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Computers, Caves, and Oracles: Neo and Socrates

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I tell them that I'm doing fine
Watching shadows on the wall.

— JOHN LENNON

So often times it happens that we live our lives in chains
And we never even know we have the key.

— THE BEATLES

Many people recognize *The Matrix* as a retelling of "the greatest story ever told." The biblical imagery is clear, and the film's release on Easter weekend 1999 supports the intent. Few people recognize *The Matrix* as a retelling of "the greatest story never told," the story of Socrates, an intellectual hero who continued on his quest despite opposition and ultimately paid for his noble defiance with his life.

Why don't most people know one of the greatest stories our culture has to offer? The main reason is that we leave the job of telling the story to college philosophy professors. Not everyone attends college and, sadly, not everyone who attends college takes a philosophy course. While Philosophy 101 is an ideal setting in which to study closely and discuss passionately the life of Socrates, there's no need to wait for an opportunity that may never come. Like the story of Jesus, the story of Socrates should be the subject of children's books, family and classroom discus-

sions, and TV specials. There should be a movie about it. The Wachowski brothers directed Keanu Reeves in a veiled retelling of the tale, but I would cast Steve Martin as the lead in an "unapologetic" Socrates cinematic celebration. Spielberg would direct. *The Matrix* is many things; a retelling of the Socrates story is just one of them, and indeed viewers are certain to miss this element of the film unless they already know the story. If you're unfamiliar with the tale, let this essay be your introduction.

Questions and Missions

"We're on a mission from God," said the Blues Brothers. They had a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, and one hundred and six miles to Chicago. It was dark and they were wearing sunglasses. Their mission? Play a concert to save the orphanage in which they were raised by an "old school" nun, affectionately called the penguin. Neo is on a mission to save the human race from unwitting enslavement to artificial intelligence. Socrates too is on a mission, a mission from (the) God (Apollo), delivered via the Oracle at Delphi to his friend Chaerephon. His mission, should he choose to accept it, is to "wake up" the people of his hometown, Athens.

In a whisper through the din of Rob Zombie in the Goth club from hell, Trinity tells Neo, "It's the question that drives us." Their question: What is the Matrix? Like Neo, Socrates had "a splinter in his mind" and a driving question: What is the good life? Questioning brings trouble to both our heroes. Socrates finds himself on trial, charged with impiety and corrupting the youth, and Neo is accused by the Agents of "committing nearly every cyber crime we have a law for."

Socrates was in the habit of asking his fellow citizens questions, often seemingly straightforward and simple questions whose answers turned out to be elusive. Like a skilled interviewer, Socrates would follow up with more difficult, probing questions which would expose the ignorance of the people he asked. For example, Socrates asks his friend Euthyphro: What is holy? What makes an act holy? Euthyphro's response: "Holiness is what all the gods love and its opposite is what all the gods hate, unholiness" (*Euthyphro* 9e). This seems to be a good answer until Socrates poses the difficult follow-up question, "Is

what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?" (*Euthyphro* 10a) As you can imagine, Euthyphro has a difficult time answering this one and grows annoyed with Socrates. This process of asking questions until the person either contradicts himself or makes a mistake has become known as the Socratic method (as Bill and Ted learned at San Dimas High). Not only does the method of persistent questioning intimidate students (as in *The Paper Chase*) and embarrass politicians (choose your own example), but it made Socrates popular among the socially conscious youth, and despised among the self-interested elite.

Despite what was often perceived as a rather arrogant conversational style, Socrates was utterly humble concerning his knowledge. He claimed ignorance rather than omniscience with his mantra, "I know nothing." Why does a guy who knows nothing question everyone else so intensely? Like Neo, Socrates' excellent adventure is sparked by the words of an oracle and some insight concerning the nature of knowledge and wisdom.

What Did the Oracles Say?

