The Cosmological Journey of Neo: An Islāmic Matrix

KUMAYL: What is Reality?

^CALĪ: A light that illuminates from the dawn of pre-eternity, and whose imprints shine upon the *matrices* of oneness.

— From a conversation between ^CALĪ IBN ABĪ ṬĀLIB and his disciple KUMAYL.

The Matrix trilogy provides an interesting smorgasbord of philosophical questions and issues. Yet underlying the *metaphysical questions* (*What is real?*; *What is the nature of reality?*), the *epistemological questions* (*How do I know what is real?*), and the ethical questions (*what am I really supposed to do?*) there lies the larger context of the *cosmology* of the Matrix. That is, the most important philosophical questions addressed in *the Matrix* are fundamentally *cosmological* questions.

Cosmology seeks the mutual and consistent integration of the answers to *particular* philosophical and scientific questions with a view to providing a model that, as comprehensively as possible, explains

1. the origin of the world and humanity;

2. the purpose of the world and humanity.

3. the destiny of the world and humanity;

Plato's *Timaeus* is the classical archetype of philosophical cosmology in the West. Whitehead's *Process and Reality* is perhaps the last comprehensive work in this field in the West.[1] Today, in the wake of the present separation of philosophy and *physics* (formerly *natural philosophy*), cosmology has by and large been left to the astrophysicists, and its domain restricted to the physical universe.[2]

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[1] But see William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (State University of New York Press, 1995).

[2] It may be argued that 'cosmology' in the philosophical sense of that expression is just another word for metaphysics (See Jorge Gracia's article in this volume for a definition of the concept "metaphysics"). We cannot deal with this issue here. Suffice it to say that it appears to me that cosmology is more general than metaphysics, and that, while every cosmology involves a metaphysics, not every metaphysics involves a cosmology. A definite resolution of the exact relationship between metaphysics and cosmology will require more research into a precise definition of "cosmology".

1 Islāmic Philosophy

Clearly *the Matrix* trilogy, while addressing cosmological questions, does not provide a comprehensive or consistent cosmological system. What it does provide are elements that may be woven into a larger cosmological scheme. Yet the matrix does offer a solid foundation upon which all the cosmological questions can be rooted: Neo's journey, from his first leap of faith (in the first film) to his return to the Source in *Revolutions*. I believe that, more than anything else, the story of *the Matrix* trilogy is first and foremost the story of the *cosmological journey of Neo*.

Placing the cosmology of *The Matrix* in the context of Neo's journey also puts us in position to compare aspects of that journey with some of the cosmological themes of *late* Islāmic philosophy. To expand: there appear to be a number of areas where the cosmological elements of Neo's journey intersect with certain themes of Islāmic philosophy in general, and with a certain school of Islāmic philosophy in particular, namely, the cosmology of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1826). Shaykh Aḥmad's cosmology is largely an integration of *primordial* and *late* Islāmic philosophy.

To explain: Islāmic philosophy may be divided into four periods:

1. Primordial.

   This refers to the early hermeneutics and cosmological explorations pioneered by the son-in-law of the Prophet of Islām, his successor ᶜAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661).[3] This tradition was continued by his descendants and their followers, usually under the very difficult circumstances of repression and persecution.

2. Classical.

   The classical age of Islāmic philosophy is the one known best in the West. It includes that special blend of Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought known as *Falsafah*, as well as that set of (generally anti-Aristotelian) systematic theological systems known as *the Kalām*. The key figures of *Falsafah* such as Fārābī (d. 950 CE), Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 1198) were to have a decisive influence on Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and the rest of Latin Scholasticism and Aristotelianism.

3. Scholastic.

   This is the period after the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, when philosophy was preserved and advanced primarily by religious scholars and doctors. Philosophical and systematic mysticism undergo heavy development.

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[3] Imām ᶜAlī is buried in Najaf, Iraq, and his tomb is one of the holiest sites in Islām.

4. Late.

> The final period of traditional Islāmic philosophy may be marked from the Eastern Renaissance of Islāmic thought that took place in 16$^{\text{th}}$ century Iran down to the end of traditional Islāmic civilization at the hands of Imperialism towards the end of the 19$^{\text{th}}$ century. This period is characterized by attempts to integrate primordial Islāmic philosophy with both philosophical mysticism and post-Avicennan Aristotelianism.

A common strand throughout these periods of Islāmic philosophy is a heavy emphasis on cosmology and cosmological issues. In watching *The Matrix* trilogy I was amazed at how many philosophical motifs in the series could be seen as expressions of themes in Islāmic philosophical cosmology. For the rest of this chapter we will consider some aspects of Neo's journey from the perspective of the last comprehensive cosmology of traditional Muslim civilization, that of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1826). The last of the great and original philosophers of traditional Muslim civilization, Shaykh Aḥmad was at once mystic, scientist, philosopher, and *cosmologist* in the Whiteheadean sense of the word 'cosmology'.[4]

An important feature of Shaykh Aḥmad's system is that it represents the most ambitious attempt to actually systematize primordial Islāmic philosophy as described above, a strand that goes right back to the time of the Prophet of Islām, ᶜAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and the latter's successors. This provides a door to connect some themes of *The Matrix* trilogy with something of the essence of Islām itself. In addition, it integrates many of the themes of traditional Muslim mysticism.

