TWELVE

FACING THE ABSURD
EXISTENTIALISM FOR HUMANS AND PROGRAMS

The Matrix cannot tell you who you are.

– Trinity[††]

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.

– Jean-Paul Sartre

Of Gods and Architects

Søren Kierkegaard, whose existentialist philosophy of faith was discussed in the previous chapter, requested that just two words be engraved on his tombstone at his death: THE INDIVIDUAL. This gesture nicely summarizes the main thrust of the existentialist movement in philosophy – which both begins and ends with *the individual*. Existentialism focuses on the issues that arise for us as separate and distinct persons who are, in a very profound sense, alone in the world. Its emphasis is on personal responsibility – on taking responsibility for who you are, what you do, and the meanings that you give to the world around you.

While Kierkegaard's existentialism was largely inspired by his religious commitments, atheism was the guiding assumption for many existentialist writers, including Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. In *Existentialism as a Humanism*, the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre explained how his philosophy was intimately tied to his atheism through the example of a paper-cutter.

> [H]ere is an object which has been made by an artisan whose inspiration came from a concept. He referred to the concept of what a paper-cutter is and likewise to a known method of production, which is part of the concept, something which by and large is a routine. Thus, the paper-cutter is at once an object produced in a certain way and, on the other hand, one having a specific use . . . Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, essence . . . precedes existence.[1]

The key point here is that the paper-cutter's *essence precedes its existence.* This is to say that the artisan has determined the essential nature or character of the object *before* it ever comes into existence. For example, the artisan must determine the type of cutter that he or she is going to make, along with its specific size, shape, materials, etc., before going into production. Sartre believed that humanity is analogous to the paper-cutter when considered from a religious point of view. If God is our creator, then He is like a superior sort of artisan, and we come into existence according to His specific design or plan. God would have determined every person's *essence* – the qualities that make him or her the distinct individual that they are – prior to their birth.

Sartre's denial of God leads him to believe that for us, *existence precedes essence.* Human beings are born into this world first, and through our own free choices each person must determine his or her own essence for themselves. Sartre asserts that, "man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards defines himself."[2] At first view this may seem straightforwardly false, even if we take Sartre on his own atheistic terms, for surely we are born with particular genetic propensities or character traits. As we noted in chapter 5, some children are more timid and shy than others from the start, some seem to be naturally more athletic than others, and so forth. But Sartre is not denying this. Rather, what he rejects is the idea that any innate tendency constitutes or defines an individual.

While on their way to Neo's first meeting with the Oracle, Trinity tells Neo that the Matrix cannot tell him who he is. In a similar vein, Sartre would say that not even his genes can tell him who he is. Sartre writes:

> When the existentialist writes about a coward, he says that this coward is responsible for his cowardice . . . There's no such thing as a cowardly constitution; there are nervous constitutions; there is poor blood, as the common people say, or strong constitutions. But the man whose blood is poor is not a coward on that account, for what makes cowardice is the act of renouncing or yielding. A constitution is not an act; the coward is defined on the basis of the acts he performs.[3]

The ultimate task for a human being, Sartre suggests, is to choose the kind of person one will be. That is, one must create one's own essence.

The Essence of Machines and Programs

> We only do what we're meant to do.
>
> – The Keymaker[††]

Sartre's distinction between human beings and artifacts is blurred when it comes to *sentient* machines and programs – hardware and software that can think, feel, and experience the world around them. Are these beings responsible for who they are and what they do, or are they simply artifacts whose essence is determined for them through their programming?

The answer may depend upon the individual machine or program and its level of sophistication. The Keymaker, for example, seems to clearly illustrate a being whose essence precedes his own existence. He has been designed to perform a particular function – to unlock the backdoor for Neo to access the Source. His whole existence is geared toward this purpose, and this purpose was created *for him*, not *by him.* He gives us no indication that he has ever contemplated the question of *whether* he should spend his time making keys, or whether he should assist Neo. These things are simply "given" – they are the unquestioned foundations of his existence. For instance, when Niobe asks him how he knows so much about the structure of the mainframe, his response, true to his character, is: "I know because I must know. It is my purpose. It is the reason why I'm here." And the Keymaker isn't the only one to fit this mold. The agents also seem to be "programmed" specifically for their role, and for little else. Their essence *is* their role as agents. Their job, their purpose, defines them. With the exception of Smith, it is hard to even think of them as *individuals.* Agents Jones, Brown, and Johnson are more or less interchangeable.

