

Discussion Questions for Selected Movies¹

Blade Runner

1. A key puzzle raised by Blade Runner is whether we can definitively distinguish between real humans and artificially engineered replicants. Suppose that no test (either objective or subjectively introspective) could show this for sure. Would that mean that a given replicant was indeed fully human?
2. One of the more dramatic philosophical points made in the movie is that we can't trust our memories: they may have been implanted in us regardless of how true they seem. What is the main reason that we trust our memories as more or less accurate accounts of our past events?
3. Rachael became convinced that she was a replicant when Deckard described some of her private childhood memories to her. What would it take for you to seriously question the truth of your memories and consider instead that they might be implanted in you or the result of a drug or mental defect?
4. The director's cut version of the movie made an alteration to the original theatrically-released story line: at the close of the movie it seems clear that Rachael has a short replicant life-span, rather than a full human life-span. Assuming that she and Deckard safely escape, does this make the ending that much less happy?
5. Another alteration in the director's cut is that questions are raised about whether Deckard himself is a replicant. What is the main indication of this, and what sort of impact should this have on Deckard, particularly in view of his feelings about Rachael?
6. A moral message of the movie is that it was wrong to enslave the replicants and use them as forced labor since they were so human-like in both appearance and thought process. What would need to be different about replicants in order for us to feel that it was OK to use them for labor?

¹ Adapted from *Philosophical Films* (hilfilms.utm.edu/1/blade.htm)

The Matrix

1. What's the deal with the blue and red pills? In terms of literary composition, according to the DVD commentary, the pills are an allusion to Alice in Wonderland: eat this, drink this. In the movie the pills serve as a mechanism by which one can either remain in the illusory world of the matrix (the blue pill) or exit it to the real world (red pill). The problem is that Neo is presented with the pills while he is still in the illusory world of the Matrix and, thus, the pills themselves are an illusion. How could taking an illusory pill yank someone out of the Matrix fantasy into reality? Morpheus offers this explanation "The pill you took is part of a trace program. It's designed to disrupt your input/output carrier signal so we can pinpoint your location." Does this make any sense?
2. After Neo is expelled from the Matrix, Morpheus gives him the following lecture on appearance/reality: "What is real. How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. This is the world that you know. The world as it was at the end of the twentieth century. It exists now only as part of a neural-interactive simulation that we call the Matrix. You've been living in a dream world, Neo. This is the world as it exists today.... Welcome to the Desert of the Real. We have only bits and pieces of information but what we know for certain is that at some point in the early twenty-first century all of mankind was united in celebration. We marveled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to AI." The Matrix is just one thought experiment to convey the problem that everything that we perceive might be an illusion. What are some others? Do you think there are endless possibilities for such thought experiments, or will they all fall into a few basic categories?
3. In a meeting with Agent Smith, Cypher makes the following remark while eating a steak: "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 realize? Ignorance is bliss." Do you agree with Cypher that ignorance is bliss in the context of the Matrix?
4. During breakfast, Mouse makes the following comment about the appearance/reality regarding tastes: "How did the machines know what Tasty Wheat tasted like. huh? Maybe they got it wrong. Maybe what I think Tasty Wheat tasted like actually tasted like oatmeal or tuna fish. That makes you wonder about a lot of things. You take chicken for example, maybe they couldn't figure out what to make chicken taste like, which is why chicken tastes like everything." Is there something in the human brain that would limit the kinds of tastes that we could experience or enjoy, and, if so, does this force the Matrix to model the fantasy world after some kind of reality?
5. Quite coincidentally, Neo in the simulated world of the Matrix, looks exactly like Neo in reality. If the Matrix felt like it, though, it could have made the simulated Neo look like an elephant. Are there limits to the ways in which the Matrix might have created the visual simulation of the world and its people (e.g., only two dimensional, no gravity). That is, would the Matrix have more creative freedom with visual images than with tastes as described in the previous question?
6. Agent Smith offers the following explanation of human happiness: "Have you ever stood and stared at it, marveled at it's beauty, it's genius? Billions of people just living out their lives, oblivious. Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world. Where none suffered. Where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost. Some believed that we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that as a species, human beings define their reality through misery and suffering. The perfect world would dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was redesigned to this, the peak of your civilization. I say your civilization because as soon as we started thinking for you it really became our civilization which is of course what this is all about. Evolution, Morpheus, evolution, like the dinosaur. Look out that window. You had your time. The future is our world, Morpheus. The future is our time." Is there some element of truth to Agent Smith's depiction of the limits of human happiness?

Ender's Game

1. Ender's childhood is unusual. Does a person robbed of a "normal" childhood have any possibility of stability as an adult? Does Ender have any chance of living "happily ever after?"
2. Do you think that Ender's Game challenges your understanding of how children behave? What does Card (the author) think marks the distinction between child and adult?
3. How is Ender's education like (and unlike) the Philosopher-King in Plato's "cave" analogy?
4. Peter appears to be the personification of evil, but, as Locke, he acts as a good person. How does Card treat the concept of good versus evil in "Ender's Game?"
5. The Buggers communicate telepathically using no identifiable external means of communication. Was it inevitable that war would have to occur when two sentient species met but were unable to communicate?
6. What ideas do you think Card uses "Ender's Game" to explore? Is he mainly interested in the ethics of "war"? Or is it something broader than this?
7. Think about the ethics of Earth's solution to the previous invasions. Does the threat to Earth justify the Battle Schools?
8. Was the ending realistic? What other ending do you think might have been possible?