

Does Exactly What It Says On The Tin

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Christopher Grau (ed.) (2005) *Philosophers Explore the Matrix*
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Philosophers Explore the Matrix, which began life as a series of essays commissioned for the official Matrix website, is a broad and diverse collection, examining the philosophical issues of the Matrix films from a largely analytical perspective. While there are occasional references to the second and third films, the focus is firmly on the original. This is unsurprising given the fact that where the first film is rich in philosophical and religious allusion, the sequels lapse into ever more extravagant action scenes linked by mostly meaningless mysticism. (The films' mythical subtext is also exhausted by the end of the *The Matrix*, with Neo having already completed the traditional Joseph Campbell-esque hero's journey including a literal death and resurrection.)

It may seem perverse, or at least willfully contrary, to pursue such a narrowly analytical methodology to a film whose only explicit reference to philosophy is (famously) a copy of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, but the ideas that *The Matrix* raises point towards solidly traditional philosophical problems rather than the postmodern scepticism of Baudrillard.

The approach of the book is determinedly introductory, with most chapters pitched at fans of the film with a passing interest in philosophy, rather than the other way round, but the level of discussion is good, the arguments thorough. Analysis of the meaning and style of the film is thin on the ground - although not entirely absent, and the emphasis is placed on the implications of the film's ideas rather than its diegesis.

Given the pedagogic nature of most of the chapters there is, perhaps unavoidably, a somewhat repetitive feel to parts of the book, with many of the essays rehearsing the same basic exposition of key philosophical arguments. Much of the discussion is centred around the old chestnuts (or classic speculative arguments, according to taste) of Descartes' malicious demon, brains in vats, and Plato's cave.

This is true of David Chalmers who, in 'The Matrix as Metaphysics' (132-76), presents a nicely detailed argument about the nature of Matrix-dwellers' knowledge of their world. He argues that humans embedded in the Matrix are not perpetually deceived about their environment, but only about the deep structure of it. Matrix-dwellers really do live in buildings and work in offices, but are simply mistaken when they think that these things are made of molecules rather than 0s and 1s. In a similar vein Iakovos Vasiliou (Reality, What Matters and The Matrix, 98-114) argues that life in the Matrix has as much potential to have value as life in the 'real' world.

A different approach is taken by Richard Hanley in 'Never the Twain Shall Meet' (115-31) in which he explores the Christian notion of heaven, comparing it to the so-called First Matrix. He argues convincingly for the impossibility of a world - whether natural, supernatural or virtual - that would allow both a plurality of free agents and an absence of suffering. The argument rests of course on the primacy of free will as essential to not only to our happiness but to our very idea of what it is to be a person. (Another fine essay by Hanley, on Baudrillard and the Matrix, appears on the original website but is sadly omitted from the book.)

Freedom - from enslavement, but also from falsehood - is a key theme of *The Matrix*, as is justly discussed at length in the book. A different perspective on this issue is tackled by James Pryor in 'What's So Bad About Living in The Matrix?' (40-61). He argues that the real problem with living in the Matrix is not that people spend their lives vastly deceived about the nature of reality, or that they are being used as batteries for sentient computers, but that they are politically disenfranchised. Although Matrix-dwellers may be in some control of their own lives within the Matrix, as a society or species they are not free to develop according to their desires. Although the film is ambiguous on this point, it seems fair to conclude that Matrix-dwellers take no real part in the government of their lives:

For most of us, the worst thing about living in the Matrix would not be something metaphysical or epistemological. Rather the worst thing would be something political. It would be the fact that life in the Matrix is a kind of slavery. (60)

Humans in the Matrix are trapped like insects in amber, living in a perpetual late 20th century conurbation, unable to advance or change society.

Pryor's chapter is among the best of the collection, not only discussing different kinds of freedom but also ranging across epistemology and ethics. His introduction to ethical egoism and the arguments against accepting it as a universal principle of human psychology is one of the best I have read. While there is little that is new or radical here, this essay alone is an excellent introduction to philosophical issues that avoids simplifying or being patronising.

Another key theme discussed at length in many of the chapters is dreaming. Throughout the films the Matrix is referred to as a 'dream world', from where Neo is 'awakened' from his 'slumber'. As Colin McGinn notes, *The Matrix* is full of dream imagery:

Characters are stylised and symbolic, as they often are in dreams, representing some emotional pivot rather than a three-dimensional person... There is a lot of striking metamorphosis, which is very characteristic of dreams: one person changing into another, Neo's mouth closing over, bulges appearing under the skin. There is also fear of heights, a common form of anxiety dream... Defiance of gravity is also an extremely common dream theme - and this is one of the first tricks that Neo masters. (70)

