
The Virtual Dialectic: Rethinking *The Matrix* and its Significance

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Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out.¹

The debates and decisions surrounding virtual reality, cyberspace, and other forms of computer-mediated communication have been, like so much philosophical reasoning within the Western tradition, organized around antinomies. One of the principal concerns involves a conflict between the real world and the computer-generated simulations that appear to threaten it. As Peter Horsfield describes it, the question is

whether the essential characteristics of virtual reality as a reality in which the frustrations and disappointments of the actual world do not exist will inevitably lead to a diminishing desire to live in the actual world. So, instead of learning the disciplines of living with or changing one's individual or communal environment, one finds it easier to escape into a reality where these practicalities do not exist.²

This apparent conflict between the real and the virtual, and the various considerations it entails, is perhaps best dramatized in a pivotal scene from *The Matrix* (1999)—the first episode of a cinematic trilogy

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part II*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 169.

2. Peter Horsfield, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Ethical Reflections on Digital Virtual Reality," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 18 (2004): 155–172, quote on 166.

written and directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski.³ In this scene, the leader of the opposition, Morpheus, presents Neo, the protagonist, with a decisive choice between two alternatives. "This is your last chance," Morpheus says stoically. "After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake in your bed, and you 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. Remember all I am offering is the truth. Nothing more." What Morpheus offers Neo in the form of two pills is a choice between two very different and opposed possibilities. To select the blue pill is to decide not only to live in an immaterial, computer-generated fantasy, but to remain ignorant of the mechanisms of this deception. This fantastic virtual world is, if not perfect, at least vastly superior to the post-apocalyptic real world that exists outside the Matrix. To select the red pill is to choose the truth no matter how disturbing, disappointing, and difficult the "desert of the real" might turn out to be. It is a choice that affirms the undeniable importance of lived experience in a real world that exists outside computer-generated simulations. Consequently, what Morpheus offers Neo is a choice between competing and radically different alternatives: an absolutely seamless immaterial fantasy, or the reality of the material world. It is an important and dramatic decision, and Neo's choice matters for the film, for advocates and critics of computer systems, and for our understanding of the social position and impact of technology.

In addressing this matter, I do not want to replay the familiar evaluations and arguments that have been publicized about this particular decision. Anthologies like William Irwin's *The Matrix and Philosophy*,⁴ Glenn Yeffeth's *Taking the Red Pill*,⁵ and Christopher Grau's *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*⁶ have already done an adequate job

3. *The Matrix* trilogy is composed of *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003). The analysis presented in this essay, although applicable to the entire trilogy, focuses its attention on a remarkable scene from the first thirty minutes of the first film. It is in this early and pivotal scene that the film introduces the principal binary opposition that structures and governs the metaphysical system of the entire trilogy. The subsequent films, although adding interesting complexity to this arrangement, do not contest its fundamental logic, but further develop and capitalize on it.

4. William Irwin, ed., *The Matrix and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

5. Glenn Yeffeth, ed., *Taking the Red Pill* (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2003).

6. Christopher Grau, ed., *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Also available online at http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/phi.html

of exposing the philosophical themes involved in Neo's choice and connecting the conceptual dots in this curious hybrid of Platonic metaphysics, cyberpunk science fiction, and martial-arts cinema. Instead, I want to submit to critical reevaluation the philosophical and technological assumptions that have been deployed in and that have informed these various writings. Despite differences in methodology and interpretation, the "critical writings" on *The Matrix* employ a set of very familiar and remarkably consistent assumptions that remain, for the most part, outside the space of critical inquiry. These assumptions go deep, and they influence not only the interpretation of this particular cinematic narrative, but also our general understanding of virtual reality (VR) technology and its philosophical position and consequences. To put it in the metaphorical language of the narrative in question, the available understandings of both *The Matrix* films and VR technology are already programmed and controlled by a matrix of largely unacknowledged assumptions. We can, on the one hand, continue to operate within this structure without question or hesitation; in doing so, we would wake in our beds and continue to believe whatever it is we have believed. On the other hand, we can opt to expose the assumptions as such and find out just how deep this rabbit hole goes. The following, like the film's protagonist, decides for the latter. But its outcome will lead in an entirely different direction. To put it schematically, we can say, paraphrasing Kierkegaard, that rather than being concerned with the choice between the red and blue pill, this examination is interested in that decision by which one chooses red and blue or rules them out.

Taking the Red Pill

The Matrix is, at its core, a film with a moral plot.⁷

Morpheus presents Neo with two alternatives: should Neo decide to swallow the blue pill, he will remain within the computer-generated dream-world of the Matrix and know nothing of his decision to do so. Should he decide to swallow the red pill, he will initiate a process that is called the "awakening" and eventually come to experience the "true world" that exists outside the virtual reality that is created and sustained by the computer. In the face of these two apparently mutually exclusive options, Neo makes what can only appear to be the right choice. He decides to swallow the red pill and live in the real world and in doing so, he becomes the hero of the

7. Iakovos Vasiliou, "Reality, What Matters, and *The Matrix*," in *ibid.*, p. 1.

narrative. In the face of seemingly impossible odds, he takes control of his life, beats the system, gets the girl, and saves the human race from machinic domination. That this decision is marked, within the space of the film, as the right choice is perhaps best illustrated by the way Neo's actions are differentiated from that of another character—Cypher. Cypher is member of Morpheus's crew, who opts to return to the computer-generated fantasies of the Matrix and does so in such a way that betrays his colleagues. In a scene that functions as the antithesis of Neo's pivotal decision, Cypher makes a deal with Agent Smith, while enjoying the pleasures of an artificial, computer-generated steak:

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 realized? . . . 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.

Cypher: Okay. You get my body back in a Power Plant, reinsert me into the Matrix, I'll get you what you want.

Agent Smith: Access codes to the Zion mainframe.

Cypher: I told you I don't know them. But I can get you the man who does.

