

Chapter 10: Belief in the Braino Machine

“There is no spoon.”

-- *“The Matrix”*

We’ve looked at what beliefs are, what they do, and how they’re justified. But that leaves some important questions unanswered:

- What makes beliefs meaningful?

Consider “the book is on the table” vs. “it’s a good book.” Both are meaningful but in different ways. If we don’t know how they’re meaningful, it’s easy for us to get confused about what they mean. For example, we might think that being good is like being on the table, and that it’s related somehow to the position or physical properties of the book. Believe it or not, people sometimes get confused about things like that.

- How can you know if beliefs are true?

This is more obviously important. If we don’t know how to determine if beliefs are true, then we can’t have confidence in any of our beliefs.

- What does it mean for beliefs to be true?

In a way, this asks what our world is like. Is it really true, as Hamlet wondered, that “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so?” Or is there a reality beyond our beliefs that makes them true or false?

The answers are the subtext of the 1999 movie “The Matrix.” The movie got them from millennia of smart people thinking about those questions. The next few chapters will answer them in more detail. In this chapter, we’ll set the stage to make the answers easier to understand.

What if nothing you perceive is “real”?

The hero of “The Matrix” is Thomas Anderson, an employee at a software company who spends his nights online as a hacker named “Neo.” He discovers that the world he sees around him isn’t real. It’s only an illusion created by wires attached to his brain. Even his own body, as he perceives it, is an illusion. His real body sits in a pod that extracts energy from it, in a dark chamber that uses billions of human bodies as living batteries.

In one of the movie’s early scenes, Neo has to escape from agents of the Matrix. He climbs out his office window onto a ledge high above the city street. He believes that if he slips, he’ll fall to the pavement and die.

But he’s not really on a ledge. He’s not high above the street. The pavement isn’t even there, nor is his body. Even so, he has beliefs about all of those things. As long as the virtual world around him stays consistent with his previous experience -- as long as there’s no “glitch in the

Matrix” -- his beliefs seem true. But are they? Do they mean what they seem to mean? And is he justified in believing them?

“The Matrix” is an entertaining movie, not a philosophy seminar. It raises serious questions but doesn’t try seriously to answer them. For millennia, some thinkers *have* tried to answer them.

Plato’s cave prisoners see shadows

The earliest known ancestor of “The Matrix” comes from ancient Athens. In his book *The Republic*, the philosopher Plato (427-347 BCE) told “the allegory of the cave.” For their entire lives, prisoners have been chained in a cave where they face away from the entrance and can’t see each other or themselves. As people outside the cave walk past the entrance, they cast shadows on the wall faced by the prisoners. The shadows are the only reality that they have ever known. The prisoners can hear each other, so they discuss the activities of the shadows, theorize about them, and so forth.

One of the prisoners escapes from the cave and makes his way to the outside. Though at first blinded by the sunlight, he eventually realizes the truth: What he’s seen all of his life and took to be real were only the shadows of people in the real world. He makes his way back into the cave and tells the other prisoners what he discovered. He tells them haltingly and with great difficulty, because even though he’s *seen* the world outside the cave, he has no words to describe it.

The other prisoners don’t understand what he’s talking about. They don’t have any frame of reference for it. All of their ideas come from thinking about shadows on the wall. The ideas of open space with ground, sky, trees, and sunlight make no sense to them because they can’t be translated into shadow-speak. They think that the returned prisoner must be insane.

Plato wanted to know the nature of our world. Is the world real and substantial, or is it like a series of shadows on the wall of our cave?

Descartes thwarts his evil demon

Two millennia later, French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) told a similar story but with a different question. He wanted to discover if he could know anything for certain.

And he had a pretty high standard for what counted as certain. What he perceived with his senses seemed pretty certain – but was it really? In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he considered:

“... for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?”

What if he was asleep and was only dreaming about sitting by the fire? The possibility meant that he couldn’t even be certain about what he perceived at the moment.

The situation was even worse: What if (like Neo) he didn’t have a body at all, and was only *dreaming* that he did? Sure, it was kind of a goofy idea, but it wasn’t impossible. If it wasn’t impossible, then it was *possible* that he was mistaken about having a body. The whole world might be an illusion. It was possible that a malicious demon:

"...has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things."

Was there anything at all that he could know for certain?

(Chapter continues ...)