

CHAPTER 5

The Sleeper Awakes: *Gnosis* and Authenticity in *The Matrix* *David P. Hunt*

A young man, to all appearances typical of his species, is vaguely dissatisfied with life. He can't shake the nagging suspicion, embedded in his consciousness "like a splinter in the mind," that something is seriously wrong with the world. Left to his own devices, there is little hope that he can resolve his worries, if indeed they aren't entirely baseless.

Then one day, out of the blue, he gets a call from an underground group claiming to possess answers to the questions that have been plaguing him. As they gradually initiate him into the truth, he begins to understand why things didn't make sense. The familiar world of the young man's experience—its values as well as its sheer concrete reality—is a cosmic illusion, a "prison house for the mind." The essential purpose of this vast deception is to keep human beings ignorant of who they really are, thereby making it easier to enslave them. Knowledge of humans' true nature and situation is therefore the most important condition for liberation.

The road ahead is fraught with difficulty. Our young man, who used to think that he was in control of his own life, has reluctantly come to appreciate the power of fate. Moreover, the evil deity who created the cosmic prison is not alone: there are various superhuman agents who must be contended with, gatekeepers who must be defeated if one is to pass through to the other side. Nevertheless, ultimate success against these forces is assured, owing to the intervention of a more-than-human, Messiah-like "anomaly" who is destined to break the power of the forces of darkness.

Most readers will recognize in the foregoing narrative the underlying premise for the blockbuster film *The Matrix*, together with its two sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions*. What fewer readers will recognize is that this narrative also constitutes, with equal accuracy, a thumbnail sketch of the leading ideas of Gnosticism: a religious movement active during the first few centuries of the Christian era, often as a parasitical growth on Christianity itself. I would like to begin by saying a bit more about the "Gnosticism connection," before going on to look at some of the philosophical issues raised in the films.¹

The Gnosticism Connection

The name 'Gnostic' comes from *gnosis*, a Greek word for knowledge. It is an apt name for a religion that regarded *knowledge* as the key to salvation. What sort of knowledge?

A formula originating with Valentinus, a 2nd-century Gnostic leader, sums up the matter this way: “What liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.”² Of course Christians, too, have typically maintained—to one degree or another—that *holding the right beliefs* is of the utmost importance. But Gnostic belief differs considerably, in content and salvific role, from Christian belief.

What did Gnostics believe? Modifying Valentinus’ series of questions, let us organize the answer under three sub-questions. Where are we from? Where are we now? Where are we going (and how do we get there)?

Where are we from? The Gnostic system begins with a unique supreme reality, a Source possessing many of the classical theistic attributes, but exceedingly remote. This primal reality gives rise to a collection of spirit beings which together constitute the “Pleroma.” The Pleroma is an unstable mix, not under the complete control of the Source, and it is their feckless attempt to produce, as they were produced, that leads ultimately to the material world. Wisdom (Sophia), a feminine principle in the Pleroma, turns away from the Source, reproducing on her own initiative. Her offspring, Ialdabaoth—ignorant of the true scheme of things and thinking himself the supreme being,—undertakes to create a world over which to exercise dominion, but can only fashion it out of matter, a metaphysically inferior principle opposed to the spirit. (“Christian” Gnostics identified this defective creator-deity with the Yahweh of the Old Testament.) Fragments of divine light are rounded up and compelled to animate the fleshly bodies that are part of this material cosmos. We are those sparks of divine light, whose true origin is in the Source.

Where are we now? We are “strangers in a strange land,” our exile so profound that we have forgotten who we are. Ignorant of our origins, we lack the wherewithal to stand against the systems of control constituting *heimarmenē*, or universal fate. The world conspires to persuade us that material objects are the paradigms of reality, and that our concerns should be all about them—thus “materialism,” in both the metaphysical and valuational senses, is part of the system that enslaves us. So is conventional morality, with its this-worldly, social orientation. (Gnostics rejected the Old Testament Law along with its creator.) Gnostic texts speak of the “noise of the world” that drowns out any discordant messages coming from deep inside us; by accepting the dream-world around us, we live life as though asleep rather than fully awake. And should anyone come to doubt that things are as they seem and endeavor to discover the truth, escape would seem out of the question: the entire universe constitutes a maximum-security prison, guarded by Ialdabaoth’s agents. Yet alongside the mass of unenlightened humanity are some who claim, against all odds, to have found a way out.

