

## *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the Morality of Memory

The film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) is one of those movies that people tend to either love or hate.<sup>1</sup> Critics generally raved about it, but if you look on websites that allow people to post their own reviews, you find a fair number of “one-star” ratings and complaints that the film was confusing, pretentious, or just plain boring. On the other hand, those who like the film tend to really like it, giving it five stars and admitting to having seen the film multiple times in the theater. Why do the fans of this film seem so, well, *fanatic* in their devotion? Although I think much of their appreciation has its base in the sensitive and creative direction of Michel Gondry, the clever script from Charlie Kaufman, the beautifully melancholy score by Jon Brion, and the impressive performances by all the actors involved, I also think it is not crazy to suggest that the *philosophy* of the film helped it to achieve the cult-like status it now enjoys.<sup>2</sup>

What, exactly, do I mean by saying that this film has a philosophy? Well, I don't *just* mean that it explores philosophical ideas. It does this very effectively, but it also offers something more: in the course of exploring these ideas, it implicitly offers a philosophical *position*. That is, it does not just raise certain deep questions, it suggests answers to those questions. Since it is a movie and not a journal article, the position that is gestured at does not come to us by way of an explicit argument, but it is one that I think can be unpacked and defended. Accordingly, here I will be attempting to make explicit the philosophical perspective that I take to be implicit in this original and moving film.<sup>3</sup>

### I. FORGET ME NOT

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (*Eternal Sunshine*) is a story about a group of people who have access to a peculiar and powerful technology. Thanks to the work of one Dr. Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson) and his company Lacuna, Inc., several characters are able to undergo a process by which they have the memories of other people erased from their minds in order to lessen the suffering that these painful memories can cause. After watching the film, it is hard not to dwell on the possibility offered to the characters of Joel (Jim Carrey), Clementine (Kate Winslet), and Mary (Kirsten Dunst). If *you* could choose to erase someone from your life, would you? Even if you personally would not choose to undergo such a procedure, do you think someone else should have that sort of choice open to him or her? If the memories of a particular incident or relationship are truly causing someone tremendous pain, *shouldn't* they have the option of removing those memories, provided that it can be done safely and effectively?

The film is wonderfully nuanced and subtle, and thus not surprisingly it doesn't offer us easy or obvious answers to these sorts of questions. Nonetheless, the general sense one gets from the film is that the memory-removal technology exhibited in the movie does not, in fact, allow for the “eternal sunshine” referenced in the title. Indeed, it is hard to imagine someone leaving the theater thinking that pursuing such a technology would be a good thing.<sup>4</sup> Why not? Well, the film shows us some rather unfortunate



FIGURE 1. Joel (Jim Carrey) undergoes a preliminary brain scan in order to create a “memory map” that will be used to erase his memories of Clementine (Kate Winslet).

consequences that result from the use of the technology: Mary, Joel, and Clementine, as well as others connected to them, all experience pain and heartbreak as a result of the supposedly secret procedure going awry through various leaks. However, what is more important for my purposes is the fact that the film seems to suggest that the memory-removal technology is problematic *even if the glitches and leaks could be worked out*. There is a sense of tragedy in Joel’s realization (while in the middle of the procedure) that he does not want to lose his memories of Clem, and the sadness the viewers feel with him is *not* lifted by the thought that he will eventually be ignorant of the loss. On the contrary, awareness of the future ignorance seems to *compound* the sadness: that he will soon be clueless is no cause for celebration. The harm done by this procedure does not seem to be fully accountable in terms of the harm the characters consciously *feel*. In going through the philosophical issues that are raised by the film, I hope to offer an account of why the sense of tragic loss suggested by the film resonates with viewers, and why the implicit philosophical position assumed by the film is a respectable and defensible one, even if it can at first appear to be quite puzzling and controversial.<sup>5</sup>

## II. UTILITARIANISM

In some ways the most obvious and sensible response that could be made to the question “Is the use of such memory removal technology a good thing?” is what philosophers would call a traditional utilitarian response. Traditional or

classical utilitarians (such as Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, or Henry Sidgwick) thought that the right action is the one that brings about the most happiness overall, where happiness is understood in terms of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. When deciding on what to do, the utilitarian does his or her best to calculate the possible consequences of the choices that lay before him or her. The morally right act is the one that (among the possible actions open to the person) will result in the most happiness and the least suffering, and so the utilitarian will always strive to choose those actions that are most likely to increase overall happiness and minimize overall suffering. Accordingly, if a memory-removal procedure can function in such a way that it brings about more happiness than would otherwise be possible, the use of such a procedure is not only justified, but in fact *morally required* on utilitarian grounds.

Now it should be pointed out that there is a big “if” in the claim above—it is *not at all clear* whether this sort of procedure *could* be implemented in such a way that it would increase happiness overall. In *Eternal Sunshine* the procedure seems far from foolproof. Indeed, we see fools implementing it (a stoned Stan (Mark Ruffalo) and his dimwitted sidekick Patrick (Elijah Wood)) and they do a thoroughly mediocre job.<sup>6</sup> We also see that the acquaintances of Clementine fail to keep her procedure a secret and in the process cause Joel no small amount of misery. In addition, the memory-removal procedure that Mary undergoes seems to increase rather than minimize the pain and suffering for everyone affected by her affair with Mierzwiak. These and other considerations would lead many people to conclude that the procedure *as displayed in the film* does *not* tend to maximize happiness overall.

The question remains, however, whether such a process *could* be streamlined so as to reliably minimize the suffering of those undergoing the procedure while not causing significant harm to anyone else. Putting aside the glitches and complications present in the film, it is natural to wonder: If memory removal was reliable, efficient, safe, and effective, are there still reasons to reject it?

One might plausibly argue that painful memories stay with us for good reason: they allow us to learn valuable lessons from the past and thus

be better prepared for the future. This is no doubt often the case, and in a situation in which it appears that the removal of memory would limit the person in this way (by denying him or her useful information), such a procedure would probably not be for the best (and thus not “maximize utility”). However, there are cases in which painful memories seem to do much more harm than good, and where any lessons that could be derived from the memories could presumably be learned via other routes. In *those* kinds of cases, it seems that the misery avoided by memory removal would more than counterbalance any possible benefits that would normally arise from retaining the memories. It seems, then, that the utilitarian response to whether such a procedure is justified should be a cautious and conditional “yes”: *if* suffering can be minimized in a particular case, then such a procedure is appropriate in that case. In circumstances in which the use of memory removal would increase overall happiness, the use of such a procedure is, on utilitarian grounds, a morally good thing. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, utilitarianism would seem to *require* the use of such a procedure if it was the most efficient means of maximizing utility.<sup>7</sup> For the utilitarian, the goodness or badness of memory removal hinges solely on the consequences, and if we can ensure that those consequences are beneficial overall, such technology would be something to welcome rather than reject.