Agent Smith: Morpheus.

In return for Morpheus and his knowledge of the access codes, Agent Smith agrees to reintegrate Cypher into the Matrix, to erase all memory of his experiences on the outside, and to give him whatever he wants. Unlike Neo, who decides for the truth, Cypher chooses deception, and he does so at all levels. He decides to deceive both his friends and himself and to live a life of deception as an actor. Cypher, therefore, freely and knowingly decides in favor of a fictional existence that is cut off from the real life of his community, and—perhaps what is worse—he does so at its expense. In being portrayed in this fashion, Cypher functions as Neo's dramatic foil. If Neo is what

8. William Gibson, "Foreword," in Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski, *The Matrix: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2001), p. viii.

William Gibson terms the “hero of the Real,”⁸ Cypher is the opposite—the champion of fantasy, self-deception, and fraud. If Neo is interpreted as a Christ-like savior,⁹ Cypher is “the Judas Iscariot of the story”¹⁰—the traitor who sells out his friends for the sake of selfish pleasures. If Neo’s “decision to face ‘the desert of the real’ allows him,” as Gerald Erion and Barry Smith argue, “to undertake genuine action and have genuine experiences that give his life meaning, and thus a moral value,”¹¹ then Cypher is the *Schauspieler* who is merely play-acting in a computer-generated fiction. He is, as Peter Boettke concludes, “choosing to not live a human life but to experience a life scripted by someone else.”¹² If Neo makes what many interpreters of the film perceive as the right choice, Cypher’s decision can only be judged as “wrong,”¹³ “foolish,”¹⁴ “stupid,”¹⁵ and “immoral.”¹⁶ In digital terms, he is the “0” to Neo’s “1.”¹⁷ By counter-posing the characters of Neo and Cypher, *The Matrix* conforms to a value system that equates the good with the real, truth, authenticity, self-knowledge, and free choice, and identifies the bad with artifice, fantasy, inauthenticity, self-deception, and mechanistic determinism. If *The Matrix* is at its core a film with a moral plot, then the moral of the story appears to be that it is “somehow morally better to face the truth

9. See Gregory Bassham, “The Religion of *The Matrix* and the Problems of Pluralism,” in *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4), pp. 111–125; and Paul Fontana, “Finding God in *The Matrix*,” in *Taking the Red Pill* (above, n. 5), pp. 159–184.

10. See Fontana, “Finding God,” *ibid.*, pp. 169–171; Thomas S. Frenz and Janice Hocker Rushing, “Mother Isn’t Quite Herself Today: Myth and Spectacle in *The Matrix*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002): 64–86, quote on 68; Colin McGinn, “The Matrix of Dreams,” in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (above, n. 6), pp. 62–70, quote on 63.

11. Gerold J. Erion and Barry Smith, “Skepticism, Morality, and *The Matrix*,” in *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4), p. 27.

12. Peter J. Boettke, “Human Freedom and the Red Pill,” in *Taking the Red Pill* (above, n. 5), p. 154.

13. Charles L. Griswold, “Happiness and Cypher’s Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss?” in *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4), p. 1.

14. Read Mercer Schuchardt, “What Is the Matrix?” in *Taking the Red Pill* (above, n. 5), p. 10.

15. Robin Hanson, “Was Cypher Right? (Part 1): Why We Stay in Our Matrix,” in *Taking the Red Pill*, (above, n. 5), p. 24.

16. Erion and Smith, “Skepticism, Morality, and *The Matrix*” (above, n. 11), p. 26.

17. Frenz and Rushing, “Mother Isn’t Quite Herself Today” (above, n. 10), p. 68.

than to live in an illusory world that makes us feel good.”¹⁸ And “in putting forth this message,” David Weberman argues, “we get an old-fashioned Hollywood morality tale.”¹⁹

Neo’s decision is immediately recognized as “the correct one,” and almost everyone, it seems, identifies with this “hero of the real.” As William Irwin, editor of *The Matrix and Philosophy*, suggests, “the red pill is a new symbol of bold choice, and most people insist they would take it if they were in Neo’s shoes.”²⁰ This immediate agreement renders his decision less than surprising; in fact, there is something about his choice that is predictable and almost programmed. (And this suspicion is confirmed at the end of the second episode in the trilogy, *The Matrix Reloaded*, where we learn that Neo’s choice is neither unique nor unprecedented. In a kind of perverse eternal recurrence of the same, Neo has made this decision before. In fact, as far as the Architect knows, “the One” has done so on at least six other occasions.) Consequently, when Morpheus holds out his hands, Neo does what we all know he will do: he takes hold of and swallows the red pill. This “decision” is predictable for at least two reasons. First, it is necessitated by and for the cinematic narrative in which this scenario is presented. If Neo had, for some reason, not selected the red pill, there would be no “Matrix”—either the one encountered by Neo within the film, or the film itself that stages this encounter. Morpheus is right: you take the blue pill and the story, quite literally in this case, ends. Had Neo decided—or better, had the Wachowski brothers, who wrote the script, decided to have Neo decide—to swallow the blue pill, the protagonist would have been returned to the relatively uneventful and mundane computer-simulated 1990s, knowing nothing of his decision to do so. The interesting and dramatic set of events that led Neo to Morpheus in the first place would come to an abrupt conclusion and be completely eradicated. In this way, the dramatic conflict that opens the film and motivates its narrative development would dissipate. The film also, as we know it, would have to end. Consequently, *The Matrix*—not just the Matrix presented within the frame of the film, but *The Matrix* that is the film—requires and stipulates that Neo take the red pill. It is a dramatic necessity.

18. See Grau, *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (above, n. 6); and Hubert Dreyfus and Stephen Dreyfus, “The Brave New World of *The Matrix*,” in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (above, n. 6), pp. 71–97.

19. David Weberman, “*The Matrix* Simulation and the Postmodern Age,” in *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4), p. 234.

