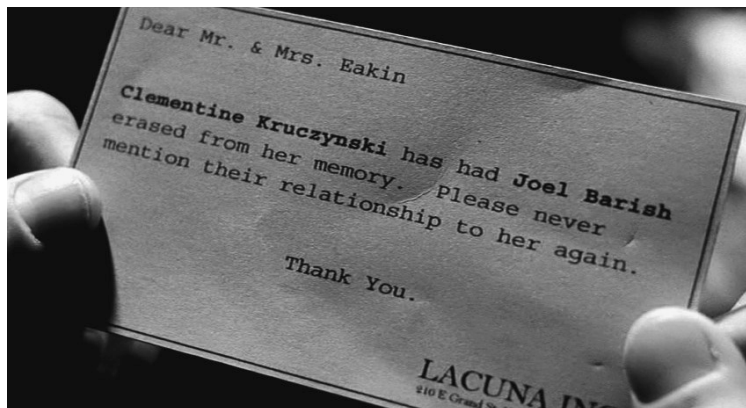


## Christopher Grau

### INTRODUCTION



**I**N KEEPING WITH THE SPIRIT of the Routledge Philosophers on Film series, this volume brings together both distinguished and emerging philosophers to explore the many philosophical issues that are raised in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (hereafter *Eternal Sunshine*). Arguably one of the best films of the past decade, *Eternal Sunshine* combines the highly original visual creativity of director Michel Gondry and the

sharp intelligence of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, both united and inspired by a simple but compelling idea about memory erasure first put forward by Gondry's friend, the French conceptual artist Pierre Bismuth. Utilizing Bismuth's conceit, the film manages to tread familiar territory in a novel way: the classic trope of a couple "divorcing" only to eventually, after some adventure, come together again is given a new twist thanks to a peculiar and powerful memory-removal technology.

The film begins with the viewer residing in the same confused epistemic position as the protagonist Joel (Jim Carrey), and only gradually unfolds to reveal that both Joel and his ex-girlfriend Clementine (Kate Winslet) have chosen to undergo a memory erasure process offered by a dodgy outfit called Lacuna, Inc. The procedure allows those mourning the death of a romance the chance to wipe out all trace of the prior relationship, including all memories of a former lover. Despite having purchased the "spotless mind" offered by Lacuna, both Joel and Clem fail to find much sunshine as a result. What they do find, surprisingly, is a way to nonetheless reunite, and upon eventually learning the true nature of their troubled past together, the film ends with them affirming the idea of giving their relationship another chance.

That brief synopsis does not begin to do justice to the richness, both philosophic and aesthetic, of this remarkable film. Indeed, the diversity of the essays in this collection is testament to the complexity, nuance, and depth of *Eternal Sunshine*. Beginning with a psychoanalytically informed interpretive essay from David Reeve in which he explores the therapeutic aspects of Joel's journey into his own mind, we move to Troy Jollimore's discussion of Nietzschean themes in the film, in particular the lessons the film offers regarding love, memory, and repetition. We then have Valerie Tiberius's careful examination of the relevance of Joel's memory loss for philosophizing about the nature of the self and the role of emotion in decision-making. Following this is Julia Driver's philosophical analysis of how *Eternal Sunshine* can help us understand why being erased from another's memory can be seen as a genuine loss to the one forgotten. Coming from a quite distinct set of concerns, Stephen White's essay connects up *Eternal Sunshine*'s themes and style with other works from Michel Gondry and argues that Gondry's cinematic innovations do much more than entertain: they challenge a number of misguided philosophical approaches to film and to perception, and they suggest the virtues of a neglected phenomenological alternative. Finally,

George Toles offers a moving and personal essay that considers the ways in which *Eternal Sunshine* can remind us of the capacity of memory and imagination to truly engage with those closest to us.