Where are we going (and how do we get there)? Human destiny is to free ourselves from our gross material surroundings and rejoin the spiritual world from whence we came. Fulfillment of this eschatological hope requires *knowledge*. Because the system is set up to reinforce itself and prevent awareness of radical alternatives, this saving knowledge can only come from outside the system. Here the Gnostics introduce a divine emissary, called the “Alien Man,” to correct the misinformation which is promulgated and

reinforced by the world-system. (Christian Gnostics naturally identified this Messianic figure with Jesus Christ.) This divine initiative is experienced as “The Call”: a general exhortation to wake up from the sleep of earthly existence and face the human condition head-on. If effective, the Call should lead to a renunciation of the worldly powers (Christian Gnostics generally approved St. Paul’s warnings about “the world”) and enlistment in the Gnostic movement. The latter provides access to further knowledge of a “technical” nature: e.g., passwords or spells designed to secure passage through the cosmic exit-gates. Eventually, all the sparks of divine light will be reunited in the Pleroma, and the world will come to an end.

One way to see the *Matrix* trilogy as a cyber-version of the Gnostic epic is to consider how the same three questions would be answered if asked by a character in the films.

Where are we from? As the charismatic rebel leader Morpheus explains, in the alternative history lesson he gives to the films’ hero Neo: “At some point in the early 21st century, all of mankind was united in celebration. We marveled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to A.I. [Artificial Intelligence] . . . a singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines.” But our hubris is misplaced; realizing too late that our creation has a “mind” of its own, we try to pull the plug but fail, and the machines we thought we controlled end up controlling us. Like the Gnostic Pleroma, the machine world includes a diverse cast of characters, some of them exhibiting considerable independence from A.I.; but these are computer programs, not superhuman spirits. They include Seraph, the Merovingian, Persephone, the Trainman, the Keymaker, the Ramakandra family, and the Agents (notably Agent Smith, Neo’s nemesis). The most important, however, are the programs to which A.I. has entrusted the task of creating a suitable prison cell for the defeated human race: the Architect (a program enamored of mathematical perfection and personified as a white-bearded male) and the Oracle (“an intuitive program, initially created to investigate certain aspects of the human psyche. If I am the father of the Matrix,” the Architect explains, “she would undoubtedly be its mother.”). The solution arrived at by these programs is to impose on human consciousness a global illusion, called the “Matrix,” in which things seem very much as they did around the year 2000, before the machines took over. The solution is ingenious: ignorant of their true situation, humans have no basis for resisting.

Where are we now? In fact it is hundreds of years later than 2000 (even Morpheus does not know the exact year or even century). Far from leading the normal lives of their experience, human beings are actually confined to pods of goo, a coaxial cable attached to a plug in the back of their heads feeding them the dream-world of the Matrix, while a tangle of tubes and wires keeps them alive and siphons off the body heat and electro-magnetic energy used by the machines as a power source. As Morpheus explains to the incredulous Neo:

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: that you are

a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage . . . a prison for your mind.

“Millions of people living out their lives oblivious,” Agent Smith exults. But not quite everyone is oblivious. Alongside the majority living in illusion, there is an alternative society living in the real world. Some indeterminate time in the past a human being arose who had the mysterious power to see through the Matrix and escape from it. This anomalous individual, known as ‘The One,’ succeeded in freeing a handful of others and establishing a city of refuge—Zion—deep underground, beyond the reach of the machines. From this base of operations teams in hovercrafts, like Morpheus’s ship *Nebuchadnezzar*, ascend through tunnels to “broadcast level” where they hack into the Matrix and seek further recruits. Protecting the system are Agents, programs designed to enter the Matrix and actively thwart the rebels’ efforts. “They are the gatekeepers,” Morpheus explains; “they are guarding all the doors, they are holding all the keys.” Some, like Morpheus, believe that the only hope for humanity is the prophesied return of the One.

Where are we going (and how do we get there)? It’s at this point that the action of *The Matrix* begins. We first meet Neo running a computer search. It is answered, not by Google, but by a hacker from outside the system: “Wake up, Neo. The Matrix has you.” This is the Gnostic Call in a nutshell. Indeed, in the first film, no other aspect of the Gnostic myth is better realized cinematically than the Call. It comes to Neo the first time over the phone lines connected to his modem; the second time it is *via* a cell phone delivered to him at work in a FedEx package, leading Neo to a “test of faith” on a window ledge. Throughout the films it is telephone connections that allow our heroes, with their saving knowledge, to “travel” in and out of the Matrix. And the first film ends with Neo in a phone booth announcing humanity’s liberation from the machines. Enlightenment is, quite literally, a (phone) call away.

