

Time, Ethics & the Films of Christopher Nolan

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Our conception of ethics is bound in time. Whether we move from intention to action, action to consequence, or advance a set of virtues as a context for reflection, time is unidirectional. We are temporal creatures, measuring time in discrete units. We are aware of time passing, and of its impermanence. We put things in the past, live for the present, plan for the future.

The syntax and techniques of filmmaking provide the means to manipulate the confines of conventional time in both story and story-telling. What happens when we change our conception of time? Does it stretch or compress our fundamental ethical thinking? Does it force us into a reconsideration from a new “starting point?” We visualize time in many ways, always moving forward. A stopwatch ticking off its discrete micro-units; the sun rising and setting to mark the passage of a day; a photo album in which images mark the advancing age of ourselves and others. We classify events as occurring consecutively, concurrently – or in digital terms synchronously or asynchronously – and in “real time.”

What If ... What Is

When time is skewed, does the flow of ethics likewise bend and reshape? Film director and writer Christopher Nolan has attained distinction for his manipulations of time in narrative structure, story theme, and filmic technique. A review of a selection of his films offers the opportunity to challenge our ethical theories against the “what if,” giving them new perspectives on application to the “what is.” What if the stopwatch stopped and reset itself every half-hour (*Memento*, 1998)? What if the sun continues in the sky, denying our biorhythmic need to chart

our days, nights, wakefulness, and sleep (*Insomnia*, 2000)? What if the images of others in the photo album showed the progression of age, but ours remained the same (*Interstellar*, 2014)? What if synchronous or concurrent actions happened at different speeds (*Inception*, 2010)? What if “real time” were actually several planes of real, operating at different speeds and directions, and we could visualize and have access to all (*Interstellar*)?

Ethical behavior is often in inverse proportion to space. Many films rely on the trope of the trouble we encounter the further we venture from home, as the more relativistic our sense of normative behavior becomes (“When in Rome,” etc.). Just as we ponder whether there are 'universal ethics' that cross physical boundaries of geographical space and societal boundaries of culture, are our ethical principles immutable within re-conceived dimensions of time?"

Space and time are the same dimension, Einstein said, and Nolan visualizes on the screen. Space warps and time warps are real. They both cause, and are caused by, gravity – literally and figuratively. When cause is effect, and effect is cause, how do we frame our moral premise?

Ethics on Screen

In “The Moral of the Story,” Nina Rosenstand (2012) reminds us that we are a story-telling species, and that much of our moral heritage is passed on through stories, whether oral, textual, or visual. As ethicists, we illustrate ethical principles through stories. And through stories we can try on various items of ethical garb. A well-told story can engage and involve us in temporarily living in the protagonist’s world, seeing it through her/his eyes, and imagining what we might do in the circumstances of the plot, and what consequences, personal and social, might follow those alternate actions. A well-told story can open our eyes as well to actions and consequences we might never have otherwise considered.

The films of Christopher Nolan comprise a set of rich, thick and well-told stories. He brings us into unique situations well outside our normal perspectives and through the cleverest of writing, narrative structure, and filmmaking techniques, and does not allow us the comfort of passive viewing. We must uncover the story along with the protagonist, following visual clues. We're required not only to dress in his garb, but to live in his skin: "Nolan attempts to use narrative structure to emphasize the interrelatedness of identity and time, challenging the audience to engage with the film and the themes on a wider scale." (Hill-Parks, 2011, p. 6).

One of Nolan's most effective techniques is his manipulation of time. His early films, *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000), and *Prestige* (2006), not only eschewed story-telling in chronological order, but *Memento* actually reversed the telling of episodes, beginning at the story's end, and ending in the middle. Later films, *Inception* (2010) and *Interstellar* (2014) turned the concept of time on its ear, unfolding parallel narratives happening simultaneously, but at drastically different rates of speed.¹

Nolan's films are replete with philosophic questions, explored in such books as "Inception and Philosophy (Johnson, 2011)," "Fictional Christopher Nolan (McGowan, 2012)," and articles such as "The Lost Unconscious (Fisher, 2011)," and "Out of Joint: Memento as Contemporary Hamlet (Mallin, 2010)." Not so deeply probed, however, are the implications for ethical queries. From *Prestige* onward, Nolan's films lean more heavily toward Science Fiction. As a genre, Sci-Fi has traditionally embraced ethical inquiry, using visions of utopian and dystopian futures to comment on the state (often literally) of the present.

