The Matrix Philosophical Analysis

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Contents

The philosophy of technology, while a currently small field, asks many important questions about something that is universally considered by modern society to be a positive advancement and influence on our species. Exploring the other side of the technology argument reveals a society that is held captive by the very things that they create. Humanity is becoming increasingly dependent on technology all the time and the unstoppable nature of our increasing dependency has led many to wonder: What will happen once a critical mass is reached? What will the future of humanity look like if we continue down this technologically controlled path? Many philosophers upon pondering these questions agree that the future unfortunately looks very dim. While the takeover of technology initially seems like the dramatic plot of a cliché science fiction movie, it is a very real phenomenon that is not brought to light when systemic decisions are being made, and works written by many great philosophers on the subject go unnoticed in a world so controlled by technology. But there are a few rare instances where the other side of the argument has reached the ears of the masses.

While it is certainly not the first film to tackle the topic of man's relationship with technology, The Matrix (1999) explores ideas presented in the philosophy of technology very deeply and seriously. Regarded as one of the best science fiction films ever made, this extremely ambitious masterpiece by the Wachowski brothers is one that successfully ventures into the realms of religion, existentialism, and technology simultaneously. A large variety of thoughtful questions are asked within its 2 hour and 10 minute timeframe, with ones involving technology at the obvious forefront.

The setting of the movie is one that will hopefully stay unfamiliar in the coming decades, although evidence seems to suggest otherwise. To briefly summarize, the world has devolved into a desolate wasteland ruled by machines. An entire generation of sentient machines is born once man invents artificial intelligence and it proceeds to wage war against the humans for planetary control. The machines initially run on solar energy and so the humans attempt to cut off their power source by "scorching the sky". Ironically, this leads to the machines' decision to enslave humanity and use them as a limitless source of power. The entire race has been connected to a neural simulation called the Matrix which resembles the world as it was in 1999. All of humanity experiences life inside of the Matrix without any knowledge of the actual state of the planet. It is an unsettling concept because it isn't too far from the truth of our own reality.

In order to discover exactly what the film is trying to convey one must first decipher what each character symbolizes, and the undeniably most important character of all is the Matrix itself. To paraphrase Morpheus, it is the world that has been pulled over our eyes to blind us from the truth. The Matrix represents the world as most people believe it to be: a world dominated by humans using technology as a neutral tool. The large majority of the population believes that they still possess all of their freedoms and they are ignorant to how much freedom technology has actually taken from them. The analogy seems to exist on two levels, because while it is obvious that they are slaves to the system through the Matrix what is less obvious is how they

continue to be ignorant slaves inside of their own false reality. Technology rules over the world inside of the Matrix just as much as it does outside, and it is apparent by the way that Neo's false reality has been shaped. He exists as an advanced computer programmer working for a software company during the day while he writes and sells illegal programs at night. His entire daily life is consumed by technology, and the only time he ever steps outside of this realm is when he believes his computer told him to do so ("follow the white rabbit"). In a way Neo is the most enslaved among anyone in the Matrix making his transformation all the more impressive.

The entire idea of the Matrix hits a multitude of key points that Martin Heidegger has made about the technological society in his essay entitled, "The Question Concerning Technology". Heidegger believes that the way in which we think has been infected by technology and its central role in today's society. Not only has it caused us to use technological ways of thinking (the scientific method) for every single decision, but through this it has also restricted us from thinking about technology in a way that reveals the truth of our relationship with it.

> "The modern physical theory of nature prepares the way first not simply for technology but for the essence of modern technology. For already in physics the challenging gathering-together into ordering revealing holds sway. But in it, that gathering does not yet come expressly to appearance. Modern physics is the herald of Enframing, a herald whose origin is still unknown. The essence of modern technology has for a long time been *concealing itself*, even where power machinery has been invented, where electrical technology is in full swing, and where atomic technology is well under way." (Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, in CT, p. 186-7)

Heidegger believed in this idea of mental slavery so much that he essentially invented his own language when it came to speaking about it, making his writings a challenge to read. Our modern way of speaking and thinking has been shaped by technology's influence and thus it has left us unable to even consider a world outside of its prison. All of the people trapped inside of the Matrix experience this limitation through their inability to recognize their own reality.