Neo is the Gnostic Everyman whose existential search leads him first to Trinity—the purveyor, like Eve, of forbidden knowledge (the Gnostics made the Serpent, rather than Yahweh, the good guy in Genesis 3)—and then to Morpheus, who helps Neo cross over from the dream-world to the real world (“Morpheus” is the Greek god of dreams). But Neo is also the Alien Man or Gnostic Messiah, the One (an anagram of ‘Neo’) whose advent is announced by Morpheus, in his role as John the Baptist, the Forerunner. Both identities are contained in the name Neo bears in the world of the Matrix: Thomas Anderson. He is Doubting Thomas (“I don’t believe it,” he reacts in horror, when Morpheus shows him the “desert of the real”) and Ander-Son (the Son of Man). At the critical moment during the confrontation with Agent Smith in the subway station, when he moves beyond doubt and accepts his identity as the One, he disavows his “slave-name”:

Smith: Goodbye, Mr. Anderson.

Neo: My name is Neo.

The Matrix ends with Neo’s death, resurrection, and ascension. But further salvific work awaits him as Smith mutates into more powerful forms in the two sequels. Physically blind, but now able to perceive the luminous essence of things, Neo enters the machine world itself (on a hovercraft named *The Logos*, no less!) and offers A.I. a deal.

Cruciform, he is pierced with a coaxial cable and jacked back into the Matrix for a final confrontation with Smith. Paradoxically, it is by suffering and dying that he vanquishes Smith, thereby redeeming humanity. “It is done,” the machine god intones as Neo is released from his cross and dragged away.

The parallels with Gnosticism are hardly perfect. Perhaps the most significant difference lies in the films’ portrayal of what is ultimately important. For the Gnostics, the spirit is more real than the flesh and the object of our deepest longings, while the body with its senses is a snare and a delusion. Matter, in short, is evil—a position consistently rejected in orthodox Christianity. The films appear at times to approach this view, as when Morpheus declares that “the mind is all that matters” or when Neo is instructed that belief by itself can alter reality. But what we’re *shown*, as opposed to what we’re *told*, points strongly in the other direction. Morpheus’s maxim is true (if at all) only in the Matrix, with its purely mental reality; in the *real* world—the world of Zion and the *Nebuchadnezzar*—the laws of physics reign supreme. Far from advocating transcendence of the body, Mouse declares (à propos the Woman in the Red Dress) that “to deny our impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human.” And if there is any doubt about where the films stand on this question, it is settled by the “Temple Gathering” in *Reloaded*. As the machine army digs inexorably toward Zion, the entire community comes together to celebrate Zion’s civic religion, the expression of its core values. Drums throb throughout the immense cavern as the “worshipers” start to dance, the camera entering the undulating throng to linger lovingly on sweaty, semi-clothed bodies; meanwhile, Neo and Trinity, having found some privacy, make love under an arch, symbol of eternity. We are clearly meant to understand the physicality and sensuality of this scene as a healthy assertion of human nature against the machines. It’s everything that Agent Smith abhors: “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 feel that I’ve somehow been *infected* by it.” The Gnostic attitude toward the body is held, not by the “liberated” humans, but by the machines.

I don’t see that this counts much against a Gnostic reading of the films, however. The films’ directors, Larry and Andy Wachowski, have simply played up the “cool” aspects of Gnosticism and downplayed the “uncool” bits. “Free your mind” and “just believe” are very much part of the spirit of our age, while serious body-denying asceticism is not. Gnosticism as a richly-drawn and credible alternative to the value-system of the average moviegoer is simply not on the films’ agenda. *The Matrix* has other business to transact, which it does very, very well.

While Neo, Trinity and Morpheus, with their designer shades and balletic moves, are the very quintessence of “eye-candy,” the *Matrix* trilogy is clearly more than just an entertaining series of action movies; it triggers thought as well as adrenalin. At the heart of the films’ Gnostic narrative is the question of appearance *versus* reality, of error *versus* truth. The films take up this theme at several levels, making the *Matrix* trilogy a virtual primer in all three of the major areas of philosophy: epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. Let’s take them in that order.

Epistemology: How Can We Know What Is Real?

