The Matrix, *Liberal Education, and Other Splinters in the Mind*

Patrick Malcolmson

St. Thomas University

> Here are superbly imaginative treatments of logical principles, the uses and meanings of words, the functions of names, the perplexities connected with time and space, the problem of personal identity, the status of substance in relation to its qualities, the mind-body problem . . . .

Beginnings

This passage is taken from Roger W. Holmes's "The Philosopher's *Alice in Wonderland*."[1] Holmes discusses a number of philosophical problems, which appear in a variety of forms in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. He delights in the pedagogical potential of Lewis Carroll's work: "Most often Carroll uses the absurd hilarity of Wonderland to bring difficult concepts into sharp focus; and for this gift teachers of logic and philosophy have unmeasured admiration and gratitude."[2] Writing in 1959, Holmes might well have been able to expect that many, and perhaps even most, students would have read one or both stories before arriving at university. Drawing upon the fantastic comical examples from Carroll's books, a teacher of phi-

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PATRICK MALCOLMSON is Chair of the Department of Political Science at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

[1] Roger W. Holmes, "The Philosopher's *Alice in Wonderland*," *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild as seen through the Critics' Looking Glasses, 1865-1971*, ed. Robert Phillips (New York: Vanguard Press, 1971), 159-174, 160.

[2] *Ibid.*, 161.

losophy and literature might both instruct and delight students, drawing them into a deeper discussion of questions and ideas, and initiating the journey that is liberal education.

A professor today teaching first-year students cannot realistically expect them to have read Carroll's books. In fact, it would be difficult to name any particular book students could be expected to have read. And yet a shared set of images and characters that can be used for talking about important ideas and questions continues to be an invaluable pedagogical tool. Teaching now seems to require turning to contemporary popular culture. As Paul Cantor observes, students will enthusiastically provide serious and insightful comments on popular television shows which "provide students today with whatever common culture they possess," and he reminds us not to be dismissive too quickly: "much of popular culture may be mindless entertainment, but we should be awake to the possibility that in what a former FCC chairman Newton Minow once famously called the 'vast wasteland' of television, oases of quality and maybe even of thoughtfulness can be found."[3] Popular culture frequently provides the rough and ready equivalent of shared texts. Much of it may be primarily entertainment, but it is at least dependable. For you can count on students' all having watched a good number of the most popular current and syndicated television shows. They know the most popular music and have seen the top selling movies, often watching some of them numerous times on video.

Many such "texts" are of limited use. Their treatment of difficult and complex ideas is often superficial or contradictory. Moreover, they at times simply retail the conventional moral and political teachings of the moment.[4] This said, popular culture can provide some of what is necessary for beginning to educate students. As Cantor suggests, "If students can learn to reflect on what they view in movies or on television, the process may eventually

Shared set of images and characters useful in discussing important questions.

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[3] Paul Cantor, *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), ix, xxxiii.

[4] *The Matrix* is no exception in this regard. Consider the agent's "revelation" that human beings do not fit into the natural world the way other mammals do, and are ruining the earth; or the inspired existential statements of "I believe" that become the foundations for the most decisive action in the movie leading to the rescue of Morpheus by Neo and Trinity; or the likening of the Matrix to "the system" of capitalist exploitation, and the need for "liberation" from false consciousness.

make them better readers of literature . . . . By being selective and rigorously analytical, one may be able to lift popular culture up to the level of high culture, or at least pull it in that direction."[5] The popular movie *The Matrix* is an exemplary case in point.[6] Its intimations that there is something much more interesting than popular culture make the film a potentially valuable tool for teaching. While not a candidate to replace the Alice books, the film can be engaged to raise significant philosophical questions and to begin a more profound discussion of the purpose of a liberal education. The film's merits in this regard are substantial. It can thus serve as a portal for students, through which they can pass from popular culture to culture simply—the equivalent of leaving the subway and ascending into the sunlight.

Selectivity and rigorous analysis might lift popular culture toward level of high culture.

A great deal has already been written about *The Matrix* as film, as popular culture, as it connects with contemporary philosophy (particularly the work of Jean Baudrillard). Our interests are more modest. We are concerned with the pedagogical usefulness of *The Matrix* for introducing students to earlier philosophers and to some of the big questions of importance to anyone embarking on a liberal education. Our intention is to suggest *The Matrix* as a starting point on this lifelong journey, not to be dismissive of other aspects of the film, while recognizing that it is hardly the entire journey in itself.

