

But What Do You Feel? Accepting Guilt to Find What is Real in *Inception*

by E. F. Haven

Edited and Published on “Blog of The APA”

<https://blog.apaonline.org/2022/10/27/the-philosophy-of-inception/>

The 2010 film *Inception* raises many questions, but none like the film's end. Our protagonist, Cobb, returns home after completing his mission. Seeing his kids playing in the yard, he places a top on the table and spins it. The camera pulls in on the top. It wobbles slightly, cuts to black, and the credits roll, leaving the viewer wondering: did Cobb make it back to reality? While Christopher Nolan, the director, has remained cagey, one does not need to take his word for it. The philosophical clues run throughout the film. This paper will show how the end is real and, in the process, what this film teaches us about guilt and authenticity.

We can get lost in the science (or lack thereof) of dream machines, the groundbreaking effects, or the story of time eloquently woven together by the director. These cinematographic wonders draw audiences and hold our attention for over three hours. Instead, this paper will move all of it to the side and focus on the story.

One way to get to the core story is to look at the main characters and how they change. In *Inception*, the core story revolves around the main character, Cobb, played by Leonardo DiCaprio. Cobb arguably faces two problems at the film's start: (1) the death of his wife and (2) getting back to his children. These plot points drive the narrative of the film. The film can only resolve these problems when Cobb comes to terms with them. Everything else is decorative tools to help tell this story.

The arc of the story follows Cobb coming to terms with his guilt. Guilt is a reactive indicator calling us to take responsibility for a transgression against the other. In Cobb's case, guilt reminds him of his responsibility for what he did to his wife, and guilt reminds him of how his actions led to his abandonment of his children. A train keeps appearing at inopportune times, and he will have visions of his child in his dreams.

To understand *Inception*, we must make sense of this guilt. Karl Jasper's work, *The Question of German Guilt*, tells us that four kinds of guilt exist: criminal, moral, political, and existential; each functions differently, calling us to take responsibility differently. It is not as simple as saying

Cobb is guilty, but we must ask how he is guilty. For this story, we need to look at moral and existential guilt, which are the two forms of guilt experienced internally.

At the beginning of the film, Cobb believes his guilt is moral. Moral guilt comes when we transgress against another, violating their moral rights or obligations. So, when one steals from a friend, one should feel guilty because one violated two moral boundaries: their trust and their right to their property.

Moral guilt is something we feel inside us, and it calls us to show penance or renewal. One will try to make it up to their friend or swear it will never happen again. If that is not possible, argues Gabriele Taylor in *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-assessment*, we can transfigure or scar ourselves to atone.

We see Cobb's moral assessment of his guilt when Ariadne follows Cobb into his dream late one night after everyone else has gone home. In it, she sees his saved memories stored away, connected by an elevator.

Ariadne: Why do you do this to yourself?

Cobb: It's the only way I can still dream.

Ariadne: Why is it so important to still dream?

Cobb: Because in my dreams, we are still together.

Ariadne: These aren't just dreams. These are memories. And you said never to use memories.

Cobb: I know I did.

Ariadne: You're trying to keep her alive. You can't let her go.

Cobb: You don't understand. These are moments I regret. They are memories I have to change. (Inception 56:06)

Through reliving these moments repeatedly, Cobb tries to atone, change what happened, and right the wrong he has done. When one breaks a promise, one makes it up to that person, and we try to fix it. Cobb believes his guilt represents a wrong he must atone for and change. He echoes this sentiment when he shares his memory of leaving his children, saying,

"I start to panic. I realize I am going to regret this moment. That I need to see their faces one last time ... And the moments passed. And whatever I do, I can't change this moment. I'm about to call out to them. They run away. If I am ever going to see their faces again, I've got to get back home." (Inception 57:48)

Cobb believes he can still fix what he has done. As a result, he is unable to accept the death of his wife. He believes that he can still be with her. However, as we know and Ariadne knows, this is not possible. Nothing he does can bring back his wife.

The kind of guilt he experiences is also existential guilt, or, as Martin Heidegger calls it, being-guilty. Existential guilt is rooted in how we live our lives. At our core, we take on roles like chef, brother, wife, or citizen. Each of us has a multitude of these ways of being. However, none of us are perfect; we all lack without exception. No one is the perfect chef; they might overcook the food. No one is the perfect brother; they do not stick up for him when he is bullied. One of the fundamental qualities of being human is not being who we say we are. This way, we transgress against those we trust and love, including ourselves. Cobb failed as a father in one of the most egregious ways: abandoning his children. He failed as a husband by abusing Mal's trust to convince her that reality is not real. In these ways, he is guilty of not being a good husband and father, and nothing can change that. He can't go back.

