people speak about themselves and that memory and identity have an inherent link. I also explored how mind control and hypnosis can have an effect on finding one's self. Ultimately, the formation of self-identity is something that varies from person to person, so exploring the topic led to a wealth of results. I studied the intricacies of external manipulation on one's self-identity, how life being viewed as a narrative can shift people's descriptions of their identities, and the different ways memory and identity are linked. I believe that people's self-identities are explained as stories that rely on memory to create a continuation of the ongoing narrative that is life.

## Different Types of Identity

"Identity" is a very broad term that describes many things. The two main deviations of identity are identity in a property sense (Lemons are yellow, sour, round) and identity in a relation sense (Are you the same person you were yesterday?). Throughout my research I reference issues to both types of identity. First, let's look into identity through relation, and then move on to the more common identity through properties.

Identity through relation can be broken down into numerical identity and qualitative identity. Numerical identity can be diachronic, which means that for something to be numerically identical to another it would mean that something  $x$  at time<sub>1</sub> is the exact same as another object  $y$  at time<sub>2</sub>, or synchronic, which eliminates the variability in time. An example of numerical identity would be like an alias change. Superman fighting a villain at noon and Clark Kent working night shift at the Daily Planet are the same person, although they have different names. We could understand this through First Order Logic, where  $a = b$ . An example of synchronic identity would be a magician putting their assistant in a box and sawing them in two. If you point to the head, or the feet, it is still the same person at one point in time.

Another way of interpreting identity is through qualitative identity. For example, two cars of the same make and model are not the same car numerically speaking, though they could be virtually identical in the qualitative sense. What makes car A itself and not car B is that it is made from its own specific hunk of metal. Car B is made from a completely different hunk of metal. An example of Qualitative identity explained in First Order Logic would be two objects with a same size relation. In the car example, this is the make and model aspect of the relation. The objects are the same in one sense, but not numerically identical. A different example to help differentiate the two would be "Clark Kent is Superman". Those are (two) names of the same person, though some people don't know that." What's plural is the names people use to identify the same person. This is because what makes them, *them* is still intact.

Self-identity as a matter of the possession of certain properties is the most common way identity is referenced in daily discourse. A few examples of this type of identity are that

I am a male, I am a college student, and that I am a philosophy major. These are all properties of my identity that I choose to represent myself. These properties do not necessarily need to be true; people have false conceptions of their own identity all the time. The properties that you choose when describing yourself vary from person to person. What exactly makes person x define themselves through their religion, while person y does not value religion enough to include it in their self-identity? It may have to do with self-esteem and what makes you feel good. Thus, understanding of self-identity could be undermined by the fact that some people see themselves as worthless or unimportant, making them choose darker properties to describe themselves. This leads me to believe that self-identity is explained as how you would describe yourself to another person in order for them to understand who you are, what you do, and the impact you have on others and the world.

Social identity is an additional aspect of identity that is constituted by what groups people are a part of in society. This can be by choice or not. For example, being a teacher is part of one's social identity because it is a profession shared by many. Your sexuality is often mentioned when it comes to social identity, although unlike your profession you do not get to choose whether or not to be in that social group. You are automatically placed in it by others whether you want to be a part of it or not. People often incorporate some of their social identities within their self-identity. However, it is also possible for someone to be a part of a social group despite disagreeing with the way they are commonly viewed.

## Types of Memory

Since a person exists over a span of time, their self-identities are often constituted by events that have happened in the past that they remember; memories. Memory as a whole can be split into semantic memory and episodic memory. Semantic memories are memories that are generally facts. These memories are those that you remember in the sense that you remember that they happened, but you cannot reimagine the experience as if you were there. For example, Columbus sailing to America in 1492 is a semantic memory because you are only able to remember learning about it. You did not personally experience sailing with him, and because of that you cannot relive that memory.

Episodic memories are memories that you are able to relive because you were there when a specific set of events happened and you had a unique point of view of that event. You can view the memory from a first-person perspective and remember some of your thoughts at the time, an experience that is completely unique to you, and something you cannot do with semantic memory. An example of episodic memory would be like the time my uncle deflated the bouncy house at my birthday party and it scared me so much I accidentally peed in my favorite jeans. Oddly specific? That is because it is an episodic memory. I can relive it.

## Films as thought experiments

My philosophical approach was to treat films as philosophical thought experiments, imaginative situations that reveal the meaning and limits of concepts. Films are great for exploring the topic of identity because they present characters struggling with their self-identity as situations change around them. The films I chose vary greatly in terms of where they were created, who made them, and when they were released. Due to this, we are able to see a wide variety of contexts being explored. The main films I studied for this project were, in order of release: *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *The Matrix*, *Memento*, and *The Manchurian Candidate* (Remake).

