# 1: Really Good Noodles: Empiricism, Rationalism, and Kant in *The Matrix*

When Neo has his first experience back in the Matrix after he has been freed from it, he spots a restaurant and says, “I used to eat there. Really good noodles. I have these memories from my life. None of them happened. What does that mean?”

Trinity replies, cryptically: “That the Matrix can’t tell you who you are.”

Neo is confounded because of his naïve *empiricism*, the philosophy according to which we discover the nature of reality through direct sense experience. But such empiricism can’t be correct, since none of Neo’s previous experiences really existed as he believed them to exist: as a reality independent of his mind.

Trinity’s reply mirrors Descartes’ *rationalism*: Even if everything you see in a dream does not exist, you at least must exist to be dreaming. I dream, therefore I am. According to rationalism, truth can only come from within, from the power of the mind itself.

As we shall see, *The Matrix* nicely illustrates a major debate in modern philosophy concerning the nature of knowledge. Empiricism argues that we attain knowledge of reality on the basis of sensory experience. But this must be false since the Matrix is possible. If we take sensory experience as the basis of our understanding of reality, Neo could never question, let alone escape, the Matrix. So there must be another basis for knowledge. And there is, the rationalist method of knowledge. Rationalism highlights the freedom of human reason to challenge direct sensory experience and reorganize the data of experience on the basis of our own ideas. Such reason is at the basis of modern science, which reorganizes direct experience from standpoints creatively adopted by the mind (or reason).

### What is real?

In the early scenes of *The Matrix*, Thomas Anderson, whose hacker name is Neo, is on a secret and dangerous quest to discover the meaning of “the Matrix.” Powerful Agents are on his track in a terrifying attempt to deter and stop him. But Neo comes to be guided by Trinity, a renowned name in the hacker world who takes Neo to Morpheus, leader of the underground opponents of the regime. Neo has had a feeling, Morpheus explains, that “there’s something wrong with the world.” This feeling has been motivating his search “like a splinter in your mind driving you mad.” This search is related to understanding a mysterious concept, “the Matrix.” Morpheus attempts to describe the nature of “the Matrix” to Neo:

> Do you want to know what it is? The 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.

*Neo*: What truth?

*Morpheus*: 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....

*The Matrix* prods the audience to reflect on the pressures and oppressions, the slavery, of ordinary life, where governments impose taxes, companies rule over hiring and firing, and religions command obedience to rules decreed from above on pain of eternal hellfire. But what can it mean to say that Neo sees the Matrix simply by looking out the window? How does this constitute slavery? The answer to this question is puzzling until Neo chooses between the red and the blue pill-- the choice between continuing to live in ignorance, and knowing the truth more fully and intimately:

*Morpheus*: 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...

For a first-time viewer of *The Matrix*, the following sequence is a great shock. Thanks to choosing the red pill and the truth, Neo wakes up in a pod of gooey substance with wires all over his body, high up in a tower of such pods alongside endless other such towers. He's rescued by the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar, a ship that flies in the dead zone of a bleak planet. The planet is our own earth of the future, destroyed by an ecological catastrophe due to the assaults of human technology on the fragile conditions of life. Neo has been living in an artificially constructed semblance of reality, the purpose of which is to supply bio-energy for the real masters of the world, machines with artificial intelligence who benefit from human enslavement. Neo does see the Matrix when he looks out the window: it is an illusion generated by electrical impulses connected to his brain, programmed to imprison humanity for the benefit of the hidden rulers of the world.

Here, it seems, is a major difference between the situation of Neo in the film and that of the viewers of the film. For when we look from our windows what we see, we think, is really there. What we see, we think, is reality, not a figment of the imagination or of the brain. When Neo eventually raises this issue about the nature of the "reality" that we see around us, Morpheus replies:

What is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.

