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‘Blessed are the forgetful’  
The Ethics of Memory Deletion in  
*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

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*How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!  
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.  
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!  
Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd.*  
(Alexander Pope, Eloisa to Abelard, quoted by Mary in *Eternal Sunshine*)

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* pursues a perennial problem within the philosophy of medicine; the question of where society should limit the pursuit of biological modifications that have no clear therapeutic purpose. In the context of memory modification, the origin of this question has its roots in two crucial bodies of literature. The first concerns the so-called ‘mind-body problem’, which involves attempting to ascertain their relationship. In large part, the entire practice of medicine is concerned with this question, which eludes any definitive answer. Nevertheless, various perspectives have emerged over the years from Rene Descartes’ deduction that they are separate or, more specifically, that we can consider human consciousness as separate from the physical world. His Cartesian dualism has been challenged by more recent philosophical thought, though one might ask whether recent discussions in relation to mind modifications, including the alteration of memories constitutes some level of revival of these ideas (Hacking, 2006). Within bioethics, these questions have become pertinent to legislation surrounding end of life issues, such as what rights one might afford a person who is in a permanent vegetative state. Locating the individual in such notions as ‘personhood’ or ‘psychological connectedness’ (Parfit, 1971; 1984) remain important questions within philosophical psychology (Reid, 2005). Moreover, these debates have informed attempts to establish the moral status of embryos and questions that seek to define humanness. The second body of literature that informs our debate involves the ethics

of neurological enhancements (neuroethics), which is crucial at a time where medicine seems to be stretching far beyond what some would see as its traditional role, as safer forms of biological modification become possible and commercially available (Whitehouse *et al*, 1997; Wolpe, 2002).

However, rather than present us with a biological modification that offers super-human capabilities, *Eternal Sunshine* questions what should be considered as an enhancement. It invites the viewer to consider how the brain constructs identity and what components of this identity are essential to being the same person over time. Crucially, it invokes this conundrum in normative terms, which again offers rich material for ethicists to consider. Thus, the viewer is encouraged to identify 'psychological connectedness' as a valuable or constitutive criterion of the 'good life' In this sense, we also see how the film engages with a number of other bioethical questions that have been discussed, such as the use of psychotropic drugs which Elliott (1998) considers troubling precisely because they have the potential to break the continuity of our identity in a way that limits our capacity to claim autonomy of action. The film pursues these issues by exploring the possibility of neurological modification, specifically, the deletion of memories. In this capacity, *Eternal Sunshine* makes useful connections with the previous essay's interest to problematize the value of enhancement technologies.

Thus, the modification that is pursued in *Eternal Sunshine* is not clearly denoted as a form of enhancement. Indeed, the film's narrative urges us to avoid seeking happiness via technological solutions and to dwell too much on how we might engineer a good life. It is an intriguing and complex story, precisely because the desire to seek technological fixes to unhappiness resonates with present-day methods by which medicine aims to relieve such suffering. Today, pharmaceutical products, psychological counselling and even the self-help movement are utilised to offer such resources through which people might overcome trauma. However, the additional challenge from the film is that the form of trauma it describes does not easily fit within a biomedical definition of trauma, but is a regular occurrence in most people's lives – the break-up of a relationship. As such, it also raises a question about how much we demand from technology in solving social and intra-personal problems. From watching the movie, it would be easy to imagine that memory deletion is the next stage of therapeutic interventions from medicine. In such an era, the question arises as to whether humanity should seek such neurological transformations or remain mostly reliant on our learned ability to cope with whatever life may bring us.

The futuristic science implied by *Eternal Sunshine* is articulated within a recognizable, present-day period, where the environment of isolating American diners, chilly train stations and dowdy waiting rooms challenge the assumption that high-technology is located exclusively within the science fiction genre or, indeed, within a distant or near future. Indeed, *Eternal Sunshine* celebrates the natural and the every day, which reinforces its anti-technological and dystopian narrative. Many of the scenes are located within nature, with frequent depictions of the frozen Charles river in Boston and snow-covered beaches in Montauk, Long Island, New York. Even Director Michel Gondry's style of shooting resonates purist ideals, eliminating special effects and, as such, any connections that might be made between the future and high-technology. These elements are inextricable from the ethical dilemmas that are presented throughout the film where the depiction of nature and technology inhabits a moral space.

