*The Matrix* Study Guide Science Fiction/Fantasy

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever had a dream that you were so sure was real? What if you couldn't awaken? How would you know the difference between dream and reality? When a beautiful stranger (Carrie Ann Moss) leads computer hacker Neo (Keanu Reeves) to a forbidding underworld, he discovers the shocking truth--the life he knows is the elaborate deception of an evil cyber-intelligence. Neo joins legendary and dangerous rebel warrior Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) in the battle to destroy the illusion enslaving humanity. Now, every move, every second, every thought becomes a fight to stay alive--to escape The Matrix.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Matrix, released in 1999, snuck up on a lot of people. Several trailers and TV commercials were released, but with little or no information available on the creators or story, little hype had built up. People were intrigued both by the unique visuals and by the "mysterious" flavor of the trailers, which gave almost nothing of the story away. A stylish blend of intense action, precise martial arts mayhem, and a multi-layered storyline blew initial audiences away. No one knew what to expect, and still they had their expectations shattered.

The Matrix was a box office smash, set records for DVD sales (first DVD to sell 1 million copies), and won four Oscars - Best Visual Effects, Best Film Editing, Best Sound, and Best Sound Effects Editing. The wirework, unusual in North American films (though popular in Japan), lent a distinct sense of unreality to many scenes. Special Effects innovations, such as "Bullet Time", were copied repeatedly for movies, TV shows, and commercials. The impact of The Matrix on filmmaking was growing, and continues to grow with the release of the 2 sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Pre-Research

Neo

Trinity

Morpheus

Cypher

Oracle

Zion

Matrix

Epistemology

Dystopia

Descartes

Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*

Gnosticism

Buddhism (samsara)

Nebuchadnezzar

Free Will

Determinism

During Viewing In addition to answering the following questions, take notes on possible symbols. Remember, a symbol is a tangible thing that represents an abstract idea.

1. Watch the set design of the first few scenes (a dark hotel, a chase across the rooftops, a dark city street). How do these set designs establish the film’s mood and its effect(s)?
2. Describe the Agents’ costumes. How do their costumes characterize them?
3. Why does Neo seek Morpheus? What is the question that Neo wonders? What does he seek?
4. In short, paraphrase in your own words what the matrix is.
5. In short, explain Morpheus and his followers’ goal.
6. Summarize what Morpheus explains to Neo about “scorching the sky” and the rise of the machines.
7. Why do the machines need humans? Why do the machines need the Matrix?
8. What does the Oracle tell Neo? Why?

Post Viewing Discussion

1. Can someone be enslaved if they don't know it? Explain.
2. If we are in a “matrix” but don't know it, is it a bad thing? Why or why not?
3. In the movie's context where “reality” is dark, cold, and desperate, would you rather be Neo or Cypher? Why? Neo chooses the truth; Cypher believes that ignorance is bliss.
4. Do we live in a matrix? Discuss how our society enslaves us.

Post Viewing Assignments

1. Trace Neo’s Hero’s Journey.

2. Choose one of the following essays. Read it thoroughly, looking up any vocabulary and concepts. Write a one-two page reaction paper discussing the essay in detail. Use concrete details from the film and the essay in your paper.

The Matrix and Philosophy (essays) <https://cdn.mashreghnews.ir/old/files/fa/news/1392/9/25/459414_291.pdf>

Essay #1 “Computers, Caves, and Oracles: Neo and Socrates” by William Irwin

Essay #2 “The Metaphysics of the Matrix” by Jorge JE Garcia and Jonathan J. Sanford

Essay #3 “The Religion of the Matrix and the Problems of Pluralism” by Gregory Bassham

Essay #4 “Real Genre and Virtual Philosophy” by Deborah Knight and George McKnight

**DREAM SKEPTICISM[[3]](#footnote-3)**

**MORPHEUS: Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real?**

Neo has woken up from a hell of a dream -- the dream that was his life. How was he to know? The cliché is that if you are dreaming and you pinch yourself, you will wake up. Unfortunately, things aren't quite that simple. It is the nature of most dreams that we take them for reality – while dreaming we are unaware that we are in fact in a dreamworld. Of course, we eventually wake up, and when we do we realize that our experience was all in our mind. Neo's predicament makes one wonder, though: how can any of us be sure that we have ever *genuinely*woken up? Perhaps, like Neo prior to his downing the red pill, our dreams thus far have in fact been dreams *within* a dream. The idea that what we take to be the real world could all be just a dream is familiar to many students of philosophy, poetry, and literature. Most of us, at one time or another, have been struck with the thought that we might mistake a dream for reality, or reality for a dream. Arguably the most famous exponent of this worry in the Western philosophical tradition is the seventeenth century French philosopher Rene Descartes. In an attempt to provide a firm foundation for knowledge, he began his *Meditations* by clearing the philosophical ground through doubting all that could be doubted. This was done, in part, in order to determine if anything that could count as certain knowledge could survive such rigorous and systematic skepticism. Descartes takes the first step towards this goal by raising (through his fictional narrator) the possibility that we might be dreaming:

