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Altruism and Choice: Idealistic and Utilitarian Morality in The Dark Knight and Interstellar

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the theme of altruism as depicted in two films by renowned director Christopher Nolan: "The Dark Knight" (2008) and "Interstellar" (2014). Through the analysis of two key characters, Harvey Dent and Cooper, this paper examines how Nolan portrays acts of altruism and sacrifice, both in a morally complex urban setting and in the vast realm of space. The goal of the paper is to assess how these characters' actions reflect different forms and ideas of altruism and the underlying philosophical and ethical questions that Nolan presents regarding the consequences of such behavior. Christopher Nolan is a filmmaker known for crafting complex narratives that prompt the audience to consider the moral implications of his characters' actions. In both works, Nolan examines the nature of altruism through the lens of two very different protagonists. On the surface, Harvey Dent and Cooper appear driven by a desire to do good and benefit others, but the ways they pursue these goals and the consequences of their actions reveal deeper complexities in the notion of altruism. In this light, the research will focus on how these two characters demonstrate altruism, the motivations behind their actions, and the eventual consequences they face.

INTRODUCTION

Gotham City is on the brink of collapse. Citizens are terrified as the Joker rules the underworld and infrastructure crumbles. In the midst of it all enters a white knight. He puts his life and romantic pursuits at stake, committing to do whatever it takes to uphold justice, not knowing or understanding the consequences that will follow.

In another universe, the world faces an unprecedented danger: crops are rapidly depleting, and climate change-induced dust storms are irreversible. It is time to seek a new home for the citizens of planet Earth. A brave father volunteers to leave Earth – and, more importantly, his two children – to save the future, not knowing when, or if, he will ever return.

These are the plots for two of Christopher Nolan's films, *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *Interstellar* (2014). Co-written with his brother, Jonathan, *The Dark Knight* follows the life of Bruce Wayne and his alter ego,

Batman. Initially, the main protagonist, Harvey Dent, acts as the District Attorney whose main goal relies solely on joining forces with Batman and Police Lieutenant Jim Gordon to eliminate crime in Gotham. After an unfortunately-timed accident leads to the death of the love of his life, Rachel Dawes, and disfigurement of his face, Dent emerges as Two-Face, a conflicted villain who uses a double-headed coin to exact revenge on those he blames for losing the life he once led. His trauma leads him to make unforeseen choices that test the merit of his character and his pursuit of justice after facing immense trauma and pain.

Similarly, in *Interstellar*, a complicated character in former NASA pilot Joseph Cooper emerges, as the Nolans once again explore themes of darkness and light within the human spirit. With the world facing extinction, Cooper agrees to travel through a wormhole to explore planets that may be habitable to the humans left behind. Facing the reality that the mission was never meant to succeed, Cooper and his team decide to journey on toward a second potential planet, in the hopes of a discovery that might save others once they are gone. There, they meet Dr. Mann, an astronaut who has manipulated data to encourage his rescue and hopeful return to Earth.

In *The Dark Knight* and *Interstellar*, plot points are not merely dramatic but reflect a deeper philosophical inquiry between idealism and pragmatism. In these two movies, Nolan explores what it means to hold an unrealistic set of morals in view of the world and how those morals must be adjusted when reality differs from expectation. Both of these main characters seek and display altruism, yet their approaches toward this moral value differ as their movies progress.

Dent represents idealistic altruism, while Cooper embodies a more utilitarian and pragmatic form of altruism. Dent applies his moral values to enact change within Gotham City – before his injury, he does not believe in an "end justifies the means" approach toward goodness. Cooper, on the other hand, approaches altruism pragmatically. He weighs the odds and consequences of his actions to reduce the suffering of those left behind or still under his care. These two characters from completely different worlds begin their journeys with seemingly selfless motivations. As their stories unfold, Nolan's narrative choices indicate that idealistic altruism, when tested by trauma and the passage of time, is untenable and impure.

