

The Relationship between Identity and Memory in  
*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

IB Philosophy SL

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**Synopsis:**

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a movie about the relationship between Joel Barish and Clementine Kruczynski. Joel discovers that his girlfriend, Clementine, had her memories of him and their relationship over the last two years erased. He decides to do the same and contacts the same company to have his memories erased. During this procedure he records a tape of himself recounting the bitter memories of this relationship, but once he has gone under he begins to re-experience his memories of their relationship in his head and realizes that he doesn't want to forget her. Joel is told by his subconscious representation of Clementine to meet her in Montauk. After waking with no memory of her, Joel impulsively takes a train to Montauk, where he, to his knowledge, is introduced to Clementine. After spending the day together they find a mysterious box that contains their pre-operation recordings of themselves recalling their relationship. After hearing the bitter things said, Clementine attempts to leave, but Joel follows her into the hallway and asks her to try their relationship again. Clementine laments that it will have the same outcome as before, leading to the final scene of the movie where Joel responds, "Okay".

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## Paper:

Imagine waking up with no memory of your loved ones, your past, who you are, or even your name. Who would you be? Would you be the same person you were the day before, even if you had no idea who that person was? Would you have anything in common with who you used to be? It's a terrifying and intriguing question that has perplexed philosophers for decades. Identity is woven from a complex tapestry of memories. These memories, both joyful and sorrowful, shape our beliefs, values, and how we navigate the world. But what happens when the tapestry starts to unravel? When the threads of memory are severed, what remains of the self? *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a film plagued with open-ended philosophical anguish around ethics, free will and determinism, identity, and much more. Particularly relating to identity, the plot of the film details the consequences of the main character, Joel, and his ex-girlfriend, Clementine, erasing their memories of their relationship. The effects that the procedure has on them and their identities elicit the question, "To what extent is identity based on memories?". This essay will explore the relationship between memory and identity by analyzing the contrasting views of John Locke and René Descartes, using the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as a primary stimulus.

John Locke held the belief that identity is formed through "psychological continuity", meaning that a person's identity is not formed by their physical body or an immaterial soul but by memory and consciousness. To Locke, memory is a necessary condition of self-identity; someone with no memories has no identity. In cases of a lapse or loss in memory, Locke argues that our consciousness is being interrupted, and we lose sight of our past selves. Because of this, we cannot readily confirm that we are the same conscious beings as we were before, constituting

a loss in self-identity, as we literally cannot identify ourselves. Lockean theory's psychological continuity means that all memories, both joyful and sorrowful, are important to one's identity. If someone owns a cat purely because a dog bit them as a child, then their identity as a cat owner is formed by this painful memory. To remove that memory is to remove a part of their identity as a cat owner, as now they would have no reason not to own a dog. Locke would not agree with Joel and Clementine's choice to erase memories of their relationship as those memories, even if painful immediately after the breakup, constitute important parts of their identities. Through erasing the now painful memories of their relationship, Joel loses the fun and adventurous part of his identity that he developed with Clementine, thus losing a part of himself.

Locke's beliefs are founded on the idea of Tabula Rasa, or blank slate, which dictates that, at birth, all humans are devoid of any innate ideas. Locke's belief in memory-based personal identity and Tabula Rasa suggest that identity is devoid of any inherent or persistent traits. If one were to lose all of their memories late into life, they would be unrecognizable from their past self all but physically. The idea of identity having no inherent traits is flimsy when given the knowledge of the human brain that is available today. People are genetically predisposed to mental illness and disorders like depression, anxiety, ADHD, and autism. Locke would argue that these conditions are formed by experience and that we are born a blank slate without them. However, these conditions are genetic, not formed by experience, and will inevitably change how one's brain works and how one defines themselves, regardless of their memories. *Eternal Sunshine* can be interpreted to both argue for and against this idea. Clementine has often been theorized to suffer from BPD, and the parts of her character that are consistent with symptoms of BPD stay persistent throughout the movie. Studies have found that BPD is very often caused by genetics, and this part of her identity stays consistent throughout the movie, regardless of

memory loss, arguing against Locke's rejection of persistent traits. Joel and Clem are given the same memories that were present when they first met, and even after having experiences in their relationship that would deter them from re-engaging in it, they still get back together. Locke would say that their past experiences and what they learned from them did not persist through the loss of memory and that their decision-making is entirely based on the memories that are present.