In the case of the perception of an alleged real tree, what we perceive is not directly the tree in itself, but an image in the brain produced by electrical signals coming from the tree. It is

technically possible, then, to reproduce all the electrical signals of the supposed external reality with no such reality being there at all. If the electrical signals that produce the image of a tree are the same as those produced in the world of real trees, the effect, our subjective experience, would be just the same in the artificial situation as in the real one. How then could we ever know that what we see out the window is really there? Touching the tree would prove nothing, since touch is only a different interpretation of other electrical signals.

If in so many other parts of our lives it makes sense to say that we simply move from one kind of prison to another, how can we be so sure that when we look out the window we are not caught up in a *total* prison for our minds, a Matrix? How would we ever know that we are being deceived? Empiricism, the philosophy of knowledge that bases truth on direct sensory experience, would only support the deception of the Matrix. Hence, since the Matrix is a real possibility there must be another way to know the truth than through direct sensory information.

## Suspending Belief in the Evidence of the Senses

Neo discovers that there really were no noodles at all, only electrical signals interpreted by his brain as noodles, while his body lay sucking synthetic nutrition from its pod of goo. “What does that mean?” he asks. Trinity replies, “That the Matrix can’t tell you who you are.” In other words, the artificial program that produced the experience of noodles could not produce the totality of that experience. It’s impossible to become completely enslaved, for then there would be no sense of slavery at all, no splinter in the mind, just a placid acceptance of experience. A cow would be thoroughly content with imaginary grass. But a human being cannot be reduced to such a state of unquestioning acquiescence. There is within human beings a source of truth, connected with a freedom of choice, that cannot be completely eliminated or programmed. But this source of truth is not to be found in the sensory information on which empiricism bases its conception of truth, for such information can be distorted, falsified, and simulated. There must another source, acting like a splinter from within the mind of the person herself. This is what the rationalist Descartes argues is the authentic foundation of truth: the human mind itself.

Like Neo, Descartes woke from a dream which he took to be true. What he thought was real, the world he directly saw when he looked out his window, wasn’t really there at all. What awakened him with a sense of profound disorientation were the findings of the new sciences of astronomy and physics. These sciences took his mind, if not his body, to a real world beyond the illusions of his previous life. They showed him that the world he had once believed to be really there isn’t there at all.

Descartes lived at the time when the advanced thinkers of the day discovered that the sun does not really rise in the morning from the east, traverse a sky shaped like an inverted bowl whose highest point is directly over our heads, and finally settle in the west below a horizon that just so happens to form a perfect circle around ourselves, the observers, conveniently placed as

we seem to be exactly in the middle of things. Instead of the sun revolving around the earth, as we still today perceive it to do, the reality is exactly the opposite of what seems to be the case. The earth really revolves around the sun. The earth does not rest fixed beneath our feet, as we directly perceive it to do, but moves at great speed. Its motion cannot be directly perceived because our means of detection, our eyes and sensory equipment including the brain itself, move along with it at the same speed and in the same direction. The world that we see when we look out the window really is an illusion.

Descartes lived at the dawn of the modern revolution in the sciences begun by Copernicus' defense of a heliocentric view of the solar system. Taking such science seriously, Descartes was obliged to rethink the old ways of understanding the world, above all by challenging the reigning empiricist philosophy handed down to the European Middle Ages from the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE). A century or so later, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), dissatisfied with problems inherited from Descartes' rationalism, and confronting the more updated form of empiricism of David Hume (1711-1776), renewed Descartes' argument for what he, Kant, called a Copernican revolution in philosophy. Kant argues that it is necessary to profoundly change our way of thinking in order to escape the prison for our mind produced by empiricist philosophy itself, which holds that we take the world as we experience it, as it directly appears to us, to be the world as it is in itself.

