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Inception and Ibn 'Arabi

Abstract

Many philosophers, playwrights, artists, sages, and scholars throughout the ages have entertained and developed the concept of life being a "but a dream." Few works, however, have explored this topic with as much depth and subtlety as the 13thC Andalusian Muslim mystic, Ibn 'Arabi. Similarly, few works of art explore this theme as thoroughly and engagingly as Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception*. This paper presents the writings of Ibn 'Arabi and Nolan's film as a pair of mirrors, in which one can contemplate the other. As such, the present work is equally a commentary on the film based on Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy, and a commentary on Ibn 'Arabi's work based on the film. The paper explores several points of philosophical significance shared by the film and the work of the Sufi sage, and their relevance to contemporary conversations in philosophy, religion, and art.

Keywords

Ibn 'Arabi, Sufism, ma'rifah, world as a dream, metaphysics, *Inception*, dream within a dream, mysticism, Christopher Nolan

Author Notes

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People are asleep and when they die, they awaken
Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad

*In reality, the entire terrestrial existence of the
Prophet (Muhammad) passed thus, as a dream in a dream."*
-Ibn 'Arabi

*Know that you are imagination, and all that you perceive
and about which you say "that's not me", is imagination.
So the whole of existence is imagination within imagination.*
-Ibn 'Arabi

*Is all that we see or seem □
But a dream within a dream?*
-Edgar Allen Poe

My favorite movies have always been somewhat philosophical, inviting me to reflect and re-examine my life and the world, and often making me regard both in a new light. Of no film has this been more true than *Inception*. Hollywood has provided us with several depictions of the world as illusion, but Christopher Nolan's 2011 film surely ranks among the finest. I remember stepping out of the theatre in Amman's Mecca Mall (itself a surreal experience) after seeing *Inception* for the first time, unable to shake the feeling that I was still in some kind of dream. Coincidentally, I had been reading the works of a few thinkers who also describe life as a kind of dream, so I was particularly sensitive to the film's effects. The more I thought about it, and the more times I saw the film, the more profound similarities I began to see between the film and things I had read in the works of Taoist, Hindu, and Muslim thinkers, so I thought I would try to organize my thoughts and share them in this essay. In no way is this essay meant to be a definitive interpretation of what the film really means, but rather an

exploration of some remarkable parallels between the film and certain important mystical ideas in order to illuminate their roles both in the movie, and in Islamic mysticism.

(Note: If you haven't seen Inception yet, please do so before reading on, I won't be summarizing the film or its labyrinthine plot.)

The Movie as a Movie

Before I get into deep philosophical waters, a quick note on a more superficial interpretation of the film is in order, simply because the film works so well on this level as well. A few minutes into the movie, I thought of *Inception* as a clever metaphor for the cinematic experience, where disparate individuals join together to “share the dream.” The dreamers populate the dream with their own “projections” just as an audience brings their collective experiences of love of love, loss, friendship, etc. into the cinema and project them into the film to give the images their significance and meaning. A love interest in the movie really only works if it is a projection of your love interest in the real world, a film's complicated relationship between friends serves as a mirror of your own.

Inception's dream architects find their counterparts in movie directors, who are able to create things that “can't exist, couldn't exist in the real world.” Ariadne can make Penrose Steps, Nolan can make shared dream technology.

Actors can appear to us in different guises as Eames does throughout the film, and play a wide variety of roles in different settings, as Cobb's team does. The fanciful shared dream technology with its chemicals and wires is a metaphor for filmmaking technology in all of its sophistication. Seen in this light, *Inception* is highly self-referential, sometimes humorously so. When Cobb and Ariadne discuss how dreaming works during one of her first shared dreams, describing how the dreamer "fills in details" and creates a sense of the real from the "feel of it," they could just as well have been discussing a movie audience's suspension of disbelief and tolerance for paradoxes, non-sequiturs, and other unrealistic elements in movies. But as Cobb points out, there is a cost to the fantasy; the audience can turn nasty if the architect/director takes too many liberties. The risky "Mr. Charles" gambit, where Cobb tells the subject that he is dreaming, is reminiscent of the risky plot device (employed to good effect in films like *Adaptation*) of self-referentially pointing out the artifice of the movie, and is one of the ways *Inception* subtly does the same: by self-referencing its own self-reference.

Inception and cinema have similar functions: to provide catharsis and to subtly influence the participants, and in several other moments of self-reference, the film tells you what it is doing and how it is doing it. Just as in the dreams it describes, the movie starts right in the middle of the action. We arrive with Cobb "on the shore of the subconscious" with no idea how he got there. All of these

elements suggest that we should understand the movie as a depiction of itself, as an image of a mirror in a mirror, as one big shared dream.

But I believe the film has deeper resonances, far older and more profound than even Descartes' famous dream argument,¹ which the film will surely evoke for most Western audiences. In striking fashion, *Inception* illustrates many important themes of Islamic mysticism (which can be found in many other spiritual traditions as well), particularly those developed in the writings of the tremendously influential 13th-Century Andalusian mystic, Ibn 'Arabi. Stylistically, the constant frame and narrative shifts that characterize the film are reminiscent of the structure of the Qur'an (and Ibn 'Arabi's own writing), which constantly leaps from one narrative to another while maintaining a mysterious structural and formal unity, much like the film. In this literature and *Inception*, this structural unity is maintained in part due to the repetition of various themes and motifs throughout the different narrative frames. The chapters of the Qur'an often begin a story in the middle, connect it to another narrative, jump to poetic meditations and exhortations on a particular range of topics, before returning to the first story. As a result, such mutli-layered structures, or framed stories within a story, became popular narrative devices in Islamic literature (such as the *Arabian Nights*, 'Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, and Rumi's *Mathnawi*), in no small part due to their resonance with the structure of the Qur'an and the worldview it shaped in which imagination and multiple levels of reality play a

significant role.² The same could equally be said about Ancient Greek philosophy, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, the mystical traditions of Christianity and Judaism, and really any other tradition with an elaborated concept of “the world as a dream/imagination/illusion.” An analysis of *Inception* from these perspectives would be fascinating, but is beyond my capacity.

It doesn't matter if the top is spinning or not

Before I continue, a quick aside about the much-debated end of the film is in order. I take the position that the film's end is meant to be ambiguous and ambivalent, and I am completely uninterested in the director's intentions or if, at the end, Cobb is “really” in a dream or back to reality. Part of the point is that the film is a dream, a phantom, a story, an illusion, so there is no “what really happens” on that level of reality. Dreams, like good movies and literature, are ambiguous and resist being pinned down to simple, literal descriptions, and this is simply the nature of all imaginal reality (more on this later). For the purposes this essay, I will take the perspective that whether or not the top stopped spinning, the film ends with Cobb still in a dream state, and in fact, Cobb has been in a dream state throughout the entire film. The entire action of the film takes place in a dream, the impossible dream technology with all of its logic-bending features, all the characters, everything, is part of a dream. In short, even if the top falls, he's still dreaming because the top we see only ever existed in a dream.

There are several reasons to support adopting this perspective, ranging from the trivial (in the final scene, his children are wearing the same clothing and are in the exact same place and position as the last time he saw them years ago without having aged a day) and the nitpicky (as many viewers are fond of pointing out, the laws of the dream technology don't seem to be consistent. This is to be expected, because such wonderful absurdities only exist in dreams, as the film itself is fond of telling us) to the plot-driven (what Cobb and Co. do to Fischer seems similar to what Ariadne and Co. due to Cobb, take him deep into his subconscious to help him overcome the trauma of losing a loved one, so that he can return to reality with a new purpose, having experienced catharsis) and the profound (see the rest of this essay). But conceivably, one could construct an equally profound analysis taking a different position. I will just take this one for the purpose of clarity. A map must have an orientation, so let's just take North to be "up," and everything depicted in the movie to be Cobb's dream.

Khayāl-The World of Creative Imagination

“Now in a dream, our mind continuously does this, we create and perceive our world simultaneously and our mind does this so well that we don't even know it's happening.”
-Cobb

One of the most important concepts in Ibn 'Arabi's writing, which *Inception* illustrates beautifully, is a term called *khayāl*, which scholars translate as “imagination” or “imaginal faculty” to separate it from the illusory or derogatory

connotations of the word “imaginary.” The world of *khayāl* is imaginary in that it is the same stuff which dreams are made of, but this stuff is real, at least partially so. For example, most of us spend our lives in this imaginal world, not only during dreams, but also during our ordinary, everyday lives. When we see a color, or smell perfume, or feel an itch, our minds/souls are actually creating these sensations out of physical stimuli. We don’t see electromagnetic radiation with a 700 nm wavelength, we see red. Our minds “imagine” the sensory reality in which we live, simultaneously creating and perceiving these experiences, much like how Cobb described the process of dreaming to Ariadne during her first shared dream. In fact, Ibn ‘Arabi writes that one of the purposes of dreams is to alert us to this aspect of our existence, writing that “The only reason God placed sleep in the animate world was so that everyone might witness the Presence of Imagination and know that there is another world similar to the [everyday] sensory world.”³