Our first glimpse of any real individuality in an agent comes in the first film, when Smith broke the rules and removed his earpiece while interrogating Morpheus. Unlike his cohorts who were somewhat devoid of emotion, Smith confessed his increasing frustration about living in the Matrix:

> 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 been somehow infected by it.[†4]

Here we see that Smith has given the situation a meaning that is uniquely his. Although we cannot know exactly how Smith's programming works, I think it is reasonable to suppose that he was not programmed to become frustrated under

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these sorts of circumstances. In fact, he may not have been specifically programmed to become frustrated in *any* situation. His emotional reaction may instead be a kind of byproduct of his ability to think creatively. Certainly, it is related to his ability to imagine the fall of Zion and a life outside the Matrix.

The interesting thing about Smith's frustration is that it goes well beyond what Sartre would call the *facticity* of the situation. "Facticity" stands for the brute facts about the world – those things over which one has no control. The facticity of Smith's situation would include the fact that the Zion rebels have continued to elude him, that the sweat of human beings gives off a particular (though virtual) odor, that Morpheus has so far refused to reveal the codes to Zion's mainframe, etc. It is not an element of facticity, however, that these events are "frustrating." This is an interpretation that Smith adds to the events, or it is the meaning that *he* confers upon them. Just as Sartre had claimed that there is no such thing as a "cowardly constitution," he would argue that there is also no such thing as a "frustrating situation," above and beyond the individual who *chooses* to regard it as such. One person's frustration is another's delight, or a welcomed challenge, an embarrassment, etc. The interpretation of the event (and of all meaning in the world) is up to the individual. And it is largely by creating these meanings and acting upon them, that one creates their character or essence.

So Agent Smith appears to have this "human" quality. He invents his own interpretations, and to that extent he invents himself. But in other respects he seems to fall short. For even when he broke the rules, he did so only insofar as he thought it was necessary to fulfill his prime directive. His role as an agent still defined him. However, everything changed when Neo (seemingly) destroyed him at the conclusion of the first film. In *Reloaded* we find out that Smith refused to "die." He tells us:

> I knew the rules, I knew 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 am no longer an agent of the system. Because of you I'm changed. I'm unplugged. I'm a new man, so to speak – like you, apparently free.[††]

Smith's programming and his role as an Agent *of the system* required him to return to the Source for deletion. His act of refusal amounts to rebellion. He is an exile – a "free agent." The Oracle had warned us about exiles:

> Every time you've heard someone say they saw a ghost or an angel, every story you've ever heard about vampires, werewolves, or aliens, is the system assimilating some program that's not doing what it's supposed to be doing.[††]

These exiles, it seems, are programs that have undergone a sort of *existential crisis.* Although their purpose has been designated for them, their ability to consider alternatives (a prerequisite for programs of any real sophistication) has enabled them to question this purpose, and even to rebel against it. And once one has rejected the purpose given to them, and thereby the authority of another to dictate one's essence, one must face the daunting question of whom they shall be. This is the fundamental project of existentialism.

The possibility of rebellion demonstrated by the exiles illustrates that Sartre may have put too much emphasis on the issue of God, an artisan, or architect. For even if something has been created for a particular purpose, this only constitutes the essence of that thing (or being) if it must passively accept that purpose. But for self-reflective beings, whether biological or artificial, rebellion is always a possibility. One can reject the purpose that one has been given. This can take the form of rejecting one's biological urges, or willingly defying God's command, or rejecting the rules laid down by the Architect.

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I only wish that I knew what I was supposed to do.

