

The Curiosity of Humanity

By Michael Rodriguez

Socrates: I would like to explore an idea today that is similar to the one we talked of earlier, of the Cave. Do you remember it?

Glaucon: I believe so. The people were chained to rocks for all of their natural lives, staring at a wall. Above them there was a fire, and in front of that fire were objects, whose shadows were cast upon the wall below. The people were given the words of the objects and they eventually came to associate them with the shadows of those objects. Since they could not turn to see the actual objects they could only assume that what they were seeing were the real objects. However, once they were brought out of the cave into the sunlight, and their eyes had adjusted to the brightness, they learned the true nature of the objects they had seen inside of the Cave.

S: Very good. I would like to work off of this image. Let us imagine a world very similar to that one. Let us call it the Matrix. Within the Matrix the people are chained as before, however the chains are not physical, but within the mind itself. Instead of seeing shadows on a wall, the people have their minds unlocked and images of the world are placed directly into them. The electrical impulses are placed into their brains so that they interpret exactly what they think they are seeing into a reality that they can feel and taste and touch. Unlike the previous example of the Cave, the objects the prisoners experience are not shadows of objects upon a wall, but replications of them that are constructed to mirror those in the real world. Imagine the real world is cold, dark, and many times less

pleasant than the Matrix world. While outside there is a constant threat of attack, for the freed humans are at war with the machina. Though freed from the invisible bonds of the false world, the world outside is more confined and limited than the slavery by the presence of the machina and the unpleasantness of life there.

G: This is a more upsetting picture than the other. It seems that all options are in some way flawed. You are either an unknowing and happy slave, or a free and unhappy soldier.

S: If both are flawed then why does it matter if you are in the Real world or the False one? If you never knew that you were in a false world wouldn't the two worlds, for the purposes of this argument, be the same? If there is some sort of difference, and why would the difference matter?

G: I am not sure. I cannot rationalize it, but I feel that living in a false world, even if I could never realize it, is somehow intrinsically different from living in a real one. I mean, you said it yourself, one is FALSE and the other is REAL. Why would we feel the need to question if there is a difference if there isn't one? The question would be irrelevant if there was not a difference.

S: Exactly Glaucon. The purpose of this conversation is to illuminate the idea that the ultimate Good, the Form of Justice, Righteousness, and Purity, is the act of exploring and striving to obtain the ultimate Truth, the ultimate Reality.

G: I am not sure I understand what you mean by that.

S: Then let us delve deeper into the implications of our Matrix world scenario. How are the two worlds different, the Matrix and the Real world?

G: As you said, one is real and the other is not.

S: What is real?

G: I am not sure I understand.

S: How do you define reality? If reality is just an interpretation of perceptions, then the two worlds are really the same, except that we know that one is generated by machines, while the other is generated from unknown origins. Is it more real because cannot perceive where it comes from?

G: That seems wrong. Maybe they are, for our purposes, the same thing. They are both real, simply different levels of reality.

S: Suppose this: you have only known one reality for all of your life, the reality of the Matrix. Would you ever be able to tell the difference?

G: It seems not.

S: Why not?

G: Well, the only way we have to judge the world is through our perceptions, and our perceptions are being manipulated. Our reality would be determined by “electrical signals interpreted by the brain” (Morpheus, Scene 12: The Real World). If the Matrix reality is the false one, then our perceptions within that reality are false.

S: Is there another way to judge if a world is false?

G: Not so far as I can tell.

S: Then why do you believe that there must be a difference between a false world and a real one? If you cannot judge a difference using your perceptions, and you only have your perceptions to judge with, then how can you say that there IS a difference?

G: I believe that there is a difference.

S: So then you might say that belief in an ultimate Truth is some part of your mind rebelling against this false reality. Believing that something is true is the first part in trying to discern if it is true, in the same way that believing that something is false is the first part in trying to discern its falsehood.

G: That doesn't make sense to me. When I want to discern if something is true then I will question it, not believe in it.

S: If I were to tell you that you could bend a spoon with your mind, if only you realized that the spoon was part of the false reality, would you think I was telling the truth? (There Is No Spoon, Scene 21)

G: No.

S: So you believe the statement to be false, and therefore would try to discern the truth through questioning. Questioning is the way to determine that something is false. If you wanted to see if what I said were true, then you would believe in it, and you would try to bend the spoon with your mind.

G: I see the difference now.

S: Someone within the Matrix might find that they feel for some reason that something is false around them. They might not understand it, but some part of them rebels against the falsehood of the world around them, some part of them understands that they are enslaved. Someone might express his or her inner rebellion with Faith in a church. They would believe that there is something more than the world that surrounds them, but don't have the will to act upon those beliefs. This is the passive method of rebellion, the peaceful congregation. Others might go so far as to rebel against authority within the system. For example, one that is intimate in the understanding of the

constructed machina within the Matrix might glean some measure of understanding through his work. They might feel the need to use their skills to gain more understanding, and to try and bring down the imagined authority within the Matrix.<sup>†</sup> Imagine that you, Glaucon, are living in the Matrix right now. Imagine that you have received a message. You are told to go to a location, someplace obscene and loud, like a brothel or a tavern, where many are dressed in forms of bondage. It is a place of chaotic dancing and hellish forms, a place that screams of rebellion against something that none there can understand, just as you do not understand. It is here that those that cannot accept the bonds of their invisible slavery go and reenact that bondage through their unconscious. Once there, a woman approaches you, and calls you by name. She tells you that it was the question that drives us, the question that brought you to that place. Do you know what that question is Glaucon? (Scene 4: The Question)

G: What is the Matrix?