20. Irwin, *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4), p. 15.

Second, Neo's choice of real truth over illusory deception is "correct," because this decision is underwritten and supported by a philosophical matrix that is some 2,400 years old. In swallowing the red pill, Neo does not make some exceptional and singular decision rooted in the strength of his unique character. The "hero of the real" simply reenacts and validates the fundamental decision that is at the center of Western thought. Although not always presented in the form of two pills, philosophy consistently decides for truth as opposed to falsity, being as opposed to appearances, authenticity as opposed to inauthenticity, and the real as opposed to illusion. Take, for example, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," a curious fable situated at the center of *The Republic* that is often compared to the experience of cinema,²¹ the technology of virtual reality,²² and the scenario presented in *The Matrix*.²³ The allegory begins with Socrates describing a subterranean cavern inhabited by men who sit before a screen on which are projected shadow images. The men are chained in place since childhood and are unable to see anything other than these artificial projections, which constitute the only reality that is possible for them to know. At one point, one of the prisoners is released and shown the actual source of the shadows—small puppets paraded in front of a firelight. Although looking at the light that provides the illumination for the images is initially painful and disorienting, the prisoner eventually comes to understand "that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion."²⁴ From here, the newly liberated individual is dragged out of the cavern and, once his eyes be-

21. See C. Falzon, *Philosophy Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Margaret Morse, *Virtualities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

22. See Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ken Hillis, *Digital Sensations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Summit Books, 1991); Herbert Zettl, "Back to Plato's Cave: Virtual Reality," in *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, eds. Lance Strait, Ronald Jacobson, and Stephanie B. Gibson (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1996), pp. 91–111; and Carolina Cruz-Neira, Daniel J. Sandin, Thomas A. DeFanti, Robert V. Kenyon, and John C. Hart, "The CAVE: Audio Visual Experience Automatic Virtual Environment," *Communications of the ACM* 35 (1992): 64–72.

23. See Boettke, "Human Freedom and the Red Pill" (above, n. 12); Jorge J. E. Gracia and Jonathan J. Sanford "The Metaphysics of *The Matrix*," in *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4), pp. 55–65; Griswold, "Happiness and Cypher's Choice" (above, n. 13); Irwin, *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4); John Partridge, "Plato's Cave and *The Matrix*," in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (above, n. 6), pp. 239–257.

24. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 515d.

come acclimated to the painfully bright sunlight, discovers the “real things” that exist outside the fictional projections encountered in the subterranean matrix. In comparing the two “realities,” Socrates’ prisoner sides with the real and the true, no matter how uncomfortable. If given a choice, “he would choose to endure anything rather than such a life” inside the cave.²⁵ The allegory, therefore, not only stages the opposition of and choice between false illusion and real truth, but makes a decision that is remarkably similar to the one enacted by Neo.

Similar scenarios and decisions are reproduced with remarkable regularity throughout the history of Western philosophy. Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*,²⁶ for example, postulates something called the “experience machine”—a computer-controlled system with electrodes that directly stimulate the user’s central nervous system. Nozick’s description of this machine is, as many commentators have remarked,²⁷ not unlike that illustrated in *The Matrix*. “Suppose,” Nozick writes,

there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.²⁸

Given this possibility, he continues, “should you plug into this machine for life?” In response, he argues that most people, if given such an opportunity, would not plug-in:

First we want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them. . . . A second reason for not plugging in is that we want to be a certain way, to be a certain sort of person. Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob. There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has been in the tank. Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It’s not merely that it’s difficult to tell; there’s no way he is. . . . [T]hirdly, plugging

25. *Ibid.*, p. 516e.

26. Robert Nozick. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

27. Erion and Smith, “Skepticism, Morality, and *The Matrix*” (above, n. 11), p. 25; Theodore Schick, “Fate, Freedom, and Foreknowledge,” in *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4), p. 89; See Boettke, “Human Freedom and the Red Pill” (above, n. 12), p. 148; Grau, *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (above, n. 6), p. 1; Lyle Zynda, “Was Cypher Right? (Part 2): The Nature of Reality and Why it Matters,” in *Taking the Red Pill* (above, n. 5), pp. 33–44.

28. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (above, n. 26), p. 42.

into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality, to a world no deeper or more important than that which people can construct. There is no actual contact with any deeper reality, though the experience can be simulated.²⁹

Like the decision made in *The Republic*, Nozick affirms the value of true experiences in the real world over illusory deception. For this reason, interpreters of *The Matrix* have used Nozick to explain the moral culpability of Cypher's decision. Lyle Zynda, for example, finds in Nozick's work a compelling case against Cypher's choice:

Would you choose to be hooked up to the Experience Machine? Nozick claims that you wouldn't, if you thought about it seriously. You don't want just the *experience* of having friends and being loved. You want to *really* have friends and be loved. It is true that if you are friendless and unloved, you might be tempted to escape reality into fantasy. (Some people use drugs for this reason.) But you would prefer real friends to imaginary ones, if you could have them. The same goes for fame, wealth, good looks, success, and so on.³⁰

Neo's decision to swallow the red pill, although having the appearance of what Irwin calls "a bold choice," actually conforms to and confirms one of the fundamental values of Western thought. It is predicated on and underwritten by that general philosophical decision that Friedrich Nietzsche termed "the unconditional will to truth."³¹ From Plato to Nozick and beyond—from the pre-Socratics to contemporary epistemologists, metaphysicians, ethicists, and practitioners of everything that goes by the name of science—truth is and remains of unconditional and unquestioned value. "We see," wrote Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*,

that science also rests on a faith; there simply is no science "without presuppositions." The question whether *truth* is needed must not only been affirmed in advance, but affirmed to such a degree that the principle, the faith, the conviction finds expression: "*Nothing* is needed *more* than truth, and in relation to it everything else has only second-rate value."³²

Consequently, Neo's choice to swallow the red pill is one of those rare moments when, as Nietzsche described it in the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, "the philosopher's 'conviction' appears on the

29. Ibid., p. 44.

30. Zynda, "Was Cypher Right? (Part 2)" (above, n. 27), p. 42.

31. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 281.