In what follows, we will consider Neo's cosmological journey from the following aspects:

- the Source as origin, and the dialectic of determinism and choice;

- the Matrix as illusion, and the universe of *Dunyā*;

- the Matrix as higher matter; and the universe of *Hūrqalyā*.

- the Source as destination.

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[4] According to Whitehead (*Process and Reality*, p. xii):

> . . . it must be one of the motives of a complete cosmology to construct a system of ideas which brings the aesthetic, moral, and religious interests [of a given civilization] into relation with those concepts of the world which have their origin in physical science.

As we will mention below, there is a fundamental tension in the trilogy related to the dual nature of Neo as both a human essentially independent of the Matrix and as a derivative of the Source of the Matrix. Our discussion is mainly based on the journey of Neo *qua* derivative of the Source. For it is the relationship of Neo to the Source that provides the context of Neo's entire cosmological journey, in my view.

2 From the Source

We are all from Allāh and to Him shall we return.

— The Qurʾān (2:156)

Everything that has a beginning has an end.

— The Oracle

Although Neo is a flesh and blood human being, the ultimate origin of his being is the Source, that principle upon which is predicated the entire universe of the Matrix and the Machines that made it. The Source is thus the *origin* of the Matrix, the Machines, and of Neo. In the Neoplatonic cosmology of Plotinus (d. 270 CE) and his Hellenic successors – a system which was adopted and extended in classical Islāmic philosophy –, the Source corresponds to either the One or to the First Intellect.

To explain: According to Neoplatonism the ultimate principle of being and reality is something called "the One" (not to be confused at all with "the one" of the Matrix). This immaterial, atemporal principle is sometimes described as *hyperousia* (*beyond substance/being*). The world consists of two primary realms: the higher immaterial, non-spatial and atemporal realm, and the lower realm of matter, space and time. Both the material and immaterial realms consist of sub-realms. The exact number of sub-realms varies from one Neoplatonic cosmology to another. In most systems, the immaterial realm comprises the Universal Intellect, the Universal Soul, and Nature. In Fārābī's system there are ten intellects, the Universal Intellect being the first.

Regardless of the number of sub-realms, in virtually every Neoplatonic system the relationships between sub-realms is determined governed by a chain of *emanation*. The beginning of the chain of emanation is the One, which is not an emanation of anything. So the One emanates the Universal Intellect, a pure Consciousness containing the general principles of all things. The Universal Intellect emanates the next immaterial sub-realm (such as the Soul or the Second Intellect). Through emanation all sub-realms are ordered in a strict (*vertical*) hierarchy from the highest (the Universal Intellect) to the lowest (the material world). The expression 'vertical' is used to refer to the non-temporal nature of this hierarchy.

The Universal Intellect appears to me to best correspond to the Source of the Matrix. The Source is not beyond the beyond, as the Neoplatonic One is. Yet it is the ultimate *source* of consciousness and being for the Machines and the Matrix. It is the Artificial Intelligence or *Intellect* that underlies that world.

In its pure form, Neoplatonic cosmology cannot adequately accommodate one very important sub-context of *The Matrix* trilogy. Whatever a complete cosmology of the Matrix entails, one of the key elements it must contain is a fundamental role for *choice*. Indeed, the dialectic of freedom versus control, choice versus determinism, constitutes the major sub-context of the entire trilogy.

The problems with the traditional Neoplatonic model in this regard is that the emanation scheme is completely oblivious to choice; it is absolutely deterministic, rooted as that model is on the principles of logical and mathematical precision. Emanation is not a *process* at all. Giving birth is a process; cooking food is a process; producing a diamond is a process. Emanation, rather, is exactly analogous to the relation of *implication* in logic. The proposition "Two is even and prime" implies the proposition "Two is even". There is no choice or process here, only a *necessary* relationship between two (abstract) objects. "Two is even and prime" cannot choose to not imply "Two is even". Whatever "Two is even and prime" implies it *must* imply. Whatever the Neoplatonic One emanates it *must* emanate. Whatever the Universal Intellect emanates it *must* emanate, right down to every detail of the material world. The Neoplatonic system does not provide a counterweight to this.