Memento

Memento (2000) is the story of Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), who suffers from anterograde amnesia. He is unable to form short-term memories. For him the clock restarts every

10 minutes. How is he to make rational choices with no current context for his thoughts or actions? Leonard's story is told in alternating episodes – one set in color running “backward,” with the order of the episodes is told in reverse order from the ending of the story to the middle. The second set is presented in black and white, running forward in time from the time he awakens in a strange motel room to the point in chronological time when the color episodes should begin. The two sets meet, and end, in the middle of the story.

Jonah (Jonathan) Nolan, the filmmaker's brother, writing partner, and author of the original short story on which the film is based (“Memento Mori”), describes the time-twisting dilemma for both character and audience: “You can never find out where you are in the time-line, because there is no time line. If it was a straight-backwards film, you could just take that two-dimensional time-line and flip it over, but you can't do that with this film ... you realize that this film doesn't run back; it's a Mobius strip.” Christopher Nolan prefers describing the film's structure as “a cycle in an ever-widening gyre ... a spiral of chaos that Leonard is perpetually sliding down.” (Mottram, 2002, p. 34).

Nolan opens the film with a stark metaphor for Leonard's condition: A fully-developed Polaroid photo of a dead body that suddenly begins to fade, losing color and imagery until it is the white blank that emerges from the camera. To nail the message we are dealing with a different telling of time, we realize the film is actually running backward as the Polaroid blank slides back into the camera, and the bullet that killed the body jumps back into the gun, along with the muzzle flash. Like the Polaroid, Leonard's mind registers his action, and then promptly fades it until it is erased from memory.

Like Leonard, the audience is faced with learning without context. We know where we are, but we don't know how we got there. Whatever we've done before the present moment, we

don't remember. How do we guide ourselves by intentions we can't recall? How do we measure the consequences of actions we don't remember? How do we anticipate the consequences of actions we will forget? While our actions are having an impact on the world around us, they have little to no influence on our thoughts and subsequent actions. What normative principles/standards/conventions can we rely on when our mind is constantly rebooting?

Leonard is not totally amnesiac. He can remember up to the point of a traumatic head injury he suffered while trying to stop the killing of his wife (or so he believes). His intent is to seek revenge. Nolan uses the Polaroid motif, along with body tattoos within the scene, and the alternating black-and-white and color sequences to frame Leonard's time out of place and place out of time. To remind himself, and to chart the progress of his quest, he tattoos key information (such as names, clues, and license plate numbers) on his body, and writes notes on Polaroid photos of people and places he thinks will be important to remember (but doesn't always remember why). Christopher Nolan notes, "on some level he is aware of the fact that he can ... 'communicate with his future self,' because he doesn't have the connection of memory between the two selves." (Mottram 2002, p. 31). George Bragues (2008) in *Film-Philosophy* notes, "We arrive at the most profound issues in *Memento*'s thought experiment, namely the extent to which memory is up to the task of validating the truth necessary to satisfactorily fulfill our moral imperatives." (p. 75)

Nolan tells the color sequences in reverse order. The next one doesn't begin where the previous one ended, the next one ends where the previous one began. We are meant to view these sequences from Leonard's point of view. They are shot mostly with a hand-held camera to offer a jittery, unsure and tense atmosphere. The black-and-white sequences are steady and sharp, shot from an angle slightly above eye-level, putting us in the role of the witness, rather than

participant. The scenes are often driven by voice-over or one-sided telephone conversation. In these sequences we are given a mix of key information – some that Leonard knows, and some that he has forgotten. The stark almost documentary-style black-and-white invites us to observe – and judge Leonard’s actions.

Other characters recognize Leonard’s disability and use it to manipulate him for their own criminal goals. How responsible is Leonard for acts he commits that he believes exist in a rational context, but in fact are quite opposite. He is the unwitting means to the illegal ends of others. Does he share the moral responsibility? Leonard himself declares, twice in the film, “I have to believe my actions still have meaning, even if I can’t remember them.” Mottram (2002) posits, “Revenge becomes a concept more than an act; unable to remember it, Leonard’s dilemma prompts the question of whether the act can exist, in any real sense, outside of one’s own head.” (p. 39)

The film leaves us with the unsettling prospect that despite killing two people he thought at the moment were responsible for his wife’s death (and almost killing a third on behalf of another character’s desire for vengeance), Leonard will continue his murderous quest as he continually forgets he may have already accomplished it. Even more unsettling are the filmmaker’s hints that Leonard is manipulating his own forgetful condition so that he will be in continual revenge-mode, as this has become his identity as the only link to the ever-repeating timeline of his existence.

... Revenge becomes Leonard’s life-blood, the idea of retribution more central to his life than the act of vengeance itself. . . . Leonard becomes locked into this ever-widening gyre, as Nolan would say. A cycle of destruction that has yet to satiate his desire for revenge, it’s a cruel trick of his condition that keeps him there. ‘I want time to pass,’ he says. ‘How can I heal if I can’t feel time?’ (Mottram, 2012, p. 39).

