



REALITY DOESN'T REALLY MATTER

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The dream has become their reality. Who are you to say otherwise, sir?

—Elderly bald man

So you're leaving the movie theater—you've just been blown away by *Inception*—and your mind is whirling. Everyone's asking each other: "Does Cobb's spinning top fall?" The screen cut to black before we could tell. You discuss it with your friends and wonder if there were any clues that you missed. You can't wait for it to come out on DVD, so you can watch it again more carefully. But even after watching *Inception* seventeen times, the movie retains many mysteries, especially about what happens to Cobb in the end. How frustrating! The success of Cobb's plan to get back home to his children, and to keep his grip on reality in the process, seems to be determined by whether or not he is really dreaming at the end. The whole point of the movie seems to hinge on whether or not Cobb's top keeps

spinning. With no way to answer that question, the point of the movie seems to be forever beyond your grasp.

Fortunately, this view of the movie is inaccurate. Perhaps Cobb's spinning top falls and he gets to see his kids in *the real world*, and perhaps it doesn't and Cobb ends up living in Limbo. But either way, Cobb is happy. Cobb himself realizes this; this is why he walks away from the top while it's still spinning. The experience of being with his kids is what he cares about most, not reality. The correct answer to "Does Cobb's spinning top fall?" is: "Who cares!" Reality doesn't really matter. And this is the point of *Inception*. It's our experiences that really matter, not whether we are living in reality.

Limbo Is Great, *the Real World Ain't*

If the closing scenes of *Inception* are showing Cobb enjoying a dream about reuniting with his kids, then Saito is probably behind it. Saito agreed to enable Cobb to see his kids again if Cobb could successfully pull off the inception on Robert Fischer, which Cobb did. So it makes sense that Saito would hold up his end of the bargain.

If Saito did choose to reunite Cobb with his kids in a dream, instead of reality, he would probably create a new world for Cobb in Limbo instead of in a shallower dream. (In fact, that may be how Saito originally intended to hold up his end of the bargain. How else could Saito fix Cobb's situation with one phone call?) The depth of Limbo combined with a Yusuf-esque supersedative would ensure that Cobb couldn't be kicked out of his dream. So, what would Cobb's Limbo world be like? Limbo is unstructured dream space. Anyone sharing the dream could create the world as they please, with their unconscious minds filling in the blanks. Saito, and anyone Saito wanted to employ, could create the Limbo world in which Cobb now resides. They could also arrange the course of events in the Limbo world by manipulating people and places.

Saito's employees might take advantage of Cobb's subconscious when creating the Limbo world. The influence of Cobb's subconscious memories and desires would help to create the world so that it would be both familiar and suitably predictable for Cobb. By combining their talents with Cobb's subconscious in this way, Saito's employees could make the Limbo world indistinguishable from *the real world* for Cobb. Since the Limbo world would be designed by Cobb's subconscious and Saito's (presumably highly skilled) employees, it would seem impeccably real. Everything would be just as Cobb remembered, and all future events would be partly based on Cobb's desires and expectations, giving him no reason to question them. Recall Cobb's comments to Ariadne: "You never really remember the beginning of a dream, do you? You always wind up right in the middle of what's going on." So Cobb's transition to Limbo (whenever it might have occurred) would have been too smooth for him to notice.

In addition to being indistinguishable from *reality*, Cobb's Limbo world could even be far superior to *the real world*. After spending time catching up with his children, Cobb would need to start living a normal life again. He would need to find a job, make new friends, and plan for his children's future. In *the real world*, Cobb's lack of references and (legal) job experience might mean that he could only find a job as a cleaner or, if he's really unlucky, a bathroom cleaner. In Limbo, though, Saito's employees could concoct a plausible scenario that results in Cobb landing a cushy acting job in an upcoming blockbuster movie—perhaps starring as a plucky rogue who stows away on the *Titanic* and then falls in love. If Cobb lives in Limbo, instead of *reality*, he could achieve much better results in all of the important areas of his life. In Limbo, Cobb's friends could be more fun and generous, his work life could be more stimulating and fulfilling, and his children could go to Ivy League colleges instead of bathroom-cleaning school.

