In Defense of Truth:
Skepticism, Morality, and *The Matrix*

Gerald J. Erion and Barry Smith

Most of us think that the world exists pretty much as it looks and sounds and feels to us. It *seems* to you that you are presently seated in a chair, reading this book, so you probably also *believe* it; you hold it to be true that you are sitting there, in the chair, reading. That it rarely occurs to you to articulate this sort of thought is irrelevant. All that matters is that, once pointed out, it seems obviously, perhaps trivially, true. Who would ever dare to question it?

But Thomas Anderson, likewise, believes himself to be a tax-paying, landlady-helping program writer for a respectable software company. (Of course, he also believes in his "other life" of criminal activity conducted under the hacker alias 'Neo,' but this life is kept hidden only from the authorities, and not from Anderson himself.) In this sense, Anderson's beliefs about reality are like yours and mine, and as such they explain why it is so painful for him to learn that the world he thinks he lives in, the world as it appears to him every day, is not at all real. Instead, the comfortable realm in which Anderson seems to go about his ordinary life is in fact a vast, deliberate deception produced in his brain by a system of intelligent computers that grows, cultivates, and harvests humans as a renewable energy source.

As Morpheus explains to Neo, this illusory world, this "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, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.

Anderson and his contemporaries are fooled into thinking that they are out in the world reading books, watching football games, and engaging in other such activities. The truth of the matter is that they spend their whole lives confined to small containers that collect and distribute their bio-electrical energy to computerized slave-masters.

When Neo first learns of this state of affairs, he becomes physically sick, and he tries to return to his previous (though artificial) life in the matrix. Neo's crewmate Cypher finds the situation so awful that he agrees to betray Morpheus in exchange for a rich and important (though, again, artificial) life based upon the lies of the matrix. "Ignorance is bliss," Cypher declares, as he completes his deal with Agent Smith (no relation). But even as these fictional scenarios horrify us, they can also provoke deep philosophical questions. Some scholars have even claimed that we might ourselves be caught up in a *Matrix*-like world of unrelenting illusion. Our aim here is to examine such claims in the spirit of Western thinkers like René Descartes. That is, we shall examine the hypothesis that we ourselves might now be living inside a matrix. In the end, we shall demonstrate that this idea is based upon a fundamental error, and that it represents at best an attitude of metaphysical rebellion. We shall also, in a concluding section,

examine the morality of Cypher's choice to return to the matrix, arguing that his mistaken moral principles lead him to flawed judgments about serious ethical issues.

Why You Might Be in a Matrix: René Descartes and the Malicious Demon
In philosophy, the hypothesis that the world we see, hear, and feel might be an illusion is advanced by defenders of the position known as *skepticism*. Skeptics argue that we cannot know with certainty that the external world exists. Hence, they maintain that it is possible to doubt our knowledge of the external world, much as the main characters in *The Matrix* come to doubt the everyday world they seem to live in.

Skeptical hypotheses are especially attractive to two groups of people. First are adolescents, whose teen-aged rebellion against the easy certainties of parental authority sometimes takes a metaphysical form that leads them to declare that "Nothing is what it seems!" or that "I alone know what reality is like!"

Second, and more importantly, are philosophers, who themselves divide into two groups. To the first group belong philosophers who have not outgrown their metaphysically rebellious phase, and who thus find explorations of absurd and obviously false hypotheses exciting or glamorous. Philosophers in this first category may even profess to find the adolescent skeptics' slogans plausible. But it is the second group of philosophers which is of most importance for us here. This second group comprises those, like Descartes, who see *Matrix*-like scenarios as useful tools for exploring fundamental questions about knowledge and reality.

In his classic *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes presents an influential skeptical argument designed not to prove that skepticism is true, but to establish a solid foundation for science. To accomplish this task, Descartes opens the *Meditations* by declaring his intention to suspend every one of his beliefs that he can find the slightest reason to doubt. Only those beliefs that are *absolutely certain*, in the strongest sense of the term, will survive Descartes' test, and only such beliefs, he holds, can serve as truly reliable foundations for science. Thus, Descartes' radical doubt is *methodological* in the sense that it is designed to serve an intellectual purpose; it is unlikely that Descartes would in fact deny all of the beliefs he suspends at this stage of his project. Their suspension is temporary only; it is a matter of heuristics.