Nolan leaves it to the audience to decide whether Leonard is thrust into, or seduced by, Nietzsche's nightmare of Eternal Recurrence: Because time is infinite, and life events are finite, they are bound to be consumed and infinitely repeated, condemning us to relive them without respite through eternity. In *Memento*, time is actually finite for Leonard, with the essential timeline of events laid out in black-and-white, but infinitely repeated in an edgy and frazzled world or color. It's a world where Kant meets Nietzsche. Instead of a Kantian Categorical Imperative where we judge our acts by whether we would will them into universal law and accept all people acting in the same way, we must judge our acts by whether we could morally survive our endless undergoing them.

But then perhaps Leonard is drawn to his "gyre" of pursuing revenge *ad infinitum* because of an unwillingness to face one of the many unanswered questions Nolan enjoys employing to heighten audience engagement (which echoes Rosenstand's primacy of story-as-ethical-experimentation): Whether Leonard was actually responsible for his wife's death, not from a violent attack, but rather an accidental overdose of insulin. We see a hint of this through a parallel story of a man with anterograde amnesia from Leonard's pre-trauma life as an insurance investigator who ends up in a mental institution following the death of his wife. In a quick flash during a black-and-white (the "truthful") sequence, we see not this man, but Leonard sitting alone in a wheelchair in the facility. In filmic terms, Nolan has Leonard reveal not a grain, but a frame of truth.

Insomnia

Insomnia (2002) is a more conventionally told story, laid out in chronological order, of a police investigation in a far north Alaskan community of the murder of a high school girl. The local police chief calls for help from the Los Angeles Police Department, where he once worked.

Will Dormer (Al Pacino), a former detective colleague is dispatched along with his partner. They are carrying some extensive psychological baggage, as Dormer is under investigation by LAPD Internal Affairs regarding planting evidence in a shooting, and his partner feels compelled to offer compromising testimony.

This potentially career-ending burden has kept Dormer unable to sleep, hence the film's title (and the play of words on the name Dormer). Relocated to an Alaskan summer where the sun doesn't set, his insomnia is without relief. Nolan now gives us another aberration of time. In *Memento*, time for the protagonist continually restarts; his conscious mind begins anew. In *Insomnia*, the protagonist has continuous consciousness. In *Memento*, the protagonist is amnesic. In *Insomnia*, he is plagued by memory. In the opening shots we are introduced to Dormer as he observes from the plane's window the endless bleakness of snow and granite mountain peaks. They are bleached of color and stretch beyond what the eye can take in. They are expansive, but they also isolate, leaving him no room but to confront himself.

The first turning point of the plot comes when Dormer accidentally shoots and kills his partner during a chase through a riverbed as their attempt to close in on a suspect is hampered by an increasingly dense fog. Nolan creates the fog that is at once natural and surreal. While others, including his partner and the suspect are moving through it, Dormer is lost within it. He can't penetrate it with his mind as well as his eyes. We see it through his eyes and we become disassociated as well. We think we see, but are we seeing what we think? Dormer is presented as a veteran but obsessive pursuer of justice, and a role model to a young Alaskan officer, Ellie Burr (Hillary Swank). Normally he would admit and grieve his mistake. But because his partner was to be an Internal Affairs witness against him, Dormer falls into the slipstream of his own

hazy sleep-time deprived “gyre” and plants evidence anew to cover up his mistake and shift the blame for the shooting on the murder suspect, Walter Finch (Robin Williams).

Finch, a clever mystery writer, witnessed the shooting through the fog – it was not so dense and confusing from his viewpoint - is aware of Dormer’s plan, and leverages his knowledge to blackmail Dormer to let him slide. Finch works on Dormer’s insomnia-driven diminished and conflicted sense of self to establish a bond between them: “You and I share a secret. We know how easy it is to kill someone. That ultimate taboo, it doesn't exist outside our minds. I didn't murder her. I killed her. But it just ended up that way.”

As in *Memento*, Dormer is followed by mostly hand-held cameras, contributing as much to making him constantly on edge as the rumpled suits, pale makeup, swollen bloodshot eyes and “thousand yard stare” of Pacino’s character. There is a slight grain to the film to go along with the continual nervous camera movement when we see from Dormer’s point of view.

Critics Frederick and Mary Ann Brussart (2002) refer to *Insomnia* as a “moral thriller:”

The riveting drama examines the slippery slope encountered by those who cross over the line and exceed the norms of what is professionally and morally correct. Do the ends justify the means? Are there degrees of moral transgression or does one size fit all? Dormer tries to figure out these dilemmas while he is disoriented from sleep deprivation and his conscience is screaming at the top of its lungs.