*How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events -- that I am here in my dressing gown, sitting by the fire -- when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep. (Meditations, 13)*

When we dream we are often blissfully ignorant that we are dreaming. Given this, and the fact that dreams often seem as vivid and "realistic" as real life, how can you rule out the possibility that you might be dreaming even now, as you sit at your computer and read this? This is the kind of perplexing thought Descartes forces us to confront. It seems we have no justification for the belief that we are not dreaming. If so, then it seems we similarly have no justification in thinking that the world we experience is the real world. Indeed, it becomes questionable whether we are justified in thinking that *any*of our beliefs are true. The narrator of Descartes' *Meditations* worries about this, but he ultimately maintains that the possibility that one might be dreaming cannot by itself cast doubt on all we think we know; he points out that even if all our sensory experience is but a dream, we can still conclude that we have *some* knowledge of the nature of reality. Just as a painter cannot create *ex nihilo* but must rely on pigments with which to create her image, certain elements of our thought must exist prior to our imaginings Among the items of knowledge that Descartes thought survived dream skepticism are truths arrived at through the use of reason, such as the truths of mathematics: "For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides." (14) While such an insight offers little comfort to someone wondering whether the people and objects she confronts are genuine, it served Descartes' larger philosophical project: he sought, among other things, to provide a foundation for knowledge in which truths arrived at through reason are given priority over knowledge gained from the senses. (This bias shouldn't surprise those who remember that Descartes was a brilliant mathematician in addition to being a philosopher.) Descartes was not himself a skeptic -- he employs this skeptical argument so as to help remind the reader that the truths of mathematics (and other truths of reason) are on firmer ground than the data provided to us by our senses. Despite the fact that Descartes' ultimate goal was to demonstrate how genuine knowledge is possible, he proceeds in *The Meditations* to utilize a much more radical skeptical argument, one that casts doubt on even his beloved mathematical truths. In the next section we will see that, many years before the Wachowskis dreamed up *The Matrix,* Descartes had imagined an equally terrifying possibility.

**THE VALUE OF REALITY: CYPHER & THE EXPERIENCE MACHINE**

**CYPHER: You know, I know that this steak doesn’t exist. I know when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, do you know what I’ve realized? Ignorance is bliss.**Cypher is not a nice guy, but is he an unreasonable guy? Is he right to want to get re-inserted into the Matrix? Many want to say no, but giving reasons for why his choice is a bad one is not an easy task. After all, so long as his experiences will be pleasant, how can his situation be worse than the inevitably crappy life he would lead outside of the Matrix? What could matter beyond the quality of his experience? Remember, once he's back in, living his fantasy life, he won't even know he made the deal. What he doesn't know can't hurt him, right? Is feeling good the only thing that has value in itself? The question of whether only conscious experience can ultimately matter is one that has been explored in depth by several contemporary philosophers. In the course of discussing this issue in his 1971 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*

Robert Nozick introduced a "thought experiment" that has become a staple of introductory philosophy classes everywhere. It is known as "the experience machine":

*Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduperneuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank with electrodes attached to your brain.*

*Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's desires?..Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside? (43)*

