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Blessed Are the Forgetful: Utilitarianism and Remarriage in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

This paper considers two different kinds of philosophical interpretations of the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. On the one hand, Christopher Grau¹ and Thomas Wartenberg² have interpreted *Eternal Sunshine* as a thought experiment that can function as an argument against utilitarianism. On the other hand, David Edelstein,³ Anthony Oliver Scott,⁴ Michael Meyer,⁵ and William Day⁶ have traced *Eternal Sunshine* back to genre of the remarriage comedy, which has been theorized by Stanley Cavell.⁷ I will argue that these two kinds of interpretations are in conflict. More specifically, *Eternal Sunshine*, understood as a comedy of remarriage, cannot function as an argument against utilitarianism, at least in the sense specified by Grau and Wartenberg. Finally, I will suggest a different way in which *Eternal Sunshine*, understood as a comedy of remarriage, might function as an argument against utilitarianism.

Grau considers the utilitarian thesis according to which “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” (p. 120).⁸ He compares the kind of memory machine that we see at work in *Eternal Sunshine* to the experience machine imagined by Robert Nozick in his famous thought experiment.⁹ More specifically, since Grau acknowledges that “the procedure *as displayed in the film* does *not* tend to maximize happiness overall”,¹⁰ he treats the actual memory machine we see in *Eternal Sunshine* as a flawed instance of an ideal memory machine, which, if properly instantiated, shall maximize happiness overall: “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?”¹¹ Just as Nozick’s experience machine “would give you any experience you desired”, the ideal memory machine would remove any memory you dislike. According to Grau, both the experience machine and the ideal memory machine involve “sacrificing knowledge of the truth for happiness”.¹² As moral subjects, we are *reluctant* to sacrifice knowledge of the truth for the sort of happiness warranted by such machines.

Such a reluctance suggests that maximizing happiness is not necessarily our primary interest. Knowledge of the truth also matters for us, and so does contact with reality: “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”.¹³ Therefore, the ideal memory machine, just as the experience machine, shows us the inadequacy of the utilitarian claim that the best action is the

one that maximizes the overall happiness. The contribution of a certain action to knowledge of the truth and to contact with reality is also to be taken into account in morally assessing this action.

Wartenberg also interprets *Eternal Sunshine* as a thought experiment against utilitarianism, but he proposes a slightly different line of reasoning. He begins by observing that: “Utilitarians take the principle of utility – the claim that a social institution is justified if it contributes more than any alternative to the general welfare – to be the supreme principle of morality”.¹⁴ From this perspective, he treats the use of the memory machine in the fictional world of *Eternal Sunshine* as a practice which challenges the principle of utility. According to Wartenberg, the main reason why we are reluctant to use the memory machine is that we do not find it right to leave the control of our mind to external agents: “it is problematic for us to cede control over our minds to others, for we then lack the means to regain control. It is the highly heteronymous nature of this practice for the one undergoing it that marks it as so problematic for the film”.¹⁵ While Grau criticizes the memory machine by highlighting the clash between the pursuit of happiness and the renunciation of knowledge, Wartenberg does so by highlighting the clash between the pursuit of happiness and the renunciation of agency.

Still, if we treat *Eternal Sunshine* as a comedy of remarriage, the memory machine seems to be capable of supporting the pursuit of happiness without requiring the renunciation of knowledge and agency. Indeed, I will argue, the memory machine allows the characters to pursue happiness by reaching a deeper level of knowledge about themselves and a more effective agency.

In their reviews of *Eternal Sunshine*, Edelstein and Scott treat the film as a contemporary instance of the comedy of remarriage. Edelstein writes:

The philosopher Stanley Cavell has called the classic screwball movies like *The Awful Truth* (1937) and *The Lady Eve* (1941) ‘comedies of remarriage,’ in which couples are rudely bounced from their Edenic connubial gardens and reunited (after a series of farcical/magical contrivances) in a spirit of wry realism: This time they know they’ll live bumpily ever after. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, screenwriter Charlie Kaufman teleports the screwball genre into the 21st century.¹⁶

In a similar vein, Scott points out that “In the classic comedy of remarriage (*Philadelphia Story* may be the most familiar example) the central couple recovers from the failure of their first union and eventually, after various humiliations and setbacks, constitutes a more perfect one”, and he concludes that “This is a pretty good summary of *Eternal Sunshine*”.¹⁷

