THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTOPHER NOLAN

Edited by JASON T. EBERL AND GEORGE A. DUNN

The Philosophy of Christopher Nolan

The Philosophy of Popular Culture

Series Editor: Mark T. Conard, Marymount Manhattan College

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Introduction

Christopher Nolan is a cinematic *auteur*, as a director, a writer, and a producer. He is not, however, a *philosopher* in the technical sense of the term that denotes professionals working in the academic discipline. Nevertheless, a volume entitled *The Philosophy of Christopher Nolan* is perfectly appropriate as his films—spanning nearly twenty years from *Doodlebug* (1997) through *Interstellar* (2014) and beyond—have provoked philosophical reflection among viewers who've found his films, to quote comedian John Oliver, more than "a little vague." In this respect, Nolan is not all that different from the father of Western philosophy, Socrates (d. 399 BCE), who styled himself a sort of "gadfly" whose function was to sting his fellow Athenians out of their intellectual complacency to ponder moral and other philosophical questions about which they've often taken for granted simple, patent conclusions. There are no simple solutions for complex problems.

Let's consider Nolan's *oeuvre* chronologically. First, in *Doodlebug*, he challenges a hallmark of Western philosophy from Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century through Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century that self-destruction is a fundamentally irrational desire. Although the protagonist in *Doodlebug* may indeed be irrational for wanting to squash himself, it's not altogether clear that he might not have some reason for doing so; or, at the very least, his perhaps irrational action might bespeak a fundamental flaw of the human condition insofar as many of us willingly engage in potentially self-destructive behaviors. *Doodlebug*, for better or worse, may be the most Freudian of Nolan's films as subconscious motivations lead one to self-destructive behavior; but the larger existential question of whether we have such motivations, and whether the behavior they induce may be *rational* at times, unavoidably challenges viewers' presumptions through Nolan's provocative imagery.

Following (1998) is Nolan's first feature-length film and extends the thesis of *Doodlebug* to the level of a man who unwittingly participates in his own downfall. The narrative has expanded, however, to show the audience a bit more of what motivates the pre-fallen protagonist. Primarily, what's at issue is a need to *belong*, to be *involved* in others' lives as a way of affirming the validity of one's own existence. Whether Nolan had ever read Martin Buber (1878–1965) or not, it's clear that he shares Buber's fundamental thesis that *I* exist fully only with respect to a *Thou* who acknowledges my existence as such and vice versa. There's an inherent

danger in such co-dependency as it may devolve into a perverse master/slave dialectic; although, even in such a relationship, according to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), the master is just as dependent on the slave as the reverse. In the case of Cobb and The Young Man, however, the former functions as a master manipulator who doesn't have any need of the latter and can easily disappear into the crowd as if he never existed. All of which raises the question of whether Cobb ever really existed; perhaps The Young Man is truly an extension of the self-destructive protagonist in *Doodlebug*.

Self-identity persists as a central organizing theme in Nolan's next and more widely-distributed film, *Memento* (2000). Here, Nolan completely disrupts the protagonist Leonard Shelby's sense of identity and creates a situation in which he must create meaning for his existence—otherwise, why not squash himself as in *Doodlebug*. Leonard's need to affirm his *self*-identity, though, comes at the cost of sacrificing others' identity—particularly that of Teddy or any other putative "John G." who happens to cross his path. Ironically, though, by eliminating Teddy, Leonard has inadvertently created the conditions of his own existential demise, since the narrative Teddy had helped Leonard construct is what gave *meaning* to his existence. Without the *telos*—to use the classical Greek term—of finding and killing John G., there's no further *purpose* to Leonard's existence to guide his moral choices. By killing the only John G. to whom the "facts" he's tattooed on his body have led him, Leonard has only succeeded in squashing his own identity and sense of purpose.

Insomnia (2002) pushes further this question of one's moral *telos* by forcing its protagonist, Will Dormer, to question his motivations in killing his partner, who was on the verge of exposing his duplicitousness. Eschewing the pat ethical questions of whether Dormer was justified or not in the decisions he made, Nolan is more interested in the *moral psychology* of a person who must learn how to live with the decisions he's made—good or bad. Is Dormer so different from the murderer Walter Finch? Is Dormer's death actually a release for him from his own moral compromises? Having squashed himself morally, and in the process ruined his reputation as a police detective who's imprisoned dozens of criminals who may now go free, physical death becomes not so much a punishment for Dormer but an escape.

The Prestige (2006) takes the questions of self-identity and moral justification raised in Nolan's earlier films and doubles them—*literally*—by crafting two protagonists, both illusionists, who use duplicity as their stock-and-trade not only on the stage but in their personal lives as well. At this point, Nolan is perhaps becoming a bit self-conscious as a filmmaker, whose personal philosophy might start being reflected in the thematic elements of the films he's creating. Although one suspects that Nolan wouldn't go to the immoral extremes to which Angier goes in order to succeed in his "transported man" illusion; nevertheless, the film-

maker and the showman have the shared goal of mesmerizing their audience and provoking them to consider possibilities they hitherto haven't imagined. Once again, self-destruction is the overarching theme as Angier allows himself to be killed night after night in order to make his trick work and triumph over his rival, Borden. The latter, or at least one of them, willingly sacrifices himself so that he may gain his ultimate revenge against Angier.

Nolan arguably reaches the apex of his skeptical approach to reality and self-identity with *Inception* (2010). Far from a simple *redux* of the Wachowksi Bros.' *Matrix* trilogy, Nolan trades on something human beings phenomenally experience every night: dreaming. Ever since René Descartes's so-called "dream argument" in the seventeenth century, philosophers have endeavored to define epistemic criteria to differentiate what we can trust to be *real* versus what may be a construction of one's own mind. Relatedly, moral theorists have debated the extent to which one's *perception* of reality may be more subjectively valuable than what is *truly* real. Does it really matter to Dom Cobb whether the top continues spinning at the end of the film? Having perhaps lost the ability to distinguish dream from reality, it may not matter to Cobb anymore whether his "real" self has been squashed, so long as he's able to enjoy the "reality" he most ardently desires: being home with his children, or at least perceiving himself to be.

Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy—*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)—revolutionized how moviegoers perceive their comic-book superheroes. Of course, the scripts for these films are based upon the comic books that created the morally ambiguous characters Nolan puts on the screen. Nevertheless, the performances Nolan drew out of Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Tom Hardy, and others crafted a world in which the moral motivations and personal identity struggles of both protagonists and antagonists are all too evident and *relatable* to audiences. Yes, the Joker is a morally reprehensible figure; but how difficult is it to argue with his—and Thomas Hobbes's (1588–1679)—characterization of human society when one introduces "a little anarchy"? While Nolan was more peripherally involved with *Man of Steel* (as a writer and producer) and *Batman v Superman* (as an executive producer), viewers can nevertheless expect the same sort of conscience-pricking moral questions that his *Dark Knight* films raise: How far is one willing to go to ensure their own and their loved ones' safety and security when confronted with injustice? Do our heroes, if truly they be such, owe the rest of us the sacrifice of their lives, whether literally or by sacrificing their own self-interest and chance at happiness?

This brings us to *Interstellar*, arguably Nolan's most triumphant film that encapsulates all the themes of his previous work. Personal identity? *They are us*. Moral choice? *The fate of loved ones versus the human race*. Epistemology? *What we know versus what we don't know in the black depths*

of Gargantua. And the perfect melding of philosophy and science: *The physics and metaphysics of hyperspace and time*. Nolan also takes audiences beyond the realm of self-interest—parents are "ghosts" of their children's future—while also maintaining the irreducible value of personal I/Thou relationships—hence why Dr. Mann is ultimately a villain and Cooper a hero. Mann, along with Prof. Brand, is willing to squash his humanity in order to save the human race "as a species." Cooper, through his attachment to particular others—most notably his daughter, Murph—willingly sacrifices himself to the unknown depths of a black hole. While Cooper doesn't allow himself to be potentially squashed by Gargantua's tremendous gravity out of some existential angst, as is apparently the case in *Doodlebug*, Nolan has nevertheless extended his ever-present thesis that sometimes the end of oneself is actually a beginning.

No one book can adequately capture the philosophical richness of Nolan's cinematic contribution to our collective pop culture consciousness. We've strived, however, to highlight key themes that define particular Nolan films, as well as point out broader themes that cross throughout his work as a whole. If you haven't watched any of Nolan's films referenced herein, you should do so before you're spoiled any further! And if you haven't read any of the philosophers referenced herein, you'll be richly rewarded by investing the time to understand the various theories that may help us discover fundamental truths about human nature, reality, morality, and the future in store for us.

Part 1

Moral Philosophy

ONE

Deceit, Desire, and Mimetic Doubling in the Films of Christopher Nolan

George A. Dunn

Christopher Nolan directed his first film in 1997, when he was still a student of English Literature at University College London. Nolan's best known films tell stories that unfold on a grand scale, but his first effort, *Doodlebug*, is a mere three minutes long and takes place entirely in one dingy room. It features what initially seems to be a lone character, a distraught young man chasing a small object, the eponymous "doodlebug," as it darts frantically across the floor. In his hand, the man wields a shoe, with which he clearly intends to deliver a lethal blow to this thumb-sized imp.

We soon discover, however, that the doodlebug is really just a miniature version of the man chasing it. Even more remarkably, the pursuer is exactly mimicking every last movement of his diminutive quarry. At last, the man corners his tiny doppelgänger and clobbers him with the shoe, only moments after we've witnessed his victim perform the very same action. We gather that the doodlebug has just flattened some even smaller doodlebug that he had been chasing. And then, suddenly but not entirely unexpectedly, a giant likeness of the man appears from behind, smiling the same triumphant smile as he crashes an oversized duplicate of the man's own shoe down on him. Our doodlebug-slayer was someone else's doodlebug all along.

The film ends on a tight shot of the murder weapon, under which lies the squashed remains of its victim. The credits roll, the screen fades to black, but we know what's coming next. Another, even more massive shoe is undoubtedly poised to drop. It's homicidal, shoe-slamming dood-

lebugs all the way down—and all the way up! An infinite regress of murderous doppelgängers stretching in both directions. *What kind of universe is this?*

WHY CAN'T DOODLEBUGS GET ALONG?

The universe of *Doodlebug*, with its furious doppelgängers forever whacking each other and being whacked in return, is alarmingly similar to our own—at least if we take as our guide the brilliant literary critic and social philosopher René Girard (1923–2015), a French émigré who taught at Stanford University for near thirty years and was in 2005 admitted into the elite ranks of the Académie Française.[1] Girard's work has drawn the interest of scholars working in a wide range of fields—from neuroscience to economic theory to literary studies and theology—all of whom have found his insights to be path-breaking. French philosopher Michel Serres hailed Girard as "the new Darwin of the human sciences" in a speech inducting him into the Académie Française. Entrepreneur Peter Thiel, the founder of PayPal, credits Girard as an influence on his business philosophy.[2] A number of internationally renowned novelists, including Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, and Roberto Calasso, have acknowledged his influence on their work. Yet, despite the tremendous explanatory power and wide applications of Girard's insights, his basic thesis is deceptively simple. Girard is—to borrow the language of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997)—a "hedgehog," someone who knows one thing, albeit one *important* thing, as opposed to a "fox," someone who knows many things.[3]

What Girard "knew"—and what he expounded upon in over twenty books and countless articles published in his long academic career—is that imitation, or, to use the Greek word that he favored, *mimesis*, is the channel for the transmission of human culture, in addition to being one of the most powerful prompts of human behavior. However, the effect of imitation is not always to foster harmony and concord, as is commonly believed. Conventional wisdom holds that enmity arises from differences—from our alleged tendency to react with hostility to whatever strikes us as foreign—but Girard insists to the contrary that the cause of our most intractable interpersonal conflicts is actually *sameness*. In brief, he believes that we tend to imitate each others' desires in a way that cause us to become rivals over items that we are unable to share. Standing in the way of the satisfaction of each other's desires, our relationships become poisoned with resentment. As the conflict heats up, the desired object retreats into the background as we become more and more exclusively obsessed with punishing our rival, imitating each other's hostile gestures and retaliating in kind against every perceived insult or injury. We, in effect, become doppelgängers, angrily attacking each other with

shoes (if not even more lethal weapons) in an endless cycle of whacking and counter-whacking that typically ends with someone getting squashed.

I have no idea whether Nolan encountered Girard's work at University College London, but it wouldn't be surprising if he did. It's striking that so many of his films—from his early low-budget outings, such as *Doodlebug* and *Following*, to his mature masterpieces, such as *The Prestige*, *Inception*, and the *Dark Knight* trilogy—seem to be preoccupied with the great theme of rival doubles, offering a dramatic illustration of many of the claims that Girard makes in his writings. But we don't need to assume that Girard influenced Nolan, since it could very well have been Nolan's own muse that led him to a view of the world so congruent with Girard's. In any case, exploring Nolan's body of work through the lens of Girard's insights can help us to identify a bright red thematic thread that runs through his films, while also perhaps exposing layers of meaning that might otherwise go unnoticed. At the same time, the artistic power of Nolan's films, the way they mirror and spotlight the truth of our own lives, provides a kind of indirect confirmation of Girard's insights, just as those insights can help us answer a number of questions that those films raise.

WHY IS THE YOUNG MAN A FOLLOWER?

Nolan's 1998 feature film *Following* tells the story of a lonely and indolent bloke—identified in the credits as "The Young Man," though he also answers to Bill—who has taken up the pastime of "following" people. There's an ambiguity to the word "following," which Nolan very likely intended for his audience to notice. To follow can mean to tail someone stealthy like a spy or a detective, which is exactly what we see The Young Man doing in early scenes, as he explains his peculiar activity in voice-over narration. His auditor, later revealed as a police officer, hints that The Young Man stalks others in order to act out the thrilling fantasy of being a "secret agent." The Young Man brushes this suggestion aside, averring instead that he follows as part of his research as a writer. But what kind of writer doesn't even own a word processor, only a vintage typewriter that seems more like a prop than a real tool of his avowed trade? We will later hear another character—the burglar Cobb, in whose web of deceit The Young Man will become ensnared—conclude on the basis of this charming but impractical accessory that The Young Man is a "dull-headed fucker" who "wants to *be* a writer," which is not the same thing as actually wanting to *write*. We can make the same point with even greater brevity: The Young Man wants desperately to *be* and that's precisely why he becomes a *follower*.

Let me explain what I mean by highlighting another meaning of the word "following," one that takes us straight into Girard's mimetic theory of interpersonal relations. To "follow" can refer to various ways of imitating or conforming to a model, taking one's cues from someone else's conduct. Girard believes that our modern moral ideal of a wholly autonomous self flies in the face of reality, since we are always "following," bending the knee before some model or other, even when we sincerely believe that we're obeying the spontaneous promptings of our own hearts. But our chronic conformity to what others model for us—what some philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), would censure as inauthentic heteronomy—is not so much a moral failing, according to Girard, as it is a consequence of the very nature of human desire, which he describes as *le desir selon l'Autre*, "desire according to the Other" or, alternatively, "desire *following* the Other."

Our tendency to emulate others is rooted in what Girard takes to be a fundamental fact about the human species, a sense of lack or a nameless need that we all experience, which leads us to imitate others, looking to them for cues as to what we should desire to fill our inner void.

> Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which the other person seems to have. The subject thus looks to the other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must be capable of conferring an even greater plentitude of being.[4]

Girard's insight isn't entirely new. The idea that human desire originates from a perceived lack of being goes back to at least Augustine of Hippo (354–430),[5] the North African bishop and Church father, who held that our awareness of our own finitude rendered us perpetually "restless" and launched us on a lifelong quest for some ontological anchor. For Augustine, our search ends only when we discover that the true object of our desire is God, the infinite source of our being.[6] Augustine's *Confessions* recounts the story of his own quest, his restless turning from one model to another until he finally converted to Christianity. But Augustine's account of desire follows an even earlier model supplied by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (428–348 BCE) in his great dialogue *Symposium*, putting a theistic spin on Plato's depiction of human desire (or Eros) as an insatiable longing for an inaccessible and unknowable Good.[7] Common to all these thinkers is the recognition that human beings suffer from a surfeit of desire far in excess of our actual needs, stemming from our sense of ontological incompleteness, and that our default state is one of ignorance as to what, if anything, could satisfy our longings. Accord-

ing to Girard, we *follow* because we hope or suspect that others have the inside dope on how to *be* that has been withheld from us.

This description of our condition perfectly fits The Young Man of *Following*. He fancies himself a writer—or at least aspires to be one—an occupation associated with a high degree of creativity and originality. He may entertain thoughts of himself as the inspired author of his own existence, the poet-creator of a life that's intensely interesting and meaningful. Yet the truth, hard as it is swallow, is that his life is a dull and monotonous pit of emptiness, bereft of friends or meaningful occupation. No doubt his loneliness is part of what drives him out into the street each day to practice his routine of following, but he also seems to be gripped by a fascination with certain individuals. "Your eyes pass over the crowd and if you let them settle on a person, then that person becomes an individual just like *that*," he explains to the police officer, in words reminiscent of Girard's account of how we look to others for clues as to how to acquire the plentitude of being we imagine them to possess. That one exceptional person on whom The Young Man lets his eyes settle, who becomes exceptional only *because* The Young Man's eyes have somehow transfigured him, suddenly acquires a reality that marks him as a person who has the thing that The Young Man covets most: a real, honest-to-goodness life.

Following provide us with a felicitous metaphor for the secret of being that we imagine others to possess: a box supposedly found in every home, in which each of us stores his or her most personal and telling mementos. "Everyone has a box," claims Cobb, while examining the contents of a container in an apartment that he and The Young Man are burglarizing. "We're very privileged to see it. It's very rare." Is it really true that each of us has a box in which we store revealing keepsakes? Without doing the requisite breaking-and-entering needed to research this question adequately, we can only venture a guess that it's just flim-flam invented by Cobb to tantalize The Young Man with the promise of penetrating the hidden secrets of others, those whom he secretly envies for having lives that strike him as richer than his own. Cobb, who boasts of his talent for reading people, quite likely perceives that the prospect of peering into the secret boxes ("breaking in, entering someone's life, finding out who they really are") makes burglary more attractive to The Young Man than it would be were it only about looting homes for merchandise. Cobb recognized The Young Man's fascination with hidden things at their very first meeting, commenting on how The Young Man had been eyeing Cobb's bag, his imagination no doubt fixated on its hidden contents. But it's not just people's things that The Young Man covets; it's their lives, the plentitude of being he imagines them to possess, and clues for how to gain such plenitude that might be gleaned from the objects they treasure. Theologically speaking, he's an "idolater," someone for whom other people have become gods; more prosaically,

he's an incurable follower. But, according to Girard, that just makes him a somewhat more blatant version of what we all are.

WHY DOES FISCHER WANT TO BE HIS OWN MAN?

According to Girard, it's because we're born not knowing what we long for that we turn to others to learn what's desirable. To understand Girard's point, consider his distinction between *desire* and *appetite*. Appetites are rooted in biological needs for such things as food, hydration, safety, and sexual satisfaction. But why do some people choose to satisfy their nutritional needs with tacos, while others prefer wonton soup? Why is a human beanpole the epitome of hotness in some locales, while a curvier figure gets tongues wagging in others? This way of posing the question highlights the role of cultural learning in transforming mere appetites, with their more or less indeterminate objects, into laser-focused desires for specific, concrete items, the allure of which often resides more in their symbolic value than in being particularly well-suited to our needs. Diamonds are a girl's best friend, not because they're intrinsically valuable, but because they stir the envy of her other friends. In Song dynasty China, it was tiny, misshapen feet—resulting from foot-binding—that afforded social status.

How do we come to acquire these tastes? Girard's term of art for the hidden mechanism that mints our desires is *mimesis*, from the Greek word for imitation. The centrality of *mimesis*, to both the transmission of culture and the acquisition of skills, has been well understood in the West since at least the time of Aristotle, who famously observed that human beings "differ from the other animals because they are the most imitative [*mimetic*] and produce their first acts of understanding by imitation."[8] We learn language by mimicking the sounds made by other members of our linguistic community; we cultivate the virtues by imitating the actions of virtuous exemplars; and we acquire the competencies of a writer or a secret agent by following in the footsteps of the most accomplished practitioners of these arts. To be a cultural animal is to be a natural born follower. Girard simply takes the logical—albeit radical—next step of extending this insight from the realm of outward cultural practices and skills to the inner wellsprings of human desire. Desire is also mimetic, meaning that our desires don't just arise spontaneously from the mysterious recesses of each individual's unique and private subjectivity, but are as much learned and copied from others as are the words with which we speak. To use the language of Nolan's 2010 blockbuster *Inception*, our desires are "incepted," implanted in us by others, often without the knowledge of either the incepted or the inceptors. However, unlike the protagonist of that movie, Dominick Cobb, and his team of professional dream navigators, the real world inceptors of our desires don't need to

sedate us and then penetrate multiple layers of our subconscious minds in order to "plant a seed." While Cobb's teammate Eames may judge inception to be "bloody difficult," Girard's mimetic theory reveals it to be the easiest and most natural thing in the world, since it's the very nature of desire to be secondhand. "True inspiration is impossible to fake," reports Arthur. However, from Girard's perspective, "true inspiration" is a chimera if it implies that the genesis of desires lies entirely within one's own entirely private subjectivity rather than in one's relationship to a mediator.

Girard's term for someone who serves as a credible model of our desires is a "mediator." The mediator might be a parent, a teacher, or some other authority figure, a historical or literary hero, an esteemed peer, a neighbor or colleague who is envied for his or her success, or—more and more frequently in our media-drenched culture—an idolized celebrity. To see how this process works, consider the specific way that Cobb and his dream team actually "incept" the wealthy heir Robert Fischer with the desire to break up his father's corporate energy conglomerate. When Cobb's crew enters Fischer's dream, they don't simply deposit the idea as though in some mental vault. Their aim is to get Fischer to form that desire on his own, which can be done only by supplying him with the right sort of mediator, someone to model the desire they want Fischer to adopt. In this case, the mediator is his father, with whom Fischer has had a fraught relationship but to whom he nonetheless looks for approval. They first put Fischer through a sequence of emotional ordeals that induce him to transfer his hostility toward his estranged father onto his godfather, Peter Browning. Then, once Fischer is primed for a reconciliation, they climax the dream with a weepy deathbed heart-to-heart between the dying father and his son, from which Fischer draws the lesson that what his father really wanted was for his son to be his "own man." The irony is delectable, since Fischer embraces the desire to be his own man only because he's not his own man at all but is slavishly following the desire of another—a desire he takes to be from his father but is really from Saito, Cobb's employer.

Fischer's borrowed desire to be *sui generis* puts him in lockstep with the values of the modern world with its premium on authenticity and novelty; whereas, in former times, one could confess one's unoriginality unabashedly. One took one's measure from how nearly one's own life approximated some culturally certified exemplar, rather than from how far one had pulled away from the pack. Due to the sea change in values that ushered in the modern subject with its aspiration to autonomy, most of us are now loath to admit the extent to which we still copy the desires of others. Yet, according to Girard, we continue to do so as energetically as ever. However, being products of a democratic age, we're now more inclined to turn our gaze sideways toward our peers in our search for models, rather than upward toward some exalted paragon. Either way,

we're still followers, even or especially when we try to stand out from the crowd and flaunt our supposedly "individuality." As Girard points out, the need to distinguish oneself from others is just another way to be fixated on them. The modern subject asserts his sovereignty over his own desire, but does so in faithful obedience to the dictum of "romantic individualism." The modern "individual," as Girard depicts him, is forever feigning indifference to others while furtively gauging their reactions to his attempts to stand out. Thus, Fischer's decision to be his "own man" doesn't mean abandoning all mediators. He must still take note of what his mediator—in this case, his father—does and then do the *opposite*. "Modern society is no longer anything but a *negative imitation*," observed Girard, "and the effort to leave the beaten path leads everyone into the same ditch."[9]

WHY DOES COBB PUMMEL THE YOUNG MAN?

Girard's term for the mimetic influence of a model who occupies a plane of existence that doesn't intersect with the subject is "external mediation." This mediator might be a religious figure who embodies transcendent perfection ("What would Jesus do?"), a respected hero from history ("What would Churchill do?"), or even some entirely fictional exemplar of a moral ideal ("What would Atticus Finch do?"). But the mediator might also be a high-status contemporary whose station in life sets him or her above the subject, such as a parent, teacher, or other superior. One mark of external mediation is the attitude of more or less unabashed reverence that the model elicits from the subject, who's usually entirely content with the subordinate role of an apprentice to a respected master.[10] Moreover, so long as subject and model move within distinct spheres of activity, separated by time, space, or social rank, there's little danger of them becoming rivals. The model indicates in a general way what *sort* of things are desirable—the admiring son might follow his father's cues in wanting "to marry a girl just like the girl who married dear old Dad"—but they aren't ordinarily drawn in a competition for the exact same objects. Outside of the salacious imagination of Sigmund Freud, it's really quite unusual for filial admiration to morph into an Oedipal desire to kill Dad and marry Mom.

But, in the modern world, many of the traditional hierarchies that once provided a locus for external mediation have toppled, collapsed under the weight of the modern doctrine that everyone's equal. Human nature being what it is, this development doesn't deter us from *following*, but the absence of external mediators means that we now must increasingly look for models among our peers. Consequently, external mediation gives way to *internal* mediation, where model and subject meet as equals on the same plane, making conflict almost inevitable, as model

and subject become doubles and therefore rivals of each other as they come to desire the same objects. Increasing equality gives rise to increasing conflict.[11] At the same time, our passionate devotion to the ideal of autonomy makes it increasingly difficult for people to acknowledge that they have acquired their desires secondhand and thus blinds us to the true source of our conflicts. As Girard observes, "the process of [internal] mediation creates a very vivid impression of autonomy and spontaneity precisely when we are no longer autonomous and spontaneous."[12] For a good picture of how internal mediation works, let's return to *Following*.

We learn early on that The Young Man had adopted rules to keep his practice of stalking random strangers from getting out of control, the most important of which was never to follow the same person twice. He quickly abandons this rule, however, when he become fascinated with another young man near his own age, a sharp-dressed fellow who projects an air of confidence and poise that's a striking contrast to our socially awkward protagonist. The sharp-dresser also has a sharp eye, so he soon notices that he's being followed. Confronting his flustered shadow, the sharp-dresser introduces himself as Cobb, coincidentally the same name as the leader of *Inception*'s team of dream raiders. But the two Cobbs have more in common than a name, for it turns out that *Following*'s Cobb is every bit as skilled as his namesake in *Inception* at planting desires in others. Cobb is a burglar and he lures The Young Man into joining him on a few of his outings. One day, they break into the flat of a young woman—identified in the credits only as "The Blonde"—who, unbeknownst to The Young Man, is Cobb's confederate in an elaborate scheme to implicate The Young Man in a murder. The plan requires The Young Man to become fascinated with The Blonde, a state of affairs that Cobb masterfully orchestrates through a shrewd manipulation of mimetic desire. First, he arranges for pictures of The Blonde to be scattered throughout the flat, providing several occasions for him to remark that "she's a fox," "she looks good," and "she's a babe," declarations of desire through which the model officially certifies The Blonde's desirability to his apprentice. An eager-to-please admirer of his mentor in crime, The Young Man needs little more than these few leering remarks to prompt him to lift a photo strip containing pictures of The Blonde and to slip it into his pocket for closer scrutiny at a later time. Cobb also stages a production of rifling lasciviously through The Blonde's underwear drawer, picking out one particularly "saucy" piece, pressing in to his face for a deep whiff, and then theatrically pocketing it. What initially registers on The Young Man's face as he witnesses this scene is something akin to distaste or scorn, but a moment later he's dutifully following suit, a purloined piece of lingerie finding its way into his own pocket. He is a stalwart follower in every sense.

Before we rashly conclude The Young Man is an atypical case, more prone than most to the mimetic contagion of desire, let's consider a much

more prosaic example, one that reflects an experience that most of us can probably relate to more readily than breaking into a woman's flat and nicking her underwear. Suppose you've been romantically involved with someone for a while, but lately you've been feeling lukewarm about the relationship and are getting ready to call it quits. But just then your best friend unexpectedly begins to show an interest in your soon-to-be-discarded sweetheart. The sensible, high-minded, and gracious course of action would be to stand aside immediately to clear a path for your friend. If you're this sensible, high-minded, and gracious sort of person, then you deserve a round of applause, but you're definitely an outlier. The more typical reaction would to be suddenly filled with a renewed burst of ardor as you succumb to the contagion of your friend's desire, which has attired your lover in fresh raiments of desirability. Indeed, this reaction is so predictable that you should probably suspect your lover of having bribed your friend to feign romantic interest as a means of rekindling your own!

The romantic triangle is such a reliable literary and cinematic trope precisely because romantic love is one area of life in which internally mediated desire is so obviously in play. In *Following*, however, The Young Man's mimicry of Cobb goes well beyond an induced fascination with The Blonde. Cobb's example also prompts The Young Man to clean up his untidy appearance by cutting his hair and donning a suit like his model. In fact, getting The Young Man to copy Cobb in these and other respects is all part of Cobb's strategy to create a double on whom he can pin the rap for a murder or whom he can at least use to deflect suspicion away from himself. "All we need is someone of roughly the same appearance, roughly the same way of working, and we should be fine," he tells The Blonde, confiding his plan. This devious Svengali is consciously and deliberately manipulating The Young Man's mimetic desire in order to transform him into a doppelgänger. But what Cobb does with malice aforethought, Girard believes the rest of us do blindly on a routine basis, copying each other's desires and unwittingly becoming each other's doppelgängers. Moreover, as mimetic doubles, we inevitably fall into acrimonious rivalries, as our desires converge on the same objects, the same would-be amorous conquests, the same coveted social positions, and all manner of other things that can't be shared without diminishing their value. As we know so well from literature, movies, and life, doppelgänger tales never end well for at least one of the pair and often enough for neither.[13]

Although *Following* is a movie about the creation of a doppelgänger, it only hints at the rivalry, envy, and escalating resentment that propel the standard doppelgänger tale. But there are still some unmistakable intimations of what Girard calls "mimetic rivalry," conflict engendered by imitation. It's significant that the only time the usually unflappable Cobb shows signs of being genuinely nettled is in a scene that comes right after

we see him pummel the daylights out of The Young Man, a seemingly gratuitous act of violence that serves no discernable purpose in the execution of Cobb's overall scheme. Cobb reclines on a couch in The Blonde's flat as she asks, "Did you have to beat him?" He replies, reproachfully, "Did you have to sleep with him?" And then, staring at her with an accusing squint and a distinct tinge of hurt in his voice, he asks, "Did you enjoy it?" It's obvious that Cobb, who had also been dating The Blonde, is experiencing the bitter taste of mimetic rivalry that accompanies the creation of a double and that the thrashing he delivered to The Young Man was a way of venting his jealousy. Cobb's jealous outburst is somewhat surprising in light of what we subsequently learn about his plan, which departs in one key respect from what he had described to The Blonde: she is actually the victim whose murder he plans to pin on The Young Man. But even though The Blonde is just a disposable prop in his master plan, he still feels jealous once his double starts enjoying what had most likely been Cobb's sole sexual prerogative. Just as Cobb's theatrical staging of desire for The Blonde had stoked The Young Man's libido, so too The Young Man's dalliance with The Blonde has incited Cobb's jealousy over a woman for whom he previously had no real feelings. At play here is what Girard calls "double mediation," in which the model imitates the desire of his imitator and the imitator, reciprocally, becomes the model of his model. "In double mediation," Girard writes, "it is not that one wants the object but that one does not want to see it in someone else's hands."[14] Internal mediation creates doppelgängers and in so doing secretes the poisonous affects of resentment, envy, and spite.

WHY CAN'T YOU PUT A PRICE TAG ON PRESTIGE?

Mimetic rivalry may lurk beneath the surface of *Following*, but it's a theme that Nolan takes up in earnest in his 2006 masterpiece *The Prestige*. The movie tells the story of two magicians in nineteenth-century England, Alfred Borden and Robert Angier, who become rivals for professional acclaim, pitted against each other in a lifelong battle of one-upmanship that takes a heavy toll on each of them, destroying not only their own lives but also the lives of those they love best. One-time partners, their relationship took an ugly turn after Borden accidentally caused the death of Angier's beloved wife Julia, prompting an act of revenge that sets in motion a war of retaliation that ultimately destroys both men, both physically and morally. Played out in a succession of devious schemes and underhanded efforts to sabotage each other's careers, the rivalry of Borden and Angier drives the plot of *The Prestige*, but it's enacted against the background of other equally bitter rivalries, such as the real life animosity between the scientists Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison, whose famous feud gives the plot a jolt of electricity (so to speak) at a crucial

juncture.[15] And, as if to underscore the Girardian insight that rivalry generates doppelgängers, *The Prestige* features a cast of literal doppelgängers of the science-fiction variety, who are no more able to coexist peacefully than are Borden and Angier.

"In some primitive societies," Girard notes, "twins inspire a particular terror. It is not unusual for one of the twins, and often both, to be put to death"[16]—sacrificed to forestall the social disorders that are feared to arise from their inevitable competition. While Borden has a biological twin, Angier acquires a device that allows him to create literal duplicates of himself. The unhappy fate of these doppelgängers is foreshadowed in an early scene, in which Borden creates the illusion of a bird that disappears and is magically restored. The distraught young nephew of Borden's future wife, Sarah, having witnessed the illusion and figured out that it was performed with doubles, asks, upon seeing the restored bird, "But where's his brother?" The unspoken but tacitly understood answer is that he's dead, sacrificed to the illusionist's legerdemain. Sacrifice, it turns out, is a necessity that arises out of the end that the magician pursues through his artistry, which is named in the title of the movie: prestige.

The meaning of the movie's title is clarified in another early scene. Every magic trick, explains John Cutter, an ingénieur whose job it is to concoct the mechanisms that produce the magician's spectacular illusions, unfolds through three stages. First, there is the *pledge*, in which a seemingly ordinary object is presented; then comes the *turn*, in which something extraordinary happens and our ordinary perception of reality is overturned; and, finally, the *prestige*, bringing the illusion to a close as everything is restored to its rightful condition and the magician receives the accolades he has earned through his feat of prestidigitation.[17] But the applause that greets the accomplishment of this last stage reminds us that *prestige* in the magician's technical sense is closely related to the word's more familiar association with reputation, status, and public esteem. Each of the movie's rival magicians is obsessed with *prestige* in this sense, intensely jealous of his own prestige and equally envious of the other's. And for the sake of this contested prestige, each will make the most horrendous sacrifices—and not just of birds!

The problem is that the two senses of *prestige*—producing the illusion and receiving the acclaim—do not always coincide for Borden and Angier. For the premier trick on which each builds his reputation, The Transported Man, accomplishes the most amazing *prestige* (in the technical sense) while simultaneously thwarting the magician's desire to luxuriate in the other form of *prestige*, the audience's roaring applause. The trick requires the magician to employ a double in order to create the illusion of disappearing (the *turn*) and then magically reappear at a remote location (the *prestige*). Border was the first to create a Transported Man illusion, the success of which prompted his rival to look for a way to mimic it. In

Angier's first attempt to reproduce the trick, he drops through a trap door in the stage, while his double, an actor named Gerald Root, reappears to take the bows. Reflecting on how night-after-night he was forced to listen to the crowd's ovation from beneath the stage as his double basked in the applause, Angier bitterly observes, "No one cares about the man who disappears, the man who goes into the box. They care about the one who comes out." His desire for prestige, for receiving the adoration of his audience, makes his success at creating this remarkable illusion intolerable to him. As it turns out, even Root, Angier's lookalike, gets drawn into mimetic rivalry with his employer. Resentful of being just an unsung second banana and egged on by Borden, Root colludes with Angier's rival to sabotage his employer's act.

Prestige in this second sense plays a central role in Girard's mimetic theory. Since mimetic desire arises from a sort of idolatry of the mediator, prestige is precisely what the mediator has in the eyes of the subject, enveloping the objects he possesses or desires in a kind of secondhand allure. Indeed, Girard argues that the object is really just a talisman through which the subject hopes to gain access to the prestige with which the mediator has imbued it. Angier acknowledges as much during his visit to Colorado Springs, where he tracks down Nikola Tesla, whom Angier asks to build for him the same device that he (wrongly) believes the great inventor had built for Borden. "Why would you want the same thing?" asks Mr. Alley, Tesla's assistant. "Call it professional rivalry," Angier replies. Angier doesn't yet know what this machine is or what it does, but he does believe that Borden has one, which is enough to awaken his own fierce desire to have one too.

Professional rivalry had set Angier on a very costly and convoluted path to his fateful rendezvous with Tesla in Colorado Springs. Some time earlier, around the time of his debacle with Root, Angier had sent his assistant, Olivia Wenscombe, who was also his lover, to spy on Borden and learn the secret of his Transported Man. She gained his confidence by initially pretending that she had come to betray Angier. As in *Following*, a scheming man attempts to manipulate his double or doppelgänger with the aid of a beautiful woman. However, as in in the earlier movie, an unexpected intrigue occurs due to the play of mimetic desire: Olivia falls in love with Borden, dutifully imitating Angier's own obsession. As Girard points out, the hatred and envy one feels for one's rival belies a secret idolatry, so it's not surprising that Angier's clandestine worship of Borden has rubbed off on Olivia. But despite her shift in loyalties, she does agree to provide Angier with a copy of Borden's encrypted diary, though it's useless to him without the decryption keyword. To access its secrets, he kidnaps Borden's ingénieur Fallon and obtains as a ransom the word T-E-S-L-A—five letters that send him on his trans-Atlantic journey to meet the great inventor.

In what could be a commentary on the lengths to which Angier is willing to go to discover Borden's secret, Girard writes, "The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it." The greater the obstacles that stand in our way, the greater the prestige of the object they withhold. And, Girard adds, the prestige of the mediator or model grows in tandem: "Even if the model has no particular prestige at the outset, even if all that 'prestige' implies—*praestigia*, spells and phantasmagoria—is quite unknown to the subject, the very rivalry will be quite enough to bring prestige into being."[18] Prestige is magical or, as Girard often terms it, "metaphysical," being not only an intangible prize for which rivals compete, but also an eidolon that they can conjure out of thin air through the sheer force of their rivalry.[19] And the more acute the rivalry becomes, the more the contest for prestige eclipses the objects of real value that had once been the rival's focus. "It won't get your wife back, Robert," says Olivia, in effort to temper Angier's obsession with beating Borden at his own game. "I don't care about my wife—I care about his secret!" he replies, momentarily (but only momentarily) sobered as he registers the meaning of what he just said. "In effect," writes Girard, describing what happens when the rivals' fascination with each other reaches a certain angry pitch, "the rivalry is purified of any external stake and becomes a matter of pure rivalry and prestige."[20] But unlike tangible objects, prestige has no reality apart from the emulous desires that creates it. And because prestige can't be shared without being diminished, a battle for prestige is always a zero-sum game: you're either the man on the stage or the man in the box.

"Have you considered the *cost*?" Tesla asks Angier about his request for a Transported Man device, urging him: "Forget this thing. I can recognize an obsession. . . . It will not do you any good." He warns Angier that obsessions—in this case, the magician's obsessive fascination with his rival in a battle for prestige—can turn you into "their slave, their whipping boy." Angier replies: "If you understand an obsession, then you know you won't change my mind." For it is obsession that generates the very prestige that obsession covets, while prestige in turn exerts the inexorable fascination that feeds obsession.

WHY IS SACRIFICE THE PRICE OF A GOOD TRICK?

In *Following*, the box of revealing mementos that everyone allegedly keeps serves as a metaphor for the secret of being that the mimetic subject believes others possess. The mimetic rivals of *The Prestige* are also obsessed with stealing secrets, but those secrets are sheltered not in boxes but in the diaries that each of the magicians keep. It's through those diaries that we, the audience, learn how these two antagonists allowed their rivalry to set them on a path of mutual destruction that will end up

costing them everything they love. But their reading of each other's diaries is more than just a storytelling device. They are also instruments of self-discovery for each of the two rivals, unsparing mirrors that reflect the vanity of their desires right back at them. For what they each discover in the end is that the image of self-sufficient being and happiness that each one presented to the world—and to each other—was really just a mask concealing the inner torment of a self that was either joyless and empty (Angier) or impossibly fragmented (Borden). As befits a rivalry between magicians, the happiness that each coveted in the other was illusory. As Angier writes in his journal: "I saw happiness, happiness that should have been mine. But I was wrong. His notebook reveals that he never had the life that I envied." It was all an illusion, albeit a very costly one, as we learn when the truth of Borden's life is revealed.

"Sacrifice, Robert—that's the price of a good trick," Borden tells Angier at their final meeting, as Borden reveals the staggering dimensions of the sacrifice he's made. Angier in turn reveals the sacrifices he has made in pursuit of his mimetic obsession, which are different but also horrifying in their nature and magnitude. But the ultimate purpose of Angier's sacrifices was not simply the production of a "good trick"—a *prestige* so fantastic as to be unsurpassable—but the total destruction, disgrace, and finally death of his rival. To achieve this end, Angier was willing in the end to destroy even himself. But if Angier desired "happiness," as he reported in his journal—the happiness that he imagined Borden to possess and that he believed should be his own—then why let those dreams of happiness fall through a trap door on the stage to drown in a tank of vengeance? The mechanism through which our natural and healthy desire for happiness becomes perverted into an appetite for destruction was explained well by one of Girard's greatest modern forerunners in the study of human desire, the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778):

> The primitive passions, which all tend directly toward our happiness, focus us only on objects that relate to it, and having only the love of self as their principle, are all loving and gentle in their essence. But when they are deflected from their object by obstacles, they are focused on removing the obstacle rather than reaching the object; they then become irascible and hateful. And that is how the love of self, which is a good and absolute feeling, becomes amour-propre [vanity], which is to say a relative feeling by which one makes comparisons; the latter feeling demands preferences, whose enjoyment is purely negative, and it no longer seeks satisfaction in our own benefit but solely in the harm of another.[21]

Envying the happiness that the model represents, we come to hate and resent him for obstructing our access to the happiness he possesses, our hatred in due course eclipsing that original desire for happiness. Thus,

mimetic rivalry puts us on a path to a violent destination unless something can intervene to deflect it from its ordinary course.

That intervention can take the form of a moment of sobriety and insight into the folly of that pursuit, as its toll is tallied and its payoff, like the magician's pledge, vanishes before one's eyes. Borden seems to have experienced such an insight as he faced his end, telling his brother, "You were right. I should have left him to his damned trick." Perhaps a similar insight led Bruce Wayne to withdraw from crime fighting at the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*, recognizing that his presence in Gotham tends to provoke more criminal ingenuity than it deters.[22] But other Nolan protagonists fail to arrive at that insight—or, worse, have it offered to them but actively refuse it, like *Memento*'s Leonard Shelby. While Girard believes that most of us are the authors of our own misery due to the way that mimetic desire is driven by its own unconscious dynamics to create obstacles to its own fulfillment, Leonard is that special case of someone who, in his moments of lucidity, deliberately creates obstacles for himself—puzzles that he can never solve, a quest that can never be consummated, and a fresh scapegoat-in-waiting in the person of John Edward Gammell—to sustain his belief that "my actions have meaning."[23] But the insights that elude Nolan's protagonists are still available to us moviegoers, which is a very good trick that requires no great sacrifice from us, only the price of admission and a willingness to recognize ourselves in the mirror Nolan casts on the screen.

Girard himself has spoken of the importance of literature as a stimulus to his own insights. He first presented his theory in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, a study of five modern novelists—Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, and Proust—each of whom he believed had succeeded in portraying the psychology of mimetic desire in a unique way. Later studies of other important literary figures, including Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians, have helped Girard build his case that many of the greatest authors have arrived at similar conclusions about the problematic nature of human desire and its tendency to produce rival doubles. To this list of authors, we might want to add the name of one of our greatest living *auteurs*, Christopher Nolan, whose cinematic worlds are so heavily populated with rival doppelgängers.[24]

NOTES

1. The Académie Française is a body of forty members founded by Cardinal de Richelieu in 1635. Known as the "immortals," its members have included Voltaire, Jean Racine, and Victor Hugo. Membership in the Académie is the highest that can be bestowed on an intellectual in France,

2. Thiel describes Girard's influence in the following interview: https://youtu.be/esk7W9Jowtc.

3. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

4. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 146.

5. "Three quarters of what I say is in Saint Augustine," concedes Girard in *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 133.

6. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 3.

7. See Plato's *Symposium*. There are many good translations, but perhaps the best may be the translation by Seth Benardete, included in *Plato's Symposium: A Translation by Seth Benardete with Commentaries by Allan Bloom and Seth Benardete* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

8. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newbury, MA: Focus Publishing, 2012), 10.

9. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 100.

10. *Memento* can be seen as an instance of external mediation, inasmuch as Leonard Shelby follows the directions, communicated through notes and tattoos, of earlier versions of himself with whom his present self is discontinuous. Issues of personal identity in *Memento* are explored in David LaRocca's chapter in this volume.

11. Girard shares this insight with Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). See Hobbes's *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 74ff.

12. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 38.

13. The classic doppelgänger story is Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Double*, which Girard discusses in *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, trans. James G. Williams (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012).

14. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 102.

15. The Tesla/Edison rivalry parallels the Borden/Angier rivalry in an interesting respect: Tesla and Borden were arguably each the better scientist or magician than his rival, while Edison and Angier were the better showmen.

16. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 57.

17. The philosophy of "magic" in *The Prestige* is further explored in Kevin Decker's chapter in this volume.

18. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 295.

19. As Troilus observes in Shakespeare's Trojan War satire *Troilus and Cressida*, "Helen must needs be fair / When with your blood you daily paint her thus" (Act I, Scene 1). Girard discusses this play in his book *A Theatre of Envy* (Herefordshire: Gracewing Publishing, 200), 112–66, esp. 149.

20. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 26.

21. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, trans. Judith R. Bush, Christopher Kelly, and Roger D. Masters (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2012), 9.

22. Consider this exchange from the end of *Batman Begins*:

> Batman: We can bring Gotham back.
>
> Gordon: What about escalation?
>
> Batman: Escalation?
>
> Gordon: We start carrying semiautomatics, they buy automatics. We start wearing Kevlar, they buy armor-piercing rounds.
>
> Batman: And?
>
> Gordon: And you're wearing a mask and jumping off rooftops. Now, take this guy. Armed robbery. Double homicide. Got a taste for the theatrical, like you.

Leaves a calling card. [Shows Batman a playing card with the image of The Joker.]

The theatrical Joker was born of mimetic rivalry with the theatrical Batman.

23. For further discussion of Leonard Shelby's search for meaning, see Jason Eberl's chapter in this volume.

24. Thanks are owed to Jason Eberl, who made helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

TWO

"So You Can Be My 'John G.'"

Moral Culpability in Memento

Jason T. Eberl

In Christopher Nolan's neo-noir film *Memento*, Leonard Shelby suffers from a form of anterograde amnesia that renders him unable to form new memories after two assailants attacked him and his wife. One of the attackers was killed and the other, who Leonard believes is still alive, he knows only as "John G." Relying on police records and "facts" tattooed on his body, Leonard attempts to track down John G. to exact vengeance. Leonard, though, has already killed John G. but can't remember it, which allows a corrupt police officer, John "Teddy" Gammell, to manipulate Leonard into killing more criminals, each of whom Leonard believes to be *the* John G. Leonard's pursuit of John G. appears to be the only avenue for his life to have an overarching purpose—or *telos*, as classical Greek philosophers like Aristotle (384–322 BCE) would call it. When Teddy reveals the truth, Leonard chooses not to believe it.[1] Before his memory fades, he gets a new tattoo containing information that will lead him to conclude that Teddy is John G. and to kill him.

Is Leonard morally responsible for killing Teddy since he doesn't remember having chosen to tattoo the false information? Two philosophical perspectives will be compared in responding to this question. John Locke (1632–1704) holds a psychologically-defined concept of personhood as the basis for judgments of moral responsibility, allowing for the possibility of more than one person—distinct loci of conscious experience not connected via memory—to exist in the same physical body. Thus, when Leonard kills Teddy, he may be a different person from the indi-

vidual who deliberately set up Teddy to be mistaken for John G. On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) would consider Leonard to be the same person throughout these experiences and thereby potentially culpable for the deliberate ignorance of Teddy's innocence that Leonard foists on himself by taking advantage of his amnesia. In conducting this analysis, the importance of formulating "moral projects" to define the *telos* of one's life will be discussed as a means of grounding Leonard's persistent identity despite the continual memory disruptions.

"CHEER UP. THERE'S PLENTY OF JOHN G.'S FOR US TO FIND"

Memento begins with Leonard killing Teddy to avenge his wife's death and the loss of his own "ability to live" due to his amnesiac condition. At that moment, given what we later learn about Leonard and his relationship to Teddy, it appears that Teddy is getting his just desserts—not for killing Leonard's wife, which he didn't do—but for manipulating Leonard into killing a drug dealer with whom Teddy was involved in some shady business. Teddy had convinced Leonard that this dealer, Jimmy Grantz, was the one and only "John G."—and it appears that this wasn't the first time that Teddy has utilized "the memory guy" for this type of dirty work. But even granting that Teddy isn't purely innocent, he doesn't necessarily deserve death for what he's done, so let's treat Leonard's killing him as an act for which Leonard may be morally *culpable* or *blameworthy*. Let's also assume that Leonard is morally justified in killing the *real* John G. as an act of vengeance. Of course, there are many good reasons to question whether revenge-killing can be morally justifiable, but it will help to clarify the question we're investigating here if we focus, not on the morality of revenge, but on the fact that he killed the wrong man. Thus, the question we'll consider is whether Leonard is culpable for Teddy's ignominious execution for a crime he didn't commit.

What's required for someone to be culpable for a moral wrongdoing? I can here provide only a brief sketch of the requisite conditions for moral culpability, highlighting those points which pertain most to the question at hand. A primary condition for culpability is that the person is *causally related* to the wrong action, though such a relationship could take many forms. Leonard is *directly* causally related to Jimmy Grantz's death as the agent who physically ends the dealer's life. In a more indirect way, Teddy is responsible for Jimmy's death by setting up Leonard to kill him under false pretenses—which is ironic given what happens to Teddy. Leonard is causally related in both ways to Teddy's death as the person who pulls the trigger and as the source of his own false belief that Teddy is John G. Leonard's two-pronged causal relation to Teddy's execution raises the question of whether we're dealing with one or *two* causal agents in this case.

Another requirement for moral culpability is that the causal agent be *aware* of what she's doing and is acting out of a *conscious intention* either (a) to do something wrong directly or (b) to create conditions in which she might do something wrong, without necessarily intending the wrong act itself. For an example of the first sort of culpable intention, consider the scene in which Natalie provokes Leonard into striking her by insulting his deceased wife. She's fully aware of his amnesiac condition and, like Teddy, is using this knowledge to manipulate Leonard into getting rid of someone—Dodd—for her. Before she starts taunting him that his wife may have "sucked one too many diseased cocks and turned you into a retard," she removes all the pens from the room so that he can't write a note to himself about what happened. Then, after he hits her in anger, she goes out to her car and waits long enough for him to have forgotten that he had hit her and why, so she can reenter the house as if she'd just returned from having had the shit beat out of her by Dodd.

Contrast this case of direct intention with that of a drunk driver who kills someone in a car accident. The driver doesn't directly intend to kill another person, but he knowingly creates a situation—by intentionally drinking heavily and then getting behind the wheel—in which the risk of causing another person's death is high. Although he didn't consciously intend to kill someone in the same way that Natalie consciously intended to manipulate Leonard, the drunk driver is still culpable for causing that person's death. Civil law reflects these different types of culpability in drawing a distinction between directly intended *first-degree murder* and various forms of lower-degree *manslaughter*. When it comes to Leonard's killing of Teddy, he clearly consciously intends to kill Teddy when he pulls the trigger and thus is *responsible* for Teddy's death. But is he *culpably* responsible? He killed the wrong man, but it could be argued that he didn't act in a *blameworthy* manner in killing a man he sincerely thought had murdered his wife. After all, when he kills Teddy under the false belief that he's John G., Leonard isn't directly intending to do anything wrong. Perhaps he's like the drunk driver since, by tattooing Teddy's license plate number, Leonard deliberately created the conditions under which he not only risked killing someone who wasn't John G., but actually had every reason to expect that he would do so.

A final requirement for moral culpability is that the agent remains *the same person*, identical with himself, throughout the entirety of the act, from the moment when he first forms the intention through the final execution of the deed. This is a given in most cases. But consider a situation in which a malicious neuroscientist has secretly implanted a chip in the motor cortex of someone else's brain, such that the scientist externally controls the other person's bodily movements. If the scientist were to compel his victim to pick up a knife and stab someone, the victim of this remote-control puppet-mastery wouldn't be culpable even though it's *her* body that executes the deed, since the intention is wholly located in the

mind of another person. Thus, the action and the intention belong to two distinct, non-identical persons. Of course, it would be extremely unusual for a *single* agent's identity to change between when he formulates an intention to perform an action and when he actually performs it, but Leonard's plight presents us with just such an improbable situation.

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE"

Before analyzing Leonard's atypical case, we need to investigate what it means for a typical human being to persist as the same person through time and change. Many contemporary philosophers writing on this question take their cue from Locke's *psychological theory* of personal identity. Locke begins by defining the term "person":

> A thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it.[2]

Defining a person as essentially a *conscious* being, Locke then defines personal identity as the *continuity* of consciousness from past to present:

> And as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that *Person*; it is the same *self* now it was then; and 'tis by the same *self* with this present one that now reflects on it, that that Action was done.[3]

It's evident, though, that the continuity of consciousness isn't like a solid, uninterrupted line running throughout the course of one's life, but rather has many breaks of various durations where one no longer remembers some experience or action:

> But that which seems to make the difficulty is this, that this consciousness, being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of our Lives wherein we have the whole train of our past Actions before our Eyes in one view: But even the best Memories losing the sight of one part whilst they are viewing another.[4]

And, of course, there are regular periods of each day of our lives when we're not conscious at all—states of dreamless sleep. Does Locke believe that people regularly go in and out of existence as they sleep through the night or lose a part of themselves when they forget some past action or experience? Yes and no.

