Valerie Racine's Commentary on "Memory Suppressor as Cognitive Enhancement"

Commentary On
Case: Memory Suppressor as Cognitive Enhancement

Most of the ethical discussion centered around psychopharmacology as cognitive enhancement has been focused on so called “smart drugs,” or neuroenhancers, such as Modafinil and Methylphenidate (Ritalin), and their “off-label” use. These discussions address ethical topics of safety, informed consent, access and fair distribution, coercion, moral accountability and cheating (Bostrom & Sandberg 2009, Cakic 2009, Farah et al. 2004, Goodman 2010, Greely et al. 2008, Hall 2003, Maslen et al. 2014, Schermer 2008, Stix 2009). Other psychopharmacological interventions that target memory forming neurochemical processes (either to enhance or erase memories) have raised additional moral concerns, such as whether these interventions will affect our concept of the good life and our notions of authenticity and personal identity, and whether the possibility of pathologizing bad memories can lead to exploitation by the pharmaceutical industry (Henry et al. 2007). Moreover, some have argued that experiencing emotional events and having emotional memories may be a requirement for moral learning and exercising moral judgment.

If that is the case, then perhaps we ought to think twice about developing therapies that involve altering our memories. For example, philosopher Elisa A. Hurley claims:
I think we have reason to worry about propranolol’s effect of severing memories of traumatic events from the emotions that would ordinarily accompany them because it seems to result in the permanent loss of epistemic access to certain information about those past occasions, namely, to their evaluative significance as registered by the emotions experienced at the time. We might say that using propranolol results in one’s losing touch with the particular moral injuries to which trauma exposes its victims (Hurley 2007, 35). Moreover, interference in the psychological mechanisms which involve emotional memories might have negative long-term effects on an

individual and society. For perpetrators of violence, such as soldiers for example, emotional memories can cause regret, or the “sting of conscience,” which can play a restorative role in individuals and communities recovering from the atrocities of war (Hurley 2007).

However, others have defended the development and use of memory-altering drugs to prevent PTSD and questioned the idea that emotional memories form the basis of one’s moral judgments (Rosenberg 2007). Rosenberg argues that because patients who suffer from PTSD often have memories of events that can be so overwhelming that they can lead to serious physical symptoms, we cannot reasonably think that those same memories can in any way enhance an individual’s moral sense or judgment. Rather, she claims, “patients often feel emotionally paralyzed and generally unable to complete desired life projects for fear of triggering a disabling PTSD episode” (Rosenberg 2007, 28). Therefore, Rosenberg concludes, if propranolol is found to be safe and efficacious for preventing PTSD, there seems to be a moral imperative to do so.