Descartes proposes some thought-experiments to strengthen mistrust in direct sensory experience. In a dream, we think that what we are dreaming is real, until we wake up. But perhaps we simply wake up to another form of dreaming. How would we know whether or not this is the case? It is possible, then, that what we now regard as an experience of a really existing world is actually a dream. Anticipating the scenario of *The Matrix*, Descartes asks us in addition to imagine that everything we experience is the fabrication of a powerful but evil demon bent on deceiving us. Descartes was not trying to create artificial philosophical puzzles, but was formulating a real, burning question about the nature of reality provoked by the liberating revolution inaugurated by the new sciences. The sciences of the modern era directly challenged the fundamental way people saw the physical world around them, and in doing so indirectly challenged the institutions of the medieval feudal society that had vouched for the ancient worldview. Once we understand that even the world we see when looking out the window is a Matrix, an artificial system or construction produced by our very own minds, new possibilities open up before us. We do not need evil demons or AI machines to delude us. The delusion is inherent in the very way in which we are built. We are naturally prisoners of our own sensory experience.

## Freeing the Mind

Aristotle argues that the mind abstracts the essence of reality from direct sensory experience. I know what a tree is by looking at a tree, describing its main features, and contrasting them with other kinds of things that I observe around me—stones, flowers, or birds. On the basis of such a procedure, what can we say about the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, the "heavenly bodies" that we observe in the sky? They *appear* to move in great circles across the sky. The earth on which we stand *seems* to remain fixed under our feet. If truth consists of abstracting the essence of things from their appearances, the earth must *really be* the center around which the heavenly bodies rotate. And so Aristotelian empiricism leads to a geocentric system of astronomy, with the earth and its human inhabitants at the center and the sun, moon, and stars moving in great circles around us. For that is just how we see things when we look out our windows. Similarly, Aristotle looked at his own social world and saw that some people are free citizens and some are slaves. Since the essence of reality is to be found in observing the world of direct experience, it would follow that some people are free by nature, and others are naturally slaves.

But the new astronomy radically challenges this approach to knowing the truth. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) argued persuasively for the superiority of a heliocentric system, with the sun at the center, and the earth revolving around it. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) depicts the conflict between the Copernican and the Aristotelian astronomies in a way that shows the greater consistency and rational intelligibility of the Copernican view. His defense of Copernicus did not rest on new observations, new empirical experience, but on a rethinking of data that had previously been regarded as self-evidently true. Once we examine the evidence of the senses from a radically different vantage point, seeing things not as they directly appear to us but from a point of view imaginatively adopted by the mind itself, then the evidence profoundly alters its significance. The mind itself must therefore free itself from its imprisonment in direct experience. It must dominate its impressions and evidences by adopting standpoints decided upon by the mind itself.

Morpheus's advice to Neo is central to the new sciences, and to the new philosophy of science first devised by Descartes: "You have to let it all go, Neo, fear, doubt, and disbelief. Free your mind."

The key to liberation from our natural imprisonment in the Matrix of direct sensory experience lies in the mind. This is the essence of Descartes' rationalist philosophy. Instead of taking the evidences of sensory experience as primary, as empiricists maintain, it is necessary to turn to the mind itself. It is possible to doubt all the evidence of experience. It may be that we are living in a dream, perhaps concocted by slave masters who have trapped us in forms of life and systems of existence that use our life-energy in ways that benefit them. But the essence of one's self, one's own mind, can raise this very possibility, can detach itself from all the sensory impressions and related ideas that have been imposed upon us, and can think all of this over from

various perspectives. The fact that the mind is fundamentally free from direct sensory impressions, and is capable of reorganizing the data of experience in ways determined by the mind itself, implies that the Matrix cannot tell us who we are. This is the liberating implication of Descartes' first truth: "I think, therefore I am."

Once we free the mind, then we will be able to go down the rabbit hole of sensory data and sort out what is truly real from what is irrational and so false. We don't find the truth by abstracting its essence from direct experience. We find the truth by detaching ourselves from such experience, by finding a starting point of truth within ourselves, for it is only the free mind that can search, that can go down the rabbit hole in which we discover the weirdness of our Alice-in-Wonderland world, and come out with a plan for a truly free existence.