“Ever have that feeling where you’re not sure if you’re awake or still dreaming?” Neo asks Troy. This feeling is a common one. It usually gets resolved one way or the other: it turns out we were awake, or it turns out we were asleep. But Neo’s question about dreaming *versus* waking life anticipates a deeper question he is about to confront. The Matrix is a super-duper “dream machine,” capable of generating experiences that are indistinguishable from ordinary waking experiences. If “the Matrix has you,” as Neo’s computer informs him just before Troy arrives, it’s hard to see how you could know that the Matrix has you, since your experiences would be just the same as if the Matrix did *not* have you.

Neo’s beliefs, when we first meet him, include the following: that the year is 1999, that he lives in a cramped one-bedroom apartment, that he owns a computer, that he has trouble sleeping, that he is employed by a software company, and so on. These beliefs are in fact false, as he will soon discover. That Neo holds some false beliefs is not itself of much philosophical interest. What *is* of interest is that he could be so thoroughly wrong about *these* beliefs. Suppose, for example, Neo also believed that the Atlantic is larger than the Pacific, that horoscopes have predictive value, and that it’s okay to break promises when keeping them is inconvenient. These beliefs would also have been false. The difference is that these mistakes are ones that Neo could have avoided by taking greater care. He had what it took to acquire better beliefs than these and he failed to do so. In contrast, he had the best reasons in the world for his first set of beliefs. In adopting the belief that he owned a computer, for example, he was relying on the clear testimony of his senses; he wasn’t being credulous or perverse; he wasn’t engaging in wishful thinking or succumbing to Alzheimer’s. And yet he was wrong about this belief, as he was about all the beliefs he had acquired in a similarly unimpeachable manner.

This isn’t a problem just for Neo, in the fictional world of the *Matrix* films; it’s a problem for us. We have beliefs very much like Neo’s—for example, your belief that you are reading an essay about *The Matrix* right now; and these beliefs rest on the same sorts of grounds—your belief that you’re reading this essay, for example, like Neo’s belief about his computer, rests at least in part on perception. If Neo could be wrong about his beliefs, we can be wrong about our corresponding beliefs. But if even our most scrupulously formed beliefs can turn out to be false, how can we claim to know *anything*?

The most influential treatment of this problem is found in the *Meditations* of René Descartes, the “father of modern philosophy.” To dramatize the problem, Descartes conjured up a “universal doubt-maker,” a sort of theological (or demonological) version of the Matrix. It is possible, Descartes maintained, that all his beliefs and other conscious states (sensations, perceptions, desires, etc.) were produced in him by a powerful demon bent on deceiving him to the maximum extent possible. But if this is possible, how could Descartes know, when he experienced himself sitting by the fire in his dressing-gown, that he really was sitting by the fire in his dressing-gown, rather than being deceived by the demon?

A radical solution to this problem is *skepticism*: just give up on the possibility of knowledge. But Descartes was not a skeptic. We can know such things as that we're sitting by a fire, and any credible epistemological theory must account for this fact. Descartes approached the problem he had raised as a puzzle to be solved, not as a counsel of despair.

Since sensory evidence cannot refute the "demon hypothesis," Descartes had to look elsewhere. His surprising move at this point was to offer two proofs for the existence of God: versions of the "ontological argument," which relies on nothing but the *idea* of God. With the existence of God thus ensured, Descartes believed that the prospects for knowledge had undergone a tectonic shift. It is part of the very idea of God that He is perfect, and therefore a *non-deceiver*. In proving the existence of this non-deceptive deity, Descartes had thereby secured a guarantee that the world would not be arranged in such a way that we would be routinely and systematically deceived when using our cognitive faculties in a responsible manner. We might still have legitimate doubts on particular occasions (is that a lake in the middle of the desert, or a mirage?); but the threat of universal doubt was broken.

It would probably be a mistake to dismiss Descartes' general strategy out of hand, especially since there aren't a lot of alternative strategies waiting in the wings. Nevertheless, few have found Descartes' solution entirely convincing. One way to bring this out is to imagine Neo reading the *Meditations* while in the Matrix. If Descartes' argument is successful, Neo is entitled to conclude, on the basis of that argument, that he isn't the victim of a global deception. But he *is* the victim of a global deception, Descartes' assurances to the contrary notwithstanding. Something has clearly gone wrong. I leave it to the reader to decide whether Descartes' argument can be revised so that it doesn't have this consequence.