Yet, despite these warnings about too-much technology, the moral narrative of *Eternal Sunshine* is ambiguous in many respects, since it confronts our uncertainty about how best to overcome difficulties in life. The opportunity and hope about the prospects of technology to improve human happiness is reflected through the character of Mary, who considers there to be value in memory deletions. As she remarks when witnessing the procedure: 'It's amazing...what Howard [Dr Mierzwiak] gives to the world...to let people begin again...it's beautiful....Howard just makes it all go away'. Mary embodies the optimism of those who argue on behalf of enhancement technologies. Yet, she ultimately comes to symbolize the naivety or impracticality of these views since, upon finding herself an unwitting participant in a memory deletion procedure herself, she finds it an abhorrent affront to her dignity. More will be said about this later. After watching *Eternal Sunshine*, while one is left feeling that the best solution to dealing with human suffering already resides within our learned capacities, there is also a sense in which leaving this merely for time to heal is inadequate and that we are quite right for seeking more effective, efficient and gentle means. The difficulty, though, is that *Eternal Sunshine* portrays memory deletion as anything but gentle.

This essay will pursue these ambiguities in detail, exploring the range of ethical issues presented through the movie. In particular, *Eternal Sunshine* successfully links philosophical with ethical questions about enhancement. It invites reflection on what we might define as a human enhancement and, subsequently, what we might then ask medical science to do to enable it. As such, it engages with one of the fundamental and timely questions within bioethics, which concerns its proper role in a time of expanding autonomy. Underpinning each of these parameters is a question about the good life and utopia: Is a good life one where we are free to call upon medicine to alleviate any form of suffering we might encounter?

I will begin by offering a brief synopsis of the movie in order to clarify how the philosophical relates to the ethical within the story. Subsequently, I will discuss the neuroscience of *Eternal Sunshine* and the recent bioethical context for the debates it raises. Finally, I will offer an ethical analysis of memory modification within the movie from the perspective of the medical profession and, more briefly, of the individual consumer.

## Remembering the Film

As was suggested earlier, *Eternal Sunshine* achieves as a bioethical text through its careful composition of the aesthetic alongside the ethical.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, it reminds the viewer that visions of the good life are often difficult to separate from ideas about beauty. Yet, like all great art works, it does not pursue any moral or social agenda aggressively, instead stumbling over a set of complex issues arising from quite simple premises. Its main characters are visually and metaphorically vivid, signified by Clementine's brightly coloured hair and Joel's contrasting, depressive presence. Throughout the film, these strong motifs re-appear, which continually reinforce the idea that the subject matter is of moral concern, invoking matters of hope, desperation, anxiety and excitement.

The film begins with Joel waking in his bed on Valentines Day morning, seemingly surprised at his circumstances. Within moments, he flees from his apartment and takes the Long Island railroad to Montauk without knowing why he is going there. He walks the snow-covered

beaches noticing the figure of the, then, unknown Clementine, whom he sees again moments later in a diner by the beach. Their first encounter within the film takes place at the Montauk train station, while they both await the return train. She is drawn to him and it is apparent that their meeting is inevitable. However, this inevitability is not merely a structural necessity for the movie – it is not just that we need for them to meet in order for there to be a story – but a literal claim that writer Charlie Kaufmann and director Gondry are seeking to reveal. For Joel and Clementine *have* met before; they are just not aware of it yet.