Locke distinguishes between the persistence of the "individual substance" that constitutes a person and that of the person herself. Clearly, there's a persisting material substance—a living human body—that remains numerically the same, despite a continual flux of micro-level constituents, throughout the course of one's life. Or, if one believes that a

person is essentially constituted by a soul or spirit, then that immaterial substance may persist throughout one's life and perhaps even beyond death. Neither body nor soul is the person herself, however. The person is the consciousness associated with a given body or soul. In short, *substantial* identity isn't the same as *personal* identity. Rather, it's your conscious relationship to past actions that makes those actions properly *yours*, regardless of whether such actions were performed by the same body that now constitutes you. Were it possible for your consciousness to be transferred to a new body, so that it retained the same memories of your past actions, the inhabitant of this new body would still be *you*. By the same token, if a different consciousness were to take up residence in your present body, the actions of that body could no longer be considered *yours*. Thus, one's personal identity may fluctuate while his substantial identity remains intact. Conversely, one's substantial identity may change but his personal *self* may still persist so long as there's continuity of consciousness.

According to Locke, our consciousness of our past *actions* is what grounds our identity because we are *concerned* for those actions. We are concerned for actions we remember having performed, but not for actions our bodies may have performed but of which we're no longer conscious. Locke compares actions that a person doesn't remember performing with a finger that's been severed from her body: just as we no longer care what happens to a severed digit nor consider it any longer a part of our *self*, we don't have any regard for actions we don't consciously remember. Locke concludes,

> That with which the *consciousness* of this present thinking thing can join it self, makes the same *Person*, and is one *self* with it, and with nothing else; and so attributes to it *self*, and owns all the Actions of that thing, as its own, as far as that consciousness reaches, and no farther.[5]

"Ownership" of one's actions entails, according to Locke, being conscious of having performed them and consciousness of past actions is required for being held morally responsible for them. If you perform an action you're no longer conscious of having done, then you can't be held responsible for it. Consider a person who, in his dreams, entertains violent fantasies, but doesn't remember such dreams upon waking and doesn't perform violent actions in his waking life. Locke argues that it would be unreasonable to hold the waking person responsible for the deeds and fantasies of the dreamer.[6]

Locke applies this same reasoning to the case of an amnesiac and draws a conclusion that bears directly on Leonard's situation:

> But yet possibly it will still be objected, suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my Life, beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that perhaps I shall never be conscious of them again; yet am I not the same Person, that did those Actions, had those Thoughts, that I

> was once conscious of, though I have now forgot them? To which I answer, that we must here take notice what the Word *I* is applied to, which in this case is the Man only. And the same Man being presumed to be the same Person. But if it be possible for the same Man to have distinct incommunicable consciousness at different times, it is past doubt that the same Man would at different times make different Persons.[7]

Locke characterizes "person" as a *forensic* term, referring to moral agents who are responsible for the actions of which they're conscious, but not those of which they aren't.[8] Thus, when Leonard kills Teddy, he isn't the same *person* as the one who created the false belief that Teddy is John G. and he's therefore not culpable for Teddy's death.

"YOU CAN'T TRUST A MAN'S LIFE TO YOUR LITTLE NOTES AND PICTURES"

For an alternative analysis, let's presume that the Lockean view isn't correct and that, when Leonard kills Teddy, he's the same person who intentionally made Teddy his "John G." When Leonard forms an intention to tattoo Teddy's license plate number, he knows that Teddy isn't the real John G. and that, due to his condition, he'll eventually kill Teddy believing that he's John G. For that intention, Leonard could be held morally culpable. Does it follow, though, that he should also be judged culpable for actually killing Teddy when he's ignorant of the fact that he'd intentionally constructed a false belief for himself?

To answer this question, we must investigate how *ignorance* affects an agent's capacity for voluntary action and her moral culpability. Aquinas offers a detailed analysis of the conditions of *voluntariness* in human action, which pertains to the question at hand since only a voluntarily performed action can be subject to moral evaluation as to whether the agent is responsible for it. The first requirement of voluntariness is that the agent has *knowledge* of the end she's pursuing: "if ignorance cause involuntariness, it is in so far as it deprives one of knowledge, which is a necessary condition for voluntariness."[9]

Aquinas immediately notes, though, that not every form of ignorance has the same effect on voluntariness. He describes three ways that ignorance may be related to an agent's will. The first relation is *concomitance*, which occurs "when there is ignorance of what is done; but, so that even if it were known, it would be done."[10] Aquinas cites the example of someone killing his foe when he mistakenly thought he was killing a stag, but, having realized that he killed his foe, doesn't regret his action and would've done it anyway had he'd known it was his foe. This may describe the moral condition of Will Dormer in Nolan's *Insomnia*, when he shoots and kills his partner, Hap Eckhart, in a dense fog. Afterward,

Dormer isn't sure whether his action was entirely unintentional, since he knew Hap was about to expose him in an Internal Affairs investigation.

In Leonard's case, the question is whether he would've killed Teddy even if he had known that the man against whose head he was pressing a gun wasn't the man who'd attacked him and his wife. Teddy, of course, has been manipulating Leonard for his own personal gain and so it's reasonable to believe that Leonard may have still killed him; however, given that Leonard seems by all accounts to have been a peaceful man prior to being attacked—as Teddy tells him, "You're not a killer. That's why you're so good at it"—it's just as reasonable to assume he wouldn't have killed Teddy if he knew he wasn't John G. His ignorance would thus not be concomitant with his will since he only had a will to kill John G. and not a will to kill Teddy *per se*.

The next type of ignorance Aquinas describes is *consequent* to an agent's act of willing, due to the ignorance actually being *willed* by the agent. Such voluntary ignorance can occur in two ways:

> First, because the act of the will is brought to bear on the ignorance: as when a man wishes not to know, that he may have an excuse for sin, or that he may not be withheld from sin. . . . And this is called *affected ignorance*.—Secondly, ignorance is said to be voluntary when it regards that which one can and ought to know. . . . And ignorance of this kind happens, either when one does not actually consider what one can and ought to consider;—this is called *ignorance of evil choice* . . . or when one does not take the trouble to acquire the knowledge which one ought to have . . . as being due to negligence.[11]

This type of ignorance renders one's action involuntary; yet the ignorance itself is the product of a volition for which an agent can be held accountable. When speeding through Springfield, Homer Simpson makes himself intentionally ignorant when he's coming up on a red light, shuts his eyes, and tells himself as he slams the gas pedal, "If I don't see it, it's not illegal!"[12] In another case, the hunter in the earlier example might take aim at something moving in the woods, not sure if it's a stag or a person, and ends up shooting a person. Because he shot his gun without having confirmed what he was shooting, the hunter is responsible for his ignorance due to negligence.

Leonard's ignorance when he kills Teddy seems at first glance to fall into this category, for he'd previously voluntarily willed to be ignorant of the fact that Teddy isn't John G. He even goes a significant step further in *making* himself believe that Teddy is John G. by tattooing Teddy's license plate number as his latest "fact," aware that he'll forget having consciously willed tattooing an erroneous fact that will lead him to kill Teddy. Knowing that he'll become ignorant of Teddy not being John G., Leonard voluntarily takes advantage of this fact with full knowledge of how matters will end.

To further illustrate why this is an example of Aquinas's second category of ignorance, consider the counterfactual case in which Leonard isn't aware of his amnesiac condition and thus hasn't *intentionally* caused himself to take false information as factual. Say that Leonard has some reason to believe that Teddy was John G. but then later discovers he isn't. Immediately upon that discovery, though, he suffers a blow to the head that causes him to forget that Teddy really isn't John G., but he remembers the previous information that led him initially to believe that Teddy is John G. In this case, Leonard's ignorance would be exculpatory because it wouldn't be the result of a conscious volition to make himself believe something he knew to be false.

Returning to the actual story, when Leonard kills Teddy under the false belief that he's John G., Leonard is *at that moment* suffering from the third type of ignorance Aquinas describes, which is *antecedent* to the agent's volition insofar as "it is not voluntary, and yet is the cause of man's willing what he would not will otherwise."[13] Assuming that Leonard wouldn't have killed Teddy if he didn't believe that Teddy was John G., Leonard's ignorance isn't concomitant with his will. Furthermore, despite his previous volition to cause himself to be ignorant of the truth by taking advantage of his condition, when he's holding the gun to Teddy's head there's nothing Leonard could possibly do to stop himself from believing that Teddy is John G. Even if he'd followed Teddy down to the basement of the abandoned warehouse and saw Jimmy Grantz's body, he'd already told himself not to believe any of Teddy's lies.

This differs from the case of the hunter who chooses to be ignorant of whether he's aiming at a stag or a person, for, right up until the moment he pulls the trigger, he could always change his mind and resolve his ignorance. In Leonard's case, though, once enough time has passed for him to have forgotten that Teddy isn't John G., he's helpless to resolve his ignorance. It seems, therefore, that while Leonard is culpable for formulating the *intention* to kill Teddy and for creating the conditions that lead to Teddy's death, he's not culpable for *actually* killing Teddy, since there's nothing he could've done at that moment to resolve his ignorance.

Consider, though, a case involving a man who's invited to go out with some colleagues for drinks after work. After deliberating for a bit on whether he should, he finally decides to go and allows himself to get riproaring drunk. In his inebriated state, he ends up raping one of his female coworkers. That very evening, he's caught and thrown in prison. As can happen when one drinks heavily, however, he "blacks out"—he functions consciously but without forming any memories—during the period when he's drunk and thus doesn't remember committing the rape. In fact, his blackout is so severe that he doesn't even remember going out drinking with his coworkers. The last memory he has before waking up in prison is sitting at his desk, deliberating whether to go out that night. Does his inability to remember not only his crime but even his decision to

create the conditions—going out and drinking heavily—that would lead to his crime exonerate him from culpability? A reasonable moral intuition may be to respond "no," which flies in the face of the earlier analysis based on Locke's memory-based criterion of personal identity and moral culpability.

"JUST BECAUSE THERE ARE THINGS I DON'T REMEMBER DOESN'T MAKE MY ACTIONS MEANINGLESS"

Another pertinent question is why does Leonard decide to make Teddy his "John G."? This question is particularly mysterious since, if Locke's view is correct, the Leonard who decides to get a tattoo with Teddy's license plate number isn't psychologically connected to—and consequently isn't identical to—the person who eventually kills Teddy. When Leonard decides to set up Teddy as John G., there's no reason for Leonard to be at all concerned with whether some future person with whom he isn't identical gains satisfaction from killing Teddy—and a short-lived satisfaction at that. As Natalie reminds him, "But even if you get revenge, you're not gonna remember it. You're not even gonna know that it happened."

Unlike Locke, David Hume (1711–1776) provides a means of linking the Leonard who formulates an intention to kill Teddy with the Leonard who actually kills Teddy, despite the lack of any psychological connection via conscious memory. Hume adds to Locke's psychological account of personal identity three mechanisms by which psychological continuity may be established: *contiguity* of mental states (one simply follows directly upon another), *resemblance* among mental states (memory), and *cause-and-effect relations* between mental states. The last allows temporally separated mental states that aren't conjoined through conscious memory to nevertheless be states of the numerically same person:

> As to *causation*; we may observe, that the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other . . . the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation.[14]

Hume shows how we're able to extend our knowledge of our own self-identity beyond the reach of conscious memory:

> As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, 'tis to be consider'd, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity. Had we no memory, we never shou'd have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of

> causes and effects, which constitute our self or person. But having once acquir'd this notion of causation from the memory, we can extend the same chain of causes, and consequently the identity of our persons beyond our memory, and can comprehend times, and circumstances, and actions, which we have entirely forgot, but suppose in general to have existed. . . . In this view, therefore, memory does not so much *produce* as *discover* personal identity, by shewing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions. 'Twill be incumbent on those [viz., Locke], who affirm that memory produces entirely our personal identity, to give a reason why we can thus extend our identity beyond our memory.[15]

Consider a victim of child abuse who, as a psychological defense mechanism, has suppressed all conscious memory of having been abused. Nevertheless, the psychological impact of the abuse has a causal bearing on his emotional well-being later in life. Only once he begins to examine, through psychotherapy or some other means, the origin of the turmoil that impacts not only his own happiness but also the health of his relationships, might he come to understand the causal influence at work and perhaps even recall the abuse. This type of psychological connectivity can also be seen in Leonard's self-description: "You don't know anything. You feel angry, you don't know why. You feel guilty, you have no idea why. You could do anything and not have the faintest idea ten minutes later." Locke would see this as evidence of a disruption of Leonard's personal identity due to the lack of *conscious* memory—such that, while the Leonard who experienced something that made him angry and the Leonard who feels angry ten minutes later without knowing why may be the same human being, they aren't the same *person*. For Hume, on the other hand, the *causal* relation between Leonard's anger-inciting experience and the anger he continues to feel despite having forgotten that experience suffices to ground his persistent identity as the same person.

In line with Hume's view, when Teddy explains to Leonard who he really is and that he'd already killed the real John G., Leonard is able to gain brief flashes of memories he'd lost due to his condition. Leonard knows—or at least now has reason to believe—that the real John G. is no longer alive for him to hunt down, which leads him to decide to create the illusion for himself that Teddy is John G. As Teddy tells him, "I guess I can only make you remember the things you wanna be true. . . . You don't want the truth. You make up your own truth"—an epistemic axiom that surely applies to people in general regardless of the state of their memory.

Hearing Teddy explain who he is and what has really happened is causally related to Leonard forming an intention to kill Teddy. Using notes and tattoos, Leonard's intention is in turn causally related to his ultimate decision to kill Teddy under the false belief that he's John G.[16] Hence, it's reasonable to hold—using a Humean psychological criterion

of personal identity and not relying upon the sameness of the underlying substance—that Leonard, when he decides to make Teddy his "John G.," is the same person who later kills Teddy due to the causal relationship between the initial intention and the ultimate decision to pull the trigger.[17] This allows Leonard to have a motivation in making Teddy his "John G." and thereby giving his future self a goal to pursue that'll ultimately satisfy him, even if it's illusory.

Leonard justifies his decision thus:

> Can I just let myself forget what you've told me? Can I just let myself forget what you made me do? You think I just want another puzzle to solve? Another John G. to look for? You're a John G. So you can be my John G. Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy, yes, I will. . . . I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. . . . We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I'm no different.

Having an evident concern for his future self, though, Leonard should equally lament the fact that that future person will quickly forget that he killed "John G." Or, even worse, in light of the coherence of the "facts" tattooed on his body and other information which he could re-verify—thanks in part to his manipulation of his police file to "create a puzzle [he] could never solve"—Leonard may be able to continually remind himself that he killed "John G." in the person of Teddy. The reason why this may be an even worse state for Leonard is that he would then have lost his *raison d'etre*, the reason for his existence—in Aristotelian terms, his *telos*. As Teddy explains, "I gave you a reason to live, and you were more than happy to help. . . . You live in a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for. A sense of purpose to your life. A romantic quest that you wouldn't end even if I wasn't in the picture."

How could Leonard be happy now that the hunt which has defined his life and motivated his actions has come to an end?[18] While one may think that revenge-killing is a poor *telos* for a human being, at least it's a *goal* and it's hard to imagine what other goals Leonard could set for himself now. Say what you will about Teddy's manipulation of Leonard, Teddy at least did Leonard the service of giving him something to pursue, a reason to *live* and not just survive. Arguably, Leonard is worse off now that Teddy is gone: "But it seems very likely that, without Teddy's competent mind aiding him, he'll quickly crash and burn."[19]

Perhaps Leonard is aware of his need for such a *telos* to define his life and thus also understands why he made Teddy his "John G.," however self-defeating that decision ultimately may be. His single-minded pursuit of John G. has not only defined Leonard's life ever since he and his wife were attacked, but, it would seem, has corrupted his *moral character*. As I assumed earlier in claiming that Leonard's ignorance of Teddy's identity

isn't concomitant with his will, Leonard wouldn't have killed Teddy if he knew he wasn't really John G. Leonard, before having been assaulted, was probably a peaceful, normal guy, not a violent revenge-seeker. His character has changed, however, as his basic human need to define his life in terms of some overarching purpose—in his case, to pursue and kill John G.—now overrides all other moral considerations. This is the change to which Teddy alludes in the following exchange:

Teddy: "You don't know who you are."

Leonard: "I'm Leonard Shelby. I'm from San Francisco"

Teddy: "That's who you were. That's not what you've become."

This explains why Leonard doesn't pause for even one moment to consider whether he should mark Teddy as his next "John G." The ease with which he makes this decision shows him to have a corrupt moral character. According to Aristotle, one's moral character defines a person—particularly when it comes to assigning moral responsibility—much more than the ephemeral memories that Locke believes constitute our personal identity.[20] Moral character consists of moral *habits*, which may be either good or bad. By his own admission, Leonard is a product of habit, which is often enabling but in his case may sometimes be pernicious. "I use habit and routine to make my life possible. Sammy [Jankis] had no drive, no reason to make it work. Me? Yeah, I got a reason," says Leonard as he looks at his tattoo that states, "John G. raped and murdered my wife." Despite his ignorance at the moment he shoots Teddy, Leonard's capacity to frame an innocent man as his wife's murderer betrays his morally corrupt character. He's even corrupted his own *dignity* by turning himself into a "living instrument," a human tool—Aristotle's definition of a *slave*[21]—by intentionally taking advantage of his own amnesiac condition to kill Teddy. Having now killed Teddy, Leonard will undoubtedly take advantage of any possible opportunity to put himself again on the path of pursuing yet another "John G."[22]

NOTES

1. There may, of course, be good reasons not to believe that what Teddy tells Leonard at the end of the film is true. For an insightful analysis of the extent to which either Leonard's or Teddy's versions of the "truth" should be trusted, see Andrew Kania, "What is *Memento*? Ontology and Interpretation in Mainstream Film" in *Memento*, ed. Andrew Kania (New York: Routledge, 2009), 168–73.
2. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), bk. II, ch. 27, §9.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., §10.
5. Ibid., §17.

6. See ibid., §19.
7. Ibid., §20.
8. See ibid., §26.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1948), Ia-IIae, q. 6, a. 8.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. *The Simpsons*, "The Trouble with Trillions" (1998).
13. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 6, a. 8.
14. David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), bk. I, pt. 4, §6.
15. Ibid.
16. The fact that the chain of causation among Leonard's psychological states includes sources outside of his own head—Teddy, Polaroids, tattoos—doesn't disallow such sources constituting parts of Leonard's *extended mind*. See Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Clark, "*Memento*'s Revenge: The Extended Mind, Extended" in *The Extended Mind*, ed. Richard Menary (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 43–66. For a critique of the application of extended-mind theory to Leonard's case, see Joseph Levine, "Leonard's System: Why Doesn't It Work?" in Kania (ed.), *Memento*, ch. 2. For further discussion of extended-mind theory, see David LaRocca's chapter in this volume.
17. The *immanence* of this causal relationship must be fairly close, however, to differentiate Leonard's causing himself to kill Teddy from Teddy's using Leonard to kill Jimmy Grantz—and presumably other alleged John G.'s. Teddy's intention to kill Jimmy Grantz is causally related to Leonard's formation of the belief that Jimmy is John G. and thereby his killing Jimmy. But Hume wouldn't conclude that Teddy and Leonard are the same person due to this causal relationship.
18. That Leonard values his own happiness more than the truth is also evidenced by his using a call-girl to create the momentary illusion that his wife is still alive. Leonard would probably be first in line for the "experience machine" discussed in William Lindenmuth's chapter in this volume in relation to Nolan's *Inception*.
19. Michael McKenna, "Moral Monster or Responsible Person? *Memento*'s Leonard as a Case Study in Defective Agency" in Kania (ed.), *Memento*, p. 34.
20. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999).
21. See Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2000), bk. I, ch. 4.
22. I'm most grateful to George Dunn for helpful discussion and comments on a draft of this paper, as well as participants at the 2011 "Faith, Film, and Philosophy" Seminar Series hosted by Gonzaga and Whitworth Universities, and the Philosophy and Culture panel on Christopher Nolan's films at the 2014 Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference.

THREE

White Nights of the Soul

Insomnia *and the Struggle for Purity of Heart*

J. L. A. Garcia

In a revealing sequence deleted from the theatrical version of Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia*, Detective Will Dormer and innkeeper Rachel Clement talk in a bar after he found her emptying the hotel room of his partner of five years, Hap Eckhart, whom Dormer had just mistakenly shot and killed. Dormer tells her that in his work he frequently deals with people who have "lost someone."[1] Their feelings, he reports, are often ambiguous and more complicated than expected. To make his point, he discloses that as a boy he himself felt "embarrassed" over his brother's death in a fire.[2] Dormer tells Rachel that he'll stay in Nightmute as long as it takes "to find this guy," the murderer of Kay Connell, adding that he believes it will be "not long." But though Dormer does not fully realize it yet, it is really himself whom he has lost and now needs to find.

Nolan's *Insomnia* is a film that explores significant questions about identity and its implications for how one should act and react. It does so directly in the characters' talk about who they are, but also indirectly by confronting the protagonist, Will Dormer, with two characters who identify with him in different ways—the murderer Walter Finch and rookie cop Ellie Burr. Together, they represent two aspects of Dormer's past, as well as two future paths between which he must choose. But in director Nolan's hands, the question of identity goes beyond merely descriptive psychology to consider evaluative questions, specifically, how *good* one is at being what one is—in Dormer's case, a cop—as well as how morally *upright* one is when one is being it. Role-assessment becomes moral as-

sessment for someone like Will Dormer. Most deeply, the question of identity points to the fundamental question of what makes actions and individuals moral or immoral, virtuous or vicious.

Dormer could be thought to embody a version of what is called the "ethics of identity"—or, in the terminology favored by Charles Taylor, the "ethics of authenticity." We could also call it an "ethics of *integrity*." Though unaware of his project, Dormer strives toward what Søren Kierkegaard called "purity of heart": a state of harmony, concord, and consistency across his will, preferences, choices, actions, and backward-looking attitudes. He would like to be able to look back on his past choices and reactions without shame or guilt. However, inner concord is not morally sufficient: there must also be compassion for other individuals.

DOPPELGÄNGERS: FINCH AND BURR

Interpreting Nolan's earlier movie *Memento*, Michael Baur draws on the thought of Martin Heidegger:

> Even though we are always thrown into the world with a past that defines who we are and what is meaningful for us, we are nevertheless also free to transform the meaning of the past by projecting ourselves into the future. "Our lives are always a process of taking over who we have been in the service of who we will be."[3]

Something similar is afoot in *Insomnia*, taking the form of a tug-of-war within Dormer between two modes of being, each rooted in past incidents in his life, each justified by its own moral vision, and each embodied in a different character who offers him an alternative possible future. Dormer's central choice is between these two doppelgängers.

In the message through which Finch makes his first contact with Dormer, the murderer identifies himself as the detective's "new partner" and then, at several other points in the story, he again, in various ways, alleges a partnership between himself and Dormer. As a younger man, Finch tried to become a policeman. Now, as a writer of murder mysteries, he applies forensic procedures to solving murders, though only those of his own invention. But he believes that the resemblance between himself and Dormer goes even further. Finch also sees himself as like Dormer in their attempts to understand the criminal mind, which Finch believes has given him psychological insights that extend beyond forensic psychology. And there is an even deeper similarity, which Finch regards as a kind of *bond*. In his sleep-exacerbated desperation and confusion, Dormer had tried to pin Hap's killing on Finch. Similarly, Finch plans to frame Kay's abusive boyfriend Randy Stetz for her murder. Most important, Finch thinks having crossed from fictional to real killings has given him insight

into the alleged artificiality of the difference between right and wrong, an insight that he apparently imagines that Dormer shares. Hence, Finch insists that he and Dormer share a situation, a secret, and an awareness that constitute a "partnership" between them. Yet the detective repudiates any similarity between them. "Don't talk to me about us," he bluntly rebukes the writer.

Alaska police investigator Ellie Burr embodies another alter ego for Dormer, representing a different aspect of him. Whereas Finch reflects Dormer's recent turn to planting evidence and framing suspects, Burr stands for a central and defining part of his more distant past as a conscientious police professional. Burr has studied Dormer's cases in her academy training and wants to be more like him. An admirer, she is palpably delighted with her unexpected opportunity to work alongside and learn from one of her professional heroes. While Dormer resists identification with Finch, he allows his relationship with Burr to bring out what is best in him. Dormer admonishes his *protégé* ("protected one") to put more care into investigating the circumstances of Hap's death before filing her report, even though the detective is jeopardizing himself with this advice. And it is Dormer's decision to shield Burr from Finch—rather than vice versa—that seals his fate and secures him a kind of redemption.

Like Dormer, Finch also had a young female admirer, Kay Connell. But there's a difference. While there is no indication of a sexual attraction between Dormer and Burr, Finch reports that he became sexually aroused while comforting Kay after she had argued with Randy. When she laughed as Finch went to kiss her, he slapped her and then, to silence her screams, killed her, unable to cope with her quick transition from admiration to derision at a moment when he was so "vulnerable." Detective Burr, similarly, becomes disillusioned with Dormer when she catches him in lies about Hap's death and even begins to question whether that death was an accident. Dormer must ultimately decide what is more important to him: protecting himself or becoming worthy again of Burr's respect. Here we glimpse an insight central to Immanuel Kant's moral theory: moral deliberation is not about identifying the means to happiness, but is driven by a desire to be *worthy* of happiness. Finch reacts violently to Kay's derisive laughter, since she has disrespected him and injured his pride, whereas Dormer in the end chooses a path that makes him worthy again of the respect that he was at risk of losing.

GOOD COPS AND BAD COPS

Identity matters in moral assessment because moral virtues, vices, and responsibilities are tied to one's social identity—parent, citizen, friend, partner, cop. For the divorced and childless Dormer, being a policeman is the most salient aspect of his self-image. It is the self-description with

which he most deeply identifies, the one that is most meaningful to him, and *the* principal source of meaning in his life.[4] The question: "What does it take to be a good policeman?" can thus become a starting point for a larger inquiry into the grounds of ethical assessment and the nature of virtue: "What makes some conduct good? What makes some people good?" Ellie Burr and Walter Finch personify, in their lives and in their encounters with Dormer, two opposing ways of answering these questions.

On the day they arrive in Alaska, Dormer tells Hap that, although he thinks he is a good cop, the partners have together committed misdeeds that the LA Internal Affairs Investigation will likely uncover. At this point, Dormer is still casting about in desperation and confusion for a way out of his troubles. Later, as he proceeds to cover up the truth about Hap's killing, there is a graphic illustration of the depths to which Dormer has sunk. He fires a bullet from Finch's gun into a dead dog in a filthy alley, in order to retrieve the bullet and switch it for the one he shot. We see his blood-soaked hands recovering the bullet from the dog's slimy corpse, a striking contrast to the white gloves he used earlier to plant the evidence to frame child-murderer Wayne Dobbs and a telling representation of his descent.

While still dazzled by hero-worship, Burr repeats to Dormer something he said, a remark that she found in her research on his cases: "A good cop can't sleep because a piece of the puzzle is missing. A bad cop can't sleep because his conscience won't let him." Of course, now Dormer has become the bad cop, first planting evidence against one murderer, Dobbs, for crimes he really committed to now trying to frame another murderer, Finch, for a homicide that Dormer himself committed. Dormer only indistinctly remembers his remark about good cops and bad cops: "Yeah, that sounds like something I'd say." His distance from his earlier and better self starkly shows his own migration from good cop to bad. His response seems to condescend to the supposedly immature young man who could pronounce on things in such simplistic, black-and-white terms. He knows, however, that the younger Dormer's views, while more innocent, are not therefore immature. The contrast they draw should not be dismissed as simplistic—rather, they bear the striking simplicity of truth.

In Plato's dialogue *Crito*, the philosopher Socrates finds himself imprisoned and facing execution for a crime of which he believes himself innocent. His friend Crito offers Socrates the opportunity to save his life by escaping from jail by bribing the guards, which Socrates refuses on the grounds that it would be unjust. "I value and respect the same principles as before," he says, insisting that he cannot abandon his lifelong commitment to justice just because those principles have now become inconvenient.[5] Whether Dormer will be able to regain that sort of integrity in his own life is, at this point in the story, an open question.

Walter Finch, Dormer's other doppelgänger, finds it much easier to adapt his principles to fit his circumstances. Like his namesake, the Galápagos bird studied by Charles Darwin, Finch has adapted to survive. It comes as little surprise then that, for him, the best life is one that manifests the most successful survival strategies. This is the implicit basis of the "partnership" he offers Dormer. Finch will enable Dormer to survive with an intact career and reputation—albeit at the cost of his better self and his moral principles—so long as he helps Finch escape punishment by framing Randy.

Dormer's inability to sleep leaves him struggling day and night—indistinguishable in the land of the midnight sun—with the choice between being Ellie's good cop and Finch's bad cop. The chief moral danger faced by Dormer—the temptation Finch offers as his prospective model and "partner"—is that Dormer will adjust and adapt, just as Finch has, that he will come to sleep soundly, no longer troubled by his conscience. Though Dormer longs to sleep, his constant wakefulness provides him with an unwanted but needed opportunity to struggle for his identity. The old adage is wrong: the *truly* wicked *can* rest and, if a bad cop is bad *enough*, he can sleep like a baby. The gnawing conscience that disturbs Dormer's sleep is evidence that he is still not beyond redemption. Though Dormer does not recognize it, his sleeplessness is a blessing.

MORAL MATH AND INTERNAL AFFAIRS

The investigation of Dormer by LAPD Internal Affairs can be seen as a pregnant metaphor, since "internal affairs"—that is, Dormer's interior life—is the moral battleground on which the story's chief drama plays out. Depicting the moral life as essentially an internal affair, *Insomnia* poses the question of whether an agent's *intentions* and *motives* matter morally, even more than the *effects* of her actions.

Finch repeatedly maintains that he is not the vicious murderer Dormer initially takes him to be, because he killed Kay Connell only by "accident." In fact, Finch's own account of the event belies this description. Though killing her was not premeditated, his assault on her was intentional and therefore he can be reasonably held to account for the foreseeable effect of his uncalled for behavior. Finch compares his lethal attack on Kay to Dormer shooting Hap in the thick fog. But the analogy is faulty. The detective believed he was firing at a fleeing suspect who had just shot a policeman. His actions were thus justified, despite their tragic result. Finch, however, had no right to strike Kay. His loss of control is no excuse. Moreover, the calm meticulousness with which Finch then cleansed her body to remove evidence contrasts tellingly with Dormer's inner torment after he shot Hap.

The truth, however, matters little to the man who weaves fictions by trade. In a revealing exchange, Dormer points his gun at Finch's head and asks, "Is this an accident?" Finch replies, "If you want it to be." *Contra* Finch, however, shooting a man doesn't become an accident simply because you want it to be, but only because you did not intend to shoot him. The thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas rightly held that an agent's *intentions* determine the moral nature of her actions and, as Elizabeth Anscombe has reminded us, there are objective limits to what we can intend any action to be.[6] To think we can make our actions mean whatever we want is akin to denying that there can be truth and falsehood in moral judgments.

Self-knowledge is always limited and a person's motives are sometimes opaque to her. Still, our difficulty in discerning our motives does not make them either wholly undetectable or unimportant. Listen to Finch, the novelist, on the importance of motives: "It's all motivation. What did you feel [when Hap died]? Guilt? Relief?" In contrast, Dormer is skeptical about motives, as we learn when he sneers at Finch: "Reasons for doing what you did? Who gives a fuck?" But the fact remains that human actions are done for reasons, though, as Dormer rightly insists, the particular reasons from which someone acts may not always vindicate her actions. To think otherwise is to succumb to the erroneous belief that good ends can justify any means. Nonetheless, ends are important, since it is in intending our ends that we make them our own and therein identify with them, investing them with our identity and investing our identity in them.

Let's consider the relationship between ends and means. As Finch presents it to Dormer, the relationship comes down to what some have called "moral mathematics." If Dormer arrests Finch for the murder of Kay Connell, Finch will reveal Dormer's morally suspect part in Hap's death, thereby discrediting him. The damage to Dormer's reputation will likely free many of the killers that his past testimony has helped to convict. "Think of all the other Kay Connells," Finch challenges the compromised detective. "Do the math. You're a pragmatist; you have to be because of your job." Do the ends justify the means? Dormer himself appeals to this old adage to rationalize the past conduct that he is reluctantly forced to face. Near the film's end, in his sleepless, addled state, Dormer packs his clothes to leave Alaska, having failed to catch Finch and forced to accede to the framing of Randy. He recalls the feel of Dobbs's clothing, the texture of his own fall from grace. His voice stripped of conviction, he attempts to rationalize his actions to the merciful Rachel Clement: "Dobbs needed to be convicted. The end justifies the means, right?" But perhaps the ends our actions achieve shouldn't be our overriding moral consideration. We must also consider how well our conduct fits with who we are and who we ought to be.

If an agent's ends do not justify her means, what does? What makes right acts right? My suggestion is that moral justification of our actions should begin by considering what lies *within* the agent, her motives and choices, not with her action's effects on the outside world. While the movie articulates no explicit moral theory, there are hints within it of a similar account of right and wrong. "What the hell's wrong with you?" a pedestrian shouts to the wearied Dormer when he almost runs her down. This incident, which occurs just after he has switched the bullet he fired into the dead dog from Finch's gun with the one from Hap's corpse, suggests that there is never merely a wrong or right action, but always something wrong or right *with us*.

Character is central, because it is the source of the moral motivations and choices that determine our actions' moral value and significance. *Good* character requires *integrity*—that is, a well-integrated self, with consistent motives and projects. It requires, as Kierkegaard put it, "willing one thing." Real moral substance lies in such moral consistency, rather than in Finch's distracting numbers game. In his moral confusion, Dormer acts at cross-purposes, covering up one killing while investigating another, attempting to frame Finch for Hap's death while trying to build a case against him for Kay's. Acting from contrary purposes is antithetical to genuine integrity.

Character involves facts about both actual and counterfactual situations; what one does, but also what one would do under certain circumstances. Dormer alleges that Finch would have slept with Kay, as if it doesn't matter that he didn't. Similarly, Finch insists that Randy would have hurt Kay worse if she had lived, as if it doesn't matter that Randy did not in fact kill her. Even if their reasoning goes too far in these cases, Dormer and Finch are both right that people's inclinations—as shown in counterfactual scenarios—do reveal something morally important about them. Their dispositions to act and react, their traits of character and their commitments, all entail facts about what they *would* do in various circumstances. That's where we find their virtues and vices. Often, the most important effects of a course of action are not on others and their happiness but on the agent herself and her character. "You're tainted forever. You don't get to pick when you tell the truth. Truth is beyond that," Finch tells Dormer, correctly pointing out that people will lose trust in Dormer once some of his frame-ups are discovered.[7]

In a revealing conversation between detectives Dormer and Burr, the LA veteran instructs the Alaskan neophyte not to ignore what she considers minor matters. He reminds her that "small things" display character. "People give themselves away [in small things]," Dormer cautions Ellie. "It's all about small stuff. You know, small lies, small mistakes. People give themselves away the same in misdemeanors as they do in murder cases. It's just human nature." Consider the ambiguity of "giving oneself away"—which can mean either unintentionally informing others about

oneself ("betraying" one's character) or losing (alienating) one's self, and then recall the previously mentioned deleted scene, in which Dormer and Rachel discuss people who have "lost someone." The larger question is, having thus lost *oneself*, given oneself away, how does one regain oneself? What is crucial is not the magnitude of an action's benefits and harms, but rather the extent to which a person is invested in her actions, what motivates her to perform them, and what it is in her that they make manifest. These are what determine whether she stands to lose herself in the bargain.

ONLY IN OUR MINDS

We observed above that Finch tells Dormer, even while the detective holds a gun to the writer's head, that shooting him—and, by implication, any action—can be turned into an accident just by wanting it to be one. In a late night phone conversation with the agonized and sleepless Dormer, Finch is even more explicit about what philosophers would call his *moral anti-realism*, his belief that there are no objective moral values. "You and I share a secret. We know how easy it is to kill somebody. That ultimate taboo? It doesn't exist outside our minds." As Finch sees it, even the most serious moral proscription is mere taboo, nothing more than a local convention of disapproval.[8] Finch, however, offers no explanation of how he achieved this supposed insight or why he thinks he is justified in affirming it. That life is fragile and the moral proscription against murder easy to break does not show that this proscription is a mere figment of thought. Nor does the fact that Finch might well get away with murder prove that murder is not really bad, but is only popularly *thought* to be so. It is hard to see how it even lends support to that thesis. Having committed murder, Finch perceives himself as one of the elite, a member of the *cognoscenti* who see through the illusions that supposedly cloud the lesser minds of the common run of humanity. However, he offers no reasons for his moral anti-realism and, even if he is right to think himself an unusually thoughtful murderer, he is no less vicious for that.[9] Along with his other crimes, he may be guilty of deluding himself.

The filmmakers may not share Finch's arrogant delusion, but neither is it clear that they see through it. It is disappointing that one of the film's main moral suggestions, put in the mouth of one its most sympathetic characters, is in fact not so different from Finch's. When Dormer pleas for Rachel to agree that his framing of Dobbs was justified, she replies to his pathetic entreaty for vindication: "I guess it's about what you thought was right at the time, then, what you're willing to live with." However, *Insomnia* dramatizes a deep problem with Rachel's simplistic formula: some of us are able to adapt to and thereby "live with" almost anything.

By his deadened conscience and restful nights even after murdering Kay, Walter Finch proves the inadequacy of Rachel's shallow ethic.

The real issue is not whether the locus and the source of morality are in our minds. Even if they are, Finch's conclusion that morality is illusory is premature. Many philosophers have thought ethics is "only in our minds" without thinking that it is therefore empty. Aristotle grounded moral virtue in humanity's biological and social nature. Immanuel Kant took moral duty to consist in commands of pure reason. His contemporary Adam Smith construed duty and virtue as what would win the approval of an idealized spectator or judge. His friend David Hume saw virtue as based in natural human tendencies to sympathetic feelings. In our time, John Rawls saw social justice as rooted in a hypothetical agreement made behind an imaginary "veil of ignorance." According to these philosophers, moral judgments, reactions, and relations may in some sense be "only in our minds," but they may also be accurate, well-grounded, objective (or, at least, intersubjective), and therefore non-illusory, *pace* Finch's assumption.[10]

Perhaps what Finch is getting at is that morality has no sting. Even if its rules and principles are somehow real or objective, they have no sanction to enforce them. Why be moral? Why live virtuously? Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill all thought morality needed to be backed-up with socially contrived sanctions. Christians hold that immorality can wreck our afterlife: unrepentant sinners live eternally but in the torment of damnation, which is another form of external sanction. More recently, Robert Nozick has suggested that immorality has an internal cost: it prevents the agent from leading the most valuable kind of life, regardless of whether she knows or cares.[11] The Lithuanian-French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas goes deeper, as does the Polish Catholic Karol Wojtyla.[12] For them, it is only in and through committing ourselves to other persons—and therein to the moral virtues—that our personhood is brought to fulfillment. This may well be where *Insomnia* points in linking morality to identity. It helps us understand how the good cop, in performing his or her duty, therein fulfills his or her self.

"LET ME SLEEP"

The scene between Dormer and Rachel in the hotel room on his last night brings to a culmination his long battle against the insistent light that always finds its way around or through every window shade, every obstacle. The American poet E. E. Cummings famously found love to have smaller fingers even than the rain, which can work its way into and saturate heavy fabric, even stone.[13] But it is in the verse of the English Catholic Francis Thompson that we find a closer prefiguration of the events of *Insomnia*. In his poem "Hound of Heaven," God seeks out the

sinner who flees Him, insinuating Himself into and undermining every distraction into which flight is taken, turning it into a signpost back to the God from whom the narrator tries with increasing frenzy to escape: "Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue . . . / 'Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.'"[14] In just the same way has the light—the light of grace and the light of truth—thwarted each of Dormer's efforts to elude it. He seeks mental oblivion in slumber, but he is not ready for it.

In the movie's penultimate scene, Dormer looks into the water, through a hole in the floor of Finch's cabin, and sees Finch's face looking up at him as if it were his own reflection. Has he become Finch? Slowly, Finch's face fades away as his corpse sinks. It is as if Dormer is being released from this part of himself. Dormer then goes outside into the fresh air, beneath a cold grey sky, to spend his last moments with Ellie, his other *alter ego*. He devotes those moments to helping her, telling her not to save his reputation by destroying evidence that links him to Hap's death. "Don't lose your way," he admonishes her and receives in return a sort of absolution from her, through which he finds the peace for which he asks. "Let me sleep. Just let me sleep," he says, not imploring this time, not desperate, but hopeful. At last he is ready to receive the rest he has pursued increasingly frantically. Now he is at peace, at home within himself, ready to slumber, even though he is surrounded by the light he has fled throughout most of the film.

NOTES

1. This chapter originally appeared under the title "White Nights of the Soul: Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* and the Renewal of Moral Reflection in Film" in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2006): 82–117.

2. In the DVD's commentary, Nolan describes this as the only time until the last sequences where Dormer is fully honest with someone. He suggests that it was omitted in theaters in part because the scene would come too early in the character's development for such straightforwardness, perhaps also too early for Dormer to be so clear and accurate in his vision of himself.

3. Michael Baur, "We All Need Mirrors to Remind Us Who We Are: Inherited Meaning and Inherited Selves in *Memento*," in *Movies and the Meaning of Life*, ed. Kimberly Blessing and Paul Tudico (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 107.

4. For a discussion of the importance of this theme in moral and political thought of the modernist epoch, see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

5. *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), 46 (46c).

6. See G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957).

7. On "taint," note our surprise when we learn at the end that the unidentified hand was not rubbing the blood out of the white fabric but rubbing it in, polluting the fabric. Dormer's corruption has already sunk deep by the time the film's main action begins.

8. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas stressed the proscription against unjust homicide as the paradigmatic, original, and gravest moral norm, conceiving it as an

inescapable imperative confronted in the Other's face. See Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A. T. Peperzak, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

9. For a helpful refutation of the assumption that the reality, objectivity, and seriousness of moral features can somehow be rejected in a way free of normative implications and without making substantive moral claims, see Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 87–139.

10. We should bear in mind that Finch's dismissal of taboo is uninformed. Alasdair MacIntyre, in his provocative book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), reminds us that even Polynesian "tabu" started out as intelligible restrictions on harmful and ignoble action, only later (under Western influence) degenerated into arbitrary, manipulated restraints, a system of social control by the more powerful over the less.

11. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), ch. 5.

12. See Levinas 1996 and Karol Wojtyla, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Teresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

13. "Your slightest look will easily unclose me / though I have closed myself as fingers, / you always open petal by petal myself as Spring opens / (touching skillfully, mysteriously) her first rose / or if your wish be to close me, i and my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly / . . . nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals the power of your intense fragility . . . / (i do not know what it is about you that closes / and opens; only something in me understands / the voice of your eyes is deeper than all the roses) / nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands" (Cummings, "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond" [1931], in *Complete Poems 1904–1962*, ed. George Firmage [New York: Norton, 1994]).

14. Thompson, "Hound of Heaven," in *I Fled Him Down the Nights and Down the Days* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970).

FOUR

Love, Value, and the Human Destiny in *Interstellar*

Lance Belluomini and George A. Dunn

You can always count on a Christopher Nolan movie to be entertaining and meaningful. Like other great filmmakers, he has the ability to transport audiences to other worlds.[1] While he doesn't intend for his films to be crossword puzzles, they do sometimes challenge us with big philosophical questions and leave us wondering where we stand with respect to his grand ideas. *Interstellar*, Nolan's first foray into hard science-fiction, is no exception.[2] It's the most visually stunning space film ever made, yet at the same time it tells an emotionally moving story about the relationship between a father and his daughter. Nolan made an excellent choice when he decided to present the ecological catastrophe (the "blight") facing humanity on Earth from the perspective of a man deeply concerned with the fate of his family, the pilot Joseph "Coop" Cooper, who is tasked with a mission that aims to "save humanity" from the impending cataclysm, while threatening to rob him of his life with those human beings he loves most. Through the contrasting viewpoints of Cooper and Professor John Brand, Cooper's former teacher and the architect of the *Endurance* project to rescue the human race from extinction on a dying planet, the movie raises the question of why we should care whether our species endures and what it really means to "save humanity." Is the universe somehow better off with creatures like us occupying it?[3] Or does our concern for our own species merely reflect a kind of ontic provincialism, a love of our own kind that is perfectly understandable but in the big scheme of things hasn't much justification?

"I'VE GOT KIDS, PROFESSOR"

The most powerful and enduring love that most people ever experience is the love nurtured in the family, in particular, the love of a parent for his or her child. Parental love can motivate the most extreme sacrifices, so it's not surprising that Professor Brand attempts to tap Cooper's protective instincts as a father in order to recruit him to pilot the *Endurance* in its search for a new home for the human race. Brand offers a grim forecast of how the blight will wipe out humanity by destroying Earth's crops and poisoning its atmosphere: "The last people to starve will be the first to suffocate and your daughter's generation will be the last to survive on Earth." The only hope is to leave the Earth and colonize a new planet. Traveling through a mysterious wormhole, a previous set of missions—christened *Lazarus* after the man who was raised from the dead—has discovered three potentially habitable worlds. The *Endurance* mission, which Brand wants Cooper to lead, is supposed to visit these three planets in order to determine which is most suitable for colonization. A widower and father of two minor children, Cooper initially balks at the prospect of leading a mission that will carry him trillions of miles into space and separate him from his family for an indeterminate number of years: "I've got kids, Professor." "Get out there and save them," replies Brand.

What Cooper soon learns, however, is that the prospect of saving his kids—or saving any of the human beings currently alive on Earth—hinges on Professor Brand solving the problem of how to harness gravity to lift the entire population of the Earth off the ground and propel them to their new home in space. He assures Cooper that he is "almost" there, optimistic of finding the solution by the time Cooper has completed his mission and returned to Earth. But, just in case: "There is a Plan A and a Plan B." Plan A is to colonize a new home with the existing population of Earth, which depends on solving the problem of gravity. The fallback Plan B is a much more easily portable cargo of 5,000 fertilized eggs, carried into space by the *Endurance* to be the germ of a new human race. What Cooper doesn't yet know is Professor Brand has absolutely no hope of solving the problem of gravity and that Plan A is a complete sham, a fraud perpetrated for the sole purpose of imbuing the crew of the *Endurance* and his other colleagues at NASA with a false hope that they might still save the ones they love. The bitter truth is that the people of Earth are hopelessly doomed and that Cooper is leaving his family behind to starve and suffocate. Not only would the hardworking NASA personnel be crushed and demoralized were this truth made public, Cooper would never have agreed to pilot the *Endurance* if he knew that there was no way to save those remaining on Earth. He learns that he had been deceived only after landing on the planet that had been scouted by Dr.

Mann, Professor Brand's protégé and confidante, who explains the motive behind his "monstrous lie":

> He knew how hard it would be to get people to work together to save the species instead of themselves or their children . . . You never would have come here unless you believed you were going to save them. Evolution has yet to transcend that simple barrier. We can care deeply, selflessly about those we know, but that empathy rarely extends beyond our line of sight.

Of course, Cooper's family is now far beyond his line of sight. But there's still a profound bond of love that connects him with them across the vast expanse of time and space—and Mann is not wrong to associate it with evolution.

Plan A promises to harness the physical force of gravity to lift human beings off the ground, but its main selling point for Cooper is the way it harnesses the inner force of love and the hope of saving his family to launch him into the vacuum of space. Professor Brand's daughter Amelia, also part of the *Endurance* mission, is also propelled by love, being enamored of one of the *Lazarus* missions' pilots, Dr. Wolf Edmunds. In the course of a debate on whether to steer the ship toward Edmunds's planet or Mann's planet, she gives a rather silly speech about love, likening it to a cosmic force that exercises its own kind of gravity: "I'm drawn across the universe to someone I haven't seen for a decade." Cooper scoffs, perhaps rightly so; but, even if love isn't some kind of cosmic force, it's still an evolutionary force, one that's played an indispensable role in the endurance of our species thus far.

Without parental care of children and the love that motivates it, the human species could never have survived. Love is what keeps the species going. And yet—this point is important—though parental love may have been favored by natural selection because it serves the survival of the species, the love that any particular parents feel never aims directly at the continuance of the species but rather at the well-being of the individual child. The human species lives on only as a byproduct of this highly partial love and its exclusive devotion to particular individuals rather than the species as a whole. In addition to parental love, we're bound to each other by the love and empathy we feel for romantic partners, spouses, and friends—affections that are similarly partial, particular, and directed at individuals. Evolution seems to have planted these affections in us as a way to help us to forge bonds that allow us to cooperate and enhance our prospects of survival. But, as Dr. Mann rightly observes, evolution seems to have endowed us with only a limited supply of empathy, such that it's felt most strongly toward those with whom we have a close relationship, with its intensity diminishing as we venture out from our circle of intimates. The partiality of empathy may also serve an evolu-

tionary purpose, since it inclines us to care most for those who are in the best position to care for us in return.

Dr. Mann may regard these aspects of our evolutionary heritage as limitations that we might hope to "transcend" someday, but it's hard to imagine how the species as a whole could ever be an object of love or a source of motivation in the same way as one's own narrow circle of kith and kin. Even if the partiality of our affections is a source of behaviors and attitudes that are less than fully rational, do we really want to become as untroubled by emotions as TARS and CASE, the robots onboard the *Endurance*? If evolution were really to "transcend" our present motivational structure in the direction of perfect impartiality, we might very well doubt whether the creature we'd become could still be considered human. In any case, it seems significant that it's ultimately Cooper's highly partial love for his daughter Murphy, reaching in an astonishing way across time and space, that enables the implementation of Plan A and saves the human race, since parental love for offspring is what has always ensured the continuation of the species.

One way to understand the extraordinary power of parental love is as an extension of self-love and the deep-seated survival instinct that accompanies it. That's another matter about which Dr. Mann has some understanding. It's ironic that the same Dr. Mann who laments that evolution has bequeathed us such a limited store of empathy and a propensity to care "selflessly" for only a select few turns out to be shockingly selfish and indifferent to the fate of the species when his own survival is imperiled. After learning that his planet was uninhabitable, Dr. Mann broadcasts false data in order to draw the *Endurance* to his planet to rescue him. When Cooper, having learned that Plan A was a farce, announces his intention to use the *Endurance* to return to Earth while the others remain on Mann's planet to implement Plan B, the deceitful Dr. Mann plots to kill him. Perhaps because Dr. Mann experiences the will to live so powerfully in himself, he understands it as a bedrock piece of human nature, as he explains in a speech he gives just prior to his attempt on Cooper's life:

> A machine doesn't improvise well because you cannot program a fear of death. Our survival instinct is our greatest source of inspiration. Take you, for example, a father with a survival instinct that extends to your kids. What does research tell us is the last thing you're going to see before you die? Your children. Their faces. At the moment of death, your mind's going to push a little harder to survive—for them.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) famously described the truly good friend as "another self," someone whom we love in a way similar to how we love ourselves, caring about the friend's survival and well-being as an end in itself, just as we care about our own existence, not as a means to something else, but for its own sake.[4] For Aristotle, the

foundation of friendship is self-love, which we're able to extend to others to the extent that we empathize and identify with them. There are those with whom we empathize and identify because we judge them to be good or virtuous according to the same standards we adopt for ourselves—consider Murphy Cooper's obvious affection for Professor Brand, at least prior to the revelation of his deception—but the love of a parent for a child, which Aristotle believes is the foundation for the mutual affection and concern that binds together all members of the family, runs even deeper because the identification is more natural and spontaneous. Parents love their children from the moment of birth, says Aristotle, not because they're morally good or have accomplished great things. Rather, parents "love children as themselves (for things that come from themselves, by being separate, are a sort of other selves) . . . they are in a certain way the same, in separate selves."[5]

"YOU CAN'T JUST THINK ABOUT YOUR FAMILY NOW"

These considerations help us to understand why Cooper is so strongly motivated by Plan A, with its promise to save those who are dearest to him, while having little inclination to sacrifice his existing relationship with his family in order to implement Plan B, which promises to save the "species" while allowing all of the people currently alive on Earth to perish. We come to learn from Amelia Brand that if Cooper strikes out on Dr. Mann's icy planet because it proves to be uninhabitable, there won't be enough fuel to push on to Edmunds's planet *and* to make the return journey home. "You might have to decide between seeing your children again and the future of the human race," she informs him. The choice for Cooper may not be nearly as tough as she imagines. Instead of carrying out Plan B, he'd rather return home to a human race facing extinction, without any real definitive data on planets that could be colonized, to live out his remaining days with those he loves.

From the beginning of the *Endurance* mission, most of the audience undoubtedly shared Cooper's hope that he'll safely return home to his children, whose lives will be saved by Professor Brand's discovery of how to harness gravity to lift them to the new home that Cooper and his crew will locate. The emotional scenes between Cooper and his daughter, Murphy, along with the massive sense of duty and guilt that he carries throughout the voyage, anchor our desire to see him uphold his promise to come back to her, even if it means abandoning Plan B. But we might wonder to what extent such a desire is selfish, especially in light of Aristotle's insight that "parents love their children as being a part of themselves."

Doyle, one of Cooper's *Endurance* crewmates, rebukes him for being selfish and shortsighted: "You can't just think about your family. You

have to think bigger than that." But Cooper's response is revealing: "I *am* thinking about my family and millions of other families." Because of Cooper's own experience of familial love, he's able to understand and empathize with other families, to regard of them as being in no essential respect different from his own. In their plight he recognizes his own. What does Plan B have to offer them? Can their deepest longings—tied to their concern for those particular individuals, those "other selves," with whom they live their lives and share their grief and joy—ever be satisfied by colonizing a foreign planet with 5,000 faceless human embryos that have no real connection to human families back on Earth? The discontinuity between the doomed families on Earth and the colony that would be seeded by these embryos on a distant planet is underscored by the name of the first mission that NASA sent through the wormhole—*Lazarus*, named for a man who came back from the dead but, as Cooper shrewdly observes, "had to die first." But the human colony that's "resurrected" on another world wouldn't be the same as the human community that starves and suffocates on Earth. Once we've brought the existing human lineages to an end, eliminating the possibility of this generation living on through its children, grandchildren, and an unbroken train of other descendants, in what sense can we say that *we* have endured?