### III. THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE SHIFTS INTO REVERSE

Many people will feel that the approach we have been considering, though intuitive in many ways, is somehow too crude. The worry is that *even if* the procedure can reliably maximize happiness overall (and minimize suffering) there is *still* something wrong with it. Memory removal seems problematic in a way that cannot fully be made out within the utilitarian framework—a loss has occurred even though we cannot explicate the loss in terms of lost *utility* or happiness.

We can get at one reason why the procedure in *Eternal Sunshine* seems so troubling by considering a classic example that is often used to raise doubts about the hedonistic assumptions that lie behind traditional utilitarianism. In his 1971 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert

Nozick introduced a thought experiment that has become a staple of introductory philosophy classes everywhere. It is known as “the experience machine.”

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s desires?...Of course, while in the tank you won’t know that you’re there; you’ll think it’s all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there’s no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?<sup>8</sup>

Nozick goes on to argue that other things do matter to us: for instance, that we actually *do* certain things, as opposed to simply have the experience of doing them. Also, he points out that we value being (and becoming) certain kinds of people. I do not just want to have the experience of being a decent person, I want to actually *be* a decent person. Finally, Nozick argues that we value contact with reality in itself, independent of any benefits such contact may bring through pleasant experience: we want to know we are experiencing the real thing. In sum, Nozick thinks that it matters to most of us, often in a rather deep way, that we be the authors of our lives and that our lives involve interacting with the world, and he thinks that the fact that most people would not choose to enter into such an experience machine demonstrates that they do value these other things. As he puts it: “We learn that something matters to us in addition to experience by imagining an experience machine and then realizing that we would not use it.”<sup>9</sup>

One way to think about the procedure presented in *Eternal Sunshine* is to consider it a kind of *reverse* experience machine: rather than *give* you the experience of your choice, it allows you to *take away* experiences that you have retained in your memory. Similar philosophical issues arise, as the worry is that in both

cases we are achieving pleasure (or the avoidance of pain) at the cost of truth. Elsewhere, I have discussed Nozick's thought experiment in the context of the character Cypher's (Joe Pantoliano) choice in the film *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999).<sup>10</sup> There, I argued that our natural aversion to sacrificing knowledge of the truth for happiness can be understood as the expression of some of our most basic values, and that these values are perfectly legitimate and need not be threatened by a hedonistic outlook that claims that only pleasurable conscious experience can ultimately have value in itself.

Not surprisingly, I think something similar can be said about the memory-removal procedure offered in *Eternal Sunshine*. Even if the use of such a procedure would maximize happiness, it is understandable and justifiable for someone to refuse such a procedure on the grounds that they do not want to "live a lie." To think otherwise is to forget that many of us value the truth in a way that cannot simply be explained in terms of the pleasure that knowledge of the truth often brings or makes possible. Our reluctance to endorse (or undergo) a memory-removal procedure is one expression of this basic value we place on the truth for its own sake.

Toward the end of *Eternal Sunshine*, Mary finds out that she has undergone the memory-removal procedure and decides that what Mierzwiak has done is horribly wrong. This realization prompts her to return the medical files of all his previous patients, telling them that she has done this to "correct" the situation. In the shooting script for the film there is an additional bit of dialogue that further suggests that her actions are motivated by considerations similar to the sort we have been considering.

MARY: Patrick Henry said, "For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it." I found that quote last night. Patrick Henry was a great patriot, Howard.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, those not inclined to share this intuition with Mary, Patrick Henry, or Nozick (that truth has value that is independent of the good consequences knowledge of the truth can bring) are likely to complain that this position stands in desperate need of justification. *Why* is

the truth valuable in itself? Why should we think it good to know the truth in situations in which it brings only misery? The natural response (we just *do* value the truth in this fundamental and basic way) is not likely to sway the person who thinks a memory-removal procedure is unproblematic. Although everyone agrees that justifications have to come to an end somewhere, rarely do philosophers agree just *where* a proper ending resides. The common response to Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous claim "my spade is turned" (that is, I have hit bedrock—I have exhausted justifications) is to tell him to pick up the damn spade and keep digging!<sup>12</sup> I am not sure that much can be said to resolve this sort of dispute, but one point that can be made is to remind the opponent that he or she, too, hits bedrock eventually, that is, a point at which he or she can no longer provide a justification for his or her own valuation. To the question, "and what justifies the value you place on pleasant conscious experience?" it seems little can be said. This sort of concern appears to be somehow self-justifying or beyond justification. If this is right, it is unclear why we should not allow that other concerns might well be similarly foundational or beyond justification.

A further justification for valuing the truth may not be possible; however, it *is* possible to say a bit more by way of explanation regarding why many people hold this value. Colin McGinn has described the threat of general epistemological skepticism as tantamount to an individual discovering he or she is in a kind of "metaphysical solitary confinement." If we do not know what we think we know, then we are in effect cut off from the world. If the skeptic is right, it turns out that our mind does not have the kind of interaction and relationship with reality that we ordinarily take it to have, and this possibility is understandably disturbing to us. As McGinn puts it, we want our mind to be a window onto the world, not a prison.<sup>13</sup>

Merely losing a portion of one's memory is certainly not equivalent to the sort of radical ignorance that epistemological skeptics entertain, but it does involve a related variety of detachment from the world. Having undergone a memory-removal procedure, the individual has consented to, if not a metaphysical prison, then at least a pair of metaphysical blinkers and, worse yet, he or she has consented to make

himself or herself ignorant of that very choice. The individual chooses to cut himself or herself off from the world—his or her mind represents the world less accurately than it did before and, accordingly, he or she is slightly closer to the isolation and solipsism that make skepticism threatening.<sup>14</sup> We have a very natural desire *not* to be cut off from the world in this way, and thus it is not surprising that the removal of memories disturbs us in a manner that cannot simply be cashed out in terms of future unhappiness. The fact that in *Eternal Sunshine* the memory removal involves isolating a person from someone who was previously very close makes the use of the procedure all the more disturbing: it is not just a metaphysical relationship that has been severed, but a personal and emotional one.

#### IV. WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW CAN HURT YOU

Granting that voluntary removal of one's memories seems to clash with the value that many people place on knowing the truth about themselves and the world, a further related question arises: Does the sort of memory loss exemplified in *Eternal Sunshine* involve an actual *harm* or *misfortune* to the person who undergoes the procedure? It is quite natural for people to think initially that such a procedure *cannot* be said to harm the person if it produces no unpleasant effects for the person. (How can I be harmed if I do not consciously experience the harm?) Although this seems straightforward enough, on reflection we can see that it is far from obvious that this simple notion of harm will suffice. Consider Thomas Nagel's comments on the view that harm must necessarily be experienced.