This paper argues that Nolan utilizes Dent and Cooper to portray two contrasting types of altruism while seeking to understand the psychological and moral consequences of extreme self-sacrifice. Where Dent's strict moral idealism collapses when faced with personal loss, Cooper's decision to leave his children behind for humanity's survival allows him to persevere in the face of struggle. Using Thomas E. Wartenberg's philosophy of film, which argues film can be used to analyze and consider humanity's greatest puzzles through discussion and critical understanding (Wartenberg, 2025), this paper will investigate how Nolan's storytelling techniques strengthen the moral ambiguity seen in both Dent and Cooper.

While Dent's acts of altruism require the belief that Gotham will eventually become a better place, Cooper's acts of altruism rely on both hope for the future, as well as an expectation of disappointment in the choices he is making today. Therefore, when the two characters face their greatest moral challenges,

Harvey Dent fails, while Joseph Cooper remains resilient, determined to forge another path forward. Through these two characters, *The Dark Knight* and *Interstellar* become more than superhero and science fiction stories. Instead, they serve as moral experiments that indicate the fragile balance that exists between conviction and consequences in the modern world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is currently a great deal of discourse and research surrounding Nolan's films. Much of the research that exists discusses either time, memory, or the non-linear structure of his films. "The Impact of Christopher Nolan's Non-linear Narrative Structure on the Audience's Acceptance" studies Nolan's use of visual cues and continuity to enhance the viewer's experience (Yang, 2025). The paper analyzes Nolan's narrative choices as well as demonstrates how those choices do not have to compromise the commercial success of the film. Another paper, "Nolan's Memento, Memory, and Recognition," analyzes Nolan's breakout film *Memento* for its use of puzzles in film and how they stimulate the mind. The paper also studies how the main character embodies the value of a hero, writing, "He aspires to actions on a grand scale, ostensibly motivated by ideals of courage/justice/altruism. By self-consciously playing against the 'hard-boiled' formula's realist pretentiousness; however, Nolan at a deeper level calls these values into question" (Gargett, 2002).

Therefore, there are a variety of research papers centered on Nolan's view of heroes and heroism in his prior films. A 2022 paper published in the SAGE Open titled "Constructing and Deconstructing the Modern Hero in the *Dark Knight* Trilogy" aims to connect the heroes and villains of the series to modernity and postmodernity, particularly in relation to their values (Yilmaz & Fundalar, 2022). Another paper highlights the burden heroes shoulder as their real persona within *The Dark Knight* in "Research on the Image Construction of Superhero Characters in the American Superhero Film '*The Dark Knight*'" (Wang, 2024). Through these papers, many researchers have discussed how Nolan has been creating films that include explorations of heroism since 2000, yet there is an academic gap in the current English language literature regarding Nolan's approach to altruism and how his views are reflected on the silver screen.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses close textual analysis and qualitative comparative film analysis to examine the characters and motivations within *The Dark Knight* and *Interstellar.* Specifically, each character's story arc, dialogue with other characters, and symbolic objects such as Dent's coin, will be considered to understand each type of altruism discussed. Both movies' narrative structures, scenes of sacrifice, and moral decision making will be examined to arrive at a conclusion that explains the motivations behind Nolan's character's altruistic choices.

DEFINITIONS

Over time, altruism has become a defining characteristic of high moral value, as one takes on the emotional and physical toll themselves for the gain of another (Filkowski et al., 2016). Derived by a French philosopher, Auguste Comte, altruism first emerged in 1830 as the antonym of egoism, as it was defined by selflessness (Etymonline, 2026). In the context of Nolan's films, altruism is seen as a self-sacrificial action or set of actions undertaken for the benefit of others. Nolan presents altruism as psychologically demanding and accepts that only sustainable when the characters adhering to its principles can endure moral uncertainty as it applies to their worldview, as well as unexpected loss.

Idealism may be defined in several different ways, as multiple schools of philosophy have attempted to define various iterations of idealism itself. For the purposes of analysis, a moral view of idealism should be assumed. In this form, as promoted by deontologist Immanuel Kant, moral idealism refers to the moral virtues grounded within one adhering to a universal obedience to a moral set of rules (Sobel, 1987). One must adhere to this set of moral truths regardless of consequence or personal outcome. However, as Sobel writes, "According to Kant, universal obedience to the rules of morality would realize a Realm of Ends" (1987). In the 'Realm of Ends' if all members of society were to adhere to the same moral ideals, the eventual result would be a system of connections that lead to a de facto utopian, ideal society. Through this ethical framework, Kant's moral idealism has an eventual end.