Yet, in the communication booth aboard the *Endurance*, Amelia listens to her father say, in one of his recorded messages, "We must reach far beyond our own lifespans. We must think, not as individuals, but as a species." Of course, one way of reaching beyond our own life spans is to care about and nurture the children who will outlive us. But in the event that a catastrophe befalls the Earth and removes all hope of saving the existing population, might we nonetheless have a stake in trying to ensure the resurrection of the human species on another planet? Professor Brand feels an imperative to colonize the Gargantua system, presumably because he believes that the existence and continuation of the human species in the universe is good in itself, even though it does no discernable good for the dying population of the Earth. Put in other terms, Professor Brand believes that it's intrinsically good that there be creatures like us in the universe. In fact, the *Endurance* and *Lazarus* missions are premised on the idea that "intrinsic value" is a real thing and that our species has it. And the intrinsic value our species allegedly possesses might arguably impose a duty on us to do whatever we must to preserve the species. In Professor Brand's case, having such a duty dictates that he be willing even to "destroy his own humanity," as Dr. Mann puts its, by perpetrating a massive deception that will gnaw cruelly at his conscience for the rest of his life and set up a barrier to any genuinely honest relationship with others. Since our powerful "yearning to be with other people" is, according to Dr. Mann, "at the foundation of what makes us human," we can recognize what a terrible price Professor Brand paid to fulfill what he took to be his duty to the "species," placing it ahead of his

duty to himself and other existing individuals. Much depends on whether his judgment of the intrinsic value of the human species is right.

"THE FOUNDATION OF WHAT MAKES US HUMAN"

But what do we mean by intrinsic value? To answer that question, let's return to Aristotle. He thought that there were two ways something could be judged good: as a means to satisfying some other desire or as something we value for its own sake, an end in itself. As we saw earlier, Aristotle believes that we typically care about our true friends and closest family members as ends in themselves, meaning that we're happy that they exist and flourish, apart from any other benefit we receive from having them around. They're *intrinsically* valuable to us. Other things we value simply as means to obtain something else we desire, like the spacesuits the *Endurance* astronauts wear when they venture out from their ship onto Mann's planet with its deadly ammonia-rich atmosphere. These bulky suits are clumsy and encumbering, so there'd be no reason to wear them were it not for the benefit they confer, namely, keeping the wearer alive. In a world where they ceased to be useful to us, they would no longer have value. We therefore say that they're *instrumentally valuable* to us, that is, valuable for the benefits they confer, not for what they are in themselves. Activities can also be instrumentally valuable. Consider Cooper's occupation as a farmer, which he dislikes but engages in because it allows him to feed his family and pay the bills.[6]

Cooper's son, Tom, on the other hand, finds farming personally fulfilling, so for him it's an intrinsically good activity, in addition to having the instrumental value of bringing in cash. He does not share his father and sister's love of science, a pursuit that has intrinsic value for them but apparently not for Tom. What this example shows is that different things and different activities might have intrinsic value for different people. Yet, in the midst of our many different preferences, Aristotle still recognizes a common thread running through all of the various things and activities that people value for its own sake: each in one way or another is thought to make an essential contribution to the *happiness* of the person who values it. Happiness is thus the one thing that everyone desires as an ultimate end, sought solely for its own sake and never merely as a means to something else. In other words, we don't seek happiness as just another rung on the ladder leading to wealth, fame, or power. To the contrary, we seek those other things because we believe, rightly or wrongly, that they'll deliver us happiness. For Cooper, his family possesses intrinsic value because it's a vital component of what constitutes a happy life *for him*, something that seeding a colony with human embryos on some distant planet could never be.

Comparing the values held by Cooper and Tom underscores the *relative* nature of the good on Aristotle's account, the fact that for something to be good, even intrinsically good, *it must be good for someone*. What's intrinsically valuable to each individual is tied to his or her own subjective conception of happiness. It's true that there are some things that nearly all people value, such as pleasure or the well-being of their children, but that's because nature has endowed our species with certain universal dispositions and desires. Dr. Mann points to one such universal when he tells Cooper about the bitter loneliness he suffered during his time alone on his planet: "That yearning to be with other people is powerful. That emotion is at the foundation of what makes us human." Such things might be said to be good because they contribute to the happiness of any normally constituted human being. However, had we evolved to hate human companionship, then the company of others would no longer hold value for us and its absence would not be suffered as a deprivation. Although Aristotle recognizes that our social nature makes companionship a good *for us*, he gives us no reason to conclude that being a social animal is objectively better than being a creature that thrives in solitude.

Likewise, while each person's happiness is intrinsically valuable to her and supplies her with ample motivation to seek out whatever contributes to it, that doesn't make her happiness objectively valuable in a way that could impose any obligation on others to protect and promote it on her behalf. As long as we stick to Aristotle's account, it appears that the intrinsic value of each person's happiness remains entirely relative to that individual and whoever else happens to care about her. Just as a beautiful work of art that somehow made its way to a desolate planet where no one is around to appreciate it would be as good as worthless, so too the value of one's own life depends on there being someone who deems it valuable, even if the only value-conferring person is oneself. In short, things in the world have value, intrinsic or otherwise, only because there are beings capable of valuing them, not the other way around. But that doesn't seem to be the kind of intrinsic value that Professor Brand believes the human species possesses, for if all value is relative to the evaluator, the disappearance of creatures like us would represent no loss to the universe for the simple reason that there'd be no one around to lament our absence.

And so we're led to consider another way of thinking about intrinsic value, one that goes beyond Aristotle's account. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that persons—by which he meant rational beings such as us—possess a value that's not only *intrinsic* in the sense of not being a mere means to an end, but also *unconditional*, since it's not dependent on whether anyone actually acknowledges or recognizes our value. As such, the value of each and every individual person isn't merely subjective or relative, but also something that exists objectively, such that everyone else is obliged to respect that value or even promote it. But

what is it that confers this unconditional value on human beings? Most people regard their own lives as valuable and some even believe that they are highly meaningful parts of the universe, as though the universe itself has a stake in their existence. We shouldn't be surprised if something like this crossed the minds of some of the personnel at NASA when they first discovered the wormhole that so serendipitously appeared forty-eight years prior to the *Endurance* mission, enabling travel to potentially habitable worlds just when they needed it. Referring to the unknown creators of the wormhole, Amelia Brand remarks, "Whoever they are, they appear to be looking out for us." On a more mundane level, when a baby is born, some may feel that something miraculous has been created, something that can elicit feelings of wonder precisely because we feel that the universe itself has been enriched by this addition. In the case of Cooper, it appears that the mere thought of his children is enough to make everything else in his life pale into insignificance. But it turns out that the "they" who created the wormhole is really just ourselves, our distant descendants, so in looking after us, they're really just looking after themselves. And the fact that we adore our children and consider their existence to be a blessing doesn't prove that the value we discern in them exists apart from our act of valuing.

So why should we believe that the value we attach to human existence—or that Professor Brand attaches to the preservation of our species—is anything more than a merely subjective preference? What is it about human existence that might conceivably make the universe a richer or better place than it would be without us? Kant's answer is one with which many other philosophers have concurred: we are unconditionally valuable because we are rational beings, for all we know the *only* rational beings in the universe. Moreover, while Kant concedes that value does indeed have a subjective component and that in fact we're the ones who confer value on *things*, he believes that persons, as rational beings, fall into an entirely different category than everything else in the universe. While the value of *things* is conditional on being valued by some person, the value of *persons* is unconditional precisely because we're the creatures who give value to other things. Without us, the universe would be destitute of all value whatsoever. Thus, we possess a unique form of value that Kant styles *dignity*. If he's right, then the mere existence of beings such as ourselves makes the universe a better or more valuable place and our extinction would be a very bad thing indeed. Something along these lines seems to be the basis of Professor Brand's conviction that no sacrifice is too great to secure a future for the human species—that we actually have a duty to "rage against the dying of the light" that our species alone can bring to an otherwise pitch-dark world.

Indeed, Professor Brand seems to believe that his duty to preserve the human species overrides every other moral obligation, including his obligation not to lie to his colleagues (and his daughter), sending them into

space with the false hope that in so doing they might save their loved ones. And that presents a problem from the point of view of Kant's moral philosophy. From Kant's perspective, our dignity as rational beings not only means that we have a reason to care about the continued existence of our species, but also that we have a duty to treat every existing person with respect. To lie to others, as Professor Brand does on such a massive scale, especially when they have done nothing to deserve such treatment, is to fail to respect their right not to be deliberately misled. Of course, with the future of the species hanging in the balance, Professor Brand might respond that the end justifies the means. But such an argument could never hold water for someone like Kant, since it involves "treating a person as a means to an end that he does not share,"[7] which amounts to treating the individual as though his value was merely instrumental. For Kant, if thinking "not as individuals, but as a species" means neglecting our duties to actual individuals in the here and now, then it's unacceptable because it tramples on the very value that it seeks to preserve, the dignity of persons. And that's only one of several concerns that can be raised to Professor Brand's species-centric thinking and his plan for saving humanity.

"FIND US A NEW HOME"

Let's say that the existence of human beings does add objective intrinsic value to the universe. Would it then follow that the more people in the universe, the better? Here on Earth, we're becoming increasingly aware of the deleterious consequence of human overpopulation for both our natural and human environments—pollution, overcrowding, the strain on natural resources, the destruction of the habitats other species need in order to flourish, and the consequent loss of biodiversity. In *Interstellar*, Edmunds's planet is discovered to offer a relatively pristine new environment in which human life could flourish. However, drawing on our experience here on Earth, we can predict that as Amelia's colony begins to grow exponentially through surrogacy (as she expects), the quality of life for those individuals will begin to diminish. Surely, if we value those lives, we should be concerned not only with maximizing their numbers, but also with creating conditions that are as conducive as possible to their happiness and well-being. Unlike certain other things we value, such as money, more is not necessarily better when it comes to people. Consequently, with any colonization on Edmunds's planet, it would be wise to limit the number of human beings and to regulate population growth. While creating more human life in the universe may enrich the universe in some important way, overdoing it might have an adverse effect, like a medicine that's therapeutic when administered in the right amount but becomes toxic or even deadly when you overdose. Clearly, what's best

for the human species—and perhaps even for the universe as a whole—isn't maximizing our absolute numbers. Let's hope Brand understands and appreciates that fact.

Of course, when human populations grow, more than the quality of *human* life often suffers. When Professor Brand directs Cooper to "find us a new home" where the human species can be either transplanted or resurrected, he must be planning also to transplant myriad other terrestrial life forms on which our survival depends—the plants and animals that provide us with food and other resources from which we construct our housing, clothing, and tools—or at least engineering new life forms that could serve as substitutes. To modify the environment of a planet to render it habitable for a creature that evolved in tandem with a very different sort of ecosystem would not only be an act of creation on a Promethean scale, but one of unparalleled destruction as well, as the entire existing ecosystem would be wiped out. Isn't Professor Brand myopically ignoring other important values, such as the biodiversity of the universe, in his single-minded focus on ensuring the survival of the human species?

At issue is whether the plants and microbial life that may exist on Edmunds's planet could also have intrinsic value that we'd need to weigh against the value of preserving our own species. If the NASA team doesn't take steps that will interrupt the evolution of whatever plants, microbes, and other life forms may be developing on one of the habitable planets identified in the Gargantua system, the human race will die. But if all conscious human beings were dead, many philosophers—Kant included—would argue that whatever beautifully diverse ecosystem was taking shape on Edmunds's planet could have no intrinsic value for there would be no one to experience it, cherish it, or marvel at its complexity. And yet all living beings, insofar as they're driven by the same "survival instinct" that Dr. Mann believes distinguishes human beings from machines like CASE and TARS, could be said to cherish the existence to which they cling so tenaciously, even if that incipient self-love rises to the level of conscious awareness only in the higher animals. If intrinsic value is a real thing having objective existence in the universe, why should we assume that we're the sole measure of it?

Still, it may simply not be possible for human beings to exist *anywhere* in the universe, not just on Edmunds's planet but even on Earth, without having a negative and in some instances catastrophic impact on at least some other species. Most of the megafauna that once roamed North America, Europe, and Asia—large mammals like wooly mammoths, mastodons, and giant sloths—have disappeared, hunted to extinction even before the emergence of agriculture.[8] And the spread of agriculture throughout the world unleashed an ever-accelerating transformation of our environment, as some species were cultivated while others found their habitats destroyed. Long before we set our sights on colonizing

distant planets, we'd already begun to alter the Earth's environment in dramatic ways, which is why many scientists have proposed designating the current geological epoch—roughly the period from 15,000 years ago until the present—as the Anthropocene, in recognition that most of the important transformations of the environment during this period bear a human signature. Terraforming another planet could be seen as simply a continuation of the sort of thing we've been doing on Earth for millennia, having now arrived at the point where tens of thousands of species are going extinct each year, overwhelmingly due to human activity. Those numbers should serve as a warning that the preservation of the human species, on Earth or elsewhere, comes at a cost. In weighing that cost, we may not be entitled to assume that we're the only beings whose existence adds value to the universe.

On the other hand, if the only beings that would be harmed by terraforming Edmunds's planet are microbial organisms—and in the movie's final frames of Amelia setting up camp on Edmunds's planet, we see no evidence that this might not be the case—it seems hard to make an argument that this environment contains sufficient intrinsic value to override the interests of human beings. We certainly don't have any qualms about disinfecting our bathroom surfaces and destroying any microbial organisms whose interests may conflict with our own. But what if the microbial life on Edmunds's planet could evolve into intelligent sentient beings in the future? There's a good chance it could occur if Amelia's interpretation of Murphy's Law is correct: "Whatever can happen, will happen." The latent potential for intelligent life on Edmunds's planet probably needn't trouble us too much, but shouldn't the possibility of encountering existing intelligent beings have been taken into account by Professor Brand and his NASA team prior to launching the initial *Lazarus* missions? If we accept Kant's theory of value, then any and all rational beings we might meet in our journeys of exploration or in our attempts to inhabit a planet must be regarded as persons whose inherent dignity we're obliged to respect, regardless of their species. Their existence would also enrich the universe. In such a scenario, how would we weigh their value against our own should the two species come into conflict? Fortunately for them, the protagonists of *Interstellar* are spared that moral dilemma, but we know from the sad experience of human history how such conflicts usually go. When survival is at stake—as it clearly is in *Interstellar*—moral considerations tend to be ditched with all the dispatch of Dr. Mann leaving behind Cooper and Amelia on his frozen planet, the same Dr. Mann who had earlier reminded Cooper that in the end the "survival instinct . . . is what drives us all. And it's going to save us."

On the other hand, the imperative of survival can also lead us to cooperate in ways that enable us to achieve more than we ever could if our existence hadn't been imperiled. As Professor Brand tells Murphy while they watch the construction in the launch facility, "Every rivet that

they strike could have been a bullet. We have done quite well for the world here." In the end, Nolan's vision in *Interstellar* is optimistic and hopeful. It's about tapping our survival instinct to achieve something positive, for ourselves and for our posterity, who are represented in the final scene of an aged Murphy on her death bed, surrounded by all the children and grandchildren whose future her efforts and those of her father have secured.

"DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT"

By having Professor Brand and Dr. Mann recite excerpts from the Dylan Thomas poem "Do not go gentle into that good night," Christopher Nolan draws our attention to the indomitable quality of the "human spirit," the fact that no matter what, something drives us always to press on, never giving up. In Nolan's vision, we'll always fight against our mortality as a species. And in the effort to ensure our survival, Nolan evidently believes that reaching out toward the stars can play a vital role.[9] "I think space exploration . . . has always represented the most hopeful and optimistic endeavor that mankind has ever really engaged with," he stated in an interview.[10] Doing so is worth both the cost and effort, for exploring space represents the highest ambition of the human race. As Cooper reminds us:

> We've always defined ourselves by the ability to overcome the impossible. And we count these moments, these moments when we dare to aim higher, to break barriers, to reach for the stars, to make the unknown known—we count these moments as our proudest achievements. But we lost all that. Or perhaps we've just forgotten that we are still pioneers. And we've barely begun. And that our greatest accomplishments cannot be behind us because our destiny lies above us.

Interstellar suggests that fulfilling that celestial destiny could put us in a position to preserve the human species in the future, a matter of paramount importance to us all, perhaps because we believe our species has the sort of value that makes the universe richer by dint of being in it or perhaps merely because we care about the future of our posterity.

But if we do colonize other planets, we must have a well thought-out plan, just as we wouldn't rush to develop any unoccupied land on Earth for commercial settlement without careful planning and due consideration of all costs and risks. The ethical considerations discussed above would need to be addressed before colonizing another planet. We'd like to imagine that Professor Brand and his team at NASA have had these discussions in their effort to ensure the survival of humanity. If so, there's nothing wrong with them looking for rocks in space to terraform and colonize.

Of the many lessons that we can take from the movie, an important one is to recognize the real possibility that space exploration could ensure humanity's survival. But Nolan boldly takes it a step further: existing beyond the Earth could initiate the next step in human evolution. Whether we might actually evolve into the fifth-dimensional beings depicted in *Interstellar* is anyone's guess. But one way or another, Cooper may very well be right that "our destiny lies above us."

NOTES

1. Christopher Nolan is very much like Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Stanley Kubrick in this sense. He knows how to create entire worlds that we can get lost in.

2. *Inception* is considered by some to be a science-fiction film as well. If one buys into the interpretation that the "real-world" scenes presented are real, then the dream-share PASIV machine technology, and the mind-control and entering of others' minds that can take place—which raises its own ethical issues—are the sci-fi elements of the film. However, some do not think it should be labeled a science-fiction film because it doesn't address any real anxiety over technology and ethics.

3. The film also makes an inspiring bold claim: we can exist beyond Earth. In fact, according to Nolan and the producers, we can exist in a spinning black hole system that contains twelve mostly uninhabitable planets with harsh environments. But why didn't the ultra-advanced bulk beings connect the wormhole to a normal solar system with a sun that provides heat (like ours) and a habitable planet (like Earth)? Fortunately, we found a satisfactory answer in a certain view of time travel via David Kyle Johnson's "Interstellar, Causal Loops and Saving Humanity" http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/plato-pop/201411/interstellar-causal-loops-and-saving-humanity (accessed March 30, 2017).

4. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Indianapolis: Focus Philosophical Library, 2001), Book IX, ch. 4; 168.

5. Ibid., Book VIII, ch. 12; 158.

6. Or consider the London's Temple Church organ that film composer Hans Zimmer used in *Interstellar*'s score. The organ pipes have instrumental value (literally) as they provided Zimmer with the appropriate means to achieve his desired end: generating the music he and Nolan were after—music where you feel human presence in each sound—which in turn generated pleasure for audiences.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Hiram Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 97.

8. See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Picador, 2015).

9. Stephen Hawking has made statements supporting large-scale colonization in space. In a lecture given at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology on June 15, 2006, he said: "Life on Earth is at the ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster, such as sudden global warming, nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus or other dangers we have not yet thought of . . . I think the human race has no future if it doesn't go into space." Hawking believes that in one hundred years, there could be self-sufficient settlements in space.

10. http://collider.com/christopher-nolan-interstellar-interview/ (accessed March 30, 2017).

Part 2

Politics and Culture

FIVE

"They Turned to a Man They Didn't Fully Understand"

The Dark Knight *and the Conservative Critique of Political Liberalism*

Joseph J. Foy and Timothy M. Dale

Fourteen years after witnessing his parents' brutal murder, Bruce Wayne sets out seeking vengeance. The man who murdered his parents, Joe Chill, has been granted parole in exchange for his testimony against Carmine Falcone, a notorious boss among Gotham's seedy world of organized crime. Bruce gets a gun and arrives at Chill's parole hearing intent on killing him. Before Bruce is able to carry out his plan, however, a hired gun working for Falcone assassinates Chill à la Jack Ruby. When Bruce later confronts Falcone, the crime boss imparts a lesson that will define the young Wayne heir: true power comes from being feared. Falcone chastises Bruce for thinking he knows anything about the dark side of life and insults the memory of Bruce's father before having the young "Prince of Gotham" thrown out into the wet, muddy streets.

Bruce leaves Gotham on a quest to learn about criminals—who they are, how they operate, and what drives them to a life of crime. Bruce admits, "the first time I stole so that I wouldn't starve . . . I lost many assumptions about the simple nature of right and wrong. And when I traveled, I learned the fear before a crime and the thrill of success." He affirms, however, that he "never became one of them." Working side-by-side with offenders from all over the world in his quest to fully understand the criminal element, Bruce is eventually arrested and thrown into

a brutal Bhutanese prison, where he's approached by a man named Ducard. Representing R'as al Ghul, the head of the League of Shadows, a vigilante organization feared widely by the criminal underground, Ducard tells Bruce: "If you make yourself more than just a man, if you devote yourself to an ideal, and if they can't stop you, you become something else entirely . . . Legend, Mr. Wayne." Bruce begins his lengthy training and induction into the League, only to learn later of the League's intent to raze Gotham City entirely because it's become irredeemably overrun with corruption. Bruce escapes the League and returns to Gotham in order to save it from itself. Inspired by Ducard's lesson that "to conquer fear you must become fear," Bruce embraces his own nightmares and converts them into a symbol intended to terrify Gotham's criminal elements. Bruce Wayne becomes "the Batman."

Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy reboots the Batman franchise. In the process, Nolan transforms Gotham City's iconic defender into a character who's at odds with the very principles that form the foundation of the American political system. Nolan's Batman is darker, more willing to violate rights in the interest of security, and practices vigilantism at a level that supersedes previous versions. That Nolan's Dark Knight is a hero motivated by conservative impulses is widely recognized. The Dark Knight steps in when the government has failed, and pursues threats to society with a willingness to compromise the rights of criminals and the letter of the law in the interest of law and order. Ultimately, Nolan's Batman acts as a hero who also steps aside and takes the blame to protect the institutions that seem incapable of solving Gotham's problems.

CONSERVATISM IN CAPE AND COWL

At numerous points throughout the *Dark Knight* trilogy, Batman acts in ways that challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions held by liberal democratic societies regarding individual rights, diversity, and accountability. Using strategies that are questioned by even those who ultimately support him—such as Rachel, Alfred, and Fox—Batman consistently applies power in a manner that steps outside the law and established principles of individual rights. Whether violating the privacy of all of Gotham's citizens by tapping their cell phones and using them to track the Joker, using torture as a means of interrogating criminals, or kidnapping a financier for organized crime from his native country to bring him forcibly back to the United States, Batman employs tactics that step outside of the law and of rights-based principles to preserve order and achieve justice. Batman's willingness to step outside the law in pursuit of justice is problematic to societies that rely on the rule of law to preserve order.[1] Moreover, Batman's willingness to suspend the rights of others in

his pursuit sets him at odds with the liberal democratic institutions that make up the political framework of Gotham City.

Liberal democracy seeks to maximize human freedom. For liberals, the goal of politics is to remove, to the greatest extent possible, external barriers to the free exercise of individual choice in society and the marketplace. Classical liberal thinkers like John Locke (1632–1704) argue that natural rights are pre-political: they exist for individuals prior to the formation of any state. Governments have a primary obligation to protect rights and only exist to make these rights more secure. Political authority thus rests on the "consent of the governed," entering into a "social contract" with each other to establish institutions of government for the express purpose of protecting their rights. More recent liberal philosophers like John Rawls (1921–2002) have advanced this tradition, arguing that political rights are fundamental to a free society. A society's first obligation, according to Rawls, is protecting the priority of rights rather than promoting a particular way of life that purports to be best for everyone. A common characteristic of liberal political philosophy is thus the conviction that fundamental rights—such as life, liberty, property, and privacy—place limits on the legitimate exercise of state power. Most importantly, these rights take precedence over even the security and well-being of the community. As Rawls puts it, "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override."[2]

Batman is clearly at odds with this principled framework when he acts as though the welfare of society must preempt so-called individual rights. In stark contrast with liberalism's emphasis on liberty and rights, Batman's political perspective suggests that there's an inviolability of social order that prevails over the individual.

On the issue of rights, Nolan's Dark Knight invokes notions clearly rooted within the philosophical tradition of conservative political theory. The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume is widely regarded as a father of political conservatism. Hume believes that politics should be based on the practices already embedded in our common life and traditions, rather than on abstract concepts like "rights" and "consent of the governed." Such abstractions actually undermine political authority by basing it on a wholly imaginary "social contract" rather than on the reality of habit and custom. The legitimacy of political authority rests on a habit of obedience, and thus authority exists prior to any willful act of consent.[3] In contrast to liberal social contract theorists, Hume argues that legitimacy can come only *after* a political order exists, not in the creation of it.[4] We recognize political authority because it's in charge; it isn't in charge because we've recognized it. We accept authority ultimately because it's in our interest to do so, because it keeps us safe. Though Hume doesn't rule out the possibility that a revolution might be justified in extraordinary circumstances, his attitude in general is that

"obedience is our duty in the common course of things," for all the benefits of the social order depend on our submission to lawful authorities.[5] More often than not, revolutionary activity is dangerous and counterproductive. Batman can be seen as something of a Humean conservative, inasmuch as he would rather reform the existing order rather than completely undermine its authority or raze Gotham to the ground, as R'as al Ghul planned.

Hume's conservative political philosophy might also be used to justify the seemingly illiberal tactics Batman employs in defending the social order. Anarchy is to be avoided above all since it's in virtually no one's self-interest; so a case could be made for using whatever tactics are necessary in order to keep our society from falling into total disorder. It could be argued, then, that in a crisis situation crime fighters shouldn't constrain their behavior based on impractical abstract principles. After Rachel's death and his subsequent fall from grace, Harvey Dent declares to Gordon and Bruce, "You thought we could be decent men in an indecent time!" Batman accepts that he has to be an indecent man in an indecent time; while he had hoped that Dent, before his fall, could've remained a decent man for a more decent time. Batman's crime-fighting techniques are thus based on what works to restore order to Gotham. Though Hume wouldn't ordinarily approve of either vigilantism or the setting aside of due process, he might be willing to make an exception in a case in which the social order as a whole is in peril.

GOTHAM CITY: STATE OF CRISIS AND SOVEREIGN EXCEPTIONALISM

When Batman assumes the role of Gotham's protector, he's taking on the traditional role of the sovereign authority of the state. Just as Batman defines himself in relation to the villains he battles, so the political state is, according to several prominent thinkers within the conservative tradition, established and defined by what it's set against. As political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973) summarized the views of conservative jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985),

> The ultimate foundation of the Right is the natural evil of man; because man is by nature evil, he therefore needs *dominion*. But dominion can be established, that is, men can be unified only in a unity *against*—against other men. Every association of men is *necessarily* a separation from other men. The tendency to separate (and therewith the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies) is given with human nature; it is in this sense destiny, period.[6]

The human tendency to define oneself over and against one's enemies is a truth that seems to be recognized by the Joker when he tells Batman, "You complete me." Schmitt held a similar view about politics: the pres-

ence of an enemy is the very condition for the emergence of a political order that the state—or, in this case, Batman—is charged with defending.

In *Batman Begins*, Ducard is revealed to be Ra's al Ghul. As a mercenary, he fell in love with the daughter of a warlord for whom he was working. When the warlord discovered this dishonorable betrayal, he banished Ra's and had his daughter thrown into a prison known as "The Pit." There, she gave birth to Ra's al Ghul's daughter, Talia, before being attacked, raped, and murdered by the other prisoners. Talia managed to survive under the care and protection of another prisoner, Bane. When she eventually escaped her hellish prison, Talia sought her father to exact revenge on the prisoners who killed her mother and brutally beat her protector within an inch of his life. Though Ra's was killed at the end of *Batman Begins*, Talia returned to carry out her father's ultimate plan to raze Gotham in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Ra's, and later Talia, represent an existential threat to the existing political and social order of Gotham. Ra's tries to expose the populace to a powerful paranoia-inducing hallucinogenic drug and then "the world will watch in horror as its greatest city tear itself apart through fear"; while Talia goes a step further in attempting to annihilate Gotham with a nuclear device. Both see their role as carrying on the established tradition of the League of Shadows. Throughout history this ancient society has dedicated itself to what it considers to be the work of justice, introducing plagues, wars, and other disasters to wipe out decadent and corrupt human societies. Both Ra's and Talia have their sights set squarely on the complete destruction of Gotham City. There's no separation between the just or the unjust, merely a purging of the city in its entirety to eliminate its blight forever from the world. Such extreme fanaticism creates an extreme crisis for the political order, which requires the extraordinary means Batman employs to respond to the threat and restore order.

Gotham is in a state of crisis, one that persists even after Batman has defeated the League of Shadows' plot against the city. After eliminating the threats posed by Ra's al Ghul, as well as by Carmine Falcone and Jonathan Crane (Scarecrow), Batman is called to the rooftop of the Gotham City Police Department by James Gordon with a report that a new villain is threatening the city. Batman receives from Gordon a single joker playing card and assures Gordon he'll check into it. We're now aware that crisis is the new normal in Gotham, which establishes a clear need for the continued vigilance of the Dark Knight.

In his 1922 work, *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt argued that the sovereign, the ultimate political authority, is whoever has the ability to declare a state of exception—an extension of government authority that entails a temporary suspension of constitutional rights—in a time of perceived crisis.[7] In this state of exception, the sovereign is freed from the usual constraints of law and the limits imposed on political institutions. No longer crippled by procedural limitations in the form of inviolate

rights, the liberated sovereign has the right to utilize whatever means are necessary in order to end the crisis and return the state to an ordered equilibrium. Once this point arrives, the state of exception is over and the sovereign steps back under the authority of the laws. Harvey Dent's brief history lesson over dinner in *The Dark Knight* refers to how the Roman Republic would declare such a state of exception when they faced threats of sufficient severity: "When their enemies were at the gates, the Romans would suspend democracy and appoint one man to protect the city." However, Rachel underscores the dangers posed by this practice when she observes that "the last man who they appointed to protect the Republic was named *Caesar* and he never gave up his power." Schmitt also envisions the possibility of a permanent state of exception, permitting the sovereign to hold legal and rights-based constraints in abeyance indefinitely. From this point of view, the apparently permanent crisis in Gotham might be thought to justify the Dark Knight in acting perpetually outside the law and above considerations of individual rights.[8]

The obvious question, of course, is *why Batman*? Why doesn't the state, with its institutions that are democratically controlled and held in check by the people, assume this role with the consent of the governed? In *The Dark Knight*, an argument between Gordon and Dent reveals one reason why only Batman is in a position to assume a role analogous to that of the sovereign in addressing Gotham's crisis: Gotham's public institutions are riven with corruption. When Gordon accuses Dent of having a mole in his office, Dent fires back that he'd previously investigated various members of Gordon's unit for corruption. One of these corrupt insiders enabled the flight of the foreign mobster Lau beyond the jurisdiction of Gotham's forces to his home in Hong Kong, where he's protected from extradition. Neither Dent nor Gordon has the power or the legal authority to extract Lau. Batman, on the other hand, isn't hamstrung by the law. With a wink and a nod from Gordon and Dent, Batman receives their implicit endorsement to do what the state can't: forcibly extract Lau from Hong Kong, in violation of a number of national and international laws, and return him to Gotham City. There, he can be prosecuted, so that a major source of funding for Gotham's crime syndicates can be closed off. Batman dirties his hands so that the official powers in Gotham can retain at the least the appearance of being clean. In response to Rachel's jab about Caesar, Dent responds, "Okay, you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain." Batman has to become an extra-legal "villain" in order for proper order to be restored in Gotham.

THE JOKER, BANE AND THE NIHILISTIC REJECTION OF VALUE

Leo Strauss identifies two dangers that he associates with liberalism, each of which are reminiscent of one of the prominent antagonists driving the

major plotlines in Nolan's trilogy, the Joker and Bane. First, Strauss contends that, because liberal philosophy emphasizes individual rights and value pluralism, it degenerates quickly into a nihilistic rejection of meaning. Since the value pluralism of liberal democracy makes everything equally meaningful, he surmises that it thereby makes everything equally meaningless. Rejecting a single set of values, liberalism leads to a relativism and repudiation of tradition that works against the promotion of human excellence and virtue. On the other hand, Strauss fears that some so-called liberals who tout equality may hide a more nefarious and illiberal agenda, the top-down imposition of equality à la Lenin or Stalin. Rather than achieving utopian goals, movements pursuing equality may ultimately lead to oppression, political failure, or economic collapse. Both relativism and tyranny should be rejected as destructive to the political and social order.[9]

Strauss's critique of liberalism is given form by the very different, yet equally dangerous, villains in the *Dark Knight* trilogy. The first is the Joker, who clearly represents the nihilistic chaos of a world without defined values or a clear sense of justice. Describing himself as "an agent of chaos," the Joker challenges Harvey Dent, as Two-Face, to "introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos." His anarchist message is captured in his claim, "The only sensible way to live in this world is without rules." For the Joker, not even truth holds a privileged position, as evidenced by his constantly changing story of how he came by the scars that permanently create his morbid grin. His entire existence is predicated on a rejection of value and order. Lacking an internally consistent moral framework, the Joker dismisses the very idea that any value could be worth more than any other. He's a terrorist who disrupts order for its own sake. Not even he seems to know what he'll do next or why. "Do I really look like a guy with a plan?" he asks. "You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it! You know, I just, do things."

If the Joker is an agent of chaos, Bane is a force of pure authority. Though he preaches the language of equality and freedom, it's clear that Bane seeks only to unify Gotham's underprivileged into an army he can control. He represents the type of radical revolutionary fervor that conservatism, with its concern for preserving order and upholding tradition, opposes. Bane's revolutionary call to action sounds a cry in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism:

> We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity, and we give it back to you . . . the people. Gotham is yours. None shall interfere. Do as you please. Start by storming Blackgate, and freeing the oppressed! Step forward those who would serve. For an army will be raised. The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests, and cast out into the cold world that we know and endure. Courts will be convened. Spoils

> will be enjoyed. Blood will be shed. The police will survive, as they learn to serve true justice. This great city . . . it will endure. Gotham will survive!

Bane symbolizes what some conservative thinkers ultimately fear from liberalism's abstract conception of rights. When the state tries to enforce some ideal in disregard of its traditional repositories of wisdom—the institutions that evolved slowly over time, reflecting the community's inherited values—there's a significant risk that such revolutionary activity will result in a grand mistake. Such "mistakes" have resulted in mass executions, bloody suppression of political opponents, and a massive failure to properly support and protect the people. Batman, as a heroic conservative icon, must confront these forms of political extremism to save the people of Gotham.

BATMAN: VIRTUOUS HERO OR VICIOUS VIGILANTE

The resources and ability to save the liberal state from its own weaknesses don't belong to everyone. The billionaire Bruce Wayne possesses the wealth, life experiences, and skills that have prepared him to save Gotham City. The city's only hope is that an elite citizen like him will emerge. Gotham needs a hero because it can't save itself, but the hero it finds isn't one it has chosen. Ultimately, contemporary conservative reliance on state authority—or, in this case, a vigilante acting outside the law—can be understood as a response to the fact that citizens don't always know what's best for them. As Gordon describes Batman, "He's the hero Gotham deserves."

Where will we find help in a world where governmental authority fails? The conservative philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–1797) famously defends the idea that a natural aristocracy must be entrusted to protect the well-being of society. Burke refers to "virtual representation" by a non-elected elite, "in which there is a communion of interest and sympathy in feelings and desires between those who act in the name of any description of people and the people in whose name they act, though the trustees are not actually chosen by them."[10] Burke believed that a qualified elite could determine what's truly in the social interest, which may not always coincide with the benighted opinion of the people on the matter.[11] Bruce Wayne is just such an elite, whose wise, well-funded heroism knows exactly what's in the best interest of the city and how to achieve it. At the surface, Batman may seem to be a vigilante seeking vengeance against all criminals as stand-ins for those who wronged him in his past; but it's clear that Nolan's Dark Knight endorses a political philosophy that's a more refined expression of conservatism in both classical and modern form. Despite the failures of the authoritative structures of society, Batman has no interest in undermining or replacing them, only

in repairing them. This impulse to defend and preserve the existing order is the defining tenet of any version of conservatism.

Most remarkably, at the conclusion of *The Dark Knight*, Batman makes a decision to preserve the needed image of Harvey Dent as the "White Knight of Gotham," an incorruptible symbol that will unify the people and help maintain a faith in the established political and social order, rather than having that image replaced by the villain Two-Face that Dent had become. In what amounts to a deep personal and psychological sacrifice to himself, Batman chooses to preserve the belief in the decency of the political elites that he judges to be necessary to sustain liberal democracy. Because of the overarching failures of the city to preserve order, it needs "a silent guardian, a watchful protector, a Dark Knight" who'll be there to again use whatever means are necessary to quell the existential crisis threatening Gotham. This is the central political puzzle of the Dark Knight: Batman's illiberal means employed in the service of protecting liberal democracy.

The theme that we can rely on the virtuous hero is continued throughout the series. At the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*, the ongoing state of crisis posed by the League of Shadows is laid to rest once and for all. The League is destroyed, and Ra's al Ghul's daughter and her followers are eliminated. The crisis is ended. The state of exception is suspended. Batman/Bruce Wayne and Catwoman/Selina Kyle shed their masks to live normal lives of quiet dignity. However, a good cop named "Robin" is given the coordinates to the Batcave. Though Batman is gone, we're assured that his successor, Nightwing, will be ready to rise to meet any future crisis should one present itself. Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy suggests that liberal democracy needs a hero because it will unlikely be able to defend itself.

NOTES

1. For a discussion on the tensions between vigilantism and justice as employed in the superhero genre, see Joseph J. Foy, "*Arrow* and Philosophy: The Ethics of Retributive Justice," http://andphilosophy.com/2014/06/02/arrow-and-philosophy/ (June 2, 2014).
2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3.
3. See David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 462.
4. See ibid., 538.
5. Ibid., 475.
6. Leo Strauss, "Letter to Carl Schmitt," September 4, 1932, included in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 125; italics original.
7. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, ed. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
8. Because they fall within the "action superhero" genre of films, Nolan's *Dark Knight* movies are set within a rich tradition of Hollywood action films that tend to

project illiberal solutions to existential crises. For a thoroughgoing analysis of the relationship between action hero films that span a variety of subgenres, see Carl Bergetz, "From John Wayne to John McClane: The Hollywood Action Hero and the Critique of the Liberal State" in *Homer Simpson Ponders Politics: Popular Culture as Political Theory*, ed. Joseph J. Foy and Timothy M. Dale (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 183–201.

9. See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 22–23; Leo Strauss, "The Crisis of Our Time" in *The Predicament of Modern Politics*, ed. Howard Spaeth (Detroit: Detroit University Press, 1964), 41–54.

10. Edmund Burke, as quoted in Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 171–73.

11. See ibid., 176.

SIX

The Vale of Top Hats

Duplicability, Duplicity and The Prestige

Kevin S. Decker

"The prestige" is the hardest part of a magician's illusion. Something—a scarf, a dove, a playing card, a man—has been made to disappear, "but you wouldn't clap yet," says *ingénieur* John Cutter, a designer of tricks for rival magicians Alfred Borden and Robert Angier. "Because making something disappear isn't enough; you have to bring it back." In his trademark flashback style, Nolan violates this order in *The Prestige* by giving us the film's "prestige" at its very beginning (and again at its end): a wooded vale near the top of Pike's Peak, Colorado, littered with elegant, velvet top hats—one of the leitmotifs of the modern magician.

The "prestige" of an illusion is the third part of any magic trick. The previous stages are the "pledge," in which the magician uses words, gestures, and a focus on their props to set up the trick; the second, the "turn," is when the magician first plunges the audience into suspense, usually by making the focus of the art—prop, animal, or person—disappear. And as the movie stress, the magician performs on-stage actions, like sawing a lady in half, which without the audience's suspension of disbelief would be unconscionable. "These are magicians, your honor. Showmen," Cutter tells the judge in Borden's murder case. "Men who live by dressing up plain and sometimes brutal truths to amaze. To shock."

But while the prestige phase of an illusion solves its own temporary, attendant mystery, the opening image of the vale full of top hats is designed to invoke the mystery of the film *The Prestige* in general. The

beauty of the natural setting is contrasted with the uncanny specter of dozens of beautiful, redundant top hats. As the camera sweeps over them, we get a quick foreshadowing of conflicts to come as two identical-looking black cats move into the scene, the second hissing and spitting at the first. The cats, motivated by some deep propensity to favor unity over diversity, cannot coexist: they are just too much alike. Like the black cat in the opening scene, Borden and Angier—who performs under the stage name "The Great Danton"—have their own doubles, doppelgängers that make their successes as magicians, as well as their conflicts, possible. These duplicates, hidden in plain view by the false appearance of unity and simplicity that their "originals" project—represent the essential duplicity of the illusionist's trade.

Duplicity is also present in the backward-and-forward method of storytelling used by Nolan. This form of duplicity is akin to that which the magician must be able to count on—the ability of audiences to bridge the gaps of an incomplete or fragmented vision or narrative with inference, expectation, preference, or a combination of all three. Indeed, the remarkable nature of the film is in how *The Prestige* exploits this commonality that the cinema shares with stage magic: "By using editing to create wrong assumptions, Nolan performs his version of magic, revealing that the relationship between the magicians and the spectators within the film corresponds to that between the director and the spectators of the film itself."[1] The ability to entertain—and be entertained—by this sort of manipulation of absence and falsehood is also a function of the spectator's attitude, as expressed by one of the great French practitioners of the illusionist's trade, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin:

> The ordinary man sees in conjuring tricks a challenge offered to his intelligence, and hence representations of sleight of hand become to him a combat in which he determines on conquering. . . . The clever man [*'homme d'esprit*], on the contrary, when he visits a conjuring performance, only goes to enjoy the illusions, and, far from offering the performer the slightest obstacle, he is the first to aid him. The more he is deceived, the more he is pleased, for that is what he paid for.[2]

Of course, the illusions of master prestidigitators like David Copperfield, Criss Angel, and David Blaine increasingly rely on sophisticated[3] technology. The ordinary man "rationalizes" the action on stage by pointing out the ways in which a gizmo or mirror could have supplied the illusion and, by so doing, "disenchants" the magic act on behalf of others willing to listen.

The preferred type of spectator for the magician is Robert-Houdin's "clever man," who invites deception. Correspondingly, the magician must be understood as someone who, as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) puts it, is "*accustomed to lying* . . . or to put it more virtuously and hypocritically . . . [is] much more of an artist than [he] knows."[4] Nietzsche's

claim actually applies to everyone, particularly the hypocrite who lies to himself in being convinced that deception is always wicked and lying is never morally acceptable. Yet his naming of the consummate liar as an *artist* implies that humanity is a willing audience: "But man has an invincible inclination to allow himself to be deceived . . . So long as it is able to deceive without *injuring*, that master of deception, the intellect, is free; it is released from its former slavery and celebrates its Saturnalia."[5]

The entertaining façade of magic, obsession, danger, and rivalry of *The Prestige* is itself a kind of illusion that conceals elements of a modern worldview about technology and sacrifice that is so integral to most of our thinking and feeling that we fail to realize that it is a defining philosophy for our age. Walter Benjamin understood the significance of this failure:

> [T]he technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind.[6]

The theme of duplication in *The Prestige* is a metaphor for the inevitability of sacrifice for any success. In the theme of the duplicity of the stage magicians Borden and Angier, we find an illustration of Friedrich Schiller's (1759–1805) secular prophecy about the modern age: "Civilization, far from setting us free, in fact creates some new need with every new power it develops in us."[7] While the production of the Great Danton's "prestige" in "The Real Transported Man" illusion requires a steel cage designed by Nikola Tesla, Nolan's *Prestige* philosophically presents us with an "iron cage" in which the modern West finds itself imprisoned—by our own designs, no less.

THE PLEDGE

> An illusion has three stages. First there is the setup, in which the nature of what might be attempted is hinted at, or suggested, or explained. The apparatus is seen. Volunteers from the audience sometimes participate in the preparation. As the trick is being set up, the magician will make every possible use of misdirection.[8]

There are two cages that should interest us in *The Prestige*. The collapsing birdcage that Cutter builds for Borden is a trope representing the hard truth and sacrifice that is the cost paid for a look at wonder—a bird is killed each time the trick is performed. Angier, however, doesn't want to kill a bird with every performance. As Tesla later puts it, "Man's grasp exceeds his nerve."

The other cage is the apparatus of the miraculous "Transported Man" device, which creates an identical duplicate of whatever is placed in it, materializing the double fifty yards away from the machine itself. Looking for any advantage over Borden, the independently wealthy Angier makes his way to Colorado with a proposition for Tesla and his dogsbody, Alley: build another version of the "Transported Man" machine that Borden's diary claimed Tesla made for him. When Tesla finally grants the Great Danton an audience, the eccentric inventor needs certain questions to be resolved before he will create a "Transported Man" device:

> Tesla: Alley says you are a stage magician. If I built you this device, you would be presenting it only as an illusion?
>
> Angier: If people thought the things I did on stage were real, they wouldn't clap—they'd scream. Thinking of sawing a woman in half.
>
> Tesla: (*nods, considering*) Mr. Angier, the cost of such a machine . . .
>
> Angier: Price is not an object.
>
> Tesla: Perhaps not. But have you considered the *cost*?

Tesla advises Angier to walk away, recognizing an obsession when he sees it, if from nowhere else than Thomas Alva Edison's personal obsession with disrupting Tesla's public exhibitions and destroying his lab. As Angier's interest persists, Tesla builds the device, works out bugs with the help of Angier's top hat and Alley's cat, and leaves it in Colorado for Angier. In a note left with the machine, Tesla gives a final warning: "Destroy it. Drop it to the bottom of the deepest ocean."

The metaphorical "iron cage" of modern society—a phrase coined by German sociologist Max Weber—is constructed not of tin or steel, but of highly rational social and economic relationships. They are rational at least in the sense that reasoning is about desired ends and the most efficient or effective means to them. "Rationalization" is what Weber names the process in the evolution of Western culture by which cost-benefit analysis or "instrumental thinking" crowds out all other heuristics for problem-solving and decision-making. Tesla's own obsessions with scientific experimentation and creation have given him the wisdom that some ends aren't worth pursuing—*contra* Edison's pernicious and violent provocations and perhaps that some means should never be used, regardless of the desired end. To Angier, absolute prohibitions like these only stand as obstacles to his single-minded need to best Borden. He is thus an excellent example of a calculatingly rational "modern."

In the fullest expression of Weber's sense of rationalization, a rational *state* would be governed by bureaucracies that overcome authority and

privilege by treating every citizen equally, while a correspondingly rational *society* would be governed by market values such as supply and demand. Both bureaucracies and market capitalism are founded on this simple economic principle: all people share the desire to maximize their preferences even if their emotions, background, education, or interests differ. A wide-ranging bureaucracy allows them to do this as fairly as possible, while free markets allow them to maximize as efficiently as possible. Bureaucracies and markets, in effect, work because they purport to *tell the truth about people* as rationally self-interested maximizers of preferences. If bureaucracies stifle progress or markets fail, people may suffer. But this is a "necessary evil," the result of consistently *telling the truth,* as defended by various theorists, that human beings are driven exclusively by individualistic, instrumental reasoning.

By contrast, the phenomenon of modern magic rests on a foundation of *deception*. This is the single greatest difference between magic as a form of entertainment that has been practiced since the 1830s and the older, pre-modern attitude that magic was a technique and a causal power, alongside prayer and hard work, for finding truth and for making desired changes to the universe. Some scholars of the history and philosophy of magic prefer to keep these two senses of magic apart, while others maintain that modern entertainment magic is "entangled with (or recapitulates for us) its not wholly dismissible double, supernatural magic."[9] The pre-modern attitude seems to originate from animistic beliefs rather than from any particular religion or occult doctrine: animistic magic attempted to get the believer in the right relationship with objects like trees and animals, which were naturally inhabited by anthropic spirits. But the idea of magic as technology—and, for some, a technology to be wholly distrusted—also creeps into the picture.

Published in 1902, Marcel Mauss's (1872–1950) "general theory of magic" rests upon the notion that magic is like both technology and religion, but also distinct from them.[10] His sociological theory takes seriously cultural beliefs about occult powers, but it only tangentially applies to modern stage magic as epitomized in *The Prestige*. The falsehoods of stage magic are not based on the complete credulity of its audience as pre-modern, occult magic was. Instead, as sleight-of-hand performer Dai Vernon claims, "In the performance of good magic, the mind is led on, step by step, to ingeniously defeat its own logic."[11] And in fully accepting the alliance between falsity, *trompe l'oeil* illusions, and stage magic, Nolan makes more than a film about obsessed magicians. The viewer is taken in by the same duplicity that Borden uses on Angier (the false diary, the identity of Fallon) and Angier deploys against Borden (playing the innocent audience member to shoot off two of Borden's fingers and ultimately framing Borden for his murder in the water tank). Indeed, because of the misleading presuppositions encouraged by Nolan's flashback/flash-forward sequences, the viewer is deceived more often than either of the

protagonists. In the same way as modern stage magicians have developed a tongue-in-cheek style to soften the impact of their illusions, Nolan's film "must deceive the spectator in a way that draws attention to the deception."[12] Whether a member of the audience at the Great Danton's act or a viewer of *The Prestige*, the capacity to be entertained and retain interest in a presentation despite its foundation in falsehood is what Joshua Landy has called "our innate capacity for lucid self-delusion," or, alternately, "an aptitude for detached credulity."[13]

Not every illusion can sustain this kind of credulity and entertain every audience member at the same time. Consider Robert-Houdin's mid-nineteenth-century version of levitation illusion, billed as "The Ethereal Suspension." The trick began with Robert-Houdin's promise to demonstrate "a marvelous new property" of the novel anesthetic inhalant, ether.

> His six-year-old son stood on a stool and extended both of his arms while a thin pole was placed under each of them. His eyes closed and his body sagged as a bottle was uncorked under his nose. "When this liquid is at its highest degree of concentration," said his father, "if a living body breathes it, the body . . . becomes in a few moments, as light as a balloon." The stool that the boy stood on was pulled away, leaving him supported by the thin rods alone. Next, the father placed the child's right hand on his own head and carefully removed the pole from underneath the child's right arm. He was now suspended by only a single stick that extended from his elbow to the stage floor. Robert-Houdin was now ready for the denouement: with a single finger he effortlessly lifted his son's feet until the child's body was suspended horizontally in midair, apparently in a state of ether-induced sleep.[14]

The trick made his reputation.[15] However, Robert-Houdin received dozens of letters excoriating him for putting his child's health at risk through nightly inhalation of ether. In truth, "the bottle decanted under the child's face was empty; backstage, meanwhile, in the words of Robert-Houdin, 'someone poured ether onto a very hot fire shovel, so that the vapor diffused into the room.'"[16]

Of course, the most dangerous deceptions that magicians traffic in are those that put themselves or their assistants in danger or at least seem to do so. Robert-Houdin's more famous namesake, Harry Houdini (born Erik Weisz), insisted on suffering through what was to be his last stage act in 1926 and died soon afterward. He died from a combination of appendicitis and strong blows to his abdomen delivered by a student who challenged the fifty-two-year-old Houdini's claim that such a beating would not hurt him. The rivalry at the center of *The Prestige* comes about as the result of a similar, ultimately fatal, set of mistakes initiated by the young Borden who is, in his words, one of "two young men devoted to an illusion." With Angier, Borden is apprenticed to an experienced magician, Milton. Borden and Angier are shills called up from the

audience each night to secure Milton's assistant—Angier's wife, Julia—for a routine water-tank escape.

With so many people involved in a death-defying trick, the regularity and consistency of the shills' performance would be of crucial importance. Yet Borden, obsessively concerned about the mechanics of illusions—far more so than Angier—insists on tying Julia's wrists in a "Langford double," which Cutter has already warned him is "not a wet knot—too dangerous." As with many other scenes in *The Prestige*, one character's words become prophecy, at least in hindsight. "He's a natural magician," Cutter had told Angier shortly before the tank escape failed. "Of course you can't trust him."