It means that even if a man is betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face, none of it can be counted as a misfortune for him so long as he does not suffer as a result. It means that a man is not injured if his wishes are ignored by the executor of his will, or if, after his death, the belief becomes current that all the literary works on which his fame rests were really written by his brother, who died in Mexico at the age of 28.<sup>15</sup>

Nagel reminds us that many situations that we would naturally want to characterize as involving harms would have to be redescribed if we want to embrace the narrow view that harms must be experienced. Elaborating on Nagel's insights, Steven Luper helpfully distinguishes between what he calls "harms that wound" versus "harm that deprive."<sup>16</sup> We can understand the harms that Nagel speaks of as harms that may not wound but do deprive the person of some good, and both Luper and Nagel suggest that a sensible account of harm should be able to incorporate these latter types of misfortune.<sup>17</sup>

If this approach is correct, then it would seem that the deprivation of the truth that Joel, Clementine, and Mary undergo in *Eternal Sunshine* could rightly be seen as a form of harm or misfortune.<sup>18</sup> The fact that it is something they bring on themselves does not change this, for we allow that people often (knowingly and unknowingly) harm themselves in other ways. (The film in fact implicitly supports this notion through characterizing Clementine as self-destructive, Mary as easily manipulated, and Joel as a depressive—just the types of people who could and would harm themselves.) The harm here is not as dramatic or obvious as some other forms of self-abuse, but it is nevertheless genuine: they have sacrificed a part of their minds and in the process blinded themselves to a part of the world.

#### V. IMMANUEL KANT ON DUTIES TO ONESELF

So far I have suggested that memory removal is morally problematic because it involves a clash between fundamental values: our concern with knowing the truth comes into tension with our desire for happiness. Undergoing such a procedure inevitably involves sacrificing the concern for truth and, accordingly, we are inclined to see the person who has undergone such a procedure as having been harmed through *deprivation* of the truth. Is there more to say regarding the sort of harm that one undergoes here? I think there is, and I think we can get at a deeper appreciation of the harm to self that memory removal involves through a consideration of some ideas from Immanuel Kant.

Kant famously proclaimed that persons are unique: everything else in the world is a thing

and thus has a price, but persons alone deserve a kind of treatment that involves recognizing their value as *beyond* price. Persons, because of their capacity for freedom and rational agency, have a dignity that is incommensurable and priceless. Accordingly, persons deserve *respect*. Kant thought that we needed to be consistent in our thinking on these matters, and that means we have to acknowledge that you have a duty to treat *yourself* with respect and never to use yourself solely as a means to an end. Accordingly, he argued that morality prohibits both suicide and many forms of self-mutilation. In the *Groundwork*, he succinctly lays out his reasons for this view.

First, as regards the concept of necessary duty to oneself, the man who contemplates suicide will ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If he destroys himself in order to escape from a difficult situation, he is making use of his person merely as a means so as to maintain a tolerable condition till the end of life. Man, however, is not a thing, and hence is not something to be used merely as a means; he must in all his actions always be regarded as an end in himself. Therefore, I cannot dispose of man in my own person by mutilating, damaging, or killing him. (It belongs to ethics proper to define this principle more precisely, so as to avoid all misunderstanding, e.g., as to the amputation of the limbs in order to preserve myself, as to exposing my life to danger with a view to preserve it, etc. This question is therefore omitted here.)<sup>19</sup>

Many have mocked Kant's remarks, wondering if his prohibition should include such horrific acts as ear piercing or haircuts. Acknowledging that we may want to make allowances for the permissibility of suicide and bodily mutilation under certain circumstances, we can still agree with the spirit of Kant's claims here: there is something disturbing about the idea of self-manipulation that parallels the disturbing aspects of manipulating others, and consistency suggests that we should recognize that cases of treating oneself solely as a means are morally problematic for the same reasons that objectifying others is wrong. Just as it is wrong to use others for advantage (even their own advantage) in ways that do not recognize their humanity, it is wrong to objectify oneself

simply for the sake of some supposed advantage. As Kant says elsewhere: "Self-regarding duties, however, are independent of all advantage, and pertain only to the worth of being human."<sup>20</sup>

It is a natural extension of Kant's view to criticize the process we see in *Eternal Sunshine* on the grounds that it involves a type of morally problematic self-objectification. Part of what is so disturbing about the memory-removal procedure is that it is in fact a form of self-mutilation: in order to "maintain a tolerable condition" one uses oneself as a mere means and thus manipulates oneself as though one were an object rather than a person deserving of respect. Indeed, the kind of manipulation involved here is more obviously problematic than the sort of bodily mutilation Kant mentions. After all, what is mutilated in this case is not merely one's body but one's *mind*, and thus the violation of one's rational nature is frightfully direct. Memory removal bears closer similarities to the sort of mind manipulation that Kant had in mind when he rejected the idea of rehabilitating prisoners. James Rachels, summarizing Kant's view, explains the rationale behind Kant's opposition to rehabilitation.

[T]he aim of "rehabilitation," although it sounds noble enough, is actually no more than the attempt to mold people into what we think they ought to be. As such, it is a violation of their rights as autonomous beings to decide for themselves what sort of people they will be. We do have the right to respond to their wickedness by "paying them back" for it, but we do not have the right to violate their integrity by trying to manipulate their personalities.<sup>21</sup>

Kant's view is obviously controversial, but it is easy enough to understand his concern, at least when considering certain types of rehabilitation. Take the film *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971): in it, a young thug named Alex (Malcolm McDowell) is captured and undergoes "aversion therapy" that makes him unable to commit violent acts but does nothing to remove his immoral desires or convince him of the wrongness of what he has done. He becomes mechanical, like clockwork, rather than a free, rational agent. It is precisely the sense that Alex has been unjustly manipulated that causes us to have sympathy for an otherwise vile person. Even if he is a criminal who has committed

countless immoral acts, that does not give society the right to treat him as though he is merely a broken mechanism rather than a person. Manipulating someone's mind is a particularly robust and offensive way to fail to grant him or her the respect that all people deserve.<sup>22</sup>

One might think the parallel between manipulative rehabilitation and self-induced memory removal fails because the case of memory removal involves a person voluntarily consenting to the manipulation while the criminal does not (presumably) consent to the rehabilitation. This brings up some rather thorny issues regarding the role of consent vis-à-vis Kantian ethics. I am inclined to think that Kant's account has to involve more than simply consent in order for an act to show proper respect, but for our purposes here we can leave this debate aside, for it seems quite likely that the person *post memory removal* is likely *not* to consent to the procedure that has been performed on him or her even if he or she did consent *prior to removal*. (Mary exhibits this pattern rather clearly in *Eternal Sunshine*.) The postprocedure person falls quite squarely into the class of persons who have had their integrity and personhood violated through the kind of manipulation that Kant criticized.