First to go in this belief-suspension process are the beliefs that Descartes had formed on the basis of sensation.[1] We justify many of our opinions with information collected through our senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. For instance, we believe that our roommate Jon has arrived home from school if we see him walk up the driveway, and we believe that he has locked himself out yet again when we hear him fumbling with the door. However, as Descartes notes, "From time to time I have found that the senses deceive." This is especially true of our sensations in relation to very small or distant objects, but it also holds of other sorts of objects. The figure we take to be Jon could turn out to be a burglar; the fumbling could be the burglar's attempt to break into the house. Because our senses sometimes deceive us, then, many of the beliefs that we justify on the basis of sensory evidence do not meet Descartes' high standard, and so he puts them out of action.

Continuing this exercise, Descartes then suggests that even such relatively uncontroversial beliefs as that you are sitting in a chair and reading this book could be subject to doubt. Of course, such beliefs seem to be more trustworthy than your beliefs about Jon and about whatever he is doing on the porch. However, Descartes points out that we often make mistakes about

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[1] René Descartes (1985) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. and ed. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), p. 12.

precisely these kinds of things when we *dream*. When you are dreaming, it may seem to you that you are sitting in your chair, reading this book, when in fact you are fast asleep in your bed.[2] We are unable to distinguish waking experiences from experiences of the sort we appear to have in dreams until after we awake, a notion that Morpheus affirms as he asks:

> Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?

Descartes himself concludes on the basis of his dream argument that sense experience is an unreliable justification mechanism, and so he suspends *all* beliefs he has formed on the basis of sensory evidence.

Descartes then carries his attack upon his own beliefs still further. While the dream argument gives us reason to doubt our opinions about the physical world, it seems to leave, for example, beliefs about numbers or geometrical figures unscathed. As Descartes writes, "Whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides."[3] However, Descartes concludes his first *Meditation* by considering the following still more radical thought experiment. Suppose, he says, that a "malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me."[4] Such a creature, Descartes argues, could easily lead us to mistaken conclusions about the sum of two and three or the number of sides to a square. This malicious demon could even more easily mislead us into thinking that there is a physical world external to ourselves, when in fact "[T]he sky, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare [our] judgment."[5] Thus, Descartes concludes, "I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things."[6] Having read Descartes' first *Meditation*, then, it is difficult to imagine how we could show that our lives are not just grand deceptions created by a malicious demon. How could we ever refute the skeptical arguments advanced by Descartes?

Those who have watched *The Matrix* might surely, against this background, have reason to question whether we could ever rule out the possibility that the meaningful lives we think we lead are in fact a matter of deceptions implanted in our brains by intelligent computer systems.

Why You Might Be in a Matrix, Continued: Peter Unger's Evil Scientist and Hilary Putnam's Brain in a Vat

In a contemporary contribution to the debate on skepticism, Peter Unger -- himself a defender of the skeptical position -- suggests the possibility that we are all duped not by an evil demon, but by an evil *scientist*.[7] In Unger's scenario, presented in his 1975 book *Ignorance*, the common belief that there are chairs, books, and other similar objects in the world around us is simply an elaborate deception stimulated in our brains by an evil scientist, a super-neurologist who uses a computer to generate electrical impulses that are then transmitted to electrodes fastened to the relevant parts of our central nervous systems. Using these impulses to stimulate our brains, the

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[2] *Ibid*., pp. 12-13.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 14.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[5] *Ibid*.
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Peter Unger (1975) *Ignorance* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon), pp. 7-8.

scientist deceives us into thinking that there are chairs and books, even though there are no such things in the world. Such a scenario has, Unger claims, the following implication; "No one *can* ever *know* [i.e., with absolute certainty] that there is *no* evil scientist who is, by means of electrodes, deceiving him into falsely believing there to be rocks," and therefore, *nobody can know that there are rocks*.[8] Likewise, you cannot know that you are in your chair, reading this book, for you can never know with absolute certainty that you are not subject to the manipulation of an evil neurologist, or for that matter, the manipulation of an evil, *Matrix*-like computer system.