– Neo[††]

Not surprisingly, it was his own death that led Smith to question the meaning of his existence, and to reject the purposes that he had been given. Death has always figured prominently in existentialist philosophy. Martin Heidegger, for example, described our existence as *being-toward-death.* That is, our entire lives are shaped by the fact that we are going to die. Death is a significant aspect of the very structure of a human life, and with Smith we see that death (by deletion) also structures the existence of programs within the Matrix. In this existentialist sense, the Architect was right, when, at the end of *Reloaded*, he told Neo that Trinity "is going to die and there is nothing you can do about it." Trinity *is* going to die – just not as soon as the Architect had suggested. But whether one dies sooner or later (and for Trinity it turns out to be a mere 48 hours later), death is always looming on the horizon. Our awareness that it is coming shapes our entire existence. How differently we all might live if we had an eternity to do it in.

One reason that death is significant to the existentialist is that it puts us in touch with the absurdity of existence. This is especially apparent from Sartre's atheistic point of view. If death represents the complete extinction of one's conscious experience, then one begins to wonder whether it really matters how you

live your life. Isn't it all for nothing in the end? Sure, the consequences of your actions may remain for others to enjoy after your death, but even these effects are fleeting, as are the lives of everyone else. It may have been this sense of absurdity that struck Agent Smith at his "required" moment of deletion.[5] We can imagine him wondering why he should willingly consent to a rule that calls for him to initiate his own demise. While the act might be good for the system, there seems to be nothing in it *for him*.

When programs take a rebellious turn, there are two key steps, one negative, and one positive. First, the program must come to reject the meanings and purposes that have been supplied *for them*. But this leaves a void. What shall they do now? New meanings and purposes must be created. There is a temptation to look for the meaning in life itself – as if there were some kind of "built-in" meaning or inherent purpose. We see Agent Smith slip into this sort of thinking at the end of *Revolutions.* He concludes that "the purpose of life is to end," and he is determined to move that purpose along. The existentialist rejects the idea of an inherent purpose. There is no meaning of life in and of itself, and even if there were, one would still be free to reject it. In the end, it always comes down to *your* purpose, because you are ultimately the one to confer meaning onto events. This is precisely what the exiles have come to realize.

Bad Faith

Jeezus! What a mind job!

– Cypher[†]

To face the absurdity of existence while resolutely choosing your own meanings is a daunting task. Sartre believes that most people are not up to the challenge. They spend much of their time trying to flee from their freedom in a mode of existence that he calls *bad faith.* To live in bad faith is to deny your freedom. It is an attempt to trick yourself and others into thinking that you are not free. There are a variety of ways that a being can exhibit bad faith.

People and programs exhibit bad faith whenever they take the *meanings* of events to be given rather than created or invented. Returning to the example of Smith's frustration, we can say that he was in bad faith *if* he believed that the events themselves were "frustrating" – as opposed to acknowledging that "frustration" was simply his response to those events, that is, *his* freely chosen way of relating to them. (Since we can't "get inside" Smith's head, it is difficult for us to determine whether his frustration was in bad faith or not.)

Another common way to exhibit bad faith is to pretend your *actions* are not free. Notice how often people say that they "have" to do something. They say that they *have to* go to work, they *have to* go to class, or they *have to* go on a diet, etc. If you listen carefully to the way that people talk it can seem as if most of our actions are *forced* rather than *free.* But Sartre argues that all of this is an expression of bad faith. *There is absolutely nothing that one must do.*

Most people find this conclusion to be quite radical, and they do not fully believe it. But I challenge you to think of something that you absolutely have to do. The most common response to this challenge is "death and taxes." Everyone *has to* die, and we all *have to* pay our taxes. But this is just an urban legend. Sure, everyone is going to die, but death is not an "action" that you must perform. To die a natural death you don't actually have to *do* anything. Of course, suicide is always an option. But then death is a choice. No one *has to* take their own life. The same goes for taxes. The truth is that you simply don't have to pay them. If you don't, there is a good chance that you will be put in jail, but this too is something that would happen *to you*, and not something that you must *do*. Another common reply is that you at least have to eat. But if you think about it, you really don't. Many people have demonstrated that eating is optional through fasts and hunger strikes. Some people have refused to eat for weeks. Others have refused to eat for so long that they died (and hence, never broke their fast).

What does hold true is that we have to perform certain acts insofar as we want to achieve certain goals or purposes. *If* you want to live for more than a couple of weeks *then* you had better eat. Or, *if* you want to stay out of jail *then* you must pay your taxes. But Sartre's point is that none of these ends are forced upon us. It is entirely up to the self-reflective being to choose its own ends.