Though Kant's moral idealism does not focus on using a moral judgement to help others, through the inevitable creation of his 'Realm of Ends,' this is the end product. In "Kant's Moral Idealism" it is stated that, " What is now important is that he conceived of morality as having an end, and as being defined by its end" (Sobel, 1987). The ends do not justify the means for moral idealism, but instead if all individuals adhere to the same principles of morality and justice, and take action based on these sets of principles, an ideal ending will appear in the form of an ideal society.

If members of society do not follow Kant's ethical framework, then a 'Realm of Ends' is impossible for everyone. Morality will never reach its endpoint because the ideal is not achievable in reality. From Sobel, " Every moral idealism presupposes that there is a unique set of ideal moral rules, that set of rules universal obedience to which would give rise to the state of affairs that is the moral ideal of the idealism. But there cannot be a unique set of rules that satisfies the universal obedience test" (1987). The flaw within this theory is the requirement for all individuals to adhere to the same moral idealistic view, which is difficult to achieve in society.

In an opposing view, utilitarianism refers to an ethical approach that judges human actions against their eventual consequences. It adheres to the principle that choices must be made to ensure the best possible outcomes for the largest number of people. One should act in a way that leads to the benefit of the maximum number of individuals possible, regardless of personal gain (Kucharski, 2024). Intention is not considered through the utilitarian school of thought; the only evaluation must be the final result.

This category of ethical theories argues that the consequences of choice and conduct are the means to evaluate and judge an individual's moral code. Regardless of why one has made a decision to act a specific way, if the outcome is a net positive, the action must be viewed as positive, no matter their initial reason for choosing to behave in that manner.

Finally, morality itself is a system of ethical judgments through which right or wrong must be determined. Nolan plays within this definition, portraying morality as both rigid and fragile, though he allows for it to become adaptive and stronger based on context and the storylines laid out in each film (Gert & Gert 2025).

DISCUSSION

Harvey Dent: The Corruption of Idealistic Altruism

In *The Dark Knight*, Harvey Dent is an upstanding District Attorney who challenges judges who are easy on organized crime. He has no qualms about risking his own life to destroy the organized crime syndicates ruling the city he calls home. He unites with Jim Gordon, Police Lieutenant, and the vigilante Batman, because he believes in the cause behind his mission. His moral code is one that adheres to justice; he is idealistic in his approach to solving moral disagreements. He stands firm that his devotion to moral law will reach the desired outcome and peace will come to Gotham City once this ideal is met.

Dent holds a double-headed coin in his possession, which he uses by flipping it to make "decisions" that challenge his moral virtues. In a scene where his fiancée, Rachel Dawes, tries to prevent him from confronting the Joker, he claims he will flip the coin and "Heads [he'll] go through with it" (Nolan, 2008). He is so secure in his altruistic beliefs and devoted to his impeccable moral code that he cannot foresee any possible diversion from what he knows to be correct. He must confront the Joker to attempt to achieve peace in Gotham, so that is what he will do. In this way, the coin becomes a symbol of Dent and his determination to redeem Gotham. He tells Dawes one must "make their own luck" to remind her of his moral standings (Nolan, 2008).

Dent's idealistic altruism must be viewed as a form of Kantian moral idealism. His ethical position that some actions, such as upholding the law and fighting corruption and crime, must be done regardless of the personal consequences he might face drives home his ideals throughout the film. He is not making the conscious choice to act against his best interests; instead, he believes he must make these choices to uphold his moral convictions. These choices can most easily be seen in his refusal to compromise with corrupt officials or in his attempt to pose as Batman to draw the Joker out of hiding. Dent sees these actions as his personal duty to defend his idealistic beliefs, his love for Dawes, and his hope for the redemption of Gotham.

