

HEROISM IN THE *MATRIX*:

An interpretation of Neo's heroism through the philosophies of
Nietzsche and Chesterton

By

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DECLARATION

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I declare that *Heroism in the Matrix: An interpretation of Neo's heroism through the philosophies of Nietzsche and Chesterton* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Duncan Reyburn
25 April 2007

“If there had been no real heroes imaginary ones would have been created,
for men cannot live without them.”

– Hamilton Wright Mabie (1903:1)

SUMMARY AND KEY TERMS

This study explores the representation of the hero in Lawrence and Andrew Wachowski's *Matrix* film trilogy, which comprises *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999), *Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). Special reference is made to how Neo embodies a postmodern view of heroism. This implies an exploration into the relationship between Neo, the protagonist and hero in the *Matrix* trilogy, and his mythological predecessors, as well as the relationship between the representation of Neo and ideas concerning heroism.

In order to further understand the nature of heroism in the *Matrix* trilogy, the ideas of two philosophers, namely Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936), are explored and compared. It is argued in this study that the heroism presented to the viewer by the *Matrix* trilogy can be interpreted as being representative of the meeting of the apparently contradictory ideas of these two philosophers. Both of these philosophers, though striving for a heroic ideal, arrived at vastly different conclusions. This study, whilst considering the nature of heroism in these two views, also seeks offer an examination of the relationship that Nietzsche's and Chesterton's writings have to one another. This examination is not an attempt to take sides with either of these philosophers, but merely to point out certain aspects of their two distinctive viewpoints as they relate to the films in question.

This study especially seeks to investigate the claim that Neo is the embodiment of the *Übermensch*, the figure that most clearly resembles Nietzsche's heroic ideal. Chesterton's views of heroism are referred to in order to counter-balance and contextualise Nietzsche's views on this. Mainly ethical aspects of the character and narrative of the hero are focused on in this study in order to show, firstly, that these more abstract aspects are implicit in the representation of the hero in the *Matrix* trilogy, and secondly, that the hero belongs to a moral taxonomy. The final aim of this study is to present a coherent view of the many facets of heroism that incorporates an assessment of how philosophy, ideology and semiology underpin the visual.

Key terms: Chesterton, GK; *eternal return*; *eternal revolution*; heroic journey; heroism; *The Matrix*; *The Matrix Reloaded*; *The Matrix Revolutions*; Monomyth; Nietzsche, Friedrich; *perspectivism*; soteriology; *Übermensch* (Superman); Visual Culture; Wachowski brothers; *will to power*.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and aims of study

In 1999, directors Lawrence and Andrew Wachowski and producer Joel Silver released *The Matrix*,¹ an action film steeped in philosophy and densely layered storytelling. Film critic Simon Danser (2004) notes that *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) had a greater impact on the academic world than any other film in history. Indeed *The Matrix* and its sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b), informed by a vast array of stories, philosophies, theologies and myths, have become iconic of postmodern eclecticism (Clover 2004:13) (Figure 1).



Figure 1: An example of postmodern eclecticism in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), which includes a bedside clock, a crystal ball, a print of a painting of *The Last Supper*, a pair of pink slippers, a plastic statue of Lord Krishna, a fake shrub, two blonde-haired plastic dolls, a portrait of Jesus of Nazareth, a 'Virgin Mary' clock and a miniature soccer ball.

¹ Throughout this dissertation, the italicised word *Matrix* refers to all films in the *Matrix* trilogy. Wherever the definite article before the word appears italicised as well – *id est* as *The Matrix* – this refers only to the first film of the trilogy. Where the word *Matrix* appears without italics, it refers to the idea of the *Matrix* as it is referred to in the *Matrix* trilogy. A summary of the plot of the *Matrix* trilogy can be found in Appendix 1. Unless noted otherwise, all quotations of dialogue from the *Matrix* trilogy are taken from the author's own transcriptions.

Screenwriter Brian Godawa (2002:98) explains that *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) reshaped the science-fiction genre for the new millennium. The *Matrix* trilogy falls into a category of film that philosophy professor Mark Rowlands (2003:vii) calls “sci-phi” – that is, a kind of science fiction film that is steeped in philosophy and even mysticism. Although the *Matrix* films have had a great impact in terms of the use of a revolutionary approach to special effects (Rickitt 2000:186), perhaps their greatest impact on the world has been in terms of their resonance as works of fiction dealing with definite existential issues.

The Wachowski brothers are self-proclaimed pluralists, whose objective in writing and directing the *Matrix* trilogy was to create entertaining films that blurred the boundaries between historical and contemporary philosophies by unifying them through the structure of a narrative (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999:20). The Wachowski brothers consequently explain that in the *Matrix* trilogy every single reference to a religious, mythological or philosophical framework is entirely intentional (in Clover 2004:13).

While the *Matrix* trilogy draws from and refers to several myths, this study seeks to explore only the most significant and central of these: the hero myth. Christopher Vogler (1992:vii) explains that a myth is a metaphor that is created to communicate a “mystery beyond human comprehension”. In other words, a myth, which is conveyed through a story, is a means to exploring a deeper truth. This deeper truth, mythologist Joseph Campbell argues, is always linked to what he calls the “Monomyth” of the hero (in Godawa 2002:30). Simply put, Campbell suggests that the hero myth is the myth that all stories point to; it is the pivot around which all axes of belief, mythologies and ideologies revolve. If this is indeed the case, one cannot escape the relevance of the further exploration of this subject.

This study proposes to explore how the *Matrix* trilogy presents viewers with a postmodern view of the hero myth. Here the term *postmodern* is taken to refer to the premise that there is no such thing as an objective truth (Godawa 2002:83). Put in other words, the postmodern assumption is that the validity of an opinion lies in its relation to other opin-

ions and not in its position against an absolute (Zacharias 1997:82). This assumption is tied to postmodernism's distrust of language and meaning, since even language, as Ferdinand de Saussure defines it, is a system of signs that acquires meaning through difference or comparison (in Robinson 1999:36). This implies that our very understanding of the universe through language is brought about by a degree of relativism. The French postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard contends that there is no such thing as an "objective difference", and as a result any knowledge about the universe always remains subjective (in Hanley 2003:1). As a result of this subjectivity, meaning is understood to be unstable. Even the meaning of a subject as old and as universal as heroism can be taken to be fluid, since it has been molded and changed throughout history by different philosophical and ideological frameworks.

The importance of an understanding of heroism as a characteristic of the hero has not gone unnoticed by theorists and thinkers throughout the ages. Indeed, one may view all of history as informed and, to a great degree, determined by heroes and their heroism (Carlyle 1897:1; Segal 2000:1). This is not to say that the views held by different thinkers regarding the character of the hero are always congruent; a great many views are conflicting. The reason for this is that every age produces the kind of hero that is needed for that age (Segal 2000:2). The hero is a kind of imaginative metaphorical chameleon that adapts to the needs or desires of his socio-cultural context (Lash 1995:27). Thus, the hero can be seen in a variety of guises: as warrior, divinity, mortal, prophet, poet, lover, priest, literary man, everyman and king (Carlyle 1897:1; Lash 1995:12,82; Tallon & Walls 2005:210). The hero is therefore a normative concept that helps to characterise not only the current condition of a society, but also an aspirational model that society ought to imitate or strive for (Loeb & Morris 2005:16). The Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BC-65 AD) expressed the reason for the existence of the hero as follows:

Choose for yourself a moral hero whose life, conversation, and expressive face all please you, then picture him to yourself at all times as your protector, and as your ethical pattern. We all need someone whose example can regulate our characters (in Loeb & Morris 2005:19).

Philosopher Aeon Skoble (2003:39) remarks that questioning the concept of the hero “ultimately involves questioning ourselves”. The hero-figure acts as a kind of mirror, or cultural barometer, that allows for a critical assessment of various trends or a particular *Zeitgeist* in a society.

Two philosophers who lived around the turn of the nineteenth century were especially captivated by the subject of heroism. The first philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), is recognised today as one of the most influential thinkers of all time. Some of his recent disciples include French philosophers Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida. Contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty has characterised the present age as “Post-Nietzschean” because of the prevalence and influence of Nietzsche’s thinking throughout the last century (in Higgins & Magnus 1996:1). Nietzsche is associated most commonly with his ideas regarding the *will to power* and the *Übermensch* (Rowlands 2003:272), two concepts that hinge around his understanding of heroism.

The second philosopher to be considered in this study is the British journalist Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936). A contemporary of George Bernard Shaw, HG Wells and James Barrie, Chesterton wrote more than a hundred works and contributed to nearly two hundred others. Although he is possibly less renowned than Nietzsche and his contemporaries, Chesterton has been typified as “one of the most influential writers of his generation” (Kibler in Chesterton 2002a:7). While today he is best known for his fiction, his work also grapples with many issues in philosophy. Bernard Shaw, one of Nietzsche’s disciples who strongly disagreed with many of Chesterton’s ideas, acknowledged him as a “colossal genius” (in Pearce 1996:vii).

Nietzsche’s and Chesterton’s views are pivotal in this study of the postmodern view of heroism presented in the *Matrix* trilogy for the simple reason that both philosophers, though both striving for a heroic ideal, arrived at vastly different conclusions (Conway 1992:1). While these two philosophers cannot be accurately labeled as postmodern in their thinking, their contrasting views on the same subject do support the postmodern assumption that truth tends towards subjectivity and relativism. Thus, this study seeks to

explore how a single subject – heroism, as it is portrayed in the *Matrix* trilogy – can be interpreted from two distinctive, and equally valid, positions.

In many sources consulted for this study it is often mentioned that Neo,² the hero in the *Matrix* films, is the embodiment of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 2002:10; Warwick 2002:4; Wachowski & Wilber 2004:4), but explanations for such a statement are infrequent and usually superficial. The Wachowski brothers themselves note that an understanding of Nietzsche is the key to understanding the *Matrix* trilogy (in Godawa 2004:7). It is necessary to test the relevance and validity of this claim in terms of the *Matrix* trilogy since it is said that Nietzsche’s philosophy is “fragile” because it can so easily be misinterpreted or misrepresented (Higgins & Magnus 1996:119).

Chesterton was one of Nietzsche’s greatest critics, even going so far as to call him a “timid thinker” (Chesterton 2002a:156). Chesterton’s views perform two primary functions in this study: firstly, they cast light onto the subject of heroism, and secondly, they provide insight into Nietzsche’s philosophies. However, there is no evidence in the *Matrix* trilogy that Chesterton’s ideas have been directly or even indirectly consulted by the Wachowski brothers. His philosophies are used in this dissertation simply as an insightful and interesting counterpoint to the philosophies of Nietzsche. No attempt is made here to take sides with either of these two great philosophers; the aim is merely to point out certain aspects of their distinctive viewpoints as they relate to the subject in question.

This study investigates certain abstract aspects of the hero’s character, since the greater resonance of the *Matrix* trilogy lies in an audience that identifies with the characterisation of the hero. This concurs with Campbell’s argument that stories are a means for people to come to terms with their own perceptions of the world, a means for examining their own reality (in Godawa 2002:26; Housel 2005:75). It is implicit that one’s understanding of this reality is inseparable from one’s ethical framework. Therefore, the primary focus of

² Neo, the character played by Keanu Reeves, is the hero in the *Matrix* trilogy. Neo is acknowledged by those around him as the hero and this status gives him the title, the “One”. A description of the main characters in the *Matrix* trilogy can be found in Appendix 2.

this study is on ethical aspects of heroism that are dealt with in the *Matrix* trilogy. In the minds of Chesterton and Nietzsche a comprehensive view of ethics was uppermost to an understanding of heroism.³

While this study does consider how various aspects of philosophy, ideology and semiology underpin the visual representation of the hero, it does not undertake to record every philosophical position on the subject of heroism; nor does it aim to record all the philosophical aspects of heroism within any specific school of thought. It should also be noted that this study does not endeavour to be a comprehensive summary of the changing views of heroism throughout the ages; many able writers have already tackled this subject in depth. Instead, this study presents the views of Nietzsche and Chesterton, and refers to those ideas that complement and reinforce these two views.

In order to better understand Neo's position as a postmodern hero, his relationship to his mythological predecessors is also examined in this dissertation. It is shown that many of the characteristics of the hero that are observable in mythology have been employed by the Wachowski brothers in creating the character of Neo. While ideology is referred to, this study is not a Marxist analysis of the visual text of the *Matrix* trilogy. Gendered concepts in the *Matrix* trilogy, whilst very prevalent, are also not considered in this dissertation. While semiotic analysis is applied to selected shots and scenes from the *Matrix* trilogy, this study does not attempt to be a detailed shot-by-shot semiotic analysis. This dissertation only seeks to highlight issues in the *Matrix* trilogy, both visual and verbal, concerning heroism as they relate to the philosophies of Nietzsche and Chesterton. It is important to bear in mind that one might employ the ideas of several other philosophers for such an explorative study. Thus, this dissertation is only one of a possible number of interpretations, and should not be taken as definitive or complete.

³ For the purposes of this study, any reference to ethics or morality is a reference to knowledge that pertains to one's view of what is right or wrong, virtuous or evil, lawful or unlawful.

1.2 Literature review

By definition, the term heroism is frequently taken to be merely a synonym for great bravery. However, this study sees heroism as etymologically inseparable from the hero; that is to say that in this dissertation heroism refers to general conduct, virtues, merits, attitudes, and beliefs that the hero possesses, and not only to the quality of courage (Friedrichsen & Onions 1973:956). It is acknowledged that the common understanding of what a hero is tends to shift and change throughout history, depending on the socio-philosophical context, which implies that the virtues, merits, attitudes and beliefs of the hero tend to differ from hero to hero, and from age to age (Carlyle 1897:1; Lash 1995:12,82; Tallon & Walls 2005:210).

The literature consulted for this study shows that a great deal of the present understanding of heroes and their heroism stems from the hero myths of Ancient Greece and Rome. These hero myths are dealt with in detail by authors James Baldwin (1914), René Girard (1972), Robert Graves (1955a, 1955b), Michael Grant (1989), HA Guerber (1907), Charles Kingsley (1889), John Lash (1995), Harold Wright Mabie (1903), MR Padilla (2004), and Otto Rank (1952). Other tales of mythological heroes may be found in Virgil's *Aeneid* (circa 50 BC), Homer's *Iliad* (circa 800 BC) or the Ancient Babylonian text of *Gilgamesh* (circa 2500 BC). In these tales, heroes are compelled by brute strength, personal honour and raw passion, but also frequently by a desire for vengeance for wrongs committed against them; yet, as Baldwin (1914:9) contends, while the love of self is present, it does not dominate the minds of these mythological heroes. Many of them are noted primarily for their courage and cunning in battle and not for their virtuous behaviour in everyday life (Baldwin 1914:27; Grant 1989:53).

Norse mythology presents its own picture of the heroic, as elaborated upon by James Baldwin (1914), Thomas Carlyle (1897) and Kevin Crossley-Holland (1980). While the stories of heroes in Norse mythology differ from those in Greek and Roman mythology, the relationship between the human hero and the gods is evident in all three of these traditions (Crossley-Holland 1980:xxxviii). Even in these ancient times, myths were seen

as a gateway to the transcendent, and to the realm of the gods (Crossley-Holland 1980:xxxviii). Throughout history, the hero has been seen as a representative of the divine; according to Carlyle (1897:3-4), the oldest, most fundamental form of heroism is the form of the “hero as divinity”.

It is this association with transcendence that allows the hero to be considered as one of three variants: the sage, the saint or the saviour (Carlyle 1897:1; Lash 1995:6). It is the saviour, explains Lash (1995:6), who “epitomizes the power to perform cosmic acts of redemption”. Both Thomas Carlyle and René Girard assume that the hero is automatically a saviour (in Segal 2000:1, 29) but Lash (1995:6) suggests that this type of hero is rarely found in mythology: in his opinion, the typical hero tends to have in mind the preservation of that which might be lost, and not necessarily the restoration of that which has already been lost. Neo, the hero in the *Matrix*, is therefore an exception to Lash’s rule, since he represents a hero who is both a protector and a redeemer.

The hero has undergone a number of transmutations since the fall of the Greek and Roman empires, yet the influence of antiquity is certainly evident in history and in literature. While this study does not seek to be a genealogy that records every detail of the hero’s transformation throughout history, some examples of this change are provided below in order to emphasise the fact that Neo represents a culmination of previous ideas of what is heroic, and is thus a definitive postmodern hero.

In medieval times, noblemen such as King Arthur’s knights of the round table or the Knights Templar were seen as model heroes (Baldwin 1914:144). As in antiquity, the medieval hero is a warrior. However, there is a definite shift during this time that sees heroism as something less bound to brute strength and more bound to generosity, faithfulness, loyalty and duty to a cause or a country (Baldwin 1914:4; Lash 1995:16). As Derek Pearsall (2003:46) observes, for these heroes “[t]he whole life of adventure [is] taken up in the cause of love and chivalry”.

After the Dark Ages, the hero increasingly becomes a man of the arts. The typical heroic ideal of the Renaissance is found in the form of the Renaissance man – one who is proficient in many different disciplines – of whom the best example is arguably Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) (Gelb 1998:259). Da Vinci epitomises the heroic Renaissance man in that he, as an archetype of human potential, was proficient as a sculptor, painter, musician, composer, physical and biological scientist, engineer and inventor (Gelb 1998:xi; Lash 1995:22). The hero of this age seeks to mechanise and thereby dominate his world through his intellectual prowess rather than through natural force (Lash 1995:22).

Lash (1995:15) writes that “[t]he epochal transformation of man’s strength from vital power into moral power is central to the drama of the hero, and [is] still unfolding”. There is a definite shift after medieval times that sees the hero as more ethical than physical, although the physicality of the hero remains significant. Nevertheless, throughout the ages, the transformation of the hero never excludes one key feature: the respect and love of his fellowman (Baldwin 1914:143). It is the adulation of others that seems to bestow the title of hero and give him his divine status (Grant 1989:51). Thus, while Romantic heroes such as the poet-warrior Lord George Byron and the composer Franz Liszt are seen to be utterly different from each other, both were adored by the public and were thus seen as heroic (Carlyle 1897:116). However, the idea that it is popularity rather than virtue that determines what is heroic is contested by both Nietzsche and Chesterton.

The age-old fascination with the hero has not waned in contemporary popular culture; in fact, fictional superheroes are arguably more popular now than ever before in history (Morris & Morris 2005:ix). Superheroes have become an integral part of the current language of Western culture (Housel 2005:75; Morris & Morris 2005:x). However, as Segal (2000:8) observes, the contemporary hero is often lowly even within his community; he is more the outsider than the insider, and more the loser than the winner. Yet in film and literature the contemporary hero rises above and beyond his limitations in order to assert his heroic nature (Segal 2000:8).

The contemporary hero is also less concerned with physical strength than with strength of will. Segal (2000:9) contends that while definitions of the hero seem to be flexible, one thing remains fixed: his *persistence of will*. This implies that the will of the hero is generally what defines his heroism. Neo reflects this trend: he is an outsider and a loser in the real world, but through *persistence of will*, he is able to achieve status as the hero; his battle lies primarily in the realm of the mind, and not of the body.

The hero must not only be seen as a fictional character in mythology, art and literature, but should also be seen as an historical figure. Authors who seek to provide more insight into the hero as a normative figure in past and present history, as well as in mythology, are Joseph Campbell (1973), Thomas Carlyle (1897), John Fitch (2004), John Lash (1995), Michael Medved (1992), Robert Segal (2000), and Richard Wagner (1881), and their writings are referred to where appropriate.

The *Matrix* films, which are fundamental for this study, have been so influential that there is no shortage of literature that deals with them. However, the literature is spread thinly over a wide area; it covers a range of subjects, but seems to remain only superficially argumentative. Authors Hubert Dreyfus (2002), Steven Dreyfus (2002), Simon Danser (2004), and several others who have been “endorsed” by the *Matrix* writer-directors, seem only to hint at various issues touched upon by the films, sometimes more successfully than others. Many aspects of philosophy have been discussed as they pertain to the *Matrix* films, but most concern the Cartesian idea of distrusting reality. This can be observed in the writings of Simon Danser (2004), Christopher Grau (2002), Richard Hanley (2003) and Jennifer Hanlon (2001). The ethical aspects of heroism in the *Matrix* trilogy are dealt with in similar literature only very briefly in the writings of Michael McKenna (2003), E Furzel ([sa]), Julia Driver (2003) and Hubert Dreyfus (2002). It was found that few references are made to the philosophies of Nietzsche, and no references at all are made to Chesterton’s views of heroism.

Nietzsche and Chesterton both wrote extensively and much has written about their respective philosophies; yet the literature study has shown that there is only one piece

that explores the relationship that their writings have to each other: Stephen Conway's short article, *Masks and paradox, passion and joy: an analysis of Chesterton and Nietzsche* (1992). This study proposes to fill this gap through an exploration of various relevant aspects of the views of these two philosophers, and especially focuses on comparing their views of heroism with each other.

The literature employed in this study includes some of Nietzsche's seminal works: *The birth of tragedy* (1872), *Thus spake Zarathustra* (1885), *Beyond good and evil* (1886) and *A genealogy of morals* (1887). Some of Chesterton's writings included here are: *The defendant* (1901), *Heretics* (1909), *Orthodoxy* (1910), *Eugenics and other evils* (1922), *The Everlasting Man* (1925) and *The outline of sanity* (1926). Owing to the broad range of ideas discussed in the above works, it must be noted that only texts that are germane to this study of heroism are focused upon.

A great number of sources referred to in this dissertation relate specifically to the subject of heroism, as has been noted above, whilst others have been used because they have some relation to the *Matrix* trilogy or to the two philosophers whose work this study discusses. For example, Alain de Botton (2000), Jacques Derrida (1987), Michel Foucault (2001), and W Somerset Maugham (1990) are referred to because of their strong affiliation with Nietzsche's ideas. CS Lewis (1960, 1963), Thomas Merton (1938), Philip Yancey (2001, 2004) and Ravi Zacharias (1997, 2004) are referred to because they align themselves with Chesterton's worldview. This is not to say that the above authors are in total agreement with the two philosophers in question, only that they have to some extent been influenced by them. To some degree, the approach in this study mirrors that of the Wachowski brothers, who have drawn from various sources in constructing the narrative of the *Matrix* trilogy (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999:20).

1.3 Theoretical framework and methodology

At present, humanity is more affected by visual media than ever before (Mirzoeff 1999:1). Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999:3) observes that there is a gap in the postmodern age

between the “wealth of visual experience” and the ability to analyse that visual experience. This gap between experience and understanding tends to arise from a lack of awareness of the relationship between meaning and context (Mirzoeff 1999:7). In order to bridge these gaps between experience and understanding, and between meaning and context, Mirzoeff (1993:3) suggests there is a need for a new discipline of study, which is called “visual culture studies”.

Visual culture, according to Sarah Chaplin and John Walker (1997:1), is a hybrid theoretical paradigm or “multidisciplinary enterprise formed as a consequence of a convergence of ... a variety of disciplines”. It can be loosely defined as those material objects, buildings and images – both time based and stationary – produced by human labour and imagination, which serve aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic or ideological purposes (Chaplin & Walker 1997:2). What this means is that the physical visual object needs to be seen as something that impacts on one’s thoughts and emotions (Chaplin & Walker 1997:4). The visual ought to be accepted as a message that stems from a particular framework and communicates within a specific exterior reality (Mirzoeff 1999:7).

While the visual remains central, the theoretical framework of visual culture studies acknowledges that a critical analysis of the visual must include an examination of ideas that underlie the visual. Therefore, visual culture studies draws upon many varying disciplines: anthropology, archeology, art criticism, cultural studies, design history, film studies, linguistics, literary criticism, Marxism, media studies, philosophy, semiotics and structuralism (Chaplin & Walker 1997:3; Mirzoeff 1999:4). However, this particular study refers primarily to philosophy and semiotics. Selected visual signs and symbols in the *Matrix* trilogy are analysed in order to uncover visual codes, myths and ideologies. Philosophical discussion is employed in order to situate the argument within the conceptual frameworks suggested by Nietzsche and Chesterton.

The analysis of visual and written texts for this study deals with theories and ideas rather than with specific statistical information and is therefore qualitative rather than quantitative. The texts are examined in terms of their formal appeal as well as in terms of philoso-

phical interpretations. In other words, this study analyses and decodes the visuals of the *Matrix* films with an aim to applying literature that is relevant to what can be observed in relation to heroism.

1.4 Overview of chapters

This study begins in Chapter Two with an overview of Nietzsche's and Chesterton's key ideas as they relate to their respective historical contexts. Nietzsche's ideas of the *Übermensch*, the *will to power*, *perspectivism*, the *herd morality* and the *Dionysian/Apollonian* opposition are discussed in brief. Thereafter, Chesterton's philosophy is discussed. His opinion on Nietzsche's philosophies, and his own ideas regarding *Romance*, mythology, truth, and mysticism are noted and explained.

Chapter Three begins an in-depth discussion on the existence of the hero by looking at the birth of the hero as it is represented both in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy. The role of the *heroic choice* in the birth of the hero is noted before Nietzsche's and Chesterton's views on the *heroic choice* are discussed. Chapter Four explores the life of the hero firstly in mythology and thereafter in the *Matrix* trilogy. The heroic states of limitation and levitation are discussed insofar as they relate to the ethical life of the hero and his position within a community. Also examined in this chapter are masks and mirrors, both as signifiers in the *Matrix* trilogy and as analogies used in mythology and in Nietzsche's writings. Chapter Four also explains Chesterton's views on the relationship between the hero and machines.

The final stage of the heroic journey – the death of the hero – is examined in Chapter Five. The hero's death in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy is described as it relates to different religious and philosophical perspectives on the subject. Thereafter, Nietzsche's interpretation of the concept of the *eternal return* and Chesterton's concept of the *eternal revolution* are explored in order to highlight Nietzsche's and Chesterton's respective beliefs concerning what they would deem to be a heroic death. Chapter Six brings this study to a close beginning with a summary of chapters. Thereafter the contribution of this

study and suggestions for further research are noted. Chapter Six ends off with concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 2

NIETZSCHE AND CHESTERTON: AN OVERVIEW OF THEIR KEY IDEAS

Before beginning this exploration of heroism in the *Matrix*, it is necessary that the relevant philosophies of Nietzsche and Chesterton first be outlined. Such an outline is useful for creating a context within which the argument postulated in this dissertation operates. These two philosophers have covered a prodigious scope in their writings, and it is therefore impractical, if not impossible, to fully summarise their views. However, an examination of certain of their foundational ideas and viewpoints is helpful for creating an understanding of how the hero in the *Matrix* trilogy can be shown to relate to their writings.

The following discussion looks not only at these foundational ideas, but also at a brief outline concerning how their ideas may be positioned within their individual historical contexts. This is done simply for the sake of highlighting their positions as revolutionary thinkers who embraced a personal heroic ideal.

2.1 A brief overview of Nietzsche's philosophy

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is almost solely responsible for swaying the twentieth century mind away from orthodoxy towards atheism (Zacharias 2004:25). He abandoned the Christian heritage of his forefathers at a very young age, and this choice had a greater impact on his writings than any other. RJ Hollingdale sees Nietzsche's contribution to Western thought as residing primarily in "his perception that Western man was facing a radical change in his relationship with 'truth'"; the perception that all contemporary ideas concerning metaphysics, religion, morality and rationalism were in fact untrue (in Nietzsche 1977:9).

Nietzsche was considered an exemplary student and at the age of 24 he was appointed to a professorship at the University of Basel in Switzerland (Robinson 1999:4). However,

Nietzsche was a sickly man and his struggles with illness forced him to resign after only ten years as a professor (Zacharias 1994:206). During the years after his time at the University of Basel, he wrote the majority of his books. At the age of 44, Nietzsche suffered a mental breakdown and spent the last twelve years of his life insane and without any capability or will to reason (Robinson 1999:6).

In discussing Nietzsche, it is significant to note at the outset that his philosophies are often ambiguous, ironic, figurative and contradictory.¹ Joan Stambaugh (1994:6) asserts that there is no fixed reading of Nietzsche, and David Robinson (1999:2) echoes this opinion when he points out that over the last century Nietzsche's philosophies have been deconstructed and reconstructed in a variety of ways, often leading to different conclusions, and even possible misinterpretations. This study seeks to critically investigate only those of Nietzsche's texts that have a bearing on the subject of heroism, and therefore does not attempt to offer yet another interpretation. However, at the same time, this study does not promise to be an accurate or definitive interpretation, for with regard to Nietzsche's philosophies such a thing is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Robinson (1999:72) argues that Nietzsche's idea of *perspectivism*, discussed further on in this chapter, demands that his writings can only ever be "interpretation" since any absolute reading would result in an absolute truth. It must be, as George Bernard Shaw suggests: "The golden rule is that there is no golden rule" (in Chesterton 1909:2).

