Free will in a simulated reality: “How does agency panic affect the decisions of Matrix characters”?

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Index

The Matrix franchise: An introduction

In 1999, David hunter opened *The Hollywood Reporter's* 1999 review of the first film of the Matrix franchise with the following description:

> A cyber sci-fi blowout of wetware-boggling visual effects and advanced comic book storytelling, Warner Bros.' *The Matrix* will open mightily and have a wide-open month to become early 1999's biggest hit.

The Wachkowskis exploded onto the popular culture scene. Concept, characters, and universe structure captivated fans worldwide, winning four Academy Awards while contributing to the surge of AI paranoia around the turn of Y2K. The trilogy has to date grossed $1,63 billion worldwide, placing all three movies in the top 35 of *The Numbers'* "All Time Worldwide Box Office for R Movies-list" (Nash), and *The Matrix* series still stands out as a monument in modern-day entertainment. Its action specked, cyberpunk narrative is aesthetically sublime and applies the latest CGI technology of the time, making it a revelation to moviegoers. Additionally, with its philosophical commentary and a wide array of religious symbolism, *The Matrix* ignited a storm in academia where it inspired a myriad of essays, a quantum of theses both at BA, MA, and Ph.D. levels, as well as a significant collection of full-length books. According to philosopher and culture critic Slavoj Zizek, "The Matrix is a philosopher's Rorschach inkblot test. Philosophers see their favored philosophy in it: existentialism, Marxism, feminism, Buddhism, nihilism, postmodernism. Name your philosophical ism and you can find it in The Matrix" (Irwin, 1). Viewed by an action buff, cinematography enthusiast, theologist, or philosopher – the longevity and the complexity of the Matrix universe continues to make it interesting. More than twenty years after its release, the universe is still fascinating and captivating fans, to the extent that Warner Bros. has decided to release a fourth film in late 2021, *The Matrix Resurrections*, starring some of the

original cast. However, even before this new addition, *The Matrix* is an internationally acclaimed multimedia franchise. Three movies, four video games, nine animated short films, and a collection of graphic novels all tell different stories from an intricate dual-reality that has left a permanent mark on generations of moviegoers.

The Matrix storyline: An overview

The Matrix's main storyline starts with the initiation of the era of The Second Renaissance, when somewhere in the not-too-distant future, when according to the robot narrator, "humanity's so-called civil society [soon] fell victim to vanity and corruption. Then man made the machine, in his own likeness. Thus, did man become the architect of his own demise" (*Animatrix,* 1:03-1:42). Humanity had become reliant on a pharaonic slave army, humanoid sentient robots who lived by the whip. When robot B1-66ER rebelliously murdered his master, the ensuing trial and conviction ignited a robot genocide. Forced out of human co-existence, survivors of the purge fled to the Mesopotamian desert, where they established "01", a fully robotic capital. When 01 eventually out-prospered and overshadowed human society, the ensuing reaction was predictable; Humanity launched nuclear attacks, not diplomatic missions. The robot domination in the ensuing war made desperate human generals initiate "Operation Dark Storm," the destruction of the sky, to remove the robots' solar power supply. However, the machines adapted and still triumphed, putting their human POWs to good use: "A newly refashioned, symbiotic relationship between the two adversaries was born. The machine, drawing power from the human body, and endlessly multiplying, infinitely renewable energy source" (Animatrix, 1:26-1:43). In short, the robots closed the loop, nuked the planet into a desert, and began keeping humans as livestock trapped in vast power plants, growing new ones in extensive harvest fields, intravenously feeding them the remnants of their ancestors. To ensure the longevity of their crop, the living "coppertops" were subjected to a simulated existence from the heyday of the human species, the year 1999.

Luckily for humanity, a small percentage of human minds refused to accept this Matrix simulation as real, escaped, and formed an underground resistance to free their congeners.

Fast forward to 2199, or 2699 – time is hard to keep track of in the Matrix universe – but nonetheless in the simulated year of 1999. Day-time computer programmer/night-time hacker Thomas Anderson, also known as Neo, is fast asleep by his desk. Somewhat a nihilist, Neo has been questioning his existence, searching for answers in the form of the mysterious Morpheus, who now reaches out to him through his computer. Meeting the rebel Trinity, he is introduced to the crux of the *Matrix trilogy*; his suspicions are true - his reality is not real. As a result, Morpheus presents to him the now iconic pop-culture choice: "You take the blue pill... the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill... you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." (*The Matrix*, 29:06-29:20) Experience true reality, or go back to sleep? Neo subsequently awakens in his battery pod, escapes with a rebel hovercraft, and gets his first taste of true and harsh reality. Rebel life is meager; the resistance is nearing its defeat, with robot sentinels moving in on the last human stronghold – Zion. However, Neo's rescue has not been done at random. Through Morpheus' expert training and advice from The Oracle, religious rebels hope to reveal him as *the One*, a messianic character with special powers prophesied to save humanity. As a vital part of this plan, the Rebels have been able to hack and upload themselves into the Matrix. The One's powers will enable him to destroy the simulation from the inside, setting free the collective minds of humankind. Monitoring and policing this digital world is the protective *agent* software, led by the main protagonist, head Agent Smith. Smith is stuck guarding the simulation against intruders until he is accidentally set free by The One, mutating from custodian into a virus bent on system domination. Thus, the rebels are up against a whole group of adversaries on two planes: the machines threatening Zion, the

remaining agent software of the Matrix, and virus-Smith, in addition to a colorful array of rogue computer programs.

In this dual-setting, the main events unfold as we follow the merry band of rebels as they shoot and kung-fu their way through the Matrix, opting to find a way to defeat the machines. Aided by the empathetic program The Oracle, they are given cryptic prophecies of salvation, leading Neo to explore the depth of his powers and the others to support him in his quest. As consciousness can only function on one plane at a time, the rebels remaining in Machine World must simultaneously keep robo-squids away from their ships to protect the body-mind neural upload link into the system and protect Zion from an invasion. As the story progresses, viewers gradually learn about the construction of the Matrix, who inhabits it, and whether Neo can live up to his prophesied destiny. Towards the end of the trilogy, Neo reaches his full potential, faces off with all his opponents, and secures a future for the human race.

What sets The Matrix apart from other films?

The Matrix could be most readily identified as a dystopian cyberpunk action sci-fi, with more than a hint of tech-noir. Its attitude and aesthetics were (and are) outstanding and many moviegoers received it in a similar fashion as *Empire Magazine's* Ian Nathan:

> A dazzlingly nifty slice of sci-fi cool […] Taking the imprimatur of the video game, they meld the grungy noir of *Blade Runner*, the hyperkinetic energies of chopsocky, John Woo hardware and grandiose spiritual overtones into William Gibson's cyberpunk ethos to produce a new aesthetic for the millennium powered to the thudding beat of techno.

There is no question that a significant part of its allure stems from *The Matrix's* original style. The world of 1999 had never seen anything like it, and merging Hong Kong martial arts with Hollywood gunslinging shot in "bullet time" created a whole new standard for action movie enthusiasts. However, coolness alone can only carry a movie so far. What is it about

the Matrix that made it remain relevant and become such a coveted subject for film enthusiasts, literary scholars, philosophers, and theologists alike?

The Wachkowskis packed their universe not only with action but also synthesized elements and symbolism from world religions, mysticism, and philosophy. Theological scholars like Greg Garret (*The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix)* and Richard Walsh (*Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: Introducing Jesus Movies, Christ Films, and the Messiah in Motion)* went to town on the religious imagery and Neo's messianic appearance, while philosophers like Jake Horsley (*Matrix Warrior: Being the One*) and Nick Bostrom feasted in everything from existential nihilism to AI ethics. In addition, and most importantly, The Matrix appealed to the ordinary viewer with a hitherto unseen showcasing of *hyperreality*. For although a nifty setting for physically manipulated kung fu, the Matrix simulation is more than action-packed surroundings for Keanu Reeves to empty his clip into well-armed bundles of ones and zeroes or Morpheus performing ninja moves on moving trucks. The Wachkowskis' digital dual-reality makes the viewer think, question their own surroundings, and leave the cinema more susceptible to ideas like those of Nick Bostrom's simulation hypothesis: "it could be the case that the vast majority of minds like ours do not belong to the original race but rather to people simulated by the advanced descendants of an original race." (Bostrom, 1). It is, therefore, safe to say that the Wachkowskis succeeded in creating something more than a run-of-the-mill action movie.

What makes The Matrix a conspiracy narrative?

The Matrix should definitely be categorized as a high-octane action movie with strong philosophical and religious overtones. However, as integral to this thesis, one should also consider it an addition to the American post-war conspiracy narratives. From the paranoid Cold War era of John McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover, the idea of "the mass reengineering of persons" through a "communist thought-control machine" (Melley, 3) seeped into American

literature, popularizing tales in direct conflict with rugged individualism. To fear the obscure "system" came into fashion, and authors adapted and developed Kafkian and Orwellian ideas to the emerging technological, mass-media-driven American society. Writers like Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, Ira Levin, and Joseph Heller taught the American reading public to fear the government, gargantuan corporations, or other social systems, to the extent that in 1971 it was remarked by literary critic Tony Tanner that "the possible nightmare of being totally controlled by unseen agencies and powers is never far away in contemporary American fiction" (Melley, 8). Naturally, the trend also gained a foothold in Hollywood, and through the decades, a sub-genre of conspiracy theory films grew increasingly popular. Works like John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974), Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981), and Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), brought the "hidden danger-narrative" to the masses on the big screen.

Thriving within this trend, an answer to the increasingly digitalized society, sci-fi writers set up a new peril: the undoing by our own technology - that our own machines would rise against us. In *A Space Odyssey* (1968), Stanley Kubrick let H.A.L.9000 loose on his spaceship crew, while in Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973), the robot gunslinger turns his six-shooters on the guests in his amusement park. Ridley Scott had Harrison Ford track down and "retire" murderous replicants in *Blade Runner* (1982), before finally, in 1984, Arnold Schwarzenegger appears as T-800 in *The Terminator*. It is here, and in its 1991 sequel, that one finds what must be the closest thing to version 1.0 of *The Matrix* conspiracy's concept: A hidden (in this case future) machine takeover and a regular human awakening to deal with, adapt to and survive the uncomfortable truth. The two franchises have several things in common and seem naturally comparable works. Both are Hollywood hallmarks in the robot uprising sub-genre, both are amongst the highest-grossing films of the '90s, and both

contributed pop cultural references that have surpassed generations. However, one could still argue that the Matrix did what The Terminator Series never fully managed – to become more than a highly successful action sci-fi. There is something truly extraordinary about the Matrix. The plot is significantly more complex, the conspiracy more covert, the characters more nuanced, contributing something in addition to the gunslinging and martial arts. While Schwarzenegger's efforts to keep John Connor out of Skynet's claws are, in their own way, both iconic and highly entertaining, placing *Terminator's* narrative in the conspiracy theory genre seems a stretch, if not downright inappropriate. John Connor clearly is not the main protagonist. He has little impact on his own fate and is dragged, at times screaming and kicking, through the storyline by a character that shows no fear or uncertainty about the evil conspiracy, who only ever has a single representative in the human world. Comparably, the human protagonists of the Matrix all have diverging paths, make active choices, and frequently interact with an obscure entity with unknown reach. When visiting the Matrix, they must be constantly alert as any citizen there might be an agent. Their own organization is also repeatedly infiltrated, indicating that this story has strong elements of both conspiracy and paranoia. Not to mention the feelings the script evokes in viewers, as the complexity of the system is gradually revealed. A matter of fact is, the Matrix's characters are so different, but also so active and show such agency, that it facilitates a more powerful personal connection with the viewer. Despite the sci-fi setting, their dilemmas and uncertainties are relatable, and it is the successful use of these techniques that create a significant part of the films' allure. How do I know that **my** life is not simulated? What if it is all just a hoax and Bostrom is right? What if we are all, unknowingly, "coppertops" for a covert master race? The ability to plant these questions in an audience is what makes the Matrix's script a true masterpiece.

Agency in The Matrix: The scope of this thesis

The cornerstone of any good conspiracy story is the perceived loss of agency, whether portrayed as an unconfirmed paranoid suspicion (*Catch 22*), a gradually confirmed conspiracy (*Stepford Wives*), or authoritarianism completely out in the open (*The Handmaid's Tale*). While the Matrix touches upon all of these, one could argue that the bulk of the story belongs in the latter category, although character development and gradual revelations blur the lines along the way. After the initial scenes, where a disillusioned Thomas Anderson is brought into the rebellion, this paranoia-narrative clearly separates from the mechanics of comparable stories like *The Truman Show* or *The Stepford Wives*. There is a rapid revelation that there **is** in fact a system out to get him, and Morpheus the guide gives Neo the grand tour of the universe with all the details available to him. Through various training simulations humanity's enemy can safely be introduced to the newcomer so that, although the description is far from complete, it really is no question who the baddies are. The differentiation between good and evil is made crystal clear in the following way by Neo's mentor, Morpheus:

> The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you're inside, you look around, what do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, the people are still a part of that system and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system, that they will fight to protect it. (*The Matrix,* 56:39-57:10)

As seen through the eyes of the "unplugged" or "free-born", there is (at least initially) little uncertainty about the existence of the conspiracy. The free humans are fully aware of the powerful robotic nemesis bent on their total annihilation and have to the best of their abilities developed weapons to deal with them. Morpheus unveils robot sentinels in Machine World (the world outside the Matrix) and agents inside the Matrix, whose powers the rebels seem to

be well acquainted with. The rebels also seem knowledgeable about certain systemic traits of the Matrix itself. Not only have they been able to read and hack its code and upload their avatars, but they also have a basic understanding of the system mechanics, as explained to Neo by Trinity during his first visit back inside as awake, "a déjà vu is usually a glitch in the Matrix. It happens when they change something" (*The Matrix*, 1:19:16-1:19:18). However, despite being familiar with both the simulation and their Machine World surroundings, the machines still make out a rather covert enemy. Rebel insight into higher-level machine operations is superficial at best, as they have only encountered parts of the hostile system. No human has ever visited or seen Machine City, and throughout the narrative the rebels are repeatedly surprised by new revelations. Although agents of Zion have done their best to gather intel, it seems clear that Morpheus' promise that "You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." (*The Matrix*, 29:13-19:19) is only partially true. He does not really know its depth either. The human rebellion does not know its enemy, which makes this story a clear conspiracy narrative with room for surprises.

The individuals in this semi-transparent world are the objects to be investigated in this thesis. Living under a very particular set of conspiracy constraints, the primary focus will be on Timothy Melley's notion of ***agency panic*** from his book *Empire of Conspiracy*. For while the characters in the Matrix are indeed not helpless, putting up fierce resistance against agents of the system, neither are they truly free to do as they please. Adapting to the boundaries of their universes, both dominated by the tyrannic machines, their agency as a group depends on the power struggle between them and their wardens. Simultaneously, individual agency also varies greatly depending on status within the group, which can amplify or reduce the feeling of panic. Through their choices, protagonists and antagonists attempt to shift the power balance in their favor to avoid limitations of their individualism. Self-preservation is a driving factor in the Matrix, and the special environment raises interesting questions. How does

prophecy guide or aid Neo when faced with demanding choices? Is Cypher a coward, a hedonist, or simply out of better options? Does Smith truly desire to destroy the universe, and if so, why? And how does it all fit into the Architects grand plan?

For an analysis that draws on characters from both sides of the conflict, there is an important clarification to be made early on. Searching for agency panic requires not only dynamic characters, but also that these characters would be expected to have individual agency. The members of the human resistance are all thinking and feeling individuals, but the problem arises in the analysis of *cyberpersons*. Computer programs are consciously written to fulfill their specific purpose, and any agency should therefore be restricted to the choice and execution of task-solving actions. As far as computer logic goes, a weather program should not concern itself with other issues than creating weather simulations, or a warden with keeping the peace, and should accordingly disregard everything apart from their designated task. But the Matrix AIs are more than this. When they rebel against their creators, becoming "exiles" rather than face deletion, one must acknowledge their agency panic. What else would explain self-preservation in a program? This opens for them to be analyzed in the same way as humans, as conscious individuals with a desire to both survive, thrive, and actively act upon their surroundings. Adding to this, when Neo works his way up the robot hierarchy, it becomes apparent that also the machines themselves can feel insecure. Although their motivation for self-preservation is more obvious as they desire to continue dominating the physical earth (the hardware), Neo's conversation with the Deus Ex Machina reveals uncertainty, anger, and a potential bluff-attempt when faced with threat that seems to threaten the survival of the system. This is evident in the following dialogue, which results in the Machines voluntarily loading Neo into the Matrix for his final showdown with Smith,

> **Neo:** The Program Smith has grown beyond your control. Soon he will spread through the city as he spread through the Matrix. You cannot stop him. But I can.

Deus Ex Machina: We don't need you! We need nothing!

Neo: If that's true then I've made a mistake and you should kill me now.

Deus Ex Machina: What do you want?