For Dent, Dawes represents both his personal hope for the future and embodies his idealistic belief in the goodness that exists within Gotham's walls. Because he is with her, his ethical code is enforced, and she

stands as an example for why upholding it is a worthy endeavor. During a discussion over dinner with Batman and Dawes, Dent remarks, "When their enemies were at the gate, the Romans would suspend democracy and appoint one man to protect the city. It wasn't considered an honor. It was considered public service" (Nolan, 2008). This scene shows how Dent's view of altruism is his moral duty. After he loses Dawes, Dent asks Batman, "Then why was it only me who lost everything?" (Nolan, 2008). He views Dawes as his reward for virtue, which is why losing her is the catalyst for his downfall.

This is also shown in one of his most famous lines, "You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (Nolan, 2008). Though this statement appears to celebrate noble sacrifice, it also highlights Dent's knowledge of the perils of moral compromise. If he, as a character, adjusts his idealistic view that defines his choices, he might face an easier life ahead. However, this would mean he becomes the villain through his own definition of morality, and so it is an unavailable choice for him to make. As the movie progresses, the irony behind this line is revealed to the viewer, as Dent will eventually become disillusioned with his idealistic altruism and his coin will take on a sinister nature for his alter ego, Two-Face.

Yet, this adherence to his strict code of ethics, in the face of personal failure, is what begins Dent's spiral downward into the eventual collapse of his moral structure. Later, when the Joker marks Rachel as one of his next targets, Dent seeks him out. He finds the Joker's thug and loads a gun in front of him, threatening his life. He pulls out his coin and explains what will happen next. He says, "Heads- you get to keep your head. Tails... not so lucky. So, you want to tell me about the Joker?" The thug is extremely scared by this threat, and shakes as Dent tosses the coin again in the air. Instead of landing, the coin is caught by Batman who asks. "You'd leave a man's life to chance?" and Dent replies, "Not exactly" (Nolan, 2008). Dent knows the coin will land on heads and does not intend to shoot the thug to get information. He still follows his idealistic ethics when it might serve him better to do the opposite.

The Joker kidnaps Dawes and Dent and provides their locations to Batman and Gordon, but both are surrounded by bombs that are arranged to be set off simultaneously. He tells Batman, "I'm going to tell you where they are. Both of them, and that's the point- you'll have to choose" (Nolan, 2008). Batman chooses to save Dawes, so Gordon's team heads to Dent's location instead. However, the Joker has switched the locations, and Batman is actually it on the way to save Dent (Nolan, 2008). In the following scenes, Dent struggles to escape, but accidentally spills oil on his face. When Batman arrives to save him, an explosion is triggered, and Dent's face catches on fire. Half of his face becomes disfigured and burnt, leading to the creation of his new moniker Two-Face. Dawes loses her life and Dent's grasp on order, justice, and altruism is altered.

In the aftermath of his choices, Dent no longer has a moral code to believe in. Trauma psychology research suggests that individuals whose identities are rooted in strong moral beliefs are especially susceptible to trauma. Experiencing significant personal loss may induce extreme cognitive dissonance when one's new reality conflicts with one's existing fundamental beliefs. The Moral Dissonance Model indicates "This happens *post-hoc*, and it is in this phase that dissonance can occur when the actual behavior contradicts a morally more desirable behavior; a sense of ought" (Te Brake & Nauta, 2022). Dent's expectations do not meet reality in the face of his trauma, so his altruistic mindset changes.

When the Joker manipulates him and kills Rachel, her death ends Dent's vision of idealism and turns it into a meaningless construct that he now chooses to violate. This psychological shift is dramatized in the hospital scene where Dent, disfigured and emotionally devastated, embraces randomness as his new guiding principle (Nolan 2008). His coin is no longer two-headed. It is now also scarred on one side and can create choice, with no regard for ethics or morals. When Gordon visits Dent at the hospital he asks Dent, "Do you know who picked up Rachel?" He also apologizes stating, "I'm sorry, Harvey." Gordon is still seeking justice for what has occurred. Dent replies, "No. No you're not. Not yet." Dent shows here his shifting mindset against idealistic altruism into a desire for revenge against what has happened to him.