As the film progresses, we are drawn into a series of disjointed, but connected event-scenes where two time-lines overlap. The first tells of Joel and Clem's initial relationship, which ends with Clem erasing all memories of Joel, and Joel's subsequent revenge deletion of his own memories. A considerable part of the film depicts the process of Joel's procedure, taking us into his mind as he recalls, in reverse order, every memory of Clementine, each of which is deleted one by one. During this process, Joel also changes his mind and attempts to break free from the procedure by hiding Clem in other memories. Throughout this time-line, we see first how they broke up and finally how they first met. The second time-line explains their subsequent and inevitable re-union, which began as I have already described. This time line begins on the morning after Joel's memory deletion. We learn later that his compulsion to head off to Montauk has something to do with a residual memory of Clem that was not completely erased.<sup>1</sup>

The film functions on a number of levels. While our interest here is to consider the ethics of biomedical modifications, Martin-Jones (2006) offers an interpretation that assists in revealing the values that, I suspect, are at stake in the analysis of legitimate action. Thus, he articulates the film as an explicit post-9/11 trauma narrative, which adopts a moral stance on how to respond to feelings of trauma. As he notes,

Rather than being defined by a traumatic loss from their recent past its protagonists decide to rework this loss. Instead of seeking a triumphal revenge over the recent past, they consciously choose to recreate the situation that led up to their trauma, and to reexamine their own role in creating it. They determine that if they can avert the trauma this time they can break out of the vicious cycle of triumphalism, a cycle rendered in the film as the actions of brainwashed automatons (p.157).

Martin-Jones' analysis locates the moral cause of *Eternal Sunshine* in the characters' initial failure to choose the right course of action in dealing with loss and their subsequent recognition of the inadequacy of this decision, which culminates in the film's final, distraught scene; a moment of profound enlightenment. It also acknowledges the motif within the film that can be reduced to the commonly held belief that failure to remember the past necessitates our being doomed to repeat it. Yet, it also extends this belief by allowing its protagonists the opportunity to change 'the conditions that led to the past trauma' (p.181), thus advancing the idea that memories (as truth-claims about the past) do not constitute the entirety of history.

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of many moments where the complexity of the human mind is shown to be superior to the complexity of a technological intervention that seeks to disrupt it.

Rather, they are, at best, critical moments within a longer historical narrative that is often perpetually open to re-writing.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the protagonists is unsatisfied, incomplete and naively innocent – ‘blameless Vestals’ as character Mary describes – and the story is as much about self-discovery, as it is about the impossibility (and unimportance) of engineering utopia via technology. Their incompleteness of character and the voids in their memories connect the overarching narrative about the importance of experiencing loss in life and the value of conflict in human relationships. For instance, in one part of the film we watch Joel remembering a time when he and Clem are having lunch. The viewer is taken into the scene via Joel’s memory, where he re-inhabits himself as if acting out a role in a play. Each character plays out the scene as it originally occurred, though the viewer is conscious of Joel’s awareness that he is within a memory. Joel’s experience of this is portrayed in a way that is akin to the playfulness one feels upon realising that one is dreaming. At some point mid-way through their lunch, Clem sarcastically asks Joel if he wouldn’t mind ‘cleaning the God damn hair off the soap after using the shower’, which reveals that this is another tense exchange. Yet, Joel’s encounter with this memory is one of happiness; he relishes knowing what she is about to say and displays affection for her unapologetic, direct and perhaps aggressive character. This scene offers a moment for questioning the value we attribute to memories, as either positive or negative. In this instance, the unpleasant encounter is recalled with a rich and deep happiness, which conveys something of the value in accepting the, often, crippling unpleasantness experienced in personal relationships.

### ‘There’s no such thing as this’<sup>2</sup>

The procedure of memory deletion within *Eternal Sunshine* is portrayed as reasonably straightforward and of limited risk. Patients<sup>3</sup> are asked to bring any artefacts that remind them of the person they want to forget, which would be destroyed by the clinic after the procedure. By monitoring the client’s brain responses to these ‘mediated memories’ (Van Dijck, 2004), the scientists create a mental map using brain scanning technology. Once this is complete, the scientists visit their clients at night and assault them into a coma-like state to perform the memory deletion procedure. The client wakes up the next morning with no recollection of the procedure having ever taken place or the deleted memories.

