

TEMPORAL ETHICS AND THE PARADOX OF SCIENTIFIC RESPONSIBILITY IN CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S *TENET*

Upi Anti, Yanti Rosalinah

Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika (BSI), Jakarta, Indonesia

E-mail: upianti345@gmail.com

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Abstract

Amid growing concerns over the ethical risks of accelerating technological development, this study examines how Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* confronts the tensions of temporal ethics and scientific responsibility through a narrative and visual design that functions as a critical reflection on time, agency, and moral consequence. Using a qualitative interpretive design, the study employs film-textual analysis based on Knight's methodological framework and Strano's concept of the "ludic space," while grounding its ethical argument in Hans Jonas's ethic of responsibility. Data were generated through repeated close-viewing of temporally inverted sequences and interpretive mapping of narrative causality. The analysis yields three central findings: *Tenet* transforms determinism into an ethical condition where human agency persists within inevitability; the film reconfigures Hans Jonas's ethic of responsibility by inverting its direction from present-to-future obligation to future-to-present retaliation driven by ecological trauma; and the cognitive struggle of the spectator to comprehend the film's nonlinear story world represents an ethical act in itself, simulating the characters' moral dilemmas under temporal uncertainty. The finding is not merely a science fiction narrative but a critical philosophical allegory for contemporary moral responsibility, challenging the direction, burden, and mandate of technological power across time.

Keywords: *determinism; scientific responsibility; temporal ethics; Tenet.*

1. Introduction

The rapid acceleration of scientific and technological power in the twenty-first century has produced an unprecedented ethical crisis: human actions in the present now possess the capacity to generate irreversible, catastrophic consequences for generations yet to come. This condition foregrounds the contemporary urgency of temporal ethics, the field concerned with long-range, intergenerational moral responsibility. Hans Jonas's seminal Ethic of Responsibility provides a foundational framework for this dilemma, arguing that modern technological civilization demands a new moral imperative one in which the present adopts guardianship over the future in order to prevent existential harm. Jonas warns that technological power, once unleashed, often exceeds the scope of human foresight, making the ethical burden of anticipating future outcomes both imperative and precarious.

Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020) emerges as an especially potent text for examining this crisis, not simply as a work of time-travel fiction but as a cinematic thought experiment on the inversion of ethical responsibility. While Nolan's earlier films frequently interrogate time, memory, and human agency (Vučković, 2023), *Tenet* uniquely extends these concerns through its mechanism of temporal inversion, a process in which the entropy of objects and persons is reversed so that they move backward through time. Unlike conventional time travel, inversion renders causality bidirectional, allowing effects to precede their causes. This mechanism is not merely a narrative device but a philosophical provocation that inverts Jonas's ethical model, instead of the present holding responsibility for the future, *Tenet* depicts a future generation retaliating against its past, reframing responsibility as a conflict moving from future to present. This temporal structure intensifies the dilemma between determinism captured in the film's mantra "what's happened, happened" (Fatkhurridho & Rusdiarti, 2024) and the possibility of moral agency within seemingly inevitable causal loops.

Recent scholarship on *Tenet* has explored several key dimensions of the film. Studies such as Quinn (2022) analyze its aesthetics of reversed motion and temporal image-making, while Fatkhurridho and Rusdiarti (2024) investigate its deterministic narrative logic. Other commentators, such as Singh (2023), highlight the ecological trauma embedded in the film's premise of a dying future Earth. However, scholarly work has not yet systematically examined *Tenet* as a philosophical reconfiguration of Hans Jonas's framework of scientific responsibility, nor has it fully analyzed how the film's inverted causality functions as a critique of intergenerational ethics. Although determinism, aesthetics, and physics have been addressed independently, a coherent textual-philosophical analysis linking the film's temporal mechanics to a theory of temporal ethics remains underdeveloped. This absence indicates a critical gap in both film studies and contemporary ethical theory.

This study contributes by offering a film-textual analysis of *Tenet* that reveals how narrative inversion transforms deterministic temporality into an ethical condition a perspective not addressed in existing scholarship. Unlike prior studies that emphasize physics or aesthetics, this research introduces a novel reframing of the paradox of scientific responsibility through the lens of ecological trauma. By examining how the film reverses the directional flow of responsibility from future to present, this paper argues that *Tenet* offers a powerful philosophical allegory for the escalating moral burdens of scientific and technological power. As technological advancement increasingly blurs the boundaries of causality, agency, and accountability, the film provides a crucial interpretive framework for understanding how the threats of the future are already inscribed within the choices of the present offering an urgent ethical warning for contemporary policy, scientific innovation, and intergenerational justice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Nolan's Philosophical Auteurship and Temporal Aesthetics

