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INCEPTION

AND PHILOSOPHY

BECAUSE IT'S NEVER
JUST A DREAM

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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For Zorro, who kept me company through the entire editing process. There will never be a dog better than you. May you always live on in my dreams.

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THE EDITOR'S TOTEM

An Elegant Solution for Keeping Track of Reality

I know, I know. An editor's note. Who cares, right? Wrong! Don't skip it. This is important stuff. If you care about understanding *Inception*, and this book, you'll want to hear me out.

Editing this book wasn't easy. *Inception* is so ambiguous, I had to worry about whether the contributing authors interpreted, and thus would speak about, the movie in the same way. One problem, in particular, kept popping up around every corner like Cobol agents in Mombasa. How much of *Inception* is a dream? Is the end a dream? Is everything after Yusuf's basement a dream? Could the whole movie be a dream? If I wasn't careful, the book could have ended up looking like it was about two or three different movies.

So I came up with an "elegant solution for keeping track of reality." Throughout the book, the authors refer to the world in which the inception is planned—the world in which Mal jumps from the window, where Cobb is on the run, meets Ariadne, and doesn't wear his wedding ring anymore—as *the real world*. The italics are important—they indicate a title, not a description. By the use of the italicized phrase, the authors will not assume that *the real world* actually is the real world (notice, no italics that time). That way, when we need to ignore the issue, we can; and when the issue is important, we can concentrate on it.

Now, that's all you need to know to start reading the book. But if you want to know why we can't just assume that *the*

real world of Inception actually is real, and you want to gain a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the movie, continue reading.

How much of *Inception* is a dream? Most people think the answer lies in an event just beyond our reach. Does the top fall at the end of the movie after the screen cuts to black? If it does, then Cobb is awake; if it doesn't, then Cobb is still dreaming. A careful examination of the film, however, shows us that this is not the case.

First of all, Cobb's totem is extremely unreliable as a dream detector. Arthur specifically points out, when telling Ariadne about totems, that they work only to tell you that you are "not in *someone else's* dream." So even if the top falls, Cobb could still be in his own dream. Totems have this weakness because, if the dreamer knows how the totem behaves in reality, the dreamer could dream that it behaves that way; and obviously the owner of a totem knows how it behaves in reality. This is why you don't want anyone else to touch your totem. If anyone gets a hint of how it is supposed to behave, they could dream that it behaves that way, and then your totem couldn't tell you that you are not in their dream world.

Despite all this, Cobb tells Ariadne, specifically, how his totem works. When she asks if the concept of a totem was his idea, Cobb says, "No . . . it was Mal's actually . . . this one was hers. She would spin it in the dream [and] it would never topple. Just spin and spin." So the top can't tell Cobb that he is not in Ariadne's dream; she knows how it works. And in fact, since she is the architect of all the dream layers in the inception, couldn't she have (even inadvertently) worked the law "All tops fall" into the very physics of the dreams she designed? How could spinning his top ever tell Cobb that he has left the dream layers of the inception?

And wait . . . what was that? Look at that quote again. The totem was Mal's? Well that's just great! Sure, Cobb thinks

Mal is dead; and if she is, then he doesn't have to worry about being in her dream. But Cobb thinks she's dead because he believes the world in which Mal threw herself from the window (*the real world*) is real. The only way he could come to that conclusion, however, is by spinning the top and watching it fall—but wouldn't that be circular reasoning?

Besides, who doesn't know that tops fall after they are spun? We have no idea how Arthur's die is weighted, or how Ariadne's chess piece is supposed to work. But if Cobb spun his top in anyone's dream, wouldn't they dream that it fell? So sure, if the top did keep spinning, after the screen went black, that would tell us Cobb is still dreaming. But the top falling wouldn't tell us anything!

This line of reasoning brings up another problem. Forget the end of the film. Think about the beginning and *the real world* that most of the first half of the movie takes place in—the world where Mal jumps out the window, Cobb is a fugitive, the inception is planned, and the main characters meet. Think about when Cobb and Mal first reentered this world, after leaving Limbo. How could they tell it was real? The top couldn't help, since they both knew how it works; either one of them could have been the dreamer. So how could they tell that world was real? The fact is, they couldn't. There was no way to prove one way or the other. In fact, that was Cobb's problem. There was no way to convince Mal that world was real, and that is why she ultimately threw herself from the window. Now, since that world didn't start to crumble as soon as Mal "died" in it (like the Japanese Mansion dream started to crumble as soon as its dreamer, Arthur, died in it), it's safe to conclude that world was not Mal's dream. But it could still be Cobb's dream. And if it is, Mal is not dead. She didn't commit suicide; she was right. They were still dreaming, and she woke up.