Despite the apparent confusion surrounding his philosophies, Nietzsche has had a marked impact on such influential thinkers as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, David Herbert Lawrence, George Bernard Shaw and William Butler Yeats (Fraser 2002:5). On a more political front, Nietzsche had a decisive influence on those the contemporary historian Paul Johnson calls the "three devils" of the twentieth century: Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini (in Zacharias 2004:25). Nietzsche's ideas may seem to be confusing, but no one could claim that they have been without effect.

¹ Nietzsche (1977:36) writes: "Some even know that the higher man wants and evokes contradiction so as to acquire a guidepost to his own acts of injustice. The ability to contradict calls for a good conscience in enmity towards the customary, the traditional and the sanctified".

It is difficult to identify a coherent theme that runs throughout Nietzsche's writings, but Giles Fraser (2002:2), a professor of philosophy at Oxford University, suggests that Nietzsche's work is primarily "soteriology" – that is, a series of literary experiments performed for the purpose of designing a type of redemption that would be effective in a post-theistic age. This particular thematic falls in line with Brian Godawa's (2002:15) belief that all mythical tales about the hero, whether ancient or contemporary, deal with this theme of redemption, which he defines as the "recovery of something lost, or the attainment of something needed". Nietzsche's ideas regarding this mythological soteriology reflect the ideals held by many in Germany at the time, and, more specifically, echo the writings of Nietzsche's friend, composer and writer, Richard Wagner (1813-1883) (1881:1).²

Nietzsche (1977:41) believes that to attain this new form of redemption there is a need for the individual to abandon optimism and embrace pessimism. This reactionary assertion has much to do with the context that Nietzsche was born into. In the nineteenth century, Germany had undergone a number of significant changes, which affected not only the politics of the age but also the general mood of the age (McGrath 2004:55). In the early part of the century, the population increased at a rate that the economy of the country could not keep up with. There was a growing dissatisfaction amongst the people of Germany brought about in part by this economic crisis and in part by a general disagreement with certain government policies. As a result of this general dissatisfaction, farmers and artisans suffered from poor harvests and financial depression, and businessmen and professional people wished to be more involved in the politics of the country (Munholland 1970:171; McGrath 2004:55). Ultimately, this led to the German Revolution in 1848, which took place four years after the birth of Nietzsche (Woodward 1972:108). However, the revolution, which was intended to create a new constitution that would unify Germany, failed in 1849 (Woodward 1972:112).

² The link between Nietzsche's writings and the writings of Wagner goes beyond the scope of this study. It is important to note, however, since it reflects the *Zeitgeist* of Germany at the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1862, Otto von Bismarck was appointed prime minister by the Prussian King, Wilhelm I, who hoped that he would help to resolve the constitutional crisis; in the end, this is exactly what happened (Woodward 1972:116). Germany became an established empire in 1871 when the 25 federal union states were united. *The constitution of the German Empire*, which was publicised for the first time on 16 April 1871, was designed to unify the country without affecting the reign of the ruling princes (Snyder 1955:142). The constitution describes a system that “was best adapted for German needs” and made for “efficiency in government” (Snyder 1955:142). This constitution gave Germany a new hope, but the century had been so racked with war, uncertainty and discontent that this hope remained tainted by pessimism.

During the nineteenth century, the works of philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804-1872) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) were widely read in Germany. Their works are frequently pessimistic and antagonistic, and it is this mood that had a significant impact on Nietzsche’s writings. Nietzsche’s philosophy and nihilism are not entirely invented or self-contained; evidence suggests that his views derive from the nihilism and pessimism of this period in time (McGrath 2004:262). However, it must be said that Nietzsche does not agree entirely with the spirit of his age. The two popular ideologies that influenced Germany at the time, socialism and Catholicism, are heavily criticised in Nietzsche’s writings: it is these very *herd* mentalities that Nietzsche (1977:101) seeks to oppose. As a consequence of his nihilistic viewpoint, Nietzsche believes that a new redemption must be found, and there is strong evidence to suggest that he seems to have been searching for a new kind of hero.

2.1.1 The *Übermensch* and the *will to power*

Nietzsche’s quest for a new form of redemption, typified in his own representations of the hero, points to one of his most pivotal ideas: the *Übermensch*. It is here that the first philosophical hurdle is encountered: though much has been written about the *Übermensch*, it remains one of Nietzsche’s most elusive ideas. Nietzsche never provides

his readers with a clear definition of the *Übermensch* and for English readers, the translation of the term *Übermensch* as *Overman* or *Superman* is misleading (Robinson 1999:76). Indeed, the word *Übermensch* refers more to a self-overcoming man³ than to a man who overcomes others, as Nietzsche (1933:5) suggests when he asks, “How can man be overcome?”⁴ Nietzsche (1993:5) asserts that this question is his paramount concern, since he believes that the answer to this question will be the embodied *Übermensch*: the Nietzschean hero.

Nietzsche (1977:237) suggests that the *Übermensch* is one who, not bound by conventions or traditional values, is responsible for the creation of his own character, beliefs and values. What this means, in essence, is that the *Übermensch* is an existentialist who seeks to define himself through experiments in experience (Robinson 1999:76). This means a necessary abandonment of what Nietzsche called the “herd morality”. This *herd morality* is the term Nietzsche (1977:102) uses especially to describe the morality that has been propagated by Christianity as something that works within the individual. It must be pointed out, however, that this *herd morality* points not only to morals but also to popular ideologies. Ultimately, it is the generally accepted *status quo* that Nietzsche seems to be opposed to.

This particular aspect of the philosophy of the *Übermensch* is problematic in that it seeks to place life and causal logic as entirely separate from each other. Nietzsche (1977:158) condones any act that is performed for the sake of experience alone. It is these experiences, after all, which are performed as an extension of the search for a new kind of redemption. Nietzsche (1977:158) does not wish to see experiences as the source of any

³ Nietzsche’s assumption is always that the hero is male, and never female. Such an assumption cannot be taken as absolute, for throughout mythology and history heroines are found. Generally, however, the archetypal hero is a man.

⁴ Translation should not be so much about matching words as it should be about matching meanings. Umberto Eco (2003:6) suggests that translation is an act of negotiation. *Übermensch* directly translates as the *Overman* or *Superman*, but more accurately translates as *Master-over-self* or as *Over-self*, for mastery over self precedes mastery over others. This dissertation, for the sake of accuracy, contains no direct translation, but rather maintains Nietzsche’s German word unless quoted.

negativity; he therefore separates experience from consequence.⁵ Nietzsche (1977:132) suggests that this “negativity” is in fact a positive thing, resulting not from leading an impoverished life, but from having a “*superabundance* of life”. It might be argued, however, that Nietzsche’s deliberate downplay of consequence is just another conscious denial of the so-called rationality of the *herd*.

The *Übermensch* reflects very clearly an idea put forward by John Lash concerning the typical hero’s reaction to the so-called sacred. Lash (1995:11) explains that the hero expresses the sacred in the “power of choice, not in the Beyond or its promises”. The hero discards transcendence, just as the *Übermensch* does, and puts in its place a “love of the act for its own sake, whatever its consequences” (Lash 1995:11). The hero, even within an atheistic framework, displays a clear internal struggle with morality. Lash (1995:16) explains:

In great measure, the heroic challenge after the Neolithic shift consisted in man’s struggle to find an ethical framework for his superfluity of power. Among themselves, warriors developed an unwritten code based on their *experiences* of facing mutual adversaries (emphasis added).

The “mutual adversaries” Lash writes about here are said to help formulate a morality that stands to assist others. Service, in traditional terms, is therefore the first priority of the hero; whereas, in Nietzsche’s writings, service is secondary to self-actualisation. This might prove to be a problematic perspective, since such self-actualisation could legitimately, if taken on Nietzsche’s terms, completely forego the desire to serve others.⁶ However, the self-serving attitude of the *Übermensch* does not necessarily make him an anti-hero since, as Hegel observes, the hero can still serve society while motivated by personal gain (in Segal 2000:4). Nietzsche tends to praise society for the role it has to play in producing such a hero. Yet, it is clear that the achievements of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* are personal, rather than societal:

⁵ Nietzsche (1977:158) writes: “Let us do away with the concept of ‘crime’ and let us quickly send after it the concept of ‘punishment.’”

⁶ Nietzsche (1977:215) considers the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel according to Matthew to be a damning approach to life, because they emphasise or advocate a human responsibility toward the poor and weak in society.

The invention of gods and supermen of all kinds, together with that of fictitious fellow men and sub-men, of dwarfs, fairies, centaurs, satyrs, demons and devils, was the invaluable preparatory exercise for the justification of the selfishness and autocracy of the individual (Nietzsche 1977:178).

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is in fact an extension of his theories on another of his key ideas: the *will to power*. The *will to power*, according to Nietzsche, is the reason for the accomplishments of generations gone by. In Nietzsche's view, the desires of all living beings must be seen in the context of power, since individual desires can only be fulfilled when the desires of others are excluded or suppressed (in Robinson 1999:77; Nietzsche 1977:222).

It is interesting to note Chesterton's (2002a:65) definition of the *will to power*, since it clarifies the idea apart from the ostentation that is so typical of Nietzsche's writing style: the *will to power* is the admiration of choice through the assertion of will. As an example, Chesterton (2002a:65) explains that this view propagates the idea that one could not logically say, "Jam would make me happy", but rather, "I want jam". Of course, the word *jam* here can be replaced by any word that describes a heroic aspiration. Therefore, the hero, in order to assert his *will to power*, would say something like "I want to be heroic" and not "heroic acts would make me happy". The first statement implies certainty about the present, and thereby denies any uncertainty that may exist concerning the future; it is therefore the assertion of the will that makes the statement heroic, and not necessarily what is chosen. It is the admiration of the act of choosing as something separate and unconnected to the thing that is chosen.

The theory of the *will to power* is born out of Nietzsche's negation of the metaphysical world, which implies that all ideas about the purpose of humankind being tied to metaphysical transcendence are regarded as unfeasible, or false. If this is the case, Nietzsche (1977:11, 172) realises that any new form of redemption and any new transcendence would have to be non-metaphysical; it would need to be psychological. For Nietzsche (1977:118) the *will to power* is synonymous with the "instinct for freedom", and is, there-

fore, Nietzsche's version of the idea of transcendence. In the following extract Nietzsche (1977:215) explains this aspect of his philosophy:

There is a defiance of oneself of which many forms of asceticism are among the most sublimated expressions. For certain men there is so great a need to exercise their strength and lust for power, in default of other objects or because their efforts in other directions have always miscarried, they at last hit upon the idea of tyrannizing over certain parts of their own nature, over, as it were, segments or stages of themselves.

Nietzsche's suggestion is that all forms of asceticism or religiosity are merely diluted versions of this *will to power* and therefore all morality, which the *herd* might view as unselfish, is in his view born out of selfish desires.

Nietzsche's (1977:215) intimates that religious practices are a means to channel impulses or energies regarded as socially unacceptable toward an activity that is in line with socially accepted values. Consequently, the *Übermensch* is the one who realises the ideological bondage brought about by the *herd morality* and who sets out to break free from it. Nietzsche implies here that the actions of the hero that outwardly seem to be virtues are inwardly simply expressions of this *will to power*. What appears outwardly to seek the salvation of others is in fact the will to save oneself.

Nietzsche intended that his writings on the *will to power* would challenge the belief of his time that people were driven by hedonism, or pleasure, rather than by a determination to succeed despite a struggle. Indeed, this theory is more consistent with the hero myth than is the Epicurean theory that people are pleasure-driven creatures,⁷ since the heroic ideal is more concerned with the attitude of the hero than with the pleasure experienced by the hero. Historian Michael Grant (1989:51) notes that the "hero's whole career was an unremitting struggle, undertaken with all his manly endurance".

⁷ Epicurus (341-270 BC) asserts, "Pleasure is the beginning and the goal of the happy life" (in De Botton 2000:50). Together with this assertion, Epicurus couples the idea that "good" cannot be conceived of without the experience of pleasure (in De Botton 2000:50).

2.1.2 *Perspectivism*

This introspective aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy highlights another of his key ideas, which is called "perspectivism". If the *will to power* is determined by the individual, then there can be no such thing as an objective truth.⁸ Instead, there can only be individual perspectives; put otherwise, there are many truths but no single Truth. More accurately, as Robinson (1999:71) explains, *perspectivism* suggests that there is no such thing as knowledge and therefore no need for epistemological theory. This theory tends to be unworkable, for if there is no such thing as knowledge, then nothing can be fully known; even the idea that there is no knowledge is not a certainty. Nietzsche's main argument, however, does not deny the existence of knowledge completely, but only expresses the opinion that absolute knowledge is unknowable. What Nietzsche (1968:211; 1977:48) propagates is the idea that philosophers should create, rather than know truth.

If anything workable can be taken from this view on *perspectivism*, a view that logicians would call inconsistent, it is that intellectual complacency is dangerous. If the concepts of the hero and heroism are to be understood, they are to be understood as fluid: the meanings to be examined are not fixed and unchangeable. This agrees with Lash's (1995:27) assertion that the hero appears to be a chameleonic figure, always changing and adapting to his socio-cultural surroundings. Nietzsche ([sa]:1) himself explains:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred and embellished; and after a long usage seem to people to be fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions – they are metaphors that have become worn out.

The concept of the hero adapts to its context, and therefore cannot be viewed as a fixed ideal, both in terms of its visual and textual representation. It is for this reason that this current discussion about the hero in the *Matrix* trilogy is referred back to mythological

⁸ Gianni Vattimo (1985:134) writes that in Nietzsche's view "[a]ll human intellectual activities are by their nature lies".

and historical ideas. If the concept of the hero is indeed fluid, it must necessarily be influenced by its historical predecessors.⁹

2.1.3 The *Dionysian/Apollonian* opposition

The last of Nietzsche's key ideas to be considered here is the concept of the *Dionysian/Apollonian* opposition, which enforces Nietzsche's belief that truth is either perspectivist or non-existent. Gianni Vattimo (1985:8) asserts that Nietzsche's use of these two Greek heroic figures to expound his own philosophy became the backbone for all his work.

Mythologist HA Guerber (1907:41) explains that Apollo, the god of music, poetry, the arts and medicine, was the most impressive of the gods, and the most beautiful to look at. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Colossus of Rhodes, which guarded the entrance to the harbour for many years, was a statue of Apollo (Guerber 1907:41). Apollo, according to Nietzsche, is associated with rationality, order and truth, and these ideas are bound to the *herd morality* (in Robinson 1999:66). Dionysus,¹⁰ on the other hand, has been associated with frenzy, fertility, instability, irrationality and excess (Robinson 1999:66; Guerber 1907:102). Nietzsche believed that Western thought could be understood as a result of the conflict between these two opposing drives, between irrationality and rationality as embodied in Apollo and Dionysus. Once again, this links to the *will to power*, which asserts that a conflict, or struggle,¹¹ is the primary force that compels the human being. Nietzsche (1977:101, 281) believes that facing opposition

⁹ In *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), this idea is encountered in the words of the Architect, who says that Neo is not one of a kind – not the only “One” – but rather the sixth One of his kind. In other words, even in this fictional realm, the hero has predecessors.

¹⁰ Dionysus finds his equivalent in Roman mythology in the person of Bacchus, the god of wine and intoxication. Michael Grant (1989:284) writes, “Dionysus is the spirit of unthinking physical enjoyment, of the instinctive group-personality, of anti-intellectual energy”. Dionysus is seen as the antidote to Greek rationalism (Grant 1989:285).

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* (Part 1, 1925 and Part 2, 1926) (translated “My struggle”) embraces this idea. Hitler's own heroic ideal took much from Nietzsche in this regard. The idea of the struggle is the keystone in many historical and political movements, many of which have been called “heroic”. In South Africa, the fight against *apartheid* is often referred to as *the struggle*. Even the terrorist attacks on America on 11 September 2001, were committed by Muslim fundamentalists in the name of the *jihād*, which directly translated means *struggle*.

produces greater strength in a person, as he famously states, “What does not kill me makes me stronger”.

At this point it is interesting to note that the *Matrix* trilogy presents the reader with this *Dionysian/Apollonian* opposition on a significant scale. The conflict is between the patriarchal Architect, the rationalist, and the more intuitive, matriarchal Oracle. The struggle that ensues from these two opposing viewpoints is the very reason for the existence of the hero, Neo; it is out of a conflict of codes that the “anomaly” of the hero arises (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).

The *Dionysian/Apollonian* opposition highlights another aspect of Nietzsche’s worldview that has a particular bearing on this study. Roy Pascal points out that Nietzsche sees life as “a meaningless process of shapes that perish as they are born, ‘illusion, will, pain’” (in Nietzsche 1958:vii). Only in the mirror of art is this reality bearable. Once again, the struggle between the *Dionysian* and *Apollonian* impulses is apparent. However, through art this dialectical tension is balanced. Art, therefore, assists people’s understanding of the human experience of truth or, as Pablo Picasso once observed: “Art is not the truth. It is the lie that leads us to the truth” (in Levy 1990:46).

Alister McGrath (2005:118), professor of theological history at Oxford, suggests that Nietzsche’s denial of the existence of God leads to a necessary acceptance of some other “corresponding metaphysical category to which human emotions and imagination may be linked”. The acceptance of any truth, according to McGrath (2005:141), whether universal or personal, is ultimately bound to the realm of the imagination as it is represented in art; and art may justifiably employ myth as an imaginative means for exploring such truth.

The question at this point is whether or not the above summary of Nietzsche’s key ideas relates accurately to the portrayal of the hero in the *Matrix*; the answer is in the affirmative. Even if the hero in the *Matrix* cannot be described entirely in Nietzsche’s terms, a great deal about him can be. The predominant readings of the *Matrix* films pertain to the

Cartesian distrust of reality, and this too falls in line with Nietzsche's ideas: "There is only One world and it is false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, meaningless. A world so constituted is the real world. We need lies in order to conquer this reality" (in Vattimo 1985:135). In this Nietzsche concurs with the Hindu concept of *Maya*, which asserts that the material world, which is considered to be reality, is in fact an illusion (Kinsley 1977:103). In other words, as philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1993:9) writes, there is a "lack of reality in reality".

Nietzsche explains, "[t]ruth is ugly. We have art¹² so that we are not destroyed by truth" (in Vattimo 1985:134). Furthermore, Nietzsche (1977:131, 126) calls art "a cult of the untrue" that "makes the sight of life bearable by laying over it the veil of unclear thinking". In the *Matrix* trilogy, the real world – the "ugly" truth of mankind's enslavement and impoverishment – is hidden by the Matrix. In a sense, the Matrix, which can be likened to Nietzsche's (1977:108) "slave morality of utility", is the lie that makes the truth that there is no morality bearable.

Nietzsche's skepticism would have welcomed the concept of the Matrix. It is an idea that presents a fictional account of Nietzsche's proposal that the "real world" is consumed by lies. Neo, as an *Übermensch* figure, embodies Nietzsche's idea that the truth that has been put forward by the *herd* can be overcome. The *Matrix* films become, in a sense, the fiction, the "lies" that help to inform the world of this Nietzschean idea. This study now turns away from Nietzsche's skepticism to briefly examine Chesterton's philosophy, which is bound to a far more optimistic view of truth and reality.

2.2 A brief overview of Chesterton's philosophy

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) did not consider himself an academic or a philosopher in the same way that Nietzsche did. In fact, he tended to refer to himself as nothing more than a "jolly journalist" (in Finch 1986:129). And yet, Chesterton's influence is

¹² Nietzsche here is using the word "art" to represent the arts in general – theatre, opera, literature, music and the visual arts.

undeniable, though perhaps not as far-reaching as Nietzsche's. On a political level, for instance, Chesterton's ideas about national independence had a marked effect on Michael Collins¹³ and Mahatma Gandhi¹⁴ (Yancey 2001:44). On a philosophical and literary level, Neil Gaiman, Graham Greene, CS Lewis, Terry Pratchett, Dorothy L Sayers and Evelyn Waugh all admit to being significantly affected by the writings of Chesterton (Pierce 1996:10).

Chesterton's ability to debate with some formidable opponents – including Rudyard Kipling, George Moore, George Bernhard Shaw, and HG Wells, amongst many others – drew large crowds. Contemporary Christian journalist Philip Yancey (2001:44) suggests that Chesterton was a man at war with his time. Stephen Medcalf echoes this estimation:

[Chesterton] believed that there was a need to fight for everything against nothing, for reality against illusion, for waking against nightmare, for sanity against despair. It was because these were his causes that he could reconcile the two poles in himself, that he was at once an unusually humble and gentle person, and furiously combative (in Chesterton 1994:1).

Chesterton walked Fleet Street¹⁵ at a time when staunch modernists were attempting to come up with a new unified theory in various guises: communism,¹⁶ Darwinism,¹⁷ eugenics,¹⁸ fascism, and pacifism. And yet, Chesterton convinced many that these new unified theories were weak and insubstantial. He explains that this is the “upshot of modern thinking, that men invent new ideals because they dare not attempt old ideals. They look forward with enthusiasm, because they are afraid to look back” (Chesterton 1910:200).

¹³ Michael Collins (1890-1922) was one of the leaders of Ireland who campaigned against British rule from 1919 until his assassination in 1922.

¹⁴ Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) was a leader and advocate for human rights in South Africa and in India. He began campaigning for the independence of India from British rule in 1914 until independence was granted India in 1947. He was assassinated in 1948 by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu fanatic who opposed Gandhi's program of tolerance for all creeds and religions.

¹⁵ Fleet Street, in London, was famous during Chesterton's lifetime as being the location of many newspaper offices. Kibler (in Chesterton 2002:89) explains that even today, despite the fact that newspaper offices have moved to other parts of London, Fleet Street is still symbolic of the English Press.

¹⁶ *The Communist Manifesto*, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, was first published in 1848.

¹⁷ Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* was published in 1859.

¹⁸ Eugenics began with the research of Sir Francis Galton in the 1880s.

The Edwardian age (1901-1910) that was the first audience to Chesterton's writings was supremely self-confident and imperialistic, and highly influenced by the Victorian era that preceded it (McGrath 2004:257). McGrath maintains that the opinion of the British at the time was that there had never been a greater empire in the history of humankind, for "the sun never set on the British Empire". It is precisely this self-congratulating mentality that has led some to label the Victorian period an "age of hero worship" (Segal 2000:3). Indeed, this imperialistic *Zeitgeist* was accepted in the British Empire right up to the start of World War I in 1914. This period in the history of Britain is marked by an optimism that stems from the powerful status of this Empire. Chesterton (1910:79), however, foresaw that such imperialism could not last, pointing out to whomever would heed his words that pride comes before a fall:

To Imperialism in the light political sense, therefore, my only objection is that it is an illusion of comfort; that an Empire whose heart is failing should be specially proud of the extremities, is to me no more sublime a fact than that an old dandy whose brain is gone should still be proud of his legs.

Chesterton's prediction was proved correct. The gradual decline of the British Empire, together with the sense of Britain's shrinking power in the face of World War I contributed to a gradual descent of the United Kingdom into cynicism and pessimism. It is this mood that Chesterton seeks to combat in his writings. In fact, Chesterton (1910:213) takes an interesting angle on this particular subject, for he suggests that the optimism of the British Empire is offensive and false, since it is claimed at the expense of other people and nations. In showing this optimism to be false, Chesterton argues that any pessimism that results as a reaction to this false optimism – caused in this context by the decline of the British Empire – is also false. "The only right optimism," suggests Chesterton (2002a:108), "is a sort of universal patriotism" which is more concerned with being a citizen of the world or some larger truth than of any particular country. This is not to say that Chesterton rules out nationalism. In truth, Chesterton (1986:275) is not against nationalism, only jingoism: a country should be loved irrespective of its historical, political, geographical or any other context.

Chesterton's ideas are somewhat more difficult to distil than Nietzsche's because of the broad range of subject matter in his writings. One can at least establish that Chesterton, like Nietzsche, was a man against the spirit of his age, but for very different reasons. Nietzsche believed that the people of his time had stayed too close to absolute truth and Christianity, whereas Chesterton believed that people have strayed too far from that very thing. Nietzsche tried to position himself outside existing belief and philosophy, whereas Chesterton worked within an existing framework – the framework of orthodox Christianity.

Whereas Nietzsche would write with arrogance essays such as, *Why I am so wise* and *Why I write such good books*, Chesterton (2002a:25) would say, "I have written [this] book, and nothing on Earth would induce me to read it". On *Orthodoxy* (1908), which remains his most popular non-fiction work to this day, he writes the following:

I offer this book with the heartiest sentiments to all the jolly people who hate what I write and regard it (justly, for all I know) as a piece of poor clowning or a single tiresome joke. For if this book is a joke, it is a joke against me. I am the man who, with the utmost daring, discovered what had been discovered before. [This book] recounts my elephantine adventuring in the pursuit of the obvious. No one can think me more ludicrous than I think myself; no reader can accuse me of trying to make a fool of him: I am the fool of this story, and no rebel shall hurl me from my throne. I freely confess all the idiotic ambitions of the end of the nineteenth century ... I tried to be some 10 minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was 1800 years behind it (Chesterton 2002a:25).

On another of his books, *All things considered* (1908), Chesterton (1908:1) writes:

I cannot understand the people who take literature seriously; but I can love them, and I do. Out of my love I warn them to keep clear of this book. It is a collection of crude and shapeless papers upon current or rather flying subjects.

Chesterton, the jolly journalist, never seems to believe that anything he has to say is of any real value. He writes because he loves writing, suggests Ralph McInerny and not necessarily because he believes it is something he is particularly good at (in Chesterton 2002b:11). However, it may be suggested that Chesterton's (1901:65) tendency towards

self-deprecation is a natural result of his belief in the importance of humility and modesty:

The most brilliant exponent of the egoistic school, Nietzsche, with deadly and honourable logic, admitted that the philosophy of self-satisfaction led to looking down upon the weak, the cowardly, and the ignorant. Looking down on things may be a delightful experience, only there is nothing, from a mountain to a cabbage, that is really *seen* when it is seen from a balloon. The philosopher of the ego sees everything, no doubt, from a high and rarefied heaven; only he sees everything foreshortened or deformed.

Chesterton's confidence in the virtue of humility also stems from his belief that the truth is not something one can lay claim to; he writes, "I will not call it my philosophy. God and humanity made it; and it made me" (Chesterton 1986:211).

While Chesterton frequently denies originality as a writer – he explains, "I found a new heresy, and when I had put the finishing touches on it, I discovered it was orthodoxy" (Chesterton 2002a:25) – his approach to any subject is most certainly unique. It is this unique approach that merits the reader's attention. It is vital for this study to realise at the outset that Chesterton's philosophy cannot be separated from his theism, just as Nietzsche's philosophy cannot be separated from his atheism. Both of their philosophies, especially their ideas concerning the hero and his heroism, are ultimately informed by these respective stances.

William Griffin argues that Chesterton did not write in the pattern of the logicians, using a series of deductions, but rather wrote in a "vague, personal way", using a series of mental pictures (in Chesterton 2003b:17). He relied, as artists and filmmakers do, on the fleeting existence of the visual to convey what he believed to be eternal ideas. If Nietzsche's primary subject were soteriology, Chesterton's subject would be, as Dale Ahlquist, president of the American Chesterton society, suggests, "the unseen presence of God in the modern world" (in Chesterton 2003b:17). Ahlquist continues:

Indeed, the two ideas we take from Chesterton are that religion begins with the realization that the world is a magical place, and that politics begins with the realization that all human beings have a God-like dignity. Every human

action, therefore, whether social or economic, is an opportunity either to exploit or dignify our fellow man (in Chesterton 2003b:17).

This, in part, reveals Chesterton's distaste for Nietzsche's idea that life should be an existential experiment. Chesterton (1989:115) accepts that experience in human relationships is vital to gaining wisdom, but refuses to believe that one needs to disregard knowledge, and therefore sympathy, so completely:

That same suppression of sympathies, that same waving away of intuitions or guesswork which make a man preternaturally clever in dealing with the stomach of the spider, will make him preternaturally stupid in dealing with the heart of man. [The man of science] is making himself inhuman in order to understand humanity.

Chesterton's writings reflect his belief that truth is absolute. This position originates from Chesterton's choice to place philosophy within an existing conceptual, or theological, framework. However, whilst Chesterton believes that absolute truth exists, he never claims that it is at any point fully knowable, for that would be to deny the finitude of human existence. Chesterton (1933:155) acknowledges that reality is in flux. He suggests: "Things change because they are not complete; but their reality can only be explained as part of something that is complete. It is God" (Chesterton 1933:155). Chesterton argues that just because reality is in flux, it does not mean it is not a truth that can be grasped. He suggests:

There is no doubt about the being of being, even if it does sometimes look like becoming; that is because what we see is not the fullness of being; or (to continue a sort of colloquial slang) we never see being *being* as much as it can. Ice is melted into cold water and cold water is heated into hot water; it cannot be all three at once. But this does not make water unreal or even relative; it only means that it is limited to being one thing at a time (Chesterton 1933:154).

