The Existentialism Behind Nolan's Batman

Author: Kaylin Marie Walker

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2611

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2012

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.
THE EXISTENTIALISM BEHIND NOLAN’S BATMAN

An analysis of the presence of existentialist thought in film director Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*

by Kaylin Walker

2012 Senior Honors Thesis, Boston College
Advised by Professor John Michalczyk
THE EXISTENTIALISM BEHIND NOLAN’S BATMAN

Honors Thesis

by

Kaylin Walker

Spring 2012

Advisor: John Michalczyk

College of Arts and Sciences

Boston College
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my advisor, John Michalczyk, for aiding my research and thought development, and my good friend Kelly Mohen, for listening and brainstorming with me during the writing process.
ABSTRACT

Despite a long affiliation with film dating back to the French New Wave, existentialism has remained a fascination reserved for art film producers and intellectual viewers for decades. In the early twenty-first century, director Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* trilogy marked the first time existentialism bubbled over from niche art films into the most blatant form of popular culture: the summer blockbuster. This analysis explores *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* as up-to-date pictures of modern existentialism, embodied by Bruce Wayne’s journey through fear, chaos and rebirth, mirroring the existentialist advancement through uncertainty to freedom and self-creation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 5  
1. Evolution of Existentialism .......................................................... 5  
2. Leading Figures of Existentialism ............................................... 8

## CHAPTER 2: FEAR .............................................................................. 15  
1. Absurdity and Meaninglessness .................................................. 15  
2. Turn to Subjectivity .................................................................. 21  
3. Manipulations of Subjectivity: Fear, Distortion, and Interpretation ........................................... 25

## CHAPTER 3: CHAOS .......................................................................... 28  
1. Freedom ..................................................................................... 28  
2. Application of Freedom ............................................................... 30  
3. Wayne as Free Spirit ................................................................. 32  
4. The will to power ...................................................................... 39

## CHAPTER 4: REBIRTH ....................................................................... 41  
1. Facing Freedom and Transcending Oneself .................................. 41  
2. The possibility of an Ethic ........................................................... 51

## CHAPTER 5: ..................................................................................... 53  
1. Memento ................................................................................... 53  
2. The Prestige ............................................................................... 59  
3. Inception .................................................................................. 61

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION ................................................................. 65  
1. Implications of the Presence of Existentialism in Nolan’s Batman ........................................... 65  
2. Mirror-image arcs: Batman and Existentialism .................................. 68

## WORKS CITED .................................................................................... 71
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1. Evolution of Existentialism

Existentialism gained popularity after World War II because it offered a pragmatic approach to a fractured postmodern world. Postmodernism developed as a skeptical reaction to the absolutist certainty of modernity; it called into question modern man’s hubris, leaving traditional boundaries and definitions ambiguous and uncertain. Over time, it was adopted and transformed into a foundation and tool for rebellious adolescents to question authority and defy social norms. Now, its basic assumptions have become deeply embedded into the subconscious of our cultural psyche, as indicated by its presence in popular film.

Existentialism has been a unique focus of film over time, from the French New Wave to Fight Club (1999), with the largest-scale and most profitable released in the last decade. Batman Begins (2005) and The Dark Knight (2008) collectively grossed over $1.3 billion; The Dark Knight is the 10th highest-grossing film of all time, trailing behind mega blockbusters Avatar (2009), two Pirates of the Caribbean (2006, 2011) sequels, Transformers: Dark Side of the Moon (2011), the final Harry Potter installment (2011) and Titanic (1997). Existentialism has been a consistent theme of film for the last fifty years, but its delivery through the biggest and most blatant vehicle of popular culture, the summer blockbuster, represents its breakthrough into mainstream relevance once again.

Birth of the postmodern superhero. The Batman narrative is an exception in superhero lore. Unlike Superman or the Hulk, Batman is the only classic superhero who created himself. He does not come from another planet and was not radiated into an inch of his humanity: Bruce

Wayne consciously and purposely chooses to be Batman. Armed with wealth and determination, Wayne has no fantastic superpowers. Alongside the atypical superhero, Batman narratives often featured atypical villains who forced Wayne to make difficult decisions in ambiguous environments, adding a layer of psychological dilemma to the usual good/evil duality of superhero folklore.

The soul of the franchise belongs to Christopher Nolan, who directed and co-wrote both films. When Nolan was offered the chance to rebuild the fatigued Batman franchise, he opted to portray the popular character in a more sober, realistic way than previous versions. Tim Burton (Batman, 1989 and Batman Returns, 1992) and Joel Schumacher’s (Batman Forever, 1995 and Batman & Robin, 1997) films garnered reviews ranging from reluctantly positive for Burton’s imaginative films to vicious attacks of Schumacher’s campy interpretation. Roger Ebert of the Sun Times assessed that “Batman & Robin, like the first three films in the series, is wonderful to look at, and has nothing authentic at its core.” Nolan’s decision to create a coarse, serious Batman film resonated with a changed viewing public. Since Burton and Schumacher’s films, the United States has skidded into two foreign wars and an economic recession. The solemnity of the postmodern world has managed to permeate into one of the most escapist genres American film has to offer: the superhero reboot.

Due to the recent rise of the superhero reboot craze, audiences are typically kept spellbound by large-scale explosions, unlikely heroes, bright costumes and over-the-top villains with silly schemes. For example, Spiderman, the enormously successful 2002 film that earned two sequels, captivated audiences but did not provide anything new. Spiderman does not even

---

begin to scratch the surface of a postmodern world; when the Green Goblin forces Spiderman choose between saving his beau Mary Jane or a car full of children, he incredibly saves them both, sidestepping a true ethical dilemma. The superhero genre is an escapist favorite precisely because it is an idealistic, morally over-simplified fantasy: a super-human in colorful spandex, endowed with incredible powers must wrestle with the hell-bent villain on the clearly-drawn line between good and evil to save the world. In Nolan’s take, we instead see Bruce Wayne, a hero whose only powers are money and perseverance, wrestle with his inner demons to find a way to reconcile the loss of the clear good/evil divide in Gotham City. Wayne’s battles are ones of deception, ambiguous choice and responsibility rather than larger-than-life battles of strength and wit.

*Influence of Christopher Nolan.* With dozens of interpretations and reincarnations across an expansive history, Nolan had significant freedom as well as significant pressure to take Batman in a new direction. “The great part was that they wanted to refresh and invigorate the franchise, but didn’t have any specific concepts and were essentially looking for someone to come in and tell them what to do. It’s pretty unusual to have this sort of movie up for grabs,” Nolan reflected in a 2005 interview prior to the release of *Batman Begins.*³ Partly in reaction to the fan backlash for the inauthenticity and inaccuracy of the last two synthetic Schumacher films, and partly in personal preference and directorial consistency, Nolan took the franchise down an intense, realistic path that reflects man’s postmodern condition. Nolan’s Batman lives in the real world, not the campy fantasy land of *Batman & Robin.*

Nolan’s debut feature-length film *Following* (1998), cult classic *Memento* (2000) and Norwegian remake *Insomnia* (2002) were all well-received by critics. Through these works,

---
Nolan proved himself to Warner Bros. to be undaunted by complex narratives and potentially controversial ambiguous ethical difficulties. Nolan’s effectively disorienting nonlinear storytelling was a defining feature of Memento and is still distinctive of his style today.

Following the release of Batman Begins in 2005, Nolan directed The Prestige (2006) from a screenplay co-written with his brother, Jonathan Nolan. After The Dark Knight (2008), Nolan finally realized a vision nine years in the making as he directed Inception (2010), a story he had written and presented to Warner Bros. in 2001. Following the box office and critical success of The Dark Knight, Nolan directed the third and final installment of the Batman series, The Dark Knight Rises, due for release Summer 2012. Unfortunately, the film will not be released in time to be incorporated into this analysis.

Of the eight films Nolan has directed, he has co-written seven. (Insomnia was originally written by Erik Skjoldbjaerg and Nikolaj Frobenius for the 1997 Norwegian release of the same name.) Because of this, his filmography is tied together thematically with a recurring discussion of perception, deception and choice in vague situations. Additionally, Nolan personally oversaw every shot of Batman Begins and The Dark Knight; it is reasonable to conclude that Nolan influenced the films from every angle in order to realize his vision for the Batman franchise, becoming a true auteur in film terms.

2. Leading Figures of Existentialism

Søren Kierkegaard. Born in Denmark in 1813, Søren Kierkegaard was generally overshadowed by contemporary philosophers such as G. W. F. Hegel and overlooked during his active years from 1843 to 1855; his work ultimately gained popularity and influence during the early twentieth century. He wrote to analyze the human condition and provide insight into the
meaning of life, especially by questioning what makes life worth living. From his best known work, *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard is remembered for a main concept and now common idiomatic expression, the “leap of faith.”

Kierkegaard describes the human condition as a tension between man’s temporal limitations and his desire to realize eternal meaning. Man’s temporality is his current self, finite and limited to the present. Man differs from animals because he has an eye for eternity, or an awareness of his past events and intentions for his future events. Man cannot solve the finite-infinite paradox; he can only strive against it by taking a stand on his own life by making a commitment.⁴ Therefore, in order to transcend the temporal and attain an glimpse of eternity, man must live a life laced together by consistent choices and a coherent style in passionate dedication to that commitment. This determined, continually renewed choice is the leap of faith. Ignoring man’s possible eternity or going about it in a way without the leap of faith results in Kierkegaard’s notion of despair.

The leap of faith requires belief. Kierkegaard holds that man finds truth in subjectivity, reasoning that belief transcends absolute truth and exists in spite of the resultant ambiguity: “The subject merely has, objectively, the uncertainty; but it is this which precisely increases the tension of that infinite passion which constitutes his inwardness.”⁵

Perspectivism and contingency find place in Kierkegaard’s thought as well; the teleological suspension of the ethical, modeled on Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac in the name of God, demonstrates the position of the individual over the collective in

---

certain situations. Kierkegaard later came to be considered a forefather of existentialism for his concern with the human condition, subjectivity, choice and uncertainty.

Friedrich Nietzsche. Forever a critic, Nietzsche radically called into question morality, religion, philosophy and ethics. He began a career as an analyst of language in historical sources, but went on to publish dozens of philosophical works, including *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Within *The Gay Science* (1882), the primary Nietzschean text for this analysis, he outlines problems and reveals holes in man’s basic schemas and suggests a solution within a new science and new approach to the world.

Nietzsche asserts that man is sick due to an unhealthy preoccupation with a truer spiritual world instead of the apparent world he immediately perceives. He points back to Plato as the first to create a distinction between the apparent and the true in his pursuit to define the eternal as separate from the temporal. Nietzsche rejects this distinction, instead embracing positivism, which treats surface reality as the only reality. Nietzsche was an atheist existentialist who discounted religion, especially Christianity, as “Platonism for the ‘people’” because it advocates a hierarchical distinction between the physical world and the spiritual world of the afterlife.6

His disruption of basic assumptions of human life (such as the underlying progress of time, the binary opposition of surface and “real,” and his concept of the eternal recurrence of the same) serves to release man from his presuppositions, flinging him into an alien world where he knows nothing for certain. Nietzsche is famous for a vivid picture of free-fall he crafts in the

---

“Death of God” passage in *The Gay Science*: “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!”

Along with breaking down basic assumptions, Nietzsche highlights the role of subjectivity in modern life. By calling reality “interpretation all the way down,” Nietzsche earned a place alongside Kierkegaard as a forefather of existentialism.

*Jean-Paul Sartre*. Jean-Paul Sartre is best known for asserting in his 1943 work *Being and Nothingness* that man is “condemned to be free.” Unlike his predecessors, Sartre was exposed to two world wars and had an increasingly globalized, modernized world to consider while writing. He was the first philosopher to call himself an existentialist, drawing the name from the sweeping maxim and fountainhead of Sartrean thought, “existence precedes essence.”

*The Humanism of Existentialism*, published in 1946, rebuked the perceived pessimism of his philosophy and ushered in the new fashion of post-war existentialist thought as a means to confirm man’s freedom and ultimate responsibility.