The way the memory-removal procedure creates a later self that may not approve of the earlier self's choices brings to mind another parallel, one that the film highlights in a particularly vivid fashion. The sadness we feel for both Clementine and Joel parallels the sort of sadness felt for people who, out of misery and desperation, start down a path of self-obliteration through drugs or alcohol. It is no coincidence that Clementine is characterized as an alcoholic, nor that Joel often appears so depressed as to be borderline suicidal. Their choice to utilize the memory-removal technology is presented as being of a piece with their other self-destructive tendencies. Kant would presumably agree that these behaviors all involve a morally problematic form of self-destruction. Discussing alcohol (and suicide), he remarks:

For example, if I have drunk too much today, I am incapable of making use of my freedom and my powers; or if I do away with myself, I likewise deprive myself of the ability to use [my powers]. So this conflicts with the greatest use of freedom, that it abolishes itself, and all use of it, as the highest *prin-*

*cipium* of life. Only under certain conditions can freedom be consistent with itself; otherwise it comes into collision with itself.<sup>23</sup>

The removal of memories can be plausibly seen as a limitation on one's freedom, just as Kant suggests both drunkenness and suicide limit freedom. (The cliché "knowledge is power" rings true here: the self-imposed ignorance brought on through memory removal limits your power and your freedom through limiting your options.) As with the other cases that Kant discusses, utilizing one's freedom in order to remove one's memories involves a kind of contradiction: you attempt to *use* your freedom in order to *limit* your freedom. On Kant's approach, we have no right to do this to ourselves, regardless of the convenience or advantage of such a procedure.

I do not want to suggest that Kant's positions on suicide, self-mutilation, or rehabilitation are clearly correct or uncontroversial—they are not, and many smart and able philosophers have criticized them. What I do want to claim is that his overall position and the way it manifests itself in these particular cases is both insightful and worthy of consideration, and that the insights Kant offers us apply rather nicely to the topic at hand, that is, the ethics of memory removal. Kant offers a rationale for why harming oneself in certain ways is particularly disturbing and morally problematic. In cases of suicide, self-abuse, and (I have argued) memory removal, we see agents treating themselves solely as a means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. There is a failure of self-respect, and this imparts the tragic sense that someone has, out of desperation, failed to recognize his or her own worth. This harmonizes well with the mood of *Eternal Sunshine*, as the film offers up exactly this sort of tragic situation in which individuals are blind to their own worth: the three people who we see using the memory-removal procedure are all characterized as self-destructive to varying degrees, with Clem's alcoholism, Joel's depression, and Mary's insecurity and weakness of will making it all too plausible that they would also engage in the sort of harm to self that memory removal involves. The film suggests that what they have done is both sad and wrong; Kant's moral theory helps make this suggestion comprehensible.

## VI. HARMING OTHERS THROUGH DECEIVING ONESELF

Watching the film, we do not simply feel bad for Joel and Clementine because we suspect they have harmed themselves in removing their memories; we also naturally think that this procedure involves harming those who are erased as well.<sup>24</sup> Consider in particular the feelings of sympathy that arise for Joel based on Clem's actions. Aside from worrying that he will harm himself in choosing memory removal, viewers of the film cannot help but think that Joel has already been harmed by Clementine through *her* trip to Lacuna. He certainly takes her decision to remove memories of him as something of an insult, and we are inclined to agree.

There is a rather straightforward way of understanding the nature of this harm, for we see Joel's confusion, sadness, and anger on the screen as he learns about what Clementine has done. He is made miserable by the news, and the thought of removing this newfound misery seems to be at least part of the basis for his decision to undergo the procedure himself. We saw earlier, though, that there are other classes of harm that are trickier to make sense of: harms that befall a person even though that person does not experience the harms. I suggested that Joel, Clementine, and Mary can be seen as harming themselves in this way by undergoing the memory-removal procedure; they harm themselves through deprivation of the truth regarding their previous relationships. I think we can (and should) go one step further, however, and say that Clementine has not just harmed herself but also harmed *Joel* in a way he cannot experience.<sup>25</sup> Just as in the case of unexperienced harm to self, this claim is initially puzzling. It is clear enough that Clem has harmed Joel in a very palpable way *once* he discovers that she has had him erased, but it is a significantly harder question whether he can be said to be harmed even if he does not discover what she has done.

We can better contemplate this possibility by considering a scenario slightly different from the one we saw in the film: imagine that Clementine erased Joel, but Joel *never* came to discover the erasure. (Perhaps he left to live in another country before she underwent the procedure and he lost all contact with mutual friends, family, and so forth.) Would it be right

to say that Clementine harmed Joel in her actions? Opinions are likely to be divided here, as we saw earlier that there are those (such as many utilitarians) who find the idea of an unexperienced harm nonsensical. Yet there are also folks like Nagel, who plausibly suggest that dismissing unexperienced harms may involve a larger sacrifice to our ordinary intuitions and commonsense than is initially obvious. If we can legitimately say that betraying someone behind their back involves harming them even if they never discover the harm, it would seem we should similarly be able to say that Clementine's actions harm Joel even if he never finds out.

Granting that *some* harms are not necessarily experienced, what is the nature of the non-experiential harm perpetrated by Clementine?<sup>26</sup> She has not exactly *betrayed* Joel, has she? After all, one might think that choosing to remove the memories of someone else is not significantly different from throwing out their old letters or deleting all their emails.<sup>27</sup> Is it not her right to remove mementos or even memories if she chooses? Perhaps, but here we may be riding roughshod over morally relevant differences between the case of an ex-lover burning letters and Clementine wiping all trace of Joel from her mind. There is certainly a difference *in degree* between the two cases, and that might be enough to make a moral difference, but there is also something more: entirely wiping out the memory of someone seems to manifest a failure of respect that is distinct *in kind* from merely discarding keepsakes.

On reflection, this sort of case appears to be less like the tossing of old letters and more like a genuine betrayal. Just as we might think that someone who has misrepresented the memory of someone else through slander has done him or her a disservice, we can similarly say that one who has removed *all* memory of someone has also done a disservice to the person who has been erased.<sup>28</sup> Though the idea may initially sound bizarre, it follows that we may have a moral obligation to remember those we have had close relationships with. Note that I did not say we have a moral obligation to have *fond* memories, or to *like* the person, for that would clearly be a ludicrous demand. Rather, I am suggesting that we are morally obliged to not distort history through distorting our own historical record.