Scholarship on Christopher Nolan's filmography consistently frames him as a philosophical auteur whose works interrogate the limits of time, agency, and epistemology. Vučković (2023) reads Nolan through postmodernism, emphasizing his deliberate destabilization of linear narrative to foreground ambiguity as a philosophical condition. In contrast, Doğan (2024) positions Nolan's cinema especially *Tenet* as a defense of modernity, arguing that its structural complexity ultimately restores rational order rather than dissolving it. This tension between postmodern ambiguity and modern reconstruction forms the

aesthetic foundation of *Tenet*, where temporal experimentation becomes an ethical inquiry rather than a mere stylistic maneuver. Quinn (2022) further supports this by analyzing the film's reverse-motion visuality as a temporal aesthetic that reconfigures narrative causality, prompting the viewer to confront time as an active philosophical force.

2.2 Temporal Narratives and Ethical Agency in Cinema

Situating *Tenet* within the broader corpus of non-linear and temporally experimental cinema reveals that temporal structures frequently serve as reflections on agency and determinism. Curry (2023) conceptualizes such films as "time-traveling images," framing temporal distortion as a philosophical instrument for probing consciousness and the limits of human action. Fatkhurridho and Rusdiarti (2024) describe *Tenet* as a closed-loop narrative in which "what's happened, happened," articulating a deterministic ontology that nevertheless requires ethical decision-making. Within this tradition, *Tenet* diverges from earlier works such as *12 Monkeys* or *Minority Report* by forcing characters to resist reverse causality, positioning agency not against the future but against the future's intrusion into the present. This reversal becomes essential for understanding how the film constructs ethical stakes through temporal mechanics.

2.3 Hans Jonas and the Principle of Responsibility

Hans Jonas's *Ethic of Responsibility* provides a foundational theoretical lens for interpreting *Tenet*'s temporal and moral paradoxes. Jonas argues that modern technology possesses an "unprecedented causal reach into the future," thereby dissolving traditional ethical boundaries and creating a new object of moral concern: the continued existence and dignity of future generations (Jonas, 1981, p. 45). Karagozi (2025) interprets this framework as grounding long-term responsibility in both human and ecological continuity, emphasizing that modern ethics must be preventive rather than reactive. When positioned within this conceptual structure, *Tenet* becomes a narrative thought experiment on the paradox Jonas leaves unresolved: How can responsibility be exercised when the future is already determined or more radically when the threat originates from the future itself? Read through Jonas, determinism in *Tenet* does not negate moral agency; instead, it expands the temporal horizon in which responsibility must operate, binding present action to inverted futurity.

2.4 Methodological Approaches to Film and Philosophy

Because *Tenet*'s ethical argument is inseparable from its narrative complexity, the study employs methodological tools that address both its structural and philosophical dimensions. Knight's methodological framework, which emphasizes systematic mapping between textual features and theoretical constructs, enables a precise alignment between temporal mechanics and ethical interpretation. Likewise, Strano's concept of the "ludic space" clarifies the film's demand for active, game-like viewer engagement, wherein uncertainty and cognitive struggle become part of the interpretive process. These approaches are essential for this study because they reveal how *Tenet*'s inverted temporality enlists not only the characters but also the spectators in ethical labor: comprehension itself becomes an enactment of agency under temporal constraint.

2.5 Scientific Responsibility, Ecological Trauma, and the Research Gap

The intersection between temporal determinism and scientific responsibility frames *Tenet* as a contemporary allegory of ecological and technological crisis. Burri (2018) characterizes science fiction as a cultural medium for projecting technoscientific futures, while Singh (2023) identifies ecological collapse as the film's underlying trauma motivating temporal warfare. In *Tenet*, the crisis emerges not from the reckless misuse of technology but from its desperate mobilization to reverse planetary death. Existing scholarship has examined the film's temporal complexity (Fatkhurridho & Rusdiarti, 2024) and its ecological anxieties (Singh, 2023). However, no study has yet undertaken a sustained philosophical-textual analysis that links *Tenet*'s inversion of causality to a critical inversion of Hans Jonas's Ethic of Responsibility. This gap reveals the necessity of interpreting the film not merely as a puzzle of temporal mechanics but as a direct philosophical confrontation with the limits of forward-looking ethics when futurity turns back upon the present.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a Qualitative Textual–Philosophical Analysis using a close-reading methodology. This design is appropriate because the objective is not empirical measurement, but hermeneutic interpretation, uncovering the latent philosophical and ethical structures embedded in *Tenet*'s narrative construction, temporal inversion, and visual rhetoric. The interpretive orientation draws on Knight's (1993) methodological argument that film analysis should avoid "all-embracing" theoretical closure and instead function pragmatically, allowing theory to emerge from the internal logic of the text. Thus, theoretical models are not imposed deductively, but mobilized as flexible analytical tools responsive to the film's temporal mechanics.