Given the obvious advantages a life in Limbo has over a life in *reality*, it's a wonder that Cobb didn't just ask Saito for a Limbo life instead of a life in *the real world*, right? Well, not quite. If Cobb had asked to be reunited with his kids in Limbo, rather than in *the real world*, then he would probably always be burdened by the thought that he was living in a dream. Fortunately for Cobb, if he did end up in Limbo, he has no idea. So, at least in terms of what Cobb would experience, we can see that ending up in Limbo is probably better for Cobb than ending up in *the real world*.

Hold on, did I just say that living in a dream is better than living in reality? No, just that in this example the total of Cobb's life experiences would probably be better in Limbo. But this raises a very interesting question: Are experiences the only things that matter for how well someone's life goes for them?

Why All the Hoopla about Reality?

I believe that only what we experience matters for our well-being. Events that we do not become consciously aware of in any way (directly or indirectly) cannot have any impact on our how well our lives go for us. So I think that Cobb would be better off living in a more enjoyable Limbo (and believing it's real) than living in *the real world*.

You might not agree with me, though. Perhaps you think that Cobb's life would be better if he lived it in *the real world*, despite the fact that his experiences would be more enjoyable in Limbo. If this is the case, I have some questions for you. How is it possible that something can make your life go worse for you if you never become consciously aware of it in any way? Can you explain the causal process by which Cobb's not living in *reality* would make his life go worse for him, without referring to impacts on his conscious states? If not, can you make some other argument as to how something can affect

how well our lives go for us without affecting our consciousness in any way?

These are certainly difficult questions. Fortunately, the hard work has already been done. In fact, thanks to philosophers with an interest in well-being (the good life for the one living it), there is a veritable mountain of philosophical musings relevant to these questions.

At the top of this mountain is work based on renown philosopher Robert Nozick's (1938–2002) pioneering and powerful argument that more than just our experiences matter to us.¹ Nozick maintained that living a life in reality is preferable to living a more enjoyable but unreal life. His argument is almost always referred to when philosophers want to claim that reality does matter. So let's use Nozick's argument to see if Cobb should care if his spinning top falls.

Imagine that Cobb is on the plane with the others after completing the inception on Fischer. Saito leans over and whispers two options in Cobb's ear. Saito is giving Cobb the choice between either reuniting with his kids in *reality* or in Limbo. Saito makes it clear that all of Cobb's experiences will be much more enjoyable in Limbo. Saito also mentions that if Cobb chooses Limbo, he will slip Cobb a pill that removes his memory of this offer so that Cobb will never realize that he chose Limbo. Saito also guarantees that the Limbo world has been so carefully crafted that Cobb will never realize it is not real. Considering only what is best for himself, what do you think Cobb should choose: *the real world* or Limbo?

Most people think that Cobb should reunite with his kids in *the real world*. They acknowledge that the Limbo life might be more enjoyable in some ways, but they also think that choosing it just doesn't feel right. Cobb never getting to see his *real-world* kids again seems like a bum deal. Of course, if Cobb did choose the life in Limbo, he would never realize that he was lovingly raising projections instead of his *real-world* children. But most people argue that this doesn't really matter

because Cobb doesn't want to reunite with projections that seem real; he wants to see his *real* children again.

The idea of living the rest of our lives in Limbo might seem both exciting and depressing. Many of the differences would be fun, but one difference would ruin it all for most of us. Since Limbo is not real, our actions would have no significant impact on any real person, and our lives would be, in some ways, meaningless. We have plans that are important to us, and we want them to come to fruition. The vast majority of these plans include having an impact on real people, such as lovingly raising our real children. In Limbo, we couldn't succeed in these plans. So the hoopla about reality seems to be that without reality, we can't achieve many important and meaning-giving goals. This seems like a good reason to think that reality matters (even if it never affects our consciousness) and to choose *the real world* over Limbo (even if we won't realize we're in Limbo). This also seems like a good reason to care if Cobb's totem will keep spinning; his life will be more meaningful, and therefore better, if it drops.