32. Ibid., p. 281.

stage.”³³ In this way, *The Matrix* stages the necessary and all-too-often unacknowledged decision that is the condition for the possibility of philosophy and science. Neo’s decision, which takes the form of an affirmation of the “value of truth,” is necessarily and unquestionably the “right” choice, not simply because of some admirable moral character, but because it is the only option that makes sense. To have decided otherwise would be, from the perspective of clear and rational thinking, nothing less than sheer nonsense.

Neo is, therefore, in good company. And his decision, one that privileges the real and the true over and against artificial illusion, is something that is also valued and reproduced by VR researchers and critics. Michael Heim, the self-proclaimed “metaphysician of virtual reality,” provides a good example of the typical maneuver. His philosophical examinations of VR, published in two books and many anthologized essays, point in the direction of all kinds of interesting and challenging possibilities. But when push comes to shove, Heim’s investigations always fall back on rather traditional and reassuring values. For example, at the end of “The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace,” an essay included in Michael Benedikt’s *Cyberspace: First Steps*³⁴ and Heim’s *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*,³⁵ Heim reaffirms the principal value of truth and the real world that exists outside the Matrix. Because this essay was published almost a decade before the release of the first episode of *The Matrix* trilogy, Heim’s text makes reference not to the Matrix in the Wachowski brothers’ film or its antithesis, the human city of Zion, but to the cyberspace Matrix of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and the curiously named “Zionites” who inhabit the world outside. The nominal coincidence here between the elements of the Wachowskis’ cinematic narrative and Gibson’s novel is anything but accidental. It not only indicates the extent to which the Wachowski brothers were influenced by Gibson’s ground-breaking work, but, more importantly, outlines the contours of a consistent metaphysical structure and ethical decision that underlies cyberpunk science-fiction and the science of VR:

Gibson leaves us the image of a human group that instinctively keeps its distance from the computer matrix. These are the Zionites, the religiously tribal folk who prefer music to computers and intuitive loyalties to calculation. The

33. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 10.

34. Michael L. Benedikt, *Cyberspace: First Steps* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

35. Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (above, n. 22).

Zionites constitute a human remnant in the environmental desolation of *Neuromancer*. . . . As we suit up for the exciting future in cyberspace, we must not lose touch with the Zionites, the body people who remain rooted in the energies of the earth. They will nudge us out of our heady reverie in this new layer of reality. They will remind us of the living genesis of cyberspace, of the heart-beat behind the laboratory, of the love that still sprouts amid the broken slag and the rusty shells of oil refineries “under the poisoned silver sky.”³⁶

Heim concludes “The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace” by recalling the figure of Gibson’s Zionites. We must not, he writes in the imperative, lose touch with these intuitive and tactile body people who are rooted in the energies of the earth and who abstain from the cerebral spectacles staged in the cyberspatial Matrix. According to this reading of *Neuromancer*, the Zionites are contrasted to the cyberspace cowboys who operate and lose themselves in the Matrix. Like the inhabitants of Zion in *The Matrix*, Gibson’s Zionites live outside the Matrix and eschew its computer-generated fantasies. In recalling the importance and centrality of the Zionites, Heim appears to make what can only be viewed as a wise and reasonable suggestion. If cyberspace has the potential to lead us into computer-generated spectacles where we can forget ourselves, the Zionites provide a kind of “reality check” that nudges us out of our heady reverie. Despite all the fantastic possibilities of VR, Heim still advocates taking the red pill. He does so not because he is some kind of neo-Luddite who has disdain for the virtual life; rather, he advocates understanding the true reality of the situation in order to put the VR experience in its proper place and perspective.³⁷ Neo, in fact, makes a similar decision. After selecting the red pill, he does not simply pack up his pod, move into a derelict apartment in the desert of the real, and get a job at some post-apocalypse Starbucks. The choice of truth does not simply exclude interactions with illusion *tout court*; it puts illusion in its proper place and perspective. The converse, however, is not true: the

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–108.

37. Similar decisions are evident in the interviews with VR developers presented in Rheingold’s *Virtual Reality* (above, n. 22), Hillis’s critical investigation of virtual environments in *Digital Sensations* (above, n. 22), Stanislaw Lem’s early investigation of “phantomatics” in his *Summa technologiae* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), and the various articles collected in anthologies like Frank Biocca and Mark R. Levy’s *Communication in the Age of Virtual Reality* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), James Brook and Iain Boal’s *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), and Ziauddin Sardar and Jerome R. Ravetz’s *Cyberfutures: Culture and Politics on the Information Superhighway* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

choice of illusion completely eclipses and precludes truth. The one who decides, like Cypher, to live in a computer-generated hallucination will remember nothing. In selecting the red pill, therefore, Neo is not simply deciding to live outside the Matrix, but is deciding to live in such a way that he knows what is and what is not true, what is and what is not a computer-generated artifice. It is, for this reason, that Neo, like the rest of Morpheus's crew, is able to enter the Matrix willfully and, once inside it, perform seemingly unreal feats. This is possible not because he has decided to live outside the Matrix, but because, in selecting the red pill and deciding for truth, Neo can interact with the VR world of the Matrix with the self-assured knowledge that it is not real. He can, as Kenneth Rufo describes it, "see the Matrix for what it really is."³⁸

