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Downward is the Only Way Forward: Following Inception's Dream Trail

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Feature

teaser:

One of *Inception's* less erroneous statements about dreaming is that it feels real while it's happening; the surreality becomes apparent only after waking up. So naturally I wondered if, for example, the people sitting around me in the theater were actually part of a dream. But who was dreaming it?

[Author's note: The following essay does not contain significant plot spoilers for the film Inception, though it does explore in detail the themes and implications of the film. If you would rather see Inception with a "clean slate," please do so before reading on.]

*"Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." – F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1)*

A minority of those who see Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* will surely walk away wondering if they are actually living in a dream, either their own or someone else's. One of the film's less erroneous statements about dreaming is that it feels real while it's happening; the surreality becomes apparent only after waking up. So naturally I wondered if, for example, the people sitting around me in the theater were actually part of a dream. But who was dreaming it? Certainly not me—or at least, if this was my dream, I should think I'd like to make it a bit more comfortable, a bit less terrifying. For instance, why did leaving the theater feel vaguely like trying to wiggle through a mob of *flesh-hungry zombies*? I'd like to have more creative control over this so-called dream. I couldn't shake these thoughts after watching *Inception*.

The film depicts a crew of dream engineers who use biochemical technology to enter the dream of a subject from whose subconscious mind they wish to extract secret information. The mechanism of “extraction” goes unexplained in the film (they use a machine that administers a sedative via the forearm), but the basic concept is that a group participates in a single person’s dream; multiple minds interact in an individual’s subconscious psyche. When the conscious ego defenses are deactivated, a person is more vulnerable to intrusion—somewhat like hacking a computer. The plot centers on an attempt at “inception,” a risky procedure that aims to plant an idea in someone’s subconscious mind with the hopes that the idea will become his own and then steer his behavior in waking life.

Like a dream itself, *Inception* is complex and open to interpretation. And judging by the plethora of speculations on the Web, the film seems to be inspiring two types of articles: first, a celebration over the increased attention given to lucid dreaming and consciousness; second, a frenzied attempt to explain the film’s complicated plot structure. Some from the latter category are insightful, but most take form in a logical swirl that quickly leads to a contradictory knot. I intend to demonstrate why this happens. As we’ll see, Christopher Nolan might have even been in on the joke.

As in our common understanding of reality, *Inception* seems to be founded on the concept that there is an absolute difference between a *dream* and being *awake*. The film doesn’t make the admission, except at the very last moment, that *there will never be a way to prove what we experience as waking life is not actually a dream, a hallucination, or some kind of after-life*. This was also implied 11 years ago in *The Matrix*, but we ignored it then because we didn’t like to consider the possibility that each of us was suspended in synthetic amniotic fluid, being used as a human battery. We told ourselves that it was only science fiction and then sank back into our regular state of mental certitude.

What I’m referring to is not science fiction, nor is it a statement of belief. It is a piece of wisdom at least 2,800 years old that has been expressed in countless ways, the oldest of which is probably the Hindu Vedanta philosophy, followed by Mahayana Buddhism. The science of it—the field known as quantum mechanics—is almost a century old; the math and logic of it—primarily Gödel’s theorems—are only slightly younger. But, perhaps not surprisingly, we’re still catching up with the implications. It is my broader suspicion that our delayed understanding and utilization of this existential map (particularly in the West, though it is a worldwide problem) has resulted in the ongoing state of mass neurosis, oppression, war, genocide, and suicide.

This is not a new problem, but we’ve failed to produce any functional solutions, whether in the realm of art, science, business, politics, or religion. As a result we’re barely treading water, collectively stranded in the middle of an ocean with no shore in sight. To point out this problem has, time and time again, marked a person as crazy, a lunatic, or deserving of punishment—whether by an institution (psychiatry, law, etc.) or by robotized, ego-crazed individuals. But that doesn’t mean we should set the topic aside; it only makes further discussion more urgent.

As such, I want to use *Inception* to outline this dilemma because the film is a snapshot of the status quo, a reflection of the mainstream reality tunnel, and an example of the continued ignorance of what we can call metaphysical reality.