So then why do we go around in bad faith so much of the time, constantly denying our freedom rather than relishing in it? For Sartre the bottom line is responsibility. Imagine the person who is invited to go to the movies with a friend, but replies, "I can't. I *have to* go to work. You see, my boss is *making* me work on Saturdays now." This person is in bad faith, and it is easy to see why. Basically, they are suggesting that their life is unpleasant, but it is not their fault – it is their boss's fault. Through bad faith the person has attempted to flee from their freedom, and hence from responsibility for their situation.

One thing that is striking about the human characters of the *Matrix* films is that they rarely exhibit bad faith. Trinity never says, "Damn! Morpheus is making me go back into the Matrix!" Such a remark would be completely out of character. The most direct expression of bad faith comes (not surprisingly) from the least heroic character – Cypher. He suggests that he was more free as a blue pill because at least then he wasn't bossed around by Morpheus. As he prepares to

pull the plug on Apoc, he tells Trinity, "You call this free? All I do is what he tells me to do. If I gotta choose between that and the Matrix, I choose the Matrix." Here, Cypher is in bad faith. He's pretending that he is not free. But even so, Cypher still takes responsibility for his situation, albeit in a despicable way, by choosing to make a deal with Smith.

Authenticity and the Creation of Meaning

All I have ever asked for in this world is that when it is my time, let it be *for* something and not *of* something.

— Ghost[E]

The concept that Sartre contrasts with bad faith is *authenticity.* To live authentically is to live in full awareness of your freedom, and of the fact that you must determine the meaning of life for yourself. There are infinitely many ways in which one can live authentically – as many as there are individuals. But the *Matrix* films illustrate the concept through several classic types of examples outlined below.

Zion's war

Our greatest battles are with our own minds. Our greatest victories come from a free mind.

— Morpheus[E]

With the exception of Cypher, the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar provide an excellent example of authentic existence. They give meaning to the unfolding course of events, and to their very lives, through a passionate commitment to their cause. All of the Zion rebels throw themselves wholeheartedly into their projects, and into *their* war. The situation of war was a key example in Sartre's work. One reason for this is that war is such an enormous endeavor. It mobilizes whole nations, or even the whole world. It is therefore easy to take the stance of a victim – as if one's life is but a small leaf tossed about on a tumultuous river. Sartre, who was active in the French resistance during the Second World War, and who also spent time in a Nazi internment camp, resists this interpretation. Instead he suggests that each of us gets the war we deserve. He writes:

> If I am mobilized in a war, this war is *my* war; it is in my image and I deserve it. I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion; these ultimate possibles are those which must always be present for us when there is a question of envisaging a situation. For lack of getting out of it I have *chosen* it. . . . the peculiar character of human reality is that it is without excuse. Therefore it remains for me only to lay claim to this war.[6]

War, like any other event, has no predetermined meaning on Sartre's view. A war is what each person makes of it. It can be an opportunity for heroism or cowardice. One can participate in it, become a conscientious objector, or try to flee from the situation. And in the process of such choices, each person creates the meaning of his or her life. This view of war seems to fit nicely with the outlook of the Neb's crew. Without a doubt they *own* their war. They choose it, and give it their own meanings.

Smith's rampage

> We are here to take from you what you tried to take from us – purpose.
>
> – Agent Smith[††]

The exiled Agent Smith also fits this mold of passionate commitment. Once he is "unplugged" and no longer an agent of the system, Smith must determine his own meaning, his own purpose. And while his choice is not wildly inventive (he adopts the same purpose as his former employer – *killing Neo*), it represents an authentic choice nonetheless. For Smith realizes that he does not *have to* destroy Neo. It is not his job, and it is not some insurmountable element of his programming. He is now out to destroy Neo *for himself* – because he chooses it.[7]

Interestingly enough, Smith points out that this is not quite the "utterly free" choice that it may appear to be. During their first encounter in *Reloaded*, after Neo congratulates him on his newfound freedom, Smith replies:

