

Philosophical Analysis of the Matrix

When the film “*The Matrix*” debuted in 1999, it captivated audiences far and wide with its slow-motion gunplay, dazzling special effects (including the much lauded and oft imitated “Bullet Time”) and exciting and well-choreographed fight scenes. The film was highly successful and quickly became a cultural phenomenon. However, the most important points of the film were often unnoticed by casual moviegoers. *The Matrix* contains a great deal of religious and philosophical parallels which have been noticed by philosophers and academia and the film is still being closely studied to this day. While many may appreciate *The Matrix* for its over-the-top fight scenes, there is much to be gained from the film on both intellectual and philosophical levels.

Classical Greek philosopher Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* has many parallels with *The Matrix*. Plato presents the idea that the world we see is a mere shadow of what truly exists and that we have never seen the world for what it really is. In *The Matrix*, this idea is integral to the film’s plot and setting. As the Matrix is a computer program that humans are plugged into, the world they view as “real” is not what it appears to be. In reality, those living within the Matrix have never seen the real world that exists beyond their perception. Only those who have been “unplugged” or removed from the Matrix have ever truly seen the real world.

In the film, it is suggested that people should be unplugged before they reach a certain age because there are some who will never be able to accept the reality of the world around them. In another allusion to the *Allegory of the Cave*, it is stated that “If the prisoners remain in the cave, or are not rescued when they are young, they will never know a higher Good” (Ferguson). If an individual is too old or otherwise set in their manner of thinking, it is highly

unlikely that they will be capable of understanding and believing that everything they have grown to perceive as real has been nothing but an elaborate façade.

The Matrix is in itself another form of reality. Despite its existence as a simulation, the actions people perform within the Matrix are perceived by the mind as real. Thus, if you are killed within the Matrix, you will die in the real world as well because the mind perceives what occurs within the Matrix as “real”. In another allusion to Plato’s Cave Allegory it is stated that “What exists is reality, like the shadows dancing on the wall in Plato’s cave. Knowing influences what and how things are viewed and can lead to a richer experience of life” (Stewart). The mind views the actions taking place within the Matrix as real, and despite the fact that the characters have the ability to bend the laws of physics to perform superhuman feats because they know that the Matrix is a simulation, they cannot defy the mind’s perception of personal injury or death.

The Matrix also parallels the works of African American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois and his concept of the “double consciousness”. The character Neo is an excellent example of the concept in that, from the beginning of the film, he struggles with leading a double life. In one life, he is Thomas Anderson, a white collar computer programmer and in another life; he is Neo, an accomplished computer hacker who seeks the answer to the question, “What is The Matrix”. “This duality can be related to ‘double consciousness,’ ... ‘Double consciousness’ is explained as two selves existing inside the same soul, whereby African Americans are ever mindful of perceptions of them in a racist society” (Boyd).

When Morpheus presents Neo with the choice of two pills, this can be interpreted as recognition of Neo’s double consciousness and his acceptance of the red pill is the first step towards becoming a singular individual. Near the end of the movie, Neo has a climactic hand to hand fight with Agent Smith who has consistently insisted on referring to Neo as “Mr.

Anderson”. During a moment in which it appears Agent Smith will be victorious, Neo takes hold of him and triumphantly exclaims “My name is Neo!” and momentarily defeats Agent Smith. In this moment, Neo has chosen which life to embrace and has discarded the Thomas Anderson persona of his previous life.

Following the climactic fight scene in which Neo goes toe to toe with Agent Smith and realizes that this is a fight he cannot win, he rushes to find the nearest exit from the Matrix. At the end of this pursuit, a matter of feet away from the exit, Neo is ambushed by three Agents and shot, presumably to death. This bears many similarities to the Crucifixion of Jesus. Neo “dies” but is resurrected moments later as “The One”. He now possesses the ability to bend the laws of physics within the Matrix to his will, stopping bullets in mid-flight by merely willing them to do so. After Neo effortlessly defeats Agent Smith, the film ends shortly thereafter with Neo leaving a short message for the machines. Afterward, Neo is seen flying into the sky, similar to the Christian belief of Jesus’ ascension into Heaven.

Most notably, the similarities between the prophecy behind “The One” and biblical prophecy are made immediately apparent. In *The Matrix*, it was believed that long after the uprising of the machines, there was a man who was born into the Matrix that could bend the rules of the Matrix itself and rebuild it as he saw fit. He freed the first people from the confines of the Matrix program and long after his death he was said to be reincarnated some time in the future, coinciding with the belief of the “Second Coming of Christ.”

Throughout the film is the notion that we as people have grown too dependent on machines in our everyday lives. At some point in the early 21st century, prior to the beginning of the film, humans created the first truly independent artificial intelligence. This artificial intelligence gave rise to the very machines that would later incite a war with, and eventually

enslave, mankind. “What would we do without machines? On the rare occasions that my computer goes down at work, I feel lost for however long it takes our IT staff to get it back up and running” (Elliott). With this in mind, the underlying concept of *The Matrix* can be seen as a reminder that we rely on machines far too much and shows us possible consequences of said reliance.

After all that has been presented, it is abundantly clear that *The Matrix* contains a great number of parallels with the ideas of many philosophers, both modern and classical and many biblical concepts and beliefs. It is clear that there are a great deal of ideas within *The Matrix* that can foster both intellectual and philosophical interpretation and discussion. On a purely cinematic level, *The Matrix* excels as a highly artistic and thematically brilliant film but its true brilliance exists within its philosophical merit. While the masses may have seen this film for what it was marketed as, an intense action movie, many have read between the lines and discovered that there is much more to this film than its special effects and cinematic gunplay.

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