## The First Law of Physics

Descartes begins with the freed mind, liberated from the prison of direct sensory experience, and having within itself a source of truth which operates like a splinter, driving us to reject falsehood and illusion. This source of truth, he argues, is the idea of truth itself, or more generally, the idea of perfection. The cow contentedly chews its cud, whether the cud is really a cud or simply electrical signals interpreted by its brain. It does not matter to the cow. The cow is like Cypher, the character on the Nebuchadnezzar who betrays his companions so that he might return to the state of illusion in the Matrix, and enjoy the taste of a good steak. He no longer cares whether that steak is real or not. As long as his illusory existence is a comfortable one, he will abandon the long road of seeking the truth.

As *The Matrix* develops its drama of illusion and reality, the audience comes to understand that this road is not an easy one. It is not simply a matter of waking up in the pod of goo and transferring to the Nebuchadnezzar and the "real world." For that real world is not *fully* real. There is still a long way to go to overcome the oppressions and injustices that impede a fully real, or a "really good" life. Sacrifices are needed. The life of freedom is dangerous. The crew on board the Nebuchadnezzar are fighting for the freedom of Zion, the free human city deep in the bowels of the earth that is threatened by the AI machines and their Agents. Tank and his brother Dozer are willing to put up with the tasteless food on the Nebuchadnezzar for the sake of their ultimate goal: "If the war was over tomorrow, Zion's where the party would be." Tank is willing to wait until then, for a meal is only *really* good when it is eaten in a truly good, i.e., free society.

For Descartes, awakening to the first truth, the freedom of the mind, is only the first step on a long road to truth. Goaded by the idea of perfection, a light within the mind itself, it is necessary to return to the world of sensory experience that it has been put into a state of suspension, and rethink its data from the new standpoint. Descartes' method that begins with awareness of the freedom of the mind from confinement to direct sensory experience establishes the roots of a new science whose ultimate fruit is found in the knowledge of what constitutes a good society.

This is not a society of masters and slaves, as Aristotle argued, but a society of free people cooperating with one another on the basis of scientific truth. But in pursuing this path Descartes confronts a paradox. If the essence of the mind is the free spirit of the thinker, the essence of the world outside of us is unfree matter. This seems to be what the new sciences tell us, and what the mind itself appears to require from out of its own resources.

As in the case of astronomy, the new physics breaks radically with the physics of the past, formulated again with clarity on the basis of direct observation by Aristotle. Some kinds of objects, like stones, fall down when we drop them. Of course stones move in whatever direction we kick them, at least up to a point. There is *forced motion* when one body contacts another body with a definite force. But what happens when we move a stone over the edge of a table? As it tips over the edge, *we* stop moving it, and *it* starts moving all on its own. And not in *any* direction. All on its own, it seems, it moves *down*. That is its *natural motion*, says Aristotle. But everything doesn't move down in this way. Fire seems naturally to move *up*. The circular motion of the sun, moon, and stars, gives us a third kind of natural motion for three kinds of things: circular motion for heavenly bodies, downward motion for earthly bodies like stones, and upward motion for fire. The different basic "elements," earth, fire, water, air, and the heavenly bodies of finer composition, therefore have different forms of natural movement—for water and air too differ radically in the way we observe them to move.

But according to Galileo, these different *apparent* motions are illusions, for there is only one *real* kind of motion, inertial motion or motion in a straight line with no inherent direction whatsoever. The stone moves in the direction caused by my hand as I slide it across the table. When I give it a shove, it continues to move for a while because I have given it motion. It soon slows down and stops moving because *another* body, the table itself causing friction with the stone, imparts to it motion in a different direction. However, if we reduce the friction, if we slide a smoothly polished stone across a surface of ice, as in the game of curling or hockey, the stone moves for a longer time before friction brings it to rest. What if friction were eliminated entirely? The body would move *forever* in whatever direction we give it. Following Galileo's discovery, Isaac Newton (1643-1727) formulated the law of inertia as his first law of physics: "Every body continues in its state of rest, or of uniform motion in a right line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed upon it."[1]

All bodies are fundamentally the same, and follow this same law, whether in the heavens or on earth. It follows from this principle of the new physics that, contrary to what seems to be the case, *nothing* moves itself. Every body, including the gaseous bodies we perceive as fire, moves as a result of motion given to it by another body. And it moves in the direction imparted to it, whatever that direction may be, by other external, causal bodies. The new physics therefore seems to require a deterministic universe.