In Noël Carroll's introduction to the *Philosophers on Film* volume on *Talk to Her*, he helpfully distinguishes between a number of different ways in which philosophers can interact with film: while some philosophers tackle the specific philosophical questions that arise when considering film as an art form, others utilize the content of particular films as jumping off points in order to explore more general philosophical ideas, ideas that may be merely suggested (perhaps unintentionally) on the screen.<sup>1</sup> Others still make the case that the films themselves can philosophize: the claim here is that, while obviously not in the business of providing proofs or giving explicit theoretical arguments, some films nonetheless not only raise philosophical questions but suggest answers to those questions. Though philosophers sometimes talk loosely about such categories as though they are exclusive in nature, Carroll is clearly right to avoid this, and attempting to apply these categories to the contributions in this collection helps highlight why. Consider White's essay: it explores some classic issues in film theory, and so in that respect it falls pretty neatly into the first category (what Carroll calls "philosophy of motion pictures"), but White also provides grounds for thinking of Gondry's work as engaged in philosophy in its own right, and thus his essay fits Carroll's third category (what some have called "film as philosophy"). Reeve's, Jollimore's, and Toles's essays seem to me to criss-cross the boundaries of "film as philosophy," "philosophy of motion pictures," and Carroll's second category (which he calls "philosophy in film"), all the while offering and defending interpretive claims that would be at home in the longstanding tradition of theoretically informed film criticism written by non-philosophers. Both Driver's and Tiberius's essays fit fairly well into the "philosophy in film" camp, but that label could be misleading by suggesting that they aren't offering up original philosophical work in addition to demonstrating connections between the film and standard philosophical issues.

In the end what matters most to me about all of the essays here is not which of these categories they best fit, but that they each help to show, often in quite different ways, why *Eternal Sunshine* is a film that is not just worth seeing but worth dwelling on, puzzling over, and living with through repeated examination. Of course, one need not be a philosopher

to reflect usefully on a film such as *Eternal Sunshine*, but what the essays in this collection all have in common is a serious and sustained passion for rigor, truth, and the uncovering of value that is the hallmark of good philosophical writing since the time of Plato. I hope you'll agree that when this philosophical spirit is directed at a film as rewarding of reflection as *Eternal Sunshine*, the results can be impressive.

David Reeve begins his essay "Two Blue Ruins: Love and Memory in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*" by acknowledging that *Eternal Sunshine* naturally prompts viewers to dwell on philosophical questions raised by memory erasure, but he suggests that the film itself is not primarily engaged in that particular investigation. Rather, he argues forcefully that the direction of the film's own thought is towards love and its roots in childhood. Adopting a broadly Freudian focus, Reeve provides an interpretation that highlights the ways in which *Eternal Sunshine* repeatedly and carefully lingers over such topics as the role our childhood plays in forming our capacity to love, as well as how that same childhood shapes our conception of who it is we are most inclined to love. Not surprisingly, he is particularly interested in those sequences of the film in which we return to Joel's youth and are shown his formative childhood anxieties and desires. Reeve also explores how these same psychoanalytic themes crop up throughout the film and are embodied in connections as subtle as the one between Joel's admission to a fondness for his childhood Huckleberry Hound doll and his (not altogether ineffective) tendency to adopt a "wounded puppy" pose when dealing with Clementine.

Surely part of the appeal of *Eternal Sunshine* for many viewers is that it provides its own spin on the traditional Hollywood tactic of playing on the deep-seated wish lovers often have for second chances. Many a classic romantic comedy has followed the formula of offering us visions of couples who end up getting that inspiring (if improbable) chance to "do it all again," and we root for them to succeed in the replay that is so rarely available to us in real life. *Eternal Sunshine* is complex and ambiguous enough that there are a variety of ways in which a viewer can interpret the possibilities for renewed and improved love offered to the couple. Those of a pessimistic bent are likely to see Joel and Clementine as simply doomed to repeat the same mistakes yet again (and perhaps again and again and again . . .). Most, however, see the film as offering a more hopeful vision, but even here there's room for disagreement over why hope is in place.

Perhaps the most straightforward interpretation is centered on the notion that optimism is justified because the couple's memories of each other went deeper than Lacuna could ever reach, and thus, post-erasure, they are still in a position to genuinely benefit from their shared past and some knowledge of their previous mistakes. Reeve offers support for such an analysis in pointing to both the implausibly radical scope of Lacuna's goals and the slipshod nature of their actual operation. However, the heart of his essay explores the more interesting possibility that hope is warranted primarily because of a beneficial therapeutic transformation achieved in the course of Joel (self-consciously) undergoing the memory erasure procedure. In other words, the unusual opportunity offered to him to relive and rework the past puts him in a better position to recognize both Clementine's actual worth and the reasons why his own psychic limitations had previously led him to distort her nature and her importance to him.

