

SURVIVAL ETHICS IN INTERSTELLAR: A PSYCHOANALYTIC COMPARISON OF COOPER AND DR. MANN

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ABSTRACT

Interstellar (2014) stages survival ethics through two astronauts: Joseph Cooper, who subordinates private desire to a collective future, and Dr. Mann, who turns moral language into a cover for self-preservation. Using a qualitative descriptive psychoanalytic approach, this study treats the film as a cultural text and analyzes twelve purposively selected scenes. Guided by Freud's structural model (id-ego-superego) and ego defense mechanisms, the analysis shows that Cooper typically maintains an ego-superego alliance by acknowledging fear and loss while regulating them through responsibility and reality testing. Mann, in contrast, exhibits id dominance supported by rationalization, denial, and deception. The comparison differentiates ethical sacrifice from survival that cancels the other.

Keywords: defense mechanisms; id-ego-superego; Interstellar; psychoanalysis; survival ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) is often remembered as a space epic, yet its most persistent drama is not the physics of wormholes but the psychology of survival. The film begins from a world where agriculture replaces scientific ambition, dust invades bedrooms, and the future is imagined as a narrowing corridor rather than an open horizon. The narrative then expands into cosmic travel, but it never abandons the intimate scale of attachment, loss, guilt, and self-justification. *Interstellar* becomes a pressure test for the human mind: what happens to ethics when extinction is no longer an abstract fear but a timetable?

Interstellar also couples an environmental emergency with a moral emergency. The story implies that mass hunger, ecological collapse, and social regression pressure humanity into a migration imaginary, so leaving Earth becomes the last available narrative of hope (Koncz & Boas, 2024; Hartnell, 2025). At the same time, the film foregrounds ethical language - promise, responsibility, loyalty, betrayal - suggesting that survival is not only a technical problem but an ethical one. A moral-values study of the film, for instance, treats key scenes as ethical lessons about honesty, protection, bravery, and the father-daughter relationship (Rahmah, 2024). Yet the film also insists on the opposite possibility: under survival pressure, moral language can become a cover for harm.

This article concentrates on one comparative axis: Cooper versus Dr. Mann. Cooper is introduced as a former pilot and engineer who still believes that humans are meant to explore, but he is also a father who experiences a severe attachment conflict when he chooses to leave his children. Dr. Mann appears later as a celebrated scientist - 'the best of us' - whose collapse becomes one of the film's decisive turns. Their opposition is not simply good versus bad. It is a

difference in psychic economy under threat: how desire, fear, and conscience are organized when the self is cornered.

Freud's structural model remains a useful vocabulary for mapping such conflicts. The id condenses primary drives and the demand for immediate discharge (pleasure, fear, aggression, survival impulses). The ego negotiates those drives within the constraints of reality, delay, and consequence. The superego crystallizes internalized ideals, guilt, and moral evaluation (Freud, 1961). When anxiety becomes unmanageable, the ego recruits defenses - strategies that reduce psychic pain by distorting, redirecting, or masking conflict. Defense mechanisms, systematized by A. Freud (1993), are not simply lies or weakness; they are patterned ways the ego prevents collapse.

A frequent weakness in student manuscripts is treating id, ego, and superego as interchangeable labels for any emotion, producing vague summaries without evidence or coding rules. By contrast, qualitative descriptive studies in film and literary research often make their procedure explicit: they define the data unit (scene, line, action), extract relevant dialogue, and justify classifications through repeated viewing and category definitions. For example, a qualitative descriptive study of *John Wick* explicitly collects scenes that show competition among id, ego, and superego (Marcelina, 2025), while a defense-mechanism study of *A Man Called Otto* frames defenses as unconscious strategies for handling loss (Maretha, 2025). These works are not perfect, but they show a concrete methodological habit that can be adopted to strengthen analysis.

The research questions are: (1) How does *Interstellar* represent Cooper's and Dr. Mann's id-ego-superego dynamics under existential threat? (2) Which defense mechanisms are foregrounded in each character, and how do these mechanisms shape ethical decision-making? (3) What does the Cooper-Mann contrast suggest about 'survival ethics' as a cinematic problem - an arena where the psyche can either sustain principles or dissolve them? The goal is not to diagnose fictional people, but to explain how the film constructs moral endurance and moral breakdown through psychoanalytic patterns.