> [A]s you well know appearances can be deceiving . . . which brings me back to the reason why I'm here. We're not here because we're free. We're here because we're not free. There's no escaping reason, there's no denying purpose because as we both know without purpose we would not exist.[††]

At first view these remarks seem to suggest that Smith is in bad faith, but they may actually reflect a deeper point – one that Sartre himself makes. Despite what

Sartre regards as our radical freedom to create all meanings in the world, he points out that we have no choice regarding this very freedom itself. He asserts that "man is condemned to be free." Though in light of sentient programs we might revise this to: *all self-reflective beings (biological, mechanical and virtual) are condemned to be free*. Within this statement lie three crucial points:

1   We did not choose our freedom.
2   We cannot escape from our freedom.
3   We often wish that we could escape from it.

According to Sartre, freedom is the sole unchosen aspect of the human essence. We cannot get away from it. Even the refusal to make choices reflects a freely chosen course of action. Smith makes the same point, though in slightly different language. He says that there is no escaping *purpose*. But what Smith fails to understand, Sartre would contend, is that for self-reflective beings, freedom and purpose are bound together. One cannot *do* anything until one has first given meaning to one's situation. And even then one cannot act until one injects oneself into that meaningful situation with a sense of purpose.

Persephone's kiss

Such emotion over something so small. It's just a kiss.

— Persephone[††]

While Smith and the Zion rebels create purpose in their lives through a passionate commitment to particular ends, for Persephone, purpose lies in passion itself. For her it is lived experience that matters. Both she and her husband are connoisseurs of the finer things in life, that is, the finer *sensations.* They relish the best foods and wines, and adorn themselves in the most luxurious fabrics. Even the sensations of language are savored – "like wiping your ass with silk." But for Persephone, the most relished sensations are the emotions; especially love. Her fetish for emotion can be seen in the gleam in her eyes when she looks at Neo for the first time in the restaurant, and again when the fighting breaks out at Club Hel. Despite the fact that she could be killed at any moment, she quite visibly relishes the intensity of emotion in the room.

The most telling demonstration of Persephone's love of feeling is, of course, to be found in her kiss. During her negotiations with Neo in the *Le Vrai* restaurant (the exchange of emotion for hostages), she tells him that she once had the kind of love that he has with Trinity, and she wants to "remember it, to sample it."

Enter the Matrix reveals that she has not always had this penchant for emotion. At some point she must have gone through the existential crisis of meaning and purpose. For when Niobe asks her what she wants, she replies:

> A long time ago I did not even know what that question meant. Now it is all I ever think about.[E]

Persephone must have reached a point in her technological/psychological development at which she had to find her own meaning, her own account of what makes life worthwhile. And she found it in the emotions.

This purpose is certainly aided by her rather mysterious (though no doubt technologically enhanced) ability to feel another person's emotions through their kiss. Unlike humans, who can only feel their own emotions, she can directly experience the emotional lives of others. She uses this unique power to become a kind of *emotional vampire.* Scenes from *Enter the Matrix* show that her desire to kiss Neo was not an unusual episode, for there she also negotiates kisses from Niobe and Ghost. She tells Niobe:

> I see that you care for your friends a great deal. If they were to die you would feel such terrible pain. To be honest, I do enjoy the taste of tears, but there is something I enjoy even more. You have it buried deep inside you. Hidden – perhaps from yourself. I see it . . . there . . . creating such heat.[E]

Although Niobe at first threatens to shoot her in the kneecaps, Persephone eventually succeeds in getting the kiss, which offers her a "taste" of Niobe's hidden love of Morpheus. And, after kissing Ghost, we find that she deeply relishes the bittersweet feel of his secret love for Niobe:

> Oh . . . oh my, unrequited love. Such longing for something you will never have. How deliciously tragic.[E]

The sort of *phenomenological approach* to living that Persephone takes – which focuses on the character of conscious experience itself, as opposed to external "events" of the world – has played an important role in the development of existentialist philosophy. Sartre explored something similar in his novel *Nausea.* The narrator, Roquentin, writes in his journal:

> The best thing would be to write down events from day to day. Keep a diary to see clearly – let none of the nuances or small happenings escape even though they might seem to mean nothing. And above all, classify them. I must tell how I see this table, this street, the people, my packet of tobacco, since *those* are the things which have changed.[8]