Consider a drug that would revise one's memories such that all the memories of one's ex-spouse become both false and unflattering. Many would rightly regard the taker of such a drug as having done something that is not only imprudent but also immoral. Although *removing* memories is not the same as *distorting* them, the removal of *all* the memories of a person does amount to a form of distortion: your mind comes to have a falsified and thus distorted perspective on one aspect of the world. Through a voluntary "lie by omission," the narrative of your life has been, in part, fictionalized.

I said earlier that memory removal is disturbing because it amounts to putting on "metaphysical blinkers" that partially sever the connection between one's mind and the world—the mind no longer reflects the world as accurately as it did. There is symmetry in our values here: just as we want our mind to accurately represent the world, we also want the world to accurately represent *us*.<sup>29</sup> If I delete all my memories of a person, I ensure that a part of the world no longer represents that person at all, and it is hard not to think that I have thus engaged in a morally problematic form of misrepresentation. If that person were to find out what I have done, he or she would have the right to be offended. Even if they do not find out, it is plausible to think that they have nonetheless been harmed by my actions. Though the degree of wrongdoing may vary in accordance with my motives (as in the case of slander or other forms of misrepresentation), even memory removal done with the best of reasons can amount to a misfortune for the person erased because it involves this willful failure to represent the person accurately.

I suspect some skepticism remains in many readers for, despite the considerations above, a duty to *remember* can seem like a very odd thing for morality to demand.<sup>30</sup> If we can free ourselves from an overly narrow conception of morality as nothing more than a collection of abstract rules that regulate behavior towards others, I think we can see that what I am suggesting is not really that strange. The philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch can provide aid here: she eloquently argued that at the core of morality is a responsibility to do our best to *get things right*, and this means not *just* to act rightly but to perceive the world and other

people accurately—to "really look" and see things as they actually are.

The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality. We can see the length, the extension, of these concepts as patient attention transforms accuracy without interval into just discernment.... Should an unhappy marriage be continued for the sake of the children? Should I leave my family in order to do political work? Should I neglect them in order to practice my art? The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*. The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair.... It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is.<sup>31</sup>

If this characterization of "the authority of morals" is correct, then I think it is quite reasonable to conclude that we ought to do our best not just to *look*, but also to *not forget* what we have seen. Choosing to obliterate all trace of someone else is the very opposite of the sort of focused attention that Murdoch describes as necessary for both love and justice.<sup>32</sup> Maintaining the ability to *look back* is just one part of our larger responsibility to look at the world with the clarity that morality requires.<sup>33</sup> *Eternal Sunshine* presents us with several characters who have, for various reasons, chosen to evade that responsibility, and the film effectively cautions us against such escapism.

#### VII. MARY'S THEFT

*Eternal Sunshine*, unlike some science-fiction films, is not in love with the new technology it showcases.<sup>34</sup> Quite the reverse: the memory-removal procedure is presented as a tempting but misguided and dangerous tool. I have attempted to make sense of and defend the pessimistic tone of the film toward this sort of procedure. I have argued that undergoing memory removal can amount to harming both yourself and the person you have erased. You harm yourself through depriving yourself of the truth about your life and the world. You harm the other person through a kind of *misrepresentation* that is inevitable when you remove *all* representation of that person. My hope is that a



FIGURE 2. Mary (Kirsten Dunst) leaving Lacuna, Inc. with patients' records in order to return them to those who have had memories erased.

consideration of the philosophical issues involved has helped us to better understand and justify the film's technological pessimism and its sense of tragic loss.

Our consideration of the philosophical issues raised by *Eternal Sunshine* has put us in a better position to defend the actions of Mary at the end of the film. I mentioned earlier that she ultimately decides to steal the medical records of Mierzwiak's patients and return them. From a strictly utilitarian perspective it might seem obvious that Mary is doing something morally wrong in returning those files, mementos, and audiotapes. Surely she will be causing many of the previous patients pain and perhaps even intense, prolonged suffering. Why, then, does she think she is "in the right," and why does the audience tend to sympathize with her actions? I have been suggesting in this essay that there are a variety of ways in which we can think of the memory-removal procedure as causing significant harm through deprivation. Mary is attempting to undo that harm, and even if her attempt brings with it some "harms that wound," we (and she) are inclined to think the suffering might well be worth it. Although we do not get to see the full results of her actions, the film suggests that her goal is a worthy one, and the philosophers we have considered have helped us acquire a fuller understanding of why her actions may be justified *despite* the pain they will bring.<sup>35</sup>

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

I have tried to explain how the philosophical resources provided by Nozick, Nagel, Kant,

Murdoch, and others put us in a position to better understand why the scenario of *Eternal Sunshine* is disturbing and morally problematic in a way that cannot be fully accommodated by traditional utilitarian thinking alone. Nozick's and Nagel's insights suggest that we can legitimately claim that memory removal involves a conflict of values, one that results in harm to the individual that goes beyond the sorts of harms measurable in terms of utility. In addition, Kant has given us reason to worry that voluntary memory removal displays a lack of self-respect that is harmful and perhaps immoral. Finally, Murdoch's moving vision of morality as requiring accurate perception allows us to make sense of the idea that memory removal can involve not just harm to self, but also harm to others.

These considerations help us better understand our response to the film: watching *Eternal Sunshine* it is quite natural to feel uneasy regarding the decisions Joel, Clementine, and Mary make to utilize memory removal. It may initially seem puzzling that we are led to feel conflicted regarding the voluntary decisions characters have made in order to pursue happiness. (No one forces them, and they are choosing memory removal in order to feel better, so why should we feel ambivalence?) However, understanding the nature of their sacrifice, and the manner in which it involves a kind of harm to others as well as exploitation of the self, allows us to make better sense of our emotional response to the film. We can now see why the depth of sadness evoked by the film is not exhausted by a consideration of the bad consequences and suffering we witness—the misfortune the characters bring on themselves and others is not always in the form of misery, but it is misfortune just the same.

Filmmakers and novelists are often more successful than philosophers at exploring the nuances and complexity of our beliefs, desires, and values. However, philosophy has a role in helping us in the quest to make sense of and interpret this complexity. *Eternal Sunshine* is, among other things, a valuable philosophical resource because it vividly illustrates the poverty of the classical utilitarian perspective through making us aware that moral reality is significantly more complex than such utilitarian theory can allow. In particular, the film shows us that the harm caused by voluntary memory

removal cannot be satisfactorily understood solely in terms of harms that are consciously experienced. Philosophical argumentation is required to make explicit these implicit lessons of the film, and it has been my goal here to utilize philosophical resources to do just that so as to better understand both this remarkable film and the philosophical issues it so eloquently raises.