The Matrix is a densely allusive film drawing on a wide range of sources: other popular movies, contemporary science fiction, Greek mythology, and numerous works of literature and philosophy.[7] Interviewed by *Time Magazine,* co-director Larry Wachowski

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[5] Paul Cantor, "The Art of the Popular," *Wilson Quarterly* 25:3 (2001): 28. See also the discussion of the relationship between philosophy and science fiction by Philip A. Pecorino, "Philosophy and Science Fiction," in *The Intersection of Science Fiction and Philosophy: Critical Studies*, ed. Robert E. Myers (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 3-14. The pedagogical potential of *The Matrix* is noted by William Irwin, ed. *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2002).

[6] The recently released *The Matrix: Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions* do not affect the use of the first movie in the classroom. Students intrigued by the ideas in the first movie may be interested in the extensive discussion of free will and choice in the sequels.

[7] Thoughtful discussions of many of these references can be found in Glenn Yeffeth, ed. *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in* The Matrix (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2003) which was published just as we were finishing this article. Among the immediately evident allusions are the concept of the Matrix

suggests that he and his brother were interested in creating something more than the typical action film: "We're interested in mythology, theology and, to a certain extent, higher-level mathematics . . . . All are ways human beings try to answer bigger questions, as well as The Big Question. If you're going to do epic stories, you should concern yourself with those issues. People might not understand all the allusions in the movie, but they understand the important ideas."[8] Though viewers of *The Matrix* may not apprehend all the allusions, the Wachowski brothers clearly expect some of the allusions to be familiar at least some of the time: "[s]ince allusions are not explicitly identified, they imply a fund of knowledge that is shared by an author and the audience for whom the author writes."[9] The film is an enjoyable action movie. That these allusions are used in a fast-paced, glossy action movie with heroes in cool clothes makes *The Matrix* that much more intriguing for students. For just as the main character, Neo, is driven to understand the Matrix by his sense that there is more to life than the world he has apparently grown up in, so students are excited by the possibility of understanding the allusions which allow them to appreciate the movie on a different level.

Our argument does not turn on whether, as Slavoj Zizek contends, many of the interpretations of the film are in fact "pseudo-sophisticated intellectualist readings that project into the film refined philosophical or psychoanalytical distinctions."[10] We are concerned primarily with the usefulness of the film as a way to bring students to appreciate that their education can make viewing such films more interesting and intellectually pleasurable. Read Mercer Schuchardt suggests "[o]ne of the perpetual pleasures of *The Matrix* lies in the fact that, unlike the majority of what

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itself in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the foundation novel of the cyberpunk genre. From Ovid and classical Greek culture we get the characters of Morpheus and the Oracle. From the Bible come Neo (an anagram of "One") who plays a messianic role, Trinity who assists him, the ship the humans use named *Nebuchadnezzar*, and the last human city, Zion. From philosophy there are direct references and allusions to, or echoes of, Plato's *Republic*, Descartes' *Meditations*, Malebranche, Bishop Berkeley, Marx, Lacan, the Frankfurt School, Marshall McLuhan, and Baudrillard.

8 Richard Corliss, "Popular Metaphysics," *Time Magazine,* April 19, 1999.

9 M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 10.

10 See Slavoj Zizek, "*The Matrix* or Malebranche in Hollywood," *Philosophy Today* 43: Supplement (1999): 11-26.

Hollywood puts out, this film does not insult the viewer's intelligence . . . . It is a pleasure that increases with time, because you see more and get more out of it with each viewing."[11] At the same time, we would hope our students could eventually see that studying the works that have provided the sources of the film is, in most cases, more interesting than the film itself.[12]

Studying a film like *The Matrix* in some detail, and in relation to other texts, has a number of pedagogical merits. To begin with, *The Matrix* provides a wonderful jumping off point for introducing students to the ideas of intertextuality and the conversation that goes on between and among poets, artists, and thinkers within a culture, between cultures, and across the ages. When they see the connections between a film like *The Matrix* and works such as *Alice in Wonderland*, the *Bible*, the *Republic*, and Descartes' *Meditations*, their appreciation of the film is greatly enhanced. The pleasant experience of discovering that there is much more than first meets the eye is essential to liberal learning.

Coming to see a film like *The Matrix* in terms of its intertextual connections can, and should, lead to more than simply the realization that film has a literary and cultural context. More importantly, it allows students to begin to develop a perspective from which they can make judgments about popular culture. From there they can develop a broader and more critical perspective, based upon having come to understand something more, about and from, these texts. Quite possibly they may then learn that, upon even further thought and examination, there is less than meets the eye. This dialectical journey from *The Matrix* as "great action flick" to the film as a "great" philosophical and literary text, to the film as perhaps a somewhat contradictory pastiche of images and ideas is the upward dialectical journey of liberal education.

The film could be the starting point for an upward dialectical journey.