Hilary Putnam pushes this skeptical science-fiction scenario even further in his 1981 volume *Reason, Truth, and History*. In Putnam's version of the argument, an evil scientist deceives us not just about rocks, but about *everything* we think we perceive through the senses.[9] Putnam begins by asking us to imagine that our brains have been surgically separated from the rest of our bodies and placed in vats filled with brain-nourishing chemicals. A powerful computer then sends electrical impulses into our brains, giving rise, for instance, to the illusion that we are sitting in chairs, reading books, playing tennis, and so forth. All the while, though, our disembodied brains are actually floating around in vats in the evil scientist's laboratory.

Putnam presupposes that the computer program is sophisticated enough to generate proper feedback for the "actions" our brains attempt to initiate. For instance, should your brain try to rouse your body from your chair to fetch a snack, the computer could provide the appropriate impulses needed to convince you that you had in fact risen from your chair and carried yourself into the kitchen. But again, despite the appearance of eating, you would through all of these experiences remain a disembodied brain in a vat.

Having laid out this curious scenario, which is strikingly similar to the situation facing most humans in *The Matrix*, Putnam then poses the skeptic's question: "How do you know you aren't in this predicament?"[10] Without an answer to this question, the skepticism inspired by Descartes' original arguments remains like a sword of Damocles hanging over our heads.

Relief From the Matrix: Arguing Against Skepticism
Fortunately, non-skeptical philosophers have come up with a number of responses to the troubling questions about knowledge and reality raised by Descartes, Unger, Putnam, and *The Matrix*. First, it is important to note that the skeptic's scenario is a mere *possibility*, and a very unlikely one at that. The fact that we take the trouble to follow Descartes in his exercise of systematic doubt is due in large part to its presentation in a special philosophical context: the context of Descartes' own quest for perfect knowledge, knowledge of the sort that would live up to the highest ideals of science. Remember that, to Descartes, knowledge requires *absolute certainty*; we cannot be absolutely certain that an evil genius (or an evil computer system) is not deceiving us during sensation, so, Descartes argues, we cannot use sensation to justify our claims to knowledge.

A maximally strict standard for knowledge of this sort is perfectly appropriate in philosophical contexts where we are examining arguments for and against skepticism. In the ordinary contexts of everyday life, however, they are much too strict. For instance, if Jon asks

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[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Hilary Putnam (1981) *Reason, Truth, and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 5-8. Though Putnam himself does not use this scenario to argue in favor of skepticism, his work has made a powerful contribution to such discussions.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

you about tomorrow's weather forecast and you respond with questions like "Does weather really exist?" or "Does time really exist?" or "What is tomorrow?", then Jon would, rightly, think that you had gone mad. This is because different standards for what properly counts as knowledge obtain in different contexts.[11] In some philosophical contexts, we quite correctly impose very strict standards for knowledge. In everyday contexts, though, we equally correctly impose just those normal standards with which we are all familiar, and which are satisfied by the vast collections of commonsensical knowledge that we all share. In everyday contexts, then, we do indeed have knowledge of where we are sitting, of what we are doing, of current local weather conditions, and of the results of baseball games.