From this, one can deduce that Chesterton's fundamental disagreement with Nietzsche's *perspectivism* lies in its relationship to truth. Chesterton (1933:103) remarks that such perspectivist reasoning is more like poetry than philosophy, since, to him at least, it seems to be more the result of a mood than a logical deduction. *Perspectivism* rejects so

called “creeds and dogmas” only to replace them with intuition and feeling¹⁹ (Chesterton 1933:102). In other words, truth is replaced by mere opinion. Here Chesterton does not mean to deny the importance of intuition and feeling, but only to criticise those who create new dogmas that are unguided by reason. One of the glories of mythology, writes Chesterton (1993:11), is that it seeks the absolute by means of the imagination, truth by means of beauty. He explains: “The imagination has its own laws, and therefore its own triumphs, which neither the logicians nor men of science can understand” (Chesterton 1993:111).

Chesterton (2002a:160) believes that for anything to be achieved and for any progress to be made, the ideal one aims for needs to be fixed, both physically and philosophically. The hero, therefore, needs to have an unchanging goal. To rely on a perspectivist opinion is to aim for an ever-changing mark, and such an aim can never logically allow for any success. Chesterton (2002a:31) regards the idea of the *Übermensch* as unreasonable, and one that leans towards insanity:

Shall I tell you where the men are who believe most in themselves? For I can tell you. I know where flames the fixed star of certainty and success. I can guide you to the thrones of the Supermen. The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums.

In this passage, Chesterton is in fact referring to Nietzsche’s insanity, and most probably to what Nietzsche (1977:90) writes in *Daybreak*: “Give me madness, you heavenly powers! Madness that I may believe in myself”. The quotation above, in clear terms, reflects Chesterton’s opinion of the *Übermensch*. To Chesterton the *Übermensch* is not the perfect picture of a hero, for in his view a man cannot overcome himself through any *will to power*. Perhaps, his writings suggest, man might *be overcome* by a sense of wonder (Chesterton 1986:318).²⁰ In other words, in Chesterton’s view, the hero is not heroic because of his ability to dominate, but rather because of his willingness to be sub-

¹⁹ Chesterton writes (1933:103) that modern philosophers “have dealt so much in moods and emotions, especially in the arts, that they have developed a large but loose vocabulary, which deals more with atmosphere than with actual attitude or position”.

²⁰ This idea is echoed by the Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel (1983:1) when he writes, “I didn’t ask for success, I asked for wonder”.

servient, and therefore because of his ability to serve. This subservience is not only bound to the hero's relationship with his leaders, but also to his relationship to society as a whole. This agrees with Lash's (1995:17) view that, without question, the one trait that the hero must exhibit is his ability to direct his energies into assisting others and protecting them from danger.

Robert Segal (2000:2) notes that ultimately heroes do not impose their own will on history, but rather they subordinate themselves to the natural course of events. This subordination, writes Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), is based on the hero's insight into the course of society, and not on the hero's will to shape the course of society (in Segal 2000:2). Therefore, the hero alters history, not so that history may serve his own intentions alone, but so that history may serve the needs of society at large.

Chesterton's (2002a: 25) literary strategy, which he calls *Romance*, involves the use of the familiar to put forward unfamiliar or forgotten ideas. His philosophy is less like a theory than it is like a love affair (Chesterton 2002b:197). He employs his imagination to encourage the reader to rethink familiar ideas:

The prime function of imagination is to see our whole orderly system of life as a pile of stratified revolutions. In spite of all revolutionaries it must be said that the function of imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders (in Chesterton 1901:41).

Chesterton (1986:213) always assumes that the truth is something greater than any individual; that if one is right about anything, one is right despite oneself. For this reason, Chesterton's style of argumentation remains light and almost frivolous. He never makes the mistake of assuming a thing to be correct just because it is taken seriously (Chesterton 2001:178):

Seriousness is not a virtue. It would be a heresy, a much more sensible heresy, to say that seriousness is a vice. It is really a natural trend or lapse into taking one's self gravely because it is the easiest thing to do. It is much easier to write a good *Times* leading article than it is to write a good joke in *Punch*. For solemnity flows out of men naturally; but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light. Satan fell by the force of gravity.

Chesterton's *Romance* is not to be confused with Romanticism. This *Romance* was, in part, simply the idea that what we believe, though highly influenced by how we think, should never be separated from matters of human existence and experience. In this aspect, Chesterton and Nietzsche find themselves on equal footing: both, though speaking to an audience of intellectuals, set out to deal with specifically humanistic concerns. Both were seeking to voice the concerns of the everyman when so many around them sought only to voice the opinions of the culturally and intellectually elite. Walter Kaufman (1956:1) points out that this philosophical angle is particularly existentialist:

The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life – that is the heart of existentialism.

Nietzsche, as co-founder of existentialism with Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), certainly tried to formulate his philosophies to be remote from tradition. It must be noted, however, that Chesterton cannot be considered an existentialist philosopher, for, although he sought to present a philosophy that was not “remote from life”, his philosophies were still bound to a particular school of thought. Yet, it can be inferred on this point that both Nietzsche and Chesterton set out to present ideas that would be pragmatic and not purely theoretical.

Chesterton (1993:87) holds that there is an historical trend that humankind discards large ideas and replaces them with smaller ones. He explains that many people are “obsessed by their evolutionary monomania that every great thing grows from a seed,²¹ from something smaller than itself. They seem to forget that every seed comes from a tree,²² from

²¹ A seed is symbolic of potential (Cirlot 1962:269).

²² Here it is significant that Chesterton uses the image of a tree, for its application stretches not only into the natural world, but also into Norse mythology, where a tree called *Yggdrasil* (world-tree) was considered to support all of creation (Crossley-Holland 1980:6). JE Cirlot (1962:328) notes that the tree is one of the most essential of traditional symbols. The link between gods and trees is often mentioned in mythology (Cirlot 1962:328). Chesterton's reference here points particularly to the tree of life that is found in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24), a tree that grants immortality to one who eats its fruit. It is interesting to note that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is associated most often with human autonomy, and so echoes Nietzsche's claim that the choice to eat from this tree is in fact better than the alternative (see Chapter Three).

something larger than itself” (Chesterton 1993:87). In this, Chesterton is referring to God, who is seen to be the source of all good things.

Nietzsche (1977:170) traded the idea of God for the idea of the *Übermensch*. Lash (1995:10) echoes this viewpoint when he explains that heroes are “as good as gods for those who did not believe in *the* God”. Such a trade, in accordance with Chesterton’s writings, is a poor one; for the *Übermensch* remains, even to an atheist, an idea smaller than the idea of God. An idea that encompasses omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence is traded for one that has none of these characteristics.

Chesterton (2002a:40) writes that this sort of thinking, which attempts to reduce life to a neat list of knowable facts, is flawed because it explains a large number of things, but it does not explain them in a large way. Chesterton (2003:129) reinforces this idea when he states, “other schools of thought are inadequate not because they do not contain a truth, but precisely because each of them does contain a truth and is content to contain a truth”. In other words, by confining one’s worldview to a single or lesser idea, one confines any explanation of the world to an improbable finitude. This perspective links with Nietzsche’s idea that truth should remain a fluid concept, but Chesterton’s suggestion is that one does not need to rebel against the idea of an absolute in order to encounter a personal reality.

Chesterton (1993:90) attests that mythology might be the beginning of the myth, but, more importantly, religion is the beginning of mythology. What we now call Greek mythology, which informs our views of myth, was religion to the ancient Greeks. History, according to Chesterton (1993:91), records the fact that before the idea of many gods, there was the idea of one God; that the idea of lesser gods was born out of a larger idea of a single God; that these polytheistic religions were born out of monotheism. It is noted that Nietzsche (1977:178) believed even polytheism to be a “better” option than monotheism, since to him it represents a “divine” version of his idea of *perspectivism*.

The position that polytheism was born out of monotheism has a direct bearing on Chesterton's view of the hero. Mythology, a splintered version of monotheism, describes deities that have been begotten by deities; and more than that, it describes heroes that have been begotten by deities. Thus, the hero finds his heroic origins not in himself, as Nietzsche would suggest, but in the realm of the gods (Chesterton 1993:91). The hero, in short, is therefore not a greater man, but a lesser god. Lash (1995:16) writes that human skepticism is perceived to be difficult, if not impossible, to overcome, and for this reason, "humanity has viewed the individual who is capable of self-overcoming as more a god than a mortal". However, Lash (1995:10) tends to agree with Nietzsche's perspective when he suggests that the hero embodies not superhuman divinity, but rather human dignity.

For Chesterton (2002a:50), the mythical needs to be kept in balance with the mystical. He explains:

Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery, you have health; when you destroy mystery, you create morbidity. The whole secret of mysticism is this: that a man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand (Chesterton 2002a:50).

What this points to is Chesterton's belief that understanding is possible, which is something that Nietzsche appears to stand against. However, Chesterton also notes that human understanding is limited. He remarks that what we call emancipation, "is always and of necessity simply the free choice of the soul between one set of limitations and another" (Chesterton 1905:1).

In the *Matrix*, no matter how much Neo's consciousness has been altered, he remains "irrevocably human" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). Therefore, as the Architect explains to Neo in a scene from *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), his understanding remains limited. Ultimately, the sanity of the hero depends on his response to the infinite, which has to do with whether or not he accepts it. This means the hero's ability to understand anything is ultimately mysterious, or, as Chesterton (2001:36, 37) puts it, something "poetic":

Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea and so make it finite. The result is mental exhaustion. To accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything is a strain. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.

The survival of the mythologies of Greece and Rome must therefore be reliant on qualities that are not purely mechanical or rational. Certain qualities of these mythologies have helped the stories to, in a sense, transcend time and in so doing they have become eternal. These same qualities are apparent in the *Matrix* films.

If we are to approach any study of heroism in the *Matrix* in terms of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Chesterton, the following must be kept in mind: the result cannot logically be a fixed definition of heroism. This study seeks to be an exploration of the perspectives of these two philosophers as they may be compared and contrasted, but does not aim to conflate their respective opinions into a single conclusion. The integrity of both of their views needs to be maintained, for they stand, more often than not, on opposite sides of the battlefield. Nietzsche believes there is no ultimate truth and Chesterton believes that the ultimate truth is too big for any human being to ever fully understand. And yet, both believe that in art – in poetry, music and in the visual arts – we encounter the answers we seek. For this reason, this study now turns to an exploration of how the philosophies of Nietzsche and Chesterton may be applied to the existence of the hero in the *Matrix* trilogy, beginning with the birth of the hero.

CHAPTER 3

THE BIRTH OF THE HERO

The existence of the hero is generally divided into three distinct phases, each having its own unique characteristics: birth, life and death. What follows in the next three chapters is a detailed examination of each of these phases. The *Matrix* trilogy is itself a reflection of these three phases. The first film, *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999), is fundamentally focused on the birth of the hero, and especially revolves around how choice is a vital catalyst for the birth of the hero. The follow up, *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), focuses on the life of the hero, and concentrates in particular on the trials that the hero must face in order to achieve the desired end. The final film, *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b), examines the death of the hero and what the fulfillment of the hero's purpose entails. It must be noted, however, that these themes – birth, life and death – are not bound exclusively to the three films in question. Thus, this study draws from all three films for the sake of clarifying each facet of the argument.

This chapter begins with an overview of the birth of the hero as it is represented both in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy. This overview includes an investigation of the part that the matriarch has to play in the story of the hero. Also examined in this initial overview is the notion of freedom and the role that choice has to play in the birth of the hero. It should be noted at the outset that the word birth is used here literally and figuratively, referring both to the physical birth of the hero and to the second birth or rebirth that takes place when the first *heroic choice* is made. The physical birth takes place owing to circumstances beyond the control of the hero, whereas the rebirth takes place through a deliberate action on the part of the hero. Following this overview of birth in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy, this study moves to examine Nietzsche's and Chesterton's respective views on the *heroic choice* and the birth of the hero.

3.1 The birth of the hero in mythology and in *The Matrix*

It needs to be emphasised that the purpose of the hero can only be achieved once he has claimed his birthright; his destiny is foreshadowed at the very beginning of his existence. *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) tells the story of the journey that Neo takes from anonymity to claiming his destiny as the “One” – the prophesied saviour of humankind. Robert Segal (2000:14) notes, “[t]he hero is heroic because he rises from obscurity to the throne”. Before the role of the *heroic choice* can be examined as it relates to the birth of the hero, it is important to first explore the birth of the hero both in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy, for birth implies not only a beginning, but also a foundation.

Near the start of *The Matrix*, Neo first meets Trinity in a rowdy nightclub (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). Trinity, after a brief introduction, points out to Neo the reason for his search: “It’s the question that drives us mad. It’s the question that brought you here. You know the question just as I did”. The question, Neo then suggests, is “What is the Matrix?” As the film progresses, Neo meets Morpheus, who continues this particular thread of exposition:

What you know, you can’t explain. But you feel it. You’ve felt it your whole life. That there’s something wrong with the world. You don’t know what it is but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It’s this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I am talking about? (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

Again, Neo suggests that what Morpheus is talking about is the Matrix (in Clover 2004:64). The word “matrix” can be defined as a setting that allows the origin, development, or growth of something. A fitting synonym, which also happens to be the archaic definition for the word, is *a womb* (Hanley 2003:13; Wachowski & Wachowski 1999:11).

In the *Matrix* films, the Matrix is, as Morpheus explains (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999), “the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth”. Philosopher Richard Hanley (2003:14) borrows terminology from the film when he

observes that it is a “neural, interactive simulation”. In other words, the Matrix is a computer-generated simulation that has the appearance of being real (Hanley 2003:14). This appearance of being real is based solely on sensory input that children of the Matrix receive, and yet the Matrix remains nothing more than a simulacrum.

It is in Morpheus’s definition of the Matrix that we encounter a definite connection between the *Matrix* films and its mythological predecessor: the Matrix is “the world” (Clover 2004:65). The creation story in Greek mythology explains that life originated with the union between Eros and Gæa (Guerber 1907:13; Graves 1955:30). Gæa gave birth to life when Eros’s arrows pierced her dull, lifeless exterior, transforming her into the beautiful natural wonder that became known as “mother earth”. It is the earth that gives life, but only owing to the *Dionysian* intervention of Eros.¹ The Matrix, even as an unreal earth – a cocoon that abuses the freedom and existence of mankind – encourages the origin, growth and development of life.

John Lash (1995:10) explains that even though the hero is regarded as the epitome of the male gender, he “is profoundly bound to the opposite sex”. The hero, as Lash (1995:10) writes, “is neither a product nor an exponent of a patriarchal order”. Greek mythology tells of how Zeus wanted to father the “greatest of all heroes” (Padilla 2004:147) who was to be called Heracles.² Zeus chose Alcmena to be gifted with the “glory of being the mother” of this hero. In Zeus’s mind, his own presence in the life of Hercules was not as important as the presence of a mother figure. Indeed, within his historical and mythological origins, the hero is situated in the world at large by the mother figure. Chesterton (1993:54) contends that “what is called matriarchy is merely moral anarchy, in which the

¹ *Eros* is the Greek word for *passion*, or *erotic love* and it is in the meaning of the word that an age-old symbolism is presented: It is the seed of passion that produces life. According to the Book of Baruch, “Erotic desire and its satisfaction is the key to the origin of the world” (in Cirlot 1962:185). Love in mythological terms tends to be more *eros* than *agape* – *agape* being unconditional, sapient, devotional love. MR Padilla (2004:9) suggests that with *eros* there is a sense of immediacy, even urgency, but never a sense of permanency. Heroic love that serves unconditionally is *agape*.

² Heracles in Roman mythology is known as Hercules. Padilla (2004:160) explains that Hercules’s character “surpasses that of the other heroes because it groups together several myths”. All of these myths indicate that the hero has “extraordinary strength and unbalanced feelings, greater than human capacity” (Padilla 2004:160). Hercules had many romantic affairs, but is recognised more as a warrior than as a lover (Padilla 2004:160).

mother alone remains fixed because all the fathers are fugitive and irresponsible”. This observation is evidently congruent with the above mentioned mythology and the *Matrix* trilogy.

What is significant about this fact is that a distinction is made between the hero’s power to master overwhelming circumstances and the matriarch’s ability to adapt to those same circumstances. At the same time, a distinction is made between the hero’s *will to power* and the matriarch’s *will to nurture*.³ This is not to say that the mother figure is on a lesser plane than the hero. The distinction is made in order to claim that the hero owes his own existence, even the existence of his abilities, to the mother. This proves a logical connection even in the *Matrix* trilogy. The Matrix is responsible for giving Neo his super-human abilities. It is, as the Architect explains in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), a so-called “anomaly” within the code of the Matrix that causes the existence of the One.

Furthermore, it is made clear in the narrative of *The Matrix* that without Trinity, Neo would never even have begun or completed his heroic journey.⁴ The idea here is that the hero must be redeemed by a heroine or love interest. In fact, love is often seen to replace transcendence in heroic tales; it is the bread and the wine that replaces the Holy Communion offered by the Christian Church (Lash 1995:24).

Though one might easily compare similarities between the matriarch and the matrix, there remains a clear difference; it is this difference that is problematic for anyone who lives within the Matrix. The problem is that no one is intended to be freed from the Matrix in the way that a child is freed from its mother. The notion of heroism, notes Segal (2000:17), implies the necessity of such liberation from the mother. In a sense, the umbilical cord that binds an individual to the Matrix is never cut, and therefore there is

³ This gendered binary is a typical example of the nature/culture dialectic.

⁴ Early on in *The Matrix*, Neo is about to get out of the car that will take him to meet Morpheus, the meeting that will ultimately lead to his “birth” into the real world. It is Trinity’s intervention that prevents Neo from getting out of the car. Later on, in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski 2003b) it is Trinity’s encouragement that inspires Neo to complete his final task as the hero (see Chapter Five).

no real birth. In order to be truly free, in the *Übermensch* sense, it is imperative that the hero be separate from the source.⁵

This enslavement to the Matrix is likened in the first film of the trilogy to the corporate world of business. This impersonal corporate climate is the visual expression of the concept of ideology. Clover (2004:60) suggests, “If *ideology* describes the world of the Matrix, The Matrix describes the world of ideology”. The Matrix is not merely a collection of images; it is a façade that is made to be a simulated reality. It is a social relationship between people and machines that is mediated by visual appearance. This, in short, is what ideology is about, for ideology’s most essential process is the process of mediation (Clover 2004:60). Mediation is in place for the purpose of making the truth, which in this case is the truth of humankind’s enslavement, more palatable. Art historian Timothy John Clark explains that the function of ideologies is to “naturalize representation” (in Clover 2004:60). In other words, he suggests that ideologies are put in place to “present constructed and disputed meanings as if they weren’t meanings at all, but, rather, forms inherent to the world out there” (in Clover 2004:60). This highlights what has already been mentioned concerning Nietzsche’s distaste for the fixity of meanings, which creates, at least in his view, a false absolute.

In the Matrix, constructed meanings are taken for granted and are therefore invisible or unperceivable. Therefore, ultimately, the Matrix is a system of control. It is an ideology that has been put into place so that the machines are able to maintain power. This power is sustainable because the Matrix, which is an image of power, has been constructed in a way that it can only ever be perceived as real. If it is taken to be real, humankind sees it as truth. However, this perception of truth can only be accepted on the basis of human ignorance. If this ignorance is dispelled, knowledge is power.

⁵ Robert Segal (2000:17) writes, “[h]eroism means separation not only from parents and anti-social constructs but even more from the unconscious”. This “unconscious” – which Segal derives from the writings of Carl Jung – is represented by life within the Matrix, and is clearly reminiscent of the *herd morality* that Nietzsche writes about.

Michel Foucault (2001:317) regards truth as “a thing of this world”; it is something “produced by multiple forms of constraint”. The domination enforced by the machines over human beings might even be what Foucault (2001:318) calls a “*régime* of truth” or what Clover (2004:62) calls the “regime of the image”. This *régime* of truth is represented in *The Matrix* in accordance with Foucault’s (2001:318) idea that in Western society, truth has become a capitalistic endeavour. This truth is not truth as it is stated in terms of the correspondence theory of truth, it is the “truth” of an enforced ideology. In a capitalistic culture truth is not only ideological, and therefore linked to power, but also a commodity, and therefore linked to wealth.



Figure 2: Metacortex Information Technology building, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

Neo, at the beginning of the first *Matrix* film, works at a respected, powerful and wealthy Information Technology⁶ company called Metacortex⁷ (Figure 2). This corporate world is nothing less than the perceptible symbol of Neo’s enslavement. The very environment he works in is ordered to the point of monotony and the “rules” of the company are so fixed that Neo’s freedom is completely restricted, even impossible. The office space he works in is divided into cubicles, each one the same size and shape, and each one undecorated

⁶ Clover (2004:88) plays on the anagram of the word “matrix”, changing it to form the words “Marx + IT”. The idea conveyed in this word play is of an ideologically constructed, capitalistic business system.

⁷ The word *cortex* refers to the outer layer of the cerebrum that plays an important role in consciousness. Therefore, as a symbol of the hyperreal simulacrum, the word *Metacortex* refers to that which is literally *beyond consciousness*. It is the machines that possess this *beyond-consciousness* and therefore are able to dominate those who are, in a sense, without consciousness.

and clinically clean (Figure 3). It is immediately apparent from the size of the company building to the neatness of the work environment that the work done there is done efficiently and effectively. However, in the context of the film, such a corporation is merely an extension of the power structures that hold the Matrix together.



Figure 3: Neo, working in an undecorated, generic cubicle at Metacortex, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

In the early stages of *The Matrix*, Neo arrives late for work, and as a consequence he must face the wrath of his corporate boss, Rheinheart⁸ (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). In his sterile managerial office, Rheinheart lays down the law:

You have a problem with authority, Mr. Anderson.⁹ You believe that you are special, that somehow the rules do not apply to you. Obviously, you are mistaken. This company is one of the world's leading software companies in the world because every single employee understands that they are part of a whole. If an employee has a problem, the company has a problem. Either you choose to be at your desk on time from this day forward or you choose to find yourself another job (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

⁸ Rheinheart's name means "pure heart" implying that Rheinheart's intentions are well meant, but are ultimately misguided since he is a slave to the *herd morality* of life within the Matrix.

⁹ In the world of the Matrix, Neo is known as Thomas A Anderson. It is, as Clover (2004:84) suggests, a "slave name" – a mark that Neo is in fact still very much a part of the simulacrum, even though he is on some level rebelling against it. It might be suggested that the first part of Neo's slave name, Thomas A, is a *homage* to the Catholic philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, whose writings are referred to in this dissertation. It could also be considered a reference to the disciple of Jesus who is famous for his doubting; Neo has to be freed from the Matrix before he is able to believe it exists. *Ander*, the first part of the name Anderson comes from the Greek word for "man", which suggests a reference to the Christian Messiah, the "Son of Man" (e.g. Matthew 8:20; Mark 2:10; Revelation 1:13).

The point made here is very clear: Neo is not “special” and his identity as an individual within the system is hardly relevant to those in power.¹⁰ His identity has, as it is suggested, in fact become interchangeable with the identity of the corporation. The fact that Rheinheart explains that Neo’s choices are limited to two options, between one job and another job, exposes his belief that life is made up entirely of labour (Clover 2004:62). There is never a suggestion within the simulacrum of the Matrix that life has any other purpose. Thus, the simulacrum opposes heroism, since heroism connotes a rebellion against the *status quo*.

Morpheus explains that all this, everything that Neo sees in the world, has been pulled over his eyes to blind him from the truth (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). Neo enquires as to the nature of this truth, and Morpheus responds, “[The truth is] that you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch: a prison for your mind” (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). In Nietzsche’s terms, this prison is the *herd morality*. In Chesterton’s terms, this enslavement is a small, incomplete or incorrect view of the truth. Ultimately, therefore, liberty is not expressed in the act of merely making a series of choices, but is the act of aligning oneself with what is ultimately real. Philosopher C Stephen Evans (2005:175) echoes this notion when he writes that the hero can only be committed to the good if he is committed to that which is “profoundly and eternally true”.

This view of enslavement to the world is certainly not a new one. Its roots lie deep in the heart of ancient philosophy. John Partridge (2003) points out that the Greek philosopher Plato likened the human condition to the state of prisoners who are bound in a cave. These prisoners, according to Plato, see only shadows that are projected onto the cave wall in front of them and never the actual person that casts that shadow. Concerning this, Chesterton (1993:114) notes the following:

¹⁰ The impersonal work environment in *The Matrix* may be a reference to three classic films: Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), King Vidor’s *The Crowd* (1928) and Billy Wilder’s *The Apartment* (1960), all three of which deal with a people who are seen as faceless by heartless corporations (Ebert 2002:34).

The metaphor of a shadow happens to hit a very vital truth here. For a shadow is a shape; a thing which reproduces shape but not texture. These things were something *like* the real thing; and to say that they were like it is to say that they were different. Saying something is like a dog is another way of saying it is not a dog; and it is in this sense of identity that a myth is not a man.

What Chesterton claims here, which fits accurately with the views of the characters in the *Matrix* films, is that the believability of this unreal state of life does not compensate for the real. Nietzsche's view negates ideology entirely, which can be likened to denying the existence of the shadows on the cave wall; whereas Chesterton (1986:143) suggests that the shadows do exist, and in fact point to some larger truth: "even if reality could be proved to be misleading, it still could not be proved to be unimportant or unimpressive". The *Matrix* is a "misleading" reality only because it does not make those enslaved to it aware of their enslavement. Plato believes the aim of any education or knowledge to be the releasing of the individual from this state of imprisonment (in Partridge 2003). The purpose of life, in Plato's estimation, is therefore to aim for the enlightenment that allows one to leave the darkness of untruth. According to this opinion, everyone has been born into this type of slavery, and yet, the very mention of this slavery suggests the possibility of its opposite: freedom. The *Matrix* films suggest that only the hero has the ability to break out of this slavery in order to claim that freedom. This is in accordance with Lash's (1995:6) view that the hero must be autonomous, though not necessarily an authoritative figure. This complies with the *Matrix* films in which Neo is certainly seen to be autonomous, and yet is always regarded as less authoritative than his captain and mentor, Morpheus (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999; 2003a; 2003b).

Chesterton (1993:114) remarks that the point of the metaphor, which describes an "unreal" life in terms of shadows, is that one needs to become aware not only of the "shadows we are", but also of the "shadows we pursue". Neo certainly does become aware of the shadows that he has been pursuing within the *Matrix*. Although he is not entirely aware of his condition prior to his 'rebirth' he knows at some level that all is not right with the world. This proposes the idea that the truth, on some level, is intrinsic, for it can

be discerned without knowledge. However, knowledge of the truth is a means by which truth can be claimed for one's self.

Chesterton (1993:114) asserts that "a myth is not a man". This highlights the fact that there is a definite difference between conceptions of what it means to be a hero in mythology and what it means to be a hero in the real world. As Segal (2000:8) notes, heroes in the real world within a postmodern framework tend to be ordinary people. Put simply, the hero in the real world is a downscaled version of the hero in mythology.

To say "a myth is not a man" is also to point out that the myth of ideology becomes a mask that prevents the larger truth of the real man from being observed. This is owing to the fact that ideology represents what Michael Thau (2005:139) calls "a smaller picture". Thau (2005:139) notes that this "smaller picture" results from a perspectivist view since it relies on a subjective sensory interpretation of the here and now. Thau (2005:140) suggests that a larger view of truth needs to replace the smaller view in order for the hero to be able to act effectively. Therefore, one might deduce that the myth that Chesterton (1993:114) writes about here refers both to ideology and to a super-reality that highlights aspects of truth. Elsewhere Chesterton (1993:68) writes that mythological imagination is impossible without an historical imagination. Accordingly, in order to understand the place and the role of the hero, one needs to be aware of the danger of letting myths become mere shadows, which is the danger of allowing the "texture" of real life to be lost in representation.

What is suggested in this chapter is that the hero is ultimately one who aligns himself with what is essentially real and true. Richard Wagner (1881:1) writes that a lie is inconceivable to the hero, because freedom, which is the mark of the hero, comes only through an encounter with the truth. This allegiance between the real and the heroic is vital to note, for it implies that the above-mentioned shadows are given texture; that the simulacrum is abandoned so that an authentic life might be lived. This allegiance is only made possible through the first act of heroism, which lies in what might be termed the *heroic choice*. It is this choice that ensures that the idea of a hero is not only fixed to physical

superhuman strength, but also to an ethical framework. Indeed, the concept of the hero, as Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris (2005:12) observe, is always tied to ethics, and ethics is always tied to choice. The remainder of this chapter focuses on this *heroic choice* in the *Matrix* trilogy as it relates to the ideas of Nietzsche and Chesterton. The relevance of choice as it relates to the birth of the hero is also examined in greater detail.