#### IX. POSTSCRIPT: THE PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL REPORT ON BIOTECHNOLOGY

I have been discussing memory removal in the context of the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. There, a procedure is utilized to wipe out all memories of a previous relationship. I suggested that the film gives us reason to think that such a procedure is troubling, and I tried to unpack this thought through relying on the insights of various philosophers. My goal in the above essay was primarily to argue that memory removal can be morally problematic in a way that goes beyond its potential for bringing about bad experiences. It does *not* follow from this that memory removal may not, in some cases, be justified. What does follow is that even if it is justified, that does not necessarily make it an unequivocally good thing—it may instead be merely the lesser of two evils.

My qualification here is not simply for the sake of academic accuracy, for the issues raised by *Eternal Sunshine* are not as farfetched or futuristic as some might think. As *The New York Times* has reported, memory-diminishing drugs have been given to those with posttraumatic stress disorder in an attempt to lessen the horrible symptoms that can follow the witnessing of traumatic events.<sup>36</sup> The drugs in question do not exactly erase problematic memories, but they do diminish them through blunting the emotions connected to specific memories. The President's Council on Bioethics finds the research disturbing enough to devote a chapter on it in a recent report, and it cautions against the use of such drugs.<sup>37</sup> I want to briefly consider their arguments and compare them with the concerns I have raised regarding the memory removal exhibited in *Eternal Sunshine*.

The report raises many sensible worries about the safety and effectiveness of such drugs,

but the heart of its philosophical argument against memory removal seems to be threefold. First, it claims that the happiness we seek from memory removal would be a shallow simulacrum of genuine happiness.

Yet it is far from clear that feelings of contentment severed from action in the world or relationships with other people could make us truly happy. Would a happiness that did not flow from what we do and say, usually in association with others, be more than a simulacrum of that happiness for which our souls fit us? (p. 208)

Second, the Council suggests that pursuing such technology shows a failure to properly recognize our limitations.

[B]y disconnecting our mood and memory from what we do and experience, the new drugs could jeopardize the fitness and truthfulness of how we live and what we feel, as well as our ability to confront responsibly and with dignity the imperfections and limits of our lives and those of others. Instead of recognizing distress, anxiety, and sorrow as appropriate reflections of the fragility of the human life and inseparable from the setbacks and heartbreaks that accompany the pursuit of happiness and the love of fellow mortals, we are invited to treat them as diseases to be cured, perhaps one day eradicated. (p. 213)

Does not the experience of hard truths—of the unchosen, the inexplicable, the tragic, remind us that we can never be fully at home in the world, especially if we are to take serious the reality of human evil? (p. 229)

Finally, the Council worries that memory removal involves a harmful tampering of one's personal identity.

But if enfeebled memory can cripple identity, selectively altered memory can distort it. Changing the content of our memories or altering their emotional tonalities... could subtly reshape who we are, at least to ourselves. With altered memories we might feel better about ourselves, but it is not clear that the better-feeling "we" remains the same as before. (p. 212)

[A]n unchecked power to erase memories, brighten moods, and alter our emotional dispositions could imperil our capacity to form a strong and coherent personal identity. (p. 212)

[W]e might be often be tempted to sacrifice the accuracy of our memories for the sake of easing our pain or expanding our control over our psychic lives. But doing so means, ultimately, severing ourselves from reality and leaving our own identity behind. (p. 234)

These and other considerations lead the Council to issue a strong warning against such biotechnology.

Memory and mood-altering drugs pose a fundamental danger to our pursuit of happiness. In the process of satisfying our genuine desires for peace of mind, a cheerful outlook, unclouded self-esteem, and intense pleasure, they may impair our capacity to satisfy the desires that by nature make us happiest. (p. 269)

Regarding the Council's claim that memory removal might alter the patient's personal identity, the relevant issues seem to be not whether one's identity might be altered, but *how* it is altered, and whether the change is for the best. There is something morally problematic about the idea of manipulating one's mind, as our consideration of Kant's position showed, but the problem is surely not *just* that one's identity has changed. After all, there are all sorts of behaviors we can engage in that will, in some sense, alter our identity.<sup>38</sup> That a procedure alters the self cannot, by itself, be a reason for rejecting it.

Regarding the claim that pursuing such technology involves a denial of our limitations as humans, the Council seems to be putting forward a contentious theistic account of human nature as inherently limited. (The Chair of the Council, Leon Kass, is notorious for his conservative, theistically-based positions, including his initial rejection of in-vitro fertilization.) Although I am rather skeptical of folks like the "transhumanists" who giddily embrace the view that technology will soon allow for a seemingly unlimited increase in our abilities,<sup>39</sup> I also find it disturbing to encounter a government council speaking of the natural "limits" of humanity and advising against even the attempt to "feel at home in the world." A rejection of a particular technology should be based on the actual dangers it poses, not on the mere fact that it is new and appears capable of reducing our limitations in ways that would once have been thought of as "unnatural."

Regarding the claim that such drugs might tempt us to accept a shallow or fake happiness instead of the real article, I am sympathetic to the Council's point but wary of their rather narrow conception of "genuine happiness." They seem in the end to suggest that genuine happiness involves not feeling good but instead simply being a good citizen.

Perhaps a remedy for our psychic troubles lies in the rediscovery of obligations and purposes outside the self—a turn outward rather than inward, a turn from the healthy mind to the good society. And perhaps the most promising route to real happiness is to live a fully engaged life, as teachers and parents, soldiers and statesmen, doctors and volunteers. (p. 267)

No doubt engagement with the community and the society at large is often conducive to a substantial and lasting sense of happiness; however, it seems quite wrong to suggest that true happiness is available *only* through such engagement, or that such engagement will necessarily bring contentment. Indeed, this suggestion is pernicious if it implies that *unless* such engagement brings happiness it is not worth pursuing.

Rather than dismiss the idea that happiness may be available through memory removal or mood-altering drugs, I think it may be more fruitful to instead point out that happiness is not all that we care about in life. As Nozick's thought experiment shows, living a happy life is not the only thing that matters—living a *meaningful* life also has priority for most people. By "meaningful life" I mean one in which a person is able to realize his or her deepest values.<sup>40</sup> Since many of us value more than simply happiness, the meaningful life is not simply the happy one. Memory removal (or memory deadening through drugs) may inhibit our capacity for meaningful lives, and caution is in order when it comes to pursuing such technology. In certain situations, however, medications or technologies that blunt memories may instead allow for a happiness and meaningfulness that is not otherwise available. As Robin Henig points out in *The New York Times*:

Without witnessing the torment of unremitting post-traumatic stress disorder, it is easy to exaggerate the benefits of holding on to bitter memories. But

a person crippled by memories is a diminished person; there is nothing ennobling about it. If we as a society decide it's better to keep people locked in their anguish because of some idealized view of what it means to be human, we might be revealing ourselves to be a society with a twisted notion of what being human really means.<sup>41</sup>