In *Reloaded* we are introduced to the Architect, that manifestation of the Source who reveals to Neo the history of the Matrix along with Neo's own role in that history. The Architect is like the Second Intellect in Fārābī's system. If the Architect had his way, so to speak, the world of the Matrix would exactly mirror a Neoplatonic cosmology:

> THE ARCHITECT: You [Neo] are the eventuality of an anomaly which, despite my sincerest efforts, I've been unable to eliminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical precision.
>
> . . .
>
> The First Matrix I designed was quite naturally perfect; it was a work of art. Flawless, sublime. A triumph equalled only by its monumental failure.

The problem, of course, is choice, as Neo points out. The Architect's words illustrate the fundamental flaw of Neoplatonic philosophy in this regard. In order for the Matrix to work, it needed a fundamental place for choice. This is where the cosmological role of the Oracle enters:

THE ARCHITECT: If I am the father of the Matrix, she would undoubtedly
be its mother.

Thus the Oracle fills in a major gap in the Neoplatonic scheme. Yet the way this
is handled in the trilogy itself is somewhat unsatisfactory. On the one hand the
Oracle is the mother of the Matrix. On the other hand she is just another program
created by the Architect, a child of the Architect, so to speak. So the Oracle is
both complementary to the Architect and derivative from the Architect, while the
Architect is not in any way derivative from the Oracle. This is somewhat inconsistent
given the overall thrust of the trilogy. The source (no pun intended) of this tension
in the plot is related to the dual nature of Neo in the trilogy as both human and
derived from the Source, as I'll explain below.

The needed symmetry is provided in a major modification of the Neoplatonic scheme
offered by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī. Up to his time virtually all Islāmic cosmolo-
gies, whether systematic and Aristotelian or mystical, were unable to escape the
deterministic parameters of Plotinus' original scheme. Shaykh Aḥmad introduced
into Neoplatonic thought a major *dialectical* element that made choice, not merely
a subjective or derivative feature of the world (as in the traditional scheme), but
rather an *essential* feature – indeed, *the* essential feature.

Consistent with both primordial Islāmic philosophy as well as Plotinian thought, the
essence of God or the One is beyond the beyond. From here the emanationist scheme
is completely subverted. The first creation or emanation of the One is a *process*,
the immaterial *Absolute Existence*. This now precedes the Universal Intellect as the
source of all things. According to Shaykh Aḥmad, *Absolute Existence* is at once
pure activity (or *matter*) and *pure receptivity* (or *form*);[5] a unity and coincidence
of opposites.[6] Matter is the principle of willing, ordering, and determining; form is
the principle of permissibility, receiving, and choosing. Everything that exists flows
from the inner tension or dialectic that constitutes *Absolute Existence*:

The meaning of the proposition that all things come from it [Absolute Ex-
istence] through marriage and procreation is that matter is the father [the
active principle] and form is the mother [the receptive principle], as we will
elucidate for you later. So matter "married" form . . . ; so form gave birth to
the thing. The Willing is the First Adam. His Eve is Permissibility and she is
his equal; she does not surpass him, nor is she deficient with respect to him,

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[5] Metaphysicians will note that this marks an inversion of traditional hylomorphism: here it is matter
that is both active and the actualizing principle; form is the receptive and *reflexive* (as opposed to
passive) principle.

[6] It is an interesting coincidence of history that Shaykh Aḥmad was a contemporary of Hegel, who
founded modern western dialectical philosophy.

as we alluded to previously. So understand! And this is the "fire" alluded to in His saying (may He be Exalted!): the oil well nigh shines, though no fire touches it![7]

That is, the oil of choice and permissibility – although essentially receptive and actualized through the fire of willing, ordering and determining – *almost* has actuality even before it is actualized. That is, choice is not merely a derivative feature of reality, even though it is in essence receptive according to Shaykh Aḥmad. Indeed, both the cosmological Adam and the cosmological Eve are each *derived* from the other, much like the variables of a non-linear differential equation. The two cannot be decoupled: neither choice nor determinism is an independent variable in the world. Conceptually we may decouple them, as we can conceptually decouple the north and south poles of a magnet. In reality however, choosing and determining are coupled in the dynamic field of reality, just as the north and south poles of a magnet are modes of a dynamic electromagnetic field.

It is interesting that *The Matrix* trilogy identifies choice with a woman (the Oracle), and determinism with a man (the Architect).[8] This is quite consistent with Shaykh Aḥmad's approach. The main difference – as I alluded to above – is that *The Matrix* gives a definite metaphysical priority to determinism in the construction of the Matrix. This throws into relief two aspects of Neo's relationship with the Matrix:

1. On the one hand Neo (along with all of humankind) stands in an antagonistic relationship with the Machines. In this context the Machines are attempting to achieve absolute control of the human psyche and introduce the Oracle only as a grudging acceptance that choice must be taken into consideration as a factor of control;

    > THE ARCHITECT: While it [the anomaly of choice] remains a burden assiduously avoided, it is not unexpected and thus not beyond a measure of control.