For Ibn ‘Arabi, this imaginal world encompasses all human experience,⁴ and the imaginal faculty of ours gives form not only to physical but also metaphysical realities or archetypes. If you’ve ever written a melody or a poem, or drawn a picture, you’re already familiar with the magical process of imagination, the process of giving tangible forms to intangible ideas, concepts, and emotions. This is the function of the imaginal faculty, to bring together “pure ideas” and meanings and clothe them in sensible forms. But what of the reality of these

things behind their imaginal forms, and what of reality itself? Most of us take these sensory, imaginal forms to be our reality, and are happy living out our days in this seemingly solid world. But Ibn ‘Arabi takes a different stance. Quoting the famous Prophetic tradition, “People are asleep, when they die, they awaken,” the Sufi master writes,

The world is an illusion; it has no real existence. And this is what is meant by ‘imagination’ (khayāl). For you just imagine that it (i.e., the world) is an autonomous reality quite different from and independent of the Absolute Reality, while in truth it is nothing of the sort’.... Know that you yourself are an imagination. And everything that you perceive and say to yourself, ‘this is not me’, is also an imagination. So that the whole world of existence is imagination within imagination.⁵

Taking the concept of imagination to its logical limit, Ibn ‘Arabi points out that even our own conception of self is an illusion, an imagination, a dream within dreams. Imagination isn’t limited to what goes on inside our heads, because even our heads are “inside our heads” as a part of the imaginal world.⁶ So we, along with this world of imagination, are not “an autonomous reality independent of the Absolute Reality.” Instead, the relationship between imagination and Reality is like that of a dream to its dreamer. The dream is not the dreamer, but it is not other than him either. We and the world are not God, but we are not other than Him either. The whole world, every human life, everything in existence, is but a part of God’s grand dream. So everything is simultaneously both God and not-God, Real and unreal.⁷

This fundamental paradox of identity is the mother of the other contradictions allowed by imagination. Logical and rational impossibilities are

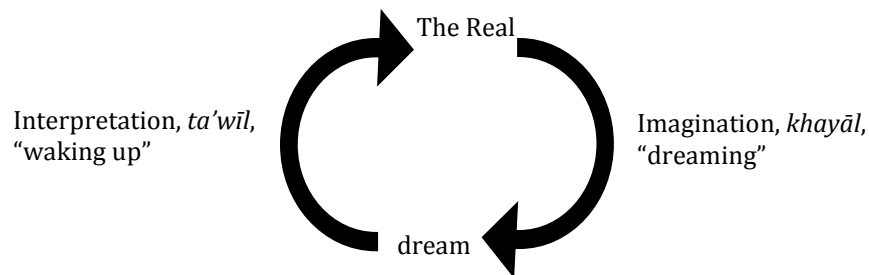
the par for the course in dreams, and the very nature of the imaginal world which most of us obliviously inhabit. This world is the land where opposites join, since imagination is the bridge between the intelligible and the sensible, the spiritual and the physical, pure meaning and form, the necessary and the impossible, pure quality and quantity. Ibn 'Arabi writes,

Imagination is neither existent nor non-existent, neither known, nor unknown, neither negated nor affirmed. For example, a person perceives his form in a mirror. He knows for certain that he has perceived his form in one respect and he knows for certain that he has not perceived his form in another respect...He cannot deny that he has seen his form, and he knows that his form is not in the mirror, nor is it between himself and the mirror...Hence he is neither a truth-teller or a liar in his words, "I saw my form, I did not see my form."⁸

Interestingly, however, Ibn 'Arabi doesn't despair of ever escaping this maze of dreams or even advocate looking for reality in another world, nor does he give up on the idea of reality altogether; rather, he employs the metaphor of the dream to explain that the various imaginal forms that comprise our ordinary reality are not groundless fantasies, but are like dreams which can be *interpreted*.

Commenting on the above-cited tradition, that "people are asleep and when they die, they awaken," Ibn 'Arabi writes, "the Prophet called attention by these words to the fact that whatever man perceives in this present world is to him as a dream is to a man who dreams, and that it must be interpreted."⁹ Just as our dreams present us with obscure images and dramatizations of events and feelings, the dream of our lives presents us with feelings, images, events, which can be interpreted to understand their origin and significance. *Inception* illustrates this point numerous times throughout the film, most recognizably when Cobb is

dunked in a bathtub, causing a flood in the dream world, when Yusuf's full bladder causes a rainstorm when they first break into Fischer's mind, or when Edith Piaf's "Non, je regrette rien" echoes through the dream worlds (more on this later). Cobb's crew, being seasoned dream travelers, have no trouble interpreting these various phenomena, that is, inferring their causes in higher levels of reality from their effects down in the dream. The same is true for Ibn 'Arabi. One of the terms Ibn 'Arabi uses for interpretation, *ta'wīl*, literally means to bring back to the first or origin, and this term is often paired with *khayāl* as complementary arcs of ascent and descent to and from reality:



So for Ibn 'Arabi, everything in the world is a symbol, a reflection or "projection" of the Real (*al-Haqq*, one of the 99 names of God in Islam). Just as the dream worlds of *Inception* are populated by projections of the dreamer, the imaginal world we commonly call real is populated by the "projections," what Ibn 'Arabi calls *tajālliyāt*, self-manifestations or self-disclosures, of the Real. Each illusory appearance in the world is, in truth, a projection, an appearance of the Real. He writes, "The world of being and becoming is an imagination, but it is, in truth,

Reality itself.”¹⁰ Just as a dream is nothing but a mode of the dreamer’s consciousness, the dream world we call “reality” is nothing but a particular mode of the Real. In this way, God “dreams” the world and all of us, and it is up to us to interpret our way back from illusory appearances to the Divine Reality.

The Hierarchy of Reality and Interpretation

“Because it’s never just a dream, is it?”
-Cobb

This concept of interpretation implies the existence of multiple levels of reality and a relationship between these levels. The notion of a hierarchal reality is a particularly strange and difficult one for modern audiences to grasp, but *Inception* deftly illustrates this point with its different dream levels, each of which depends on the former and is intimately connected with it.¹¹ These connections are what allow for interpretation, the conceptual movement from a lower dream level to a higher one. For example, this relationship between levels allows Cobb’s team to interpret the gravity shifts and rain in the hotel dream level as being due to Yusuf’s driving. It is significant, even if accidental, that this character shares his name with the Prophet Yusuf (the Biblical Joseph) famed for his ability to interpret dreams. Ibn ‘Arabi uses the Qur’anic account of Yusuf to explain his theory of imagination and interpretation. As a young child, Yusuf had a dream of the sun and moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. Years later,

when he had become a “mighty prince” in Egypt and his eleven brothers came to beg food from him during a time of famine, Yusuf remarked, “This is the interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it true!”¹² Ibn ‘Arabi clarifies the meaning of this last sentence:

It means: ‘God has made to appear in the sensible world what was in the past in the form of imagination’. This implies that the realization or materialization in a sensible form of what he had seen in a dream was, in the understanding of Joseph, the final and ultimate realization. He thought that the things left the domain of ‘dream’ and came out to the level of ‘reality.’¹³

However, given his understanding of imagination, Ibn ‘Arabi asserts that both Joseph’s “dream” and its fulfillment in “reality” are simply the same event manifesting itself in different modes or levels of imagination. Given that both events were sensible, they are both the products of imagination and cannot be fully called “real” or “true.” He contrasts Yusuf’s statement with the position of the Prophet Muhammad that life itself is a dream. From this perspective, Yusuf’s interpretation has only taken him from one level of dreaming to another. He dreams a dream, and then wakes into another dream, or more precisely, he dreams that he awakens in this dream level that is his life. Then he interprets his dream, or rather, he dreams that he interprets his dream. When his brothers prostrate before him, he thinks his dream has come ‘true,’ and that he is now outside of his dream; but unbeknownst to him, he is still dreaming. Al-Kāshānī, a prominent commentator on Ibn ‘Arabi explains:

The difference between Muhammad and Joseph in regard to the depth of understanding consists in this. Joseph regarded the sensible forms existing in the outer world as ‘reality’ whereas, in truth, all forms that exist in imagination are (also)

sensible without exception, for imagination (*khayal*) is a treasury of the sensible things. Everything that exists in imagination is a sensible form although it actually is not perceived by the senses. As for Muhammad, he regarded the sensible forms existing in the outer world also as products of imagination (*khayaliyah*), nay even as imagination within imagination. This because he regarded the present world of ours as a dream while the only 'reality' (in the true sense of the word) was, in his view, the Absolute revealing itself as it really is in the sensible forms which are nothing but so many different loci of its self-manifestation. This point is understood only when one wakes up from the present life which is a sleep of forgetfulness after one dies to this world through self-annihilation in God.¹⁴

Yusuf is not the only name in *Inception* with significant symbolism,¹⁵ the young architect Ariadne who serves as Cobb's guide through the dark depths of his psyche, shares her name with the mythical Minoan princess who helped rescue Theseus from the Minotaur's labyrinth by giving him a spool of golden thread. She held one end while Theseus carried the other through the maze, so that after slaying the minotaur, he could find his way back out. This is precisely what Ariadne does in *Inception*, she guides Cobb through his labyrinth of dreams. She (or Cobb's projection of her, depending on how you look at it) follows Cobb all the way to the depths of limbo where Cobb confronts and defeats his projection of his wife, and reminds him to return to their "reality" up above. Throughout the dream journey, she helps guide and tether him to "reality" across the different levels of the dream.