Turning the Tables

Actually, the hoopla about reality is as bogus as one of Eames's impersonations. As convincing as they might seem, the reasons given for why most of us choose reality over Limbo for Cobb are just guesses, bad guesses, in fact. Let's consider a reversed scenario to see why.

Again, imagine that Cobb is on the plane after successfully completing Saito's job. Saito leans over and tells Cobb that he has actually been in Limbo all along, that Cobb's whole life up to that point has been a dream. Saito gives Cobb the choice of either remaining in the world that he has been experiencing as real all this time (*the real world* that is not actually real) or living in reality. Again, Saito gives Cobb a pill so that Cobb can erase his memory of the conversation if he wants to. Saito also

guarantees that if Cobb remains in the dream, he will never become aware that it is a dream. Cobb asks what his real life is like, and Saito replies that it is both very different from this life and much less enjoyable. Only considering what is best for Cobb, do you think that Cobb should choose to spend the rest of his life in the realistic dream or in the less enjoyable reality that he knows nothing about?

This time, most people think Cobb should take the pill and stay in Limbo. Why? This new scenario is a reversal of the original one. In the first scenario, you were asked if Cobb should choose the *reality* he knew over a more enjoyable dream. In this second scenario, you were asked if Cobb should choose the dream he knows over a less enjoyable real world. Most people think that Cobb should choose to remain in reality in the first scenario and to remain in Limbo in the second scenario. But if reality is so important, why don't most people think Cobb should choose reality in the second scenario, as they did in the first? The only thing that changed between the scenarios is where Cobb spent the majority of his time—what Cobb had become familiar with.

Could it be that sticking with what we are familiar with matters more to us than what is real? Is it perhaps the case that we are irrationally biased toward the familiar? Is this bias the main reason that we choose *reality* over Limbo in the first Nozickian scenario? The answers to these questions are “yes,” “yes,” and “yes” (respectively).

Familiarity Breeds Approval

Psychologists are well aware of the human tendencies to prefer things to remain the same and to favor what they are familiar with over unfamiliar things of equal or even greater value. These tendencies are collectively referred to as “status quo bias” and are considered irrational because they can make us miss out on beneficial changes of circumstance.

You may not realize it, but mere exposure to a person can make you think that they are more attractive. If you happened to live in the same town as Ellen Page (Ariadne) and had caught a glimpse of her here and there, then you would prefer to look at a picture of her rather than that of an equally attractive person. Psychologists recently demonstrated this by planting several equally attractive models in a class, each a different number of times, making the students familiar with each of them to a different degree. The students were then asked to rate pictures of the models, which they did, scoring the models that they were more familiar with more highly.²

In another experiment, three classes of students were rewarded for completing a task. In the first class, the students were given a mug and then (a short while later) asked if they wanted to swap their mug for a chocolate bar. In the second class, the students were given a chocolate bar and then (a short while later) asked if they wanted to swap their chocolate bar for a mug. In the third class, the students were given a choice between a chocolate bar and a mug. Despite only having to raise a piece of colored paper to accept the offer to switch gifts, only 10 percent of students from the first two classes chose to do so. This is unusual because about half of the students from the third class chose the mug and the other half the chocolate bar—indicating that the bar and the mug had similar value. It can't be that 40 percent of the students in classes one and two were just too lazy or shy to swap their reward. Psychologists think that the students didn't want to swap their rewards because they had created irrational attachments to them—they overvalued them because they had become familiar with them.³

Even more recently, the philosopher Philippe de Brigard demonstrated how status quo bias can affect our decisions about which kinds of lives we would choose for ourselves. Using scenarios similar to those we have been considering, de Brigard revealed that the less familiar we are with a life, the less

likely we are to choose it even if it is more enjoyable or more real.⁴ The point of all this is to show that we tend to overvalue what we are familiar with, including when we evaluate potential lives.