The Oracle told Morpheus he would find the One, the person who would break the grip of the Matrix and free humanity with the truth. Thus Morpheus unplugs Neo, and, after some rehab and Kung Fu Fighting, takes him to the Oracle for confirmation. Neo resists this grand possibility and rejects the idea that his life is fated in any such way, telling Morpheus that he doesn't believe in fate—that he wants to believe he is in control of his life. Socrates was similarly resistant to his fate. At least so he tells us at his trial, recorded by Plato and entitled the *Apology*.

[Chaerephon] was a friend of mine . . . [I]e went to Delphi one day, and went so far as to put this question to the oracle . . . he asked if there was anyone wiser than me; and the priestess of Apollo replied that there was no one wiser. (*Apology* 21a)

When I heard the priestess's reply, my reaction was this: "What on earth is the god saying? What is his hidden meaning? I am well aware that I have no wisdom, great or small. So what can he mean by saying I am so wiser?" (*Apology* 21b)

Indeed, how could it be that no one was wiser than he who claimed to know nothing? Socrates tells us he set out to disprove the prophetic words of the oracle.

What I did was this: I approached one of those who seemed to be wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could prove the reply wrong, and say quite clearly to the oracle, "This man is wiser than I am, whereas you said I was the wisest." (*Apology* 21 c)

Socrates was disappointed upon questioning this man, a politician, to find that the man thought he knew much but really didn't know anything. Persistent by nature, Socrates did not give up but proceeded to question the esteemed playwrights and then the skilled craftsmen of Athens. He was similarly disappointed. Ironically, in realizing his own ignorance Socrates was indeed the wisest man in Athens.

Consequently, Socrates took it as his divine charge to question his fellow citizens, to expose them to their own ignorance so that they might wake up and join him in seeking knowledge.

It is as if the city, to use a slightly absurd simile, were a horse—a large horse, high minded, but which because of its size is somewhat sluggish, and needs to be stung into action by some kind of horsefly. I think god has caused me to settle on the city as this horsefly, the sort that never stops, all day long, coming to rest on every part of you, stinging each one of you into action, and persuading and criticizing each one of you. (*Apology* 30e)

Like a pest, a horsefly (or gnat), with constant questioning Socrates aimed to awaken the city at large to the truth—that the glue factory, not bliss, awaits those who rest in idle ignorance.

The homes of the two Oracles are quite different. According to mythology, Zeus released one eagle from the east and another from the west to find the center of the world. They flew until they impaled each other in mid air above a spot in Delphi, thus declared the omphalos, or navel, of the world. At Delphi, a place of majestic beauty at the foot of Mt. Parnassus, Apollo spoke through his priestess, the Oracle, known also as the Pythia. Morpheus takes Neo, not to the omphalos of the world, but into the heart of the Matrix, to a place as unlike Mt.

Parnassus as possible, an inner-city tenement, the home of an unlikely Oracle.

Neo, very unsure of himself asks Morpheus, "She knows what? . . . Everything?" Morpheus responds, "She would say she knows enough." Neo, still skeptical, asks, "And she's never wrong?" Morpheus with aloof, paradoxical assurance replies, "Try not to think of it in terms of right and wrong. She is a guide, Neo. She can help you to find the path."

A visitor to the temple of Apollo at Delphi, after making the appropriate sacrifices and payments, would ask his (no women allowed) question of one of the Oracle's assistants who would ask it of the priestess. Seated on a tripod, the priestess would inhale the breath of Apollo, the fumes (probably ethylene) emanating from a chasm in the earth. Like a midnight toker at Woodstock, the priestess of Apollo would prophesy by speaking in tongues. A priest would then interpret the incoherent babbling and usually put it in hexameter verse. Like the sage advice one gets from calling 1-900-PSYCHIC, the prophecies of the Oracle were usually vague and open to more than one possible interpretation. Socrates, as we know, found puzzling the Oracle's declaration that there was no one wiser than he. Knowing the Oracle's reputation for cryptic prophecies though, he set out to disprove it, only to discover its ironic meaning. Less wise was King Croesus, who wanted to know of the Oracle whether it was an auspicious time for him to make war against the Persians. The Oracle's response was, "If you go into battle now a great kingdom will be destroyed." Taking this as terrific news the King led his troops to war and to the slaughter. He had no genuine grounds of complaint to the Oracle who simply pointed out that he was mistaken about *which* kingdom she had meant.

