

Philosophy through Film:

The Matrix (1999)

What is REAL and how do we KNOW? Philosophy is about asking questions, and understanding how people have tried to answer very broad questions.

An Introduction to METAPHYSICS and EPISTEMOLOGY



In *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) Keanu Reeves plays a computer programmer who leads a double life as a hacker called Neo. After receiving cryptic messages on his computer monitor, Neo begins to search for Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), the leader of a resistance group, who he believes is responsible for the messages. Eventually, Neo finds Morpheus, and is then told that **reality is actually very different from what he perceives it to be**.

Morpheus tells Neo that **human existence is merely an illusion**. In reality, humans are being 'farmed' as a source of energy by a race of sentient, malevolent machines. People actually live their entire lives in pods, with their brains being fed sensory stimuli which give them the illusion of leading 'ordinary' lives. Morpheus explains that, up until then, the 'reality' perceived by Neo is actually '*a computer-generated dream world...a neural interactive simulation*' called The Matrix.

Watch the clips from *The Matrix* and think about the following three questions:

What is REAL?

What can we KNOW?

If this film is meant to teach us something about life, what is its message?

Your first topic will look at the famous work of Plato and his ideas about knowing what we can know (epistemology) and what actually exists (metaphysics)

Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave'

"One of the ideas that most people believe is Plato's rather than Socrates' is that the world is not at all as it seems. There is a significant difference between appearance and reality. Most of us mistake appearances for reality. We think we understand, but we don't. Plato believed that only philosophers understand what the world is truly like. They discover the nature of reality by thinking rather than relying on their senses.

To make this point, Plato described a cave. In that imaginary cave there are people chained facing a wall. In front of them they can see flickering shadows that they believe are real things. They aren't. What they see are shadows made by objects held up in front of a fire behind them. These people spend their whole lives thinking that the shadows projected on the wall are the real world. Then one of them breaks free from his chains and turns towards the fire. His eyes are blurry at first, but then he starts to see where he is. He stumbles out of the cave and eventually is able to look at the sun. When he comes back to the cave, no one believes what he has to tell them about the world outside. The man who breaks free is like a philosopher. He sees beyond appearances. Ordinary people have little idea about reality because they are content with looking at what's in front of them rather than thinking deeply about it. But the appearances are deceptive. What they see are shadows, not reality."

Plato's 'theory of forms'

"This story of the cave is connected with what's come to be known as Plato's Theory of Forms. The easiest way to understand this is through an example. Think of all the circles that you have seen in your life. Was any one of them a perfect circle? No. Not one of them was absolutely perfect. In a perfect circle every point on its circumference is exactly the same distance from the centre point. Real circles never quite achieve this. But you understood what I meant when I used the words 'perfect circle'. So what is that perfect circle? Plato would say that the idea of a perfect circle is the Form of a circle. If you want to understand what a circle is, you should focus on the Form of the circle, not actual circles that you can draw and experience through your visual sense, all of which are imperfect in some way. Similarly, Plato thought, if you want to understand what goodness is, then you need to concentrate on the Form of goodness, not on particular examples of it that you witness. Philosophers are the people who are best suited to thinking about the Forms in this abstract way; ordinary people get led astray by the world as they grasp it through their senses."

'Philosophy' comes from the Ancient Greek 'Philosophia' which literally means 'love of wisdom'.

Philosophy is 'thinking about thinking'. Philosophers consider fundamental questions. They do not merely ponder over ultimate questions and offer different theories as answers; but they examine whether the question is the right one as well as its implications.

Philosophy of religion is a branch of philosophy concerned with questions regarding religion, including the **nature and existence of God**, the examination of religious experience, analysis of religious vocabulary and texts, and the relationship of religion and science.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Mr D Devlin.