The insights that can be found in Edelstein’s and Scott’s popular reviews are further developed in two philosophical papers, one by Meyer and the other by Day. Meyer states that memory, forgiveness and reconciliation are the key components of the comedy of remarriage, and in virtue of its way of highlighting these elements “*Eternal Sunshine* is arguably the most instructive and also

the most canonical twenty-first-century comedy of remarriage”.¹⁸ Day points out the crucial role of conversation in the comedy of remarriage and proposes to read “the middle of *Eternal Sunshine* as an extravagant remarriage conversation between Joel and Clementine”.¹⁹ Although Meyer and Day emphasize different components of remarriage, they ultimately agree in treating *Eternal Sunshine* as a remarkable contemporary occurrence of the peculiar film genre discovered by Cavell.

Grau himself, in note 3 of his essay, acknowledges 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.’ [...] 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.’²⁰

Yet, if we treat *Eternal Sunshine* as a comedy of remarriage, the functioning of the movie as an argument against utilitarianism can be undermined. In fact, the comedy of remarriage tells the story of a man and a woman whose pursue of happiness depends on a process that involves failure and break-up. Since in *Eternal Sunshine* the memory machine is an essential constituent of this process, the best way for Joel and Clementine to pursue their happiness is to go through the experience of the memory machine.

To a certain extent, Grau and Wartenberg are right in claiming that *Eternal Sunshine* addresses a utilitarian issue by treating the memory machine as a means to the end of happiness. Nevertheless, both Grau and Wartenberg consider the wrong machine. They focus on an ideal memory machine that would perfectly succeed in completely erasing the memories about the beloved. Yet, as both Grau and Wartenberg acknowledge, this is not the machine that is at work in *Eternal Sunshine*. Instead, the film shows us a flawed machine, which may fail in completely erasing the memories about the beloved. Indeed, in the case of Joel, the memory machine actually fails in fulfilling its primary function. After the erasure process has finished, Joel is left with a piece of memory, the word “Montauk”, which leads him to take a train and go to the place in which he will meet Clementine again on Valentine’s Day. Arguably, a similar failure of the memory machine also occurs in the case of Clementine, since she also goes to Montauk on Valentine’s Day.

Grau himself acknowledges this fact in note 4 of his paper, when he writes:

...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.²¹

Still, such an acknowledgment can function as the starting point of an argument leading to a different conception of the role of utilitarianism in *Eternal Sunshine*. If (1) it is “the technology as it functions in the film (flaws and all)” that “brings about a *happy* result in this particular case”; and (2) this result maximizes happiness for Joel and Clem; then, at least in this particular case, (3) the alternative that the utilitarian would consider *the best way to happiness* is precisely the one involving the use of the flawed memory machine. Therefore, if one wants to use *Eternal Sunshine* as an argument against utilitarianism, one should challenge *this* alternative.²²

Premises (1) and (2), from which conclusion (3) follows, rest upon an account of *Eternal Sunshine* as a comedy of remarriage. According to such an account, remarriage maximizes happiness for Joel and Clem given the crisis of their relationship. Yet, only the flawed memory machine seems capable of making remarriage possible, since – given the situation presented in the film – the ideal memory machine will lead Joel and Clem, at most, to a brand-new marriage, while the refusal of any memory machine will bring them to an irreversible divorce.

Thus, given the story told in *Eternal Sunshine*, the ideal memory machine is not the right option from a utilitarian point of view, since it is not “the one that brings about the most happiness overall”, in Grau’s words – or the one that “contributes more than any alternative to the general welfare”, in Wartenberg’s words. There is an alternative that better contributes to the pursuit of happiness, and to remarriage, and this alternative is the flawed memory machine, that is, the memory machine that we see at work in the movie.

Since the flawed memory machine is the one that offers the best contribution to the pursuit of happiness, if one wants to interpret *Eternal Sunshine* as an argument against utilitarianism, it is *this* machine one should consider to be one’s target. It is against *this* machine that Grau’s argument about knowledge and Wartenberg’s argument about agency should be addressed. Unlike the *ideal* memory machine, the actual, flawed memory machine can resist these arguments. In order to make this point, let us focus on the pursuit of happiness in the remarriage genre.