2. On a deeper level, however, Neo is a manifestation of the Source of those very machines and beyond being a mere human. His purpose is ultimately to return to the Source, which is what happens at the end of *Revolutions*.

This dual nature of Neo is a fundamental tension within the trilogy that gives rise to a number of inconsistencies. From the perspective of Neo's cosmological journey it is

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[7] The Qurʾān: 24:35.

[8] Indeed, most of the *men* inside the Matrix – like Agent Smith ("We are here because we are not free") and the Merovengian ("Choice is an illusion") – are cast as determinists.

the second perspective that is more interesting, not the battle with the Machines per se. From the latter perspective: Since the essence of Neo comes from the Source, and since choice is a part of Neo's essence, it seems that the Source should also reflect the origin of choice. Shaykh Aḥmad's scheme in many ways provides a more consistent model for Neo's relationship with the Source.

In Shaykh Aḥmad's cosmology, the primordial Adam/Eve of Absolute existence produces delimited existence, which immediately bifurcates into the Universal Intellect and the Arid Earth. The Universal Intellect is the Second Adam, the second father; the Arid Earth is the Second Eve, the second mother. So emanation has been subverted into a process, at each level of which there is both father and mother. The Architect is the Universal Intellect; The Oracle is the Arid Earth. The Arid Earth is the container of all possibilities and choices seeking actualization through the "rain" of the Universal Intellect. The Universal Intellect provides direction and order; the Arid Earth provides choice and possibilities.

In her conversations with Neo, the Oracle explains her complementary role vis-a-vis the Architect:

> ORACLE: . . . that man (the Architect) can't see past any choice.

> NEO: Why not?

> ORACLE: He doesn't understand them. He can't. To him they are variables in an equation. One at a time, each variable must be solved, then countered. That's his purpose: to balance the equation.

> NEO: And what's your purpose?

> Oracle: To *un*balance it.

The Oracle and the Architect here play complementary roles, with a symmetry between them; in this conversation it is clear that she cannot be a mere creation of the Architect. The Oracle provides a limitless source of possibilities that defies any one equation, one structure. In both Permissibility and the Barren Earth – the first and second Eve's – this is called "*the Great Depths*" in Shaykh Aḥmad's cosmology.

Note that, at each level, Adam and Eve are not in conflict but rather complement each other. Similarly, the Architect and Oracle are not at war; they complement each other. Indeed, in *Revolutions* the Oracle works (through Neo) to save the very world the Architect built.[9] Despite being the torch-bearer of choice, she is no nihilist

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[9] From the point of view of the plot, one can argue that the Oracle is more interested in saving the Matrix than in saving Zion.

or anarchist. While she subverts order *locally*, she seeks to preserve order *globally*. Similarly, in Shaykh Aḥmad the exercise of choice may lead to evil consequences in the world but part of the responsibility of choice involves the preservation of order, both personally and otherwise.

From the rain of the Universal Intellect upon the Arid Earth droplets of choice are actualized. Thus, according to Shaykh Aḥmad, every person ultimately comes into existence through his own choice, beginning his downward descent to our world of lower matter. And this is where Neo begins his search to answer the question, "What is the Matrix?"

3 Illusion and Dunyā

Die before you die!

— Muḥammad

The people are asleep; only when they die do they wake up.

— ᶜAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the son-in-law and successor of Muḥammad

In the cosmological journey of Neo the Matrix plays two roles:

1. a world of illusions and control. It is this sense with which we will deal in this section;

2. an intermediary realm between Neo's earthly existence and the source that is his cosmological origin. We will discuss the Matrix from this perspective in the next section.

The Matrix in the first sense corresponds to the world of *Dunyā* or *the immediate world* in Islāmic terminology. It is the realm of which we are immediately conscious. It is a phenomenal world wherein lie our immediate desires and attachments. It is an ephemeral world whose objects of desire do not last. It is a universe where one is not free except as a slave to one's own desires. It is a place where the initial choice that brought us into existence has been forgotten and buried very deep into the recesses of consciousness. Yet most of us accept this world as ultimately real and are completely enslaved by it.

The founder of primordial Islāmic philosophy, ᶜAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, was famous for his countless exhortations about the dangers of the phenomenal world of Dunyā and the need to wake up from it. Here is an example:

> I hereby caution you about Dunyā! It is apparently sweet and green, surrounded by desires, loved for its immediate pleasures. It excites wonder through that which is small, big hopes are attached to it, and it is adorned with illusions. Its joys do not last and no one is secure from its harm. It is full of illusions and harmful. . .

It is important to note that the Dunyā is not the world of matter per se but rather the illusions that we attach to the world of matter. ᶜAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib was not a recluse from the world as a physical object; rather he only sought refuge from attaching any ultimate importance to the world of sensible matter. According to Islām, the *matrix* of illusions, desires and ultimate significance that we attach to this life is the Matrix from which we must wake up. Hence the saying of the Prophet of Islām: "Die before you die!," which Imām ᶜAlī explains in his saying, "The people are asleep; only when they die do they wake up."