As I argued earlier, memory removal involves a sacrifice because of the conflict between the value we place on veracity and the value we place on contentment. Such a sacrifice involves a significant loss, but in certain circumstances this loss may be outweighed by the gain made in contentment, freedom, and psychic health. Our duty to remember can be trumped by the horribly debilitating effects of severe trauma and, in such cases, it would be quite cruel to deny relief to the person who is suffering.<sup>42</sup>

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1. I benefited from the discussions of an audience at the University of North Florida, as well as the participants of the 2005 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association session hosted by the Society for the Philosophical Study of Contemporary Visual Art. In addition, I owe special thanks to Susan Wolf, Tim Mawson, Murray Smith, Tom Wartenberg, Dan Callcut, Sean Greenberg, Carlene Bauer, Chris Caruso, Susan Watson, Sean Allen-Hermanson, Paul Draper, and Josh Oreck for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

2. It might seem obvious that any philosophical themes in the film should be credited to the screenwriter, but in this case it is not clear who gets the credit (or blame). The screenplay was written by Charlie Kaufman, but based on a scenario by Michel Gondry that is, in turn, based on an idea by the French conceptual artist Pierre Bismuth. Also, Kaufman's original script is significantly different, with a bleaker and more cynical ending. Presumably, either Gondry or others pushed for the film to have a more nuanced, romantic, and (cautiously) upbeat conclusion.

3. I will not be exploring the particular aesthetic and film-theoretic issues raised by *Eternal Sunshine*, but that certainly is not because I do not think they are worth exploring—there is much that could be said about this notable film. For example, others have pointed out that *Eternal Sunshine* seems to fit rather nicely within the genre of film that

Stanley Cavell has made famous with the label "Comedies of Remarriage." See Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981). Such films involve a separated couple ultimately getting back together through rediscovering why they fell in love in the first place. *Eternal Sunshine* follows that pattern, but with the novel twist of memory removal facilitating the "reunion."

4. There is an interesting exception here: the technology as it functions in the film (flaws and all) actually allows a couple to reunite in a way that may not have been possible otherwise. It is not clear whether this reunion is a *good* thing (though many viewers, myself included, take it to be). Even if a glitchy and incomplete memory removal brings about a happy result in this particular case, however, this does not warrant an acceptance of the technology in general.

5. In "Philosophy Screened: Experiencing *The Matrix*," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 26 (2003): 139–152, Thomas Wartenberg has usefully pointed out that the idea that film, a visual medium, *can* illustrate a philosophical claim is itself worth questioning. Although I think this is indeed a general issue worth pursuing, it seems to me the best way to do this is to consider whether a particular film can in fact succeed in such illustration. This is part of what I am undertaking here. (When discussing *The Matrix*, Wartenberg ultimately acknowledges that film can occasionally embody philosophical argumentation as a form of "thought experiment." Though I do not dwell on this issue in this essay, I think that a similar claim could be made regarding *Eternal Sunshine*. Wartenberg's comment that "the film actually provides its viewers with a visual experience that is analogous to [the protagonist's]" seems equally applicable here (p. 149). As with *The Matrix*, *Eternal Sunshine* begins by forcing the viewer to enter an epistemic position similar to that of the main character, and in the process "screens" a thought experiment that can provide philosophical insight.)

6. One of the more insightful aspects of the film involves its presentation of how the memory-removal technology is actually implemented. Unlike most "sci-fi" films, which offer naïve pictures of technological innovation being pursued and employed by only the best and brightest (for example, brainiacs in lab coats), we here see a much more realistic portrayal of how this technology (if widely marketed) is likely to be used: ordinary twenty-something slackers perform the procedure with the same degree of respect and competence that they would bring to developing film at a one-hour photo lab. (Having worked at a one-hour photo lab as an ordinary slacker I can speak with some authority here. The manner in which Patrick unethically keeps Clementine's mementos for his own purposes is similar to the way in which some of my fellow employees would make copies of photos they liked for their own use.) It is an interesting question why most futuristic films fail to contain this sort of realism regarding the manner in which technology is likely to be employed, though I will not further pursue that issue here.

7. It should be noted that one of the many difficulties with utilitarianism is that in situations such as the one we are considering, utilitarian theory would seem to require even the *involuntary* use of such technology if it would be likely to maximize utility.

8. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 43.

9. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, p. 44.
10. Christopher Grau, "Bad Dreams, Evil Demons, and the Experience Machine: Philosophy and *The Matrix*," in *Philosophers Explore the Matrix*, ed. Christopher Grau (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). My summary of Nozick's thought experiment here draws on my formulation in that essay.
11. Charlie Kaufman, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (The Shooting Script)* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2004), p. 111.
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1958), § 217.
13. Colin McGinn, *Eternal Questions, Timeless Approaches* (New York: Barnes & Noble Audio, 2004). McGinn further explores this theme in "Being and Know- ingness" (unpublished manuscript, 2005).
14. There is another less direct way in which this procedure brings on the threat of metaphysical isolation: if such a procedure were actually possible, the ordinarily farfetched skeptical worries that we may be radically wrong about our past become much less farfetched and much more worrisome. No one could be sure that they had not in fact had large portions of their lives erased at some earlier point. (This might be grounds for doubting that a utilitarian defense of such technology could ever be feasible, for it is hard to see how this sort of worry could be eliminated if the existence of the procedure became widely known.) The worry here is related to the skeptical worries regarding *artificial* memories that are raised by such films as *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990).
15. Thomas Nagel, "Death," in *The Metaphysics of Death*, ed. John Fischer (Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 64.
16. Steven Luper, "Death," in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <<http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/death>>.
17. Nagel's primary concern is to make sense of the idea that *death* harms the one who dies. Acknowledging death as a deprivation brings with it additional metaphysical difficulties (e.g., *when* is one deprived?) that do not confront the case of memory removal.
18. There is another way in which we can see this technology as involving harm to oneself: on some philosophical accounts of the self (such as John Locke's), personal identity consists in the continuity of and connections between memories. Put bluntly, on this sort of account you just *are* your memories. Such approaches to identity bring with them the consequence that a loss of memories is quite literally a loss of the self. Memory removal becomes "self-destructive" as a matter of definition! (I do not find such a criterion for personal identity particularly persuasive, so I do not dwell on this issue here.)
19. Immanuel Kant, "Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Ethical Philosophy*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), pp. 36–37, § 429.
20. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 125.
21. James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 136.
22. It is a further question whether Kant is right to classify *all* forms of rehabilitation as manipulation. It seems that Kant should have distinguished between those methods that

involve trying to *reason* with the agent from those that use nonrational means and coercion to induce change.

23. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 127.