What solution do the *Matrix* films offer? Neo takes the red pill, bursts out of his pod, and sees his true situation for the first time; Morpheus then receives him on board the *Nebuchadnezzar* with the words, "Welcome to the real world." Well, that was easy: the red pill is the answer! But of course it isn't. Neo's evidence that he has now joined the real world is the same kind of evidence he used to have for thinking that the Matrix was the real world, namely, experiential confirmation (he sees it, touches it, etc.). But why suppose that his new experiences aren't just as deceptive as his old experiences? The films *could* have ended with Thomas Anderson waking up in his cheap apartment and finding that his adventures as the heroic Neo, with the glamorous Trinity and unflappable Morpheus as sidekicks, were all a dream. Audiences would undoubtedly have felt cheated by such an ending, but they couldn't complain that the resulting story-line would be less consistent than the films' actual story-line.

Perhaps no philosopher has had so much influence on science fiction as Descartes, and no film has raised the problem of "Cartesian doubt" quite so effectively as *The Matrix*.³ What it does not do is offer a serious solution to that problem—unless that solution is to be found in a suggestion to be explored in the next section.

Metaphysics: What Is It for Something To *Be* Real?

“This . . . this isn’t real?” Neo asks, as he begins to realize the horrible truth. Morpheus, like a good philosopher, kicks the question upstairs: “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.” Morpheus appears to be suggesting that, when it comes to perceptible objects, at least, reality is *mental* (“electrical signals interpreted by your brain”).

This is a position most famously associated with George Berkeley, an 18th-century Anglo-Irish philosopher. Berkeley’s central maxim was *esse est percipi*: “to be is to be perceived.” According to Berkeley, there are no “material substances” lying behind, and causing, our perceptions of things; there are only the perceptions themselves, together with the “mental substances” that are engaged in the perceiving. Thus, Berkeley’s position is more radical than the one suggested by the famous question, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, would it make a sound?” Berkeley would not only deny that it made a sound, he would deny that the tree even existed. This assumes, of course, that *no perceiver at all* is present. But Berkeley, who was also an Anglican bishop, believed in the existence of an infinite perceiver, God, in addition to finite perceivers like you and me. Since *esse est percipi*, if *God* perceives the tree falling in the forest, it exists (and makes a sound) even if no *finite* perceiver happens to be present. Indeed, God creates the world by perceiving it into existence.

To understand the implications of the Berkeley-Morpheus proposal, let us return to the problem from the preceding section. When we wonder whether our beliefs put us in touch with reality, there must be some idea of reality with which we’re operating, some standard with respect to which reality measures up and unreality falls short. What is it for something (anything) to *be* real in the first place? Few questions in philosophy are more basic (or abstract!). Fortunately, we can delimit the question a bit. Though Descartes *tried* to doubt everything, he found that some things just can’t be doubted: for example, his own existence (“I think, therefore I am”), and the content of his own consciousness. Consider, then, some occasion on which Descartes experienced an ovoid patch of red in his visual field, followed by a tactile sensation of smoothness and hardness, followed again by the gustatory quality of sweetness with a hint of tartness. It isn’t these conscious experiences, or the existence of the experiencing subject, that he questioned; what *was* subject to doubt was whether these experiences provided adequate grounds for believing that he was in the presence of a real apple (first viewed, then grasped, and finally tasted). He had a problem with his knowledge of reality only because he assumed that there was a reality apart from his own thoughts about it. This *metaphysical* assumption—that reality is, for the most part, extra-mental—is precisely what Berkeley denied.

The films also question this assumption about reality, if they don’t deny it outright. The best confirmation from the first film is the scene with the “potentials” at the Oracle’s apartment. Neo notices a boy with a shaved head who is manipulating a spoon telekinetically. When Neo’s attempt to imitate the boy fails, he turns to the boy for help:

Spoon Boy: Do not try and bend the spoon—that's impossible. *Instead* only try to realize the truth—

Neo: What truth?

Spoon Boy: There is no spoon. . . . Then you will see, it is not the *spoon* that bends, it is only yourself.

Neo tries again and this time succeeds. Whatever is going on here, it appears to be more than Berkeley would endorse: he never suggested that reality could be manipulated in this fashion, except by God. This is Berkeley on steroids; better, it is Buddhism. There is much that a Buddhist reading of the films might make of this scene; for purposes of our Gnostic reading, however, the important point is that the Spoon Boy's philosophy does appear to solve—or better, *dissolve*—Descartes' problem. There is no spoon “out there” to stand in judgment of the spoon in my head.