Sure, it's possible Cobb and Mal were still dreaming—but is it reasonable to think they were? Yes! If you pay careful attention to the movie, you will see that it is ambiguous throughout. For the same reasons that the end of the movie might be a dream, the entire movie might be a dream. Let me elaborate.

Whether the top keeps spinning at the end of the movie is an issue because it's not clear whether Saito and Cobb make it all the way back to the real world, after exiting Limbo.¹ Why is this not clear? For one thing, it's never clear. Even when one dream ends, Cobb is always concerned that he merely dreamed that he awoke. That's why he's always spinning his top. But specific elements of the film give us reason to suspect that Cobb and Saito didn't make it back. Think about this: What happens to someone when they exit Limbo? Where do they go? The two clearest examples we have are Fischer and Ariadne, who both exit Limbo by falling off a tall building. Where do they go? Not out to the real world! They go one level up, to the third layer of the shared dream—the snow fortress. (They have to ride the kicks back up to the first layer.) So when Cobb and Saito exit Limbo, wouldn't they go up to that third layer too? If so, wouldn't it have been long abandoned by then? (The other characters make it back up to the first level, while Cobb and Saito's bodies lie motionless in the van.) Given this, wouldn't one of them have simply remade that layer based on their own expectations—to find themselves on a plane, landing in California?²

You might think this is inconsistent with the facts of the film, but it says nothing about what happens to someone upon arriving at an abandoned dream level, or whether or not such a thing is possible. We know, at least, that a dreamer exiting a dream layer does not necessarily make it collapse immediately; we learn this early on in the film, when Arthur exists his Japanese Mansion dream and it

continues. So it is possible to inhabit a dream layer, without a dreamer. Arthur even tries to keep Saito under, to keep the dream going. If he had been successful, who knows how long that dream could have continued, or if it would have become Saito's or Cobb's dream.

So, think again of the end of the film. If that third snow fortress dream level was empty when Saito arrived,³ why wouldn't he dictate a new architecture for that level with his expectations? And, once Cobb arrived, why wouldn't he populate it with projections of his subconscious—his team and his family? They were under very heavy sedation, and according to Cobb and Yusuf, it wasn't going to wear off until after they spent a week on the first layer of the dream (which was six months on the second level and ten years on the third). And the other dreamers made it back up to that level before even an hour had passed in it. Even after exiting Limbo, Saito and Cobb could have almost ten years to live on that third level before the sedative even begins to wear off.

Is it reasonable to worry that Cobb and Saito didn't make it back to the real world after exiting Limbo? Of course it's reasonable—that's why so many people care whether the top falls at the end of the film. But as we listen to Cobb recount his and Mal's story to Ariadne, we realize a very similar problem comes up for them—one where we don't even have to worry about what happens if one arrives at an abandoned dream level.

Cobb and Mal entered Limbo by experimenting with multilayered dreaming. As Cobb recounts to Ariadne,

We were working together. We were exploring the concept of a dream, within a dream. I kept pushing things, I wanted to go deeper and deeper . . . when we wound up on the shore of our own subconscious [Limbo], we lost sight of what was real.

To exit Limbo, they laid their heads on the train tracks—and woke up on the floor of some house, hooked up to a “dream machine” (PASIV) briefcase, married with two kids. But if their exit from Limbo was like every other, that floor was only one level up—the deepest layer of a multilevel dream, just above Limbo. If so, their fifty years in Limbo was long enough for them to forget this fact, or what the real world was even like. So, even if that world is not real, it’s no wonder that Cobb believes it is. Sure, Mal believes it is a dream only because Cobb incepted the idea into her in Limbo. That doesn’t mean, though, that Mal’s belief is false. She might be right, and if she is, she didn’t commit suicide—she woke up!⁴ If the sedative Cobb and Mal used is nearly as potent as the one used on the airplane, Cobb could be stuck on that level for ten years before he even has a chance to wake up in the real world. Who knows? Cobb and Mal might not even have kids in the real world. They might not even be married; they might have been just exploring the possibility through shared dreaming.

In fact, it seems that Christopher Nolan, the film’s writer and director, leaves us some subtle clues to suggest that it is indeed possible that *the real world* is only a dream.

- Through his conversations with Ariadne, Yusuf, and others, we learn that Cobb can’t dream anymore unless he hooks into a PASIV device, and that he does so every night. This is, apparently, how he sleeps. Could it be that he can’t sleep or dream without the machine because he is already asleep and dreaming?
- Consider the scene in which Mal jumps from the window. Cobb navigates through the room that Mal has trashed, and looks out the window. She is on the opposite ledge, in the open window of another room in the hotel.⁵ How did she get there? Wouldn’t she have inched out on the ledge, away from *their* hotel room window and thus been on the same side of the building as Cobb? Isn’t Mal

being on the opposite ledge just the kind of inexplicable thing that happens when dreaming?