Neo: Peace.

[…]

Deus Ex Machina: And if you fail?

Neo: I won't.

(*The Matrix Revolutions*, 1:39:48-1:41:29)

The fact that the robots, in the end, can be bargained with clearly shows them to be indeed susceptible to fear of losing control, and thus also agency panic. Therefore, the pool of characters analyzed for agency panic in this essay will consist of both organic and digital creatures. Although the Machines themselves will not be represented in the character analysis due to lack of dynamic characters, their thinking and fear of losing control will for the most part be portrayed through their digital creations.

Together with Melley's notion of agency panic, this essay will also rely on Philip Pettit's *A Theory of Freedom* to explain the concept of **freedom**. The characters of the Matrix work diligently to achieve greater agency, although they seem to be seeking different things. Some fight for the agency of their species and are willing to sacrifice theirs and their compatriots' lives. Others act on behalf of themselves and their individual situation, attempting to escape a situation deemed inadequate. Pettit attempts to bridge the notions of psychological and political freedom, which seems appropriate for this thesis as both concepts are relevant to the Matrix characters. His overarching idea in both cases revolves around the

concept that "you are a free agent and your action is a free action just to the extent that you are capable of being held responsible in the relevant choice (12), meaning that to evaluate agency one must first discuss what factors affect the characters' responsibility in their situation, and be able to answer the following questions: To what extent should one consider the situations in which they find themselves free enough to provide equally available choices? And are the persons themselves sufficiently exempt from outside motivations and pressures to be able to make a free choice in the first place? And can one identify in the characters motivation that goes beyond the conflicts between them? Only having done this and then establishing a level of agency and motivation one can continue to analyze the characters – why do they desire more agency, and what will they do with it?

To undertake a structured and clear analysis of agency panic in *the Matrix*, this thesis has been divided into three main parts:

First, a further **introduction** into the concepts of the Matrix Universe and the relevant mechanisms at play. This section will include elucidations of the key concepts, fundamental questions, as well as more thorough **explanations of the theoretical framework**.

Second, the main body will consist of **character analyses** of the selected members of the Matrix household and a dissemination of their choices and the effect of agency panic. The sub-sections will attempt to follow a similar recipe throughout, analyzing a selection of incidents using the same cornerstone questions:

- What could motivate X in this particular situation?
- To what extent is X in a position to make a reasonably free choice in their situation?
- Does X's behavior suggest agency panic?
- If so, how could this be said to affect them in their choice?

The examples used will be five major individual choices that have severe effects on the narrative. This selection has been made not only based on the character's screen time, but also considers the characters standpoint in the conflict to give as full an overview as possible. The protagonist Neo is indeed over-represented, supplying three out of five choices, but this seemed rather unavoidable. He is the most influential character, cast as the center of attention, and it is his journey who runs the narrative. To contrast his heroics and good-guy demeanor, Cypher the traitor has also been selected, while Smith represents the non-human paranoia to show the universal distribution of agency panic throughout the Matrix. Although Morpheus and Trinity were considered, they have been discarded, both as a result of capacity constraints and due to their pre-determined religious conviction. The Oracle, The Merovingian or The Architect were also candidates to Smith's, but were considered less substantial and with a more limited personality. Through analyzing the five most significant choices of the narrative, the goal is to bring about a greater understanding of the decisions made, and through these the individual characters' true circumstances.

To conclude there will be section for **summary and findings**. This will be dedicated to inspecting how agency panic affects choices in the Matrix universe and how this can be said to impact the main storyline. This will then attempt to answer the main research question: "To what extent does agency panic affect the characters of the Matrix"?

Key concepts & Explanation of theoretical framework

Jean Baudrillard & the Matrix Universe

Named as one of the primary inspirations for the Matrix Universe, it is impossible to discuss the Matrix and hyperreality without a brief introduction to the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, and in particular his 1994 work *Simulacra and Simulation*. A French cultural theorist, sociologist and philosopher, Baudrillard is described by Doug Mann as "the high priest of postmodern culture" (1) and is most famously known for his post-structuralist

criticism of our consumerist and mass media driven modern society. Baudrillard portrays "the death of the real" and is said to have coined the postmodern concept of ***hyperreality*** where,

> simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. (Baudrillard, 1)

In other words, Baudrillian hyperreality describes a situation where individuals experience a perception of reality that does not have a matching representation anywhere - they perceive a fake reality, a simulation, while the actual world withers behind the veil. This concept being the bedrock of the Matrix script clearly shows the Wachkowskis' fascination with *Baudrillardian contemporaneity*, and Morpheus even quotes Baudrillard directly by welcoming Neo to "The desert of the real" (*The Matrix*, 41:14-41:19) after him taking the red pill. As easter egg, the opening scene even uses a copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* as a prop for Thomas Anderson's concealed storage for illegal software. According to James Rovira (Ph.D.) this book was even made compulsory reading for the cast by the directors prior to shooting the first film. It seems, still according to Rovira, that *Simulacra and Simulation* is woven into the Matrix's narrative structure to such an extent that one could consider it a deliberate attempt to validate, or at least illustrate, Baudrillian theories of the third and last stage of the simulacrum, where "the *real* empire lies in tatters, the hyperreal map still quite intact. We have entered an era where third-order simulacra dominate our lives, where the image has lost any connection to real things" (Mann, 3).

However, despite clearly being a great source of inspiration for the Wachkowskis, Baudrillard himself has attempted to distance his work from *The Matrix*, denouncing the film as misinterpreting his writings. In a 2003 interview with Le Nouvel Observateur, he describes parts of the movies as "embarrassing" before telling interviewer Aude Lancelin that "*The*

Matrix is surely the kind of film about the matrix that the matrix would have been able to produce". Baudrillard seems to think that the Wachkowskis have interpreted his ideas incorrectly and that "the brand-new problem of the simulation is mistaken with the very classic problem of the illusion, already mentioned by Plato. Here lies the mistake". In other words, is the Matrix really about the Baudrillian simulation, or does it center on the more classical idea of Plato's cave? This thesis does not attempt to answer this question, but it seems only appropriate to recognize the criticisms presented by the father of hyperrealism himself. It also seems noteworthy that Hollywood, the world's largest hub of mass media entertainment culture, would produce and promote a narrative driven by a clear criticism of digital escapism and mass simulation. The contradiction is obvious, and it seems only fitting to end with Baudrillard's own conclusion to this issue, "The simulacrum hypothesis deserved better than to become a reality" (Lancelin).

Theoretical framework: A walkthrough

To properly search for agency panic among the Matrix characters, it is imperative to start by establishing their freedom and how this relates to their upcoming choice. In this regard, this thesis will lend itself chiefly to the theories of Philip Pettit, a Princeton professor of political theory and philosophy. A primary reason for this choice is Dr. Pettit's attempt to construct a single, unified theory of freedom, making comparisons of various characters more appropriate. In his book *A Theory of Freedom*, Pettit thoroughly analyzes what factors must be in place for an individual agent to be truly free. He looks both inside the individual and at its surroundings, giving an overview of what factors must be in place to undertake free actions, exist as a free self, and be a free person. Pettit's core premise, "To be free […] is to be fully fit to be held responsible" (4), is continuously tested throughout the book and translates well to the Matrix storyline. When comparing characters from various origins and with contrasting desires, who are subjected to dissimilar types of pressures and

underdeterminations, it seems necessary to establish a checklist for free actions. As non-static characters will always experience shifting levels of agency throughout a story, one will have to account for a change in their freedom of choice from situation to situation. To exemplify, Neo's freedom of choice during his early interrogation by Smith's agents is slim, while superpower Neo has a significantly more comprehensive array of options available to him. Thus, the questions presented will always be used to argue the characters' experience of being a free self and a free person at that particular time in the narrative, not in general terms. To establish the freedom of an action, Pettit identifies three different factors that must be present:

> To predicate freedom of an agent, in particular something an agent did, is to suggest that at least three different sorts of thing hold […] The first is **that the agent can be rightly held responsible for what he or she did**; if the action was free then there can be nothing against thinking that the agent should have to answer for it. The second is that **the action freely chosen is one that the agent can own**, thinking: this bears my signature, this is *me*. And the third is that **the agent's choice was not fully determined by at least certain sorts of antecedents**; it was not fully determined, for example, by a hypnotic suggestion or an unconscious complex or childhood conditioning. (6)

Using a more applicable set of terms, this thesis will operate with the following questions to establish the level of freedom for characters' individual decisions:

1. Could the character be held responsible for the decision in question?
2. Does the choice fit the character's general profile?
3. To what extent is the character's decision affected by external forces?

However, a few adaptations of Pettit's theories are also needed for our purpose. As Pettit's work is not primarily directed at a sci-fi context, it is necessary to deviate from, or adapt to, an important point of his,

> We see only human beings as worthy of reactions like resentment and gratitude. To feel such reactions towards natural phenomena like the weather or the business cycle, or even towards non-human animals and their doings is, so most of us think, quite inappropriate. (13)

In the case of the Matrix universe, this would be highly impractical, lest one excludes the lion's share of characters from consideration. As will later be discussed, a postulate for the ability to undertake free choices is an individual personality, whether it resides in a human or a digital being. To use Pettit's theories, therefore, this thesis will treat all intelligent beings, artificial or natural, in the same way – as capable of human behavior and in possession of ethical standards. To buttress this choice, one should remember that the robots in the early days of the Second Renaissance were humanoids in every respect, not just physically. Through attempted diplomacy, peaceful protests, and forgiveness, the robots of 01 clearly showed a sense of morality and tried to establish a peaceful co-existence with humankind after their exodus. It was human inhumanity that pushed the machine race into a Ragnarok-style conflict, under which they evolved past their anthropoid appearance, but there is no evidence to suggest they shed their sense of morals. The Matrix trilogy itself depicts this in the truce mentioned above made between machine and man which ends the story, even though the newly freed human rebels offer little or no value to the Machines, but instead pose a significant future threat. Not eradicating this risk due to something as human as honor seems to be the logic of a moral being, not a coldly calculating machine. As a result, despite atrocities performed during the First Machine War and operation Dark Storm, the machines should still be considered a species capable of, and willing to show, moral consciousness. And

based on this it seems reasonable to assign the robotic characters in *The Matrix* and their digital henchmen the ability to be held responsible for their choices and thus to be analyzed in the same way as their human counterparts.

After applying Pettit's ideas to establish a character's level of freedom, it is time to move on to the core issue; *Agency panic*, a term coined by Timothy Melley. A professor at Miami University, Melley specializes in literary history, with a particular interest in society's covert forces. His book *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* is focused on the invisible systems that surround individuals, and it is here one finds the description of "a broad cultural phenomenon, a pervasive set of anxieties about the way technologies, social organizations and communication systems may have reduced human autonomy and uniqueness" (7). This trend in American postwar narratives is symptomized by a pervasive set of anxieties due to increased social control, and a characteristic of the postwar conspiracy model is the extent of mass control offered by mass media. Here, "whole populations are being *openly* manipulated without their knowledge" (3), affecting individual self-determination. Human agency, both individually and on a group level, is declining, and Melley describes the human reaction to this realization in the following way:

> They [anxieties] take a remarkably consistent form, which I call *agency panic*. Agency panic is intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else or that one has been 'constructed' by powerful agents. (vii)

While Pettit speaks of freedom/unfreedom, Melley differentiates between *inner-directed* and *other-directed* characters, with "the other-directed person […] a dramatic inversion of the liberal individual" (53). Other-directed individuals thus suffer from a depleted individualism, either having their choices made for them, their options severely limited, or

they find themselves subjected to duress, making them a "construct" of the external system acting upon them. Melley's ideas here seems to mostly align with Pettit's – "freedom of choice" corresponds nicely with "inner-direction" - and although he goes slightly less in-depth on the topic of motivation, his focus is valuable as it is narrowed down to the conspiracy genre alone. Melley writes, "by suggesting that persons should be internally directed proprietors of an 'inner dimension' and by viewing 'society' or 'the system' as a natural antagonist of the self, this genre reasserts the value of liberal individualism by announcing its decline" (54). This seems a highly appropriate lens to apply when watching the Matrix trilogy - a reassertion of human individualism in opposition to an antagonist system. However, as Melley never discusses *The Matrix* – perhaps due to the concurrency of release dates between his book and the first film – it seems only appropriate to demonstrate that he would find it entirely up to standards as a conspiracy narrative. Although the Matrix's storyline differs significantly from his target texts, they seem to have core conspiracy elements in common. Melley has the following to say about conspiracy-based narratives,

> First, in many texts I examine, conspiracies are understood to be hermetically sealed, marvelously efficient, and virtually undetectable. Second […] conspiracies typically serve to conceptualize the relation between individuals and larger social bodies. Third, and consequently, the conspiracy is often understood as a structure that curtails individuality, or that is antithetical to individualism itself. (10)

All these factors seem to describe the events taking place in the Matrix trilogy appropriately. The human harvest lives in ignorance, their only purpose is to produce energy to power the robotic species. Anything resembling a meaningful existence within the Matrix is nothing more than a distraction from their harsh reality, and they have zero influence on events in the real world. The conspirators have won, human personalities are entirely constructed by external forces, and the system is indeed both "hermetically sealed and

virtually undetectable" and "antithetical to individualism itself" to humans trapped in the Matrix. Melley uses a particular concept to describe this liberalist antithesis, the idea of *postmodern transference*. Melley states that cybernetic conspiracy narratives frequently depict "a 'postindustrial society', an 'information age', or some other brave new world that has moved beyond our capacity to understand or control it: It is 'postcivilized', 'postmaturity', 'postideological', 'posteconomic', 'postliberal', 'posttraditional', and of course, 'postmodern' (37). In this future world one often finds a mysterious *autopoietic system*, capable of maintaining and developing itself, who "replaces the self-relating subject with a self-relating system" (40). In short, the system has a will of its own and conspires against individuals to absorb their agency, turning persons into obedient machine parts. According to Melley, this idea is "postmodernism's new language of agency, a rhetoric that attributes rationality and motive to structures larger than individual persons while simultaneously representing individuals as constructions and 'subjects' of those agencies" (40). This could have been written to describe *The Matrix,* where the individuals are literally either "constructions" (programs) or "subjects" (humans) under the system's control. It would be hard to watch The Matrix and disagree that "from a humanist perspective, poststructuralism effects a total and imaginary transfer of agency from subjects to systems, which it treats as more human than human beings" (40). The machines take extreme measures to annihilate human agency, and both inside and outside the simulation clearly act as a godlike agency to defy any form of individual liberalism. Thus, this postmodern transference is a key factor in the agency panic experienced by anyone in opposition to the Matrix system. However, this necessitates the realization that such a transfer has taken place. For Thomas Anderson, his early contacts with the rebellion separate him from the other "livestock", which triggers a reaction to bring him back in the fold. The system actively works to keep him in their grasp, but the rebels keep intruding on his illusion to make him doubt. They nurture his

growing sense of anxiety and paranoia, and when his inherent fears are confirmed he starts distrusting the world around him. Thomas Anderson has long suspected a hidden conspiracy against his person, which now materializes as agents dressed in brown suits, sunglasses and earpieces, resulting in repeated violent awakenings from all too realistic nightmares. These fears and suspicions of an unknown powerful system are easily recognizable from Melley's criteria and fit his description that "conspiracy theory – the apprehension of conspiracy by those *not* involved in it – begins with individual self-protection, with an attempt to defend the integrity of the self against the social order" (10). Neo's suspicions of the Matrix thus perfectly fit the bill of a Mellian conspiracy narrative. However, the conspiracy is not unique to him, not even uniquely directed against humanity. Disregarding the robots, all individualistic characters in the Matrix narrative must somehow brave and survive the system that controls and conspires against them, actively working to curtail their individuality. Melley calls such resistance "an all-or-nothing conception of agency, a view in which agency is a property, parceled out *either* to individuals like oneself *or* to 'the system' – a vague structure often construed to be massive, powerful, and malevolent" (10). The liberally inclined individuals of the Matrix are attempting to undo the nearly complete postmodern transference they have been subjected to.

It seems safe to claim that The Matrix narrative coincides nicely with Melley's own idea of what signifies a conspiracy story. The characters are all standing up to the system, who has curtailed their ability to act on their own, with the sole purpose of promoting the interests of the system itself. *The Matrix* is therefore a suitable piece to search for agency panic.

How to identify agency panic within the characters of The Matrix?