24. Mary's case is significantly different, of course, as she has Mierziak's consent and encouragement.

25. The thought that she could harm Joel through erasing him may have been her primary motivation for undergoing the procedure. She proudly admits at one point that "I'm a vindictive little bitch truth be told." However, their mutual friend Carrie tells Joel: "What can I say Joel...She's impulsive...She decided to erase you almost as a lark," so the degree of intended malice in the act is not entirely clear.

26. I do not here explore a specifically Kantian account of the harm done to others, but perhaps such an account could be defended. It is not clear that a maxim involving the desire to erase memories of someone could be universalized, and it also seems plausible to suggest that choosing to erase the memories of someone embodies a failure of respect for the person erased. Ken Rogerson has suggested (in conversation) that utilizing memory removal may violate Kant's absolute prohibition on lying, for in erasing all trace of someone you *intentionally* place yourself in a position in which, if asked, you are bound to say false things about your own history and the person you have erased. There is also the obvious possibility that memory removal will cause one to disregard a Kantian prohibition on breaking promises: if you cannot remember your promises, you cannot possibly be sure you will keep them.

27. In a recent *New York Times* article, Anna Bahney points out that thanks to the dominance of email and digital photography, these days the mementos of a love gone sour can be "expunged with brutal efficiency" ("Zapping Old Flames Into Digital Ash," April 4, 2004).

28. I am here focusing on the harm done to the person you have erased, but given the way the memory removal functions in the film, other questions come up regarding your duties to those who are constrained by your actions. Is it moral of you to request that all mutual friends refrain from mentioning the procedure you have undergone? Asking them to act as though your relationship never occurred could, in certain circumstances, amount to imposing a very significant burden.

29. If we feel that part of our nature is reprehensible, however, we may embrace the opportunity to hide this fact. (Thus Mierziak feels no need for Mary's mind to accurately reflect his full nature.)

30. In his book *The Ethics of Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2002), Avishai Margalit argues that we have an *ethical* rather than a *moral* obligation to remember others. He aligns ethics with what Bernard Williams has called "thick relations" with those we care about, while morality is relegated to "thin relations" with those we are less connected to. He thinks the realm of ethics is optional in a way morality is not, for he concludes that our obligation to remember is conditional on our desire to be involved in caring relations with others. Although I think there is something insightful in the distinction between ethics and morality (as well as between thick and thin), I am not as confident as he is that the line between the two can be clearly drawn, or that one is optional in a way that the other is not. Accordingly, I do not hesitate to speak of special moral obligations to those we care about. (My arguments for *why* we have an obligation are rather distinct from

Margalit's, though I do think much of what he says about the relationship between care and memory is compatible with my account. In particular, I suspect Iris Murdoch's emphasis on focused attention could be reformulated in terms of "care" as he uses that term.)

31. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 90–91.

32. It is rather ironic that Kate Winslet has played both Iris Murdoch (in the film *Iris* (Richard Eyre, 2001)) and Clementine, a character who exhibits the reluctance to "really look" that Murdoch criticized. (It is also sadly ironic that Iris Murdoch herself came to suffer from Alzheimer's, and thus gradually lost just the sort of perceptual acuteness she felt was so important for love and justice.)

33. My utilization here of Murdoch the moral particularist alongside Kant the universalist may strike some readers as bizarre. It certainly would be bizarre (and perhaps incoherent) if I were urging that we accept Kant's entire moral theory. However, I think we can benefit from Kant's insights regarding the problematic nature of self-mutilation without committing ourselves to his overall conception of morality, just as we can benefit from Murdoch's insights regarding focused attention and the connection between love and justice without accepting all that she says on the topic of morals.

34. In an insightful article, Andrew Light has argued that the film *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) can be seen as supporting what Light calls a "substantive" thesis regarding technology. See "Enemies of the State," in *Reel Arguments: Film, Philosophy, and Social Criticism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003). This thesis (originating in the works of Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, and others) involves the view that technology is not "value free" or morally neutral, but has an inherently ethical dimension. In particular, Light suggests that the surveillance technology employed in *The Conversation* is presented as corrupting its users. Light explains this corruption in terms of the alienation that is inevitably imposed by the technology: by its very nature the surveillance technology tends to objectify the person being surveyed. I think something similar could be said in favor of a "substantive" interpretation of *Eternal Sunshine*. The film presents the actual employment of the memory-removal technology as inevitably involving the depersonalization and manipulation of the patient. This in turn seems to lead to other moral infractions great and small: Patrick steals both underwear and Joel's girlfriend, Stan utterly fails to show respect for Joel as a patient, Mierzwiak uses the technology to evade responsibility for his affair with Mary, and so forth. Just as *The Conversation* suggests that surveillance technology corrupts the character of those utilizing it, *Eternal Sunshine* seems to suggest that memory removal technology is also far from morally neutral and brings with it a problematic attitude of objec-

tification that infects those charged with controlling the technology.

35. I say "may be justified" here because it is possible that the return of the files will indeed cause *so much* suffering that it will counterbalance the good accomplished through undoing the harm of deprivation caused by memory removal. There are also questions of patient consent that may be morally relevant. I do not want to deny these possibilities and complications—I just want to suggest that the fact that we seriously consider the judgment that Mary's actions are justifiable shows us that both harms that wound and harms that deprive need to be recognized here. Without the recognition that there has been harm through deprivation, Mary's actions become *obviously* unjustifiable, yet when we watch the film we do not find her to be so obviously in the wrong.

36. Robin Marantz Henig, "The Quest to Forget: Drugs to Prevent Painful Memories," *The New York Times* April 4, 2004.

37. This report, *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, is available at <<http://www.bioethics.gov/reports/beyondtherapy>>. Future references will be to page numbers only.

38. Indeed, it is hard to think of activities that do not, *in some sense*, change who we are. The incredible popularity of "self-help" books is a testament to the degree to which we not only permit, but seek out, opportunities to alter the self.

39. Resources regarding transhumanism can be found on the web at <<http://www.transhumanism.org>>. Nick Bostrom is perhaps the best known transhumanist who is also an academic philosopher.

40. It would take us too far afield for me to go into much more depth here, but it should be pointed out that my characterization of meaningfulness is meant to be neutral between "subjective" and "objective" accounts of meaningfulness and value. Although I am sympathetic to objective accounts, for my purposes here the subjective account can suffice. For an insightful discussion of why subjective accounts of meaningfulness are problematic, see Susan Wolf's essay "The True, the Good, and the Lovable," in *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (MIT Press, 2002).

41. Henig, "The Quest to Forget."

42. Note also that some of the objections I raised to the memory-removal technology that appears in *Eternal Sunshine* may not apply to cases involving posttraumatic stress disorder and memory-blunting drugs. There may be no significant harm inflicted on others through the use of such drugs. Also, to the extent that the drugs blunt emotional tonalities rather than the factual content of memories, the proper use of such drugs may not threaten the value we place on knowing the truth.

