

THE MATRIX (1999)

PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES: Appearance/reality

CHARACTERS: Neo (Keanu Reeves), Morpheus (rebel leader), Trinity (rebel, and Neo's romantic interest), Cypher (rebel who later conspires with the Matrix), Agent Smith (enforcement officer generated by the Matrix)

OTHER MOVIES BY DIRECTORS AND LARRY AND ANDY WACHOWSKI:

Bound (1996), The Matrix Revisited (2001), The Matrix Reloaded (2003)

SYNOPSIS: Neo, a software developer by day and computer hacker by night, is recruited by an underground rebel named Morpheus. Morpheus explains that Neo and everyone else has been living in is an illusion generated by a massive computer called the Matrix. The Matrix, in turn, is powered by the biologically-created electricity of millions of humans that are wired to it in a dream-like state. Neo physically breaks free of the Matrix and, now in the real world, attempts to expose the illusion with Morpheus and other rebels. The rest of the story will be revealed as we view and discuss the film.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Directions: Read each question carefully and answer ALL parts of each.

1. What's the deal with the blue and red pills? In terms of literary composition, according to the DVD commentary, the pills are an allusion to Alice in Wonderland: eat this, drink this. In the movie the pills serve as a mechanism by which one can either remain in the illusory world of the matrix (the blue pill) or exit it to the real world (red pill). The problem is that Neo is presented with the pills while he is still in the illusory world of the Matrix and, thus, the pills themselves are an illusion. How could taking an illusory pill yank someone out of the Matrix fantasy into reality? Morpheus offers this explanation "The pill you took is part of a trace program. It's designed to disrupt your input/output carrier signal so we can pinpoint your location." Does this make any sense?

2. After Neo is expelled from the Matrix, Morpheus gives him the following lecture on appearance/reality: “What is real. How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. This is the world that you know. The world as it was at the end of the twentieth century. It exists now only as part of a neural-interactive simulation that we call the Matrix. You've been living in a dream world, Neo. This is the world as it exists today.... Welcome to the Desert of the Real. We have only bits and pieces of information but what we know for certain is that at some point in the early twenty-first century all of mankind was united in celebration. We marveled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to AI.” The Matrix is just one thought experiment to convey the problem that everything that we perceive might be an illusion. What are some others? Do you think there are endless possibilities for such thought experiments, or will they all fall into a few basic categories?

3. In a meeting with Agent Smith, Cypher makes the following remark while eating a steak: “You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.” Do you agree with Cypher that ignorance is bliss in the context of the Matrix?

4. During breakfast, Mouse makes the following comment about the appearance/reality regarding tastes: “How did the machines know what Tasty Wheat tasted like. huh? Maybe they got it wrong. Maybe what I think Tasty Wheat tasted like actually tasted like oatmeal or tuna fish. That makes you wonder about a lot of things. You take chicken for example, maybe they couldn't figure out what to make chicken taste like, which is why chicken tastes like everything.” Is there something in the human brain that would limit the kinds of tastes that we could experience or enjoy, and, if so, does this force the Matrix to model the fantasy world after some kind of reality?

5. Quite coincidentally, Neo in the simulated world of the Matrix, looks exactly like Neo in reality. If the Matrix felt like it, though, it could have made the simulated Neo look like an elephant. Are there limits to the ways in which the Matrix might have created the visual simulation of the world and its people (e.g., only two dimensional, no gravity). That is, would the Matrix have more creative freedom with visual images than with tastes as described in the previous question?

6. Agent Smith offers the following explanation of human happiness: “Have you ever stood and stared at it, marveled at it's beauty, it's genius? Billions of people just living out their lives, oblivious. Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world. Where none suffered. Where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost. Some believed that we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that as a species, human beings define their reality through misery and suffering. The perfect world would dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was redesigned to this, the peak of your civilization. I say your civilization because as soon as we started thinking for you it really became our civilization which is of course what this is all about. Evolution, Morpheus, evolution, like the dinosaur. Look out that window. You had your time. The future is our world, Morpheus. The future is our time.” Is there some element of truth to Agent Smith’s depiction of the limits of human happiness?

REVIEWS

The Matrix raises the question of “How do you know whether the things you perceive are real or just an illusion.” This position is called skepticism, the genuine knowledge in such matters that is unattainable. The Matrix also exploits the fears of Descartes theory “What if all of life is actually a dream”? How do we know that we are awake, rather than merely dreaming? How do we know that our thoughts are not being manipulated, and that our perceptions of reality are accurate? The film involves manipulation of the mind and soul where human actions have no real consequences in a world that exists independently of their own mind. Some dreams are so vivid and indeed lucid that one can never be sure that what you are experiencing under these conditions is dream or reality. And of course this is the problem – there does not appear to be any sure test to distinguish vivid/lucid dreaming from perceptions received in the 'real' world under normal circumstances. On the other hand we generally have no problem in making the distinction because our dreams have that quality – that 'dream' quality which is sufficiently remote from our waking experience to assure us that what is dreamt is not real. It takes little imagination to conceive of the next possible step of sensory and perceptual manipulation of the kind that lies at the core of 'The Matrix' narrative. If neurological research continues with its present rate of success, then it should be possible to probe not only the regions of the brain but also the deeper regions of the lower animal brain . Such comprehensive probing would throw into doubt all of our perceptions. Maybe my mind is at this moment being manipulated so that I think comprehensive mind control is only a future possibility when in fact it is a present reality, and this is not the end of the 21st century but the middle of the 25th. These speculations throw up what philosophers call 'the problem of knowledge' which might be rephrased as 'how do we know anything for sure?' --Hippy