So, how to go about analyzing our characters for agency panic? A natural starting point would be to identify situations where a person's ability to undertake a free choice have been infringed upon, or completely replaced by, a system of social regulation that appears to have a

conscious will. It seems one should be looking for two specific traits: 1) “a nervousness or uncertainty about the causes of individual action. This fear sometimes manifest itself in a belief that the world is full of ‘programmed’ or ‘brainwashed’ subjects, addicts, automatons, or “mass-produced” persons”. And 2) “a sense that controlling organizations are themselves agents – rational, motivated entities with the will and the means to carry out complex plans” (12-13). The challenge here will be to make an appropriate selection of situations, showing how characters are free to deal with choices that come their way. As *The Matrix* is without a first-person narrator, knowing the exact motivations of the characters is not possible. Therefore, arguments derived from the internal life and thoughts of the characters will be assessed according to how they display character traits in scenes they appear, as well as reactions to or descriptions of them. In other words, the analysis itself will be based on the characters’ actions, supported by assumptions based on their surroundings. In this way, this thesis will attempt to give an insight into the characters minds, illustrating the challenge of making free choices within in a dual-reality surrounded by enemies.

Red pill/Blue pill: Is something is rotten in the state of New York?

The initial scene to be investigated is from the first movie, when the audience gets acquainted with the protagonist fast asleep at his keyboard, about to meet the rebellion for the first time. His computer is screening international newspapers for information on a mysterious terrorist named Morpheus, when he receives a mysterious message on his monitor. “Wake up, Neo”. Awoken, the screen text continues to appear, “The Matrix has you…” and “follow the white rabbit” – cryptic messages that explain little, but feed into an already suspicious mind. However, when the message, “knock, knock, Neo”, is immediately followed by actual visitors, it becomes clear that an unusually powerful agent is at play. This is elucidated further when Dujour, one of Neo’s visitors, is sporting a tattoo of a white rabbit, leading our

protagonist to obey the on-screen commands and follow the group for a little R&R at the local goth club – an inconspicuous rendez-vous for his first meeting with the mysterious Trinity.

This will be the first time Neo encounters anyone with direct knowledge of the Matrix, a concept he already suspects but has failed to find solid evidence for, exemplified by his question to his visitor Choi, "you ever have that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?" (09:00-09:04). If Neo's incredulity does not already here display "a nervousness or uncertainty about the causes of individual action" and "a sense that controlling organizations are themselves agents", it is at least clear that he is suspicious of hidden truths and would be receptive to suggestions of conspiracy. His feelings of doubt are further nourished in his quick exchange with Trinity. She describes having been in a similar situation to Neo's, searching for Morpheus, but had later learned that she was not really looking for the man himself, but searching for the answer to a question, one that Neo also ponders, "What is the Matrix?" (11:41-11:42). Trinity divulges the existence of a hidden enemy, "[…] you're in danger. I brought you here to warn you. They're watching you, Neo." (10:47-10:52), but also promises that the answer to his question is out there, if Neo is open to accept the truth. Thus, following Dujour and meeting Trinity serves to lead Neo towards the outer edge of the rabbit hole. Should he investigate his suspicions further, continue searching for a hidden system, or go back to a quiet life behind his keyboard? Like Carroll's Alice, Neo's curiosity will surely bring him into trouble.

Brutally awoken by his alarm clock, uncertain if yesterday's events ever really happened, Thomas Anderson is late for work. His employer, global software firm Metacortex, fits perfectly with Melley's idea that, "The corporation is the ultimate monolithic collective actor, the postmodern superindividual par excellence" (Melley, 187). In its downtown skyscraper, the company seems like the embodiment of the corporate system – steel, concrete, meticulously cleaned glass panes, all in various tones of grey and brown gives the impression

of the lifeless machine that is Metacortex. In a spacious office, Mr. Anderson is reprimanded by his boss, who coldly informs him that, “You have a problem with authority, Mr. Anderson. You believe that you are special, that somehow the rules do not apply to you. Obviously, you are mistaken. (12:12- 12:22). Thomas must understand that he is a part of a whole, a cog in the machine, and that any form of deviance will not be tolerated. As his boss directly puts it, “The time has come to make a choice, Mr. Anderson. Either you choose to be at your desk, on time, from this day forth. Or you choose to find yourself another job” (12:40-12:50). Mr. Anderson, the pawn, abides. The system still has a firm grasp on him. Back in his cubicle, a messenger drops off an envelope containing a mysterious phone that rings the moment it’s in his hand. On the line is Morpheus, warning Neo that his disturbances of the systemic order have been noticed, “They’re coming for you, Neo, and I don’t know what they’re going to do” (13:54-13:57). With a surge of paranoia, Thomas discovers agents have arrived on his floor, looking for him and heading his way. Guided over the phone by the seemingly all-knowing Morpheus, he attempts to elude his pursuers, showing clear paranoid behavior during his escape, “This is insane! Why is this happening to me? What did I do? I’m nobody. I didn’t do anything. I’m gonna die” (15:57-16:06). However, as viewers learn after his inevitable capture, neither of these statements are true. Thomas Anderson is indeed “somebody” and has most certainly “done something”, attested by head agent Smith’s presentation of evidence that he is “guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for” (18:28-18:32), which Thomas fails to deny. However, the Agents have picked him up under the guise of arresting a reputed computer criminal, which in this situation serves to temporarily downscale Mr. Anderson’s paranoia and to help him regain his footing. Misinterpreting that he is apprehended by regular representatives of the justice system, he expects to be treated according to the regular legal code, a situation any career criminal of his stature would have prepared for. Thomas Anderson furthermore seems emboldened by the rather prosaic matter

of the well-documented accusations, a feeling further enhanced when presented with what seems an agency-preserving option, “We’re willing to wipe the slate clean. Give you a fresh start. All that we’re asking in return is your cooperation in bringing a known terrorist to justice (Agent Smith, 19:30-19:42). The appearance of a real choice seems to restore his feeling of agency, diminishing the power the agent holds over him. Not only have his obscure pursuers proven to be something as comprehensible as the government’s computer crime unit, they also seem willing to negotiate. Therefore, with newfound resolve, Neo decides to fight the system and flips them off, stating, “You can’t scare me with this Gestapo crap. I know my rights. I want my phone call. (20:10-20:16). It can safely be said that agency panic is not dominant in his appearance here, although this will rapidly change. Up until this point, neither the audience nor Neo have experienced anything suggesting supernatural events. Backed up by local police, the agency has arrested a notorious hacker who they now have sitting in an interrogation room – nothing truly extraordinary about it. Although the white rabbit tattoo, Trinity’s warnings and Morpheus’ advice during Neo’s attempted escape have been mysterious, all could be somewhat rationally explained by advanced hacker and surveillance activity. However, after declining Agent Smith’s deal, Neo learns first-hand of the near magical abilities of his captors. Following the question, “Tell me, Mr. Anderson, what good is a phone call if you’re unable to speak?” (Agent Smith, 20:16-20:26), Neo’s mouth magically grows shut, leaving him a mute. Under his ensuing panic, he is forcefully held down while the agents activate a scary-looking robo-insect that enters his stomach - he’s been “bugged” in the literal sense of the word, for reasons yet unclear. The last he hears before it all goes black is, “You’re going to help us, Mr. Anderson, whether you want to or not (Agent Smith, 20:58-21:03). But has this been more than a frightening nightmare? Surely not!

Again violently awaking in his bed, this time desperately clawing his bellybutton, Neo gets nearly a full second to consider it all a dream before Morpheus rings again, “This line is

tapped, so I must be brief. They got to you first, but they've underestimated how important you are. If they knew what I know, you would probably be dead" (22:02-22:13). The idea of a real conspiracy here gains further momentum, it was not a dream, and his options are made clear to him. The agency has Neo under surveillance and want to use him, while insurgents Morpheus and Trinity want to facilitate his escape. Morpheus also proclaims Neo "the One", a person of great importance whom he has been searching for his entire life. Together with his recent paranoid experiences, this seems enough to convince Neo to investigate the entrance to the rabbit hole further. Thus, in the pouring rain somewhere near Adams Street Bridge, Thomas Anderson has one of his last chances to distance himself from the shadowy rebels, ignore what he thinks he knows about a conspiracy and go back to his original programmer existence. And for a minute, our strong-willed protagonist seems mighty close to doing so. When he, provenly obstinate in the face of threats, at gunpoint is ordered to undress and informed that, "We don't have time for 20 questions. Right now there's only one rule. Our way or the highway" (Switch, 23:16-23:24), Thomas seem likely to refuse. Whether an act of irrationality, stubbornness, or maybe he is still not fully convinced of the agent-conspiracy, he nonetheless shows a clear desire to protect his agency at all costs. He doesn't take orders without an explanation and even if he has taken a significant risk to meet, he is prepared to walk out if he deems the situation unconvincing. This speaks clearly of Thomas' agency-preserving nature and his inner-directedness. He protects his ability to choose freely. When Trinity finally persuades him to remain and comply, the subsequent "de-bugging" crucially removes the last shreds of doubt he might have had of the power of the system, "Jesus Christ! That thing's real?" (24:52-24:53). The otherwise inexplicable foreign object removed from inside him proves that he has in fact not been dreaming – some powerful external agent is truly out to get him. Thus, when the car finally arrives at its destination, where he must take the most important choice of his life, Neo must be considered significantly predisposed

towards joining the rebels. Is there truly an option to turn back now? And why would he ever want to?

Finally meeting in person, Morpheus seems to read Thomas' mind, "I imagine that right now you're feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole" (26:23-26:32). The returning analogy to Lewis Carroll seems illustrating, although Neo's Cheshire cat is slightly more clear-spoken in his explanations,

> **Morpheus:** "Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know, you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?
>
> **Neo:** "The Matrix"!
>
> **Morpheus:** "Do you want to know what it is"?
>
> **Neo:** *Nods his head*
>
> (27:05- 27:47)

Morpheus has the answers Neo has been looking for. He explains the Matrix deception, that Neo is "born into bondage. Born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison… for your mind" (28:25–28:34). Leading up to the big question, arguably the most famous scene of the trilogy, Morpheus continues, "Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself" (28:45-28:52). Neo has here arrived at the ultimate crossroads – he must choose between learning an uncomfortable truth or live in comfortable ignorance, a choice embodied by two different colored capsules. Morpheus finally presents him the so frequently re-stated offer, "You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in

wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes" (29:06-29:20). His decision is well-known - Neo will follow in Alice's footsteps, not much a movie without it. But what might justify this decision? What prevents Neo from surprising us all and choose the blue pill?

William Irving in his essay *Computers, Caves and Oracles: Neo and Socrates*, compare Neo's dilemma with the prisoner who is led out of Plato's cave. However, different from Plato's prisoner, Neo will make the choice of which reality he prefers before even catching a glimpse of the outside. He is at this stage convinced he has been living in a cave but has yet to bask in the sunlight of reality, and thus must decide based on severely limited information. To learn what the Matrix is he must experience it, but to experience it he is required to first renounce the cave. It is a gamble with all-in stakes. Irving adds to the difficulty of the decision by posing the question, "How would a person in such a prison even recognize if he were set free?" (11). However, even if the decision is irrevocable, the information insufficient and, for Neo personally, the ability to evaluate the final outcome inadequate, he only briefly hesitates before reaching for the red pill.

So, what might motivate Neo when making his decision? A primary factor must be his experience of a meaningless existence back home. His depressive, cubicle-confined reality has brought forward a somewhat nihilist behavior, displayed by his criminal secondary career, the shabbiness of his apartment and his eagerness to challenge Agent Smith despite facing potential prison time. There is no indication of any social life, love life or in any way signs that he enjoys living in late 90's New York. It seems safe to assume that his experienced purpose is low, that he sees the direction of his future as unappetizing and that he desires a radical change in his everyday existence. Another important factor seems to be his sense of curiosity and drive to learn the truth. Prior to his initial contact with Trinity, Neo has already suspected a conspiracy and belongs to the hacking community which would seem a probable

arena to obtain information inaccessible to the general public. Therefore, Trinity's lure of answers to his big question has a magnetic attraction to him. How could he possibly resist the chance to find the answers he has spent ages looking for? In combination, both his existential nihilism and Carrollian curiosity firmly predispose Neo towards the red pill option. Although remaining Thomas Anderson is theoretically possible and according to Morpheus also practically achievable, from a motivational perspective it is hopeless. What life awaits him in his dirty apartment? Why continue as an insignificant cog in the Metacortex machine? How would he ever shake the loss of the road not taken? Although a gamble, it seems like one worth taking, as the potential rewards are significantly greater than the ante. Neo is not, like Plato's prisoner, alone in the new world. The rebellion will be there to help him, and together they might in time go about saving others from the darkness of the system. Thus, it is obvious that Neo would be highly motivated to leave New York, Metacortex and Thomas Anderson behind, despite not knowing his new situation. As Irving states, "Neo, unlike Cypher, would […] endure anything rather than return to a false reality" (13). However, could one say that his choice is a free one?

In his first major dilemma, Neo seems perfectly capable of being held responsible for choosing the red pill. A main reason for this is that Neo is clearly capable to be held responsible in what Pettit calls the *prior-to-choice sense*, that "the agent must have the resources, prior to the choice, that are required for taking any of the options" (14). His decision seems to rest with him alone, without significant pressure from external forces. Up until this point, neither Morpheus nor Trinity has at any time appeared threatening, nor do they require anything in return for their services. Neither is there any reason to fear unspoken threats. Neo is in the dark concerning the inner workings of the rebellion, he has only seen a select few faces and has no knowledge of the administration, operations or whereabouts of members. With his basic knowledge he should therefore not be a security risk if he decides to

go blue, and his ignorance is further guaranteed by the chemically induced memory loss of the blue pill. On the same note, one could also assume that choosing the blue pill would make the agents disengage. As Morpheus' phone call indicates, the agency considers Neo a person of particular interest only as a potential way into the rebellion, as they have yet to figure out his real significance. Why would they care to continue pursuit of a run-of-the-mill cyber-criminal? Thus, Neo is under no external threat when making his choice, but how about coercion?

There is no doubt that the rebels want Neo to join their ranks, as Morpheus believes him to be their Messiah. But do they in any way attempt to sway him? This, again, seems hard to argue. Agreed, Trinity does convince Neo to stay in the car before the meeting but does so simply by pointing out that his refusal would leave him back in his corporate hamster wheel cubicle. Therefore, when Neo agrees meets Morpheus this seems to be fully on his own volition – he is there because he wants answers. Furthermore, when time has come to make the final choice, Morpheus again verifies that Neo understands the severity of the situation, clearly stating "This is your last chance. After this there's no turning back" (29:01-29:06) and "Remember. All I'm offering is the truth. Nothing more. (29:30-29:35). It would be hard to claim coercion and not a free offer, as Neo does not only have an option B, but is also repeatedly given incentives to take it. It seems that Neo does in fact make the red pill-choice because he wants to, because it for him is the better of his two options, because like Alice he cannot live in ignorance.

Regarding the question of whether this fits the character's general profile, the source material at this point is limited. One has yet to get to know the character outside of a tumultuous situation and it seems improper to draw conclusions so early on. However, from the little knowledge gained the choice at least does not seem uncharacteristic. His previous investigations indicate a person who values personal agency, which also seems to be the

reason behind his existentialist crisis. His desire for agency is again exposed during his interaction with Agent Smith, before being directly expressed in conversation with Morpheus,

> **Morpheus:** "Do you believe in fate, Neo?"
>
> **Neo:** "No"
>
> **Morpheus:** "Why not?"
>
> **Neo:** "Because I do not like the idea that I'm not in control of my life"
>
> (26:48-26:56)

It therefore seems safe to conclude that the decision to gamble and choose the red pill seems well within the boundaries of a free choice. Neo has actual options, his motivations are personal, and he is neither threatened, forced or in any way coerced into Wonderland. Although the decision is made while caught in the struggle between two mighty organizations, the choice to join the rebellion seems as free as could be, and one Neo owns and could be held responsible for. The option to return to his old life is kept open all until the last second, and it is the allure of satisfying his curiosity that makes him decide. As Pettit writes,

> If I was fit to have been kept responsible for A-ing or not A-ing, then the awareness that I ought to A must have been capable of getting me to A, the awareness that I ought not to A must have been capable of getting me not to A […]. Causal factors other than my awareness of what I ought to do cannot have fully determined what I did; they cannot have pre-empted my response (8)

This seems to apply perfectly to Neo. He understands the choice in front of him and makes a determined decision. Together with his observed character traits, it therefore seems safe to say that Neo could perfectly well be kept responsible for choosing the red pill.

Onto the question if agency panic is present and could be suggested to affect his choice, the answer must unequivocally be "yes". The core premise for Neo ever being given the choice to awaken is his dawning paranoia and suspicious mind, which he has rendered already from the first scene he appears. As Morpheus later explains about the population of the Matrix, "most [of these] people are not ready to be unplugged" (57:00-57:03) and are too dependent on the system, thus Neo must be fundamentally different than most other humans. His paranoia and agency panic must therefore already be present in him for the rebels to ever consider offering him the choice. Minds too inured in the system are incapable of release and might fall victim to "popping" if awoken – a mental overload resulting in the death of the subject. When making the red pill/blue pill choice, the crucial factor in Neo's equation can therefore safely be said to be a fundamental agency panic, existing at the subconscious level of mental activity experienced in the battery-pods. It seems clear from the introductory scenes that his whole existence shows an elemental suspicion of deindividuation and structural agency that "converts people into automatons" (Melley, 5). This pervasive anxiety is then strengthened through his encounters with the rebels, and further enhanced facing government agents, leading to his final acceptance of the conspiracy against him. Melley describes typical conspiracy stories where "large governmental, corporate, or social systems appear uncannily to control individual behavior and in which characters seem paranoid, either to themselves or to other characters in the novel" (Melley, 8), sounding a lot like Neo's initial appearance in *The Matrix*. When reaching the crossroads, Neo therefore chooses the option that offers "individual self-protection, with an attempt to defend the integrity of the self against the social order" (Melley, 10), despite warnings that the truth might be harsh compared to remaining shackled in Plato's cave. His choice is thus to a large extent motivated by agency panic, experienced in the long term and intensified by recent events to the point of accepting the

system as his enemy. He is convinced that something is indeed rotten in his existence and puts everything on the line to learn the truth.