## Film by Film: Summary + key scenes

The 1962 film, *The Manchurian Candidate*, takes place during and after the Korean war and follows a platoon of soldiers who were intercepted by the enemy and hypnotized into following their orders down to a T. Raymond Shaw, whose mother is married to the soon-to-be vice president John Iselin, is pulled into an elaborate scheme ran by a group of communist infiltrators to assassinate the upcoming president. This is against Raymond's free will, in fact, he is even unaware of the actions he commits. When I say against his free will, I mean that these are actions Shaw would normally detest and never perform. Shaw's odd behavior was the result of brutal hypnosis and brainwashing tactics that made it so whenever Shaw heard the word "solitaire" he would immediately drop everything else he was doing, find a deck of cards, and begin playing. He would then inevitably see the queen of diamonds which would trigger him to listen to and carry out any tasks given to him after placing the card on the table. After he finished the tasks, Shaw would return to an unclouded state. The scene in which Shaw unknowingly murders the love of his life signals that he loses his logical capabilities while under the effects of hypnosis, although he is aware of his surroundings. Is Raymond responsible for the acts he commits during this time? Let's say that a person gets belligerently drunk and blacks out to the point where they are unconscious of their actions afterwards. If they commit a crime during this time, are they responsible? Slightly modified, what if someone else orders you to commit a crime while you are in this state? Raymond was the one who committed the crimes, although he had no intent of doing so. This issue bleeds into the realm of ethics I'd assume. The ability to reason properly I feel is a key part in one's self although it may go unmentioned. It seems to be something we take for granted. After Raymond murders his love interest, he asks his captain, "Who would do such a thing?", which implies Raymond believes someone else is responsible for the murder, despite he himself being the real killer. The influence others have on our actions is important to note when it comes to self-identity because we like to act on our own accord, not at the whim of an evil military general. That is because when we make decisions based on our own reasoning, we have more reason to own them.

In *Blade Runner*, released in 1982, there are characters known as replicants who are essentially puppets, because they have been fed memories belonging to others and act based on these memories. Someone else has influenced their actions through manipulation, which I believe calls for the definition of puppet. Rachael, a replicant, is given a set of false memories that she is unaware have been implanted into her. She believes they are real, genuine events that have happened and characterize her as a person. Deckard, who we are led to believe is human throughout the movie is also hinted at as being a replicant. This is suggested when Gaff leaves an origami unicorn for Deckard to find, signaling he is free to escape and pursue a relationship with Rachael. The figure being a unicorn is important because it references a vision or a dream that Deckard has earlier in the film. Deckard never tells Gaff of this dream, so the only way for him to know what Deckard dreams is if he was aware that this vision had been implanted within Deckard. Rachael tears up once she realizes her memories were implanted, in a tragic scene. This scene suggests that she may have lost some sense of self-identity since everything she thought she knew was a lie. I believe that perhaps she could form a new self-identity, even though her prior beliefs were shattered.

The 1990 film, *Total Recall*, follows Douglas Quaid who has a recurring dream of him falling down a hill on Mars with a mysterious woman and almost dying due to a lack of oxygen. He then decides to go to a lab belonging to a company known as Rekall Inc. where he can be implanted with false memories of a vacation, in this case a trip to Mars. Prior to receiving the memory implants however, he freaks out and begins attacking the scientists

administering him his memories. It is revealed in his outburst that he indeed had already been to Mars and that he was living under a false identity. His dream was real, but it was just a lingering thought that had been unsuccessfully erased by Coahaagen, an evil man who had monopolized living on Mars. Quaid is guided by a mysterious man on how to escape an array of attackers following his trip to Rekall. After evading them all, the mysterious man gives him a suitcase containing a video that shows him himself describing what he must do in order to stop Coahaagen. We follow Quaid along on this adventure until we are met with a twist: prior to his memory loss, Quaid's former self, Hauser, was in cahoots with Coahaagen, and was actually giving him instructions that would lead him right into Coahaagen's grasp. In this case, Quaid was a puppet and he had a shift in self-identity. He was manipulated by himself technically, although Hauser and Quaid have entirely different values. One is selfish and pursues a life where Coahaagen can monopolize life on Mars, while the other is genuinely fighting for the rebel cause to overthrow Coahaagen. Does the formation of self-identity occur prior, during, or after the manipulation is noticed by Quaid? I believe there is some sort of shift in self-identity with Quaid originally believing he was a normal construction worker, then losing that idea when his wife turns on him and he discovers he had in fact been to Mars but doesn't remember it, and finally he realizes he was being used gets reunited with the rebel forces. There is almost a second shift when the Coahaagen and past-Quaid pact is revealed, however at this point Quaid has reformed his identity and rejects the orders from his former self, and ultimately turns on Coahaagen. The film introduces the idea that someone at a later point in time could become a version of themselves that they would despise if they existed at the same time.