“Do the math,” Finch urges Dormer. Is bringing Finch to justice enough to offset the downfall of Dormer’s stellar and storied career and potentially invalidate every case he’s ever closed and release every criminal he’s ever jailed?

In the end Dormer falls back on his core principles, sacrificing himself both to see justice, and to preserve those principles in younger officer Burr. Like all Nolan films, we are left with some unanswered questions: Was Dormer using Burr’s idealistic hero worship to further the cover-up, or to guide her in uncovering his involvement? And the most unsettling: Since there

were enough breaks in the fog for Finch to see Dormer shoot his partner, was Dormer also aware of his ultimate target?

What we do know is *Insomnia* wears away Dormer. Continuous, relentless time without the normal day/night, wake/sleep cycles has left him without respite for rational thinking. Christopher Nolan reports in an interview in *The Guardian*, “I wanted to make a film where night and day started to become confused. As you follow this character his perceptual distortion is increased, and you start to wonder whether you're seeing the whole picture and how much time has passed. So I wanted the audience to be floating a little bit by the end of the film.” Through this unyielding barrage of time, “your perception becomes distorted and you start misinterpreting things, both visually and aurally. In the film he mistakes someone else for his partner, which everybody's done, and those were the sort of things we wanted to push” (Andrew, 2002).

Insomnia, McGowan (2012) notes, “presents itself as a crime thriller, but the detective himself ends up as both the subject and the object of the investigation,” (p. 14) and: “The movement of the typical Nolan film is not, as in most films, from ignorance to knowledge. Instead, the spectator moves from mistaken knowledge to a later knowledge that corrects the mistakes. The beginning point is not a blank slate but an initial error.” (p. 2) Nolan offers a “flash forward” image at the beginning of the film of blood soaking into a swath of fabric. Is this the high school girl victim? Dormer’s partner? The killer Finch? We learn at the end it is Dormer’s blood as he lies dying, perhaps the ultimate redemption for his deeds. Nolan adds: “The issues that fascinate me are those grey areas where the cop, particularly the movie-cop, is torn between pragmatism and idealism. That is why the figure of the cop in fiction will endure because they are someone who is forced to deal with that dilemma on a daily basis” (Andrew, 2002).

The Prestige

The Prestige (2006) begins Nolan's infusion of illusion, science fiction and fantasy in his films. Nolan again manipulates time in altering the chronology of the story, told beginning the middle, in parallel flashbacks as the two protagonists reach each other's stolen diaries that tell the story from opposite perspectives. By keeping the audience in search for context, he delays the "reveal" of its multiple plot points by misdirecting us, like a good illusionist, from the story's and characters' past. Nolan uses the illusions of dueling magicians, Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman) and Alfred Borden (Christian Bale), to test our concepts of truth. As he uses the absence of context in *Memento*, Nolan forces us to distrust our senses in finding meaning. Like Plato's Cave, the ultimate staging of illusion of our senses, we find ourselves embracing shadows.

The two magicians, supremely obsessed in their art, take increasingly violent steps, and deceptions, to outdo each other throughout the film. A trick presented early in the film serves as a visual metaphor for the extreme illusions and self-delusions that follow. A dove is made to disappear from a cage that is forcibly collapsed. A young boy in the audience reacts with horror, crying that the bird has been killed. Even when an identical dove is presented as the bird's reappearance, the boy plaintively asks: "What about his brother?"

Nolan uses a visual metaphor of multiples in the film – from row upon row of identical doves in a backstage coop that will meet their death for the sake of the trick, to row upon row of identical corpses in water-tank coffins who have met their untimely fate at the hands of Angier. Along the way there are images of multiple hats, and multiple cats that lead us to the knowledge that a very dark science is at play.

Angier and Borden both use, and abuse, "brothers" in their acts, ultimately destroying them. The illusionists' battle culminates in the "Transported Man" trick where Borden uses his twin as a double to accomplish it. Angier, however, has ventured onto the far edges of science

through a Mephistophelean deal with a fictional Nikola Tesla who, while trying to create a matter transporter, inadvertently produced a high-voltage clone generator. To use the device in his trick, Angier must kill one version of himself by drowning in a locked tank below a trap door in the stage, while the other version of himself is transported to the far reaches of the balcony where he reveals himself to the audience's delight that he has disappeared from the stage and reappeared in their midst.

Nolan's unanswered question: Is Angier killing himself so the clone may appear to finish and repeat the trick in the next performance, killing himself again, or is the clone created on stage by the device and immediately sentenced to death while Angier is transported by the device to the balcony? The inner workings of the Tesla device are never revealed.