So if the Matrix seems to represent the world/society as people perceive it to be, then the "real world" in the film logically represents how things actually are: a world ruled by technology. An important question must then be answered: how does one travel from one to the other? In other words, how does one escape the prison that technology has created for us? The answer lies in the interactions with one of the most interesting characters of the entire film, Morpheus. Cleverly named after the god of dreams, Morpheus is responsible for modifying Neo's thought patterns throughout the film, which we eventually find out is the key to solving the whole technological problem. His first physical appearance is marked by a conversation with Neo involving the artificial feeling of the world and whether he has ever had a dream that felt too real.

As the embodiment of dreams, nearly all of Morpheus' dialogue involves using abstract thought and redefining reality; he even refers to the Matrix as a "dream world." Within the Matrix Morpheus is extremely powerful and is even described by the Agents as "the most dangerous man alive." It is the place where Morpheus feels the most comfortable and it is where Neo receives all of his training. The Matrix has become his domain because he has learned how to appropriately think about technology and therefore how to control it, which is expressed through his seeming supernatural abilities.

This mode of thinking is something that Morpheus spends the entire film attempting to teach Neo. This concept falls right into Heidegger's theoretical territory once again, for according to the film the ultimate solution to the problem of the technologically controlled society first involves drastically changing the way in which we think about technology itself. Technology's influence spreads into every single aspect of society including our thought process. The scientific method of thought and problem solving is so heavily stressed as the best and most efficient strategy that eventually humanity will be unable to think in any other way, assuming it is not already limited in this way. Therefore a new mode of thinking needs to be introduced otherwise technology will never be understood enough to be controlled. The only thing that can save someone stuck inside of such a vicious circle is intervention from outside of the sphere of influence. In the film, there are humans that have escaped the Matrix and thus are able to go back in to save certain individuals. In the real world those people seem to be the great philosophers and intellectuals that have worked hard enough to recognize the truth of technology's control, but their voices have not been loud enough to permeate the thick technological barrier created in the rest of the population's minds. Just like in the film unfortunately, there are few people capable of thinking about technology as it actually exists, which does not bode well for us if we desire to change our apocalyptic course.

Not only are we disadvantaged by a lack of enlightened individuals, we are also limited by the rest of the populations inherent ability to modify their thinking patterns. Expressed in the film as well, not everyone is ready to accept the reality of the situation. In the scene where Neo is taken into the agent-training simulation, Morpheus explains that technology is not the only enemy, but also the people trapped within. Many of them will defend technology with their lives and unfortunately Cypher was one of those people. His selfishness and desire to return to the Matrix are what catalyze the main conflict of the story, and it is all because he is unable to accept reality. His name references a technological term directly related to ideas of secrecy, making his shady behavior all the more appropriate. Cypher poses a lot of existential questions surrounding the Matrix, i.e. there is no difference between reality and the Matrix to our brains, therefore one might as well live in ignorant bliss inside of the Matrix. According to his dialogue throughout the film, Cypher's acceptance of this line of thinking was spawned by a lack of control that he felt once he had entered the real world. Upon viewing its ugly hopelessness he began to believe that he was "saved" from a world that was filled with less stress, less danger, and less gross food. He then questions his own freedom and the very definition of the term, claiming that the Matrix is freer

than reality based on pure neural experience. It therefore becomes clear that Cypher's character is created as an example of what happens when humanity gives in to the controlling force of technology. He has seen the truth of technology but refuses to accept it because he believes that the pleasures of technology are worth the risk, despite the much larger weight of the risks. Ignorance may be bliss according to Cypher but this line and his discussion about freedom are prime examples of exactly why humanity cannot choose to simply give in. Ted Kaczynski in his manuscript "Industrial Society and Its Future" provides an interesting strategy on how to solve the technological problem in a world filled with people unwilling to break their technological chains:

