

What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger? Memory and Suffering in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

In this paper, I argue that although *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* portrays memory erasure (ME) as bad, it does so for the wrong reasons. The movie takes a utilitarian approach to ME: the procedure is only shown as bad because it causes additional suffering. However, the movie wrongly fails to affirm, or perhaps even denies, the value of suffering in itself. I develop my argument by examining the ME cases of Joel and Mary and then discussing how and why ME is wrong—even if it does generate less overall suffering and more overall happiness, and why we should avoid ME and value memories. Finally, I discuss some concerns about not allowing ME, and scenarios where ME would be reasonable.

Eternal Sunshine ends with a rejection of ME and the dissolution of Lacuna Inc., but this is only due to unforeseen negative side-effects of the procedure, whether it is the sadness of deep regret, the pain of repeating mistakes, or the disgust of other people remembering your past that you forgot. Joel changes his mind about ME only once his 'good' memories with Clementine begin to be erased. Initially, Joel is happy about the procedure: after reliving their final argument, Joel is almost giddy, saying "By the morning, you'll be gone! Ha!"¹, as if forgetting is one-upping. Then, while reliving the scene where he lies with Clementine on the frozen river, he's hit with dread and regret: "I want to call it off! I'll give you a sign! I'll give you a sign!"² he desperately screams, and we are now supposed to see the harm of ME. But this suggests that if Joel's memories were entirely negative, or perhaps if the negative outweighed the positive memories more obviously, he would never have called it off and continued to affirm ME. Similarly, Mary changes her mind only after she makes the same mistake and realizes Howard and Howard's wife hid the past from her. If the confrontation at Joel's was avoided, it would seem that Mary is now much happier. Indeed, we can imagine cases where reliving memories

does not cause suffering as it did Joel, or where secrets were kept and mistakes not repeated. It seems that *Eternal Sunshine* would have no reason to object to this perfected, idealized ME.

Additionally, *Eternal Sunshine* also assumes some ineradicable natural tendency that ensures people repeat themselves over time—what Wartenburg calls recidivism³. This is exemplified by Clementine Joel, Mary, and even the unknown caller requesting a third procedure in the same month. This assumption is intuitive but entirely undefended. People are influenced by environmental factors (seasons, time, local events, their day at work, the mood of friends...) which may not operate in the exact same way again. The recidivism assumption reduces the utility of ME to zero since patients are doomed to regain the memories—a strawman argument. Without this assumption, the movie loses a large part of its persuasiveness against ME.

A truth and authenticity-based approach, as discussed by Grau, is a more robust argument against ME. As Grau writes, ME is a form of self-harm or self-mutilation: “they harm themselves through deprivation of the truth[...]”⁴. Grau provides a Kantian analysis: ME is wrong because instead of treating him/herself as an end-in-itself, one denies one’s own independent rationality and humanity and treats one as an object for the sake of happiness (some other good). This self-mutilation has many negative consequences unrelated to utilitarianism. Our experiences, both good and bad, are what shape our personality, develop character, and construct our values and worldview. Since this mechanism of our experience transforming into our personhood is subconscious and deeply entangled with each other, it is difficult to isolate parts of ourselves that come from one experience (as seen in how ME alters Joel’s childhood memory). Thus, erasing one’s memory might increase happiness, but it also regresses the natural trajectory of the development of our personhood, destroying the half of ourselves that comes from suffering, preventing us from growing into the mature person we would have been.

Of course, it could be argued that suffering makes us bitter or resentful instead of mature and understanding, or that happiness simply is *more* important than character for some people. Thus, rather than examining the self, perhaps a more convincing argument against ME stems from our responsibility to the external world – to those with whom we share deep relationships. Grau discusses Thomas Nagel’s “harms that wound” and “harm that deprive”, and gives being ridiculed by all your friends as an example of the latter⁵. Erasing your memory of someone else is not only self-deprivation but severe harm-that-deprives of the person being erased. When Clementine erases Joel from her memory, she deprives him of his ‘reputation’ with her. It discredits the reality of all the good things that he’s done for her and all the memories they’ve shared; this is analogous to Nagel’s examples of ridicule or losing one’s reputation after death. There is also an existential dimension to ME – a key experience of human life is to be perceived and remembered by others. ME allows for the possibility of being forgotten by everyone you loved while being alive – an intuitively terrible and inhumane form of loneliness.

Finally, we cannot deny that under extreme cases (e.g. suicide or mental breakdown) ME is justified. But this is not a utilitarian response. Anything else we can value, the human being as an end, freedom, autonomy, authenticity—presupposes us being alive and psychologically whole. Thus, if ME is the only way to maintain this continuous self, it is acceptable⁶.

In conclusion, the question of ME is not whether the good of erasing memory outweighs the bad, or whether the joy of the during is worth the pain of the conclusion. Otherwise, we reduce the complexity of a human to a means of pursuing happiness, diminish the range of human possibilities, and cause harm to the people to whom we are important. The question is whether a human’s existence is at risk—if ME is the only alternative to destruction, then it becomes a means to achieving the end of a human.

¹ *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, The Daily Script 2003, p.45

² Ibid p.61

³ Wartenburg, p.88

⁴ Grau, p.126; 'they' refers to Clementine, Joel, and Mary

⁵ Grau, p.123

⁶ Although then it could be argued that the exact 'line' to be drawn here is almost arbitrary and difficult to decide. Something bystanders might see as 'no big deal' might be intolerable for the person going through it. In that case, we should err on the side of caution since once ME is undergone, there is no undoing. On the other hand, one can always attempt to withstand the pain with the possibility of ME at any time.