- In Cobb's dream in the basement, as he sees images of her laying her head on the train tracks in Limbo, Cobb's projection of Mal tells him, "You know how to find me. You know what you have to do." She says this again, as Ariadne finds him reliving his memories. If the real Mal was right and they were dreaming, Cobb merely has to commit suicide to find her. Is Cobb's projection of Mal calling him to wake up from the dream of *the real world*—by committing suicide—so he can find the real Mal "up above"?
- Consider the chase scene in Mombasa. When Cobb jumps out the bar window, a Cobol "Businessman" is waiting for him and says, "You're not dreaming now, are you?" Yet the chase has dreamlike qualities. Notice, in the overhead shots, how much Mombasa appears to be a maze, a labyrinth—just like Ariadne designs for the Fischer inception. Notice also how businessmen continually appear, around every corner, in just the right place, and for no reason. As the chase begins, Cobb eliminates the two who are chasing him; but as soon as he turns to run, two more are inexplicably right on his tail. When he tries to run out of the restaurant, a businessman literally appears out of nowhere to tackle him from the side. And how about the company they work for—Cobol?⁶ Isn't "Cobol" just a little too similar to "Cobb"? Is he chasing himself?⁷ And what about that restaurant waiter, who won't get him a "café," but insists on drawing attention to him? And what about when he tries to escape between the two buildings, and the walls literally close in on him? Aren't these the kinds of things that happen while one is being chased in a dream?

- Fischer's subconscious is trained, when Arthur's research shows that it should not be. Could it be trained, because in attacking Fischer, they are actually attacking Cobb—because it's all just Cobb's dream?
- When Ariadne enters Cobb's memory of the night Mal jumped, why does she step on the glass just as Cobb did? Is it because, as a projection in Cobb's dream, she is Cobb?
- Consider the beginning of the movie, when we see Cobb talking to the elderly Saito in Limbo. Saito spins the top, and then we flash back to Cobb speaking to Saito as a young man in Arthur's dream. We then spend the rest of the movie getting back to where we started—Cobb talking to the elderly Saito in Limbo. And, we see, the top is still spinning; it was, in a way, spinning the whole movie! Could this be a symbolic clue, left by Nolan? After all, when the top spins, but doesn't fall, aren't we in someone else's dream?
- Similarly, the running time of Inception is *exactly* 2:28 (in hours and minutes). The song the dreamers use to signal the end of a dream is Edith Piaf's "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien," the original recording time of which is 2:28 (in minutes and seconds). Another subtle clue? When the song is done, the dream is over.
- And what is the deal with the dream share technology? Not only do we not know how it works, but it doesn't even make sense. Controlling dreams . . . through the arm? The technology working inexplicably is what we would expect if it is just a part of a dream. Not so much, if it is supposed to be technology that could exist in reality.⁸

Of course, you can explain all of this away. Maybe Cobb can't sleep or dream because he is addicted to the dream machine. Maybe Mal rented another hotel room, across the way, and went to it after she trashed the other. Maybe

Cobb's projection of Mal is calling him back to Limbo, not back to reality. Maybe Cobb is just unlucky when it comes to Mombasa chases. Maybe Fischer had covert training, and the "movie long spinning top" is just an artifact of the flashback. Maybe the film ending at 2:28 signals that it's time for us to return to reality. Maybe Cobb's memories never change. Maybe a dream briefcase emits some kind of "psychic field" that synchronizes all unconscious brains in the vicinity. Maybe you can't enter layers once they are abandoned, and Saito and Cobb did make it back to *the real world*. Maybe Cobb and Mal didn't use heavy enough sedatives for stable multilevel dreaming, and their suicide in Limbo woke them all the way back up. Maybe, in fact, every dreamlike element of *the real world* is just a way to hint at the fact that Cobb is losing his ability to distinguish dreams from reality. Maybe I'm just anomaly hunting, seeing clues where there are none! I am not arguing that the "Full Dream" interpretation is the right one. I'm pointing out that it is a legitimate, consistent interpretation of the film. (In fact, as we will see, these are not the only clues.)²

So you can see the problem. A first viewing of the film leads one to believe that *the real world*—the world in which Mal jumps from the window and in which the inception is planned—is the real world. A deeper look reveals that this might not be the case, however. In fact, the entire movie might be a dream.