The Matrix trilogy presents the Matrix as primarily a structure of control. In primordial Islāmic philosophy, especially as systematized by Shaykh Aḥmad, it is about more than mere oppression from the outside but oppression from the inside. As the Qurʾān says (7:160): "They did not do us any harm; rather they only oppress themselves." Thus one may escape the structure of *external* control and still be enslaved by the structure of *internal* control. The Qurʾān gives the example of the people of Moses. He rescued them from the matrix of Pharaoh. But it was not long before his people complained about the better food and drink they had back in Egypt, compared to the stuff they had to eat as a free people in the wilderness.

Thus "waking up" from the Matrix is more than just escaping from a place or location; it refers to an awareness of Dunyā and all of the illusions that one attaches to it. This perspective gives context to Cypher's betrayal: He never really left the Matrix in the full sense. Yes there was a transfer of physical location, like the Hebrews from physical captivity in Egypt. But real knowledge and awareness escapes Cypher. In a famous tradition of the prophet often quoted by Shaykh Aḥmad and other mystics it is said

> THE PROPHET: Knowledge is a light that Allāh casts in the heart of one that he loves. He then becomes at ease so that he sees the unseen. He opens up so that he can carry trial and tribulation.
>
> Someone asked: Is there a sign of that?
>
> THE PROPHET: Withdrawal from the house of illusions. . .

Cypher never attained awareness. He was not ready for the trials and tribulations entailed by freedom because he never really freed himself from the Matrix and "the

house of illusions" to begin with. When one attains true knowledge and awareness one becomes capable of carrying the trial and tribulations which accompany a higher degree of knowledge. The following point of Morpheus is an excellent description of the state of those who, like Cypher, are still trapped in Dunyā:

MORPHEUS: You have to understand. . . most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on the system, that they will fight to protect it.

There are degrees of knowledge and awareness. To each degree there corresponds choice, hardship and trial. In primordial Islāmic philosophy there are three general degrees of consciousness, choice, and action:

- Faith (Īmān).

  At this stage, one has the sense that there is more to reality than the phenomenal and makes a leap of faith. Neo meets Morpheus, makes a choice, then takes the red pill on nothing but faith that truth lies on the other side.

  This stage is also marked by questions: "Who is Morpheus?" is the first question. But that's not the real question, as Trinity points out:

  TRINITY: You're looking for him (Morpheus). I know because I was once looking for the same thing. And when he found me, he told me I wasn't really looking for him. . . I was looking for an answer. It's the question that drives us, Neo.

  NEO: What is the Matrix?

  This is the first stage of knowledge, obtained by Neo's first choice and based on faith. Note that in primordial Islāmic philosophy, the word '*īmān*' signifies both faith and action equally, and thus entails choice. Faith produces choice, then choice produces action. This is the field of *īmān*;

- Awareness (Taqwā).

  Upon waking up in the *Nebuchadnezzar*, Neo now cognizes that he was a prisoner his entire life. Life has become more difficult. The nature of the Matrix is no longer the question. There is a more important question now: Who is Neo and what is the choice that he has made? In *Reloaded* the Oracle guides Neo further:

  NEO: But if you already know, how can I make a choice?

  ORACLE: Because you didn't come here to make the choice. You've already made it. You're here to try to understand *why* you made it.

Neo made a choice at the very onset of his existence that he is now trying to understand. "Know thyself," the Oracle urges.

Neo asks if he is "the One" whom Morpheus is expecting:

ORACLE: Being the One is just like being in love. No one can tell you you're in love; you just know it. . .

No one can tell Neo he's "the One;" he has to become aware of it himself through the journey of self-knowledge. And that involves a choice: to save or not to save Morpheus:

ORACLE: One of you is going to die. Which one. . . will be up to you.

By choosing to save Morpheus "the One" within Neo moves from inner potential to outer realization and manifestation. Based upon his faith, first he saves Morpheus. Then he takes on Agent Smith, something hitherto considered impossible. Then, analogous to his rebirth and awakening in the wake of taking the red pill, he awakens again, defeats Smith, and is now aware of himself as the One.

Analogous to '*īmān*', '*taqwā*' equally signifies awareness and action: Awareness gives rise to choice, and choice produces action. Continual application of this leads to the next level;

- Certainty (Yaqīn).

  This is the stage where one actually *sees* and witnesses the realities of things removed from the veils that generally separate things. To reach this level, Neo had to make yet another very difficult choice. The Oracle hints at it and Neo resists, for this choice will be a more difficult trial than the first. This time he has to navigate the apparently mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive choice between saving Trinity or saving humanity, in the face of the heavy intimidation of the Architect.

