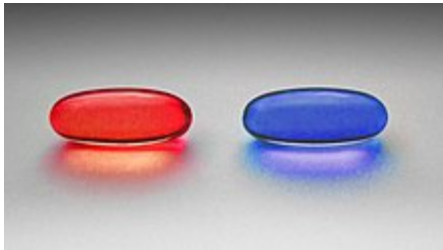


# Red pill and blue pill

The **red pill**, together with its opposite, the **blue pill**, is a popular cultural meme, a metaphor representing a choice between the "red pill", representing a life of harsh knowledge, desperate freedom, and the brutal truths of reality, and the "blue pill", representing a life of luxurious security, tranquil happiness, and the blissful ignorance of the harsh realities of life, basking in an (essentially dishonest) illusion. The terms, popularized in science fiction culture, are directly derived from a scene in the 1999 film *The Matrix*.



A red pill and a blue pill

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## Overview

In *The Matrix*, the main character Neo is offered the choice between a red pill and a blue pill by rebel leader Morpheus. The red pill represented an uncertain future—it would free him from the enslaving control of the machine-generated dream world and allow him to escape into the real world, but living the "truth of reality" is harsher and more difficult. On the other hand, the blue pill represented a beautiful prison—it would lead him back to ignorance, living in confined comfort without want or fear within the simulated reality of the Matrix.

### *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979)

Douglas Hofstadter's book *Gödel, Escher, Bach* features a pair of characters who "push-into" and "pop-out of" the two-dimensional world of Escher prints. The way they do this is to drink from a blue or a red phial.<sup>[1][2]</sup> A further reference could be taken later in the story when the pair encounter a paradox during which "The System crashed". Hofstadter cites Lewis Carroll as a strong influence on the book (the front cover of the book has a line that says that the book is "in the spirit of Lewis Carroll".) The "push-into" and "pop-out of" phials are reminiscent of the *Alice in Wonderland* "drink me" and "eat me" potion and cake, which cause Alice to shrink and grow.

### *Total Recall* (1990)

The science fiction film *Total Recall* (1990) features a red pill which is offered to Arnold Schwarzenegger's character, Douglas Quaid, by one Dr. Edgemar. He is told "it's a symbol, of your desire to return to reality."<sup>[3][4]</sup> No blue pill is present in the film, and the story centers on the uncertainty of whether Quaid is dreaming or in the real world. However, the pill is offered to him with the claim that he *is* dreaming, and that the pill will return him to reality, with the words "inside your dream, you'll fall asleep."<sup>[5]</sup> Quaid seriously considers the offer but notices that Dr. Edgemar is sweating, whereupon he shoots him in the forehead. The implication is that if the

dream is not a dream but reality, Dr. Edgemar is part of the conspiracy against Quaid, and the pill is simply poison. He had also told Quaid that if Quaid killed him, "the walls of reality will come crashing down"; moments after his death, the walls of the hotel room literally come crashing down.<sup>[6]</sup>

## *The Matrix* (1999)

### Reality, subjectivity and religion

*The Matrix* (1999), directed by The Wachowskis, makes references to historical myths and philosophy, including gnosticism, existentialism, and nihilism.<sup>[7][8]</sup> The film's premise resembles Plato's Allegory of the Cave,<sup>[9][10]</sup> Zhuangzi's "Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly", René Descartes's skepticism<sup>[11][12]</sup> and evil demon, Kant's reflections on the Phenomenon versus the *Ding an sich*, Robert Nozick's "experience machine",<sup>[13]</sup> the concept of a simulated reality and the brain in a vat thought experiment.<sup>[14][15]</sup> *The Matrix* very clearly references *Alice in Wonderland* with the "white rabbit" and the "down the rabbit hole" phrases, as well as referring to Neo's path of discovery as "Wonderland".

Japanese director Mamoru Oshii's anime film adaptation of Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* was a strong influence.<sup>[16]</sup>

In *The Matrix*, Neo (Keanu Reeves) hears rumors of the Matrix and a mysterious man named Morpheus. Neo spends his nights at his home computer trying to discover the secret of the Matrix and what the Matrix is. Eventually, another hacker, Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), introduces Neo to Morpheus.

Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) explains to Neo that the Matrix is an illusory world created to prevent humans from discovering that they are slaves to an external influence. Holding out a capsule on each of his palms, he describes the choice facing Neo:

This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and 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'm offering is the truth. Nothing more.

As narrated, the blue pill will allow the subject to remain in the fabricated reality of the Matrix; the red serves as a "location device" to locate the subject's body in the real world and to prepare him or her to be "unplugged" from the Matrix. Once one chooses the red or blue pill, the choice is irrevocable.

Neo takes the red pill and awakens in the real world, where he is forcibly ejected from the liquid-filled chamber in which he has been lying unconscious. After his rescue and convalescence aboard Morpheus's ship, Morpheus shows him the true nature of the Matrix: a detailed computer simulation of Earth at the end of the 20th century (the actual year, though not known for sure, is approximately two hundred years later). It has been created to keep the minds of humans docile while their bodies are stored in massive power plants, their body heat and bioelectricity consumed as power by the sentient machines that have enslaved them.

In a 2012 interview, Lana Wachowski said:<sup>[17]</sup>

What we were trying to achieve with the story overall was a shift, the same kind of shift that happens for Neo, that Neo goes from being in this sort of cocooned and programmed world, to having to participate in the construction of meaning to his life. And we're like, "Well, can the audience go through the three movies and experience something similar to what the main character experiences?" So the first movie is sort of classical in its approach. The second movie is deconstructionist, and it assaults all of the things that you thought to be true in the first movie, and so people get very upset, and they're like "Stop attacking me!" in the same way that people get upset with deconstructionist philosophy. I mean, Derrida and Foucault, these people upset us. And then the third movie is the most ambiguous, because it asks you to actually participate in the construction of meaning...