The Matrix, then, is a parable that connects up with and dramatizes values that appear to be unquestioned and undeniable. Its privilege of the true and real is something that is already affirmed in the history of philosophy, and is reinforced by contemporary theorists and critics of VR technology. And *The Matrix* is not the only contemporary fable to entertain or to capitalize on this decision; in fact, a good number of popular films produced during the last decade of the twentieth century seem to be about similar matters. *Lawnmower Man*,³⁹ one of the earliest films to address VR, ends by making a similar choice. At the climax of the narrative, the protagonist terminates his ascendancy to virtual immortality and returns to the real world to save the life of his friend. As Heim has interpreted it, the film ends by affirming the unmistakable importance of the "primary world" and the real human relationships that are a part of it. In this way, Heim argues that a film like *Lawnmower Man* "spells out . . . just what values should underpin virtual-worlds research."⁴⁰

A similar argument is presented in Peter Weir's *Truman Show*,⁴¹ which constitutes something like reality television "turned up to eleven."⁴² The narrative concerns the life of Truman Burbank, who, like Plato's prisoners and the human batteries wired into the Matrix, unknowingly lives his entire life on a television set. The film concludes with the protagonist bravely exiting through the horizon of

38. Kenneth Rufo, "The Mirror in *The Matrix* of Media Ecology," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20 (2003): 117–140, quote on 137.

39. *Lawnmower Man* (motion picture), New Line Cinema, Hollywood, Calif., 1992.

40. Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (above, n. 22). p. 146.

41. *Truman Show* (motion picture), Paramount Pictures, Hollywood, Calif., 1998.

his artificial environment in order to confront the real and true world that exists outside the illusion that had constituted what he thought was reality. *The Matrix*, then, is not alone. In the popular mythology of our time, we see and entertain argument after argument for taking the red pill.

The Blue Pill and Beyond

It is less a matter of being pro- or anti-technology, but of developing a critical perspective on the ethics of virtuality.⁴³

It seems no one, or almost no one, advocates swallowing the blue pill. And even the small number who do, do not question the meta-physical structure and values that organize the film and direct its interpretations. In fact, the few dissenting voices actually reinforce the fundamental “will to truth” that is at the core of the narrative, even though they appear to question Neo’s choice and even side with Cypher. In his essay “You Won’t Know the Difference So You Can’t Make the Choice,” Robin Beck evaluates the two options presented to Neo and concludes that the difference between the blue and red pills is negligible and essentially immaterial. “There are,” he argues, “no rational grounds for making the decision [because] [e]pistemologically, the worlds are the same,” given that either world would seem “equally real” once one pill or the other had been swallowed.⁴⁴ For Beck, it simply does not matter which pill is taken; both lead to a “reality” that is equally true and real for the individual who encounters it. Whether he takes the blue or red pill, Neo will live in a “reality” that will be, as far as he knows, absolutely real and unquestionably true.

David Weberman goes one step further in his essay, “*The Matrix Simulation and the Postmodern Age.*” Weberman agrees with Beck that the decision between blue and red is ostensibly insignificant, though he draws an entirely different conclusion:

Of course the whole plot of the film is driven by the noble battle for liberation from the tyranny of the machines and their evil Matrix. But the film, despite

42. “Turned up to eleven” originated with the character Nigel Tufnel (played by Christopher Guest) in the film mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap* (1984). The phrase is generally used to indicate the act of taking something to an extreme and has, since 2002, been included in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

43. Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein, *Data Trash* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), p. 5.

44. Robin Beck, “You Won’t Know the Difference So You Can’t Make the Choice,” *Philosophy Now* 30 (2000): 35–36.

itself, presents us with two worlds in a way that shows us that Cypher is the one who is right. I believe that the only sensible path is to choose the simulated world over the real one.⁴⁵

According to Weberman, if there is no appreciable difference between taking the blue or red pill, then a rational and defensible decision can be made. One should choose the option that offers the best outcome:

The Matrix does not just offer sensual pleasures. It really encompasses much more, in fact, it gives us just about everything we could want from the shallowest to the deepest gratifications. Assuming that the machines haven't made things unnecessarily impoverished, the virtual world gives us the opportunity to visit museums and concerts, read Shakespeare and Stephen King, fall in love, make love, raise children, form deep friendships, and so on. . . . The real world, on the other hand, is a wasteland. The libraries and theatres have been destroyed and the skies are always gray. In fact, you'd have to be out of your mind or at least seriously out to lunch to choose the real world (is that why Keanu Reeves seems so well cast in the role?). We're not talking base hedonism now, we're talking about, to use John Stuart Mill's words, "the higher faculties" and the deep and diverse types of gratifications derived from them. Such gratification is to be found more easily in the Matrix than in the "desert of the real."⁴⁶

For Weberman, the quality of life inside the Matrix is simply better than that on the outside. And by "quality of life," he is not simply referring to the base hedonistic pleasures that have been associated with the character of Cypher. The computer-generated world can certainly provide for these shallow gratifications, but it can also run simulations that stimulate "the higher faculties," providing everything we believe makes a human life worth living. Consequently, swallowing the blue pill and living life inside the Matrix, despite the way this option has been maligned both within the film and through its various interpretations, is without question the best decision. And those who choose otherwise are, Weberman believes, either out of their minds or out to lunch.

A similar quality of life argument is made by Kevin Warwick, who finds Morpheus and his rebel colleagues to be nothing but a bunch of reactionary humanists:

45. Weberman, "The Matrix Simulation and the Postmodern Age" (above, n. 19), p. 234.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 234–235.