The Catastrophe of the Infinite Regress

"Now forget everything you just learned." – My Physics 1 professor, at the end of the semester

The technology used in *Inception* allows participants to design the dream environment and control their actions within the dream. This differs from our usual conception of a dream as something that happens to us (i.e., to the subjective dreamer), a phenomenon that we're more or less trapped in until the eyes on our body's head open and we re-enter full consciousness. In that regard, one could call this activity "lucid group dreaming," since a lucid dream is one in which the dreamer somehow gains control over events.

Before a group dream, someone other than the primary dreamer is designated as the architect. This person must create a dreamscape with enough detail and complexity that it is indistinguishable from reality, in order to fool the target into acting along. Someone is woken from a controlled dream through one of two methods: by being killed in the dream, or by receiving a "kick" in the waking world. A kick essentially means a physical shock strong enough to bring the dreamer out of his or her subdued state.

The characters use an item referred to as a totem to prove to themselves that they are not still in someone else's dream. Each small, unique piece is known only to its owner while awake, so any dream where its weight or shape differs is surely happening in someone else's subconscious. For example, the character Cobb (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) carries a small metal top in his pocket at all times.

Of course, before any of this can happen a dreamer must first be experienced enough to tell a dream from reality. In other words, the awareness of a dream state precedes control over it. Any instance of that kind of reflexive self-awareness can be called "meta-programming," as Robert Anton Wilson explains in *Prometheus Rising*. "The meta-programming circuit...simply represents the brain becoming aware of itself." (2) Meta-programming is the seventh out of eight speculative levels in the psychological evolution of human beings, in a map that Wilson adapted from Timothy Leary's work. The meta-programming circuit "consists, in modern terms, of cybernetic consciousness, reprogramming and reimprinting all other circuits, even reprogramming itself, making possible conscious choice between...reality tunnels." (3)

Lucid dreaming is definitely a type of meta-programming, but meta-programming is not limited to the dream state. Meta-programming really pertains to a state of multiplied consciousness, regardless of the context in which that happens. What we commonly call the "soul" contains within it the implications of meta-programming. "There is no theoretical or real limit to the higher-ordering process; it is the 'Infinity Within' of which the mystics speak." (4) This endless ordering capacity relates to *Inception* because of the characters' ability to create not just a simple dream, but also multi-layer dreams—dreams within dreams—to suit their mission. In fact, the dreamers navigate five separate levels of consciousness throughout the story.

Yet Cobb never seems quite convinced when he returns to real life, and to me the reason is obvious. There is no concrete way to distinguish that level of consciousness from any other level. The brain presents each level to the mind as a real experience. More specifically, when we take dreams and waking life to be two distinct states of existence, we are left with an infinite array of states above and below what we call "real life." A dream

seems real while it's going on; it's at least as convincing as "reality."

This begins to show why most explanations of Inception will sound like nonsense. Wilson references the book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* in which Douglas R. Hofstadter describes the infinite ordering as "Strange Loops": "It just seems like we're about to self-destruct...and we decide that what we have been reading, or thinking, or perceiving, must be 'nonsense.' It is not nonsense. We are merely confronting infinity where we least expected to encounter it—in our own lonely selves." (5)

That fear of self-destruction is a symptom of the general state of existential despair that human beings have been stuck in for well over 150 years now. But before I discuss that common (if repressed) reaction, I must return to the phenomena itself. The Strange Loops occur at the frontiers of logic and rationality, when what we take to be objective experience, sound thinking, or empirical research reveals itself to be a victim of contradiction, paradox, or hypocrisy. As Wilson points out, "It happens in both linguistics and mathematics, because it *happens in consciousness itself*; language and math are just models of consciousness." (6)

Wilson credits Niels Bohr for being the first to make a formal admission of this dilemma in his Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics. The problem with modern science is that "our equations do not describe the universe really. They describe the mental processes we have to put ourselves through to describe the universe." (7) Bohr's argument was based on the realization that the act of measuring alters the phenomenon being measured. In other words, the observer is tied to that which is observed—even when using a scientific instrument—so there really is no such thing as an objective measurement.