The technology demonstrates some appreciation for research on brain structure and links between emotions and memory. As Damasio (1994) notes, ‘the essence of feeling an emotion is the experience of such changes in juxtaposition to the mental images that initiated the cycle’ (p.145), which corresponds with how memory is imagined within the film. Indeed, the process of eliminating the links between these images is critical to the process of forgetting. Moreover, the idea that specific memories occupy material space within the brain is also consistent with both Damasio’s and Sacks’ (1985) observations of memory. Nevertheless, Baxendale (2004) notes that the frequent portrayal of memory loss within films doesn’t often take into account the distinction between ‘amnesic syndromes with a psychiatric basis and

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<sup>2</sup> This reinforces Martin-Jones’ (2006) claim that the film ‘smuggles in a political critique’ (p.157) by offering a chance to consider 9/11 as a pivotal moment for addressing global relations in US foreign policy, rather than concluding that it represented the impossibility of reconciling ideological difference.

those with an underlying neurological cause'. *Eternal Sunshine* manages to disguise its science to a great extent, which limits any (rather dull) criticism of its failure to portray adequately whether memory deletion could ever be a possibility.

Perhaps the most pressing scientific question is to ask how long it will be before such science is available. In part, the science presented extends from present-day approaches to conceptualising and treating traumatic memories. For instance, Kolber (2006) discusses how propranolol is an FDA-approved drug that has been shown to dampen memories associated with an event when taken within six hours of its occurrence. Beyond this, there are high expectations about the future of neuroscience to deliver memory modifications. Indeed, Farah et al. (2004) note that some are predicting that the 'twenty-first century will be the century of neuroscience' (p.421) and the ethical implications of this are neatly characterised within *Eternal Sunshine*. Yet, crucial metaphysical questions are still unresolved in neuroscience, which have the potential to undermine the way that *Eternal Sunshine* imagines memory-altering procedures. For instance, it remains unclear whether memory can be isolated from other forms of knowledge, though we are reasonably clear that 'the brain stores emotional memories very differently from unemotional ones' (Johnson, 2004). Thus, one of the problems that is not resolved by the film is whether it is possible to delete something that cannot easily be defined. To draw a parallel between neuroscience and genetics: it is difficult to point to a gene and say 'let's enhance that', precisely because most genes perform many functions. Similarly, the functions of memory are multi-faceted and to suggest that it is possible to isolate them within a brain space is problematic.

One might also question the suitability of a cinematic lens to portray memories. The viewer is inevitably looking into the memory as a spectator and this requires its construction as a familiar visual form. The conceptualisation of the brain itself also corresponds with established ways of representing brains, often as computer-like in their construction (Van Dijck, 2005). This is reflected both in the way that the technicians in the film are presented as computer geeks and in the way that memories are displayed as small dots within regions on the brain scan, rather like individual bit spaces within a computer's hard-drive. This way of imagining what memories look like is useful, but nevertheless contrived.

One might also say something about the problem with Joel's witnessing the deletion of his memory and how that process would generate a new memory to confound the initial deletion. These ideas are approached by Reason (2003) who draws attention to the distinction between lived experiences and recordings as markers of reality. While the direction and script attempt to attend to the 'detritus' of memory – by presenting details that are witnessed only through the subconscious – this is certainly difficult to convey through cinema. Indeed, the two protagonists' resignation to living in the 'present' somehow confirms the important distinction between recorded and lived experiences, where the latter is presumed to offer some guarantee of greater correspondence to a truthful existence.

A further difficulty involves the claim that memories of particular objects or people can be isolated from all *other* memories. Again, *Eternal Sunshine* side-steps this problem by omitting to engage with it. We do not sense, for example, whether Joel has lost two years of *all other* memories rather than just those that involve Clem. However, there are moments where this problem is suggested. For instance, when trying to hide in another memory to avoid its deletion, Joel says to Clem, 'I can't remember anything without you'. This gets to

the very heart of the scientific problem: our memories of others are not located merely in our physical interactions with them; we often spend time thinking of others when they are not there, or even dreaming about them. It is unclear from the film whether these indirect memories must also be deleted in order for the procedure to be complete.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the problem of inevitability is never fully addressed by *Eternal Sunshine*. When Joel and Clem are informed that they once knew each other, this constitutes a new act, rather than simply the re-playing of the same past. This intervention implies a challenge to the fatalistic stance of the movie and could be seen as monumental in determining where they go next. They now have knowledge of their future and this alone might be enough for them to alter it. Indeed, we are reminded that, but for their ‘complicity’ (Martin-Jones, 2006, p.177), at every point in their relationship, there was an opportunity to change and be more flexible with each other. This possibility of minute changes offers a challenge to the overall thesis of the film, that we are destined to repeat our actions if we do not remember the past. This is confirmed at the end of the movie when both Joel and Clem agree to start again. Despite their inevitable repeated separation, there is still a sense of hope that this need not happen and that they will overcome any differences that should arise.<sup>5</sup>