Finally, the film as a whole and particularly the experiences of its hero, Neo, offers a useful starting point for a discussion of the philosophical questions essential to liberal education. Such questions are psychological as well as metaphysical. The cast of char-

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[11] Read Mercer Schuchardt, "What is the Matrix?" *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in* The Matrix, 16.

[12] Kathi Maoi provides a balanced criticism of the film in her review "Beyond the Magpie Impulse," *Fantasy & Science Fiction* 97 (1999): 107-13.

acters invites a discussion of human nature, virtue and vice, and human psychology. The film's arresting depiction of liberating education as a difficult process of *periagoge* or "turning around" offers us an analogy with the experience of our students. Most are intrigued. In Socrates' allegory of the cave, liberation does not come as a momentary flash of insight, or an epiphany, but as a process or journey upwards and outwards. Neo, too, must undergo a similar process.

The Plot of The Matrix

The Matrix is set about two centuries into the future. Having created artificial intelligence (AI), the human race soon found itself overtaken and subjugated. The machines began to take control, and war against the machines ensued.[13] In their desperate attempt to starve the machines of the power source of sunlight, a sort of nuclear winter was created, and the earth became a desert wasteland. AI coped by enslaving human beings, growing them in pods and harvesting the energy produced by human metabolism. Human beings are thus grown and harvested in vast energy pod farms, while they unknowingly live out their lives in a computer programmed virtual reality—the Matrix. Guarding the Matrix are special "sentient programs" that generate FBI type agents. These agents are the program's gatekeepers, and their function is to destroy the rebel "viruses" that infiltrate the virtual reality of the Matrix.

Neo is told of a man who freed himself from enslavement, then liberated others, and began a rebellion against the machines. One

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[13] Science fiction has provided numerous examples of similar scenarios, but one of the most directly influential in this case would seem to be Harlan Ellison's short story, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," reprinted in *The Essential Ellison*, ed. Terry Dowling (Beverly Hills, CA: Morpheus International, 1991), 167-180. In the story, a computer created for military purposes accidentally acquires sentience, frees itself from human control, and eradicates all but the last five human beings whom it traps and tortures underground. AM (or originally Allied Mastercomputer) resembles AI in *The Matrix*. A significant parallel between the story and the film is in the hatred of the created for the creator. Although we do not meet AI directly in *The Matrix*, we do meet the AI's programs known as the agents. As Agent Smith interrogates and tortures Morpheus, the agent's hatred of humanity is apparent. Both the film and the story depict the rejection of the creator by the created. The relationship of creator and created has been a central one in science fiction from the foundations of the genre in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

last underground human city, Zion, survives. Morpheus, a leader of one of the rebel bands, is looking for "the one" who it is prophesied will come and lead humanity to freedom by destroying the Matrix. Morpheus believes "the one" is Neo.

"Neo" is the hacker alias of Thomas Anderson, a young office worker struggling through daily life in the contemporary "cube farm" corporate world. *The Matrix* depicts Neo's quest to understand the world and his own existence. He has an intuition that something is not quite right, that reality and appearance do not fit together. Through the course of this journey he discovers that almost everything he has accepted as reality is a computer-generated illusion that holds mankind captive.

Morpheus and the other rebels free Neo's body from his pod and begin his painful re-education aboard their subterranean ship, the *Nebuchadnezzar*, where they use the sewers of destroyed cities to hide from the machines. They use training programs to prepare Neo to face the Matrix once more. Neo doubts his part in all of this, and his doubts seem to be confirmed when he is taken to see the Oracle, an older woman—perhaps with powers of prophesy— who tells him he has potential but is waiting for something. She also tells him he will face the choice of saving his own life or that of Morpheus. When one of the rebels, Cypher, betrays the group to the agents, Morpheus is captured. Neo finally gets off the fence and risks his life to save Morpheus, since the rebellion will be jeopardised without Morpheus' leadership. Neo and Trinity successfully free Morpheus, only for Neo to find himself in a showdown with one of the agents, Smith. Neo appears to die when he is shot repeatedly by Agent Smith, but he comes back to life with a kiss from Trinity who is on the *Nebuchadnezzar* with his real body. Within the Matrix, Neo comes into his power, now seeing the Matrix as computer code not as apparent reality, and he easily defeats the agents.

Allusion and Reality

We first meet Neo at his apartment, where he wakes to a mysterious message on his computer screen:

> Wake up Neo . . . .
>
> The Matrix has you . . . .

He is then directed to "follow the white rabbit." This is the first in a series of references, direct and allusory, to the Alice books. The white rabbit soon appears in the form of a tattoo on a woman's shoulder: following the woman leads Neo to a bar where he meets Trinity. She in turn eventually leads him to the fugitive rebel leader Morpheus, who begins their conversation observing ironically "I imagine, right now, you must be feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole?" Morpheus now confronts Neo with a choice: a blue pill or a red pill. The blue pill will return him to his former virtual life, with no memory of what has happened; the red pill will disrupt the computer program of the Matrix to make possible Neo's escape into the real world.