S: Why do you ask this question?

G: Because I wish to gain understanding of the Matrix.

S: Why do we ask questions?

G: So that we may gain a further understanding of the world as we know it, and so that we may determine falsehoods, as you mentioned earlier.

S: Would you say that questioning is a way in which we may compare our beliefs against our perceptions?

G: Yes.

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<sup>†</sup> Neo does just this as a computer hacker.

S: That is the nature of questions, Glaucon. They are the paths used to discern the truth from the world around us. But even with questioning the world as we see it, we can still never really be sure that the reality we are in is the Real, the ultimate True Reality. The only thing that is knowable about a world is that it is a false one, and that it is only proven by ascending to a higher reality.

G: But Socrates, what then is the purpose of ascending if you can never know that the reality you are in is the True?

S: Because the newer reality will be closer to the Truth. Though we must first ask, does it really matter if you are that much closer to the Truth?

G: I am not sure. This is something that has been confusing me. If the reality I am in seems real enough to me, and a higher reality is unpleasant, why should I want to leave? I think that simply curiosity would not be enough to keep me.

S: What did you have for lunch today?

G: A steak.

S: How did it taste?

G: Juicy and delicious.

S: And if you were in the Matrix and knew that it didn't exist? How would it taste?

G: I would know that the steak doesn't exist, but the Matrix would be telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious... in this case ignorance is bliss, is it not Socrates?

(Scene 19: Dealing for Bliss) I would prefer not to know that the steak doesn't exist. And if I didn't know that the steak was false, wouldn't it just seem real to me? Isn't it real to

me? “Would it really make [my] life any better if [I] were *really* eating steak? Is it really eating steak that we value, or just the *experience* of eating steak?” (Pryor 50).

S: There is the problem with your argument. Just because two things seem the same doesn't make them the same. This is a question of reference. Imagine that you are in a world that does not have steak. Let us say that you are given through the mental image of a steak, and the words in a language that you do not know, such as one from the Far East, to describe that steak. You have both of these things, and yet you do not understand the words, nor know what steak is. When within the Matrix you are referring not to a steak, but to a mental image of a steak, created by the Matrix world. You have the words, the smell, the taste, the feel, and the image of the steak, and yet you do not know what steak is in its true form (Putnam 317). Let us go through another example so I may show you what I mean. If you have a turtle and you make an exact copy of that turtle, are those turtles the same?

G: I would think not.

S: If you have a turtle and a reflection of that turtle, are they the same?

G: No, one is a reflection.

S: And if you didn't know which one was the reflection, are they the same turtle then?

G: No, I simply don't know which is real.

S: And if you are eating a steak, and you do not know if it is reflection or real, are you eating the same steak?

G No. One is real and the other is not. But why does that matter? Why can I not eat my steak and be happy with it as a steak?

S: Because you are not eating a steak. Think of the turtle and the reflection. You do not know which is real, and so you reach out to touch the reflection turtle. Can you touch it?

G: No.

Let us say that there is a cleverly designed set of mirrors that allows you to “see” yourself reaching out to touch the turtle, and a false turtle is placed under your hands, so that you may “feel” the turtle. Can you touch the reflection turtle?

G: Still no.

S: Can you eat the reflection steak?

G: It would seem not.

S: Was that steak juicy and delicious, or were you given a false experience that it was juicy and delicious?

G: I did not eat it, so it must not have been juicy and delicious.

S: How did we come to this conclusion? What methods did we use to gain this understanding?

G: You had a belief that you thought was true, and I thought false. I questioned it as though it was a falsehood, and you questioned my false beliefs and proved them as falsehoods.

S: And why did we feel the need to go through this whole process?

G: I am not sure. Curiosity?

S: Yes, my good Glaucon. It was curiosity that drove us. It is curiosity that makes us persons, for curiosity is derived from rational thought. Imagine a being that has no

capability for curiosity. Is that being a person, or is it an inanimate object, like a spoon or a steak?

G: It is most certainly not a person.

S: And curiosity is the desire to find the truth, to see past illusions, and to find what is real, is it not?

G: That is an apt definition.

S: Would you agree that personhood and humanity is something that we desire? Would you rather be a rock, a steak, or a spoon than a living, breathing, thinking, feeling curious being?

G: Of course not. Personhood is most certainly desirable.

S: So to us, personhood is a good thing.

G: Yes.

S: Curiosity is the search for truth, it makes us persons, and personhood is the highest aspiration that one can have. Therefore to strive for truth, to try and see past illusion, to look for the real is Good, and it must be wrong to want to live within the Matrix when you have the chance to search for freedom. Some would suggest that it is because “most of us would like humans to be in charge of our own destiny. We don’t want our long-term efforts to be futile. We don’t want to be living out someone else’s plan for our lives” (Pryor 60). While this is certainly true, it is not the reason that I am suggesting that the Matrix is bad. I say that it is not the result that is important but rather the search itself that is Good. Even if the Matrix was not ruled by evil machina, not a form of slavery, it would still be the path of Righteousness to try and free your mind from it, to ascend the hierarchy of realities in search of the Truth. Even though it might be

easier or more pleasant than the real world, it is still a false world with false experiences, and so it is the path of Purity and Justice to try and find the Truth. Our personhood, our curiosity demands it.

## Works Cited

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