The Oracle of *The Matrix* not only lives in a rough part of the virtual city, she is a grandmotherly black woman—"not what you expected," much as the Pythia were, for a time, selected from women over 50 rather than from virginal maidens whose virtue would be less secure. Unlike her Delphic counterpart, the inner city Oracle meets face to face with those who seek her. And despite the fact that, sitting on a tripod, she blissfully breathes the cookie fumes issuing from her oven and inhales smoke from her cigarette, she does not speak in tongues. But

don't let that fool you; her message, though apparently plain, is Pythian in its purpose. Oddly, this Oracle asks the questions. "You know why you're here?" "What do you think? Do you think you're the one?" Neo responds, "I don't know." Socrates had always claimed not to know, but Neo really does not know. As the Oracle quips, he's cute but not too bright. She allows him to conclude for himself that he is not the One and tells him that being the One is like being in love. No one can tell you. "You know it through and through, balls to bones." A poor consolation, she tells him, "You got the gift, but it looks like you're waiting for something." "What?" he asks? Her prophetic reply: "Your next life maybe. Who knows? That's the way these things go."

The Oracle is without malice though, and even offers some free advice in the course of their session. Pointing to a sign above her kitchen door she asks Neo if he knows what it says. It's Latin, she tells him, it means "Know Thyself." This wisdom is in fact the key to making sense of the Oracle's prophecy. The same phrase was inscribed in Greek, γνώθι σεαυτόν, (rather than the "barbaric" Latin, "Tenebre Morte") in the temple of Apollo at Delphi, and it was surely more important in interpreting any Pythian prophecy than the actual answer given by the Oracle. Socrates realized this and lived by the related maxim "The unexamined life is not worth living." Cocky King Croesus did not know himself, as we saw, and paid dearly for it. Only in time does Neo come to know himself, and thus believe in himself, and thus fulfill the depth of the Oracle's prophecy—which includes Morpheus finding the One and Trinity falling in love with a dead man who is the One.

Self knowledge is the key, and without it we can unlock no other knowledge worth having. This is a theme important not just to Socrates and *The Matrix* but to other outstanding philosophical films. *Fight Club* poses the seemingly adolescent question, "How much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?" We see, however, as the plot and the "fight" develop, this is not a morose, testosteric query. We gain self-knowledge through struggle. Consider also *Boys Don't Cry* with Brandon's deception of himself and others and the disastrous consequences this brings. Finally, *Memoria* wrestles with the perplexing question: How is it possible for me to lie to myself? Is memory loss part of the answer? Hollywood and Athens agree, the unexamined life is not worth living.

To complete our look at the urban Oracle, consider another piece of wisdom inscribed at Delphi and practiced in the kitchen, "Nothing in excess" (μηδὲν ἄγαν). "Here, take a cookie," the Oracle says to Neo, not "take some cookies" or "take as many cookies as your heart desires." We know they smell good, perhaps tempting Neo to overindulge. The Oracle is also drinking something strange (quite likely an adult beverage) and smoking a cigarette. Presumably, she can indulge in these things without going to excess. This is in stark contrast to humanity in general, described by Agent Smith as a virus that spreads, using up all the resources in an area before it moves on.

Legend has it that there was a time when the fumes that inspired the Oracle at Delphi were available to all, but the people abused the privilege and harmed themselves, jumping into the hole from which the fumes emanated. In time the Pythia alone was allowed to inhale "the breath of Apollo," and a priest-interpreter had to hear her prophecy and put it into verse for consumption by the seeker, who was thus two levels removed from the god. If fully digested, the wisdom of "Know thyself" and "Nothing in excess" might allow the chosen One to tell the truth to the many. Perhaps then all could "inhale the prophetic smoke" and commune with the god for themselves.