There are striking parallels between Alice and Neo.

The many parallels through the film between Alice and Neo are indeed striking. The parallel is not merely in the pills, which remind us of the cordial and cake or the caterpillar's mushroom which alter Alice's size. Neo, like Alice, is also about to go through a mirror (as he morphs into mirror material before being unplugged from the Matrix). More important is Alice's confusion as a result of these changes. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice is questioned by the Caterpillar: "'Who are you?' said the Caterpillar . . . . Alice replied, rather shyly, 'I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'"[14] Like Alice, Neo is about to undergo an experience which will leave him wondering who he is and what is real, questions the thoughtful student will inevitably face as part of a liberal education.

Neo's escape from the Matrix is directed by Morpheus, a name shared with the Greek god of dreams. As Charles L. Griswold, Jr., observes, "The god's name comes from the Greek word 'morphé,' meaning shape or form; for the god could summon up, in the sleeper, all sorts of shapes and forms. Who better than divine Morpheus to understand the difference between wakefulness and dreams?"[15] Again and again in this film the viewer watches Neo awaken (at his computer, in his bed at home, on the rebel ship),

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[14] Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland *and* Through the Looking Glass, ed. Martin Gardner (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 67.

[15] Charles L. Griswold, Jr., "Happiness and Cypher's Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss?" *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 126-137, 129.

and each time the viewer must wonder whether Neo is actually awake or only dreaming that he is. The viewer's experience is analogous to Neo's struggle to identify which life is the dream— the life he has always led or the weirdness he is about to experience? Again, this recalls the question of who has dreamt Alice's experience at the end of *Through the Looking-Glass*: Alice herself or the Red King? The Alice allusions signal the beginning of Neo's quest to distinguish illusion from reality. Many of the allusions used throughout the movie are to works, including the Alice books, which likewise question our understanding of reality. For perceptive viewers of the film, the experience of recognising the allusions and recognising that the movie is more than it first appears is a deliberate parallel to Neo's experience and invites viewers to ask the same questions with regard to their own lives. Perhaps the most famous account of the quest to move from the world of opinion or appearance to the realm of knowledge and reality is given in Plato's *Republic* and Socrates' famous allegory of the cave:

Difference between wakefulness and dreams explored.

> Make an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets . . . . Then also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent.[16]

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[16] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 514a-515a. The connection between the Socratic image and the idea that we are enslaved to a virtual reality Matrix has been commented on by many. And there are other analyses. See P. Chad Barnett, "Reviving Cyberpunk: (Re)Constructing the Subject and Mapping Cyberspace in the Wachowski Brothers' Film *The Matrix*," *Extrapolation* 41, 4 (2000): 359-374. Barnett argues that the humans living in the Matrix unaware of their own pod-confined bodies are the "ultimate depiction of the death of the subject." *The Matrix* is a sign that "[t]here must be genuine concern in late capitalist society that the possibility of crossing between reality and

This image is presented by Socrates as the last in a series of three images: the sun, the divided line, and the cave. The images are used in his discussion of what constitutes a philosophical education. The cave allegory is about liberation. It is the beginning point and involves a crucial event—a turning around from the light of the cave to the light of the sun, and a recognition that the shadowy world of the cave is not the real world. This "turning around" or *periagoge* is the necessary starting point for a conversion, one that will allow a person to distinguish appearance from reality. This experience is the subject of both *The Republic* and *The Matrix*. This turning around is a turning from the world of becoming to the world of being. It is worth noting that in *The Matrix*, Neo's education involves a re-education of his senses. The question of how he is to tell whether he has not just moved from one matrix into another—or, one might say, exchanged one cave for another— is left open. Socrates points out that being "compelled" to turn around and to ascend out of the cave into the bright light of the sun is a painful experience. As Morpheus explains to Neo, his eyes hurt because he has never used them.[17] Moreover, the one who does this is not likely to meet with a happy reception should he try to communicate the good news that the world in which everyone believes is a mere simulacrum of reality.

Morpheus makes a similar point in *The Matrix*. He tells Neo that it is not standard procedure to unplug and free those beyond a certain age from the Matrix. They cannot bear the shock and refuse to believe what has happened is true. For this reason, when operating in the virtual reality of the Matrix, everyone who has not been "turned around" must be treated as an enemy. They will instinctively, albeit unwittingly, side with AI against human freedom. Neo himself turns away from the truth when he is first contacted by Morpheus, his voluntary bondage symbolised by his arrest by the agents. Neo's "turning around" begins with his

"Turning around" or periagoge *is the subject of Plato's* Republic *as well as* The Matrix.