Thus, you do indeed *know* (in the fullest sense of the term) many things about yourself and the world around you; your beliefs about these things are both true and thoroughly justified through your everyday experiences. You *know*, for instance, that you are not currently dreaming. You know that Descartes (like Elvis) is dead. And you know that *The Matrix* is just a film. In addition, modern science provides massive amounts of additional, no less genuine knowledge -- that electrons are smaller than asteroids, that fish are not mammals, that the moon is not made of green (or any other type of) cheese, and so on.[12] But if we do indeed possess these great and ever-growing stores of commonsensical and scientific knowledge, then, it follows that we must reject Descartes' claim that knowledge always requires that very special sort of (philosophical) certainty that he demands in the specific context of his discussion of skepticism.[13]

Descartes' fundamental epistemological principle to the effect that only knowledge marked by certainty is genuine knowledge has, moreover, problems of its own. Thus it seems to be self-defeating, in the sense that its supposed truth would entail that it could not be known. As Theodore Schick, Jr. and Lewis Vaughn point out, "unless [skeptics] are *certain* that knowledge requires certainty, they can't *know* that it does" (emphasis added).[14] But in light of our previously noted doubts about Descartes' principle, this principle begins to seem much less than certain. Indeed, our commonsensical and scientific beliefs are at least as dependable, if not more so, than Descartes' principle. It was through acceptance of these beliefs, after all, that we were able to trust the evidence of our senses when reading Descartes' own writings. Thus, we have good reason to doubt his claim that knowledge requires certainty.

We should keep in mind, too, another anti-skeptical argument advanced by the philosopher Bernard Williams.[15] Williams soothes our fears of being locked in a perpetual *Matrix*-like dream-prison by pointing out that the fact that we can make a distinction between dreams and waking experiences itself presupposes that we are aware of both types of experience and of the difference between them. We can talk sensibly about the difference between the two only because there *is* a difference between them, a difference that we are aware of. As Williams

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[11] See David Lewis (1996) "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74, pp. 549-567.

[12] This is not to deny the important role played by the doctrine of *fallibilism* in the advancement of science; that is, by the view that scientific theories must be subject to consistent testing against reality itself. Even evolutionary biologists remain open to the possibility that new evidence could be gathered to prove the theory of evolution mistaken; the fervor with which they attack such alternative theories as creationism is grounded, however, not in anti-religious bigotry, but in the tremendous amount of high-quality evidence that supports evolution. See, for instance, Theodore Schick and Lewis Vaughn (1995) *How To Think About Weird Things* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield), pp. 211-219, for a lucid discussion of this issue.

[13] David Nixon raises a similar point in his contribution to this volume.

[14] Schick and Vaughn, p. 100.

[15] Bernard Williams (1978) *Descartes* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press).

writes, it is only "from the perspective of waking [that] we can explain dreaming."[16] Thus, we can only make sense of the distinction between waking and dreaming itself if *we really are awake sometimes*, and since we *can* distinguish the two kinds of experience, it follows that there can be no serious reason to worry that our lives might be made up entirely of dream sequences that never end.

So, philosophy provides a number of tools for relieving the metaphysical uncertainty that a thoughtful viewing of *The Matrix* might at first provoke. Since our knowledge -- of where we are sitting, of what we are doing, of what the world around us is like -- does not require philosophical certainty, but only those sorts of strong, context-appropriate justifications which we employ for everyday and scientific purposes, it follows that we can use the good reasons we have for believing in the external world to justify our claims to knowledge not only about the existence of this world, but also about its nature and constitution. As Martin Gardner puts it:

> The hypothesis that there is an external world ... is so obviously useful and so strongly confirmed by experience down through the ages that we can say without exaggerating that it is better con-firmed than any other empirical hypothesis. So useful is the posit that it is almost impossible for anyone except a madman or a metaphysician to comprehend a reason for doubting it.[17]

Morality and the Matrix: Cypher's Mistake

In the grips of the sort of skeptical doubt inspired by Descartes and *The Matrix*, we might be able to empathize with Cypher as he cuts his despicable deal with Agent Smith. Tired of the misery of the real world, Cypher agrees to lead Smith to Morpheus in exchange for a new life as a wealthy, famous actor inside the matrix. Cypher knows that the matrix is not real, but he believes that he can make his life better by simply ignoring this and retreating back into a pleasant world of illusory fantasy.