  Upon the rendering of this veil, Neo begins to move between both the Matrix and the material world on his own with less artificial assistance. In *Revolutions* the Oracle guides Neo yet further:

  Oracle: You have the *sight* now, Neo. You are looking at the world without time.

  Yaqīn also entails both choice and action: Through the application of *yaqīn*, Neo makes his way to the machine city to meet his final destiny.

Interestingly, these three levels are actually mentioned in an off-hand and inverse manner in the *The Matrix*:

> Morpheus: You have to let it all go, Neo: fear, doubt, and disbelief.

Upon rearrangement and inversion of the three things mentioned by Morpheus we can say that

> Letting go of *disbelief* produces *faith* (*īmān*). Letting go of *fear* produces *awareness* (*taqwā*). Letting go of *doubt* produces *certainty* (*yaqīn*).

A descendant of Imām ᶜAlī, Jaᶜfar Ṣādiq – one of the most important figures in primordial Islāmic philosophy, made the following general point that captures the entire process described above:

> Through wisdom the depths of consciousness are fathomed; through consciousness the depths of wisdom are fathomed.

Shaykh Aḥmad interprets this as meaning that one must apply whatever level of consciousness one has to wise action commensurate to that state of consciousness. Continual application will deepen that consciousness, which will deepen the wisdom of actions and choices, which will feed back into deeper consciousness, and so forth. At each level, consciousness produces a wise choice, which produces a wise action, which leads to a deeper consciousness. This process is the engine of the cosmological journey.

Looking back at the trilogy, we can say that the first film marks Neo's journey from faith to awareness (*īmān* to *taqwā*); *Reloaded* marks his journey from awareness to certainty (*taqwā* to *yaqīn*); and *Revolutions* marks the final leg of Neo's journey from certainty to his final destination, that of *bayān* or *clarity*, where yet another choice had to be made. We will return to this in the last section.

4 Subtle Matter and Hūrqalyā

One of the interesting things about the Matrix is that, on the one hand, it starts off as a prison of control. But for Neo and his other unplugged cohorts, it is also a platform for spiritual development that is more subtle than the outside world of matter and physics. In *Reloaded*, it is inside of the Matrix that Neo undergoes further awareness and development.

Put another way: For those who are "plugged in," the Matrix corresponds to Dunyā. But for those who are unplugged, the Matrix corresponds to the higher realm of *Hūrqalyā*. But what is Hūrqalyā?

Originally, Neoplatonic cosmology postulated two general realms:

- the purely intelligible, non-spatial, atemporal realm. Here one finds the intellects, the soul, etc.;

- the purely sensible realm of matter, time and space.

Beginning with Suhrawardī (d. 1191), founder of the post-Avicennan *ishrāqī* (*illuminationist*) school, modifications to this dualist division occur. Suhrawardī sought the integration of those observations that result from the cognitive experience of unitary consciousness (commonly called "mysticism") with a systematic Platonic/Peripatetic framework. One idea which was to have a major impact on all succeeding generations of philosophers is the principle of the gradation or analogicity of the intensity of reality between *God – the One* in Neoplatonic terminology and *the Necessary Existent* in the terminology of *falsafah* – and the material world. Thus each higher level of the chain of emanation is more intensely real than the level beneath. There are two corollaries of this principle, which were employed to the fullest by Shaykh Aḥmad:

- Every level of reality contains features of the level immediately *beneath* it, but in a more sublime way;

- Every level of reality contains features of the level immediately *above* it, but in a more coarse way;[10]

To these principles Shaykh Aḥmad turns Aristotelian hylomorphism on its head: here *matter* is the active, actualizing principle; *form* is the receptive, potential principle. This goes against the very grain of traditional Neoplatonism which saw matter as something low, evil, and even non-existent in itself.

Shaykh Aḥmad goes even further: active matter is in constant movement through the receptivity and reflexivity of forms and states. The matter of given thing or substance is what identifies that particular substance, but the forms, both essential as well as accidental, of that substance are always in flux. This provides for a kind of *substantial movement* – that is, motion in the category of substance – something generally considered to be not possible in traditional Aristotelian metaphysics.[11]

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[10] It must be noted that, in Shaykh Aḥmad's metaphysics, God is excluded from the principles of gradation and analogicity. So God is not in any way like His creation and His creation is nothing like Him. His essential attributes and characteristics are identical to His Essence. Every true proposition about the Essence of God *qua* Essence is thus a tautology.

[11] The first Islāmic philosopher to give a systematic account and proof of substantial movement was Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1641), upon whom Shaykh Aḥmad wrote important commentaries and studies. Mullā Ṣadrā adhered to traditional Aristotelian hylomorphism so his account was firmly rooted in an Aristotelian framework.