## Layered Ethical Narratives.

It is possible to analyse the ethics of *Eternal Sunshine* from at least two perspectives. The first involves an assessment of the *medical professions* within the film, as they undertake a practice that is ambiguously defined as healthcare. The second, concerns the *choices sought by the protagonists*, in their attempt to improve their happiness through employing quick-fix technology to change their memories. I will focus on the ethics of the profession within this analysis, though offer some brief comments on individual ethics.

### *The Ethics of Lacuna*

The organisation offering memory deletion services within *Eternal Sunshine* is called Lacuna and is led by Dr Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson). It appears to employ three other staff members, two of whom – Patrick and Stan – have a mixed professional role, which might be characterised as medical assistants or biostatisticians. The other, Mary, is the general secretary within the clinic. In each of the cases, the characters’ performative function extends well beyond their professional titles. Indeed, one of the major sources of ethical concern resides within the clumsy character of their organisation. Lacuna is a low-tech outfit, operating from dull and simple premises. There is no visible high-technology within the clinic. Rather, the technology of memory deletion is obscured by the invisibility of its digital form. This makeshift character is given gravitas by Dr Mierzwiak who, we are reminded by Mary, should one day ‘be in Bartlett’s’ [dictionary] for his work in developing this technology.<sup>6</sup>

A series of ethical questions precede the general practice of their work, the first of which concerns whether this science is ethically *feasible* in the sense of it meeting our expectations about the ethics of science and/or medicine. It is unclear whether Lacuna’s work still resides (or should reside) within medicine at all. This question is more broadly contextualised in

debates about the proper role of medicine. For example, it is similar to discussions over the status of cosmetic surgery as a medical speciality. Clearly, Lacuna's work encompasses a therapeutic role for many of its clients – which includes an elderly lady seeking to overcome the death of her dog. However, it also seems non-therapeutic, enhancing or merely non-medical, in that it is utilised by individuals for means that are medically questionable – such as the customer who asks Mary whether it is possible to receive the procedure three times in one night. Although she indicates that this is not their policy, the dialogue alludes to the challenge arising from commercial models of medical provision, where consumer demands may conflict with medical advice. The confused status of the medicine is further compounded by the behaviour of Lacuna's employees. Throughout the film, we learn that Dr Mierzwiak has previously had an affair with the receptionist Mary but that all memories of this were deleted – at her request - in order to overcome the trauma it created after his wife discovered them. It would not be particularly difficult to characterise this as a conflict of interests! The two assistants are equally unprofessional in their practice. For instance, during Joel's procedure, they are drinking, taking drugs and dancing on his bed.