Reeve's thesis, which brings with it the claim that Joel alone was in need of such therapy, while Clementine "already has the sort of heart that Joel, through suffering, must acquire," is bound to strike some as controversial. It is backed up with considerable skill, however, and takes for ammunition the credible insight that when they first came together Joel too quickly adopted a picture of Clementine as a savior who would do all the necessary heavy lifting to inject much-needed sunshine into his life. Joel's conscious absorption into Lacuna's process of erasure, and the trip to his past it allows, gets him to see that Clementine's real aid comes in the form of a partner who can help mend him rather than simply soothe him. As they go through assorted memories of both their relationship and his childhood we see her, as teacher and guide, direct him to adopt a healthier and more mature perspective on his life, his limitations, and his love for her. Reeve's careful consideration of the film reveals that at the core of this narrative resides an unexpectedly curative journey of self-discovery for Joel. This is a journey that, through the talents of Gondry and Kaufman, manages to take on a thrilling and powerfully cinematic dimension for the viewer, a dimension rarely achieved in such a complex and philosophical tale of psychic renovation.

We saw that David Reeve's interpretation of *Eternal Sunshine* presupposed the potential for hope at the end of the film: the couple's affirmation and willingness to continue their relationship seems to derive in part from

the expectation that things just might go better this time. Reeve's reasons for optimism are not exhausted by an awareness of the possibility of Joel and Clem drawing on residual memories, or the access the couple has to the knowledge contained in returned tapes. Rather, Reeve suggests that the particularities of Joel's erasure process have allowed him to come out of that procedure psychically transformed, and thus in a better position to pursue a relationship with Clementine than when they first met.

While I think many viewers do take the film to contain a "happy ending," and I think they respond this way in part because they leave the theater thinking that *perhaps* Joel and Clementine will avoid some of the mistakes (and resulting heartache) that plagued them the first time around, I'm also impressed by Troy Jollimore's audacious suggestion that there is a sense in which the film ought to be seen as ending happily *even if the couple is in fact doomed to repeat every last mistake and sorrow*. In "Miserably Ever After: Forgetting, Repeating, and Affirming Love in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," Jollimore presents an extended discussion of Nietzschean themes in *Eternal Sunshine*. In particular (and as the title suggests) he focuses on the importance for Nietzsche of the idea of *affirming* one's life even in the face of great difficulty.

Jollimore proposes four "affirmation theses," derived from Nietzsche's writings, that have relevance for our understanding of *Eternal Sunshine*. Briefly, these theses can be summarized as follows: 1) Affirming one's life necessarily involves denying and forgetting certain aspects of that life and of reality more generally. 2) When one can, one *ought* to affirm even the painful aspects of one's life, for denying reality is a sign of weakness. 3) To affirm certain moments in one's life is inevitably to affirm the *whole* life. 4) One ought to affirm life *as it is lived*, in the present, and resist the temptation to evaluate the moment with reference to some general standard derived from either the past or the future.

In a wide-ranging discussion that draws on such diverse literary sources as Lydia Davis, Milan Kundera, R. W. Emerson, and C. S. Lewis, Jollimore considers the ways in which these four theses capture provocative but nonetheless genuine insights about the importance of affirmation in life and in love. Pointing out that it is far from clear that the theses can be brought together into a systematic whole, he explains that such systematization was not Nietzsche's goal. Indeed, as Jollimore describes it, the fourth thesis contains within it a recommendation from Nietzsche that we resist the natural and strong urge to impose such a framework on

either our lives or our philosophical thought. Jollimore takes this fourth thesis to resonate with aspects of Emerson's thought, and he declares it to be both the most important and the most troubling thesis of the lot. He then considers the multiple ways in which *Eternal Sunshine* shows Clementine (and sometimes Joel) embodying this call to resist consistency and accept the present moment.