Sartre’s philosophy springs from the central assumption that there is no God coupled with perceived meaninglessness of a scientific world. His works move outward from this point: if there is no God, then man is not determined by a higher power. If there is no God, then man is without a destiny; there is no creator controlling the pieces and events of his life. Without a destiny, the power of choice and determination moves from the unintelligible creator and orchestrator down to the subjectivity of the man himself; he is free and thus ultimately responsible for his actions and choices which are all he has left to define him. Through these

---

8Nietzsche, *Beyond* 166-167.
10Sartre *Humanism* 292.
actions, he determines his own character; his existence precedes the essence he crafts. This freedom is empowering but at the same time overwhelming; Sartre captures the uneasiness of total responsibility in his concepts of anguish and nausea.

Sartre’s philosophy offers no concrete morality; in *The Humanism of Existentialism*, he tried to establish an ethic by declaring that every free decision must affirm and protect the freedom of others.\textsuperscript{11} This claim didn’t fully satisfy critics; his coworker and lifelong companion, Simone de Beauvoir, later addressed this issue in her work *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). Rather, Sartre suggests that the best way to live is authentically, or without letting external pressures influence one’s decisions. To live with authenticity is to live a life with a coherent string of actions and choices based on one’s own personality and character, untainted by social or other forces. Bad faith is the condition of living a life governed by external pressures; it is the inability or refusal to accept one’s own responsibility and face one’s anguish.

*Simone de Beauvoir.* Born in Paris in 1908, de Beauvoir became a prominent philosopher and important feminist. With instrumental works *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and *The Second Sex* (1949), and novels *She Came to Stay* (1943) and *The Mandarins* (1954), de Beauvoir proved herself as a cutting-edge feminist existentialist. She used existentialist concepts of freedom and responsibility to argue against oppression of women and minorities in an chaotic, clouded post-war world.

In the existentialist tradition, she is remembered for her exploration and pursuit of an ethic. Sartre failed in defining a convincing moral system; de Beauvoir took up the challenge in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Her thought aligns very closely with Sartre’s existentialism; man is inherently free because his consciousness exists in the cleavage or nothingness between the past and the future. Man transcends his facticity as he separates himself from it through \textsuperscript{11}Sartre *Humanism* 293.
consciousness; he surpasses himself in his choices and actions. If consistent, they build upon themselves in a unity that pursues a goal or a project which defines the man.

De Beauvoir asserts that there can be no absolute ethic for mankind. “The value of an act lies not in its conformity to an external model, but in its internal truth,” she asserts, confirming existentialism’s subjective basis. The only ethic offered by existentialism is freedom; in other words, man must recognize his freedom and accept his ultimate responsibility for his actions and their consequences. Hiding from one’s responsibility and freedom is unethical. In regards to other men, man necessarily wills others free as he wills himself free. His projects are only realized through their intersections with the projects of other men, thereby inextricably linking him to other men. De Beauvoir’s ethic calls for man to realize his own freedom and to will the freedom of others.

Existentialism, the philosophy whereby man creates himself and his world in his subjectivity, is shown in three main characteristics: the emphasis on subjectivity and its manipulation, freedom of man, and the ability to make meaning. For the purposes of this argument, existentialism will be shown within Batman Begins and The Dark Knight as well as in Nolan’s earlier work, specifically the psycho-thriller Memento. As a director and screenwriter, Nolan imparts a special existentialism into his films that is as bleak as the postmodern world in which man finds himself. He offers an illustration of how man deals with this bleakness; although times seem dark, there is some optimism in the commentary.

Nolan was the first to interpret the Batman franchise as a trilogy, spanning from Wayne’s rising transformation into Batman in Batman Begins, across his stint as Gotham’s sliding resident protector in The Dark Knight, to his transition downward into something harder to understand in The Dark Knight Rises. The arc that Wayne follows as Batman can be distilled into the mirror

---

image of the arc that existentialist thought follows. First, man feels his world shattering and fears what he is slipping into without the order he is accustomed to; second, he adjusts to the chaos that is a new, changing world of freedom and disorder; third, he collects himself and rises into taking charge of his life, orchestrating his own rebirth into the world. This analysis will be broken into three chapters focusing on fear, chaos, and rebirth, much like Nolan’s trilogy: 

_Batman Begins_ concentrates on fear, _The Dark Knight_ on chaos, and in my prediction, _The Dark Knight Rises_ will focus on rebirth.
CHAPTER 2: FEAR

SUBJECTIVITY TRIGGERED BY UNCERTAINTY

1. Absurdity and Meaninglessness

Existentialism is a reactionary shift in thought triggered by a modern mechanized world. As scientific exploration boomed and demystified nature, it reduced the world into an infinite number of tiny autonomous machines. Science removed mystery; it pulled people away from religion and regarded faith as a coping mechanism for those who didn’t understand the obvious advantage of scientific exploration. Science arrogantly implied that it could answer all of man’s questions, but in the end left man disenchanted, feeling homeless in a meaningless world. Where is the meaning behind electron excitation? What is the significance of a rainbow when it is reduced to wavelengths? As a consequence of scientific reduction, a sense of orchestration and meaning were expunged from the universe. For Sartre, this is anguish; for Nietzsche, nihilism; for Kierkegaard, despair; for de Beauvoir, absurdity. Man searches for meaning, and yet there is none to be found: man is lost, horizonless, and forlorn.

Gotham City as a postmodern landscape. Gotham is a city immersed in a long, drawn out existential crisis: it has lost its order and its meaning, and it has nowhere to turn. Gotham was in need of help even during Bruce Wayne’s childhood; his parents built a transportation system encouraging people to commute to work in the city in order to boost the economy. Dr. and Mrs. Wayne become symbols of hope for Gotham, and their uncalled-for, unfair deaths plunge Gotham into a downward spiral of hopelessness. Their death at the hands of a desperate mugger symbolize the triumph of chaos and degeneration over order and benevolence; to the people of Gotham, this proves that their city is beyond saving and that attempts to reform it are futile. Any
value system Gotham had left deteriorates into an economy of fear and corruption by the time Wayne returns.

Gotham is plunged into a kind of insanity by the loss of order and meaning. The name itself indicates an unstable public. “Gotham” is an old nickname for New York City, derived from Gotham, Nottinghamshire, England, a village famous for the legend The Wise Fools of Gotham.\(^{13}\) In the legend, the villagers pretend to be insane in order to prevent the king from routing a royal highway through their village that they would in turn be expected to build and maintain. At the time insanity was believed to be contagious, forcing the king’s knights retreat and leave Gotham alone. At the surface, the tale echoes the running theme of insanity found within Batman tradition. Gotham is physically wrapped around Arkham Asylum; villains, heroes and minor characters alike suffer breaks from reality. In a closer read, the story implies that Gotham is off-balance, but that it also has the potential to correct itself.

Gotham stands in contrast to other superhero cities, such as Superman’s Metropolis. Frank Miller, the creator of the comic Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986) has said that “Metropolis is New York City in the daytime; Gotham is New York at night.”\(^{14}\) Visually, Gotham is bleaker, grittier, darker and more realistic in Batman Begins and The Dark Knight than in earlier film portrayals. The only bright, light-filled shots occur during Wayne’s flashbacks to his childhood when his parents are still around. For the rest of the Batman Begins, the shots are tight, shadowy and grungy. In The Dark Knight, there is an increase in the number of lighter, daylight-filled scenes as Gotham begins to heal, but the dominant shade remains black. The people of Gotham are immersed in a dark cityscape where every so often light peeks

---


through, but disorder and ambiguity reign. Harvey Dent, Gotham’s favorite district attorney and contrasting “White Knight,” expresses this observation when he imparts hope to the people: “the night is darkest just before the dawn, and I promise you, the dawn is coming.”

Reaction to uncertainty in Gotham. The value vacuum of Gotham allows Falcone and his mob to take over and use fear to control the justice system like a puppet. The vacuum also creates a space for another symbol of hope to emerge and fill the shoes of Dr. and Mrs. Wayne: first, Wayne steps up in *Batman Begins*, followed by Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight*. These symbols give the people of Gotham a horizon for orientation and meaning as an anchor. Before they appear, Gotham descends into rampant nihilism. With no values, the city enters a chaos similar to that anticipated by Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan reasons that “if there is no God, then everything is permitted,” because there is no ultimate judgment or consequence of Hell. With Falcone puppeteering the justice system, he and his goons have the kind of impunity Ivan foresees. “They all know where to find Falcone…but no one will touch him because he keeps the bad people rich and the good people scared,” Wayne’s childhood friend Rachel Dawes explains. The fear Falcone inspires is comparable to Sartre’s nausea, the discomfort in viewing the world without the order to which man is accustomed. Regardless of religion or belief, a basic human schema assumes that eventually evil will be punished and good will be rewarded. This schema is blown apart by Gotham’s advanced state of corruption, which its citizens deal with this in different ways. Existential crises lead Wayne to

---


become a rallying symbol of justice and order, Dent to deteriorate into a cynical killer, and the Joker to invent his persona as an agent of chaos.\(^\text{18}\)

Wayne reacts to the loss of order by turning himself into a symbol around which the people of Gotham can orient themselves. He helps alleviate the uncertainty that the madman in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* raves about after he claims that man has killed God:

> Who gave us the sponge to erase the whole horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the Earth from its sun? Now where is it going? Where are we moving? Away from all suns? Aren’t we falling constantly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in every direction?\(^\text{19}\)

The people of Gotham are in a similar situation; they have nothing to hold onto now that the city has descended into crime and corruption. Wayne understands that the city needs a symbol to rally around as an example to put their hope and faith in. Even though man finds himself in a world with no inherent meaning and no order does not mean that he stops searching for it; Gotham needs an anchor and finds it in Batman. Ideally, man should ground his actions within himself, but in Gotham’s state of ethical free-fall, it is hard for even the good to ground their actions without some external justification. It takes a strong person, like Bruce Wayne or Harvey Dent, to lead the disenchanted population of Gotham. Dent’s campaign stickers touch on this, reading “I believe in Harvey Dent.”

*The postmodern villain.* The Dark Knight* introduces two existentialist villains: the Joker and Two-Face. Each is unhinged by an existential crisis. The origin of the Joker is not explored, but the arc of Harvey Dent’s transfiguration into Two-Face is a concentration of the film. At the start, Dent is a something of a pragmatic idealist. He believes in the justice system as the righteous renovator of Gotham, yet understands that it is an imperfect arrangement. Dent believes in something bigger than himself, yet he doesn’t leave himself at its mercy. Carrying a

---

\(^{18}\) *The Dark Knight.*

\(^{19}\) Nietzsche *Science* 141.
coin with two heads and no tails, Dent parodies chance by asking people to “flip for” something while knowing that the outcome will always be heads; he claims that he makes his own luck.  

When Rachel Dawes, Dent’s coworker and girlfriend, is killed in one of the Joker’s schemes, he loses any belief he once had in the significance of his actions or a higher order of fairness in the world. Dent is plunged into existential hopelessness and reacts with incensed cynicism. After the Joker frees him from the hospital and plants the idea in his head that only chaos is fair, Dent goes on a killing spree as Two-Face, flipping his scorched “lucky” coin to determine whether his victim lives or dies. “You thought we could be decent men in an indecent world. You thought we could lead by example. You thought the rules could be bent but not break. You were wrong. The world is cruel. And the only morality in a cruel world is chance: unbiased, unprejudiced, fair,” he rants to Wayne. Dent continues to use charged ideas like ‘fairness’ even though chance could never be fair in the way that the old Dent would have meant it. Fairness implies that a mediating party makes sure people get what they deserve, not detached neutrality; a flat 50/50 chance of death is anything but fair. Two-Face represents complete detachment and disillusionment with the modern world; the absurdity of Dawes’s death has pushed him over the edge and ruined the faith he had in the universe.

The Joker is disillusioned with the world as well, but instead of falling victim to the absurdity, he embraces it passionately and finds joy in amplifying it. The Joker is chaos and the absurd personified; his sole goal in Gotham is to create disorder and reveal the meaninglessness of the world to Gotham’s citizens. Smearred with clown makeup and haphazard, outlandishly bright clothes, the Joker is visually absurd as well. We know nothing about his origin because his **causa sui**, or self-caused, existence represents the way modern man is set before the world. Man

---

20 The Dark Knight.

21 ibid.
can look backward and try to figure out how the world has come into a disillusioned, uncertain state, but he cannot actually experience a time before it. The viewer is not privy to the Joker’s genesis because he has to be an absolute, unchangeable character much in the way that man must face modernity as an unalterable fact of existence.