Strano's (2023) conception of the mind-game film as a ludic space further supports this paradigm. *Tenet* compels the spectator into active epistemic participation through reversibility and narrative opacity, making cognition itself a methodological requirement. Accordingly, the qualitative design treats *Tenet* not merely as narrative, but as a self-reflexive methodological object whose temporal form dictates how ethical meaning is produced and interpreted.

3.2 Data Source and Unit of Analysis

The primary data of this study consist of the film text *Tenet* (2020), examined through Repeated Close-Viewing and Annotation as the core technique of qualitative textual-philosophical analysis. To strengthen methodological rigor, all annotated scenes, key dialogues, and inversion sequences were systematically coded and organized using a structured spreadsheet, allowing the researcher to classify temporal patterns, ethical themes, and narrative inversions with timestamp-based precision. To ensure analytical clarity, the unit of analysis is specified not at the level of the entire film, but across three distinct textual components that directly articulate the film's temporal and ethical structures.

First, the narrative structure is analyzed through the segmentation of scenes containing inverted causality, chronological disruption, or recursive temporal loops such as the Freeport sequence, the highway inversion, and the final temporal pincer movement. These segments are treated as critical narrative units for tracing how reversed time

functions simultaneously as a structural device and an ethical mechanism. Second, key dialogue and monologues form the discursive unit of analysis, particularly utterances that articulate determinism, agency, and futurity. These lines foreground how the film frames moral responsibility within the constraints of temporal inevitability. Third, the study analyzes visual and aural rhetoric, focusing on *mise-en-scène*, framing, sound design, and editing rhythm elements that construct the spectator's cognitive struggle with temporal uncertainty.

Data collection follows a three-stage procedure. (1) Initial viewing maps the general narrative and temporal architecture. (2) Systematic thematic close-viewing focuses on sequences involving inversion and ethically charged decision-making, functioning as a process of data reduction. (3) Transcription and time-coding document key dialogues and visual moments with exact temporal markers to support verifiable interpretation. This iterative procedure accords with Knight's (1993) concept of interpretive "interanimation," in which method evolves dialogically with the film rather than imposing a rigid external framework. Likewise, Strano (2023) demonstrates that *Tenet* places the spectator in a "ludic space" that requires active cognitive reconfiguration. Data collection is not passive extraction but an interpretive act compelled by the film's own temporal logic.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis is conducted recursively to mirror *Tenet*'s palindromic temporal structure, allowing meaning to emerge through return, reorientation, and reinterpretation rather than linear progression. This approach reflects Knight's (1993) critique of methodological closure emphasizing open, responsive interpretation and Strano's (2023) argument that the spectator's cognitive labor within the film's ludic opacity is integral to its meaning. Thus, temporal form is treated as an ethical framework: the viewer's interpretive struggle is itself an analogy for acting under conditions of determinism. The analysis proceeds through four interpretive phases.

- a. Phase 1 Philosophical Premise (Jonas). Although Jonas is not cited in this subsection, this phase situates the film's future-to-present threat and ecological trauma within the framework of the ethic of responsibility.
- b. Phase 2 Textual-Philosophical Mapping (Knight, 1993). Knight's (1993) methodological orientation guides the mapping of narrative causality, especially how the maxim "what's happened, happened" operates both as a deterministic plot logic and as an ethical limit on agency.
- c. Phase 3 Spectatorship and Ludic Cognition (Strano, 2023). Using Strano's (2023) concept of the ludic space, this phase interprets how the spectator's effort to reconstruct the inverted timeline becomes a cognitive simulation of the characters' ethical struggle under temporal uncertainty.
- d. Phase 4 Synthesis. The final phase synthesizes structural, discursive, and ethical findings to demonstrate how *Tenet* constructs scientific responsibility across bidirectional temporal flows.

4. Results and Discussion

A textual-philosophical analysis of *Tenet*, conducted through Knight's (1993) interpretive methodology and Strano's (2023) "ludic space," demonstrates that the film transforms temporal inversion from a narrative device into an ethical architecture. Rather

than simply representing the paradox of scientific responsibility, *Tenet* makes the paradox experientially felt: through characters who must act ethically within deterministic constraints, through a future that retaliates against the past, and through spectators who must cognitively struggle to understand nonlinear causality.