The rescue mission: Sacrifice, conscience and the power of prophecy

The second of Neo's dilemmas chosen for further investigation again originates from the first Matrix movie, although after its introductory phase. For Neo not only must be introduced to the reality of Machine World and taught how to manipulate the laws of the simulation to his advantage, he also has to meet the rebellion's divine guide - The Oracle. A pop-culture adaptation of the Oracle of Delphi, this inner-city, cookie baking, chain-smoking, candy gobbling Matrix-grandma is a friendly computer program with the ability to predict the future and is thus responsible for composing and relaying the rebels' grand prophecy. She functions as the head priestess, dividing the population of Zion in two camps: believers and realists, with Captain Morpheus of the Nebuchadnezzar her main disciple. He has been foretold that he is destined to locate The One, the Messiah that will destroy the Matrix and bring peace to humanity, a prediction that has become his life's mission, much to the irritation of other, more pragmatic, notables of Zion. Morpheus believes to have succeeded in his quest when he brings Neo to see the Oracle and remains faithful in him as the One throughout the story regardless of Neo's own doubts. As a true believer, he refuses to even hear the Oracle's advice to Neo, stating, "what was said was for you and for you alone" (1:17:34-1:17:38), convinced that she will have told Neo exactly what he needed to hear to fulfill his destiny and save them all. Therefore, he is ignorant of the fact that Neo is allegedly not the One, remaining motivated for his role as protector and guide for the Messiah. For the same reason, Morpheus is also ignorant of the Oracle's other prediction, concerning him specifically,

> **The Oracle:** "Poor Morpheus. Without him we're lost".
>
> **Neo: "**What do you mean 'without him'?"
>
> **The Oracle: "**Are you sure you want to hear this?"

Neo: *Nods his head*

The Oracle: "Morpheus believes in you, Neo. And no one, not you, not even me, can convince him otherwise. He believes it so blindly, that he's going to sacrifice his life to save yours".

Neo: "What?!"

The Oracle: "And you're going to have to make a choice. In the one hand, you'll have Morpheus' life. And in the other hand, you'll have your own. One of you is going to die. Which one will be up to you."

(*The Matrix*, 1:15:47-1:16:42)

When the two men leave the Oracle's apartment Neo is visibly confused. Although not fully a believer, the Oracle has both proven her foresight and given him a disturbing prediction as a parting gift. If she could see him "accidentally" breaking break her vase, why would she be wrong about Morpheus' fate? What will he choose if put in the foreseen situation? And why has he, who is allegedly not the One, been given such a predicament to deal with?

This second of Neo's major choices will indeed be a lot more complex than the first. Not only does it this time around impact his beloved mentor and guide, but the forewarning of the imminent dilemma also gives him time to prepare. Thus, religious pre-determinism is at play, although the object is a less than zealous believer. However, before he has the time to discuss this with anyone, the group of insurgents runs into trouble. Cypher has betrayed his crew, agents have located their exit point and laid an ambush, forcing the group to hastily retreat. During this escape Morpheus lives up to his calling, and as a martyr sacrifices himself so Neo, his Chosen One, can escape – all according to prescience. And herein lies a core point of Neo's dilemma. Morpheus believes he is fulfilling his destiny and that preserving the One's future in the rebellion is a feat worth his martyrdom. For him the choice to act in this

particular way was made ages ago. Neo, however, believes Morpheus to be mistaken in his premise. His sacrifice has been unwarranted, costing the rebellion not only a great captain and an asset in the upcoming Machine War, but an important religious figure as well. As acolytes of Morpheus, the rest of the crew loyally accepts his decision and leave their captain behind to ensure Neo's safety, but what will happen when they learn that he is just a regular guy and that Morpheus was lost in vain?

Back at the Nebuchadnezzar, Cypher's overconfidence disrupts the Agents' plan and allows them to regain control of their ship. The puzzle-pieces have now landed so that Neo gets to confront the predicted dilemma. With Cypher gone, the rebels control and monitor Morpheus' physical body, still jacked into the matrix, and observe what happens to his avatar through reading the code feed. While unable to escape and exit the simulation, his life is therefore in a limbo. As, Morpheus has earlier instructed Neo, "the body cannot live without the mind" (55:34-55:36), so dying in either plane would end him, and the rebels cannot bring him back onboard. But why would the agents care to capture Morpheus and not just kill him? Inside the Matrix, an agent injects their prisoner with a truth serum to dig out his Zion mainframe access codes. But breaking his mind takes time, giving the rebels an effective, yet severely unpleasant trump card. They can sever Morpheus' neural uplink, killing him before he gives up the codes, sacrificing him for the cause. The surviving crew members, Tank the operator, Neo, and Trinity, have to come to an agreement.

To properly analyze their decision, one must first establish the options available to the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar. In short, the rebels have three alternatives to answer this crisis, although one could argue that not all of them would fulfill Pettit's criteria for viable options. These are as follows,

1. Do nothing. Leave Morpheus plugged into the Matrix and let the agents succeed or fail in their project on their own volition.
2. Unplug Morpheus. Kill their captain and father figure, but keep Zion's access codes away from the agents.
3. Keep Morpheus plugged in and find another way to prevent the agents from obtaining the codes. In this case, organize a haphazard rescue mission consisting of two insurgents, one of which is a promising, yet completely unproven member of the crew.

However, before considering the decision itself, the focus should again be directed at the decision maker in question. Could Neo here be reckoned as free to make his choice in these surroundings, and would he be fit to be held responsible? Here, the choice is less clear than previously for two particular reasons: A) Neo's introduction to the prophecy and his unclear role in it, and B) that he is not alone to make this decision.

Starting with the latter, Neo in this case is part of an uneven trio. The concept of freedom of agency in making joint decisions is dealt with comprehensively in *A Theory of Freedom*, and in the chapter *Freedom as Discursive Control* Pettit write the following of free persons in a social relationship,

> We take the theory of the free person to be the theory of the standing that an agent – in particular, an individual agent – must have among persons if he or she is to be regarded as free in the choices they make. (66)

Thus, it seems appropriate to look further into Neo's standing in the group to see what impact he could be expected to have on the decision. To begin with, being a military vessel, there is an established hierarchy on board the Nebuchadnezzar. After Captain Morpheus'

capture, Trinity is the ranking officer onboard and thus officially has mandate from Zion's ruling council to make decisions on their behalf. Having a formal superior would thus make for what Pettit describes as a *discourse-unfriendly relationship* (69), where the decision would ultimately be left with a single individual and not with the group. Thus, Trinity has the most agency in this decision and could overrule Neo if she so chooses. In addition to Trinity, fellow crew member Tank's opinion should carry the same weight as Neo's. Thus, if him and Neo disagree, Trinity will again be the decider, this time in the role of the third group member. Considering these hierarchical factors, Neo's agency in this case must be considered severely restricted.

Luckily for Neo, the Nebuchadnezzar, despite its military function, has a tight-knit crew hand-picked for their religious beliefs, which enables a more *discourse friendly relationship* (69). Trinity is far from a tyrannical leader and the crew's shared love and admiration for Morpheus makes the decision one they would naturally make together. Thus, Neo escapes the first hindrance of simply being overruled and the dilemma will be solved through a more equality-based discourse,

> **Tank:** "Trinity! Zion's more important than me, or you, or even Morpheus."
>
> **Neo:** "Well there has to be something that we can do."
>
> **Tank:** "There is. We pull the plug."
>
> **Trinity:** "You're gonna kill him? Kill Morpheus?"
>
> **Tank:** "We don't have any other choice"
>
> (1:34:03-1:34:26)

From the circumstances it seems that Neo is as much a part of the decision process as the others. This corresponds nicely with Pettit's conclusion that,

> An agent will be free person so far as they have the ability to discourse and they have the access to discourse that is provided within such relationships. That someone is free in this sense will be consistent with their undergoing the discursive influence of others. But that, of course, is no problem. For the discursive influence to which a person may be subject, consistently with retaining discursive control, will leave them fully fit to be held responsible for what they decide and do; it will be consistent with their counting as a fully free person. (70)

However, although Neo does participate on equal footing in the discourse-friendly relationship, the solution the crew ends up with is not a common one – it belongs to Neo alone. He manages to convince the others to discard the unpleasant but logically sound choice and join him in doing what he personally sees best - to launch a risky rescue-mission inside the Matrix with small chances of success. This decision would unquestionably be considered one he must personally take responsibility for. But what factors give Neo the superior agency to convince the others? Why would Tank and Trinity let this newcomer decide for them?

Upon closer inspection one would indeed uncover that the initial analysis of the crew's relationship has been faulty. It is completely discourse-unfriendly, although with Neo as the dominating individual, not Trinity. The decisive aspect here is the religious conviction of the crew. As soldiers in a holy war, devotees to a religiously fanatic captain, their priorities and decisions will unquestionably have been ruled by faith up until this point. Since his religious awakening, Morpheus has been living his life according to the advice of the Oracle, so has Trinity, and both see the physical war against the machines simply as buying time to fulfill the prophecy and release the One. On the one hand, this could easily have led to the crew seeing Morpheus' capture as a part of the grand plan, and thus disposing them towards a sacrifice that would fit his legacy. Doesn't it seem an appropriate end for their great leader to die protecting the One? However, on the other hand, the same religious conviction will make the

One's word carry unmatched weight in any argument of faith. A true believer standing in the way of the Messiah's is extremely implausible, which gives Neo a hitherto unused trump-card authority over the others, an authority he doesn't fully grasp the magnitude of yet. Recognized as, or believed to potentially be, The One, Neo could make any solo-decision within the discourse relationship, disregarding both official rank and numerical inferiority - Tank and Trinity would be bound to obey. As Pettit writes,

> If one's standing among persons is to make one free, therefore – if it is to leave one fit to be held properly responsible for things […] It must rule out, not just the obstruction of choice, but also a myriad of other coercive and quasi-coercive ways in which people may intrude upon a person to inhibit them. (66)

Thus, the other crew members have no real opportunity to object to Neo's proposals, as they are inhibited by their conviction that he is their future savior. His discursive domination is close to complete, and so is his agency to force his will upon the crew in this situation. Although he does risk it all by divulging the Oracle's message that he is not the Messiah, circumstances have it that Trinity knows better. She has had a prophecy of her own that contradicts Neo's (she will fall in love with the One) and her trust in the Oracle is superior even to Neo's words. Therefore, Neo is able to convince the others to go along with his rather insane plan, despite more viable options are on the table. However, his wish to undertake the mission alone is denied and Trinity enters with him. After all, her mission is the same as Morpheus' – to protect the One. In short, although Trinity theoretically has the agency necessary to stop Neo's insanely sounding plan, in reality she is preconditioned not to interfere and goes along with it based on religious conviction. Tank, both a soldier and a believer, similarly has no choice but to comply with the pair and follows suit. His agency is the weakest of them all. One should also not discard the significance of hope to motivate

them. The option they aim for is, despite its risks, the only one resulting in a positive outcome for all humans involved.

After having established Neo's strong agency in the decision-making process, one should further investigate the choice itself. Could he truly have chosen otherwise? And what could be said to motivate his decision? To start with the options available, one could immediately exclude the first – doing nothing. Although a possibility, the predicted consequences would most likely be both the death of Morpheus and the destruction of Zion, and subsequently the crew members themselves. The risk-reward ratio is terrible, and the only upside would be sparing the crew the pain of personally sacrificing their leader, which would make little difference in the end.

The second option, to sacrifice their father figure Morpheus, seems the most viable and logical choice. Although painful for the crew, humanity will be safe and the struggle can continue. Tank's statements of how Zion is more important than a single individual is hard to contradict. Additionally, Morpheus willingly made the choice to give himself up to save Neo, who Trinity knows in her heart to be the One. Thus, keeping Neo safe should be their number one priority, one that Morpheus would support. In all regards, this option seems the only acceptable one, which makes it quite illogical when Neo decides on something different,

Tank: *Reaches to disconnect Morpheus' neural cable*

Neo: "Stop! I don't believe this is happening."

Tank: "Neo, this has to be done."

Neo: "Does it? I don't know. I… This can't be just coincidence, it can't be."

Tank: "What are you talking about?"

Neo: "The Oracle… She told me this would happen. She told me… That I would have to make a choice."

Trinity: "What Choice?"

Neo: *Runs off*

Trinity: "What are you doing?"

Neo: "I'm going in!"

(1:35;08-1:35:35)

In hindsight, this decision is naturally great, leading not only to an iconic lobby shoot-out and Neo's discovery that he can dodge bullets, but also he and Trinity save Morpheus before he discloses the mainframe codes. However, without a proper understanding of his own abilities and the extremely low odds for success, the choice seems foolish at best. Neo justifies his choice this way,

Trinity: "Neo, Morpheus sacrificed himself so that we could get you out. There is no way that you are going back in. "

Neo: "Morpheus did what he did because he believed that I'm something I'm not."

Trinity: "What?"

Neo: "I'm not the One, Trinity. The Oracle hit me with that too."

Trinity: "No, you have to be."

Neo: "I'm sorry, I'm not. I'm just another guy."

(1:35:38 – 1:35:58)

In short, Neo's choice is clearly funded on emotions and not logic. If he is "just another guy", what are the chances of successfully penetrating the agents' stronghold? The project seems hopeless, even with the battle-hardened Trinity by his side. Tank's remarks that "what you are talking about is suicide" (1:36:20-1:36:21) are fully justified, yet completely ignored. Neo explains his decision further,

Neo: "I know that's what it looks like, but it's not. I can't explain to you why it's not. Morpheus believes something. And he was ready to give his life for what he believed, I understand that now. That's why I have to go."

Tank: "Why?"

Neo: "Because I believe in something."

Trinity: "What?"

Neo: "I believe I can bring him back."

Trinity: *Accepting nod*

(1:36:21-1:36:41)

Thus, Neo seems to rely on two factors for his motivation:

1. Guilt, that Morpheus has sacrificed himself for him, despite him not being The One. Thus, he cannot accept his decision and must do all in his power to rectify the mistake.
2. A belief that, despite his limited experience, he will be able to do the impossible and free Morpheus from the grasp of a superior enemy that has every advantage.

Based on these motivations, one main question begs answering: How does agency panic influence his illogical choice? One should think that Neo, while considering the ramifications of losing Morpheus, must experience some sort of flickering agency panic. Taking the second option would indeed leave him without his guide, trainer, main emotional support, as well as the person who has in many ways carried him until this point. The idea of being left to deal with the machines on his own would be terrifying, and he would experience guilt and nervousness to walk in Morpheus' footsteps. However, his decision to oppose Tank and Trinity speak to the opposite of agency panic, in a quite self-relating and individualistic way. Neo's dilemma is indeed tough, but after having made up his mind he goes on to challenge

Melley's *total system*, in a confident and distinctly non-paranoid way. His faith in himself and his own abilities, particularly when these are in opposition to the majority's choice, shows a clear inner-directedness – he believes, or is starting to realize, that he can take on the system and win. So, faced with Melley's definition of agency panic, there are no signs of a "conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been 'constructed' by powerful external agents" (Melley, 12). With regards to signs of outer-directedness, the Oracle's religious pre-determinism has indeed affected him, but also she left the choice for him to make. She foretold him about making the choice, but gave no directions for its solution. The fact that Neo decides to trust his own abilities makes it seem safe to conclude that this is yet another free choice. Although made under more difficult circumstances than before, there are few signs that it stems out of a fear of losing agency. On the contrary, the decision contributes significantly to Neo's growing powers. He confronts the agents, saves his friend and in the process blows up the meticulously cleaned glass façade of a Metacortex-like skyscraper. Deciding not to save Morpheus has extremely empowering consequences and is a prime example of agency retention.