Neo is kidnapped by Luddites, dinosaurs from the past when humans ruled the earth. It's not the future. We are in reality heading towards a world run by machines with an intelligence far superior to that of an individual human. But by linking into the network and becoming a Cyborg, life can appear to be even better than it is now. We really need to clamp down on the party-pooper Neos of this world and get into the future as soon as we can—a future in which we can be part of a Matrix system, which is morally far superior to our Neolithic morals of today.⁴⁷

For Warwick, being wired into the machine and becoming a component in a “Matrix system” is part of an evolutionary step by which human beings surpass the limitations of their biologically determined capabilities and become something more—what is often called “cyborg” or “post-human.” This human/machine confluence will, Warwick believes, provide a better life and be judged to be morally superior to our current situation, which will, in retrospect, seem to be prehistoric. Consequently, to resist this evolutionary step is, in his estimation, reactionary, nostalgic, and simply unintelligible. Although Warwick's argument might appear to be somewhat extreme, his position is not unprecedented. Similar descriptions of human/machine hybridity and post-human configurations have been promoted in J. C. R. Licklider's “Man/Computer Symbiosis,” Donna Haraway's “A Cyborg Manifesto,” and N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman*.⁴⁸ Like Warwick, these scholars suggest, as Haraway succinctly describes it, that “the machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment.”⁴⁹

These alternative readings of *The Matrix* challenge the customary interpretations by apparently inverting the fundamental decision between the red and blue pills. I say “apparently,” because these alternatives, despite their best efforts, do not manage to affect such an inversion. If “the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians,” as Nietzsche argued at the beginning of *Beyond Good and Evil*, “is the belief in opposite values,”⁵⁰ then *The Matrix* is in fact “the most philo-

47. Kevin Warwick, “*The Matrix—Our Future?*” in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (above, n. 6), pp. 198–207.

48. See J. C. R. Licklider, “Man/Computer Symbiosis,” *IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics* HFE-1 (1960), available at <http://memex.org/licklider.html>; Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149–181; and N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

49. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” *ibid.*, p. 180.

50. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (above, n. 33), p. 2.

sophical film ever made"⁵¹ (insofar as its narrative is defined and motivated by a distinction between two opposed and mutually exclusive possibilities where the one is clearly valued over the other). The film and the majority of its interpretations decide, for example, in favor of the red pill over the blue one, the immediate real world over computer-mediated simulations, and the "hero of the real" who awakens to the truth over the anti-hero who proclaims that "ignorance is bliss." The interpretations offered by Beck, Weberman, and Warwick seem to challenge these customary decisions by elevating the depreciated terms over and against the ones that have been customarily privileged. Such operations would be "revolutionary," because they literally "overturn" the customary value system. They would, it seems, propose an inversion of traditional metaphysics whereby falsity, error, and deception would be valued over truth, and fantastic illusions would be given precedence over the real. This, in fact, *does not* occur. The substitution of the blue pill for the red one that is suggested in these interpretations is not a revolutionary gesture. Although Beck, Weberman, and Warwick provide alternative readings of *The Matrix*, their analyses remain bounded and structured by a metaphysical system that adheres to the assumed value of real truth. What makes the blue pill attractive, on their accounts, is not that it leads to deception, illusion, and falsity; rather, what makes it attractive is that it also leads to a world that is just as real and true. What they dispute, then, is not the choice of truth over illusion, but the fact that the decision between the two pills is presented in a way that is not entirely accurate. Despite what Morpheus says, they argue, the blue pill does not lead to something that is the opposite of true reality, but constitutes the doorway to an alternative and possibly improved reality. Consequently, the issue is not to decide between reality and deceptive illusion, but to choose between two very different kinds of reality: a neo-Luddite existence in the real world of the *Nebuchadnezzar*, or the virtual reality created through a computer.

Even those who advocate swallowing the blue pill, then, still affirm the fundamental values of the real and the true over and against deceptive illusions. No matter how the film is interpreted, no matter who is situated as the hero of the narrative, illusion and deception are still regarded with suspicion. But why? What's the matter with illusory deceptions? Why are they so thoroughly devalued that they are, almost without question, universally maligned? Should not this

51. See the dustjacket of Irwin's *The Matrix and Philosophy* (above, n. 4).

absolute exclusion make us just a little apprehensive? Nietzsche is one thinker in the Western tradition who questions this seemingly universal conviction and moral prejudice. Beginning with *The Genealogy of Morals* and continuing through intervening works up to and including *Beyond Good and Evil*, he sought not only to expose the unquestioned prejudices and unacknowledged decisions that structure Western thought, but to challenge their hegemony. It is in *The Gay Science* that these misgivings are perhaps best articulated:

This unconditional will to truth—what is it? Is it the will *not to allow oneself to be deceived*? Or is it the will *not to deceive*? For the will to truth could be interpreted in the second way, too—if only the special case “I do not want to deceive myself” is subsumed under the generalization “I do not want to deceive.” But why not deceive?⁵²

In asking these questions, Nietzsche not only exposes one of the moral prejudices of philosophy, which always decides in favor of the true, but inquires about the almost universal exclusion of deception. “Why do you not want to deceive,” Nietzsche asks provocatively, “especially if it should seem—and it does seem!—as if all of life aimed at semblance, meaning error, deception, simulation, delusion, self-delusion, and when the great sweep of life has actually always shown itself to be on the side of the most unscrupulous πολύτροποι.”⁵³ Here, in his use of the Greek word πολύτροποι (“polytropoi”), Nietzsche reiterates one of the many epithets of Odysseus, whom Homer presents as the hero of “many turns,” master of deceptions, disguises, and tricks.⁵⁴ According to Nietzsche, then, it is virtuosity in deception that is necessary for survival, while the “will to truth”—the will to avoid deception at any cost—is a disposition that is antithetical and even hostile to life. The “will to truth,” Nietzsche wrote, “that might be a concealed will to death.”⁵⁵

A similar form of critical reflection is situated in the context of *The Matrix*, voiced by the only character who can occupy such a thoroughly skeptical position—Cypher: “You know, I know what you’re thinking ‘cause right now I’m thinking the same thing. Actually, to tell you the truth, I’ve been thinking the same thing ever since I got here. Why, oh why, didn’t I take the blue pill!?” Cypher reflects on the burden and danger of having taken the red pill. In his estima-

52. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (above, n. 31), p. 281.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

54. I am indebted to Debra Hawhee for this insight.

55. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (above, n. 31), p. 282.

tion, the “will to truth” is both a painful disappointment and a death sentence. And he not only asks the critical question, he acts on it. For this reason, his character is situated as a defector and traitor: he not only “betrays Neo and his disciples,”⁵⁶ but he also betrays the unquestioned faith in and the unconditional will to truth. Consequently, Cypher is, like Nietzsche, the blasphemer of metaphysics who, through a gesture that can only appear to be ethically suspect and metaphysically foolish, puts in question the seemingly irrefutable value of truth.