Turning from appearance to reality is not easy.

virtual reality may undermine concepts of subjectivity and identity . . . . if virtual reality becomes the primary reality, then the body is at risk of being absorbed into its own technology (Hollinger, 32), and the subject, as it is known in contemporary reality, may be lost forever" (Barnett, 369). The method of loss may be new, but these ideas are not.

[17] In *The Republic,* liberal education essentially involves this "art of turning around." See Bk. vii, particularly 518. A philosophical account of *periagoge* can be found in Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. 3, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 112-117.

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recognition that those things he has been fixed on are not all there is. As Trinity says to Neo when he considers returning to his old life: "you have been down there, Neo. You know that road. You know exactly where it ends."

The film serves as an excellent starting point for discussing the problems of liberal education. Moreover, the differences between the film and Plato's philosophy are surely as important as the similarities. One important topic for discussion is the question of whether all human beings have the capacity to be freed or "to free their minds." Is it in fact the case that every human being, provided he or she is reached early enough in life, is open to a liberating education? Or is it the case that there will always be those, a few or perhaps a great many, who prefer the world they have grown up with to the "real" world, loving their own familiar world more than the truth?

Differences between the film and Plato's philosophy are as important as the similarities.

It is also worth considering a key difference between the film and Socrates' allegory in this regard: in the film, reality is portrayed as dark, ugly and grim. The world's surface environment has been purposefully destroyed by human beings in the hope of stopping the sun's energy from reaching the surface and hence depriving the machines of energy. As Morpheus puts it, "Welcome to the desert of the real." In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates depicts the world outside the cave as far more beautiful than the world in the cave. It seems paradoxical that, while reality is much more appealing in the Platonic account, there is little doubt that Socrates is much more pessimistic about the prospect of ever turning more than a few minds towards the light.[18]

The Matrix also calls to mind a second famous philosophical account of the distinction between appearance and reality, an account which contrasts sharply with the Platonic one. Consider the following passage from Descartes' *Meditations*, and the resonance between it and the film:

> I shall then suppose . . . . some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes,

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[18] One need only consider Socrates' account in the *Apology* (23B-24B) of how his conversations with those reputed to be wise led to his being hated.

no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing to possess all these things; . . . . And just as a captive who in sleep enjoys imaginary liberty, when he begins to suspect that his liberty is but a dream, fears to awaken, and conspires with these agreeable illusions that the deception may be prolonged, so insensibly of my own accord I fall back into my former opinions . . . . [19]

The film as springboard to contrast ancients and moderns.

AI stands in nicely for Descartes' "evil genius," and Descartes' account of why human beings might be quite disinclined to want to awake from the dream world of virtual reality suggests the fear that reality might not be as pleasant as the dream world. Descartes raises the question of how we are to proceed. He begins with his program of radical doubt and the one certain proposition that we can know, his famous *cogito ergo sum*. This procedure contrasts markedly from the Platonic account. The film provides a useful springboard to contrast the ancients and the moderns when it comes to how, or if, we are to ascend to the world of the "true."

In either account, liberal education involves learning what is true or what is truth. It requires an open-ended inquiry into whether and how this is possible. Today students typically arrive at university with a kind of naive relativism that apparently encompasses epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics. One cannot know the truth, they often claim. The teacher responds: you cannot begin with the view that it is impossible—how would you know that? Moreover, the beginning point is the one focussed on here: appearance versus reality. If there is no truth, then that distinction makes no sense. What intrigues the students about the film—the distinction between appearance and reality—is precisely the point they would deny.

Ignorance is Bliss?

Plato, Descartes, and the Wachowski brothers seem to agree on a crucial point: freedom is not something that most people are going to be inclined towards or be receptive to. Whether this problem is in the nature of things or determined by the social environment seems to be at issue. On this point, Plato and Descartes

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[19] Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, "Meditation I," *The Essential Descartes*, ed. Margaret Wilson (New York: Mentor, 1969) 169-70. See James L. Ford, "Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema"(12), *The Journal of Religion and Film* 4 (2000), http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/thematrix.htm. Gerald J. Erion and Barry Smith note the parallel to Hilary Putnam's brain in a vat scenario (Erion and Smith,

would seem to stand against the authors of *The Matrix*. Here again the film serves as a wonderful portal into another of the most profound philosophical questions: do human beings naturally want to know the truth? Or, as Descartes suggests, do we not often want to be deceived? The truth in this matter has some rather profound political implications.[20]

When Neo is brought to meet Morpheus for the first time, Morpheus explains that they have been looking for each other:

> You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain. But you feel it. 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.