Nozick goes on to argue that other things do matter to us: For instance, that we actually do certain things, as opposed to simply have the experience of doing them. Also, he points out that we value being (and becoming) certain kinds of people. I don't just want to have the experience of being a decent person, I want to actually be a decent person. Finally, Nozick argues that we value contact with reality in itself, independent of any benefits such contact may bring through pleasant experience: we want to know we are experiencing the real thing. In sum, Nozick thinks that it matters to most of us, often in a rather deep way, that we be the authors of our lives and that our lives involve interacting with the world, and he thinks that the fact that most people would not choose to enter into such an experience machine demonstrates that they do value these other things. As he puts it: "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." (44) While Nozick's description of his machine is vague, it appears that there is at least one important difference between it and the simulated world of The Matrix. Nozick implies that someone hooked up to the experience machine will not be able exercise their agency -- they become the passive recipients of preprogrammed experiences. This apparent loss of free will is disturbing to many people, and it might be distorting people's reactions to the case and clouding the issue of whether they value contact with reality per se. The Matrix seems to be set up in such a way that one can enter it and retain one's free will and capacity for decision making, and perhaps this makes it a significantly more attractive option than the experience machine Nozick describes. Nonetheless, a loss of freedom is not the only disturbing aspect of Nozick's story. As he points out, we seem to mourn the loss of contact with the real world as well. Even if a modified experience machine is presented to us, one which allows us to keep our free will but enter into an entirely virtual world, many would still object that permanently going into such a machine involves the loss of something valuable. Cypher and his philosophical comrades are likely to be unmoved by such observations. So what if most people are hung-up on "reality" and would turn down the offer to permanently enter an experience machine? Most people might be wrong. All their responses might show is that such people are superstitious, or irrational, or otherwise confused. Maybe they think something could go wrong with the machines, or maybe they keep forgetting that while in the machine they will no longer be aware of their choice to enter the machine. Perhaps those hesitant to plug-in don't realize that they value being active in the real world only because normally that is the most reliable way for them to acquire the pleasant experience that they value in itself. In other words, perhaps our free will and our capacity to interact with reality are means to a further end -- they matter to us because they allow us access to what really matters: pleasant conscious experience. To think the reverse, that reality and freedom have value in themselves (or what philosophers sometimes call non-derivative or intrinsic value), is simply to put the cart before the horse. After all, Cypher could reply, what would be so great about the capacity to freely make decisions or the ability to be in the real world if neither of these things allowed us to feel good? Peter Unger has taken on these kinds of objections in his own discussion of "experience inducers". He acknowledges that there is a strong temptation when in a certain frame of mind to agree with this kind of Cypher-esque reasoning, but he argues that this is a temptation we ought to try and resist. Cypher's vision of value is too easy and too simplistic. We are inclined to think that only conscious experience can really matter in part because we fall into the grip of a particular picture of what values must be like, and this in turn leads us to stop paying attention to our actual values. We make ourselves blind to the subtlety and complexity of our values, and we then find it hard to understand how something that doesn't affect our consciousness could sensibly matter to us. If we stop and reflect on what we really do care about, however, we come across some surprisingly everyday examples that don't sit easily with Cypher's claims:

*Consider life insurance. To be sure, some among the insured may strongly believe that, if they die before their dependents do, they will still observe their beloved dependents, perhaps from a heaven on high. But others among the insured have no significant belief to that effect... Still, we all pay our premiums. In my case, this is because, even if I will never experience anything that happens to them, I still want things to go better, rather than worse, for my dependents. No doubt, I am rational in having this concern. (Identity, Consciousness, and Value,301)*

As Unger goes on to point out, it seems contrived to chalk up all examples of people purchasinglife insurance to cases in which someone is simply trying to benefit (while alive) from the favorable impression such a purchase might make on the dependents. In many cases it seems ludicrous to deny that "what motivates us, of course, is our great concern for our dependent's future, whether we experience their future or not."(302). This is not a proof that such concern is rational, but it does show that incidents in which we intrinsically value things other than our own conscious experience might be more widespread than we are at first liable to think. (Other examples include the value we place on not being deceived or lied to -- the importance of this value doesn't seem to be completely exhausted by our concern that we might one day become aware of the lies and deception.) Most of us care about a lot of things independently of the experiences that those things provide for us. The realization that we value things other than pleasant conscious experience should lead us to at least wonder if the legitimacy of this kind of value hasn't been too hastily dismissed by Cypher and his ilk. After all, once we see how widespread and commonplace our other non-derivative concerns are, the insistence that conscious experience is the only thing that has value in itself can come to seem downright peculiar. If purchasing life insurance seems like a rationalthing to do, why shouldn't the desire that I experience reality (rather than some illusorysimulation) be similarly rational? Perhaps the best test of the rationality of our most basic value sis actually whether they, taken together, form a consistent and coherent network of attachments and concerns. (Do they make sense in light of each other and in light of our beliefs about the world and ourselves?) It isn't obvious that valuing interaction with the real world fails this kind of test. Of course, pointing out that the value I place on living in the real world coheres well with my other values and beliefs will not quiet the defender of Cypher, as he will be quick to respond that the fact that my values all cohere doesn't show that they are all justified. Maybe I hold a bunch of exquisitely consistent but thoroughly irrational values! The quest for some further justification of my basic values might be misguided, however. Explanations have to come to an end somewhere, as Ludwig Wittgenstein once famouslyremarked. Maybe the right response to a demand for justification here is to point out that the same demand can be made to Cypher: "Just what justifies your exclusive concern with pleasant conscious experience?" It seems as though nothing does -- if such concern is justified it must be somehow self-justifying but if that is possible, why shouldn't our concerns for other people and our desire to live in the real world also be self-justifying? If those can also be self-justifying, then maybe what we don't experience should matter to us, and perhaps what we don't know *can* hurt us...Christopher Grau

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1. http://www.whatisthematrix.com/?matrix4K [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://thematrix101.com/matrix/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.scribd.com/document/44636116/The-Matrix-The-Philosophy-Behind-the-Movie [↑](#footnote-ref-3)