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Popping a Bitter Pill: Existential Authenticity in *The Matrix* and *Nausea*

JENNIFER L. McMAHON

Early in *The Matrix* the main character, Neo, is faced with an existential choice. This choice is encapsulated quite literally in a choice between a red and a blue pill. Neo is given the pills by the character, Morpheus, immediately after Morpheus tells Neo that what he believes to be the world is instead a fabrication "that has been pulled over [his] eyes to blind [him] from the truth." Morpheus informs Neo that if he takes the red pill the true nature of things will be revealed, whereas if he takes the blue pill his perception of things will remain unchanged. Given their opposite effects, the pills represent the means through which Neo can either elect to wake from his slumber or sustain his dream. Thus, Neo's choice between the red and blue pills symbolizes the existential choice between living honestly and living in ignorance. Neo swallows the red pill and the plot unfolds.

Virtually all existential philosophers speak at length of the sort of choice Neo makes between honesty and ignorance, or truth and illusion. Though some use different terminology, they tend to describe it as a choice between authenticity and inauthenticity. Existentialists define authenticity as a state in which the individual is aware of the true nature of the human condition. In contrast, inauthenticity is defined as a state in which the individual is either ignorant of the true nature of reality or in denial with respect to it. The existentialist view is that existence

is without any inherent purpose or underlying design. Existentialists assert that humans invest the world with order and meaning. They stress the freedom implied by, and the responsibility that accompanies this investiture, as well as the anxiety it can elicit. Common themes that existential philosophers discuss include absurdity, alienation, anguish, and authenticity. While Neo's choice involves a number of these items, it is most clearly a choice between authenticity and inauthenticity.

When describing authenticity and inauthenticity, existentialist philosophers tend to privilege authenticity over inauthenticity. For example, prominent existentialists such as Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger,[1] and Jean-Paul Sartre clearly elevate authenticity and scorn inauthenticity. In their philosophic works, these individuals describe inauthenticity in uniformly negative terms. Sartre refers to inauthenticity as bad faith.[2] Camus describes it as intellectual suicide.[3] Heidegger asserts that living inauthentically not only leads to "the levelling down of all possibilities,"(*Being and Time*, p. 119) but also to "the phasing out of the possible as such" (p. 181). In contrast, these existentialist philosophers describe an authentic lifestyle positively as one that is courageous, full of "majesty" ("Absurd Reasoning," p. 40) and "free of illusions"(*Being and Time*, p. 245). Oddly, despite the positive terms that existentialists use to describe authenticity, their literary portraits of characters who approximate or achieve it are discouraging, if not downright depressing. Whereas inauthentic characters are described as existing in tranquil ignorance, characters approaching authenticity are

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[1] Admittedly, Heidegger's assertion in *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) that "the inauthenticity of *Dasein* does not signify a *lesser* or *lower* degree of being" (p. 40) has led some to question whether Heidegger actually privileges authenticity over inauthenticity. However, it seems evident that this assertion is made to clarify that authenticity and inauthenticity are modes of the same being rather than two categorically different types of being. Importantly, asserting that authenticity and inauthenticity are modes of the same being does not preclude Heidegger from considering one as a superior mode. Heidegger's negative descriptions of inauthenticity make it clear that he sees it as inferior.

[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956).

[3] Albert Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning," in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1955).

depicted as anxious, alienated, and bordering on insanity. Because of the preponderance of such depictions, existential literature seems to suggest that the movement toward authenticity entails anguish, social dislocation, and sometimes madness. These consequences compel one to ask whether authenticity is indeed preferable to inauthenticity. Though authenticity may represent an honest awareness of the human condition, perhaps ignorance is bliss. Perhaps it is better to choose the blue pill. In what follows, I shall examine authenticity and inauthenticity and the benefits and burdens of each. I shall use *The Matrix* and Sartre's existential novel *Nausea* to support my claims, as characters in these works illustrate the pros and cons of both states. Though this essay will question the appeal of authenticity, it will conclude with an argument for it. Despite the challenge it represents, I shall argue that the benefits of authenticity outweigh its burdens and that a unique sort of serenity can be achieved in this state. I shall argue for the red pill.