In the allegory of the cave, the hands of those in the cave are *not* bound, yet few seem able to use their hands to free themselves and escape the cave. Does everyone share Neo's experience of a splinter in the mind—a longing to know the truth? Plato and the Wachowski brothers seem to agree that only the few experience the nagging feeling that there is something not quite right with the orthodox set of opinions and beliefs they have been brought up with. Morpheus offers Neo the chance to find out what the Matrix is:

Does everyone long for the truth, or only the few?

> You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes . . . . Remember, all I'm offering is the truth, nothing more . . . .

The pill will disrupt the computer program of the Matrix, and allow for Neo's escape into the real world. This time Neo does not hesitate to take the plunge. The red pill allows Morpheus and the others to free Neo from the Matrix, and finally gives Neo the opportunity to be able to distinguish appearance from reality.

Neo's education takes most of the film, and in this way *The Matrix* raises the question of how someone is educated. The choice of

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"Skepticism, Morality, and The Matrix," *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 21-22). See Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981).

[20] Consider Machiavelli's discussion of this question in Chapter 17 of *The Prince*, or Nietzsche's "Preface" and Aphorism #1 in *Beyond Good and Evil*. The film is an excellent avenue for raising the question of whether human beings naturally desire to know the truth.

the red pill merely begins the journey; as Morpheus observes, the truth is not something you can be told. Students often seem to hope that being in class, taking notes, and reading the books will be sufficient for acquiring a liberal education. *The Matrix* provides a wonderful analogy for this problem. Once Neo has been told what the Matrix is, it should be possible for him to manipulate the program; that is, like a dreamer who is aware that he is dreaming, Neo should be able to do apparently crazy or impossible things.[21] The test of this awareness for the rebels is conducted using the "jump program," which duplicates some aspects of the virtual reality Matrix. Each newcomer must undergo the trial of having to make an incredible rooftop leap spanning the distance between two skyscrapers. In reality, such a feat is humanly impossible. The trial serves to test each person's liberation from the belief that the Matrix is real. No one, it turns out, is capable of making the jump the first time. Although each has been told what the Matrix is, no one passes the test on the first try because he or she, presumably like the others before, continues to rely on the apparent evidence of the senses. The wind whipping across the top of the building, the smallness of things in the distance far below, unnerve Neo, and, consequently, he fails to manipulate the reality of the program as one might manipulate a dream. Morpheus' exhortation for Neo to free his mind is not enough: one cannot simply be told the truth, nor can one simply will liberation.

When Neo is taken to meet the Oracle, he meets children who have achieved a level of "awakeness" that allows them to manipulate objects in a way that disregards the rules of the Matrix reality: as one child practising spoon bending reminds Neo, "There is no spoon." The ability seems to come more easily to children than to adults. Although Morpheus, Trinity, and the others have mastered gravity-defeating physical feats, none of them has the ability to defeat the agents, the sentient programs that patrol the Matrix in human form. Even Morpheus, whose name suggests a mastery of

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[21] In Wonderland, Alice meets the Cheshire Cat who can appear, disappear, and partially appear at will and who tells her, "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad" (Carroll, 89). Martin Gardner, editor of *The Annotated Alice*, quotes a diary entry by Carroll: "Query: when we are dreaming and . . . have a dim consciousness of the fact and try to wake, do we not say and do things which in waking life would be insane? May we not then sometimes define insanity as an inability to distinguish which is the waking and which is the sleeping life?" (90, n. 8).

shape-changing, is captured, tortured, and nearly killed by these agents. Although he can tell Neo that the Matrix is not real, "it is all in your mind," he is unable to believe this sufficiently himself to escape the agents on his own. It is Neo, at the conclusion of the film, who demonstrates the full potential of such knowledge as he dives into and destroys Agent Smith from the inside. Even so, it is a near thing, and it is Trinity, back on the *Nebuchadnezzar* with Neo's real body, who must first bring him back from death.

The long, often painful, process of education which Neo must undergo provides an opportunity to discuss assumptions about how one is educated. For some it may raise the question of whether a liberal education is even desirable, an issue raised explicitly by the traitor in the rebel band whose actions contrast markedly with Neo's. Cypher, the traitor, at one point says to Neo: "I know what you're thinking, because right now I'm thinking the same thing. Actually, I've been thinking it ever since I got here. Why, oh why didn't I take the blue pill . . . ." Subsequently he betrays the group in return for a promise that he will be returned to one of the pods with no memory of what has happened, and thus be able to live out his years in the more pleasant reality of the virtual world. He inserts himself into the virtual reality world of the Matrix in order to effect his betrayal. In conversation with one of the predatory agents, Cypher makes his case:

> 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.[22]

One intriguing aspect of using this film to raise philosophical questions is the extent to which students sympathise with, and at times even agree with, Cypher. Some defend his actions; some even say that is what they would do. The film raises one of the most profound questions about being human: why do we want to know the truth?