Landslide on Mount Nozick

So, are we victims of status quo bias in considering Cobb? Sure, most think that Cobb should choose the real world over the unreal one in the first case; but remember, the real world is also what is familiar in the first case. In the second case, most think Cobb should choose the unreal world, and in this case it's the unreal world that is familiar. So most think Cobb should choose to reunite with the kids he knew, regardless of whether they were more real or more likely to bring him happiness. This shows that the judgment that Cobb should choose a *real* life over a dream life in the first scenario isn't as heavily impacted by our concern about reality as we first imagined. What we care about is familiarity. And if familiarity is the main reason most people chose reality in the first scenario—instead of because it is real—then Nozick's argument fails to show that reality is important.

Where does the failure of Nozick's argument leave us? It certainly becomes much less clear whether reality matters and why it should matter. We are returned to the problem of how living in Limbo could make Cobb's life go worse for him, despite never becoming aware that he is not in *reality* and never experiencing any negative consequences from living in Limbo. You might worry that his real desires are not being satisfied in Limbo, but there is still no good explanation for how this actually affects him. If Cobb ends up in Limbo, then, as far as he is concerned, his desires do get satisfied and his life is meaningful. In fact, the advantages of Limbo, such as providing Cobb more fulfilling work and better friends, would mean that from Cobb's perspective, his life would be more enjoyable and

more meaningful than if he had ended up in *reality*. Since we are interested in what is best for Cobb, why should any other perspective be more important?

But what about the people who think that Cobb should choose to avoid Limbo in both scenarios? Let's call these people die-hard fans of reality (not because they attend all the reality conventions in their reality-branded T-shirts, but because they still think living in reality is better for us). They can plausibly claim to be relatively unaffected by the status quo bias, since they didn't choose the familiar life in both scenarios. These people presumably chose reality over Limbo both times precisely because they think there is something valuable about reality even if it never, directly or indirectly, affects our consciousness. As we shall see, these die-hard fans of reality are in the grip of a pernicious assumption.

The Problem with Reality-Spotting

Die-hard fans of reality probably assume both that they can really know when they are in reality and that they are in reality right now. Most people have probably never given either of these assumptions much thought. Fair enough, too, considering that most of us haven't had much reason to question them in the past. Seeing *Inception*, though, generally makes people want to dig a little deeper into these issues.

How do you know when you're dreaming and when you're awake? It might seem obvious when you wake up . . . until you wake up again! Just like Saito, when Cobb is performing the extraction on him, you could be in a dream, within a dream, within a dream. Of course, right now you think it is obvious that you are awake. But has it not been equally obvious, while in a vivid dream, that you are awake? As other chapters in this book have pointed out, the sensation of "not dreaming" can be dreamt—so it can't guarantee that you are not dreaming.

We think there are telltale signs that help us to know when we are dreaming. It's said that trying to read can let you know you are dreaming; the text won't sit still or will look garbled. The movie *Waking Life* suggests that you can't turn off the lights in a dream. If I am just waking up, but wondering if I am still dreaming, I check for the drool patch—it's never there if I'm still dreaming. Others will try to control the dream, say by flying or making others in the dream do what they want. Successfully doing any of these things may very well tell you that you are dreaming.

But does failing to do these things necessarily indicate that you are not dreaming? If you can read, if you can shut off the lights, if the drool patch is there, if you can't fly or control others—presumably all of these things are true right now (except maybe the drool)—are you certain you are not dreaming? Haven't you tried to fly in dreams before and failed? Failing such tests could simply be a part of your dream, and thus would not necessarily let you know that you are not dreaming. Mal points this out to Cobb when he is trying to convince her, in their kitchen, that they are not dreaming. He asks, "If it's my dream, why can't I control it?" She replies, as if it's obvious, "[Because] you don't know you're dreaming."⁵ We can't control every dream, especially vivid ones we think are real. So even though controlling a dream might tell us we are dreaming, failing to control one doesn't tell us that we aren't.