The absurd as a weapon. The Joker highlights absurdity in the choice scenarios that he orchestrates. In creating ethical dilemmas, he reveals inherent problems of modern morality. He forces the choice-makers to face their power, feel their responsibility and realize their inability to ground these choices. First, he forces Wayne to choose between saving Dawes or saving Dent: he forces a situation where Wayne will feel responsible for one death even as he saves one life. “You choose one life over the other. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you where they are, both of them – that’s the point! – you’ll have to choose,” the Joker cackles. By lying about the addresses, he guarantees that Wayne will save the wrong one and become even more dislodged from any overarching residual belief in justice. The dilemma of the explosive-wired boats also serves to emphasize the impossibility of choice and the fundamental accountability man has for his choices. Even when the civilian boat votes to detonate the bomb on the criminal boat to save themselves, no one can bring themselves to push the button. The score, too, plays a role in each of these choice situations as well. The dissonance swells until it becomes almost unbearable; the acute discomfort that follows feels physically uncomfortable like the nausea Sartre couples with anguish. Facing one’s ultimate, inescapable freedom in a choice scenario is frightening and abhorrent.

To the people of Gotham, the Joker is irrefutably insane. His only drive is the glorification of chaos; he is a nihilist who thrives on anarchy and finds truth in disorder. Nietzsche would find a lot of truth in the Joker’s philosophy; he claimed in The Gay Science that

---

22The Dark Knight.
“the overall character of the world is, for all eternity, chaos,” and predicted that the initial result of nihilism will be anarchy.\textsuperscript{23} The Dark Knight suggests that man cannot escape the chaos, but he can resist the anarchy. The Joker is effective at dislodging the people of Gotham from any semblance of order and meaning that they had recouped during Batman’s reign and the rise of civil servants Dent and Gordon. He is an unconventional villain that Gotham can’t seem to make sense of: he has no origin, no objective and no weakness. Alfred Pennyworth, Wayne’s butler and confidante, illuminates the essence of the Joker in a parallel anecdote about a thief who carelessly threw away his loot: “Some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money…they can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.”\textsuperscript{24} Batman’s physical and psychological struggles with the Joker are a clear metaphor for man’s struggles with meaninglessness and absurdity.

2. Turn to Subjectivity

The next reasonable step when the world stops making sense and man is unable to reconcile the absence of external order is to start looking within. When man’s meaning system has been shattered, it leaves a deep, lingering uncertainty: what is truth? Without any grounds for truth or falsehood, man has no method to deny the validity of others’ subjectivities and finds himself submerged in overwhelming pluralism and perspectivism. Nietzsche claims in Beyond Good and Evil that untruth, or perspective, is the inescapable condition of humanity.\textsuperscript{25} It is impossible to see anything without a lens. There is no such thing as a chair-in-itself, only one’s perception and interpretation of the thing labeled a chair. Nietzsche asserts that when man searches for an objectively true reality instead of accepting his subjective, surface reality as true,

\textsuperscript{23}Nietzsche Science 133.
\textsuperscript{24}The Dark Knight.
\textsuperscript{25}Nietzsche Beyond 3.
he is fostering a degenerative sickness. Searching for external foundation in the existential world is absurd; the only ground that man has left is his self-awareness and his subjectivity. Thus, when man searches for absolute truth, he is deceiving himself and devaluing the world he personally experiences.

*Perspectivism and the teleological suspension of the ethical.* The turn inward is coupled with the alarming realization that there are other valid interpretations of the world and that man is one individual among many individuals. When Wayne confronts Falcone about his assassination of key witness (and murderer of Dr. and Mrs. Wayne) Joe Chill, Falcone berates him for not understanding the life of the other half. He shakes himself free from his sheltered life by traveling the world, where he experiences the life of a criminal as well as of a life of poverty. “The first time you’re forced to steal not to starve, you lose many assumptions about the simple nature of right and wrong,” Wayne reflects.

Subjectivity plays an important role in existentialism’s refusal to define an absolute morality. Kierkegaard’s teleological suspension of the ethical and Nietzsche’s perspectivism place emphasis on the importance of contingency in moral decision. In other words, without objective truth, it is impossible to will one thing for all of mankind. Unlike Kant’s categorical imperative, where if one man chooses to lie he wills that all men should lie, existentialism holds that each man must make his own decision in each unique situation. Each situation is unique because it is tempered by interpretation, so a universal law is improbable and would be ineffective. Just as there is no such thing as the chair-in-itself, there is no such thing as the moral-decision-in-itself; it is necessarily the moral-decision-in-the-situation.

---

26 Nietzsche *Science* 154-155.
27 *Batman Begins.*
Wayne internalizes this view and makes use of it as the masked defender Batman. Kierkegaard reasons that ethical requirements are subject to exceptions. In *Fear and Trembling*, he outlines that “faith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, is not subordinate but superior,” due to one’s special relationship with God.\(^{28}\) For Kierkegaard, Abraham engaged in a teleological suspension of the ethical when God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac; ethically, he would have been a murderer, but because it was commanded of him by God, the act transcends human ethics.\(^{29}\) To suspend the ethical teleologically means some moral decisions are contingent on the situation; Abraham’s actions were contingent on God’s satisfaction.

Batman has the ability to defy ethical rules and the civil laws of Gotham in pursuit of justice that Wayne as a citizen could never have. Batman can assault crooked cops, break and enter into apartments, turn all of the city’s cell phones into listening devices and engage in high-speed car chases with the police. Wayne would be held personally accountable, but because Batman’s identity is unknown, he acts with impunity. At first, Batman is begrudgingly allowed to suspend the ethical because the police cannot identify him; later, after he has proven himself, Gordon and Gotham tentatively trust his judgment. Batman can assert himself over the ethical laws of the city because he acts in the name of justice and the greater good; his actions are focused on the end goal of a cleaner, safer Gotham. Batman is not superior to universal ethical law because of a special relationship with God; instead, Batman receives his justification from his special relationship with an ideal. He is willing to sacrifice and devote his life to the ideal of justice.

\(^{28}\) Kierkegaard *Fear* 57.
\(^{29}\) ibid 38-39.
The ability to suspend the laws of the city is one common to superheroes; the heroic concept of the “greater good” implies that the ends justify the means. Batman, however, is more heavily influenced by the contingent situation than most superheroes. Along with suspending the ethical laws of Gotham, Wayne occasionally suspends his own “greater good” ethic; his ethical actions as Batman are still subject to contingency and exception. For example, he leaves the scene when Scarecrow is dumping the hallucinogen in the city’s water supply to race poisoned Dawes home for an antidote instead of standing his ground and apprehending the villain.

Batman, as an alter ego, can never be Kierkegaard’s knight of faith; he has justification in the pursuit of justice and the greater good, something that the people of Gotham can understand and appreciate. Instead, Batman is a tragic hero. The knight of faith acts in a way unintelligible to others; Abraham would have been called a murderer by his neighbors. Wayne, however, could be considered a knight of faith. He often uses his playboy millionaire image to divert attention away from his alter ego or as a tool in his pursuit of the greater good. To his birthday guests, Wayne is an arrogant jerk who told all of the “freeloaders” to get out of his house. In actuality, Wayne sacrifices his public image in order to save his guests from the fire set by Ra’s al Ghul and the League of Shadows.30

To cope with the loss of order and meaning, man turns inward in an attempt to create meaning from the only ground he has left. This turn toward subjectivity leads to hyper-awareness of individual consciousness and the ability to justify exceptions to ethical and moral guidelines. Batman embodies this shift because he suspends the ethical more often than other superheroes do in a way that the viewer can understand his contextual decision.

30 *Batman Begins.*
3. Manipulations of Subjectivity: Fear, Distortion, and Interpretation

Because all that man has left is his subjectivity, the manipulation and distortion of perception and experience is a major hit to any ground man has managed to establish. Manipulation of man’s internal reality magnifies the doubt man already feels when facing the world; if his only foundation is cracked, how does he continue? A threat to one’s subjectivity is a threat to one’s meaning system and sense of the world. *Batman Begins* explores this problem with a hallucinogen to distort perception and fear to distort interpretation.

*Fear: a threat to subjectivity.* The major theme of *Batman Begins* is fear and its weaponization. In fact, the original title of *Batman Begins* was *Batman: The Frightening.* Fear manifests itself in *Batman Begins* as fear of the unknown. Three characters in *Batman Begins* use fear as a weapon: Falcone, Scarecrow (as an agent of the League of Shadows) and Batman himself. Falcone uses fear as leverage against the justice system and citizens of Gotham in order to keep his illegal empire running. Scarecrow uses his potent hallucinogen to subdue his enemies, and in conjunction with the League of Shadows, to bring Gotham into a state of widespread panic and anarchy with the assumption that it will tear itself apart. Wayne uses fear against those who wield fear; in the words of his League of Shadows mentor Ducard, “to conquer fear you must become fear, and men fear most what they cannot see.” Ducard suggests the use of theatricality and deception as conduits of weaponized fear. Before they declare Wayne purified and ready to lead, they purge him of his fear by exposing him to a hallucinogen while forcing him to engage Ducard in combat, testing his power over his own experience regardless of compromised perception. Although he passes the test, Wayne’s fears resurge when Scarecrow hits him with another dosage of the hallucinogen, indicating that fear never completely

---

32 *Batman Begins.*
dissipates. This parallels the inescapability of doubt in modern life: although man finds shaky ground in his subjectivity, he can never truly stand firm. Wayne masters his fear as man can master his doubt, yet neither ever dissipate completely.

*The power of subjectivity: interpretation.* Another element of Sartrean subjectivity is the effect of personal experience on man’s interpretation of reality. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses the inability of an object to contain any sort of “not” within itself. A chair is a chair and within it is no clause that says it is not a table. The only way to determine that the chair is not a table is to compare the two; in other words, distinctions are made, not found in the world. Man interprets his subjective experience and in so doing changes it. Acknowledging this malleability of reality is both frightening and empowering; Wayne understands this flexibility and the power of a reframed point of view. In one of the opening scenes in the foreign prison, a large inmate challenges Wayne to fight, stating, “I am the devil,” to which he retorts, “You’re not the devil. You’re just practice.”[^33] He decides to interpret this lumbering aggressor as a sparring opponent rather than as a frightening assailant. His power over his interpretation contributes to his power over his decisions and therefore his power over his creation of self.

*Subjectivity in Nolan’s Batman.* Existentialism is presented as the necessary shift in thought in reaction to the disenchantment of modernity and science. *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* both express the complex situation of the modern man: uncertain, lost, dark, hopeless, and yet full of potential. Nolan’s Batman series features an existential setting, existential heroes and villains, and provides an absorbing depiction of the different reactions to a modern, disaffected world.

Nolan’s recurring concentration on subjectivity and its manipulation serve to show that objective truth is impossible and along with it an objective morality. With no higher power, there

[^33]: *Batman Begins.*
can be no a priori good. This is something that Wayne both struggles with and takes advantage of in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*. With no higher power pulling the strings of fate, man is faced with ultimate freedom and ultimate responsibility.
1. Freedom

Situated in a bleak city where order and value have been shattered, Wayne grapples for some sort of foundation. With the belief in intelligent design or a plan stemming from a higher creator gone along with previously unquestioned, “absolute” values, he is set into the world with no guidance and no horizon; he is detached and utterly free.

**Freedom and existence.** Sartre is famous for the claim that named his philosophy: “existence precedes essence.” As an atheist existentialist, Sartre began with the assumption that there is no God. Without predetermination, man is born without a pregiven essence or a nature. First, he exists; then, he defines his essence, or who he is, using his freedom to transcend his givenness by making choices and commitments.