The question cannot but bring to mind John Stuart Mill's famous dictum from his essay *Utilitarianism*: "It is better to be a hu-

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[22] Here the teacher might usefully have students read Thomas Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College." The famous "ignorance is bliss" comes from this poem. Contemplating Gray's account of the relationship between happiness and knowledge allows for a fruitful comparison with the account implicit in the film, as well as the views put forward by Plato and J. S. Mill. See Mark Lilla, "Ignorance and Bliss," *Wilson Quarterly* 25:3 (Summer, 2001): 64-75.

man being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." Mill argues that human beings will not trade their conscious existence for the happy but sub-human life of an animal. For there is a qualitative distinction between the pleasures. If we have experience of both the lower and higher pleasures, we will choose those of superior quality rather than mere quantity.

> Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. Few human beings would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs . . . . A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy . . . . he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence.[23]

Illusion is often preferred to reality.

The film raises Mill's point precisely and suggests that human beings are indeed quite capable of wishing they could sink into a lower, happier grade of existence. In *The Matrix*, Cypher willingly chooses the illusion of a steak over real food because it is easier and apparently more pleasant. The idea that human beings might prefer a sort of dream world of virtual reality is perhaps not so unthinkable if one reflects upon his or her own experience. Who has not awakened with the last wisps of a pleasant dream still lingering in their mind, and then attempted to fall back asleep so that they might re-enter that dream world? This common human experience would seem to be the one that defines and dominates Cypher's life.

Why, then, does Cypher turn Judas in this situation? Why do human beings turn traitors? Cypher seems to lack courage, the courage to face reality. His anger seems to grow out of his deep resentment that reality is not as pleasant as his former illusory life. If pleasure is the standard of what is good, the real world is not as good as the dream world of the Matrix. The illusion is a pleasant illusion. In addition, there is Cypher's deep resentment at having

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[23] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 8-9. See P. Chad Barnett, "Reviving Cyberpunk," 371. See also Erion and Smith, 25-27, and Jennifer L. McMahon, "Popping a Bitter Pill: Existential Authenticity in *The Matrix* and *Nausea*," *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 166-177.

to take orders from Morpheus: "All I do is what he tells me to do. If I had to choose between that and the Matrix, I choose the Matrix." Freedom in Cypher's view is not being free from ignorance and delusion; it is being free to do what you want, and hence free from all responsibilities and restraints. Is it true that many, perhaps even most, human beings will not choose a pleasant delusion over a less pleasant reality?

Characters and Myth

Cypher's choices, his willingness to betray his friends and his leader, make him representative of a useful character type for class discussion. Indeed, another set of important and useful images the film can provide is the characters themselves. As teachers, we are familiar with the phenomenon of the loss of a common stock of characters which has come with the loss of commonly shared stories. As Allan Bloom puts it in *The Closing of the American Mind*: "students today have nothing like the Dickens who gave so many of us the unforgettable Pecksniffs, Micawbers, Pips, with which we sharpened our vision, allowing us some subtlety in our distinction of human types."[24] Characters who have served as reliable allusions and analogies for centuries—the angry Achilles, the doubting Thomas, the traitorous Judas, to name a few—can no longer be assumed to be widely recognizable. Popular culture does, of course, provide shared points of reference: at the moment, *The Simpsons* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be helpful, but the currency of such references tends to be fleeting in comparison to the examples above (try asking your students about the depiction of the cold war in *Get Smart*). In addition, though, what students are often missing or do not share on a wide basis within any particular class are the truly memorable, subtle characters who are at once recognizable types and yet are created with a degree of particularity that invites the reader to reflect on individual traits, the personal and historical circumstances of the characters, and individual choices and actions without losing sight of the general category.[25]

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[24] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 67-68.

[25] The domineering father figure of Shakespeare's Lear or the romantic heroine of Austen's Elizabeth would seem to have few contemporary equivalents.

In *The Matrix*, the Wachowski brothers use allusions to create for the audience a sense of their characters as more than mere fictional individuals in something that is "just a story." Through allusion, their characters evoke mythic character types; for example, Neo's prophesied role as the "One" is clearly a parallel to a messianic figure. At the same time, the brothers resist the narrower abstraction of allegory. Neo does not simply "stand for" such a figure.

The film's allusions are inverted in unexpected ways.