A related qualitative film study on *Interstellar* and *Ready Player One* shows that narrative structure can be analyzed systematically through scene selection and textual interpretation (Akbar, 2023), which supports the present study's close-reading method.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design. Qualitative descriptive research aims to present a careful, low-inference account of meaning in context, especially when the object is a text and the analysis depends on interpretation rather than measurement. In film research, this approach

typically combines repeated viewing with systematic note-taking, scene selection, and analytic categorization. Similar procedures are used in recent descriptive qualitative studies that take movie dialogue and character behavior as primary data (Palupi, Adrian, & Susilawati, 2024; Marcelina, 2025).

Data source is *Interstellar* (directed by Christopher Nolan 2014). The film is treated as a cultural text whose narrative decisions, images, and dialogue can be interpreted as representations of psychological and ethical conflict. Because streaming, Blu-ray, and theatrical cuts may differ slightly in timing, this article reports timecodes as approximate markers intended to help readers locate scenes, not as exact forensic timestamps.

The unit of analysis is the scene: a coherent sequence of actions and dialogue that produces a recognizable dramatic function (decision, confession, betrayal, sacrifice). Twelve scenes were selected purposively because they foreground (a) high-stakes survival decisions, (b) direct moral language (promise, duty, betrayal), and (c) observable defense mechanisms such as rationalization, denial, projection, or displacement. The selection is balanced to capture (1) Cooper's repeated negotiation between attachment and duty and (2) Dr. Mann's arc from public heroism to private collapse.

Data collection proceeded in four steps. First, the film was watched multiple times to map the full narrative arc. Second, the twelve scenes were isolated and transcribed in descriptive notes, including key lines, actions, camera emphasis, and immediate consequences. Third, each scene was coded with two code families: (i) structural components (id, ego, superego) and (ii) defense mechanisms (e.g., rationalization, denial, reaction formation, projection). Fourth, codes were compared across Cooper and Mann to identify stable patterns and contradictions. The aim was not to count codes but to explain how the film organizes the characters' choices.

Analytic interpretation followed a rule of evidence: a psychological label is assigned only when it is supported by at least two indicators among (a) explicit dialogue, (b) repeated behavioral pattern, (c) narrative consequence, and (d) contradiction between stated values and enacted choices. This rule is used to reduce the common problem of free-floating labeling in psychoanalytic film readings. To enhance credibility, the analysis triangulates the scene evidence with existing scholarship on *Interstellar*'s moral narrative and affective structure (Rahmah, 2024; Sari, 2021) and on the film's broader crisis imaginaries (Koncz & Boas, 2024).

Recent qualitative descriptive film studies also demonstrate the usefulness of scene-based coding for psychoanalytic analysis, including work on *John Wick*, *A Man Called Otto*, *Spencer*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The Lovely Bones* (Marcelina, 2025; Maretha, 2025; Murti, 2024; Palupi, Adrian, & Susilawati, 2024; Rezeki, Tawakal, & Setyowati, 2023; Setyowati, 2024).