The Edith Piaf song, "Non Je Regrette Rien" also crosses all of the dream levels of the movie, tying them together and literally serving as the point of connection and transition from one dream level to the next. The theme echoes through the different levels of the dream, calling the dreamers back to "reality"

and preparing them for the transition up to the next dream level by counting down to the “kick.” For Ibn ‘Arabi and his school, everything, at all levels of existence, is like this haunting music. To quote Toshihiko Izutsu, one of the foremost experts on Ibn ‘Arabi,

Anything that is found at the lowest level of Being, i.e., the sensible world, or any event that occurs there, is a ‘phenomenon’ in the etymological meaning of the term; it is a form (*sūrah*) in which a state of affairs in the higher plane of Images directly reveals itself, and indirectly and ultimately, the absolute Mystery itself. To look at things in the sensible world and not to stop there, but to see beyond them the ultimate ground of all Being, that precisely is what is called by Ibn ‘Arabi ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*) or mystical intuition. “Unveiling” means, in short, taking each of the sensible things as a locus in which Reality discloses itself to us. And a man who does so encounters everywhere a ‘phenomenon’ of Reality, whatever he sees and hears in this world. Whatever he experiences is for him a form manifesting an aspect of Divine Existence, a symbol for an aspect of Divine Reality. And in this particular respect, his sensory experiences are of the same symbolic nature as visions he experiences in his sleep. In the eyes of a man possessed of this kind of spiritual capacity, the whole world of ‘reality’ ceases to be something solidly self-sufficient and turns into a deep mysterious *forêt de symboles*, a system of ontological correspondences.¹⁶

The music in *Inception* illustrates these correspondences beautifully through the manipulation of the Edith Piaf song into the distinctive theme music of the movie.¹⁷ This effect is far easier to experience than to explain (see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVkQ0C4qDvM>). The discerning listener can hear or recognize the original throughout nearly the entire soundtrack, which itself becomes a kind of “forest of symbols”. The soundtrack is to the Edith Piaf original what a dream is to the dreamer, what the “phenomenon” is to the Reality; the latter is the ground from which the former is derived. Similarly, a person of “unveiling” à la Ibn ‘Arabi can recognize aspects of the Reality throughout the “soundtrack” of sensible forms that constitute his life.¹⁸

In the Sufi tradition, music is understood to recall man back to his primordial and eternal state of being with God, before the creation of time and space. Sufi poets and authors link music to two moments of Divine speech described in the Qur'an: 1) the "call-and-response" covenant of *alast* (7:172) in which God asks the souls of all humankind, "Am I not your Lord?", to which they reply in the affirmative, and 2) the verbal creative command "Be!" by which God brings all things into being.¹⁹ Both of these utterances are understood to have taken place in eternity, outside of space and time, prior to the creation of the world. For many Sufis, earthly music calls us back to this eternal state, our original reality, much as Piaf's haunting melody calls the dreamers back to their "reality." Ibn 'Arabi writes, "Thus when the singer sings, the one worthy of *samā'* (listening) sees God's speech 'Be!' to the thing before it comes to be." Music allows the mystic, in the words of William Blake, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour."

Time

"Five minutes in the real world gives you an hour in the dream."
-Arthur

This temporal aspect brings us to another feature shared by *Inception* and Islamic cosmology (and most traditional cosmologies in general). In the film,

Cobb explains to Ariadne that, “In a dream, your mind functions more quickly, so time seems to feel more slow,” and this effect is compounded in the dreams within dreams. All of this is reminiscent of the Biblical, “A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past...”²⁰ and “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.”²¹ The Qur’an similarly recounts, “A day with your Lord is equivalent to a thousand years in the way you count,” and describing the questioning of souls after the resurrection, “He will say, ‘How many years did you tarry on the earth?’ They will say, ‘We tarried there for a day or part of a day. Ask those able to count!’ He will say, ‘You only tarried there for a little while if you did but know!’”²² The fundamental idea underlying this cosmological feature is that since Reality is eternal, i.e. is situated outside of time, time is an inherent aspect of the dream world of illusion. As one goes deeper into the dream world, away from Reality, time becomes more intense, and as one “awakens” towards Reality, time fades away with the rest of the dream, so that after death, life will seem a fleeting dream of “a day or part of a day.”

Inception also brilliantly illustrates the close association between death, resurrection and awakening alluded to above. The almost-apocalyptic scenes of collapsing dream levels in which the whole world is literally falling down around the dreamers recall the poetic accounts of apocalypse found in the Qur’an where the “sky is cleft asunder” or the “heavens are rolled up like a scroll,” the mountains “fly hither and thither” like “carded wool” and are “crushed to powder”

and “scattered like dust,” “vanishing like a mirage,” while the oceans “boil over” and “burst forth.” This cataclysmic destruction leads to awakening onto a higher dream level, what is called in Islamic terms, the *akhīrah* or afterlife. The dream levels of *Inception* illustrate a fundamental aspect of Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine of the afterlife, namely that it does not exist “after” our life, but rather “above” it. The afterlife does not only exist in the future, it also exists here and now, on another level of reality. In fact the relationship between the afterlife and our everyday life is described in pretty much the same terms as that between a dream and the dream within that dream. Mulla Sadra, a prominent philosopher of Ibn ‘Arabi’s school, writes, “As for forms which exist in the Afterlife, they are things potent with existence and intense in effects. Their relation to worldly forms is like the relation of sensory forms to existent forms in sleep, among which are the remnants from the impressions of sense-intuition and the storehouses of imagination.”²³ That is, the things we experience in our everyday life are but shadows and reflections of the realities of the afterlife, not the other way around. We ourselves are but shadows or reflections of our selves in this afterlife.²⁴ This life is a dream within the dream of the afterlife, and the things that are happening to us “there” filter down into our dream lives “here,” much like the action and music in the different dream levels of *Inception*.

Aside from the music, a number different images and thematic phrases and motifs cascade through the different dream levels of *Inception*.²⁵ Most obviously,

Saito's wound, sustained in the taxicab, slowly emerges in the hotel dream level, and trickles down to the hospital dream level, eventually killing and sending him into limbo. Moreover, fugues of phrases such as, "Do you want to take a leap of faith, or become an old man filled with regret, waiting to die alone," emerge in different characters' voices at different levels of the dream, again illustrating the symbolic web of correspondences between levels of reality in Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics. Like the music, these phrases guide Cobb and Saito back through the maze of dreams back to their "reality." This same fugal structure appears not only in phrases, but also in plot lines. As alluded to above, Cobb's descent into limbo to confront his projection of his dead wife mirrors Fischer's guided journey through the dream levels to confront his projection of his dead father. These confrontations lead to catharsis for both characters, which allows them to come to terms with the death of their loved one, giving them a new orientation to deal with the legacy of the departed.

But there is also a dark side to his cascade of images and sounds. The very creative principle which brings dreams into being becomes the seductive, gravitational pull of illusion when echoed through the different levels of the dream. The old man in Yusuf's dream lair explains those who have become addicted to dreaming, "They come to be woken up...The dream has become their reality... who are you to say otherwise?" This sentiment is echoed by Cobb's

projection of Mal, “Admit it, you don’t believe in one reality anymore. So choose. Choose to be here. Choose me.”

Mal as Maya/hijāb

“So certain of your world. Of what's real...No creeping doubts?”
-Mal

“I can’t imagine you with all your complexity with all your perfection, all your imperfection. Look at you, you’re just a shade, you’re just a shade of my real wife, and you’re the best I can do, but I’m sorry, you’re just not good enough”
-Cobb

For me, Mal is the most interesting character in *Inception*, embodying the ambiguities, contradictions, and mystery of imagination on which the film is based. We never actually meet Mal, only encountering Cobb’s projections and recollections of her. Her love for Cobb is both liberating and enslaving, simultaneously calling Cobb out of the dream world he thinks is real (remember I take the position the Cobb is dreaming the whole time and we never actually see the “real” world) and dragging him deeper into illusion. In this aspect, Mal is a wonderful embodiment of Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of the veil (*hijāb*) and the shadow. A veil, by its very nature, hides that which it veils, but it can also reveal that which it hides. Imagine that there’s an invisible man in your room, how could you possibly discover what he looks like? If you were to throw a sheet over him, all of a sudden, the basic outline of his form would become apparent, while the sheet would still cover and conceal him.

This is the dual nature of the *hijāb* or veil, it simultaneously reveals and conceals, in fact, its revelation is its concealment. Returning to the concept of *khayāl*, the creative imagination through which the Real clothes itself in sensory forms, we can see how the whole imaginal world, indeed all of existence, is comprised of these veils which conceal and reveal the Real. But remembering that the dream is not other than the dreamer, it becomes clear that these veils are not other than the reality they veil! As a famous Sufi aphorism puts it, “Behold what shows you His Omnipotence, (may He be exalted): it is that He hides Himself from you by that which has no existence apart from Him.”²⁶ But we ourselves are veils of imagination, having “no existence apart from” the Real. So (paraphrasing Ibn ‘Arabi) the Real hides itself from itself (us), by what is not other than itself (veils of imagination).