This perceptive comment is a highlight in an otherwise disappointing chapter. In what seems like a rather hastily and carelessly composed essay McGinn gives a weak account of how the Matrix must be a 'dream machine, an imagination manipulator', rather than a sophisticated virtual reality. (67) His understanding of what dreams are and how they operate is unfortunately put in the shade by the vastly more sophisticated account offered by Andy Clark in 'The Twisted Matrix: Dream, Simulation or Hybrid' (177-97) in which he summarises current scientific understanding of what dreaming is:

The dreaming brain is not like the awake brain. Normal sensory input is blocked; attentional capacities are impaired or lost; memory is distorted; reasoning and logic are weakened; narratives run wild; self-reflection is dampened or destroyed; emotion and instinct are hyper-stimulated; and forms of 'top-down' willed control and decision making are diluted and easily overwhelmed. (177)

The state of the brain while dreaming is more akin to being drugged than to being fed false images by a malicious demon or computer program. Clark offers a sophisticated reading of *The Matrix* as deliberately fudging the issue of whether the 'dream world' in which humans are trapped is a computer-generated fully interactive environment which allows freedom of agency, or a more repressive state in which critical faculties are actively 'muffled' and agency is consequently undermined.

This distinction is absolutely vital to understanding the nature of the Matrix: most of the explorations of the nature of life in the Matrix in the current collection rest on the assumption that humans have a good level of agency and self-awareness. If the reality (if

we can speak of such a thing about a fictional creation) is that Matrix-dwellers are in the equivalent of a drug-induced hallucination then all consideration of their epistemological and ethical status is more or less redundant.

Clark argues that neither reading of the Matrix is entirely satisfactory. Matrix-dwellers clearly have self-awareness, they share a single environment (i.e. they are not contained in a private, subjective world) and the world in which they live has clear rules and logic, all of which points to the Matrix being a fully-interactive environment of self-aware and free agents. However, the dream-like style noted by McGinn and, more importantly, the rule-bending of the film's heroes which allows for the crowd-pleasing stunts and action sequences imply a less 'realistic', more subjective world easily manipulated by the imagination.

The heroes' remarkable abilities within the Matrix embody the ambiguity that Clark claims the films exhibit. The ability to fly and dodge bullets seems obviously to be the kind of thing we can achieve only in dreams: in particular they seem reminiscent of the power that lucid dreamers have over their dreams. (McGinn argues for the interpretation that Neo is at heart a very capable lucid dreamer). However, these abilities are perceived by other people in the Matrix, and thus clearly do not just belong to the personal dreams of the agent: 'the fact that Neo's flying is seen by everyone as something remarkable, as proof of superhuman prowess, and is not simply accommodated courtesy of dampened critical and executive processing' (194).

Something that Clark omits to note is that once Neo has been liberated from the Matrix he all but ceases to interact with any of its inhabitants. Apart from the boy with the spoon, who clearly has heightened awareness of the true nature of the Matrix, the only people with whom he engages are his fellow liberated humans and the Artificially Intelligent agents of the machines. (The Oracle, whose nature is left unconsidered in the first film, is revealed to be a computer program in the sequels.) When Matrix-dwellers do come into contact with the heroes it is either as impotent bystanders or all-but-faceless enemies to be disposed of. Although it is never made explicit, those freed from the Matrix seem to consider those still embedded in it to be not worthy of their time or moral consideration. Certainly none of the liberated is ever seen to express concern or interest in friends or relatives left behind. Thus the extent to which the Matrix-dwellers do perceive the wondrous abilities of the heroes is left somewhat open. There is a real possibility that they are somehow cognitively pacified and unable to see or remember these remarkable occurrences.

As Vasiliou also notes, it is the shared quality of the Matrix that counts against it being dreamlike: 'Regardless of the amount of conscious control one has or lacks in a dream, a dream is private to one's own consciousness. It is part of the grammar of 'dream', as Wittgenstein might say, that only I can have my dream.' (106)

Colin McGinn leaps from the role of dreams in *The Matrix* to segue a bit untidily into his own theory of how watching films is importantly like the state of dreaming: '... I hold that watching a movie is like being in a dream; that is, the state of consciousness of being absorbed in a movie resembles and draws upon the state of consciousness of the dreamer.' (69) The idea of a connection between dreaming and film narrative is not a new one, and amongst the sophisticated discussion of dreaming given by Clark the understanding of how it works in this passage seems particularly naive. McGinn asserts a vital distinction between watching filmed actors and seeing live actors in a theatre without providing any argument for conceiving of one of these experiences as dreamlike and the other as not. Whatever strength McGinn may have as a philosopher he is a novice as a theorist of film. This is a particular shame as it is the only time the book addresses the wider field of film theory.

This one gripe aside, the book is a great success as far as it goes – which is far enough for the interested amateur or undergraduate. The majority of the contributors do extremely well to tease out interesting arguments from often slender textual material.