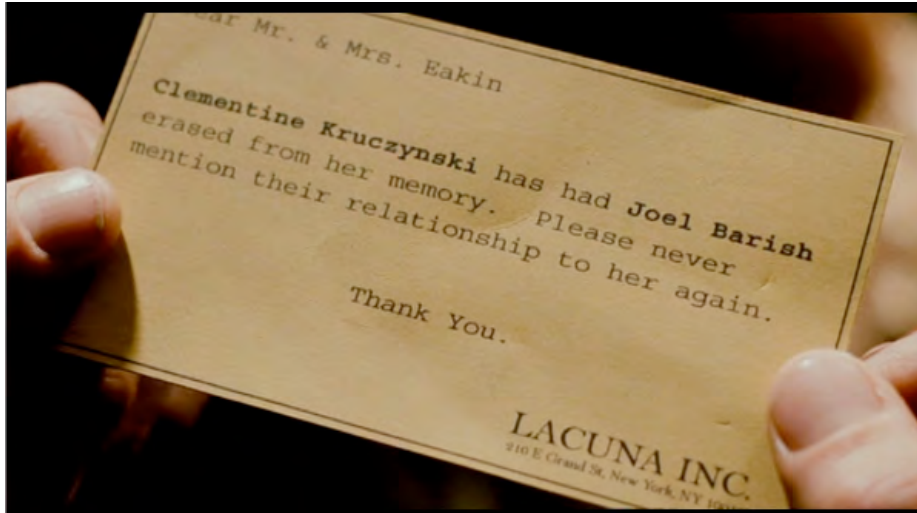
Yet, to dwell too much on these details would be to miss the more interesting and complicated ethical issues the film presents. Indeed, the movie allows us to dismiss the possibility that memory deletion might simply be an unethical use of science. For as I have argued, if we accept that the technology is therapeutic, then it is reasonable to consider Lacuna's work as just another form of alleviating trauma, comparable to perhaps psychiatry, the use of psychopharmacology and so on. However, if we *do not* regard it as therapeutic, then we are also informed that there are no grave concerns about the practice anyway. Indeed, when asked by Joel whether the procedure involves 'any risk of brain damage', Dr Mierzwiak informs him that, 'technically, it is brain damage' but that it is 'on a par with a night of heavy drinking'. In this statement, we learn that Lacuna's work is justified on behalf of an argument from precedent – the brain damage involved from memory deletion is equivalent to the damage arising from acceptable. This argument is familiar to many debates surrounding the ethics of enhancement technologies, though its legitimacy is contested. As Parens (1998) argues, there are two sets of problems with arguing from precedent. The first is that one cannot assume moral equivalence to different means through which we might pursue a particular end, or moral equivalence to different ends. The second problem is that different means can 'embody and/or express different values', so again it does not follow that they are simply the same as the previous case (Parens, 1998, p.13).

At least, we might conclude that memory deletion is not obviously unethical from a medical perspective, but we might also accept that it is not medicine at all. The implications of this are significant, for it matters how one characterises specific applications of technology, particularly as regards the regulatory structure underpinning it and the funding mechanisms through which it is provided. Indeed, one initial conclusion from *Eternal Sunshine*, which can inform more general debates about the ethics of enhancement, is that a radical new ethical framework is required to address how medicine can be administered to *healthy subjects*. The fundamental assumption that such procedures would contradict the ethical principle of non-maleficence is brought into question when the technology is made sufficiently safe.

A final set of ethical issues surrounding Lacuna's work concerns *privacy* and *confidentiality*. When Lacuna deletes memories, it recognises that it is not sufficient merely to delete the client's own memories. In order for the procedure to be effective, it is crucial that all of the



client's significant others refrain from mentioning the deleted person, as this could trigger the memory or create further trauma. Thus, the film takes into account the cultural life of memories. Lacuna's answer to this is to send letters to all of the client's significant others, which read as follows:



In this way, one might argue that confidentiality functions as a truly relational concept (Donchin, 1995; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000; Meyers 1989; Sherwin, 1998). Indeed, turning traditional ethical issues surrounding privacy on their head, privacy is ensured *only* by telling other people and by those people. Thus, privacy is afforded by all parties respecting the patient's wishes to keep the truth from them, rather than by others not knowing. The patient/client must waive their entitlement to confidentiality, but is also predisposed to disvalue what could be described as a traditional notion of privacy. Again, this issue is critical to contemporary bioethics, where debates over the confidentiality of something like genetic information continue to raise new questions. The only difficulty is that the film also shows us that such openness is not protected from abuse. For example, I have already mentioned that Mary had an affair with Dr Mierzwiak, which was subsequently deleted from her memory. However, I did not mention that she learns of this after a second indiscretion with him that takes place on the night of Joel's procedure. If we are to believe that Lacuna protects the integrity of the procedure by ensuring that all friends are aware of what not to mention, then it is unclear how Mary could find herself in this situation for a second time. For while Dr Mierzwiak might feel obliged to say nothing and allow her to continue working, it is harder to believe that his wife will have been comfortable with the situation. Indeed, it is more likely that Mary would have been dismissed from the organisation. These circumstances characterise the difficult position within which the friends of the client are placed and the broader *conflict of interests* that will ensue. This is articulated in the scene where Joel's friend gives-up trying to lie about the circumstances and shows him the card sent by Lacuna. The entire process creates a range of ambiguous situations where friends and family will struggle to know how best to protect the client, ultimately undermining this dispersed model of confidentiality. Indeed, this entire problematic is ethically intriguing, as usual rules of morality, such as truth-telling, are overturned as concerns the deleted memories

and persons. A friend will have to decide whether to respect the truth or respect the friend, where the two, formerly, should have coincided.<sup>7</sup>