How do we come to see and take responsibility for our existential guilt? According to Heidegger, this happens once we confront death, not physically, but existentially. Death is defined "as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all." (Being and Time 307). We live our lives moving from one possibility to another, always trying to adjust. If it does not work to be a citizen one way, one tries another. Cobb believes at first, it is just a matter of changing possibilities. However, we all have one possibility that looms: the possibility of the end of possibilities; at some unknown time, we will run out of possibilities. Once we see this, we can no longer run from possibility to possibility. We can no longer keep playing games and push responsibility down the road. We are forced to see that our options are limited. In doing so, we must accept our lives for what they are, not just what we want them to be. Cobb has to accept his failure as a father, not only look at the father he wants to be.

Cobb confronts death clearly when at the final fortress. He perches with the sniper rifle, about to watch their plan come to fruition, to see Mal drop into the room. He freezes because killing Mal would make it impossible ever to atone. However, once she shoots Fischer, he confronts the end of all possibilities, the end of the possibility of ever being a father, and his existential death.

We confront death to see ourselves for who we are. When Cobb shoots Mal, he becomes his authentic self, no longer running from himself. No longer able to accept the fantasy of saving Mal. He sees she is a dream and kills her. He authentically takes existential responsibility for

being a father. Heidegger identifies several features of authenticity, which we see in Cobb after this point.

The first is resoluteness. "By 'resoluteness,' Heidegger means 'letting oneself be called forth to one's own most Being-guilty.'" (Being and Time 353) When we confront death and the call toward authenticity, we disabuse our false beliefs and fantasies. We can no longer buy into the myth we told ourselves about who we are.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre called this bad faith. We can no longer lie to ourselves to say we will make it big when waiting tables in the middle of nowhere. Cobb can no longer lie to himself by saying he will save his wife. As a result, he becomes resolute, accepting it and still moving forward. We clear out the noise and work with what we have.

The second quality of authenticity is improvisation. When things do not go as they should, we must work with what we have. When descending the elevator into Mal's layer in limbo, Ariadne asks, "How do we bring Fisher back?" to which Cobb replies, "I'm gonna improvise." (Inception 1:59:20) In authenticity, we are no longer looking for some other authority to tell us what to do or to do what we are supposed to do. We free ourselves to react to our given possibilities, to what is in front of us.

We arrive at the culminating scene in the film, where Cobb chooses to confront Mal in Limbo. Mal attempts to appeal to the moral construction of his guilt, to offer him renewal, but that no longer works for Cobb:

Mal: ... So certain of your world, of what's real. Do you think he is? Or do you think he is as lost as I was?

Cobb: I know what's real, Mal.

Mal: No creeping doubts? Not feeling persecuted, Dom? Chased around the globe by anonymous corporations and police forces? The way the projections persecute the dreamer? Admit it. You don't believe in one reality anymore. So choose, choose to be here, choose me....

Cobb: You know what I have to do. I have to get back to our children because you left them because you left us.

Mal: You're wrong. ... You are confused ...

Cobb: No, I know it.

Mal: And what if you're wrong? What if I'm what's real? You keep telling yourself what you know, but what do you believe? What do you feel?

Cobb: Guilt. I feel guilt, Mal. And no matter what I do, no matter how hopeless I am, no matter how confused, that guilt is always there, reminding me of the truth.

(Inception 2:00:14)

In clearing out of resoluteness and the opening of possibilities of improvisation, we are presented with the primordial truth. We see things as they are and people for who they are. "[We] are in the truth' we have called attention to the primordial disclosedness of this entity as the truth of existence." (Being and Time 343) In his confrontation with Mal, Cobb presents this primordial truth: she is dead, and she can't bring back his children. This is a lie that can never be substituted for reality.

Mal: You infected my mind.

Cobb: I was trying to save you.

Mal: You betrayed me. You can make amends. You can keep your promise. We can still be together. Right here, in the world, we built together. ...

Cobb: I wish. I wish more than anything but I can't imagine you with all your complexity, all your perfections, all your imperfections ... look at you. You're just a shade. You're just a shade of my real wife. You are the best that I could do but I'm sorry you're just not good enough.

(Inception 2:05:24)

His existential guilt functions like a compass to guide him home. Fake realities can no longer trick him. He becomes confident he can rescue Saito from limbo and return to the real world. With his existential guilt in hand, he knows how to return because dreams can no longer deceive him.

Upon returning home to his real children, he puts the totem down again and spins it. However, rather than watching the top, we should be watching Cobb. He walks away from the totem toward his children. He no longer cares whether it falls because he no longer needs it. This is also symbolic because this was never his totem. The top was Mal's totem. We know this because he spins it in the safe to convince her that limbo is not real. He was always holding onto it, and now he can let go.

Looking at Cobb's journey, struggle, and growth, we can see that Inception is about guilt. The science fiction of dreams is a tool for telling the story of a person's mind grappling with loss,

guilt, and acceptance. As Cobb moves from an understanding of his guilt as moral to understanding it as existential, he confronts death to find his authentic self, being-guilty, which can lead him home. This is how we know the end is necessarily real.