Ibn ‘Arabi derives these insights from the famous “hadith of the veils,” a prophetic tradition which says, “God has seventy”—or—“seventy-thousand veils of light and darkness; were they to be removed, the Glories of His Face would burn away everything perceived by the sight of His creatures.”²⁷ The “light” of these veils is their manifesting, revelatory aspect, and the “darkness,” their concealing nature. Without these veils of imagination, God would be completely unknowable, since we would be blinded by the brilliance of His Reality, or more accurately, we wouldn’t even exist since we ourselves are these veils. Commenting on this hadith, Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “We see only that Thou art thyself

the veils. That is why the veils are also veiled and we do not see them, though they are light and darkness. They are what Thou hast named Thyself, the 'Manifest' and the 'Nonmanifest'... So Thou art the veil. We are veiled from Thee only through Thee, and Thou art veiled from us only through Thy manifestation.”²⁸

But what does all of this have to do with Mal? A quick look at her first scene in the movie should be informative in this regard. We first encounter Mal in the Japanese palace where Cobb and Arthur are trying to steal Saito's secrets.²⁹ Cobb has her sit on a chair to anchor him while he rappels out of a window to another floor of the palace, commanding, “Stay where you are Mal.” Mal smiles and gets up out of the chair, letting Cobb fall. In this scene, Mal literally tethers Cobb to a higher level as he descends, symbolizing her role in connecting her husband to reality as he dives into dreams. However, she is also unreliable; Cobb says, “I can't trust you anymore,” before he does trust her by tying himself to her. Her suicide which uproots Cobb's life is foreshadowed or echoed (depending on your frame of reference) in this scene when she playfully gets up from the chair and leaves, letting Cobb fall.

The suicidal Mal is calling to Cobb from above to escape from his dreams and join her in reality, while his projection of Mal is calling to him from below to join him in illusion. They are like mirror images of each other, concealing and revealing the truth from and to Cobb “that this world is not real.” The projection

of Mal tries to convince Cobb that his reality isn't real in hopes of getting him to abandon reality and stay with her in limbo, while the suicidal Mal tried to convince Cobb that his reality wasn't real to get him to join her "up above" on the other side of death. Both Mal's tell him his ordinary world is not real, one asks him to transcend it, the other asks him to flee deeper into the illusion.

In the Christian world, this dual feminine principle is represented by the pairing of Eve (she who births sin/illusion) and Mary (she who births salvation from sin/illusion), and in the dharmic world of Hinduism and Buddhism, by the single term, *Maya*. In the words of one contemporary scholar of comparative religion:

Maya is...often rendered as "universal illusion", or "cosmic illusion", but she is also "divine play". She is the great theophany, the "unveiling" of God "in Himself and by Himself" as the Sufis would say. Maya may be likened to a magic fabric woven from a warp that veils and a weft that unveils; she is a quasi-incomprehensible intermediary between the finite and the Infinite – at least from our point of view as creatures – and as such she has all the multi-coloured ambiguity appropriate to her part-cosmic, part-divine nature.³⁰

Mal is Maya, imagination personified, the creative feminine principle which brings the world into being, but in so doing, introduces illusion and evil. Mal's name literally means "evil" in French, which, aside from being a convenient anagram for "veil," is the necessary consequence of the creative process of manifestation, which unveils and veils.³¹ Light cannot project without shadow.

Along with dreams/imagination, the shadow is one of Ibn 'Arabi's favorite symbols of this principle, and it is also stunningly depicted by Mal, of whom

Cobb eventually says, “you’re just a shade.”³² In addition to being attached to Cobb like his shadow, haunting him through all of his dreams, Nolan’s cinematography frequently shadows half of Mal’s face. “Shade,” “phantasm” or “mirror image” is actually the everyday meaning of the term *khayāl*, and in the same chapter of his *Ringstones of Wisdom* where he discusses Yusuf and dreams/imagination, Ibn ‘Arabi describes shadows in nearly identical terms,

Know that what one calls ‘other than the Real’ and which is referred to as ‘the world’ is, in relation to the Real, as a shadow is to an object. It is the shadow of God. ... The world is known to the extent that the shadows are known, and the Real is unknown to the extent that the object that casts the shadow is unknown.... For this reason we say that the Real is known to us in one respect, and unknown in another.³³

In fact, mirroring his statement about the purpose of dreams, Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “God did not create the shadows...except to serve as an indication for you of you and of Him, so that you may know who you are, what your relationship is to Him, and what His relationship is to you.”³⁴ A shadow cannot exist without its object, it takes the form of its object, and it cannot separate from its object. As Cobb’s shadow, Mal repeatedly begs him to remain with her, pleading, “you promised we’d be together.” But “the property of shadows is to disappear, not to remain immutable,”³⁵ the Andalusian sage writes. Just as Mal won’t stay in the chair, the “real” Mal disappears from Cobb’s life, indicating the “shadowy” and impermanent nature of the world they shared, and leaving him with nothing but her totem and his guilt to guide him home.

Mal's final scene is also particularly philosophically and emotionally poignant. At the bottom of the dream world, she scoffs at Cobb's simple notion of reality, and, echoing many hierarchy-denying modern and post-modern philosophical trends,³⁶ pleads with Cobb to give up his metaphysical notions of a reality apart from what he sees around him. This presents a number of profound philosophical questions. If you could enter a virtual world like *The Matrix* or Nozick's *Pleasure Machine*, where you could experience anything and everything you ever wanted, would you? Would you leave? What would distinguish this reality from your old one? What makes one reality better than another? What makes one "more real" than another? Is "more real" also better?

In the film, Cobb's guilt at causing his wife's suicide acts as a kind of "inner wakefulness,"³⁷ to borrow a term from Sufism. It is this force, a kind of metaphysical buoyancy, that propels his rise from illusion to reality and gives him direction. In Cobb's words, "and no matter what I do, no matter how hopeless I am, no matter how confused... that guilt is always there, reminding me of the truth."³⁸ If Cobb is a diver lost deep in a sea of dreams, his guilt is the buoyancy that distinguishes up from down. But in the end, it is Cobb's intimacy with and love for his real wife and children that helps him recognize and reject his projections as unreal, escaping the downward pull of Mal and *Maya*. The same love that eventually pulls Cobb out of limbo and orients him throughout his exile in dreams also threatens to trap him in these illusions. This is the ambiguous,

ambivalent nature of the beauty of the world/*Maya*/Mal, and the love that attaches itself to this beauty. Insofar as this beauty is transparent and points beyond itself, love for it is liberating; but insofar as it is opaque and veiling, this love is imprisoning. Cobb's love for his family could either lead him back to them, or leave him wrecked in the dreams which hold their reflections, like a bird crashed on a window.

This last point about love is also highly significant, because for Ibn 'Arabi, love is the force which causes the Real to dream the world into existence in the first place. Moreover, the reflection of this primordial love is the longing love we shadows have to return our source. He writes, "Motion is always the motion of love.... The motion which is the world's existence is the motion of love. The Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, called our attention to this by relating 'I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known.'"³⁹ Were it not for this love, the world would not have been manifest in His Identity."⁴⁰ The sage also writes, "None but God is loved in existent things. It is He who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover—and there is nothing which is not a lover. So all the cosmos is a lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him."⁴¹ Love is quite literally what makes the world go round and round in the arcs of imagination outlined above.

The perpetual motion engendered by this love is another characteristic of the world of imagination, symbolized by Mal's perpetually spinning top. All

imagination, which is to say everything but the Absolute Reality, is in a state of constant flux and transformation like waves upon the sea. Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

All of this—praise be to God—is in actual fact imagination, since it never has any fixity in a single state. But “people are asleep,” and the sleeper may recognize everything he sees and the presence in which he sees it, “and when they die, they awake” form this dream within a dream. They will never cease being sleepers, so they will never cease being dreamers. Hence they will never cease undergoing constant changes within themselves. Nor will that which they see with their eyes ever cease its constant changing. The situation has always been such, and it will be such in this life and the hereafter.⁴²

The film’s final scene recalls many of the Qur’an’s descriptions of the Paradisal hereafter and underscores its imaginal nature. Cobb’s reunion with his children on the lush green lawn where he first left them echoes the Qur’an repeated descriptions of paradise as “a return” and “a Garden” wherein one’s desires will be fulfilled. In reference to the Qur’anic verse, “*You shall have within it [the Garden] whatever your souls desire* [tashtahī, a verbal form of *shahwa*, ‘passion’]” (41:31). He [Ibn ‘Arabi] takes this Qur’anic verse as a declaration of the ontological state of the Garden, where ‘imagination’ rules. Whatever a person desires—whatever his ‘passion’ seeks—that is given to him....”⁴³

Cobb desired reunion with his family more than anything else, and so that was his garden. But given that the Garden is yet another veil of imagination, it is not fixed, but rather an evolving part of the soul’s voyage of self-discovery. Commenting on the Quranic verse *enter my garden*, (89:30) Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “*Enter my garden*, which is My veil. ‘My Garden is naught else but thee...’.