The irony about Borden's monstrous error and his apparent responsibility for Julia's death and Angier's attendant need for revenge is that the precise knot he chose to tie would have made no difference to the performance whatsoever. The irony in the case of Robert-Houdin's "Ethereal Suspension" is somewhat different. Although he alienated many members of his nineteenth-century audience by apparently doping his own son night after night, the illusion was not performed merely for its own sake. Rather, "what matter[ed] is, instead, that Robert-Houdin presented it as a miracle of *science*, with himself acting the role of *professor*, and his performance gaining the feel of an *experiment*."[17] Robert-Houdin used a certain degree of transparency about his methods to teach his audience in an effort to effect an "epistemological break with the magical past"[18] and he was not the first to do so. With no less an audience than the newly-minted *citoyens* of the French Revolution before him, Etienne-Gaspard Robertson in the late eighteenth century pioneered a "smoke and mirrors" magic lantern show to both entertain and show that spectral visions could be produced using non-supernatural means. At the conclusion of a "ghostly parade" that one can only envision as an early answer to Disney's "Haunted Mansion," Robertson addressed his avid audience:

> I have now shown you all the phenomena of the phantasmagoria and have revealed to you all the secrets of the priests of Memphis and of the more modern Illuminati. I have tried to show you the magic effects of natural philosophy—effects that only a few years ago would have been deemed supernatural.[19]

Robertson was perhaps the first of a long line of creators of illusions in the service of rationality, professional magicians who "began to claim disenchantment as their *raison d'etre* in the post-Enlightenment world."[20]

THE TURN

> The performance is where the magician's lifetime of practice, and his innate skill as a performer, conjoin to produce the magical display.[21]

We sometimes hear that citizens of the West live in a "disenchanted" world. While this might seem to imply that we no longer live in a world of village wizards, astrology, and witchcraft, it is still true that superstition and an active belief in the causal power of the paranormal—whether religious, extraterrestrial, or magical—continue to dominate the beliefs of today's heirs of the Enlightenment rationality.[22] We might couch the sense in which we talk about a "disenchanted" world as referring to the dominance of problem-solving techniques based on scientific, as opposed to supernatural, principles. Or we might be referring to the significant decline of supernatural or religious-based reason-giving in public or legal discourse and debate.[23]

Importantly however, the working-out of disenchantment in Western culture was not simply swapping out one view of the world with another in the minds of individuals. Instead, the world as "enchanted" signifies a particular way people reflected on themselves as part of the world. There are at least three facets to this perspective: first, individuals and communities see themselves as being part of an intrinsically intelligible order, an order originally established by divinity. Second, what ultimately *keeps* divinely created order in order is the shared awareness of being part of a cohesive narrative in which objects and events occur "for a reason." Third, that order is not established for its own sake, but for the sake of a larger purpose for humanity.[24] Whether or not we accept that the progress of science replaces the explanatory role of the divine in this scheme, it is clear that disenchantment relies on giving up a cosmic order in which human values, traits, fears, and aspirations play an essential role. We replace this with an order in which humans are, for better or worse, just another piece of nature's furniture. As Nietzsche puts it, "[T]he most insidious question of all" is "whether science can furnish goals of action after it has proved that it can take such goals away and annihilate them."[25]

What caused this sense of disenchantment? We owe widespread public skepticism about the reality of pre-modern "magic," as a tool to be used alongside science and common sense, to diverse historical causes: the decline of the practice of traditional magic after the late seventeenth century, the Protestant Reformation, the scientific revolution, urbanization, and theoretical advances in mathematics, psychology, and sociology that provided new statistical, wholly secular powers of prediction and control.[26] Now, the "ordinary man" in the audience of the illusionist's performance is, as we saw above, a person comfortable in this world. The key to his behavior, claims Max Weber, is how he rationalizes his actions in terms of his own self-interest and that of others he holds close, rather than in terms of "unthinking acceptance of ancient custom." "To be sure," Weber continues:

> this process by no means exhausts the concept of rationalization of action. For in addition this can proceed in a variety of other directions; positively in that of a conscious rationalization of ultimate values; or negatively, at the expense not only of custom, but of emotional values; and finally, in favor of a morally skeptical type of rationality, at the expense of any belief in absolute values.[27]

The substitution for custom or tradition of absolutist, emotional, or skeptical modes of thinking is a primary motif of "rational" modern society. However, another point of Weber's is that the *free decisions* of one generation become the very *conceptual frameworks* of later generations. For example, among the early modern urban Puritans in Holland, England, and the American colonies, one's work is a *calling*, not one option among many, and "hence deeds and renunciation inevitably condition each other today."[28] Together with the view that "faithful labor, even at low wages, is highly pleasing to God," the affluent, hard-working Puritans created "their own superior middle-class business morality," which would last into later industrialized centuries.[29] At one point, Weber calls the modern economic order, constructed as it is around "technical and economic conditions of machine production," a "mechanism."[30] More famously, he calls it an "iron cage"—an assemblage of social facts that condition the mindset of the modern West in every respect. Although "no one knows who will live in this cage in the future," Weber speculates that they will be "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart."[31]

A grim picture—and yet Weber cannot bring himself to advocate dismantling the cage, even in theory, nor does he stand in judgment of these future "specialists" and "sensualists." Instead, it is a peculiarly modern characteristic of Weber's own extensive writing on society that he presents an even-handed acceptance of the grim picture of the iron cage of modernity. The cage's strength stems from a system of cultural tensions, each of which "creates some new need with every new power they develop in us" (to paraphrase Schiller). One Weber scholar summarizes his theoretical ambivalence like this:

> Weber's thinking about the cultural situation of the modern age exhibits several contrasting, yet partially overlapping tensions: the tension between the moral or spiritual order (for example, religious asceticism) and the material order (for example, the "iron cage" of mechanization and materialistic norms), between the morality of self-control and the morality of self-gratification, between aesthetic culture and social modernity, between pessimism about cultural development and affirmation of modern culture and its "goods."[32]

This is a studied ambivalence—indeed, some might mistake it for a kind of callousness in the face of tragedy—that can also be found in Nolan's directorial attitude toward the situations and characters in many of his films. Indeed, had Nolan read Weber along with Christopher Priest's

original novel *The Prestige*, he might have recognized Alfred Borden as a "specialist without spirit" and Robert Angier as a "sensualist without heart." As film critic Kim Newman observes about the film, "A conventional Hollywood development exec might object that there's no one to root for: though Bale and Jackman never entirely lose our sympathy, their characters are monsters whose sole redemption comes in the revelation that each is willing to inflict grievous harm upon himself to achieve the illusion he needs for his act."[33] Indeed, these hidden sacrifices are the secret behind why Borden and Angier are such accomplished prestidigitators. Thinking of the death of Julia when the water tank escape failed, Angier confesses in his diary, "Borden writes as if no one but he understood the true nature of magic . . . but what does he know of self-sacrifice more than the rest of us?"

Weber's way of doing sociology revolved around what he called "ideal types," representing patterns of characters and roles in society—the "specialist" and "sensualist" are clearly two of these ideal types. As I noted above, Borden is more of an *ingénieur*, a creator of tricks, than a showman—and this is quite literally true, as the film interchangeably gives us "showman" Freddy Borden and his *ingénieur* and surprise twin brother, "Bernard Fallon." At the very least, by the end of the movie when this sustained duplicity of duplication—the hidden twin that makes possible Borden's non-technological version of "The Transported Man"—the viewer is staggered by the dimensions of the sacrifice that concealing a twin brother must have meant for Borden's personal life, including his relationship with wife Sarah and mistress Olivia. The key to Borden's success—the degree to which he is willing to sacrifice for his art—is also one of the final magic tricks of the movie. This sacrifice is represented, to a degree, by his faked diary, which to fool Angier needs—and achieves—an astonishing degree of duplicity, thanks to Borden's struggle, like the child who compounds lie upon lie, to make the diary consistent and coherent in its utter falsity.

Of all the characters in *The Prestige*, only one besides Tesla represents a historical personage and he's one with a history of duplicity himself. This is Chung Ling Soo, in reality white stage magician William Robertson playing an ersatz "Chinaman." In the late nineteenth century, when "mysteries of the Orient" posed an exotic appeal to audiences, genuine Chinese magicians such as Ching Ling Foo pioneered tricks such as the "goldfish bowl" illusion that Angier and Borden discuss in the film prior to Julia's death. Robertson's alter ego "Chung Ling Soo" was created to capitalize on the success of illusionists like Foo, but the westerner's show was more flashy and sensational.[34] Watching the magician hobbling slowly from his carriage with the help of a cane and several handlers, Borden and Angier attempt to figure out the seemingly impossible production of a huge bowl of water, complete with goldfish, from beneath a silken shawl.

Angier: You're wrong. It can't be.

Borden: It is. He carries the bowl between his knees for the entire performance.

Angier: But look at the man!

Borden: (*points*) *This* is the trick. *This* is why no one detects his methods. Total devotion to his art. Utter self-sacrifice. It's the only way to escape *this*. (*slaps brick wall behind him*)

The boys are half-right. According to his biographer, Robinson "was most comfortable on a stage hiding behind the impersonation of a Chinese wizard—the deliberately cold, mysterious master of the art."[35] In reality, the wizard's hobble was indeed affected in order to conceal under his robes a porcelain bowl with a waterproof cover hanging by straps from a heavy leather belt. Misdirection, as well as a complicated system of ratchets and straps—and much practice in releasing the bowl without spilling its contents—rather than walking with the bowl between the legs, made the illusion possible. And outside the theater, "Chung Ling Soo" would have been "disrobed" to present as William Robinson in public. However, the real Soo stands as an inspiration and model for Borden's willingness to sacrifice all—even to the extent that Robinson himself was not merely wounded, but actually killed while attempting the bullet-catching trick in 1918. Unlike Borden's mutilation, Chung Ling Soo's mishap was caused by wear and tear on the rifles used, not deliberate sabotage.[36]

Sometimes sacrifice is present in how one copes with the hand that a nemesis deals one. Rivals Angier and Borden, in rather pathetic disguises, honor the time-old magical tradition of attempting to ruin each other's acts. It is a remarkable fact about the history of stage magic that by the 1830s, it was "difficult to find any performer working on a New York sage [sic] who did not explicitly claim disenchantment as the goal and function of magical entertainment."[37] Beyond this, however, a common piece of nineteenth-century magicians' patter was "dissing" the competition, either out of friendly rivalry or to discredit them. The most famous version of the latter was Harry Houdini's 1906 book *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*, in which Houdini took his namesake to task for having stolen or borrowed every aspect of his stage show.[38] One of the great ironies of stage magic is that "in the business of artful deception, innovation almost always involves *original* production of old *ideas*."[39] Of course, Borden and Angier engage with each other much more directly, never more so than when Angier defeats Borden's bullet-catch trick at the run-down Prince's Arms Bar and Theatre by loading a real bullet in the gun before it is fired. The loss of two of his fingers represents a disruption

to the sustained sacrifice that keeping the secret of his twin brother represents. One of the most chilling moments of the film follows as the twin's fingers are removed brutally by use of hammer and chisel. Tragically, for Borden and Fallon, "the original sacrifice of separate lives for the sake of the Transported Man trick does not suffice, as the illusion continues to demand increasingly costly payments."[40] This is, of course true for both Borden and Angier, as they lose those close to them, their freedom, and their lives.

Todd McGowan maintains, "*The Prestige* makes clear that the source of the new is the repetition of sacrifice";[41] we must go further and note that, in the case of *The Prestige*, sacrifice always implies violence. The connection between violence and creation is one that is particularly strong in the early twentieth century—and the Edwardian era that is the setting for the chronologically later scenes of the film slightly predates the Futurist and Fascist movements in Europe that glorified war and could be summarized in the manifesto slogan "Except in struggle, there is no beauty."[42] This is also the era of Weber's "iron cage of modernity," a cage that McGowan sees Nolan as accepting in *The Prestige*'s philosophy of creation, sacrifice, and violence:

> The film absolutely refuses to take a side in the rivalry between Borden and Angier. Nor does it suggest that both are wrong, that the problem lies in magic itself. It would be more correct to say that the implication of the film is that both are right: magic demands self-sacrifice, as Borden recognizes, but it also creates transcendence, as Angier sees. The solution to the rivalry is not a compromise between the two positions . . . but the difficult task of thinking the two together.[43]

By combining his showman's skills with his single-minded devotion to discovering the secret of Borden's "Transported Man" and Tesla's cage-like electrical machine, the Great Danton attempts to think these two together. But can he succeed?

THE PRESTIGE

> The third stage is sometimes called the effect, or the prestige, and this is the product of magic. If a rabbit is pulled from a hat, the rabbit, which apparently did not exist before the trick was performed, can be said to be the prestige of that trick.[44]

Marcel Mauss's general theory of pre-modern magic distinguishes between subjective beliefs in the occult—like the gambler's fallacy—and public, ritualistic practices that are reproducible.

So while a reputation for proficiency in *occult* magic grew from a specific approach to life's many problems, magic as entertainment generated the need for a unique stage presence that would draw crowds night after night, often by word of mouth. Each stage magician had to develop

the dramatic introduction to an illusion—the "pledge"—in his or her own distinctive way. While Borden characteristically undersells his illusions—perhaps heightening their effect as a result—Angier goes in for a more bombastic style. When we first see him perform the "Real Transported Man," he introduces the trick by declaiming, "In my travels I have seen the future, and it is a very strange future indeed. The world is on the brink of new and terrifying possibilities!" In the scheme of things, Angier simply has no idea how prophetic this introduction will be: World War I, the Great Depression, and the Holocaust will occur in the next half-century, along with the development of technological means of warfare that include deadly gasses and atomic bombs. The Tesla device that represents the "terrifying possibilities" revealed at the end of *The Prestige* is, ironically, no illusion at all. As Cutter puts it behind the scenes with the judge in Borden's murder case:

> Judge: I'm sure beneath its bells and whistles it's got some simple and disappointing trick.
> Cutter: The most disappointing of all—it has no trick. It's real.

Cutter further advises the judge that Tesla's "Transported Man" device is dangerous and should be destroyed. One of the film's delicious ironies is that the inventors and *ingénieurs*, Tesla and Cutter, are the conscience of the drama, warning the protagonists that there are some sacrifices not worth making even as they invent new and dangerous possibilities themselves. Their conscience is not untempered: Tesla happily works for Angier's money, and Cutter tells both aspiring magicians that if they want to be successful, they must be willing to get their hands dirty.

Although all modern stage magic relies on clever technology for both its stunning effects and its reproducibility, Angier's "Real Transported Man" is a cheat because it produces the effect of Borden's version without any sleight-of-hand whatsoever. Curiously though, it still fits the definition of authentic magical innovation: "the *original* production of old *ideas*." Tesla's device is an allegory the role of technology in Weber's "iron cage" and specifically refers to the interdependency of progress and sacrifice that industrialization in the West represents. Borden's illusions performed for the skeptical and brash "ordinary men" at the dreary Prince's Arms point to another secret of the success of stage magic—and vaudeville in general—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

> [T]he cumulative impact of technology acts as a repressive force; the more technology demands of us in terms of regulations, schedules, and coordination, the more we apparently need to escape this kind of rationality by plunging into the irrational, into random sensations.[45]

I have stressed the several senses in which "duplication" in the magic arts implies "duplicity." Similarly, the social and literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) stresses the changes in worldviews that come about with

unlimited "reproducibility" in his important essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production," written in 1936. Benjamin charts the course of the use of technology to faithfully duplicate originals—from Greek bronzes, terra cottas, and coins that were reproduced using simple mechanical means, to the woodcut graphic and the Gutenberg press, and the contemporary photograph and film. Even had Benjamin "known" that Tesla and Angier were duplicating cats and humans around the turn of the twentieth century, the basic themes of his essay would probably not have been affected.

Two concepts wind their way through Benjamin's themes: *authenticity* and *transcendence*. As an aesthetician, concerned with what makes something art or not-art, Benjamin considers that the achievement of transcendence has always been the goal of a genuine artwork: "One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form."[46] The world of the magicians' rivalry in *The Prestige* can be seen as a microcosm of the process that Benjamin claims spans entire eras of history. Benjamin's thought that new art forms are created throughout history regardless of the intentions of specific artists also speaks to the nature of obsession—particularly Angier's. Even when confronted and shot by Borden's twin, Angier maintains that "he's made sacrifices." "It takes nothing to steal someone's else's work," the twin replies. Angier, life leaking from his chest, spits out, "It takes *everything*."

The reproductive capability of the "The Transported Man" is one that requires perhaps the film's most significant sacrifice—or, from a different perspective, no sacrifice at all. For each time the Great Danton mounts the platform of Tesla's machine, he is perfectly duplicated. Whichever Angier is on the stage falls through a trapdoor and is drowned in a water tank—Angier's own trap for himself. The other Angier survives, at least until the next performance. "It took courage to climb into that machine every night, not knowing if I'd be the prestige . . . or the man in the box."[47]

Angier willingly takes on a fifty-fifty chance, the edge of which is perhaps blunted slightly by Cutter's assertion that drowning sailors feel "as if they're going home," so the unlucky Angier won't suffer much. It's too bad that Cutter is lying. The film goes to some lengths to keep us guessing, even to the end, about what happened to the original, "authentic" Angier. When his first "prestige" or duplicate is formed in a test run, he immediately shoots the man, ignoring his protest, "No, wait! I'm the . . . "

Has the original already been killed? Benjamin would admit that the question matters little. "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. . . . The whole sphere of authenticity is out-

side technical—and of course, not only technical—reproducibility," he writes.[48] "To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."[49] While other values may accrue to objects that can be reproduced limitlessly, we can no longer talk about their "authenticity." The fact that Angier, as a person, no longer represents a single, linear consciousness or life may be interpreted to mean that he has given up the commonly held "intrinsic" value of personhood in favor of ultimate success at prestidigitation.

This is the subtle horror of *The Prestige*, brought home by the consideration of row upon row of drowned "Angiers" in the basement of the abandoned theater—deprived, when each falls through the trap door, of not only life, but also the joy of the audience's applause that Angier is able to at least hear from below the stage in his pre-Tesla version of the "Transported Man." This "plain and brutal truth" must be hidden from the audience of the Great Danton, but the film viewer must see it in order to gauge whether or not Angier's claim to transcendence outweighs the "cost"—Tesla's word—of these repeated sacrifices. Ever the showman, even after being shot by Borden/Fallon, Angier tells his killer, "You never understood why we did this. The audience knows the truth. The world is simple, miserable, solid all the way through. But if you can fool them, even for a second, then you can make them wonder."

The dozens of concealed, watery caskets in the theater basement, a mirror image of the vale of top hats that began this chapter and the film, illustrates the inevitable human cost of progress and technology. "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," Benjamin wrote, echoing Weber's theses about the tensions of modern life: the "iron cage" of modern times and the interpenetration of sacrifice and transcendence, violence and creation.[50] We live in a society and participate all too passively in a culture that all too often keeps citizens transfixed, like an audience, by flashy and sensational acts that take place in front of the curtain. As Cutter says, "You're looking for the secret. But you won't find it, because you don't really want to know. You want to be fooled." One of the many merits of philosophy is that it allows us to pull aside the curtain to look, even if only for a brief while, at what goes on backstage that makes these illusions possible.[51]

NOTES

1. Todd McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 118.

2. Robert-Houdin, quoted in Landy, "Modern Magic," *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, eds. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 109.

3. "Sophisticated" is the word that both Angier and his wife choose to describe his sobriquet "The Great Danton"; not coincidentally, the describing word is rooted in the Latin *sophisticus*, or "sophistical," the trait of convincing others with clever but fallacious arguments like Socrates's Sophist opponents of old.

4. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*: *Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), section 192.

5. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," trans. Daniel Breazeale, *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 60. "Saturnalia" was a Roman festival held in honor of the god Saturn. It was held in mid-to-late December and characterized by continuous partying.

6. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 221.

7. Friedrich Schiller, "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man," trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, in *Friedrich Schiller: Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 2003), 97.

8. Christopher Priest, *The Prestige* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1995), 64.

9. Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 61.

10. See Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

11. Quoted in Ricky Jay, *Jay's Journal of Anomalies* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2001), 147.

12. McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*, 117.

13. Landy, "Modern Magic," *The Re-enchantment of the World*, 112, 125.

14. Jay, *Jay's Journal of Anomalies*, 139.

15. Landy, "Modern Magic," *The Re-enchantment of the World*, 106.

16. Jay, *Jay's Journal of Anomalies*, 139.

17. Landy, "Modern Magic," *The Re-enchantment of the World*, 107; it's worth noting that Borden's stage name is "The Professor."

18. James A. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 170.

19. Ibid., 172–73.

20. Ibid., 179.

21. Priest, *The Prestige*, 64.

22. For example, a 2005 Gallup Poll on belief in the paranormal showed that, in the United States of America, 37 percent of all respondents believed that houses could be haunted; 25 percent believed in the causal power of the stars (astrology); 24 percent believed that extraterrestrials have visited Earth, and 21 percent believed in the existence of witches. www.gallup.com/poll/19558/Paranormal-Beliefs-Come-SuperNaturally-Some.aspx, accessed March 27, 2014.

23. See the instructive debate in Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolsterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

24. Andrea Nightingale, "Broken Knowledge," *The Re-enchantment of the World*, 18; Landy, "Modern Magic," *The Re-enchantment of the World*, 103.

25. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1974), aphorism 7.

26. Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 164.

27. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 123.

28. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 180.

29. Ibid., 178, 179.

30. Ibid., 181.

31. Ibid., 182.

32. Scaff, "Weber on the Cultural Situation of the Age," *The Cambridge Companion to Weber*, ed. Stephen Turner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 102.

33. Newman, "The Grand Illusion," *Sight and Sound* 16, no. 12 (December 2006): 18–19.
34. Steinmeyer, *The Glorious Deception: The Double Life of William Robinson, AKA Chung Ling Soo the "Marvelous Chinese Conjurer"* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), 212–13.
35. Ibid., 206.
36. Ibid., 403–5.
37. Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 180.
38. See *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/42723/42723-h/42723-h.htm; accessed March 31, 2014.
39. Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 186; italics added.
40. McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*, 105.
41. Ibid., 104.
42. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," excerpted in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000*, vol. 3, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 148.
43. McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*, 108–9.
44. Priest, *The Prestige*, 64–65.
45. Stivers, *Technology as Magic: The Triumph of the Irrational* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 39.
46. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 237.
47. Among the many details of Priest's novel that differ from the film, Angier actually transports using Tesla's machine; it is only when Borden sabotages the device near the end of the book that Angier creates a ghost-like, insubstantial "prestige" of himself which goes on living even after the original has a heart attack.
48. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 220.
49. Ibid., 224.
50. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, 256.
51. Many thanks to editors Jason Eberl and George Dunn for their astounding transformation of this paper. I want to extend special gratitude to my late father, Raymond Decker, for getting me interested in magic in the first place—hey, presto!

SEVEN

Plato, Habermas, and the Demonic Cobb

Jason Burke Murphy

When I look at fiction and other art with philosophy in mind, I treat the artwork as provocative instead of as didactic. In other words, I'm not here arguing that there's a particular argument presented in the film *Following*. An interview with the writer/director Christopher Nolan could show diverse intentions on his part. But it's impossible to make such a thought-provoking film without inducing the viewer to consider many claims about the world. Artists and critics have long been open to a large role for the interpreter in the generation of meaning in a work of art.[1] If one were to argue that *Following* is more about film noir—an exploration of the conventions of that genre of film—than a meditation on morality, I wouldn't be able to prove her wrong.[2]

Art is powerful because of the attention it can bring to aspects of the world. Philosophy, on the other hand, centers on arguments—their structure and relation to the world. Art can be coupled with claims about how the world works, as there are very powerful works in which the artist is providing evidence for a claim. Art can also be powerful even when the creator is motivated by beliefs the interpreter would reject. A philosopher can diagnose a relationship between an artistic work and an argument, which is my purpose here. I don't actually know if Nolan is making claims about morality, but I can note where he draws our attention and point out some claims and arguments that apply there.

Provoked by the appearance of a copy of Plato's (428–348 BCE) *Republic* in *Following*—and in *Man of Steel*, which Nolan produced and storied—I'll draw comparisons between the characters and stories in these works.

Plato diagnosed a conflict between poetry—including dramatic arts and music and, we could presume, film—and philosophy, the former inciting the emotions, while the latter speaks to the rational part of the human soul. I think the solution to the conflict is to do a little more philosophy. We should spell out possible implied arguments and issue retorts. This beats banning poetry and letting philosophers run our movie studios.

WHEN A RING TURNS YOU INVISIBLE

Philosophical writing doesn't require drama or beauty to be considered salient, but it has posed some very dramatic figures in its history. Plato is often praised for his rhetoric and his literary devices. Think of the chariot in his *Phaedrus* and the story of Atlantis in the *Timaeus*. Many readers leave these works with a strong recall of the black and white horses and the image of a sunken city. I've seen students recall these stories even as they struggle to recall the arguments they're meant to elucidate.

One of the best stories is found in Plato's *Republic.* It's about a magical artifact that has come to be known as the Ring of Gyges, named for a descendant of the shepherd who accidentally discovered it. With the power to make its bearer invisible, this ring enables the shepherd to seduce the queen, kill the king, and establish himself as a tyrant, without having to suffer any consequences for his brutal crimes. This story suggests that we are all purely selfish individuals who are restrained only by our fear of detection and punishment. Before finding the ring, the shepherd is restrained by his fear that people will see him and judge him. Glaucon, the young friend of Socrates who tells the story, challenges Socrates to explain why anyone would have a reason to be *just* if he could escape detection.

Elsewhere in the *Republic*, Socrates engages with another interlocutor, an aggressive arguer named Thrasymachus. He's a Sophist, a member of a somewhat notorious band of intellectuals who often made their living imparting to their clients the skills needed to win arguments in court or in the political assembly, without any regard for the justice of their cause. Thrasymachus contends that justice is whatever is in the interests of the stronger.[3] In some societies, the majority is the stronger and thereby defines justice for the entire community. In others, a tyrant establishes what justice is. In short, for Thrasymachus, the demands of justice, whatever they may be, simply reflect the brute fact that some individual or group is in a position to exert social dominance. Whoever has the power dictates what is just.

Whereas Thrasymachus sees justice as originating with the strong, Glaucon argues that communities establish rules of justice because of the relative weakness of their members. Each person would prefer to dominate all his fellows, but is too weak to do so. But at the same time, each

wants to avoid being dominated by others. In other words, we naturally desire to be unjust, but have an even stronger aversion to suffering injustice. So we strike a compromise, agreeing to accept limits on our conduct in exchange for others accepting the same limits on theirs, enabling us to live together peacefully and cooperatively. Therefore, it is only self-interest that motivates us to act justly. But, Glaucon argues, if one had the Ring of Gyges, there would be no reason at all to restrain ourselves in the name of justice.

In Socrates response to Glaucon, he argues that justice is valuable for its own sake, for it is linked to possession of the sort of orderly soul without which we can't live satisfying lives. An unjust person ends up with a soul that is in conflict with itself, its insatiable and unruly appetites and passions resist the rule of reason. The shepherd cum tyrant has, on this account, traded away any hope of genuine happiness for a power over others can't ultimately satisfy him. He imagines himself to be perfectly free, but his disordered soul is enslaved to every desire and to phantom goods that he is induced to pursue.

In *Following*, Bill finds a copy of Plato's *Republic* in The Blonde's apartment. We also see Clark Kent clutching the same book while letting himself be bullied in *Man of Steel*. Nolan appears to be drawing our attention specifically to this work. Indeed, *Following* features a character—Cobb—who in a way resembles the shepherd with the invisible ring. Cobb is a compelling character, for he has the ability to show people what he wants them to see, while hiding what he doesn't want to disclose. Like the bearer of the ring of invisibility, Cobb doesn't have to worry about anyone's social expectations, since he's capable of a sort of invisibility. When caught breaking into a house, he's smooth enough to say just the right things to avoid getting into trouble and he's skilled at hiding his own motivations, as well as reading the motivations of others. Just like the idea of a ring that would make us invisible is compelling, Nolan presents us with Plato's book, and then shows us a world that calls into question Socrates's response to Glaucon's challenge.

COBB AS THE INVISIBLE STRONGMAN

The film opens with Bill—also known as The Young Man—describing his habit of following people in order to get to know something about them. At first, he claims to have no other interest besides knowing about other people and seeing how they work. He's a loner, but also a writer who's having difficulty writing. While he's odd, he's not a vicious person. Cobb is someone Bill finds interesting and starts to follow, but Cobb soon catches Bill red-handed as the writer is stalking him and confronts Bill about his practice of following. After aggressively reading Bill, Cobb offers to show him a more intimate level of "following": breaking into and

entering other people's houses, not merely for the purpose of burglary, but primarily to be a voyeur, to peer into their private lives, and sometimes to manipulate those lives.

Moving in and out of houses with ease, Cobb is like the shepherd with his invisible ring. Able to read people thoroughly, he readily obtains the sort of information that can get him what he wants. In strangers' apartments, he can discovers a great deal about them just by looking around. He tells Bill that gaining this knowledge of others is his point in breaking into apartments and draws Bill's attention to the "box" full of revelatory contents that allegedly can be found in every apartment: "Everyone has a box. . . . An unconscious collection. A display. . . . Each thing tells us something very intimate about the people. We are very privileged to see it. Very rare."

Cobb hypes his burglary as a higher pleasure, superior to the desire for mere money. Later, he describes his break-ins as a form of therapy—for their victims. The burglars obtain intimate knowledge of his victims and take a few things, but the ones he invades are provoked into rethinking their lives. All of this appeals to Bill's desire to be more important, to gain insight, and to be helpful to others. This dubious rationale is used to justify some particularly vicious acts, such as leaving a woman's panties wound up in a man's worn trousers to be discovered by his girlfriend. Cobb has interrupted Bill's life and shown him what appears to be a more profound way to live that fits with being the perceptive person he imagined himself to be. "They hide it," says Cobb about the contents of people's boxes, "but actually they want someone to see it. That's what it is all about. Interrupting someone's life. . . . This is the point . . . finding out who people really are." One could see Cobb as selling a deranged version of Socrates's gadfly. People are forced to confront themselves when they see that they have been seen, that they have been read so effectively. Cobb interrogates Bill, forcing him to diagnose himself as a hopeless drifter, driving him to do Cobb's bidding.

Cobb shows these people—and Bill—another way to live. Bill is thrilled by the whole enterprise, which enables Cobb to lead Bill through an intricate web of deceit and desire. At first, Bill is only following people, but he soon starts seeking to acquire Cobb's abilities, becoming in effect his disciple. Bill regards Cobb as his ally and teacher, never suspecting until it's too late that Cobb is manipulating him for Cobb's own purposes.

The credits refer to the other main character in *Following* only as The Blonde. With the aid of Cobb's manipulation, Bill falls for The Blonde and seeks to help her. We witness a whole other layer to Cobb's manipulation when we see him discussing Bill's gullibility with The Blonde. The Blonde thinks that she is Cobb's co-conspirator but, as we eventually learn, Cobb has been setting her up as well. Bill and The Blonde both enjoy the game of deception. We see her delight in the game when she

reveals to Bill how thoroughly he's been fooled by Cobb, taking pleasure in showing how skillfully they've manipulated him. Cobb has shown them both an amoral world in which those who are clever enough can disregard the rules. We're not told how The Blonde became so corrupted, but her copy of the *Republic* and her box of mementos suggest that she didn't start out totally depraved.

Cobb thoroughly disguises his viciousness from his victims—Bill and The Blonde. Nothing they see shows them that they're being fooled or in danger. His victims are wrapped up in a world that's no longer real—like the chained prisoners in the "Allegory of the Cave," another story Socrates tells in the *Republic*, who believe shadows cast on a wall are real things because they have no way of knowing better.[4] Watching Cobb move smoothly in and out of people's houses and his manipulation of Bill and The Blonde, we're amazed at how much he can do. The police even end up being played no less than Bill and The Blonde. Cobb may as well have the Ring of Gyges as he disappears into a crowd at the film's end.

I consider Cobb *demonic*. I'm not using this word as it is found in any philosophical literature.[5] Rather, I use this term to describe someone with the intellectual capabilities of a Socrates but lacking his concern for justice. I find this prospect frightening. Cobb doesn't appear to be motivated by ordinary human motivations—neither money, glory, pleasure, nor justice. He doesn't seek glory, but lives in anonymity. When he robs a house, he takes money, but—despite all of his deceptiveness—he seems genuine when he tells Bill that money isn't the point of breaking into people's homes. He seeks to know and manipulate people.[6]

Cobb also is able to control himself and read others' emotions in order to do things a more deeply empathetic person—that is, someone who not only reads others' emotions but actually *sympathizes* with them—couldn't do. Cobb seems to have all the capabilities that Socrates believes that a just person has, but without any of their love for justice. Like a rational ruler, Cobb can discern the desires of Bill and The Blonde and he can convince them that he knows how best to fulfill them, but he doesn't act with their best interests in mind, as a *just* person would. In the aforementioned "Allegory of the Cave," someone enters the cave to release one of the prisoners from his chains, revealing to him the world beyond the shadow play on the walls.[7] Cobb, on the other hand, drags Bill and The Blonde into a cave of illusion and despair, thereby making them into his puppets.

We have a desire to know people beyond what they show us. Peering into the hidden corners of other people's lives isn't just the modus operandi of burglars: detectives use deception to solve crimes, spies seek classified information, and biographers seek out unpublished diaries. This sort of knowledge is tempting.[8] But desire, even the desire for knowledge, can cloud our reason and threaten our relationships. Bill desires a secretive access to people and control over them. The Blonde

wants the same thing and finds a vain delight in Cobb's attention. Without the corrupting influence of Cobb, each might have eventually come to appreciate how their disorderly desire was wrecking their chance at happiness and come to understand the benefits of being just. But when Cobb tempts them with the prospect of a life free of the constraints of justice, they both seek training in his dark arts. They think they're above the shadow play of ordinary people, but they've been led into darkness by Cobb all along.

Is there something missing in the life that Cobb offers them? Socrates argues that the unjust person forgoes harmony of the soul, which is valuable in itself, far surpassing the value of money, glory, or bodily pleasure. A soul that delights in being just becomes independent and capable of accessing a different sort of pleasure, one that doesn't require shaping the social and physical world toward any particular material end. We should satisfy our desires as simply as we can, so that our wants don't interfere with our efforts to understand goods that transcend money, fame, and purely physical pleasure. This is why, at the end of the *Republic*, Socrates's interlocutors agree that the pleasures of the wise and virtuous king is "729 times more pleasant" than the tyrant.[9]

Cobb clearly uses both Bill and The Blonde as mere means to his own ends. Bill and The Blonde also try to use each other. We can see what Cobb is missing on this score. A metaphysical claim that there's something with intrinsic value—whether the Good, True, and Beautiful in themselves, or persons capable of intellectually grasping such ideas—gives us reason to be in a certain relationship to it.[10] We may not have what it takes to give these intrinsically good entities the respect they deserve, but we should at least orient ourselves toward them.

COBB: SUPERVILLAIN

Contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas takes a different approach to defending the value of living justly, by looking at the pragmatic commitments that become ours by virtue of the fact that we participate in ways of life and use language.[11] Habermas would respond to Cobb by showing that our rationality and sanity depend on taking seriously *truth* and *fairness*: "There are elementary social functions that can only be satisfied by means of communicative action"—that is, action through which we seek to coordinate with others through joint reasoning and deliberation.[12] Everyone considers some things valuable, but our sense of value is always embedded in a host of commitments and relationships. Every ethically important report—every judgment concerning whether an act or person is just or unjust—is framed by such a background. This background is a "lifeworld" composed of people, their commitments, and their social institutions. The possibility of genuinely caring

about something is bound up with the possibility of communicating about them with others, as well as the communications of others, past and present.

Communicative action should be free of the sort of violence and manipulation wrought by those like Cobb. "The skeptic [or a demonic figure like Cobb] may reject morality," writes Habermas, "but he cannot reject the ethical substance of the life circumstances in which he spends his waking hours, not unless he is willing to take refuge in suicide or mental illness."[13] Habermas points to sociological and psychological studies which show that our ability to think depends upon taking seriously the give-and-take of reasons. We cannot seriously consider a complete abandonment of our orientation toward valid reasoning. Although there are people who renounce such commitments, and there are people who waver in their commitment to fairness, truth, and truthfulness, our moments of resentment and pain show us what we can lose if we depart from them.

Habermas's approach has something to say to Cobb that I believe is correct. I can't imagine embracing a life like Cobb's and not suffering much of the pain suffered by the mentally ill on their bad days. But Nolan doesn't show us Cobb on a bad day. Rather, someone with Cobb's abilities may not look for anything good beyond enjoyment of their manipulation of others. Such a purely instrumental view of people, which looks at them without any regard for justice, cuts us off from the communicative action of others. Someone like Cobb can no longer give us reasons for his actions and can no longer assess the ones we give them. Because he's missing out on an ethical life, he's also missing out on many other good things.

However, the film doesn't show Cobb is missing anything and that raises my main concern. We see Cobb victorious but aren't afforded any final word about his happiness, sanity, or any sense of loss. Nolan does a remarkable job taking the viewer along for the ride. We think we're following Bill's story, but we're actually being led around by Cobb every bit as much as Bill and The Blonde are. In the end, we're shocked by how thoroughly they—and we—have been violated.

In what ways are they violated? Some of the ways are quite obvious. You don't need a philosopher to tell you that it's bad to be murdered or to be set up as a murderer. Cobb violates people in other ways as well. He looks into places people have chosen to keep private, behind locked doors or in secreted boxes. Even if Cobb is right that we often would like for someone to know our secrets, it's a violation of privacy to force them into the open without permission. Bill sees how well Cobb is able to penetrate the truth of his victim's lives when Bill has them both break into his own apartment. Cobb demeans Bill's situation and declares him to be not worth stealing from or getting to know. We learn later that Cobb knows Bill has led them into his own apartment, which highlights an-

other violation: imposing a completely false relationship between people and their world. Bill and The Blonde are lured into believing they have capabilities they don't have and that they know things they don't know. The sort of honest relationships we depend on to sound out meaning is denied them. Bill and The Blonde lose because, having arrived at an unrealistic assessment of their powers, they find that they can't keep up with Cobb, who is depicted as so powerful that he doesn't need people like the rest of us do. Cobb clearly belongs in the category of supervillain.

Movies have a way of building a world, similar to the world-building of Nolan's dream architects in *Inception*. Samuel Coleridge coined the term, "willing suspension of disbelief," to describe readers' openness to literature. But perhaps *Following* features a character in whom we shouldn't believe. A successful criminal might *appear* happy—but if our willing suspension of disbelief leads us to accept the portrayal of the happy criminal as accurate, we risk being deceived by a non-existent world. A life that is simultaneously immoral and pleasurable may seem more plausible in the movies, but in the real world truly valuable relationships and an orderly and happy life can never be gained by deceit or force. Plato's *Republic* attempts to show us why the unjust life can never be satisfying, despite its deceptive allure. We see The Blonde's copy of the *Republic*, but we hear no mention of its contents. Cobb never refers to it in any of his analysis of her. Bill and The Blonde don't discuss the book or any of the ideas in it. They live in a world where this sort of book is no longer taken seriously. The result, as Habermas warns, is the sociopathic loner that is Cobb.

In *Man of Steel*, Clark Kent clutches a copy of the *Republic* while being harassed by bullies. His adoptive human father, Jonathan Kent, stresses that the world will damage Clark if it knows that he is superhuman. Jonathan is even willing to sacrifice his own life to keep his son's secret, signaling to Clark not to save him from a tornado. Similarly, Socrates in the *Republic* reports that someone who returns to the cave of shadows to tell its inhabitants of a more meaningful and valuable world will be killed, which is precisely what Socrates suffered at the hands of his fellow citizens in Athens. The presence of Plato's *Republic* in *Man of Steel* may indicate that Nolan agrees with Socrates that someone who consistently acts virtuously will be rejected by the earthly mob. Indeed, Jonathan is almost proven right when General Zod demands that Earth turn Clark over to the Kryptonians, a demand that the earthlings are all too ready to obey. *Man of Steel*, confronting us with a character who chooses to do what's right no matter the cost to himself, is the closest Nolan comes to illustrating why we should choose justice. Imagine Clark Kent without his sense of justice. He would make Cobb's crimes look like child's play.

Fortunately, very few people are capable of withholding all concern for others as Cobb does. Cobb describes Bill as a "pathetic loser" when they ransack his apartment, but the story leaves us wondering whether a

sociopathic loner like Cobb can in fact be described as a winner and, if so, whether he can keep winning indefinitely. *Following* can be the occasion for such self-reflection. Nolan's genius lies in the profound provocation to thought that his movies offer, but we must do the reflective work ourselves. In the end, nothing less than our happiness and sanity is at stake.[14]

NOTES

1. This is a well-known development in the theory of art. For a discussion of problematic aspects of this turn away from intention, which was incorrectly linked with a turn away from emotion, see Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), especially ch. 3 "Thinking Feeling: Criticism and Emotion."

2. For a discussion of film noir conventions in another Christopher Nolan movie, see Deborah Knight and George McKnight, "Reconfiguring the Past: *Memento* and Neo-Noir" in *Memento*, ed. Andrew Kania (New York: Routledge, 2009). See also their chapter in this volume.

3. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 338c ff.

4. *Republic*, 514a-517a. This is the "Allegory of the Cave." Throughout the rest of Book VII (517b–541b), Plato lays out the educational regime that reflects the existence of the good itself: "We shall require them to turn upward the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light on all, and when they have thus beheld the good itself and they shall use it as a pattern for the right ordering of the state and the citizens and themselves throughout the remainder of their lives" (540b).

5. However, the word "demonic" does appear in many famous texts, most famously the "evil demon" postulated by René Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. I initially compared Cobb to this demon. Cobb puts Bill and The Blonde in a false world.

6. Cobb could be compared to the Joker in Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, who tests people in order to get them to recognize how superficial their virtues really are. Both Cobb and the Joker sell what they do as a truer relationship to life than the one most people seek.

7. *Republic*, 514a ff.

8. The sort of prying wrought by biographers and detectives poses difficult questions for ethicists. We're playing with fire when we enlist some people to investigate others; but this topic is best reserved for another essay.

9. *Republic*, 587e.

10. Plato isn't the only philosopher to posit something intrinsically valuable. Immanuel Kant famously argues that people, by virtue of their rational and autonomous nature, possess intrinsic and unconditional value—*dignity*—and thus can never justly be used merely as a means to some other end. G. E. Moore argues that the word "good" refers to something non-natural and intrinsically valuable. A core question in philosophical ethics is whether or not such things exist and what is to be done with or without them.

11. Habermas's seminal text in this regard is his two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas A. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984–87).

12. Jürgen Habermas, *Past as Future*, trans. Max Pensky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 111.

13. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 100.

14. The author wishes to thank the editors of this volume as well as Matt Carr and Todd Porter.

EIGHT

"Are You Watching Closely?"

Narrative Comprehension in Nolan's Early Films

Deborah Knight and George McKnight

Christopher Nolan's films are extremely complex aesthetic artifacts, self-consciously created. They raise a number of philosophical questions. What is the nature of personal identity? How should actions be understood and interpreted? How can we determine whether actions are moral? What, if anything, can be known with certainty? Nolan's films tantalize us with these puzzling and interwoven questions, but do not offer easy answers. At the heart of Nolan's narrative aesthetics—his unique way of telling a story by cinematographic means—we find ambiguity and uncertainty, misleading clues and unexpected changes of character, doubling and duplicity, deliberate artifice and fabrication. As viewers, we can't necessarily trust what we see as we watch characters who often only imperfectly understand the situations in which they find themselves. Even if you are watching closely, you may not—and possibly on first viewing *cannot*—immediately recognize what's central in the plot action unfolding in front of you.

When analyzing Nolan's storytelling, it's helpful to distinguish between the chronological sequence of depicted events and the order in which those events are assembled and presented in each film's narrative. This distinction was drawn in the early twentieth century by the Russian Formalists, literary analysts whose work is familiar to film theorists.[1] One basic way of telling a story is simply to present events in their chronological order: beginning, middle, and end. But many narratives don't do this. As the French New Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once famous-

ly remarked, a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end—but not necessarily in that order. Often, for example in mystery narratives, we start *in medias res*, in the middle of the action, and have to look for clues to explain how things got to the point where we come into the story. More complex narratives move back and forth through time, presenting events out of the chronological sequence in which they occurred. Nolan's films often exploit the difference between the chronological order of events and the order in which those events are represented—nowhere more brilliantly than in *Memento*. Our job as viewers is to keep a sharp eye on just what's happening onscreen in front of us, to make sure we understand what we see. At the same time, given the complex structure of his films, we must work to understand how the events presented to us fit into the overall story, to discover not just what has happened, but why.

THE FILMMAKER AND THE VIEWER

"Are you watching closely?" is a question asked in voice-over at the beginning of *The Prestige.* It's not an innocent question. Indeed, it is repeated a second time toward the film's conclusion. We discover that the first speaker is Alfred Borden, one of two magicians who enter into a deadly rivalry.[2] The voice-over leads to a scene in which an *ingénieur*, John Cutter, illustrates how a magic trick is constructed in three stages or acts: the pledge, the turn, and the prestige. The performance of a magic trick is quite visible, yet how it's accomplished is not. We see—but at the same time do *not* see—how the illusion is achieved. Artifice and the construction of illusions are central to *The Prestige*. They are also metaphors for Nolan's early filmmaking and his conception of cinema. With its central theme of the fabrication of illusions, *The Prestige* draws together Nolan's early concerns with seeing and cognition, identity and deception. The question "Are you watching closely?"—which could be taken as an admonition to Nolan's viewers—speaks to the self-consciousness with which he constructs his cinematic illusions.

Nolan's cinematic style challenges what viewers typically expect when watching films, notably their expectations about transparency in the construction and presentation of cinematic narratives. In many of his films, particularly in *Following* and *Memento*, the foundations of conventional mainstream narrative cinema—such as linear and causal plot action, temporally continuous editing, narrative transitivity (in which one event follows another in a clear causal sequence), and the singularity and stability of character and identity—take unfamiliar forms and are sometimes simply absent. During the first burglary in *Following*, Cobb says about his thievery, "That's what it's all about. Interrupting someone's life. Making them see all the things that they took for granted . . . You

take it away. Show them what they had . . . You take it away." Cobb's statement describes Nolan's approach to cinematic storytelling. This is most obvious when the cinematic conventions that facilitate a more transparent understanding are taken away.

How viewers are positioned in relation to Nolan's film narratives, and particularly how we're aligned with key characters, is central to the task of making sense of what we see. Because Nolan's early films do not necessarily follow a straightforward linear-causal sequence of actions, part of our job as viewers is to discover not only what actually happens when, but also how everything adds up, what it means. Our assumptions about characters and their actions—as well as the significance and meaning of plot action more generally—often undergo revisions: The Man in *Doodlebug* is not trying to kill a bug; Cobb is not merely introducing The Young Man in *Following* to petty theft; Leonard Shelby's attempts to understand his situation and his recollections of his past are not to be trusted in *Memento*. Regardless of whether actions are presented in the temporal order in which they occur, our first impressions can simply be wrong.

The absence of continuity from scene to scene in *Following* creates a sense of mystery and uncertainty. In the final sequence, The Policeman reveals the extent of Cobb's deception that has entrapped The Young Man. This information enables the viewer finally to reconstruct a linear, causal understanding of the plot action. *Memento* calls upon viewers to simultaneously reconstruct the narrative in terms of the chronology of plot action and the meaning of the story while reconsidering our alignment with Leonard. The viewers' initial alignment with Will Dormer in *Insomnia* creates both a sympathetic understanding of the accidental shooting and the moral dilemma surrounding his course of action, particularly when others become vulnerable—but over the course of the film we rethink our initial sympathy. The final shots of *The Prestige*—before that film's coda reveals the duplicity of Lord Caldlow—direct the viewer back into the film to reconsider our earlier sympathetic alignment with Caldlow's theatrical persona, Robert Angier. The two key revelations late in the film—that Borden has an identical twin brother who impersonates him on stage and off and the existence of Angier's doubles created by Nikola Tesla's machine—force viewers to reconsider what we thought we understood.

Nolan's films are replete with both verbal and visual references to seeing and watching, observing and being observed. Characters, whether watching something closely or observing someone attentively, not only make viewers aware of themselves watching, but also raise questions of perception and cognition. What is it we look for when watching either a performance—a film, for example, or a magic trick—or someone's actions? How do we understand what we're watching or have seen? Beginning with *Doodlebug*, Nolan makes us aware of how we're positioned as

spectators and what as a consequence we may and may not understand. *Doodlebug* draws immediate attention to the act of watching with the two "eyes" looking through the double OO of the title. Frequent changes in camera position are combined with a camera that is often in motion. This ideally positions viewers, often alongside the unnamed figure as he stalks what we assume to be a bug with his shoe. Whenever The Man looks at something, the camera position changes so we see what he's looking at, usually in closer detail. The scale of shots change with The Man's movements, frequently putting viewers in close proximity to his face and expressions. Camera position and movement along with editing create a sense of access and transparency. We seem to see and understand what is happening.

But things are not as they seem. The doodlebug is revealed as a miniature of The Man, mimicking his movements and actions, but with a slight temporal priority, so that the "doodlebug" performs each movement a second or so prior to The Man. Viewers then see The Man strike the "bug" with his shoe, a second after the miniature is seen performing the same action. At this point, viewers are positioned looking up from below at The Man's face so we see his moment of elation, only to have another face appear behind him. This new face is much larger in scale but otherwise obviously a duplicate of The Man's. The new figure strikes the figure with whom we have previously been aligned—and thus metaphorically the viewer as well—with a shoe. The film credits then appear against the shoe although the top of an eyebrow from the large face remains in the upper left corner of the image. What initially seemed like a man trying to kill a bug is revealed to be a potentially infinite regress of versions of one man killing smaller versions of himself. What we were watching turns out to be something quite different from what we first thought. We realize we've been witnessing a fatalistic parable where actions are repeated again and again.

FRAMING DEVICES AND UNDERSTANDING

Nolan's films often draw attention to how they've been constructed. For example, plot action in *Following*, *Memento*, *The Prestige*, and *Inception* is framed or "bookended" by identical or parallel scenes.[3] To understand these films, we need to understand the significance of their framing devices. Of course, on first viewing, we can't understand the opening frame as part of a framing device until we see the repetition or variation in the closing frame. We've seen the opening frame, but we can't understand it *as* a frame until the end of the film.

The Prestige, a classic example of a self-consciously framed narrative, actually features twin framing devices. The opening sequence presents an uncanny shot of a forest floor covered in top hats. The shot is beautiful,

but melancholic and even eerie. Why hats in this desolate place? Why so many of them? This shot is paralleled by a closing shot of the drowned bodies of Angier's doubles, trapped and stored in the water-escape tanks that have been set up to kill them. This shot, too, is uncanny but more obviously sinister than the first. The framing device draws our attention to the implications of Tesla's machine, which can in fact create duplicate copies of things such as hats or people.

Within this governing frame, just after the shot of the top hats in the forest, there's a scene in which Cutter demonstrates a magic illusion for Jess, Sarah's daughter. A parallel scene occurs at the film's end, where a voice-over again explains the three stages or acts of a proper work of illusion. This second framing device illustrates the importance of the "prestige" for any successful magic trick. But as we discover, the "prestige" doesn't necessarily reproduce the original figure that served as the "pledge." In one of the film's magic tricks, the first canary, the pledge, is killed and a second, looking just like the first, is presented as the prestige. Those who believe the illusion accept the prestige as the return of the pledge. At the film's end, the figure of Borden who appears as the prestige of Cutter's final illusion isn't the one who promised Jess from jail that he would take her home soon. That twin is executed for a crime he didn't commit. The twin who's the prestige of Cutter's illusion is the "other" Borden, the one who loved Jess's mother.

Both framing devices—the Tesla duplicates and the magic tricks—question the nature of identity. Which of the many versions of Angier is the "real" one? Perhaps it doesn't matter, if each of them is pursuing the same goals, trying to achieve the same aim.[4] Perhaps each of these doubles can be Angier. It's an interesting question about Angier's psychology that he seems not to particularly care which of the versions of himself survives and which dies. But what then of the man who's presented to Jess Borden as the prestige of Cutter's illusion? That's a question for us, not for Jess. She believes the illusion that there's only one Alfred Borden, just as she believes the illusion that there's only one Fallon. It matters for us because we finally understand that both twins appeared as Borden and as Fallon—that they exchanged roles and thus "shared one life"—but that one twin's ambition fuels the feud with Angier and ultimately leads to Sarah's suicide.

Following uses framing devices to underscore by formal means the film's main theme, which is framing and being framed. As it unfolds, the central character, the unnamed Young Man, falls under the influence of Cobb, seemingly a petty thief who commits burglaries, not just to steal, but for the pleasure of violating the privacy of his victims' homes and possessions. By the film's end, Cobb has framed The Young Man for the brutal murder of The Blonde, the ex-girlfriend of Cobb's boss, The Bald Man—a murder Cobb commits. The film is organized as an extended first-person recollection set within an omniscient third-person framing

device. The Young Man's story is framed by an opening sequence of discontinuous close-ups of someone's gloved hands examining the contents of a box. The film's title appears over these images. We wonder whose hands these are, and what they're searching for? How do these actions fit into the sequence of events that The Young Man retells? The closing frame is of a busy street with the figure of Cobb at a distance disappearing into a crowd. This framing device must be attributed to the authorial presence of Nolan as filmmaker. The scenes we see in the opening frame actually take place later in the chronology of the film's action and establish a sense of mystery about the events we're witnessing. The concluding scene, where Cobb disappears, is not seen by either The Young Man or the man to whom he's speaking. Just as Cobb has emerged from the crowd, he blends back into it, a murderer who continues to move anonymously through the city.

Within this framing device, The Young Man—initially identified by voice-over—offers an account of his recent past to an unidentified listener. His story is represented by a discontinuous series of shots, including flash-forwards, at his typewriter, or following people—eventually following Cobb—in crowded streets. The film concludes with a return to The Young Man in the film's present time in the café, where the listener, who we learn is actually a policeman, reveals the evidence that connects The Young Man to The Blonde's murder. The framing device is, again, intended for us as viewers. The images in the opening frame initially seem arbitrary, without context. We understand them later as emblematic of Cobb's, and then The Young Man's, style of burglary, which isn't so much about merely taking what's valuable as deliberately and anonymously violating the privacy of those whose belongings they steal. The closing frame, with Cobb disappearing from view in a crowded street, underscores the dark irony of The Young Man's situation. Having arbitrarily selected Cobb as someone to follow, The Young Man has fallen into a plot where by his own actions he's provided the police with the evidence they'll use to hold him responsible for Cobb's crime. In both *The Prestige* and *Following*, framing devices contextualize each film's action by showing how apparently random or disconnected details take on significance as part of the overarching story.

FRAMING IN *MEMENTO*

Memento, Nolan's most unconventional and self-conscious film, raises the question how to frame such a convoluted narrative. Instead of framing devices that "bookend" a more-or-less linear story, *Memento*'s involute structure bends time by working both backward and forward through the story's chronology of events. The film starts and ends with a killing at the hands of the amnesiac protagonist, Leonard. Famously, the killing of

John "Teddy" Gammell, with which the film begins, is revealed to us in reverse chronology as the Polaroid image of Teddy's dead body fades to white. In the penultimate sequence of the film, Leonard kills the drug dealer, Jimmy Grantz, and then quarrels with Teddy. In both instances, Leonard believes he's avenging the rape and murder of his wife by killing her assailant. Understanding Leonard's quest for revenge, Teddy's and Jimmy Grantz's deaths, and Leonard's role in his wife's death requires us to revise and reassess what we think we know about the events presented to us.

The film's non-linear structure gives figurative form to Leonard's existence and his unique cognitive impairment. Leonard suffers from an inability to remember events that have recently occurred. In fact, he has only about a five-minute window on his present memories, a fact exploited by several characters, including the motel clerk and, more sinisterly, Natalie. Yet Leonard believes that his more distant memories, which predate the trauma that caused his amnesia, survive intact. Leonard believes he's on a quest to find and kill his wife's rapist and murderer. He kills Jimmy Grantz believing him to be the murderer he's been hunting. Later, still caught up in his pursuit of his wife's killer, he comes to believe that the murderer is Teddy. The question for us is whether we should believe Leonard's story of his past and his reconstruction of the events that form his current quest. A further question is whether we should trust our own initially sympathetic response to Leonard's predicament. If Leonard's beliefs about his wife's rape and murder are true, then his quest for revenge makes a certain tragic sense. But if his beliefs are false, his quest for revenge is nothing but a fantastical fiction he's persuaded himself is true, and he'll have murdered the wrong men for the wrong reasons.