No.	Scene label	Approx. time	Analytic evidence (paraphrase)
1	Departure as ethical wound	00:20:00-00:28:00	Cooper decides to leave Murph and Tom after the NASA briefing. Murph refuses goodbye and frames the choice as abandonment; Cooper frames it as duty. The scene foregrounds guilt, delayed gratification, and the ego's attempt to regulate attachment.
2	Dr. Brand's promise and Plan A/Plan B split	00:44:00-00:52:00	NASA frames the mission as humanity's last chance. Brand Sr. uses moral language (saving people) while hiding the impossibility of Plan A. Cooper accepts the mission under a superego-heavy narrative of responsibility.
3	Miller's planet and the wave: reality principle shock	01:18:00-01:30:00	The crew debates landing despite time-dilation risk. After the wave and losses, Cooper experiences guilt and anger; he insists on confronting consequences (ego reality principle) rather than fantasy reassurance.
4	Video messages: attachment vs mission arithmetic	01:31:00-01:40:00	Cooper watches decades of messages. His grief and longing erupt, but he returns to mission planning. The film frames this as disciplined delay rather than emotional numbness.
5	Decision to visit Mann: hope as defensive investment	01:41:00-01:49:00	The crew chooses to seek Dr. Mann based on previous signal. Cooper's hope becomes pragmatic: he treats hope as a calculated risk, not a guarantee, signaling ego mediation.
6	Mann revived: hero image and superego mask	01:49:00-01:57:00	Mann wakes crying, thanking them. He performs the ideal scientist identity and speaks of humanity, but his affect is unstable, hinting that the 'best of us' is an image that must be maintained.
7	Mann confesses the falsified data	01:57:00-02:03:00	Mann admits he sent false positive data because he could not die alone. He frames it as species logic and necessity. This is rationalization paired with denial of harm.
8	Mann's betrayal and physical struggle with Cooper	02:04:00-02:10:00	Mann attempts to kill Cooper during a repair excursion. He narrates survival as natural law and treats empathy as weakness. The id's survival drive overrides superego constraints.
9	The docking catastrophe: omnipotent control fantasy collapses	02:11:00-02:18:00	Mann attempts an unauthorized docking despite clear warnings. The resulting explosion visualizes catastrophic consequences of denial and grandiosity; the ego's reality testing fails.
10	Cooper's sacrifice into Gargantua	02:19:00-02:28:00	Cooper detaches to save Brand, choosing collective future over self-preservation and immediate reunion fantasies. The act reads as ego-superego alignment under extreme pressure.
11	Tesseract communication: guilt transformed into repair	02:30:00-02:43:00	Inside the tesseract, Cooper re-enacts the departure trauma and tries to 'undo' it by sending data to Murph. The film frames this as sublimation: painful affect is converted into problem-solving and care.
12	Hospital reunion: ethical outcome of delayed gratification	02:47:00-02:54:00	Cooper meets elderly Murph. She interprets his leaving as meaningful within the larger survival narrative. The scene closes the guilt circuit and reframes sacrifice as relational continuity.

Table 1. Scene corpus (approximate timecodes) and analytic focus

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Survival crisis as a test of psychic economy

Interstellar frames survival as a totalizing horizon: every personal choice is measured against extinction. This framing aligns with scholarship that reads the film as a climate-migration narrative, where ecological breakdown forces the imagination to relocate humanity beyond Earth (Koncz & Boas, 2024). In such a frame, moral talk becomes unstable. Ethical principles can be strengthened because the stakes are total, but they can also be hollowed out because the stakes are total. The film dramatizes both possibilities by placing its characters inside dilemmas where any option produces loss and where 'doing the right thing' cannot avoid pain.

The emotional engine of *Interstellar* reinforces that test. Sari argues that awe and the sublime operate as the film's emotional core and that sacrifice is staged as a central building block of the narrative (Sari, 2021). Awe can amplify superego demands: the larger the object, the more the self is pressed to justify its existence through duty and meaning. Yet awe can also destabilize the ego by shrinking the self into insignificance, which may invite id-driven panic. *Interstellar* designs its spectacle so that characters must either translate awe into responsibility or translate awe into entitlement.

At the level of plot mechanics, *Interstellar* repeatedly forces characters to choose between mutually injurious options: stay and die with those you love, or leave and hurt them in order to save them; protect a few now, or gamble for many later. Such dilemmas make psychic conflict visible. The id demands immediate relief (avoid pain, survive now). The superego demands an idealized duty (save humanity, do not betray). The ego must calculate reality: time dilation, fuel limits, and irreversible consequences. The Cooper-Mann contrast becomes the film's clearest demonstration that survival pressure does not remove ethics; it intensifies the psychic struggle that makes ethics possible.