Consider Cobb's totem—his top. If he spins it and it doesn't fall, this lets Cobb know that he is dreaming. But if it falls, is that a certain indication that he is not dreaming? No. Arthur explains to Ariadne that when entering someone else's dream your totem will act differently because the dreamer does not know the specific features that make it unique. So a totem's usefulness relies on only its owner knowing its precise characteristics, and even then totems only tell you whether you are in someone else's dream. They cannot tell you whether you

are in your own dream. Of course, if all the talk about, and making of, totems occurs within a dream (if, say, the entire movie is actually Cobb's dream), then totems cannot be trusted at all. If totems are made in a dream, then their precise characteristics cannot be secret.⁶ Similarly, if Cobb ends up in Limbo and his subconscious is partly responsible for populating the world with objects, then he can't trust his totem because one of the dreamers (himself) knows how it works. This is a good reason not to care if Cobb's spinning top falls or not, but it also helps make a very important point: just as Cobb can never be sure that he is not in a dream, neither can we.

So die-hard fans of reality, who are adamant that actual reality (not just the experience of it) is important for well-being, should be feeling a little uneasy now. They probably thought they knew how to tell when they were dreaming. Now, however, they must admit that they can't be sure. And if reality is so important to die-hard fans of reality, then their inability to really be sure that they are not dreaming should make them worry about whether they are missing out on something very important.

When die-hard fans of reality avoid Limbo in both of the scenarios because reality matters so much, they are making two big mistakes. First, they have assigned reality special value for Cobb—they value reality over the additional enjoyment and sense of meaning in Limbo. They have even assigned this special value to reality in scenarios when it's impossible for reality to affect Cobb's consciousness in any way.

Second, die-hard fans of reality are making the mistake of placing great value on something that they can never be sure of. Even if reality (that never affects our consciousness) is more valuable than extra enjoyment and a sense of meaning in life, actively valuing it and pursuing it is a choice that would seem to lead to a worse life. Someone who has seen *Inception* should realize that they can't be sure of whether the life they are familiar with is actually a real one. So anyone who

remains a die-hard fan of reality after seeing *Inception* is likely to be made worse off by worrying about whether they are in fact living in reality. And since there is no way for them to be certain that they aren't dreaming, this worry could plague them for the rest of their days.

Some philosophers have argued that knowledge doesn't require certainty. We can know that we are not dreaming because it is the best and most justified explanation of our experience. Still, I contend that we cannot be certain, and lack of certainty is still something significant to worry about.⁷ I can in fact have certainty about something else. I can be certain of my own experiences—of how they feel, how they seem, of which ones are enjoyable and which ones are not. Even if I am dreaming, I know what kind of dream I want to have.

When we take the uncertainty about whether *the real world* is actually real into account, it is clearly a mistake to think that Cobb should make his choice based on valuing reality rather than valuing enjoyment and a sense of meaning in life. In choosing *the real world*, he would be gambling that *the real world* actually is real, but this is a bad bet because the stakes are very high and the payoff is uncertain. Even if *the real world* is real, it's not clear that reality can actually impact our well-being over and above what we experience. And even if reality could have this impact on our well-being, there is no way to be sure that it actually does because we can't be sure we're not dreaming. Do die-hard fans of reality really want Cobb to sacrifice a guarantee of more enjoyment and a greater sense of meaning in life for such uncertainties? Betting on reality is a bad bet.

The irony is that the more die-hard a fan of reality someone is, the more reason they have to choose the life in Limbo. This is because a die-hard fan of reality who chooses *the real world* might not get the reality he or she is looking for. In fact, the only reality they will get is the reality that they can never be certain. The more die-hard of a fan they are, the more the

thought of forgoing enjoyment and meaning for a nonexistent reality should scare them.

Some “super advanced die-hard fans of reality” (or SADFORs) might think that reality is still worth the risk; they might think that Cobb should take a chance on *the real world* being reality because a chance of reality trumps a guarantee of no reality. These SADFORs presumably think that the mere fact of living in reality is valuable, despite the fact that it can't affect our experiences, because it somehow makes life *meaningful*. There's more than one kind of meaning, though. There is objective meaning (the kind of meaning the SADFORs are talking about), and there is also subjective meaning—the kind of meaning a person finds in something. Cobb's life in Limbo would be subjectively meaningful because he would feel like he is succeeding at his important life plans. So his life would still have meaning—just a meaning of a different kind. It's unclear which kind of meaning is more important. Sure, objective meaning *sounds* more important, but even if Cobb lives in reality, the objective meaning of doing so will never be experienced by him—his consciousness is never affected by it. So why care about it? I know which kind of meaning I value more. If only SADFORs could convince themselves to value subjective meaning, they could worry less and enjoy life more.