Applied to the mystical cosmological journey, the road from here to God (ending in Absolute Existence according to Shaykh Aḥmad) proceeds through the various levels of reality, each one containing something of the one left behind. Since matter is the actualizing principle, each higher level of reality is material, but in a more sublime way. Between the realm of the intelligible (where the limit of materiality goes to zero) and that of this sensible world (where the limit of immateriality goes to zero) there must be an intermediary world is neither purely spiritual nor purely material. This is the world of Hūrqalyā.[12]

Hūrqalyā is a universe corresponding to a set of states of matter that are more subtle than those of the sensible world. Space and time are also more subtle. The topological possibilities for the configuration and manipulation of matter are much richer in Hūrqalyā than in the material world. Indeed, if Shaykh Aḥmad saw *The Matrix* he would almost certainly say that the Matrix is really nothing but one of the many sub-realms of Hūrqalyā. Doors that open to different regions of a subtle space-time depending on which key is used are quite consistent with the nature of Hūrqalyā.

Full access to Hūrqalyā from the sensible world requires a particular kind of cognitive vision, though a low level of access is obtained just by looking at an image in a mirror. Virtual reality, advanced video games; these worlds are all low levels of Hūrqalyā.

Hūrqalyā is also important to spiritual and cosmological development. According to Shaykh Aḥmad each of us has a subtle physical body that belongs to Hūrqalyā. It is not a mere "residual self-image" as Morpheus put it in the first film, but rather it is more "real" than the outer sensible body. Actually it is the *same* body as the outer sensible body, containing matter in a more subtle state of which we are not normally aware. Shaykh Aḥmad often says that the relationship of the outer sensible body to the body in Hūrqalyā is like the relationship of sand to glass. The matter of the transparent glass *is* the matter of the opaque sand, but the glass is a more subtle state of that very sand.

In primordial Islāmic philosophy two "cities" of Hūrqalyā are mentioned.[13] These are *Jābalqā* and *Jābarṣā*. Jābalqā in particular can be something of a hellish place, according to Shaykh Aḥmad; maybe we can assimilate it to the machine city. Yet ultimately even the inhabitants of Jābalqā "do only what we are meant to do," to

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[12] The word 'Hūrqalyā' is not Arabic or Persian but some form of Syriac, another (ancient) Semitic language.

[13] Yet the term 'Hūrqalyā' itself is not found in what we have of the primary sources of primordial Islāmic philosophy. Suhrawardī was apparently the first philosopher to use this term. After him the term apparently went into abeyance until Shaykh Aḥmad began making extensive use of it again.

quote the Keymaker, just like the non-human inhabitants of the Matrix all do what they are meant to do (at least until Smith gets unplugged).

In his journey through Hūrqalyā, Neo learns more about who he really is. He is no longer limited as he was in the sensible world. Shaykh Aḥmad says in this regard:

> When these bodies of the immediate world (Dunyā) are purified of those accidents that are really foreign to them, then the way of those who are lower join the way of those who are above. . . Similarly, when the spirits which are presently connected to these bodies are purified of the disobedience and forgetfulness [of their primordial choice at the beginning of their cosmological journey], they perceive – in and of their essences[14] – the [purified] bodies and all that pertains to them. This is because their bodies may become spiritualized just by wishing it; their spirits can become bodies and renewed just by wishing it.

Hūrqalyā also has level and degrees:

> NEO: What are you trying to tell me? That I can dodge bullets?

> MORPHEUS: No, Neo. I'm trying to tell you that when you're ready. . . you won't have to.

For Neo, the first degree corresponds to being able to "dodge bullets." This also corresponds to the level of *īmān* or *faith*. Then he dies in Hūrqalyā and is reborn in Hūrqalyā[15] with *taqwā* and awareness . Now he is no longer like his friends. He can see the structure of the Matrix. He can now fly high like a spirit and walk on the ground. He no longer needs to "dodge bullets." As he continues to grow, he finally begins to outgrow the need to be physically "jacked in" to access the Matrix. He is now permanently aware of his subtle body; the worlds have collapsed into one; he is *always* in Hūrqalyā.

5 Back to the Source

O Allāh! Show me things the way they really are!

— MUḤAMMAD

KUMAYL: What is Reality?

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[14] In classical Islāmic philosophy, spirits are not *essentially connected to bodies*, only *accidentally*.

[15] Death and rebirth in Hūrqalyā is interpreted by Shaykh Aḥmad as corresponding to the "Day of Resurrection".

^cAlī: The unveiling of the auroras of majesty independent of direction.

Kumayl: Increase me in *clarity* (*bayān*)!

^cAlī: A light that illuminates from the dawn of pre-eternity, and whose imprints shine upon the *matrices* of oneness.

— From a conversation between ^cAlī and his disciple Kumayl.

According to a famous tradition of the Prophet of Islām, between our sensible level of consciousness and God there are 70,000 veils of darkness and light. Accordingly, the spiritual journey involves piercing these veils until one reaches back to the source of Absolute Existence:

> Oracle: The power of the One extends beyond this world. It reaches from here all the way back to where it came from [the Source]..... That's what you felt when you touched those sentinels, but you weren't ready for it.