Cypher is making a big mistake here, however. In choosing to lead his life for pleasure alone, he presupposes that pleasure is the only thing that could make his life worth living. The doctrine according to which pleasure is the only thing valuable for its own sake is known to philosophers as *hedonism*.[18] Though hedonism may seem to have some intuitive appeal, the philosopher Robert Nozick provides a powerful argument against it in his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. This argument is especially interesting for us here, because it involves yet another brain-in-a-vat-type thought experiment.[19]

To begin, Nozick again suggests that we might simply be unconscious bodies floating in vats of nourishing chemicals. He postulates something called the "experience machine," a sophisticated piece of computer equipment that uses electrodes to stimulate our central nervous systems. Using the experience machine, neurophysiologists could make it seem to us that we are reading books, meeting with friends, drinking beer, and doing other pleasant things. All the while, though, we would in fact merely lie dormant inside the machine. Assuming that the experience machine could be configured to generate any experience we think worthwhile, that it

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[16] Williams, p. 313.

[17] Martin Gardner (1983) *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* (New York: Quill), p. 15, quoted in Schick and Vaughn, p. 87.

[18] Hedonism is one fundamental component of *utilitarianism*, a moral philosophy that holds that an action's moral value is dependent upon the total amount of happiness that it produces. The two founders of utilitarianism were Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill; see Jeremy Bentham (1948) *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Hafner) and John Stuart Mill (1979) *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett).

[19] Robert Nozick (1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books), pp. 42-45.

could be programmed to make us seem to be wonderfully successful, rich, happy, and beautiful, Nozick asks, "Should you plug into this machine for life?"[20]

Cypher, of course, would answer "Yes." Most of us, though, are rightly much more cautious. For there seems to be something troubling about the idea of turning our lives over in this way to mere stimulation by electrodes.[21] Nozick explains why this is so with a series of arguments against those who, like Cypher, would choose to submit to the experience machine. First, he says, "We want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them."[22] Neither the experience machine nor the matrix allows for genuine, meaningful action; instead, they merely give the *appearance* of meaningful action. But in addition:

> We want to *be* a certain way ... [but] someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob. There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank. Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It's not merely that it's difficult to tell; there's no way he is.[23]

Finally, the experience machine does not allow us to connect with reality in any substantial way, despite the strong desires most of us have to do so.[24] Thus, Nozick concludes, "We learn that something matters to us in addition to experience by imagining an experience machine and then realizing that we would not use it."[25] Likewise, we learn that something matters to us besides pleasure (or fame, or wealth, or beauty) by considering Cypher's decision and then realizing that we would not make it. Cypher's decision is, in fact, *immoral*. In contrast, Neo's decision to face "the desert of the real" allows him to undertake genuine action and have genuine experiences that give his life meaning, and thus a moral value. As the moral philosopher John Stuart Mill writes, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."[26]

Conclusion

The Matrix exposes us to the uncomfortable worries of philosophical skepticism in an especially compelling way. However, with a bit more reflection, we can see why we need not share the skeptic's doubts about the existence of the world. Such doubts are appropriate only in the very special context of the philosophical seminar. When we return to normal life we see immediately that they are groundless. Furthermore, we see also the drastic mistake that Cypher commits in turning his back upon reality and re-entering the matrix. Not only does reason compel us to admit the existence of the external world, it also requires us to face this world, to build for ourselves meaningful lives within it, and to engage, as adults, in the serious business of living.

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[20] Nozick, p. 42.

[21] Even the great utilitarian John Stuart Mill seems to have been troubled by this sort of objection to hedonism. In responding to his own (and to Bentham's) critics, Mill tried to distinguish different kinds of pleasure, some of a higher and some of a lower quality.

[22] Nozick, p. 43.

[23] *Ibid*.

[24] *Ibid*., p. 43-44. Continuing, Nozick points out that:

> This clarifies the intensity of the conflict over psychoactive drugs, which some view as mere local experience machines, and others view as avenues to a deeper reality; what some view as equivalent to surrender to the experience machine, others view as following one of the reasons *not* to surrender!

[25] *Ibid*., p. 44.

[26] Mill, p. 10.