A Tale of Two Caves

Morpheus tells Neo he was "Born into a prison for [his] mind." Even slaves, prisoners of war, and concentration camp victims sometimes manage to keep their minds free. "They may have my body but they'll never have my mind." This resistance to slavery and imprisonment has been implemented through the ages by countless heroes such as Epictetus, Frederick Douglass, Viktor Frankl, James Bond Stockdale, Nelson Mandela, John McCain, Malcolm X, and Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, to name a few. The only thing worse than a prison for your mind would be a prison for your mind you didn't know you were in, a prison from which, therefore, you would have no urge to escape. How would a person in such a prison even recognize if he were self-free?

"Suppose one of them were set free and forced suddenly to stand up, turn his head and walk with his eyes lifted to the light,

all these movements would be painful, and he would be too dazzled to make out the objects whose shadows he had been used to seeing. What do you think he would say, if someone told him what he had formerly seen was meaningless illusion, but now, being somewhat nearer to reality and turned towards more real objects, he was getting a truer view? . . . Would he not be perplexed and believe the objects now shown him to be not so real as what he formerly saw?" These lines are from Plato's *Republic* (514c-d) in which Plato tells a story known as the allegory of the cave (also variously called the simile, myth, or parable of the cave) (514a-521b). The account, however, serves just as well to describe Neo's predicament upon being freed from the Matrix.

The prisoners in the cave are chained by the neck, hands, and legs. They have been this way since birth and so have no conception of any other way of life. Shadows appear on the wall in front of them, as their fathers pass animal figures before the light of a fire in the manner of a puppet show. The prisoners watch shadows on a wall, shadows not of real animals but of carved figures. The light that makes these shadows possible is firelight, not the best possible kind of light, sunlight. Yet these prisoners do not know that they are prisoners and do not suspect there is any reality but that which they experience. One day, however, one of the prisoners is set free of his chains, is dragged to the outside world, and by the light of the sun beholds things as they actually are. Rather than selfishly remaining in the outside world, the prisoner returns to tell the others, who reward his kindness with mockery and resistance, believing he has gone insane.

This story parallels the life of Plato's teacher,¹ Socrates, who was thought mad and ultimately put to death for trying to draw attention to a higher plane of reality. Of course it also parallels the story of Neo, who one day is freed from the Matrix to behold "the desert of the real." Like Plato's prisoner, Neo finds himself in chains or, more precisely, black cable wires that stimulate the

¹ Plato uses his teacher Socrates as a character in his writings, including the allegory of the cave in *The Republic*. For a discussion of the complicated connection between Plato and Socrates see my "Terry and Socrates: The Examined Life" in *Sartre and Philosophy: A Book about Being and Nothingness* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), pp. 3-5.

illusory shadow show of the Matrix. Who frees the prisoner in Plato's allegory is unclear, though in *The Matrix* it is Morpheus (in Greek mythology the name of the God of sleep, who brings changes in shape via dreams). Like Plato's prisoner who must be dragged upward, Neo is at first horrified by the sight of the other unwriting prisoners who slumber, plugged in goopy pink cave-pods. Neo does not want to accept that what he now sees is real, that previously he had been living in a dream world. "Most of these people are not ready to be unplugged," Morpheus assures him. Like Plato's prisoner's gradual, painful period of adjustment to the world outside the cave, Neo's rehab is painful. "Why do my eyes hurt?" Neo asks. "Because you've never used them," Morpheus replies.