Let's pause to take stock. The *Matrix* films raise the epistemological question—how can we tell the difference between reality and illusion?—in a particularly powerful way. At the same time, there are suggestions throughout the films that the correct metaphysics is one in which reality is fundamentally mind-dependent (“there is no spoon”). This leaves it an open question how there can *be* an ultimate distinction between reality and illusion, as presupposed by the epistemological question. Certainly this distinction can no longer rest on mind-dependence *versus* mind-independence, and the films do not suggest an alternative way of marking the distinction (such as Berkeley's appeal to the way God perceives things). Do the films then mean to reject this distinction? That's doubtful, because this distinction is all-important when we come to the last of the three philosophical questions raised by the films, namely, the moral significance of embracing reality and rejecting illusion.

Ethics: Why Does It Matter What's Real?

The key scene in the first film is arguably the meeting between Cypher and Agent Smith, when Cypher's agreement to betray Morpheus is finalized. The rendezvous takes place at a restaurant in the Matrix, and Cypher reveals his motive while biting into a thick steak: “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.” Notice that Cypher does not rest his case for ignorance on the claim that, since there is no difference between “reality” and illusion anyway, there's no reason to prefer knowledge over ignorance. It isn't his endorsement of a radical metaphysical theory that has brought him to this pass. Rather, Cypher is reaffirming the difference between knowledge and ignorance, and choosing ignorance—because living in the full knowledge of the truth is so unpleasant.

The film shows us enough of the real world—the blasted surface of the Earth, the Spartan living-conditions and constant danger aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*—that we understand Cypher's wish to be reinserted into the Matrix. Understand, but not condone: we are clearly meant to recoil from Cypher, while admiring and identifying with the hardy band of rebels who embrace reality despite its hardship. But why? When truth and pleasure conflict, what's so bad about opting for pleasure?

An interesting approach to this question is taken by philosopher Robert Nozick with the help of a fictional device called the “Experience Machine.” Like the Matrix, the Experience Machine produces, in the person hooked up to it, a complete set of experiences indistinguishable from real life; unlike the Matrix, a person *chooses* to go on the Experience Machine for the sake of these simulated experiences. These can range from simple physical pleasures, like an expert back massage, to more complex experiences, like discovering and exploring a new continent, performing at Carnegie Hall to a standing ovation, or loving (and being loved by) the ideal mate. Unpleasant experiences, like headaches, broken legs, the hurt of rejection, the tedium of waiting in line, can be reduced or eliminated. The only catch is that, once connected, it’s impossible to disconnect: you’re on the machine for life. So if you had the opportunity to go on the Experience Machine, *on this condition*, would you do so?

Nozick was confident that virtually no one, upon reflection, would agree to go on the Experience Machine. If Nozick was right about this, it tells us something important, and perhaps surprising, about our ultimate values. We must value more than just our subjective mental states. What’s missing from the Experience Machine, Nozick opined, is this:

First we want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them . . . [Second] we want to *be* a certain way, to be a certain sort of person. . . . Is [someone floating in a tank] courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It’s not merely that it’s difficult to tell; there’s no way he is. Thirdly, plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality, to a world no deeper or more important than that which people can construct.⁴

Let’s pursue these doubts about the Experience Machine under the rubrics ‘Doing’ and ‘Being’.

Doing. What is it *to do* something, as opposed to having something *done to you*? Most important, the action must flow from one’s own choices. “Choice, the problem is choice,” Neo tells the Architect in *Reloaded*. This is true from the beginning of Neo’s journey (the choice to get back in the car taking him to Morpheus, the choice of the red pill over the blue) to its end (Smith: “Why do you persist?” Neo: “Because I choose to.”). But what *is* choice? The walls of the room where Neo is interviewed by the Architect are covered with monitors displaying Neo’s possible reactions to the Architect’s revelations; at the end of the interview Neo must exit through one of two doors. This is one way to think of choice: two or more responses are genuinely open to me, and I’m the one who settles which of these possibilities is to become actual. But choice, so understood, is under assault throughout the films.

One critic is the Merovingian, who delivers the following mini-lecture in *Reloaded*:

Merovingian: You see, there is only one constant, one universal, it is the only real truth: causality. Action. Reaction. Cause and effect.
Morpheus: Everything begins with choice.

Merovingian: No. Wrong. Choice is an illusion . . . This is the nature of the universe. We struggle against it, we fight to deny it. . . . Our only hope, our only peace is to understand it, to understand the ‘why’.