One might be reminded at this point of the Theory of Everything popularized by Stephen Hawking—a grasping attempt to reconcile the extremes of theoretical physics in a system that doesn't contradict itself. Physics is especially relevant here because, if there were a way to prove that one was awake or asleep, it would be through some kind of physical test. When we're awake and present in the real world, we're subject to the laws of classical (Newtonian) mechanics. These laws deal with position and velocity as finite concepts, worked into equations with factors such as time, mass, and acceleration.

For instance, if you stand on the ground and jump while awake, you'll probably rise about a foot and then drop back down. But if you jump from ground level while in a dream, who knows—you might take off and fly around! If the most common dreams share anything, it's what we call absurdity. Although, that's still a subjective interpretation. "Real life" is often just as absurd—or absurd in a different way—and I think our awareness of that is slowly building. Imagine—if you find yourself naked in front of a room of your peers, you might actually be awake!

To simplify this problem, the characters in *Inception* carry a totem that no one else has ever touched. Only by knowing the physical attributes of the object—its weight, its exact appearance, how long it spins before falling, etc.—can they prove to themselves that they're not in another person's dream. Though the film doesn't state it explicitly, a totem can't prove whether or not someone is awake or *in their own dream*, since the mind could easily reproduce the object with enough accuracy. However, being experienced lucid dreamers, they could, for example, make a top spin indefinitely—since it wouldn't have gravity pulling down on it, slowly reducing its centripetal force—and this would be a sure

sign of a dream state.

The point is that, in a dream, the characters are not automatically subject to the laws of classical mechanics. They are co-creators in their universe, and they can edit the dream environment as they see fit. The trouble with our ordinary view of reality is that the laws of classical mechanics are now defunct. To clarify, they only work under certain conditions, such as on the earth's surface, at human scale. But more importantly, quantum mechanics has discovered that all matter (physical solids, liquids, and gases) actually displays properties of both particle and wave, not the simple atomic mass we commonly assign it. Whereas classical mechanics was concerned with position and velocity, quantum mechanics says these are relative concepts and therefore adopts the idea of a wave function. One can be sure about either a particle's position or its velocity, but not both—and wave function is a probability statement encompassing both factors.

One extension of wave function is the concept that subatomic particles—electrons and protons, the building blocks of matter—don't fit into any model that explains the way human beings perceive matter. As Alfred North Whitehead puts it, "This discontinuous existence in space, thus assigned to electrons, is very unlike the continuous existence of material entities which we habitually assume as obvious. [...] These electrons, with the correlative protons, are now conceived as being fundamental entities out of which material bodies of ordinary experience are composed. Accordingly, if this explanation is allowed, we have to revise all our notions of the ultimate character of material existence." (8)

Terence McKenna's response to this: "The problem can be overcome if we accord to matter the same vibratory character that we apply to light and sound. The adoption of this vibratory picture of matter is going to necessitate the drastic revision of our ideas of simple location. ...time becomes an essence of the material. ...the vibratory entity of a primordial unit of matter requires a definite period of time...for the expression of its essential nature." (9)

So what does this mean for the human experience, or for the characters in *Inception*? The physical objects that we perceive in waking life aren't any more *there* than the objects projected in someone's subconscious mind. What *is there*, according to quantum theory, is more like a Van Gogh painting—matter as wave/particles vibrating throughout a timeframe of expression. All that we take for granted as physical reality is actually an endless "wave function collapse." By observing matter our brains reduce the wave function to an approximation of location and velocity, characteristics apparent to us but which do not exist in the matter itself. "For there is in nature virtually nothing that exhibits the classical attributes of material; nature is a process of processes, and processes within processes." (10)

Unfortunately for theoretical physicists, this results in a giant paradox. But it's the same paradox that anyone will end up in when trying to clarify all aspects of *Inception's* plot. As Wilson says: "...we are still in a Strange Loop, and most physicists want to get out. Dr. Jon von Neumann proved that there was no way out. This is technically known as Von Neumann's Catastrophe of the Infinite Regress, and it merely shows that any device that will get us out of the first Strange Loop (the Copenhagen collapse of objectivity) will just lead us into a second Strange Loop; and any way out of that will lead to an inexorable third Strange Loop; and so on, forever. Everybody is still trying to refute von Neumann; but nobody has been successful." (11)

As it turns out, even Hawking has surrendered to the Infinite Regress, as he stated in a 2002 speech: "...a physical theory is self-referencing, like in Gödel's theorem. One might therefore expect it to be either inconsistent or incomplete. The theories we have so far are both inconsistent and incomplete. [...] Some people will be very disappointed if there is not an ultimate theory that can be formulated as a finite number of principles. I used to belong to that camp, but I have changed my mind." (12)

He changed his mind, and so must anyone who wishes to surpass the infinite regress of strange loops. With our best theories and systems stuck in an irreconcilable bind, we find that the mind must expand to create a new map of reality—a reality that is far more complex than we ever imagined.