4.1 The Narrative of Necessity: Inverting Causality and the Persistence of Agency

Building on Burnett's (2022) concept of a "nonlinear storyworld," *Tenet* does not merely rearrange chronology; it constructs a world in which causality itself is bidirectional. This ontological deviation marks the film as a "puzzle film" (Gabelica, 2024; Khouri, 2025) and establishes the deterministic condition under which agency must operate. A central piece of textual evidence is the film's recurring maxim: "What's happened, happened." This line spoken by Neil after the highway inversion and later echoed by the Protagonist anchors the film in a closed temporal loop. The line's placement in key moments confirms that the characters understand the future as fixed and unavoidable, yet they continue acting with urgency.

Figure 1

Poster of Tenet illustrating the concept of a 'nonlinear storyworld'. Source from Tenet (theatrical poster), by Warner Bros. Pictures, 2020.



For example, in the highway sequence, the Protagonist realizes that he himself moving inverted was the masked driver who attacked him earlier in the timeline. Even after realizing the event cannot be changed, he still acts to prevent Sator from obtaining the Algorithm. Similarly, during the temporal pincer movement at Stalsk-12, both Red and Blue Teams must execute their parts of the mission despite already knowing its predetermined outcome. Agency persists not by altering the future, but by choosing one's moral position within inevitability.

This fulfills the paradox central to the film's ethical proposition: determinism does not negate responsibility; it creates the conditions in which responsibility becomes ethically necessary. Thus, *Tenet* transforms linear cinematic ethics where choice is tied to open futures into ethics under constraint, establishing the first major finding: determinism becomes an ethical condition rather than a fatalistic barrier (Bezruchko & Federova, 2024).

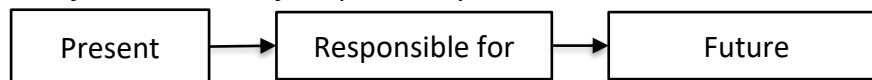
4.2 Retaliation from the Future: Reconfiguring Hans Jonas's Ethic of Responsibility

Tenet's temporal conflict originates from ecological collapse, what Singh (2023) terms the "trauma of a dying Earth." This future environmental devastation is the catalyst that

activates and simultaneously transforms Hans Jonas’s ethical model. Jonas (1981) argues that modern technological power creates an “unprecedented causal reach” into the future (p. 45), obligating the present to preserve the conditions for future human life. His ethic is inherently forward-facing in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Standard Direction of Jonas’s Ethic of Responsibility



The film initially depicts this model through the future scientist who invents the Algorithm. Recognizing its catastrophic potential, the scientist dismantles the device and hides its pieces in the past an act consistent with Jonas’s preventative ethic (Karagjozi, 2025). However, Tenet goes further by inverting Jonas’s ethical vector. The future, rather than being a passive recipient of our moral obligations, becomes an active, hostile agent attempting to annihilate the present. Sator serves as the relay point: receiving instructions and technology from future generations who believe the only way to survive ecological collapse is to reverse entropy, even if it destroys their ancestors.

Figure 3

Scene Tenet visualizing the concept of ecological trauma and moral responsibility. Source From Tenet Film, by Warner Bros. Pictures, 2020.



By literalizing the future as a moral antagonist, the film forces viewers to confront ecological responsibility not as a distant theoretical concern, but as an immediate threat that “returns” to the present. The determinism articulated in “what’s happened, happened” (Fatkhurridho & Rusdiarti, 2024) thus becomes the battlefield upon which two temporal generations confront each other. Tenet reconfigures Jonas’s Ethic of Responsibility by reversing its direction, making ecological trauma the engine of future-to-present retaliation.

Table 1

A New Ethical Structure

Jonas’s Etchical Direction	Tenet’s Ethical Direction
Present → Future	Future → Present
Responsibility as protection	Responsibility as retaliation
Future is voiceless	Future is agential and violent

4.3 The Spectator's Cognitive Struggle as Ethical Act: The Ludic Space of *Tenet*

Strano's (2023) concept of *Tenet* as a "ludic space" is best understood through the film's formal construction, which deliberately imposes high cognitive demands on the viewer. The confusion often reported by audiences sometimes described as narrative fatigue (Khoury, 2025) is not a flaw but a methodological design. Cinematic techniques enforce this cognitive work:

- Freeport sequence (forward vs. inverted). The Protagonist fights an inverted version of himself, with choreography and sound patterns reversed. The spectator must reconstruct causality manually.
- Highway inversion. The silver Saab moves inverted while the Protagonist moves forward. Dialogue from Neil ("You're not catching the bullet, you're catching it") forces conceptual inversion.
- Battle of Stalsk-12. Editing collapses two timelines one forward-moving, one inverted into a single chaotic battlefield, demanding continuous re-evaluation.