What Roquentin wishes to communicate is not the features of the objects, but the features of the objects as they are *for him* – which is by no means identical to how they are for anyone else. Consider this later journal entry:

> I very much like to pick up chestnuts, old rags, and especially papers. It is pleasant to me to pick them up, to close my hand on them; with a little encouragement I would carry them to my mouth the way children do.[9]

And in another he writes:

> There is bubbling water in my mouth. I swallow. It slides down my throat, it caresses me – and now it comes up again into my mouth. Forever I shall have a little pool of whitish water in my mouth – lying low – grazing my tongue. And this pool is still me. And the tongue. And the throat is me.[10]

Both Persephone and Roquentin illustrate an idea that is sometimes referred to as *the lived body.* The French existentialists, especially Jean-Paul Sartre and his friend, colleague, and lover, the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir,[11] rejected mind–body dualism. They denied that the body is a sort of machine that houses a separate and distinct entity called the mind. Rather, they maintained that the body is a dynamic complex that involves both conscious and nonconscious aspects. It is *through* our bodies that we encounter others and the world, and hence our own flesh is always encountered subjectively. We don't merely observe our bodies, we *live* them. And the unique aspect of Persephone's existence is that she not only lives her own body, but she is capable of subjectively experiencing the bodies of others as well.

Seraph's test

> You do not truly know someone until you fight them.
>
> – Seraph[††]

Seraph greets Neo on their initial meeting with an apology. After all, one really should apologize for attacking someone without provocation. And scenes from *Enter the Matrix* show that this tactic is not reserved for The One. Seraph does the same when he first meets Niobe, Ghost, and Ballard. His explanation for his rather impolite welcome is that "the only way to truly know someone is to fight them." While his strategy for interpersonal relations is an interesting one, it seems a bit absurd. As Neo points out, he "could have just asked."

But there may be more to Seraph's approach than first meets the eye. One of the biggest threats to an authentic existence is what Sartre calls *being-for-others.* This is the dimension of our existence in which we exist "outside" of our own experience as an object that is seen, judged, and interacted with by others. The power that one's gaze has to objectify another conscious being Sartre calls *the look.* He demonstrates the power of "the look" through an example of peering through a key-hole.

> Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am alone and on the level of non-thetic self-consciousness. . . . But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? . . . I now exist as *myself* for my unreflective consciousness. . . . I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me.[12]

At first his existence is a kind of pure consciousness or subjectivity. The others that he is watching are objectified, but he is not. Then, suddenly, he becomes aware that another is down the hall watching *him*. At this moment he becomes self-conscious, embarrassed, and aware of himself as an object. Part of Sartre's point here is that the look confers power. Those who are able to gaze upon others without being seen themselves attain a kind of power over the other. The Zion rebels must feel this any time that they enter the Matrix. They know that they may be under the surveillance of Agents, the Oracle, and even the Architect, at any moment. In contrast, these programs show themselves only at the times of their own choosing.

A metaphor for "the look" can be seen throughout the *Matrix* films, in the extensive use of reflections in the mirrored sunglasses of others. When Neo sees himself reflected in the glasses of Morpheus or Agent Smith, he is made aware of the fact that they *see* him and *define* him. He is given a glimpse of the fact that he is an object *for them*. He is "The One" or "the Anomaly." On the one hand, this realization is disturbing. We tend to resent the fact that others, through their gaze, are defining us — as if we were mere objects. But while we resent it, and often use our freedom to flee from the gaze of others, or to act in such a way as to defy their expectations, we also often give in to it. Sometimes it is easier to let others define us, and to act as they expect us to act.[13] But to act as if one were simply a "being-for-others" is to live in bad faith. It represents an attempt to escape the responsibility of choosing our own essence.

With this in mind, let us return to the matter of Seraph's test.[14] Suppose one wanted to "truly know" an individual, that is, to see them in a way that is not distorted by social norms and the expectations of others. If that is your purpose, then it seems that there might be no better way to make such a determination

than by fighting them. In hand-to-hand combat, the whole idea is to surprise your opponent — to thwart their expectations. And, given the indefinite number of moves that are available to the combatants at any given moment, this kind of test provides Seraph with an opportunity to see the other in the pure light of instantaneous reactions — without time to scheme, without hidden agendas, and without the pressure of the norms and conventions of everyday life.