Why Reality Doesn't Matter

As we were sitting on the edge of our seats, watching Cobb's totem spin smoothly at the end of *Inception*, our minds were racing. When Cobb's spinning top jolted, as though kicked out of a relaxing dream, we heard the sharp intake of breath around us and we felt it in our own throats, too. But Cobb's totem kept spinning until the screen faded to black and the credits rolled. It's only natural that we wanted to know if Cobb's spinning top was going to fall—we are curious creatures who compulsively seek the truth. Now, though, you should

realize that it doesn't really matter what happened to that spinning top. Christopher Nolan, who has been notoriously tight-lipped about what really happens in *Inception*, has even said that Cobb doesn't care if his spinning top falls at the end: "The real point of the scene. . . is that Cobb isn't looking at the top. He's looking at his kids. He's left it behind. That's the emotional significance of the thing."⁸

We were caught in the grip of some assumptions that we had good reason to think of as true. But now that we have had the chance to think about *Inception* for a while, we should question those assumptions.

Since things that don't affect our consciousness can't affect how our life goes for us, reality doesn't really matter. We think that reality matters to us, but it's really familiarity that most of us desire more. As long as we experience life as if we are living in familiar surroundings that seem real, it doesn't matter if we are living in *reality* or in Limbo. In fact, living in Limbo could allow for us to lead lives that we find more enjoyable and meaningful.

Die-hard fans of reality might try to convince you that reality should matter to you, even when it will not affect your consciousness in any way. If this happens, you should point out to them that they are probably being blinded by a couple of assumptions. You should encourage them to watch *Inception* and reevaluate whether they can be sure if they are dreaming or not. Most importantly, get them to question their assumption that they are currently living in reality. They'll realize that they can't ever be sure that they're not dreaming. And because the cost of more enjoyment and sense of meaning is too high for the mere chance of living in reality, they too will understand that it doesn't matter if Cobb's spinning top falls or not. In fact, they'll probably wish that Cobb would just throw his totem away and focus on finding enjoyment and meaning in his life because they, too, will realize that it's our experiences that really matter, not whether we are living in reality.

NOTES

1. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42–45.
2. Richard L. Moreland and Scott R. Beach, “Exposure Effects in the Classroom: The Development of Affinity among Students,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 28 (1992), pp. 255–276. Melissa Peskin and Fiona N Newell, “Familiarity Breeds Attraction: Effects of Exposure on the Attractiveness of Typical and Distinctive Faces,” *Perception* 33 (2004), pp. 147–157.
3. Jack L. Knetsch, “The Endowment Effect and Evidence of Nonreversible Indifference Curves,” *The American Economic Review* 79 (1989), pp. 1277–1284.
4. Philippe de Brigard, “If You Like It, Does it Matter If It’s Real?” *Philosophical Psychology* 23 (2010), pp. 43–57.
5. Christopher Nolan, *Inception: The Shooting Script*, (San Rafael, CA: Insight Editions, 2010), p. 140.
6. As is pointed out in “The Editor’s Totem” and in chapters in this volume by various authors, there are even more reasons that the reliability of Cobb’s totem is limited. For one, it’s Mal’s, not his. So the top falling doesn’t tell him he is not in Mal’s dream. Second, he told Ariadne how it works, so the top would fall if he were in one of her dreams as well. Third—who doesn’t know that tops fall? If Cobb spun a top in your dream, wouldn’t you dream that it fell? While the top’s perpetual spin tells Cobb he is in a dream, the top falling doesn’t tell him much.
7. For more on how to deal with the epistemic angst raised by the lack of certainty that we are not dreaming, see Katherine Tullman’s chapter in this volume.
8. Nolan made these comments to *Entertainment Weekly*, 30 November 2010. Available at <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2010/11/30/christopher-nolan-batman-inception/>.