

# Moral philosopher questions memory manipulation

April 29 2008

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Is medicated memory manipulation ethically sound? And perhaps more importantly, who should be charged with the decision to deliver such a treatment: patient or physician?

Elisa Hurley, a philosophy professor, is seeking answers to these questions in her research currently underway at The University of Western Ontario.

In the Academy Award-winning film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a fictional, non-surgical procedure called ‘targeted memory erasure’ is used to delete painful memories the afflicted wish to forget – permanently.

And while the story’s science-fiction based concept earned the movie an Oscar for best original screenplay, real-life scientists are conducting clinical trials today using beta-blockers – drugs traditionally used for varying heart conditions – for manipulating the memories of people, who may go on to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Hurley says while the real threat of developing PTSD might be a good enough reason to use beta-blockers as a preventative measure, she also wants policy makers to consider the ramifications of what such a treatment may mean to a person’s moral well-being.

“Beta-blockers do not cause amnesia. Rather they make memories less vivid, detailed and arousing,” explains Hurley, who specializes in

bioethics. “They lessen the emotional impact when someone is recalling upsetting events.”

Citing examples of a woman who has been brutally raped or a soldier who has killed while serving in the military, Hurley says, “In types of trauma involving interpersonal violence, such as sexual violence, torture, combat stress, and genocide, emotional memories may play a crucial role in one’s moral recovery.”

With respect to the military case, she adds, “I suggest that dampening emotional responses such as guilt, revulsion, and regret to someone’s participation in wrongdoing may undermine an appropriate understanding by the person of his or her moral responsibility.”

Source: University of Western Ontario

Citation: Moral philosopher questions memory manipulation (2008, April 29) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-04-moral-philosopher-memory.html>

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