Jollimore ends his essay with an examination of Nietzsche's famous doctrine of the eternal return, and draws connections between the model of affirmation presented in that parable and the endorsement and affirmation we see in the "okays" exchanged by Joel and Clementine in the final moments of the film. The couple's readiness to say "okay" (in light of the knowledge that any attempt at a new relationship is surely doomed) is offered by Jollimore as testament to their courage, their wisdom, and their love. As viewers, he asks us to reconsider our willingness to recoil at the thought of the two throwing themselves into a painful repetition of past mistakes. Instead, he argues that we take seriously the idea that such a miserable outcome for the couple is wholly compatible with their final affirmation, and that this affirmation, made while aware of the dark future that lay before them, provides a joyous finale to what Jollimore considers "one of the most romantic movies ever made."

Valerie Tiberius is a philosopher whose work has focused on theories of practical reasoning and philosophical conceptions of the role of reflection in a good life. Her contribution to this collection, "Bad Memories, Good Decisions, and the Three Joels," utilizes *Eternal Sunshine* as a vehicle for exploring some of the theoretical questions that arise when we try to determine how best to make decisions about our lives. Pointing out the ways in which the film vividly presents important psychological truths about the dangers of memory distortion and the role of emotion in decision-making, Tiberius helpfully sketches an account of "three Joels" that we are presented with in *Eternal Sunshine*: a "bitter" Joel, who is under the influence of powerful angry emotions after a difficult break-up; a "spotless" Joel, who has had memories of his relationship erased; and the "sadder but wiser" Joel, who has had his memories erased but learned about this (and other aspects of his relationship with Clem) through listening to the returned tapes. By considering which of these Joels is best placed to make decisions about a future relationship with Clementine, Tiberius leads the reader to explore various philosophical approaches to

decision-making, approaches that, at least initially, may appear to be in tension with each other.

Tiberius points out that it is pretty clear that “spotless Joel,” with his memories of the previous relationship wiped clean, is missing information crucial to making the best decision about a future with Clementine. Does it follow that “bitter Joel” is in the best position to judge the merits of the situation? Probably not, as bitter Joel appears to be experiencing the sort of memory distortion and emotional overload that psychologists have shown to be typical: we naturally focus on the peak and end of our memories, and Joel’s anger and fixation on the bitter end of his relationship with Clementine does not seem to put him in the best position to consider whether a future with her is possible or desirable.

This leaves us with the inference that “sadder but wiser” Joel is in fact best placed to decide on a future relationship with Clementine. Tiberius does indeed endorse this apparently common-sense conclusion, but she cautions that whether the “calm, cool” perspective afforded this Joel is ideal depends in part on the particular circumstances in which he has found himself. Given the nature of their relationship and the path that brought Joel and Clem together again, Joel is better off having some distance from his anger, as this buffer allows him to correctly see the potential for a more successful relationship the second time around. However, Tiberius points out that had things been different—consider, for example, the possibility that their initial relationship was seriously abusive—perhaps bitter Joel (or bitter Clem) would have been in the best position to make a wise decision. Anger triggered by memories of such a past would arguably not be distorting one’s vision but rather clarifying it. Tiberius argues persuasively that while it is good to have distance from distorting memories and emotions, not all memories are distorted, and the emotions triggered by memories need not always be discounted as suspect. Given her embrace of a contextual approach to decision-making that acknowledges the virtues of both a distanced perspective and the insight that can be provided by emotion, Tiberius concludes her discussion with a consideration of the worry that the flexibility required of her account is at odds with our ordinary sense of ourselves as unified authors of our lives. Criticizing the robust notion of unity demanded by philosophers such as Christine Korsgaard, Tiberius makes the case that a nuanced vision of the self as involving multiple perspectives is better able



to make sense of our own experiences as agents and, in addition, she suggests that this approach offers a framework for making more humane judgments regarding the decisions and behavior of others. Tiberius credits *Eternal Sunshine* with helping us to philosophize about these important issues through presenting us with a creative and powerful depiction of the various perspectives available to Joel Barish in the course of the film.