The Kick That Awakens

"Our vibrations were getting nasty—but why? I was puzzled, frustrated. Was there no communication in this car? Had we deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts?" – Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (13)

It's no new idea to say that what we assume to be an objective, physical reality is actually a subjective, metaphysical surreality. While Americans likely didn't discuss the idea much until the 1950s or '60s, the earliest recorded instances originate in India around 800 BCE. The Vedanta philosophy of the Hindus—collected in written form as *The Upanishads*—was not a religion as we commonly think of it today, but it *was* very influential on Mahayana Buddhism, which formed between 300-800 CE.

Alan Watts is remembered primarily for interpreting Zen Buddhism (a subset of Mahayana) for Westerners, but he also attempted to explain Vedanta with *The Book, On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (1966). "The universe of seemingly separate things is therefore real only for a while, not eternally real, for it comes and goes as the Self hides and seeks itself. But Vedanta is much more than the idea or the belief that this is so. It is centrally and above all the *experience*, the immediate knowledge of its being so, and for this reason such a complete subversion of our ordinary way of seeing things." (14)

The subversive element is key here. To a mind that has been imprinted with the mental patterns of a monotheism, this is a very threatening concept. As a result, it seems that the metaphysical aspects of Vedanta are the parts that most often get distorted during translation into Western language and thought. The same goes for interpretations of Buddhism, since the core philosophical aspects are so similar. As Shinto Kuroda explains in *Outline of Mahayana* (1893), "The essence and the phenomena of mind are inseparable; and as the former is all-pervading and ever-existing, so the phenomena occur everywhere and continually... Thus the perceptible and imperceptible phenomena are manifestations of the essence of mind... All things in the universe, therefore, are mind itself." (15)

It is the thesis of this essay that the West has been reluctant to adopt this ancient wisdom of the Essence of Mind until arriving the same conclusions through tireless work in science, mathematics and logic. *Inception* demonstrates that we are *still* refusing to integrate this knowledge into our view of reality, because it's a direct threat to the ego's control over human life. We continue to view our surroundings as consisting of matter and

organisms that exist *in themselves* as separate from mind, whether an individual mind or a collective one. As far as I can tell, the only mindset that could result from internalizing Vedanta, Mahayana, quantum mechanics, and/or Gödel's mathematical theorem is a conclusive state of metaphysical agnosticism. However, it *does not* result in nihilism or solipsism; actually it would cure us of those ailments. On average, human beings currently operate as if they believed in nothing beyond physical existence (embodied life, material possessions, etc.), and as if nothing mattered outside of their ego construction (myself, my family, my race, my country, etc.). But people do try their best to convince themselves and their peers of the opposite.

Furthermore, *Inception* expresses a persisting terror of the subconscious mind—one that was institutionalized throughout the 20th century through public relations and propaganda efforts, often in the form of TV shows and movies. Once a character in *Inception* has entered a dream, a kind of tension sets in that can only be resolved once the person returns to waking life. In that way the film suggests that the only worthwhile level of consciousness is the waking state, and that it would be worse to spend your life in a dream than in reality. This notion is reflected whenever we scorn someone for being withdrawn or isolated—for “losing touch with reality.” (However, there is a moment in the film when we see a secret room in Tangiers that people visit each day to share in a group dream together. They aren't ridiculed, but it is clearly stated that they view the group dream as their *true* reality.)