Freedom is the cleavage or nothingness that exists at any given moment in the hinge between man’s past and his future. The present is constantly being created. This means that although man is influenced by his past, there is nothing concrete that binds him to it. Without a destiny, there is nothing that ties man to his future. His present is fully suspended from both; any choice is possible. Man’s consciousness exists in this cleavage, which separates him from his givenness or facticity of existence; it creates the space that allows for contemplation and choice. Man’s consciousness, and thus freedom, is the characteristic that separates him from animals and plants. “Man is permitted to separate himself from this world by contemplation, to think about it, to create it anew,” de Beauvoir reasoned.\(^{35}\)

---

\(^{34}\)Sartre *Humanism* 292.  
\(^{35}\)De Beauvoir 68.
**Batman and freedom.** As noted in the chapter 1, Bruce Wayne is the only superhero to create himself. He builds Batman of his own accord, without any nod from fate; he creates Batman to go beyond his condition and to become more. Superman falls to Earth, Spiderman gets bitten by a super-spider, the Hulk is radiated into a super-human, Captain America gets an injection, Iron Man has a bionic heart. The stock-character superhero does not choose his power; it is thrust upon him by circumstances beyond his control. He typically spends a good deal of time coming to terms with the power and deciding to use it for good.

Wayne decides to dedicate his life to the continuation of his parents’ mission: making Gotham City a better, safer place to live. Aided by wealth, determination and friends in the right places, Wayne transforms himself into a symbol. Batman is built intentionally and out of Wayne’s own freedom; other superheroes are born out of necessity and adopt a benevolent mission as a secondary concern. Peter Parker finds himself with the ability to scale walls and shoot webs, so he decides he should use the power to help others, after Uncle Ben warns that “with great power comes great responsibility.” Wayne, on the other hand, feels responsible as a citizen to create his power to enact social change. Without the deep understanding of the enemy that Wayne holds or the developed sense of dedication to a project, Parker’s decision to use his power for good can only appear hollow and hasty.

**Accountability and anguish.** The American narrative of “freedom” as a very positive thing; we think of it as triumphant liberty from stifling oppression. For existentialists, freedom is a double-edged sword which can be put into other, less charged terms such as abandonment or detachment. Man is set into the world with no guiding path or absolute moral rules. Without a higher power to judge or absolve, man is faced with full accountability for his actions, a

---

realization perhaps best understood through Sartre’s notion of anguish. Anguish is the emotion felt by man when he faces the world, understands his full freedom and responsibility, and realizes that there is no ground on which to base his actions. Man is faced with infinite possibilities coupled with a lack of external justification or direction: this is the feeling Sartre channels when he alleges that man is “condemned to be free.”

Existentialist freedom is not a blank check for impunitive action in a meaningless world. As discussed in chapter 2, existentialist subjectivity denies the existence of objective truth, not the existence of any truth at all. Just because the world has no absolute values or meaning in itself does not mean that man acts in a value vacuum; rather, existentialism asserts that man must operate within a plane of values that he establishes. This task of creation and self-definition is why Sartre feels terror within freedom.

Nietzsche claimed that no man could escape his own perspective in order to see reality by itself, resulting in an unlimited number of perspectives. “We cannot exclude the possibility that it contains infinite interpretations. Once again the great horror takes hold of us.” Perspectivism denies any universal ground, cementing the loss of certainty begun by the loss of order and perceived meaning in the post-modern world.

2. Application of freedom

Denial of freedom. Freedom is a condition of existence. To be alive is to be free, which is to have an open future. Lack of freedom is characterized by death because it is impossible to exist without that existence constantly extending into the future. It is impossible to escape freedom, but it is possible to ignore it, a condition de Beauvoir called the serious and Sartre

37Sartre Humanism 296.
38Nietzsche Science 166-167.
referred to as bad faith. The serious mood is characterized by the acceptance of the world as given and ideas as fixed and absolute; bad faith is living synthetically by unquestioned external labels.  

For example, superheroes like Spiderman live in the condition of the serious because they confine themselves to the choice between being the good-superhero or bad-villain. For Wayne, there are infinitely more shades of gray and countless paths open to pursuit. He is unconstrained by conventional labels or rules. De Beauvoir explained the condition of the serious man as such: “in his eyes, human inventions, words, actions, and values are given facts, as inevitable as the sky and the trees. This means that the world in which he lives is a serious world, since the characteristic of the spirit of seriousness is to consider values as ready-made things.”

Acceptance of freedom and the free spirit. Sartre found the tyranny of choice disturbing, but Nietzsche found a way to depict it in a positive light. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche applauds the advanced “free spirit,” or the unconfined man who can float between multiple perspectives, leaving or staying whenever he pleases. Nietzsche defines the free spirit:

One could conceive of a pleasure and strength in self-determination, a freedom of the will in which a spirit takes its leave of every faith, every wish for certainty, practiced as it is in supporting itself on slender cords and possibilities, and dancing even by abysses. Such a spirit would be the free spirit par excellence.

Perspectivism is the condition of life, he claimed, so there can be no perception that is any more true or valid than another. This applies to personal viewpoints and interpretations, but it also speaks to the fluidity of values and ideas: there are no longer any absolute values or universal truths. In The Ethics of Ambiguity, de Beauvoir further explored this detachment. “Yes, it is because there are real dangers, real failures, and real earthly damnation that words like victory,

---

40 De Beauvoir 35.
41 Nietzsche Science 155.
wisdom, or joy have meaning. Nothing is decided in advance, and it is because man has something to lose and because he can lose that he can also win.”

3. Wayne as free spirit

In order to become a free spirit, man must fully recognize his freedom. Wayne does this by breaking free: from his past, from the League of Shadows, and from conventional superhero expectations and boundaries. He must break free in order to operate on a plane where nothing holds him down to one perspective. Wayne is a free spirit because he keeps his interpretations of ideals like justice, balance, good and evil malleable; he operates on a higher level than people unable to reevaluate and update their perceptions. Non-free spirits let their past determine their actions, allow their present attachments to tie them down, and remain chained to unchallenged values that they believe are fixed and given.

*Break from the past.* The death of Wayne’s parents is the most formative event of his youth; he feels responsible for their death (as the reason they found themselves in a dark alley instead of safely inside the opera) and copes by burying his guilt in rage.\(^\text{43}\) His rage motivates his plan to kill Chill at the hearing, gets him kicked out of college, and provokes his foolish confrontation of mob boss Falcone. Wayne’s rage defines his actions until he meets Ducard and is trained as a member of the League of Shadows, where he is forced to deal with his suppressed emotions. He gains control of his anger and lets himself feel his guilt instead of shoving it down within, a practice which rendered him violent with frequent lash-outs. He leaves his anger in his past.

\(^{42}\)De Beauvoir 34.

\(^{43}\) *Batman Begins.*
Bats become Wayne’s biggest fear when he falls down the well in his backyard and is attacked by a camp of the dark, winged creatures. *Batman Begins* is punctuated with flashbacks to his time in the well, as often as, if not more often than, flashbacks to the murder of his parents. His fear of bats is just as formative as the death of his parents. During the climax of Wayne’s training with the League of Shadows, Ducard prompts him to inhale a fear-inducing hallucinogen; the fear manifests as large groups of bats obscuring the light while diving in and around the other combatants. His fear has control over him, acting as a paralyzing agent; by facing it and controlling his physical reaction to the terror, he thus masters his fear.

Furthermore, Wayne symbolically gains control of his fear by making the symbol of his alter ego a bat. He places his secret headquarters, otherwise known as the Batcave, in the place he used to fear the most: the well and adjoining caverns under Wayne Manor where bats nest. He harnesses the dark nature of bats and sublimes his greatest fear into his greatest asset and power.

By gaining control of his fear and letting go of his anger, Wayne disconnects himself from binding aspects of his past. Earlier in his life, these were features that exerted a lot of influence on his actions and on the course of his life; after removing their hooks from himself, he is free to make decisions without their bias or manipulation. He can never be fully free from his past fear and anger; rather, he acknowledges them from a calm, controlled distance. Wayne even physically separates himself from his past when he boards up the well he fell into as a child during the closing scene of *Batman Begins*.

_Break from The League of Shadows._ The League of Shadows poses a problem for Wayne. Ra’s Al Ghul and the members of the League maintain a very precise, inflexible interpretation of justice. For Al Ghul, justice is balance and must be carried out independent of human
compassion; he sees it as weakness, since criminals capitalize on it in order to get away with even more crimes. Ducard repeatedly uses the label “criminal” as an indicting, conclusive brand. After a man commits a crime, Ducard resolves that it defines him and he can never change. As a member of any larger organization, man loses flexibility of interpretation because he must regard, or becomes absorbed in, the authority of his superiors. In this case, Ducard asks Wayne to execute a farmer accused of a crime in order to prove to Al Ghul that he is ready to do what is necessary to pursue the League’s definition of justice. Others would likely accept the definition of the respected and seemingly wise Al Ghul rather than question it; instead, Wayne defects from the organization when he realizes that their interpretations of justice are incompatible. He literally and metaphorically casts off the bindings of a singular perspective during the ensuing battle with Al Ghul and Ducard.

“Your compassion is something your enemies will not share,” Ducard warns Wayne. “That’s why it’s so important. It separates us.” Wayne’s compassion is instrumental in his definition as a free spirit: compassion is the ability to see the world through someone else’s eyes and to experience their problems as your own. Compassion is the most basic way that man can experience many different perspectives. It doesn’t reach nearly as deep as Nietzsche’s free spirit, but it is the beginning because it allows man to reevaluate his perceptions and to start seeing through another. Wayne gains this compassion after purposefully seeing the world from another’s perspective. He travels far from Gotham City to a place where no one recognizes him in order to live a life of poverty of petty crime. “I lost a lot of assumptions about the simple nature of good and evil,” Wayne admits. By the time he is faced with the task of killing the farmer, he has learned enough and gained enough compassion to refuse. A younger, more naïve

---

44 *Batman Begins.*
45 *ibid.*
Wayne may have carried through with the League’s order with minimal or no hesitation. Instead, his character and spirit has developed enough to avoid ignorant obedience.

*Break from traditional superhero morality.* Batman operates on a different ethical plane than do other classic superheroes. As discussed in chapter 2, he takes advantage of guerilla fighting techniques and utilizes fear as his main weapon against his enemies. Figures like Superman or Wonder Woman are tied to stricter ethical boundaries; they act as arms of the law as types of super-enforcers. Superman would never hide in the shadows or use dark theatricality to frighten and gain leverage over his opponent; instead, he would charge in, flags flying and voice booming. He pursues a concept of good that matches up with, and finds no reason to question, civil law, filling in where the police cannot reach. Wayne fights on the level of his opponent, whereas Superman is defined by fighting on a higher, more “ethical” level than his opponent.

Wayne works in tandem with the police of Gotham City and Lieutenant Gordon, but one of his most effective tools is the ability to operate outside of the law when necessary. In part, his law-breaking draws on the Kantian concept where the ends justify the means; in another part, he breaks the law where it has flaws. It is important to note that the justice system Batman works with is depicted as much more flawed and corrupt than the justice system aided by Superman. This difference fosters questioning and reevaluation of certain practices; within Metropolis, good/legal and bad/illegal are clearly defined and there is no reason to question or doubt. In Gotham, ethics and morality become a bit more fuzzy, characteristic of the postmodern uncertainty of Nolan’s Batman franchise.

Although the definitions are obscured, it is useful to define good and evil in Nolan’s terms. He purposefully blurs the boundaries between Ducard, Wayne, the Joker, and Dent in
order to illustrate the malleable nature of good and evil and undermine the certainty often presented by superhero narratives. The only thing that links Nolan’s “good” guys (Dent, Wayne, Alfred Pennyworth, Lucius Fox, Rachel Dawes) is, on a literal level, the resistance of corruption; on a deeper, more basic level, they are connected by compassion. Nolan’s “good” guys care about other people and the benefit of society in general more than they care about personal gain, whereas Nolan’s “bad” guys (Falcone, the Joker, corrupt cop Flass, Wayne Enterprises executive Earle, Al Ghul) seek personal benefit and destruction, through greed or power, with little concern for others. In Nolan’s depictions, compassion is the largest and perhaps the only difference between a hero and villain.

*Compassion and an ethic of freedom.* Compassion was mentioned earlier in conjunction with Wayne’s free spirit. Compassion aids in understanding to allow for movement between perspectives, but it also is the cornerstone of de Beauvoir’s *Ethics of Ambiguity*. She claims that every man’s freedom is interconnected with and amplified by the freedom of other men. When two free men are together, the possibilities of each man’s open future are multiplied by the presence of the other. For this reason, de Beauvoir states that it is unethical to limit another man’s freedom; in other words, killing another man inhibits your own freedom and is therefore self-limiting: “my freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge in an open future: it is other men who open the future to me.”