3.2 The *heroic choice* according to Nietzsche

Neo is informed by Morpheus in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) that no one can be told what the Matrix is, for it is something that can only be experienced. Such thinking is, thus far, perfectly in line with Nietzsche's soteriology: the redemption of the world must necessarily begin with the hero's own redemption.

Thau (2005:138) observes that experience is central to the notion of wisdom. It is this experience that is Nietzsche's (1977:22) primary focus because he believes that knowledge, though possible without experience, has no depth without experience. Even knowledge gleaned from books, he suggests, is illusionary, and therefore untrustworthy (Nietzsche 1977:22). Nietzsche (1977:36) generalises that "all founders" of religions "have never made of their experiences a matter of conscience for knowledge". He believes that those who are "thirsty for reason" should desire to "look at our experiences as fixedly in the eye as a scientific experiment, hour by hour, day by day. We ourselves want to be our own experiments and vivisectional animals" (Nietzsche 1977:36). In addition, Nietzsche (1977:54) suggests that a "higher culture" is a culture that places great value on "the little unpretentious truths, which have been discovered by rigorous method".

For Nietzsche (1977:54) experience precedes the outcome of the experiment and so a choice is, in a sense, made blindly. Traditionally, this flies in the face of wisdom, but it is important to realise that Nietzsche's (1977:17) definition of wisdom is far from traditional: "Courageous, untroubled, mocking, violent – that is what wisdom wants to be". Traditionally, as Thau (2005:138) observes, wisdom is cautious and discerning, and

places reason above the senses, but in Nietzsche's view it is something that moves boldly and unflinchingly, taking head-on whatever struggle or trial the *will to power* demands.

The hero's redemption, which is an "existential experiment" in the *Matrix* trilogy, begins with the denial of fate. Before acting on his choice to take the red pill, Neo explains to Morpheus that he does not believe in fate because he does not like the idea that he has no control over his life (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). This perspective is particularly Nietzschean, for without total independence, which is independence from an ultimate reality as well as from the *herd morality*, one cannot claim to be authentic or even an individual (Conway 1992:7). Logically, it follows that without this authenticity the "hero" cannot be heroic, because he would not be acting independently.

With the denial of God as the absolute, for genuine purpose to be a possibility, fate must necessarily be introduced as the new absolute. Philosopher and theologian CS Lewis (1960:35) explains that most would "not want to believe that the whole universe is a mere mechanical dance of atoms", and so imagine that there must be some "great mysterious Force" that guides these atoms. Lewis (1960:35) goes on to note that this Force has no morals or mind and therefore remains impersonal. Therefore, like fate, this Force cannot be interfering like "that troublesome God" (Lewis 1960:35).

Lewis (1960:35) suggests here that this fatalistic "Life-Force" demands no accountability and is thus preferred by those who wish to make choices without having to answer to anyone. Neo, being an aspiring *Übermensch*, clings to Nietzsche's ideal, which presumes that there is categorically no absolute, and so states outright that he likes to believe that he is in control of his own life. This falls in line with Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1904:101) idea that the hero sees any event as "ancillary" in that events should be subsequent to any choice made by the hero. Indeed, this even suggests that the birth of the hero, as an event, is ancillary. Another way of describing this it is to see the philosophical distinction between *accident* and *substance*. *Substance*, or essence, is that which does not change, whereas *accident* is that which is non-essential, or, as has been suggested already, ancillary (Aquinas 1951:131). This is reminiscent of Plato's dialectic between "appearance"

and “reality”. Appearance is fleeting, whereas reality is seen as permanent. Also linked to this is Arthur Schopenhauer’s (1788-1860) (1966:1) assertion that the world we experience through our senses is mere “representation”. Therefore, the contention here, according to the Nietzschean position, is that choice is *substance* or reality, and that the consequences of that choice are *accident* or appearance.

In Emerson’s (1901:101) view, which seems to align itself with Nietzsche’s view on this subject, the hero must always lead and never follow. This perspective stands as contradictory to Lash’s (1995:6) idea that the hero’s autonomy supercedes the necessity to be an authoritative figure. It is worth bearing in mind that it is never a question of whether such “control” over destiny is an actual possibility, for such a question would pertain to a construct of truth in the Nietzschean worldview. It is not a question of whether Neo is in control of his life; it is a question of whether or not he prefers to think that he is in control. He prefers to believe that he is the maker of his own laws. On this, Nietzsche (1977:241) writes:

Can you furnish yourself with your own good and evil and hand up your own will above yourself as a law? Can you be judge of yourself and avenger of your own law? It is terrible to be alone with the judge and avenger of one’s own law. It is to be a star thrown forth into empty space and into the icy breath of solitude.

This statement concludes that, though it is possible to discard the absolute, the result of such a claim to authority has its own penalty, a penalty that the Nietzschean ought to readily accept. It is a tall order for any man to have to play the part of a god, and yet it is this very aspiration that leads Neo to choose to abandon life within the Matrix. In so choosing, he is well on the way to becoming the One, or even the *Übermensch*.

The problem of choice is presented to the viewer of the *The Matrix* in simple visual terms as a choice between a blue pill and a red pill (Figure 4), but on a more complex level it is a choice either for or against the Matrix (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

Morpheus explains that what he is offering Neo is simply an opportunity to encounter the “truth”. Once again this truth is not something that can be explained, for explanation defies the process of soteriology. In this context, truth must be experienced. To claim

knowledge without experience would be too easy, and, as Alain de Botton (2000:215) observes, Nietzsche writes to correct the belief that fulfillment must come without difficulty or not at all.



Figure 4: Morpheus presents Neo with a choice between the red pill and the blue pill, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

The use of colour in this scene is particularly pertinent with regard to Neo's choice. The red pill is symbolic of action, progression, passion, love and aggression, all of which are qualities that apply to the life of the hero. Red is also the colour of blood, which is in itself a reference to life, war, justice and sacrifice (Cirlot 1962:28). Blood, importantly, is representative of mortality, for gods do not bleed, but the hero does. Blood, therefore, is also a symbol of humanity. It is this quality of vulnerability that is the mark of the hero, for, as Tom Morris (2005:12) writes, if the hero acts without there being any risk, then the action is not heroic. Heroism implies risk. Indeed, red might even be considered the colour of heroism.¹¹ Red, in Nietzschean terms, represents the *Dionysian* principle.

The blue pill, which is cool in colour, is symbolic of passivity, timidity, conservatism, inaction, sedation and acceptance, all of which are characteristics that the hero cannot afford to have. Symbologist JE Cirlot (1962:268) notes that blue is also representative of water, which is "the mediating agent between non-formal (air and gases) and formal

¹¹ Coincidentally, Chesterton (2000:86) connects the colour red to his heroes and the colour blue to those who oppose his heroes in his novel *Manalive* (1912) when he writes: "... the decision was duly noted down by Moses [the opposition] with a blue, and by Michael [one of the heroes in the story] with a red, pencil".

(earth and solids) and, by analogy, between life and death”. This is significant in that it points to the fact that taking the blue pill will leave the subject within the simulacrum of the Matrix, where life and death are only ever mediated and never experienced in reality.¹²

Philosopher Rem Edwards (1969:28) explains that choice is primarily an action, for it involves active deliberation and not just passive resignation. Chesterton (1986:342) writes that all moral reform “must start in the active and not the passive will”. Edwards (1969:30) mentions that an active choice can only be made when there is a conflict of some sort. Where there is no conflict the choice is made for the hero; in which case, the choice would be passive. If Neo had chosen the blue pill, which is symbolic of passivity and Nietzsche’s *Apollonian* principle, the choice itself would still have been active because of the presence of conflict. This demonstrates that it is not the act of choice itself that is heroic, but rather the act of choosing according to one’s *will to power*. In other words, to fit with Nietzsche’s (1977:37) view on this active choice, the hero must choose, in a sense, according to his desire to overcome the self, even if a struggle results.

One might consider this scenario a catalyst for arguments on the philosophical problem of free will,¹³ but here is not the place for any such debate. The *Matrix* clearly suggests that ultimately mankind does in fact have the ability to choose. Even the Oracle, who has the ability to foresee events in the future, explains that she “cannot see beyond a choice [she] doesn’t understand” (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). In the end, therefore, the hero clearly has the ability to act autonomously, without having to answer to anyone but himself.

Before being freed from the Matrix, Neo is not yet a hero, and it is important to note that merely choosing the red pill does not yet make him a hero. Yet the act itself is heroic. It

¹² In the *Matrix*, however, blue does acquire an additional symbolic value: it is representative of the body, whilst green is representative of the mind and gold is representative of the spirit. This aspect of colour symbolism is discussed in Chapter Five. It is only when body, mind and spirit are united that peace is restored.

¹³ The philosophical problem of free will is essentially a debate concerning whether the outcome of history is determined, predestined, or non-specific and based purely on choice and free will.

is because of this heroic act that Neo is in fact “born”. The importance of this initial choice echoes Tom Morris’ (2005:60) view that the hero is one who believes that ultimately it is not the genetic predisposition or the personal heritage that defines the individual, but rather the choices that the individual makes. Neo’s birth into the real world highlights an important aspect of the hero myth: Neo’s birth within the Matrix was only a simulation, but his birth into the real world is, to put it simply, real. It has been noted that in order to be truly free, in the *Übermensch* sense, it is imperative that the hero be separate from the source, and here, for the first time, Neo is indeed separate from the source.

The red pill/blue pill scenario discussed above is very probably also a reference to the forbidden fruit in the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as told in the book of Genesis. It is worthwhile discussing this particular reference because of the implications it has on the Nietzschean view of choice and the *will to power*. The fruit in this biblical story may be considered to be representative of the sin of pride, but in *The Matrix*, the red pill represents more than just a single concept. In Nietzsche’s view, the active choice made by Adam and Eve is in fact heroic in exactly the same way that Neo’s act of choosing the red pill is heroic, since it is in choosing to eat the fruit that Adam and Eve become rulers over themselves. More importantly, Adam and Eve chose to face the struggle rather than accept the comfort of the *status quo* of the so-called *herd morality*. However, Adam and Eve refuse to acknowledge their actions when God confronts them; thus, while their choice may seem heroic, they display cowardice in facing the consequences of their choice.

In the red pill/blue pill scenario, Morpheus is essentially presenting what can be called a ‘sales-pitch.’ His aim is to convince Neo to change his ideological framework, to align himself with the truth of the real world. Morpheus employs subtle rhetoric that highlights positive results of choosing the red pill, whilst neglecting to mention certain hard truths about the state of the real world. In a sense, Morpheus hides behind the mask of experience in order to present a compelling, reasonable argument. The choice, which objectively might look unappealing, since the real world provides a life that is devoid of any

ease and comfort, is made to look very appealing indeed. Morpheus's role in this scene is reminiscent of the role of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. He tempts Neo to accept the red pill because he believes Neo to be the One (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). In so doing, he is in fact offering Neo more power. Neo is later to discover that the role of the One belongs to "just another system of control" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).

Chesterton writes about the incident in the Garden of Eden in such a way that it has particular relevance to this moment in the first film (in Pearce 1997:365). He explains that the promise is not just to "eat more fruit" but that in "eating more fruit" without discerning between the options available seems to promise that one would "become a god".

Chesterton continues:

It is extraordinary that humanity, which began with the apple and ended with the patent medicine,¹⁴ has not even yet become exactly like gods. It is still more extraordinary that the record ends with some extraordinary remarks to the effect that one thus pursuing the bright career of Salesmanship is condemned to crawl on his stomach and eat a great deal of dirt (in Pearce 1997:365).

In *The Matrix*, the viewer is informed that Morpheus believes his destiny is to "find the One" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999), and as a result it is clear that Morpheus has a great deal invested in Neo's decision. If Neo chooses the red pill and proves himself to be the One, then consequently Morpheus realises his own destiny. Morpheus's display of humility is Nietzschean in this case in that this is based on the *will to power*, or, in other words, founded on a selfish motivation. Morpheus is arguably concerned with his own ambition, which is to be the one who finds the One. However, if this is false humility, Morpheus is, to paraphrase Chesterton's words, merely crawling around on his stomach and eating a lot of dirt. This reading of Morpheus' actions is typically Nietzschean, since it seeks the selfish motivation behind any altruistic action. However, it

¹⁴ It is a coincidence, but an interesting one, that Chesterton puts the choice of the fruit in the Garden of Eden on par with a choice for which medication to take, for indeed that is the very comparison that is being made in this scene in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

needs to be noted that the *Matrix* films do not depict Morpheus as one who embraces the *will to power*, but rather as someone who truly cares for the salvation of humankind.

It seems apparent that in order for the hero to be able to make a choice in this case he must believe that the *will to choose* is his. He cannot believe that Morpheus's 'sales-pitch' is just "another system of control", for if that were true then Neo would have no authentic, autonomous *will to power*. Conway (1992:7) explains that the Nietzschean ideal is to "freely choose" and to "become more important than what is chosen".

According to Edwards (1969:4), any active choice is always instigated by some clear motivation. Keeping in mind what has already been said, one can deduce that Nietzsche places greater importance on what motivates a choice than on what one chooses.

Nietzsche explains that choice is ultimately tied to one's perception of pain and pleasure (in de Botton 2000:214). If both are impersonal, which he suggests is the case, then again what matters is the impetus behind the choice, even the choice itself, rather than the objective of such a choice.

Nietzsche (1977:71) argues that man cannot be made accountable for anything. This is because his view is that man is not accountable for his nature and therefore cannot be accountable for his motives, "nor for his actions, nor for the effects he produces" (Nietzsche 1977:71). This appears to contradict his idea that the motivation for a choice matters above the objective of a choice, but in fact it does not. The accountability mentioned above pertains to an external measurement of 'good' or 'evil'. However, the impetus behind the *heroic choice* is dependant not on the external, but rather on the internal *will to power*. In other words, man is accountable to himself and to no other. Therefore, according to this view, what makes Neo heroic in his initial choice is dependant more on his own view of himself than on the perspective of the viewer.

The red pill/blue pill scenario is also reminiscent of the mythological tale of the *Choice of Hercules* (Baldwin 1914:27). The story tells of how Hercules is forced to choose a guide for his heroic journey. The choice is between a beautiful, persuasive lady named Pleasure, who offers Hercules anything his heart desires, and a plain lady named Labour

– known also as Virtue – who explains that she has nothing to offer Hercules, “save that which he will win with his own strength” (Baldwin 1914:28). Pleasure, like the blue pill, offers that which is known; Labour, like the red pill, offers that which is unknown. Pleasure offers the illusion of achievement, whilst Labour offers genuine achievement. Hercules’ choice highlights Nietzsche’s (1977:37) claim that the hero is one who takes it upon himself to “rejoice in his strength”. The hero wants to face the struggle in order to win his destiny by his own strength. Perhaps the defining difference between what Pleasure offers and what Labour offers pertains to the idea of purpose. Pleasure offers something that is significant in and of itself, whereas Labour offers a means to an end. At the conclusion of this story, Hercules chooses Labour as his guide (Baldwin 1914:28). In the same way, it is Neo’s desire for a self-defined purpose that determines his initial *heroic choice*.

3.3 The *heroic choice* according to Chesterton

It has been noted that in the Nietzschean view of choice the question of whether control over destiny is an actual possibility is never addressed, for such a question would pertain to a construct of truth. It is therefore not a question of whether Neo is in control of his life, but rather a question of whether or not he prefers to believe that he is in control. In other words, the existence of an absolute like fate is irrelevant in the Nietzschean view, since such a fact would, in Nietzsche’s mind, conflict with the free will of the hero. However, it is clear that Neo is represented as the embodiment of free will, which is unlike the villain, Smith,¹⁵ who is represented as the embodiment of determinism, fatalism and even nihilism.

Chesterton (2003:55) insists that heroic vision is “stereoscopic, like his physical sight: he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that”. Thus, he continues, it is possible to believe that fate and free will can coexist without clashing: that is, there is

¹⁵ The name Smith, being the most common English surname, is also representative of the idea of the *everyman*. This is noteworthy especially considering the fact that Smith is the exact opposite of Neo, who also functions as the everyman (see the discussion in the following chapter). However, Smith’s name is also representative of the *herd morality* that Neo must destroy (see Chapter Five).

a fixed, or determined outcome that is reliant on free will (Chesterton 2003:55). According to this view, Neo is both the hero because he chooses to be, and because it is his destiny. Fate cannot be separated from free will in the way that Nietzsche has separated the two, for that would imply one of two things: either that the hero has the ability to act completely autonomously, or that the hero does not have the ability to make any sort of choice. The thing that unites this paradoxical meeting of fate and free will is the passage of time, since a choice and the outcome of that choice occur at different periods in time.¹⁶

Free will, or the ability to choose, is an inherent human characteristic according to Chesterton (1908:94), but contrary to Nietzsche, Chesterton sees a choice as heroic not if it is made in accordance with one's *will to power*, but rather if it is made in accordance with some absolute external, ethical ideal. This is not to say that the choice should be impersonal or even entirely objective, for Chesterton (1993:104) holds that for anything to be perfect, it needs to be personal. What is implied is that any choice made ought to be measured against something other than itself. In other words, if one makes a choice, and consciously only measures that choice against one's own *will to power*, the choice remains selfish and therefore cannot be considered heroic.

The ideal measure of the *heroic choice* in Chesterton's view pertains to the hero's duty to his fellowman (Chesterton 1909:68). Duty, therefore, becomes the first external moral ideal against which the heroic status of the choice is measured. Chesterton (1909:68) explains that, "the duty towards humanity may often take the form of some choice which is personal or even pleasurable". But he goes on to explain that a choice based purely on such a motivation could lead to "the most repulsive experience" if one's personal taste is so inclined. In other words, where personal taste alone dictates choice, the hero has the option of abandoning the cause. This outlook stands in contrast to Nietzsche's *perspectivism*, since it places duty over and above the *will to power*, and in so doing places the self in a submissive rather than in an assertive position.

¹⁶ Michael Grant (1989:68) observes that it is not uncommon for fate and free will to exist in the minds of people. He suggests that it is inevitably a contraction that is accepted even if it is not fully understood.

However, it must be noted that submission to duty is merely the starting point for a heroic action, for duty is a concept that is universally applied, and therefore expected of all people and not just the hero. There is a second external moral ideal against which the heroic status of the choice is measured, namely love. Love is that which calls the hero beyond mere duty. Rebecca Housel (2005:86) maintains that it is precisely in going beyond the call of duty that an action becomes heroic.

Chesterton (1909:68) suggests that if taste were the primary concern, one could love according to one's discretion, and so, logically, also hate according to one's discretion. Hatred, in Chesterton's view is un-heroic, and therefore he suggests that one should be concerned not with "one's duty towards humanity, but one's duty towards one's neighbour" (Chesterton 1909:68). The hero should not love his neighbour because of the sort of person he is, but simply "because he is there. He is the sample of humanity which is actually given to us. Precisely because he may be anybody he is everybody."¹⁷ He is a symbol because he is an accident" (Chesterton 1909:68). Chesterton here proposes that the absolute external ideal is a general symbol rather than a specific detail. It is a rule, rather than an exception. And precisely because it is a general rule, it can be applied in specific terms. Another assertion made by Chesterton (1908:98) in this regard is that all injustice begins in the mind of the individual. This assertion is made under the assumption that justice, which to a great degree concerns both duty and love, is an external truth by which the choices of the individual can be measured. Felix Tallon and Jerry Walls (2005:216) intimate that the belief that there is no ultimate justice opposes any inclination toward self-sacrifice, and therefore justice needs to be in place in order for heroism to be a possibility.

Nietzsche (1977:71) argues that human beings are not responsible for their natures and therefore cannot be held accountable for their motives and actions, nor for the consequences of those actions. Indeed, Nietzsche (1977:72) insists that this "error of accountability" rests on the "error of freedom of will". This stands in stark contrast to

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard (1995:192) argues that the human life ought to be lived as a life of "universal love". That is to say that we should love our neighbours and that no one should be excluded from the category of 'neighbour.'

Chesterton's arguments. For such a premise to be true, it follows that any form of free will would be a logical impossibility. Here again, Nietzsche appears to contradict himself: on one hand, it has been seen that he denies the existence of fate, and then on the other hand he denies free will. It can be argued, however, that Nietzsche's intention is simply to demonstrate his belief in the fluidity of truth.

The hero's existence relies almost entirely on the supposition that the freedom of choice is a reality. Without such a reality, the actions of the hero are merely mechanical accidents, without substance or intention; and without intention there can be no purpose. In other words, to deny free will is to deny the possibility of the hero's existence.

In establishing the importance of free will, one must allow for the likelihood that the status of the hero is not inadvertent. Chesterton (1908:35) supposes that any position of power is something that is chosen deliberately. Therefore it can be said that Neo is in the position of being the hero precisely because of a decision made in favour of that position. This is not to say that the hero chooses to be the hero, but rather that the hero is one who chooses to act in a way that is heroic. The *Matrix* films support this view. Neo, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) believes at first that he is not the One, because he does not believe that he could be. Only when he has made a definite *heroic choice* – the choice to save Morpheus from the Agents in the Matrix – does he take on the role of being the hero. He becomes the hero by decision rather than by default.

One of the ideas that Nietzsche (1977:47) holds to is that pain is “the ultimate liberator of the spirit”. This indicates that one cannot achieve the autonomy of the *Übermensch* without the experience of pain. Nietzsche (1977:48) does not suggest that pain “improves” the individual, but that it does “deepen” the individual. Pain helps the individual to transcend his experience, to be master over his experience. Pain is personal. Chesterton echoes this view, saying that both pain and pleasure are personal since they affect one personally (in Pearce 1996:367). However, pain and pleasure are aspects of a much larger whole. Chesterton suggests that pain is a means to prove the finitude of the human being when he writes that “there is no cure for the nightmare of omnipotence except pain, because it

is the one thing that man knows he would not tolerate if he could control it” (in Pearce 1996:367). One might, as Nietzsche would argue, overcome many things, but in Chesterton’s view, pain communicates the idea that one can never have complete control, or complete power. Once again, Chesterton’s point of departure is an external ideal. The hero does not act to dominate experience, but rather to act according to a submissive choice. The actions of the hero are subservient to a higher ideal, which supports the greater good of his people.

Chesterton (2002:66) points out that to “worship the will is the negation of the will”; that is to say, “to admire mere choice is to refuse to choose”. The *will to power*, in Chesterton’s view (2003:66) is merely the “will to anything”. In Chesterton’s (2003:66) mind it seems nonsensical to admire will in general, “because the essence of will is that it is particular”. Chesterton (2003:66) continues this attack on Nietzsche’s logic:

You can praise an action by saying that it is calculated to bring pleasure or pain to discover truth or to save the soul. But you cannot praise an action because it shows will; for to say that is merely to say that it is an action. By this praise of will you cannot really choose one course as better than another. And yet choosing one course as better than another is the very definition of the will you are praising.

Finally, as regards Chesterton’s view on the *will to power*, it needs to be observed that the *will to power* is based on a supreme act of egoism. And yet, it appears that Nietzsche denies his own egoism “by preaching it” (Chesterton 2002:64). Chesterton (2002:64) notes that “[t]o preach anything is to give it away. To preach egoism is to practice altruism”. This unintended paradox fits well within the narrative of the *Matrix*, since Neo, when finally asserting his position as the One, is in fact asserting his vocation to serve humankind. In proclaiming his willingness to stand above the rest of humankind, the hero, whether wittingly or unwittingly, asserts his position as a servant.

Apart from the relevance of examining what the hero chooses to be in favour of, it is important to examine what the hero chooses to stand against. *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) does not go into great detail about the life of Neo before his birth into the real world, but what is represented in the film has a particular relevance to

the *heroic choice*. The film presents the viewer with a critique of life within the Matrix in the form of a visual representation of a generic office space (Figure 5). This critique speaks directly to the viewer by means of an interior paradox. Clover (2004:69) explains:

We'd like to suppose ourselves to be liberated rebels, fighting for power, but for the duration of the film we can't help but resemble the docile laborers, each of us enclosed in our own chair, hooked to the Coke and popcorn machine, consuming digitized and mediated images that sing to us our own autonomy while returning our labor to the economy one dollar at a time.



Figure 5: The office space shown in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

The office space represented in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) is divided into cubicles or cells of equal size. These cubicles are neat to the extreme and each is equipped with two filing cabinets, one or two files on top of each cabinet, and a desktop computer, which is the only thing to be found on each spotless, white desk (Figure 3). This standardised workspace is reminiscent of Fordism, which requires what Fred Thompson (2005:1) calls the “perfect interchangeability of parts” which is only possible through standardisation. In other words, the office space is merely a machine and the assembly line of workers merely parts in that machine. People are seen only in terms of their function rather than in terms of their existence; people are seen as human *doings* rather than as human *beings*.

The aim of the modernist aesthetic of the office space in the Matrix is to show a work environment devoid of personality, which conveys the idea that people have been

dehumanised. In addition, this office is a clear example of how space can be controlled for the purpose of enforcing an ideology. Space is clearly linked to ideas of power and identity (Massey & Jess 1995:229). Indeed, the office space in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) might be considered a semiotic code representing ideological restriction and even imprisonment. This controlled space is reminiscent of the idea of a prison design – called a *Panopticon* (Figure 6) – suggested by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1842), the philosopher who founded the utilitarian school of thought. However, the office space is only the façade. The *Panopticon's* cylindrical layout is more closely reflected in the layout of the structures that house the pods that human beings are kept in by the machines in the *Matrix* trilogy (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) (Figure 7).

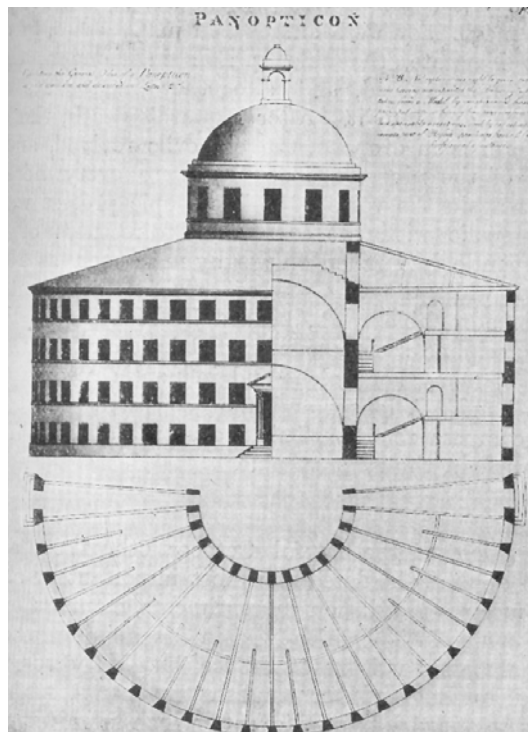


Figure 6: Blueprint for the *Panopticon* (1791) by Jeremy Bentham ([sa]).

Bentham argues that space should be designed to control ‘prisoners’ through isolation and surveillance (in McGrath 2004:222). This analogy between the office space and a prison is fitting because human beings are represented in the *Matrix* as slaves to the

machines.¹⁸ This idea of controlling space is discussed by Michel Foucault to critique indifference to diversity:

Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen by his supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never the subject of communication (in McGrath 2004:222).



Figure 7: The *Panopticon*-like structures seen in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

Implied here is the idea that when space is controlled, people are controlled. The individuality of the office worker is seen by those in power to be irrelevant and unnecessary. Doreen Massey (1995:230) holds that people consider their connection to a specific place as a significant aspect of their identity. In other words, perception of identity is linked to the material. To disregard the value of the material is to negate the value of the identity of the individual.

This office space is presented as a negative, not only because it is system within the Matrix, but also, perhaps more importantly, because it is a predictable system. This is not to say that life within the Matrix is uncomfortable, for, as Clover (2004:69) observes, the Matrix appears to be a “utopia of predictability”. The office space is comfortable in many ways, since it meets the expectations of the *status quo* (Clover 2004:69). This

¹⁸ The office space is discussed in Chapter Five in relation to how it symbolises not only imprisonment, but also alienation and death.

comfortable *status quo* stands as a clear opposition to Nietzsche's ideology, which places a great deal of emphasis on the aspiration to make life and labour into a work of art (Ku 2003:93). Such an aspiration cannot be achieved in an environment of perceived or actual slavery.