The reason we hate all instances of people living outside the common reality tunnel (aside from the utility of established social norms and roles) is that we cannot escape our own feeling of unreality. Thus we live in a suicidal state, overwhelmed by the sense of nausea that real life provides each day. This is what happens the first time that Cobb and his wife Mal (played by Marion Cotillard) find themselves stuck in “limbo,” the film's name for the lowest level of the subconscious (which also has a Catholic connotation). It takes the two a while to suspect that they might be dreaming (or more precisely, that they might be four levels below waking consciousness), since it seems real enough and there is no rift in their memory. When their suspicions of the unreality start to peak, they decide to kill themselves with the hope that it will wake them up—that it will bring them back to reality.

Sadly the characters find that this so-called reality feels no more “real” than the dream they just left. But since death was a release from a lower dream state, the idea persists that death will be a release from the feeling of unreality. It seems that human beings have been at this basic juncture, looking at death as a release, for all recorded history. Therein lies the very foundation of a heavenly after-life promised in every established religion. Although, our suicidal tendencies have been at a fever pitch for about 150 years now. Collectively it has shown in the endless string of anger and violence between nations, ethnic groups, and religions. In individual terms it's the basis for Existentialism, the foundations of which are often attributed to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky.

At the core of both the individual and collective existential dilemmas is the feeling of unreality. We want so badly to believe in something, to found our view of reality on stone instead of sand. But this misses the point altogether. Both stone and sand can only exist in one place: *the mind*. Once we wrap our heads around that concept, we might as well found our understanding of existence on a hovering platform of invisible air. The point here is that the only place we can ever say for sure that life “happens” is in the neural network where sensory input is interpreted and stored. Then the mind uses this information to create a reality tunnel, just as in a dream or a drug- or starvation- or carbon-dioxide-

induced hallucination. That's why all seem equally real while they're happening.

One undeniable example of drug-induced dissociation from reality is the viral video known as "David After Dentist." (16) Seven-year-old David experienced a strange trip after a dental operation for which he was given the drug ketamine as an anesthetic. On the drive home, David couldn't tell if what he was experiencing was real. His father answered affirmatively when David asked, "Is this real life?" But David must have been unconvinced and horrified, judging by the burst of anger and frustration that emanated from the small boy shortly thereafter in a sustained wail. That is the singular effect of not being able to depend on reality. Unfortunately David had no recollection of the trip later in the evening, so he won't be likely to internalize the experience.

The simple interpretation of David's ketamine panic is that he experienced the Infinite Regress firsthand. Everything he had taken for granted to be *the one-and-only reality* suddenly crumbled like a sand castle. I haven't personally taken ketamine, but I'd be willing to bet that this is one of the reasons it ranks highly on the chart of dangerous drugs. Think of it this way: If David's father hadn't been around to reassure him, might he have tried to kill himself in order to return to real life? When faced with the horror of the "Infinity Within," death does seem to be a release—but it is not. How could it be when mind doesn't require physical manifestation to exist?

Death isn't a release in the context of the movie, since it's merely one possible "kick" that can launch the dreamer up one level of consciousness. But death is not a release in real life either. Dream and waking life do have unique characteristics that set them apart in our mental categories of experience—but they are both functions of the mind, or degrees of consciousness. Just as we will never be able to prove that we are not dreaming, we may never be totally sure that consciousness cannot exist after death. Aldous Huxley ventures a guess about this topic in *Heaven and Hell*:

"If consciousness survives bodily death, it survives, presumably, on every mental level... After having had a glimpse of the unbearable splendor of ultimate Reality, and after having shuttled back and forth between heaven and hell, most souls find it possible to retreat into that more reassuring region of the mind, where they can use their own and other people's wishes, memories and fancies to construct a world very like that in which they lived on earth." (17)

Whether or not we think we are dreaming, to think of death as an awakening results in an Infinite Regress where "real life" is lost in an endless array of psychic levels. In other words, what we need is not death but what Watts calls "a new experience—a new feeling of what it is to be 'I.'" (18) Every individual can come to terms with the existential relativity one is faced with, and to me that involves (at the very least) an investigation of the ancient traditions that have humbly espoused this wisdom for millennia. As Watts writes, "This is why, I think, there is so much interest in a culturally productive way of life which...has felt thoroughly at home in 'the Void,' and which not only feels no terror for it but rather a positive delight." (19)

The trick is to see that *awakening happens in waking life itself*, though the movie *Inception* won't give anyone that impression. In a coincidental link with *Inception*, Watts even claims that Vedanta is "the very jolt that we need to kick ourselves out of our isolated sensation of self." (20) Of course, engaging the mortal terror doesn't require Eastern philosophy, but it would be hypocritical of the West to claim that we were the first to tread this theoretical

ground.