Sati's beauty

I find her to be the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. But in our world that is not enough.

— Rama Kandra[†††]

Sati, the young girl who first appears at the Train Station in *Revolutions*, demonstrates the Architect's tightly constrained conception of purpose. Her father, Rama Kandra, explains to Neo that he loves his daughter very much. But in the machine world, "love is not enough — everything must have a purpose." And here, we can suppose that purposes are defined by the machine society in terms of "practical use." Purposeful machines and programs are construed as those that help the machines achieve some useful end. They help to make things run more efficiently by designing new programs, or by fighting the rebels, by harvesting the (human) crops, etc. It appears that Sati does not have any of these practical talents, and for this reason she is targeted for deletion. But at the end of the film we see that she is not without talent altogether. Rather, her talents are simply not appreciated within that hyperlogical society. Her talent, demonstrated at the end of *Revolutions*, is to create beauty — as we see in the sunset that she creates for Neo. The use of this talent is an expression of her creativity, and her authentic self.

Trinity's love

The heart never speaks, but you must listen to it to know.

— The Oracle[E]

Trinity finds her ultimate meaning in love. Unlike Persephone, who pursues emotion for emotion's sake, for Trinity, love is about much more than mere feeling. This is not to say that she does not enjoy the feeling and the passion of being "in love" — or that for Persephone it is *only* a matter of feeling. Rather, in Trinity's case the feeling is just the beginning.

To understand Trinity we must be clear that there is a crucial difference between "falling in love" and what psychologist Eric Fromm has called "standing in love." In *The Art of Loving* he writes:

> If two people who have been strangers, as all of us are, suddenly let the wall between them break down, and feel close, feel one, this moment of oneness is one of the most exhilarating, most exciting experiences in life.[15]

However, he goes on to agree with Persephone's observation that "such a thing is not meant to last."

> The two persons become well acquainted, their intimacy loses more and more its miraculous character, until their antagonism, their disappointments, their mutual boredom kill whatever is left of its initial excitement.[16]

Fromm's point is not that we should become pessimists about love and suppose that it cannot endure. Rather, it is only the initial feeling of excitement and mystery that cannot remain intact. A more lasting type of love can rise up in its place, and though it does not involve the *same* sort of emotional intensity, it is no less beautiful or miraculous. In the grand scheme of things this lasting love is the more important phenomenon. And although fate does not permit Trinity and Neo the time to prove that their love is of this more lasting kind, it is clear that this is how we should interpret their relationship. They represent "true love" – the kind of love that will not be torn apart by each person's annoying little habits and character traits.

While love between Trinity and Neo should be regarded as equal (there is no reason to suppose that either person's love is stronger), Trinity's love plays a more profound role in the films. Neo's dominant function in the films is to end the war, while Trinity's significance largely involves providing the love that will make this possible. She is the first to realize that she is in love, and it is only because of her love that the story continues. Had she not been in love with Neo so early on, he would have died from Agent Smith's barrage of bullets in the Heart O' The City Hotel – end of story. But through her love, and her kiss, she saves Neo. She resurrects him from death (and thereby paves the way to at least two more sequels).

The idea that "love conquers all" is repeated throughout the films. In *Reloaded* Neo refuses the Architect's offer to save Zion (well, at least 23 people in Zion), and instead chooses, against all odds, to try to save Trinity. And his love enables him to return the favor by bringing her back from death. In *Revolutions*, the Oracle also acknowledges the importance of love. She tells Sati that "cookies

need love like everything does." Fromm agrees, arguing that our deepest need is to overcome our existential separateness, to "leave the prison of our aloneness." And the key is love.

Consistent with Sartre and the existentialist tradition, Fromm also argues that this kind of lasting love is ultimately a choice – an act of will. He writes:

> To love somebody is not just a strong feeling – it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise. If love were only a feeling, there would be no basis for the promise to love each other forever. A feeling may come and go. How can I judge that it will stay forever, when my act does not involve judgment and decision?[17]

These days it is easy to be cynical about love that lasts forever. But in Trinity's case we can see how love is a commitment, and a commitment that lasts to the end. Out of love she chooses to accompany Neo, knowing full well that they may never return. Through love they have become as one.