According to Cavell, the pursuit of happiness that occurs in the comedies of remarriage requires that the man and the woman leave an original condition in which they are just like Adam and Eve after the creation. In this sense, the story told by the comedy of remarriage can be seen as a “trouble in paradise” tale,²³ that is, as “some comic version of the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden”.²⁴ In order to move from the condition of marriage to that of remarriage, the man and the woman should undergo the temptation and eat the apple that will lead them to be chased from the Garden of Eden. As Cavell puts it, “the woman has probably started the [process] with something called an apple, anyway by presenting a temptation”.²⁵

In *Eternal Sunshine*, the apple, the temptation originally presented by the woman, is precisely the memory machine. Only eating the apple can enable the hero and the heroine to achieve the changing they need. As Cavell puts it, "...this changing is *the forgoing or forgetting of the past state* and its impasse of vengefulness".²⁶

Cavell traces the changes that characters undergo in the remarriage comedy back to the changing that occurs in the Shakespearean romance, which "deals in marvelous events and solves its problems through metamorphoses and recognition scenes – through, in other words, transformations of perception" (p. 48).²⁷ In the tradition of romance, as well as in the remarriage comedy, such metamorphoses and transformations require "the action's moving from a starting place of impasse to a place Frye calls 'the green world,' a place in which perspective and renewal are to be achieved" (p. 48).²⁸

In *Eternal Sunshine* the role of the "green world" is played by the inner world that the memory machine makes accessible to Joel (and arguably also to Clementine, though the film does not directly show that). Day emphasizes this correspondence when he writes: "In classical Hollywood remarriage comedies featuring couples of sufficient wealth and Manhattan addresses, the green world is given the name 'Connecticut.' In *Eternal Sunshine*, this mythical locale gets renamed 'Joel's head'" (pp. 140-141).²⁹ In particular, Day focuses on the green world as a suitable space for "the uniquely human and uniquely philosophical form of intercourse we call conversation" (p. 134),³⁰ noting that in the case of Joel and Clem, "their conversation of desire is nowhere if not in the kaleidoscopic center of the film, in the scenes that take place in Joel's head" (p. 135).³¹

However, such a conversation also has a darker side. As Cavell points out, in the green world "the mind or plot will not only be cleared and restored, it will be darkened and frozen" (p. 49).³² This situation, indeed, precisely occurs in the inner world made accessible by the memory machine in *Eternal Sunshine*. Furthermore, Cavell states that the master of the green world is a father figure, which is endowed "with the power, or to use Shakespeare's words, the art of magic" (p. 49).³³ For instance, in *The Tempest* the green world has been set up and is ruled by Prospero, "the most famous of Shakespeare's father-magicians" (p. 50).³⁴ Likewise, in *Eternal Sunshine*, a similar role of "father-magician" is played by Doctor Howard Mierzwiak, the inventor of the memory machine.

Still, the analogy that connects the Shakespearean romance and the comedy of remarriage to *Eternal Sunshine* lies not only in the crossing of the green world ruled by the father-magician, but also in the upshot of this crossing. What is so wonderful about these tales of remarriage is "the nature of the *forgiving and forgetting* asked for at the conclusion of romantic comedy" (p. 51, my emphasis).³⁵ In *Eternal Sunshine*, the memory machine, invented by the father-magician Dr.

Mierzwiak, provides Joel and Clementine with the analogue of a green world, which leads them to a condition of forgiving and forgetting each other that enables their willingness to try it again. The memory machine attempts to erase memories, thereby forcing Joel (and arguably also Clementine, though the film does not show that) to revisit them. In so doing, the memory machine allows Joel (and Clementine) to reach a different perspective, one that permits a renewal.

More specifically, the memory machine allows Joel to elaborate his memory through imagination, thereby grafting wishes concerning the future onto memories concerning the past (as it can happen in certain dreams, but, here, with a much higher degree of self-consciousness). In particular, Joel relives the memories of his childhood and grafts the figure of Clementine onto them. In this way, he expresses a wish that according to Cavell is crucial in the remarriage comedy: “almost without exception these films allow the principal pair to express the wish to be children again, or perhaps to be children together”.³⁶

The richness of Joel’s imaginations and wishes, and their interaction with his memories, show that the memory machine does not cause an immediate erasure. Rather, it pursues its own effect through a process that challenges the subject’s resistance. The machine tries to erase Joel’s memories of Clementine, while letting Joel resist this process, and Clementine herself, as a creature of memory, becomes an ally of Joel in this challenge.³⁷ Thus, Joel does not completely lose agency during the process. He is prevented from carrying out bodily movements, but he can still perform mental acts. He remains an intentional subject. In a certain sense, his intentionality functions better than ever, since he can introspect with more perspicuity than ever. His decision to resist total erasure of Clementine allows him to retain what he does.