Yet now that we have these tools of thought, we're reluctant to use them because we're so overwhelmed by the sense of entrapment that physical reality places on us. As Wilson writes: "The meta-programming circuit is not a trap. [...] Simply accept that the universe is so structured that it can see itself, and that this self-reflexive arc is built into our frontal lobes, so that consciousness contains an infinite regress, and all we can do is make models of ourselves making models... Well, at that point, the only thing to do is relax and enjoy the show." (21)

We Are All Architects

"The way to the superconscious is through the subconscious..." – Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell* (22)

Cartesian dualism has been the prevalent Western take on the interaction between mind and body since the 17th century. René Descartes (the originator of "Cartesian" thought) posed that non-physical mind somehow interacts with the body through the physical brain, thus establishing a distinction not only between mind and body, but between mind and all of nature in its physical manifestations.

The kink in this model is that, while the primary characteristics of physical phenomena are at least co-created when modeled in the mind, the metaphysical phenomena of mind don't require the same one-to-one correspondence with physical matter. Mind can infinitely multiply itself through the self-reflexive action we've been discussing (i.e., Strange Loops)—even a single mind that's supposedly attached to a single body.

And yes, a dream does involve some physically detectable activity in the brain. But what matters to our discussion is the subjective experience, and it's accurate to say that in a lucid dream, for example, a person operates *as if* he or she was in a physical realm, all the while knowing that the activity is taking place in the subconscious mind. In other words, the feeling of unreality stems from the budding awareness that experience has only ever consisted of mental constructions.

Sadly, the only options for escape open to one who is entrenched in Cartesian dualism are those of a physical nature, whether temporary (e.g., alcohol, opiates, church attendance, etc.) or permanent (e.g., suicide). Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that, by remaining trapped in the Cartesian paradigm, we are condemning ourselves to death. Watts hoped to get this point across in *The Book*:

"...the prevalent sensation of oneself as a separate ego enclosed in a bag of skin is a hallucination which accords neither with Western science nor with the experimental philosophy-religions of the East... This hallucination underlies the misuse of technology for the violent subjugation of man's natural environment and, consequently, its eventual destruction. We are therefore in urgent need of a sense of our own existence which is in accord with the physical facts and which overcomes our feeling of alienation from the universe." (23)

Mal wants to find a plane of existence that feels real to her; she desires this sensation at

any cost. Cobb, on the other hand, ultimately chooses to remain in unreality. He's the one who first thinks of suicide as a way out of limbo, yet he refuses to admit to the uncertainty he feels every time he "wakes up." Instead of thinking reality is one level higher, he takes for granted that he's there, barely holding on to his sanity each time he makes the assumption. His only reassurance comes from spinning his top—his unique totem. If it looks or feels strange, he's in someone else's dream; if it keeps spinning, he's likely in his own dream.

I say Cobb *chose* unreality when in fact he learned to accept it. He accepts the aching nausea arising from the total unreliability of information provided by his sensory organs. All he cares about is returning to the reality tunnel that he considers to be the *most real* (i.e., to be with his children, from whom he's been distanced...for reasons I won't spoil). While he's an accomplished architect in the dream world, he submits to the architecture as it exists in the physical realm.

In forgoing a true metaphysical awakening, Cobb plays the archetypal role of modern man. He's like Cypher in *The Matrix*, preferring the world of illusion to one of enlightenment. But a much more lasting image of modern man is Jay Gatsby of F. Scott Fitzgerald's enduring masterpiece *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby is a man who dreams an empire into existence, but who can't fulfill the yearnings of his heart with material or flesh any more than he can avoid death by bullet. And as long as we continue to prioritize a physical perception of reality, our "dreams" (the desires we have while awake) remain mostly infantile wishes that don't accord with the general flow of the universe. Strangely, it seems that modern man—with his industry, medicine, sports and business—has flourished *precisely by denying* the metaphysical awakening that was clearly perceptible on the horizon by the 1920s. In other words, modern man has singularly repressed his suspicion that "the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." (24)