Cypher’s actions seek and end with a reversal of Neo’s affirmation of the real and the true. He questions the value of the true world, asks to be returned to the computer simulations of the Matrix, and wants to live the life of an actor. Nietzsche, it seems, charts a similar course. He also questions the “will to truth,” is intrigued by the actor’s “delight in simulation” and “craving for appearances,”⁵⁷ and seeks to reverse the traditional value system that has defined Western philosophy.⁵⁸ Nietzsche, however, was not satisfied with mere reversal; he knew, as both Heidegger (1978) and Derrida (1981b) point out, that mere inversion essentially changes nothing, because it still operates, albeit in an inverted form, on the terrain of and from the system that is supposedly effected. Consequently, Nietzsche is not a mere philosophical revolutionary; he goes one step further and deliberately undermines the very logic that defines Western philosophy—that is, he disturbs the rules of the philosophical game, unsettling the very logic by which “true being” had been opposed to illusory appearances in the first place. This is perhaps most evident in the story, included in *The Twilight of the Idols*, of “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable.” This parable, which proceeds in several discrete steps, ends with the following remarkable statement: “The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.*”⁵⁹ Here, Nietzsche moves beyond mere rever-

56. McGinn, “The Matrix of Dreams” (above, n. 10), p. 2.

57. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (above, n. 31), p. 316.

58. In an early notebook entry from 1870, for example, Nietzsche indicated that his research program sought to institute an inversion of the traditional values of philosophy: “My philosophy is a *reversed Platonism*. The farther removed from true beings, all the purer, more beautiful and better it is. Life in illusion as goal.” See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente, 1869–1874*, in Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, eds., *Friedrich Nietzsche Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 7 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), p. 199.

59. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 486.

sal, undermining and collapsing the very distinction between the true world and its apparitional other. According to Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen,

the point is not simply that truth and reality have been absorbed by illusion and appearance. Something far more subtle and unsettling is taking place. Somewhere Nietzsche suggests that when reality is effaced, appearances disappear as well. What emerges in the wake of the death of oppositions like truth/illusion and reality/appearance is something that is neither truth nor illusion, reality nor appearance but something else, something other. This other is as yet unnamed.⁶⁰

Nietzsche's questioning of the "will to truth" and his skepticism concerning the depreciation of deception, does not seek to replace one term of the traditional metaphysical dichotomy with the other; instead, he questions and undermines the entire system that opposes true being and deceptive appearances in the first place. What Nietzsche effects, therefore, is not a simple reversal, but a *deconstruction*⁶¹ of what are perhaps the principal binary oppositions that structure the field of philosophical thinking. This operation leaves neither truth nor illusion, reality nor appearance, but something other—something that is beyond and outside of these logical oppositions that organizes all possible modes of thinking and that, because of

60. Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen, *Imagologies: Media Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 15.

61. The term *deconstruction* is, perhaps, one of the most misused and misunderstood concepts in contemporary theory. Despite the circulation of misinterpretations that have become something of an institutional (mal)practice, deconstruction does not indicate "to take apart" or "to un-construct." What it signifies is neither simply synonymous with "destruction" nor the antithesis of "construction." As Derrida points out, "the 'de-' of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructionist or destructionist schema" (see Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. S. Weber and J. Mehlman [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993], p. 147). For this reason, deconstruction is something entirely other than what is understood and delimited by the conceptual opposition situated between construction and destruction. To put it schematically, deconstruction comprises a kind of general strategy by which to intervene in this and all other conceptual oppositions that have and continue to organize and regulate Western systems of knowing. For a more detailed explanation of the strategies and operations of deconstruction, see Derrida's *Positions* (trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), and Briankle Chang's *Deconstructing Communication: Representation, Subject, and Economies of Exchange* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), as well as David J. Gunkel's "Deconstruction for Dummies" in *Hacking Cyberspace* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001).

this, exceeds the scope of available names;⁶² that is, it ruptures the very limit of *λογος*, which, in this case, can be understood as both “logic” and “word.”

Technically speaking, this is also what transpires in *The Matrix*, which can be read as film that not only employs but exploits the binary oppositions that define traditional metaphysics. In this way, the narrative proceeds by drawing distinctions between the red and blue pills and deciding in favor of one over the other. All of this, of course, is programmed and delimited by the metaphysics of opposite values—a metaphysics that not only arranges binary oppositions, but determines an ethical schema by privileging one term over the other. In *The Matrix*, the blue pill, which leads to a life of self-deception in a computer-generated simulation, is both opposed and subordinated to the red pill, which leads to real knowledge of the truth. This arrangement, however, shows itself to be an artifice. If one pays attention to the structure of the narrative, the decision that Morpheus offers Neo cannot be, within the metaphysical system articulated by the film, a real alternative or choice; in other words, there is neither a blue nor red pill. What appears as a choice between two alternatives is itself something that is simulated within the artifice of the Matrix. Neo’s encounter with Morpheus takes place in a computer-generated hotel room inside the Matrix, which is, at this point in the film, the only reality Neo is capable of understanding. This situation is marked explicitly by Morpheus at the beginning of the conversation: “The Matrix is everywhere, it’s all around us, here even in this room.” Consequently, the choice that Morpheus presents to Neo between a programmed artifice and true reality is itself an artifact in a computer-generated simulation. The decision between the blue or red pill is something that is staged within and completely circumscribed by the Matrix: the two pills, as Peter Lloyd (2003) argues, are entirely virtual.⁶³ This insight is eventually confirmed in

62. One attempt to name this alternative has been proposed in Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. S. F. Glaser [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994]), a publication that has not only figured prominently in the narrative structure of *The Matrix*, but is actually included as a prop in an early scene. For Baudrillard, *simulation* names that which remains outside of and beyond the sovereign difference that had distinguished the real from imaginary representations (p. 2). For a detailed consideration of simulation and VR technology, see David J. Gunkel, “Rethinking Virtual Reality: Simulations and the Deconstruction of the Image,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17 (2000): 43–62.