In virtue of the experience provided by the machine, Joel discovers that what he really wants is not to leave Clementine, but to stay with her. Arguably, if Joel had not challenged the memory machine, he would not have discovered this truth about himself. Nevertheless, he does challenge this machine and does discover this truth. Therefore, he does not sacrifice agency and knowledge in order to pursue happiness. Rather, he performs subtler mental acts, and reaches a deeper knowledge of himself, that helps him in his pursuit of happiness.³⁸

Of course, the challenge involves a risk. The memory machine could have done its job, thereby leading Joel to fully forget Clementine and to never meet her again in his life. Yet, from the perspective of *Eternal Sunshine*, this is a risk that is worth taking: this is probably the only way available to resurrect the love relationship between Joel and Clementine. In Cavell’s terms, Joel’s head was the only “green world” at their disposal, and they had to cross it, even if the crossing

involves the risk of a permanent separation. Indeed, refusing to cross the green world would involve not the risk but the certainty of separation.

If we consider the memory machine in *Eternal Sunshine* not only as a technical device but more generally as an institution, whose name in the film is “Lacuna, Inc.,” there is another sense in which the memories are not fully erased. In fact, the memory machine is aimed at erasing “primary memories” in the mind of the patient, while “secondary memories” stored in material objects are preserved, though only in archives that are no longer available to the patients. In particular, such secondary memories consist of writings, drawings, gifts, and a tape on which the patient records a confession telling the reason why he or she has decided to undergo the memory erasure.

At the end of *Eternal Sunshine*, Mary, the secretary of Lacuna, Inc., introduces an important amendment to the functioning of the memory machine as an institution. She does so by sending all the patients their archives of personal memorabilia. This is the last crucial step in the process of remarriage carried out by Joel and Clementine. The memory machine has erased their primary memories about their shared past, but now they can rediscover it through secondary memories. The definitive reconciliation of Joel and Clementine occurs precisely while the cassette player plays a tape in which Joel explains the reason why he did not love Clementine anymore. As Day puts it, “The words on these tapes are part of their remarriage conversation” (p. 148).³⁹

If this is right, we can challenge Grau’s account of what (by referring to the secretary of Lacuna, Inc.) he calls “Mary’s theft”:

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.⁴⁰

At least with respect to the case of Joel and Clementine, “[f]rom a strictly utilitarian perspective” it does *not* “seem obvious” that Mary is doing something morally wrong in returning their memorabilia. Indeed, she gives them the opportunity to turn their brand-new marriage into a ultimately happier remarriage. The pain and suffering Mary causes to Joel and Clementine is nothing but a mean to the end of a greater happiness. The reason why Mary contributes to Joel and Clementine’s pursuit of happiness is that she turns the flawed memory machine into an *amended memory machine*, which does not destroy the memories but ultimately purges them from those

negative emotions that prevented the subjects to see them in the proper light. By relying on the distinction introduced by Endel Tulving,⁴¹ we may say that the amended memory machine purifies memory by turning first-person “episodic” or “experiential” memories into third-person “semantic” or “propositional” memories. The latter just give us information about a past episode whereas the former make us relive the episode from inside. For example, one has just semantic memory of his or her birth whereas arguably has episodic memory of the birth of his or her child. Julia Driver (2009) highlights the relevance of this distinction in *Eternal Sunshine*, calling “description” or “information” the semantic memory and simply “memory” the episodic memory:

Joel is told about his past with Clementine via Mary’s revelations. So he knows that the man in love with Clementine was himself. But instead of knowing via memory, he knows via a description of a situation he used to remember. It is like the knowledge of the past someone gets looking through a very old photo album. “That was me in the picture playing with the kitten, but I have no memory of it.” Thus, Joel has information about his past, but no first-person knowledge of it, since he is lacking the memory of it.⁴²

The purification of memory that the amended memory machine enables in *Eternal Sunshine* can be better understood by considering what Valerie Tiberius, in her philosophical analysis of the movie, calls “the three Joels”.⁴³ First, there is a “bitter” Joel, who is under influence of powerful angry emotions; second, a “spotless” Joel who has had memories completely erased; and, finally, a “sadder but wiser” Joel, who has had his memories erased but has somehow recovered them through listening to the returned tapes. Tiberius wonders which Joel is best placed to make decisions and she suggests that it is sadder but wiser Joel, since bitter Joel is overwhelmed by negative emotions, while spotless Joel lacks crucial information. “Sadder but wiser” Joel became wiser precisely by virtue of the amended memory machine, which has turned his episodic memories into semantic memories.