When you enter His Garden, you enter yourself and know yourself...”⁴⁴ Elsewhere he comments, “Among the most wondrous of things is that one is always ascending, though not aware of it due to the subtleness and fineness of the veil, and due to the resemblance of forms, spoken of in His Words, *And they shall be given its like.*”⁴⁵ Even at the end of the film, Cobb’s journey continues, although he may not be aware of this fact due to the similarities between his home and children when he first fled and when he returned. Or rather, had he realized that his children hadn’t aged a day and were wearing the exact same clothes as when he left, he could have realized that he was not simply going back home, but being “given its like” on his perpetual ascension through imagination to the Real.

The ambiguous ending of the film, with the famous wobbling top, suggests that Cobb may not have escaped the dream, and according to Ibn ‘Arabi, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Both Heaven and Hell, both this life and the next, are woven from imagination because everything other than the Real itself is imagination. So as long as Cobb exists as someone or something other than the Real, the world he inhabits will always be a dream world of imagination. According to Ibn ‘Arabi, the dreamer ascends through these imaginal worlds perpetually, even if he, like Cobb at the end of the film, is unaware of his ascension. Spun by love, the top of imagination never stops spinning, the dream world keeps on turning, and we, like Cobb, will keep dreaming even after we’ve

awoken. The world of imagination is perpetual and infinite like the tunnel of mirrors Ariadne creates on the bridge.

The Double Mirror

Ariadne: Who are these people?

Cobb: They're projections of my subconscious.

In our ordinary life, we are vouchsafed a few visions of infinity: the unfathomable depth of the night sky, the vast expanse of an ocean or desert, and the mysterious corridor of two mirrors facing each other. This latter image appears throughout the film, on the bridge in Ariadne's imagined Paris and in the hotel elevator, where Eames (disguised as a blond woman) flirts with Saito. This spectacular image summarizes, perhaps better than any other, the fundamental mystery of the film, and of Ibn 'Arabi's unique perspective on the relationship between God, man, and the universe.

The very appearance of the infinite cascade of mirrors within mirrors is a perfect model of the levels of imagination that make up the film and Ibn 'Arabi's cosmology. A reflection in a mirror is not the same as the object it reflects, but like the dream or the shadow, it is not other than this object either. Moreover, each mirror-frame in this infinite tunnel is invisible in itself, but derives its appearance from the reflections of the images which appear in its framing mirror, which itself only contains the reflections of the images in its framing mirror...*ad*

infinitum. Similarly, for Ibn 'Arabi, each world or level of reality is but the image or reflection of the world above it. Everything that appears in the sensory world is but a reflection, on that level, of the images of the archetypal world, and these images are in turn merely reflections of realities in higher levels of existence...going all the way back to the Real itself. The image of the Real is reflected and reduplicated through the different levels of mirrors just like the images of Cobb and Ariadne between the mirrors. Similarly, the images from Cobb's imagination (the open window of the Cobbs' anniversary suite, the crouching, laughing children, the sound of the breaking champagne flute) are reflected through all the dream levels along with Edith Piaf's music, much like the various appearances of the Real.

But for Ibn 'Arabi, the metaphor of the double mirror goes even deeper, revealing the reason for creation and the limits of human knowledge. The Andalusian sage begins his most famous work, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, with a discussion of the origin of creation. He writes that "the vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like the vision a thing has of itself in another thing, which is like a mirror for it,"⁴⁶ explaining that "in the beginning," the Real saw itself in itself without any other thing, without any subject-object relation. This kind of "seeing" is difficult to understand, but can be compared to our most basic and simple self-consciousness, not our awareness of an object, not our awareness of our own awareness, not even our awareness of ourselves as an object, but rather, simple,

pure consciousness. Hindu sages call this unrestricted mode of consciousness *Atman*, and claim that something like it is experienced during deep sleep.

However, this seemingly unqualified and unrestricted mode of consciousness or seeing is actually qualified by the fact that it is unqualified, restricted by its being unrestricted. That is, the unlimited nature of this kind of vision is, in fact, a kind of limitation since it is not limited vision. The vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like that it has in another. So the Real wanted to see itself not just in an unqualified, but also in a limited way, as an object in a mirror. To this end, the Real brought the universe into being, as a mirror in which to contemplate itself.

Now, mirrors can be polished or clouded; when clouded, you see the mirror (or rather the dirt on the mirror) and barely see the reflection, but when the mirror is polished, the reflection is what you see. The polish of the mirror is what makes the reflection visible in it. Ibn 'Arabi explains that the universe was created "like an unpolished mirror," but "the situation demanded that the mirror of the world be clear, and Man (literally "Adam") was the very clearness of this mirror." Man is what makes the universe visible to the Real, which is, after all, the former's *raison d'être*. Ibn 'Arabi clarifies this relationship in other terms, "In relation to the Real, man is like the pupil in relation to the eye, through which vision occurs; one calls this the faculty of sight. For this reason he is called Man [the word for "man" in Arabic, *insān*, also means pupil], and through him the Real looks upon

His creation and shows mercy upon them.”⁴⁷ Of course, we have to remember that the mirror of the universe, along with its human polish, is not other than the Real, they are only an imagined form.

All of this may seem very confusing, and it should be, but this is precisely where *Inception* can hopefully help polish and clarify things. If we take the whole movie to be one big dream of Cobb's, then all of the characters, events, images, etc. *are* Cobb; they are nothing other than aspects of his character or personality imaginalized into different forms. Mal could be his guilt, Eames his playful side, etc. But who is the Cobb of the dream world? Although, like everything else in the dream, he is entirely a product of the sleeping Cobb's imagination, he is not the same as the Cobb who is dreaming him. Rather, he is the one through whom the sleeping Cobb experiences and acts in the dream. He is the one through whom the dream becomes visible and intelligible to the sleeper. I can think of no better depiction of Ibn 'Arabi's description of the relationship between the Real (the dreamer), the universe (the dream), and man (the dreamer in the dream).

There remains one further point of precision: what exactly gives the dream Cobb his special relationship with the sleeping Cobb? Why doesn't the dreamer experience the dream through one of the other characters or projections? Presumably this is because the dream Cobb is a kind of summary version of the dreamer: they look similar, feel similarly, and share other defining characteristics.

While other characters may be projections of different aspects of Cobb, the dream Cobb is the projection of the sleeping Cobb's very own self. This gives him a unique relationship to the dream as a whole; because the entire dream is comprised of projections of his sleeping consciousness, he is a microcosm of the whole dream.

This, in short, is Ibn 'Arabi's description of the special place Man occupies in the universe. Man is a Small Universe, while the Universe is a Big Man.⁴⁸

Izutsu explains,

Ibn 'Arabi calls the world in this particular context the Big Man (*al-insān al-kabīr*), i.e. Macrocosm. The most salient feature of the Big Man is that every single existent in it represents one particular aspect (Name) of God, and one only, so that the whole thing lacks a clear delineation and a definite articulation, being as it is a loose conglomeration of discrete points. It is, so to speak, a clouded mirror. In contrast to this...Man is a well-polished spotless mirror reflecting any object as it really is. Rather, Man is the polishing itself of this mirror which is called the universe. Those discrete things and properties that have been diffused and scattered all over the immense universe become united and unified into a sharp focus in Man. The structure of the whole universe with all its complicated details is reflected in him in a clear and distinctly articulated miniature. This is the meaning of being a microcosm.⁴⁹

The Andalusian sage also cites the hadith, "God created Adam in His Image," to explain this special relationship between Man and the Real."⁵⁰

But Man (and the Universe) is not just a mirror of God; God is also the mirror of Man. Ibn 'Arabi writes, "He is your mirror for your vision of yourself, and you are His mirror for His Vision of His Names [His existence in a relational mode;]—which are none other than Himself..."⁵¹ These two mirrors, when perfectly aligned, produce the infinitude of reflections which comprise the cosmos.

The discussion above illustrates how Man, the central figure and microcosm of the dream universe, is the mirror of God, but how is God the mirror of Man?

These two statements are really two sides of the same coin, as Ibn 'Arabi explains,

You must know that since, as we have said, it [Man/the universe] appears in His Form, clearly God has arranged that we should, in trying to know Him, resort to studying creation carefully. Thus He Himself has said [in the Qur'an (41:53)] that he will show us His signs within it.⁵² He has shown himself to us through us. We describe Him by no quality without being that quality⁵³.... When we know him through ourselves and from ourselves, we attribute everything to Him that we attribute to ourselves and on this point the divine sayings have come down to us on the tongues of interpreters. So He described Himself to us through us. When we witness Him, we witness ourselves, and when He witnesses us, He witnesses Himself.⁵⁴

God is the mirror of Man, because we are the mirror of God. When we look for God, we look to the universe and in ourselves because we reflect Him. So when we look at God, we see ourselves. Or from another perspective, because we are made in God's image, and we are a mirror, God must also be a mirror. Still, there is something inscrutable and mysterious about the mirror of God. Mirror to mirror, deep to deep, God's mystery is reflected in us, rather it is His reflection in us, and our mystery is reflected in God, and is our reflection in Him. And these two mysteries are the same. According to another hadith, God has said, "Man is My secret, and I am his secret."