Red or Blue? Neo and Cypher concerning Authenticity and Ignorance

Like the classics of existential literature, the popular film *The Matrix* illustrates both the unpleasant consequences of authenticity and the appeal of inauthenticity. This film depicts a future state when, after a long and world-ravaging conflict, computers conquer the human race and enslave it as their energy source. The Matrix is the virtual reality created by the computers that both placates, and maximizes the energy output from, the human subjects who lie captive in a vast complex of energy pods. While the billions inside the Matrix exist in blissful ignorance of their true condition (as immobilized, expendable energy cells for the artificial intelligence that dominates earth), a small number of individuals are free of its digital illusion. Unlike their captive counterparts, these individuals are painfully aware of humanity's authentic state. They constitute a resistance force that seeks to undermine the oppression by the Matrix. As a result, they live on the run from the computers that attempt to annihilate them. While the philosophic implications of *The Matrix* are numerous, the liberation of the character, Neo, and the choice made by the character, Cypher, illustrate the point addressed here concerning authenticity.

The character Neo illustrates the agony that accompanies the move to, and the achievement of, authenticity. Ensconced in the Matrix since birth, Neo exists unaware that the world in which he finds himself is an illusion. However, with the aid of Morpheus and his band of rebels, Neo is brought out of captivity. Rescued from his pod, Neo is like the prisoner brought from Plato's cave.[1] He too is brought from ignorance to enlightenment. Like the prisoner's emancipation, Neo's liberation from ignorance is painful. He experiences both physical and mental anguish. Neo's eyes hurt because he has "never used them before." His lifetime of captivity has left his body atrophied. Indeed, his limbs are so emaciated they require extensive electronic stimulation to give them sufficient strength to afford mobility. Though the physical pain that Neo experiences is acute, arguably the mental anguish is more severe. Indeed, he experiences a sort of cognitive shock. Morpheus apologizes to Neo for the mental anguish he endures, admitting that rescues of adults from the Matrix are rare because the psychological trauma is too great for most to endure. Ultimately, Neo's liberation from the virtual world of the Matrix compels him to admit that everything he believed to be real was an illusion. Worse yet, as Morpheus welcomes him "to the desert of the real," Neo realizes that reality is more terrible than he had ever imagined. Neo's experience turns his understanding upside down. It disorients him, pains him, and hands him more responsibility—and more "truth"—than he ever had or wanted.

Where Neo was freed late from the Matrix, Cypher was liberated when he was relatively young. Thus, he lives most of his life aware of the true nature of the human condition. In the film, Cypher illustrates the attraction of inauthenticity by opting for ignorance. After enduring years underground in harsh conditions, in perpetual fear of annihilation, and with little hope of improvement in his state, Cypher finds himself unable to bear his existence any longer. Consequently, he sells out Morpheus and the rest of his rebel companions for the opportunity to have his memory erased and his body returned to the Matrix. Over a virtual dinner with Agent Smith who arranges for his return,

[1] See Chapter 1 of this volume for a thorough comparison of Neo and Plato's prisoner.

Cypher explains his choice, stating, "I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth the Matrix tells my brain it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I've realized?—ignorance is bliss."

Though we scorn Cypher for his choice, we can also sympathize with him. The apocalyptic reality with which he is faced is distressing to imagine, let alone admit. After all, who among us would choose a life spent in subterranean passages, under perpetual threat, where every meal represents the eternal recurrence of viscous gag-eliciting goop? While Cypher forfeits autonomy, honesty, and the opportunity for genuine experiences and human connections to return to virtual world of the Matrix, his choice will alleviate the extreme anxiety and discomfort that accompany authenticity. In his shoes, we too might opt for the illusion.

Sartre on Stomaching Existence

In his novel *Nausea*, existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre illustrates that the circumstances need not be those of science fiction for authenticity to seem unbearable or inauthenticity to present itself as a refuge. Where the characters and circumstances in *The Matrix* are extraordinary, Sartre's novel chronicles an ordinary man's discovery that existence is not as he assumed. In *Nausea*, the main character, Roquentin, comes reluctantly to an awareness of the true nature of reality. Where Neo possesses fantastic abilities and is characterized essentially as a savior, Sartre goes to great lengths to emphasize Roquentin's averageness. Roquentin is a historian of no acclaim. He writes books and frequents cafés. He lives in a rather mundane city in 1930s France. He is of modest means. He has a small and nondescript apartment. Indeed, the only thing unusual about Roquentin is his shocking red hair. Similarly, this common man's enlightenment begins not with a thrilling hovercraft rescue from gelatinous incarceration, but after a disquieting experience at the beach where the presence of a pebble in his hand engenders disgust and intractable fear. Unable to shake the disturbing feelings that this experience generates, Roquentin states, "something has happened to me."[5] Though he tries to dismiss his response to

[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 2.

the stone as "a passing moment of madness," (*Nausea*, p. 2) subsequent experiences lead Roquentin—and readers—to wonder whether he is going insane.