By undergoing the amended memory machine, Joel and Clementine consider their past affair as they might consider an affair that involved *two other persons*. On closer inspection, this is precisely the attitude they *should learn* to adopt towards their old selves since, according to the process of remarriage, they need to become a *new* man and a *new* woman. Turning an episodic memory into a semantic memory is not necessarily a loss of knowledge. On the contrary, it could lead us to better place the events recorded by this memory in the proper perspective, without being excessively influenced by our emotional involvement in those events. In this sense, *Eternal Sunshine* suggests an interesting way to make sense of Nietzsche’s sentence that is quoted twice in the movie: “Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders.” From the perspective of *Eternal Sunshine*, the forgetful are blessed (and can get the better even of their blunders) if they

forget their episodic memories, drenched as they are with negative emotions, but retain their semantic memories. As Daniel Shaw puts it in his analysis of Nietzschean themes in the film: “we must transform our attitude from a regretful ‘It was’ to an ecstatic ‘Thus I will it so’.”(2011, p. 263)⁴⁴

The idea that the amended memory machine ultimately improves the quality of Joel’s memories is implicitly at work in Meyer’s reading of *Eternal Sunshine* as a remarriage comedy, especially when he describes the ending scenes of the film as imbued with “a spirit of memory, forgiveness, and reconciliation”⁴⁵ Meyer’s point is that remarriage requires reconciliation, which requires forgiveness, which requires memory. He characterizes the memory that Joel shares with Clementine at the end of the film as “a solid memory of past troubles”, “an uncompromised memory of past difficulty” which leads Joel to “a higher and more trustworthy level of self-awareness” (p. 83).⁴⁶ Yet, in *Eternal Sunshine*, such a solid and uncompromised memory, which ultimately grounds the reconciliation between Joel and Clementine, is the memory that has been emotionally purged by the amended memory machine.

If this is right, the amended memory machine is not incompatible with Grau’s emphasis on the value that we ascribe to knowledge, since *this* machine allows patients to reach a deeper knowledge about their own inner nature, in spite of the loss of episodic memories. Neither is the amended memory machine incompatible with Wartenberg’s emphasis on the value that we ascribe to agency, since *this* machine challenges patients in a game of self-exploration and change that leaves them room to maneuver. Given that *this* machine, in *Eternal Sunshine*, is the one that warrants the maximization of Joel and Clementine’s happiness, and given that this machine leaves room for knowledge and agency, we can conclude that *Eternal Sunshine* does not function as an argument against utilitarianism, at least not as an argument of the sorts that Grau and Wartenberg consider.

To sum up, *Eternal Sunshine* is not necessarily an argument *against* utilitarianism, but rather can best be seen as an argument *within* utilitarianism. At least in the case of Joel and Clementine, the alternative that contributes more than any other to the pursuit of happiness is neither the ideal memory machine that would completely erase memory leading them, at most, to a brand-new marriage nor the rejection of whatever kind of memory machine that would lead them to an irreversible divorce. Instead, the alternative that, according to *Eternal Sunshine*, maximizes Joel and Clementine’s happiness by leading them to remarriage is a flawed and amended memory machine that purges memory from negative emotions by turning episodic memories into semantic memories. An attempt to use *Eternal Sunshine* as an argument against utilitarianism should show that *this* machine, which actually maximizes happiness, clashes with our moral intuitions about knowledge

and agency. In this paper, I have argued that *this* machine, unlike the ideal memory machine, does not clash with our intuitions about knowledge and agency. That is because this machine provides the patients with some relevant agency, allowing them to challenge the machine itself and to achieve some deeper knowledge about themselves thereby. In short, the amended memory machine provides the patients with a process of *learning*.

Eternal Sunshine emphasizes the relevance of learning by means of the song *Everybody's Got to Learn Sometime*, which consists of four verses: "Change your heart, look around you / Change your heart, it will astound you / I need your loving like the sunshine / And everybody's gotta learn sometime". This song appears twice in the movie, once at the beginning and once at the end. We first hear it during the opening credits, when Joel is listening to it in his car just after discovering that Clementine has erased her memories about him. Yet when the song reaches the refrain "everybody's gotta learn sometime" Joel stops the radio and throws the tape out of the car window. He is still not in the proper condition to change and learn. Nevertheless, the song reappears just after the definitive reconciliation of Joel and Clementine, thereby accompanying the last sequence of the movie.