Dent uses his coin as a weapon of fate during his transformation into Two-Face as a second villain in *The Dark Knight*. His trauma can be viewed as a lens through which he has no control over the outcome of life, thus rendering moral choices irrelevant. When the Joker visits Dent in the hospital, Dent shows him the coin. The Joker explains why he lives for chaos by sharing, "I'm an agent of chaos. And you know the thing about chaos, Harvey? It's fair." In response, Harvey tells the Joker "You live. You die," as he prepares to flip his charred coin for the first time (Nolan, 2008). His ethical framework does not matter as much as taking revenge for what has occurred. From *Altruism Born of Suffering,* "…Even when it does not lead to significant trauma symptoms, intentional victimization is likely to create psychological wounds and transformations that turn people away from, and at times against, others" (Staub & Vollhardt, 2008). Sometimes termed as an "origin story," many superhero villains were once heroic, yet circumstances outside of their control have led to their new trajectory of villainhood. As explored in *The Superhero Inside*, trauma can be an ongoing trigger that drives these villains toward vengeance and abandonment of their altruism, rather than a reinforcement of their moral virtue (Craig 2018). Once Dent loses everything he deems valuable and rewarding, most notably Dawes, he no longer has a reason to uphold his ethical views.

Harvey Dent's downfall highlights how inflexible ideals can collapse without moral adaptability and emotional flexibility. His noble, idealistic altruism is not resilient due to the expectation that a strong moral code will eventually yield just, deserving outcomes. Dent's experience is potentially rooted in the emotional distress he experiences when his ethical worldview is betrayed by reality. His idealistic altruism is revealed to be conditional, not everlasting, in the face of his personal tragedy.

When his altruism is practiced without self-awareness or moral recalibration, Dent's desire to achieve justice and order becomes contorted into a destructive force, overpowering his once noble self. According to *The Psychosocial and Contextual Predictors of Revenge Desire and Attitudes in Crime Victims,* his beliefs have now become radicalized and spur on his emotionally-driven desire for vengeance. (McGaughey et al., 2025). This is evident in the film when Dent responds to his injury and loss by shifting his worldview to one of randomness and revenge. He is unable to uphold the values he once believed so strongly in and cannot reassess his moral standing as one worth saving. He has begun to forsake his once-longstanding principles as Two-Face takes over with a new ethical value system.

This change is fully realized when Dent holds Gordon's family hostage, forcing them to endure the chance-based justice system he now embraces (Nolan 2008). The scene marks the culmination of Dent's psychological breakdown; his descent into villainy reveals the total corruption of his original altruistic

intent. It is because his selfless and committed intent to protect Gotham led to his personal loss that he can no longer uphold his idealistic values. Dent's transformation portrays the fragile boundary between altruism and moral collapse. When decisions are based on a rigid expectation of justice, and those expectations are then betrayed, altruism easily mutates into the very chaos it once disabused.

In Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, Dent's downward spiral is more than a personal failure; it is a broader commentary on the peril of moral altruism when it becomes dependent on a world that does not exist. Dent often operates in absolutes: good or bad, black or white. To Dent, the "bad guys" belong in prison, and the "good guys" must seek justice at all costs. The rigid nature of his worldview is the reason why Dent cannot withstand the trauma introduced by the Joker, who operates with a disregard for social norms or ethical values. As Dent loses faith in the justice he once believed in, his coin, once a moral indicator, now leads to decisions regarding life or death without prior ethical consideration.

Instead, Two-Face and his coin decide the future, regardless of what the outcome may be. Once on the path to heroism, Dent has now become a villain to rival the Joker himself, where his random coin flips also contribute to the chaos that plagues Gotham. His prior words about dying as a hero were actually a prediction and prompt the viewers to question how their own moral code would be challenged by Dent's experiences.

Dent's fall exposes the paradox of idealistic altruism, asking the viewer to consider when the pursuit of justice becomes indistinguishable from the corruption it was meant to defeat. By the end of the film, Dent has threatened a child, kidnapped a family, and killed without a trial. These illegal crimes are no different from those that Gotham's criminals have committed earlier that he sought to end. Despite this, Dent is unable to see his own downfall for what it is. He continues to see himself as an agent of fairness and justice.