As we learn, Roquentin's experience with the pebble is just the beginning. Rather than improve, Roquentin's situation gets worse. Indeed, for Roquentin it appears that the bizarre has become commonplace as his mundane existence takes on a hallucinogenic quality. Similar to the experience Neo has upon ingesting the red pill, Roquentin's perceptions become increasingly distorted. For example, upon taking a friend's hand in greeting, Roquentin drops it in horror because it feels like "a fat white worm" (p. 4). Similarly, he is paralyzed by fear when he grabs a door-knob and it seems to grab him back and hold his attention "with a sort of personality" (p. 4). These experiences prompt Roquentin's confidence in reality to slip and he begins to think that, "nothing can ever be proved" (p. 13). When Roquentin looks in the mirror to get his bearings, he finds no solace. He finds no comfort because when he looks he, "understand[s] nothing of [his] face" (p. 16). Instead, he sees only something "on the fringe of the vegetable-world, at the level of jellyfish . . . the insipid flesh blossoming and palpitating with abandon" (p. 17). Likewise, when Roquentin looks at his hand and sees instead a crustacean, the impression is so intolerable that he stabs himself in the hand (p. 100).

As a result of his experiences, Roquentin's life becomes strangely disconcerting. It loses its order and continuity. Roquentin describes his life as becoming "jerky, [and] incoherent" (p. 5). He states anxiously, "nothing seemed true; I felt surrounded by cardboard scenery which could quickly be removed" (p. 77). As his perceptions repeatedly defy his conventional understanding, Roquentin's world dissolves around him. For example, while riding the tramway Roquentin struggles to stay calm as a simple seat cushion takes on the appearance of the bloated belly of a dead animal. He agonizes, "things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to . . . say anything about them. I am in the midst of things, nameless things . . . defenceless" (p. 125). Not surprisingly, Roquentin's experiences cause him to feel increasingly isolated, disoriented, and "full of anguish" (p. 55).

Though it appears that Roquentin is losing touch with reality, at the end of *Nausea* it becomes evident that he is, in fact, becoming aware of its true nature. As Sartre makes clear, what Roquentin's experiences reveal is that "the diversity of things, their individuality, [are] only an appearance, a veneer" (p. 127). Roquentin's experiences inform him that "the world of explanations and reason is not the world of existence" (p. 129). They show him that the orders and values we believe are intrinsic to the world and the things in it are instead "the feeble points of reference which [we] have traced on their surface" (p. 127). In *Nausea*, Roquentin confronts the unwanted and overwhelming truth that humans exist in—and are confined to—a world that lacks essential order and meaning. As Sartre explains in *Being and Nothingness*, though it does not create it, human consciousness gives order and purpose to the world. Without the structuring activity of consciousness the world exists as an indeterminate totality, an awesome undifferentiated whole. At the root of the chestnut tree, "[this] World, the naked World suddenly [reveals] itself" (p. 134) to Roquentin. With his previous experiences pushing him toward it, Roquentin finally becomes formally aware of the true nature of existence. He recognizes that the order and purpose he took to *be* reality is instead a construct consciousness *places upon it*. Rather than relish the truth that is revealed, Roquentin states, "I hated this ignoble mess. [Existence] mounting up, mounting up as high as the sky, filling everything with its gelatinous slither . . . I choked with rage at this gross, absurd being" (p. 134). Nauseated at the sight of existence's true nature, Roquentin describes existence as a "messy suffering" (p. 174) that both disgusts him and makes him "afraid" (p. 160).

Authenticity: Our Aversion to It and an Argument for It

In both *The Matrix* and *Nausea*, the main characters come to an awareness of the true nature of the human condition. As they illustrate, this awareness is unpleasant and met with resistance largely because the truth it reveals is terrifying. Morpheus acknowledges the burden of authenticity when he tells Neo, "I didn't say it would be easy, I just said it would be the truth." We see the desire to escape this burden evidenced not only in

Cypher's choice to return to the Matrix, but also in Mouse's fascination with his virtual woman in red and Neo's nostalgia for the noodle shop when he first re-enters the Matrix.