Newton's first law seems to have another startling implication regarding the nature of reality. A leaf falling in its own picturesque and irregular way is only an *appearance* of millions of

straight-line motions caused by outside forces: the complex interactions of the leaf, the air around it, and the downward pull of gravity. The movement of the earth orbiting the sun consists in untold zillions of straight-line motions in which inertial movement is contradicted by gravitational pull. The resulting form of motion is only a highly complex *appearance* of the fundamental *reality* of straight-line inertial motion. Everything therefore 1) *really* moves in straight lines, and 2) is *really* moved by external forces impressed upon it. The new science therefore appears to impose a fundamentally new conception of reality which seems even more confining, even more enslaving, than the ancient physics of Aristotle.

But if every *body* is moved by outside forces, there is still something, Descartes argues, that moves itself: the mind ~~itself~~. The essential characteristic of the mind is the free self-motion of the Self, the "I" who thinks or is self-aware. There is no left and right side of the mind, for consciousness is an indivisible point of self-awareness. The mind is therefore non-material, or spiritual. Matter, the basic property of the external objects of thought that produce our sensory impressions, has quite opposite characteristics. A material body is extended in space, is divisible into smaller and small parts, and moves only as a result of external forces impressed upon it. The new science of physics is thus founded on a rational operation of thought that contrasts the nature of the mind with everything that is not like the mind, that is, with matter.

## The Battle of Metaphysics

But how do these two fundamentally different forms of existence interact? How can the body affect the mind, or the mind move the body? If every body is only moved by another body, as Newton's first law holds, how can one's body be moved by one's non-physical mind? How is freedom of spirit possible in a material world governed by deterministic laws? Descartes' dualism of mind and body, or spirit and matter, creates an unsolvable problem. This problem led to sharply opposing metaphysical positions, epitomized by the materialism represented by Hobbes and the spiritualism defended by Leibniz. Starting from the new physics as fundamental, the rationalist *materialist* Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) concludes that free will is an illusion, and the idea of a spiritual consciousness is nonsensical. Physics therefore correctly tells us that, body and soul, we are slaves, governed by outside forces we cannot control. But then how is science itself possible, for science requires that the mind be able to free itself from sensory impressions? Hobbes' materialism therefore negates the freedom of thought that is implicit in his own adoption of the rationalist method as the method implied by the new sciences. Attempting to resolve the contradictions of Descartes' dualism, Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) argues, also from the perspective of rationalism, that it is so-called matter and externally caused motion that is the illusion, and physics with its deterministic laws is only a description of external behavior. Viewed internally thanks to metaphysical reason, all reality should be regarded as composed of essentially conscious, spirit-like, free beings, which he called "monads."[2] If we must begin with the freedom of "I think," Descartes' cogito, the material world out of which human

consciousness evolves must consist of primitive forms of mind. Otherwise human consciousness itself would be impossible. Against the materialism of the rationalist Hobbes, the rationalist Leibniz argues for a radical spiritualism.

Rather than providing us with a reliable understanding of reality, the same new sciences are invoked by conflicting metaphysical systems. The dualism of Descartes gives birth to warring trends of materialism and idealism (or spiritualism), all claiming to be consistent with the new sciences. Distrusting the grand metaphysical schemes of the rationalists, David Hume returns to empiricism. We can never go beyond basic sense experience:[3]

> As to those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses.