Like Tiberius, Julia Driver is interested in reflecting on the philosophical relevance of the memory erasure technology depicted in *Eternal Sunshine*. However, rather than focus on how memory loss might affect one's ability to make good decisions, Driver's essay, "Memory, Desire, and Value in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," considers the nature and scope of the possible harms involved in such a loss. More specifically, she explores the philosophical issues connected to the belief that Clementine's erasure of memories of Joel constitutes a harm to Joel. How is it that someone else's decision to erase a memory of you could amount to a harm to you? Driver begins her essay with a discussion of some of the relevant arguments offered by the philosopher Avishai Margalit, whose book *The Ethics of Memory* is one of the few sustained philosophical treatments of these sorts of questions. Margalit makes the case that the moral importance of memory is essentially linked to its importance in creating and maintaining "thick" relationships with others. (Such relations are typically those substantial and personal relations we have to those close to us.) While sympathetic to Margalit's emphasis on the connection between memory and the care that cements thick relations, Driver goes on to offer her own independent and original arguments for why memory loss can be a harm and how, in particular, such a loss can be a harm to the one forgotten.

Driver's discussion centers around a thought experiment in which we are asked to consider the nature of the loss incurred to a skier who suffers an accident that results in total loss of his memories of his wife and children. Imagining that the man can, upon recovering from the accident, be informed of all the relevant details of his relationships to his family, we realize that something very significant has nonetheless been sacrificed. While he'll come to have "propositional knowledge" of his past with these people, he won't be able to regain the actual memories, and thus he won't regain the specific emotional connections to his loved ones that

those memories made possible. Pointing out the parallels between such a scenario and the situation Joel and Clementine find themselves in at the end of *Eternal Sunshine*, Driver considers the ramifications of such a loss both for the amnesic and those forgotten.

In focusing on the ways in which memory loss cuts a person off from the specific attachments they have to others, Driver makes the case that those cut off can rightly complain of being harmed when the forgotten individuals possess a desire to be remembered. However, not just any such desire will do: drawing on the work of Derek Parfit, Driver explains how some such desires to be remembered may not actually be “operational” in the life of the individual possessing the desire. In other words, one might have desires that float free of one’s other concerns, projects, and values. In such a case, the failure for the desire to be realized may not matter much, and may not amount to a significant harm. In the case of a desire to be remembered by a loved one (or ex-loved one, as in the case of Joel’s desire to be remembered by Clementine) it seems clear that what is at stake is a desire that is operational, one that meshes with important parts of one’s life, and thus Driver concludes that we can philosophically defend the intuitive idea that Clementine’s memory erasure amounts to a genuine loss for Joel.

Stephen White’s essay, “Michel Gondry and the Phenomenology of Visual Perception,” takes a different tack from the other essays in this collection by considering *Eternal Sunshine* in the context of other works by Michel Gondry. The essay begins by pointing out some underappreciated similarities between one important “realist” strain of film theory (according to which the cinematic image is a particularly objective record of reality) and the still-influential approach in philosophy of mind that understands perception as involving the unmediated reception of raw sensory data. White then goes on to offer a thorough demonstration of the many ways in which the work of Michel Gondry challenges both philosophical dogmas. Considering *Eternal Sunshine* alongside Gondry’s many music videos and his more recent film *The Science of Sleep*, White catalogues the variety of techniques through which Gondry repeatedly upsets comfortable philosophical assumptions by utilizing highly creative manipulations of the images that appear within a movie frame.

In his music videos, Gondry forces viewers to become aware of their implicit assumptions about both cinematic and ordinary perception by

offering surprising reversals: optical effects manifest literal “traces” in space and time; doublings and repetitions that could be easily accomplished through optical or digital effects are achieved manually; typical patterns of causation are turned around; and spatial norms are persistently violated. *Eternal Sunshine*, seen in the light of these other experiments, functions as a “kind of negative image of his short films.” The many sequences in the film that visualize memory erasure through a gradual dismantling of the field of perception (e.g. the slow fading away of the books in the bookstore) remind us of just how full of significance the ordinary film image is. This, in turn, can remind us that ordinary perception itself is not in fact a passive process in which we are given raw “sense-data.” Instead, it is always already experienced under a variety of fundamental categories and distinctions, such as the categories of time and intentionality and the distinctions between inside/outside and self/other. *Eternal Sunshine*, in particular, offers an invitation to consider the multiple ways in which “the past is given to us in its traces in the present.” White convincingly argues that Gondry’s “philosophical film practice” can help us to appreciate an important phenomenological insight: we naturally and directly perceive zones of significance and traces of the past in a way that is not adequately appreciated by either realist film theory or the empiricist tradition in the philosophy of perception. On this account, watching *Eternal Sunshine* can be, among many other things, a helpful dose of philosophical therapy.