Figure 4

The Battle of Stalsk-12 Scene in Tenet. Source From Tenet, by Warner Bros. Pictures, 2020.



These nonlinear, disorienting structures activate Strano's ludic space. The spectator is compelled into active problem-solving rather than passive viewing. This cognitive effort is ethically analogous to the Protagonist's own struggle. Just as characters must think ethically within a temporally inverted world, spectators must think interpretively within a narrative that violates traditional causality. The viewer's attempt to produce coherence from temporal chaos becomes an ethical enactment: an experiential simulation of acting responsibly under incomplete or contradictory temporal knowledge.

4.4 Key Findings a Synthesis of Temporal Ethics

In synthesis, this analysis identifies three key findings that distinguish *Tenet* as a case study in temporal ethics:

- Determinism as an Ethical Condition. This research finds that the film's determinism ("what's happened, happened") does not negate agency but rather reinforces it. Knowing that something will happen does not change the moral responsibility to see it through, positioning ethics as an act of affirmation rather than free will.
- The Inversion of Jonas's Ethic. The film not only applies Jonas's ethic of responsibility (present for the future) but also inverts it (future against the present). This creates a

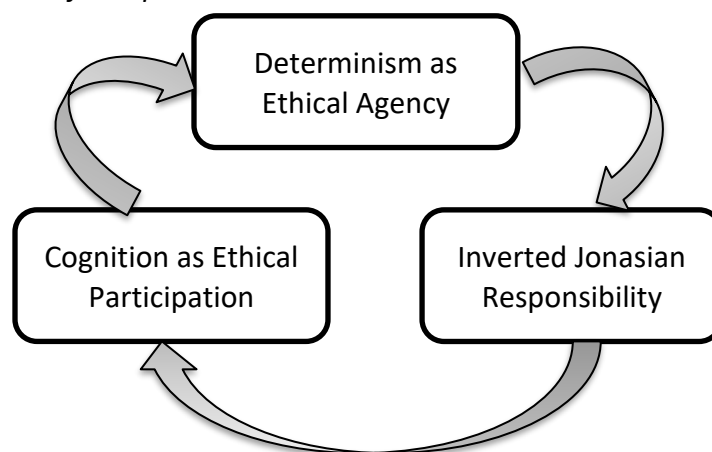
reciprocal model of responsibility driven by ecological trauma, where the present is responsible for creating the trauma and the future is responsible for its retaliation.

- Cognition as an Ethical Act. The most significant finding is that *Tenet* uses its formal complexity as an ethical mechanism. The spectator's cognitive struggle to understand the film (Khoury, 2025) is a simulation of the characters' struggle to act ethically within the nonlinear "storyworld" (Burnett, 2022). Thus, understanding the film becomes an ethical act in itself.

Ultimately, *Tenet* functions not merely as science fiction, but as a philosophical allegory that challenges unidirectional assumptions about time and responsibility. The film warns that scientific and ecological responsibility is no longer a matter of safeguarding the future because the consequences of our actions are already returning to confront us.

Figure 5

Conceptual Diagram of Temporal Ethics in *Tenet*



5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Tenet* operates as a cinematic thought experiment that exposes the limits of linear moral reasoning in an age of catastrophic technological and ecological risk. Through a nonlinear storyworld characterized by deterministic loops, temporal pincer movements, and inversion mechanics, the film transforms temporal structure into ethical architecture. The analysis confirms three central findings: first, that determinism articulated through the maxim “what’s happened, happened” functions not as a denial of agency but as the condition under which ethical action becomes necessary; second, that the film radically inverts Hans Jonas’s forward-facing ethic of responsibility by depicting a future that retaliates against the present for inherited ecological trauma; and third, that the spectator’s cognitive struggle to reconstruct meaning from nonlinear causality constitutes an ethical simulation, mirroring the characters’ efforts to act responsibly under temporal uncertainty.

These findings position *Tenet* as more than a science-fiction narrative; it is a philosophical allegory that reconfigures intergenerational ethics and reframes scientific responsibility as an act performed within constraint rather than directed toward an open future. The film compels the audience to confront ecological and technological consequences as immediate, recursive pressures rather than distant possibilities. This interdisciplinary contribution demonstrates how complex cinematic forms can serve as

ethical laboratories and suggests future research comparing Nolan's broader temporal corpus or empirically examining how different audiences experience the film's cognitive and ethical demands. Future research may also explore how *Tenet* can be used pedagogically in ethics or film studies courses to help students engage with concepts of ecological responsibility and nonlinear causality.

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