An example of how this works in the film is apparent in its evocation of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. In the film, humanity is captive in the Matrix, and Neo will presumably be the one to lead them out of the captivity. So, the last free human city is named Zion. *The Matrix*, however, resists interpretation as straightforward allegory: the rebel ship, the *Nebuchadnezzar*, is named after the King of Babylon who successfully attacked Jerusalem and enslaved the Jews. The cluster of allusions are inverted in an unexpected way (perhaps another Carrollian influence). Not only are allusions used in unexpected ways, but they are also multi-layered. Neo's character is a good example of the play of allusions, since in addition to his parallels to a Judeo-Christian messianic figure, he is also a doubter, a quest hero, and a student of Eastern physical and mental disciplines.

Great enduring character types combine abstraction and particularity.

Audience fascination with the character types is related to the power of myths. We would not argue that the Wachowski brothers are attempting to create a myth; they are, through allusion, connecting their characters to myth. C. S. Lewis has observed that it is in "the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction."[26] This connecting of abstraction and particularity is evident in great, enduring character types. "Myth," Lewis suggests, "is the isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with that vast continent we really belong to." Myth, to shift the analogy, is the connecting passage between the mental constructs of thought and the world of the real. Evoking the power of myth is particularly fitting in a work where the main character struggles to connect thought with reality, truth with experience.

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[26] C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics,* ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), 66.

Liberal Education as the Appreciation of Culture

Our experience in teaching confirms that the reason why students are initially interested in something will not, in most cases, be the reason why they continue to be interested. This is as it should be, for liberal education involves a movement of the mind. So one of the most useful pedagogical strategies is to turn the genetic fallacy—that is, the fallacy of believing that the reason a thing comes into existence is the reason why it continues in existence—to the purpose of liberal education. Studying *The Matrix*, students begin with one set of interests, but we can introduce them to more profound ideas that they quickly find intriguing. A student's interest in a film like *The Matrix* begins in one place but moves to another.

Involved in this movement is a growing appreciation for the depth of some works of popular culture, and a recognition of the lack of depth of much of it. It is often the case that a keen pleasure is derived from the insight that there is sometimes more to popular culture than meets the eye. Liberal education can lead to such appreciation: appreciation of the densely allusive character of *The Matrix* is a perfect example. And having seen this at work in one case, students begin to look for it in others. Things are often not, students find, as they first appear. Of course, this will mean that things also can be less than they appear.

While the study of popular culture has developed into a full-fledged academic field, and the ability to apply ever more sophisticated analysis to popular culture has grown, the works of popular culture themselves retain a pedagogical usefulness outside or alongside this arena, which teachers should not be chary of claiming. In "The Art in the Popular," for instance, Paul Cantor proposes a "process beginning with popular culture and attempting to ascend from it to higher levels of reflection."[27] He goes on to argue that this method already exists:

> I am offering a Socratic approach to popular culture as an alternative to cultural studies as it is usually practiced . . . . Cultural studies generally takes a historicist approach to artistic activity and philosophic thought. In its view, all art and thought are historically determined; no artist or thinker is free of the biases and limited premises of the historical period in which he or she lives. Plato's parable of the cave in the *Republic* is, of course, the most

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[27] Cantor, "The Art in the Popular," 28.

vivid image ever invented of this kind of imprisonment within a limited worldview. But Plato's image allows for the possibility of a sun outside the cave and for the perennial human ability to ascend from the cave to view it . . . . Beginning with the images human beings create for themselves in the cave of their civic existence, philosophers such as Socrates begin an ascent from conventional opinion to true knowledge. Hence, the importance for Socrates of poetry and, more broadly, of popular culture as we understand it.[28]

As Cantor suggests, approaching popular culture to see what it can teach us and using it as a starting point to something more is both a profitable way to learn from a film like *The Matrix* and a way to reflect on the experience of the film's protagonist.

To develop a critical perspective, students must learn to weigh and compare ideas.

To develop a critical perspective on popular culture and on their own time, students need to acquire knowledge of culture, popular and otherwise, and learn to compare and weigh ideas. They must continually ask what stands up to reasonable examination and what does not? Which books or films are nothing more than blue pills returning us to what we know, and which are actually the red ones showing us how deep the rabbit hole goes? The achievement of this critical perspective is not easy. As *The Matrix* so admirably demonstrates, Neo's struggle to perceive his world as it really is and not as it seems is a painful, often unpleasant, and potentially dangerous journey. Similarly, the ascent from the cave to the light—that is, the process of a liberal and liberating education—is difficult. "For surely all great things carry with them the risk of a fall, and, really as the saying goes, fine things are hard."[29]

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[28] Cantor, "The Art in the Popular," 38.
[29] Plato, *Republic*, 497d.