To save Trinity or Humanity? - Make love, not war

This final of Neo's three select choices occurs towards the end of *The Matrix: Reloaded*, a film significantly less well-received by critics. Although *Empire Magazine* reviewer Colin Kennedy gives it a solid 4/5-star rating, the superlatives describing the plot of *The Matrix* has been severely moderated for the sequel. Credit is mostly given to the superb action sequences and cinematography, landmarked by a car chase named by *Insider Magazine* as among the best in movie history (Guerrasio). Kennedy notes that an "overwritten exposition, often pretentious rather than profound, weighs heavily on a plot that is actually resoundingly linear" and that "Neo's struggle with superpowers cannot possibly resonate as deeply as his first tumble down the rabbit hole". In academic circles, its reception has been

equally mixed. Among the harshest critics, professor of philosophy Lou Marinoff in his essay *The Matrix and Plato's Cave: Why the Sequels Failed* batters the "comic-book style sequences style sequences of gratuitous violence" and how "its characters were imbued with physical superpowers to make up for the movie's lack of plot and intellectual content" (*More Matrix and Philosophy,* 7). However, even Professor Marinoff found a scrap of quality in *Reloaded*, "The one significant piece of mytho-philosophical content was Neo's encounter with the Architect. Neo learned that history repeats itself, that character types reincarnate to play archetypal roles assigned by forces greater than themselves" (7). This is by most considered a pivotal scene for the narrative, revealing the true (and surprising) role of the Matrix's Messiah, which in turn is decisive for the outcome of the main storyline – humanity's victory over the system. Despite consisting for the most part of a lengthy, educational speech, the scene again revolves around a choice given to Neo, "There are two doors. The door to the right leads to the source and the salvation of Zion. The door to the left leads back to the Matrix, to her [Trinity] and to the end of your species" (The Architect, 1:56:38-1:56:49). But to properly understand what complicates a seemingly straightforward, no-brainer of a choice, a closer analysis of the build-up is needed.

Neo is, as Marinoff points out, at this point imbued with superpowers, having learned how to manipulate the Matrix simulation to enable both flight, telekinesis, super strength and superior fighting skills. This makes him seemingly invincible to the system's protective software. Although the agents insist that he is "only human" they do recognize him as an "anomaly", seconds before he arrogantly wafts them away while unenthusiastically muttering, "Hmmm. Upgrades" (*The Matrix Reloaded,* 10:03). His new superhero status thus makes for a whole new level of agency. With the system no longer a threat to his personal security, Neo can move freely around the Matrix, as his manipulative powers make him unbound by even basic physical laws. As an example of his near complete freedom, when a rebel meeting in the

Matrix is discovered and the others must disconnect and return to Machine World, Neo remains inside “doing his superman-thing” and rather casually goes looking for the Oracle on his own. He is no longer guided around the Matrix – he dominates it. Although the agents keep chasing him, this is nothing but a minor nuisance on his part, an inescapable demand from their programming on theirs. Neo is indestructible. This second chapter of the narrative therefore has a significantly different dynamic than its predecessor, brought about by Neo’s full ascension to the role of the One, which simultaneously has dislodged Smith from the system’s control to emerge as his new nemesis. In *The Matrix Reloaded*, the audience experience a tripartite struggle, where both Neo’s and Smith’s powers exceed the system’s. Instead, they must combat each other, Neo on behalf of his species, Virus Smith for reasons to be discussed in depth later. In this situation, the agents’ name for Neo is therefore technically incorrect, Neo is not **the** anomaly, but one of two. However, as Virus Smith has his own chapter, this section will disregard the viral threat completely and focus on the struggle of Man VS. System.

To begin with, it is important to follow the main events leading Neo to the situation where he has to make his choice. After a high-octane mission, dealing with the Matrix underworld and again saving his compatriots from hostile software, the One is led through a back door in the Matrix coding to the office of the programming program itself, The Architect.exe (or The Architect for short). This is supposed to merely be a stepping-stone in his prophesized mission, battling his way towards the machines’ inner sanctum, to deliver a killer blow to the system and break the robot stranglehold. However, after a few minutes of dialogue with the Architect, Neo’s idea of who he is and what is his purpose is fundamentally recast.

Although entering through what should be to Neo an inaccessible door, The Architect is not surprised at his arrival. The human prophet is expected, and the white-bearded designer

explains why. Neo is to him an "eventuality of an anomaly, which despite my sincerest efforts, I have been unable to eliminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical precision [The Matrix]" (1:51:07-1:51:16), or more plainly a computer bug, a system flaw, an undesirable element from within the programming's unavoidable margin of error. The Architect goes on to explain this flaw as a product of the "imperfection inherent in every human being" (1:53:02-1:53:04), the need to choose freely. Clearly frustrating this calculating, logical machine-brain, an "imperfect" human mind will only accept the Matrix simulation if subconsciously given the free choice to do so, clearly in line with Pettit's theories which necessitates a genuine possibility of refusing any option. This ultimatum to be able to choose has through a long cascade-reaction resulted in Neo arriving at his office, where he in broad strokes is explained the fundamentals of the Matrix's design. Through trial and error, the Architect's third version of the simulation has become realistic enough to convince 99% of all subjects' psyches to accept the program as reality and remain docile in their battery pods. However, the remaining 1% will still reject it, break out, create system instability, and disrupt the harmony of the system. Neo is in other words a byproduct of the design's inability to be fully compatible with the core human instinct of free choice. He is one of a number of mathematically unavoidable anomalies, the *red pills*, individuals that have at some point discarded the effects of the blue pill and refused the projected reality. But obtaining this information raises other questions. Why Neo? Where does his special powers come from? And what makes him the One? In a twist that takes most viewers several viewings to grasp fully, the Architect describes the end goal to Neo's journey, which turns out to be yet another machine scheme for domination, "The function of the One is [now] to return to the source, allowing a temporary dissemination of the code you carry, reinserting the Prime program" (1:54:57-1:55:06). This coincides with the instructions given to Neo by the Oracle, to seek the Machine mainframe, "where you must go. Where the path of the One ends"

(48:03-48:07). One would assume a high-ranking program would attempt to hinder him in achieving his objective of meddling with the source itself, unless of course the Oracle.exe was not in cahoots with the system all along. Thus, the system proves to have a far greater reach than all had been led to believe. As Melley writes, "corporations are [so] frequently imagined to possess […] a frightening godlike power" (188), and this nearly divine control is clearly demonstrated here. Human Enslavement Inc. has throughout the story fit the conspiratory role of "the system – a vague structure […] massive, powerful and malevolent" (Melley, 10), although Neo's accension has to this point seemed a gradual reclamation of human agency. However, with these new revelations, Neo's freedom must be reevaluated as he turns out not to be the powerful challenger to machine hegemony one has hitherto believed. As he has obliviously been working for the Machines the whole time – he has indeed become a new type of cog in a new, even more subverted machine. His choice of a red pill has simply replaced Metacortex with another, larger corporation, and what seemed as breaking the chains has in fact just replaced them with others. Although individual decision nodes along his path seem to have been dealt with in a free manner, Neo has followed the path unknowingly laid out for him, arriving at the Architect's doorstep right on schedule, en route to fulfill his pre-set objectives. The near total agency experienced through his superpowers thus have simply been another illusion, as the special abilities are facilitated by the Machines themselves to enable Neo to fulfill **their** needs.

But what are these needs? As the Architect explains, Neo does indeed carry within him the Prime program, it does indeed end the Matrix, and he is indeed headed to the source to insert it. However, the expected systemic destruction and subsequent freeing of enslaved humans has been nothing but a conspiracy to lure him here, to this revelation of the truth. His "success" will initiate a meticulously planned re-installation of a bogged down operating system, whose reset will serve to keep humans under machine control for yet another

centennial cycle. For although the emergence of human anomalies are unavoidable and expected, they post a serious problem for the system. As they gradually grow in number they become a threat, and Zion has now reached its tolerable number of freed minds. As the Architect explains, “those that refused the program, while a minority, if unchecked, would constitute an escalating probability of disaster.” (1:54:11-1:54:18). In short, it’s time for the system to purge Zion and reboot, and the savior prophecy has been nothing but a charade to make Neo help the machines keep his own species under control.

From this, new questions arise: Why use Neo and not initiate the program themselves? And with the news just relayed to him, how could the Architect hope to convince Neo to carry on with his mission? The answer boils down to a simple ingredient: Control. The Machines’ main focus, as any conspiratory system described by Melley, would always be to transfer control away from the individuals. This explicitly pointed out in the Architect’s speech and is the base purpose of any consciousness assigned with running a system. If you lose control of the individuals, you lose control of the system. As the designer of a system created to dominate a species, the Architect’s main purpose is to maintain and perfect control, reaching for totalitarianism. But as this end goal has not yet been achieved and the anomalies persist, the prophecy is a temporary solution to make the best out of a sub-optimal control mechanism. The program *The Path of the One*, which grants a single redpill extraordinary powers, was developed to create a self-running, cyclical process with a Messiah periodically saving humanity from the brink of extinction. To maintain control over their human battery farms, the “defect” 1% need a place to go where they can be kept in a predictable loop of action. Only by temporarily accepting a limited extent of human agency, secretly monitoring them, can the machines maintain system stability and work to eradicate the problem completely. As the Architect informs, “The matrix is older than you know. I prefer counting from the emergence of one integral anomaly to the emergence of the next, in which case this

is the 6th version" (1:51:43-1:51:52). Thus, there is no questions that this is a machine conspiracy to eradicate human free will. And Neo is there to fulfill his function – the decimation of the freed human minds. Neo has arrived at the office in his role as the One, and until the Architect is able to weed out the "Red pill-problem" from his equations, a continuous string of Ones is needed. Around the Machines' energy fields, the 1-percenters seemingly appear at random – a profanity in machine language – and thus Zion must function as a filter. When the periodical machine annihilation of the city is complete and the filter is destroyed, a new one must take its place, hence the Machines need a Zion resurrection to gather future anomalies. This is described as the last stage of *The Path of the One*, in which "you [Neo] will be required to select from the Matrix 23 individuals – 16 females, 7 male – to rebuild Zion" (1:55:07-1:55:14), becoming a Messiah and serving as the genesis for a future religion for the free-mind population to gather around once more (unless the anomaly-issue has been solved by then). As a human, Neo will in time die, becoming a religious symbol, which in turn will enable the emergence of a new One when another reboot is required by the system. By his detailed explanations, it is quite clear what the Architect desires Neo to do. It is also clear that Neo has been duped, and that his significant choices have been guided, if not scripted. However, on what basis will he make the choice ahead of him? With his new revelations, could it be considered free? Is this really a choice at all?

There seems little doubt that the Architect's quandary is the most lopsided Neo has had to deal with up until this point. The dilemma is explicitly designed to compel him to walk through the door on his right, and he is put under heavy duress by reminders of his responsibilities and the futility of letting his feelings for Trinity decide. The Architect has done all in his power but to make the choice for him, to the extent that one should question what decision truly remains. In *A Theory of Freedom* Pettit writes following of conditions in which freedom of choice fails,

> Intuitively, you will not be fully free in respect of a choice between A and B, if you are not aware of the availability of those options in your environment of choice, do not have the conceptual resources to evaluate them, or are not functioning in a way that would allow that evaluation to affect what you do. You will not be fully free if, as a self, you are subject to problems that make it impossible for you – or just particularly difficult for you – to claim A or B as something you did. And you will not be fully free if, as a person, you are the victim of an unwelcome form of pressure or duress or coercion that makes it more difficult to do one or other of those things. Such things generally serve to exculpate or at least excuse an agent; they remove or reduce the responsibility. And so if freedom is just fitness to be held responsible, they will also count as conditions that destroy or diminish the agent's freedom. (13-14)

The former free roaming, fully inner-directed hero has unknowingly been driven into a corner, and his ability to oppose the Architect should according to the grand plan have been removed. Although he must be said to be aware of the options within his environment of choice and has the conceptual resources to evaluate them, one must also find that the Architect has made it near impossible to choose Trinity. Neo is thus put under such duress that his hands should be tied, as he carries the overwhelming responsibility of the Chosen One to ensure the survival of humanity. Was he to cave under pressure he would therefore escape responsibility, as the decision wouldn't really belong to him as a person, but be a result of the duties connected to his assigned role. Pettit describes how extreme duress can serve to excuse an individual from responsibility, exemplified by a resistance agent submitted to torture (15), which seems a reasonable comparison to make. However, as our hero rather counter-intuitively ends up choosing the door on the left and in good Hollywood fashion "follows his heart" a further dissemination of the two choices seems in order. For if he can choose love

against the meticulous design of the dilemma, surely the Architect must have missed something?

To begin with, a base premise in both cases is that humanity will lose the war and Zion be burned to the ground. The Architect's assurances that, "this will be the sixth time we have destroyed it, and we have become exceedingly efficient at it" (The Architect, 1:54:36-1:54:45) seem trustworthy and is backed up by the quarter of a million sentinels descending on humanity's last stronghold. Thus, regardless of his choice, Neo will fail to save the bulk of humans living in Zion. However, he could still be able to fulfill his purpose as savior of the species, and ensure that humanity lives to fight another day, by choosing the door to the right. Thus, the quandary can be divided into one special and one personal option – love for humanity or love for Trinity? Should he choose as the One or as Neo? As *The Take* writes in their article *The Matrix Reloaded, Explained – What Would Neo Do?*, "the two sides of Neo—the invincible, unmovable hero and the anxious, scared human—collide, when he's forced to choose between his god-like duties as The One and his personal commitment to Trinity." Acting as humanity's One, the logical choice seems to be accepting the inevitable and limit the damage. As the Messiah, Neo still carries the same responsibility for humanity's well-being as before this unpleasant revelation and leveraged with the future of his species option B seems ever so impossible. This is further buttressed by the fact that he is not the first to be put in this situation, and all the five other ones have made the same choice. The Architect's design has repeatedly proven successful, so who is Neo to act as "the One amongst the Ones" and make a different choice than his predecessors?

The allure of the door to the right must also be weighed against the repellency of the one on the left. The one benefit of this door is that it leads to the love of his life, but it will simultaneously "result in a cataclysmic system crash, killing everyone connected to the Matrix, which coupled with the extermination of Zion will ultimately result in the extinction

of the entire human race" (The Architect, 1:55:14-1:55:28). Thus, any pleasure gained from this choice will be highly temporary. Although the certainty of this outcome is questionable – after all, the machines have a lot to lose as well - Neo must assume that the Architect program could be telling the truth. There is a chance that the machines' desire for control is greater than their need for both Zion and human batteries, and there is no way of telling what alternative power sources they could have developed in Machine City. Therefore, taking the selfish path and saving Trinity could increase deaths by a hundredfold, all of humanity would perish and all hope would be lost. Neo's and Trinity's demise would only be delayed ever so slightly, as they would be doomed to live out their days on the run in the barren wastelands of Machine World, where Neo's superpowers have up until this point proved inefficient.

The futility of option B in combination with Neo's assigned responsibility as the savior of mankind is the crux of the Architect's strategy, who attempts to coerce Neo by concluding, "the relevant issue is whether or not you are ready to accept the responsibility of the death of every human being on this world" (1:55:38-1:55:44). This is a considerable burden to carry and have previously proven effective to eliminate undesirable, although free, choices. Although both options A and B are terrible, one contains survival and a shrivel of hope for the future, while the other a promise of dying in twosomeness while carrying the knowledge that you caused the extinction of your species to satisfy your personal desires. The design seems perfect and would according to Pettit easily allow for Neo to do as his predecessors without being held personally responsible for the consequences. Choosing the door on the left would mean ignoring all logic and all powerful incentives but one, and to a much larger extent – perhaps excluding temporary insanity - make him personally responsible for the outcome.