> "Most people hate psychological conflict. For this reason they avoid doing any serious thinking about difficult social issues, and they like to have such issues presented to them in simple, black-and-white terms: THIS is all good and THAT is all bad. The revolutionary ideology should therefore be developed on two levels.
>
> On the more sophisticated level the ideology should address itself to people who are intelligent, thoughtful and rational. The object should be to create a core of people who will be opposed to the industrial system on a rational, thought-out basis, with full appreciation of the problems and ambiguities involved, and of the price that has to be paid for getting rid of the system. It is particularly important to attract people of this type, as they are capable people and will be instrumental in influencing others...
>
> On a second level, the ideology should be propagated in a simplified form that will enable the unthinking majority to see the conflict of technology vs nature in unambiguous terms. But even on this second level the ideology should not be expressed in language that is so cheap, intemperate or irrational that it alienates people of the thoughtful and rational type. Cheap, intemperate propaganda sometimes achieves impressive short-term gains, but it will be more advantageous in the long run to keep the loyalty of a small number of intelligently committed people than to arouse the passions of an unthinking, fickle mob who will change their attitude as soon as someone comes along with a better propaganda gimmick." (Kaczynski, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, in CT, p. 278-9)

This piece of Kaczynski's master solution sounds like it was directly pulled from the Wachowski's film itself. Just as the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar were doing, he highlights the importance of only involving people whom are capable of handling the knowledge of the truth of technology and can assist in reforming the rest of society. The risk of recruiting those without the intellectual requirements is a potential loss of those people to a more convincing argument, as well as damaging the "core" of those capable of supporting the revolution. Cypher was incorrectly recruited and it left him vulnerable to the convincing argument proposed by Agent Smith, leading

to his betrayal of the rest of the crew and the damaging of their "core". Kaczynski theorized along with many others that the process of regaining independence from technology after being controlled by it for so long was not going to be painless, and Cypher exemplifies this idea for he experiences the truth as painful while the rest of the crew finds their mental freedom to be worth the inherent hardship. He gives up because changing is too hard, but this will once again only lead to an early grave, whether it be physical or mental.

The movie presents man and technology as vicious rivals. However their relationship is in fact very ambiguous, and the line between man and technology is heavily blurred. From the names of the characters and their respective meanings to their behavioral and dialogue patterns, the roles of man and technology are constantly questioned and abstracted. A clear example right off the bat is that four of the nine main human protagonists are named after technologically related things: Dozer, Tank, Switch, and Cypher.

Dozer and Tank are brothers, appropriately, as both of their names reference large mobile machinery that exist today. Dozer doesn't play a very important role previous to his demise, although Tank seems to live up to his name as he is difficult to kill (survives Cypher's attack) and packs a big punch (kills Cypher). Ironically however, these characters are also the most human members of the main protagonist group. Their brotherhood gives them a sense of family which none of the other characters are fortunate enough to experience. Tank always provides a little humor in his dialogue and is the closest to shedding a tear for the captured Morpheus among all of the crew members. They both also add a human element simply through their vocal pitch. They tend to have a much wider and realistic range when compared to the robotic and monotonous style of speech spoken by the three main protagonists especially. The Wachowski's also brilliantly explain Dozer and Tanks' human element through their heritage as the only "pure" humans aboard the vessel (that is, they were born in Zion and not grown in the fields nor did they begin life connected to the Matrix). These two then seem to represent individuals that may one day be born in the post-technological apocalypse should it ever occur. It seems that the Wachowski's hold the belief that given a technological apocalypse, humans born without ,the immediate influence or manipulative force of technology will be weaker (Dozer was the second to die) and less equipped for adapting to the new full technological world (Neither are able to enter the Matrix, they're stuck in the real world where humans are severely disadvantaged). Dozer and Tank show the difficulty in attempting to maintain humanity in a world completely controlled by technology. It influences every single aspect of society and creates the norms, therefore anyone acting in a manner which could be described as anti-technology is immediately ostracized.

As for the rest of the crew, they appear to play much more technological characters. As the only ones capable of entering and exiting the Matrix, every time that they are inside they are presented wearing very tight black clothing (except for Switch who wears white; a clever nod to her technological name) and dark glasses frequently

hide their human eyes. At first they just seem like cool outfits to impress the 1999 movie audience, but when compared to the clothing of the Agents some interesting observations can be made. All of the Agents are seen wearing a normal professional suit and tie combo making them appear very human next to their black leather opponents. They are usually wearing dark glasses as well, although they are much more appropriate for their roles as literal technology. They both appear to be imitating the other when inside of the Matrix.