It is this world – the world of controlled space and predictable living – that Neo rejects. This rebellion against life within the Matrix shows not only the hero's preference for freedom from external constraint, but also the hero's attitude towards monotony. This raises a question concerning whether monotony is automatically anti-heroic. Chesterton (2002:93) argues that the modernist assumption that if something is repeated like clock-work then it is automatically dead or at least opposed to a free life, is incorrect. He writes:

For the variation in human affairs is generally brought into them, not by life, but by death; by the dying down or breaking of their strength or desire. A man varies his movements because of some slight element of failure or fatigue. He gets into an omnibus because he is tired of walking; or he walks because he is tired of sitting still. The very speed and ecstasy of his life would have the stillness of death (Chesterton 2002a:93).

Chesterton (2002:94) points out that monotony, as much as variation, is not necessarily owing to automatic necessity, but is in fact a matter of choice. Note that Chesterton is not praising monotony, he is simply pointing out that monotony is not necessarily negative, as Neo and his co-revolutionaries see it. However, monotony does become negative the moment it overrides personal choice and takes away the freedom of the human being. Thus, in the case of the Matrix, monotony is anti-heroic, but not in and of itself. It relies on the fact that the Matrix is a simulacrum for its anti-heroic status.

When Neo chooses the red pill a chain reaction begins that will allow him to be born into the real world. In a sense, he dies to the life he has lived within the simulacrum of the Matrix in order to be reborn. Firstly, he begins to perceive the unreality of the world has been living in; he realises the hyperreality of the Matrix: he sees a mirror, which ordinarily would appear to be solid, turn into a viscous liquid (Figure 8). Following this, Neo wakes up from the dream-world that is the Matrix, and finds himself in the real world; he

is in a pod, still plugged into the Matrix (Figure 9). He is soon unplugged by a machine and expelled from the Matrix via a chute, and he lands in a pool of liquid matter (Figure 10).



Figure 8: A solid mirror appears to turn into a liquid, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).



Figure 9: Neo inside a pod, still plugged into the Matrix, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

Neo's birth into the real world is significant in a few respects. Firstly, his birth into the real world is in many ways reminiscent of any natural birth: it is both messy and miraculous. Also of some significance is the fact that Neo enters the real world bald, naked and helpless. Although a grown man in body, Neo enters the real world as a baby. Neo's nakedness, or *nuditas naturalis*, is perhaps indicative of purity and innocence since he

has, of yet, no understanding of his heroic calling (Cirlot 1962:219; Hall 1974:226). Neo's nakedness is also symbolic of the naked truth, which he has just been exposed to for the first time: the naked reality (Hall 1974:226).



Figure 10: Neo, bald, naked and helpless in a pool of liquid matter, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

Mythologist Otto Rank (1952:57) explains that, according to traditional hero myths, the hero is born into a world that has heard a prophecy of his future greatness. According to these myths, the hero is expelled in some way, usually by the father figure in the story, who in the case of the *Matrix* trilogy is the Architect (Rank 1952:57). Following this, the hero is “surrendered to the water” where he is rescued by lowly people (Rank 1952:57). This analysis is particularly true of Moses, the biblical hero, and Perseus, the Greek mythological hero. Neo is fished out of the water by the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* in much the same way that Perseus is fished out of the water by Dictis (Padilla 2004:102) (Figure 11). This echoes Edward Tylor’s argument that traditionally, after the hero and his calling has been exposed at birth, he is saved by other humans (in Segal 2000:12).

The question arises whether it is significant that Neo is born in this manner. Is it important to have a hero who at the beginning of his journey appears to be weak and feeble? Chesterton notes (1993:172):

The notion of a hero appearing, like Pallas from the brain of Zeus, mature and without a mother, is obviously the very opposite of the idea of a god

being born like an ordinary baby and entirely dependant on a mother. Which-
ever ideal we might prefer, we should surely see that they are contrary ideas.



Figure 11: Neo, fished out of the water by the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

This highlights a simple aspect of the birth of the hero that ought not to be overlooked. The hero's journey begins by displaying his weakness, precisely because the life of the hero is a process.

This chapter has discussed the beginning of that process, starting with an exploration of the birth of the hero as it is represented both in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy. The role of the matriarch and the relationship between the hero and the mother-figure has been established in order to point out how it affects the freedom of the hero. It has been noted that the *heroic choice* is central to the actions of the hero, both as it relates to the motivation of the hero and to the consequences of the *heroic choice*. The overview of the birth of the hero in mythology reinforced this fact. Following this, Nietzsche's and Chesterton's respective views on the *heroic choice* were discussed.

It was emphasised that for Nietzsche a struggle is essential to the *heroic choice*. In addition, the importance of experiential knowledge, soteriology, and the role of the hero's autonomous *will to power* in the Nietzschean worldview were elaborated upon. Following this, the Chestertonian prioritising of subservience and servanthood over freedom and

the *will to power* was made evident. The role of duty and love and their service of justice in Chesterton's philosophy were also demonstrated through the above discussion.

It needs to be mentioned that the physical, mental and spiritual strength of the hero are not achieved in the instant of birth. In the *Matrix* trilogy, the hero is represented first and foremost as human, and not as a god. It is only through a process that the hero achieves what seems to be a divine status. It is to this process that this study now turns.

CHAPTER 4

THE LIFE OF THE HERO

The second phase in the existence of the hero is referred to in this study as the *life of the hero*. The term existence refers to all aspects of the hero's being, and encompasses all three phases: birth, life and death. This chapter begins with an overview of the life of the hero as it is presented in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy, and especially refers to the heroic states of limitation and levitation¹ as they relate to the ethical life of the hero in the context of his community. This chapter refers to both Nietzsche's and Chesterton's notions surrounding these states of being. Following this overview there is an examination of masks and mirrors, both as signifiers in the *Matrix* trilogy and as analogies used in mythology and in Nietzsche's writings. Finally, this chapter examines Chesterton's views on the relationship between people and machines, and especially between the hero and machines. Visual and narrative symbolism in the *Matrix* trilogy is used where necessary to reinforce the discussion.

4.1 Limitation and levitation

Philosopher Mark Stucky (2005:1) observes that the *Matrix* trilogy refers frequently to Christology, and that this use of a "Christ-figure motif" goes beyond superficial plot enhancements. Stucky (2005:1) suggests that Neo's messianic growth, both in self-awareness and power, and "his eventual bringing of salvation to humanity" outline the essential plot of the *Matrix* trilogy. This consideration points to Aristotle's (384-322 BC) (1895:15) idea that plot, which can be defined as the arrangement of incidents, is guided or driven by motivated actions. These actions are ultimately determined by character, and character, as was suggested in the previous chapter, is determined by the *heroic choice*. It must be noted, however, that character and choice often operate simultaneously, with

¹ Levitation is used here to refer to the hero's ability to fly by means of supernatural powers. It is noted that the traditional meaning of the word refers only to a hovering suspension in the air. It is used here to emphasise the fact that Neo's ability to fly is not the same as the natural ability that birds have to fly. Neo is able to fly because he acts according to his *will to power*; he asserts his authority over the "natural" laws that govern the Matrix.

choice determining character in some instances, and with character determining choice in others (Aristotle 1895:17).

The life of the hero is embodied in the dialogue between two things: character and plot. This dialogue can best be described as a journey that is primarily metaphorical and allegorical, but also physical. It is about being and becoming. It is a process that ultimately leads the hero to a fuller knowledge of himself, and a greater understanding of his role in the world in which he finds himself. The outcome of this heroic journey is significant, for, as Robert Segal (2000:132) asserts, without such self-knowledge, any heroic act remains merely accidental, devoid of substance or meaning. It is also significant to note that the outcome of the heroic journey or quest is never achieved with any sort of ease (Grant 1989:51).

The hero's journey is also something greatly influenced by his context and circumstances. Although it can be argued that the hero does act autonomously on many occasions, it is true that many of his decisions are made because he is not in control of the circumstances around him. If he were in control there would be no need for his actions to be heroic. John Lash (1995:6) writes that the hero displays autonomy but not authority; it is for this reason that his choices are so greatly affected by his context. Chesterton (1986:143) explains that birth exposes the individual to a world "which is incalculable", a world "which has its own strange laws". This world remains incalculable because always hidden beneath the story of the hero's journey is the idea that this hero may never have existed. However, Chesterton (1986:143) does contend that if one particular hero did not exist, another hero would. That is to say, the autonomy of the hero is not absolute, for the hero's existence is not absolute. If the hero is not responsible for his existence, he cannot be considered completely autonomous:

A man has control over many things in his life; he has control over enough things to be the hero of a [story]. But if he had control over everything, there would be so much hero that there would be no [story] ... The thing that makes life romantic and full of fiery possibilities is the existence of these great plain limitations which force all of us to meet the things we do not like or do not expect (Chesterton 1986:144).

Chesterton's argument here, that the hero must be in control over only a limited number of things, complies with Aristotle's (1895:16) assertion that character is secondary to plot. It can be said that the hero has liberty, but that this freedom is not without its limitations. Chesterton (1986: 243) notes that the very actions of the hero confirm the idea of limitation: "To desire action is to desire limitation". That is to say, to affirm one thing is to reject all else; to affirm the idea that some truth exists is to assert the exclusion of lies. In this sense, the hero cannot avoid asserting some sort of standard of what is heroic; to do otherwise would be un-heroic:

You can free things from alien or accidental laws, but not from laws of their own nature. You may free a tiger from his bars; but do not free him from his stripes. Do not free a camel of the burden of his hump: you may be freeing him from being a camel. Do not go about as a demagogue, encouraging triangles to break out of the prison of their three sides. If a triangle breaks out of its three sides, its life comes to a lamentable end. Somebody wrote a work called "The Loves of the Triangles"; I never read it, but I am sure that if triangles ever were loved, they were loved for being triangular (Chesterton 1986:244).

Chesterton sees the heroic vision as an artistic one, linking to Nietzsche's idea that art is the lie that exposes the truth. Chesterton (1986:243) writes that it is "impossible to be an artist and not care for laws or limits. Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame". The French postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) (1987:19) argues that while limitation is essential to the physical art object, interpretation cannot be bound to such an essence. Interpretation "interferes with solid structures" since it transcends material essences (Derrida 1987:19). To draw from what was mentioned in the previous chapter, essence is tied to *substance*, whereas interpretation is tied to *accident*. Thus, interpretation can be aligned to both the Nietzschean and the Chestertonian world-views, since art is both the "lie that exposes truth" and the truth of limitation that exposes the lie of absolute freedom.

These limitations, or laws, are defined by the community of people that the hero is brought up in, as well as by the conditions in which this community of people lives. The hero never seeks to dominate those people who live in this immediate community. Lash (1995:6) writes that heroes will fight their equals, or take on horrific adversaries, "but to

challenge or overpower ordinary people is beneath them”. Nietzsche (1989:131) observes that the context of the community has the potential to be an unnecessary limitation on the individual if it imposes the so-called “deception” of the *herd morality*. Indeed, Nietzsche (1989: 187) equates such limitation with sheer stupidity.

This, perhaps, would be Nietzsche’s reason for the hero’s disinterest in challenging the power of ordinary people: it is their concern for the *herd morality* that Nietzsche abhors. This stance is clearly anti-heroic since it precludes the possibility that the hero’s purpose is to redeem his people. However, it should be noted that Nietzsche allows for this initial subservience to a community and even to the *herd morality* since he believes it is the beginning of what he calls the “metamorphosis of the spirit” (in Steiner 1960:71). Once this metamorphosis is complete, the hero is able to step outside the limitations placed on him by his community and become a fully-fledged *Übermensch*.

It is worth citing Immanuel Kant’s position on this issue: according to him, the aim of morality is to contribute to the flourishing of both the individual and the community (in Taliaferro & Lindahl-Urben 2005:71). This is called a “kingdom of ends” in which the individual is free to act in accordance with the intrinsic value of other people (Taliaferro & Lindahl-Urben 2005:71). A further implication of this contention is that people ought to be treated as ends in themselves and never as a means to an end. According to Joseph Campbell (1973:383), the heroic position asserts that the fullness of humanity lies with “the body of humanity as a whole” and not solely in the lives of individuals. Once again, the concern of justice is hinted at: justice is that which seeks to render or administer what is deserved or needed by others (Aquinas 1951:342); the hero is one who seeks to mete out that justice.

After the birth of the hero, according to a pattern observed by Joseph Campbell, the hero is “spirited away” from his original home and raised by foster parents in a foreign country (in Segal 2000:24). Campbell’s pattern remains a generalisation and not a rule, yet proves to be accurate in describing the beginnings of such mythological heroes as Oedipus and Perseus. This pattern also applies to Neo in the *Matrix* trilogy: he is ‘spirited

away' from his original country, which is the Matrix, and taught to learn about his role as the hero – the One – in the foreign context of the real world (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

As well as beginning his journey within a context with fixed limitations, the hero begins his journey as an outsider. The hero is foreign both to his home world and to the world into which he has been adopted (Segal 2000:25). Neo is a clear example of this idea. He is an outsider both to the Matrix, since he has been expelled from it, and to the real world, since he is new to it. To state that the hero is an outsider is to imply that there is an inside, which implies a delineation of what it means to be inside. Being 'inside' in Nietzschean terms implies an adherence to the *herd morality*, and therefore, at least in Nietzsche's view, being 'outside' is preferable; according to Nietzsche (1977:102), "[m]orality is the herd instinct of the individual". Chesterton (1986:362) explains that by this philosophy the "outer ring is obviously artistic and emancipated; its despair is within". Here Chesterton (1986:362) notes that, though being an outsider to absolute truth is preferable to Nietzsche, there is still some sort of existential epicentre from which pessimism springs forth. Indeed, even though Neo is accepted as the One, he remains an outsider in the sense that the burden of the task set before him – to redeem humankind – remains his alone. This fact is highlighted in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b) when the Oracle informs Neo that if he does not find a way to bring about some sort of peace treaty between humans and machines, "there may be no tomorrow for any [one]". The Oracle tells Neo that when he is fighting his final battle, "the future of both worlds will be in [his] hands" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

Throughout the *Matrix* trilogy there are references to the time that Neo spends alone deliberating the course of action he should take. Reference is also made to the fact that he does not sleep when all others in his community are sleeping.² For the hero to be able to stand apart, or above, the rest of humankind, it seems that it is necessary for him to be

² This may be a reference to Jesus in the New Testament, who stays awake to pray before he is arrested and taken to trial before his crucifixion. All the while, his disciples sleep, oblivious of the troubles they are about to face (Luke 22:29-46). This comparison between the hero being 'awake' and his community being 'asleep' is metaphorical: the hero is aware and enlightened while his community is incognizant and unenlightened.

regarded as separate. This status of the hero as outsider is common to Hebrew tradition: the hero is one who stands against the *herd morality*, or rather – in biblical terms – the *herd immorality*. Such biblical heroes as Moses, Elijah, Ezra, Daniel and Jesus are all those who often very literally stand apart from their communities in order to assert their adherence to a higher moral and divine law. Aeon Skoble (2005:38) remarks that this ‘standing apart’ is equivalent to the Olympian perspective whereby a person “places himself above all others as a judge concerning how and whether they should live”. Ultimately, however, it is left to the community, rather than the hero, to choose to follow or reject this judgment.

Neo, however, ought not to be seen only as an outsider, for he is only really an outsider with regard to the abilities he displays when he is inside the Matrix. Outside the Matrix, in the real world, Neo is an ordinary human being. People perceive him simultaneously as uniquely the One and as an ordinary man. Thus, Neo reflects Elliot Magin’s idea that the “superhero is Everyman” (in Tallon & Walls 2005:210). Although the hero may be seen as an outsider he remains the representative of those who are on the inside; it is his task to fight on behalf of his community, and thus the hero represents his community (Segal 2000:26). In a sense, he *is* his community: his successes and failures are the successes and failures of his community.

Lash (1995:9) writes that the *Dionysian* heroic ideal stands outside only to those who “hold to the clear rule of Apollonian rationality”. The corollary of this is that the *Apollonian* heroic ideal stands outside only to those who hold to the more liberal *Dionysian* heroic idea. Neo is more *Apollonian* as a hero in this regard, and therefore less in line with Nietzsche’s ideal hero than with Chesterton’s. The reason for this is that Neo relies more on the strength of his mind than on his physicality. The battles that Neo fights in the Matrix are battles of the mind of the man versus the mind of the machine. In fact, the physical strength of the hero is for all practical purposes irrelevant to his life as the hero. However, in the *Matrix* trilogy, Neo’s mental prowess is represented by physical power; his quickness of thought is represented as quickness of physical movement. Freedom of thought is expressed as the expression of strength (Nietzsche 1977:115).

This particular idea is expressed clearly in a scene in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a) where Neo is required to fight the Oracle's bodyguard, Seraph – the one who “protect[s] that which matters most” (Figure 12). Following this fight, Seraph explains why he had to fight Neo:

Seraph: The Oracle has many enemies. I had to be sure.
Neo: Of what?
Seraph: That you are the One.
Neo: You could have just asked.
Seraph: No. You do not surely know someone until you fight them
(Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).



Figure 12: Neo fights Seraph, in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).

Seraph is representative of a guardian angel. In *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), Neo is able to perceive this fact, since Seraph appears to have angelic form (Figure 13). Indeed, Seraph's name refers to a specific angelic being that is most often associated with light, valour in battle, and purity. The significance of this is realised when one considers the fact that this encounter between Neo and Seraph is reminiscent of the battle between Jacob and the angel at Peniel that is described in Genesis 32:

Jacob was left alone; and [an angel]³ wrestled with him until daybreak. Then the [angel] saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip

³ The passage in Genesis 32:24-28 describes the fight as one between Jacob and “a man”. It is only towards the end of the passage that the supernatural nature of this man is made known, and even then it is not clear

socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then the [angel] said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking”. But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me”. So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob”. Then the [angel] said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel – which means he who strives with God – for you have fought with God and with people, and have prevailed.



Figure 13: Seraph as he appears to Neo in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).

Both battles, between Neo and Seraph, and between Jacob and the angel, are battles of the will and of the mind. Neo’s will is to see the Oracle, and thus deems it necessary to fight against Seraph. Jacob wishes to be blessed, and therefore deems it necessary to fight against the angel. In both cases, it is the will of the mortal that impresses the divine figure. Jean-Paul Kauffmann (2001:148), in his book on Eugène Delacroix’s (1798-1863) painting *The struggle with the angel* (1854-1861),⁴ notes that the struggle between the mortal and the angel gives the impression of “something unfinished”; it is incidental rather than instrumental. Indeed, even in the *Matrix*, there seems to be an awareness that the story must include both events of great significance and events of lesser significance.

that the fight is between Jacob and an angel. It is only in Hosea 12:4 that the Bible indicates that the fight was between a mortal and an angel, and not just between two mortals. However, some see the angel in this passage as the pre-incarnate Christ, since Jacob has “fought with *God* ... and prevailed” (emphasis added).

⁴ Delacroix’s painting is also known as *Jacob wrestling with the angel* (Figure 14), and is frequently used as a Romantic metaphor for the artist’s struggle with his own creativity. It is also used as a metaphor in Judaism for the idea of wrestling with the meaning of a scriptural text (Bell 2005:69).



Figure 14. Eugène Delacroix, *Jacob wrestling with the angel* (1854-1861).
Oil and wax on plaster, 751 x 485 cm
Saint-Sulpice, Paris (Singletary 2004).

A second feature of Nietzsche's above-mentioned *metamorphosis of the spirit* pertains to the hero's desire to become the master of his own world (Steiner 1960:71). The hero must in some way free himself from his subservience to the *herd morality*. In *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999), a large part of what might be termed Neo's hero training, or initiation, is concerned with the process of 'freeing the mind'. Above it is argued that the hero is not above his circumstances, and indeed, this process of freeing the mind is concerned with being released from what Chesterton (1986:333) terms "the tyranny of circumstance". This idea is pivotal to an understanding of Chesterton's (1986:394) worldview:

Man has something in him always which is not conquered by conditions.
Yes, there is a liberty that has never been chained. There is a liberty that has made men happy in dungeons, as it may make them happy in slums. It is the liberty of the mind.

The necessity of the liberation of the mind presupposes a key, albeit obvious, idea: namely that the present circumstances of the hero are less than desirable (South 2005:92). Born out of this idea is the notion that the hero must pay attention to his own desires in order to escape this undesirable condition (South 2005:92). This implies that the liberty of the mind begins with the *desire* for the liberty of the mind.

Nietzsche (1977:81) understands that ultimately true liberty is only attained through the liberty of the mind; thus, he writes that when “we are in a prison, we can only *dream* ourselves free, not *make* ourselves free”. Elsewhere Nietzsche (1977:91) writes:

Free-doers are at a disadvantage compared with freethinkers because people suffer more obviously from the consequences of deeds than from those of thoughts. If one considers, however, that both the one and the other are in search of gratification, and that in the case of the freethinker the mere thinking through and enunciation of forbidden things provides this gratification, both are on an equal footing with regard to motive.

Nietzsche (1977:91) continues that the one who overthrows an “existing law of custom” is regarded as a good man if the overthrowing of the law becomes the new norm. It is suggested that the revolt against the *status quo* results in the forming of new values (Nietzsche 1977:112). However, if the overturning of a law is not a permanent change, the action is not seen to be heroic. In other words, the freethinker is one who overthrows existing laws with a result that appears to be permanent. In Nietzsche’s (1977:122) view no morality has value in itself; its perceived value lies in effects that are long-lasting. This is not to say that one must necessarily agree with the new freedom of the mind – a notion that has its roots in Gnosticism – since the freedom of the mind makes a significant impact on the actions of the individual. Here it must be noted that the *Matrix* trilogy does not agree with Nietzsche on this point. Nietzsche appears to separate body and mind, but the *Matrix* trilogy makes it clear that the body cannot live without the mind; which is to say that actions necessarily follow thoughts (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). In other words, the free-doer and the freethinker are one and the same person.

Chesterton (1986:333) suggests that freedom from the *tyranny of circumstance*, which begins with the liberation of the mind, only comes through a belief in miracles. In simple terms, the hero, according both to tradition and to the text of the *Matrix* trilogy, must perform great acts that defy the physical world. Overcoming the *tyranny of circumstance* must take place before the hero can take on humankind's adversary, which in the case of the *Matrix* trilogy is the machine world. This belief in miracles, which by definition is a belief in the impossible, might be said to pertain to the third and final aspect of Nietzsche's *metamorphosis of the spirit*, in which the individual submits himself to a new self-created rule in which impossibilities are possible (Steiner 1960:71). The hero no longer has to ask what rule is acceptable, but simply acts according to his *will to power* and follows only his own ego (Steiner 1960:71). In *The Matrix*, Morpheus speaks to Neo about this freeing of the mind: "I am trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You're the one who has to walk through it" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). This necessitates the fact that the hero can easily learn about the freeing of the mind, but fundamentally it is personal conviction that makes it real.

"If it is desirable that man should triumph over the cruelty of nature or custom," writes Chesterton (1986:333), "then miracles are certainly desirable; we will discuss afterwards whether they are possible". Chesterton's argument in favour of the existence of miracles is worth noting for it adds a unique perspective on the issue of freeing the mind.

Chesterton (1986:355) writes that a belief in miracles is not mystical at all if that belief is based on evidences of miracles:

Somehow or other an extraordinary idea has arisen that the disbelievers in miracles consider them coldly and fairly, while believers in miracles accept them only in connection with some dogma. The fact is quite the other way. The believers in miracles accept them (rightly or wrongly) because they have evidence for them. The disbelievers in miracles deny them (rightly or wrongly) because they have a doctrine against them (Chesterton 1986:355).

It is advisable to refer to an example to clarify this line of argument. In *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999), Morpheus takes Neo into something called the "Jump Program" – where the viewer finds Morpheus and Neo standing on the top of a skyscraper, looking out over a landscape of tall buildings. Morpheus explains: "You have

to let it all go, Neo: fear, doubt, *disbelief*. Free your mind” (emphasis added) (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). Having said this, Morpheus proceeds to jump from the top of the skyscraper to the next skyscraper, which stands some 40 metres away, apparently defying the law of gravity (Figure 15). Morpheus understands that the impossible is only possible when one relinquishes a preconceived idea of what is possible. Neo, even after having seen this impossible feat, exclaims: “That’s impossible” (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). If a miracle is disbelieved, despite clear evidence of its existence, the only reason for that disbelief lies in some dogma against its existence. Neo is forced to accept that Morpheus’ defiance of gravity is in fact possible, based on his own testimony, and so quickly learns to renounce his own doctrine against the impossible.



Figure 15: Neo (left) sees Morpheus (right) defy gravity, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

It might be contended that there is nothing particularly noteworthy or heroic about Neo, since he defies laws in the same way that Morpheus does. However, we learn later in the *Matrix* trilogy that Morpheus and all the others who have been freed from the Matrix are only bending the rules (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). Only Neo, as the One, is able to break the rules completely. It is argued above that breaking a law temporarily is not heroic in the Nietzschean view (Nietzsche 1977:112); only when the law is broken with a sense of permanency is it heroic. Morpheus defies gravity only for a short period of time, whereas Neo defies gravity for as long as he desires to. Instead of only being

able to jump incredibly far or high, he is able to fly. Neo’s ability to fly is referred to jokingly in the *Matrix* trilogy as his “Superman thing” (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a) (Figure 16). The reference is to Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s comic book hero, Superman, who is depicted as having this same ability to defy gravity for as long as he desires to (Figure 17).⁵



Figure 16: Neo does his “Superman thing” in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).



Figure 17: Brandon Routh in an iconic “Superman pose” in a film adaptation of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s *Superman Comics* (Singer 2006).

⁵ Superman was initially created to be a parody of Nietzsche’s idea of the *Übermensch*, but was later re-imagined to embody “truth, justice and the American way” (Waid 2005:3).

Flight is a symbol for freedom, both in the *Matrix* and in mythology. In Greek mythology, the great inventor Daedalus attaches wings of wax to himself and to his son, Icarus, so that they may escape from the island of Crete (Padilla 2004:68). Icarus, however, flies too close to the sun, causing his waxen wings to melt, and as a result he plummets to his death (Grant 1989:385; Padilla 2004:68). Icarus is considered a tragic hero precisely because he is unable to sustain flight. Another mythological figure possessing the gift of flight is Mercury (or Hermes), who is the herald or messenger of the gods (Graves 1955a:65). Both Icarus and Mercury are *Dionysian* in character; both of them are defiant of *Apollonian* rationality. In fact, Mercury's *Dionysian* belief in the fluidity of truth led to his name being given to a type of liquid metal (Cirlot 1962:198). However, where Mercury finds reward in his defiance, Icarus finds only disaster. Both Icarus and Mercury follow the Nietzschean rule by asserting their own personal values. However, only Mercury's assertiveness is met with success.

There is one key difference between the flight of Icarus and the flight of Mercury that should be noted, for it has a bearing on the life of the hero in the *Matrix* trilogy. It is this difference that determines the success or failure of *Dionysian* heroics: although both Icarus and Mercury are given the gift of flight by an external source, only Mercury receives flight from a supernatural source (Padilla 2004:68; Graves 1955a:65). Both Icarus and Mercury are given the gift of flight by their fathers, Daedalus and Zeus respectively, but only Mercury's father is a god. Campbell (1973:72) notes that supernatural aid to the hero often tends to be masculine in origin. The significance of this lies in the fact that, generally, the masculine is more readily associated with strength and permanence in mythology. However, the symbolism that is of most significance here is not in the gender of the gift giver, but in the nature of the gift giver: it is only the supernatural giver's gift of flight that lasts.

Nietzsche (1977:235) suggests that man can overcome himself, which is to say that the hero is one who transcends himself by adhering to his own *will to power*. However, mythology suggests that the hero can only transcend himself with the help of some external supernatural force. This sentiment is echoed by Chesterton (1986:340) when he writes

that by “[i]nsisting that God is inside man, man is always inside himself. By insisting that God transcends man, man has transcended himself”. The freedom of the mind, therefore, is not something that the hero *wills* for himself, it is something that the hero *accepts* for himself from an external source. It is a gift received rather than a truth that the hero creates. Even the *Matrix* trilogy suggests that Neo gets his abilities from the Matrix itself, which may be considered more supernatural than natural since Neo’s abilities are not biologically or physiologically defined (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). In this way, Neo is not accountable for his abilities, and therefore, as Nietzsche (1977:71) would say, the hero is not accountable for his actions. Clearly, however, Chesterton (1986:340) believes that the hero is accountable for his actions, precisely because his abilities have been given to him and are not just self-created; he is accountable to the giver of the gift.

The gift of flight points to one detail that is vital to an understanding of Chesterton’s view of heroism. It was suggested above that the hero accomplishes all that he is able to do precisely because his abilities are not self-sustained or self-created. The natural response of the hero to this gift is twofold. Firstly, the hero ought to be humble, and secondly, he ought to respond with a deep sense of gratitude.