This unfathomable mystery, the very limit of human knowledge is represented in the image of the double mirror by the inscrutable darkness in the center of each mirror, at either end of the infinite tunnel, which paradoxically goes no deeper than the surface of either mirror. Or rather, the darkness at the

center of each mirror merely shows the invisibility of the mirror itself. Ibn ‘Arabi explains,

It is similar to what one finds in a visible mirror: when you see a form in it, you do not see it [the mirror], although you know that there do you see forms—or your own form. Now God has manifested this as a similitude, employing it to represent the self-disclosure of the Essence, so that the object of self-disclosure will know that he does not see Him. There is no symbol which comes closer to or more closely resembles this vision and this self-disclosure. When you see a form in a mirror struggle within yourself to see the body of the mirror; you will, without any doubt, never see it. Some of those who have grasped the likes of this—concerning forms in mirrors—have held the position that the visible form comes between the sight of the onlooker and the mirror...If you have tasted this, you have tasted the goal which, for the creature, no goal exceeds. Do not entertain any hopes and do not tire your soul in trying to ascend to something higher than this degree; there is no such thing at all, and there is nothing after it but pure non-existence.⁵⁵

Or in the dream language of *Inception*, the dreamer is always invisible. Although the dream itself and the dreamer’s representation of himself within the dream reflect the dreamer in a particularly direct way, they are not the dreamer himself. Rather, they are like reflections in the mirror of his consciousness. More concretely, imagine we’re projections in one of Cobb’s dreams. We could get to know Cobb through the character Cobb in the dream and the other characters (including ourselves) and features of the dream, which are the sleeping Cobb’s projections. However, we have no way to find the “real Cobb,” the Cobb that sleeps and lives outside of the dream. Outside of the dream, we don’t exist. Or, from another perspective, we would only exist as an aspect of Cobb’s consciousness, in which case, we would no longer be ourselves. As projections, all we can know is that aspect of the dreamer we represent, which is simply what we are. We can only ever know ourselves, and only the dreamer can know

himself. As the Sufis say, “Only God knows God.” We can’t see the mirror of Cobb’s mind because it is filled with images and forms, all of which, (including us!) are reflections of him. The mind of the dreamer, like the mirror of the Real, is invisible because it is filled with reflections of itself which simultaneously reveal and conceal it. This is the true significance of the double mirror, and according to Ibn ‘Arabi, the end and goal of human knowledge, beyond which there is nothing.⁵⁶

Death as Awakening, Awakening as Death

“You can’t wake up from within a dream unless you die.”
-Arthur

“No room for tourists on a job like this”
-Eames and Saito

We have already seen how the saying, “People are asleep and when they die, they awaken,” has been used to understand our life in this world as a dream, or rather, as a dream within a dream, how death in the dream of this life can be seen as an awakening into the dream of the afterlife. But there is another, more subtle point derived from this saying, and alluded to at the end of the previous section, and alluded to by the famous saying of the Prophet, “Die before you die.” What happens to a character in a dream, a projection when the dreamer awakes? What a radical transformation must it undergo, from a seemingly independent persona to an aspect of another’s consciousness. Such a dramatic shift, traversing the

boundaries of the dream, passing from reflection to reality, from form to meaning, is surely a kind of death. Izutsu explains,

The expression: “to die and wake up” appearing in the Tradition is for Ibn ‘Arabi nothing other than a metaphorical reference to the act of interpretation understood in this sense. Thus ‘death’ does not mean here death as a biological event. It means a spiritual event consisting in a man’s throwing off the shackles of the sense and reason, stepping over the confines of the phenomenal, and seeing through the web of phenomenal things what lies beyond. It means, in short, the mystical experience of ‘self-annihilation’ (*fanā*).⁵⁷

As Ibn ‘Arabi frequently reminds his readers, it is important not to confuse the conceptual understanding this state of affairs with its realization. In terms of the film, it is one thing to understand that you could be dreaming, it’s quite another to put the gun to your head. The annihilation of *fanā*’ is not something you can just read about; it’s not “for tourists.”⁵⁸ *Fanā*’ can only be attained through rigorous spiritual exercises and the abandonment of all worldly desires for the sake of drawing closer to God, just as the Prophet recommended, “Die before you die.”

This “death” is a necessary condition of the realization of the reality beyond the dream, because in the face of this reality, we do not exist. *Fanā*’ is precisely to realize our own non-existence in the face of the Real. Ibn ‘Arabi frequently cites the Qur’anic verse, “All things perish save his face,”⁵⁹ in explaining this point. However, this is not the whole story. On one hand, we are nothing in the face of the Real, but on the other hand, we are nothing but the Real. The positive realization of our existence as the Real after the realization of our unreality is known as *baqā*’ or “subsistence.” This subsistence is often described as the “annihilation of annihilation,” since the realization of nothingness is itself realized

to be nothing. The perishing of *fanā'* itself perishes in the face of the Real.

In the awakening of *fanā'*, all of the various features of the dream perish into the mind of the dreamer, and all multiplicity is overwhelmed by unity of the realization that “everything is just a dream.” Seen in this regard, this awakening is called “union.” The subsequent awakening of *baqā'* is the realization that all the various features of the dream subsist in the dreamer. Multiplicity and distinction return, but this time, seen in the unity of the dreamer. In this regard, it is known as “the union of union” because it unites both unity and multiplicity. In *fanā'*, unity annihilates multiplicity, whereas in *baqā'*, multiplicity is reflected in unity.

In terms of the symbolism of the double mirror, *fanā'* is like the perspective shift from seeing the infinite reflections in our mirror to “seeing” nothing but the Real’s invisible mirror. *Baqā'* is like the perspective shift of seeing the infinite reflections again, but this time in the Real’s mirror. Or in terms of the film, *fanā'* would be like Ariadne’s first realization that she is dreaming which obliterated the dream of the Paris street in a fantastic series of explosions. *Baqā'* would be like her return to this dream where she sees everything as a projection, and starts messing around with its structure by turning a whole block back on itself.⁶⁰ Only people who have attained this level of realization can truly reflect the Real, and act as an extension of the consciousness of the dreamer in the dream. What separates a projection from the representation of the dreamer in the dream? The

dreamer knows who he really is, and that he is dreaming.⁶¹

In this way, we can see how the “death before death” referred to in the two Prophetic sayings, “die before you die,” and “people are asleep, when they die, they awaken,” does not just refer to a biological event, but also to a radical transformation of consciousness, which should take place before the biological event. “Death” here refers to the death of the everyday consciousness which takes the world and the self at face value. This death is the pre-requisite for the birth of the “awake” consciousness which interprets and experiences these various appearances as reflections of the Real.

Inception / talqīn

“We will show them Our signs on the horizons and in their souls, until it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth (al-Haqq)”
-Qur’an XLI, 53

“If you’re going to perform inception, you need imagination.”
-Eames

It would be nice, if, as for Ariadne, all it took were an afternoon conversation in a Parisian café to realize *fanā’* and *baqā’*. However, for most of us, things are not so simple. Realizing the truth is often a long and complicated process that involves our emotions and experiences as well as our minds. Changing the way we experience the world is a serious business, and although it happens all the time, directing these changes toward a specific goal is the task of a lifetime. In fact, for Ibn ‘Arabi, this is *the* task of our lives, or rather it is life

itself. In commenting on the above verse of the Qur'an, Ibn 'Arabi writes, "And God most high says, *We shall show them our signs on the horizons*, which is what is outside of you, and *in their souls*, which is your identity, *until it becomes clear to them*, that is to the onlooker, *that it is al-Haqq (the Truth/the Real)*, that is by virtue of you being His image, and of His being your spirit."⁶² That is, God will keep showing us things in the world and in ourselves, until we realize that these things, the world, and ourselves are nothing but the Real manifesting itself. Everything we experience in life and everything that we are or will be is nothing other than this sequence of "signs," carefully arranged to lead us to the realization of the Truth.

This is very much like what Cobb's team does to Fischer, what Cobb did to Mal, and what Cobb himself goes through throughout the course of the film. In each of these cases, the subject of inception goes through an elaborate and individualized process in a dream world or worlds full of symbols, which eventually leads him or her to some profound realization that has dramatic consequences. For Fischer, it is the "realization" that his father wanted him to chart his own course in life, leading to his decision to break up his father's company. For Mal, it was the realization that her world wasn't real, which led to her suicide. As for Cobb, it was the realization and relinquishing of the projections of his wife and children as unreal, but we don't see what happens if and when he wakes up. As he tells Ariadne in limbo, "There's something you

should know about me, about inception. An idea is like a virus, resilient, highly contagious, and the smallest seed of an idea can grow, it can grow to define, or destroy you.” In Ibn ‘Arabi’s case, the central idea of the Real/unreal imaginal nature of ourselves and our world is meant to both destroy us in terms of our unreality, and redefine us in terms of the Real.

If I had to translate “inception” the way it is used in the film into Arabic, I would use the word *talqīn*, which is commonly used to refer to both burial and initiation, and has the literal meaning of “implanting.” The relations in this semantic web are quite profound, since according to many Islamic scholars including Ibn ‘Arabi (and as depicted in numerous films such as *What Dreams May Come*), while in the grave, our souls undergo a series of imaginal experiences, which may be blissful or tormenting, that lead us to the realization of our relation to the Real.⁶³ Furthermore, most religious initiations involve some kind of symbolic burial or death as a part of the larger process in which symbols and profound experiences plant a seed whose fruits of meaning gradually ripen and are revealed as life (and death) unfolds. This, of course, is nothing other than “inception” as described in the film.