3.2 Cooper: ego-superego alliance under attachment pressure

Cooper is written as a character who contains a strong id (desire to stay with his children, fear of loss, anger at institutional deceit) but rarely allows that id to govern action. In the departure sequence, Murph reads his leaving as abandonment. From an id perspective, her reaction is accurate because leaving is felt as injury. Cooper's response, however, is not to dismiss her pain but to carry it while still leaving. The scene presents a classic conflict: the id wants immediate attachment repair, the superego demands duty, and the ego chooses delay while accepting guilt as a cost rather than denying it.

The Miller's planet episode intensifies this structure. The decision to land is a compromise between id-hope (the desire for a quick success) and ego-reality (the known risk of time dilation). After the wave disaster and the loss of decades on Earth, Cooper's grief appears as rage and self-blame. A purely defensive ego might deny the loss or retreat into fantasy reassurance. Instead, Cooper insists on watching the consequences in the video-message sequence. He confronts decades of absence without attempting to reinterpret them as 'not real.' That insistence on confronting reality is the ego's reality principle at work, even when reality is psychologically unbearable.

Cooper's defenses are therefore largely adaptive. One recurring mechanism is suppression: he postpones overwhelming affect to complete tasks, then releases it in contained moments. The message scene shows him crying, then returning to mission arithmetic. Another mechanism is

sublimation: he converts guilt and longing into technical problem-solving and care. The clearest instance is the tesseract sequence, where he re-enters the traumatic memory of leaving Murph. Rather than remain in regret, he uses that position to send information that will allow Murph to solve the gravity problem. Pain is transformed into repair and responsibility.

Cooper also displays displacement and controlled aggression. His anger at deception is real, but he attempts to locate that anger at its proper object rather than spreading it onto the innocent. When conflict erupts, he returns to constraints: docking rules, fuel arithmetic, and mission sequence. This repeated return to procedure positions him as ego-identified. Even his hope is constrained. He does not treat hope as a guarantee; he treats it as a risk that must be managed. In psychoanalytic terms, he preserves reality testing under pressure.

The decisive ethical crystallization occurs in Cooper's detachment into Gargantua. At the id level, self-preservation is maximal: he could attempt to keep himself alive to return to his family. Yet the ego recognizes the fuel reality and the mission logic; the superego supplies the imperative to save the other and preserve the future. The act is not presented as the absence of desire but as desire disciplined by value. The hospital reunion later confirms the narrative meaning: Murph interprets his leaving as meaningful within a survival story rather than as simple abandonment, and Cooper's guilt is partially integrated into a repaired relationship.

3.3 Dr. Mann: id dominance and the collapse of moral language

Dr. Mann is introduced as an icon. The film insists that he was selected as the best candidate, which makes his later failure function as a critique of moral idealization. His first appearance after revival is a performance of gratitude and tears. This can be read as genuine affect, but it also functions as an appeal to the superego of the rescuers: to see him as a noble sufferer and to confirm their mission's meaning. Psychoanalytically, the hero image becomes a superego costume that Mann must maintain, because losing it would mean facing his fear without a moral shield.

Mann's confession exposes the mechanism behind that costume. He admits that he falsified data because he could not die alone. This is an id statement disguised as a species argument. He describes the fear of death and isolation as an irresistible force, then retrofits an ethical narrative around it. The primary defense is rationalization: an unacceptable motive (self-preservation at any cost) is translated into acceptable language (necessity, the greater good). Denial operates alongside it: he minimizes the harm caused by the false signal and treats the rescue team's risk as a secondary detail.

The betrayal sequence makes id dominance visible as action. Mann attempts to kill Cooper while delivering an ideology of survival. His speech positions empathy and loyalty as luxuries, and

necessity as natural law. Projection also appears: Mann attributes to the world an absolute hostility that mirrors his internal panic, thereby justifying aggression as realism. Instead of the ego negotiating between desire and consequence, Mann's ego becomes instrumental to the id. It plans and manipulates to secure survival, while superego language remains as a rhetorical layer that tries to keep the self-image intact.