"The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet," wrote Aristotle. And we do well to keep in mind that "education" literally, etymologically, means "to lead out," as the prisoner is led out of the cave and as Neo is led out of the Matrix. The Hippocratic Oath reminds physicians that they are guardians and trustees, not owners, of medical knowledge. They must share the knowledge to help others. No solemn oath binds those who receive education in philosophy, though the duty to share is no less attendant. Plato's escaped prisoner would prefer to bask in the light of the sun, of goodness and knowledge, but he returns to help others: "Would he not feel like Homer's Achilles, that he would far sooner 'be on earth as a hired servant in the house of a landless man' or endure anything rather than go back to his old beliefs and live in the old way?" (*Republic* 515d) Neo, unlike Cypher, would similarly endure anything rather than return to a false reality.

Knowledge and Reality

The allegory of the cave is not only, or even most importantly, a veiled retelling of the Socrates story. Rather Plato uses it to point to, and encourage openness in the reader to, a higher level of reality, the Forms. We—all of us—are like the prisoners, for we often mistakenly suppose that the reality in which we live is the truest and highest reality there is. According to Plato, all we actually experience at the level of reality available through our five senses, are poor imitations of a higher level of reality, the Forms. We may experience beautiful sunsets, just

actions, and really good noodles, but all of these things are mere imitations of the perfect Forms, copies of Beauty itself, Justice itself, Goodness itself, and so on.

What "splinter in the mind" could rouse a person to seek the Forms? And how can they be known? Plato and Socrates teach the importance of understanding not through the senses but through the intellect alone. Morpheus tells Neo that no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to "see it for yourself." As with the Forms, it is not a literal "seeing" but a direct knowing that brings understanding of the Matrix. This essay cannot truly teach you what the Forms are, not even reading Plato can. This is part of the challenge and frustration of Plato's dialogues. One finds oneself asking, What is Justice? What is Love? What is Goodness? What, after all, is a Form? It was asking such questions that landed Socrates in trouble. So read and proceed with caution.

Neo too learns that intellect is more important than the senses. Mind is more important than matter. As for Plato the physical is not as real as the Form, so for Neo "there is no spoon." Neo is the reincarnation of the man who freed the first humans. Plato held that the intellect and body are so alien to one another that their union at birth traumatically engenders loss of memory, a kind of amnesia. This is not the total loss of memory Cypher traitorously deals for, but rather the kind one might suffer after drinking too much of Dozer's Lethic moonshine. The details can come back with the right prompting and clues. For Plato, *déjà vu* is not evidence of a glitch in the Matrix but a recollection (*anamnesis*) of the Forms. In the time between incarnations, when the soul is free of the body, we behold the Forms. On the earthly plane all learning is actually a process of recollection in which we recall the Forms, cued in by the resemblance mundane objects bear to them. A child does not need to be taught that a flower is pretty, for example, but knows it through recollection of the Form of Beauty itself and the flower's share in it.

Philosophy: The Road Less Traveled

In the car, on the way to see Morpheus, Neo considers turning back, but Trinity forces the moment to its crisis. "You have been down there, Neo. You know that road. You know exactly where

it ends, and I know that is not where you want to be." One cannot help but think of Robert Frost's famous lines, "I took the one less traveled by / And that has made all the difference." We must wonder just how many people this favorite yearbook quotation and valdictory allusion truly fits. After all it would have to be a super highway, and there would still be a traffic jam, if everyone who ever claimed the verse for his or her own actually lived it.

The red pill is a new symbol of bold choice, and most people insist they would take it if they were in Neo's shoes. So at the conclusion of my introduction to philosophy course I invite my students to inhale the fumes from one of my classroom writing implements, the red marker or the blue marker. If they inhale the red marker they will major in philosophy and "see how far down the rabbit hole goes." If they inhale the blue marker they will return to their previously chosen major and forget they had ever given thought to questions that matter and mysteries of the universe. Most are amusingly annoyed. They would like to think there is no such choice. No one really majors in philosophy—it's just too impractical. But, in truth, a select few cannot resist the lure of knowledge and reality.²

² Thanks to all my friends and students who offered me their insights on *The Matrix*.