There comes a point in the film when Cobb—thinking he's in real life—spins his top and the scene cuts before it falls. This leaves the viewer to decide either that the top *will* fall (because it is real life) or keep spinning (because what seems like real life is actually a dream). Metaphysically conservative viewers will hope to themselves that the top does eventually fall, since it would mean that there is still a specific plane of consciousness called "real life" and that Cobb has safely returned to it. But I think it was Nolan's intention to leave the viewer hanging, because it invites so much further investigation.

The slightly more adventurous viewer might decide that the top keeps spinning—that Cobb's convincing real life is actually still a dream. This interpretation implies that Nolan is in on the ancient wisdom of Ultimate Reality after all, but just didn't want to admit it straight out. According to this line of thought, the entire film consists of the machinations of Cobb's mind, and all the characters and events are projections of his subconscious that we get to witness. This theme is nothing new in modern filmmaking. Still, filmmakers have been slow to catch up with similar experiments in fiction that courageous authors were attempting about a century ago. And of course, this interpretation leaves us in a metaphysical freefall, with no grip on the infinite levels of consciousness above and below us.

Another take on the spinning top relates to the basic concept of "inception," the attempt to plant an idea in someone's subconscious mind. If successful, the subject thinks he or she came up with the idea; it grows within his or her mind and takes shape on its own. So the entire film *Inception* may have been Nolan's attempt at planting within the subconscious

mind of viewers the concept that “real life” isn’t so real after all. In that way Nolan is pulling a magic trick of sorts. In fact, I would argue that a primary objective of high-end filmmaking and literary fiction is to plant ideas in people’s minds—or at least to prod them into thinking in new ways—without them realizing it. It’s practically common knowledge at this point in history that no one likes uninvited preaching. And as Bill Hicks was known for pointing out, we tend to kill those who tell us repeatedly that “this is just a ride”—people like John Lennon and Martin Luther King Jr.

A third view on this perplexing scene cut is that Cobb is beginning to enjoy life in the Great Void. Maybe he’s starting to take ownership of his role as meta-programmer. According to this theory, Cobb *no longer cares whether the top stops spinning*, so it really doesn’t matter if it does. If there’s some truth here, it means that (according to the persisting view of the psychiatry institution) Cobb has “lost touch with reality,” and that he’s gone a bit “mad,” and he might need a round or two of electro-shock therapy to lock him back into the physical realm. But another, more enlightened, way to describe it is that Cobb is experiencing something like schizophrenia, and he has started to cure himself. As Huxley puts it:

“Many schizophrenics pass most of their time neither on earth, nor in heaven, nor even in hell, but in a gray, shadowy world of phantoms and unrealities. [...] The history of eschatological ideas marks a genuine progress—a progress which can be described theological terms as the passage from Hades to Heaven...and in psychological terms as the advance from catatonia and feelings of unreality to a sense of heightened reality in vision and, finally, in mystical experience.” (25)

Western philosophical tradition has referred to this type of experience as either visionary or mystical, but those are both misleading terms. What’s more important is that Cobb may be starting to recognize he’s fully capable of constructing a reality tunnel that suits his own psychological needs. Whether or not we realize it, this is what we do subconsciously on an everyday basis. Wilson explains: “The brain...takes in, edits, orchestrates, organizes, packages, labels etc. all raw ‘existential’ experience and classifies it according to the neurological Dewey Decimal System.” (26)

He says that “we learn from the type of meta-programming experience called *dhyana* in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions” that the “usual system of classifying the contents as ‘me’ (part of ‘mind’) and not-‘me’ (‘outside’) can be abolished—not just by meditation, but by certain well-known drugs—and the unity of the field of perception is then recognized. We become Metaprogrammers.” (27)

If we feel trapped by reality, or uneasy about a feeling of unreality, it only reflects our as-yet-unconsummated ability to control the situation. But instead of trying to command the physical world, we must first come to terms with the metaphysical. As more and more individuals gain knowledge of this through direct experience, it will eventually lead to a chain reaction that will empower the human race in its current fight for survival. Adaptation is crucial, and Wilson stresses that “semantic maps are not the territories they represent; ...we can always make maps of our maps, revisions of our revisions, meta-selves of our selves.” (28)

