

### **The Prison of Ignorance, or the Prison of Truth?**

In this paper, I argue that although truth is valuable in many circumstances, we should not conceptualize it as an intrinsic moral good or a goal of life. Truth is valuable and necessary as it allows us to describe the world (hence increasing our knowledge of it) and to communicate with others; it is in some sense a tool, but this does not justify us requiring anyone to pursue truth. To clarify, truth is defined as statements that correspond with external reality – e.g., a statement X is Y is true iff X is Y in reality. I develop my argument by discussing the reasons why we value truth based on Plato, Descartes and *The Matrix*, focusing on *The Matrix* as a case study for Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, and finally introducing a thought experiment in response.

First, it must be pointed out that the texts we have encountered include a similar logic of presenting non-truths<sup>1</sup> as being tied to oppression, malintent, and manipulation. For Descartes, non-truth is due to a malicious demon deceiving the meditator. For Plato, non-truth similarly exists under a condition of extreme oppression: people are imprisoned since childhood; their necks and legs shackled so that they cannot even turn<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, the matrix is constructed by nightmarish sentient machines who despise humans, with the sole purpose of deception and exploitation. As Morpheus says, the matrix is “the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.”<sup>3</sup> Then, truth, the opposite of non-truth, naturally appears to be tied to freedom, autonomy, and self-determination. According to this logic, non-truth is the prison that limits human potential and reduces human existence, and truth can “free us from the shackles of our ignorance”<sup>4</sup>. Hence, in these texts, truth is presented as good because it gives us autonomy, allowing us to, at the very least, be free.

Indeed, in both *The Matrix* and the allegory of the cave, the moment of freedom is literally also the moment of truth. In *The Matrix*, Morpheus tells Neo that he is a slave, being “born into

bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch”<sup>5</sup>. The moment that he exits the matrix (i.e. gains freedom from the prison) is when he realizes the truth. In the *Allegory of the Cave*, the moment a prisoner breaks free of his chains and turns around is also the moment he realizes the truth of the sunlit world. However, do these moments suffice as a defence of the value of truth and its connection to freedom/autonomy, and the unconditional pursuit of truth? Could we not imagine scenarios where the opposite is true? Could truth ever be bad, or opposing to autonomy?

In daily life, there are many reasons to value and pursue truth. Truths about others are the foundation of human relationships. Truths are practical as they help us make decisions. Scientific observations that are true allow us to make technological. Indeed, truth is almost always good; a world without truth would be incomprehensible. But we can also find situations where non-truth is preferable. What if deceiving political leaders of a belligerent country can avert war and save lives? Furthermore, non-truths do not always have to be enacted with bad intentions. For example, if you ask me when our exam is and I say 11:30 am when it is 9:30 am, and we both miss our exam and get a zero, I am not morally bad. On the other hand, if I intentionally deceive you so that you get zero, but I go take the exam at 9:30 am, then I am morally bad. Furthermore, we don't require people to relive or remember forgotten trauma which can shift their entire perception of self and infringe on their autonomy. Thus, the good or bad of truth/non-truth are context and intent-dependent; truth is not always good.

Returning to the texts, in *The Allegory of the Cave*, Plato says that when a prisoner sees the sunlight world, he has an obligation to tell the others of it and bring them out of the cave, because it is fair and just<sup>6</sup>. However, this is dependent on the circumstances of the cave and the sunlight world. If an ordinary person is awoken and is forced to join Morpheus to save others, is

he not risking likely death? It seems unfair to demand others die for us. Furthermore, Plato claims that those who have seen the truth would not want to return to the dark world: “their souls are always eager to spend their time above”<sup>7</sup>. But this again depends on the world above being better than the one below. Indeed, the character of Cypher perhaps proves Plato wrong: he is disgusted by the real world and wishes to return to the one below. Speaking with agent Smith, he says “I know that this steak doesn’t exist. I know when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious[...] Ignorance is bliss.”<sup>8</sup> Then, in his confrontation with Trinity, their conversation reveals the opposite of the equation of truth with freedom.

Cypher: “Free? You call this free? All I do is what he tells me to do. If I have to choose between that and the Matrix, I choose the Matrix.”

Trinity: “The Matrix isn’t real!”<sup>9</sup>

It seems that Cypher (and perhaps all people outside of the One) has more autonomy within the matrix than without. He can choose his career, his lover, family and friends, hobbies, and realize himself. Outside of the matrix, he must follow the orders of Morpheus and alienate himself from the rest of humanity, imprisoned on the *Nebuchadnezzar* and interacting with its crew. The truth robs him of any semblance of a normal human life. Thus, the initial connection between freedom and truth is not always true, but contingent on circumstances. If, as implied in the *Allegory of the Cave* and *The Matrix*, the value of truth is in autonomy and freedom from oppression, then we cannot blame Cypher for pursuing what he views as autonomy and escaping oppression. We cannot blame anyone for choosing freedom and happiness over martyrdom.

Finally, I present a thought experiment, based on the experience machine. What if humans created a matrix for us because we’ve exhausted the earth’s natural resources, and we live in a matrix to have enough resources for everyone? This matrix is run by humans and in

every way the same as the world, everyone is told about the matrix and given the choice to leave at any time, and the external world still exists as it does today? Would there be any obligation to pursue the truth and live in the ‘real’ world?

In conclusion, unlike freedom from oppression and imprisonment, truth is not an intrinsic good that we must always pursue. Plato’s the *Allegory of the Cave* draws a false necessary connection between freedom and truth. Of course, some may define truth as *the* goal and spend a lifetime in its pursuit, but some may choose to pursue personal happiness and satisfaction of desires. One is not superior to the other.

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, I use “non-truth” to indicate whatever is not the full truth, be it entirely false (i.e does not correspond to reality at all) or a limited view of reality. I use “non-truth” because other terms such as “deception” or “lies” already imply there is an actor with bad intention.

<sup>2</sup> *The Republic*, p.207 (*The Allegory of the Cave*)

<sup>3</sup> *The Matrix* ([screenplay](#)), p.28, *The Daily Script*

<sup>4</sup> *Ontology and The Matrix*, p.73

<sup>5</sup> *The Matrix* ([screenplay](#)), p.29, *The Daily Script*

<sup>6</sup> *The Republic*, p.213 (*The Allegory of the Cave*)

<sup>7</sup> *The Republic*, p.211 (*The Allegory of the Cave*)

<sup>8</sup> *The Matrix* ([screenplay](#)), p.61, *The Daily Script*

<sup>9</sup> *The Matrix* ([screenplay](#)), p.88, *The Daily Script*