Ibn ‘Arabi came to his unique way of seeing the world through reflecting on his visions, dreams, and other mystical experiences, which radically changed the way he lived. In fact, much of his writing is actually an exposition of his spiritual experiences, aimed at inspiring similar experiences and a similar orientation in his

readers. Inception (both the movie and the process described therein) works similarly by presenting its subject or us, the audience, with a series of visions, images, and ideas, all of which work to provoke a certain response and implant a central notion or orientation. It takes imagination to make someone realize something because it takes imagination to truly realize something. Rational argumentation alone rarely does the trick, not least of all because we and the world in which we live are nothing but imagination.

Imagination and the limits of reason

One of the most interesting and challenging aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's work for modern readers is his critique of reason. As Ibn 'Arabi is fond of pointing out, one of the Arabic words for "reason," *'aql*,⁶⁴ comes from the verb *'aqala* which means to "bind" or "fetter." In this sense, reason is useful in that it allows us to get a handle on things and deal with them conceptually. However, in doing so, reason necessarily distorts reality by trying to delimit, define, and "bind" it in its rational schemas. Reason cannot deal with paradoxes and seeks to resolve ambiguities into "either/or" relations, while the worlds of imagination are characterized by the relations of "neither/nor" and "both/and." But for Ibn 'Arabi, reason and imagination are not opposed to each other; rather, they are complementary. Reason is critical and analytic, while imagination is creative and synthetic. A balance of both is needed to achieve the correct view of things,

which Ibn 'Arabi calls "seeing with two eyes." The eye of reason distinguishes the real from the unreal, and the eye of imagination sees the images, reflections, and dreams that make up our world as simultaneously real and unreal. This formulation is particularly apt, because you need two eyes in order perceive the third dimension correctly, just as you need both reason and imagination to understand the metaphysical dimension of the world. With the eye of reason, we can discriminate things from each other and see the multiplicity of the world, and with the eye of imagination, we can see the many things as one. Ibn 'Arabi argues that in order to understand things properly, we have to see both ways at once.

In *Inception*, Eames represents the pole of imagination, while Arthur represents that of reason. Eames calls Arthur a "stick in the mud," and during a gunfight, tells him, "you mustn't be afraid to dream a little bigger darling," before mysteriously producing a grenade launcher. Their friendly rivalry in the planning stages of the mission, in which Arthur demands "specificity," while Eames calls inception a "subtle art," teases Arthur for his condescension, and declares, "to perform Inception, you need imagination," wonderfully illustrates the creative tension between imagination and reason. The ensuing fantastical fight scenes and Arthur's ingenious (and wonderfully shot), gravity-free "kick" vividly depict the process of "seeing with both eyes," of thinking simultaneously inside and beyond a given dream level. The team's ability to think both vertically and horizontally,

to “see with both eyes,” is what allows them to navigate the labyrinth of dream worlds. Similarly, for Ibn ‘Arabi, “seeing with both eyes” is what allows people to navigate the labyrinth of the imaginal worlds that make up our existence both before and after death. Unaware of the various levels of reality, the unimaginative projections are bound to one level of reality and its rules, while with the aid of imagination, Cobb and his team jump from level to level, bending and breaking the local laws of logic as they go.

Reason is a tool and like most tools, works best in conjunction with others. In fact, pure reason has to be coupled with imagination and insight in order to work at all.⁶⁵ This fact, and the limitations of reason, can be somewhat difficult for us to grasp today, because we live in a world that undervalues insight and imagination, and is simultaneously irrational and corroded by over-rationalization. Turned against imagination and insight, instead of working in conjunction with them, modern reason has tried, and then given up on addressing issues it can't handle on its own, such as metaphysics, ethics, and teleology. For this reason, fundamental questions such as “What is real?”, “What is right?”, and “What are we here for?” are often better engaged by artists (such as filmmakers) than by scientists and academic philosophers. “Rational” disciplines such as the physical sciences can tell me about the biochemical component of my love for my family, but they can't tell me how I should love them, why I should love them, or what my love for them actually *means*; that is, what this love tells me about the Real

and my relationship to it.

Religion in particular is being choked to death by the bonds of restrictive, narrow, critical reason, and the fact that religion is often criticized for not being “rational enough” is paradoxically proof of this very point. What modern religion really lacks is the imagination, not the kind that sees conspiracy theories everywhere, but the kind capable of thinking vertically, and not just arguing horizontally, the kind capable of seeing the world as a dream. If contemporary religious leaders possessed the kind of imagination that animates Ibn ‘Arabi’s work or *Inception*, they wouldn’t waste their time arguing about the age of the world on the basis of religious doctrine, since the whole dream is only “one night” old anyway, and the apparent features of this dream world only matter insofar as they can be interpreted back to Reality. Films such as *Inception* and works like Ibn ‘Arabi’s can be a wake-up call (excuse the pun) for contemporary religious thinkers and scholars of religion to reconsider the role of imagination and its relationship to reason.

Conclusion

Inception is a remarkable and challenging film, and I love it because for me, it “imaginalizes” many of the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi, perhaps the most challenging and remarkable thinker I have ever read. There are many more connections between the film and the Sufi master’s vast corpus, but in spite of its length, this

essay was not intended to be comprehensive, simply a presentation of *Inception* and Ibn 'Arabi as mirrors in which to contemplate each other. Although the film's inspiration probably comes more directly from Jung's work,⁶⁶ every time I watch it, I see another one of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas played out in front of me. It seems God's "signs on the horizons" can also be reflected on the big screen.

¹ See his *Meditations in First Philosophy*. Remarkably similar skeptical arguments were advanced centuries and even millennia before Descartes by figures such as al-Ghazali, Chuang Tzu, and whole schools of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. These thinkers came to markedly different conclusions from Descartes' "I think therefore I am," which could be summarized as "I think, therefore, God is," "Is the I that I think I am really I?," "I AM, therefore, i think," and "I,' 'thinking,' 'therefore,' and 'being' are empty conceptual constructs."

² This device features prominently in ancient Sanskrit works such as the *Panchatantra* and *Mahabharata*, Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo*, and many of Shakespeare's plays such as *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Taming of the Shrew*, all of which assume a similar kind of worldview and take up similar issues of reality/illusion particularly suited to this device.

³ Trans. in Chittick, William. *Sufi Path of Knowledge : Ibn 'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 119.

⁴ To be more precise, *khayāl* has three meanings: 1) everything which is not the Absolute Reality, 2) the human faculty which joins sensory forms to pure ideas, and 3) a specific level of reality experienced in veridical dreams and visions, between the physical and spiritual levels of reality (although these levels are both considered part of *khayāl* in the first sense). This third meaning of *khayāl* is an objective world more real than the physical but less real than the spiritual, and serves as the bridge between the two. It is the realm of mystical visions and spiritual experiences, where "spirits are embodied," as in the vision of an angel in human form, and "bodies are spiritualized," as in the sensory experiences that occur after death. This level of reality is the one to which Ibn 'Arabi is refers to by "Presence of Imagination" in the quote above, but for the purposes of this paper, I will not get into detailed discussion of this level of reality. Throughout the paper, I primarily use "imagination" and "imaginal world" to refer *khayāl* in the first sense, and "imaginal faculty" for the second.

⁵ Trans. in Toshihiko Izutsu *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 7.

⁶ This perspective shift provides a compelling refutation of solipsism. From this point of view, the solipsist's fallacy lies in his failure to apply his skeptical argument to his apparent self. Just as the appearance of the external world and its various things are not proof of their reality, neither is the appearance of the mind and its various mental states, which although more immediate than the seemingly external world, are not as immediate as Pure Consciousness. I only seem to have direct access to my mental states, much as I only seem to have direct access to the external world.

⁷ This point is what distinguishes Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought from pantheism

⁸ Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 118

⁹ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 8

¹⁰ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 8

¹¹ Ibn ‘Arabi describes five distinct levels of reality in his writings, coincidentally, *Inception* also depicts five dream levels: The airplane, the street, the hotel, the hospital, and limbo.

¹² Qur’an 12:99

¹³ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 10

¹⁴ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 10

¹⁵ Fischer’s name and the image of his father lying ill in the bed at the end of the dream journey, also has strong resonances with the Arthurian Grail legend of the Fisher King, in which the keepers of the Grail, a wounded father and son, lie waiting in their castle for a knight to come and heal them and lift the curse from their kingdom.

¹⁶ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 12

¹⁷ See http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2010/07/hans-zimmer-on-manipulating-edith-piaf-for-inception-its-how-you-get-from-one-dream-level-to-the-nex.html

¹⁸ Supposedly the film’s running time of 2 hours and 28 minutes is a nod to the length (2 min 28 sec) of the original Edith Piaf song. Furthermore, the theme of the song’s lyrics, letting go of regrets to be “swept away in love” and start over, echoes through the film like its music, and is similarly interwoven into the film’s plot, just as the music is inextricably linked to the soundtrack. Anyone familiar with Sufism will also recognize the resonances between Piaf’s plaintive lyrics and the poetry and ideas of prominent Sufis such as Rumi and Ibn ‘Arabi himself.