If the former, Angier is creating a new life (the clone appearing in the balcony) who exists in both continuing time and continuing memory. The clone Angier is so identical to the original that he is willing to kill himself in the next performance so that a new clone can be created and revealed in the balcony.

If the latter, Angier is committing multiple murders of his successive clones so that he can claim the superior version of the trick from Borden. As the clone is created "fully formed" with Angier's knowledge and memory, he becomes shockingly aware of his fate in the moment before his fatal plunge. Stanley Williams (2007), author of *The Moral Premise: Harnessing Virtue & Vice for Box Office Success*, offers this observation on his accompanying blog:

The Prestige offers an excellent opportunity to examine how virtues such a passion for excellence and self-sacrifice can become horrific Faustian examples of destructive obsession. Self-sacrifice is often considered a virtue when that sacrifice is for another's good. But self-sacrifice is also what obsessive people do for something that they selfishly want but don't need.

Angiers additionally arranges a ruse during his final performance that incriminates Borden as the murderer. Borden is not so dull, however, as to cast himself as a silent victim. He has his own assembly of deceptions, including the sacrifice of his brother as a stand-in for him at his execution that bring about the film's final reveal. In fact, there are hints that it was Borden's misdirection that led Angier to Tesla, creating the cascade, or Nolanesque "gyre," of increasingly dire consequences.

As in *Memento*, the protagonist Angier is driven by vengeance, as he blames Borden for his wife's death at the start of the film – through drowning in that same locked tank during a stage trick. His wife's death is real, but all subsequent perceptions – his and ours - become increasingly clouded by the illusionists' tricks.

How do we establish a "base reality" from which to make rational decisions if we cannot trust our senses? Is the creation and disposition of the clones simply a means to an artistic end? Their lives are part of an illusion, but are they inherently illusory? Is their purpose to continue an artistic life and so should be celebrated for accomplishing their goal rather than being mourned as discarded innocents?

Nolan, of course, wants the illusion of the film to continue well past its viewing, so leaves such questions to the audience to ponder well beyond the theatre. One such pondering, posted as "The Prestige – A Moral Conundrum?" on the *Casual Musings* (2007) website:

... Was (Angier's) magical performance of drowning himself only to reappear in the form of his clone, an act of murder or suicide? He kills himself everyday only to be reborn the same instant. Is the man drowning himself guilty of suicide or is the clone guilty of murder? Or has no crime been committed because nobody is missing?

Inception

In *Inception* (2010), Nolan fully commits to science fiction/fantasy, while maintaining what David Johnson (2011) calls a "philosophic thriller." Where *Insomnia* is set physically and

psychologically in a world without respite from wakefulness, most (perhaps all?) of *Inception* takes place in dreamscapes where characters are sedated through a pharmacological device that allows a dream invasion team to penetrate into a subject's unconscious oneiric worlds and to rob his innermost secrets – an elegant biotech of corporate espionage.

The unmerciful and unrelenting reality of *Insomnia* is merely the top, and perhaps least important level of action in *Inception*, which introduces us to four levels of dream worlds, or more accurately three levels of dreams within a dream.

Since many corporate movers and shakers have been trained to recognize and to call on projections of protective security personnel when their dreams have been invaded, the clever extraction team, led by Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio - no full names for characters in this and the next Nolan film) operates in a dream within a dream to afford them greater time and anonymity to accomplish their task. When called upon not to rob a secret, but to implant an innermost idea – an “inception” – they must find a way to drill deeper into the subconscious: a dream within a dream within a dream.

Between these concentric rings of dreaming, and between the dream and real worlds, time dilates. Time moves slower in dreams, we're told, because the brain works exceptionally faster while we are unconscious. Time is dramatically stretched, moving exponentially slower, in the deeper levels of the unconscious – the dreams within dreams. While only five minutes ticks off in reality, an hour of action takes place in the normal dream space, a day in the dream-within-a-dream, weeks and months in the dream-within-that-dream, and years in the deepest level known as “limbo,” an “unconstructed dreamscape” in the subconscious where characters can become lost and never return. There is a seduction of, and by, time here – being drawn into a world where youth is practically eternal, where death is so far away it never reaches us. Cobb's

wife, Mal (Marion Cotillard), now exists in this architecture of his dreamscapes, given immortality by his guilt for inadvertently causing her death after emerging from a shared lifetime-within-a-lifetime in “limbo.” She emerges during his attempts at inception with a desire to foil them so that he will rejoin her in the never-never land of an endless dream.