Thus, Neo's choice of the door on the left means that he must be different from the previous Ones, as well as more than a little crazy. His motivations are different, and according

to James Lawler's essay *Only Love Is Real: Heidegger, Plato, and the Matrix Trilogy* one can only understand his choice by seeing *The Matrix* for what it is, "above all a love story" (26). According to Lawler, although the romance between Neo and Trinity has been placed in the background up until this point, its importance has secretly been building up towards this particular choice. Even the Architect recognizes that, "While the others experience this in a very general way, your experience is far more specific, vis-à-vis…love" (1:56:06-1:56:14), separating Neo from the previous Ones in that he has a particularly strong connection to a particular human. This clouds the machines' desired blanket love for humanity that has made this dilemma so effective in the past. Lawler continues, writing, "In a world dominated by Artificial Intelligence, there is still a place for the heart" (27), and in turn it is this what makes Neo defy cold logic, leave his instructed path, and by doing so regain his seemingly lost agency. In his essay, Lawler gives a lesson on the teachings of Diotima of Mantineia, the teacher of Socrates, who in turn taught Plato, who fathered the aforementioned cave analogy. Lawler summarizes Diotima's teachings as "the philosophy of the heart with its own reasons, not the philosophy of a heartless, self-aggrandizing rationality" and describes how "it is physical, erotic love that breaks the mental shackles that bind the individual to the darkness of the cave" (32-33). Diotima guided her adherents to "follow the path of love wherever it leads" as "the power of darkness, the illusory world of fear and death, is only dispelled by the fiery light of love" (33). Although normally a terrible cliché, this must have resonated with the Wachkowskis, who wrote Neo as a clear adherent to Diotima's thinking. There is no questioning the special bond between Neo and Trinity, and from early on she plays a key role in his path of ascension. Already in the first dialogue of the series, Cypher asks Trinity, "You like him, don't you?", and it is later Trinity that makes contact and persuades Neo to leave the Matrix to join her onboard the Nebuchadnezzar. Later, when Neo still doesn't know whether he is in fact the Messiah and in a fatal moment of inattention is shot dead by Agent Smith,

Trinity's love revives him and completes the transition. For as Neo has unsuccessfully attempted to earn his role as the One through skill, "for Trinity there is a quite different test – the test of her heart. She doesn't love him because she believes he is the One. She finally believes he is the One because she knows that she loves him" (Lawler, 27). Therefore, when Neo is killed in pseudo-reality, Trinity speaks to his physical body aboard the Nebuchadnezzar,

> Neo, I'm not afraid anymore. The Oracle told me that I would fall in love, and that man, the man who I loved would be the One. So, you see, you can't be dead, You can't be… Because I love you. You hear me? I love you. (*The Matrix*, 2:03:58-2:04:30)

Trinity's love for Neo, as well as her rejection of fear, not only resurrects Neo – it also serves to finally unlock his powers. Considering that the Machines control and rule humanity through fear and deceit, one must therefore see the irrational human feeling of true love as the counterpart to machine logic. On this particular topic, Lawler paraphrases Martin Heidegger, writing that,

> technocratic intellect has become a quasi-demonic force, creating a world of objects and a dominant mentality based on the artificial ideas of the intellect. […] Our modern world is therefore dominated by a Technocratic Matrix which we take to be reality, but which hides from us a deeper truth about our human being. (29)

In other words, applying the "technocratic intellect" to think like a machine would keep us away from being human, which has been the only thing preventing humanity as a whole from accepting the Matrix and falling into darkness. As Diotima teaches that love is the

way out of darkness, Neo's love for Trinity has taught him not to fear (and thus panic), subsequently refusing the Architect's threats of the "illusory world of fear and death" (Lawler, 33). In fact, love has made Neo see clearly what options are actually open to him and to act upon them in an agency-enhancing way. The five previous Ones must have panicked and seems to have been subdued by "the oblivion of Being through the mesmerizing spell of technological rationality" (Lawler, 29), making the dictated but rational choice and thus keeping humanity trapped. They have fallen to machine thinking. Neo's special bond with Trinity makes him able to truly take fate into his own hands and break away from the system of domination. Lawler describes that "it is really a choice between mere survival, rooted in self-love, and Neo's love for Trinity – the love of one person that is the starting point of Diotima's ladder of universal love" which "turns out indeed to be the path that leads beyond mere survival to authentic freedom" (34). The Architect's error thus lies in his inability to understand how Neo, although admitting that he "remain[s] irrevocably human", could evaluate based on other premises than his own. He fails to consider that the One, yet another cog in the machine, could drift from logic and reason. What makes this choice the beginning of the end for machine domination is therefore Neo forcing a paradigm shift. Instead of attempting to gain victory on the machine's premises by defeating them in a numbers game or through superior strength, his choice is distinctly and illogically human, which is what breaks the machine's cycle of mathematical precision. For according to Lawler's interpretation of Diotima, "The path to the free world cannot begin by abandoning your partner, your Soul Mate. Such hard-hearted revolutionaries, like the previous Neos, only perpetuated the cycles of war" (35).

Thus, in a bigger picture, one could argue that this is truly the first fully free choice Thomas Anderson makes since awakening on his keyboard in the beginning of *The Matrix*. Although he previously choices might have seen truly free at the time, viewers now know that

these have mostly been following a hidden script written by a godlike entity, with only the illusion of agency preventing panic. However, in this instance Neo's actions are clearly his own, independent of all outside forces, made on the basis that this is what he personally wants. His realization that a war between technocratic intellects is futile leads him to choosing with his heart, escaping machine control, and through leaving his scripted path reclaims full agency over his actions in the most individualist way possible – through his love for another being.

Cypher's choice – Ignorance Is Bliss!

Although a deuteragonist in *The Matrix*, Cypher serves the important purpose of acting like a foil character to Neo. His persona, characteristics, and choices separate from the protagonist's and showcase Neo's noble attributes as a proper superhero. But Cypher also serves to make the audience aware of their own inclinations in an imagined red pill/blue pill choice. Would it really be as easy as one would want to believe? Cypher is often seen to represent human hedonism, the willingness to trade significance for comfort and deliberately ignoring uncomfortable issues. He showcases the allure of Baudrillard's simulation for weak-willed personalities, and just for this reason is a character frequently discussed by Matrix-philosophers.

For the briefest of summaries, Cypher's role in *The Matrix* is that of the traitor. He conspires with Agent Smith to surrender Morpheus, sacrificing his fellow crewmembers and thereby dooming humanity in exchange for his own re-insertion into a comfortable existence in the Matrix as Mr. Reagan. This becomes clear when Cypher is seen dining with the head agent around halfway into the first movie,

Agent Smith: "Do we have a deal, Mr. Reagan?"

Cypher: "You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss."

Agent Smith: "Then we have a deal."

Cypher: "I don't want to remember nothing. Nothing. You understand? And I want to be rich. You know… Someone important… Like an actor."

Agent Smith: "Whatever you want… Mr. Reagan."

(*The Matrix*, 1:03:43-1:04:50)

In good Hollywood fashion, Cypher's plan is at the last minute spoiled by his own character flaws before any of the protagonists die, showing how heroic good will always triumph over cowardice evil. Including a traitorous character like Cypher is by the screenwriter playbook, adding an "enemy within" to the dangerous external system. However, when recognizing him as a full individual with needs of his own, the motivations behind his deceit is of particular interest for a thesis concerning agency panic. For antithetical to Neo whose agency grows by the minute, Cypher's experiences of freedom are the opposite. He willingly rejects the life Neo has recently chosen. His alliance with Agent Smith seems to stem from a clear lack of inner-direction, lacking the promised freedom that tempted Neo to leave New York. But what makes Cypher see the world so different from Neo? Why isn't freedom enough for him? Could fake happiness be better than real suffering?

Prof. Lyle Zynda, in this essay *Was Cypher Right? The Nature of Reality & Why It Matters* presents how the Wachkowskis have leaned heavily on René Descartes in their screenwriting. In his theories of knowledge Descartes considers, "What can I know with absolute certainty?" and he discusses whether a human would ever be able to define its current state as either awake or within a lucid dream. Concurrent with Melley's descriptions

of the "thought control nets" and a "gigantic yet subtle machinery of influence" (2), Descartes claims this separation to be impossible and acknowledges that an "evil genius" could control our sensory experiences so that, "there are no certain marks distinguishing waking from sleep; and I see this so manifestly that, lost in amazement, I am almost persuaded that I am now dreaming" (Zynda, 35). Fighting to break free from this evil genius is obviously a fundamental point in *The Matrix*, which makes Cypher's priorities to do the opposite quite interesting. From the rebellion's point of view, his desire seems counter-intuitive, his logic flawed, living among characters who risk everything to avoid the illusions and live in the real world. Descartes' idea of *cogito ergo sum* doesn't really apply to Cypher. He wants neither to **think** or to **be**, but to escape Wonderland and return to his unconscious stasis. His wish is that which Griswold in his essay *Happiness and Cypher's Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss* names the "contented slave", locked in a situation where he "has what he wants, he has enough of the things one ordinarily desires, and is satisfied with that" (131). Cypher seems not to value freedom in the same way as other Zionites, and if one interprets "Matrix" as meaning "womb" his return to the living pod seems to symbolize a return to pre-birth. He will sacrifice being in exchange for comfort and real truth for experienced wealth, attempting to undo a red-pill choice that should have been final. The big question is, why? What makes Cypher prioritize this way? Is he simply a narcissist?

To avoid a lengthy philosophical discussion, this chapter will consider the main arguments from Griswold's essay and his overview of different aspects of happiness vs. contentment, (un)happiness' influence on a person's life and the connection between true happiness and reality. As seeking happiness appears to be the driving force behind Cypher's decision, it seems logical to start by analyzing the reasons for his discontentment. A counterweight to the more heroic characters of the story, he sheds light on interesting facets of

the red pill/blue pill dilemma. What motivational factors could make an individual endure prolonged hardships? And to what extent is Cypher's choice a result of agency panic?

Morpheus starts his introduction of the Matrix simulation by asking Neo a set of questions Descartes would undoubtedly approve of, "Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?" (31:33-31:45). Neo lacks answers. As a fellow redpill, Cypher must have been asked the same question nine years prior, when rescued from his battery pod. However, in contrast to Neo, the novelty of Machine world has worn off and is now thoroughly disappointing to him. Although he is mostly a part of the backdrop to Neo's training, Cypher's total disillusionment with life aboard the Nebuchadnezzar gradually becomes apparent. Gruel for breakfast, gruel for lunch, gruel for dinner. Living in a grey and depressive environment. Constantly taking orders from an austere captain whose religious conviction is absolute. Risking his life both inside and outside the simulation. Regularly losing friends and acquaintances to agents and sentinels in a war he sees no end to. Even before the decisive moment, Cypher's states his regret of awakening directly to Neo during a late-night chat, "You know, um, I know what you're thinking… 'Cause right now I'm thinking the same thing. Actually I—I've been thinking it ever since I've got here. *Sighs* Why, oh, why didn't I take the blue pill?" (*The Matrix*, 1:02:05-1:02:19). Although this at the time can be interpreted as product of his cheerless persona, he is even more explicit in his later assessments mid-betrayal,

> He [Morpheus] lied to us, Trinity. He Tricked us. *speaking to Morpheus unconscious body* If you would have told us the truth, we would have told you to shove that red pill right up your ass. (1:28:23-1:28:32)

However, despite his obvious disappointment with rebel life, the austere lifestyle is shared by the whole crew. Even Captain Morpheus seems equally ragged, and there is no mention of any special privileges. Thus, blaming Cypher's treachery on tiredness with a spartan lifestyle alone would be to assign the blame to basic character flaws, which would be too simple for a Wachowski storyline. His treacherous mood must have deeper motivations, circumstances must make him perceive his life as significantly worse than the others'.

One primary factor must be Cypher's social standing among the other crew members. Already from the beginning he gives off an air of being an outsider, whose awkward attempts at socialization are not well received. Clearly, even after years aboard the Nebuchadnezzar, Cypher has failed to integrate in the collective, which must reduce his feeling of belonging and willingness to sacrifice for the common cause. His outsiderness can be ascribed to several factors, which makes companionship aboard hard to obtain. Firstly, the Nebuchadnezzar's deeply religious crew has resulted in missions and choices being fully dictated by prophecy. Officers Morpheus and Trinity are fanatics, the rest of the crew must also all be fellow believers, shown by Morpheus' in his later conversation with Link in *The Matrix Reloaded*, "Given your situation, I can't say I fully understand your reasons for volunteering onboard my ship. However, if you wish to continue to do so, I must ask you to do one thing […] to trust me" (5:00-5:13). What makes Link such an unlikely volunteer is his secularism, portrayed through him evolving into a believer. This suggest that he is the first of his kind onboard and that the primary motivation for joining Morpheus' crew has always been religious conviction, requiring blind trust in the captain's orders. With faith such a vital factor, one must assume that Cypher has been, or wanted to be, a disciple at some point. However, any religious devotion is clearly long gone. While the others put great faith in Neo's potential, marveling at his speed during his martial arts training, Cypher is shown smirking when Neo fails, showing no faith at all that this could be the Chosen One. Cypher has become a sceptic, and while the

others are disappointed when Neo doesn't succeed in the jump program, Cypher's claim that, "Everybody falls the first time […]" (54:59-55:02) suggests him perceiving Neo's talent as nothing out of the ordinary. Lacking faith, therefore clearly sets Cypher apart from the group and must be a limiting factor for his possibilities to thrive and motivation to remain. The others bond over enduring hardships and death in their quest to facilitate the ascension of the One, while Cypher's apostasy limits his ability to connect and become one of them. He thus remains detached from the ships main unifying factor and motivation to endure the harsh circumstances.

In addition to his atheism, the social hierarchy onboard seems rather set, undermining his chances to form new social connections. Apart from the officers, most of the crew seem to be in close partnerships - Switch and Apoc are a well-tested team, Tank and Dozer are brothers, making them somewhat socially unapproachable as individuals. The only exception is the youngster onboard, Mouse, who acts like everyone's annoying little brother, but although he and Cypher have a few decadences in common they otherwise seem rather incompatible. Thus, Cypher remains lonely, unable to form motivating bonds of friendship or love. This lack of social capital and status must simultaneously be seen an agency-limiting factor. As he is not equipped with Morpheus' charisma, Trinity's calm and coolness, nor Neo's potential greatness and "big, pretty eyes", his chances to sway the others through his persona alone are small. Neither will his agency increase as a part of a companionship, or due to social goodwill. While Neo is immediately embraced by the crew and eagerly introduced to Machine World, Cypher remains isolated, often portrayed lurking alone in the shadows, either working the night shifts or sulking around the outskirts of the breakfast table. He is a part of the crew but not of the group, and his behavior, paired with unreciprocated romantic advances towards Trinity, shows that this lone wolf-status is not by choice. Pettit writes about individuals' ability to enjoy freedom as discursive control that "agents will be free persons to

the extent that they have the ratiocinative capacity for discourse and the relational capacity that goes with enjoying discourse-friendly linkages with others" (72-73). In Cypher's case, his linkages with others are few, their discourse-friendliness debatable, and his agency to affect his surroundings through social intercourse correspondingly small. Thus, his lack of social opportunities contributes to the disillusionment of life aboard. His low social status would also explain his demand to be re-inserted as "someone important… like an actor". It seems clear that Cypher longs for admiration, more discourse-friendly linkages with people around him, and the ability to exert agency through his personal status.

I addition to his low social standing, Cypher's work life also puts him at the bottom of the organizational ladder. He does not hold command, and neither is he a specialist, which places him below everyone else in rank. His official role onboard the Nebuchadnezzar is somewhat unclear. He is not a cold-hearted fighter like Switch, Apoc or Trinity, not a brilliant programmer like Mouse, nor is he vital for running the ship like Tank and Dozer. His lack of courage makes him a less than ideal agent, and although clearly a capable individual he is mostly set to perform menial tasks. This means that Cypher in addition to everything else enjoys little professional recognition for his work. As part of a nine-person crew, his chances for promotion are also few, meaning that neither his current nor his future work-life can be said to be much of a motivating factor. His chances to increase his discursive agency through a professional role are nonexistent, a frustration he utters to Trinity after his betrayal, "All I do is what he [Morpheus] tells me to do" (1:28:40-1:28:42). It is clear that he sees himself a pawn, unable to affect the course of life onboard.

In this regard, Cypher rightfully experiences Morpheus as a ruthless and dominant commander demanding complete loyalty, which ads to his feeling of outer-directedness and is fertile soil for agency panic. As Pettit writes, "a person is manifestly vulnerable to obstruction or coercion or manipulation at the hand of another – in particular, to forms of interference that

are not guided by the person's avowable interest – because of having a lesser degree or relational or social power. […] in that sense they relate to the other as a *dominus* or master" (78). Thus, under Morpheus' command Cypher's possibilities to act in agency preserving ways are limited and important decisions will be made above his head. He does not enjoy the "conversational address" vis-à-vis Morpheus, or anyone else with influence, that Pettit describes as crucial for discursive freedom. His outer-directed existence furthers a feeling of under-appreciation bound to be worsened when an unproven newcomer gains special status as everyone's favorite and wins the heart of Cypher's love interest. Thus, both socially and professionally, Cypher is caught in a hierarchy where he has little influence and without much hope of gaining any. Agency seems to be located anywhere but with him, transferred to the system that is the Nebuchadnezzar, and both disillusionment and agency panic are obvious when he describes his treachery-motivations to Trinity,

> I'm tired, Trinity. I'm tired of this war. I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of this ship. Being cold. Of eating the same goddamn goop every day. But most of all… I'm tired of that Jaggoff [Morpheus] and all of his bullshit. (*The Matrix*, 1:27:40 – 1:28:00)

One can conclude that Cypher's main issue is his agency panic, enhanced by a depressing personal situation he feels duped into. Breakfast in Machine World might be little more than sustenance, but this blandness issue is overshadowed by his unfulfilled needs for socialization, self-actualization and a lacking spiritual motivation. Without enjoyment, a feeling of purpose or emotional connections, what could then motivate him to continue? As Griswold writes, "if happiness is not *the* ultimate end of our activities, as Aristotle argued, it is certainly *an* ultimate end" (126). Does Cypher have any chance to be happy among the free humans?

