

THE MATRIX AS IDEOLOGY

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Trinity: "It's the question that drives us, Neo. It's the question that brought you here. You know the question, just as I did." Neo: "What is the Matrix?"

Professional philosophers have written a whole lot about the movie *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999), but have done their best to misunderstand the Matrix as a concept. The movie tells us that the question "What is the Matrix?" is the key question, but philosophers tend to assume the answer to that question is easy: it's a virtual reality computer program which allows us to believe we are living our everyday lives when we are really in a pod hooked up to a computer. With this answer in hand, philosophers can then turn their essays to discussions of Hilary Putnam's "brain in a vat" scenarios, derived from Descartes's "Evil Demon" hypothesis, which in turn is a relative of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave". Then they write all about the epistemology of external world skepticism and about the metaphysics of substance dualism. But in all this they miss the true meaning of the Matrix, a mistake that involves what can only be described as a willful disregard of the things the film says about the Matrix.

The most blatant line philosophers disregard is when Morpheus says, "Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself." This line makes no sense if the Matrix is simply a virtual reality program. Why couldn't Neo be told this fact? And what

would it mean to "see" a computer program for yourself? There is something more going on here. Consider the other things Morpheus says about the Matrix:

- "The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth. ... [Y]ou are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage. Born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind."
- "I'm trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You're the one that has to "What is the Matrix? Control. The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world built to turn a human being into this [i.e., a battery]."
- "The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. When you're inside, you look around, what do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of people we're trying to save, but until we do, these people are still a part of that system and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand that most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it."

The line about the battery is pretty clear: the Matrix is a system that turns human beings into a source of labor for "the machines". That system is capitalism, supported by corporate interests, religion, and government (i.e, "when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes"). This movie is about Marxism. It's Marxism is not even a subtext. It's just text. But we miss it. Why? Because *we* are in the Matrix.

The Matrix is "all around" us, but we don't see it. It is ideology: a system that forms our thinking without our knowing it. It is a system that is enslaving us but which we are willing to die to protect. Our decadent civilization is crumbling right before our eyes, being destroyed by machines of our own creation, but when we look out the window everything looks prosperous. We are blinded by ideology. The film demonstrates that just as religion is the opiate of the masses (says Marx), so is analytic philosophy. The system wants us to focus on epistemology and metaphysics and to miss the political implications. And that's okay, because we want that, too. Remember that we created the machines in the first place. Now we are under the self-deception that the system does not control us. And for many of us, we enjoy being under that self-deception because we benefit from it.

It's no accident that the vast majority of philosophy professors are white males (like me). We're the "image translators" mentioned by Cypher. When Neo sees Cypher looking at the familiar stream of green numbers, he asks "Do you always look at it encoded?" Cypher responds: "Well, you have to. The image translators work for the construct program." He's talking about us, the professional philosophers. We're supposed to help people see the truth but we secretly work for the Matrix, making sure people get just enough truth to be distracted from overthrowing their oppressors but not enough to realize that they are indeed enslaved. (On this reading, we can now see why most of the members of "the resistance" are minorities -- women and people of color -- except, of course, for Cypher who turns out to be a traitor. The rebels are resisting the agents of "the Man", those Morpheus calls "the gatekeepers" of the Matrix, i.e., those who decide who gets into power.)

If the film is interested in 20th Century philosophy, it is not the "brain in a vat" stuff -- it is in postmodernism. The reason "there is no spoon" is not that the physical world is not real but

that when we look at a "spoon" or anything else, our experience is mediated by our society's concepts and ways of "constructing" reality. (Morpheus calls the Matrix a "construct", implying that it needs to be de-constructed.) It is not an accident that the enemies are "machines", symbols of totalizing drive toward technological efficiency exposed by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. These machines are the natural result of the Descartes's modern desire for pure, disembodied rationality.

In this way, the film is actually anti-Cartesian, and anti-Platonist. The standard interpretations of *The Matrix* are completely backwards. It is about rejecting reason in favor of the body. On the way to meet the Oracle, Trinity tells Neo that "the Matrix cannot tell you who you are." He replies, "But an Oracle can?" And she says "That's different." Why? Because the Oracle is a symbol of emotion, intuition, and embodiedness -- she turns out to be an African-American grandmother, baking cookies. (Regarding embodiedness, consider the infamous orgy/rave sequence in the first *Matrix* sequel.) It is the machines who are Platonists. Agent Smith says, "I hate this place. This zoo. This prison. This reality, whatever you want to call it. I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink and every time I do, I fear that I've somehow been infected by it. It's repulsive, isn't it? I must get out of here." Here he uses two metaphors from Plato's *Phaedo*: the body as a prison and life as a disease.

Agent Smith also says that the first Matrix failed because "Some believed we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world." He rejects this interpretation, but I think the film is suggesting that this is actually the truth. A world run by computers cannot give us everything we need to be fully human. This is what Morpheus means when he tells Neo, "You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the world, you don't know what it is,

but it's there. Like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad." And, according to the film, what we need above all in order to be human is freedom. The main problem with the machines is that they control us and force us to follow their rules. As Mouse says, "To deny our own impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human." And it is in being human that we will defeat the machines: Morpheus says "their strength and their speed are still based in a world that is built on rules. Because of that, they will never be as strong or as fast as you can be." We, unlike the machines can break the rules of rationality. (The rejection of rules suggests an "anarchist" political theory which connects *The Matrix* to the Wachowski-scripted *V For Vendetta*.) Unlike the machines, we humans can live based on instinct and passion. And that is why the power of Trinity's love for Neo can save the day in the end. But as long as the system can tempt us into seeing *The Matrix* as an abstract theoretical exercise in metaphysics and epistemology instead of a political statement, we will never be free. ... Or so says *The Matrix*.

Trinity: "Wake up, Neo. The Matrix has you."