Reason, or rationalism, says Hume, is incapable of resolving the question as to the ultimate cause of our sensory impressions. They may be caused by an external world. They may be inventions of consciousness. They may be placed in our heads by God, as Bishop Berkeley argues. Hume could have added: they might be produced by intelligent machines while we are really lying in pods of goo. All we really know are the impressions of sensory experience and the ideas we construct on their basis. On the basis of these impressions and their associations, we manage to carry on our lives, but they provide no clue as to the nature of the reality that produces them. Hume recognizes that the old empiricism of Aristotle has to be abandoned. Sensory impressions provide no clue as to the ultimate nature of their causes. But rationalism too is stymied, since it gives birth to opposed metaphysical systems without any possibility of resolution between them. All we have to go on are the sensory impressions themselves, their consistency with one another, and the patterns or associations between them that we have accumulated over time. In practical life, too, reason is powerless, for we are driven by desires or passions that arise somehow within us. "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."[4] With his reassertion of empiricism, Hume therefore returns us to the slavery of the Matrix.

Immanuel Kant writes that he was awakened from his dogmatic slumber by the skepticism of Hume. As a rationalist philosopher attempting to build on Leibniz' spiritualism, he recognizes, thanks to Hume, that he has been living in a philosophical dream world. Accordingly, he writes a book in which he describes his early philosophical ideas "Dreams of Metaphysics."[5] Philosophers who think that philosophical reason is able to provide clear and convincing answers regarding the nature of reality are only telling "a fairy-story from the *cloud-cuckoo-land* of metaphysics."[6]

But if rationalism fails, Hume's radical empiricism cannot be right either, for two reasons: it makes science itself impossible, and it denies our moral experience of freedom. If all we have to go on are subjective impressions, we could never escape the illusions of the pre-Copernican astronomy. Kant therefore affirms the fundamental correctness of the rationalist perspective as the necessary implication of modern science. Only reason can free us from the illusions of our sense-based perceptions of the world: "Viewed from earth, the planets sometimes move backwards, sometimes forward, and sometimes not at all. But if the standpoint selected is the sun, an act which only reason can perform, according to the Copernican hypothesis they move constantly in their regular course."[7]

## Creating Our Own Matrix

Yes, says Kant, we must begin from our subjective impressions, from data received by our senses. We not only directly see the sun circling the earth, but when we look around us we see a world centered on oneself. Each of us sees the world in this egocentric way. Perception is therefore profoundly illusory. And yet we overcome this egocentrism thanks to the capacity of reason which enables us to free ourselves from the power of our immediate impressions. We objectify our experience by distinguishing the objects we perceive from the subject, ourselves, who perceives them. We situate these objects in a grid work or matrix of space and time. Hence the four dimensional coordinates of our Global Positioning Systems (GPS) that enable us to locate one another in any place on the planet are rightly called Cartesian coordinates, thanks to the mathematical discoveries of Descartes.

But Descartes was only half right in arguing that material objects exist in space alongside one another and move in time from one moment to the next. Where Descartes erred was in supposing that these characteristics of *our concept* of matter describe the characteristics of reality in itself. Subjective in origin, arising out of *our* concepts, such structures of space and time, like the concepts of subject and object, or cause and effect, enable us to organize our impressions and make our way in the world. They enable us to overcome the egocentricity and subjectivism of direct perception, and so to situate ourselves in a common world with others. They constitute a Matrix by which we actively organize our world. But it does not follow, from the fact that we actively impose such a Matrix on the data of experience, that reality in itself accords with our human ways of knowing it. We can never experience a tree the way a dog experiences it. Because science is *our* science, because it rests on fundamental concepts of human construction, it can only give us *appearances*, never *reality as it is in itself*. Science indeed gives us other or better appearances, from new points of view. But it does not free us altogether from perspectives our own construction. Kant thus rejects the implications of the Newtonian science according to which all reality is reducible to straight line movements determined by external causal forces. Such implications are not only counter-intuitive but downright bizarre. He recognizes that a theory of physical motion based on the straight line is a projection of our mathematical tools, and

not a description of the real nature of motion itself. He therefore prepares the way for other ways of representing movement in post-Newtonian physics. But none of these methods of *representing* physical reality present us with reality as it is in itself. We therefore inevitably live in a Matrix of our own construction. But knowing this sets us free. As Neo's actions in *The Matrix* dramatically demonstrate, when we understand the Matrix and its laws, a world of mere appearances can be an exciting place in which to exist.