*Doctor, will you fix my broken heart?*

*“Blessed are the forgetful,  
for they get the better even of their blunders.”*  
(Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, quoted by Mary in *Eternal Sunshine*)

The other perspective one can take on the bioethics of *Eternal Sunshine* concerns the actions of its protagonists, Joel and Clem. One of the difficulties within the film is its bias – we have little choice but to conclude that memory deletion is a bad idea. For instance, the fact that Joel appears to seek memory deletion almost as revenge for Clem’s own deletion does not sit particularly well for anybody seeking to argue that such choices are empowering acts of autonomy and self-authorship. Clementine’s decision is presented in equally negative terms. When Joel first finds out what she has done, a mutual friend tells him that Clem probably did it ‘as a lark’, so both characters are described as having done this without much careful consideration.<sup>8</sup> Again, the fact that this is of no concern to Lacuna who ‘provide the possibility’ of moving on and ‘starting again’, further diminishes its professionalism. Indeed, its practice is perhaps the one major futuristic narrative, insofar as it presents an era where medical treatments occupy a commercial social space, where all boundaries of medical professionalism and care have been transcended. Thus, Lacuna functions in a time where healthcare is consumer led and based on a very loose definition of health as a vague form of well-being. The protagonists claim an unquestioning entitlement to the procedure to help them overcome a difficult time in their life. Perhaps the only characteristics in their favour are the protagonist’s familiar circumstances. Neither of them exhibits the usual hubris of the scientist seeking to control nature and push the frontiers of human capabilities. Rather, their choice to use the technology is relatively under-stated; one might even say normal.

In this sense, *Eternal Sunshine* does not encounter the typical characteristics of movies where high-tech is associated with limitless wealth and liberty – a kind of frivolous autonomy. Indeed, it is not obvious that Joel and Clem are acting immorally towards each other at all when deleting their memories. Rather, the problem is determining whether our moral commitment to others extends to our *memories* of them, rather than simply our *actions* towards them. While the film suggests a positive response to this question, it stops short of conveying it as an obligation. My suspicion is that there should be no obligation to remember others, but that there could be good reasons to preserve even those memories we would prefer to be without. Indeed, in the case of the latter, the desire to not hold the memory should more properly be described as the desire for the event to have not occurred at all. Nevertheless, one must admit an incomplete knowledge in understanding what are the relevant memories to enable the greatest flourishing in life. *Eternal Sunshine* avoids being forced into making any such claim by characterising the consequences of memory deletion as traumatic. In this sense, it offers a passionate, intuitive appeal to the idea that such a practice would be wrong in itself by demonstrating the ‘pain and hardbreak’ (Grau, 2006; p.119) that will result. Moreover, it appeals to notions of authenticity and self-hood by showing the altered mind to be devoid of meaning. As Herzog (2005) notes, ‘Memory is what distinguishes a particular human being

from being in general' and is the 'inner narration of the search for freedom'. So conceived, it is also difficult to neglect the moral content of this pursuit and the need to retain the integrity of one's memories. In contrast, Mary's quote from Nietzsche suggests that there is value in seeking to forget. In this sense, the ethics of memory deletion are 'beyond good and evil', as the quote might attempt to convey.

## Conclusion

The bioethical issues raised through *Eternal Sunshine* permeate a number of crucial questions arising from emerging medical technologies. On one level, it discusses the ethics of medical science, portraying a number of challenges posed by a commercial model of medicine and the difficulty with modifying the biology of healthy subjects. It also encompasses a critique on the ethics of enhancement and the value of pursuing neurological modifications. More broadly, the movie situates bioethical debates within philosophical questions about the irrelevance of fatalism and the importance of remembering. Towards the end of the movie, these issues are foregrounded when the protagonists realise that they are doomed to be separated, but that they are *also* doomed to fall in love. Their response to resign themselves to each inevitability and accept the highs and lows of life seems all they can do.

