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## A Screening Of The Deception Hypothesis In “The Matrix”

The Matrix like the Meditations on First Philosophy, presents a scenario in which an individual is radically deceived about the nature of the external world. Skeptics sometimes take the position that if it is possible that we are deceived about the nature of the external world, then we do not really know those propositions that we think of as ordinary knowledge claims. I believe The Matrix, in conjunction with the skeptical principle (skepticism), constitutes an argument that your ordinary knowledge claims are not really knowledge. The Matrix shows a fictional world that is created and maintained by the computers that have taken over the world. With this scenario, The Matrix presents what I call a screening of the deception hypothesis. That is, upon viewing The Matrix, a viewer must confront the question of whether it might not be the case that all of her perceptual experience could be what it now is without there being a world that resembles those perceptions. This raises a number of questions. How does the film raise the skeptical question about a viewer's experience? Does its doing so amount to a real screening of a philosophical claim? Does the screened version of Descartes' claim carry the same conviction as the written one? What, if anything, does this tell us about the nature of film?

The Matrix's protagonist, Neo is clearly bothered by something about his world and trying to get to the bottom of his worries. Neo is not convinced that the world that he believes to be real is anything but that. Only as the result of the intervention of Trinity and her cohorts does he come to realize that the world that he had taken to be real is in fact merely an apparent one. Neo's revelation occurs after he swallows a pill offered to him by Morpheus, the leader of the rebels. Neo is led into a large room filled with computer and video equipment operated by a number of people. He is placed in a chair and electrodes are taped to his chest and inserted into his ear. Morpheus explains that the pill Neo has taken is part of a trace program that will help him and his associates find Neo's location. Neo will be able to see reality as it truly is for the first time. Neo sees his own image in a mirror and suddenly, the image fractures, lights appear in it, and it seems to move as if it were a liquid. Neo reaches out to touch the mirror and his finger goes into it, as if it were a liquid metal, like mercury. When he withdraws his finger, the liquid mirror is pulled with it, though eventually it pulls back into its original shape. As this is going on, Morpheus asks Neo if he has ever had a dream that he was sure was real. Once you awake, how would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world? As the mirror-like substance begins to move up his arm and onto the rest of his body, Neo begins to fibrillate and go into cardiac arrest. I claim that the film provides its viewers with a visual experience that is analogous to Neo's, an experience in which the world that they take to be real.

A skeptical thought experiment world that the film projects begins to exhibit irregularities that suggest that one's perceptual experience is not an accurate guide to the nature of that reality.

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After all, as we have been looking at the screen, we have been assuming that the images we are seeing provide us with accurate information about the fictional world of the film. That is, all along we have been interpreting the images that we see projected on the movie screen as images of objects and persons that are real in the film's fictional world. But as Neo begins to experience disruptions to the regularities of his world, the filmmakers disrupt our experience of the film world as well, providing us viewers with an actual experience (albeit of a fictional world) in which we recognize that our senses have been deceiving us about the nature of reality. In so doing, the film transforms our awareness of the screen as opening up a fictional world to us into an awareness of the screen as screening that world from us through representations for which there are no corresponding objects in its fictional world (or only objects whose natures differ from the manner in which they are presented). This realization is an exact parallel of the one that Neo has, although his realization has to do with a world that is real for him. The film accomplishes this by making us aware that it has similar abilities to those it attributes to the giant computers that simulate the Matrix, for The Matrix also presents its viewers with a world that is not real even in a fictional sense. We are systematically deluded about the nature of reality.

A skeptical thought experiment to be the actual situation of humans in its fictional world. So what most of the Matrix's inhabitants had taken to be real – and what we viewers had accepted as the film's fictional reality – is shown to be no more than an appearance generated by an interactive computer program, just as Descartes hypothesized that reality might be nothing but an appearance generated by a malign demon. Viewers generally do not immediately grasp the full significance of what they have seen, for it all goes by very quickly in the film. Later scenes help viewers understand the metaphysics of what they have seen by including shots in which the characters exist as they do within the Matrix intercut with scenes of the reality behind this orchestrated illusion.

One example involves a fight between Neo and Morpheus. As Morpheus repeatedly instructs Neo to reject his belief that the world of the Matrix is the real world so that he can realize his true power and ability, the film cuts to the other members of the ship's crew who are watching Neo and Morpheus on CRT screens. This juxtaposition of the apparent world of the Matrix with Trinity holds Neo in the "real world" as she gazes at him on screen in the Matrix. As Neo comes to see that the world he had believed to be real was only a computer simulation, so do we. That is, we have an experience analogous to his of coming to see that the "real world" of the film is only a computer projection – the Matrix – and, hence, merely apparent, and that there is an underlying (fictional) reality that differs in marked ways from this apparent one. But what we see is that what we had taken to be the "real" world of the film was merely a projected one. What I am suggesting is that The Matrix, by means of its ability to get its viewers to see the world of the Matrix as (fictionally) real when it is (fictionally) only apparent, puts a new twist on Descartes' deception hypothesis. By substituting a vast network of rebellious computers for the

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evil demon, the film shows itself to be capable of a deception of its viewers analogous to that which Descartes imagines the evil demon to be capable of in relation to himself. So viewers come to acknowledge that The Matrix itself has the power to deceive them about (fictional) reality. The film has thus done to us what the computers do to Neo and the other inhabitants of the Matrix: cause us/them to mistake a generated and merely apparent world for the real world. Films are not unique in their ability to get readers to draw false inferences about the nature of their fictional worlds. What's unique about The Matrix, however, is that it deceives viewers about their perceptual beliefs, for, while watching the initial segment of the film, they believe themselves to be perceiving a real, albeit fictional, world when all they are perceiving is the illusory world of the Matrix.

A skeptical thought experiment There is an earlier sequence in which the film already establishes its power to deceive and manipulate not only its own characters but the members of its audience as well. The sequence begins after Neo is arrested and interrogated by the computer forces known as agents. It is a scary experience for him, one that ends with the agents injecting a bug-like creature into him through his belly button. As this rather horrifying event ends, Neo is shown to be awakening from a nightmare and we – along with him – experience a first shift in our interpretation of the previous scene, assuming that what we had seen was just the content of a nightmare he had had. The film has relied on a technical possibility that has been exploited by films for some time: They are able to frame a sequence in such a way that what the audience took to be part of the fictional world of the film was really just the subjective experience of one of that world's characters. Viewers are led to this thought through their experience of their own credulity, for the film has succeeded in manipulating their beliefs about its (fictional) world as easily and successfully as Descartes' hypothetical evil demon could deceive Descartes about his.

By getting audiences to take seriously the possibility that what we take to be the real world is nothing but a projection of a different reality, the film is asking us to think about how such devices may have screened us from the world rather than allowed the world to be visible on their screens. It is the presence of a complex thought experiment within the broader narrative of The Matrix, then, that qualifies it as genuinely doing philosophy. The film not only shows viewers a situation in which skepticism about the external world is justified, it actually deceives them in a way that engenders their own skeptical doubts. This thought experiment not only updates Descartes' own evil demon thought experiment for an audience more worried about their own susceptibility to virtual realities than the truth of modern science, it also demonstrates its own ability, as a technology for screening reality, to get us to take its own projections to be real.

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