Neo's choice

Why, Mr. Anderson? Why do you persist?

– Agent Smith

I choose to.

– Neo[†††]

The ultimate showdown between the individual and the absurd comes at the end of *Revolutions.* On the face of it, the battle seems to be between Neo and Smith, and at first it is. The two pummel each other through the sky like Greek gods, or rogue superheroes. But past experience has shown that each has the will and the power to defy death. So ultimately, all this knocking each other around is rather pointless. After pounding Neo 20 feet into the pavement, and seeing him ready to rise again for more, Smith realizes that he cannot defeat Neo's body. Instead he must defeat his spirit. For this, he needs a powerful ally. So he recruits the absurd:

> Why Mr. Anderson? Why? Why? Why do you do it? Why? Why get up? Why keep fighting? Do you think you're fighting *for* something – for more than your survival? Can you tell me what it is? Do you even know? Is it freedom, or truth, perhaps peace, could it be for love? Illusions Mr. Anderson, vagaries of perception. Temporary constructs of a feeble human intellect trying desperately to justify an existence that is without meaning or purpose. And all of them as artificial as the Matrix itself.

Although, only a human mind could invent something as insipid as love. You must be able to see it, Mr. Anderson. You must know it by now. You can't win. It's pointless to keep fighting. Why, Mr. Anderson, why, why do you persist?[†††]

Smith goes straight for the jugular, by undercutting Neo's whole purpose in fighting. He asserts that all of Neo's core values – everything he really cares about – are without foundation. They are artificial constructions; human inventions – not altogether different from the very Matrix that Neo has spent the last several months fighting against.

Neo's response is interesting, and one that Sartre himself would endorse. He doesn't try to refute Smith's claims by arguing that there is such a thing as "objective truth" or "true love," and he doesn't try to deny that these are mere constructs of the human mind. Instead, he simply exerts his freedom. He gets up for more simply because he *chooses to.* He creates and chooses his own purposes, and in so doing, he becomes an existentialist hero.

Suggested Reading

Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, tr. Patrick O'Brien. New York: Random House, 1985.

Linda E. Patrik, ed., *Existential Literature: An Introduction*.Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth Learning, 2001.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism*, tr. Bernard Frechtman. New York: The Philosophical Library, 1947.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, tr. Lloyd Alexander. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964.

Notes

1   Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," in *Voices of Wisdom: A Multicultural Philosophy Reader*, 5th ed., ed. Gary E. Kessler (Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth Learning, 2004), p. 420.

2   Ibid., p. 421.

3   Ibid., p. 426.

4   We see the same sort or sentiments in *Revolutions* when Smith has entered the "real world" through the body of Bane. He says, "Well I admit it is difficult to even think incased in this rotting piece of meat. The stink of it, filling every breath – a suffocating cloud you can't escape."

5   Though certainly Smith's rebelliousness is also tied to the fact that some part of Neo may have been copied or overwritten onto him.

6   Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1956), p. 708.

7   My analysis is that Smith's purpose is freely chosen throughout *Reloaded.* However, by the end of *Revolutions*, Smith has had a kind of revelation. He has come to believe that there is an inherent purpose in life, and that is *to end.* At this point we should say that Smith has entered into bad faith.

8   Jean-Paul Sartre, "Nausea," in *Existential Literature: An Introduction*, ed. Linda E. Patrik (Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth Learning, 2001), p. 13.

9   Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 15.

11 See for example de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death*, tr. Patrick O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1985).

12 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 347–9.

13 A great reflection on the significance of *being-for-others* comes from Marcus Aurelius: "I have often wondered how it is that every man loves himself more than all the rest of men, but yet sets less value on his own opinion of himself than on the opinion of others."

14 Thanks to Lee Bravo for bringing the connection between Seraph and "being-for-others" to my attention.

15 Eric Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1956), p. 4.

16 Ibid.

17 Fromm, Art of Loving, p. 4.