This sequence consists of three repetitions of the same scene, in which Joel and Clementine run happily on the snow-covered beach of Montauk. In reviewing a collection of philosophical essays about *Eternal Sunshine*, Carl Plantinga (2010) complains that one essay that focuses on the movie's ending "fails to note the representation and overlapping of the same shot of Clem and Joel playing in the snow" (p. 419).⁴⁷ Plantinga adds that "Although various essayists offer interpretations of the film's perspective on Joel and Clem's prospects for the future, none mention this very important shot sequence, coming as it does at the end of the film" (p. 419).⁴⁸

One way of interpreting this sequence is to say it implies that Joel and Clem are destined to repeat indefinitely the process of remarriage that the movie has showed. They will quarrel and separate again, and then go do Lacuna, Inc. to erase their memories again, and then meet in Montauk again, and so on and so forth. Likewise, as we discover in the course of the film, Mary, the secretary of Lacuna, Inc., endlessly repeats her love affair with Doctor Mierzwiak. According to this interpretation, the memory machine risks leading Joel and Clementine into a degraded version of Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence of the same" instead of to a degraded version of Pope's "eternal sunshine of the spotless mind." In Pope's poem *Eloisa to Abelard*, the "eternal sunshine of the spotless mind" is a divine gift to Eloise ("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") whereas in the movie this boils down to the brute outcome of a machine.

Likewise, in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* the "eternal recurrence of the same" is the exact *repetition of a whole life* ("This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more") whereas in the movie this boils down to a *whole life consisting in a repetition* of episodes of the same kind.⁴⁹

If this is right, there is another sense in which *Eternal Sunshine* can be treated as an argument against utilitarianism. As seen above, we find it acceptable to challenge a memory machine if this challenge can allow us to deploy a subtler form of agency and to reach a deeper level of knowledge. Yet, in accepting this peculiar learning process, we conceive of learning as a step towards moral progress, not as an ephemeral phase that will be soon replaced by a phase of unlearning. The remarriage at stake must be something more than an ephemeral link between a past divorce and a future divorce. If the ending of *Eternal Sunshine* involves nothing but this, we are left with the impression that there is something morally wrong in it, in spite of the happiness of Joel and Clementine. It is not just that Joel and Clementine will suffer again in the future. In fact, from an utilitarian perspective, such a further suffering can be justified by considering the further happiness of the further remarriage to which it will lead. It is the lack of true progress, of durable learning, in spite of the maximization of happiness, that strikes us as something unjust.

Indeed, *Eternal Sunshine*, so understood, would no longer be a proper comedy of remarriage, since Cavell conceives of the pursuit of happiness in remarriage comedies as a sort of moral progress, which in his later book *Cities of Words* (2004) he will call "moral perfectionism".⁵⁰ But there is no progress in the indefinite repetition of the same patterns of behavior. An indefinite alternation between remarriage and divorce cannot make room for "the new creation of the human" (Cavell 1980, p. 140).⁵¹ If Joel and Clementine's indefinitely repeated happiness at the end of *Eternal Sunshine* strikes us as something that brings about the most happiness overall, without involving true moral progress, maybe we have found a new way of reading *Eternal Sunshine* as an argument against utilitarianism.⁵²

Enrico Terrone

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Notes

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Edelstein, see website above.

Scott, see website above.

Meyer, p. 84.

Day, p. 127.

Grau, p. 131.

Grau, p. 131.

Thanks to Christopher Grau for leading me to explicit premise (2), which remained implicit in a previous version of the paper.

- 23 Cavell, p. 31.
- 24 Cavell, p. 47.
- 25 Cavell, p. 32.
- 26 Cavell, p. 32, my emphasis.
- 27 Cavell, p. 48.
- 28 Cavell, p. 48.
- 29 Day, pp. 140-141.
- 30 Day, p. 134.
- 31 Day, p. 135.
- 32 Cavell, p. 49.
- 33 Cavell, p. 49.
- 34 Cavell, p. 50.
- 35 Cavell, p. 51, my emphasis.
- 36 Cavell, p. 60. On the role of childhood in *Eternal Sunshine* as a comedy of remarriage, see also Day, p. 141
- 37 See Day, p. 136.
- 38 On Joel's memory erasure as a curative journey of self-discovery, see Reeve, C. D. C. (2009). Two Blue Ruins: Love and Memory. In C. Grau (Ed.), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. London-New York: Routledge (pp. 15-30).
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- 40 Grau, p. 128.
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