Dent's now forgotten belief in the results of an instilled altruistic moral code highlights the danger of holding a self-righteous ethical system. Those who believe themselves to be just and good, or beyond reproach, often fail to recognize their own ethical flaws. To the audience, Dent, once Gotham's symbol of idealistic altruism, has become its cautionary tale. His journey differs greatly from Cooper's because it illustrates that altruism, when inflexible and rooted in the expectation of just outcomes, cannot survive when the expectations are anything but.

Joseph Cooper: The Pragmatic Altruist

Where Harvey Dent's story explores the fragility of idealistic altruism when confronted with trauma and personal loss, Cooper's journey in *Interstellar* offers an altruistic view that is pragmatic, emotionally grounded, and resilient. Dent's altruism fails because it depends on moral absolutes and a belief in institutional justice, but Cooper's altruism adapts to uncertainty. It draws strength from personal love rather than ideological conviction.

In *Interstellar*, Cooper's altruism is not rooted in abstract ideals or rigid rules that depend on rewards. Although it is difficult to predict the outcome of his specific actions, Cooper demonstrates a utilitarian

altruistic code by attempting to maximize the best possible outcome. He acts selflessly in relation to his own desires and expectations. *Moral Believer or Moral Problem-Solver? Moral Pragmatism Fosters Tolerance Without Impeding Moral Behavior* explains that "from a moral pragmatist's perspective, moral beliefs are neither universal sacred values nor mere products of culture but habits as useful tools people develop to deal with specific problems" (Zhang et al., 2024). In the film, Cooper does not sacrifice himself for a faceless humanity out of principle; he sacrifices because he loves his children, most notably his daughter.

As the film presents it, Cooper's choice to leave Earth and participate in a last-hope mission is as heroic as it is self-sacrificing. It is a decision made not in defiance of emotion, but because of it. He says, "I'm not gonna lie to you. Heading out there is what I feel born to do and it excites me. That doesn't make it wrong (Noal 2014). Here, he admits that he might not have the best intentions for his reasons behind completing the mission, but in the end, he is still demonstrating altruism by attempting to save Earth.

Cooper worries about the world left behind if he does not take action and how that world will affect his daughter (Nolan, 2014). He believes his only hope for her survival is to try and save the entire world. This form of altruism, shows how selflessness can be sustained by personal attachment rather than ideological purity. In his choice to leave Murphy behind, he sets in motion the action that will save humanity. Coop does not seek the reward that will come to him for doing the right thing; instead, he makes his choice using the information he has been given without knowing what the outcome will be.

This form of pragmatic self-sacrifice can be further understood through Peter Singer's utilitarian ethical framework, which evaluates the morality of actions based on their end results rather than their noble beginnings. Singer argues that individuals are morally obligated to act in ways that maximize overall well-being, as long as the actions do not take a moral toll on the person acting (Singer, 2011). Though much of Singer's work stems from a desire for equality between man and beast, and a consideration for nations that are less well off than their counterparts, his arguments may be applied to Cooper as well. However, Cooper must still tell his daughter he is leaving. He does this through a metaphor about parents existing as ghosts of their children. He tells Murphy, "That's right. I can't be your ghost right now - I need to exist. Because they chose me. They chose me, Murph" (Nolan, 2014). Considering utilitarian altruism in this context, Cooper's decision to leave Earth and his children behind aligns with effective altruism: the suffering of the few, including himself and his family, is justified by the potential survival of humanity as a whole.

Crucially, Nolan does not present Cooper's choice as morally easy or one that is emotionally detached. While Cooper's actions conform to utilitarian logic, the film chooses to explore the psychological burden of such reasoning, emphasizing that moral correctness does not negate emotional loss. Cooper's decision to board the *Endurance* is an overwhelmingly difficult decision for him to make. If he is unable to save humanity, as he fully expects to be when told this is Earth's last chance, he will never see his daughter again. This choice by Cooper is a stark difference from Dent's choices in *The Dark Knight*; in the face of emotional loss, Dent becomes chaotic and turns away from his idealistic altruism framework, while Cooper adheres more closely to his own utilitarian mindset.

Alternate Viewpoints

Overall, Nolan's films suggest that the result of altruism is less important than the moral posture one maintains in its pursuit. But here too, there is room for disagreement. For instance, one article suggests that Nolan's heroes operate in moral gray zones where sacrifice is expected and redemptive (Kwiatkowski, 2024). Yet this viewing does not fully capture how isolating that sacrifice has become. Cooper doesn't return to acclaim; he returns to a future that has moved on without him, and only he knows what it has cost him.