— Lana Wachowski, *Movie City News*, October 13, 2012

## *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013)

In *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, when Ben Stiller's character lands at Nuuk in Greenland, he asks the man in the airport booth: "Do you have any cars available?" "Yeah, we have a blue one and a red one", the man replies. "I'll take the red one", says Walter.<sup>[18][19]</sup> "The choice between the red and blue car at the rental car lot is worthy of mention, if only because it almost candidly pulls the idea from the red pill of *The Matrix*. Two jelly bean, or pill, shaped cars [Daewoo Matiz], red and blue; the only thing missing is Lawrence Fishburne [*sic*] working the counter".<sup>[20]</sup> "The passage connecting reality to illusion is often visualised using tangible things and physical environments [as] Neo took the red pill in *The Matrix*."<sup>[21]</sup>

## Analysis

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An essay written by Russell Blackford discusses the red and blue pills, questioning whether if a person were fully informed they would take the red pill, opting for the real world, believing that the choice of physical reality over a digital simulation is not so beneficial as to be valid for all people. Both Neo and another character, Cypher (Joe Pantoliano), take the red pill over the blue pill, though later in the first *Matrix* film, the latter demonstrates regret for having made that choice, saying that if Morpheus fully informed him of the situation, Cypher would have told him to "shove the red pill right up [his] ass." When Cypher subsequently makes a deal with the machines to return to the Matrix and forget everything he had learned, he says, "Ignorance is bliss." Blackford argues that the *Matrix* films set things up so that even if Neo fails, the taking of the red pill is worthwhile because he lives and dies authentically. Blackford and science-fiction writer James Patrick Kelly feel that *The Matrix* stacks the deck against machines and their simulated world.<sup>[22]</sup>

*Matrix Warrior: Being the One* author Jake Horsley compared the red pill to LSD, citing a scene where Neo forms his own world outside of the Matrix. When he asks Morpheus if he could return, Morpheus responds by asking him if he would want to. Horsley also describes the blue pill as addictive, calling *The Matrix* series a continuous series of choices between taking the blue pill and not taking it. He adds that the habits and routines of people inside the Matrix are merely the people dosing themselves with the blue pill. While he describes the blue pill as a common thing, he states that the red pill is one of a kind, and something someone may not even find.<sup>[23]</sup>

In the book *The Art of the Start*, author Guy Kawasaki uses the red pill as an analogue to the situation of leaders of new organizations, in that they face the same choice to either live in reality or fantasy. He adds that if they want to be successful, they have to take the red pill and see how deep the rabbit hole goes.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Other uses

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- The Blue Pill rootkit ("malware")—named in reference to the pill, as are the Red Pill techniques used to combat it—is a special type of software that utilizes the virtualization techniques of modern central processing units (CPUs) to execute as a hypervisor; as a virtual platform on which the entire operating system runs, it is capable of examining the entire state of the machine and to cause any behavior with full privilege, while the operating system "believes" itself to be running directly on physical hardware, creating a parallel to the illusory Matrix. Blue Pill describes the concept of infecting a machine while Red Pill techniques help the operating system to detect the presence of such a hypervisor.<sup>[25]</sup> These concepts were described by Joanna Rutkowska in 2006.
- In cybersecurity, a red pill is any means of detecting hooking or virtualization. It is frequently used by anti-cheat, antirootkit software, malware, and digital rights management, etc. Red pills usually make use of real-time clocks to measure the time it takes for critical operations and interactions with peripheral hardware to occur, and compare the length of them with the expected length of such operations as they occur without virtualization. If the clock is compromised, the hypervisor can hide its presence by slowing the clock down in a controlled way, to hide the extra time imposed by virtualization.
- Until they were removed from the Maemo operating system application installer in January 2010, certain advanced features were unlocked by a "Red Pill Mode" Easter egg to prevent accidental use by novice users but make them readily available to experienced users. This was activated by starting to add a catalog whose URL was "matrix" and then choosing to cancel. A dialog box would appear asking "Which pill?" with the choices "Red" or "Blue", allowing the user to enter red pill mode.<sup>[26][27]</sup> In "Red Pill" mode, the installer allows the user to view and reconfigure system packages whose existence it normally does not acknowledge. In Blue Pill mode the installer displays only software installed by a user, creating the illusion that system software does not exist on the system.
- The choice between taking a blue or red pill is a central metaphor in the 2011 Arte documentary film *Marx Reloaded*, in which philosophers including Slavoj Žižek and Nina Power explore solutions to the global economic and financial crisis of 2008–09. The film also contains an animated parody of the red/blue pill scene in *The Matrix*, with Leon Trotsky as Morpheus and Karl Marx as Neo.<sup>[28]</sup>
- In some parts of the men's rights movement, the term "red pill" has been used as a metaphor for the specific moment when they come to the belief that certain gender roles they are expected to conform to, such as marriage and monogamy, are intended to

benefit women, not themselves.<sup>[29][30]</sup> In 2016, a documentary titled *The Red Pill* was released, which deals with the men's rights movement.

## See also

- Allegory of the Cave
- Baader-Meinhof effect
- Black pill
- Denialism
- Epiphany
- Experience machine
- False dilemma
- Hyperreality
- Malo periculosam libertatem quam quietum servitium*
- Quid est veritas*
- Simulated reality
- The Social Construction of Reality*
- /r/TheRedPill

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