Importantly, both *The Matrix* and *Nausea* illustrate that authenticity is difficult not only because the truth it reveals is hard to stomach, but also because inauthenticity is the norm. Existentialists agree that most people are inauthentic. They attribute the prevalence of inauthenticity both to psychological resistance and social indoctrination. As Roquentin's and Neo's experiences make evident, the true nature of reality is not necessarily something humans *want* to see. Rather, existence contains numerous phenomena that we would prefer to deny. Death, suffering, and meaninglessness are three obvious examples. Most people have difficulty accepting these aspects of existence. However, authenticity entails accepting all aspects of reality, not just those with which we are comfortable. Existentialists assert that inauthenticity is pervasive because most people *do not want to know* the hard truths of existence. Instead, people prefer to comfort themselves with a vast array of lies about life. These lies range in size from major metaphysical fibs to the tiny tales we tell ourselves, but they are all lies we *want* to hear. As *The Matrix* illustrates, instead of aspiring to the Oracle's injunction, "Know thyself," most people prefer to flee the facts and remain in a "dreamworld" of their own—or someone else's—design.

Like psychological resistance, social indoctrination is a powerful deterrent to authenticity. As existentialists explain, most people are so thoroughly conditioned to believe that the world *is* the way they have been taught to see it that they resist any alternative. This indoctrination, and the resistance to change it encourages, makes becoming authentic more unlikely by making it alienating and making it appear as a movement into madness.

The prevalence of inauthenticity makes moving toward authenticity alienating primarily because it requires the individual who is becoming authentic to accept an understanding of things that is at odds with that of the majority. As Morpheus indicates, "most people are not ready to be unplugged." Most people are not ready for authenticity because they have been conditioned to accept, and are not psychologically ready to relinquish, the comfortable illusions they have about life and that they share with others. Consequently, most people will

resist authenticity themselves and will renounce anyone who seems to be moving toward it. This resistance is evident in the antagonistic treatment of Roquentin in *Nausea* as well as in the characterization of unfreed individuals in *The Matrix* as "hardware" that will actively subvert efforts at revolution. As Roquentin states, "it is so important [for most people] to think the same things all together" (p. 8). Because of the pervasiveness of inauthenticity, the person who moves toward an honest awareness of the human condition loses the support of others precisely when she needs it most. Indeed, the seemingly ubiquitous desire to be like others and the social prohibitions against "deviant" behavior are sufficient to keep most people from ever achieving authenticity.

In addition to disclosing a burdensome truth and compelling social estrangement, the transition to authenticity also tends to appear as a movement toward, and elicit feelings of, madness. Certainly Neo suffers feelings of madness. Arguably, Sartre's character Roquentin illustrates this effect even more clearly. Repeatedly, Roquentin questions his sanity. After his experience with the pebble, he speculates that he might be "insane" (p. 2). Similarly, after a dizzying array of dissociative experiences, Roquentin concludes that others are likely to place him in "the crazy loon category" (p. 64). As Roquentin demonstrates, the movement toward authenticity both represents, and is experienced as, a movement toward insanity because the understanding achieved in authenticity transcends what has been established as "normal." Consequently, the individual who approaches or achieves authenticity not only appears mad to others, it is likely that she feels crazy herself.

Given what has been said about authenticity, it's hard to see why anyone would want to achieve it. As the existentialists admit, achieving authenticity entails not only accepting that the world has no intrinsic order or purpose, but also that we are fragile and finite creatures who bear complete responsibility for ourselves and the meanings we create. Given the burden of this awareness and the feelings of estrangement and insanity it can cause, it is easy to see why individuals prefer to remain ignorant of the nature of the human condition and insulated from the truth.

Though inauthenticity does seem to have some notable advantages over authenticity, the latter is still preferable. There