This theme of role reversal is shown via not only their appearance but their behavior as well. All of the humans are able to effectively read code presented by the Matrix and understand the situations occurring within, an ability bordering on superhuman from the viewer's perspective. Despite being directly opposed to technology they seldom abstain from using it. If anything this exemplifies a key aspect of the technologically controlled world: the use of technology no longer being voluntary. Humans must use technology to both survive and fight the very system that created each machine. The members of the crew also all refer to the main protagonist as Neo, a programmer nickname given to him presumably from inside the Matrix. The Agents on the other hand always refer to him as Mr. Anderson, his actual name passed down from his parents (assuming they were real, even if still connected to the Matrix, and not just implanted memories).

Focusing only on the two main characters of the film, Mr. Smith and Neo, their individual characters' evolutionary paths mirror each other beautifully. Mr. Smith is nothing special in the beginning of the film. He has no name nor any incredibly defining features which might separate him from the rest of the Agents. This is appropriate considering his role as a computer program; he is simply an amalgamation of numbers and code, nothing more. As the film progresses however he begins to exhibit more and more human behavior. In his very first scene even, he visually expresses disgust when saying the word "computers" to Neo, a reaction that is hardly expected from a computer program. Eventually it is learned that he actually has a name and that it is a much more human name than any of the humans'. He slowly becomes a leader of other programs and develops a plan to do something which only humans had previously desired: escaping the Matrix. In a dramatic scene where Mr. Smith is torturing Morpheus, he reveals his true plan using words like "honest", "hate", and "stink", all of which reference exclusively human emotions. The fact that Mr. Smith, a computer program, expresses such feelings implies a transformation into a more human character.

Neo begins as a typical enslaved human, unaware of the grip that technology has on his life. But as the film progresses, and as he learns how to fully control the technological beast, he appears to turn into a machine himself. In fact, in a scene where Neo is literally being transformed by training programs fed directly into his brain, Tank comments on how long Neo has been in the chair absorbing information saying, "Ten hours in. He's a machine." By the end he has become the most powerful human ever which ironically entails seeing the simulation of the Matrix as simple code able to be manipulated. His transformation into "The One" takes him from a typical human to a black-leather-

wearing, emotionless and merciless being, but only when inside of the Matrix (the technological domain).

This mixed reversal of roles is interesting, but what is it trying to say about technology? Perhaps instead of a warning, it is further subtle commentary on the relentlessly permeating nature of technology. Jacques Ellul discusses this characteristic of technology with great clarity in his book *The Technological Society.*

> "Another relationship exists between technique and the machine, and this relationship penetrates to the very core of the problem of our civilization. It is said (and everyone agrees) that the machine has created an inhuman atmosphere. The machine, so characteristic of the nineteenth century, made an abrupt entrance into a society which, from the political, institutional, and human points of view, was not made to receive it; and man has had to put up with it as best as he can. Men now live in conditions that are less than human. Consider the concentration of our great cities, the slums...Think of our dehumanized factories, our unsatisfied senses, our working women, our estrangement from nature. Life in such an environment has no meaning. Consider our public transportation, in which man is less important than a parcel; our hospitals, in which he is only a number. Yet we call this progress..." (Ellul, *Technological Society*, p. 4-5)

Ellul makes it very clear that one of technology's important properties is that it changes everything it touches into technology, and because technology has been welcomed with such open arms into our society it has been allowed to run amok and turn everything from public transportation to how we think into a mechanistic version of itself. As the movie suggests, eventually it may permeate so deeply that humans themselves will be indistinguishable from technology. It has turned Neo and the rest of the humans into monotone emotionless beings incapable of surviving without technology. Even if in the end they were able to begin the dismantling of the technological system, they can never escape how technology has changed their very minds.

From the very beginning we are disadvantaged, just as Neo, but all we require is someone else to show us the truth so that we may begin to change our thought processes and confront the problems technology has brought. This film does an excellent job of exploring not just one but many possible futures of our technological society, as well as revealing the true state of affairs today. Despite being released 16 years ago the themes presented in The Matrix still ring very true and should be discussed with application to our own world, lest we end up as coppertops ourselves.

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