Nolan and long-time cinematographer Wally Pfister differentiate these dream levels with a varying color palate that is progressively muted through a gray and rainy Los Angeles, through a shadowy hotel, hallway, and elevator, into a sun-bleached arctic fortress framed by glare outside and impersonal metal and glass inside. Finally there is the dark and brooding “limbo” of buildings crumbling into a stormy sea and a not only empty but hollow cityscape of repeated, sharp-edged skyline shapes. As characters descend into deeper levels, the time dilation of events occurring in the levels above them is shown in increasing slow motion. Accompanying the visuals is a soundtrack based on Edith Piaf’s “*Non, je ne Regrette Rien*” with the initial notes slowed to a haunting bellow. The combination of visual and aural creates the sense of a radically altered timescape for the audience.

Inception has inspired numerous ruminations, including the philosophy of time (Sigrist, 2011), ethical responsibility for actions within dreams (Belluomini, 2011), and the ethical implications of the concept of dream invasion (Malloy, 2011). Unexplored territory remains in the influence of dilating time on ethical action, and how we perceive it. Since some members of the team remain on “Level 1” of the dream where time is flowing relatively faster, what obligations toward them have Cobb and the members of the team who have descended to deeper levels where there is additional time to reflect and act, as the actions at each level directly affect the actions at the levels above it. Those at the higher levels of dreaming would appear to be

moving in (inversely proportional) slow motion to those at the lower levels, allowing both micro- and macro-interventions to change the courses of action.

In the film, all dreamers at all levels must experience a particular “kick” to wake from the dream, and these “kicks” must occur simultaneously, lest the dreamer slip into “limbo,” living out a seemingly endless advancement of age and suffering for each and every hour trapped in an unawakening comatose state. There are responsibilities among the team members to each other, as well as responsibilities toward the subject, whose sleep and dreams have been induced.

If time existed on such multiple planes, how might it influence our obligations to those moving “faster” or “slower” than we are? Perhaps the analogy to the world we know are the generational planes. As we age and (presumably) gather wisdom, what obligations do we have to those still burning through a fast-paced existence that doesn’t allow for much quality reflection? Or is our duty quite the opposite: To not interfere and allow the young to collect their own wisdom in their own way – and time.

Malloy (2011) postulates that the film, and filmmaking itself, is a close parallel to the process of “inception:”

In constructing the dreams that will serve as the settings for the heist, Cobb and company are really doing what any filmmaker does: establishing a particular story line in a particular place and time. The three levels of the dream are like three acts in a single film.... This is why art worries philosophers. Philosophy is concerned with ideas, how we get them, where they come from and what justification there is for believing them. In implanting ideas, films and other artworks seem to bypass our rational thought processes. There is no chance to critically examine an idea that is slipped in with a lot of other, flashier ideas (pp. 127-8).

The entire third act, in a sense, never really happens. It’s just a grouping of stories being played out in the dreams of various characters, each dream a step further away from reality. So? What’s the danger? Just ask Cobb and Mal. It’s possible to lose oneself in these various fantasies, to pass further and further away from life and real concerns. Plato would be concerned that in

becoming more and more enthralled by these illusions, passing into ever deeper levels of the dream and seduced by the sweetly slowly unfolding of time, we are not only getting further away from life, we are getting further from truth. (Malloy, 2011, p. 135)

Nolan introduces various visual devices the dream-invaders use to help them gauge whether they are in a dream or reality. One uses the roll of a dice that must land on a specific number for him to be sure. Cobb uses a small spinning top. If he is in a dream world, it will keep spinning. In reality it will begin to wobble and topple over. At the film's conclusion, Cobb appears to be reunited with his children. But they also seem to be the same age as when he had to leave them years earlier. He spins the top. Before we see whether if it topples, the film ends.

Interstellar

In the world we know, science tells us time does exist on multiple planes. Astrophysics and Quantum Mechanics, Black Holes, Tidal Gravity, and Time Warps comprise the actual scientific foundations for Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), a "Sci-Phi" epic that honors Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in both scope and theme.

The basic premise of *Interstellar* is simple: Blights of dust are choking Earth, reducing and then eliminating the crops it can sustain. Science can't stop it, and so science must shift focus to finding a new habitable planet and a new force capable of removing Earth's population to it. An unknown intelligence has opened a wormhole through which such interplanetary exploration can take place. There are three possible worlds on the other side of that wormhole discovered by a trio of earlier astronauts who may, or may not be, preparing them as the Brave New World for surviving humanity. Getting there, as always, is half the fun, and even more of

the plot. Through it all, we are reminded, time is precious and limited. The earth can sustain only one more generation.

The twist in this search for Earth 2.0, the planets do not orbit a sun, but a black hole, which absorbs the signals from the previous astronauts - whether they've established a livable environment on their worlds, or even whether they've survived. So our two main current explorers, Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) and Brand (Anne Hathaway), must follow their trails and pick the one new world out of the three most likely.