Mann's unauthorized docking attempt is the film's clearest dramatization of failed reality testing. He is warned that the procedure will not work, yet he insists that he can control the situation. This is a fantasy of omnipotent control: the belief that desire and will can override technical constraint. When the docking catastrophe occurs, it externalizes the psychic failure. Denial of limits produces lethal consequences that are not symbolic but mechanical. The film therefore refuses to romanticize desperation; it treats desperation as dangerous when it recruits technology without accepting constraint.

The Mann arc reframes the phrase 'the best of us.' Under a psychoanalytic reading, the phrase is less a stable moral category and more an identification fantasy. Mann identifies with being the hero so strongly that he cannot survive the possibility of dying as an ordinary, frightened person. The id demands life; the ego provides tactics; the superego provides slogans. The moral breakdown is not the absence of morality, but morality instrumentalized as a tool for the id. In this sense, Mann is not a monster outside humanity; he is a frightening possibility inside it.

3.4 Defense mechanisms as ethical technology

Interstellar suggests that defense mechanisms are not minor psychological details but ethical technologies. They are how a subject makes an action feel permissible. In Cooper, defenses such as suppression and sublimation protect moral continuity: he can bear guilt without externalizing it into harm. In Mann, defenses such as rationalization and denial protect the id: he can harm others while preserving a self-image of necessity. The ethical difference is therefore not only what they do, but how they make what they do psychologically livable.

Rationalization is the key mechanism in Mann. He repeatedly narrates his choices as unavoidable and frames betrayal as an extension of survival logic. This rhetorical pattern erases agency. Psychoanalytically, erasing agency reduces superego guilt by pretending that no alternative existed. Cooper's language tends to preserve agency. He acknowledges that leaving hurts, that time has been lost, and that sacrifice is chosen. Even when he is trapped by constraints, he does not pretend his choices are morally neutral; he treats them as burdens.

Denial in Mann appears in two forms: denial of consequences and denial of limits. He denies the consequences of falsified data by minimizing the risk to others, and he denies the limits of docking procedure by treating warnings as obstacles to be overridden. In contrast, Cooper's ego

work is defined by acceptance of limits: fuel, time dilation, and irreversible loss. This acceptance is not resignation; it is the condition for effective action. Cooper can grieve and still act because he does not need to pretend limits do not exist.

Projection and displacement operate differently in each character. Mann projects danger onto others, turning rescuers into threats to his survival narrative and turning the environment into an enemy that authorizes violence. Cooper displaces affect into controlled spaces (private tears, intense focus), but he resists projecting his pain as license to harm. The film therefore distinguishes defenses that enable communal survival from defenses that sabotage it.

Reaction formation can be glimpsed in Mann's early speeches about humanity. Excessive moral rhetoric may function as a defense against the opposite impulse: panic and selfishness. The stronger the underlying fear, the louder the moral performance. This reading does not reduce Mann to simple hypocrisy; it explains hypocrisy as a structural symptom of conflict. The defense is evidence of a struggle, but in Mann the struggle is resolved by violence rather than by negotiation.

3.5 Cooper and Mann as doubles: what survival can do to the self

A productive way to understand the Cooper-Mann contrast is to treat Mann as Cooper's shadow double. Both men are guardians of the future. Both are isolated, both confront impossible odds, and both must live with the injury their choices cause. The film creates this doubling by placing Mann on a planet that appears stable at first glance, as if he represents the successful version of the mission. When that success is revealed as false, the double becomes a warning: under the same survival pressure, one subject can preserve ethics while another weaponizes survival against others.

This doubling fits the film's affective design. Awe positions the self against vastness (Sari, 2021). In that position, the self can respond with humility and duty (superego regulation) or with panic and entitlement (id dominance). Cooper uses awe to justify sacrifice; Mann uses awe to justify desperation. The film's scale does not determine ethics; it intensifies whatever psychic economy the character brings to the scene. Awe becomes a mirror: it returns either responsibility or panic. Scholarship often emphasizes *Interstellar's* mixture of scientific credibility and emotional narrative. A review in *Physics Today* notes that the film was developed with scientific consultation from Kip Thorne and dramatizes how humanity might leave Earth through a wormhole scenario (Guinnessy, 2014). That credibility matters for psychoanalysis because it sharpens the reality principle: constraints are real. When Cooper accepts limits, he aligns with the film's world. When Mann rejects limits, his denial collides with the film's physics, and the collision is lethal.