There is a moment on the commentary track when Charlie Kaufman remarks that, in the scene being shown, Clementine is actually (and merely) a projection of Joel’s mind. As he puts it: “Clementine is really Joel talking to himself.” Kaufman goes on to suggest that this quirk of the plot allows Joel license to be more adventurous than he might otherwise. Michel Gondry, while not exactly disagreeing with Kaufman’s remarks, suggests instead that “sometimes when you talk to people in your head you can find a way to talk for real to them.” He then goes on to give a touching elaboration of this thought:

I had this experience when my father was dying [. . .] I remember talking to him in my head at this time when you wake up in the morning [. . .] and I could really have a conversation with him . . . and I thought that maybe all the information I had from him were

collected at this moment by my subconscious and I would put them all together and I reconstruct his character in a way that I was not necessarily aware of . . . so I think there is a possibility to talk to somebody even if it is in your imagination [. . .] it is kind of tricky . . . it is like people would think when you experience afterlife stuff, but I just think that's rubbish.<sup>2</sup>

There is a bold suggestion here that our imaginative engagement (in dreams, memories, or daydreams) with those close to us allows for access to real truths about those persons, truths perhaps otherwise unavailable. This provocative idea lies at the core of George Toles's contribution to this volume, "Trying to Remember Clementine." Toles begins his essay with a consideration of some remarks from Kaufman that represent the more skeptical (and quite common) view that memories, far from providing mirrors of the past, offer up instead an inevitably skewed and thus suspect projection. Toles later connects this seemingly sophisticated cynicism about memory with the related Proustian worry that a focus honed through love and attachment distorts rather than clarifies the object of our vision. He challenges these ideas and, in what I take to be a thoroughly Gondry-esque spirit, offers up an extensive discussion of *Eternal Sunshine* in which we are asked to seriously consider the possibility that Joel's engagement with his memories of Clementine make possible a level of careful, loving attention and knowledge that is often not possible when we encounter a person "face to face."

Devoting much of his attention to the scene in which Joel and Clementine return home from Montauk on the train, Toles explores the nuanced ways in which the characters struggle in those moments to stagger forward (unaware of their recent mental impoverishment) while inevitably, if unconsciously, being moved by their nature and what remains of their memories to connect again. Seeing both of them as unknowingly enduring a process of mourning, Toles considers how in "a landscape chilled by bereavement" Joel and Clementine are able to slowly and hesitantly come to reveal themselves to each other and, in turn, to themselves.

Of course, the first time through the film we are as ignorant as the characters of their loss and bereavement. It is only on later viewings that the impressive subtlety and importance of this seemingly modest

scene becomes apparent. Toles's evaluation of this and other scenes in *Eternal Sunshine* allows for an appreciation of how, as viewers, we can benefit and grow from repeated exposure to this film. Pointing out the Nietzschean theme of recurrence in the film that is also explored by Jollimore, Toles draws an insightful analogy between the cycle of repetition in the film and an often overlooked but aesthetically vital feature of film itself: we can (and increasingly do) come back to a film and re-enter the cinematic world offered to us, assured of a perfect fidelity in repetition. He spends some time teasing out this and related features of the phenomenology of film perception, and suggests that one reason *Eternal Sunshine* haunts us is because its fragmented and cyclical structure, combined with the focus on the fragility of memory, self-consciously invites the viewer to contemplate the intricate assumptions and expectations we bring to the re-viewing of this (and any) film.

There's much more to Toles's essay than this sketch can suggest. He goes on to discuss the too-often-neglected risks that come with "respecting" otherness, as well as the ways in which we regrettably avoid trusting the sometimes opaque but crucial vision provided by love in favor of the clear-cut material effects of power and supposed objectivity of cool detachment. These reflections never stray far from a continual investigation of the relevance of memory to both the film and our lives. Ending with a meditation on the importance to him of his own memories of his parents, Toles provides an examination of *Eternal Sunshine* that, like the film itself, combines moments of beauty and dramatic force with edifying philosophical insight.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Carroll 2008.
- 2 Michel Gondry speaking on the commentary to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* on the movie's DVD.
- 3 I would like to thank the contributors to this volume as well as Carlene Bauer, Daniel Callcut, Tom Wartenberg, and Susan Watson for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this introduction.

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