After killing Jimmy Grantz and arguing with Teddy at a deserted warehouse, Leonard drives away in Jimmy's car. The concluding sequence of the film, which follows immediately after this killing, serves as a coda to the events we've seen unfold, even though they occur much earlier in the story's chronology. Because we've already seen the rest of the story, and most importantly events that occur *after* the coda, we're positioned to question Leonard's reflections as he drives away. In voice-over, Leonard talks about the nature of beliefs, memories, and identity. He thinks, "I have to believe in a world outside my own mind." He shuts his eyes, opens them again, and the world is still there. But believing in a world outside his mind doesn't mean that Leonard understands himself or his actions in that world. While he drives with his eyes shut, we see a flashback—of uncertain veridicality—of his wife with her head resting on his chest. He then thinks to himself, "I have to believe that my actions still have meaning even if I can't remember them." This is a nice existential point, but what we realize and what Leonard might perhaps suspect is that his actions do not have the meaning he believes them to have. They may, in fact, have no meaning at all. Leonard continues, "We all need

memories to remind ourselves of who we are. I'm no different." But of course, Leonard *is* different, pathologically so, given his cognitive impairment. As Teddy continuously tells Leonard, "You don't even know who you are."

Beliefs and memories are crucial features of our conscious life, essential for understanding ourselves and the world around us. Most of the time and for most of us, our memories track the truth and thus give us reliable knowledge. A problem for all of us, from time to time, is to figure out which of our memories and which of the beliefs we base on them might be false. Leonard's cognitive impairment means that he shouldn't trust what he "remembers." Because he's unable to test his memories against independent facts, he can't discover when his memories or concomitant beliefs are false—for instance, when he scratches out his reminder, "Do not trust her," scribbled on the back of a Polaroid of Natalie, or when he writes on the back of a Polaroid of Teddy, "Do not believe his lies," when Teddy's account of Leonard's past and present is arguably as close to "the truth" as anything in this film gets. Because we're initially sympathetic to Leonard, we're inclined to believe him and trust those parts of his memory to which he claims to have access. Unlike Leonard, however, we have the ability to discover our mistake, that Leonard's reconstruction of past events and his belief that a "John G."—whether Teddy or another—is his wife's murderer are parts of a complex and distorted confabulation. Leonard doesn't intend to deceive others; nor can he realize his own self-deception. But the remembered events surrounding his wife's murder are fictions he tells himself and his plans for revenge are based on his inability to separate fact from fiction.

This problem is vividly illustrated during the coda as Leonard recollects the intimate moment with his wife's head resting on his chest. In this memory, Leonard's chest is tattooed with two key phrases: "John G. raped and murdered my wife" and "I've done it"—the latter marking his killing of yet another "John G." who may in fact have been his wife's rapist, though not her murderer. Yet these tattoos could only have been inscribed after his wife's death, making it a false memory—a conclusion also supported by the fact that the latter tattoo doesn't appear at any other time in the film. As we've discovered, Leonard tries to pin down his beliefs about his ongoing present with various inscriptions—notes on his many Polaroids as well as charts and tattoos. Near the end of the coda, after reassuring himself that he's just like other people, Leonard brings his car to a screeching halt at a tattoo parlor in order to try to capture the present before it falls out of mind. The final words we hear in voice-over as Leonard sits outside the tattoo parlor are: "Now, where was I?" This isn't a literal question about where he was in terms of location, but a metaphorical question about where he was in an ongoing plan of action. Spoken as though he has the cognitive resources to recall what he's been planning, these words point to the most disturbing aspect of Leonard's

psychological state. Given his amnesia, he can't know for sure where he is, just what his plans are, or whether his plans connect up properly to events in the world outside his confabulation. For Leonard, though, it suffices that he has a scrap of paper in his hand instructing himself to tattoo a license plate number that'll eventually lead to his killing Teddy.

ACTION, IDENTITY, AND AMBIGUITY

Plot action in Nolan's films usually originates out of some event from the past, normally a crime or violent death. In *Following*, a brutal murder witnessed by The Blonde leads to blackmail and a plan to kill her so both her killer and the murderer remain undetected. In *Memento*, Leonard provides an account—although a confabulated one—of the rape and murder of his wife that's led to his search for her alleged killer. In *Insomnia*, Dormer is under investigation for planting evidence that leads to the conviction of a man he believes is guilty of murder. In *Batman Begins*, plot action originates from Bruce Wayne's childhood fall into a well, his subsequent fear of bats, and the murder of his parents. In *The Prestige*, the "other" brother ties the wrong knot binding Julia's wrists, leading to her death during the performance of an escape from a water tank.

Our task as viewers is to discover just how past actions and events influence the present, what leads characters to act as they do, and who's responsible for the ensuing events. This involves making and testing hypotheses—and very often revising those hypotheses in light of new evidence or the discovery that we haven't correctly understood the evidence we've been using. A wry illustration of such a revision of assumptions occurs in *Memento*. Leonard finds himself running through a trailer park and asks, "Okay, what am I doing?" He decides he's chasing "this guy," Dodd—only to realize after being shot at that Dodd is chasing him. This is yet another example of Leonard not understanding the situation he's in, but we're initially no more certain what's going on than Leonard is. Nor are we certain why The Young Man, other than being "kind of lonely, bored, nothing to do all day," takes up following people and so easily succumbs to Cobb's suggestions. Whatever we think about Robert Angier, our views change dramatically when we discover that Angier is just a public persona created by Lord Caldlow.

Caldlow isn't the only Nolan character to create a duplicitous public persona as well as false, or at least misleading, stories about their identity. The Young Man in *Following* seems to adopt identities at random, first identifying himself as Bill and later, using a credit card Cobb stole, assuming the name of its owner, Daniel Lloyd. Cobb assumes and maintains the identity of a burglar throughout the film. His identity is little more than the persona created around his duplicity as he ensnares The Young Man. The invention of a public persona is tied into deceiving

others as well in *The Prestige*, where both Bordens conspire to deceive Sarah, and Cutter is systematically deceived by Caldlow to believe in his doppelgänger, Angier. In *The Prestige*, two brothers "play the part" of Alfred Borden and Caldlow "plays the part" of Angier. In *Inception*, the play between a character's name and identity becomes explicit with characters such as Mal—whose name comes from the Latin, through the French, for "wrong" or "bad"—and Ariadne—whose namesake from Greek mythology had a special knowledge of labyrinths. But since Mal is only a projection of Cobb's imagination, it's ambiguous whether *she* is in some way bad or evil, or whether she represents an aspect of his wife's character that's been constructed by Cobb's subconscious.

Doubling and duplicity are recurring themes in Nolan's films. While *The Prestige* may focus on magic illusions, the film's concluding scenes are all about doubles and the illusion of identities. In *Insomnia*, Dormer duplicitously fabricates evidence in Los Angeles and again later in Alaska to misdirect the investigation into his partner's death. In *Batman Begins*, doubling occurs through the construction of public personas: both Bruce Wayne's persona as a playboy and his persona as the Batman. With his *Dark Knight* trilogy, Nolan objectifies his ongoing concern with identity by quite literally adding masks along with other facial disguises and markers of identity: Scarecrow, The Joker, Harvey "Two-Face" Dent, Selina Kyle at the masked Charity Ball, and Bane. We've previously seen something similar with the various disguises worn by Angier and Borden in *The Prestige.* Masking doesn't necessarily conceal the identity of characters. Rather, masking objectifies concealment of intention, alignment with the intentions of others, or psychotic violence. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Nolan subverts the purported use of masks when it's revealed that the ruthless child of R'as al Ghul, who survived hellish imprisonment and orchestrated the destruction of Gotham, is not the menacing and masked Bane, but the beautiful and charming Miranda Tate.

RIGHT AND WRONG ACTIONS

Just as viewers of Nolan's films must determine which character is performing which actions, we also have to sort out the reasons why characters act as they do. The *who* and *what* in Nolan's films can be ambiguous enough; the *why* is often even more so. Without knowing the reason for an action, we can't fully understand what action it is—and we need to know that if we're to determine its moral value. Not all killings are homicides, for example. Is the death of Leonard's wife a homicide or the result of an accidental insulin overdose? What about the drowning of Angier's stage assistant Julia, or the shooting of Dormer's partner Hap?

Following, *Memento*, and *Insomnia* constitute their own trilogy since they all center on the moral failings of a protagonist who is increasingly

mired in circumstances of his own making. *Following* literally follows its characters through a series of seemingly coincidental events and random actions. The full implications of what has gone on are only discovered after the fact when The Young Man is forced to reinterpret his relationship to Cobb and see how he's allowed himself to be set up as a suspect in a murder Cobb has plotted. The listener who appears in the café at the beginning of *Following* isn't identified as a policeman until the film's concluding sequence. Located only in the present time sequences of the film that bookend The Young Man's story, The Policeman does not appear in or during The Young Man's account of action in the past. Though identified with the law, The Policeman simply refers us to a legal context, a legal frame of reference within which The Young Man's story is told. In fact, there is nothing to represent the law in the account of the past. The world in which The Young Man acted is seemingly without any moral center or legal authority—or at least one that is actively present.

Similarly, *Memento* is without any discernable moral center as virtually every character is either duplicitous or otherwise morally compromised. While Teddy is identified as a detective who worked on the case of Leonard's wife's death, he provides only a superficial reference point for the law since he's a "dirty cop" who takes Jimmy Grantz's money and is complicit in Leonard's killing both the man who raped his wife and Jimmy. Leonard's condition and false beliefs lead him to act outside any legal, let alone moral, framework. If Teddy is to be trusted, Leonard killed his wife with an overdose of insulin, a scenario Leonard now falsely attributes to Sammy Jankis. Leonard's vigilante quest for revenge is thereby, at best, a murderous displacement of his own guilt over causing his wife's death.

A legal framework is represented in *Insomnia* by the LAPD Internal Affairs Department, as well as the LA detectives and local police in Alaska. This too is a film without a clear moral center, as the central characters' actions are morally compromised. Out of loyalty, Police Chief Nyback is prepared to ignore Internal Affairs' request to report on his friend, Will Dormer. Clearly, both Dormer and the murderer, Walter Finch, act outside the law. Dormer does act against Finch when he understands Finch may have planted the murder weapon in Randy Stetz's room, though at the same time Dormer is acting to protect himself in the face of evidence that indicates his guilt. It takes time before Dormer finally accepts responsibility for the circumstances he's created that now threaten the young detective, Ellie Burr.

The question of how to act both morally and legally is focused around the moral failure of Dormer and the decision Ellie must make about how she'll act in the future. She must make a moral choice whether to conceal Dormer's crime as he lies dying. It is only then, however, that Dormer becomes a moral guide for Ellie when he prevents her from throwing the bullet into the water, telling her not to lose her way. He seems to want

her to safeguard her conscience and career rather than his reputation. There is, nevertheless, lingering ambiguity about what she'll do after she puts the bullet back into her pocket. Viewers might assume that she'll do the morally right thing—but that isn't resolved clearly within the film.[5] Indeed, what is the morally correct action is itself unclear.

With *Batman Begins*, Nolan takes up the idea of a moral fable without the degree of ambiguity characteristic of *Insomnia* and the earlier films. His films now increasingly feature a figure that functions as a moral center or compass. In Nolan's fictional worlds, a moral compass doesn't simplistically point to "the good" as if there's a straightforward and unambiguous way in which characters might proceed morally. Sometimes, even the figure of the moral compass might think it wiser to act in a way that viewers might consider deceptive. In the *Dark Knight* trilogy, Alfred serves as the moral compass for Bruce Wayne, counseling Bruce not to allow the "monster" he's created to dominate his existence. However, he also decides to destroy Rachel Dawes's letter after her death, a decision of questionable moral rectitude. The scene in *The Dark Knight Rises* where Alfred returns again to the restaurant in France concludes with Bruce Wayne's acknowledgment of his faith in Alfred's moral certainty.

The idea of Alfred as a moral center finds an earlier correlative in the figure of Cutter in *The Prestige*. There's certainly moral ambiguity around Cutter's final actions when he helps provide a form of what Francis Bacon calls "wild justice" that the law can't provide with the killing of Lord Caldlow.[6] Clearly, Angier/Lord Caldlow has betrayed Cutter and has been responsible for Borden's execution. With both Cutter and Alfred played by Michael Caine, and with both serving a similar function in the plots of their respective films, the idea of a moral center begins to find its place in Nolan's work. Caine's character provides fatherly moral advice to Dom Cobb as well in *Inception*.

With the *Dark Knight* trilogy, the actions of characters establish an increasingly delineated, though perhaps simplistic, moral framework appropriate to the nature of these fables. The increasing violence and visual spectacle in the trilogy calls not simply for an adversary such as Ra's al Ghul, but also for a thoroughly psychotic character such as The Joker, as well as malevolent characters such as Scarecrow and Bane. Notwithstanding abrupt shifts in a character such as Harvey Dent, reversals in a character's actions such as Selina Kyle, or the revelation of a character's duplicity such as Miranda Tate, the trilogy is thoroughly and unambiguously morally affirmative. Characters such as Alfred, Lucius Fox, James Gordon, and finally even Selina are the dramatic counterparts to the spectacle of Batman's moral action. And as moral tales, it's fitting they conclude with John Blake, a fitting surrogate for the Dark Knight—the genuine White Knight Dent had failed to be.

NOLAN AS *AUTEUR*

With the *Dark Knight* trilogy, Nolan creates a fictional world with more linear and accessible story lines and a clear—even if imperfect—moral compass, but the exploration of cinematic narrative in his earlier films and the main themes examined there persist. The stories he chooses to tell, how he chooses to tell them, the themes and aesthetic issues his films raise, and the challenges—both aesthetic and moral—they pose for viewers all speak to a conception of cinema where the very process of storytelling and filmmaking is invariably part of the story. Nolan's films are, at heart, complex puzzles crafted to challenge viewers as they try to make sense of the fictional situations in which characters find themselves.

Formal self-consciousness is a key aspect of Nolan's work as a cinematic *auteur*. This calls for viewers' recognition of how cinematic form shapes and directs our comprehension and understanding of events that might otherwise appear transparent and self-evident. This theme is perhaps clearest in *Inception*, which takes its characters into one another's dreams and thus makes a "reality" of subconscious states. Watching and attempting to recognize the significance of what you're seeing remain central to Nolan's cinema, both thematically and experientially for the viewer. But even watching closely will not necessarily be enough to grasp the subtleties of Nolan's complex plots, replete as they are with breaks in spatio-temporal continuity, framing devices, calculated uses of repetition of scenes or dialogue, and revelations to show that what we thought was real is either a deceit on the part of characters or an aspect of the overall plot that we initially did not understand. The admonition from *The Prestige*—"Are you watching closely?"—remains excellent advice.

NOTES

1. See, for example, David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), as well as related works by Seymour Chatman, Jonathan Culler, Roman Jakobson, and Tzvetan Todorov, for the introduction and development of the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*—story and discourse—in the poetics of both literature and film.

2. One of the conceits of the film, of course, is that there are *three* central magicians, since Borden and his twin take turns playing a magician and his *ingénieur*. Robert Angier is the third.

3. For a discussion of the framing devices in *Inception*, see Deborah Knight and George McKnight, "Narrative, Aesthetics and Cultural Imperatives in Recent Science Fiction Films" in *Endangering Science Fiction Film*, ed. Leon Marvell and Sean Redmond (New York: Routledge, 2015).

4. The philosopher Derek Parfit's thought-experiment of the Teletransporter raises exactly this question. Parfit asks whether, for each of two otherwise identical versions of the same person, it *ought* to matter if one dies and the other survives to continue "their" shared life projects. Parfit's perhaps surprising answer is that it shouldn't matter which survives, as long as the life project can be pursued by the survivor. See

Reasons and Persons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). For further discussion of Parfit's view of personal survival, see David LaRocca's chapter in this volume.

5. It's particularly noteworthy that Nolan alters the ending—perhaps for commercial reasons—from the Norwegian original, which has the "Ellie" character throwing away the bullet that implicates Dormer in Hap's killing.

6. Francis Bacon, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 347.

Part 3

Epistemology and Metaphysics

NINE

Remembering, Reminding, and Forgetting with Leonard Shelby

Dennis Knepp

Christopher Nolan's *Memento* is about a man named Leonard Shelby who lives with a traumatic brain injury. "I have this condition" he explains "Have I told you about it?" "Only every time I see you," replies Edward "Teddy" Gammell, for Leonard can't remember the last time that he explained his condition even if it was just ten minutes ago. Leonard can remember his life as an insurance investigator up until the night he and his wife were brutally attacked. But ever since the attack, he can't make new memories. Talk to him for long enough and he'll forget how the conversation started.

"What's it like?" asks Burt Hadley, the front desk clerk at the Discount Inn. "It's like waking. Like you just woke up," explains Leonard. "That must suck," says Burt—and indeed it does! But Leonard has devised a way to partially compensate for his handicap: he routinely makes use of various external signs that he carries around on his person and, in the case of his tattoos, on his very flesh. Comparing himself to another individual who suffered a similar affliction, Leonard reports, "Sammy Jankis wrote himself endless notes. But he'd get mixed up. I've got a more graceful solution to the memory problem. I'm disciplined and organized. I use habit and routine to make my life possible. Sammy had no drive. No reason to make it work."

But Leonard has a reason. He's on a mission to find the man who "killed my wife," "took away my fucking memory," and "destroyed my ability to live." His determination to find his wife's killer means that Leonard works hard to make the signs work for him, which makes him

acutely conscious about how signs work. For instance, standing outside an abandoned building, Leonard notices some tracks "These tracks are just a few days old," he tells Teddy, who responds, "What are you, Pocahontas?" Despite Teddy's teasing, Leonard is indeed like Pocahontas reading the tracks, interpreting the signs, which he hopes will lead him to his wife's killer.

"NICE SHOT, LIEBOWITZ"

Leonard uses Polaroids, notes, and tattoos to help remember things and get through each day. For example, when he gets a room at the Discount Inn, he takes a picture of the motel's marquee. Leonard uses a Polaroid camera so that the film develops quickly and he can write notes on the margin below the image. Later, when he wants to remember where he was staying, Leonard can look through the pictures in his pockets to find the one of the Discount Inn. Even though Leonard can't make any new memories about where he's currently residing, he *can* learn from this Polaroid image that he's staying at the Discount Inn.

Leonard is able to connect the Polaroid image to the Discount Inn in three specific ways: the look of the image; his knowing that Polaroid cameras create images of the things at which they're pointed; and his understanding of the meaning of the words "Discount Inn." These three ways aren't arbitrary; they reflect the three basic kinds of sign: icon, index, and symbol. The Discount Inn Polaroid expresses these three elements in this way:

1. The colors and shapes in the image reproduce what one sees when looking at the Discount Inn. It's what semiotician Charles S. Peirce (pronounced "purse") (1839–1914) calls an *Icon*, something that serves as a sign by virtue of its shared likeness with the thing signified.[1]
2. Leonard's Polaroid camera, however, must've been pointed at the Discount Inn marquee to create this likeness. Reflected light interacts with the camera lens, the film is exposed, a chemical reaction occurs, and finally the photograph is ejected from the camera. It's this complex causal process that connects the finished image to the Discount Inn. When one thing signifies another by virtue of some causal connection between them, it's what Peirce calls an *Index*.
3. But the sign still requires someone to interpret it, which Leonard is able to do precisely because he can read and understand the meaning of the words "Discount Inn." The connection between those words and the location they signify, however, is purely conventional. The words neither resemble nor have a causal connection to the signified; they have meaning only because the English-speaking community has agreed to interpret them in a certain way. In

> Peirce's terminology, those words constitute a *Symbol*, which is a triadic relationship involving an interpreter who's able to connect the sign to its meaning.

The signs in Leonard's collection of Polaroids thus follow a triadic pattern of icon, index, and symbol. There's order in the apparent chaos.

Peirce relates the three basic kinds of signs to three basic categories in which he believed all things whatsoever could be classified:

1. *Firstness* refers to the immediate experiential qualities of things, simple phenomenological experiences, such as colors and shapes. It corresponds to the Icon.
2. *Secondness* refers to the experience of force or impact, which forges a causal connection between two things. It corresponds to the Index.
3. *Thirdness* refers to a representation that can be meaningfully related to some other thing by a third part, the interpreter. It corresponds to the Symbol.

Each of Leonard's signs demonstrates this essential triad. A Polaroid starts with the experience of the look of the thing itself: its colors, shape, and other visible qualities. This is *Firstness*, the thing by itself alone. The next stage is *Secondness*, the connection between two things, in this case the Polaroid camera and Discount Inn. Their connection is due to the necessity that the camera be pointed at the motel marquee and be acted upon by the light reflected from it in order to create that image. *Thirdness* completes the triadic relationship by adding the interpreter who connects the sign to its object, in this case, Leonard, who connects the Polaroid image to his room at the Discount Inn through his understanding that the words "Discount Inn" denote the kind of establishment that would rent rooms to someone like him on the cheap.

"MAYBE I'LL TAKE A PHOTOGRAPH TO REMIND MYSELF, GET ANOTHER FREAKY TATTOO"

A sign is a thing that stands for something else, but a sign is also a thing—a Polaroid is something you can hold in your hands and write on with a black pen. Even Leonard's many tattoos are things; they're ink trapped within dermal tissues. As Leonard sits in a chair getting his tattoo of John G.'s license plate, the tattoo artist has to think of the tattoo as a thing, an object, because she has to pay close attention to the process of tattooing Leonard's thigh with a sharp needle and ink. But a tattoo is also a sign. Leonard gets the tattoo of the license plate number because of its connection with another thing: John G.'s car. It's that connection that makes the tattoo a sign rather than just a thing.

Leonard's body is covered with twenty-six tattoos (twenty-seven if you count his daydreamed tattoo that says, "I've done it"). They're all text: no images. The tattoo on his left wrist starts a list:

THE
FACTS:

One could argue that there are actually eleven tattoos here since there are eight separate letters, the two dots of the colon, and an underline. But that's silly. As it appears on Leonard's wrist we read it as one tattoo because it's the header to a list of tattooed facts:

FACT 1:
MALE

FACT 2.
WHITE

These and other tattoos remind Leonard of his mission. Moreover, they all insist that they represent *facts*. As Leonard tells Teddy, "Memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the color of a car. And memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation, they're not a record, and they're irrelevant if you have the facts." The list continues on his inside right forearm: FACT 3. FIRST NAME JOHN and FACT 4: G_____; and on his left thigh: FACT 5: DRUG DEALER and Fact 6: car license number SG1371U.

Some of his tattoos are printed backward, so they can be read in a mirror:

Others are upside down so that Leonard can look down at them easily and read them. There are tattoos that remind him how to live ("EAT" and "LEARN BY REPETITION") and what to do ("PHOTOGRAPH: HOUSE CAR FRIEND FOE" and "HABIT & ROUTINE"). Some of them are warnings, such as "DON'T TRUST," "HIDE YOUR WEAKNESS," "NOTES CAN BE LOST," or my favorite from his right bicep:

CONSIDER THE SOURCE
MEMORY IS TREACHERY

The tattoos are also in different fonts and sizes. Different fonts carry different meanings as well: Ariel or Comic Sans is much more playful than the very serious Times New Roman. Leonard's tattoo "find him and kill him," which runs diagonally across his chest, is in a Gothic style font popularly used in tattoos to make the letters look richer, more complex, and more interesting. Those deliberately artistic letters are also some of the few that aren't in all-caps. In contrast, the tattoo "OR JAMES" added to Fact 3 looks like it was written with a black magic marker and

scrawled in a hurry, without any consideration given to how it would look. The tattoo "remember Sammy Jankis" on his left hand also looks hand-scripted, but with care and nicely formed letters. In one scene, Leonard peels off a bandage from his right forearm to reveal "NEVER ANSWER THE PHONE" in a curved comic book script that evokes the noir aesthetic of the film.

"IT'S ALL BACKWARDS"

All of these text tattoos tell a remarkable story about Leonard and provide him with clues for finding his wife's killer. Typically the next thing to do would be to explain how Leonard uses the triadic semiotic relationship to read the signs and solve the mystery. All the pieces are there: Leonard's tattoos provide the "facts" and Peirce's theory of semiotics purports to explain how to read the signs. But *Memento* doesn't end with correctly interpreted signs that unveil the truth. Rather, it ends with a disturbing scene in which Leonard writes down Teddy's license plate number as a new "fact" to be tattooed. "I'm not a killer," Leonard says. "I'm just someone who wanted to make things right. Can't I just let myself forget what you've told me? Can't I just let myself forget what you've made me do? You think I just want another puzzle to solve? Another John G. to look for? You're John G. So you can be my John G. . . . Will I lie to myself to be happy? In your case Teddy . . . yes, I will."

Memento leaves us in doubt about the truth of the "facts." This chapter is similar. Rather than ending with a tidy solution, this chapter ends with doubt and unsolved problems.

In a way this is backward. Usually an essay starts with the problem and then solves it; but by starting with a potential solution and proceeding, as it were, backward to unanswered questions this chapter mimics the backward presentation of *Memento.* Nolan starts his movie where the story ends, with Teddy being shot, and then backs up to show us what happened previously, and then backs up again to tell what happened previous to the scene we just watched, and so on until we end with Leonard deciding to hunt Teddy. This chronologically backward method of presenting the story gives the viewer some sense of what it's like to be Leonard and not remember what happened ten minutes ago. One of the funniest examples of the disorientation that Leonard's "condition" produces in him is the scene that opens with Leonard running through a trailer park. He sees another man running and asks "Okay, so . . . what am I doing here? Oh, I'm chasing this guy." But then he quickly realizes, "No. He's chasing me!" Let's reproduce some of that same uncertainty in an essay.

"WE FOUND HIM, YOU KILLED HIM! . . . BUT YOU DIDN'T REMEMBER"

Memento isn't a detective story where the hero reads the clues that lead to the killer, but a disturbing fable about a man who deliberately uses tattoos and other signs to deceive himself about his own past. The permanence of tattoos gives the illusion of truth, since we often think of the truth as something that endures while deceptions are exposed and disappear. The printed word fools us into thinking that it speaks the truth and we automatically believe what we read. It's tough to be skeptical when the printed word is right there telling you what to believe. Written words have even more power to make themselves seem believable when they appear in a list of "THE FACTS." If it says "fact," we tend to believe it's a fact. Leonard thinks this way: "Facts, not memories. That's how you investigate. I know, it's what I used to do." The printed word carries more authority than handwritten notes because we tend to think that whatever's printed in books must be true. In Leonard's case, the words are even more authoritative, since they're printed indelibly on his flesh. The permanence of a tattooed list of "facts" suggests absolute truth and absolute authority.

But the printed word can't be naively trusted and *Memento* highlights just how dangerous the apparent truthfulness of the printed word can be. As a case in point, while Leonard tattoos Teddy's license plate number as SG137*1*U, the actual plate number is SG137*I*U. Leonard is a walking cautionary tale about the dangers of the written word, but some of the problems with writing were already known to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (428–348 BCE). Plato wrote dialogues, similar to plays, except that the main action is a philosophical discussion. The main character in most of Plato's dialogues is the philosopher Socrates (469–399 BCE), who 's typically engaged with his fellow Athenian citizens, as well various itinerant intellectuals, about the nature of virtue and other related topics. Socrates himself never wrote anything, instead spending his days in philosophical conversations with all comers. Socrates once described himself as a "gadfly," whose job it was to stress the importance of virtue to his fellow Athenians, whom he believed were slumbering in moral complacency. Plato, whose dialogues capture Socrates's conversational style, seems to have believed that conversation was the best method of finding truth.

Plato wrote a dialogue called the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates tells a story:

> Well, this is what I've heard. Among the ancient gods of Naucratis in Egypt there was one to whom the bird called the ibis is sacred. The name of that divinity was Theuth, and it was he who first discovered

> number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, as well as the games of draughts and dice, and, above all else, writing.[2]

The legend tells of the gift of writing from the god Theuth to the Egyptian King Thamus. Theuth is proud of his new invention and claims it'll improve memory. But Thamus disagrees, arguing that the written word will make people forgetful:

> The story goes that Thamus said much to Theuth, both for and against each art, which it would take too long to repeat. But when they came to writing, Theuth said: "O King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion for memory and for wisdom." Thamus, however, replied: "O most expert Theuth, one man can give birth to the elements of an art, but only another can judge how they can benefit or harm those who will use them. And now, since you are the father of writing, your affection for it has made you describe its effects as the opposite of what they really are. In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so."[3]

The problems associated with the written word are on display in an exaggerated form in Leonard's tattoos. He trusts them to give permanence and absolute truth, while in reality these "signs that belong to others" deceive him. Leonard doesn't have real wisdom "from the inside;" he has "the appearance of wisdom" which makes him "difficult to get along with." He doesn't know who actually killed his wife; he uses his tattoos to deceive himself into thinking he knows. Plato argues the written word itself is unreliable. I add that the very nature of Leonard's tattoos helps in that deception because the use of text, a list of "facts," capital letters, and serious fonts are all designed to give the words the illusion of authority and reliability. But it is just an illusion. While teasing Leonard, Natalie expresses a danger in trusting written lists: "It must be hard living your life off a couple of scraps of paper. You mix your laundry list with your grocery list you'll end up eating your underwear for breakfast."

NOTES

1. Charles Sanders Peirce, "What is a Sign?" in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2 (1893–1913), ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 4–10. The best biography of Peirce is Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
2. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 274c–d.
3. Ibid., 274e–275b.

TEN

False Tattoos and Failed Totems

Kierkegaard and Subjective Truth in Memento *and* Inception

Karen D. Hoffman

Featuring protagonists who attempt to accomplish their goals under epistemically problematic conditions, Christopher Nolan's *Memento* and *Inception* raise interesting questions about the complexity of determining what is objectively real. The tattoos that are supposed to assist Leonard Shelby in accurately identifying and bringing to justice the man who raped and murdered his wife, as well as the totems that are supposed to enable Dom Cobb to distinguish the real world from the landscape of dreams, ultimately fail to provide either character with the kind of access to unbiased, objective certainty that both mistakenly seem to expect from them. Although Leonard's difficulty stems from a head injury that has left him seemingly incapable of making new memories, and Cobb's difficulty is generated by his ability to enter into (and become trapped in) vivid and shared dreamscapes, both face the challenge of living in a world of objective uncertainty that contains falsities introduced by other characters—and even by the protagonists themselves.

Leonard's and Cobb's responses to the difficulties they encounter reveal a great deal about the characters themselves, so much so that the films become as much about these two men as they are about the search for a killer or a quest to complete an inception. Viewers understand that *Memento* isn't just about a man trying to bring a murderer to justice; it's about *Leonard Shelby's* attempt to accomplish this task. Similarly, viewers realize the *Inception* isn't just about an attempt to use dreams to plant a

lucrative idea in the mind of a rival businessman. Elements of Cobb's memories, dreams, and subconscious play such a prominent role in the film that moviegoers seem to be exploring the man as much as the dream worlds he inhabits. *Cobb's* subconscious and dreams are central to the film—so much so that Ariadne expresses concern "that, as we go deeper into Fischer, we're also going deeper into you [Cobb]. And I'm not sure we're gonna like what we find."

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) would likely think that this focus on the characters and their responses to living in a world of objective uncertainty is part of what makes *Memento* and *Inception* so interesting. Not only are Leonard and Cobb dealing with the problem of distinguishing what's objectively true from what merely appears to be, both are also asked to confront questions about who they are, to take responsibility for the choices they've made, and to work toward becoming the individuals they would like to be. In Kierkegaard's terms, both protagonists are confronted by questions pertaining to *subjective* as well as *objective* truth. They must commit to values and interpretations that lack objective certainty but that will nevertheless be crucial to shaping their identities and their relations to others and the worlds in which they live.

Memento and *Inception* also point to the significance of how these characters appropriate and relate to their chosen beliefs, values, projects, and commitments. Both films engage their audiences in trying to discern what's really happening and what's objectively real, but both also reveal how the subjective truths that the characters embrace are, in the end, existentially more important than any objective facts.

SUBJECTIVE TRUTH AND IDEAS THAT "STICK"

Kierkegaard devotes a significant portion of his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments"* to a discussion of subjective truth.[1] In this work, authored under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus,[2] Kierkegaard responds to philosophy's increasing emphasis on "scientific" views of the natural world, history, and human beings, particularly as presented in the work of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Kierkegaard's "unscientific" text explores some of the problems inherent in a philosophical system like Hegel's, which regards human beings primarily as rational observers who engage in speculative thought about the world, our role in history, and ourselves. Kierkegaard worries that such systems fail to appreciate the significance of subjectivity and the importance of our relationship to "essential truths" that concern our ethical and religious values and commitments. He believes that the fact that human beings are *existing* individuals in the world, not just disengaged minds that simply *think* about the world, has consequences

not just for what we can know but also for who we are and what we should be. Kierkegaard urges us not to lose sight of the significance of the task of becoming a *self*. While objective truth focuses on claims that have no essential relationship to the knower, subjective truth focuses on the way that an individual passionately commits to his beliefs and values, making them central to his existence. In emphasizing subjectivity, Kierkegaard means for us to consider the *subject*—the existing individual—who engages in thinking and acting, as well as the implications of her beliefs, choices, and actions for her life. Subjectivity focuses not just on *what* someone knows but on *how* she appropriates it, values it, commits to it, and integrates it into her life:

> When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth, the true. If only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual's relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.[3]

A person who passionately appropriates an idea can be living subjectively "in the truth" even if the idea turns out to be objectively false: *"Objectively the emphasis is on what is said; subjectively the emphasis is on how it is said."* Importantly, the "how" does not refer to the way it's said in terms of "manner, modulation of voice, oral delivery, etc., but [to] . . . the relation of the existing person, in his very existence, to what is said."[4] *How* existing individuals live their ethical and religious commitments is at least as important as—and arguably more important than—*what* those commitments are.[5] We must relate ourselves to our values and commitments by engaging in honest self-reflection about what they are, what they mean for us, and whether they are good for us.

Kierkegaard isn't making the problematic assertion that a claim that's objectively false becomes objectively true merely because the subject wants or believes it to be. Instead, his point seems to be that, when we're talking about essential ethical and ethical-religious knowledge, there's something existentially more important than objective truth: namely, passionately adopting our values and beliefs, actively reflecting on them, being shaped by them, and making choices in connection with them. Living as if certain things are true can make them true *for an individual*—not in an objective sense but in an *existential* one.

Like many characters in Nolan's films, Kierkegaard is interested in ideas, values, and commitments that "stick" by having emotional significance for an individual and shaping who she is as well as what she does. He worries that the "scientific" view of the individual emphasizes detached reason and fails to value passionate engagement with self, others,

and the world. He calls attention to how we relate to what we know—how we reflect on it and how we're defined by it.

When objective truth is at issue, any knower can be substituted for any other; it's not important who happens to be in possession of the knowledge. One knower relates to 2+3=5 just as any other knower would. Individuals typically have no passionate connection to objective truth; it isn't essential to who they are or how they live. Conversely, "All essential knowing pertains to existence."[6] Because our existence extends beyond our intellects, we can passionately live and die for ideas as well as contemplate them.

When Cobb talks with Saito about the possibility of inception, a process through which Cobb's team will access the dreams of Robert Fischer and plant the idea that Fischer should break up his father's company, Cobb explains that the idea to be incepted has to "stick"; it has to be planted deep enough that the mark believes it to be his own. For that to happen, it must be an idea to which he has an emotional connection. Additionally, the incepted idea must become one on which he will be moved to act: "the seed that we plant in this man's mind will grow into an idea. This idea will define him. . . . It may come to change everything about him." If inception works, the idea won't be something Fischer believes merely as an objective truth; his passion for this idea will play a significant role in shaping who he is and his future choices. Cobb insists that inception is possible—"you just have to go deep enough."

In order to do that, the idea has to be translated into "an emotional concept" at multiple levels. It must connect with other ideas, values, and commitments that Fischer already has. Even though it's a new idea, it must find a coherent place within the larger whole that defines Fischer and be situated among his given cares and concerns. Although it won't originate from Fischer's mind, it must find a receptive place within his mind. The seed won't grow unless it's planted within soil capable of nurturing it.

It's for this reason that Cobb suggests that the team connect the idea of dissolving Fischer's father's corporation to the positive emotions of reconciliation and catharsis. After learning as much as they can about Fischer and his relationship to his father, the team decides to connect the idea to several others at different levels of the dream they'll all be sharing. On the first level, the attitude that "I will not follow in my father's footsteps" is of central importance. The second level stresses the commitment that "I will create something for myself"; while the third houses the belief that "My father doesn't want me to be him." Connecting with Fischer's existing choices, values, hopes, and commitments, these ideas work together toward the conclusion that he should dissolve his father's company and spend his life in some other endeavor that will define him.

It isn't the objective truth of the idea that's most important here: what matters is how Fischer appropriates it in his own life. One's relationship

to an idea is more important than its source. To regard the *source* of the idea as having primary significance assumes that ideas that originate from the self have a validity that ideas that originate from other people do not. But, regardless of how we came to have our ideas, the important thing is what we do with them—how we reflect on them, evaluate them, and choose to follow or reject them. For ideas to "stick," they must fit with all our other commitments.

Perhaps that's part of the reason why Leonard's act of killing someone he believes to be "John G.," his wife's alleged rapist and murderer, doesn't stick; although he claims he wants to kill John G., he may be more interested in perpetuating the search itself. He values playing detective more than he values bringing the *real* perpetrator to justice. As John "Teddy" Gammell, the police detective who helps Leonard with his search, insightfully observes, "You don't want the truth. You make up your own truth." He informs Leonard that he was the one who removed the missing pages in his police file "to create a puzzle you could never solve. . . . You, you wander around, playing detective. You live in a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for. A sense of purpose to your life. A romantic quest that you wouldn't end even if I wasn't in the picture." Even when Teddy, Natalie, and others attempt to use Leonard for their own purposes, they likely meet with so much success in large part because Leonard wants to believe them. He doesn't really want to close the case. In addition to editing his police file,[7] Leonard burns the single copy of the Polaroid picture that provides evidence of his role in the death of the man who attacked his wife. Since he hasn't chosen to give himself any tattoos to commemorate the execution, Leonard has no record of the event.[8]

Enjoying his role as a detective, he allows himself to be played by others and sabotages any attempts to move on to a life that consists of something other than living for revenge. The way that Leonard relates to his search and appropriates the information he uncovers is at least as important as the facts themselves. Viewers have good reason to suspect that Leonard's completion of his self-proclaimed *raison d'être* doesn't stick, not just because of his anterograde amnesia, but even more so because it isn't the thing to which he's truly committed.

EMBRACING OBJECTIVE UNCERTAINTY

Despite our lack of objective certainty, we must choose to live as though some set of ideas, values, and moral principles are true. But Kierkegaard doesn't believe that we should therefore try to convince ourselves that they're *objectively* true. Instead, we should embrace subjective truths for what they are, accepting that we've chosen them despite our uncertainty. In recognition of this situation, Kierkegaard defines a subjective truth as

"*[a]n objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness*."[9] Subjective truth is by definition objectively uncertain; it can't be justified by appealing to rational proofs and demonstrations that would satisfy impartial observers. Leonard Shelby seems to make precisely this mistake.

Leonard's orientation to the world is compromised by a head injury that seems to have left him incapable of making new memories. Although he remembers things he knew before his injury, his most recent memory seems to be his injured wife lying on the bathroom floor after being attacked by the intruder John G. and his partner, whom Leonard shot. Given his anterograde amnesia, Leonard has only a brief period of time before his short-term memory "resets," leaving him to rely on Polaroids, handwritten notes, and his extensive tattoos. The film uses Leonard's confusion to comic effect in several scenes, as when he's shown initially thinking he's chasing a man only to discover quickly that the man is chasing *him*, or when he asks the same man—now bloodied and gagged in a closet—who hit him, only to be told, "You did."

While Leonard acknowledges that his seemingly objective mementos can be manipulated, he seems to place a great deal of faith in the system he's created. "You really need a system if you're gonna make it work," he explains. "You kind of learn to trust your own handwriting. That becomes an important part of your life. You write yourself notes. And where you put your notes—that also becomes important." He adds that "you have to be wary of other people writing stuff for you" that might "lead you astray."

Particularly vital information can be tattooed on his body. Leonard's tattoos warn him to be wary of reliance on objectively false or missing information. One reads: "DON'T TRUST YOUR WEAKNESS." Others warn him to "CONSIDER THE SOURCE" and to remember that "MEMORY IS TREACHERY" and that "NOTES CAN BE LOST." In his recalling of the story of Sammy Jankis, whose condition helps Leonard understand his own similar situation, Leonard observes that "Sammy wrote himself endless amounts of notes, but he got mixed up." Leonard believes he can avoid Sammy's mistakes by being "disciplined and organized" and using "habit and routine." Whereas "Sammy had no drive," Leonard claims he has a reason to make his system work: his quest to find the John G. who raped and murdered his wife.

At first glance, Leonard's passionate commitment to his search for John G. might appear to be exactly what Kierkegaard recommends. However, we've already seen that we have good reason to wonder whether Leonard is actually more committed to playing detective than he is to finding John G. Additionally, we have reason to suspect that Leonard doesn't accept the objective uncertainty of his position. Leonard dismisses Teddy's concern that someone might be setting him up to kill the wrong guy, noting that he relies "on facts, not recommendations." When

Teddy counters that "you can't trust a man's life to your little notes and pictures," Leonard asks simply, "Why not?" Reminding Teddy that "eyewitness testimony is unreliable" and that "cops don't catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff," Leonard points out that the police "collect facts. They make notes. And they draw conclusions. Facts, not memories. That's how you investigate."

What Leonard completely ignores is that facts must be interpreted and the person interpreting them may not be impartial. Even while recognizing "that memories can be distorted" and that they're "just an interpretation," he seems to think that he can be an objective gatherer of facts despite the problems with his memory. He places undue faith in his own ability to be objective rather than accepting a certain degree of objective uncertainty and acknowledging his limitations.

Toward the end of the film, it becomes clear that even the supposed "facts" of the case aren't what they initially appeared to be. Not only has Leonard been deceived in his pursuit of multiple John G.'s, the basic facts of the crime he's supposedly attempting to solve have been altered. According to Teddy, Leonard's wife *survived* the assault, only to lapse into a coma and die after Leonard gave her too many insulin injections—a tragedy that Leonard's distorted memory had associated with Sammy Jankis and his wife.

Kierkegaard might criticize Leonard not only for being mistaken about *what* he's really subjectively committed to doing—playing detective rather than catching a killer—but even for being dishonest about *how* he's playing detective. He convinces himself that he's gathering facts when, if anything, he's obscuring and falsifying data. He even goes so far as to get a tattoo that he knows to be false—a clear violation of his own rules and an act through which he sets himself up to murder Teddy.[10] Moreover, by killing Teddy, the one person with knowledge of Leonard's activities and a full understanding of the extent of his self-deception, he takes the life of the one person who might be able to help him become better. Despite his remark that "we all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are," Leonard kills the one person who could fulfill that function. He thus loses his best chance at engaging in honest self-reflection, achieving an honest self-assessment, and advancing toward living in the truth.

"MAYBE YOU SHOULD START INVESTIGATING YOURSELF"

Kierkegaard notes that "speculative thought defines subjectivity *negatively* in the direction of objectivity"[11]—that is, as merely that which falls short of being objective. In contrast, he prefers to emphasize subjectivity as something *positive*, as what allows individuals to be "in the truth," passionately embracing objective uncertainties, reflecting on their beliefs, values, and commitments, and living according to them.[12] For Kierke-

gaard, our ability to appropriate ideas creates both the possibility of subjective truth and the task of living *in the truth* and existing as human beings in the fullest sense. While objective claims, like those made by mathematicians, aren't likely to change who we are or help us decide who we should become, subjective truths have implications for almost every aspect of our moral and religious lives. But "subjectivity is untruth if it refuses to comprehend that subjectivity is truth but wants, for example, to be objective."[13] Subjective truth must be recognized and accepted as objectively uncertain. An individual who mistakenly tries to turn a subjective, existential claim into an objective one and parade it as fact is unlikely to be living in the truth.[14]

Leonard seems to be making this mistake. As we've seen, his life presents an overarching pattern of self-deception and active support of the mechanisms to perpetuate it. He lies to himself about even the thing that he claims is most subjectively important to him and that forms his life's mission: finding John G. Leonard has not only managed to deceive himself into thinking that John G. killed his wife, he's also managed to convince himself that John G. is out there waiting to be found. He knows that the tattoo he will get with Teddy's license plate will incorrectly identify Teddy as his wife's attacker and set Leonard up to kill him. One might wonder if Leonard even lies to himself about his inability to make new memories, since the fact that he's conditioned himself mistakenly to remember that Sammy had a wife suggests that Leonard might be able to condition himself to make new—albeit false—memories. Teddy's observation is instructive here: "Well, I guess they can only make you remember the things you want to be true."

Given Leonard's level of self-deception, it seems fairly clear that he isn't living in the truth. Toward the end of the film, which marks the beginning of the sequence of events the film depicts, Leonard even allows himself to ponder the question, "Do I lie to myself to be happy?" But rather than taking any action to correct his deception, he simply answers, "Yes." Although he's made it his mission to try to live objectively—as a detective seeking objective facts—he doesn't really care about them.

Kierkegaard would likely find it even more troubling that Leonard shows no interest in considering who he really is. Repeatedly, he answers Teddy's allegation that he doesn't know who he is with a statement of facts: "My name is Leonard Shelby. I'm from San Francisco." He isn't interested in engaging in even the kind of modest self-reflection and introspection that his clothes and sports car would seem to require. He shrugs off Teddy's observation that most insurance investigators don't wear designer suits and drive Jaguars. Seemingly obsessed with "facts," Leonard's oblivious to the larger and more substantive existential questions about himself.[15] He ignores Teddy's advice that he ought to start investigating himself and instead prefers to focus on seemingly objective,

though often mistaken, facts of the case that he's supposedly trying to solve.

Additionally, he seems to believe that the facts speak for themselves and ignores his role in interpreting and manipulating them. Speaking about his wife, in one of his few honest moments, Leonard laments to Natalie: "She's gone. And the present is trivia, which I scribble down as fucking notes!"[16] Despite his self-deception, he seems to have some awareness that he's living a lie, not simply because he's working with incorrect "objective" claims, but because he ignores the larger existential project of determining who he is and committing to becoming the person he wants to be.

TAKING A LEAP OF FAITH

Dom Cobb faces problems of objective uncertainty throughout *Inception*. But, unlike Leonard, who seems to think that his "system" of mementos can overcome objective uncertainty, Cobb seems to be willing to accept objective uncertainty and take a leap of faith. He differs from Leonard because he faces the problems from his past, engages in self-reflection, and takes responsibility for his choices.

Although Cobb doesn't have any problem making new memories, he has difficulties dealing with old ones, particularly those involving his deceased wife, Mal. A recurring figure from Cobb's subconscious, Mal repeatedly shows up in his dreams. That might not be a problem were it not for the fact that much of the action—perhaps all of the action—in the film takes place in dreams, and Mal wreaks havoc whenever she appears.

Due to the realistic quality of their dreams, it's difficult for the film's characters to determine whether they're currently awake or dreaming. The initial action sequence occurs within a dream at Saito's palace from which the characters awaken into yet another dream, now in Saito's apartment. When the team awakens again on a train from their shared, drug-induced dream within a dream, we're left wondering whether *this* world into which they've awoken is objectively real. Cobb seems to wonder about this himself, for he repeatedly engages in spinning his top, the totem that supposedly succumbs to gravity and topples in the real world, allowing him to determine whether he's awake. He checks it three times within the first hour of the film.

But it's not clear that Cobb's totem is entirely reliable. Since it initially belonged to Mal, she knows its weight and properties and understands how long it should spin before falling. She could've constructed a dream in which Cobb's totem would behave just as it does in the real world. Consequently, Cobb can't be sure that he isn't in a dream Mal has constructed.

Moreover, he can't be certain that he isn't in a dream of his *own* making. A totem can only ensure that its owner isn't trapped in a dream constructed by someone unfamiliar with the specific properties of that object. But it doesn't preclude being in a dream whose architect is familiar with the totem's particulars. Like Mal, Cobb knows how long his top is supposed to spin before succumbing to the laws of gravity. So *he* could've constructed a dream world in which his top appears to be subject to the physical laws of the real world. Consequently, the totem that's supposed to demonstrate the objective truth of the external world can't prove that Cobb isn't living in his own dream. It can never provide the objective certainty he seeks.

Complicating matters further is Cobb's disregard of one of his own recommendations about avoiding incorporating memories into dream spaces. Memories are dangerous because they make it particularly challenging to distinguish waking from dreaming and reality from fiction.[17] When Ariadne challenges Cobb after discovering that he's using his dreams to relive his memories of his life with Mal, he explains that he returns to these memories because "these are moments I regret. They're memories that I have to change." Yet he also admits, "Whatever I do, I can't change this moment." Accepting the inalterability of the past and avoiding regret are important parts of Cobb's existential journey. It's no accident that the very song that plays throughout the film to signal to the characters that the end of the dream is near is Edith Piaf's "*Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*" ("No, I Regret Nothing").

Cobb knows that in order to see his children again, he has to "get back home" to the "real world." The film seems to be intentionally vague, however, about which—if any—of its scenes occur in the real world.[18] The characters in the film pass from dreams to reality so seamlessly that it's practically impossible to distinguish the two. Clues about the fact that dreams lack a transition to what came before are of little help, since the characters in *Inception*, as in most films, often appear in scenes that lack lead-ins and don't show viewers how the characters came to be where they are. When, in a remembered argument with Mal, Cobb appeals to the fact that he can't manipulate reality as evidence that the world is objectively real, Mal replies that he can't alter his surroundings at will only because he doesn't *know* that he's dreaming.

Moreover, the film depicts dreams within dreams in an increasingly complicated and reality-defying way. Although *Inception* works hard to explain the logic of the five levels of reality on which it operates for much of the last hour, and though it gives us visual and verbal cues, like Piaf's song and the "kick," to signal transitions and to distinguish the different levels of dreaming, the mere possibility of a dream within a dream within a dream—with the limbo of the pure, unconstructed subconscious one more level down—suggests a labyrinth from which it might be impossible to escape.

Throughout the film, various characters suggest that Cobb might be lost in the confusion about reality and dreaming. Early on, his father-in-law, Stephen Miles, encourages Cobb to "come back to reality." The sleepers in the den in Mombasa raise the possibility that there are people for whom "the dream has become their reality."[19] Mal raises the possibility that Cobb is "lost" in the labyrinth between reality and dreams. She presses him to acknowledge his confusion: "Chased around the globe by anonymous corporations and police forces the way the projections persecute the dreamer? Admit it. You don't believe in one reality anymore."

Interestingly, Mal's advice to her husband echoes Saito's admonition when Cobb is deciding whether to attempt inception: "choose."[20] Although Saito offers Cobb the substantial reward of a pardon that would let him return to home to his children as payment for a successful inception, the businessman leaves it to Cobb to choose whether he wants to do the work necessary to achieve that reward. Although there's no guarantee—no objective certainty—that Saito will be able to deliver on his promise, he asks Cobb to take a "leap of faith"[21] and trust him. In a line that the two men will exchange several times in the course of the film, Saito suggests that the alternative to taking the leap is to "become an old man, filled with regret, waiting to die alone."[22]

Ultimately, the choice is Cobb's, and he must choose under conditions of objective uncertainty. He must decide that what's important isn't demonstrable proof of the objective reality of the world but the fact that he's chosen it. He must embrace the objective uncertainty and passionately appropriate his choice. As long as he remains caught up trying to determine what's objectively real, he won't be able to escape his doubt, despair, and regret. Instead, he must make a commitment to something that he will make subjectively true by *living* it.

In the end, this is precisely what he does. Rather than becoming an old man filled with regret, Cobb chooses to live in a world where he's reunited with his children. At the end of the film, he spins his totem one last time. But in this final scene, he no longer seems concerned about the outcome. In the past, he would hover anxiously over his spinning totem, eager to know if it would fall. In the final scene of *Inception*, however, he walks away—and the film ends—while it's still spinning. Cobb seems to have accepted that his totem can't provide him with absolute certainty about what's real and that to remain fixated on it is to focus on the wrong thing. His renewed relationship with his children is more important than whether the top falls.[23]

Unlike Leonard Shelby—haunted by his deceased wife, actively deceiving himself about his role in her demise, and problematically responding to his existential situation by immersing himself in a world of seemingly objective facts—Cobb faces his troubling memories of Mal, comes to terms with her suicide, admits that he's lost, and chooses to live in a world that reunites him with his children. While false tattoos and

unreliable totems place both characters in positions of uncertainty about what's objectively real, only Cobb seems to be fully aware of that fact. Unlike Leonard, who lies to himself about his real motives in his search for a nonexistent man and who mistakenly places his faith in the "facts" of the world, Cobb takes responsibility for his past, chooses a particular future, and in the process seems to find both himself and his way home. By the end of *Inception*, we have reason to be optimistic that Cobb has managed to find and choose what Leonard did not: an idea that sticks, an idea that lacks objective certainty but has the greatest possible significance for the one who chooses to take a leap of faith and live according to it, an idea that creates the possibility of living a subjectively true life.

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NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

2. It should be noted that there's some controversy in the secondary literature about the extent to which the texts penned under Kierkegaard's pseudonyms can be said to represent his thought. In his helpful exposition of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, C. Stephen Evans discusses some of the reasons that Kierkegaard used pseudonyms to communicate indirectly with his readers. Evans also calls attention to the fact that Kierkegaard listed his own name on both volumes as the person "responsible for publication." For more discussion of the role of the pseudonyms see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's* Fragments *and* Postscript*: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), particularly pp. 6–16. See also Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's* Concluding Unscientific Postscript (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996), particularly pp. 8–19.