The contrast also clarifies how love functions in the film. Love can be read as an attachment force that intensifies both id demand and superego duty. Cooper's love produces guilt but also motivates sublimation and sacrifice. Mann's lack of relational anchors produces a different psychic economy: survival becomes purely self-referential. In that sense, the film's ethical claim is not that love is a magic solution; it is that attachment provides a social and moral grammar that helps the ego tolerate pain without converting it into harm.

3.6 Synthesis: survival ethics as the management of guilt

Across the twelve scenes, the deepest difference between Cooper and Mann can be summarized as the management of guilt. Cooper accepts guilt as the price of meaningful action. He carries it, mourns it, and transforms it into repair. Mann cannot bear guilt because guilt would collapse the hero image he uses to survive his fear. Therefore he converts guilt into justification. The film suggests that the problem is not fear itself; fear is universal. The problem is what the psyche does with fear when it becomes unbearable.

This interpretation aligns with and extends moral readings of *Interstellar*. Studies that identify moral values in the film, such as honesty and loyalty (Rahmah, 2024), are correct to treat *Interstellar* as ethically instructional. The psychoanalytic lens adds an explanation mechanism: it shows how moral values are maintained or violated through defenses. Honesty fails in Mann not because he lacks intelligence, but because lying is the defense that preserves his psychic survival. Loyalty holds in Cooper not because he is free from fear, but because his defenses keep fear from canceling the other.

In practical terms, the Cooper-Mann contrast implies that survival ethics is not simply a list of virtues. It is an organization of the psyche under pressure: the ability to keep reality testing, to delay discharge, to admit agency, and to resist using necessity as an excuse. *Interstellar* dramatizes this by giving the audience two versions of human potential. One version shows courage and sacrifice; the other shows desperation and cruelty. The film's ethical argument is that both potentials are human, and that what matters is the psychic work that lets duty survive panic.

Sands argues that scientific narratives and technical filmmaking can make science fiction feel immediate and credible (Sands, 2018); this helps explain why *Interstellar*'s realistic constraint structure sharpens rather than softens its psychoanalytic tension.

Taken together, these scenes show that survival ethics in *Interstellar* is not a static virtue list but a way of organizing guilt, reality testing, and responsibility under threat.

4. CONCLUSION

This article compared Cooper and Dr. Mann as two psychoanalytic responses to extinction pressure in *Interstellar*. Using Freud's structural model and ego defense mechanisms, the analysis

of twelve purposively selected scenes shows that the film does not treat survival as a single moral logic. Instead, it stages survival as a psychic economy that can either sustain ethics or dissolve it. Cooper tends to maintain an ego-superego alliance. He acknowledges id pressures such as longing, fear, anger, and the wish to remain with family, but he regulates those pressures through reality testing, delayed gratification, and responsibility. His dominant defenses (suppression and sublimation) protect moral continuity because they allow him to carry guilt without turning guilt into harm. His decisive sacrifice into Gargantua is therefore not a denial of desire but a disciplined channeling of desire into an ethical action that preserves another life and a future community.

Dr. Mann represents the opposite economy. His fear of dying alone activates id dominance, and his ego becomes a tactical instrument for self-preservation. Through rationalization, denial, and projection, he transforms betrayal into necessity and converts moral language into a mask. The docking catastrophe functions as the film's demonstration that denial of limits is not only a psychological error but also a communal threat with lethal consequences.

The Cooper-Mann contrast implies that survival ethics is less about abstract virtue and more about how a subject manages guilt, agency, and limits. *Interstellar* invites viewers to recognize that 'human nature' contains both potentials: the capacity to sacrifice for others and the capacity to weaponize survival against others. Psychoanalysis clarifies how each potential is made thinkable and livable through defense mechanisms. Future research could extend the same framework to other character networks in the film (for example Murph, Brand, and Professor Brand) or compare *Interstellar* with other climate-crisis science-fiction films to map recurring psychological patterns.

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