It is in this respect for the freedom of other men that Wayne embodies an existentialist ethic.

In these ways, Wayne is what Nietzsche refers to as a “free spirit.” He breaks away from the external influence of his past fear and anger, organizations with rigid and narrow interpretations, and role expectations. He is influenced by all three, yet determined by none. He has a “freedom of the will” in which he is capable of founding his actions within himself and not

---

46De Beauvoir 82.
on a “wish for certainty.” As a free spirit, Wayne is able to question assumptions such as the main question of *The Dark Knight*: is a vigilante good or bad for order and society?

The free spirit and the superhero narrative. *The Dark Knight* explores the value and longevity of the hero: “Either you die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain,” Dent muses. Dent and Wayne both struggle with what it means to be a hero. Dent loses himself in the ideal of justice; when that is threatened he loses his mind and literally turns into the villain, emerging as Two-Face. With no pregiven essence, man has the freedom to create himself through his actions; the flip side of freedom is the possibility to vary over time and make choices inconsistent with your past values and ideals. Sartre found this possibility frightening, and particularly illuminated it through his metaphor of walking along a precipice: man can step carefully and hold onto the guard rail, or he can throw himself over the edge. All are possible: the possibility of negative or opposite conduct is horrifying and another form of anguish. Dent fears that power will corrupt Batman; the real threat to the “hero” figure is inelasticity. Dent is incapable of flexibility in his notion of justice; when Dawes dies, it shatters as he suffers an existential crisis. If he had been able to bend his interpretation, he could have adjusted his actions accordingly and maintained his commitment to justice and sanity.

Likewise, Wayne deals with the possibility of corruption and the deviation it would cause from his commitment to protect Gotham. Unlike Dent, Wayne keeps his interpretation of a protector or hero fluid. Wayne decides to absorb Dent’s crimes and take the blame in order to keep Dent’s legacy untarnished in the eyes of Gotham citizens. Because he can modify his interpretation of right and wrong, he is able to remain Gotham’s protector. “You’ll condemn me, set the dogs on me…because that’s what needs to happen. Because sometimes the truth isn’t

---

47 *The Dark Knight.*
48 Sartre *Nothingness* 327.
good enough. Sometimes, people deserve more,” Wayne’s voiceover muses as he escapes into
the night. “He’s the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now. So we’ll hunt him,
because he can take it. Because he’s not our hero…he’s a silent guardian, a watchful protector: a
dark knight,” Lt. Gordon concludes in the closing scene of The Dark Knight.49 This is the
practical application of Nietzsche’s free spirit; Wayne’s ability to move between perspectives
and remain fluid renders him more completely free than a man tied down to one absolute, fixed
perspective.

Wayne’s concept of justice evolves over the course of the films as well. He begins
without the ability to separate justice from revenge and ends with a very different idea of what
justice means. At the hearing for his parents’ murders, Wayne shows up gun in hand, planning to
shoot Joe Chill in order to feel better and balance the scales of justice. Wayne is prevented from
acting when Falcone’s thug shoots Chill first, but the intention and undiluted anger remained and
his anger undiluted. By the time Wayne has traveled the world, trained with the League of
Shadows, stood up for himself and developed Batman, he has changed his interpretation quite a
bit. He has the opportunity to kill the Joker, who barely a day before had murdered Wayne’s love
Dawes, but instead lets him live. Wayne even saves the Joker as he falls off the side of the
skyscraper; this deviation from his inaction to save Ducard in Batman Begins stands in stark
contrast.

        Not every man can utilize his freedom to the fullest and be a free spirit due to the limiting
qualities of fear. Nietzsche wrote that innumerable perspectives would be “a great horror.”50
Infinite interpretations are frightening because they are unknown, and fear stems from the

49 The Dark Knight.
50 Nietzsche Science 141.
unknown. As Ducard instructs Wayne, “men fear most what they cannot see.”\textsuperscript{51} The lack of a concrete answer and certain meaning is terrifying. There is a safe quality to certainty and absolutes; elasticity of meaning is shaky and uncomfortable. It’s much easier for man to ignore his freedom and the anguish and uncertainty that accompanies by it by remaining a serious man.

4. The will to power

What drives man to utilize this freedom? Nietzsche’s concept of man’s “will to power” states that man feels a drive to exert power, over others or over his own actions. “A man who wills commands something within himself which renders obedience…we are at the same time the commanding and the obeying parties,” Nietzsche writes of free will’s desire to exert power.\textsuperscript{52} Man desires to achieve things, to go beyond his facticity and become “more” than what he is at any given point in time. This implies that man fundamentally dislikes being controlled or at the mercy of another. According to de Beauvoir, freedom must have a direction and an intention; for Nietzsche, the use of freedom to fulfill man’s will is a basic human drive.

First, man exists. His facticity is as inescapable as his freedom. Freedom, however, gives him the power to go beyond or transcend his facticity, thereby defining his own essence. For example, a man is not born a coward; he may develop a shy personality, but this does not determine his actions in the face of a bully. A shy man is free to stand up to a bully or to accept the abuse. Man has the power to define himself through his actions. The shy man who passively accepts the bully’s abuse because people call him shy and weak is living in bad faith: he conducts himself based on external labels instead of breaking free.

\textsuperscript{51}Batman Begins.
\textsuperscript{52}Nietzsche Beyond 13.
Man’s tendency to push forward, to transcend his facticity and go beyond himself has its roots in freedom. “The death of an individual is not a failure if it is integrated into a project which surpasses the limits of life,” de Beauvoir asserted in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. He must use his freedom to engage with the world and to define who he is, his essence. Man does this by making meaning.
CHAPTER 4: REBIRTH

MAKING MEANING

1. Facing freedom and transcending oneself

“To exist is to become.”53 Kierkegaard posited that man is constantly in the making. In line with Sartre’s assertion that existence precedes essence, Kierkegaard asserted that humans are not predetermined because they are never finished.54 Man’s freedom enables him to give himself form through his actions: “a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings,” Sartre wrote.55 In other words, man’s self is intangible and can be assessed only through his acts.

Man’s self is dynamic due to the implicit tension between his temporal and eternal natures.56 In other words, due to man’s capability to take a mental step back and view his life as the sum of each individual, fleeting temporal moment, he can yearn for an eternal meaning of life. Because he can see his existence as a whole narrative, he seeks the thread that ties each event to the prior and to the subsequent. In this pursuit man strives to discover meaning, and it is in his striving that man creates his own meaning and thereby develops his self.

Transcending facticity through unity. Sartre discusses transcendence and facticity in The Humanism of Existentialism as two important conditions of human life.57 Man has facticity because he exists in a physical sense; trees and stones have facticity as well because it is the basic fact of existence. Transcendence is man’s movement beyond, to overcome facticity; this

54Sartre Humanism 292.
55ibid. 300.
56Kierkegaard Fear 30.
57Sartre Nothingness 333.
second level occurs when he can question his mere givenness and rise above his circumstances by assuming control of his own life. By taking control, man utilizes his freedom to create his self and to form meaning in his life.

In order to create a coherent self and achieve broad unity, man’s acts must be coherent. The idea that man’s actions must be consistent in order to express a self appears under different names in the work of all four philosophers featured in this analysis: to Sartre and de Beauvoir, the project; to Kierkegaard, the passionate commitment (or faith); to Nietzsche, the life of a single style.58 Unity must be a purposeful decision due to the inescapable cleavage, or disconnection, between the past and the future. As man completes his actions, they fall away into the past, neither defining him nor fully leaving him. “We must try, through our living projects, to turn our own account that freedom which was undertaken in the past and to integrate it into the present world,” wrote de Beauvoir.59 Man affirms his past and endorses his future by acting in a unified manner. According to Kierkegaard, the separation of humans from animals is the unique use of consciousness to remove oneself from the physical present and see one’s life as a expansive storyline. Due to this capacity, only human beings can derive meaning from overarching unity.

Active creation versus passive acceptance. If man is defined by the global unity of his actions, he has the possibility to choose any path or project he pleases. In fact, according to this canon, man is fully responsible for the individual he becomes because he has actively made himself into that person. On one hand, man is influenced by the things he cannot control: environmental characteristics, the actions of others, and various events in his life. Yet, according to the dogma of existentialism, man defines himself actively, not passively. Passive definition of

58 Sartre Humanism 300; De Beauvoir 27; Kierkegaard Postscript 86; Nietzsche Science 144.  
59 De Beauvoir 93.
the self brings us back to Sartre’s notion of bad faith and de Beauvoir’s serious man: accepting definitions from an external source without challenging them is not taking responsibility for yourself. For example, if a bully steals a child’s lunch money every day, the child has the decision to become a victim, to stand up for himself, or to devise his own reaction. What matters is that he actively crafts his own narrative; instead of taking on the label “victim” or “fighter,” the child has the option to decide that he is a smart person for strategically not challenging the bully or that he is a strong person who doesn’t let others take advantage of him. The important part is that the child freely and actively chose, whatever the decision may be.

The second caveat of existentialist self-creation is that action needs intentionality, or that life needs a project toward which to strive. De Beauvoir wrote that man himself is the project: “man is a being of the distances, a movement toward the future, a project.” Actions must consistently seek a common goal for man to take total advantage of his capability to self-create. The prominence of subjectivity assumed by existentialist philosophy puts the full power of self-definition on the self: man holds the pen in the crafting of his own story.

Self-creation and the leap of faith. Kierkegaard translates this unity of action into faith. Man is pressed to act consistently and to choose a style, a project, and a path; yet due to the uncertainty of the modern world, he has nothing on which to ground his decision. Faith is similar: there is no way to prove the existence of a higher power; believers are called to take the “leap of faith” by trusting without a foundation. “The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite,” or in other words, truth is created by man’s avid belief in something he acknowledges to be impossible to substantiate.61

60 De Beauvoir 102.
61 Kierkegaard Postscript 92.
Man begins the journey to determining the meaning of life when he realizes that it cannot be found; it must be made, and he must make it.

Successful transcendence: Batman and the Joker. Bruce Wayne and the Joker are both examples of self-creating, facticity-transcending individuals. The scopes of their deeds are radically different when compared against conventional morality and ethics, but under the creeds of existentialism, both men live respectably full lives. Both use a sublimated will to power to challenge the given values of their society, take their lives into their own hands, and direct their acts toward a project, but vary in degree: Wayne transcends his facticity, but the Joker one-ups him in intensity of transcendence on all fronts.

Ubermensc and the sublimated will to power. Before man can challenge his facticity or direct the creation of his self, he needs to develop the faculty that enables those movements: the sublimated will to power. Nietzsche’s übermensch, or overman, is a man who has overcome himself to become something more in the movement. He writes of man’s basic drive to continually exert power to become more: “a living thing seeks beyond all else to discharge its strength, life itself is Will to Power.”62 Man uses his power to gain control of his world; Nietzsche discusses free will as an example of man’s will to power as well. Free will involves the submission of man to his own authority: “a man who wills commands something within himself that renders obedience.”63 The sublimated will to power pushes for control, especially at man’s most fundamental level: control of the self. This is similar to the mundane concept of self-control, but instead of controlling his actions in one sector of his life in pursuit of a long-term goal, man must control every aspect of his life in pursuit of a life-long goal. The control of the

---

62Nietzsche Beyond 10.
63ibid.13.
self is the most sophisticated outlet for man’s sublimated will to power because it results in self-
creation.

Levels of the will to power. Man’s will is both active and intentional; it extends into the
future with purpose. He constantly seeks to discharge this will and govern his world, but there
are levels that increase in efficiency and profundity. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche uses a
man’s possession of a woman as an example of his will to power over another. 64 He may possess
her on a shallow level, physically and sexually. To possess her on a slightly deeper level, he may
test her and convince her to make a sacrifice for his sake. On the deepest level, he convinces her
to make a sacrifice for his sake, but with the complete understanding that she does so not for a
“phantom” of him, but for his true self. At this point, he can be sure that he possesses her wholly.
He refers to this deep possession as the sublimated will to power, or the pursuit of a deeper
satisfaction as the result of refined self-control. To reach this level, man must suppress the
immediate instinct for control over another in favor of the later, more profound domination. The
overman is a man who can overcome his own drive for instant power in favor of deeper,
sublimated power.