Next, *Ghost in the Shell*, released in 1995, shows mind control in the form of hacking. Mind control is only possible through hacking because the characters in the film have cybernetic augmentations. This method of mind control relies purely on the motives of the victim. The garbage man in the beginning of the film is hacked by the puppet master and implanted with a wealth of false memories. The garbage man centers his life around these false memories, and all of his decisions take into consideration his completely fabricated past. I wonder how this situation compares to people that base their lives around false imaginations that they naturally obtain through the certain error of memory. Everyone has false memories in some form, and surely these have to have some effect on how they function like any normal memory would because they believe these events really took place. Are these situations comparable? I think so in a sense. Even though the memories weren't purposefully placed, the resulting actions still could be comparable. Let's say that you falsely remember that you ate a chicken sandwich at a party when you were a child and it made you sick. You proceeded to throw up everywhere and embarrass yourself and vow to never eat a chicken sandwich again because of the incident. The consumption of the chicken sandwich never happened, and you've been shaping your life around this disdain for chicken sandwiches which has no actual root. False memories don't have to be placed by someone else in some futuristic universe, we do this to ourselves all the time. I think the film just brings light to the issue inadvertently.

*The Matrix* released in 1999 follows Neo as he breaks from the shackles of the world known as the matrix which resembles normal human life in the 90s. He is hunted down by Morpheus, a reputable hacker who understands practically all the limitations of the matrix. He claims that Neo is the chosen one, destined to destroy the matrix, and helps him escape the matrix to enter reality. Upon exiting the matrix, Neo is shocked to discover a world in ruin, where due to the rapid evolution of AI, robots had taken over and began to control the human race, using them as batteries to fuel their operations. He must come to terms with the fact that everything he had experienced prior to that point in his life was a simulation. An

interesting contrast is how one might view themselves inside the matrix versus in the real world. In the matrix it is possible to alter yourself drastically at the drop of a dime, a luxury the characters do not have in the real world. The film makes me question if there is a singular way to identify ourselves; in other words, is there one form of your identity that is the true version? I feel this is impossible due to the innumerable number of contexts we find ourselves in throughout a lifetime.

*Memento* was released in 2000 and follows Leonard Shelby, an insurance investigator, through Southern California as he tries to find one of the men who attacked his wife and himself in a home invasion. Leonard has memories, but his current functioning memory is damaged due to a fight in the aforementioned incident. Leonard references a specific case of a man named Sammy Jankis during his time as an insurance investigator, who suffered from anterograde amnesia as well. This is a condition that leaves most prior memories intact, but any experiences after the home invasion have trouble being stored as long term memories. Leonard forgets new events within 5-10 minutes of them occurring. Jankis's wife was skeptical that his condition was legitimate, so she repeatedly asked him to administer her insulin shot for her. She was hoping he would recognize that he had already given it to her after a few trials and admit he was faking the inability to form new memories, however unfortunately this was not the case and Mrs. Jankis ended up dying from an insulin overdose. It is revealed later on that in this specific case, Leonard was actually the one who killed his wife, and that he was replacing himself with Sammy to alleviate guilt. In this film we are able to see that without the certainty that memory brings, your self-identity is able to be sculpted. The only self-identity he is capable of forming is one that is based on his life before his incident. He is unable to see himself as a man that accidentally killed his own wife. He does not remember it, and he chooses to not remind himself of this fact. He instead uses his disability as a sort of advantage, to give himself a story that he can cope with. The clues that Leonard gives himself are able to be altered and interpreted in different ways. Natalie and Teddy manage to exploit this in the film, briefly changing how Leonard sees himself. Natalie makes him believe that he is her ally, while Teddy makes him believe that he is still looking for his wife's murderer. Without memory, self-identity is much more malleable.

Finally, I'd like to look at the 2004 remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*, which alters the plot and details of the film quite significantly while still retaining the same major theme of mind control from an enemy of the nation. The Korean War and Red Scare fears are replaced with the Gulf War and fears of bombings. The mind control in this version of the film is not implemented through odd manipulation techniques such as brainwashing and hypnosis. It is instead implemented mechanically through special microchips implanted within Shaw and his surviving companies' backs + heads. The first chip is surgically placed in the victims' back and is responsible for providing false memories. This is to fill in any gaps within the character's narratives of their past experiences, replicating effects of the mind hacking in *Ghost in the Shell*. The second is placed within the head and is used to give and receive directions when a trigger word is uttered. In the film the characters' trigger words are their entire names. This version of the film introduces the issue of whether it is ethical to manipulate people's minds mechanically. The doctor responsible for implanting these modifications in the characters' bodies was originally developing the technology to aid patients with dementia in remembering memories they would normally forget. When he was forced to stop his work due to bio-ethical complaints, he fled and eventually began to continue his work for a corrupt corporation with political motives. The main question I recognize from the film is: Should people's minds should be able to be manipulated through mechanical tampering, regardless of whether it helps them or not? If someone with dementia or some form of a similar disease could be permanently implanted with recollections of their

life and all their affairs, should we be able to carry out that operation? A case could be made that Leonard from *Memento* would rather forget than forgive himself.