are several reasons for this. First, while living inauthentically does alleviate anxiety, it does not eradicate it. For existentialists such as Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger, anxiety issues from the nature of our being. Thus, the only possible way to eradicate anxiety is to annihilate ourselves. This hardly seems a desirable option. After all, if death marks our end, then we will not be around to appreciate the eradication of anxiety that it brings. According to Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger, anxiety is an inescapable aspect of our being. It is part of our being because humans all have a sense of their constitution, a visceral concern for being that is rooted in an intuitive awareness of their true nature. Like the "splinter in the mind" that Morpheus describes, Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger believe that we all have a sense of the fragility and dependency of our nature that fosters feelings of anxiety. Existentialists recognize that we can disguise—or deny—this awareness, but they assert that we cannot eradicate it. Inauthenticity is precisely this attempt to disguise or repress what we know in our gut but do not want to admit to our mind. When one lives inauthentically one covers over the true cause of one's ontological insecurity and attributes this feeling instead to some mundane cause. For example, instead of attributing the generalized anxiety we experience to existence itself, we instead tend to attribute it to some localized source, like work, another person, or the lack of a particular object or status. We do this largely because attributing ontological insecurity to a mundane source gives us the impression that this insecurity can be controlled or even eradicated. We figure if we get the job, or get the right car, our insecurities and dissatisfactions will be eliminated. However, since inauthenticity represents a "flight . . . from [oneself]" (*Being and Time*, p. 172) and we cannot escape what we are, an inauthentic life is characterized by a certain desperate fervency and perpetual effort. Whether we want to admit it or not, most of us are familiar with this insidious cycle. Sadly, because of its internal dynamic, inauthentic individuals exist on the run from their being while at the same refusing to acknowledge the actual cause of their flight.

In addition to failing to eradicate anxiety and necessitating a sort of "life on the run," living inauthentically also has the negative consequence of limiting an individual's freedom. As existentialists explain, when one lives inauthentically one covers over not only the true nature of the world, but also the true

nature of the individual. For existentialists, though humans find themselves in a situation they did not choose, they are free to determine themselves within that situation. Because this freedom is frightening, individuals often seek to deny it. Individuals who live inauthentically live in denial of their freedom. Consequently, they live without a genuine awareness of their own possibility. Individuals who are inauthentic do not admit the true extent of their choice. For example, instead of embracing the opportunity they have to create themselves, they instead adopt predetermined identities. They slip into roles that were dictated to them rather than crafted by them. Ultimately, inauthentic individuals cannot make genuinely informed or autonomous choices because they refuse to be honest about the actual state of affairs and because they make choices that are in keeping with their determined roles, rather than choosing for themselves. By removing responsibility, living inauthentically gives individuals some comfort. However, it does so at the expense of individual autonomy.

Though authenticity entails that one accept some disturbing facts, unlike inauthenticity, it lets one live honestly. Given the impossibility of actualizing one's potential and making informed choices in a state of inauthenticity, authenticity seems eminently preferable to living a lie. While the move to authenticity disrupts one's conventional understanding and forces one to dispense with certain illusions about the world, it need not induce madness. Instead, by allowing one to admit the nature of existence and the true cause of one's concern, becoming authentic not only creates a situation where genuine choices can be made, it also can compel a unique sort of serenity and existential appreciation. Sartre illustrates this when, despite the initial horror of his experiences, Roquentin comes to the awareness that existence is "a perfect free gift" (*Nausea*, p. 131) and a "fullness which man can never abandon" (p. 133). Indeed, by the end of the novel, existence has been transformed from something that arouses disgust to something bordering on the delicious when Roquentin describes it as "dense, heavy, and sweet" (p. 13). As Sartre illustrates, when Roquentin finally admits the true nature of existence, his nausea lessens. It transforms from a stifling, "insipid idea" (p. 5) which makes him sick into a poignant—and bearable—appreciation of the human condition and the burdens it brings (p. 157). When he accepts the true nature of existence,

Roquentin stops running and starts living. The nightmarish experience that constitutes the bulk of the novel ends and Roquentin commits himself to the arduous and unglamorous task of existing day by day "without justification and without excuse" (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 78). Despite the disturbing picture it paints, *The Matrix* also ends on a positive note. Though seeing the true nature of reality initially affects Neo in much the same way it does Roquentin, he too overcomes his nausea and seizes the grand opportunity that existence represents. Indeed, at the end of the film, it appears that Neo is poised not only to forge his own future, but also to lead humanity out of its oppression.

As Roquentin and Neo illustrate, the insights that authenticity brings are only unbearable as long as we resist them. Though existence may not be everything we want, it is only overwhelming if we insist that it be something other than it is. If one lets go of these expectations, one can see things as they are. Only at this point can one fully appreciate and make use of the remarkable gift of existence. While authenticity may not conform to our conventional definition of bliss, living authentically affords individuals a unique serenity because it ends the maddening run from our being that characterizes inauthenticity. It represents an opening up to ourselves and an acceptance of what is. Though the truth of existence may be sobering, it is all we have and all we are. Regardless of its attraction, if Heidegger is right and our being is time and our time is finite, then it would be madness to waste one's time—and thus one's being—living inauthentically. Either way, as Neo reminds us, the future is up to us. Take the red pill.[1]

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