In the world of *Eternal Sunshine*, where it is possible to delete unwanted memories, it also becomes clear that people are generally capable of overcoming the trauma of those memories of their own volition. This provides a persuasive argument against the use of medical technology to alleviate some forms of suffering, no matter if we sympathise with the sufferer. Indeed, *Eternal Sunshine* attempts to derive clear limits to the role of medicine and encourages the viewer to seek alternative ways of dealing with suffering and accept that happiness is in part constituted by the absence of guaranteeing a life free from suffering. Even where medication might make our lives better, we would suffer at the hands of technology from being deprived of characteristics that make us human. It suggests that, without grief and suffering, we are unable to achieve the kind of intimacy that binds people together.

However, *Eternal Sunshine* also obscures a balanced evaluation of memory modification, by relying on the assumption that it is impossible to characterise neurological enhancements as *improvements*. As such, it never satisfactorily attends to the fact that people are unavoidably positioned within a locus of decision making that compels them to alleviate human suffering by whatever means are available to them. In such circumstances, it is hard to imagine that people would be satisfied with relying on their own capacities, should alternative means be available. Moreover, it is not obvious that anybody is harmed by the use of such technology, even though the practical ethics of employing such means are incredibly difficult to resolve.

Both a beautiful production and a subtle (and stormy) romance, *Eternal Sunshine* engages bioethicists through a confrontation with questions about the good life and utopia. Its narrative is a warning about runaway individualism and the problem of having too much choice and control over ourselves. However, there are various nuances that allow *Eternal*

*Sunshine* to occupy the space of a genuine ethical issue, which leaves the viewer uncertain about how to reconcile the intuition to alleviate human suffering by whatever means are available and the concern that human suffering might also be fundamental to our appreciation of happiness.

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## Study Questions

- If memory deletion were possible, how would you decide which memories to keep and which to erase?
- In what way can memory deletion be characterised as human enhancement?
- Do we have a moral responsibility to remember?
- How does the professional contact of Lacuna employees correspond with general medical ethics?

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<sup>1</sup> This is reflected at one point in the film where Mary compares Dr Mierzwiak to a surgeon or a concert pianist, invoking metaphors of healer, creator, magician or deity. From this, one can derive claims about 'Playing God', which are so prevalent within many discussions about the limits of medical ethics.

<sup>2</sup> Joel, upon learning about the science.

<sup>3</sup> I will use the term patient and client interchangeably throughout this essay, without saying too much about the film's capacity to raise questions about the collapse between these concepts within medicine.

<sup>4</sup> The film does allude to these unresolved problems by indicating that remnants of memories remain within the minds of our protagonists, thus suggesting that the procedure was not completely flawless.

<sup>5</sup> In this way, the tapes they receive of their consultations at Lacuna then constitute a performative, reconciliatory function, which is much closer to contemporary psychiatric practices.

<sup>6</sup> One might offer various interpretations of why Howard's colleagues consider that he is worthy of entry into the Bartlett's dictionary of quotations. Perhaps there is some attempt here to connect the Doctor with Mary's citation of Nietzsche's 'Beyond Good and Evil' or even Alexander Pope's poem from which the 'Eternal Sunshine' title derives.

<sup>7</sup> An additional ethical ambiguity on behalf of Dr Mierzwiak arises here again where, upon playing her consultation tape to herself, we hear the Doctor say 'we agreed it was for the best' (for Mary to delete her memories), which raises questions over his integrity, but also whether one can truly enter into such technology with a strong sense of empowerment, since it seems always and only to be moments of deep suffering that bring people to this technology.

<sup>8</sup> This signifier is also used later in the film, where Joel is reminded that this is also a characteristic that he loves about Clementine, further advancing the claim that affection and anxiety are so closely related that it would be foolhardy to seek the deletion of one.