The most interesting moment of the film as viewed from this perspective is when Ariadne (played by Ellen Page), the newest recruit to Cobb’s team, first realizes she’s been designated as architect in Cobb’s dream. Her immediate reaction is of the “David After

Dentist” variety: sheer panic, automatic denial...the horror of total freefall. Cobb tells her to stay calm, but her surroundings start exploding. Once she gets a grip on the situation she flourishes, editing her environment and constructing new locations as she walks around the dreamscape. What she experiences then is something like absolute freedom. Although, Cobb warns her not to make too many alterations, because his subconscious projections (i.e., the people walking around in the dream) will turn on her, somewhat like the body’s immune system attacks unwanted bacteria.

Before Ariadne senses she’s in a dream, Cobb asks her to try to figure out how she got to that exact spot, or to try and remember where she was even a few minutes ago. She can’t, and in fact this is what triggers her recognition of the dream state. But what we are unlikely to admit to ourselves is that we are no more certain about the contents of our *own* memory—either short- or long-term. No matter how uncomfortable this makes us, it is an unavoidable admission. Wilson says “the life-history you *think* you have, the part that is stored in your brain as ‘memory,’ has certainly been selected. You can’t even remember *everything* that happened in the last five minutes.” (29)

This line of thought began to solidify in Western philosophy in the late 19th century with the help of Nietzsche, who writes, “Even in the midst of the strangest experiences...we make up the major part of the experience and can scarcely be forced *not* to contemplate some event as its ‘inventors.’ All this means: basically and from time immemorial we are—*accustomed to lying*. Or to put it...more pleasantly: one is much more of an artist than one knows.” (30)

The alteration that we must make in *our* approach is to stop announcing that “life *is* a dream,” or “this *is not* real life,” or “all mankind *is* sharing in a hallucination.” These statements only magnify the feeling of nausea to the point of blind anger and violence. In attempting to describe the situation, it would be better to do so in a way that emphasizes the factor of liberation. In other words, let it be known that *we are all architects*. It could be said that life is *like* a shared dream in which everyone is a co-creator. If we don’t like this “dream”—if it often feels more like a nightmare—well, we have the full capability to change it...that is, if we can adjust to this feeling of zero gravity.

Now you might be thinking, “But in the movie, they had technology that enabled the group dream.” I would agree with that, except for the fact that, in *Inception*, characters merely attached the machine *to a wrist* in order to enter a shared dream. While the human body does have nerves in the arm, they’re not the type of neural cells that exist in the brain—the ones that mysteriously constitute our thinking mechanism. The wrist attachment could do nothing more than inject a sedative into the person’s blood stream. If there ever did exist a technology that created a group dream—like a sort of virtual reality—it would likely require contacts on the participant’s head.

So this could be counted as a blatant film flaw, but I tend to think of it as another intentional statement by Nolan. Viewers can’t prove that the film didn’t take place in Cobb’s mind, just as any person can’t prove that existence doesn’t take place in a mind. The fact that the dream team was connected only by their wrists supports this hypothesis even more.

While I’ve discussed all these topics as if there’s some single truth about them that has already been established for some time, in reality we’re only just approaching this realm of thought and vision. *Inception* sends us into a state of heavy thinking, but it’s also a trap.

For too long we've let other people do our visionary work for us, and for the most part, the products of Hollywood serve as a comfort blanket, presenting us with material that is patently "unreal" in order to make our own lives feel more "real."

We deserve a more rewarding sensation of existence. After all, we're all co-directors in the biggest production of all time: the manifestation of the Universe! Integrating a sense of meta-programming awareness into one's own life takes a lot of time and practice. Just as well, every human who journeys down that mental path will surely face resistance from the more ancient parts of one's psychological make-up. But I feel that this realization—this *awakening*, as it were—is at the core of a paradigm shift that will define the next era of human existence.

* The title of this essay is a quote from the film *Inception* (Dir. by Christopher Nolan. 2010. Warner Bros. Pictures.)

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