Wayne and self-creation. The sublimated will to power is not a foreign concept in any
crime film; the villain rises to the top of his crime empire by wielding a very developed faculty
of self-control and seeking a deeper satisfaction than the hot-tempered goons who make up his
army. In the classic crime drama The Godfather (1972), Don Corleone rises to the top of his
regime through the avoidance of hasty action and emphasis on calculated, levelheaded planning.

64 Nietzsche Beyond 62.
Rather than hold his enemies at gun point to attain immediate, fleeting control, he wraps them up in favors and traps them into doing his wishes on their own volition.\textsuperscript{65}

Wayne demonstrates a sublimated will to power as well. When we see Wayne in \textit{Batman Begins} as an adolescent, his angry, volatile nature limits him to a shallow will to power. He picks fights, hastily confronts Falcone, and contemplates shooting Joe Chill to avenge his parents’ murders. As the film progresses, Wayne learns two parallel lessons: how to sublimate his will to power, and to grasp the difference between revenge and justice. The self-control necessary for deeper satisfaction is the same faculty necessary to overcome the instinct for revenge. By the time Wayne has trained with the League of Shadows, he has gained the foresight to change his goal from killing Chill to restoring order to Gotham. Both actions would have been in tribute to his dead parents, but killing Chill would have resulted in an immediate, fleeting satisfaction while restoring order would realize Dr. and Mrs. Wayne’s ultimate goal and generate immense fulfillment for Wayne. Because he can delay gratification and domination, Wayne represents Nietzsche’s overman with a sublimated will to power. The sublimated will allows him to extend his self into the future in pursuit of a complex, long-term project that also creates the unity of his self. Wayne is able to make coherent meaning in his life due to his ability to sublimate his drive for power.

Equipped with a sublimated will to power, Wayne challenges his facticity by breaking free from external labels and leveling a campaign against the rampant corruption in Gotham City. Wayne leaves labels behind when he puts his angsty, entitled rich kid persona behind him. Society expected him to buy hotels, go on cruises and throw massive parties for Gotham’s elite. It would have been easy for Wayne to slip into that role and accept a cushy life of wealth, power

and prestige. He could have hosted well-meaning philanthropic galas to aid the “other half,” but instead he chose to experience other ways of life firsthand. By traveling the world and learning what it meant to be poor or a criminal, Wayne overcame the circumstances of his birth. He transcended his given facticity by taking a step back, looking at his life, and deciding if his given and current path was the one he truly wanted. Falcone does Wayne a favor by roughing him up and mocking his confrontation; his harsh, true words push Wayne to reevaluate his assumptions and break free from his bubble.

Wayne takes the course of his life into his own hands by developing Batman as an alter ego in order to force change within Gotham. Wayne challenges his facticity by turning himself into a legend and an icon; through this transformation he transcends his mere givenness to become something eternal. “People need dramatic examples to shake them out of their apathy and I can’t do that as Bruce Wayne. As a man I’m flesh and blood. I can be ignored, I can be destroyed, but as a symbol…as a symbol I can be incorruptible, I can be everlasting.” With nothing more than determination and wealth, Wayne constructs a tool to fight crime and a symbol around which Gotham can rally. His deliberate construction of his alter ego is symbolic of his deliberate construction of his self and stands in contrast to the accidental developments of peer superhero characters like Spiderman or Superman. He develops his self through this symbol, sublimating his fear of bats into his trademark and crafting his own guerilla fighting techniques. These methods challenge his society’s ethical values. His actions go outside of common ethical code: law enforcement directly opposes vigilanteism. Western society has agreed that vigilanteism is unacceptable because it has no order, no checks or balances and gives one individual too much authority and power. Although he challenges societal values, in the end he doesn’t find himself too far away from typical morality and social constructs.

\[66\] *Batman Begins.*
The Joker and self-creation. The Joker, likewise, demonstrates a sublimated will to power. His terroristic ploys required planning, waiting and the delay of gratification he may have gained from slicing a victim up with his knives. He gets greater satisfaction out of making Wayne choose between saving Rachel or Dent than he does from personally punching him. If anything, the Joker displays a deeper sublimation of his will to power because his schemes are orchestrated with intense patience and detail.

The Joker has challenged his facticity to the point where he has all but completely detached himself from societal values. He is impossible to understand, which is the source of the terror he inspires in others. Gotham’s mobsters, as well as Wayne, find it very difficult to defeat him because he has no intelligible goal. When threatened for information by Batman, the Joker exclaims:

Don't talk like one of them. You're not! Even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak, like me! They need you right now, but when they don't, they'll cast you out, like a leper! You see, their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these... these civilized people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve.67

The Joker claims that people are “only as good as the world allows them to be,” suggesting that the average citizen of Gotham is limited by their shared moral code. He gets to the heart of the biggest problem of “greater good” morality: consensus does not equate with objective truth. Consensus is simply the summation of many subjective truths. Taking subjective agreement for objective truth limits the people of Gotham in their actions and reactions. In contrast, the Joker is absolutely free because he has no binding moral code. He has freed himself up to do anything; he considers this complete adoption of freedom part of an evolution that leaves him “ahead of the curve.”

67The Dark Knight.
The Joker and Wayne both take their lives into their own hands by consciously creating their selves, but again, the Joker takes it even further. Rather than creating an alter ego and maintaining a “normal” self, the Joker fully becomes this ego. He comes into the story in *The Dark Knight* with no name, no backstory, and no explanation of his development. He varies the story of his scars to his different victims to further highlights his obscured source. The Joker decided long ago that, along with morality, reality was a construct that he was not tied to in any concrete way. He explains the subjective nature of reality when observing perceived order:

> You know what I've noticed? Nobody panics when things go "according to plan." Even if the plan is horrifying! If, tomorrow, I tell the press that, like, a gang banger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics, because it's all "part of the plan." But when I say that one little old mayor will die, well then everyone loses their minds!  

The Joker enjoys creating chaos because it brings the subjective nature of reality to the forefront. As discussed in chapter 1, perceived disorder inspires fear and panic. The fine line between order and disorder is determined subjectively; the absurdity of that realization pushed the Joker past societal constraints. Somehow he separated himself fully enough from society to engage in supremely antisocial and deviant deeds while feeling little or no remorse. By detaching himself from community morality, or perhaps even all morality, the Joker has made himself into an outsider. He dresses, speaks and acts unconventionally. His ridiculous make-up, purple suit, facial ticks and mannerisms represent his deviation from conventional society and conventional thought.

The fact that the Joker pushes further than Wayne in challenging his facticity and exploring the full range of life paths in front of him is an important one. For the audience, Wayne is unconventional but not impossible to sympathize with and understand. We can root for him as he steps back from his life and questions his assumptions; we can root for him as he takes control.

---

68 *The Dark Knight.*
of his life and constructs a persona in the name of the greater good. His actions reflect existentialist transcendence, but not at the extreme level that the Joker displays. Wayne challenges his assumptions and his facticity in order to transcend them, but his ultimate conclusion does not fall too far away from the norm for the audience to understand. We are familiar with the superhero narrative and the tragic hero archetype; Wayne’s project is classic, but his methods reflect the uncertainty of foundation felt by the average man. Wayne retains his civilian identity, which often makes his adoption of the Batman costume seem like a man stepping into a character that he can always step out of again. The Joker, on the other hand, challenges his facticity and finds himself so far beyond it that every avenue has opened: he can murder, he can steal, he can lie, all without strained glancing back to his original community morality. The Joker has no “normal” persona to fall back on; he is completely and only “the Joker.” He is unintelligible to the audience and necessarily becomes the villain. A man free from all communal morality and ethics is terrifying because he is capable of anything. This demonstrates that existentialism operates on a plane distinct and detached from that of conventional morality. To draw comparisons between the hero and the villain is unsettling because it implies that there is not much tangible difference between two figures that are supposedly the personification of “good” and “evil.” The loss of clear good/evil morality is frightening because it could result in the erosion of the basic trust in, and understanding of, others. The average superhero blockbuster audience member is not ready for that big of a challenge to their current beliefs.

Through the mechanism of a sublimated will to power, Wayne and the Joker challenge their facticity through breaking with conventional values and overcome their circumstances to write their own stories and develop their own selves. Wayne breaks free from his wealthy bubble
to experience the world, challenging societal expectations and morality when he returns to pursue his commitment to justice as his project. He constructs Batman and thereby take the reins of his life. The Joker shows up on the scene already detached from any conventionality, guiding himself toward his project to be an “agent of chaos” in whatever way he pleases.\textsuperscript{69} The passionate pursuit of Wayne and the Joker’s projects (order and chaos, respectively) ensure unity of action and thus coherent selves. Wayne’s alter ego is clearly marked and exaggerated by his deeper Batman voice and bat-shaped gear; likewise, the Joker’s self-crafted persona is exaggerated by his costume and mannerisms. The more each challenges assumptions and tries to build their own selves, the further they transcend above their facticity, the further they deviate the common man. As the Joker retorts to the bank manager in the opening scene of \textit{The Dark Knight}, “what doesn’t kill you simply makes you…stranger.”\textsuperscript{70}

\section*{2. The possibility of an ethic}

\textit{The Dark Knight} presents Wayne and the Joker in the typical superhero-villain character roles, but a deeper analysis reveals that their roles are not black and white. As the film presses on, it becomes harder to define where the line between good and evil falls or if there even is a distinct line. As viewers, we are meant to feel contempt for the Joker because he violates a basic moral code by killing carelessly and remorselessly; on the flip side, we are meant to sympathize with and allow Wayne’s moral transgressions (stealing, breaking and entering, use of violence and fear as a weapon) because he seeks order and the greater good.

Viewer perceptions aside, from an existentialist standpoint the Joker and Wayne are not two opposing ends of a moral continuum. Because existentialism emphasizes subjectivity and the

\textsuperscript{69}\textit{The Dark Knight}.
\textsuperscript{70}ibid.
lack of objective truth, it unavoidably has no absolute foundation on which to judge all actions. Because of this, morality becomes contingent on the situation: the decision to lie or not has no absolute “good” or “bad” value because those qualifiers themselves are relative words. Nietzsche illuminated this point in *The Gay Science* while discussing the importance of acting in a coherent style: “Whether the taste is good or bad means less than one thinks – it is enough that it is one taste!” Without a benchmark for good and bad, how does man guide himself through life’s tougher decisions?

A few attempts at an ethic show up in the texts. Sartre wrote that when man makes a choice, he confirms that choice as if he would have every man act in such a way; the act of selection affirms the value of what he has chosen. In a similar vein, Nietzsche wrote about the eternal recurrence of the same, or the idea that because an finite number of elements exist in a finite number of possible arrangements, over an infinite amount of time, the same events and patterns will eventually recur over and over again. This concept puts extra emphasis on each decision man makes as it implies he will make it over and over again; thus, each choice has extra weight. De Beauvoir suggests an ethic based on the maximization of personal freedom. Man’s relation to other men and their freedoms multiplies his freedom; consequently, the removal of another man takes away his freedom and thus limits the original man’s freedom. Overall, de Beauvoir’s ethic saved “thou shalt not kill” as its main tenet. The sum of these ethics leaves man still without a universal ethical code; however, they serve to emphasize the subjective nature of ethics by communicating that whatever man chooses becomes what is “good” to him. It leaves man with the responsibility of deciding for himself what is ethical.

---

71 Nietzsche *Science* 144.
72 Sartre *Humanism* 293.
73 Nietzsche op. cit. 147-8.
CHAPTER 5:

EXISTENTIALISM IN NOLAN’S OTHER WORK

Nolan’s small but powerful body of work has focused on the inner workings of the human mind. He explores memory failure, illusion-based magic, and dream states in order to build a commentary on postmodern subjectivity, uncertainty, freedom and self-created meaning.