It will be helpful, then, to start right from the first chapter by thinking about the issue of how much of *Inception* is a dream. So, stave off your temptation to go watch the movie again and dive right into *Inception and Philosophy*.

NOTES

1. There is even an issue as to whether they exited Limbo at all. But since Limbo is never as populated as the world is

in the final scenes in the movie, I think we can assume they at least made it out of Limbo.

2. Besides, even if they did make it back up to the first level, their bodies are strapped into a van that is submerged in water. So, even if they did make it out of Limbo and back to the first level, it seems that they would just die again and fall right back down into Limbo.

3. Since Saito had the gun in Limbo, I'll assume he shot himself first. Since Cobb has the same expectations, if Cobb arrived first, the story works out about the same.

4. Maybe in the real world, but maybe just in another layer of dreaming.

5. If you look behind Mal, you will see the interior of the room is the same as the one Cobb is in—notice the couch and the lamp, among other things. It's just that Cobb's room is trashed. She is not in another part of their suite; she is in the window of another room.

6. Interestingly, the name of Saito's Company is "Proclus Global," and Proclus was a Neo-Platonist philosopher (a.d. 412-485) of minor fame, who played a key role in keeping Platonic philosophy alive by heading the Platonic Academy in Athens. I considered the possibility that this was another subtle clue that Cobb is dreaming, and looked at Proclus' philosophy. But, alas, I found nothing—although I don't think Nolan chose the name coincidentally. It must be symbolic of something else. Nolan likes symbolic Greek names. Ariadne helped Theseus through the labyrinth to slay the Minotaur. Perhaps Nolan considers Saito to run a company of "cutting-edge thinkers" like Proclus did.

7. Actually, Nolan spoke to this possibility and dismissed it in an article in the January 2011 issue of *Empire* magazine titled "Christopher Nolan Made Our Minds the Scene of the Crime." When asked whether the name "Cobol Engineering" is a giveaway that the whole plot's a subconscious fabrication since its first syllable matches

Cobb's name, he said, "That unfortunately I would have to confess is definitely not the case. For legal reasons I had to rename Cobol Corporation about ten times. So that one I can shoot down as being not indicative of anything in particular." One wonders, however, despite his original intention—could it still be a clue? For more on whether an author's original intent sets the meaning of a film, see Ruth Tallman's chapter in this volume.

8. This last point deserves some elaboration. It could be that an aside about how the technology works would just get in the way of the story, so Nolan left it out. This is actually how my favorite modern sci-fi television show, *Doctor Who*, handles such things. It simply explains away funky technology and time travel paradoxes by saying "It's wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff," and moves on. Unlike *Star Trek* fans, most *Doctor Who* fans care about the story and characters, not the technical specifics, so this seems perfectly acceptable. But the problem with *Inception's* dream technology goes a little deeper. How the dream share technology works is not only unexplained, it's inexplicable. Dreams are caused by brain activity, and for a device to synchronize a group of people's dreams, it would have to make their brains' neurons fire in similar ways. Perhaps the machine could find some arm nerves to hook into, but synchronizing brain activity with arm nerves would be like trying to program a computer by using only the "shift" key. There is no way to control the mass action of the brain through the arm.

9. For more such clues, see Ruth Tallman's and Jason Southworth's chapters in this volume.

INTRODUCTION

Plato's Academy Award

Inception didn't win the 2010 Academy Award for Best Picture. But if they gave an Oscar for philosophical depth—call it Plato's Academy Award—*Inception* would have taken home the statue (which would look like Rodin's *The Thinker*). Indeed, no film in recent memory raises philosophical questions quite like *Inception*.

The screen cuts to black before we see whether the top falls. If we can't know whether Cobb is dreaming, can we know that we ourselves are not dreaming? And if we can't, how exactly should we deal with the angst such uncertainty brings? This problem has been considered by philosophers as far back as Plato (c. 428–347 bce), and it raises questions about *Inception* itself. If we can't know whether Cobb is dreaming, can we really know how much of the movie is a dream? Maybe Cobb is still in Yusuf's basement. Maybe Mal was right, and the whole movie is a dream! When it comes to works of art, is there even a way to settle such matters and determine what *Inception* means?

What if someone offered you a life in Limbo? Would you take it? Imagine living in a world that you control, where you can have any experience you want: a utopia. Sure, they aren't real experiences—but what if you didn't know that? What if, like Mal did in Limbo, you thought it was real? Would you take it then? Or would there be something pitiful about being a prisoner in Limbo, forced to think that your dream was real? Would you really want to live in Limbo anyway? Is a utopia even possible? If not, why do we strive toward one? Perhaps because it's important to dream?

What about *Inception* itself? You might think it's impossible, but isn't it just implanting ideas in other