3. Kierkegaard, p. 199; italics deleted from original text.

4. Kierkegaard, pp. 202–3; italics and bold in original text.

5. That isn't to say that it makes no difference at all what those commitments are. Kierkegaard seems to be arguing that subjective truth is more important when we are talking about essential (ethical and religious) knowledge for existing beings. He may have believed that a passionate and earnest attempt to live a particular way has a self-corrective function that will discover and replace those subjective commitments and ways of living that are not tenable.

6. Kierkegaard, p. 197.

7. Although Teddy is the source of this information, it doesn't appear that there is any reason for him to lie about it, since Leonard is not going to remember what Teddy says.

8. Interestingly, in the final images of the film, Leonard closes his eyes and images himself in bed with his wife with the tattoo "I've done it" located in the empty space on his chest. Since he is at that point on his way to the tattoo parlor and still in

possession of the knowledge (and the memory of the photo) that Teddy gave him about having killed John G., the film seems to be calling attention to the fact that Leonard, even with his seeming inability to make new memories, is capable of making meaningful choices. He could have chosen to write "I've done it" on his notecard and made that the content of his next tattoo. Instead, he chooses to burn the Polaroids that are evidence of his role in the deaths of two men (both John G.'s) and to carefully record Teddy's license plate number on the card, thereby ensuring that Teddy will be Leonard's next victim.

9. Kierkegaard, p. 203; italics original.

10. For a discussion of the *moral* significance of Leonard's choice to get a false tattoo, see Jason Eberl's chapter in this volume.

11. Kierkegaard, p. 207; italics added.

12. Another way in which Kierkegaard believes that subjectivity can be positive is that it can help us to discover some of the objective facts that we are capable of discerning. What we find can be influenced by how we seek. Nolan's *Interstellar* provides a helpful example of this: it's unlikely that Murph Cooper would have discovered the information she needed to save the world if she hadn't felt an emotional connection to the "ghost" behind her bookshelf and if she didn't value the watch her father gave her enough to return to the farmhouse and retrieve it.

13. Kierkegaard, p. 207.

14. Complicating matters here is Kierkegaard suggestion that, in addition to being untrue by trying to make subjective truths into objective claims, an individual can fail to be in the truth even as she embraces subjectivity. Evans maintains that this makes sense if we understand the claim that "subjectivity is truth" to be an ideal statement about what subjectivity should be and "subjectivity is untruth" to be a descriptive statement about what subjectivity is in practice for the majority who fall short of ideal. Evans, p 134.

15. One of the few times viewers see Leonard engage in honest reflection about his life and his condition occurs while he is lying in bed with Natalie discussing his inability to grieve over his wife's death, since he doesn't even know how long ago she died. He's lost the ability to process things like grief. But instead of going deeper, he seems to have cut off that introspection. It's easier to be a detective with a factual case to solve than to be an existing individual embracing objective uncertainty.

16. Interestingly, his outburst follows a conversation in which he and Natalie have been discussing the possibility of whether Leonard can be certain of anything.

17. When Cobb warns Ariadne that building a dream from your memory is the "easiest way to lose your grasp on what's real and what is a dream," she asks, "Is that what happened to you?"

18. In a 2010 interview with *Wired*, Nolan admits that "the ambiguity is very much a part of the substance of the film—I'll put it that way. The film does not specify one way or the other." Nolan goes on to add that he has an answer that resolves the ambiguity of the film, but the film doesn't reveal that answer: "I've always believed that if you make a film with ambiguity, it needs to be based on a sincere interpretation. If it's not, then it will contradict itself, or it will be somehow insubstantial and end up making the audience feel cheated. I think the only way to make ambiguity satisfying is to base it on a very solid point of view of what you think is going on, and then allow the ambiguity to come from the inability of the character to know, and the alignment of the audience with that character." Robert Capps, "Q&A: Christopher Nolan on Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity" *Wired* (November 29, 2010): http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/11/pl_inception_nolan/all/.

19. Interestingly, when Yusuf offers to show Cobb the sleepers, he adds that "perhaps you will not want to see." Less than a minute later he goes on to ask Cobb, "Do you still dream?"

20. It's difficult to explain why Mal doesn't simply kill Cobb in order to awaken him if she really believes they're trapped in a dream unless there's some significance to the fact that he needs to *choose* to take the leap himself. As it is, Mal tries to coerce

Cobb into jumping with her by saying that she's arranged it so that the police will believe that he's responsible for her death, which will prevent him from being able to return to the United States and see his children. (This despite the fact that Cobb isn't even in the same building that Mal is in when she jumps. He's in the window of the room that shows signs of an argument or a struggle, but that room is across the street from the window from which Mal seemingly jumps to her death.)

21. It's worth noting that this is a phrase often associated with Kierkegaard, particularly with the knight of faith that he discusses in his *Fear and Trembling*, a work attributed to the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). Mal also asks Cobb to take a leap of faith with her and jump off the window ledge. The leap of faith is also raised in Cobb's final discussion with Saito as an old man in limbo near the end of the film.

22. At 1:13:15, Saito and Cobb have a second exchange about the possibility of being filled with regret and waiting to die alone. Finally, at 2:15:30, when the film returns to the scene with which it opened, we hear Saito say that he's an old man, to which Cobb replies "filled with regret" and Saito finishes "waiting to die alone."

23. Nolan himself makes this point: "the most important emotional thing is that Cobb's not looking at it [the spinning top]. He doesn't care." *Wired*, 2010.

ELEVEN

Inception and Perception

What Should a Dream Thief Believe?

Jamie Carlin Watson

> You are not wrong, who deem
> That my days have been a dream;
> Yet if hope has flown away
> In a night, or in a day,
> In a vision, or in none,
> Is it therefore the less *gone*?
>
> —Edgar Alan Poe, "A Dream Within a Dream" (1849)

Dominick Cobb and his team of dream specialists steal ideas from people's minds while they sleep. Their latest project is to attempt the opposite, the fabled and highly improbable implanting of an idea—inception. Unfortunately, while inside a target's mind, it's almost impossible to distinguish reality from the dream state constructed for the project. There's supposedly only one sure way to tell the difference: keep a totem that has properties or that behaves in a way only you understand.

But what if these totems don't work and there's no way to distinguish between dreaming and waking life? In that case, *what* should the dream thieves believe? Should they suspend *all* belief? Or should they stop worrying about whether they're dreaming, go on believing as normal? Many philosophers have argued that *having true beliefs* about the world should be our most fundamental cognitive goal. Some have even claimed that if it turns out we can't have true beliefs, we should give up believing altogether—and that we might even be happier for it. It isn't implausible to think our dream thieves might be less anxious if they stopped worrying

about whether their beliefs are true. But would they have to give up believing altogether? Are beliefs valuable for any reason other than truth?

To answer this question of what the dream thieves should believe if they realize they might be dreaming, we will need a bit of background on the problem. Could we really be *completely* deceived by a dream? And if so, is there any hope of breaking the spell? Could totems—or anything else—tell us for certain that we aren't dreaming?

IS LIFE BUT A DREAM?

Inception is premised on the possibility of constructing a dream that seems so real the dreamer—and sometimes even the dream thieves—can't tell the difference between the real world of waking life and the fictional world of a dream architect's making, between *the way things really are* and *the way they perceive them to be*. If an architect could construct such a vivid world, couldn't our minds do the same?

This question wasn't new even to Socrates (469–399 BCE), who posed the puzzle to the young math student Theaetetus: "There's a question you must often have heard people ask—the question what evidence we could offer if we were asked whether in the present instance, at this moment, we are asleep and dreaming all our thoughts, or awake and talking to each other in real life."[1] Theaetetus is unhelpful: "The two seem to correspond in all their characteristics." This puzzle was revived in the seventeenth century by René Descartes, whose response to it we'll examine later on.

The idea that waking and dreaming life could correspond in all their characteristics motivates an argument for skepticism called the "dream argument." *Skepticism*, of the sort we're interested in, is the view that we don't know whether we know anything at all. It is *not* the view that we don't know *anything*, which is self-defeating. Rather, it's a disposition to *suspend* belief because you can't tell whether any claim is true.

The dream argument for skepticism goes like this:

1. I know I am in the waking world only if I can tell, at any given time, that I am not dreaming.
2. I can't tell, at any given time, that I am not dreaming.
3. Therefore, I do not know that I am in the waking world.

Notice that the argument doesn't say I can't tell that I *am* dreaming. I might be able to. It says only that I can't tell that I am *not* dreaming. This is a problem because, if I can tell I *am* dreaming, I am not perceiving reality as it is; therefore, my beliefs about my perceptions are most likely faulty. But, if I can't tell that I'm *not* dreaming, I don't know that my beliefs aren't faulty.

Notice how *personal* the argument is—it must be considered by each of us in the first person. You can't help me solve the dream argument because you might be part of my dream! This point isn't lost on our dream thieves. The dream technicians are frequently worried they're still in a dream, Dom especially. When he's alone, we often find him spinning his totem to confirm that he's really awake.

We should keep in mind a difference between the dream argument and the related "evil demon argument." The evil demon argument, first introduced by Descartes, asks me to consider the possibility that there is a being like God, all powerful, but malicious instead of good—an omnipotent demon. Imagine this demon is intent upon deceiving me about all my beliefs. Such a being could make me believe just about anything it wants, so even something as seemingly simple and obvious as *two plus two equals four* could be false. If it is even possible that this being exists, I can't be sure that most of my beliefs aren't false; I can't rule out the possibility that all my experiences and perceptions are the result of the demon's deceit. Now, both the dream argument and the evil demon argument support skepticism, but they lead to skepticism about different sets of beliefs. The dream argument raises doubts about beliefs based on sensory experiences, the sorts of perceptions that are regularly mimicked in a dream. The evil demon argument raises doubts about sensory beliefs *plus* beliefs about abstract matters like mathematics and logic. Even if we need not worry about the dream argument, the evil demon argument may still loom. However, we won't consider the evil demon argument here.

Now that we know what the dream argument is, we can ask: does it work? In other words, do Dom and crew *really* have to worry whether their beliefs are true? The argument hangs on its second premise: *I can't tell, at any given time, that I am not dreaming*. Is there any reason to believe this premise? Presumably, we've all had a vivid dream or nightmare that we were sure was real until we "woke up." But waking ends it, right?

One reason to believe this premise is that most of us already agree that our perceptions aren't *necessarily* caused by what we think causes them. Most people who aren't skeptics admit that you can *perceive* something that *isn't there*—as in a hallucination or trick of the light—and you can *fail to perceive* something that *is* there—such as not seeing your keys when they're right in front of you.

Early in the film, when Mal has blown the crew's cover to Saito and has a gun to Arthur's head, Dom says, "There's no use threatening him in a dream, right, Mal?" At this point, we've learned that, when dreamers are killed, they supposedly wake to the real world. But here we learn something new; we're told that there's more to a dream than mere imagery. Mal says, "That depends on what you are threatening. Killing him would just wake him up. But pain . . . pain is in the mind." She then shoots Arthur in the leg, which causes him terrible pain even though he

hasn't been shot in the real world. He feels pain, but shooting him in the leg didn't cause it because he wasn't *really* shot in the leg! And a little later in the film, when Dom is first introducing Ariadne to dream building, he blows up the café they're sitting next to. She's killed and wakes, but she feels the shattered glass hitting her before she dies. Dom explains, "It's never *just* a dream, is it? A face full of glass hurts like hell. When you're in it, it feels real." This suggests that we might perceive the world exactly as we do even if all those perceptions are merely the products of a dream.

Another reason to believe the premise is that it isn't clear—even scientifically—how objects and events in the world outside of our minds *cause* or *become* ideas in our minds. If we're pressed to explain how perception works, we might draw analogies between our eyes and cameras, and our ears and microphones, but cameras and microphones are tools that merely *convey* light and sound: cameras do not select, interpret, and form attitudes about images. And even when these tools are paired with powerful computers that select and interpret images and sounds, these computers must be programmed to "know" what to look for. It's unclear how the processes of *recognition* and *understanding* work. Physical things can't become meaningful ideas, and yet meaningful ideas about physical things are what we perceive. If there's no viable explanation of how the external world impresses itself onto our mental lives, it isn't clear that our perceptions are actually caused by things outside our minds. Hence, we might be massively mistaken about what we think we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell; all of it could be the product of a dream.

A third reason to believe the premise, popular among ancient skeptics, is the diversity of mechanisms by which different organisms supposedly perceive the world. The Roman philosopher Sextus Empiricus (160–210 CE) asks us to consider all the different mechanisms we suppose animals use to perceive: "animals which have the pupil of the eye slanting and elongated . . . animals which have round pupils . . . [eyes that] protrude beyond the face owing to their convexity, while others are quite concave, and others again lie in a level plane." He notes differences in tactile organs: "creatures covered with shells, with flesh, with prickles, with scales." And he contrasts animals "with a very narrow auditory passage and those with a very wide one, or . . . animals with hairy ears and those with smooth ears." These differences in mechanism suggest differences in perception. Imagine replacing your eyes with infrared cameras or night-vision goggles. Your perceptions of the world would be very different from what they are now. Based on these physical differences among animals, Sextus concludes, "it is probable that their impressions differ." If this is right, no one can defeat skepticism by appealing to the evidence of his or her senses because those very senses tell you that the world might be different than you perceive it. Your own experience tells you there's no *one* way to perceive the world, and to presume that

human experiences are more accurate than any other creature's would be hasty, at best. The possibility that we're massively mistaken in our perceptions makes the worry that we're being deceived by a dream all the more acute.

CAN WE DEBUNK THE DREAM ARGUMENT?

Despite these reasons to think the dream argument works, many people remain committed to the idea that we can know, at least in some circumstances, that we're not dreaming. How do they think we can tell? There are three general strategies for debunking the dream argument.

First, there are what we might call the "old standbys." These are the sorts of tests you try when you've first encountered the dream argument. For instance, you might trot out a list of idiosyncratic dreams: I can't see faces in my dreams; I see only in black-and-white in my dreams; I can't read in my dreams. *Inception* nods at this sort of strategy when Dom explains that he can't see his children's faces when he is dreaming. One of the reasons he wants to go home is so he can see his kids' faces again.

Unfortunately, these old standbys presuppose that you can already distinguish waking life from dreaming life. They presuppose that all those times you could see faces, or all the times you weren't seeing in black-and-white, *weren't* dreams. But how do you know that? The dream argument calls just such perceptions into question: Isn't it possible that those were simply dreams where you *could* see faces and *could* see in color? In philosophical terms, a strategy that assumes the very thing you need to prove is called "begging the question." In this case, you are assuming that you can distinguish dreams from waking life in order to prove that you can distinguish dreams from waking life.

In light of problems with the old standbys, some philosophers turn to what we might call the "stability test" for debunking the dream argument. Descartes offers a version of this response:

> Dreams are never joined by the memory with all the other actions of life, as is the case with those actions that occur when one is awake. For surely, if, while I am awake, someone were suddenly to appear to me and then immediately disappear, as occurs in dreams, so that I see neither where he came from nor where he went, it is not without reason that I would judge him to be a ghost or a phantom conjured up in my brain, rather than a true man.

For Descartes, it is the *oddness* of dream perceptions that sets them apart from waking perceptions. When the stories his perceptions tell are well-connected with one another and with the rest of his life, Descartes concludes, "I am clearly certain that these perceptions have happened to me not while I was dreaming but while I was awake."[2] Offering a similar test in *Inception*, Dom tells Ariadne, "You never really remember the begin-

ning of a dream, do you? You always wind up right in the middle of what's going on." The idea is that, if there were a completely reliable indicator of being in a dream—something that's always present when you're dreaming and always absent when you're not—then we could distinguish waking from dreaming life.

The problem with this test, like the previous, is that it still presupposes you can already distinguish waking life from dreaming life. Even if you could tell that you *are* in a dream when odd things happen, like people's appearing and disappearing, this doesn't help you tell whether the dream states that *seem* well connected with reality really are connected with reality; it doesn't help you distinguish reality from those dreams that mimic what you presume to be stable reality. Even before he proposed his stability test, Descartes had already challenged it when he wrote, "How often does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! . . . As I consider these matters more carefully, I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep."[3] If there are no definitive, reliable signs of dreaming, then the stability test is an unsuccessful way to avoid the dream argument.

In addition, what we take to be the "waking world" doesn't behave all that well. We sometimes get home late at night and think, "Did I stop at all the stop signs? Which route did I take home?" Seemingly lost objects often turn up right in front of us. Scientists tell us that our perceptions about motion are massively mistaken even at the level we perceive. We have a terrible time explaining why, if the earth is spinning so quickly, an object we throw in the air comes straight back down to us rather than landing far away. If all this is right, the stability test cannot debunk the dream argument.

A third strategy for avoiding the dream argument's skeptical conclusion is suggested by the use of "totems" in *Inception*. The trick, apparently devised by Mal, is to keep a totem that behaves in a way only *you* understand. If the totem behaves as anyone else might expect—a die that rolls randomly, a Mombasa casino chip with the correct spelling of Mombasa—the dream thief is in someone else's dream. This is because the architect of the dream wouldn't know to make totems act in unexpected ways. The goal of creating a convincing dream is to make it as much like "normal" as possible. But if a totem behaves only the way its owner expects—the die always lands on five, Momba(s)sa is misspelled—the dream thief can be sure he or she is in the waking world.

This clever tactic seems useful for escaping the chicanery of a dream architect. But is it good enough? Unfortunately, totems can't really help us for three reasons. First, a totem can't tell you that you aren't in the dream of someone who *made you dream about* choosing your totem. To be sure, this could happen only through a case of inception—where the

dreamer comes to believe he or she originated the idea of how the totem would work—and we're told that inceptions of complicated ideas are practically impossible. But that's what the dream thieves *believe* about inception. Incepting the idea of a particular totem would be unlikely if inception is as difficult as Dom and crew believe. The seeming difficulty, however, could be the work of another dream architect. If it's in fact *easy* to plant the idea of a token, then no token will be successful—the dream architect can manipulate it so that you think you're in the waking world.

Second, a totem cannot tell you that you aren't in someone's dream who knows your totem. Dom, in a moment of apparent carelessness, tells Ariadne—the dream architect!—how his totem works. This means she can manipulate the dream to make it seem to Dom as if he's in the waking world. You may have never told your totem's secret to anyone. But if you have, even in a private journal, a totem can't help you distinguish waking from dreaming life—and thus Dom is able to manipulate Mal's totem such that she questions her reality (opening the safe where she keeps it and starts it spinning so that she is misled).

And finally, even if totems work as proposed, they can tell you only that you aren't in *someone else's* dream. It can't help you know that you aren't in *your own* dream. This is because your subconscious mind knows how your totem is supposed to work. If you try to use a totem, your mind can trick you into thinking you're in the waking world by making your totem behave as you would expect it to in the waking world.

All this means is that the dream argument is a highly resilient argument for skepticism. The conclusion is tough to avoid. It has stood the test of time since Socrates first proposed it to Theaetetus, and it has influenced popular culture in countless ways, showing up in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Edgar Alan Poe's poetry, films like *The Matrix* (which, is technically about the evil demon argument), and even the video game *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*. Since there's little hope of solving the problem here, let's turn back to our original question: What should we and the dream thieves believe if we might be dreaming?

SLEEPING TO DREAM?

If we keep believing as we normally do, we're either ignoring the dream argument or not taking it seriously. We're treating our beliefs as if they're obviously true when we have good reasons to doubt them. On the other hand, if we suspend all judgment, we limit our worldviews to neutral, common-sense pragmatism. We would live according to what *seems* true, refusing to believe that anything is *really* real outside of our own minds. To be consistent, we might have to give up things that make life meaningful or valuable, such as morality, religion, and bonds of trust, insofar as these depend on the way the world is.

A group of ancient skeptics called the Pyrrhonians reject the idea that skepticism would make us give up what is most valuable. Instead, they suggest that suspending judgment helps us avoid a lot of life's strife. Sextus Empiricus, who literally wrote the book on skepticism, says that one who is always trying to figure out if "anything is by nature good or bad is for ever being disquieted: when he is without things he deems good he believes himself to be tormented," and when he obtains the things he thinks are good, he's still unhappy "because of his irrational and immoderate elation, and in his dread of a change of fortune he uses every endeavor to avoid losing [them]."[4] The same goes for beliefs about what's true or false. The goal of skepticism is "quietude in respect of matters of opinion and moderate feeling in respect of things unavoidable." The latter is supposed to apply to those perceptions we can't avoid: seeming to have a broken bone, seeming to be sick, seeming to experience a loved one's death. We can't help feeling something about these perceptions, but we can at least avoid the futile search for deeper meaning or the bitterness that comes with blame and envy.

But these two extremes—*believe as normal* and *suspend all judgment* (even on a charitable reading of Sextus Empiricus)—presuppose that *believing truly* is the only, or at least the most important, reason to believe anything. But is this right? Might there be beliefs that are valuable even if they aren't true or irrespective of whether they're true? There are actually two questions here, one about *what we value*—beliefs that we find valuable even if they're false or irrespective of their truth—and another about *our ability to believe*—beliefs we can't help but accept regardless of their truth. The American philosopher William James (1842–1910) gave some examples of the latter, distinguishing *living* from *dead* hypotheses. He defines the former as something you could, under the right circumstances, consider believing: it "makes some appeal, however small, to your belief."[5] One example James gives is belief in the Mahdi, a prophesied figure of Islam, who is supposed to rid the world of evil. Depending on where you were raised, says James, a decision to "believe in the Mahdi" will either seem like a real choice or it won't.[6] If it does, it's a live hypothesis. If it doesn't—that is, if it "makes no electric connection with your nature"—it's a dead hypothesis. It is so far removed from possibility that you can't take it seriously.

A second example James gives is the notion of *radical* skepticism often discussed in philosophy classes. Most of us believe that tables and trees and bodies exist in the way we perceive them, outside of our minds and independently of us. When the radical skeptic challenges us to *Prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt!* that tables and trees exist, we find that we can't. Yet, we believe anyway. James concludes, "It is just one volition against another—we willing to go in for a life upon a trust or assumption which [the skeptic], for his part, does not care to make."[7] Even if we're wrong, there's apparently no argument strong enough to convince us to

give up our common-sense beliefs about tables. James's point is that surely it's rational to believe what we can't help but believe. If this is right, then we're well within our intellectual rights to believe these things even if we're dreaming.

Can we help it if we don't believe we're dreaming? James's examples raise the question of just how *voluntary* any of our beliefs are. We might say: "Of course we can't help but believe in the face of overwhelming evidence! That's just what evidence does. It *compels* our belief." The problem is that we tend to be particularly *un*willing to believe many things for which there *is* overwhelming evidence. For example, there are cultural beliefs that women are less rational than men, religious beliefs that the Earth is less than 10,000 years old, and biological beliefs that non-human animals are incapable of suffering.

In the first stage of Robert Fischer's dream in *Inception*, he can't help but believe he's been kidnapped along with his uncle, Peter Browning, when in fact he hasn't been kidnapped and "Browning" is really Eames. All this seems perfectly reasonable given his evidence. But Dom's belief that totems work is, as we've seen, contradicted by lots of evidence, and yet he still believes. This sort of belief seems more a product of wishful thinking than the compelling nature of his evidence. Dom *should* be more attentive to his evidence, and there's little reason to think he can't be. If this is right, there are some reasons for believing we should take more seriously than others, even if we are dreaming. This brings us to the second question, concerning *what we value*.

If we can choose to take some reasons for believing more seriously than others, we have to figure out what the options are. As we've seen, having *true beliefs* has been a central topic of discussion since ancient Greece. But relatively recently, more and more philosophers are coming to think there's an alternative to viewing truth as the only or most important goal of forming beliefs.

Assume you're not in a dream right now. Even awake, the perception that your beliefs are true is probably just *one* of the things that make them valuable to you. Beliefs could be true merely by accident—you could guess which team will win the Super Bowl and just happen to be right. So, even if you're not in a dream, you want to be more than *simply* right. You also want to be right for *fitting reasons*, that is, to feel that your beliefs are appropriate given your evidence, even if that evidence is actually faulty. Or you may just want to seem *rational*, to yourself or others. You may want the satisfaction of having beliefs that are *useful*, regardless of whether they're true. Certain beliefs could increase your self-esteem or overall well-being even if they're false. They might even enhance your relationships with people you love.

These worthwhile, but non-truth-based, reasons for believing are called *intellectual virtues*. They're similar to how philosophers have described *moral* virtues, such as honesty, courage, friendship, and kindness.

Moral virtues aren't about doing the *right* thing—it isn't obvious that there is always a single "right" thing, and even vicious people do "the right thing" from time to time. For virtue ethicists, morality is about doing things from the right attitudes or dispositions, cultivated through the practice of treating people well. Intellectual virtues are cultivated by believing for fitting or appropriate reasons: for example, being attentive to the right types of evidence, getting second opinions, checking the reliability of sources, asking hard questions, trusting people who have proven trustworthy, treating others' ideas charitably and humbly, recognizing that your own beliefs could be mistaken or faulty, and admitting your mistakes when you discover them. A person can have these virtues even if all her beliefs are false. (To be sure, the pursuit of true beliefs is also virtuous, and can enhance the value of some beliefs. The point here is that truth is not necessary for a belief to have significant value.) Further, these virtues can contribute to an overall sense of well-being that isn't obviously available to the skeptics who suspend all belief. For example, the willingness to trust a family member who has demonstrated trustworthiness may lead to a deeper, more meaningful relationship than simply remaining skeptical.

In addition, suspending belief (because you cannot tell whether a belief is true) may stifle ingenuity and creativity. While truth is a virtuous aim, philosopher Linda Zagzebski says it may be that "only 5 per cent of a creative thinker's original ideas turn out to be true. Clearly, their truth conduciveness in the sense of producing a high proportion of true beliefs is much lower than that of the ordinary virtues of careful and sober inquiry, but they are truth conducive in that they are necessary for the advancement of knowledge."[8] This suggests that the conditions under which a person has valuable beliefs are highly contingent on changing contexts and individual goals. And this seems consistent with the wide variability in human values and the diversity of contexts in which we find ourselves.

In *Inception*, the dream thieves have perceptions that constitute reasons to believe even if all those perceptions are faulty. For example, when Ariadne and Arthur are exploring paradoxical staircases, it's rational for them to raise each leg to climb the stairs and to believe that their doing so will carry them higher up the steps. And when the crew's taxi cab is blocked by traffic in the first layer of Fischer's dream, it's rational to believe the car won't move forward *because* other cars are stopping it, even though there's in fact no traffic and they aren't in a cab. It's rational to want to avoid the bullets from Fischer's subconscious bodyguards because they still hurt even if they aren't real. If all this is right, then some of our beliefs can be reasonable and valuable even if we are dreaming.

WHEN BELIEFS TURN VICIOUS

Even if it's right that a belief need not be true to be valuable, this doesn't imply that just any belief is worth having. Just as some behaviors can be morally *vicious*—that is, they can exhibit vices such as greed, cowardice, and dishonesty—some belief-forming behaviors can be intellectually vicious.

Early in *Inception*, Dom warns Ariadne not to create places from memory "because building a dream from your memory is the easiest way to lose your grasp on what is real and what is a dream." And when Ariadne slips into one of Dom's dreams, we discover that he's built a whole elevator-world from memories. The memories on each floor so infiltrate Dom's subconscious that he's constantly worried that he's still dreaming. Further, the subconscious images are so ubiquitous that he can't keep them out of others' dreams when he's on dream missions. In order to keep his subconscious elements from knowing their way around a dream world and undermining the crew's missions, he must get someone else to build the dreams. But not even this helps for long. From the very beginning, we find the supposedly dead Mal showing up randomly, and Dom and Mal's train barrels down the street in the first layer of Fischer's dream.

All these intrusions tell us something about Dom's intellectual character. He's been irresponsible with his dream building, allowing his fantasy life to undermine his well-being and threaten others. Ariadne points out the dangers of this on multiple occasions. Regardless of whether his beliefs are true, Dom is exhibiting intellectually vicious behavior. One could make the same judgment about Arthur when he accepts the Fischer inception job. He has every opportunity to walk away from a mission that promises little hope of success and no obvious reward. Cobb at least balances the risk against the hope of seeing his children again. But it isn't clear what Arthur gains from the gamble. This seems intellectually irresponsible.

What sort of intellectual vices are at work in Dom's and Arthur's belief-forming behavior? We can answer this question by organizing the virtues into categories. In the first place, there seem to be *skill-based* intellectual virtues, which the believer has when she is adept at searching for evidence, can process information quickly and efficiently, can see subtle logical connections between concepts, and can apply all this information successfully in her behaviors. Dom and Arthur are not generally vicious in this area. They seem to be very good at what they do, and their quick-witted decisions tend to produce the results they expect. There are also *creative* virtues, which the believer has when she can see original, creative, or inventive connections between concepts and form new beliefs that help fulfill her goals. As architects skilled at building mazes, Dom and Arthur aren't generally deficient in this set of virtues. Eames says

that Arthur lacks imagination, though we aren't sure whether this is an accurate assessment or a personal bias.

But there are also virtues of *motivation*, which a believer has if she's pursuing the right goals for the right reasons. Even if we can't obtain true beliefs in a dream, it still might be virtuous to *seek* truth: Hilary Kornblith says, "An *epistemically responsible agent* desires to have true beliefs, and thus desires to have his beliefs produced by processes which lead to true beliefs; his actions are guided by those desires."[9] Similarly, Zagzebski says that virtuous motivations are virtuous, in part, because they direct the believer toward truth: "They make her receptive to processes known to her epistemic community to be truth conducive."[10] (Of course, this sort of claim presumes we can know which processes are truth conducive, but we can set that aside and focus on truth as a goal.) Even though Dom and Arthur keep totems with the idea that they can tell truth from fiction, their behaviors suggest they aren't appropriately motivated by truth. Dom seems to value his fictional world with Mal as much as he values the waking life he wants with his children. Arthur *tells* Ariadne how his totem works: his die is loaded. He doesn't tell her which number the die is loaded to land on, but she has a one-sixth chance of guessing correctly. Arthur also takes the unnecessary risk of the Fischer job. Their motivations render their belief-forming behaviors vicious. Further, a lack of virtue in motive tends to corrupt other virtues. As the dream thieves use their skills and creativity in the service of irresponsible motives, they build vices into their intellectual characters that may pollute all of their belief-forming behavior.

To the extent that we can't help but believe certain things, it's rational to hold those beliefs. But there seem to be beliefs for which some reasons are more fitting than others, and on which we can choose to believe or refrain. For these, our values determine whether our beliefs are worth holding. And while some values are virtuous, others are vicious. Philosophers value seeking and attaining truth very highly, as a premier virtue. There is much in favor of this view of truth. But the dream argument undermines our ability to know whether we actually have true beliefs. Thankfully, as long as there are other good reasons to believe, we need not give up believing all together.

LIVING THE DREAM

After examining the dream argument and the difficulties with trying to debunk it, and after considering the possibility that truth isn't the only reason to value beliefs, what should we and the dream thieves believe if we can't shake the possibility that we're dreaming? If there are other things that make beliefs valuable besides truth, such as intellectual virtues, we can still believe things that promote many of our values without

being naïve or intellectually irresponsible. And there really do seem to be such virtues. The more complete answer may be that we're asking the wrong question. Perhaps the question shouldn't be *what* we should believe, but *how* we should believe: we can take the dream argument seriously but still follow our evidence where it leads; we can still be careful, trusting, and charitable. In other words, we can still believe *well*, even if we can't be sure we're believing *truly*.

Interestingly, *Inception* tips a nod in this direction—albeit a melancholy one—when the dream thieves are looking for a sedative powerful enough to construct a three-stage dream. In the basement of Yusuf's chemist shop, the crew is shown twelve people who come every day for three or four hours, as Yusuf says, "to share the dream." Dom says this is because, after a while, it becomes the only way you *can* dream. But when Eames asks, "They come here everyday to sleep?" an old attendant answers, "No. They come to be woken up. The dream has become their reality. Who are you to say otherwise?"

These twelve dreamers value their relationships with one another. They value sharing experiences they're too old to share as they did when young. Sharing a dream, despite the fact that it's contrived, despite the fact that it's fictional, helps each to experience something important—perhaps even more important than truth. At the very end of the film, we see a similar disposition in Dom. He spins his top and then walks out to see his children, apparently unconcerned with the outcome. Does it matter—to him or to us as viewers—whether the top falls if he finally has what he values more than anything else in the world? Maybe this is part of the reason we allow ourselves to get lost in the fictional worlds of storytellers like Christopher Nolan.

NOTES

1. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. M. J. Levett, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 158b–c.
2. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 50.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R. G. Bury (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), bk. I, ch. 12.
5. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1968), 89.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid. 94.
8. Linda Zagzebski, "Virtues of the Mind," in *Epistemology: An Anthology*, ed. Ernest Sosa and Jaegown Kim (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 465.
9. Hilary Kornblith, "Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action" *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983), 34.
10. Zagzebski, "Virtues of the Mind," 463.

TWELVE

Spinning Tops and Brains in Vats

Nolan's Inception *and Nozick's "Experience Machine"*

William A. Lindenmuth

Do we owe an allegiance to reality? Since the way we experience the universe is through our senses, is it essential that our sensations are real? Christopher Nolan's *Inception* challenges us with this question by showing us a world in which we can share and control our dreams, manipulating them to give us whatever we want. Would a life spent inhabiting these dreams be a wasted one? In the film's final scene, the protagonist, Dominick Cobb, appears to ignore the test he normally performs that would prove to him that he's in the real world. The film ends on a purposefully ambiguous note: does the spinning top wobble (indicating reality) or not (indicating a dream)? The fact that Cobb rushes to see his children before establishing whether he's in reality indicates that perhaps our perception of happiness overrides any further consideration. Is this similar to the bargain Faust makes with Mephistopheles, that if the devil can authentically satisfy him, he will surrender his soul? If we could genuinely invent a device that promised us far more pleasure than we could get in our real lives, would we be foolish not to plug-in?

I contend that reality has importance and that it matters whether Cobb is in a dream at *Inception*'s conclusion. Much like philosopher Robert Nozick's (1938–2002) idea of an "experience machine," which I will discuss in this chapter, *Inception* provokes us with the question "What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?"[1] Its equivocal finale elicits feelings of excitement and temptation to the idea that all that actually matters is the impression that you have what you

want. But, I will argue, what Cobb—and we—*really* want isn't for reality to be a dream, but rather our dreams to be reality.

"ASSEMBLE YOUR TEAM, MR. COBB"

Inception is a complicated film, but it rewards well those that take the time to peel away the layers. This science-fiction tale imagines a world in which a machine allows people to inhabit other people's dreams. Our protagonist, Cobb, is a for-hire dream infiltrator who uses this device on people unawares for the purpose of extracting confidential information. Cobb is hired by a businessman named Saito who wants Cobb to do something rather different: not to steal information, but to plant it—a process known as "inception"—giving someone an idea, but tricking them into thinking it's their own.

Saito runs an energy company in competition with another powerful company that's about to pass into the hands of Robert Fischer, the son and heir of the company's recently deceased founder. Saito wants Cobb to collect a team to enter the son's mind and impregnate it with an idea that will cause him to break up his father's company. Because of the difficulty involved, Cobb does not want the job, but is persuaded to do so by Saito's promise that he will deploy his power and connections to allow Cobb to "go home, to America, to your children." We don't at this point know why Cobb can't do this—it seems to be some sort of legal issue that no one can fix. Saito insists that he can and he challenges Cobb to either "take a leap of faith . . . or become an old man, filled with regret, waiting to die alone." Cobb relents.

Cobb flies to Paris to acquire an "architect," the person who will design the world of the dream in which the subjects will be placed. The architect takes over the creative process of dreaming, designing a world of her choosing, which the subject inhabits without being aware that he's in someone else's dream. Meanwhile, he fills that dream world with material generated by his own subconscious. This architect, Ariadne, is named after the daughter of the mythical King Minos, a princess whose thread helped the hero Theseus escape the infamous Labyrinth.

Flying to Mombasa, Cobb recruits Eames, a professional forger and impersonator, and Yusuf, a chemist who will provide the sedative for the job. To demonstrate the potency of his chemicals, Yusuf shows them a group of men who come to him every day to share a dream together. Eames asks, "They come here every day to sleep?" Yusuf's assistant responds, "No. They come here to be woken up. The dream has become their reality. Who are you to say otherwise, sir?" This is one of numerous suggestions throughout the film that the line between dream and reality is not clear and that it might not even matter much either way, as long as you have what you want.

The completed team consists of Cobb, Ariadne, Eames, Yusuf, Saito, who wants to come along to ensure the job is done, and Arthur, Cobb's partner and mission researcher. They devise an intricate plan to "incept" Fischer with the idea to break up his father's empire, placing this idea deep within Fischer's subconscious, so he will feel like it is his own. The team needs Fischer to have a positive feeling toward this incepted idea, as Cobb believes that positive emotions are more powerful than negative ones. The key is therefore to persuade Fischer that breaking up the company and succeeding as his own man reflects his father's wishes. "We all yearn for reconciliation, for catharsis," remarks Cobb, noting that the father and son had a very strained relationship. These words also provide insight into Cobb's own character, as we learn that he also yearns for a reconciliation—between himself and his deceased wife Mal—that he can't have.

"IT'S ONLY WHEN WE WAKE UP THAT WE REALIZE SOMETHING WAS ACTUALLY STRANGE"

One evening, when Ariadne finds Cobb in a machine-induced dream, she connects herself to the machine, placing herself in Cobb's dream world. We learn a key point here: Cobb needs the machine to dream and in his dreams he continually revisits his main regrets: the loss of his wife, Mal, and his subsequent separation from his two children. Have the dreams indeed become his reality and would he be better off in the fabricated world?

Cobb and Mal spent some time in the dream world together—a lot of time, since time passes more slowly in dreams. Also, you can use the dream machine within a dream, which makes it possible to create dream worlds with multiple levels, with time passing more slowly as you pass to deeper and deeper levels of the dream. In this way, an hour in real-time could translate to years in dream time. The couple spent so much time going in and out of dreams that they needed to create certain objects or "totems" to help them determine whether they were dreaming. Each totem has something unique about it that only the individual knows. Mal's totem, a silver top, functions thus: once spun, in reality it eventually topples, while in a dream it spins perpetually. They remained in a dream world for "something like fifty years." He eventually grew restless, however—"it became impossible for me to live like that"—and wanted to return to reality, but Mal wanted to stay.

We should pause here to reflect on whether a dream world could provide an endless source of enjoyment. If the passage of time could be slowed enough, one might become essentially *immortal*. Is that what we want? Or is a life without death no longer a human one? Bernard Williams (1929–2003) famously argued that immortality would be *bor-*

ing.[2] Moreover, imagine how fifty years in a dream world, experienced as an hour in real-time, would *change* you. How could you convey those experiences to anyone else? Wouldn't they alienate you from others? Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) once speculated, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him."[3] One interpretation of this claim is that we would have none of the shared experiences, frames of reference, or value systems required for communication. Wouldn't a person become equally foreign to others after ages spent in concocted air castles? We never see any indication that Cobb spends his dream time doing anything other than revisiting his regrets. He's become an anachronism, a man out-of-time, stuck in an infinite loop. He knows it and that's why getting to reality is so important to him.

Unable to convince Mal to leave the dream world, which she had come to perceive as reality, he located her totem: the silver top, at rest—in a safe. As they're in a dream, the top should have been spinning, but Mal wanted to forget reality. "She had locked something away inside her," said Cobb. "A truth she had once known but chose to forget." To remind her that she was in a dream, he sets her top spinning. However, this action had the unintended consequence of causing her to believe that she was in a dream even after they woke up. This is the eponymous "inception" of the film: the implantation of an idea into someone's mind through the subterfuge of a dream. In *Inception*, the way to wake out of a machine-created dream is through "the kick," but the kick that awakens a dreamer from a self-imposed dream is suicide. Mal and Cobb killed themselves to escape their dream and return to reality and their children, but Mal's incepted idea came with them. The idea that Cobb incepted in her grew into an obsession, as she clung to the belief that her world was not real and that death was her only escape. Finally, she committed suicide after trying to get Cobb to join her by making it look like he was responsible for her death. She does this out of love, however, in order to free him of the guilt of leaving this (she presumes) fabricated world so they can return to the real world, which she believes is another step up. But the simple idea that Cobb incepted her with grew into an obsession, which ostensibly would stay with her wherever she was: that her world was not real, and that death was the only escape.

Holding himself responsible for Mal's death, Cobb spends much of his time in a dream state where they are still together. He's torn between his dream-reality with Mal and the real world where his children are. Inside one of his dreams, we are witness to a memory that he apparently revisits often. Preparing to flee the country to escape legal troubles stemming from his suspected involvement in his wife's death, he watches his children playing outside. They are turned away from him and he wants to call out in order to see their faces one last time, but he doesn't and the moment is passed. "If I'm ever going to see their faces again," he confesses, "I've got to get back home—to the real world." Cobb is apparently *able*

to see them in his dreams, but he *chooses* not to, which means that seeing their faces would indicate that he's in the real world. They're his reward—his totem, if you will—for reaching what he perceives to be reality. In his final confrontation with Mal, she calls to their children, but Cobb forces himself to turn away. The final shot of the film is Cobb allowing himself the prize of experiencing his children, but only the spinning top can tell us whether it's "real."

"IF YOU CAN STEAL AN IDEA FROM SOMEONE'S MIND, WHY CAN'T YOU PLANT ONE THERE INSTEAD?"

When Robert Fischer's father dies, he takes the long flight from Sydney to Los Angeles for the funeral, providing the perfect opportunity for the team to sedate Fischer and attempt inception. The team has a harder time with the job than they'd anticipated, since Fischer has had some training to protect himself in a dream state. A dreamer fills up his dream with his subconscious projections and Fischer's projections are violent. Saito is severely wounded, but the team doesn't want to kill him to wake him up, as they are so heavily sedated that they fear that Saito's death in the dream world would lead to him dropping into limbo, an unconstructed dream space of raw, infinite subconscious.

In the first level of the dream, the team kidnaps Fischer and makes him think that they are trying to obtain something in a safe next to his father's deathbed, all the while implanting the idea that his father wants him to break up his company. They go deeper, where they make Fischer think that a fellow executive at his company is trying to prevent him from seeing his father's *real* will, which asks Fischer to break up the company and "become his own man." They convince Fischer in this level to join them going into the subconscious of this fellow executive, entering his dreams to find out what he's trying to do. However, the executive is really Eames, who dreams of a fortress with a safe room inside. They fight their way into the room, where the inception should finally take hold.

Unfortunately, Cobb's projection of Mal shows up and shoots Fischer. Saito has also died and so Cobb and Ariadne must go into this deepest dream level—limbo—to rescue Fischer and Saito. But Mal is waiting there for Cobb and she wants him to stay there with her, and he is tempted to remain, forever.

However, here and throughout the course of the film, Cobb raises some serious objections to abandoning himself to limbo. Choosing a world—and a relationship to his children—that isn't real would be selfish, solipsistic, and contrary to his original intention in using inception with his wife in the first place: to convince her that reality matters. He expresses his discontent with his imagined reality to dream-Mal in the

penultimate moments of the film, telling her, "I can't imagine you with all your complexity, all your perfection, all your imperfection. Look at you. You are just a shade of my real wife. You're the best I can do . . . but, I'm sorry, you're just not good enough."

Ariadne and Fischer jump off a building, and she tells Cobb not to "lose himself." Fischer is resuscitated, enters the safe room that Eames has set-up, and has a brief but moving conversation with his father, who tells him he was disappointed that his son had tried to *be like him*. He motions to the safe, where Fischer finds a will and a pinwheel, the very pinwheel belonging to him in a picture taken when he was a young boy. His father dies and, as Eames watches this exchange, he nods, we can see the inception has taken hold. We see the rest of the team wake up through the various kicks, but not Saito or Cobb. Considerable dream-time passes before Cobb finally finds Saito, who's aged considerably. Cobb pleads him to come back with him, so they can be young men together again and Saito can "honor their arrangement."

Cobb's eyes open: he's back on the airplane, in the apparently real world. He looks around at the rest of the also-waking team, who are startled and readjusting to the world the way we do when waking up from an intense dream. He looks intently at Saito, who wordlessly comes to his senses and picks up the phone. Cobb has no trouble getting through immigration, and arrives home. He starts to look around frantically—he's not sure if he is in a dream, as the setting looks so similar to the dream that he revisits every day. He reaches for his totem, and spins it on the dining room table. As it spins, he can hear his father-in-law call for Cobb's children. He looks at them, playing outside in the grass—a duplicate image of his dream. He hunches forward and cocks his head; it's as if he's trying to control the turn of their heads with his body language, much like a bowler will lean in the direction they want the ball to go after it has been thrown.

And then . . . they turn! Cobb can see the beautiful faces of his daughter and son. He can hardly believe it. "Hey," he says weakly. He hesitantly takes a step forward, then breaks into a run, pushing open the screen door and enthusiastically sweeping up his children; they are equally excited to have their dad back. We see this happy reunion from behind, with Cobb holding his son in one arm and embracing his daughter in the other. The camera then tilts away from their silhouettes to focus on what has quickly been forgotten: the spinning top. Nolan cuts to black after the top wobbles, giving us a purposefully ambiguous ending.

"TRUE INSPIRATION IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FAKE"—"THAT'S NOT TRUE"

Robert Nozick came up with the idea of an experience machine as an attempt to definitively disprove the philosophical thesis of hedonism. He asked us to consider the following case:

> Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?[4]

Hedonists argue that pleasure is the only supreme good and that we should maximize it whenever possible. They believe that everyone seeks to obtain pleasure and avoid pain, all life being structured around these two aims. Other goods, such as honor, integrity, and altruism, are valuable only if they create pleasure. Nozick aims to prove that there are things we care about beyond pleasurable experiences. If the experience machine is guaranteed to give us pleasure—more pleasure than we could ever hope to get in our "real" lives—and we refuse to get into the machine, he thinks we can securely say that hedonism is false, as we'd willingly sacrifice pleasure for other concerns or values. This is a strong argument, because we'd be giving up a device that would make our dreams at least appear to come true. But it's the fact that it would only be an *appearance* that's the decisive matter for Nozick.

Cobb is faced with a similar dilemma. He and Mal entered a dream state where they did whatever they wanted, reveling in both each other and their fabricated world. Mal was content to stay in limbo, living like a god, but Cobb gradually comes to hate—or, at least, grows tired of (as Williams predicts)—that kind of existence. He seems to value reality—but should he? If what Cobb wants most is to be with his kids or his wife and a machine can make it seem like he is, what would be wrong with that? What difference does it make whether something is real, as long as it *appears* real to us? Who hasn't woken from a particular dream and been disappointed when upon realizing that that's all it was? If a machine could give us any kind of experience we desire, then real life must pale in comparison. As Nozick asks, "What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?"[5]

Nozick presents three compelling arguments for why we should reject plugging into the experience machine, which can help us to understand why Cobb wants reality over a dream.

"DON'T YOU WANT TO TAKE A LEAP OF FAITH?"

Consider the sort of things that people say that they want: they want to finish school, find a meaningful job, fall in love and start a family, participate in the life of one's community. Of course, we enjoy the experience of having accomplished these things, which provide us with a subjective sense of happiness or satisfaction. But, as Nozick points out, "it is only because we want to do the action that we want the experience of doing them or thinking we've done them."[6] In other words, it's not just the *experience* of doing things and the attendant satisfaction that we desire; what we want are experiences that actually correspond to reality. Knowing that an experience was a mere simulacrum—that our great love affair or our family life was a sham that only *seemed* real—would radically diminish the value of that experience for us. It's not just the feeling of love or romance that we want but the full-bodied concreteness of a genuine relationship with an actually existing human being. We want our partners to genuinely love us and not simply appear to do so. Visualize two women in similar circumstances, both in love and happy with their partners, whom they feel love them back equally . . . except one partner does not. Now, both women are equally happy, but they are obviously not the same. One of them suffers from a kind of false happiness—she experiences things as good, where she would not if she knew "the truth." A hedonist must say that "the truth" doesn't matter, and Nozick is arguing that it does. Likewise with the machine, imagine someone plugged in doing amazing things, and someone actually doing amazing things in real life. Is there any question to which person you would rather be? The argument is that reality is more important than the sensation of it. Of course, our only access to reality is through our experience of it, which makes the decision to plug in the paramount one.

As above, if one were given the option of something good in real life or something good in a dream, we would always opt for real life. This is easy. Choosing between something bad in real life and something much, much better in a dream, is not. Cobb's wife is dead and will remain only in his dreams, but his children are real. If Cobb indeed loves his children, he'd want to be a part of their lives, to educate and protect them, to help them grow. His children can also function as a symbol of his striving for growth and change, of breaking the spiral of guilt and shame in which he's stuck. We can feel his pain during the meager phone conversation he has with his children early on in the film. To know that his real children are out there, needing their father, and for him to neglect them and solipsistically choose instead a comatose state where he could privately live out his fantasies, all alone . . . that's not something we want for our protagonist. Even if he were blissfully unaware that he was locked in a dream and thus perfectly content with experiences that he mistakenly took to be real, we would likely regard his apparent happiness as some-

thing abject and pitiable. And he presumably would too, were the truth to be revealed to him. Of course, as long as he remains in the machine, it would never be. As Nozick says, "What's a few moments of distress compared to a lifetime of bliss?"[7]

Imagine the moment you might unplug from an experience machine or awake from a dream. To learn that it was all just a simulation would be absolutely devastating—especially if you got into the machine because you were trying to escape the brutal facticity of your own life. Think here of the humans unplugging from their avatars in the film *Surrogates* (Mostow, 2009). Anything that we had experienced—such as forming a friendship, being courageous, falling in love—would immediately be stripped of meaning for us and we'd be stuck in the real life we've so desperately tried to escape. An experience or dream machine would be like a drug with a 100 percent addiction rate; once you plug-in, it would be unbearable to leave.

"DON'T LOSE YOURSELF!"

What can we say of someone plugged into a machine or asleep? We can't praise or blame a sleeping or comatose person for what they do while in that state. We could say nothing about a person or brain floating in a vat. They are essentially putting their humanity on pause; they can exhibit no virtues or vices. Nozick proclaims "We want to *be* a certain way—to be a certain sort of person."[8] Of course, being a certain kind of person means doing certain kinds of things. We call a person honest if they habitually tell the truth; generous if they routinely manifest magnanimous behavior. The moral attributes we assign to people typically reflect what we believe to be their habitual ways of acting in the world. Our fantasies are not who we are, rather, we are what we do. As Nolan's Batman says, "It's not who I am underneath, but what I *do* that defines me." Our fantasies may motivate what we do, but until acted upon they're mere chimeras.

It also would be impossible to fulfill any perceived religious duties. Nozick wonders how piety could be possible in this construct, or even the future possibility of "merging" with a higher being in another plane of existence.[9] Nozick states "Many persons desire to leave themselves open to such contact and to a plumbing of deeper significance."[10] It would be hard to imagine God rewarding someone for "being good" in a dream or simulation or someone who would program a machine to give them the experience of being pious or charitable. It is unlikely that someone would choose a simulation of the life of Mother Theresa; it's precisely the things she did and the sacrifices she made, the *hardship* of her choices—and that they were *real*—that make her saintly.

Nozick claims, "Plugging into the machine is a kind of suicide."[11] In *Inception*, the only way to force yourself out of a self-constructed dream

state is to commit suicide. Mal, tortured with the idea that her world isn't real, kills herself. Would Cobb not in a way be doing the same thing if he were to abandon his mind to limbo? His body would become a husk, a thing incapable of doing anything human. He would no longer be a subject, Dom Cobb, capable of courage, wit, or emotion, but rather a shell, a computer program running perpetually. He'd be no different than a brain in a vat.

"YOU MUSTN'T BE AFRAID TO DREAM A LITTLE BIGGER, DARLING"

First, we would be remanded by the limitations of the machine. As Nozick claims, "Plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality, to a world no deeper or more important than that which people can construct."[12] We'd only be able to go as far as the technology could take us. René Descartes (1596–1650) countered his initial "dream argument" for skepticism about the information delivered through our sense by noting that there are evident distortions in spatial and temporal continuity that the observant dreamer can utilize as markers for distinguishing dreams from reality.[13] Much like conspicuous special effects in a movie or video game (think pixilation), the false, phony-awkwardness of our mental construction that makes it noticeable that we're indeed dreaming. Sitting outside the café in *faux*-Paris, Cobb asks Ariadne how they got there, realizing she has no memory of the time immediately prior to being at the café allows her to realize that she's in a constructed dream world. *Inception* further demonstrates the apparently unreality of dreams with the projections the team must constantly battle, the inhabitants of the dreamscapes that, as Cobb describes, "sense the foreign nature of the dreamer. They attack like white blood cells fighting an infection." Even in dreams, if things get too strange or constructed, we *know* it's not real. Nozick's experience machine, however, is designed to provide us with experiences that will be *perfectly* indistinguishable from those in the real world. Nonetheless, Nozick claims we'd still have reasons not to plug in. One reason is that our experiences or dreams would be man-made and thereby exclude any possibility of something that *transcends* our own minds or the machine's programming, divine or otherwise, from entering in.

Second, we would be confined by the imagination of the programmers. We would have to give over control of our lives to others to plan and orchestrate for us. It would be like *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998): other humans giving us what they think is best for us. Regardless of the specificity of our instructions, unless we were the programmers ourselves, we'd be at the mercy of the creator. An example of this in *Inception* is the incompetence of the first architect in the film that Ariadne replaces.

There are also the intentional and unintentional things that others bring into their dreams: the rain in Yusuf's dream because he needs to urinate, Eames's freezing artic fortress—as Fischer remarks "Couldn't someone have dreamed up a beach?"—and, of course, Mal.

Third, our own minds would circumscribe our fantasies. We could only ask for what we already know. Imagine if a child were to enter the machine. If we allowed him to choose his experience, he could only choose based on his own limited perception of what is out there in the world. Think of how your conception of life changed as you matured: your sense of the meaning of friendship, courage, perseverance, and so on have all undergone alteration on light of new experiences. Not many would enter a machine and spend the years of hard work in a gym and dieting necessary for an attractive figure; you'd simply want to experience what it felt like to be strong or fit. Experiencing "gains" without the normally requisite "pains" might grow old frighteningly quickly. Of course, we could program the machine to give us sufficient "pain" to invest our "gains" with the requisite value for us, but it's likely that we would still prefer to get both the "gains" and "pains" from contact with reality rather than just experiencing them by way of a machine.