63. Peter B. Lloyd, “Glitches in *The Matrix* . . . and How to Fix Them,” in *Taking the Red Pill* (above, n. 5), p. 106.

the sequel, *The Matrix Reloaded*, where it becomes clear to Neo that his choice between the red and blue pills was always and already part of the Matrix's own program and operations.

The task, therefore, is not a matter of simply choosing one or the other, but of questioning the structure, necessity, and stakes of this particular and limited set of alternatives. It is, to paraphrase Kroker and Weinstein, less a matter of being pro- or anti-Matrix than of developing a critical perspective on the ethics of this very choice.⁶⁴ What is at issue in such an undertaking is not deciding either for blue or red, but of inquiring about the terms and conditions by which this either/or logic has been generated in the first place. The issue, then, is not as simple as deciding between two different pills; instead, the task is to learn to think outside of and beyond these limited options and the customary metaphysical categories that already dictate the kinds of questions we ask, the alternatives we think we have to choose between, and the outcomes that we foresee as possible. For instance, instead of selecting between the two pills presented by Morpheus, Neo could have stood up and walked away from the entire scene. In doing so, he would have not selected either pill. He would have effectively said "no to drugs" and not consented to having his options restricted to a binary opposition where one term is already opposed to and privileged over the other. He would, therefore, neither have awakened in the "desert of the real" nor have been returned to the anesthetized deceptions of the Matrix in which "ignorance is bliss." He would have done something entirely other, something that is neither predictable nor revolutionary, something outside of and beyond the logical oppositions of truth/falsity, reality/illusion, and good/bad.

A similar opportunity is available in VR research. We can, of course, continue to apply the usually metaphysical concepts in order to generate an understanding of VR technology and to demarcate what is considered acceptable and proper. If we do so, VR will conform to rather predictable, calculable, and comfortable norms, becoming, as Michael Heim suggests, "Platonism as a working product."⁶⁵ If, however, the consideration of this technology extends beyond the customary categories and values, we can begin to perceive other and perhaps more interesting alternatives. This requires, above everything else, a mode of operation that both questions and eventually ruptures the limit of the conceptual systems that already

64. Kroker and Weinstein, *Data Trash* (above, n. 42), p. 5.

65. Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (above, n. 22), p. 89.

define the possibility of both a metaphysics and ethics of virtual reality. What is needed is an entirely other kind of “metaphysics” and “ethics”—perhaps it is problematic to retain these names—that are able to interrupt and to operate in excess of the traditional logical distinctions that divide truth from illusion, being from appearance, and even good from evil. We can find a model for this kind of transaction by “returning to the source.” It is in the concluding pages of Plato’s *Phaedrus* that Socrates encodes the evaluation of the technology of writing in a binary structure, employs the figure of the φαρμάκον (drugs) to illustrate the two options, and limits discussion to this rather restricted binary opposition.⁶⁶ As long as evaluations of scriptural technology remain organized and delimited by the two alternatives that are presented by Socrates, writing will be understood according to a structure that has already stacked the deck against it; in other words, if writing is positioned, as it is at the end of *Phaedrus*, as the deficient and negatively defined “other” of memory and speech, it can only be the wrong choice—the equivalent of swallowing the blue pill. The critical task, one taken up by writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and others, is not simply to reverse the tradition, replacing the logocentric privilege of memory and speech with a revolutionary privileging of writing. This kind of simple-minded inversion changes nothing and, as Walter Ong correctly points out, would be an “uncritical literacy”;⁶⁷ instead, the task is to learn to *think* writing and to be able to *write* writing outside of and beyond the horizon of this logocentric metaphysics. Similarly, the task before VR theorists and practitioners is to learn to think and visualize VR outside of and beyond the binary oppositions that have all too often been employed to structure understandings of this technology. Indicative of this kind of alternative procedure is the work of Mark Taylor, for whom VR, like many of the technical terms introduced in post-structuralism, cannot be contained by or understood according to the customary metaphysical categories:

Previous responses to virtual reality reinscribe oppositions like mind/body, human/machine, natural/artificial, and material/immaterial, which the long process of virtualizing reality subverts. What once seemed to be hard-and-fast

66. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 274c–275a. See also Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

67. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1982), p. 169.

oppositions now appear to be interfaces in which neither term remains the same. Virtual reality involves neither the synthesis of opposites nor the suppression of one term by the other but gives rise to a different order of "reality" that eludes traditional classificatory structures.⁶⁸

According to Taylor, VR, which he argues is not just a technology but also an effective figure of the postmodern condition,⁶⁹ does not take up residence on either one side or the other of the conceptual oppositions that have organized and programmed Western systems of meaning. It, therefore, is neither located on the side of the real nor is it situated as its opposite. It also does not, following the procedure of Hegelian philosophy, mediate or synthesize this difference; instead, it is situated completely outside and in excess of the either/or possibilities that have been programmed by the binary oppositions that define and characterize Western metaphysics. This third term, therefore, does not participate in the dialectical game of either/or, but exceeds and even circumscribes its rules. In the end, we can say that to come full circle and return to the quotation from Kierkegaard with which this all began, that rather than designating a choice between the real and the virtual, the decision before VR theorists and practitioners is whether to continue to operate within this dialectic, or to rule it out and proceed to investigate opportunities that are otherwise.

68. Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 302–303.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