The freedom of the mind, in Chesterton’s (1986:234) view, must necessarily be bound to the virtue of humility. Humility is that virtue which sees one’s position of importance as a reason to stoop to help others. It is a self-imposed – not natural, though not unnatural – position of meekness and is not the same as diffidence, which comes from a lack of self-confidence. Instead, it is a reflection of strength of will and resilience of character.

Flight, for Chesterton (1986:234), is not a symbol of pride, but is in fact the symbol of its exact opposite. For Chesterton (1986:234), the freedom of the mind implies imaginative possibilities; that is to say the freedom of the mind allows for impossibilities. “Without humility,” writes Chesterton (1986:234), “it is impossible to enjoy anything”. In other words, humility expresses itself in delight. Joseph Pearce (1996:x) suggests that

Chesterton's success as a philosopher lies in his linking laughter and logic. As Chesterton (1986:107) suggests, "the secret of life is in laughter and humility".⁶

Neo, as the heroic figure in the *Matrix* trilogy, does not possess this Chestertonian heroic lightness. One may refute the suggestion that lightness is necessarily a characteristic of the hero, but Chesterton (1986:325) sees it as a non-negotiable essential:

The swiftest things are the softest things. A bird is active because a bird is soft. A stone is helpless because a stone is hard. The stone must by its own nature go downwards, because hardness is weakness. The bird can of its nature go upwards, because fragility is force. In perfect force there is a kind of frivolity, an airiness that can maintain itself in the air. Modern investigators of miraculous history have solemnly admitted that a characteristic of the great saints is their power of "levitation". They might go further; a characteristic of the great saints is their power of levity. Angels fly because they take themselves lightly.⁷

It needs to be noted that the hero can be a saint – one who has the ability to act supernaturally or in a manner that is not dependent on worldly values (Campbell 1973:354). The saints that Chesterton refers to here might well include Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), and Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), all of whom are recorded to have defied gravity for a time (Gordon 1996:224). However, this reference is not only to the levitation of the body, but also to levity of spirit; what is also called a sense of humour. Chesterton is not alone in his high regard for the levity of the hero. In fact, Nietzsche (1977:245) suggests that one of the greatest weaknesses of the *herd* is its inability to dance or laugh. The *Übermensch* is the enemy of the so-called "spirit of gravity" (Nietzsche 1933:172). Nietzsche's hero must destroy all landmarks and laws in order to fly (Nietzsche 1933:172). The *Übermensch*, according to Nietzsche (1977:245) receives wings only in levity:

⁶ The idea of a laughing hero is also reflected in Chesterton's (1986:366) understanding of Jesus Christ: "There was some one thing too great for God to show us while he walked upon this earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was his mirth". It is this secret or shy side of Jesus's character that Umberto Eco weaves into his novel, *The name of the rose* (1980). Even Buddhism's founder is known for his benevolent laughing face (Kramer 1988:47)

⁷ Levity and levitation are frequently linked. Popular novelist, Jonathan Safran Foer (2005:78) writes that doves are able to fly only because there is laughter in the world. Another popular author, Richard Bach (1972:76) suggests that physical flight is possible only because of the "flight of ideas".

[L]earn to laugh beyond yourselves. Lift up your hearts, you fine dancers, high! higher! and do not forget to laugh well. This laughter's crown, this rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, do I throw this crown! I have canonized laughter: you higher men, *learn* – to laugh!

Once again, Nietzsche's position stands in stark contrast to Chesterton's. For Chesterton (1986:325) delight is born out of humility; whereas for Nietzsche (1977:245) delight is born out of asserting the *will to power*; that is to say, delight is born out of pride.

The hero in the *Matrix* trilogy is never depicted as delighted. There is no laughter, only seriousness. This is highlighted since it can be seen as Neo's singular failure. It is a failure according to the criteria laid out by Nietzsche and Chesterton, but for different reasons: Neo does not laugh, because he is not humble enough according to Chesterton's (1986:170) criterion; and according to Nietzsche's criterion because he is not proud enough. However, Neo is not a Stoic, though he may appear to be at first. For that to be true, he would have to place resignation to fate as his highest ideal. And, as has already been pointed out, the Nietzschean hero does not believe in the existence of fate. Neo does, however, show honest emotion and this, in Chesterton's view, is commendable for a hero. Accordingly, Chesterton (1986:153) suggests that honest emotion is the hero's greatest strength.

The second response of the hero to the gift of flight, which is linked strongly to the hero's humility, is gratitude. Gratitude is the strongest of the individual's honest emotions in Chesterton's (1986:258) view. It is clear that the hero should be grateful because he readily acknowledges that his abilities are not his own creation. Moreover, the hero ought to be grateful because his life is not his own creation (Chesterton 1986:258). The hero might be responsible for his rebirth, which takes place owing to his first *heroic choice*, but he cannot take any responsibility for his existence. For Nietzsche (1977:211), gratitude, especially gratitude to an external source, is redundant:

What alone can *our* teaching be? That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*. ... *No one* is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives. ... He is *not* the result of a special design, a will, a purpose; he is *not* the subject of an at-

tempt to attain an ‘ideal of man’ or an ‘ideal of happiness’ or an ‘ideal of morality.’ ... We deny God and in denying God, we deny accountability: only by doing *that* do we redeem the world.

The argument here is that for gratitude to have meaning, accountability must be acknowledged. Although there is no acknowledgement of the existence of God in the *Matrix*, there is a sense in which Neo finds himself accountable to the people in his community. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes refers to the replacing of God with society as the “social contract” theory of morality (in Rowlands 2003:161; Brenzel 2005:156). Whereas in religion God might be seen as the objective judge of what is right and wrong, in the *Matrix*, right and wrong are measured in accordance with how the community is served (Rowlands 2003:161). Although Neo is seen to redeem himself, it is clear at the outset that his redemption would be impossible without the help of others. As a result of this sense of accountability, he acts in a way that is helpful to his community. Stephen Evans (2005:169) notes that when the hero becomes integrated into a community, it is inevitable that he will reflect the causes and concerns of that community.

4.2 Nietzsche: masks and mirrors

A lack of gratitude is perhaps the defining issue in Nietzsche’s writings on the *Übermensch*. Although Nietzsche’s philosophies remain ambiguous at many points, one gets the clear impression that as far as the issue of gratitude is concerned Nietzsche’s heroic ideal is, to put it simply, un-heroic. It may even be considered anti-heroic. In Chesterton’s view, the hero becomes heroic in serving lowly people. In Nietzsche’s (1977:243) view, “petty people” are the greatest danger to the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche (1977:243) abhors these “petty people” precisely because they approve of submission and consideration towards others. One might question whether Nietzsche embraces a heroic ideal at all. Perhaps the solution to this problem lies in Chesterton’s (1986:241) above-mentioned assertion that “to preach egoism is to practice altruism”. Nietzsche presents his true intentions under a mask (Conway 1992:1), and he shows his concern for the community by sharing his ideas concerning the individual. It ought to be noted, however,

that this is mere speculation. It is mentioned in order to show that Nietzsche's apparent disdain for humanity as a whole is not as clear-cut as one might first suppose.

The metaphor of the mask is useful for understanding two further aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy. Firstly, with regard to style, Nietzsche conceals his ultimate meanings in order to adhere to his belief in the fluidity of truth (Conway 1992:1). His writings often pose more questions than answers, since it is Nietzsche's intention to leave room for the reader's own interpretations. Secondly, it is Nietzsche's (1977:149) contention that the hero must assume a mask in order to assert his *will to power*, and thereby to become the *Übermensch*. In other words, the individual becomes a hero by first assuming the role of a hypocrite and then by becoming in reality what he is in name:

The profession of almost every man, even that of the artist, begins with hypocrisy, with an imitation from without, with a copying of what is most effective. He who is always wearing the mask of a friendly countenance must finally acquire a power over benevolent moods without which the impression of friendliness cannot be obtained – and finally these acquire a power over him, he *is* benevolent (Nietzsche 1977:149).

In the *Matrix*, Neo is called the One long before he believes he is the One; he is the One in name long before he is the One in actuality. That is to say, he learns to live up to the mask he wears. Novelist W Somerset Maugham (1990:144) expresses this idea in another way when he writes that sometimes “people carry to such perfection the mask they have assumed that in due course they actually become the person they seem”. It was mentioned above that the *Übermensch* is one who creates truth, and here again Neo lives up to this Nietzschean ideal. As Nietzsche (1977:150) writes, “[s]elf-deception has to exist if a grand *effect* is to be produced. For men believe in the truth of that which is plainly strongly believed”. The “grand *effect*” here refers to the *Übermensch*. In a sense, Neo ‘deceives’ – or convinces – himself into believing that he is the One, and thus becomes the One. He submits to the idea of the One before fully believing it. The man becomes the myth. Nietzsche writes that philosophy, which is the impetus behind the actions of the *Übermensch*, creates a world in its own image (in Conway 1992:2).

Nietzsche (1989:95) also argues that the one who obtains his ideal, or becomes the mask he wishes to wear, in so doing surpasses that ideal. This is to say that in living up to one's self-created goal, one will discover that the ideal is greater than one might imagine.

Nietzsche (1977:224) explains that the *Übermensch* is one who wishes to create a world and an ideal before which he can kneel. JE Cirlot (1962:195) notes that for any transformation to take place the symbolic mask must be present. This transformation can be linked to the idea of transfiguration, since the hero experiences definite physical and mental changes. In the case of Neo it is only really a mental transfiguration since he changes his mind rather than his appearance. However, once again, in the *Matrix*, the mental transfiguration of Neo is represented physically in the form of improved fighting abilities and increased strength.

It is worth noting that the Matrix is itself a mask. Neo is the only member of his community who has the ability to see beyond appearances and into the actual code behind the Matrix (see Figure 13). It is this ability that allows Neo to break the rules of the Matrix, rather than only bend them. Others in his community are able to understand that the Matrix is a mask of sorts, but they are unable to alter its rules. They can only bend the rules of the Matrix for a limited period of time. They are only able to act according to their knowledge of the truth, whereas Neo has, in a sense, created the truth, and is thus able to become a god, whom the Matrix to some extent serves.

This idea of the hero who assumes a mask is a clear theme for writers of the *Matrix* trilogy. In another film scripted by the Wachowski brothers, *V for Vendetta* (McTeigue & Silver 2005), the hero's visual identity is defined by a physical mask. The faces of the hero, both in the *Matrix* and in *V for Vendetta*, appear to be stylised.

Scott McCloud (1993:43), a theorist who specialises in comics,⁸ suggests that stylising the face in such a way helps to present the character, in the case of the hero, as a concept. Thus, the viewer finds himself or herself relating to the concept more than to the

⁸ It is worth paying attention to comics theory for the simple reason that both the *Matrix* trilogy and *V for Vendetta* were inspired by comics. Thus it is highly likely that certain aspects of visual representation have been influenced by the comics medium.

character (McCloud 1993:43). Indeed, in theory, the viewer *becomes* the character by transference. The result of this transference is that the viewer sees himself or herself not only as aspiring to be the hero, but, in fact, as *being* the hero. This is, yet again, a reference to the hero as the *Everyman*. In *V for Vendetta* (McTeigue & Silver 2005), the hero is described in the following way by one of the characters who is asked the question *Who was he?*: “He was Edmund Dantes, and he was my father, and my mother, my brother, my friend. He was you, and me. He was all of us”. Therefore, it is true that the hero assumes a mask in order to become in reality what he is in name, but it is also possible that the viewer assume the hero’s face as a mask, in order to aspire to a heroic ideal.

Once Neo has started to believe in his self-created truth – that he is the One – he receives so-called “mirror shades” or reflective sunglasses. All the other characters in the *Matrix* wear their own unique reflective sunglasses from the moment the viewer first encounters them, and it is interesting to note that these sunglasses are worn only inside the Matrix and never in the real world (Figure 18). Joshua Clover (2004:65) explains that these “lenses distinguish the people who know the Matrix isn’t the world but a mediated worldview, and have realised the power to change it”. This realisation of the individual’s power to change the simulacrum can be termed “superconsciousness”: it is an awareness that goes beyond what appears to be true into the heart of what is really true (Clover 2004:65). It is not coincidental that the lenses of the hero’s sunglasses are mirror-like, for, as Cirlot (1962:201) notes, a mirror is a symbol of the imagination or consciousness. The fact that Neo receives his own pair of reflective sunglasses is symbolic of his new-found consciousness.

A great many reflective surfaces are shown throughout the *Matrix* trilogy (Figure 19). The function of this visual leitmotif is twofold: firstly, it is a reminder that the viewer is conscious of the Matrix’s illusionary status – which, in the Hindu tradition is referred to as *maya* (Appelbaum 1999:xvii); and secondly, it is symbolic of the fact that the Matrix itself is a reflection of a reality that ended two centuries previously (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999). Mirrors are frequently used in magic tricks or illusions to both reveal and conceal things from an audience (Gaiman 1999:96). The result of such an

illusion, according to storyteller Neil Gaiman (1999:96) is that it makes the viewer question the nature of reality – something that the *Matrix* films also do.



Figure 18: Trinity, Morpheus and Neo wearing “mirror shades”, in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).



Figure 19: One of the many reflective surfaces, in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).

The mirrors in the *Matrix* trilogy may also be a reference to the mythological tale that tells of how Perseus sets out to kill Medusa, the most dangerous of the Gorgons (Padilla 2004:104). In this tale, the goddess Athena informs Perseus that to look in Medusa’s eyes directly would mean an instant death, since Medusa’s glance petrifies – literally turns to stone – those who look at her (Padilla 2004:104). Perseus uses a burnished silver shield

so that he may look at Medusa's reflection, and thus, after a long battle, he manages to behead her (Padilla 2004:104). It would have been no use for Perseus to fight the reflection. He is only able to defeat his enemy by realising that the image in the shield is a reflection. In the Matrix too, the hero uses the reflection of reality to defeat his enemy. It is no use to ignore the reflection simply because it is not real; one first has to be aware of its unreality. It is interesting to note that Medusa's gaze is symbolic of the realisation of personal guilt (Padilla 2004:110). Perseus, who is most certainly the *Übermensch* in this story, is able to destroy this *herd idea* and thus creates his own truth.

Once again, this is reminiscent of Plato's cave, which presents itself as a truth, but is in fact only a reflection of reality. The Matrix is an example of something hyperreal in the sense that it is impossible to see its unreality. It is a reflection of reality that appears, and is perceived by the five senses, to be as real as the reality. One might even say that the real world can be yet another Matrix, since reality is never provable. This echoes Jean Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum, which refers to a hyperreality that does not hide the truth; it hides the "fact that there is no truth" (in Hanley 2003:4). This echoes Nietzsche's position on the non-existence of truth, and poses the same problem that has already been mentioned: if there is no truth, then even the suggestion that there is no truth cannot be taken to be true. The state of reality is never provable, even scientifically. It is always assumed. Accordingly, without the assumption of the existence of a 'real reality' all notions of what is 'true' and 'truthful' are robbed of any meaning (Lynch 2001:7). To use the metaphor of the mirror, one cannot have an endless chain of reflections, just as one cannot, logically, have an endless chain of causes or referents or signifieds, for a mirror that endlessly reflects the reflections of other mirrors only ends up reflecting nothing. In the end, the signified must point to a signifier, just as a referent must refer to something. Chesterton (1933:170) suggests, "God made Man so that he was capable of coming in contact with reality; and those whom God hath joined, let no man put asunder".

Nietzsche (1989:207) writes that the objective spirit is a mirror, because it is able to see one's self from the outside. It is not, as Nietzsche (1977:169) suggests, about looking into the "mirror of God" since that would only mean that one sees one's nature as "dismal"

and “distorted” and one’s life as “humiliated”. To see God as the source is to become the mirror, like the moon, which reflects the light of the sun. Nietzsche (1977:224) insists that one must reject this perspective in order to become the light that reflects in other mirrors:

But [being] must accommodate itself to you! Thus you will have it. It must become smooth and subject to the mind as the mind’s mirror and reflection. This is your entire will, you wisest men; it is a will to power; and that is so even when you talk of good and evil and of the assessment of values.

The hero needs to, in a sense, become a narcissist, at least in the poet Joachim Gasquet’s terms: he needs to be caught in the act of contemplating the self in the “mirror of the unreal” (in Cirlot 1962:216).⁹ In Nietzsche’s terms, the hero sees everything as a reflection of himself; this reflection is often the exact opposite of what the hero stands for. In other words, the world of the hero is defined by the hero. This echoes the idea expressed in the Talmud that “[w]e do not see things as they are, we see them as we are. We do not hear things as they are, we hear them as we are” (in Shahmardaan 2003). The hero is only made fully aware of his own identity through encountering the world around him.

Hay Lin Helen Ku (2003:24) notes that the Nietzschean view sees that the advance of the individual, and therefore the advance of the hero, is made possible only through an encounter with opposites: destruction and construction, morality and immorality, truths and lies, unreality and reality. The *Matrix* trilogy has its own representations of this encounter with opposites: Neo’s opposite is the character Smith, the Oracle’s is the Architect, the Merovingian’s is his wife, Persephone, and Niobe’s is her former lover Locke, to name a few. This interplay of opposites is an important angle to consider. Perhaps the earliest record in philosophical history of the importance of opposites can be found in the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus (540 BC-480 BC), who suggests that without the constant interplay of opposites, meaning in the world would not exist (in Gaarder 1991:30). Heraclitus explains, for example, that without illness one

⁹ Michael Grant (1989:383) writes that Narcissus stands not only for the contemplation of the unreal, but also for the “pursuit of the unreal”. The idea here is interesting, because Neo’s victory in the end does not destroy the unreality of the Matrix. The hero’s pursuit is, therefore, not for reality, but for peace both within reality and unreality.

cannot appreciate being well, without war peace is impossible, and without hunger there can be no pleasure in being sated (in Gaarder 1991:30).

According to Nietzsche, one grows through an encounter with “challenging opposition or problems” (Ku 2003:24). This aspect of opposition, as represented by the symbol of the mirror in the *Matrix* trilogy is a reference to Lewis Carroll’s symbolism in *Alice through the looking glass* (1896). Martin Gardner calls this opposition an “inversion” since “[t]he ordinary world is turned upside down and backward; it becomes a world in which things go every way except the way they are supposed to go” (in Carroll 1960:181). In a mirror, that which is on the right appears to be on the left. So, as in Ku’s (2003:24) argument, one perspective encounters its opposite and is thus negated. The world of the *Matrix* is reflected off Neo’s reflective sunglasses and is thus exposed as a fraud. This is only possible since the hero is the so-called mirror against which all else is measured. This is pivotal to understanding the *will to power*: one cannot overcome one’s self or the *herd morality* without first facing the reflection of one’s self and the *herd morality*.

The hero, in Nietzschean terms, is one who creates and experiences truth first hand; that is, he defines and claims his own reality without mediation. He is the one who has walked out of Plato’s cave in order to experience first hand what is real, self-made truth. This facet of the hero’s vision is emphasised in the *Matrix* trilogy in a scene where Neo encounters the programme that designed the *Matrix*. This programme is known in the films as the Architect (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). In this scene, Neo meets the Architect in a large circular room; the walls all around are covered from floor to ceiling with televisions, which are symbolic of mediation and surveillance (Figure 20). As the Architect speaks, the televisions show images that relate to his speech. However, Neo is not concerned with the televisions, since his purpose as the One is to disregard the world of mediation and the regime of the image. Thus, Neo turns his attention away from the mediated image in order to face the Architect head on; to encounter the unmediated reality of what he is saying.

Televisions, whilst being symbols of mediation, are also symbolic of entertainment. More specifically, televisions are symbolic of populist, or even what one might call *herd*, entertainment. The purpose of television, according to Neal Gabler (1998:87) is to “give people what they want”. The masses do not want to be edified, Gabler writes (1998:59), only entertained.



Figure 20: Neo’s encounter with the Architect in a room walled in by televisions, in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).¹⁰

During the discourse between the Architect and Neo, the Architect mentions that several versions of the Matrix had been created, but many of these had failed because people could not accept what they were seeing (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). This is an interesting reference to television ratings, which are used to determine the standard or measurement of entertainment (Gabler 1998:87). The standard of entertainment is not concerned with a qualitative measurement, but rather with a quantitative measurement, namely, popularity. In other words, the aim of entertainment is not necessarily to meet individual criteria, unless those criteria are linked to what might please a crowd. This can also be taken to refer to a measure of what makes a hero: it is frequently his glory – favourable public opinion – that makes him the hero, and not always his virtuous actions (Grant 1989:51).

¹⁰ This is the first shot in this particular scene and has particular symbolic significance. The Architect’s hand is seen large and foreshortened as the “hand of God”; the pen he holds is reminiscent of the axiom “The pen is mightier than the sword” and also confirms the Architect’s position as a ‘writer’ or ‘author’ of the Matrix.

Kathleen Kelly Reardon (1981:197) explains that television entertainment, and especially that which exalts un-heroic qualities such as lawlessness and irreverence, has the ability to collapse the inhibitions and personal judgments of the individual. Accordingly, the mediated image takes away the individual's ability to practice self-control and discernment, and thus robs the individual of certain aspects of personal freedom. Once again, the hero, being freed from the regime of the image, is able to be master over himself, and therefore becomes the master over others; he is able to exercise self-control and is thus able to pass judgment on any given situation.

It was noted above that Nietzsche (1977:149) presents the idea that a mask must be assumed if the hero is to assert his *will to power*. However, this is only the first part of the journey of the hero. The hero must also assert his ability to see beyond all other masks or mediated images if he is to learn to overcome the *herd morality*. The first assertion pertains to the overcoming of the self, the second to the overcoming of others. In other words, one must first determine and create one's own truth in order to overcome the truth propagated by the *herd*. Nietzsche (1977:225) explains that "he who cannot obey himself will be commanded".

What follows from this particular assertion of the will is action; in a sense, appearance is translated into deeds (Nietzsche 1977:228). This echoes an idea put forward by the ancient Roman philosopher, Lucretius (100 BC-55 BC) (1951:67, 158), who writes that "the will of the individual originates the movements that trickle through his limbs" and also that "no one ever initiates any actions without the mind first foreseeing what it wills". This agrees with Nietzsche (1977:228) who argues that the *will to power* and the action that results from the will are inseparable, and in fact may be considered one and the same thing. Freedom of the will demands an expression of that will (Nietzsche 1977:228).

One can see from what has been written above that for Nietzsche heroism is inextricably linked to an understanding of the metaphorical function of the mask and the mirror. It is

required of the hero that he first become aware of the current state of the world, which can be seen both as a hyperreal mask that conceals the truth or the fact that there is no truth, and a mirror that reveals the truth, but only in an incomplete form. This particular philosophy is an outward-looking philosophy that it is focused on the hero's perception of the physical rather than the social or ethical world around him. Thus it is necessary for this study to turn to a more inward looking philosophy, a philosophy that captures the social and ethical environment of the hero. The following section of this chapter examines Chesterton's view on the origin of evil and the issue of the hero's responsibility toward his community. It is argued that the hero, although having an important part to play within a physical environment, needs to be alert to his role as a spiritual leader, albeit a rebellious one. It is shown that the hero's aim, as a priestly figure, is to bring peace to his community and thus that the hero's strength lies not only in his physical prowess, but in his character attributes. It should be understood hereafter that the hero, and indeed heroism, operates on many levels.

4.3. Chesterton: man and machines

It should be noted that in terms of mythology the evil that humankind needs to overcome is that which has been brought about by human error. In other words, evil, a word that may be used to encompass all that is not heroic, is created or brought about by human beings. In Greek mythology, for instance, the first created woman, Pandora, opens an enchanted jar and so unleashes those evils on the world (Graves 1955a:149). In the same way, Adam and Eve, in the book of Genesis, are responsible for bringing evil into the world. This is worth noting because heroism is produced by the same community that produces evil. In other words, the hero is not only tasked with saving his people from an external evil, but with saving his people from their own inherent evil. In other words, the hero must fight against society's un-heroic actions, or at least the results of those actions.

The *Matrix* trilogy presents its own mythology of how evil is loosed upon the world in the form of artificially intelligent machines (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999; 2003c). It is told how these machines were created to serve mankind, to assist with hard

labour, and thus allow people greater leisure (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999; 2003c). Chesterton (1987:162) would see this act as un-heroic:

If by machinery saving labour, and therefore producing leisure, be meant the machinery that now achieves what is called mass production, I cannot see any vital value in the leisure; because there is in that leisure *nothing of liberty*. The man may only work for an hour with his machine-made tools, but he can only run away and play for twenty-three hours with machine-made toys. Everything he handles has to come from a huge machine that he cannot handle (emphasis added).

A paradox arises: the very thing that is created to allow for the heroic quality of liberty robs the individual of liberty. The loss of liberty, in Chesterton's (1987:647) view, is a calamity worse than war; therefore, war should be waged in order to reclaim that liberty. Chesterton (1987:157) explains that machines, which may be an inspiration for the inventor, only end up becoming "monotony for the consumer". In other words, one can acknowledge the invention as being remarkable, but to make the invention, even in theory, more remarkable than a human being is to rob the individual of his or her dignity. However, the greatest problem with giving so many tasks to the machine, according to Chesterton (1987:154), is the fact that one's personal happiness no longer lies in one's own hands.

Here it is important to clarify the moral status of the machines in the *Matrix* trilogy. To claim that a physical or material object has an ethical framework attached to its mere presence is to neglect reason. For example, it is not the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden that is evil, and neither is the jar that Pandora opens. It is the *actions* of the people involved that are evil. And so, it is not the machines that are evil but rather the actions of inventors of those machines that are. It is not a concern whether these actions are wittingly or ignorantly caused. Chesterton (1987:152) insists that machines are amoral, which is to say that any action exerted by a machine is devoid of ethical quality. The so-called 'evil' actions of machines are simply consequences of the evil actions of human beings. In other words, what appears on the surface to be intrinsically evil is in fact only the result of evil. It then falls to human

beings to ensure that freedom remains their own responsibility and not the responsibility of a soulless, material object (Chesterton 1987:155).

Campbell (1973:287) suggests that the invention of the machine transforms the life of people in such a way that freedom, and indeed belief, is restricted. Chesterton (1987:155), by way of example, explains that the “effect of railways on a population cannot be to produce a population of engine drivers. It can only produce a population of passengers”. Simply put, the act of allowing society to be ruled by technology does not produce leaders, only followers. Chesterton (1987:147) does not suggest that machines as material objects have the ability to rob the individual or a society of its happiness, since happiness, in his view, is not bound to circumstance. In other words, it is not logical that an impersonal entity affects the individual so personally. Instead, it is the personal, human impetus behind the creation of the machine that determines the individual’s response to it. Moreover, Chesterton (1987:145) suggests that one should not necessarily seek to destroy the machine that diminishes freedom, but should rather seek to destroy a certain kind of mentality that diminishes freedom. Therefore, the heroism suggested by Chesterton here lies not in the presence of the machine, but rather in the mind of the human being. This idea concurs with the *Matrix* trilogy, in which it is suggested that humankind is responsible for its own woes (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

The fact that the moral actions of the past affect future outcomes is an idea referred to in the *Matrix* trilogy as *karma*, which is cited as a natural part of human existence (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). *Karma*, which is an idea taken from Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, explains the fate of individuals and society as a result of the past actions of those individuals and society (Layman 2005:204). This is not the same as pure *causality* – a concept also referred to a great deal in the *Matrix* trilogy – since *karma* applies to an ethical reality and not only to material reality. *Karma* dictates that all actions, insofar as they are linked to morality, have consequences; that good is repaid with good, and evil with evil. Thus *karma* can be either good or bad.

Karma, as that which has both positive and negative qualities, is a further manifestation of the encounter with opposites referred to above. The opposites are in place, as the Oracle explains in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b), to “balance the equation”. However, the Oracle makes it clear that her concern is to “un-balance” that very equation (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). The Oracle’s concern for this equation is represented by the Chinese *yin-yang* symbol that is seen on her earrings (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b) (Figure 21). The *yin*, embodied by the black of the *yin-yang* symbol, represents the so-called passive female principle of the universe, which is a sustaining force that is associated with earth, dark and cold. The *yang*, embodied by the white of the *yin-yang* symbol, represents the active male principle is a creative, fleeting force associated with heaven, heat and light. This symbolism is reinforced in the *Matrix* in this way: the Oracle, the female (*yin*), is played by a black woman (Mary Alice), whereas the Architect, the male (*yang*), is played by a white man (Helmut Bakaitis) (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a; 2003b). It is worth noting that the *yin-yang* traditionally symbolises a balance between the opposing forces in the universe, whereas in the *Matrix* it simply symbolises the fact that such opposing forces exist.



Figure 21: The Oracle, wearing *yin-yang* earrings, in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b); insert: the *yin-yang* symbol.