It does seem as if certain experiences could be enjoyed and detached from. Imagine using a device for a history class or to attend a sporting event. But *Inception* and Nozick are dealing with serious, life-changing issues. One episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* focuses on an officer addicted to the holodeck, a room that can create anything you ask it to, but at the cost of his missing out on cultivating true, intimate human relationships.[14] Captain John Anderton of *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002) spends his evenings getting high while play-acting with holograms of his wife and deceased child. Dom Cobb spends his free time hooked up to a drug-supplying machine that induces a sleep where he visits his deceased wife who can only beg him to remain through guilt. If we play it forward with these types of reality-challenging devices, things can get dark rather quickly.

We always want to be open to deeper experiences, ones beyond our imagining. We hold tightly to the idea that there's something waiting for us out there, something special and sacred. A dream or machine would signify the end of this possibility. A person who plugged in would be surrendering to despair. We'd essentially be giving up on life as holding something irreplaceably valuable for us.

DOWN WITH SPINNING TOPS

Both Nozick and Nolan give us substantial reasons to be tempted by artificially constructed realms, but even stronger reasons not to perpetually live in them. Nozick clearly shows that there are things we care about

beyond pleasure and *Inception* gives us a powerful story about a man who finds himself despite deep personal loss. He cannot get his wife back, but he can have his children—and because they are real, he chooses them over the shade of his wife. Choosing limbo would be the effective death of Dom Cobb. All of the characters in the film yearn for reality and are dissatisfied with the prospect of living forever in a dream. Mal even commits suicide based on her (incepted) belief that the world around her isn't real, despite her husband's insistent claims to the contrary. Why would they do this if reality doesn't matter? Nolan's purposefully indeterminate ending of *Inception*—does the top falter or not—isn't meant to make us shrug, as if it doesn't matter either way. It's the difference of whether or not the film is a tragedy.

NOTES

1. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 42.
2. Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" in *Language, Metaphysics, and Death*, ed. John Donnelly (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978).
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: MacMillan, 1953), 223.
4. Nozick, 42.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 43.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. John Cottingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
14. For discussion of the holodeck's failure to fully satisfy its users, see Philip Tallon and Jerry Walls's chapter in *Star Trek and Philosophy: The Wrath of Kant*, ed. Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker (Chicago: Open Court, 2008).

Part 4

Time and Selfhood

THIRTEEN

"You Don't Know Who You Are"

Imagining the Self in the Films of Christopher Nolan

Peter S. Fosl

As if recruiting him—and us—to join a philosophical discussion, *Memento*'s Teddy Gammell tells Leonard Shelby, moments before Leonard dispatches Teddy with a bullet in his skull, "You don't know who you are." It's a fair point, one worth considering more generally, for, as Leonard tells us in both his narration and in one of his tattoos, "I'm no different" from anyone else.

Nolan's protagonists commonly struggle with divisions within themselves, exhibiting both a public self and a more private or secret self, each of which depends on the other. Nolan often correlates people's hidden selves with hidden places—the underwear in *Doodlebug*; the personal boxes and safe the burglars root out in *Following*; Walter Finch's hideaway cabin and the drawer containing Kay Connell's dress in *Insomnia*; the safes and basement rooms of *Inception*'s dreamscapes; and the underground prison, the bat-infested well, the Pit, the subway hideout, and, most famously, the Batcave in the *Dark Knight* trilogy. These are places that are offstage in relation to the prestigious public spaces—like the offstage and understage spaces where the Borden twins compose and swap their identities in *The Prestige*—but they crucially shape what happens in public view. The deepest action in Nolan's films often pivots around the struggles of these private, hidden, or secret selves.

The various selves in Nolan's films often struggle with questions of self-knowledge and self-definition, too, especially in the form of the public and private narratives they wish to sustain and protect. But these

narratives aren't just stories told and exhibited. They're also signified in material ways, through objects, places, signs, symbols, and other material reminders. Although narrativity and materiality make self-knowledge possible, they do so at the price of instability, insecurity, vulnerability, and frustration at the hands of others. Because, for Nolan, the self is caught up in the struggle to create and sustain itself through these semiotic media, it becomes vulnerable and frustrated in its aspirations to control itself, to define itself clearly, and to police the boundary between its private and public iterations. One of the things that makes Nolan's films so philosophically satisfying is his recognition that the very same conditions that make our projects of self-creation and self-understanding possible can also thwart them.

Narratives belong to not only their tellers, but also their audiences and re-tellers. In a sense, they belong to the language in which they're composed. Narratives often compete with counter-narratives advanced by others with competing interests, purposes, and views. Similarly, one of the defining characteristics of material objects is that they can be manipulated, modified, forgotten, lost, or even taken or destroyed by others. Like narratives, objects aren't self-explanatory; they must be read, interpreted and reinterpreted—just like the dust columns, fallen books, and twitching watch hands Murph must read in *Interstellar*. Those interpretations are unstable not only because of irruptions from the outside, which can sideswipe us with the force of a freight train bursting through the walls of a dream, but also, as Nolan reminds us so well, because of the problematic nature of our own selves.

Epistemically limited, we wander in the fog like the police investigators in *Insomnia*, ignorant of crucial swaths of the world, armed but impaired and exposed. And, on top of all that, we're internally conflicted—sometimes because our past selves are inconsistent with our present selves, but sometimes because we actively, if unconsciously, work to defeat or deceive ourselves. We lack the courage to face ourselves, afraid of what we'll discover if we look too closely at who we are, have been, and might become—just as Alfred Pennyworth fears Bruce Wayne becoming "lost inside this monster" he's invented. Let's take a closer look at Nolan's films to see what they have to teach us about the self, cognizant of the risk that we might not like what we discover.

FOLLOWING, NARRATING, AND PERFORMING THE SELF

Many philosophers have understood the self as a kind of *narrative*. In *Following*, The Young Man, who calls himself Bill, wishes to be the follower, the watcher, the author who draws material from observations that he can craft into a narrative without participating in them. He at first conceives of himself as detached, viewing things from the outside, the author

of his own story, exercising authority over the stories he writes of others. The film opens and closes with Bill narrating, but his narrative—the narrative that would define him in the role of "the innocent man" and the "hero who saves the maiden in distress"—is frustrated by another, darker narrative, the one the police detective has already adopted, composed unbeknownst to Bill but with his inadvertent participation, by Cobb. Bill thinks that he possesses authority over his narrative, but he's dreadfully wrong. He knows the most important facts, but facts must be interpreted, and the true story as he knows it doesn't prevail. His motives are, in a relevant sense, good and clear, but good will isn't enough. In the end, Bill finds the meaning of his actions at the mercy of others' interpretation. As the horror of his situation becomes clear, one might say Bill comes to learn the importance of what contemporary philosophers have called "performativity."

Shakespeare was right in *As You Like It* that "All the world's a stage."[1] But we don't simply write the scripts of our own lives. Our selves are iterated and reiterated in what J. L. Austin (1911–1960) called "performative" acts, much as a priest is created by the speech act and laying of hands in ordination, or a physician by the conferral of a medical degree and subsequent act of licensing. But just as the vocabulary and grammar of the language we use precedes us, the performative acts through which we enact our identities have already been determined—the roles of man, woman, hero, villain, burglar, lover, writer, and detective all consist of the performance of certain acts with a socially-determined meaning. Even the roles that correspond to our innermost selves, the selves we dream we would be if we were free, are all preformed so that they can be performed. Not even Bruce Wayne, for all his wealth and ingenuity, can escape this condition. At the end of the *Dark Knight* trilogy, Bruce sits in a Florentine café with his companion, the former Catwoman, finally free of his roles as crime-fighter and billionaire philanthropist. Yet he still seems only able to perform a role Alfred had previously imagined in his fantasy of exchanging silent glances with Bruce across the tables in just such a café on the banks of the Arno. Having spent his adult life creating selves to meet the needs or expectations of others—shedding the role with which he was born in order to adopt the persona of a criminal, then later inventing "the Batman" while masquerading as his father's heir—one might expect that he'd find it difficult to discover his *own authentic self*. So he adopts a persona and lifestyle given to him by Alfred—who thereby fulfills the role defined by his promise to Bruce's parents to keep Bruce safe one last time.

Bill in *Following* is similarly unable to maintain his freedom, which he found boring and lonely until he became the object of another subject, his role and identity becoming determined by another. Things begin to turn when Cobb, whom Bill had been following, turns around and confronts him in a café. Bill's apparently private self starts to become the focus of

another person's authorial activity. Just as another Cobb and his team of dreamers construct worlds and implant ideas that govern the lives of their targets in *Inception*, so the Cobb of *Following* enters Bill's narrative and begins to take control of it so that it turns back upon Bill and his imagined power. As Bill learns, it's a quick jump from following watchfully to following instructions. In inadvertently laying the groundwork for Cobb to murder The Blonde, Bill unwittingly assists in the crime, precisely the opposite of what he'd intended. Having lost control over his life's narrative and his performative identity, he finally must relinquish control of his own body to the authority of the state. Similarly, in *Insomnia*, Will Dormer and Walter Finch advance contesting narratives, each designed to protect or destroy a public self and shield their bodies from state control.

Still, we in the audience know that Cobb is the real killer and that Bill has been duped. We also know that Finch, not the falsely accused Randy Stetz, killed Kay Connell. A real, true, and passably good self still seems discernible to us, even if it lies buried beneath the false narratives others have fashioned. This is in keeping with the views of some critical theorists, who suggest that if we could just expose the performative acts that rule us and then obstruct, appropriate, queer, jam, or subvert them, we'd become free of them and perhaps gain truer, freer, and more authentic selves, ones we create on our own. If Bill had just understood the role he was performing, perhaps he could've turned around like Cobb-the-burglar and taken charge. And perhaps, like Cobb-the-inceptor, we might reenter the illusory and oppressive world of ideology in order to rescue its prisoners.[2] But I have my doubts.

The *Prestige* also seems to hang on a conception of a true and private self in the secret knowledge that Alfred Borden and Robert Angier keep about their lives—specifically, that Borden's public persona is shared by twins and that Angier's public persona is a duplicate, a simulacrum, that duplicates itself in an ongoing series by means of a machine Nikola Tesla built for him, with each new iteration drowned at the end of each performance under the public stage, just as his wife had drowned years before. "Secrets are my life," one of the Borden twins explains to Sarah—literally, as we come to know, but his wife never understands despite her demand: "No more lies. No more secrets." We also know the truth about Bruce Wayne's identity and that Harvey Dent (Two-Face), not Batman, is guilty of the murders imputed to the caped crusader at the end of *The Dark Knight*. In *Inception*, we know how Robert Fischer came to the idea that he should break up his father's empire and that Dominick Cobb didn't murder his wife, Mal. In *Memento*, we know—or at least eventually learn—that John "Teddy" Gammell and Natalie have been manipulating Leonard to kill the wrong man and that Leonard actually killed his wife. Don't we?

Alas, things just aren't so simple and clear in Nolan's films. If Bill's experience in *Following* calls into question the veracity of narratives and muddies the public/private distinction, casting doubt on how private our putatively private selves really are, a closer look at cognitive limitations, psychological dysfunction, and the problematic nature of signs in Nolan's films raises still more doubts about the self—including the self of each viewer.

THE SELF SIGNIFIED

At the close of *Memento*, Leonard tells us, "We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are." Leonard's mirrors, the words and objects he uses to see himself, compose a haphazard collection of photos, notes, and tattoos. The film begins with him reading these signs and interpreting the objects around him: "So where are you? . . . You just wake up, and you're in . . . in a motel room. There's the key. . . . It's just an anonymous room. There's nothing in the drawers. But you look anyway." Leonard must read himself off the signs he finds in the world. His self, like ours, is embedded in a context of materiality that he uses to signify himself—not only to others but also to himself. Of course, we come to realize that Leonard is wrong, possibly even lying to himself, when he says: "You know who you are, and you know kind of all about yourself. But just for day-to-day stuff, notes are really useful." As Teddy later reminds him, Leonard doesn't know who he is. We, too, don't know ourselves—and notes, as well as other signs, enmesh us in much more than just "day-to-day stuff."

Certainly we find signs really useful, but material signs can be manipulated and our *selves* can be manipulated along with them.[3] Teddy manipulates Leonard by giving him false information for his photos and notes. *Inception*'s Cobb manipulates Mal's spinning-top totem. Bane manipulates the signifiers of a people's revolution. And Dormer plants incriminating blood droplets in suspect Wayne Dobbs's apartment back in LA, convinced of Dobbs's guilt on the basis of what he thinks was signified in the materiality of Dobbs's eyes. With his guide, Cobb-the-burglar, Bill penetrates and violates the personal spaces of others to read—and to be instructed on how to read—their signifiers, open their secret boxes, and come to know their private selves. The material signs on which Bill hangs his own story, however—the credit card, the clothing and hair, the hammer he fatally swings, the abandoned building where he visits Cobb—have all been pre-handled, too, prepared so they can be read by still other intruders.

Signs can *always* be reinterpreted by others. Despite our best efforts, they stand forever underdetermined and open to new and dynamic reappraisals—just as Detective Ellie Burr stands at the end of *Insomnia* with a

Walther 9mm shell in her palm and Dormer's lifeless corpse at her feet, poised indeterminately between different interpretations of the material stuff at hand. Murph might well have read the twitching of her father's watch hands as an anomalous mechanical phenomenon, rather than a message from her father. Is it anything more than luck that she didn't?

Like those watch hands, signs are also already caught up in streams of causality that operate beyond us and produce consequences we can't anticipate—just as Cobb's manipulating Mal's totem leads unexpectedly to her suicide and, in a sense, does make him guilty of having killed her. Our words aren't entirely our own either, nor are the material mirrors with which we reflect ourselves back to ourselves fully under our own control. In fact, they aren't fully under *anyone's* control and, therefore, they're never fully clear or determinate in their meaning. How, then, could our selves be our *own*? How vain and self-deluding we are to imagine that they are.

PAST AND PRESENT SELVES

In *Memento*, Teddy tries desperately to save himself from Leonard by appealing to the inherent inability of signs to signify fully and unequivocally, as well as to the weakness of Leonard's cognitive faculties. In particular, Teddy reminds Leonard about the defectiveness of his *memory*. Memory is a cognitive faculty that has had significant philosophical import ever since the influential Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) stressed the centrality of memory to self-knowledge. Augustine's *Confessions* is an exercise in the power of *memoria* to disclose the truth of our lives, in which he reviews the events of his life, stitches them together into a more-or-less coherent narrative, and finds in the story the truth about himself. Losing one's memory, for Augustine, entails losing the capacity for self-knowledge.[4]

Teddy argues that Leonard's "condition" makes it impossible for Leonard to have acquired enough knowledge to justify killing him as his "John G.": "You don't have a clue, you freak! . . . Leonard, you don't know what's going on. You don't even know my name." Leonard, however, does believe he knows his name: "Teddy." But Teddy replies, "'Cause you read it off a fucking picture!" Verbal and photographic signs clearly aren't sufficient to count for knowledge and especially not for *self*-knowledge. Because of the limits of his memory, Leonard lacks the ability to confirm their truth, to know the world, and even to know himself.

Can the material objects to which words refer offer a better guarantee of knowledge than words alone? Teddy seems to suggest as much when he says, "Come on, let's go down to the basement"—one of those hidden places where, for Nolan, true selves reside and where Leonard had stowed the body of his latest victim: Natalie's boyfriend, Jimmy Grantz.

"Let's go down, you and me together," says Teddy. "Then you'll know who you really are." Even if they had gone down into the basement, however, seeing Jimmy's body wouldn't have been enough, just as words and images weren't enough. In the midst of a world of indeterminate signs and suffering from cognitive limitations, especially limitations of memory, nothing can pin Leonard's self down for him. Leonard is "no different" from the rest of us. Rather, we're no different from Leonard.

Now, Leonard does lack what seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke takes to be essential to the persistence of *personal identity*: the continuity of consciousness made possible through memory. Leonard, however, is never totally disconnected from his past selves. Despite having to reorient himself every few minutes, he shares both material and causal continuity with his past selves, as well as a disrupted kind of conscious continuity between his present impaired self and his past normal self. He remains connected, after a fashion, to the married insurance adjuster he seems to have been before the attack. Like Dormer in the fog and disorientation of *Insomnia*, and perhaps like us all, Leonard seems to occupy a liminal space, epistemically problematic but not utterly confused, with a partially enduring self.[5] It's tempting to read the interruptions in his conscious experience due to his forgetfulness as merely a magnification of what each of us deals with when we wake up every day.

Still, something real has been lost for Leonard. Since he knows that he's been conscious and active during each forgotten period, his awakenings seem very different from ordinary awakening, even different from the awakening of someone who's been sleepwalking. His awakenings from forgetfulness are like awakening from an alternate personality or another self. Leonard's awakenings might be thought of as serial—or *diachronic*—branchings that reiterate his self in a way that makes it nonidentical with former iterations, even if each iteration remains identical with his pre-trauma self. With each new awakening, it seems a new Leonard is born; or rather the old Leonard is reborn, washed clean of anything his other recent selves have done. For him, forgetfulness is absolution, a recurrent baptism in oblivion. His forgetfulness accounts for the earnest, Boy Scout quality of his demeanor. It's the reason he sounds so persuasive when he says to Teddy, "I'm not a killer." And it's what makes Teddy so chillingly right when he says, "That's why you're so good at it."

There's a shortcoming, however, to being reborn over and over. Leonard worries that because he can't ever remember anything since the attack, which therefore seems forever recent, he can't heal from it: "How am I supposed to heal if I can't . . . feel time?"[6] While burning some of his wife's physical mementos, he muses, "Probably burned truckloads of your stuff before. Can't remember to forget you." Paradoxically, his inability to remember the recent past makes it impossible for him to forget the increasingly distant past—and, as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

observes, "the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become a gravedigger of the present."[7]

ONE'S OWN WORST ENEMY

Indeed, the past isn't so easily annihilated. The problems the self faces aren't restricted to the predation of others, the indeterminacy of signs, or cognitive weakness—impaired memory isn't Leonard's deepest problem, no more so than it's ours. The most disturbing moment of *Memento*, like similar moments in many of Nolan's films, is the instant we realize that Leonard has deceived and manipulated himself, that his past self has pulled the strings that determine Leonard's present conduct. While Leonard's conscious memory seems perpetually to reset to immediately after his attack, traces of his more recent but forgotten selves remain operative in his life in three principal ways: in the habits of thinking and feeling he's cultivated; in the notes and photos he retains; and in the tattoos those past selves inscribed on his body.

Habits endure after memory fades. By habituating himself to believe a false story about his wife's death, altering his body, burning selected photos, and reconfiguring his notes and police file containing leads about his assailants, Leonard's past selves deceitfully manipulate his later self into murdering Teddy. It's part of the film's horror to realize this may not be the first time he's manipulated himself in this way, as both his quick dispatching of Teddy and his cautionary tattoos suggest. He may have already acquired and perfected the habit of killing and covering it up, perhaps having picked the practice up from Teddy.

Our physical bodies, along with their dispositions, also bear the shape and inscriptions of the past. The persistent materiality that we shape and that in turn shapes our selves could be called "somatic" as opposed to cognitive memory—memories of the sort that Leonard certainly retains in his tattoos as well as his bodily habits. Our past selves, like the dead, leave remains, but these remains are hardly inert. As William Faulkner reminds us, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."[8] And, as if demonstrating the truth of that dictum, Leonard's past selves stretch out into the future to make a reborn non-killer into a killer. The effects of experience—even forgotten experience—persist and produce consequences, ensuring Leonard's wish that his actions have meaning even if they aren't remembered. The ineradicability of the past is a lesson that Ra's and Talia al Ghul should've learned, a lesson that would've deflated their vain wish to erase the past and start the world again from a clean slate on new virtuous foundations. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) puts it, the past remains "effective" in the present, sometimes dangerously so.[9]

But the past isn't safe from the influence of present or future selves either. By habituating himself to believe certain things about Sammy Jankis and about his wife's diabetes and overdose, Leonard has altered his past self or at least his "historical" self—that is, the way his past self is remembered. In order to be happy in the present by teasing out a puzzle he can never solve, in order to live out the romantic narrative of a wronged husband on a quest to avenge his wife's death and dishonor, Leonard has raided his past, altering some bits while obliterating others. *Insomnia*'s Will Dormer, in contrast, labors to protect his historical self, at least his historical past as it's understood by others, by swapping the bullet drawn from Hap Eckart's body and perhaps even by killing Eckart himself. Recognizing the way that even the past can be manipulated, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) writes, "To be dead is to be a prey for the living."[10] In this sense, even the dead can be harmed.

Cooper, in *Interstellar*, presents another example of a present (or, alternatively, future) self that reaches back to change his past self. Just as the material signs by which we situate ourselves are manipulable, in *Interstellar* space and time can themselves become material and manipulable so that Cooper, inside the black hole, is able to return, sort of, to the past and pass on information to his daughter and to himself. One might read in this a metaphor for the way parents and teachers affect children all the time. The act of teaching the young so that they can carry our humanity, what we've made of ourselves, into future worlds is an act that in a sense defies the forward march of time and the relentless annihilation and oblivion of death. Even as a father's material being abandons his children, he leaves something of himself behind, often lessons that are unpacked only as his children's own lives unfold. The dead may be our prey, but they're also sometimes our guides and even saviors.

We are, in sum, historical beings upon whom the past acts. We're also self-deceptive beings who mislead and manipulate ourselves and for whom the past is vulnerable to alteration. The past lives on, but not even the past can pin the self down—the self sometimes slips the snares of history, the present rewriting the past as it resists and overcomes space and time. It's a truth the Joker seems to understand when he offers us changing narratives of his own past—"You wanna know how I got these scars?" In the contest of writing and rewriting ourselves we can become *other* to our past selves and our past selves can become *other* to us, and as potentially hostile as anyone else. But things are still worse in Nolan's imagination. Even our *present* selves can become *other* to us and work against us. We don't stand in unstable and sometimes contested relationships only with other people and our past selves. Like the unfortunate man in *Doodlebug*, we exist at every moment—*synchronically*—as a house divided, with little prospect of future union or coherence.

CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS SELVES

Nolan accepts that our most private self (or selves) remains unconscious and hidden from us—and that we may even be the one doing the hiding. Bruce Wayne represses into the Batcave of his unconscious the personal motives that drive him to attack criminals—namely, his wish to avenge his parents' murder—in order to sustain the narrative of "the Batman" as an agent of justice, rather than lawless private retribution. His childhood friend, Rachel Dawes, sees through the disguise, remarking, "You're not talking about justice. You're talking about revenge." "Sometimes they're the same," Bruce replies, but Rachel holds the line: "No, they're never the same. Justice is about harmony. Revenge is about you making yourself feel better. It's why we have an impartial system." Interestingly, Bruce's response—"Your system is broken"—is something less than a denial that revenge is his real aim. Is Bruce Wayne closer, then, to the serial-killer vigilante Dexter Morgan than he is to Clark Kent or other familiar superheroes?[11]

The self may even enjoy its self-deception. It may perversely and unconsciously wish to be deceived, manipulated, violated, frustrated, and undone. Bill seems to delight in inviting Cobb to break into his flat; but, if Cobb is right, the desire that motivates Bill isn't peculiar to him. We all want that kind of exposure. The self wants its most personal dimensions, especially those that are problematic, to be both hidden and known, both secret and examined. The box, the basement, and the cave are not only hiding places for secret and sometimes shameful things; they're forms of "display." As Cobb tells us about the contents of people's private boxes, "They hide it. But actually they want someone to see it."

Insomnia confirms this impression when Dormer instructs Burr to review her report on Eckart's death, thereby exposing himself to the additional scrutiny that will eventually expose him, and when he confesses his past wrongs to the hotel clerk, Rachel Clement. Similarly, Finch opens the drawer containing Kay Connell's dress and then leaves it open for Detective Burr to see, finding it intolerable that she shouldn't know him for who he is, even for just the moment before she's to die. On the other hand, Alfred Borden expresses the fear of exposure that moves us to shield our hidden selves when he tells a young boy to whom he's just explained a coin trick, "Never show anyone. They'll beg you and they'll flatter you for the secret, but as soon as you give it up, you'll be nothing to them." And Bruce Wayne perhaps disingenuously explains to John Blake in *The Dark Knight Rises* that exposure risks not only ourselves but those we love: "The mask is not for you. It's to protect the people you care about."

Inception illustrates that the unconscious doesn't always wait for others to expose and undo us. It performs that role perfectly well itself, barreling self-destructively into our projects like a trackless freight train.

It seems to be always, like the doppelgängers in *Doodlebug*, one step ahead of us. The unconscious self can perversely shoot down the objects of our most compelling conscious desires—just as Mal shoots Fischer in the snow fortress in *Inception* and the man in *Doodlebug* (unknowingly?) attacks himself when he attacks his diminutive double. Perhaps, in these acts of self-subversion, the self actually reveals its deeper, more compelling, unconscious desires. In Cobb's case, this could be the secret desire to return to Mal in limbo, to stay there and not return to his children. On this reading, Mal and her destructive tendencies aren't an expression of Cobb's guilt—unless it's guilt over not loving his children—but rather of his unacknowledged desire, his secret wish. It's like Dormer's secret wish to kill Eckart, Leonard's secret wish not to end his search for his wife's assailant, Batman's secret wish to be a vengeful vigilante, and the man in *Doodlebug*'s secret wish to die. Are we any different?

Nolan places the self in a deep and dark forest. Frustrated by others in its efforts to compose its own narrative, ruled by forms of performativity that always already precede us, betrayed by semiotic slippage and indeterminacy, cognitively impaired, psychologically flawed, stalked by its own past and unconscious selves, the self as Nolan imagines it hasn't so much lost its way but exists at a loss. *Gnōthi seauton* ("Know yourself") is, in Nolan's world, a terribly difficult and perhaps impossible imperative to heed.[12] But that's one of things about his films that keeps those with philosophical inclinations coming back for more.

NOTES

1. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 2.
2. I have a political reading of *Inception*, which I won't pursue here but that interprets the film as arguing that in order to go home again Americans have to stop colonizing others' minds, acknowledge that their having done so has been damaging, and convince the rising generation to give up the empire of their dying fathers.
3. For more on how manipulating the environment can manipulate identity, see David LaRocca's essay in this volume.
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), Book 10.
5. For further analysis of Leonard's disrupted personal identity, see Jason Eberl's essay in this volume.
6. Interestingly, it is Cooper's ability to feel time in the black hole of *Interstellar*, or rather to feel through time, that makes it possible for him to heal the wounds he, and humanity, have inflicted.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 63.
8. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 2011), 73.
9. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2004), II.4, B, iv (p. 298 ff.).
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 543.

11. The difference between Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent may become evident in the upcoming film, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, of which Nolan is an executive producer.
12. Inscribed on the temple to Apollo at Delphi.

FOURTEEN

"Memory Man"

The Constitution of Personal Identity in Memento

David LaRocca

Memento's Leonard Shelby can't make new long-term memories due to a traumatic brain injury. However, there's a sense in which he can create new memories and inscribe them in locations *outside* his damaged brain—by means of self-fashioned and often self-inscribed tattoos, as well as other external media such as maps, notecards, and captioned Polaroid photographs.[1] These memories reside in what philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers have called one's "extended mind." According to their Extended Mind Thesis (EMT), our cognitive processes often make use of external objects in such a way that they can properly be regarded as extensions of our mind. Leonard's notes, tattoos, and Polaroids are the way that he makes, stores, and accesses new memories now that he is no longer able to do so internally. In fact, Leonard resembles a fictional character whom Clark and Chalmers themselves invented to illustrate their thesis. They describe a person named Otto who suffers from Alzheimer's disease and so keeps a notebook in which he writes down important information that he would otherwise forget. Otto's notebook does the same work as his friend Inga's internal or cranially encased memory, so Clark and Chalmers see no reason not to regard Otto's notebook as a genuine extension of his mind into an external medium.[2] Clark has also proposed *Memento* as an illustration of EMT.[3] EMT challenges our understanding of what a mind is, what it can do, and, perhaps most provocatively, *where* it is. Clark and Chalmers ask, "Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?" They reply with a notion called

"active externalism," which describes the environment as having an "active role" in "driving cognitive processes."[4]

However, Clark and Chalmers also argue that if EMT is true and some of our cognitive processes take place outside us and not simply in our heads, "there will be effects in the moral and social domains. . . . It may be, for example, that in some cases interfering with someone's environment will have the same moral significance as interfering with their person."[5] *Memento* shows us how this statement can apply even to interfering with one's own environment. Consider how a note Leonard writes on a Polaroid leads to the death of a presumably innocent man at Leonard's hands. Near the end of *Memento*, police detective John "Teddy" Gammell tells Leonard that the man he had been hunting in the belief that he had raped and murdered his wife, a man known to Leonard only as John G., has been dead for over a year, killed by Leonard after he tracked him down with Teddy's help. Leonard could've written on his Polaroid of Teddy, "With this man's help, you have found and killed John G.—the man who raped and murdered your wife. You are finished searching." But Leonard's search for his wife's killer has become his sole method of creating a meaningful and purposeful life for himself, limited and truncated though it may be. And so he asks himself: "Can I just let myself forget what you told me?"—and then writes "Don't believe his lies," a mnemonic to justify his ongoing manhunt and to mark his next victim.[6] In manipulating his environment, Leonard is modifying his "memory." How are we to assess the moral culpability of someone like Leonard who deliberately and duplicitously manipulates his environment in order to reshape his own extended mind?

THE ETHICS OF MEMORY

Path-breaking research by S. Matthew Liao and Anders Sandberg on the ethics of memory alteration,[7] as well as cutting-edge neurological research by Steve Ramirez, Xu Liu, and other MIT scientists at work on Project Inception (named for Nolan's film),[8] helps us to understand some of the ethical implications of memory alteration. Examining the "ethical issues that may arise from the development and use of MMTs"—memory modification technologies—"if and when they become available,"[9] Liao and Sandberg invoke the high-tech, sci-fi scenarios depicted in the films *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004) and *Total Recall* (Verhoeven, 1990). However, in contrast to these speculative and still-unrealized scenarios, all of *Memento*'s MMTs are low-tech, widely available, and relatively cheap items, such as tattoos, post-its, index cards, maps, and Polaroids. While *Eternal Sunshine* and *Total Recall* depict "deleting and editing memories" as neuro-technological procedures, for Leonard a notebook and pen will do just as well—assuming that Natalie

hasn't taken away all of the pens in the house. And destroying the memories stored in his extended mind is just as easy as creating them, as seen when Leonard takes a lighter to the Polaroids that would otherwise remind him that he killed a first John G. and then a second, Jimmy Grantz.

Liao and Sanberg note that "memories enable us to form a certain narrative identity, which is crucial to our having a sense of what we believe to be true about ourselves."[10] *Memento* underscores how important forming a coherent narrative of our lives is to our sense of who we are, since our identity is constructed through the stories we tell each other and ourselves. Memory allows us to construct narratives that connect our present with our past and situate ourselves in terms of the ongoing projects that give meaning to our lives—hence the terror and trauma of Alzheimer's disease. Leonard's sense of himself as a man on a mission to avenge the murder of his wife depends on memories stored in his head (of events that occurred before his injury) as well as all the more recently acquired memories that he can no longer keep in his head, and so has inscribed in the external mind of tattoos, Polaroids, and notes. But since Leonard's memory is inscribed in external media, he's in a unique position to alter his memory. His situation poses some acute questions: Does the possibility of manipulating or altering memory have the potential to make us editors in a new art of self-creation and personal identity formation? If so, can we delete our errors, faults, offenses, and hurts—at least the *memory* of them—in order to establish a clear, "spotless" record for ourselves? But *whose* record would that be?

As Noël Carroll has observed, *Memento* is one of our finest filmic illustrations of not only the nature of narrative in motion pictures, but also of the nature of temporal progression—the relationship of past, present, and future—and of causality, phenomena that are intimately bound up with narrative identity.[11] Presented in reverse chronological order, with brief overlaps between scenes as a bid for continuity, *Memento* demonstrates our typical, engrained habits of viewership in the very process of upsetting them: we expect one thing to happen after another in a forward-moving chronological sequence, whereas *Memento* forces us to struggle to make sense out of a series of temporally displaced episodes. Meanwhile, internal to the film—that is, with respect to Leonard's experience—we see how he also struggles to achieve a sense of temporal orientation. What may seem like an editing gimmick is actually part-and-parcel of the film's content and thus helps us to understand how identity is dependent on narrative design and flow.

Given *Memento*'s narrative structure, viewers are placed in Leonard's position of not knowing the veracity of new information or of the memories that encode them. How do we know what should be forgotten or erased—either on paper or in the brain—and what is, or becomes, essential to our knowledge as individual selves? As Liao and Sandberg note, "if a memory is crucial to your narrative identity, it is likely that it is

nested in many other beliefs and memories that are mutually reinforcing."[12] Given the interwoven nature of memories, who can say precisely which parts or portions can be deleted, added, or allowed to fade without consequences to the overall networks of the mind—in and out of the skull—as well as one's identity and capacity for moral agency? Leonard is perpetually engaged in fashioning his external mind through tattoos, notes, and other media, while simultaneously trying to discern the *truthfulness* of the external phenomena he inscribes—including what he's written to himself and what others, such as Natalie and Teddy, tell him is the case. When Leonard says of Teddy, "You're John G.—so you can be my John G.," Leonard has decided to dismiss what Teddy says about the past and write his own alternate version. For Leonard, this will become a reliable, actionable truth. Leonard's need to *not yet* have avenged his wife's murder is so essential to his narrative identity that he's willing to shape deliberately—to fake, to lie, to forget, to destroy—any evidence that would dismantle this emotionally charged quest as an ongoing and perpetually uncompleted project.[13]

We're not in the habit of holding a person morally culpable for *unintentional* memory loss—for involuntary forgetting or for the effects of physical or psychological trauma or disease. However, Leonard's capacity to *intentionally* forget prompts a novel concern with the ethics of choosing what to remember and what to forget. Even though most of us don't suffer anterograde amnesia like Leonard, we're perpetually involved in an ongoing process of identity creation by means of the choices we make. Leonard's condition is just an exaggerated version of the way we all control the content and meaning of our personal narratives. Even without the use of high-tech MMTs, we are capable of *consciously* reinforcing the neural pathways that give rise to our picture of ourselves. Just as Leonard wakes up each day and undertakes a refresher course in who he is—by way of his externalized notes and photographs—so the rest of us spend our waking life dismissing or reinforcing our internally-stored memories. In this respect, *Memento* is a noir allegory of the manner in which we create and control memory and by extension our narrative identity, which in turn can bear upon our culpability for our actions. Consider that one of the actions for which one might be culpable could be the decision to remember—or forget—something. For his part, Leonard appears to be of sufficiently sound mind that his choice to make Teddy his "John G." carries moral weight.

"PHOTOGRAPHIC" MEMORY

With respect to the fallibility of memory, Liao and Sandberg remind us that "it is likely that much information in our memories is inaccurate, biased or even false, and that our memories are constantly reinterpreted

in the light of our ongoing project to construct a self." As Leonard tells Teddy, "Memory's unreliable. . . . Memory's not perfect. It's not even that good. Ask the police. Eyewitness testimony is unreliable." Of course, in *Memento*, it's especially difficult to determine the veracity of memories, since characters regularly offer descriptions of events that are contested by the visual depictions of events that we see as viewers or by the first-hand verbal accounts given by other characters. Whose statements, whose memories can we trust? How do we distinguish between memories and lies told to manipulate Leonard? By forcing us to wrestle with these questions, *Memento* encourages us to consider the extent to which a memory is an *interpretation* and not a record. As novelist Philip Roth has glossed the nature of memory in his autobiography *The Facts*, "Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imaginings of facts."[14]

Compare this understanding of memory as a process of *interpretation* with the visual pun of Polaroids as a literalization of the common figurative expression "photographic memory." Even someone who is said to possess a photographic memory doesn't literally have *photographs* in his or her mind, only an ability to remember phenomena with tremendous fidelity, a power to make or take mental images. But if we can *develop* mental images, perhaps we can also allow them to *fade*, just as the photograph of Teddy's body does in the film's backward-running opening shot. Leonard can't create new long-term memories, so he creates new long-term *images*, photographs, as a proxy for his biological memory. Leonard's Polaroids *are* his memories, not just prompts to inner-cranial processes. When Leonard burns the photograph, he is in a literal sense immolating a memory.

Moreover, as viewers of *Memento*, we aren't always entirely sure what we're watching: Are the flashbacks to the attack memories in Leonard's head or dramatic imaginings that Nolan has created for the viewer's benefit, in the way that a third-person narrator might function in a novel? Is the black and white footage of Sammy Jankis and his wife a fictionalized presentation of Leonard's first-hand experience? Is it Leonard's inner dramatization of the story he heard from Sammy Jankis or his wife? Is it Nolan's visual rendering of Sammy's story? Or is it something else entirely? Part of what *Memento* cultivates in viewers is the fear of losing our grip on the *criteria* for judging when a memory is false. What if others, like Natalie, allow Leonard to live according to a false memory? What if Leonard ignores those who, like Teddy, insist that his memory is false? Because memory is to some extent socially constructed and may differ from person to person,[15] it can be difficult to determine a standard for determining what is a true memory. Leonard's ongoing anxiety about whether Teddy and Natalie are lying to him becomes a powerful allegory of our own struggle to verify memories. In fact, misremembering or distorted remembering—intentionally or not—seems to be a huge compo-

nent of human experience.[16] We can make significant decisions—many of them morally charged—on the basis of false memories.

When Leonard decides to write "Don't believe his lies" on his Polaroid of Teddy, he may be subconsciously remembering how Teddy had previously said: "You lie to yourself to be happy. There's nothing wrong with that. We all do it. Who cares if there's a few details you'd rather not remember . . . I guess I can only make you remember the things you want to be true." Leonard is skeptical of Teddy's story, inasmuch as he claims that Leonard has already killed the real John G. and that Sammy didn't have a wife but rather it was *Leonard's* wife who was diabetic. Since Leonard has constructed a narrative that conflicts with Teddy's account, Leonard has to make a decision about what (and whom) to believe. "Do I lie to myself to be happy?" Leonard asks himself and replies with intentional mischief: "In your case, Teddy, yes, I will." If Teddy's story is correct, then Leonard would be deprived of the narrative he's created for himself. Consequently, he lies to himself in order to lend credence to his own story. Rather than dwell on whether Teddy might be telling the truth, Leonard decides to kill him, thereby eliminating the challenge Teddy presents to his beliefs. As Liao and Sandberg note, "one's ability to live in falsehood may be dependent on *what others remember*."[17]

BELIEVING LIES, CREATING TRUTHS

Nolan has given us reason to doubt the veracity of what nearly *everyone* in the film says—even Burt Hadley, the motel clerk, abuses Leonard's condition by charging him for an extra room. Because we do not know who is lying—and to what degree—it's very difficult to determine with precision the actual nature of the story and the epistemic or moral virtue of the characters. Since we have no anchor on the truth of the narrative, everyone is potentially unreliable as a source of information or guidance. And so we're left wondering about how to put the story together—not unlike Leonard.

Murder mysteries, noir narratives, detective dramas, and forensic fictions customarily withhold their truths and revelations until the end. The viewer is, in effect, tricked, given false leads, encouraged on scant evidence to develop pet theories of guilt and innocence, and deceived in various ways throughout the proceedings until the very end when explanations are given, culprits are identified, the wrongfully accused are vindicated, and order is reestablished. In *Memento*, by contrast, there's no denouement in which we discover it was Professor Plum in the Library with the Candlestick. Rather, we have a meta-noir that is caught up with the conditions of its own creation:[18] we're not just watching a man struggling with his memory, we are *also* struggling with our own. Even at the very end of the film the viewer is left in the lurch; loose ends aren't tied

up. Rather, a loop is created where, at the end, we are sent back to the beginning—as if we too have to live Leonard's circumstance of always beginning again, perpetually questing for reliable facts, endlessly questioning which statements are true. Is this my motel room? Is Natalie my friend? Is Teddy a cop—or is he John G.? Perhaps Leonard's purported memories and his efforts to constitute a narrative identity from them are as much a "put on" as the suit belonging to Jimmy Grantz that he wears throughout most of the movie.

Leonard's quest for truth is beset on all sides by those who present ideas that conflict with his sense of what is true based on what he finds etched into his skin, captioned on Polaroids, logged in his detective file, and recorded in what he takes to be his reliable memories from before the assault. But Teddy's challenge to Leonard's account of events illustrates that he may only *think* he remembers things that never happened. Or perhaps Leonard is lying and he's really a fraud. If so, then how far back and to what extent has he been faking? Leonard's predicament may very well be a tragic and violent illustration of the cliché that one always needs more lies to cover the lies one has already told. Each new John G. is a lie that requires a new batch of lies to sustain it.

The issue of Leonard's possible fakery not only makes him a very good actor; it also makes the moment when he adopts Teddy as his next John G. revelatory in mortifying ways. The largest arc of the film begins at this moment, since everything we've seen from the beginning of the film has led (in reverse) to this point. Since Leonard can sometimes hold onto new memories for perhaps as long as ten minutes, in that brief span while he's sitting in his truck he's a morally capable—and thus *culpable*—agent, culpable for the sinister act of premeditated murder.[19] That Leonard will later not be able to call to mind his premeditation is of secondary importance to his decision to hatch the plan. By writing "Don't believe his lies" on the Polaroid, Leonard in effect implants (or "incepts," to use the language of Nolan's film *Inception*) a command in his extended mind that he knows will set him on a path to kill Teddy.

REMEMBERING TO FORGET; FORGETTING TO REMEMBER

According to Teddy, Leonard has made a habit of "learning through repetition." Reading his cards over and over again gives him some orientation to who he is and what he should be doing. There's a clever analogue to this practice in a flashback where Leonard's wife reads—actually, re-reads—an untitled, dog-eared book. Leonard asks incredulously, "How can you read that again? . . . You've read it a hundred times." When she tells him that she "enjoys it," Leonard discounts her delight in repetition: "Yeah, but the pleasure of a book is in wanting to know what happens next." Ironically, after Leonard loses his ability to form new

long-term memory, *he* will be telling the same story over and over again, not knowing what came before or what comes next. Though Leonard spends much of the film in a state of agitated, nervous, almost paranoid distress, there are moments when we wonder whether he perhaps *enjoys* repeating the stories he tells himself and others about what happened to him and his wife, about what happened to Sammy, and about his search for John G. And though Leonard thinks the pleasure of reading—of following a narrative forward—lies in "wanting to know what happens next," his own amnesiac experience exhibits the painful nature of not knowing what happened *before*. Thus, his repetition and his wife's serve different ends. Reviewing his notecards is Leonard's form of self-education, his way to get a grip on who he is, but because he can't remember having read them before, he is always "learning" anew. We might even wonder whether it can be called "learning," since one can't learn if one can't remember. While his wife knows both what has happened and what will happen next in her book, Leonard can't know either with respect to the narrative of his life. For him, re-reading the "facts" that putatively define his life and his quest is always reading for the first time.

Given his lack of context for his reading of his own life's narrative, it may not be surprising to hear Leonard say he "can't feel time." Recall how Teddy says to Leonard *twice*: "You don't even know how long ago it was. Maybe you should start investigating yourself." Teddy's recommendation of a self-investigation not only alludes to noir genre conventions, but also to the peculiar tonal—and moral—shift we experience in watching *Memento* as Leonard goes from being an apparent victim to an apparent villain, from the victim of an attack to an attacker himself. Since the film is presented in reverse, only at the end are we shown that he's a deluded villain who has no idea that he's anything other than a victim. We initially encounter Leonard as a man still reeling from the aftermath of a violent attack and the loss of his wife. In other words, we begin with his trials, his torments, and his traumas. It's only very late in the film that we gain the troubling knowledge that Leonard has *chosen* to forget he had already killed John G. In that moment, Leonard goes from vigilante-man-in-mourning to serial-murderer-on-the-loose.

While we may enjoy watching *Memento* precisely because we want to know what happened *before*—in the past—viewers may be troubled by the extent to which they are living the film's structure. Beginning at the end, we experience ourselves as innocent, as afflicted by a condition we cannot control, but then ending at the beginning, we're innocent no more—for the film presents us with an unnerving *reminder* that we too can modify our memory. That the alteration of memory can transform identity is not news, but it's startling to realize that the modification of memory may involve a morally weighty decision or culminate in an alteration of our moral condition. What will we choose to forget? Will it be

moral to do so? And how will the consequences of our memory modification be integrated into the narratives that inform our personal identity?

Leonard's case suggests that any form of memory modification technology—whether low-tech notecards and Polaroids or the high-tech neuroscience of MMTs—intensifies the risk that we may become disassociated from our past thoughts, actions, and experiences. And so we wonder and maybe even worry: What will I forget?—what *can* I forget?—and how will it affect my identity and thereby my status as a moral agent?

Since the truth of our memories is never self-certifying, there's good reason to believe that we have a duty, both epistemic and moral, to undertake the construction and reinforcement of a narrative identity that's as truthful as we can possibly make it—regardless of whether those truths make us happy or give us pleasure. Joel and Clementine share this realization at the end of *Eternal Sunshine* when they decide to *protect* their painful memories, however much they hurt, because those memories are part of what gives their relationship its meaning. In contrast, Leonard's decision to *abandon* the truth of his experience by intentionally writing down false information confirms the corruption of his conscience and the erosion of his fidelity to moral action. Through his falsehoods, Leonard succeeds in creating a purpose for his life after "the attack," thereby giving shape to the narrative that defines his identity, but he does so at the cost of becoming a serial killer.

Having a self involves constructing a narrative that we constitute not simply by passively recording experience but through deliberate decisions. Having an authentic self would seem to be predicated on a willed decision to create and incorporate only truthful representations of experience. We can do that by recognizing our duty to maintain cognitive fidelity to events-as-they-happen, to complement our own attempts at veridical perception with input from other trustworthy persons who were there, and to create material evidence, such as a written journal that's not full of fabrications and fictions—all of which underwrite and affect the constitution of biological memory. It's precisely because Leonard violates this duty that we can find him guilty of murder. Despite his mental trauma, Leonard's so-called "defective agency" could still be redeemed if only he acted conscientiously in his moments of lucid remembering.[20] While we wouldn't hold Leonard responsible for every act committed due to his condition—it's not his fault that he ends up paying for two hotel rooms—we *can* assign moral judgment to those acts he commits when deliberately conspiring with his own epistemically debilitating condition. Leonard thus becomes a signal—if provocatively extreme—illustration of the relationship between memory, selfhood, and moral culpability. We are thus brought back to Clark and Chalmers's claim "that in some cases interfering with someone's environment will have the same moral significance as interfering with their person."[21] Whether inside or outside one's head, memory modification should always proceed with an

awareness of memory's intimate connection with personal identity and moral accountability.

As viewers of *Memento*, we do not just watch Leonard in action and hear him narrating his experience—we are also made privy to his extended mind, the information-bearing items that surround him and are in some cases etched into his flesh. Since we have the benefit of our long-term memories, the true nature of his actions eventually become clear to us. We see him kill Teddy at the beginning of the film and Jimmy at the end, as well as a photograph taken after the first John G. was murdered. Though Leonard may have forgotten what he's done to these men—and perhaps many others—*Memento* has become Leonard's case file,[22] a material document, albeit disordered, that we can study and call to mind in our own investigation of the case of the forgetful but unforgettable "memory man."

NOTES

1. See Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," *Analysis* (1998) 58: 7–19; and Richard Menary, ed., *The Extended Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), which includes Andy Clark's "*Memento*'s Revenge: The Extended Mind, Extended," replying to critics of the 1998 essay. See also Michael McKenna, "Moral Monster or Responsible Person? *Memento*'s Leonard as a Case Study in Defective Agency" in *Memento*, ed. Andrew Kania (New York: Routledge, 2009), 23–43. For reflections on the inscribed body in film, such as Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* (1996), see Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2007).

2. Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," in *The Extended Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 33–35.

3. Andy Clark, "*Memento*'s Revenge: The Extended Mind, Extended," in *The Extended Mind*, 43–66.

4. Clark and Chalmers, *The Extended Mind*, 27.

5. Ibid., 39.

6. For further discussion of Leonard's need to create a moral purpose for himself, see Jason Eberl's chapter in this volume.

7. S. Matthew Liao and Anders Sandberg, "The Normativity of Memory Modification," *Neuroethics* 1 (2008): 85–99.

8. Xu Liu, Steve Ramirez, et al. "Optogenetic Stimulation of a Hippocampal Engram Activates Fear Memory Recall," *Nature* 484 (19 April 2012): 381–87.

9. Liao and Sandberg, "The Normativity of Memory Modification," 85.

10. Ibid., 90. There's an important description of narrative identity given by Kwame Anthony Appiah in which inherited, socially-created "scripts" give shape and definition to our lives; see his *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 21–24. Even the trope here—"of lines written on our behalf, perhaps even in a dynamic three-act structure with an arc"—reinforces the *narrative* nature of our thinking about identity. Identity is, on this view, a kind of story we tell ourselves. And it also appears to be necessarily caught up with what other people think and do, as well as what other people think of us and make available to us. *Memento* illustrates—and meaningfully exaggerates—the social creation of narrative identity insofar as Leonard is desperately reliant upon Teddy, Natalie, and others to achieve a sense of who he is. We're *all* similarly dependent, according to Appiah, but may be largely unaware of that prevailing need. Other philosophers have argued for the necessarily narrative nature of personal identity—including the influence of the "social matrix" in which it

arises; see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

11. Noël Carroll, "*Memento* and the Phenomenology of Comprehending Motion Picture Narration" in Kania, *Memento*, 135.

12. Liao and Sandberg, "The Normativity of Memory Modification," 91.

13. Consider also Nolan's use of the rape and murder of a woman as a plot device. Actor Norbert Leo Butz, for one, has "told his agents and manager that he could no longer audition for" what he describes as "material that uses the rape, mutilation, or murder of a woman for the purpose of adding suspense to a plot, to tease or titillate an audience when the narrative gets boring," Jesse Green, "A Better Way to Say Goodbye," *New York* (September 30, 2013), 92. How would the moral stakes of Leonard's quest be understood without violence against his wife? Even if the rape and murder of Leonard's wife turns out to be a mental delusion—perhaps a stress response to Leonard having caused his wife's overdose of insulin—it's still something that *viewers* experience as a morally charged and emotionally taxing hypothetical scenario.

14. Philip Roth, *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 8.

15. Clark and Chalmers address what they call "socially extended cognition"—for example, as a longtime couple might depend on one another's memories (*The Extended Mind*, 38). Moreover, it seems plausible to speak of socially extended memory in the form of *material* culture—for instance, the way we both contribute to and share the creation of extra-mental realities such as photographs, notebooks, etc.

16. For a compelling illustration of how misremembering can transform narrative identity, listen to Michael Lewis's story about Emir Kamenica, "My Ames is True" *This American Life* (September 6, 2014), show 504.

17. Ibid.; italics added.

18. I borrow the term "meta-noir" from J. Hoberman, "Persistence of Memory," *The Village Voice* (March 13, 2001).

19. Carroll, "*Memento* and the Phenomenology of Comprehending Motion Picture Narration," 134.

20. See McKenna, "Moral Monster or Responsible Person?"

21. Clark and Chalmers, *The Extended Mind*, 39.

22. In fact, a "widescreen, two-disc edition" of *Memento* treats the film as exactly such—that is, as a case file, including bespoke details such as a clipboard, a psychiatric report, a medical exam, a post-it note that reads "Watch," and even an antic red paperclip.

FIFTEEN

Engaging Otherness through *Following*

Subjectivity and Contemporary Film Spectatorship

Louis-Paul Willis

Over the past decade, much has been written on the increasing use of avant-garde narrative and filmic devices within popular mainstream cinema. Since the mid-1990s, there's been a growing complexity within popular film and media production and spectatorship. While mainstream film has, for the most part of its history, followed the clear-set guidelines of Hollywood realism, it seems that more and more popular films employ narrative strategies that were previously exclusive to "art-cinema." For instance, the use of *metalepsis*—a trope where narrative boundaries or logics are transgressed, generating a rupture with conventional film viewership—has long remained somewhat exclusive to the avant-garde.[1] Recent mainstream films, however, have turned to metalepsis as a narrative strategy to generate more intense spectator involvement with the construction of meaning. The use of metalepsis in mainstream film is increasing in recurrence and complexity as part of a broader trend generating a radical shift in spectator expectations of the films they view (and re-view). The way contemporary films tell stories has little to do with the Hollywood tradition of realism and linearity; a growing portion of films today confront viewers with the task of constructing and re-constructing the meaning of the films they watch. Contemporary methods of spectatorship, from DVD and Blu-ray discs to online streaming services such as Netflix, encourage viewers to revisit the films they enjoy, allowing them to take pleasure in decoding details that were glossed over in previous

viewings, thus adding to the pleasure of inference and construction of meaning – a truly *interactive* film experience.

Christopher Nolan is often considered one of the main contributors to this tendency within contemporary film production. From *Memento* (2000) to *The Prestige* (2006) to *Inception* (2010), many of his films resort to narrative strategies that engage viewers with more than a simple and linear story. His first feature film, *Following* (1998), sets the table for his numerous experiences with film spectatorship. Through various narrative and formal devices, Nolan creates a filmic experience that echoes contemporary tendencies toward complex forms of media spectatorship. *Following* is a prototypical film that demonstrates the filmmaker's wish to engage and provoke us, rather than comfort us in our position as spectators. This essay presents a reading of *Following* articulated around notions of *subjectivity* and *otherness* as they're shaped by filmic reception on the part of viewers. I situate Nolan's film within the context of the contemporary filmic tendency for complex, multiform, and multi-strand narratives that compel viewers to the re-viewing and deciphering of the films they consume. I draw attention to the film's deployment of the gaze, filmic desire, and the filmic intrigue's intimate ties to questions of identity and subjectivity. I aim to provide an understanding of Nolan's attempt to rethink contemporary filmic spectatorship as it's deployed in his first film.