If science is about appearances, not reality in itself, Kant argues, it is *possible* that we human beings as we are in ourselves are fundamentally free. We cannot *know* that we are free, for as soon as we apply the procedures of science to ourselves, we situate ourselves in the Matrix of separate objects in space and time, governed by causal laws, and so must regard our actions as effects of outside causes. But such an objectifying scientific approach is not the standpoint of practical action. The point of view of action is not that of knowing objects that already exist, but of creating objects that don't exist yet. Inevitably, in our practical choices we *believe* ourselves to be free either to proceed with a particular plan of action, or to abandon it.

Morpheus asks Neo if he believes in Fate. No, says Neo, "Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life." He gives Neo a choice, the red or the blue pill. Similarly, the Oracle gives Neo a choice:

> You're going to have to make a choice. In the one hand you'll have Morpheus' life and in the other hand you'll have your own. One of you is going to die. Which one will be up to you.

She then refers back to the earlier conversation of Neo and Morpheus:

> I'm sorry, kiddo, I really am. You have a good soul, and I hate giving good people bad news. Oh, don't worry about it. As soon as you step outside that door, you'll start feeling better. You'll remember you don't believe in any of this fate crap. You're in control of your own life, remember?

The fact that our fate is in our hands, that we can refuse to follow our destiny, does not mean there is no such thing as fate. There are laws of a different kind, not the laws of deterministic physics, but laws we give ourselves, freely. Neo makes his choice. He gives up his life for the sake of Morpheus. In doing so he rejects the laws of egotism evoked by Cypher:

> Did he tell you why he did it? Why you're here. Jee-zus. What a mind job. So you're here to save the world. What do you say to something like that? A little piece of advice. You see an agent, you do what we do. Run. You run your ass off.

Instead of running Neo turns to face the Agents. Morpheus, watching the scene that takes place in the Matrix, says: "He's beginning to believe." In making the choice to take his stand, Neo rises above the fear-based laws of ordinary existence, believing in the possibilities of his own freedom.

We don't *know* that we are free to make our own lives. Knowledge gives us the useful laws of science. But since these laws apply to appearances (or "phenomena"), not to things in themselves (or what Kant called "noumena"), it is legitimate to *believe* in our ultimate freedom. After all, we are the makers of the Matrix by which we organize our lives. And so, if we don't like the Matrix we have created, we are free to create another one. If we believe that there is something wrong with a world where we have severely limited choices, we are free to change that world, to follow the ideal of perfection that lights our actions from within, and create a world of free human beings, the new Matrix of Zion. And so, at the end of film, Neo warns the powers that rule the Matrix:

> I know you're out there. I can feel you now. I know that you're afraid. You're afraid of us. You're afraid of change. I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin. I'm going to hang up this phone and then I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. I'm going to show them a world without you, a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.[8]

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[1] Isaac, Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 34, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) 14.

[2] For detailed examination of these ideas, see James Lawler, *Matter and Spirit: the Battle of Metaphysics in Modern Western Philosophy before Kant*. Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006.

[3] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature;* edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press), I, 3, 5; 84.

[4] Ibid., II, 2, 3; 415.

[5] Immanuel Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766), in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical philosophy, 1755-1770;* translated and edited by David Walford, in collaboration with Ralf Meerbote. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

[6] Ibid., 343.

[7] Immanuel Kant, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing? In Kant *On History* (The Library of Liberal Arts, 1985), 8:83; 142.

[8] For a more complete view of *The Matrix Trilogy*, see James Lawler, *The God Tube: Uncovering the Hidden Spiritual Message in Pop Culture*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company (forthcoming).