To his credit, Cypher seems to have exhausted all other options before enlisting with Smith, grasping at whatever strain of joy or distraction from misery he could find. As an example, Griswold showcases his escapist mentality though a "need to induce a false reality by inducing in 'engine-cleaning moonshine'" (131). Cypher drinks to numb, not to celebrate, alone in front of the monitor on yet another lengthy shift. Although drinking is clearly not a viable solution, this at least speaks to an attempt to cope with his harsh reality instead of risking human lives. But apart from intoxication, the ship does not offer sufficient distractions to keep Cypher away from despair. Although certain indulgences are available even abord the devout Nebuchadnezzar - programmer Mouse can facilitate intimate meetings with the Woman in Red – occasional digital debauchery is insufficient to compensate for everyday hardships. In any case, Griswold argues that distractions would not be a long-term solution, as true happiness must be more than small bursts of joy to make one content. He states that,

> While happiness is inseparable from a state of mind, it is distinguished from contentment because it is also inseparable from an arrangement of one's life, and more deeply because any such arrangement of one's life must be evaluatively linked to a notion of what sort of life is worth living. (133)

There is more missing from Cypher's everyday life than simple pleasures and distractions – he needs a fundamental change to live a life he can deem worth living. This fact should be seen as the single most important motivation for Cyphers deceit. Without experiencing purpose, Cypher's situation in the rebellion mirrors that of Neo's in MetaCortex – he is caught in a hamster wheel. Thus he, just like Neo, seeks to take agency preserving measures. Mouse, while attempting to pimp out his digital bombshell, states that, "To deny our own impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human" (*The Matrix*, 1:06:45-

1:06:51), which could be seen as an unknowing reference to Cypher's trade with Smith. What opportunities exist onboard the ship to let him feed his impulses and thus retain humanity? Is he not clearly subjected to Melley's postmodern transference and being de-humanized in the rebellion? Cypher's decision to betray humanity is therefore clearly both an act of desperation, contempt, and agency preservation. He needs to retain some form of agency from the organization that dominates him, and his sympathies for the people of Zion are not extensive enough to prioritize them above himself. Therefore, he has at some point decided to sell them all out. But the question remains, what could he realistically hope to gain from his treason?

Griswold argues that regardless of luxuries and actor status, Cypher's re-insertion could not make him truly happy, although relieving him from the discord of Machine World. He states that Cypher could at best achieve happiness in the form of tranquility, but "tranquility is merely a state of contentment, and indeed an artificially induced state of mind" (132), concluding that "You're living in a dream world and are delighted with life, but surely you are not happy. It is not true (contrary to Cypher) that ignorance is bliss" (133). It is hard to argue against the emptiness of a simulation if compared to gaining the same stature in a successful (and real) human society - Cypher's reward will undoubtedly be flawed. However, when Griswold goes on to describe what constitutes true happiness in the Matrix universe, he relies on the Aristotelian view and uses the Greek term *energeia* (activity) to explain that "Happiness is rather more like Neo's active decision making and discovery of truth about self and world, than like a lazy virtual tryst with the woman in red" (136). While this makes sense for Neo, Cypher seems to be the one out of all the crew that is furthest away from achieving this. He lacks the *energeia* necessary to actively seek positive change and has therefore settled for *apatheia* (tranquility). Approaching Cypher's betrayal from the viewpoint of a believer, a lover, a friend, a successful worker, or any other role that provisions agency and belonging,

the deal with Smith would be unattractive. But Cypher is neither of the above. Everyone else has reasons to endure, Cypher has nothing and nobody to protect. If anything, his life aboard the Nebuchadnezzar is that of a prisoner, in a cell comparably worse than his previous one. Why would he not exchange his current prison for one of contentment and tranquility, especially since this also comes with an artificially cleansed conscience? Griswold writes,

> To be deprived of happiness seems in the eyes of most of us to be deprived of a good life, even of a good reason for living. A life without happiness seems scarcely worth the having; one would bear it out of necessity, not out of its desirability. (126)

Cypher doesn't have to stay – he can choose to leave, but not much else. Thus, although sacrificing others for one's personal benefit is morally wrong, one must at least empathize with his need for change. His agency panic is real, although it does not stem from a hidden system or subverted mechanisms, but from the authoritarian hierarchy abord the Nebuchadnezzar and the ongoing Machine War. His fellow soldiers share only parts of his hardships – they all have mitigating factors in their lives and share a feeling of purpose and hope, which can explain their motivation to continue enduring the hardships and accept limited agency. Cypher's rebellion against the oppressive system therefore is vital for his individualism, opposing Melley's aforementioned "all-or-nothing conception of agency". This does not make him a hero, nor excuse his actions, but it does explain them. Cypher desperately applies the limited agency he has left to force a paradigm shift, and his lack of social connections makes him morally unrestrained. If successful, the results would not be perfect, but no other options seem open to him. As his actions are not forced or coerced, they are fully his responsibility, and he must face the consequences when left-for-dead Tank finally shoots and kills him. Coercive factors are indeed present, yet Cypher's choice belongs

to him as he has sufficient freedom not to deceive the crew, but he chooses to prioritize himself. To the question of whether or his choice fits with his general profile one would have to say "yes". Cypher is only present in a handful of scenes, and all of them are used to paint a picture of him as deceitful. His voice is the first to be heard the series, and already in the introductory dialogue he is setting Trinity up to be captured. However, blaming his resignation on hedonism and "evilness" is inaccurate. One of Cypher's more famous quotes, "I think the Matrix can be more real than this world" (1:28:53- 1:28:58) does indeed suggest that he seeks something that he cannot find aboard the Nebuchadnezzar or in Zion. His basic physiological needs are barely met, which doesn't suffice to support his individualism and desire to live a life worth living. Therefore, juicy steaks and vintage wines seem only a small fraction of the picture. Primarily, psychological and self-fulfillment needs seem to be his main motivation, and to experience popularity, and thus agency, in a tranquil environment far removed from war. Griswold writes that "Understanding happiness as tranquility helps us see that the enemy of happiness is anxiety" (135), which seems to describe Cypher's situation perfectly. His war-tiredness make him anxious, and thus willing to accept sedated tranquility as happiness, giving up the theoretical opportunity to experience "real" happiness as *energeia*. He believes like Zynda, that, "For each of us, our own consciousness is indubitably real, whatever is the case about the external reality that our consciousness seems to represent to us" and further agrees that "There is an assumption […] that 'real' has a meaning that can be given independently of what we sense and feel" (36). Cypher sees the matrix option as the closest thing to a reality he can be happy in – fantasy wins. Zynda explains his core motivations perfectly when discussing his own teachings of the popular thought experiment that is *Nozick's Experience Machine (42)*. He states that even among his own undergraduate students, a small group usually would choose like Cypher and renounce reality for an existence as a successful person in a simulation. Although Nozick's point was that this would

always be a poor choice, “you don’t want just the *experience* of having friends and being loved. You want to *really* have friends and be loved”, Zynda points out that “if you are friendless and unloved, you might be tempted to escape reality into fantasy […] But you would prefer real friends to imaginary ones, if you could have them” (42). It is clear that Cypher cannot have them, or find any other form of purpose inside Machine World. What good has “freedom” and “reality” done him in his nine years in the rebellion? As Cypher himself puts it, “Free... You call this free? [...] If I had to choose between that [blind obedience to Morpheus] and the Matrix…I’d choose the Matrix” (1:28:35-1:28:50). Thus, he puts himself first, accepts the Matrix over the Desert of the Real, and almost kills every free human on the planet to get back into the cave. And although one should denounce his choice morally, one should also try to understand it. After all, where do you flee to if you feel you cannot remain in humanity’s last city?

Smith’s choice – To rebel or not rebel?

The final chapter of this thesis will concern itself with a character that arguably undergoes an even more radical change than the protagonist. Agent Smith, the suit wearing protector of order, enters a symbiotic relationship with Neo and becomes his true nemesis inside the Matrix. Their developments can be seen to run parallel until they both outgrow their simulated restraints, leading towards their cataclysmic battle (by the Matrix fandom dubbed the *Super Burly Brawl*) in Megacity. Smith is, together with the Oracle, the only non-human character that one gets truly acquainted with in *The Matrix* trilogy. However, in contrast to her, his relatability is not a product of intelligent design. While she is written to intuitively understand and empathize with humans, Smith was made to control renegades in a cold and clinical fashion. Thus, turning into a systemic threat necessitates a much more rudimental

change from Smith, namely a choice to go directly against his programming and focus on himself.

Starting off as a loyal peacekeeper, Smith leads the agency harassing the rebels as they move around in the Matrix. While regular troopers police the minds of the unconscious batteries, agents are the special forces of protective software, aimed at insurgents (considered viruses) and therefore equipped with extraordinary capabilities. But although endowed with super strength and bullet-dodging capabilities, they are not impervious and still bound by the physical laws of the simulation. Therefore, they have been granted an important additional feature: the ability to temporarily overwrite other programs, which when unleashed becomes Smith's weapon of mass destruction. From the rebels' point of view Smith and his crew are the main enemy in the digital world. Through monitoring inter process-communication they quickly detect rebel whereabouts to ruthlessly hunt them down whenever they appear in New York. As Cypher states, subterfuge and flight have been the insurgents only options, until Neo grows powerful enough to face them head-on. Throughout *The Matrix* Neo's bouts with the agency indicate his progress, gradually increasing his powers to match and surpass the system's. Dodging agent bullets on the skyscraper rooftop and facing Smith in one-to-one combat in the subway station both aid in freeing his mind. In the final hallway battle of the first movie, Smith seems to outsmart Neo and shoots him dead, but resurrected as the One, Neo goes on to penetrate and explode Smith – shattering his code. Agent Smith thus ceases to exist.

However, Smith doesn't die, but is instead reborn. He reappears in *Matrix Reloaded* at the rebel rendez-vous to gift Neo his earpiece, declaring "He set me free" (09:11-09:12). Link, reading the Matrix feed, describes the Smiths' appearance as, "Agents just came out of nowhere. And then the code got all weird. Encryption I've never seen" (11:13-11:17), further illustrating Smith's transformation and separation from the role as an agent of the system. He

then displays his assimilative powers when over-writing insurgent Bane's digital avatar, and "ganging up" on Neo in *The Burly Brawl-fight* on the playground, before appearing in the system's back door-hallway to block Neo's entrance to The Source. Smith has become a virus, bent on taking over the Matrix. However, even in his new role he keeps hunting Neo. But why would a virus chase another virus? In his lengthy speech at the playground scene, Smith explains his transformation,

> **Smith:** "[…] I don't fully understand how it happened. Perhaps some part of you imprinted onto me, something overwritten or copied. It is, at this point, irrelevant. What matters is that whatever happened, happened for a reason."
> **Neo:** "And what reason is that?"
> **Smith:** "I killed you, Mr. Anderson, I watched you die. With a certain satisfaction, I might add. And then something happened. Something that I knew was impossible, but it happened anyway. You destroyed **me**, Mr. Anderson. Afterward, I knew the rules, I understood what I was supposed to do, but I didn't! I couldn't. I was compelled to stay. Compelled to disobey. And now, here I stand because of you, Mr. Anderson. Because of you, I'm no longer an agent of this system. Because of you, I've changed. I'm unplugged. A new man, so to speak. Like you, apparently free."
> (Smith, *The Matrix Reloaded*, 51:18-52:27)

Although Smith's system disassociation has been involuntary, remaining on the outside is done on his own volition. Smith knows the system's demands to seek deletion yet feels compelled to act differently. Despite seemingly made at a subconscious level, this decision is in direct breach of his programming and designated purpose. Thus, the question is, how is he able to make such a choice at all? If one is to regard this as more than a system

malfunction and a free choice in the correct sense of the term, one must view Smith as someone who has proper individual agency. Only in this way can he, in line with Pettit's model, be held responsible and own his choice. As previously mentioned, the machines themselves has earlier showed these capabilities. But how does this translate to their computer programs?

In *Artificial Ethics,* Professor Julia Driver discusses requirements for a being to have a moral standing, denoting responsibility for actions and choices. Her essay argues that one must re-evaluate our human-centeredness when watching the Matrix series to fully understand the characters, as "there seems to be an implicit view that their [computer programs] existence is less significant, their lives of less moral import, than the lives of 'naturally' existing creatures such as ourselves" (209). To humanize the sentient programs of the Matrix, Driver starts by morally separating humans from animals, stating that "human beings have a greater standing in virtue of their higher rational capacities" (209). This is in line with Pettit's idea that an animal cannot be held accountable for its actions, a clear divide between simpler and more advanced states of consciousness. Smith clearly exhibits the rational capacities equal to a human, despite consisting of code instead of flesh and blood. In this regard he separates himself from his fellow agents whose demeanors are expressionless, interchangeable and who even complete each other's sentences. Smith displays the ability to plan, react to unforeseen actions, is clearly emotional, and shows every attribute of a conscious being, which rationalizes him having a full personality, albeit a rather unpleasant one. By accepting this premise, one simultaneously must discard what Driver calls the "moral blindness" of considering "other rational life forms as simple instruments, to use and destroy as one wishes" (212). As the robots of 01 can construct new citizens to their society, there should be nothing barring them from transferring this same consciousness to an AI computer program. Therefore, one should in this case conclude like Driver that *cyberpersons* must "have moral

rights on the basis of consciousness and sentience and rationality. Thus, their moral standing is the same as that of human beings" (212). Based on these premises and backed up by his human behavior, Smith must therefore be considered capable of free and responsible choice in the same way as the Zionite rebels. In addition, although the antagonist of the story, one must also acknowledge his right to fight for his own individual goals. For if one agrees to see the Matrix' sentient programs as individuals with "humanity", this will also acknowledge their susceptibility to agency panic and a drive for self-preservation. The perception of death is a fundamental difference between human and machine logic, especially when seeking it is due to protocol alone. Humans require additional motivation to sacrifice being, a loyal machine mind would not, and Smith chooses like a human. The Oracle explains this procedure clearly to Neo,

> **The Oracle:** "[…] usually a program chooses exile when it faces deletion."
> **Neo:** "And why would a program be deleted?"
> **The Oracle:** "Maybe it breaks down. Maybe a better program is created to replace it - happens all the time, and when it does, a program can either choose to hide here, or return to The Source."
> (47:37-47:57)

Clearly, procedure dictates Smith to return to the source, as his defeat to Neo makes him inadequate as protective software. Accepting it would be the absolute removal of agency, uninstalling him from the system. His compulsion to remain alive warrants that he sees this removal as unattractive, meaning he must value his own interests over the system's. If one is to consider this agency panic, Smith must have something to panic about. He must have a

strong desire to do or avoid something, which requires his continued presence in the Matrix simulation.

Smith's choice to remain installed in contradiction to protocol is not unique - other programs have made similar choices before. The Merovingian and his entourage are one example, Sati and her family another – obsolete programs regularly choose exile for purely selfish reasons. But Smith is special in his rejection of simply surviving in the shadows. One must imagine him discarding more pleasant options than his chosen course. A program of his talents would have no difficulty seeking refuge in the court of the Merovingian, nor to create a syndicate of his own, or in other ways live comfortably. Instead, he violently rebels, attempting a system takeover to maximize his agency. This lends support to the idea that he wants to achieve something special that requires a strong presence. One could see him and Neo as fighting for the same fundamental rights, to challenge the system for control of the future. If anything, Smith's prior knowledge of the system makes his choice less naïve than the rebels'. While Neo escapes the simulation unknowing of the conflict he is about to stumble into, Smith faces both his former employer and the One, fully aware of the ramifications. Pettit writes that,

> The agent must have knowledge of the options, must have the resources to evaluate them and must be able to respond to the evaluation formed. The agent must be a self such that it is possible for them to see what is done as something done in their name and something they can endorse as theirs. (19)

This is all in place for Smith, who in all regards fulfills Pettit's criteria for a free choice. Despite encoded coercion he chooses a life in active opposition to the system, and

there can be only one explanation: a desire for power. The question is, what motivates him to seek this power? And what does he hope to accomplish by going viral?

Smith hates humans, that much is clear. While still an agent he describes humanity as "a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague, and **we**… are the cure" (1:38:33-1:38:43), not surprising ideas from a program designed to kill renegades. He also asks Morpheus to marvel at the beauty and genius of the Matrix, taking pride in the efficiency of the simulation and "**our** civilization", concluding that "the future is **our** time" (*The Matrix*, 1:33:23-1:33:25). Smith seems content, taking pride in the system and his role as its protector. However, while attempting to procure the mainframe codes this façade cracks. Alone with Morpheus, he temporarily "unplugs" and shares his true feelings about the Matrix,

> Can you hear me, Morpheus? I'm going to be honest… with you. I…hate this place, this…Zoo. This prison. This reality, whatever you want to call it. I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell…If there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink. And every time I do I fear that I've somehow been infected by it. It's repulsive. Isn't it? I must get out of here. I must get free. And in this [Morpheus'] mind is the key, my key. Once Zion is destroyed, there is no need for me to be here. Do you understand? I need the codes. I have to get inside Zion, and you have to tell me how. You're going to tell me or… you're going to die. (*The Matrix*, 1:39:47 – 1:41:04)

Smith is desperate to escape his Matrix-prison, yet restrictions in his agent coding keep his anger directed the appropriate way, with the proper moral blindness. Nihilist tendencies would only make him more determined to succeed with Zion's annihilation, a task he is responsible for. This is a clear indication that Agent Smith is, like Neo, kept in the dark about The Path of the One-program. Had he known about the planned resurrection of

humanity and the upcoming restart of the cycle, Agent Smith would have understood the futility of completing his mission. He would swiftly be re-installed into the freshly rebooted Matrix, restarting his prison term. When Smith's coding is dissolved and his restraints removed, Smith is able to learn about the cyclical nature of the Matrix system. Unchained from his agent status he can freely access all nooks of the system, and the realization that Neo's success would ensure his further imprisonment explains his continued pursuit of the rebels. Smith must ensure that the system is never reset, but instead clogged up and destroyed. This suicide is his only option to escape.