Locke's theory of identity hinges on the idea of a continuous and accurate memory. Both reality and the film challenge this notion. Human memory is flawed and unreliable. For example, imagine an orphaned child grows up believing that they are of Austrian descent because they possess memories of their late mother telling them that they are Austrian. This person grows up immersing themselves in Austrian culture, and it becomes a large part of their identity. If a close friend of their mother's who was present during those memories informs them that their mother actually told her son that they are Australian, would being Austrian still be a part of this person's identity? Despite being rooted in a false memory, the emotional connection and narrative identity the child has formed towards Austrian culture is clear and has become a key part of their identity. This example identifies complexity in one's identity beyond memories that Locke's theory fails to account for. Memories in *Eternal Sunshine* are similarly fragmented, subjective, and even directly manipulated by Lacuna, the memory erasure company. Joel's memories of Clementine are shown to be biased and inaccurate, acting in ways that are completely antithetical to Clementine's identity in the outside world. So, given this, how can an imperfect and unreliable memory truly define our identities?

René Descartes's theory of personal identity, the "thinking self", starkly contrasts Locke's. To Descartes, the only necessary condition of personal identity is the existence of a soul, a thinking consciousness that is separate from the body. The mind, or at least the consciousness

inhabiting the body, is an immaterial, non-physical substance. Descartes famously articulated this idea as, "Je pense, donc je suis," translated to English as "I think, therefore I am." To Descartes, memories are not the primary factor that shapes our identity. Memories influence our thinking and shape our experiences. However, Descartes would not consider them essential to our identity. Without memories, one might struggle to navigate the world or understand one's past, but one's identity would remain, and one would remain the same person. Descartes would interpret the struggle that Joel and Clem face after their memory erasure as a temporary disruption to their thinking caused by the absence of familiar memories. However, the essence of their identity, their ability to think and feel, would remain, and they would therefore be the same people.

Descartes's theory of the "thinking self" persisting over memories and physical state can lend to the idea that there are persistent aspects to one's identity. In Descartes's view, the impact that an experience has on your consciousness will persist even if a memory does not. To Descartes, a cat owner whom a dog bit as a child will still be a cat owner who is adverse to dogs if the memory of being bitten is removed because the impression that being bitten left on their "thinking self" will persist despite not remembering being bitten. Descartes would argue that *Eternal Sunshine* is hard evidence of the persistent "thinking self". Despite the procedure, the emotional core of his connection with Clementine still lingers. During the final part of Joel's procedure, his representation of Clementine tells him to meet her in Montauk. Joel awakes with no memory of this but finds himself inexplicably going to Montauk, where he meets Clementine. Clementine has no way of knowing who Joel is or to be there on that exact day through her memory, and Joel does not seem to understand why he is going there, but they still meet there. Descartes would argue that this is clear evidence that the connection between them and their

shared experience has persisted through their "thinking selves", regardless of their memory erasure.

Descartes' theory is not without its limits. Although Descartes would acknowledge the importance of memory in identity, he ignores its importance in his theory. Descartes's theory of the "thinking self" can be seen as an oversimplification of identity. Identity is influenced by factors like emotions, experiences, and relationships and cannot be reduced to our ability to think. This oversimplification is evident when we view the emotional effect that memories, or the lack thereof, can have. As Locke would argue, a lapse in memory leaves one in emotional turmoil, disconnected from one's past and unsure of who one is. If this emotional impact is accepted, one could argue that this can interfere with one's ability to think and, therefore, interfere with one's identity, under Descartes's definition. This emotional impact is evident in how the procedure affects Clementine. Although we aren't given direct insight into her thoughts and feelings, it is clear that the lapse in memory she is experiencing is putting her in a state of turmoil. She goes through what seems to be a manic episode and struggles to form coherent thoughts about herself, her ongoing relationship with Patrick, and what is making her feel this way. The effect of the missing memories is actively altering her mental state and perception of self, an effect of memory on her identity that Descartes disregards.

The extent to which identity relates to memory is not a question that can be answered with extremes. The perspectives of Locke and Descartes are important in understanding how our identities are defined by a conscious understanding of our past experiences, as well as an understanding of our current being, regardless of memory. However, as this essay has shown, these perspectives are not all-encompassing. While John Locke argues that memory is the essence of who we are, *Eternal Sunshine* and examples like genetic mental illness demonstrate

the limitations of his view. René Descartes's emphasis on the "thinking self" proves to be ignorant of key aspects of the human experience, such as emotions and experiences. Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between these two extremes. *Eternal Sunshine* presents the alternative that identity is a combination between memory, emotions, and the "thinking self". This is where the answer lies: in the recognition of the complex interplay between the three. Our memories may shape our thoughts and feelings to an extent, but they do not solely define our present selves. Thus, neither Locke nor Descartes's perspectives fully answer the extent to which memory and identity are related. However, the evaluation of their theories can help us come closer to understanding how we define ourselves.

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