More importantly, the black hole exerts such gravitational forces that it causes time displacement on the planets – and passing spaceships - closest to it. Nolan worked closely with astrophysicist Kip Thorne (2014) to visualize a black hole (which essentially is “nothingness”) by framing it with the light rays its massive gravitational force causes to bend. These bright bands represent light, gravity, and time – all warped by the nothingness at their center. Nolan now invites us to look at the planes of time from the reverse perspective. For each hour the astronauts travel near and to the closest planet, seven years of “Earth Time” elapse. While three (and then two) are on the planet, decades elapse for their colleague who has remained aboard the mother ship in orbit, plunging him into a depressive loneliness and on the cusp of suicide. We see him upon Cooper and Brand's return to the ship as a much older man with a graying beard. The ship as well shows signs of wear, tear and age. In even greater peril are the people of the original Mother Ship Earth, as these passing decades (a swiftly changing calendar from the perspective of those on the “heavy gravity” planet) bring them closer to ultimate doom. We see this time passing in the form of Cooper's daughter Murph, whom he left when she was a gangly pre-teen (Mackenzie Foy) and now, via televised messages beamed through space, is a mature

scientist (Jessica Chastain), dedicated to finding the gravity-manipulation solution that will lift a populated artificial planet to a safe space haven.

Cooper and Brand must severely economize their time on this planet while assessing its potential for habitation, lest time run out for those they would save. As it happens, this water-borne planet is fraught with danger and the third member of the exploration is swept away by one of a recurring series of mountainous waves. Remaining on the planet in an attempt to rescue him will imperil not only the remaining two from the next wave, but all of Earth itself as time literally flies by on the home front. Time, in this Nolan movie world, would seem to impose a stark utilitarianism: You have to sacrifice the one to save the many.

The varying time planes in this thickly conceived epic are portrayed not only by their speed of passage, but also by how they intersect in a space-time dimension (the “bulk”) that both incorporates and transcends direction. This key element of the film, which lifts it from the “we’ve landed in a different time” trope (e.g. *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Back to the Future* (1985)), is the “Tesseract,” visualized on an x-y-z axis:

You can begin with a square and if you move it perpendicular to itself in the third dimension you get a cube; if you move a cube perpendicular to itself in a fourth space dimension, you get a Tesseract. ...For a century physicists have argued time as a fourth dimension, and in *Interstellar* there is one more space dimension that leads out of our universe into the so-called ‘bulk,’ and that’s the fifth dimension. Chris’s variant of the Tesseract turns space dimensions into time dimensions in an intriguing way.” (Kip Thorne in Vaz, 2014, p. 131)

Nolan reports, “We wanted to construct a mathematically sound model of how you could display time as a spatial dimension and it’s very true to that,” (Vaz, 2014, p. 135).

Since time is so pliable in this fourth and fifth dimensional construction, Cooper finds himself able to communicate with his daughter Murph at various stages of her life (most importantly after she becomes a scientist) to pass along the secrets he’s learning about

gravitational forces that will allow her to transport the remaining Earth population in a space station in the shadow of Saturn, and await the final push through the wormhole to the new Gaia.

A nexus of the Tesseract, what (Visual Effects Supervisor Paul) Franklin calls a ‘membrane’ manifests itself within a bookcase in the bedroom at Cooper’s farmhouse where the forward flowing time experience on Earth intersects with the fourth-dimensional fabric where time is not only infinite but a physical and navigable dimension. (Vaz, 2014, p. 132)

Interstellar, like the Nolan films before it, inspired some intense philosophic analyses.

Belluomini (2014) posits a baseline position: After screwing up our own planet (presumably the dust-drought was brought about by our hubris toward climate change), what right do we have to claim another planet where we might be denying native microbes of their own evolution into beings perhaps far superior to us?

Consider the marketing slogan for the film. Cooper says, “Mankind was born on earth, it was never meant to die here.” Could this be true? Should we be looking for other worlds out in the universe in an effort to perpetuate the human species? Is it morally permissible to colonize another planet? Is it morally obligatory?

Nolan continues to tickle us with time, and how our actions are conceived, perceived, and received at different levels or planes. As he told Stephen Galloway (2014) in *The Hollywood*

Reporter:

In making (travel across space and time) seem attainable, you think about it very differently. Your perspective immediately starts to change. You have to start wrestling with the idea of scale, with the idea of these vast distances ... what a black hole would be like. You have to start examining these things as practical possibilities. It all becomes much more tactile.