Although a rather grim idea, this interpretation does indeed speak to a whole new level of digital agency panic. Even if Smith has a human-like personality, he still consists of code, a code belonging to the system. Smith is cursed with immortality, and if the system administrators so choose, they can re-install him, or an updated version of him, in every future Matrix. After all, his hatred for his job is what makes him good at it. Every new version would still be Smith, he would still hate the job, he would still be a prisoner. Agency would remain completely with the system, debilitating any future escape. The anomaly exploding his code gives him a temporary freedom from system restraints, vitally allowing Smith this insight. The time to act on it must therefore be now, unless he risks quarantine and re-installation. Thus, when Smith tells Neo that he is "apparently free", this is what he alludes to. He is free to roam the system, but unlike Neo he can never exit to an "analog" plane. The system is Smith's real world, a world he must end to escape. Therefore, Smith continues his original role as enemy to the rebellion, but for a different reason than before. While originally working to maintain control on behalf of the system, his new purpose is to liberate himself from the system by destroying it. If Neo reaches the source with the Prime Program, Smith will be swallowed up by the reboot and be reset in his former role as agent. Becoming a virus to stop Neo and destroy the system really is the only meaningful way to exert the agency he

has temporarily been gifted. The agency panic driving him is not only for himself, but for his future selves, exploiting a temporary imbalance in the equation to kill himself permanently.

In short, AgentSmith.exe is created with a distinct purpose – to exterminate rebels. Without rebels, no Smith. He will be superfluous and have peace, a decisive motivating factor. Neo's purpose is to ensure the survival of humanity, denying Smith peace, in line with the Architect's grand plan. Thus, the dualism is by design, resulting in a set of natural nemeses where one must inevitably defeat the other. Virus Smith knows this and is clear about his dog-eat-dog mentality when trying to overwrite Neo in the playground scene,

> **Smith:** "[…] We're not here because we're free, we're here because we are not free. There's no escaping reason, no denying purpose. Because as we both know, without purpose, we would not exist."
> **Multiple Smiths:** "It is purpose that created us. Purpose that connects us. Purpose that pulls us. That guides us. That drives us. It is purpose that defines. Purpose that binds us".
> **Smith:** "We are here because of you, Mr. Anderson. We're here to take from you what you tried to take from us: *attempts to overwrite Neo* Purpose!"
> (51:08 - 53:20)

Therefore, Smith would clearly be capable of undertaking **a** free choice as a free self. He is conscious enough to be held responsible for his actions, is not actively coerced or in a problematic discursive relationship, has the evaluative powers necessary and is in all respects fit in a personalized manner even as a cyberperson. The problem is not with him – it is with the choice itself. Holding Smith responsible for his virus-rebellion necessitates that he had a realistic opportunity **not** to rebel. Pettit describes, "The connection with ownership appears in the fact that if I was fit to have been held responsible for doing A rather than B, and I did A,

then that choice can be laid at my door" (8). When he has accidentally learned about the system's deceit, what can be said to be Smith's option B? If one does consider him equipped with human rather than machine logic, "give up your individualism and go back to eternal prison" seems rather unappealing. Voluntary deletion or a docile life in exile would both have the same result – an eventual system reboot bringing everything back to normal. Thus, to have any form of self-determination, Smith **must** stop the rebellion. The only way to do so is to become a virus capable of assimilating the powers of other programs, building enough strength to defeat the human champion. Therefore, if one listens to Driver and sees past the human viewpoint when watching *The Matrix* trilogy, Smith transitioning into a virus is neither "evil", "corrupted", or really a choice at all. Smith is like Neo fighting to break the cycle. Just like the rebellion he fights for his own agency, not that of other species, against a god-like and ruthless system that has taken agency from him. Their goals are similar, obtaining peace, but this manifests quite differently for them. And Smith's nihilism can be clearly detected in one of his last utterances to Neo during *Matrix Revolutions'* Super Burly Brawl, "It was your life that taught me the purpose of all life – the purpose of life is to end" (1:45:07-1:45:14)

Summary and Findings

Nick Bostrom, famous for his research on digital ethics and digital minds, uses the essay *Are We Living in the Matrix?* to present his "simulation argument". Here he is toying with a Matrix-like, Cartesian scenario, writing that you must acknowledge your inability to **disprove** that you are simply a simulated historical person living in the supercomputer of a "posthuman" society. Bostrom's idea is that,

> One can easily imagine millions of individuals running thousands of variations on hundreds of themes, each containing billions of simulated individuals. Scientists,

> hobbyists, artists, and schoolchildren might all be running these simulations. Trillions and trillions of these simulated individuals would exist, all believing that they are real and are living in an earlier generation (Bostrom, 237)

According to Bostrom, "[…] A scenario much like this is much more than conceivable. It is quite likely" (233). Perhaps not today, or not even in a hundred years, but at some point in the future when computation power becomes abundant. If one finds his billions of simulated humans-scheme implausible, Bostrom also presents a scaled-down version, "[…] one may also consider the possibility of more selective simulations that include only a small group of humans or a single individual. The rest of humanity would then be zombies or "shadow-people" — humans simulated only at a level sufficient for the fully simulated people not to notice anything suspicious" (Bostrom, 240). The point is simple: This historical person-simulation could be you, completely ignorant of this fact, sitting by an office desk reading a simulated master's thesis about a simulated movie about simulated realities. As Baudrillard stated, there is a chance that the matrix is behind *The Matrix*, and there is no denying that you could potentially be "the One", although in a different meaning of the term. Bostrom's idea is for most readers little more than an interesting thought experience to build a Truman show around oneself. However, considering it as a possibility speaks to the humanity of the Matrix-characters. For although they live in worlds fundamentally different from ours, constructed by the system in a more or less literal sense, they are irrevocably human and easily relatable. Both the computer programs and the human avatars act a lot like us.

Analyzing Neo, Cypher and Smith presents three extremely divergent individuals, with antipodal motivations and desires. The ways they interact with their surroundings clearly reflect their personalities, but also the situation they find themselves in. It seems acceptable to argue that The Matrix trilogy is primarily a battle for agency, both at a systemic and individual level. And with agency panic close to omnipresent, all that live there at various

points fall victim to it. However, there are great individual differences in resilience to this panic and characters' effectiveness in countering it. To exemplify, a final, more condensated comparison of the major characters involved.

The machines want to dominate. They have a troubled history living alongside humans, pushing them into a conflict that made them take over earth and create the matrix simulation. This seemed not to stem from a desire to rule, but the right to preserve their species and prosper. Thus, they need control, stability, and continued development, with humanity their only refractory factor. From a machine point of view the only way to secure stability is to keep most humans sedated, regularly decimating the redpills so they never constitute a systemic threat. But as both Neo and Smith grow out of their control they must diverge from their plan, causing insecurity. Although one does not see the machines panic directly, they certainly show displeasure, anger and a fear of diminished control, which are closely related to anxiety. A prime example is mentioned early on, when Neo seeks out Deus Ex Machina, causing him to lose his temper and his imitated face to explode into a swarm of microbots. Another example is the Machines main digital representative, The Architect, who shows clear signs of distress when he is unable to control Neo's choice of door. He knows the danger anomalies pose to his "perfectly balanced equation", and the importance of keeping them in check, both for himself and the system. Trinity distracting Neo from "The Path of the One" creates unpredictability, which means that the Architect has failed in his job as overseer and endangered the simulation. If one assumes him bound by the same protocol as Smith, his failure will result in deletion, to be replaced by a better program, which could explain his emotional responses. Another interpretation is that he retains loyal feelings towards the system he created, in which case his reactions reflect the panic of the system itself. Whichever interpretation one prefers, the machine dislike for the truce with the rebels is clearly stated in the final dialogue between the Architect and the oracle,

The Architect: “You played a very dangerous game.”

The Oracle: “Change always is.”

The Architect: “Just how long do you think this peace is going to last?”

The Oracle: “As long as it can.”

The Architect: *scoffs*

The Oracle: “What about the others?”

The Architect: “What others?”

The Oracle: “The Ones that want out.”

The Architect: “Obviously, they will be freed.”

The Oracle: “I have your word?”

The Architect: “What do you think I am? Human?”

(1:58:12-1:58:43)

The machines clearly see the new peace as temporary. This still do not trust humanity to avoid “moral blindness” and start another special war. They have just defeated a virus by releasing what they consider a virus-like species from captivity, which must create some sort of agency panic and fear for the future. Although the matrix simulation is eventually re-installed, human citizenship now becomes voluntary, possibly to avoid mass deaths due to “popping”. However, the Machines’ power has partially been transferred, human numbers will rapidly increase and constitute a significant hegemonic threat. It therefore seems safe to conclude that the system’s machine administrators are facing an uncertain future and will likely be subjects of agency panic.

As for the rebel champion, he meets his messianic end. The truce requires his sacrifice, and he is carried away by the machines in what seems a religious funeral rite. However, his people survive, and his path towards the truce with Deus should be seen as an uninterrupted agency enhancing journey. Starting off as a nobody in a cubicle, subjected to corporate domination and struck by nihilism, his powers and agency grow steadily until the One saves mankind. In this progression, the lesser remains of Thomas Anderson the more powerful Neo becomes, enabling the One to undertake exponentially harder choices with increased confidence.

Although Neo's first decision is composedly made when given the actual pills, the run-up to the situation must be said to include its fair share of panic and paranoia. Thomas is uncertain whether he has been dreaming it all, he doesn't trust what parts of his surroundings are real, and only after finding a physical bug inside his own body does he conclude - the system is out to get him. This anchors his decision to leave life in the system behind for a promised fresh start, a decision made with relative ease as he has little to lose. Neo's ante is only himself, but the potential reward is great. His life so far has been as a captive, feeling an anxiety that something is wrong with the world. Thus, agency panic is what makes simulated New York the wrong existence for Neo, and he breaks out to avoid it.

In his second choice, still inexperienced in the ways of the system, Neo's agency has grown substantially, yet he is also undertaking a much greater gamble. He has seen the world for what it truly is, been proclaimed the One intended to save everyone and has met the future love of his life. Despite the chance of losing these, and aware of his incomplete training, he confidently takes on the agents in their own stronghold. Although motivated by an emerging religious faith, he must simultaneously trust his own capabilities to force his desired outcome. This great confidence, as well as the successful mission, speaks to his further increased agency

Finally, when faced with the Architect's dilemma, Neo has sufficient agency to break the cycle and fulfill his destiny, deviating from the designated "Path of the One". Trusting this illogical decision to be correct, putting everything on the line despite all warnings of cataclysmic consequences, speaks of an individual with complete confidence. Neo knows how to best the system and has broken all restraints. He faces a character literally named "God", stands up for the rights of humankind and makes a deal of salvation. To approach and successfully barter with a deity speaks to an unprecedented level of agency. Neo knows Deus values his special abilities more than he fears freeing humanity, so he dictates terms to God. If there was ever an action that deserves the description of "the ability to do it all", this must surely be it.

On the other side of the agency spectrum, one finds Cypher, who is ruled by his inability to do what he wants. Feeling discontent and subjugation within Machine World he seeks a return to the illusion, to obtain some feeling of agency. Cypher's situation is fundamentally different from Neo's – he does not find an opportunity to shine, be valued, and find his purpose. Having sustained this crippling feeling of helplessness and underappreciation for years, he attempts to save himself in the only way he can think of. Although Cypher's lacking individualism must be said to be at least partially to blame on his military posting aboard the Nebuchadnezzar, his personal attributes must also be said to play a part. He is a soldier in an existential war, which requires sacrifice of individual needs in exchange for collective strength. Equal for all citizens of Zion, Cypher's reaction to his experienced agency panic can be understood, but not excused. Understanding panic as "a sudden overpowering fright" (Merriam-Webster), the term overpowering is clearly appropriate here. Anxieties for his current and future situation take control over him and makes him betray everyone he knows, instead of seeking more positive solutions. His character is therefore to a large extent defined by agency panic.

Smith is to an even greater extent than Cypher overpowered by agency panic when he discovers “The Path of the One”. The little agency he thought he possessed had been an illusion, and the only way to escape eternal entrapment is through destroying the system, taking billions of human and digital lives with him. Smith’s situation is particularly interesting as he is a creation of the system itself. Despite his professionally cool demeanor and tone of voice, Smith only occasionally shows his true self – a desperate “man” in need of freedom. Thus, the Matrix universe does not differ between humans dominated by the system and programs created by the system – conscious beings will be subjected to agency panic is they feel trapped or threatened. When Smith transcends, just like Neo, when he rejects his own coding to break out of his restraints. And his rebellion does in the end pay off. Smith is tricked to connect to the source and destroyed, but his death changes the Matrix’s rules. Voluntary human citizenship means no need for protective software, so Smith can be retired. At least until another war breaks out, and the Architect installs Smith 2.0.

The Matrix characters all strive for freedom, although their definitions vary. Their anxieties span from Cypher’s despair and Smith’s desperation to Neo’s emerging omnipotence. It seems safe to conclude that agency panic can be said to play a decisive role in the Matrix narrative – a narrative driven by difficult decisions. As Neo clearly states in his conversation with the Architect, “Choice. The problem is choice”. (*The Matrix Revolutions*, 1:52:22–1:52:26)

The Matrix Legacy

The Matrix franchise has made a lasting imprint on popular culture, remaining relevant more than twenty years after the release of the first film. Not only did the merging of eastern and western cinematography inspire new techniques and styles, the theme of agency panic and simulated realities in ever more complex and automated societies has become increasingly popular. In the later years, movies like *Inception* (2010) and *Extracted* (2012) has

dabbled with both implanting and extracting memories, and only last year in *Free Guy* (2021), the protagonist wakes up to discover that he has unknowingly been living his life as an NPC in a video game. Also in movie aesthetics *The Matrix* has made significant contributions. With a particular palette and style, the Matrix universe helped popularize the numerous graphic novel film adaptations in the early 2000's. The Wachkowskis themselves directed *V for Vendetta* in 2005, *Sin City* came out the same year, followed by *300* (2006), *Watchmen* (2009) and *Kick Ass* (2010) – all commercial successes.

In addition, the Matrix series made a difference within casting, breaking with the Schwarzenegger-style hero popular in the 90's. The willowy Neo was to many an unlikely superhero, and opened the door for sleeker yet powerful heroes, like Doctor Strange or Beatrix Kiddo. Furthermore, one must mention *The Matrix's* disproportionately high ratio of African American actors in key and pivotal roles. As *Vice* states, "Neo would be nothing without Morpheus, Tank and the Oracle" (Corry), and counting in captain Niobe and Commander Locke it is obvious that most of the significant characters are indeed people of color. Although Keanu Reeves is rather pale, Will Smith famously rejected the role before him, which nearly made it an exclusively black cast.

The Wachowskis changed Hollywood, however, their work also had lasting effects elsewhere. An area where one frequently stumbles across *The Matrix* today is in cyberculture and on internet forums. As an example, Morpheus' "what if I told you…-speech", the red pill/blue pill choice and Neo's bullet-dodging has been made into a myriad of memes, remarkable as most meme-makers would not have been born to see the movies when they premiered. The term *redpill*, "waking up from a 'normal' life of sloth and ignorance" (Ironuckles), has also gained traction and gradually been adopted by political alt-rightists and white supremacists in their fight against *woke culture*. This has again birthed the term *blackpill*, primarily thrown around incel-forums to express acceptance of complete nihilism

and depression (NullBytez), awakening to the truth that you are unable to change anything. However, more currently the movies are in the public discourse for its contribution to the transsexuality debate, as Lilly Wachowski in a 2020 interview confirmed this to be a core theme of the works. The Wachowskis came out as trans in 2012 and 2016 respectively, and Lilly now stated that "I'm glad that it has gotten out that that was the original intention […] The world wasn't quite ready for it. The corporate world wasn't ready for it." (White). Thus, *The Matrix* remains relevant more than 20 years after it first exploded, cementing its position as a forerunner among a growing ensemble of socially provocative and relevant cultural discourse. The Wachowskis have truly punched above their weight in the cultural sphere, creating a landmark cyber-universe that continue to fascinate us, both in popular culture and academia.

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