In this way, Nolan complicates this utilitarian framework by exposing the human cost that persists even when a desired outcome is achieved. Through a series of choices, some independent and others necessary, Cooper is trapped in his spacecraft for decades longer than anticipated. When he is finally reunited with Murphy at the end of the film, she is significantly older, while Cooper has remained young. Though Cooper has achieved his goals and saved humanity, his personal loss cannot be recovered. Murphy and Cooper do not have much time left together, and it is almost a certainty that she will die before him. He must shoulder the burden that she asked him not to go on his mission decades prior, and these are the consequences of his actions.

During the reunion with his daughter, Murphy exemplifies this emotional alienation (Nolan, 2014). It is not a moment of triumph; instead, it is a sobering reminder that effective altruism will eventually demand extreme loss (Baxter, 2005). Singer's utilitarian model also justifies personal suffering for greater outcomes (2011). And while Cooper's sacrifice does align with utilitarian ethics, Nolan chooses to explore the psychological toll of his actions. Though Cooper has saved humanity, the film ends with a sense of grief rather than triumph. It appears that true altruism in Nolan's films is not to be measured by success, but instead by a character's ability to endure the internal dissonance it creates.

This contrast between expected moral outcomes is especially significant when viewed through the same psychological lens used to examine Dent. While Dent spirals into vengeance when his expectations are broken, Cooper faces profound emotional hardship, including time dilation, loss, and isolation, without abandoning his purpose. His utilitarian altruism has allowed him to persevere through resilience, rather than crumble in the face of unexpected setbacks. Drawing from the same trauma theories discussed in *Moral Believer or Moral Problem-Solver? Moral Pragmatism Fosters Tolerance Without Impeding Moral Behavior*, Cooper's behavior suggests resilience rooted in adaptability as a coping mechanism for handling the choices he has made. "Understanding that there is no one-size-fits-all solution allows for the coexistence of multiple belief systems without diminishing one's belief in their own values" (Zhang et al., 2024). Dent, whose altruism collapses when the world no longer mirrors his ideals, emerges as the anti-hero to Cooper, who anticipates disorder throughout every step of his journey and persists despite it. His decisions are informed by a willingness to endure uncertainty for the chance to save both humanity and his daughter.

CONCLUSION

Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* and *Interstellar* offer more than character studies in heroism. They serve as philosophical inquiries into the nature of altruism. Nolan uses the story arcs of Harvey Dent and Cooper to critique two distinct forms of selflessness, one that is grounded in rigid moral idealism and institutional validation, and another in utilitarian ethics rooted in emotional and adaptive reasoning.

Interstellar reimagines what makes altruism heroic, even when on a surface level most viewers would lean toward *The Dark Knight's* portrayal as the morally superior. Dent's idealistic altruism demands moral order and societal recognition, but Cooper's does not. As noted in *The Philosophy of Christopher Nolan*, this blend of love, duty, and uncertainty elevates Cooper's character as a symbol of morally complex altruism, or utilitarianism (Belluomini & Dunn, 2017). His altruism resists the fragility that destroyed Dent because it is not dependent on a just world.

Where Dent seeks moral resolution, Cooper accepts that moral ambiguity is part of the journey. His decisions are emotionally fraught, ethically complex, and never fully rewarded. That resilience, not moral purity, is what defines his brand of altruism. Through this juxtaposition, Nolan critiques the cultural ideal of the flawless hero and instead offers a vision of altruism that is imperfect, costly, and profoundly human.

Ultimately, Nolan does not define altruism as a pure ideological framework. It is a fragile negotiation between conviction and consequence. True selflessness, in his films, may only be achieved when one is willing to adjust their expectations of their moral code, accepting both the positive and negative outcomes that may emerge once a choice has been made.

In the end, this paper has shown that Nolan's moral universe resists simple categorization. By presenting altruism as both necessary and dangerous, Nolan urges his audience to both admire heroism, as well as to question the personal cost it demands and whether we ourselves would be willing to pay it.

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