1. Memento

*Memento*, the 1999 film that brought critical acclaim and attention to Christopher Nolan, is a classic chronicle of a man searching for the murderer of his wife. Leonard Shelby’s unique caveat, however, is the practical challenge he faces due to anterograde amnesia; the attacker that killed his wife also left Leonard with a head injury that prevents him from making new memories. His memory is wiped clean every thirty minutes or so, leaving him in a constant state of confusion. He remembers who he is and enough to cling to his revenge mission, but he cannot remember who he is talking to, where he is or where he was going. Nolan amplifies the confusion and disorder by presenting Leonard’s story to the audience in small, reverse-chronological segments. Viewers are as much in the dark as Leonard is in each scene, unable to know what just happened in the few minutes prior.

Fear, uncertainty and subjectivity in *Memento*. “Have I told you about my condition?”

Leonard frequently reminds those around him that he cannot make new memories. His disorder is very unsettling because it removes any discernable cause-and-effect pattern from his life. Every time Leonard “wakes up,” his mental slate has been wiped clean and he has to redefine his reality in an instant. He does not know how he received the slashes on his face or why he feels

---

angry; all he can do is observe his surroundings and attempt to deduce a list of details and inferences. Leonard’s condition is an exaggeration of man’s inability to ever know absolute truth. Leonard lives an almost entirely subjective life. He can never know the whole picture; he can only know the immediate situation and pieces of his past interpretations, just as man can never see the “whole picture” of objective reality.

Leonard claims to discount memories and trust only facts (one tattoo reads “Memory is Treachery”), but his condition necessitates his transformation into an almost wholly subjective person. Leonard cannot move beyond his own instincts, perceptions and interpretations because he cannot trust anyone else. Leonard is perpetually lost: without his memories to ground him, he is forever floating in the realm of uncertainty and is easily deceived. His solution involves writing down and even tattooing a large part of his body with important information and conditioning himself through repetition to perform basic tasks, including the habit of transcribing vital information. Leonard feels certain that his notes are trustworthy because it is his own handwriting, but he does not realize that he has the capability to deceive himself. After his friend Teddy reveals the truth to him, Leonard makes the conscious decision to let himself forget the reality of his fabricated investigation (he has already completed his mission by killing the “guilty man” several times), instead opting to continue the romantic quest and lead himself into killing Teddy as another perpetrator. This is not he first time that Leonard has deceived himself; Teddy makes it clear that Leonard’s wife survived the attack and that the cautionary tale about Sammy Jenkis is really Leonard’s story.

Nolan infuses Leonard’s story with irony as he clings to fact as a form of certainty. Leonard is aware that memory is flawed, but he ignores the potential flaw of his own interpretation of events or in his past self’s notes. Teddy warns Leonard that his notes could be

75 *Memento.*
unreliable, to which he rebukes, “Memory is unreliable. Memory can change the shape of a room, it can change the color of a car, and memories can be distorted. They are just an interpretation, they’re not a record. And they’re irrelevant if you have the facts.”Leonard feels like he has figured out how to know the truth, but his notes can and do deceive him. He purposely records Teddy’s license plate number as the main suspect, John G’s, a purposeful and blatant lie. Nolan also planted small distortions for us as well: Natalie’s handwriting on the back of the Ferdy’s Bar coaster changes three times, although Leonard finds Dodd at the Mountcrest Inn, his note reads “MonteRest Inn,” and Jimmy’s facial hair changes in the picture Natalie shows Leonard. Although disillusionment has turned man inward and made him rely on subjectivity for meaning, it doesn’t offer the same certainty that external, objective truths can. Subjectivity and the task of self-creation are necessarily paired with doubt and a form of anguish.

Memento and freedom. For Sartre, freedom is the break between the present and the past, or the independence of man to act in the present and future without letting his past choices determine his future actions. “Freedom is the human being putting his past out of play.” Leonard conflictingly embodies a fully free man as well as an extremely limited man due to his unique condition.

In the context of his post-accident and short-term memory loss life, Leonard is completely free and undetermined by his past actions because he cannot remember them. He has the ability to make a decision at any given time free from his past identity or social role. Leonard takes care of Natalie when she returns with a bruised cheek and bloody lip and does not consider for a second that he would have the capacity to hit a friend or a woman, but in the moments

---

76 Memento.
77 Sartre Nothingness 324.
prior, he was the one who delivered the blow. His previous strike could not hold him back from helping her and sympathizing with her because he was free from the memory of it.

In another way, Leonard is unable to use his freedom: he is tied to his tattoos and the interpretations he leaves himself. Once he writes down a “fact,” it becomes permanent; he has no way of questioning it after he forgets when or why he wrote it. Leonard’s actions are largely determined by his earlier versions of himself, and often by the manipulation of others around him. Leonard is completely helpless when Natalie insults him and reveals her plan to use him to murder her enemies because she hides all of the pens. Leonard is unable to update his previous opinion of Natalie as helpful and is instead stuck back with his earlier note.

His inability to form new memories hurts his freedom in another way. Not only is he tied to his earlier self’s interpretations, but he is unable to move forward from the moment of his wife’s death. His actions are mediated by his anger because he constantly feels the pain and grief of her death. “How am I supposed to heal if I can’t feel time?” For anyone else, the passage of time would dull the anger and obsession, but for Leonard, it remains fresh. In a way, his actions are determined by this inescapable mindset.

The limitations inherent in deficient memory suggest that although mindful distance from the past is necessary, a vast chasm has detrimental effects on man’s freedom. In order to fully exercise freedom of choice, man should be aware of his past but have the power to determine himself independent of the external pressures of the mounted decisions of his past selves. Ideally, Leonard should be able to take into account that Teddy has repeatedly covered for him and looked after him, as well as lied to him and used him to kill drug lords. Instead, Leonard acts out the wish of his irate earlier self by following the license plate back to Teddy and killing him.

---

78 *Memento.*
Sartre elucidates his concept of freedom in another way: man has his facticity, the facts about himself that he cannot change, and he has his transcendence, the man he can become. Human consciousness fills the gap between facticity and transcendence, and therein lies man’s freedom. Man is faced with possibilities and in the process of choosing he is constantly creating himself and striving beyond his facticity. How can Leonard strive beyond his facticity when he does not know what it is anymore? Leonard has moved past his pre-attack self but has no way to update his self image. During their ultimate struggle, Teddy questions Leonard’s sense of self. When Leonard recites his name and hometown, Teddy replies, “That’s who you were, this is what you’ve become!”

Viewers can feel Leonard’s inherent deficit in judgment due to Nolan’s use of backward chronology in storytelling. We do not know what happened before or whom we can trust either: we are just as much in the dark as Leonard. This activity magnifies the investigative aspect of Memento and of Leonard’s life. He is always working backward in an effort to discover the causes of the events in his life because his memories quickly fade. This is highlighted in the opening scene, where Leonard shakes a Polaroid as it develops, but the scene is played backward and we watch the image erase itself from the photograph. He is free from his (post-attack) past in the most literal sense.

Making meaning in Memento. Leonard deals with this loss of order and meaning by instituting a system of habituation and documentation. He compares himself to the case of Sammy Jenkis, a man he knew with similar memory deficiencies: “I have habit and routine to make my life work. Sammy had no reason. Me? Yeah, I have a reason,” Leonard tells Teddy on the phone. The implication is that the solution to meaninglessness and disorder is to create

\[79\text{Memento.}\]
\[80\text{ibid.}\]
one’s own meaning: Leonard finds purpose in his quest to avenge his dead wife. At the climax, Teddy reveals that he has provided Leonard with several John G suspects in the past, all of which Leonard has killed; yet, his memory loss allows him to forever pursue his goal. “I gave you a reason to live. And you were more than happy to help. You don’t want the truth. You make up your own truth,” Teddy alleges. Leonard reconciles the apparently random, meaningless event of his wife’s death by inventing a conspiracy and a reason for her murder. Leonard’s solution confirms that man is unable to live without constructing meaning from the events in his life. Man cannot deal with meaninglessness, so he imposes distinctions like cause and effect onto his world.

Leonard’s life is riddled with self-deception and lies, but that does not make it any less real to him. He operates under the idea that there is an objective reality that he can deduce and figure out through habit and order, yet his actual life depends very little on objective reality. Sartre declared that subjectivity is the starting point: man makes his own meaning, and therefore, objective truth is less important than personal reality.

Leonard transcends his facticity because he has taken his condition into his own hands. Instead of letting his anterograde amnesia define his life, he has risen beyond it to become a detective and even a murderer. Sammy Jenkis’s character is reduced to passively watching commercials on television, but Leonard manages to conduct a somewhat cohesive life on his own. His created self is authentic because he acknowledges his responsibility for his actions. “My wife deserves vengeance. It doesn’t matter if I know about it. Just because there are things I don’t remember doesn’t mean my actions are meaningless. The world doesn’t just disappear because you close your eyes, does it?”

In order to take responsibility, Leonard must convince

81 Memento.
82 Ibid.
himself that an objective reality does exist. He grapples with the horror of pure subjectivity; but he must cling to a belief in objectivity or he would be unable to carve meaning out of his life and actions.

*Memento* demonstrates an existentialist base through the discussion of subjectivity, the impossibility of objective truth, the uncertainty of perception and nonlinearity, emphasis on man’s freedom and his capability of self-creation. *Memento* presents a lot of questions but offers a somewhat dark example of man’s capability for survival in a postmodern world.

### 2. *The Prestige*

Nolan’s 2006 work, *The Prestige*, is concerned with similar themes of modernity, uncertainty, subjectivity and blurry morality. Nolan and his brother Jonathan teamed up as screenwriters to adapt Christopher Priest’s 1995 novel of the same name. The film follows two late nineteenth century British magicians as they compete to construct the best illusion through obsession, sabotage and deception.83

The Prestige and disillusionment. The stage performances of the two magicians, Robert Angier and Alfred Borden, portrayed by Hugh Jackman and Christian Bale, respectively, highlight the historical emergence of science and its possible consequences. They present science as magic, concealing the mechanisms and engineering that create the illusions they perform on stage. The audience finds delight in the tricks, but Angier and Borden both descend into depression and obsession. The audience sees the impossible and believes in the illusion; the magicians know the inner workings and are unable to accept the uncertainty of not understanding another man’s trick. In fact, Angier spends years trying to discover the secret of Borden’s

---

Transported Man illusion. This dichotomy illuminates man’s increasing disillusionment with the world that accompanies the development of science in modernity. The film is infused with an overall apprehension of science; even fanatical inventor Tesla’s project for Angier is treated as a reincarnation of Pandora’s box and comes with a destruction clause.

Uncertainty due to constant deception is a central theme of the film. Magic, at its heart, is simply audience deception: the presentation of the impossible through illusion. Borden and Angier frequently use plants in the audience to aid in the tricks, bypassing the added authenticity of having an audience member participate in the trick. In addition, the discovery of the secret of Borden’s trick leaves the viewers stunned. Borden dedicated his entire life to maintaining the deception that made his illusion so great: Borden, the magician, is actually two identical twins sharing the same life under the same name, taking turns as the performer and as a heavily costumed associate named Fallon.

Uncertainty plays another large role in the film as Angier searches for someone to blame in his wife’s death. When she drowns during a routine water tank escape trick, Angier blames Borden for tying a different, more difficult knot to untie. It is never revealed whether Borden tied a different knot or if something else went wrong. All of this uncertainty and deception serves to exaggerate the inability of man to see objective truth through his subjective perspective in life.

The Prestige, freedom, and making meaning. In regards to freedom and making meaning, both central characters devote their lives to a project and live consistently. Borden and his brother each sacrifice half of their lives in order to act as the same man and maintain the Transported Man trick. In dedication to his deceased wife, Angier dedicates his life to becoming the greatest magician he can, under the name “The Great Danton,” a vision that she had for him. Both men become obsessed with their projects and suffer because of it. They fail to devise a way
to make meaning, instead focused only on the great, likely unattainable end goal. Their obsessions also limit their freedom; their fixations impede them from obtaining meaning from any other source.

The presence of uncertainty and modern disillusionment in The Prestige make the film a postmodern work, certainly. It raises questions about objective truth, contests the assumed benevolence of scientific progress and focuses on the subjectivity of man. However, the lack of concentration on man’s freedom makes the film less of an existentialist work than Batman Begins, The Dark Knight and Memento.