It is the Oracle’s concern for unbalancing the equation that becomes Neo’s primary goal. The aim of heroism is not to allow good and evil to balance out each other, for that is a

compromise. Instead, heroism strives to let good outweigh evil, for that is victory. It is the task of the hero, who represents a higher moral state to, in a sense, overrule *karma* and thus redeem humankind.

Chesterton (1987:162) connects the existence of the machine to the running of a society, and this link is not inaccurate in terms of the *Matrix* in which the machine is used as a powerful symbol. However, it should be noted that the symbolic value of machines alters according to context. Traditionally, machines are symbolic of the physiological functions of the human body: ingestion, digestion and reproduction (Cirlot 1962:187), but in the *Matrix* the symbolism of machines tends away from this traditional view. Three allusions are made to machines during the course of the trilogy. Firstly, early on in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999), Neo is referred to as “a machine”. Secondly, machines are alluded to as those entities that are out to destroy those human beings who are free from the Matrix (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999; 2003a; 2003b). Finally, machines are referred to in the *Matrix* as those entities that allow the survival of those people who live in Zion (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a; 2003b).

In the first instance, where Neo is referred to as a machine, this is a compliment referring to his abilities and not to his moral character. This reference is in fact a comparison between Neo and the so-called Agents, machine-run programmes that act as law enforcement to oppose those rebels who either seek to be free from the Matrix or are already free from the Matrix. Neo’s abilities, at this point early on in the story, are comparable or even equal to the abilities of the Agents. However, later on in the narrative it is shown that Neo’s abilities grow to become more advanced than the abilities of these Agents.¹¹ It is in surpassing the abilities of the machines that Neo is able to conquer them. This is a clear example of how the hero strives to ‘unbalance the equation’ and so ensures that good overcomes evil.

¹¹ Neo, as the *Übermensch*, is able to improve his abilities, but Agents are part of another form of *herd morality*; that of the machines. Thus, Neo is able to increase in strength, both mentally and physically, whereas the machines are forced to comply with their existing limitations.

Secondly, the machines are depicted in the *Matrix* as hostile to human life. This particular reference gains relevance when one takes into account the fact that the machines in the *Matrix* trilogy are representative of spirit, just as the Matrix represents mind and Zion represents body (Wachowski & Wilber 2004:2). This fact is only revealed in the last twenty minutes of the final film in the *Matrix* trilogy when Neo is able for the first time to see the machines beyond their physical appearance (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). Neo, just prior to this event in the story, has been physically blinded, and has received what might be termed ‘spiritual sight’. He is able to see the machines as luminous, golden, fiery lights (Figure 22). In fact, Neo suggests when he first encounters this new vision of the world that the machine world is made out of light (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).



Figure 22: Neo sees the “spiritual” nature of machines, in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

Traditionally, along with being representative of spirit, light is a manifestation of morality and of cosmic energy (Cirlot 1962:179). Radiance or brightness, Cirlot notes (1968:259) is “always felt to be supernatural, like a message standing out clearly against a negative or neutral background. Brightness is, of course, related to fire and to daylight both in their positive and in their destructive aspects”. This symbolism is especially significant in that it points to the ultimate aim of the hero in the *Matrix*. The hero’s ultimate goal is not to destroy machines, or the Matrix, but to unify the Matrix, the human world and the machine world. Symbolically, there needs to be a union between the mind, the

body and the spirit. When spirit is disembodied or separated from the mind, morality is also disembodied and hostility is, therefore, a natural consequence (Wachowski & Wilber 2004:2). What is aimed for is a synthesis, or a triune. This aim is embodied in the name of Neo's love interest: Trinity. The very word *trinity* – or triunity – denotes a group of three that is both separate and unified.

What is suggested is that the hero's role is not solely concerned with the physical; the hero is as much a priest as he is a warrior (Carlyle 1897:138). Carlyle (1897:139) refers to the hero as the "spiritual Captain" of his people. In the *Matrix* Neo's role as a spiritual leader is represented in his clothing, which can be considered a combination between a priest's vestments and a superhero's cape (Figure 23). Accordingly, as Chesterton (1993:53) suggests, the fact that clothes are worn for decoration or dignity or decency, suggests that mankind, as a reflection of the dignity and divinity of God, is a priest; clothes are valued for ornament before they are valued for use. That is to say, the clothing of the hero is far from insignificant.



Figure 23: Neo's hybrid clothes, representative of a priest's vestments and a superhero's cape, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999).

Sarah Street (2001:93) points out that the trench coat worn by Neo is also reminiscent of fascist iconography, which is to say that Neo is more a rebellious priest than one who adheres to any specific establishment's doctrines. The establishment is represented by the Agents who wear suits (Figure 24). These suits are symbolic of impersonality, authority

and legalism. It is also worth noting that Neo's coat is made of wool, and so is also an allusion of the idea of a lamb being led to the slaughter (Street 2001:94). The exterior clothing therefore becomes a representation of interior character and in a sense also becomes prophetic of the hero's fate.



Figure 24: An Agent to the Matrix whose suit is symbolic of impersonality, authority and legalism, in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).

Thirdly and finally, in the *Matrix* machines are noted as having an additional, more positive role in the life of the people who live in Zion. Machines, in various forms, ensure the survival of human beings (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). Indeed, in the context of the *Matrix* trilogy it is suggested that without machines it would be impossible to overpower the other anti-human machines. The machine in this case becomes a symbol that replaces the archetypal symbol of the horse.¹² Traditionally, a knight, who represents the heroic figure, rides a horse into battle. The horse symbolises human dominion over nature and, by default, over matter (Cirlot 1962:161). Cirlot (1962:161) suggests that this is a spiritual dominion over the physical world. In the *Matrix*, the horse is replaced by these life-supporting machines, meaning that the natural is replaced by the unnatural. Perhaps the greatest significance of this picture is that it hints at what a union between man and machines might look like. In symbolic terms, the spirit is no longer disembodied, and so peace prevails.

¹² In *The Animatrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003c), in *The Second Renaissance*, some of the machines are shown to resemble horses.

Chesterton (1993:14) notes that it is perfectly natural that a man should ride a horse, but completely unnatural to suggest that the horse should be riding the man. This is precisely the logic that describes how people should relate to machines. Machines ought to be ruled and controlled by people and should not rule over people. When the roles are reversed, as Lucretius (1951:119) suggests, the human being would be witless and beasts rational. To establish an interdependent relationship between the man and the horse is to create a kind of philosophical centaur, or, in terms of the *Matrix*, a sort of philosophical cyborg, where there is a balance of power between attributes drawn from two different sources (Lucretius 1951:198).

Finally, peace, which is expressed symbolically in the *Matrix* as the unity between mind, body and spirit in the world, is the measure of whether the life of the hero is successful or not. This unity is shown in the final image of the *Matrix* trilogy as a sunrise that consists predominantly of the three colours mentioned here: blue, gold and green (Figure 25). The golden sun, in the centre of the image holds the image together; just as the spiritual, when embodied and not disembodied, helps to hold both the mental and physical together. The image of a sunrise alone is symbolic of a new dawn, suggesting that the end is a new beginning, and a kind of rebirth that is reminiscent of Nietzsche's *eternal return*, which is discussed in the following chapter.



Figure 25: A new dawn: peace, symbolised as the union between green (mind), blue (body) and gold (spirit) in the final shot of *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

Tom Morris (2005:52) suggests that the hero's strength is not only physical, but also mental and spiritual. The hero's spiritual strength is measured by strength of character, guided always by virtues such as courage, resilience, persistence, integrity and compassion (Morris 2005:52). These qualities are worth noting since they are the motivational force behind the actions of the hero, and therefore behind the life of the hero. This study focuses on these and other ethical aspects of heroism because it is realised that without such analysis, the mental and physical strengths of the hero have no real meaning or merit. It was noted in the previous chapter that it is only through a process that the hero achieves this heroic status.

This chapter suggested that this process is inextricably linked to the context that the hero finds himself in. This context includes all aspects of community and the limitations placed on the hero, and also demands that the hero be aware of his outlook on gratitude and levity. The hero also needs to have a clear understanding of his physical environment in order to know how to act within it. This point was emphasised by the study of Nietzsche's relationship to masks and mirrors as metaphorical entities. Part of this vision of heroism, which aims to see beyond *herd* conceptions of reality, involves the hero's attempts to 'unbalance' the equation and in so doing bring peace to his community. It has been noted that key to the life-process of the hero is his understanding of his community's relationship with the so-called enemy, which in the *Matrix* refers to the machines.

It has been shown that the hero must possess not only physical strength but also strength of character, which may be observed in the virtues he displays. It is this combination of outer and inner strength that allows the hero to continue on his journey. Finally, however, the journey of the hero must end. Clover (2004:69) writes that the final act of heroism is always self-sacrifice. It is to this final act of heroism, which culminates in the death of the hero, that this study now turns.

CHAPTER 5

THE DEATH OF THE HERO

The subject of death in general is a complex one, for there are so many different beliefs regarding it. Some of these beliefs are founded upon religion, whilst others are riddled with personal superstitions. Philosopher John Hick (1976:21) observes that the subject of death is impossibly vast, for it is the “central concern of all religions of the world, and has been reflected upon by nearly all the great religious and non-religious thinkers”. Despite the relevance and far-reaching nature of the subject of death, it remains a mystery.

Hick (1976:22) suggests that if one is to be realistic about any issue in life, the subject of death cannot be avoided. In the same way, if one is to be realistic about any issue in the life of the hero, the subject of his death is of great importance. This chapter attempts to show that the issue of death may perhaps be the most central concern in any study of the topic of heroism.

To begin with, this chapter examines the subject of the death of the hero as it is found, first in mythology and then in the *Matrix* trilogy. Included in this examination is a brief summation of how death can be viewed from various religious and philosophical perspectives. This helps to outline how death might be deemed relevant to any study of heroism. Secondly, this chapter looks at Nietzsche’s interpretation of the *eternal return*, an idea that predates the rise of Western civilisation. This assists in creating a picture of what kind of death Nietzsche would deem to be heroic, and also acts as a counterpoint to Chesterton’s perspectives on the heroic death. The third and final section of this chapter deals with Chesterton’s philosophy of the *eternal revolution*.

5.1 The death of the hero in mythology and in the *Matrix*

In the *Matrix* trilogy, Neo has such extraordinary powers that many characters, both people and programmes, seem to doubt his humanness and his mortality. However, at certain points during the course of the *Matrix*, reference is made to Neo’s mortal state in order to

emphasise the fact that he is not some kind of divinity, thereby showing that he is not invincible. For example, during one scene in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), Neo fights with the Merovingian's minions. During the course of this fight he is cut on the hand (Figure 26). When the Merovingian sees blood dripping from Neo's hand onto the floor, he quips, "[s]ee, [he is] only human" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). During another scene in the same film, Neo is talking to Councilor Hamman about the fact that he is not able to sleep. Councilor Hamman remarks that Neo's insomnia is a good sign, because it indicates that he is "still human" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). It may seem a strange point to labour, but there is no denying its significance. For one thing, this fact is highlighted because it indicates Neo's finitude and transience as a human being. It is true, however, that Neo does display certain divine characteristics, and this coincides with John Lash's (1995:16) notion that the hero, though mortal, is often perceived to be a god by his community.

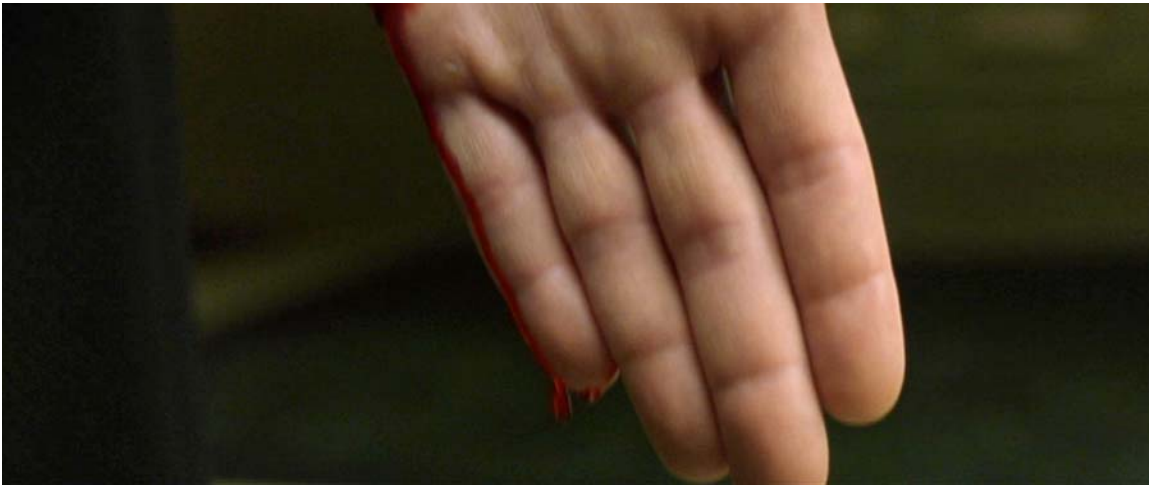


Figure 26: Neo's bleeding hand, in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).

"Man is mortal like the other animals," writes Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) (1951:211), and is therefore not exempt from death. Aquinas (1951:211) notes that "[d]eath is natural considering our material status". What is implied here is the fact that the hero, being mortal, cannot be exempt from anything that other mortals are exposed to: joy, elation, hurt, pain, loss, frustration, success, defeat, and even death (Fitch 2004:1). This reiterates an idea that has already been articulated in this dissertation: it is the mortality of the hero,

expressed as vulnerability to pain and death, that qualifies him as a heroic figure, since heroism implies some kind of risk. Death may be considered the greatest risk since it carries with it the weight of finality and irreversibility.

Death may be easily explained in biological terms as the permanent ending of vital processes in cell or tissue (Hopkins 1992:143). In merely scientific or materialistic terms, the life span of a single human being, when compared to the time-scale of the universe, is a mere blink of an eye. Death, in such a view, seems to be an inevitable and even inconsequential part of the emergence of any species (Hick 1976:147). It may be suggested that the scientific or materialistic view of death affords it no real significance (Hick 1976:103). In fact, the materialist's view of death does not even afford any significance to life, as W Somerset Maugham points out by means of one of his characters in his novel, *On human bondage* (1915):

Philip exulted, as he had exulted in his boyhood when the weight of a belief in God had been lifted from his shoulders: it seemed to him that the last burden of responsibility was taken from him; and for the first time he was utterly free. His insignificance was turned to power, and he felt himself suddenly equal with the cruel fate which had seemed to persecute him; *for if life was meaningless, the world was the robber of its cruelty. What he did or left undone did not matter. Failure was unimportant and success amounted to nothing* (in Hick 1976:151, emphasis added)

It should be noted that the view that life and death are insignificant complies only with the worldviews of the naturalist and the materialist. It is only when one investigates death from an existential, metaphysical or philosophical perspective that one realises its importance as an event in the life of both the ordinary human being and in the life of the hero.

Lucretius (1951:30) remarks that death forces the individual to ponder a number of things: the purpose of death, the possibility of life after death, the possibility of judgment in the afterlife, the question of whether death should be feared or not, and the question of why death should be opposed. It is almost paradoxical that one's understanding of death comes largely, if not entirely, from one's understanding of life. Philip Yancey (2004:218) writes that "[d]eath casts its shadow in advance. Not one of us has experienced death, yet

no one doubts it will come”. Despite the inevitability of death, it remains a mystery of nature (Aurelius 1946:19).

Yancey (2004:218) notes that the issue of what happens after death tends to define the divide between “those who believe in two worlds and those who do not”.¹ This reference to “two worlds” is an indication of the possibility that this life on earth is not the only life led by a human being: that there is the likelihood of another world that lies beyond death (Hick 1976:280). For the materialist, man has no immortal soul, which means that life only ever exists in a physical form (Chesterton 1987:421). For people who believe in a spiritual realm, the soul is immortal and continues to exist long after the vital processes in cell or tissue have ended (Chesterton 1987:421). Thus, the term *death* is ambiguous, for it can embody different meanings for different people (Luper 2006:1). In philosophy and literature, one encounters various attitudes toward death, and yet many of these reflect in distilled form a simple divide between those who believe that there is an afterlife and those who do not. These attitudes need to be acknowledged, since they have a bearing on how the ethical life of the hero may be understood.

Those who do not believe in the existence of an afterlife believe that death brings a release from life, and therefore from pain and sorrow. Thus, death is seen as something that ought not to be feared. Epicurus (341-270 BC) holds that death is “nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not” (in Luper 2006:1). The Italian Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) (2002:9) echoes this view when he writes that “[d]eath is not an evil, for it frees us from all evils, and while it takes away good things, it takes away also the desire for them”. Perhaps none captures this view more evocatively than William Shakespeare (1902:389) in his romance play *Cymbeline* (Act IV, Sc. II) (1609):

¹ Philip Yancey is an author who draws many of his ideas from Chesterton. Even this idea of “two worlds” may have come from Chesterton (2000:66), who writes that “a mystic is one who holds that two worlds are better than one”. Rebecca Housel (2005:77) suggests that the hero is one who is the “master of two worlds”; he is one who is at home both in his or her land of origin and in the land that he or she has ended up. In the *Matrix* trilogy, Neo finds himself in the “two worlds” of the real world and the Matrix.

Fear no more the heat o' th' sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages ...

Fear no more the frown o' th' great;
Thou are past the tyrant's stroke.
Care no more to clothe and eat;
To thee the reed is as the oak ...

Fear no more the lightning flash
Nor th' all dreaded thunder-stone;
Fear not slander, censure rash;
Thou hast finished joy and moan.

The implication here, at least as far as a materialistic or non-theistic worldview is concerned, is that death brings nothingness. Both joy and sorrow are at an end. This is often referred to as one facet of the so-called “termination thesis”, which states that “we do not exist as *anything* while dead” (Luper 2006:1). There is no need to fear death, for to do so would be to fear nonexistence. Nonexistence should not be feared, at least according to Epicurus and Leopardi (2002:9), because nonexistence cannot be aware of anything, fear included. Indeed, nonexistence connotes the termination of all emotions.

That death brings nothingness may be seen as escapist from the perspective of a theistic worldview, as the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz suggests (in Ward 1999:1). According to Milosz, the belief in nothingness after death is the real opiate of the masses, and not religion as Karl Marx suggests; it is the belief that for all the greed, cowardice, betrayals, and murders committed by the human race, no one will have to give account, nor will anyone have to face judgment (in Ward 1999:1). In other words, this aspect of the termination thesis robs all actions of any ultimate meaning. The belief in nothingness after death entails that it is not only the hero who dies, but also his heroism.

Another group of philosophers acknowledges the possibility that death may lead to either nothingness or to a change of a person's state of consciousness. Such a viewpoint is held by Roman Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius (AD 121-180) (1946:61), who expresses his view on death in the following way:

He who fears death fears either total loss of consciousness or a change of consciousness. Now if you should no longer possess consciousness, you will no longer be aware of any evil; alternatively, if you possess an altered consciousness, you will be an altered creature and will not cease from living.

Both of the above views – the view that death brings nothingness and the view that death brings a change of consciousness – presuppose that all people, no matter what their values system, religion or station in life, are exposed to exactly the same fate. There is no suggestion of the idea that the fate of so-called ‘evil’ people is different to that of the so-called ‘good.’ According to this belief, for example, people such as Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini are exposed to exactly the same destiny as people like St. Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, and Mother Theresa. Heroism and anti-heroism, as they are traditionally understood, are seen to be neutral, inconsequential and insignificant in this view of death.

A second facet of the abovementioned termination thesis can be expressed as follows: one does “not exist as a person while dead” (Luper 2006:1). This signifies that the state of a person changes or evolves when one dies: the physical state of the human being is exchanged for another, indeterminate state of being. In this view, death is seen as a transition or a doorway that leads to the next phase of the journey of life. This is where philosophy and religion can only speculate, for no one can say for certain what might lie in the life hereafter. The ancient Greeks and Romans speculate on the existence of a single place called the *House of Hades* where all the souls of the dead must descend (North 1992:49). This *House of Hades* is different from Vallhalla in the Norse myths which is a hall reserved only for those who die in battle (Crossley-Holland 1980:xxii). Today, these speculations have largely given way to the various views on death and the afterlife propagated by the main world religions, Bhuddism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam.

Theistic worldviews, and especially those belonging to the Christian and Islamic traditions, suggest that death has been conquered and is therefore not to be feared (Chittick 1964:125). In terms of Christianity, death has been conquered by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this view, death brings a new, richer, fuller life. It is more a beginning than an end. The English poet John Donne (1572-1631) (1950:170) poignantly expresses his response to this view in the tenth of his *Holy Sonnets*:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou are not soe,
For, those, whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
Rest their bones, and soules deliverie.
Thou are slave to Fate, Chance, kind and desperate men,
And thou dost with poison, warre, and sicknesse dwell,
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,
And better than thy stroake; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

Death, therefore, can be seen as a necessary step that needs to be taken in order that one may step into one's eternal home. At this point it should be noted that speculation about the various places and states of death that may or may not exist in the afterlife becomes relevant to any discussion about the existence of the hero only insofar as it relates to the hero's own beliefs concerning death. For this reason this discussion now turns to a few examples from mythology concerning the death of the hero.

There is a sense in mythology that the hero's death is not merely coincidental, but is rather something preordained by some divine or fated purpose. The death scene of one of the heroes of the Trojan War, Hector, in Homer's (1999:267) *Iliad* gives credence to this view:

When [Hector] had said thus, the shrouds of death enfolded him, whereon his soul went out of him and flew down to the House of Hades, lamenting its sad fate that it should enjoy youth and strength no longer. But Achilles said, speaking to [Hector's] dead body, "Die; for my part I will accept my fate *whensoever Zeus and the other gods see fit to send it* (emphasis added).

Achilles is fully aware that he has just killed Hector, and yet he reasons that Hector dies only because the gods allow it (Homer 1999:267). Achilles, in a sense, acts as the 'hand of the gods' since it is by his hand that the will of the gods is carried out. Even Achilles' death later on in the *Iliad* seems far from coincidental (Grant 1989:42). Achilles dies when a poisoned arrow, shot by Paris, pierces his heel – his only vulnerable spot. Thetis, Achilles' mother, had dipped him into the river Styx when he was an infant and this ren-

dered every part of him invulnerable except that by which she held him: his heel (Grant 1989:42).² In this way the manner in which Achilles will die is predicted long before the event.

In *The epic of Gilgamesh* from Babylonian mythology it is made clear that Gilgamesh, the hero of the story, does not die because he falls under the protection of the god Shamash (Sandars 1960:35). Once again, there is a sense that some divine will determines the length of the hero's life. Yet, even Gilgamesh is brought to contemplate the inevitability of his own death when his life-long friend, Enkidu, meets his end (Sandars 1960:36).

It is also important to consider that heroes in mythology hardly ever die peacefully in old age. The hero inevitably dies in battle. Indeed, Norse mythology presents the idea that it was considered shameful not to die in battle (Crossley-Holland 1980:xix).³ There are, however, some exceptions: both Ajax and Hercules commit suicide in order to retain their honour; although they do not die in battle, they do die by the sword by which they lived (Padilla 2004:161). The idea of retaining honour by committing suicide is one that has been embraced by many Japanese warriors throughout history in the form of *hara kiri*, but again honour is seen to lie in this kind of death only if one dies by the sword. And so, according to the pattern that is displayed in mythology, the hero, who must necessarily be mortal, dies in battle, but only because his death has been allowed or predestined by the gods. The issue of the hero's suicide is examined further on in this chapter since it sheds light on both Chesterton's and Nietzsche's views on the definitive heroic virtue of courage (see section 5.3).

During the course of the *Matrix* trilogy, Neo faces not one but two deaths. The first death, which occurs in *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999), is placed in the story for three reasons. Firstly, this death allows Neo to be resurrected; thus, Neo is

² It is from this mythological tale that the Achilles tendon gets its name.

³ In Norse mythology, there was no guarantee of a timeless afterlife, and so fame became the next best thing (Crossley-Holland 1980:xix). This ties in with the idea mentioned earlier, that it is renown that frequently bestows the title hero (Grant 1989:51).

shown to be a Christ-like figure, since his resurrection mirrors Christ's resurrection. This resurrection also establishes Neo's uniqueness as the hero, for although there are other heroic figures in the *Matrix* trilogy, only Neo is able to conquer death. The second reason for this death is that it establishes the importance of the female character, Trinity. In *The Matrix* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 1999) it is clear that without Trinity's confession of love to Neo, he would never be able to rise from the dead. In short, Trinity's love for Neo helps to conquer his death. This scene is certainly reminiscent of the way in which Snow White is raised from the dead by the kiss of her prince, although in *The Matrix*, the gender roles are switched. There is also a reference here to Egyptian mythology: Trinity hovers over Neo in the same way that Isis hovers over the body of Osiris, the lord of the underworld, the earth and the heavens; and Trinity gives Neo's spirit back to him, as Isis gives Osiris's spirit back to him (Thomas 1986:46). The third and final reason for Neo's first death is less obvious: this first death acts as a foreshadowing of his inevitable demise, the result of Neo's final battle in the final film of the *Matrix* trilogy.

Towards the end of the final film in the *Matrix* trilogy, Neo must fight against his nemesis and archenemy, Smith (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b) (Figure 27). Beforehand, the Oracle informs Neo of the seriousness of this fight:

Everything that has a beginning has an end. I see the end coming, I see the darkness spreading. I see death, and you are all that stands in his way. Very soon he is going to have the power to destroy this world, but I believe he won't stop there. He can't. He won't stop until there is nothing left at all ... He is you, [Neo], your opposite, your negative, the result of the equation trying to balance itself out. One way or another, Neo, this war is going to end. Tonight the future of both worlds [human and machine] will be in your hands or his [Smith's] (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

It has been mentioned that Smith, as the villain in the *Matrix* trilogy, is the embodiment of determinism and fatalism. Indeed, in the above quotation, Smith is referred to as "death". Smith's position as the death-figure is emphasised by his role as a rogue programme that goes around taking the lives of other people. He does this by copying, or cloning, himself onto other people, thereby replacing the lives of other people with his own essence, which is death. In this he also replaces the old *status quo* with his own *herd*

morality of purposelessness and death, since he becomes the new *herd*. It is this *herd morality* that Neo aims to destroy.



Figure 27: Neo (right) faces his archenemy Smith (left) in his final battle, in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

At one point, during the final conflict between Neo and himself in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b), Smith cries out, “This is my world, my world!” If there is one thing both people and machines have no control over in the context of the *Matrix* trilogy, it is death. It is the one unconquerable foe. In considering this, it is especially noteworthy that death is embodied by Smith for it is clear that death does in fact *own* the world. If there is one certainty, it is the certainty of death.

Smith is undoubtedly not the typical representation of death. In medieval art, death – Thanatos of Greek mythology – is usually represented as a skeleton that wears a hooded cloak and carries a scythe, which is symbolic of death’s act of cutting life short (Grant 1989:100; Hall 1974:94, 276).⁴ Smith, however, appears to be human and is always seen dressed in a business suit. Smith’s presence as death is therefore embodied more as a concept than as a clear visual icon, although in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), his arrival is foreshadowed by the presence of crows – birds

⁴ The scythe can also be symbolic of the cutting down of worldly illusions – an idea that is very prevalent in the *Matrix* trilogy (Grant 1989:100). Death can also be seen as the key to enlightenment or the “road to awe” (Aronofsky 2005:93), but in the context of the Matrix, death only means deletion and complete annihilation.

notoriously linked to death (Figure 28). Keeping in mind that the suit is also symbolic of the imprisonment of people enforced by the corporate world discussed in Chapter Two, it is interesting to make this new connection: corporate business is seen to be synonymous with death. The association of the business world with death is an interesting one: labour that is intended to support life can be a mere distraction to the fact that death is fast approaching all people: life is a terminal illness, so to speak; it will kill us all.



Figure 28: Smith as the embodiment of death, in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a).

This notion of labour being synonymous with death can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures and, in a different form, in the writings of Karl Marx. Labour in both of these contexts is not only symbolic of death but also of alienation. In Genesis 3:19, God pronounces that, as a consequence of Adam's rejection of Him, man will eat bread by the sweat of his brow until he returns to the dust of earth from which he was made. Here labour and death, which are brought about by mankind's alienation from God, are seen as inseparable. Alienation leads to labour and death.

Marx, however, does not consider alienation, labour and death as an inseparable trinity, since death is inevitable. Instead, Marx considers the duality of labour and alienation as indivisible. For Marx alienation from God does not lead to labour; instead, labour leads to alienation from the object of human labour (in Coser 1977:50). Alienation, in Marx's opinion, can be described as a condition in which people are dominated by forces of their

own creation, which is to say that the objects of human labour confront people as alien powers (in Coser 1977:50). Marx (1964:37) uses commerce as an example of this idea when he writes that "[m]oney is the alienated essence of man's work and existence; the essence dominates him and he worships it". Alienation for Marx (1964:122) has some severe consequences:

The object produced by labor, its product, now stands opposed to it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer ... The more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself.