Two hallmarks of Nolan’s work are that he always shoots on film and eschews computer-generated imagery wherever possible. The dust storms in *Interstellar* use an actual nontoxic compound filling the air and gathering in small dunes. The cornfields are real, planted for the film. The farmhouse was built. The spaceship interiors are real sets so that the actors don’t have to pretend in front of a green screen. The locations are real – Iceland stands in for the planetary

surfaces. The Tesseract is a set in which the actor can interact with real scenery and props. This level of physical realism and fluid camera work through real objects helps his films transcend the distance that separates most fantasy films from the audience where they are invited to be spectators to be awed, not participants in a story process. Nolan's cinematic worlds can be fantastical, but they feel like ours.

Time Transcendence in a Moral Universe

The “responsibilities of wisdom” question raised in *Inception* is answered with a resounding yes in *Interstellar*. Our knowledge and wisdom base in this film is given to us, as it turns out, by us – a future us guiding the past and present us out of harm's way. To demonstrate the better wisdom of the future us is the revelation that the “present day” scientist-in-charge, Professor Brand (Michael Caine, astronaut Brand's father), has created this space-penetrating journey as something of a hoax. He never expects Earth's population to be saved, just his daughter and a supply of fertilized human eggs. Her hidden mission is to get them to a new world and shepherd them into creating a new civilization. Again, the severe utilitarianism: Sacrifice the degenerating present for the promise of life in the future.

The senior Brand is unable to intellectualize the solution that would break the bonds of gravity. What turns that tide is love – Cooper's love for his daughter Murph, the younger Brand's love and determination to search for an earlier astronaut who found the final and most livable planet. Those integral demonstrations of love connect time - past, present, and future - across gravity and space, which turn out to be inexorably interrelated.

...The movie opts for a view that ‘love’ is before/transcends the recent descriptive science of evolution and moral psychology that seeks to ‘explain it away.’ The film holds love is an essential component, a catalyst of the universe and life itself, and that we should trust in it for ultimate underlying direction. (James, 2014)

Ethical analysis provides multiple entry points into Christopher Nolan’s films whether it is the Existential wasteland of Leonard Shelby in *Memento*, the exhausting conflict between duty and self-preservation in *Insomnia*, the Machiavellian manipulations of the dueling magicians pursuing greatness in *The Prestige*, or the multi-leveled quest for the utilitarian “greater good” across space and time in *Inception* and *Interstellar*. Our “suspension of disbelief” when watching a film allows the director to lead us to identify with the protagonists and test justifications for their ethical behavior or misbehavior. These Christopher Nolan films add dimensions of time to shape character and plot to test those moral premises at the center of the film.

In the final analysis, perhaps it is *agape* – a universal and unconditional love - and the sacrifice it requires that forms the Nolan philosophy that intersects all of the planes of time and narrative spaces of his films. Leonard Shelby sacrifices his identity and memory over repeated time to bring honor, albeit through vengeance, to his wife’s memory. Will Dormer breaks the harsh light bonds of a never-ending daytime to sacrifice his own freedom (from prosecution) and reputation to uphold his principles, and to keep the principles unsullied of his young protégé. The magician Angier repeatedly sacrifices his own life (in one interpretation) for his art. His rival’s brother (Borden’s twin) sacrifices his life so that Borden can reunite with and raise his beloved daughter. Cobb sacrifices his memory-locked wife (or rather the locked memories of his wife that exists in his dreamscapes), with whom he could have spent eons of seemingly infinite dreamtime, so that he could break the dream cycles and reunite with his children. Cooper is prepared to sacrifice his life, to be torn apart by the forces of the “bulk,” to communicate the secrets of the universe across time to his daughter to save her - and almost incidentally, humanity as well.

Nolan himself offers:

There's a connection between human beings and what that may or may not mean. I like the idea that we are imprisoned in the temporal, three-dimensional spatial world and don't necessarily understand what all facets of human nature mean. Time feels like a particular experience to us, but if we could view ourselves from a higher dimension, we might see that these connections actually mean something different. (quoted in Vaz (2014), p. 129)

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¹This essay has omitted the Nolan “franchise” Dark Knight films, which form their own investigation into moral thought through Nolan’s other main portal of analysis: the exploration of identity. There is a strong point of analysis that in the 2nd of the trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*, Nolan exploits real-time and the corybantic nature it had on Gotham. The passengers on the two ferryboats are each posed with the great gamble of time: Press the button and destroy the other ferry before they destroy you. Nolan also imposes the cruelty of time. The Joker gives Batman only enough time to save his love or the man who would save Gotham. Much like the Black Hole in *Interstellar*, the Joker warps real-time into a weapon to create helplessness. I am indebted to theatrical manager Christopher Brislin for these observations.