¹⁹ See Qur’an 2:117; 3: 47; 3:59; 6:73; 16:40; 19:35; 36:82; and 40:68

²⁰ Psalm 90:4 KJV

²¹ 2 Peter 3:8 KJV

²² Qur’an 22:47; 23:113

²³ trans. in Rustom, M. “Psychology, Eschatology, and Imagination In Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī’s Commentary on the *hadith* of Awakening.” *Islam & Science*, Vol. 5(1) (2007): 12.

²⁴ See *Ibid*, p. 22 “for Sadra, upon dying, each individual will awaken to his own reality reflected in the mirror of his soul.”

²⁵ This same structure also characteristic of the Qur’an, which is interwoven with repeating, phrases, motifs, and images.

²⁶ The Fifteenth saying of the *Hikam* of Ibn Atā Allāh al-Iskandarī

²⁷ See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 401

²⁸ Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 364

²⁹ For an interesting analysis of the painting she looks at in this room and its relation to her character see <http://reelclub.wordpress.com/2011/02/06/a-picture's-worth-a-thousand-words-francis-bacon-and-inception/>

³⁰ Frithjof Schuon, *Light on Ancient Worlds*. (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 75

³¹ In this sense, Mal shares much with the conception of Satan as developed by the school of Ibn 'Arabi. In his commentary on the former's *Ringstones of Wisdom*, Qaysari, an influential interpreter of Ibn 'Arabi's works, writes that Satan's name (*Shaytān*) is derived from the verb "shatana" meaning "to be distant," identifying the Satan with the force that distances one from God. He also identifies Satan as the macrocosmic manifestation of the Divine Name "The Misguider," *al-Mudill*, "whose microcosmic counterpart is the negative pole of imagination." see Caner Dagli, trans. *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fusūs al-hikam)*. (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2004), p. 25 n65, p. 168 n 940. Mal is an image of the devil in all of us, the negative aspect of imagination that tries to mislead and distance us from the Real, and whom we have to confront and combat in order to escape from our illusions. In fact, it is only by wrestling with this "dark side" of imagination, of ourselves, that we come to recognize and understand our imaginal reality and its relation to the Real.

³² See http://images2.fanpop.com/image/polls/450000/450705_1274738393838_full.jpg

³³ Caner Dagli, trans. *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fusūs al-hikam)*. (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2004), 86-7

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 90

³⁵ Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 204

³⁶ Such as relativism, pragmatism, and other anti-foundationalist or anti-metaphysical philosophical positions

³⁷ From the hadith "I sleep, but my heart is awake"

³⁸ At the end of the film, when Cobb has put aside this guilt, he no longer looks at the top or wrestles with questions of illusion or reality. I almost wish that Nolan had had Cobb come back and die in ambiguous circumstances like his wife, but the spinning top ending does the trick, and as Cobb says, "Positive emotion trumps negative emotion every time. We yearn for people to be reconciled, for catharsis." Interestingly, the final scene also illustrates the imaginal nature of Paradise for Ibn 'Arabi

³⁹ The full tradition reports that God said, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known so I created the creatures that they might know me."

⁴⁰ Dagli, *Ringstones*, 202

⁴¹ The quote continues, “though no one loves any but his own Creator, he is veiled from Him by the love for Zaynab, Su‘ād, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world.” Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 181

⁴² Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 231

⁴³ Chodkiewicz, M. ed., Chittick, W. & Morris, J., trans. *The Meccan Revelations vol.1* (Pir Press: New York, 2002), 301

⁴⁴ Dagli, *Ringstones*, 202

⁴⁵ Dagli, *Ringstones*, 113

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 3

⁴⁷ Dagli, *Ringstones*, 18

⁴⁸ This doctrine of “man as small world; world as big man” is not unique to Ibn ‘Arabi, or even the Islamic tradition. Some form of it is found in nearly every religious tradition, and even the etymology of the English word “world” bears witness to this doctrine. “world” comes from a combination of the old Germanic *were*, as in “werewolf” or the Latin *vir*, meaning “man,” and *uld* meaning “big” or “old.”

⁴⁹ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 220-1

⁵⁰ Fakhruddin ‘Iraqi, a student of Ibn ‘Arabi’s main disciple, Qunawī, explains this relationship through another hadith, “The Prophet said, ‘The believer is the mirror of the believer’ and God is ‘The Believer.’” “The point ‘Iraqi wants to make concerning the Prophet’s saying ‘The believer is the mirror of the believer’ and the fact that ‘the Believer’ is one of God’s Names (although it is usually translated as ‘All-Faithful’ or Keeper of Faith’) is explained by Jami: The fact that God sees nothing but himself in the mirror of the servant depends on reading the hadith so that the first ‘believer’ refers to the servant and the second to God. As for the fact that the slave sees nothing but himself in the mirror of God’s Being, this depends on taking the first ‘believer’ to refer to God and the second to the servant. But if we take both ‘believers’ to refer to God, the hadith reveals that viewer, viewed, and mirror are all God.” Chittick W. and Wilson, P.L., trans. *Fakhruddin Iraqi: Divine Flashes*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 86 and 140

⁵¹ Dagli, *Ringstones*, 33

⁵² A reference to the Qur’an (41: 53), “We will show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth.”

⁵³ The quote continues “although that is not the case for that necessity which is unique to the Essence.”

⁵⁴ Dagli, *Ringstones*, 23

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 33. The translator of the above passage explains this symbol of the invisible mirror in more philosophical language, “No matter how high we go, all that we ever find is more and more of ourselves. There is nothing beyond our own identity to which we can attain, because beyond it

there is only the Divine Self. The Divine Self, which is by definition pure Subject, could never be the object of any type of knowledge. Only the Self truly knows the Self. When that which is not the Self knows the Self, it really knows only a certain aspect of the Self, this aspect being the reality of its own identity, which is a disclosure of the Self. In the face of the Self, all other selves are nothing. This is what is meant by saying that after this point there is only pure non-existence.” (n 115)

⁵⁶ ‘Attar describes this matter in the mysterious and beautiful final scene of his *Conference of the Birds* where the thirty birds (*si murgh*) encounter their Lord, the Simurgh, in their own form, “They gazed and dared at last to comprehend/ they were the Simurgh and the journey’s end...And silently their shining Lord replies, / ‘I am a mirror set before your eyes/And all who come before my splendor see/ Themselves, their own unique reality / You came as thirty birds and therefore saw / These selfsame thirty birds, not less nor more / If you had come as forty, fifty — here/ an answering forty, fifty would appear...The journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine-/ You slept secure in Being’s inmost shrine / And since you came as thirty birds, you see / These thirty birds when you discover Me.” Then the birds/Simorgh vanish into silence. Davis, Dick. *The Conference of the Birds*. (Penguin: New York, 1984), 234-5.

⁵⁷ Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 8

⁵⁸ It may go without saying, but the “death before death” of *fanā*’ is very different from suicide, which Ibn ‘Arabi certainly doesn’t advocate. Suicide is simply the second kind of death, which takes one into another dream world of imagination, while *fanā* is the first kind of death, the obliteration of these dreams in the Real.

⁵⁹ Qur’an 28:88

⁶⁰ This brings up another important aspect of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought. Realized individuals, by virtue of their awareness of the dream-like nature of the world, can do all kinds of things that seem to violate the “laws” of that world, just like the dream travelers in *Inception*. Similarly, as history shows us, such extraordinary people are frequently persecuted or killed by other “projections” who have no interest in waking up.

⁶¹ In the language of the famous hadith, the dreamer in the dream realizes that his real self is “the hearing by which he hears, the seeing by which he sees, the hand by which he holds, and the foot by which he walks.” Bukhari (8) 509.

⁶² Dagli, *Ringstones*, 42

⁶³ For example, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes the numerous lights, apparitions, and experiences that will confront the newly deceased adept. If the adept is able to recognize the lights and apparitions for what they are, then he is liberated from the dreamlike, purgatorial state known as *Bardo*, if not, he descends to another level of the *Bardo*, and keeps descending through increasingly terrifying levels until he achieves this recognition. (See Coleman, G. and Thupten, J., eds., Gurme Dorje, trans. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*. Penguin Classics deluxe ed. New York: Penguin, 2007.) This is remarkably similar to what happens in *Inception*, as Cobb falls deeper and deeper through the levels of the dream until he has his epiphany in limbo.

⁶⁴ Ibn 'Arabi also uses *'aql* positively to mean “mind” and “Intellect” or “intelligence,” which, for him, refers to the faculty which can perceive intelligible realities without recourse to sensible forms. When Ibn 'Arabi opposes “reason” to “passion,” he praises it, but when he opposes “reason” to imagination, or mystical “unveiling” he is far more critical of it, and is referring to a different aspect of “reason” than that which holds the passions in check.

⁶⁵ This is true of everything, and not just lofty metaphysical matters. In any domain of rational thinking, be it pure mathematics or chemistry or computer science, the logic of this domain cannot prove its own adequacy and coherence, and so one must always begin with axioms. But how does one arrive at these axioms and determine how and when to apply them? Through the use of imagination and insight.

⁶⁶ Although Jung himself may have been indirectly influenced by Ibn 'Arabi through his close academic relationship with Henri Corbin, a French Orientalist responsible for introducing Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of imagination to Western audiences.

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