In *The Matrix* and in most of *Reloaded*, Neo's journey consists mainly of penetrating the veils of darkness. He travels through many doors and visits many places. But then Neo is led to a special portal:

> The Keymaker: But one door is special. One door leads to the Source.

When Neo passes through that door, he is embraced by light, the first of the veils of light. For this first encounter with the light turns out to not be the final answer. Neo is disappointed, not realizing that in passing through these first veils of light he has crossed a major threshold and milestone in his journey. This is part of what the Oracle meant when she said, "That's what you felt when you touched those sentinels, but you weren't ready for it." That is, "You did not realize that you had penetrated some of the veils of light; thus you did not fully grasp the power that thereby manifested itself in you."

Neo has more questions, then the following dialogue takes place:

> Oracle: If there is an answer, there's only one place you're going to find it.
>
> Neo: Where?
>
> Oracle: You know where.

With the knowledge and eye of *yaqīn*, Neo must now face the most difficult choice of all, the most arduous leg of his long, hard journey. *Yaqīn* has placed him on the

threshold of the penultimate choice, the final answer, the point and moment of final and certain truth.[16]

During the journey, Neo is physically blinded by Smith, who has managed to install a copy of himself into a human cerebrum. But this apparent setback opens Neo to yet another field of light. Continuing his journey, he encounters more sentinels, appearing to him as more veils of light. Finally Neo reaches the center of the machine city. In his physical blindness his vision is clear and penetrating. He has reached the final veils of light, the last *auroras of majesty*:

> Neo: It's unbelievable, Trin...Light everywhere. Like the whole thing was built of light. I wish you could see what I see.[17]

Neo moves on and encounters a manifestation of the gatekeeper to the Source. The gatekeeper tests Neo, then allows him to enter the Matrix one last time. Here Neo faces the final test.

Throughout all his travels and battles, Neo has always held onto one thing: his own self-identity. While trapped in the *intermediary region* (*barzakh* in Islāmic terminology) between the sensible world and the Matrix, between Dunyā and Hūrqalyā, Neo tries to bully his way onto the train to Jābalqā, and the Trainman just laughs at him, pushes him aside, and drives away. Neo does not quite get what's needed to overcome the Trainman. Neo's self-identity, the essence that says, "I:" this is the last thing to go in the cosmological journey. It is one of the highest veils of light, one of the "auroras of majesty" referred to by Imām ʿAlī above. Letting that go marks the end of the journey. As Imām ʿAlī says in a poem:

> You think you are nothing but a little germ,
>
>> Yet within you the Greater World is enfolded!

After fruitlessly fighting an out-of-control Smith for what must have felt like an eternity, Neo finally understands. He lets go of himself and completely gives up his self-identity. At this point he exemplifies the most fundamental axiom of primordial Islāmic cosmology and that of Shaykh Aḥmad's cosmology as well (first enunciated – as far as we know – by the afore-mentioned Jaʿfar Ṣādiq):

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[16] There are three degrees of *yaqīn*: *knowledge of certainty*, *eye of certainty*, and *truth of certainty*, the highest. The above paragraph plays on these three.

[17] One of the more poignant scenes in *Revolutions* is the final dash above the clouds Trinity makes, culminating in her vision of the Sun and sky. At this point Neo cannot see what she sees, making this phenomenon a unique gift for Trinity. Given her quite serene and content death immediately thereafter I see this as a symbol of the culmination of her own cosmological journey, and a satisfying complement to Neo's journey.

> Servitude is a jewel whose inner reality is lordship. That which is missing in servitude is found in lordship. That which is hidden in lordship is attained in servitude.

By letting go and turning himself over, Neo has now annihilated his self-identity in the Source and becomes its manifestation so that he can now easily destroy Smith. Neo has now attained the final cosmological stage of *bayān* (*clarity*). His journey has now come full circle: from the Source, to the Source.

The first definition in *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* of "matrix" is, "something within or from which something else originates develops, or takes form." The very essence of Neo's being is now itself a *matrix*, a *matrix of oneness* that reflects the one *light* of the One Source, the light of Absolute Existence. This points to the final answer to the question that has been driving Neo's cosmological journey from the opening lines of the first film. And the questions, "What is the Matrix?", "Who is Neo?" and "What is Reality?" are really all the same question. We will let Imām ᶜAlī articulate the final answer:

> KUMAYL: Increase me in *clarity* (*bayān*)!

> ᶜALĪ: A light that illuminates from the dawn of pre-eternity, and whose imprints shine upon the *matrices* of oneness.

> KUMAYL: Increase me in clarity!

> ᶜALĪ: Turn off the lamp, for the Dawn has arisen!