3. Inception

Inception (2010) follows Dom Cobb and his team of information extractors as they attempt to plant, rather than steal, an idea in another man’s mind through his dreams. Typically, they put the subject to sleep and all enter into a dream constructed by the team’s architect. The architect has control of the look and feel of the dream, and is tasked with making it as identical to a normal dream as possible. Because the subject’s mind is less guarded while dreaming, Cobb can enter into the dream and discover the pertinent information in a more elegant way than through clumsier means of interrogation or torture. The new, reverse task of inception is to influence a man at the dream level to subliminally compel him to choose to dismantle his dying father’s energy empire.

Inception and subjectivity. The first tenet of existentialism is the presence of uncertainty and a focus on subjectivity. The majority of the film takes place within the human mind; moreover, at the center of Inception is the assertion that dreams are indistinguishable from

---

reality. To test reality, each member of the team carries a totem that is uniquely weighted in a way only known to the owner; if the totem feels different or falls in a way that is not correct, the owner knows he is in a dream created and controlled by another. Cobb repeatedly tests his totem, a spinning top, in order to make sure that he is in his own reality.

If dreams and reality are indistinguishable, how can one tell what is real and what is a product of the mind? This uncertainty of perception rests on the discovery of the extensive influence of subjectivity on one’s reality. After being exposed to dream after dream and false reality after false reality, Cobb struggles to keep tabs on what is real and what is a dream. His late wife, Mal, killed herself because she was convinced that she was living in a dream, knowing that dying is the shortest route back to reality. She was so convinced that her reality was false that she had no reservations about leaping from a building. The inability to know for sure what is true and what is false destabilizes man and leaves him horizonless, grasping for foundation. Cobb literally has to tell the difference for his own survival, and the impossible task drives him further and further from peace and mental health. He uses his totem as a last effort to ground his discernment of true from false.

Inception and freedom. The second tenet of existentialism is the freedom afforded to man by the destruction of assumptions and human constructs. The comprehension that reality is subjective should offer man the ability to take control of his perceptions of the world; in the art of dream state information extraction, the architect literally creates a world, shaping it to his or her wish. This ultimate control, of not only perception but of physical creation, exaggerates man’s freedom and capabilities. Although man cannot control the world around him, he can control his perception and interpretation of that world; in the dream world, the architect can control everything.
The ethical questions posed by the act of inception stem from the loss of personal freedom. The target, Robert Fischer, will lose some of his own personal freedom when a foreign mind plants an idea within his dream. Uncertainty of perception drives man inward, to a subjective inner state; inception reduces his autonomy through a eccentric, subtle form of mind control. The loss of that freedom, the power to self-create, is jarring. In addition to the idea of false objectivity, Nolan presents a new event for the audience to fear: false subjectivity.

*Inception* raises the bar on the uneasiness and uncertainty surrounding false perception by calling into question the one thing man thought he alone possessed had control over.

Inception *and making meaning.* The third tenet of existentialism holds that man should use his freedom to make his own meaning and to perceive the world in any way that he so chooses. Again, the act of inception poses real problems for this: is it possible to create meaning for someone else? At the end of the film, Fischer decides to split up his father’s empire based on the messages Cobb and his team planted deep within his psyche. He feels that the idea was self-generated and spontaneous; the rest of his life will be based on that very decision and will therefore alter the way that makes meaning. Instead of “I will continue in my father’s footsteps,” his core schema turns to “I will forge an empire for myself,” and because of this, the way he derives satisfaction and meaning from the world will change. It is likely that Fischer would never be wise to the foreign origin of the idea, but if he somehow did become aware of it, his world would crumble and he would begin to doubt every idea he had.

From another perspective, the planted idea could be viewed as a new part of Fischer’s facticity. He still has the choice to pursue the idea or to forget about it. It bares argument that he would not split up the company based on an idea he had in a dream if he was not already predisposed to doing the very same thing. A parallel to the planted idea can be drawn in
undesirable impulses. For patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder, intrusive ideas plague the mind and urge him or her to complete mundane tasks to reduce sensations of anxiety. With the aid of behavioral therapy and some medication, OCD patients can begin to ignore the thoughts. Existentially, they transcend the fact of their obsessions by choosing not to act on them. The same could be said for Fischer; despite the planted idea, he has complete and total freedom of action and perception.

Along with Memento and The Prestige, Inception is an existentialist work because it focuses on post-modern disillusionment, uncertainty of perception and human freedom. Furthermore, it raises complex questions about the nature of subjectivity and possible flaws in man’s ability to make meaning for himself. Nolan has shaped his filmography into a cohesive discussion of man’s position in a subjective, uncertain post-modern world.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

1. Implications of the presence of existentialism in Nolan’s *Batman*

The presence of existentialism in major summer blockbusters indicates that it is a mode of thought relevant to mainstream culture. In this way, *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, along with dozens of other mega films, are reflecting pools for contemporary ideas. Siegfried Kracauer, German film critic often associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, suggested: “what films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions - those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness.” Kracauer’s theory suggests that popular films, though often thin at first glance, reflect much more meaningful information about our culture than we may know.

*Existentialism and isolation.* The characters of Nolan’s filmography serve as excellent case studies of the effect and implications of existentialism. The wide range of existentialist characters, from heroes to villains and everything in-between, demonstrates the uncertainty and ambivalence felt by mass audiences toward existentialist concepts. Nolan presents a picture of existentialism that highlights its antisocial qualities: his main characters find it difficult to make friends with others, work in teams or develop romantic relationships following the death of a loved one.

For example, the Joker fully embraces extreme freedom through chaos, invents an entire identity and commits himself to a lifelong project of chaos. His dedication has turned him into such an outsider that no one can relate to him, not even Wayne, who should have the most philosophical understanding of the Joker’s absurd performances. Wayne experiences isolation as

---

well, losing the ability to relate to his childhood friend and love, Dawes, along with the possibility of a social life. He draws inward to protect his secret and as his philosophy changes.

In addition to being incomprehensible to others, Nolan’s existentialist characters are unable to work in teams or groups. Wayne leaves the League of Shadows, the Joker operates alone, Leonard Shelby refuses most external aid, Robert Angier and Alfred Borden conduct solo magic acts. Dom Cobb of *Inception* is an exception: he works in a group, yet he still pushes his teammates away emotionally and often withdraws into himself. The existentialist men of Nolan’s filmography may be attempting to protect the ones they push away: every main character suffers the death of a major female companion. Wayne and Dent lose Rachel Dawes; Leonard Shelby, Robert Angier and Dom Cobb all lose their wives. Nolan purposefully isolates his existentialist characters emotionally and socially on top of philosophical and intellectual distance from their peers.

With focus on subjectivity and the self, Nolan presents existentialism as inherently antisocial. Conventional morality relies on consensus and the preservation of the community; existentialist morality relies only on the individual. This begs the question of whether or not Nolan is advocating community-wide adoption of existentialism as a postmodern solution: is an individual-focused philosophy applicable en masse? Judging by the chaos of *The Dark Knight*, it is impossible. If each individual designs his or her own meaning structures and creates his or her own values, an organized and copacetic society would be very difficult to maintain. Societies are held together by collaborative rules and shared values; without a common thread, no widespread order can be maintained. If a community were to adopt existentialism, it could no longer function as a community. Humans are social animals; the adoption of existentialism or any individual-focused philosophy would necessitate a large-scale reversal of the human drive for
companionship into a drive for independence. The same anarchy of freedom and detachment that
the individual feels would be felt on a grand scale. It is because of this that the Joker parodies
order and community morality, treating each as a shallow sham.

*The proper use of existentialism.* Nolan presents extraordinary characters as existentialist
examples: Wayne, the Joker, Leonard of *Memento.* Instead of showing an “everyman” who has
adopted the thought, he shows men whose experiences of extreme trauma have served as
catalysts of the acceptance of existentialism. Not only does Wayne have the ability to go beyond,
but he must lead all of the “normal” people who are not capable of the transformation.

Although Wayne and the Joker can both transcend convention, only one of them can still
fit into a community-based society. Discussed in chapter 3, Nolan implies that the only dividing
line between the “good guy” and the “bad guy” is compassion and regard for others. Even
though they operate according to similar philosophies, we as viewers can support Wayne and
condemn the Joker because they differ on one important note: Wayne respects the freedom of
others, whereas the Joker consistently seeks to limit it. By presenting extremely similar cases,
Nolan highlights the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in a postmodern world; by
demonstrating their differences, he reveals a possible collective application of existentialism.
Nolan asserts that only compassion allows for the social use of existentialism. In other words,
man must maintain regard for others in order to maintain order and communal living and protect
himself from the possible abuse of existentialist freedom.

While Nolan illustrates the presence of existentialism in modern thought, it doesn’t
appear that he advocates its widespread adoption. He makes it clear that not everyone is capable,
and the characters who do subscribe to existentialist thought end up isolated, further indicating
the impossibility of an existentialist society. He presents a picture of the modern condition and
offers existentialism as a possible solution along with a cautionary tale of its possible misuse. A subjective philosophy may be useful for the individual, but may fail at the community level unless a high level of compassion is retained. Batman is a tool Wayne uses to restore order; ironically, the philosophy that gives him the power to do so is the very threat against which he is guarding the city. The Joker personifies this threat of anarchy and individualism, further illustrating the deep ambivalence we as a culture feel toward subjectivity, freedom and self-creation.

2. Mirror-image arcs: Batman and existentialism

Existentialism and Nolan’s Batman follow similar paths. Existentialism begins with disillusionment with the demystified world, pushing man inward into subjectivity, where uncertainty bubbles up and creates a pervasive fear of detachment, followed by complete freedom and finalized by the act of making meaning. To simplify, the existentialist feels uncertainty, then freedom, and finally discovers the ability to make meaning and organize his freedom.

_Fear/Uncertainty_. This arc is mirrored in Nolan’s _Batman_ trilogy. We meet Bruce Wayne at a pivotal point in his life, a position where he reflects backward as well as makes proactive changes in his life. He looks back on his childhood trauma and persistent fear that followed his tumble down the well and his parents’ murders; as a young adult, this fear often manifests as anger. Losing a loved one often prompts a search for a reason; when one cannot be found, meaning is lost. Without it, his fear moves in and takes over. Throughout _Batman Begins_, Wayne deals with his own fear, ultimately conquering it and transforming it in to a tool and a weapon.
against his enemies; it is clear that the theme of *Batman Begins* is fear and the defeat of fear. As noted in chapter 1, the original title for Nolan’s first installment was *Batman: The Frightening*.

*Chaos/Freedom.* Fear is followed by chaos in *The Dark Knight*. The Joker refers to himself as an “agent of chaos,” while endeavoring to turn the moral assumptions of Batman, Dent and Gotham City’s residents upside down by constructing extreme moral dilemmas. He blows up the mob’s drug money, kills Dawes, turns Dent into a monster, and makes a mockery of law enforcement. Through these stunts, the Joker manages to shatter any order in Gotham City that Wayne was struggling to maintain. By the end of *The Dark Knight*, Gotham City’s world has been smashed to smithereens, leaving Wayne and the rest of the city free floating in the unknown. From an existentialist perspective, freedom, detachment and the Joker’s chaos are all the same thing.

*Rebirth/Making meaning.* After the existentialist discovers his terrifying and amazing freedom of detachment he must also discover his ability to self-create. He has the power to draw his own organizational conclusions about the world and invent his own meanings. In order to escape the crushing despair of detachment, he must begin constructing his own foundations.

Chapter 1 speculated that *The Dark Knight Rises*, to be released after the completion of this analysis, will focus on rebirth and making meaning. Much like the path of the existentialist from freedom and chaos back into order through self-creation, Wayne must rise from the ashes. At the end of *The Dark Knight*, he has run off in order to take the blame for Dent’s misdeeds. He must orchestrate his own rebirth back into Gotham by recreating Batman in a way that incorporates this blame. He must “rise” as a Dark Knight.

This analysis has proven that existentialist thought is implicit in Nolan’s Batman. Wayne deals with fear, experiences chaos, and will emerge reborn, as the existentialist experiences
uncertainty, feels detachment and freedom, and emerges self-created. Ebert slammed Schumacher’s 1989 campy *Batman & Robin* for having “nothing at its core,” but saw depth in *The Dark Knight*: “*The Dark Knight* is not a simplistic tale of good and evil. Batman is good, yes, the Joker is evil, yes. But Batman poses a more complex puzzle than usual.”86


Touchstone Pictures and Warner Bros., 2006.