MIND-TRICKING NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

Using Alejandro González Iñarritu's first three films, *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006) as examples of contemporary complex storytelling, film critic David Denby reflects on how "a scrambling of time frames . . . can leave the viewer experiencing reactions before actions, dénouements before climaxes, disillusion before ecstasy, and many other upsetting reversals and discombobulations."[2] He notes a trend within contemporary film production and spectatorship, the origins of which he links back to Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994),[3] where audiences are seen as developing an increased liking for films that require active participation in the construction of meaning. He rightfully asserts that "as soon as film was invented, experimental film was invented,"[4] thus suggesting that while narrative devices aimed at radical forms of counter-spectatorship have developed over much of cinema's history, only recently have they been making their way into mainstream film production:

> [M]ainstream moviegoers are bringing a new sensibility to these complex films . . . they have discovered the pleasures of narrative complexity that were formerly reserved for arthouse audiences and want more. Their willingness to struggle through the disruptions and dislocations,

> to find pleasure in making sense of challenging narratives, and most importantly, to pay for the opportunity to do so will result in a continuation of the cycle.[5]

While experimentations with film narration have indeed been mostly expressed through avant-garde movements, from Russian formalism and German expressionism to the French New Wave, these movements weren't necessarily aimed at a wide viewership. In contrast, contemporary viewers have taken an increased pleasure in being subjected to complex narratives that can problematize their position as spectators, rather than comfort in the typically passive position of classical Hollywood realism.

This thesis is grounded in the notion that contemporary mainstream film's recent explorations with narrative complexities calls for an investigation into independent cinema's use of narrative devices, such as fragmented, multi-strand, and multiform narratives. While fragmented narratives present an unconventional representation of diegetic[6] time and space, and therefore "lack the unified, linear storyline of conventional narratives,"[7] multi-strand narratives designate those films "with more than one narrative or that follow more than one protagonist."[8] They typically represent a variety of protagonists who evolve within fragmented temporalities of a given diegetic reality; examples include Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999), the previously mentioned films of Iñarritu, as well as Paul Haggis's *Crash* (2004). Because these films' characters occupy the same diegetic universe, their complexity lies within the multitudinous narrative elements that the viewer must take into account in order to make sense out of the film. On the other hand, multiform narratives are similar to multi-strand narratives insofar as they both present two or more narrative strands. However, "the multiplicity of the multiform is not simply narratological but also ontological—it features parallel or alternate realities in one or more of its strands."[9] Such films confront viewers not only with multiple narrative strands, but also multiple levels of diegetic reality through the proliferation of narrative strands; examples include David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004).[10] In Nolan's filmic *oeuvre*, the narrative complexity of *Memento*, together with its representation of a single protagonist and diegetic reality, make the film into a pertinent example of a fragmented narrative, while the multiple ontological levels of *Inception* present an intriguing example of a multiform narrative. Through its use of non-linear editing and complex representation of diegetic actions, *Following* can be seen as a fragmented narrative.

Because of the increasing use of such complex narratives within popular film, a growing amount of scholarship has been devoted to issues related to production and spectatorship. Beyond questions of narrative typology *per se*, there've been explorations into the reception of these complex films and their effect on film spectatorship. Terms such as

"mind-game films," "puzzle films," "mind-tricking narratives," and "mind-fuck films," while differently articulated and defined, all refer to the *effect* such films have on the viewer's mind through their "meticulously designed narratives that force the audience to participate actively and lead up to the final mind-boggling plot twists [that] have been extremely popular" in recent years.[11]

Mind-game films can be broadly defined as "movies that are 'playing games,' and this at two levels: there are films in which a character is being played games with . . . Then, there are films where the audience is being played games with."[12] Similarly, mind-tricking narratives "feature an ending that completely takes us by surprise" by concealing information until the very ending of the film.[13] Given this particular aspect of mind-tricking narratives,[14] typical narratological approaches to film no longer suffice in discussing the complexities of contemporary tendencies in film and their effect on reception. Recent trends in film studies have attempted to rethink classical narratology; although such an approach doesn't consider the mind-tricking narrative's inspiration in previous non-Hollywood, "art-film" experimentations.[15]

Film theorist Warren Buckland suggests that "in today's culture dominated by new media, experiences are becoming increasingly ambiguous and fragmented; correspondingly, the stories that attempt to represent those experiences have become opaque and complex. These complex stories overturn folk-psychological ways of understanding and instead represent radically new experiences and identities."[16] A purely narratological approach to mind-tricking narratives thus seems problematic; one must also take into account questions of film reception. While the *cognitive theory* advocated by Bordwell and his acolytes can explain aspects of spectatorship related to inference and construction of meaning through various cognitive schemas, it can't explain questions of subjectivity and desire.[17] Contemporary theories of reception should therefore take into account recent trends in *film psychoanalysis* in conjunction with current areas of study within film cognitivism. I'll show how one can interpret the mind-tricking devices within Nolan's *Following* through such a complementary approach.

SPECTATORSHIP, SUBJECTIVITY, AND OTHERNESS

A psychoanalytical approach to film is shaped around the understanding of spectatorship, as conveyed by filmic reception. It centers on cinema's role in the formation of subjectivity, as well as collective and cultural identities, with attention to certain central concepts, such as desire and the filmic gaze. As film historian Thomas Elsaesser notes, "mind-game films could be seen as indicative of a 'crisis' in the spectator-film relation, in the sense that the traditional 'suspension of disbelief' or the classical

spectator positions of 'voyeur,' 'witness,' 'observer' and their related cinematic regimes or techniques . . . are no longer deemed appropriate, compelling, or challenging enough."[18] Narrative devices that were aimed at keeping the disturbance related to the revelation of the filmic gaze at bay within classical Hollywood film are gradually set aside within contemporary mind-tricking narratives. As such, the cinema's role in the construction of subjectivity and otherness is no longer withheld or dissimulated, as is most obvious with Nolan's films, as I shall demonstrate in the next section.

Early psychoanalytic film theory initially thought of the concept of the "gaze" as the spectator's look, a dynamic engagement of the viewer in processes of recognition and identification with others as they're presented on screen. According to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), however, the gaze isn't a *controlling* look that the subject poses on an external object to gain mastery, but rather the point within the visual field that looks back at the subject and produces a *lack* of mastery.[19] Because the dynamics of such a gaze posit the subject as the object of an external point of view, the existence of such a gaze triggers the subject's desire; Lacan thus conceives the gaze as the "objet *a*" of the visual field.[20] This conception of the gaze contrasts with the notion that *visual pleasure* is intimately tied to film spectatorship.[21] Distinguishing an active look from a passive gaze, film scholar Elizabeth Cowie specifies that "the gaze is not the look, for to look is merely to see whereas the gaze is to be posed by oneself in a field of vision. The pleasure of the scopic drive is first and foremost passive—the wish to be seen."[22] One may ask how the wish to be seen can be taken into account in the context of film spectatorship. Popular mainstream film typically avoids the disturbance related to the manifestation of the gaze within the field of vision, thereby maintaining the spectator's sense of mastery over what's seen, which in turn brings on voyeuristic visual pleasure.

By contrast, contemporary tendencies in popular film—especially those related to mind-tricking narratives—exemplify the move from the study of visual pleasure to that of *radical spectatorship* within current theoretical trends in film studies. Mainstream film has taken a turn toward narrative deployments that go against typical Hollywood realism, generally avoiding a sustainment of desire through its deployment of the gaze. Rather, most films "blend desire and fantasy in order to produce first a sense of lack—the gaze as absence—and then a sense of the absence filled in."[23] In narratological terms, "any narrative's underlying principle is the tension between withholding information and releasing information."[24] Mainstream films generally resolve the desire they've elicited in the triggering event that causes an unsatisfactory situation that requires resolving: "the most common tack for a film lies in providing a fantasmatic resolution for the constitutive dissatisfaction of desire."[25] Through editing, filming, and overall use of sophisticated narrative devices, however,

mind-tricking narratives circumvent the viewer's habitual relation to filmic desire and its resolution through fantasy: "they open a focused and temporary gap, keeping it open to the last possible moment."[26] And sometimes—as with Nolan's *Following*—they rely on the viewer's reception and construction of meaning to close a gap that simply refuses to be closed. This tendency presents a definitive affront to conventional Hollywood storytelling and, most importantly, conventional deployments of the gaze. This necessarily plays on the sense of subjectivity provided by cinematic spectatorship.

VOYEURISM REVISITED

Following traces the events into which its main protagonist, who initially presents himself as Bill, is drawn after developing an interest in following strangers to find out more about them. Cobb, one of the people he follows, confronts him and they eventually become partners in crime, breaking into various London apartments. Their partnership turn out to be duplicitous and through actions that seem insignificant at the time of their occurrence—both narrative and diegetic—Bill ends up framed by Cobb for the murder of a woman he'll be set up to meet. While this woman believes she's using Bill with Cobb's complicity, she is in fact also being used by Cobb for the framing of her own murder, which he'll end up committing with Bill's *modus operandi*. The narrative apparatus that underlies the film's progression is complex; not only are certain characters played games with, but the film's viewer is also repeatedly played games with. The film uses our position as spectators, as well as our being accustomed to certain dynamics in the deployment of subjectivity and otherness within filmic reception, in order to trick us in our attempt to make sense of the narrative. Ultimately, the film reveals its inclusion of the viewer through its organization of the look, the gaze, and the cinematographic rendering of the tension between subjectivity and otherness.

Through its initial premise, the overall thematic dimension of *Following* is grounded in questions related to voyeurism and the desire to investigate otherness. The film opens to images of gloved hands manipulating objects in a wooden box. The box's importance evades the first-time viewer, whose attention tends to be focused on the images and voice-over narration that immediately follow these first images. Once the film's title shows up, we're shown an image of the gloved hands closing the box and are immediately faced with an image of Bill, who proceeds to explain "what happened" in an off-screen narration that accompanies seemingly random images of him following people in an urban setting. As he describes to an unknown interlocutor—and, indirectly, to the viewer—after going through a phase where he was alone and lonely, he started "shadowing" random strangers on the street out of curiosity. He justifies his

behavior by specifying that "other people are interesting" to him, and details how he became addicted to following strangers and learning about them.

Bill provides an important analogy when he asks his interlocutor if he ever looked up at a crowd of people and gradually started to fix on one particular person, explaining how, in doing so, "all of a sudden that person isn't part of the crowd anymore. They've become an individual." This analogy perfectly captures Lacan's idea of an external gaze that defines and delimits subjective existence. It also directly interpellates the viewer in a movie theater, who's an individual within a crowd, and whose position necessarily relies on an "interest in other people." Nolan seems to be indicating, or at least implying, how the narrative deployment will rely on questions of subjectivity and individuation. Most interestingly, we've yet to resolve the question of whom the protagonist is talking to. Given the questions asked, which cause Bill to reflect on certain aspects of his actions, one may initially suspect that he's in a conversation with a therapist. When the opening dialogue ends with the notion that things started going awry once the protagonist stopped respecting the rules he made himself to structure his addiction and keep it under control, the film's preliminary narrative tension is deployed around two simple questions: what went wrong and how was the shortcoming repaired?

Because of the emphasis the film places on the dynamics of look and gaze, we should look at the way the viewer's filmic experience is defined within *Following*. While the traditional spectatorship implied by mainstream movies supports a voyeuristic look, where the viewer is given the impression of prying into private scenes that don't take his presence into account,[27] contemporary mind-tricking narratives decidedly *do* take the viewer's presence into account. *Following* indeed prompts its viewer to confront this typical passive point of view, not only through the cognitive activity tied to its mind-tricking narrative, but also on a thematic level. While we're led to believe that Bill is the active follower, taking interest in other individuals and prying into their lives with voyeuristic curiosity, it turns out he's in fact the one who's being followed. His own actions become devoid of any sovereign will, as he plays out as a patsy within a meticulously plotted frame-up aimed at making him the suspect in the murder of the woman whose apartment he breaks into. One could say that the voyeur becomes the one who's viewed from an external perspective. When one considers that the voyeur's quest is centered on the investigation of the other, we could say that the investigator becomes the investigated. In Lacan's terms, the subject of the look becomes the object of the gaze, revealing how there's no point of view that's exempt from the Other's gaze, even within film spectatorship. By revisiting the inherent voyeurism typical to film spectatorship, Nolan seems intent on bringing

viewers to the conclusion that voyeurism—hence typical film spectatorship—is in fact a trap, an impossibility.

This impossibility is most apparent with the film's insistence on "the box." When Cobb and Bill complete their first break-in together, Cobb explains to his newfound accomplice how one "can tell a lot about people by their stuff" before proceeding to show Bill how details about the inhabitants of the flat they're robbing can be deduced from the objects they own—from their futon to their books to their laundry bag. Cobb's attention is drawn to a particular item, which he identifies as "the box." Cobb explains how "everyone has a box" that contains an "unconscious collection, a display" of "personal things like snapshots, letters, little trinkets from Christmas." As depicted and described in the film, "the box" is a core of both subjectivity and otherness: "our interest in others (and in the cinema) derives from the idea of a box of secrets that we believe them to possess—a hidden knowledge of what is most singular about them."[28]

This core that triggers the subject's desire is centered on what Lacan calls the "objet *a*"—the object/cause of desire. For Lacan, the "objet *a*" triggers desire because it represents what's *in* the object *more than* the object itself. The "objet *a*" is never a simple object: it's an object the subject invests with a trait related to his own desire. "The box" presents the underside of this deadlock: through the film's narrative we eventually discover that it's staged in order to attract Bill's desire. Far from being authentic, "the box" is in fact a lure meant to drag Bill into a voyeuristic quest to discover the hidden core contained within other people's "boxes": "The point is not that the secret box as such does not exist, that there is no hidden kernel of the Other's being, but that even this hidden kernel takes our desire into account."[29] Bill's quest is voyeuristic because he seeks to discover the Other's hidden kernel, to discover "what the other is when no one is looking."[30] But just as the voyeur's quest is doomed to fail, given that we're all subjected to an external gaze to which we adapt our behavior even in our most intimate moment,[31] Bill's quest is also doomed to failure since "there is no such thing as the Other when no subject is looking."[32] This represents the idea of film spectatorship as a trap, a snare where truth is but another fictitious illusion: "Bill's failure is also that of the cinematic spectator," because "the position that Bill takes up when he follows parallels the position of the spectator in the cinema." Just as the spectator fails to realize that the film takes her into account, "Bill fails to recognize that the person he is following and the world that he is observing take his presence into account."[33] Keeping in mind this idea of a failure—at the level of both voyeurism and spectatorship—where the gaze reveals itself through the film's inclusion of the viewer in the process of sense-making and storytelling, I suggest that there's a mind-tricking spectatorship at work in *Following*—a notion that's prototypical to Nolan's subsequent films.

MIND-TRICKING SPECTATORSHIP

While Bill's voyeuristic fascination with otherness can be seen as the underlying element that gets him framed, the same can be said of the framing the movie exerts toward its spectator. As is often the case with mind-tricking narratives, the editing in *Following* necessitates constant attention on the viewer's part and re-viewing the film can lead to the uncovering of certain deceits typical to film spectatorship. For instance, early on we see images of Bill choking on a latex glove Cobb stuffed in his mouth as a gift for his "solo career." Later this sequence is placed in context, with a subtle nuance: the footage used isn't the same as that used at the film's beginning. The shot used at the beginning is a close-up, while the later one is a medium shot, with the clothes hanging on a rooftop clothesline partially obstructing the point of view. Furthermore, both shots present a subtly different action: the glove isn't identically placed in Bill's mouth; in one shot his tie is hanging out of his blazer, while in the other it's tucked in. These infinitesimal differences most likely elude the viewer's attention, even after multiple viewings. One could even argue that these differences are simply a matter of editing and don't reflect a voluntary choice in enunciation on the director's part. Movies are made with numerous shots and a sequence can be edited using shots taken at different moments, thus reflecting minor discrepancies.

Even with this contingency in mind, recalling a specific moment in a fragmented narrative draws attention to such details. Whether this difference is voluntary or not, it reflects the lure that is filmic spectatorship—in fact, should this discrepancy be involuntary, it would prove even more pertinent in revealing the lure of filmic spectatorship. Fragmented narratives place added emphasis on editing and, in turn, underline the importance of memory and the recalling of certain moments previously shown: "mind-tricking twists have always to do with the recognition of past events and never constitute a reversal of future events, that is, they always involve a *discovery* and not necessarily a peripety. And this discovery is of such magnitude that it changes our understanding of the entire story and forces the viewer to reinterpret the entire film."[34] Here, the discovery concerns the very act of viewing a film. With this in mind, we can approach *Following* and the spectatorship it calls for through the idea of "mind-tricking spectatorship," where the viewer is faced with the very paradox of his position as viewer.

The most striking aspect of the mind-tricking spectatorship solicited by *Following* is the staging of the intrigue beyond questions of editing and narrative fragmentation. Just as "the box" and its secret core of otherness are revealed as staged after the fact, many other details that bring on the final climax turn out to be fictitious—at the level of both reception *and* diegetic ontology. Bill isn't even "Bill"—his name is an obvious fake giv-

en to Cobb when they first meet.[35] Narrative elements that would be presented as transparent and natural within mainstream cinema turn out to be fake, resulting in deep perturbation in the act of spectatorship. It's not so much that the film presents staged elements, as this is typical to virtually any film; what's striking is that the staging of these elements is revealed to the viewer, thus breaking with traditional pacts of narrative representation. For instance, in a completely anodyne conversation where Bill calls Cobb to ask questions about how to protect himself during his upcoming break-in at the bar, Cobb matter-of-factly lists numerous options, among which is a hammer. As it turns out, Cobb deliberately planned on Bill using a hammer in order for him to perpetuate his own boss's *modus operandi*. Hence, a trivial conversation leading to the protagonist's choice reveals later to the viewer how literally everything in a film is *staged*, as film itself and filmic reception is staged. Details such as this, as well as the overall editing of the film, keep the viewer in a perpetual state of attention, "thus shifting [his] focus of attention from the narrated to the narration."[36] Through this shift in attention, viewers become increasingly aware of the *deceit* at the heart of film spectatorship.

Mind-tricking narratives lead to mind-tricking spectatorship insofar as the viewer is directly interpellated from his typically passive position. Much like Bill's example of someone in a crowd becoming an individual through the focused attention paid to him, mind-tricking films individualize viewers as active subjects through deployments of the gaze. This is where recent trends in complex storytelling—specifically within mind-tricking narratives—seem to recuperate formal and narrative devices previously exclusive to avant-garde art-cinema. It's also where film psychoanalysis can prove useful to approach such films: "classical narration wants to make the audience oblivious to the artifice of the film while art film tends to draw attention to it."[37] Not only does *Following* draw attention to the problematic subjective position of the typical film viewer, it also problematizes our very participation in the construction of meaning. As is common with mind-tricking narratives, the closer we get to the end, the closer we're brought to slowly understand how we, as well as Bill, have been deceived: as when it's made clear that Cobb and The Blonde have conspired to frame Bill for the murder of an old woman. But we're eventually faced with the fact that there's a lure within the lure, when it's understood that Cobb is in fact framing Bill for the murder of The Blonde. When Bill discovers the first deceit and confronts The Blonde, she arrogantly states, "You set yourself up for it!" Once the lure within the lure is revealed, it turns out that she unknowingly set herself up for her own death, just as Bill set himself up as the patsy. The fundamental lure of filmic reception is thus revealed: "Bill functions as a stand-in for the cinematic spectator who refuses to acquiesce to the primacy of the illusion that film provides."[38] In this respect, Nolan's first film is a prelude to his entire filmic opus, summed up in one simple statement: when view-

ing a Nolan film, the viewer is in fact "setting himself up" to be faced with an atypical spectatorship where there is no comfort zone, no passive point-of-view, but instead a confrontation with the illusory nature of film spectatorship. While Nolan isn't the only contemporary director to put forth such mind-tricking contexts of viewership, his films definitely represent an increasing awareness of the various intricacies related to subjectivity and its role within film spectatorship.

NOTES

1. Two notable exceptions here would be slapstick comedy and cartoons, which have traditionally used metalepsis as a humoristic device.
2. David Denby, "The New Disorder: Adventures in Film Narrative," *The New Yorker* (March 5, 2007).
3. Whether this trend actually started with *Pulp Fiction* could easily be up for debate. Denby is correct, nevertheless, in asserting that the 1990s saw complex narratives become increasingly commonplace within popular film.
4. Denby, "The New Disorder."
5. Matthew Campora, "From the Arthouse to the Multiplex: An Exploration of Multiform Narrative in the Cinema" (PhD diss., University of Queensland, 2009), 182–83.
6. In film, the *diegesis* designates the narrative and its underlying components (narrative time, space, rules, logic, etc.).
7. Jane Stadler and Kelly McWilliam, *Screen Media: Analyzing Film and Television* (Crows West, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2009), 157.
8. Campora, "From the Arthouse to the Multiplex," 36.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. For a detailed analysis of Gondry's film in a contemporary narratological context, see Matthew Campora, "Art Cinema and New Hollywood: Multiform Narrative and Sonic Metalepsis in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7:2 (2009): 119–31.
11. Cornelia Klecker, "Mind-Tricking Narratives: Between Classical and Art-Cinema Narration" *Poetics Today* 34:1–2 (2013): 121.
12. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 15.
13. Klecker, "Mind-Tricking Narratives," 130.
14. For the remainder of this paper I will stick to the term "mind-tricking" as it appears more inclusive. While these films do "play games" with their characters as well as their viewers, they also do more than that: they actively reveal how the very act of viewing a film can be deceitful.
15. Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," 21.
16. Warren Buckland, "Introduction: Puzzle Plots," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1.
17. Cognitive film theory is a theoretical approach to film that was developed during the 1980s, as a direct response to film psychoanalysis, which cognitivists deemed not empirical enough. Cognitive film theory focuses on the various cognitive schemas that operate in order for viewers to make sense of a film.
18. Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," 16.
19. Lacan developped his notion of the gaze in his *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977).
20. In Lacan's thought, the "objet *a*" represents an object invested with such a trait that it provokes the subject's desire. The "objet *a*" is an elusive object, rather than a

purely physical one; through its evanescent quality, it is unattainable and unrepresentable.

21. Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 288. For further reading on the issue of the gaze and its misconception in 1970 film theory, see Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), as well as Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).
22. Cowie, *Representing the Woman*, 288.
23. Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 15.
24. Klecker, "Mind-Tricking Narratives," 130.
25. McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 19.
26. Klecker, "Mind-Tricking Narratives," 130.
27. This is, of course, highly deceitful given that the gaze is always there, even when hidden by the fantasmatical mise-en-scène typical to mainstream cinema. As McGowan points out, "Even when the subject sees a complete image, something remains obscure: the subject cannot see how its own desire distorts what it sees" (*The Real Gaze*, 11).
28. Todd McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 22.
29. Ibid., 23.
30. Ibid., 22.
31. As McGowan states elsewhere, "the scene that the voyeur witnesses is always a scene created for the look of the voyeur" (*The Impossible David Lynch* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2007], 4).
32. McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*, 23.
33. Ibid.
34. Klecker, "Mind-Tricking Narratives," 132.
35. This is supported by the closing credits, where the main protagonist is listed as "The Young Man."
36. Klecker, "Mind-Tricking Narratives," 133.
37. Ibid., 140.
38. McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*, 20.

SIXTEEN

We Are the Change That We Seek

The Subjectivity of Substance in Interstellar

Todd McGowan

Though Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* is a science-fiction film that aims to relate a captivating story rather than provide exposition of a philosophical problem, its narrative and formal structure does address one of the most significant and persistent problems in the history of philosophy—that of the existence and nature of *substance*. Almost every philosopher has posed some sort of theory concerning the existence of something that serves as a *foundation* for everything else that exists. A theory of substance provides a philosophical framework through which to think about what it means for something to exist. Nolan's film, however, following the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), breaks from the idea of substance altogether. *Interstellar* depicts a universe without a secure foundation, a universe in which what we believe is substantial is eventually revealed to be insubstantial. This occurs when Nolan reveals that the mysterious "others" working to save humanity aren't mysterious at all, but rather a future version of humanity. With this revelation, Nolan creates the image of a substantial being—an alien presence looking to take care of humanity—and then undermines this image. Nolan's film puts its spectators through the same paces as Hegel does in his philosophy: we begin the film believing that there's some substantial being existing beyond what can be known, but later realize that substance is an illusion generated by our lack of knowledge. In the end, we discover that the apparently substantial being is just as lacking as us. We

discover our own fractured being in what seems to be solid and whole. This is the great achievement of Nolan's film.

A HOLE IN THE NARRATIVE

In *Interstellar*, Nolan takes care to construct a credible account of space travel and the search for a new home for humanity. Just as he does with his superhero films, Nolan strives for believability in a genre that tends nonchalantly to stretch credulity. Physicist Kip Thorne even validated the science of the film as conceivable, though not presently realizable.[1] But the film does openly defy the logic of narrative with the depiction of its central conceit: the future causing a change in the past. This step is the key to the philosophical significance of *Interstellar*.

Interstellar begins with an image of humanity on the verge of extinction due to the rise of blight that makes it impossible for crops to grow. During the film's opening minutes, we learn that corn is now the only crop that will grow and soon even corn will cease to be viable. The film's main character, Joseph Cooper, is a farmer who receives a mysterious signal that sends him to a secret NASA laboratory, where scientists led by his mentor, Professor John Brand, are working to save humanity by finding another planet on which to live. Cooper, a former NASA pilot, leads the mission on the spaceship *Endurance* that will seek out a habitable planet. Three fellow astronauts make up the rest of the crew—Drs. Amelia Brand, Nikolai Romilly, and Doyle, as well as robots TARS and CASE. The mission is possible thanks to the existence of a wormhole near Saturn that suddenly appeared years earlier. Because, as Cooper points out, "a wormhole is not a naturally occurring phenomenon," the scientists can only conclude that some form of intelligence placed the wormhole there for humanity's sake. This is where the leap in narrative logic takes place.

The explanation for the wormhole's appearance violates the laws of narrative chronology. Though the scientists initially credit its appearance to some beneficent alien intelligence, the film reveals near the conclusion that it was in fact the work of future humanity. Advanced human beings opened the wormhole for the humans in the film to escape Earth and find a new planet to inhabit. The narrative contradiction here is obvious: in order for future humanity to survive and develop the technology to open the wormhole, contemporary humanity would have to find a way to survive by escaping Earth through the wormhole. The survival of humanity from the threat of extinction depends on the help that humanity receives from those who've already survived the threat. The narrative logic is circular and self-refuting. Even spectators prepared to suspend their disbelief about the incredible scientific achievements in the film balk at this development.

But this narrative contradiction is the point at which the film explores one of the principal ideas in the Hegelian philosophical worldview. For Hegel, the fundamental error of thought involves the idea of *substance*. We "substantialize"—or treat as substantial—what we don't understand. The effect of this substantializing is that we misrecognize how causality works: according to Hegel, causality is retroactive and changes the past as much as it changes the future. Even the past isn't substantial and immune to the activity of the subject—the being engaged in knowing and desiring this past. Recognizing that what we take to be substantial is in fact insubstantial gives us freedom to change the past, which is the act that Hegel's philosophy centers around and that *Interstellar* depicts. Initially, however, the film reveals the error of believing in substance when the NASA scientists substantialize the source of the wormhole. They attribute it to an alien intelligence because it acts as a blind spot within their field of knowledge and they assume that what they don't know surpasses their understanding. It's in this sense that the authors of the wormhole have the status of substantial beings. But the film opposes this error and enables the spectator to rethink substance just as Hegel does.

"Substance," as defined by Hegel, is irreducible and independent, a being or entity that exists on its own without any need for another entity to sustain it or give it identity. Substance is non-relational. Prior to Hegel, philosophers debated the status of substance and attributed substantiality to various entities. One can even classify the pre-Socratic philosophers according to how they conceive of substance. For Thales, water is substantial; for Pythagoras, it's number; for Democritus, it's the atom. In modern philosophy, theories about substance become much more complex, but continue to provide a shortcut for defining different philosophical approaches. The basic divide among modern philosophers before Hegel occurs between Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) and Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646–1716), who both tried to solve the problem of how disparate substances relate to each other left to them by the "dualist" René Descartes (1596–1650).[2]

Spinoza rejects Cartesian dualism by proclaiming that there's only one substance: God.[3] Though Spinoza acknowledges the divide between thought and extension, he views both as attributes of a single substance that express it in different ways. The mind doesn't need to act on the body because they're always functioning in concert, even if the mind is unaware of this parallel. The singularity of substance solves the problem of how substances interact, but it leaves a world without any genuine difference.

Leibniz's solution runs in the opposite direction. Rather than reducing multiple substances to one, he theorizes an infinity of substances, each existing in isolation from the others. Leibniz labels these substances "monads" and claims that "monads have no windows, through which anything could come in or go out."[4] This view leaves Leibniz with a

problem, the exact opposite as that of Spinoza. Whereas Spinoza can't explain difference, Leibniz struggles to explain how distinct monads without windows to other monads manage to coexist in the world without a series of violent collisions.[5] Both the idea of a singular substance, and that of multiple substances, result in insurmountable difficulties.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) seems to come to the rescue by banishing all knowledge of substances. In Kant's philosophy, substance is only a *negative* category assigned to what finite subjects can't know. The Kantian "thing in itself" is substantial, but represents a blank spot within the field of knowledge. We know what's substantial by identifying what we can't know. This Kantian solution to the problem of substance is the one taken by the NASA scientists at the beginning of *Interstellar* by virtue of their postulating a "they" responsible for the creation of the wormhole. But while it seems to avoid the problems encountered by Spinoza and Leibniz, it has the effect of "deifying" the unknown. This is, in fact, the problem with the idea of substance. It places what we don't know in a transcendent position solely by virtue of our lack of knowledge. Our failure to know provides ontological support for the entity we suppose inhabits the point of this failure. One can avoid this deification of the unknown only by rejecting the idea of substance altogether, which is what Hegel accomplishes in his philosophy.

Hegel transforms Kant's epistemological critique into an ontological one. Instead of remaining obscure because of our inability to know it, Hegel insists that there is no substance at all, that what we initially take as substantial lacks the independence that we attribute to it. Substantiality is nothing but an illusion of perspective that philosophy aims to correct: "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*."[6] If substance is subject, then there's nothing that's independent and self-subsistent. That which seems wholly "other" and foundational must suffer from the same self-division as the knowing subject itself. The task of philosophy, for Hegel, becomes that of recognizing that the contradictions that beset subjectivity in its attempts to know also infect the apparently substantial other that the subject is trying to know.[7]

The trajectory Nolan lays out in *Interstellar* follows Hegel's insofar as the unfolding of the film reveals the subjectivity of substance. The force that creates the wormhole initially appears as a secret alien power, but the film's climax shows that this force is humanity itself. Cooper seems to receive a message from this same alien power, but it turns out that he himself is the origin of the message. The film doesn't just depict a narrative for the spectator to watch, but pushes the spectator to the position of "absolute knowing," a position in which the subject recognizes that the other is also contradictory. Absolute knowing doesn't mean that one knows everything, but rather that one reconciles oneself with the ultimate lack of substance. The subject who attains absolute knowing recog-

nizes that no additional amount of knowledge will ever provide relief from the burden of contradiction, which is why it represents an *ending*, even though there's always more that could be known. This recognition has the effect of dismantling the other's authority and freeing the subject to act. An instance of the freedom that derives from absolute knowing occurs in *Interstellar* when Cooper recognizes the possibilities that exist within the Tesseract. He's no longer bound by any external authority and can communicate across space and time. Obviously, Hegel didn't envision this degree of freedom, but Nolan's film takes Hegel's logic to its ultimate conclusion. Absolute knowing is freedom from the idea of the substantiality of the other and it's this position that *Interstellar* produces for the spectator.

THEY AREN'T THEY

The path to absolute knowing in the film begins with the necessary illusion that some substantial otherness exists. The idea that there's a mysterious force operating to save humanity from the dying Earth appears early in *Interstellar*. Cooper's daughter Murphy—or "Murph"—experiences the presence of what she calls a "ghost" behind the bookshelf in her bedroom. During a severe dust storm, the ghost sends a clear message when it relays coordinates in binary code through the arrangement of the dust. The coordinates lead Cooper to a secret NASA base where scientists are in the final stages of preparing a mission to find a new planet for humanity to inhabit.

Because NASA had been shut down for years while the nation focused on simply trying to feed people, it has no experienced pilot for the voyage. Cooper's training makes him the perfect candidate to lead the mission; hence, his arrival at the NASA base at this exact time does not appear to be mere coincidence. It's evident that some intelligence has orchestrated the situation.

Professor Brand, who's in charge of the project, recognizes immediately that Cooper's arrival isn't the result of chance: "Something sent you here. They chose you." Cooper responds, "Who's they?" But Professor Brand doesn't answer him. By allowing Cooper's question to remain unanswered, the film generates a mystery surrounding the "they" that sent Cooper to NASA and also opened the wormhole for humanity to use. The reason Professor Brand doesn't answer Cooper is because he can't answer. He has no idea who "they" are; "they" signifies a gap in his knowledge. The scientists at NASA assume that "they" are an intelligent form of life, with technological capacities far beyond humanity's, who have taken an interest in human survival.

By attributing the incomprehensible appearance of the wormhole to an alien intelligence, Professor Brand and the other NASA scientists treat

the gap within their knowledge as a substance. Though none of them attribute the wormhole to a deity, they theorize the source of the wormhole as if it were divine—or at least superhuman. Because it's unknown, so their thinking goes, it must be fundamentally alien to us and therefore independent from the subjects knowing it—a separate "they."

This is, according to Hegel, our typical way of relating to the unknown. We assume that what we don't know has a substantial identity separate from ourselves: "We usually suppose that the Absolute must lie far beyond; but it is precisely what is wholly present, what we, as thinkers, always carry with us and employ, even though we have no express consciousness of it."[8] The scientists at the beginning of *Interstellar* assume that the "absolute other" doesn't relate to them at all, which is why they're so quick to use the label "they" to describe it. The film also invites the spectator to share this misrecognition. But the initial misrecognition prepares the spectator, through Cooper, for the revolution into absolute knowing.

At first, Cooper has no more insight into the "they" than the NASA scientists, but during the mission through the wormhole, he discovers the truth. After the crew explores two planets that prove uninhabitable—costing the lives of Doyle and Romilly—Cooper and Dr. Brand—Professor Brand's daughter—must pass by the black hole "Gargantua" in order to arrive at the third possible habitable planet in this solar system. While the *Endurance* slingshots around the black hole, Cooper and the robot TARS eject into the black hole. They do so in order to lighten the load to make it possible for the *Endurance* to make it to the planet. But they also plan to send information about the black hole that might prove useful for solving the problem of reconciling the quantum-level effects of gravity with relativity theory, thereby potentially enabling the rescue of all currently living humans from Earth.

As Cooper and TARS separately plummet toward the black hole's event horizon, they enter into a Tesseract that suspends them just on the edge of the black hole and allows them to communicate across space and time. Cooper now can communicate with Murph by moving books from her bookshelf. Cooper and the spectator now recognize that he's actually the "ghost" in Murph's bedroom. This forces us to reinterpret Cooper's parting words to his daughter before he departs on his mission: "Parents are the ghosts of their children's future. I can't be your ghost now. I need to exist. They chose me." As he communicates with Murph from the Tesseract, it's clear that not only is Cooper Murph's ghost, but also the "they" who chose him was actually *himself* in the future.

This revelation transforms our understanding of the "they" and has the effect of "desubstantializing" it, though this only becomes fully evident when TARS upbraids Cooper for communicating with his daughter in the past. TARS informs Cooper that his focus on the past is a distraction from the mission to discover information that might help rescue

humanity: "They didn't bring us here to change the past." In response, Cooper articulates the temporal paradox that underwrites the film's entire narrative structure: "They didn't bring us here at all. We brought ourselves." The "they" isn't an alien intelligence that has a substantial existence humanity lacks, but a future version of humanity. The revelation that occurs in the Tesseract shows that substance is really just another version of subjectivity.

This revelation gives Cooper an unparalleled agency. Through the Tesseract, he's able to communicate indirectly not only with the young Murph, but also with her as an adult. When the older Murph returns to her room after she's begun working with Professor Brand on the problem of gravity, Cooper signals her the solution to the problem through Morse code. This leads to the rescue of humanity because it enables Murph to do what Professor Brand couldn't: harness the power of gravity to allow everyone to leave Earth. It is only the insubstantiality of the "they"—that is, the connection between Cooper and his daughter—that makes this act possible. This is a Hegelian way to interpret Dr. Brand's claim, later recognized as well by Cooper, that *love*—an emotion Hegel himself early on sees as the basis for his philosophy—transcends the four dimensions of space and time just as gravity does.[9]

Hegel correlates the *act* with the achievement of absolute knowing. Without absolute knowing, subjects are unable to act freely because they posit an authoritative substance that ultimately functions as a barrier to the act. The belief in substance limits what one conceives of as possible. For instance, the subject that believes in the substantiality of God can't act in a way free of God or the subject that believes in the substantiality of the atom can't act in a way that would challenge the existence of atoms. Whatever entity has the status of "substance" for the subject impedes the subject's ability to act freely.

Hegel thus associates freedom with absolute knowing, which is the recognition of the subjectivity of all substance or the absence of any substance: "what in religion was *content* or form for presenting an *other*, is here the Self's own *act*; the concept requires the *content* to be the *Self's* own *act*. For this concept is, as we see, the knowledge of the Self's act within itself as all essentiality and all existence, the knowledge of this subject as substance."[10] Absolute knowing enables the subject to act freely because it abandons any investment in the other's substantiality. There ceases to be a substance that's ultimately responsible for whatever comes to be. Responsibility now falls to the subject itself.

As long as the subject believes in the existence of a substance, it's incapable of a genuinely free act. Freedom derives from the ability to act without regard to any authority that provides a foundation for one's act, and any conception of substance functions as such an authority. Hegel's worldview brings one to a point where nothing is substantial in one's thinking, and this is where *Interstellar* also brings the spectator.

RETROACTIVITY CAUSALITY

Grasping the insubstantiality or subjectivity of substance changes one's relationship to the past. We always imagine the past as substantial and thereby immune to any transformation. As French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) puts it, "Between past and present there is an absolute heterogeneity; and if I can not enter the past, it is because the past *is*."[11] Sartre expresses the common understanding of the fundamental difference between present and past: I can change the present, but the past is what it is. This conception of the past has the effect of transforming it into a substance that's immune to external effects—Leibniz's monad doesn't have windows—because it has an independent and autonomous status, just as the past. But Hegel's insistence on the subjectivity of substance frees us to transform the past.[12]

The past is never simply what it is. Subjects have the capacity to create a different past by changing the present. In this sense, the extreme heterogeneity between past and present that Sartre describes doesn't exist. When we change what counts as valuable in the past, we engage in a retroactive causality that moves in the opposite direction of traditional causality. We retroactively transform the significance of what's already happened and thereby effectively change what has happened. The subject is capable of a constant revision of the past.[13]

Retroactive causality has its basis in the insubstantiality of the past, but it doesn't license the subject to change the past in an arbitrary fashion. Instead, the subject must come to see itself as a break in the continuum of history, an interruption capable of acting in a way that has no license from the past, and then it must act. The subject's free act is what institutes the retroactive change in the past, and it's this act that *Interstellar* both depicts and encourages.

German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) outlines the contrast between typical historical causality—which he associates with historicism—and the Hegelian retroactive version: "Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years."[14] Benjamin's critique of historicism centers on its failure to recognize how history operates. Though past events obviously impact present ones, the most significant causality works in the other direction. Changes in the present enable us to see the significance of past events that would otherwise have been completely valueless.

As a medium, film constantly engages in retroactive causality. Perhaps more than any other artistic medium, a focus on this type of causality appears as a central domain of the cinema. Most famously, the final shot of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) of the burning sled with the

name "Rosebud" changes the opening sequence of the film in which a dying Charles Foster Kane utters this seemingly inexplicable word. When we see the sled, the significance of what Kane says undergoes a transformation after it takes place. The cause for the change is in the future and its effect is in the past. This type of retroactive causality populates all of Nolan's films, though it reaches its high point in *Interstellar*.[15] The entire structure of the film has its basis in retroactive causality; and at several points, the film enacts the reversals engendered by this causality on the spectator.

The first lines of the film set the stage for a series of acts of retroactive causality. We hear Murph's voice talking about Cooper, her description seeming straightforward. She says, "My dad was a farmer, like everybody else back then." She then adds, "Of course, he didn't start that way," as the film cuts to Cooper crashing in a spaceship. While Cooper is a farmer when the film begins, we soon learn that he's an engineer and a pilot who's been forced into farming by the lack of food on Earth. Cooper later confirms that not only is he not a farmer, but that he hates farming. Murph's description of him is thus profoundly misleading, and by the end of the film, we can reinterpret it and see through the deception. The spectator's subsequent experience changes the initial impression. What seemed to be a straightforward substantial expression becomes the misleading impression of a particular subject.

The use of retroactive causality multiplies as the narrative advances. For instance, during a conversation on the front porch, Cooper's father-in-law, Donald, challenges his decision to fly through the wormhole. Cooper claims that the fact that he enjoys the idea of it doesn't "make it wrong." Donald replies, "It might." At this point, the spectator shares Donald's suspicion about Cooper's choice. But aboard the *Endurance*, a similar conversation takes place, in which the astronauts have to decide which planet to visit because they have fuel for only one trip. Dr. Brand argues for the planet researched by Dr. Wolf Edmunds, but Cooper questions her choice on the basis of her romantic attachment to Edmunds. She says, "The tiniest possibility of seeing Wolf again excites me. That doesn't mean I'm wrong." This time, Cooper responds with the same words that he dismissed when his father-in-law used them: "Honestly, Amelia, it might." This repetition of Donald's response doesn't necessarily invalidate the reasoning, and the spectator sees, as in the earlier situation, that perhaps the skepticism is warranted.

But the events that follow force the spectator to abandon this skepticism. Not only does the choice of going to the planet researched by Dr. Mann instead of Dr. Edmunds's almost lead to the mission's failure, but Cooper learns that love can serve as a source of insight when it enables him to communicate with his daughter across space and time. Cooper's interaction with Murph in the Tesseract validates Dr. Brand's argument that her love for Edmunds helps her to decide properly rather than ham-

pering a correct choice. This only becomes visible after the fact, the later events having the effect of changing the significance of both Cooper's argument with his father-in-law and Dr. Brand's argument with Cooper. Retroactive causality forces us to be constantly ready to judge characters anew because present events in the film might change what we've already seen.

The most important instance of retroactive causality for the spectator concerns not what we see but what we hear—the poem that Professor Brand repeats throughout the film: "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas. Because Professor Brand recites the well-known refrain from this poem as the astronauts launch on their mission, it serves as something like the mantra for the mission and for the film: "Do not go gentle into that good night; / Old age should burn and rage at close of day. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light." The poem offers encouragement to those who are at the edge of life and preaches struggle even in a seemingly hopeless situation. When Professor Brand first says these lines, we can accept them at face value. But the later repetitions of the poem require a new examination of its apparently straightforward message.

Professor Brand repeats the poem on his deathbed, just after he confesses to Murph that he's deceived her and the others about the possibility of saving humanity. This has the effect of diluting the power of the poem: rather than inspiring the speaker or listener to defiance, it seems to serve as an alibi for the speaker's injustice. This retroactive transformation of the poem becomes even clearer when Mann recites it to Cooper after leaving him to die on the ice planet. Mann is one of the first explorers who went through the wormhole to investigate possible new planets for humanity to inhabit, but his planet wasn't viable. Unable to face his own death, Mann sent a duplicitous message back to Earth about the planet and then must murder Cooper to cover up his misdeeds and prevent him from leaving with the Ranger spacecraft. When Mann attempts to justify his unjustifiable actions, he turns to Professor's Brand's favorite poem, telling Cooper, "Do not go gentle into that good night," despite trying himself to thrust Cooper directly into "that good night." At this moment, the poem loses its heroic and defiant resonance, and Professor Brand's earlier recourse to it becomes the emblem of his ethical failure and not his courage.

It's only at the end of *Interstellar* that the spectator can make sense of what happens throughout the film's narrative.[16] Nolan misleads the spectator at several points, but subsequent events always provide a corrective. This isn't an uncommon narrative strategy, but Nolan links it to the idea of retroactive causality through the film's content. Due to the dominance of retroactive causality, the spectator's past experiences are constantly changing, even though they don't reappear within the film. In this way, the film demands that spectators experience their own past—

the immediate past of viewing the film—as subject rather than substance. The ability to experience the insubstantiality of what appears substantial is the key to an ethical subjectivity.

SUBJECTS AS SUBSTANCE

It shouldn't be surprising that the two characters in *Interstellar* who act the most unethically are those who believe themselves to be capable of transcending their own subjectivity and achieving the perspective of a pure substance. Professor Brand and Dr. Mann initially appear as ethical exemplars, but subsequently the film reveals their ethical failure due to their not recognizing how their own subjectivity shapes their actions. As the film forces spectators to revise their evaluation of these characters, it demands that we see the subjectivity within their claims to substantiality. The greatest ethical failing comes from forgetting that one is necessarily a divided subject.

The film enacts an apotheosis of both Professor Brand and Dr. Mann in order to expose this failing. We see Professor Brand as the architect of the project to save humanity and thus it's difficult to judge him as an unethical figure. But in order to convince the NASA scientists to work on this project, he constructs an elaborate deception—what his daughter calls a "monstrous lie" when she learns of it—to hide his belief that the humans on Earth can't be rescued. The lie is that there are two plans. "Plan A" involves Professor Brand solving the problem of gravity in order to allow all the current inhabitants of Earth to travel through the wormhole to a new world. "Plan B" abandons those living on Earth in order to populate the new world with human embryos, thereby saving the species while sacrificing all currently living individuals of the species. In fact, Plan B is the only viable alternative because Professor Brand knows he can't solve the problem of gravity and save the people on Earth. The cynical propagation of this lie and the inherent condemnation of those on Earth to death impugn him as an ethical figure, despite his efforts to find a new planet for humanity.

The problem with what Professor Brand does isn't that he lies. The lie is absolutely necessary to save humanity and thus might even be classified as a "noble" or ethical lie. The film doesn't condemn Professor Brand for concocting the lie concerning Plan A—it's a lie necessary to engender desire for the project—but for his failure to believe it. If he'd believed his own lie, he would've continued to try to solve the problem of gravity rather than simply repeatedly rehearsing solutions he knew would fail. In this sense, Professor Brand isn't the true villain of the film.

The case with Dr. Mann is more dramatic. Mann is the only other character the film presents as knowing the fictional status of Plan A. Like Professor Brand, Mann acts for the sake of the species rather than for his

own individual subjectivity. Dr. Brand describes Mann in elegiac terms: "Dr. Mann, well, he's remarkable. He's the best of us." Soon after this panegyric to Mann, however, we see that he has lured the *Endurance* to an uninhabitable planet and thereby put humanity's survival at risk because of his own horror at the prospect of dying alone.

The crew investigates Mann's planet instead of Edmunds's because he lied about the uninhabitable ice planet on which he landed. His willingness to send a deceitful message in hopes of being rescued reveals his complete inability to put humanity's welfare above his own, despite the image he propagated of himself. Once the astronauts from the *Endurance* land on his planet, he tries to kill Cooper in order to cover up his lie and escape with his life. Though he plans to go himself to Edmunds's planet and enact Plan B, it's clear that this is a secondary goal after his personal survival, which is why he leaves so much destruction in his wake. He decommissioned his robot KIPP and set it to explode if turned back on, which causes Romilly's death. After Cooper survives the murder attempt and reveals Mann's nefariousness, Mann attempts to maroon Cooper and Dr. Brand on the ice planet, but his inability to successfully dock with the *Endurance* leads to his fully merited death. Instead of taking of the pure perspective that he claims to adopt, Mann allows the most narrowly subjective outlook to guide his actions, as evidenced by his initial reaction to being rescued, telling the *Endurance* crew: "Pray you never learn just how good it can be to see another face. I hadn't a lot of hope to begin with, but after so long I had none." Later, he confesses to Cooper, "I tried to do my duty, Cooper. But I knew, the day that I arrived here, that this place had nothing. And I resisted the temptation for years. But I knew that, if I just pressed that button, somebody would come and save me . . . Don't judge, Cooper. You were never tested like I was." Dr. Mann's attempt to exculpate himself rings hollow because the film highlights the devastation that his lack of courage unleashes.

Nolan's inclusion of Professor Brand and Dr. Mann as ethically dubious characters shows the catastrophe that may occur when one invests oneself in the idea of transcending subjectivity and accessing substance. Both characters present themselves as acting for the sake of the whole and without regard for their own subjectivity, but the effect of their subjectivity manifests itself throughout their activity. Through these two failed characters, Nolan shows the impossibility of taking up the perspective of substantiality—poignantly expressed by Mann's last, seemingly heroic self-transcendent words, "This is not about my life. . . . This is about all mankind. There is a moment . . . "—words abruptly cut-off by the explosion that kills him. Instead of trying to transcend subjectivity in order to act ethically, one must abandon the idea of substantiality, an idea that's the source of our ethical failings.

Even more than Cooper, Murph is the hero of *Interstellar*, and the film shows her in opposition to both Professor Brand and Dr. Mann. When

Nolan depicts Mann trying to kill Cooper, he cuts between this scene and a scene of Murph risking herself to rescue her brother's family. This visual juxtaposition emphasizes the contrast. However, Murph initially seems similar to Professor Brand because she acquiesces to the same lie that he proffers, deciding not to reveal it to the public. When her partner Getty compares her to Professor Brand, Murph responds, "Brand gave up on us. I'm still trying to solve this." The difference between Professor Brand and Murph isn't just defeatism versus optimism. Instead, it lies in Murph's belief that though there are barriers, none are substantial. The obstacle to rescuing humanity appears to her as a subject, which is why she finds the solution, not out in space, but in the house where she grew up.

Murph is the hero of *Interstellar* not just because she finds the solution to the problem of gravity that rescues all of humanity. Her heroism begins with her childhood interaction with what she calls her "ghost." Murph believes in the ghost's existence, but she assures her father that it doesn't frighten her. Even though the ghost represents a blind spot in her field of knowledge, Murph doesn't substantialize it by treating it as a supernatural entity. Instead, it's for her just another subject, which is what makes communication with it possible.

Murph's attitude as a young girl remains as she becomes a researcher at NASA, and it leads her to rescuing humanity from the dying Earth. She's able to act like no other characters in the film due to her insight into the subjectivity of what appears as substance. *Interstellar* presents this as the ethical position that Murph occupies, but it also invites the spectator into this position through its formal structure. When we translate substance into subject, we lose all secure foundation for our being, all sense of having a stable background against which to act. But at the same time, we gain freedom from all authority that would predetermine how we should act. This radical freedom leads most subjects to cling to a belief in some form of substance, even if it's just the substantiality of the past; but *Interstellar* shows us that revolutionary acts depend on its complete abandonment. Once we see that substance is subject and that the other is just as divided as we are, there is no barrier to the act.

NOTES

1. See Kip Thorne, *The Science of Interstellar* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).
2. Because Descartes describes thought and extension as each substantial, he must explain their intersection without violating their independence. This requires the invention of the miraculous pineal gland, a point at which the mind can affect the body. The problem with this invention, as both Spinoza and Leibniz would grasp, is that conceiving thought and extension as connected has the effect of desubstantializing them.

3. In part 1 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza makes his position about the substantiality of God absolutely clear: "There can be, or be conceived, no other substance than God." Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 39.

4. G. W. Leibniz, "Monadology," in *Philosophical Texts*, trans. R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 268.

5. Leibniz's solution to the problem of how monads harmonize with each other is to posit the existence of a divine monad—a monad of monads—that coordinates all the others so that their worlds align.

6. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

7. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant articulates what he calls "antinomies" of pure reason—contradictions that reason encounters when it tries to consider metaphysical questions, like whether the world has a beginning in space and time or whether there's an absolutely necessary being (God). For Kant, these antinomies occur in thought alone and tell us nothing about the real state of the universe. Hegel claims that Kant's antinomies of pure reason are actually antinomies of being itself. He comes to this conclusion not because he fails to recognize how thought distorts what it knows but because he sees that we have no reason to assume, as Kant does, that being is immune to the problems that distort knowledge. Hegel famously accuses Kant of excessive tenderness for things, which is another way of saying that Kant believes in the substantiality of substance.

8. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedic Logic: Part I of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences with Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 59.

9. See G. W. F. Hegel, "Love," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 302–8.

10. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 485 (translation slightly modified).

11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 174.

12. Time-travel films depict in metaphorical terms the subject's capacity to transform the past, but they tend almost universally to stick to a standard version of causality in which changes in the past produce changes in the future. For instance, the machines send a Terminator into the past in order to destroy the human resistance in their present in *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984). According to Hegel's retroactive conception of causality, we don't need to travel back in time to change the past.

13. Sigmund Freud imports (without acknowledgment) Hegel's concept of retroactive causality into psychoanalysis when he theorizes how subjects experience trauma. The initial would-be traumatic event isn't traumatic at the time because the subject undergoes it without the intellectual apparatus for understanding it. But then, according to Freud, a subsequent event forces the subject to recognize the significance that the initial event actually had. It's a subsequent event that changes the past and renders it traumatic. Freud calls this process *Nachträglichkeit*.

14. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 397.

15. One might be tempted to see *Memento* as Nolan's film devoted most explicitly to the concept of retroactive causality due to its reverse chronology—in which the latest events in time occur earliest in the film. But the effect of this reverse chronology is actually to support a traditional concept of causality, even though the spectator only discovers the cause of the events in the film at the end. Ironically, the reverse chronology doesn't reveal a retroactive causality, but a traditional causality in which causes precede their effects in time.

16. In each of his works, Hegel insists that one can only discover the significance at the end, even though one must go through the process of the various misunderstandings in order to arrive at this point. For instance, "Logic . . . cannot say what it is in advance, rather does this knowledge of itself only emerge as the final result and

completion of its whole treatment. Likewise its subject matter, *thinking* or more specifically *conceptual* thinking, is essentially elaborated within it; its concept is generated in the course of this elaboration and cannot therefore be given in advance" G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 23.

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