## Context and Identity

When people are asked who they are, or more specifically what aspects of their life constitute their identity, they choose a specific set of traits and characteristics out of a giant grab bag of things that are a part of who they are. The reasons why people choose certain traits over others is only understood by the person answering the question, but we can speculate what tips the scale in the favor of certain responses. I think one possible explanation is that some responses cover more contexts than others. This makes these responses more favorable since they satisfy the largest audience. Let me explain the importance of context.

Answers to a question can vary depending on the context in which they are asked. For example, if you are asked where you were born, your answer would most likely vary based on who asked you, and where you were asked. I'll put myself in this scenario. If I was asked where I was born by someone who was familiar with the local area in Pennsylvania, I'd say Brandywine Hospital. If someone asked me the same question, "Where were you born?", while I was vacationing in another country, my answer would be the United States. If someone who knew that I was born in Brandywine Hospital and asked me where I was born while we are standing together in the hospital asked me that question, I'd specify a room number. The same question can yield many different answers based on how it was asked. Another question, "Who are you?", results in different answers based on the context. If Superman is at his job at the Daily Planet, he would not answer the question by saying, "I am Superman", he would say he is Clark Kent. If he was asked by a reporter shortly after defeating a supervillain, he would answer Superman because he wants to keep his other identity a secret. The context is everything and can even affect more than just answers; Context can change the meaning of the question itself.

If we were to take the question, "when were you born?", and see how it is used in different scenarios, we can see how the context can alter the question itself. A typical answer would be the date that you came into this world as a child from your mother's body. It is also feasible, however, that when dealing with someone who developed a new identity or an alter-ego, their answer to the question would be when this new identity was conceived, not when they came out of their mother. An example of this would be someone like Freddie Mercury, who could give you his biological birthdate, or the date that he changed his name and birthed his Rockstar persona. The same words were uttered, but the actual meaning of the question is completely different and results in a different answer.

## Life as a Narrative

People want to retell their life as a narrative. When asked who they are, people's responses will be the result of their previous experiences throughout life. They try to connect the events leading up to their present/current existence using memory and assess how these memories relate to the way they live. This is why the chips in the back were necessary in the remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*. These chips attempted to fill in any plot holes the soldiers had in their own stories. Because of this, I'm inclined to believe that memory and identity share a special bond. Memory has a key role in forming identity.

The reasoning behind my belief that humans need to string events together in order to understand themselves, is because in the absence of a concrete memory, people will form

something in its place. Like in the film *Memento*, when Leonard's condition causes his memory to become unreliable, he tries to fill in his memory using pictures and tattoos. He is discontent with the lack of information he has available of his day-to-day activities. He fills his life with lies, just so that he has a story to follow. A real example of this would be someone who is told they did something the week prior by a friend. They don't remember the specific action, but they'll accept the fact that they did it. It's a piece of the story, so they accept it to make sure they have as many pages possible. That way they have a broad selection to choose from when they go about defining their self-identity.

## Conclusions

Whether it is one's real memories, fake memories that have been implanted, or the lack of a functioning memory, one's self-identity is heavily influenced by all of them. Memory facilitates the manipulation of people because of how fragile it is at its core. While brainwashing or hypnosis, as demonstrated in *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Ghost in the Shell* may be exaggerated, the idea stands on its own as a frightening possibility. *Memento* opens up the possibility of reinvention or repurposing one's identity through self-manipulation. *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall* show how manipulating one's past is a setup for disaster when it comes to understanding who they are. The universe of *The Matrix* allows for infinite reinvention of the self, or the possibility that finding one's true self may never happen. You can either be absolutely certain of your self-identity like Morpheus or never come to grasp it because the world is so vast and ever expanding like Neo. While this is clearly a fantasy world, with the rate at which technology is advancing, I feel we are approaching a world that leans more towards the latter. The more I think of it, the sheer number of contexts that influence how we identify ourselves is almost comparable to the endless possibilities of scenarios in the matrix. I've come to believe that self-identity is best understood as an explanatory narrative that gives meaning and coherence to life. Memory provides the content for the narrative that gives you your sense of self. In the matrix, Neo and the other characters can rewrite their story, as can Leonard due to his unique condition. Memory is crucial to building that narrative, but there is no single right narrative. People's narratives are constantly shifting and changing. While everyone has their own narrative and generally expects it to be respected, others can choose to tell their own stories about us. They can flip the script.

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