The Merovingian assumes here the truth of *causal determinism*, the position that all events (including human actions) are the necessary causal consequences of prior events over which we have no control. He also assumes, not implausibly, that causal determinism rules out free choice. Finally, his *response* to these assumptions is similar to that of certain ancient Stoics, who likened human beings to a dog tied behind a moving cart. The dog has no choice about where it’s going—that’s determined by the cart. But it is up to the dog whether to trot compliantly behind the cart, or be dragged. Once we understand that we are in the same situation as this dog, the Merovingian suggests, it’s best to accept this rather than engage in futile resistance.

Another challenge to free choice comes from the Oracle, a considerably more sympathetic figure than the Merovingian. There’s an obvious allusion here to the oracle at Delphi: the motto over her kitchen door, “Know thyself,” was also inscribed on the shrine at Delphi, and she advises Neo while sitting on a kitchen stool inhaling the aroma of freshly-baked cookies, just as the priestess at Delphi prophesied while sitting on a tripod breathing in the hallucinogenic fumes issuing from a crack in the ground. The future is fated, and she knows what it holds in store; when she declares that such-and-such will happen, it *must* happen. This fatalistic necessity is even stronger than the causal determinism to which the Merovingian appeals. Trinity, for example, has been told by the Oracle that she will fall in love with the One, and she has in fact fallen in love with Neo; she therefore infers, when Neo dies, that he can’t remain dead—and she’s right. When the course of nature (fatal gunshots causing the heart to stop beating) conflicts with the edicts of fate, it is nature that must give way.⁵

If either determinism or fatalism is correct, then the monitors in the Architect’s room do not represent a *real* diversity of responses open to Neo; insofar as choice requires genuine alternatives, choice is therefore an illusion. There is little evidence, however, that the films mean to endorse this conclusion. How then do they escape it?

One suggestion is that what looks like fate might instead be *providence*. Notice the difference this makes to Morpheus as the parts of a complex mission into the Matrix fall into place:

Tonight is not an accident. There are no accidents. I do not believe in chance. When I see three objectives, three captains, three ships, I do not see coincidence; I see providence, I see purpose. I believe it is our fate to be here; it is our destiny. I believe this night holds for each and every one of us the very meaning of our lives.

If Morpheus is right in discerning the hand of providence in these events, his enthusiasm is understandable. It’s not clear, though, how this serves to rehabilitate choice. I’d rather be a character in a script composed by an intelligent author than in one produced by twelve monkeys pecking away at twelve typewriters, but it’s not because the first scenario delivers more freedom. The problem of finding a place for free choice in a

world ruled by blind, impersonal fate, has simply been replaced by the problem of finding a place for free choice in a world governed by providence.⁶

The films are at their best when they raise questions about free choice, but the temptation to provide answers (however enigmatic) is too much for the filmmakers to resist. The Oracle, who might be expected to offer some insight into how fate can coexist with choice, is given the last words of the final film: “I believe, I believe.” That’s not a solution, to this or to any of the problems raised in the films; it’s just magic, and a disappointingly flabby ending for a series that is, at least intermittently, more rigorous than this.

Being. The second moral Nozick derives from the Experience Machine is that we want to *be* something. But how is this missing for someone hooked up to the Experience Machine? There is something you are when you are on the machine—or in the Matrix, for that matter. You are a blob floating in a tank. But this is no way to be. Why not?

At the beginning of *Reloaded*, Neo laments: “I just wish I knew what I’m supposed to do.” Freedom is only a start; it also matters how we use our freedom. When we act, we do so as particular beings (humans, not cats or corkscrews) in a particular context. There are two touchstones here: who *we* are, and how the *world* is. The norms guiding free choice must take both of these into account. Let’s call this dual norm *authenticity*. Neo aspires to an “authentic life,” one that is true to the facts about himself and the environment in which he lives; Cypher, on the other hand, no longer cares.

The films are quite clear that authenticity begins with a thing’s function or *purpose*. “Every program that is created must have a purpose,” Neo is told by Ramakandra in the Train Station; love, for example, is just “a way of saying what I am here to do.” This is the position Aristotle develops in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle notes that what it is to be a good flute-player or sculptor depends on the *function* of flute-playing and sculpting, and suggests that what it is to be a good human being might likewise depend on the function of human life. What could this be? Simply being alive is shared with plants, perception with other animals, “but what we are looking for is the special function of a human being.” Aristotle concludes that this must involve “some sort of life of action of the part of the soul that has reason.”⁷

One implication of Aristotle’s approach is that it makes sense to speak of an “owner’s manual” for human beings. The owner’s manual for a washing machine explains what it can do, how to operate it, how to care for it, how to troubleshoot when something goes wrong. These instructions are all predicated on there being something that this thing *is*. A washing machine is not a cement mixer; using it as one means *not* using it to do what it’s made for and can do well, and risks damaging it so it *cannot* do what it’s for. Likewise a human being is not a dog, a daffodil, or a DVD player. Aristotle devotes a lot of attention to the various virtues, like courage and truthfulness, that equip us to function well and be all that we can be. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is, in effect, Aristotle’s “owner’s manual,” as *The Bible* is for Christians.

The supreme good for human beings, according to Aristotle, is *happiness*. This is not a subjective mental state, like a feeling, though it is ordinarily *accompanied* by desirable mental states; it is instead an objective condition in which a person's activity fits harmoniously into the nexus of facts about that person and the relevant aspects of the environment. Real happiness, in this sense, cannot be achieved through activities that run counter to who we are (e.g., taking advantage of others) or that exemplify nothing higher than what we share with plants or animals (e.g., a life devoted to fine dining), no matter how pleasurable they may be. Happiness can even be undermined by facts of which we are completely unaware. Imagine an elderly woman, contented with life, whose joy rests on the belief that her only child is prospering in a distant country; imagine further that this belief is false, and that she never discovers the truth: her son is in fact childless, divorced, indigent, and homeless, sobering up only long enough to write the weekly letters in which he tells his mother what she most wants to hear. For Aristotle, this woman is not happy, even if she thinks she is—her situation is simply sad, no matter how good she feels.

The same is true of people stuck in the Matrix. There's something sad about imagining oneself a talented artist, successful entrepreneur, or beloved spouse, while in reality immobile in a tank of goo. It matters how things are, not just how they seem.

Wake Up, Neo

The Matrix is the story of a sleeper who wakes up. This is a very powerful metaphor. The great Christian Platonist, St. Augustine, uses it to express the difficulty of breaking free from old habits and bringing his will into sync with his intellectual acceptance of Christianity: "I was held down as agreeably by this world's baggage as one often is by sleep; and indeed the thoughts with which I meditated upon You were like the efforts of a man who wants to get up but is so heavy with sleep that he simply sinks back into it again."⁸ Descartes echoes this passage from Augustine when describing his own efforts to awaken from the sleep of doubt.⁹ "There is no one who wants to be asleep always," Augustine adds. This is the moral of both the Experience Machine and *The Matrix*.

At the end of the first film, when Neo emerges from the phone booth, the people crowding around him look like sleepwalkers, moving robotically toward meaningless destinations, as though on auto-pilot; Neo seems the only person truly alive. Here's someone who has found out what it's all about, what it is that we're *for*, and it's exhilarating. We want to be like Neo, not like the oblivious crowd. It's true that the films are short on details, such as what it is we should be waking up *from* and *to*. The boundary between authenticity and inauthenticity can get drawn in many different ways. (Is there a cosmic struggle in which viewers should enlist? What is it?) They're also vague about what one should actually do in order to "wake up." ("Free your mind"? What's that?) This is a vexing practical problem, with which Augustine struggled at length in *The Confessions*. But what the first film, at least, does very effectively is stir the viewer with the thrill, wonder, and transformative power of waking up to . . . whatever it is that the real world has to offer. There is more to life—on any account of what that "more" might be—than simply drifting along, unreflectingly, from one experience to another. With this much of *The Matrix*, at least, the Apostle would surely

agree: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Eph. 5:14)

Notes

¹ The filmmakers, Andy and Larry Wachowski, have acknowledged the “Gnosticism connection” in interviews, and a number of scholarly articles (not to mention a host of websites!) have commented on Gnostic themes in the films. A good analysis of the first film in Gnostic (and, in this case, Buddhist) terms may be found in Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner, “Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 5 (October 2001). The best survey of Gnosticism is still Hans Jonas’ *The Gnostic Religion*, now available in a third edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

² Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2, quoted in Jonas, p. 45.

³ Others include *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Vanilla Sky*, just to name a few.

⁴ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 43.

⁵ The theological parallel to this problem is obviously the one posed by the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. Some Christian responses to the latter problem may be found in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Gregory A. Boyd, David Hunt, William Lane Craig, Paul Helm), eds. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

⁶ I would say the same thing about the Christian doctrine of *divine* providence. Its virtues are many, but they do not include providing, by itself, a solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human free will. That solution must be found elsewhere.

⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, in the Terence Irwin translation.

⁸ *Confessions* VIII.5, in the F.J. Sheed translation.

⁹ *Meditations* I.