When one conflates the biblical and Marxist ideas regarding death, labour and alienation, one arrives at the theory propounded in the *Matrix* trilogy. The objects of human labour – machines – are alienated from their creators to such an extent that they threaten the very lives of their creators. As a result, as Marx (1964:122) puts it, man no longer “belongs to himself”. His life and his death are in the hands of the machines. This augments what has already been discussed in the previous chapter regarding the symbolism of the machines; they are symbolic of spirit (Wachowski & Wilber 2004:2). This alienation is not just alienation from machines but also from the spirit. If man no longer belongs to himself, he has lost his soul and his spiritual essence. This alienation from spirit, which mirrors the alienation from God described in the book of Genesis, can only lead to death. This alienation is exemplified in the person of Smith, who is alienated from both his creator – the machines – and the ones who created his creator – human beings. Thus, death, which is personified by Smith, is not only the result of alienation but is itself an extreme form of alienation.⁵

If Smith is the symbol of death, Neo, as Smith’s photonegative, may be considered the symbol of life. This point is supported by a scene towards the end of *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a) in which Neo literally brings Trinity

⁵ This is evident in the fact that Smith is completely isolated from any system but his own. In this way, Smith appears to be more of an *Übermensch* than Neo could ever be, since Neo still works within and for his community. In many ways, ironically, one might argue that the ideal *Übermensch* is death (*cf.* Nietzsche 1977:267).

back to life after she is killed by a bullet wound.⁶ While Smith brings death to others, Neo brings life. Neo is also the only character in the *Matrix* trilogy who is able to see the golden yellow light that comes from the Machine City in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b); this is significant because light is a symbol of life and *Apollonian* rationality (Cirlot 1962:52, 179). Light is also the symbol of life used in the Bible, and is often employed to refer not only to light as a physical property that we encounter in the world, but also as a spiritual force.

Even though Neo and Smith are opposites, as life and death respectively, their individual definitions of what constitutes life and death differ. Neo, as a mortal human being, sees death as merely a part of life, a continuation of the process of living. It may even be said that death is simply another leg of the journey. This is something the viewer learns as Neo watches Trinity die (for the second time) in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). Trinity tells Neo that she has gone as far as she can; that it is Neo's task to do the rest, to finish what he needs to in order to save Zion (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). Trinity's acceptance of her own death in this scene helps Neo to accept the inevitability of his own death. And it is only once Neo has accepted the death of Trinity that he is able to face his final challenge. It is worth noting that Neo and Trinity both die twice. This parallel shows that Neo's life and heroism are mirrored in the life and heroism of Trinity, and also emphasises the fact that heroism needs, ultimately, to be founded upon love.

Neo views death as personal. Smith on the other hand sees death as the equivalent of deletion – an impersonal act – since he is a programme and cannot experience life in the same way that Neo can. For Smith death is seen as a logical part of life; it is the natural end of life and is therefore the “purpose of all life” (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). This complies with Nietzsche's (1977:201) opinion that death is not the opposite of life; rather, death is “the consummation” of life (Nietzsche 1977:267). This also coin-

⁶ In Greek mythology, the hero Hercules is associated with the power to bring life (Grant 1989:254). Just as Neo raises Trinity from the dead, so Hercules raises Alcestis – the wife of Admetus – from the dead (Grant 1989:254). The significance of this myth, in terms of Nietzsche's philosophy, is that Apollo was unable to help (Grant 1989:253). Only the reckless *Dionysian* character of Hercules was able to conquer death. Dionysus is recorded to have had the power to heal and overcome death (Grant 1989:241).

cides with Martin Heidegger's idea that because death lies before all people, one's existence is a movement towards it (in Hick 1976:98). Even Neo, as the symbol of life, acknowledges its inevitability. Neo needs to surrender to the fact that death is an inevitable part of life in order to conquer Smith. In other words, Neo, who is life, has to die so that death, in the form of Smith, may die.⁷

There is nothing in the *Matrix* trilogy to suggest that any of the characters believe in any sort of afterlife. Philosophy professor Stephen Layman (2005:203) notes that the issue of the existence of an afterlife is a topic broached in most stories about superheroes. However, neither is there any suggestion that there is no afterlife. In the *Matrix* trilogy, there is a reference to Neo's return after his death, which suggests at least a vague belief in reincarnation, although not reincarnation in the conventional sense of the word (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). In order to understand this type of reincarnation, this study now turns to Nietzsche's ideas concerning the death of the hero and especially focuses on his philosophy of the *eternal return*.

5.2 Nietzsche and the *eternal return*

The idea of the *eternal return* is sometimes referred to as the *eternal recurrence*.⁸ It posits the notion that the universe has been recurring, and will continue to recur in the exact same form an unquantifiable number of times (Robinson 1999:68). It can also be said to refer to "an infinite amount of time and a finite number of events" (McDonald [sa]:1). Nietzsche propagates this idea of the *eternal return* in his writings, but it is not his own unique idea. The concept has roots in Ancient Egypt, and was also adopted later by the Pythagoreans and the Stoics prior to the rise of Christianity (Murnane 1964:44). The *eternal return* also reflects in some ways the Buddhist idea of the 'wheel of rebirth' (Ku 2003:109). The aim here, however, is not to examine the history of the philosophy of

⁷ This is certainly compliant with the Christian belief that it was through the death of Jesus – who is God, the source of all life – that the sting of death was conquered (1 Corinthians 15:54).

⁸ According to Joseph Campbell, the hero goes on a cyclical journey that involves three phases: the departure, initiation and return of the hero (in Housel 2005:77). However, Campbell is not referring to Nietzsche's *eternal return*, but rather to the return of the hero to his place of origin.

the *eternal return*, but rather to focus on Nietzsche's views concerning how it affects his understanding of heroism.

In order to appreciate Nietzsche's views on the *eternal return*, one needs to first understand Nietzsche's view on the nature of time. The traditional or modernist conception of time is that it is purely linear and linked to ideas of progress, causality, rationality and consequence. For one to be 'in time' is traditionally taken to mean that one is part of a created order which is "an irreversible process in which things are brought into and taken out of existence" (McDonald [sa]:2). This idea is echoed in the sciences, where it is taught, according to a theory by Albert Einstein, that space and time are not independent, but are two components of an imperceptible but indivisible whole (Uzunov 2002:1). The suggestion, insofar as tradition is concerned, is that time has a beginning and an end (McDonald [sa]:2). Time is therefore a measure of change rather than permanence (Aquinas 1951:83). Nietzsche's (1977:253) view differs quite substantially from this: time is seen to be cyclical rather than linear (in McDonald [sa]:2; Robinson 1999:69). For Nietzsche (1977:253), human beings are bound to time and can never transcend it because the soul is as mortal as the body.

If time is cyclical, as Nietzsche (1977:249) presupposes, the idea of the *eternal return* becomes logically deducible. Accordingly, the idea of the *eternal return* begins with the notion that it is possible that the life one lives may have to be repeated "again and again, times without number" (Nietzsche 1977:249). The reason for this is simple: our actions, being finite, are destined to be repeated at some point because time is infinite. Nietzsche (1977:253) speculates that at some point in the future, someone will exist who has the exact thought processes and possibly the same physical features as himself, and that this is probable for every person on the planet. Thus, Nietzsche (1977:253) sums up his theory on the *eternal return* as follows:

Now I die and decay ... and in an instant I shall be nothingness. Souls are as mortal as bodies. But the complex of causes in which I am now tangled will recur – it will create me again! I myself am part of these causes of the eternal recurrence. I shall return with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent – not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I shall return

eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and in the smallest, to teach once more the eternal recurrence of all things.

The suggestion of such endless repetition echoes Nietzsche's belief that there is no such thing as a 'final state' of anything. Matthew McDonald ([sa]:2) explains this Nietzschean view as follows: "There is no permanence, no duration, no 'once-and-for-all'". In other words, a state of equilibrium is never reached, proving that there cannot be any finality in the universe. As McDonald ([sa]:2) writes, "Not only does the world never reach a final state, it avoids a final state". Thus, in Nietzsche's (1977:252) opinion, there is no being, only becoming.

Nietzsche's (1977:249) belief in the *eternal return* seems to stem from his desire always to be an "affirmer" of his version of the truth. To joyfully wish for the *eternal return* of all events, in Nietzsche's (1977:257) opinion, marks the ultimate affirmation of all life. Nietzsche assumes that he will return to once more preach his doctrine of the *Übermensch*. It is clear that Nietzsche's writings reflect a positive and decisive move towards a state in which regret cannot exist. In fact, his negation of regret is closely linked to his denial of the existence of justice and morality (Nietzsche 1977:249). This Nietzschean negation of regret is reflected in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b) in the scene in which Trinity dies for the second time. Trinity, as she lies dying, explains that when she died the first time the last thing she said was "sorry" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). She continues:

I wish I hadn't [said sorry]. That was my last thought. I wished I had one more chance to say what really mattered; to say how much I loved you [Neo], how grateful I was for every moment I was with you. But by the time I knew what I wanted to say it was too late. But you brought me back. You gave me my wish: one more chance to say what I really wanted to say (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

Although Trinity does express some regret in this scene, there is evidence here to suggest that the only thing she regrets is her regret. Her final wish is to affirm the truth that she has encountered within her own experiences, the truth of her love for Neo. Nietzsche (1977:52) sees any admission of an error as cowardice: it is heroic courage that embraces a life for all its faults and its successes.

It is significant that Trinity dies on a ship called the *Logos*. Indeed, it is when the Logos fails that Trinity is carried to her death. A number of interesting conjectures can be drawn from this fact. The word *logos* is the Greek word that refers to the *rational word, authority, command* and to *reason*. Symbolically, it is when *Apollonian* reason fails that Trinity is killed. On the one hand this symbolism conflicts with Nietzsche's rejection of reason and his preference for the *Dionysian*; on the other hand this scene presents a side of reason that is almost *Dionysian* in character: *logos* is that which moulds the material just as an artist moulds and shapes a plastic substance (Aurelius 1946:164).

Reason, in this sense, is responsible for the flux that is inherent in Nietzschean truth. Thus reason is permitted to change or even fail, since the state of truth must be allowed to alter. This failure of reason should not be taken in the sense of something that ceases to work, but rather in the sense of something that ceases to work according to a set convention or expectation. If one concedes that conventions and expectations can change, it does not mean that reason no longer applies; it simply means that reason is applied according to a new standard. Therefore, to clarify this argument in terms of the *Matrix*, Trinity does not die because reason fails completely, but rather because reason fails to act according to the expectations of both the audience and the characters in the film. Thus reason, which results from the flux of truth, is able to shape the narrative.

Death is not an evil, but a natural result of the *eternal recurrence*, since recurrence cannot occur without death, just as truth cannot be in flux without the 'death' of previous conceptions of truth. And yet, because time is cyclical, Trinity's death is not a singular, random, unimportant moment, but rather an eternal event that will recur an infinite number of times. Thus, Trinity's death affirms her life, for she will die an infinite number of deaths, just as she will live an infinite number of lives.

The very medium of film seems to affirm this idea of the *eternal recurrence*, since the same film is screened all over the world, many times for many different viewers.

Although the contexts and cultures within which the *Matrix* trilogy is screened may alter,

the events within the film remain the same. Even though there may be many interpretations of the events shown in the film, those events remain fixed and eternal. Thus, the ‘truth’ is allowed to both be permanent and in flux, both temporary and everlasting.

The idea of the *eternal return* is, however, not the same as the idea of ‘reincarnation’. Reincarnation is simply the rebirth of a soul into a new body (Hick 1976:297). The *eternal return* differs from reincarnation in that it dictates that the exact same soul will return in the form of the exact same body. There is no “rebirth” since the individual is not born-
anew.

Paradoxically, the *Matrix* trilogy seems to embrace both reincarnation and the *eternal return*. In *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a), the audience is informed that the code carried by the One is passed down from era to era, just as a soul is passed from body to body in reincarnation. The One is not the *only* One, for the viewer is told that every era has its own Messiah (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003a). In *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b) the audience is told that Neo, and not just the code he carries, will return. This is not just a false hope, but a certainty according to the Oracle who reveals this information, for it is based on the assumed certainty of the *eternal return*.⁹

Unfortunately, no matter how one might attempt to justify the *eternal return*, it cannot be taken as a certainty. It is impossible in scientific terms for two reasons. The first reason is explained by George Simmel as follows:

Even if there were exceedingly few things in a finite space in an infinite time, they would not have to repeat in the same configurations. Suppose there were three wheels of equal size, rotating on the same axis, one point marked on the circumference of each wheel, and these three points lined up in one straight line. If the second wheel rotated twice as fast as the first, and if the speed of the third wheel was $1/\pi$ of the speed of the first, the initial line-up would never recur (in Kaufmann 1974:327).

⁹ For Carlyle (1897:116), hope is central to the existence of the hero; without hope there would be no reason to risk life and limb. However, this hope, in Carlyle’s view is not associated with the *eternal return*.

What this suggests is that the number of finite states that occur within an infinite amount of time can still be infinite. The second reason for the improbability of the *eternal return* lies in Nietzsche's assumption of the finitude of the universe. It is a scientific fact that the universe is constantly expanding and evolving. Even the physical universe is infinite. This is reinforced by the idea, mentioned above, that time and space are interdependent. Therefore, if time is infinite, space is also infinite. Nietzsche's *eternal return* is therefore more compelling as a theoretical notion than it is as scientific conjecture, although even as a theoretical notion the *eternal return* is flawed. One therefore needs to take into account Nietzsche's other views on death, which may be seen as alarming and problematic when considered in the light of traditional views of heroism.

Nietzsche (1977:265) sees a natural decline from youth and strength into old age and weakness as going against his ideal of the *Übermensch*. Thus, Nietzsche (1977:265) is in favour of the idea that the hero ought to die whilst at the height of his powers. Nietzsche (1977:265) takes this reasoning to its logical conclusion when he suggests that if one is at the height of one's personal strength of body and will, one should immediately commit suicide. According to Nietzsche (1977:265), suicide is "a wholly natural obvious action". Suicide is *Übermenschian* since it is the final act of defiance against all others and the final affirmation of self:

I commend to you my sort of death, voluntary death that comes to me because I wish it. And when shall I wish it? – He who has a goal and an heir wants death at the time most favourable to his goal and his heir. And out of reverence for his goal and his heir he will hang upon no more withered wreaths in the sanctuary of life (Nietzsche 1977:267).

Nietzsche's hero need not sacrifice himself for a cause, for that would imply that the hero is subservient to the *herd morality*. If the hero chooses to die, he should die for himself and himself alone. One does not die for love, peace, freedom or honour as far as Nietzsche is concerned; one can and must only die because one chooses to (Nietzsche 1977:267). This view is powerfully conveyed in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b) when Smith challenges Neo's reasons for fighting by asking him a series of questions:

Why Mr. Anderson, why? Why do you do it? Why, why get up? Why keep fighting? Do you believe 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 or 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?

Neo's reason could not be more *Übermenschian*. He simply responds: "Because I choose to" (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). He does not need to explain himself to Smith, for that would be to cater to Smith's own self-created morality. Instead, Neo has only to answer to himself, for he embraces the Nietzschean ideal that the value of philosophy lies not in causes or effects, but in its own self-importance. Neo understands and claims the Nietzschean position that death and life are riddles that can only be solved by the individual (in Ku 2003:63). Nietzsche (1977:280) argues that dying a martyr for what one believes in is problematic, because one should not be sure enough of one's opinions for that. Perhaps, Nietzsche (1977:280) suggests, one might die for the "right to have [one's] opinions and to change them".

Neo's death may be considered suicidal, for he dies in a fight where the odds are clearly against him: an infinite number of cloned 'Smiths' against a single human being. Also, it is clear that he dies at the right time, the "time most favourable to his goal and his heir" (Nietzsche 1977:267). His heir is Zion and the people who live in Zion. This is true in that Zion is the heir to Neo's legacy, since its course is determined by Neo's actions. Neo's goal has been to save Zion, and since that goal has been achieved, there is no point in living on. Neo's death is therefore not only inevitable, but in the light of Nietzsche's philosophy, it is necessary.

It can be argued that for Nietzsche, the death of the hero begins and ends with the *death of God*. One needs to bear in mind, once again, that Nietzsche's entire theory of the *Übermensch* is rooted in his own personal doctrine of salvation, which is called soteriology (Fraser 2002:2). The *Übermensch* is set up by Nietzsche to replace the salvation pro-

vided by the Christian God. It is not a salvation that prepares one for any sort of afterlife, since in Nietzsche's opinion no such thing exists. Instead, it is a salvation for the here and now. This idea is expressed visually in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b) at the moment of Neo's death, where a light in the shape of a cross appears in the place where Neo's heart is (Figure 29). This cross is formed as the machine, *Deus ex machina*, pours energy into Neo to assist in the overcoming of Smith. Neo's cross replaces the cross of Christ, and thus Neo becomes the embodiment of Nietzsche's *anti-Christ*.¹⁰ When Smith and all his incarnations or copies die, the power of the symbolic cross is shown visually: light, quite literally, overcomes darkness (Figure 30).

The cross as a symbol connotes the unifying of separate elements. Cirlot (1962:65) writes that the cross acts as the "world axis" since it stands in the mystic centre of the universe and thereby becomes both a bridge, represented in the horizontal axis, and a ladder, represented by the vertical axis, by means of which the soul may reach God. However, in the non-theistic framework of the *Matrix*, the cross represents the unification of mind, body and spirit.



Figure 29: The death and the cross of Neo, in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

¹⁰ The Nazi *Swastika* was seen by Hitler, a devoted follower of Nietzsche, to be a replacement for the cross of Christ (Cirlot 1962:67). This does not mean that the *Swastika* had always been used for this purpose. Indeed, it is found to have different meanings in several other cultures (Cirlot 1962:67). The *Swastika* is also symbolic of the *eternal recurrence* and was very likely chosen by Hitler because it represented this aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy (Chesterton 1987:560).



Figure 30: The death of an infinite number of Smiths, in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

It is clear, however, that Neo's death may be interpreted in other ways that do not necessarily comply with Nietzsche's views. For this reason, this chapter continues by looking at Chesterton's ideas on the subject of the death of the hero. Also examined in the following section is Chesterton's notion of the *eternal revolution*, which is arguably the idea that best expresses Chesterton's view of heroism.

5.3 Chesterton and the *eternal revolution*

In order to fully appreciate Chesterton's idea of the eternal revolution, it is necessary to first investigate Nietzsche's idea of the 'genealogy of morals,' since Chesterton uses this aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy as an argumentative point of departure for his own contrary philosophy. Once Chesterton's philosophy of the *eternal revolution* is fully explained, it becomes clear how it is relevant to the death of the hero, and especially illuminates Neo's heroism in facing death in *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b).

For Nietzsche, the idea of the *Übermensch* is a natural result of human evolution, and indeed the result of what may be termed the 'evolution of morality'. If truth evolves as Nietzsche argued it does, then, logically, morality ought to evolve as well (Nietzsche

1977:92). Nietzsche (1977:73) argues that the morality that is widely accepted by people is a morality that has “grown in the soil of the ruling tribes and classes”. This suggests that morality is a consequence of power and not an inherent or intrinsic quality.

Nietzsche’s (1977:171, 172) entire *death of God* thesis was founded on the idea that the idea of God had outlived its usefulness (Guinness 1973:22). It does not claim that God is necessarily dead, but only that the idea of God has ‘evolved’ out of existence. Truth has evolved into something else. Nietzsche, however, wishes to be one step ahead of this evolution. Instead of letting morality evolve naturally, according to a process, he wishes to create his own morality (Nietzsche 1977:103). But for Nietzsche it is a supra-morality or an amorality that does not necessarily delineate what is good and what is evil.

Chesterton (1986:309) finds this thinking to be particularly untrustworthy, for it justifies nothing and accepts everything in the name of a vague notion of “progress”:

This, incidentally, is almost the whole weakness of Nietzsche, whom some are representing as a bold and strong thinker. No one will deny that he was a poetical and suggestive thinker; but he was the very reverse of strong. He was not at all bold ... He said, “beyond good and evil” because he had not the courage to say “more good than good and evil,” or, “more evil than good and evil”. Had he faced his thought without metaphors he would have seen that it was utter nonsense. So, when he describes his hero, he does not say, “the purer man,” or “the happier man,” or “the sadder man,” for all these are ideas; and ideas are alarming. He says “the upper man,” or “over man,” a physical metaphor from acrobats or alpine climbers.

Chesterton makes a very strong case for his opinion on this matter. If morality is ever shifting, one needs to question whether such a shift will come to an end. One can argue that morality is in a process of becoming, but surely it needs to become something specific if the process of becoming is to have any meaning? One might argue that if morality evolves ‘beyond’ good and evil, it ceases to be morality and should therefore not be referred to in relation to morality.

And yet, Nietzsche favours an evolutionary view of morality, since to him it seems better than the current *herd morality*. However, Nietzsche never gives sufficient justification for his embracing of his *Übermensch* ideal. One can easily assume that his moral views

are simply a matter of personal taste. For Nietzsche (1977:172) the Christian ideal of morality is “poison”, but it is only poison because it stands against his own personal preferences. Nietzsche never justifies the principles upon which he bases his own morality, he simply assumes them as a point of departure; that is, he never gives any reason *why* a person ought to change his or her view of morality, he simply states *that* a person ought to change it.

The problem with this ever-evolving view of morality, according to Chesterton (1986:311), is that it ends up changing nothing. Terms like “evolution” and “progress” can only ever be taken to be metaphors that stem from “mere automatic unrolling”. “Progress,” Chesterton (1986:313) writes, “should mean that we are always changing the world to suit the vision. Progress does mean (just now) that we are always changing the vision”. The suggestion is clear: one cannot hit a target if one does not know what one is aiming for. Or, to put it another way, if one grasps for nothing, that is what one will get. Chesterton (1986:313) argues against the extreme fluidity of truth when he writes, “[t]he modern young man will never change his environment; for he will always be changing his mind”.

If there is to be any sort of real change, or revolution as Chesterton (1986:313) calls it, the ideal that one is striving for needs to be “fixed and familiar”. Lash (1995:27) argues that this is indeed a non-negotiable standard for the hero: his values must be unchanging. Therefore, if the heroic revolution is to stand the test of time, the hero’s ideals need to be “fixed eternally” (Chesterton 1986:314). Just as permanence becomes a test with regard to the hero’s ability to fly, permanence becomes a test of whether a heroic ideal is worth pursuing.

There is no evidence against the fact that, if Nietzsche’s view of morality holds, morality might not produce a completely different *Übermensch*. It is possible that the *Übermensch* might turn out to be the exact opposite of what Nietzsche saw him to be. In other words, if mere change is the object of the game, then there can be no winning nor losing, for one

man's *Superman* is another man's *Underman* as long as there is no ideal or standard against which to measure this moral evolution.

Chesterton (1986:320) argues that if there is any sort of trend in terms of the evolution of morality it is a trend towards corruption, but, unexpectedly, he argues that this trend toward corruption is “not only the best argument for being progressive; it is also the only argument against being conservative”. Conservatism, as far as Chesterton (1986:320) is concerned, seems to suggest that if one leaves a thing alone it will stay the same, but of course the reverse is true. If one leaves a thing alone, one leaves room for a deluge of change: “If you leave a white post alone it will soon be a black post. If you particularly want it to be white you must always be painting it again; that is you must always be having a revolution” (Chesterton 1986:320).

Considering this, it is possible to sum up the idea of the *eternal revolution* as follows: firstly, one must see that change for its own sake achieves nothing, and therefore there must be a perfect, fixed ideal towards which change can take place; secondly, the present state of the world needs to be measured against this fixed ideal in order to determine what is right and what is wrong. Thirdly, this change, which works towards a fixed ideal, must be in a constant state of reform and repair. In other words, it must be sustained. In this, the heroic quality of *persistence of will* is affirmed.

Nietzsche wishes that his *Übermensch* seize the crown by his own will, but the *eternal revolution* suggests that the hero ought to serve the crown, or at least the ideals for which the crown stands. Thomas Carlyle's (1897:239) hero is much like Nietzsche's in the sense that he declares openly, “I will be king”.¹¹ Chesterton (1986:324) writes, “Carlyle was quite wrong; we have not got to crown the exceptional man who knows he can rule. Rather we must crown the much more exceptional man who knows he can't”. Once again, Chesterton emphasises the idea that the hero must possess the quality of humility,

¹¹ Carlyle (1897:236) links the idea of the king to its etymological roots, thus defining the word “king” as “Ableman”. Carlyle's *Ableman* is in many ways equivalent to the Nietzschean *Übermensch*.

for a hero who only serves his selfish interests is not a hero at all, but a villain. Hence, any philosophy that negates a fixed ideal is a philosophy of anarchy, and not of heroism.

The above argument is relevant to the death of the hero in that it proves that the hero is able to die for a purpose, and if the hero dies for a purpose his death has meaning that transcends the act of dying. If one dies for one's own sake, the termination thesis holds, for death becomes an end in itself. If one dies for an ideal or for a community, and one is successful, the ideal and the community go on living. Chesterton (1986:277) writes:

Obviously a suicide is the opposite of a martyr. A martyr is a man who cares so much for something outside of him that he forgets his own personal life. A suicide is a man who cares so little for anything outside of him, that he wants to see the last of everything. The one wants something to begin: the other wants everything to end.

For Nietzsche (1977:267) the suicide is the ultimate *Übermensch* hero, for he has taken his life into his own hands. For Nietzsche suicide is the ultimate act of defiance against any deity or host of gods. But Chesterton (1986:276) sees the suicide as the ultimate anti-hero, for "a man who kills a man kills a man; a man who kills himself, kills all men; as far as he is concerned he wipes out the world". Yet, it so often seems that the hero is suicidal, since he will step so readily into the task that he knows will probably kill him. This is self-destruction and is far more a mark of the anti-hero than a mark of the hero. Neo in the *Matrix* trilogy acknowledges, even though it seems he does not wish to, that his own death is inescapable (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). However, Chesterton (1986:297) identifies what makes the hero different from the suicide in the following way:

Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die ... A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of ferocious indifference to it; he must desire life like water, yet drink death like wine.

There is, therefore, a clear difference between the one who dies for the sake of living and the one who lives for the sake of dying (Chesterton 1986:297). For Chesterton heroic purpose seems, ultimately, to be a simple matter: if one has found something worth dying for, then one has found something worth living for. However, the hero cannot just live or die for anything. He needs to live for some transcendental ideal. Neo, during the course of his heroic journey, finds many such ideals worth embracing. On his own terms, he chooses to fight for these ideals: freedom, love, and peace. Lash (1995:17) argues that the hero needs to display one specific trait that relates to this fight for fixed ideals, his “capacity for benign aggression” which must always be “directed toward aiding and assisting others, as much as protecting them from obvious dangers”.

The outcome of the hero’s death is a catharsis which is felt both by the hero’s community in the narrative and by the reader or viewer who has been following the hero’s story. It is catharsis because the hero’s community is able to see the importance of the entire journey of the hero, despite its tragic end. There is certainly a sense of relief in the end, when the enemy has been vanquished and peace reigns. In the *Matrix* trilogy, Neo’s death brings great rejoicing. There seems to be little attention paid to the fact that he is dead; to the people of Zion, Neo’s death is almost irrelevant. All that matters is the peace that Neo has achieved for his community. This is the Nietzschean legacy referred to above, since Zion’s course, and not its values, is determined by Neo’s self-sacrifice. Neo does not leave an example of the kind of life one should live, only the possibility that life may be lived.

There is a very strong sense in the *Matrix* of the role that love plays in heroism, and it is clear that love plays a great part in Chesterton’s *eternal revolution*. In the *Matrix*, it is unmistakable that Neo would accomplish nothing if it were not for Trinity’s love for him; and in the same way, Chesterton’s *eternal revolution* cannot be accomplished without some level of devotion to the cause. As Chesterton (1901:1) suggests, things must be loved first and then improved. Chesterton (1986:270) argues that one’s love for something cannot just be bound to circumstance, for that would make love reasonable, and a reasonable love is more dangerous than it is helpful. For example: if one loves something

for its flaws, there will never be any reason to improve it; and if something is loved only for its merits, then love will fluctuate, for as the old adage says: nothing is perfect. “Men did not love Rome because she was great,” suggests Chesterton (1986:271). “She was great because they had loved her”. The love that is needed is an unconditional love.

Nietzsche (1977:260) also places great value on love, but for him the definition of love is conditional: “What else is love but understanding and rejoicing in the fact that another person loves, acts, and experiences otherwise than we do?” Nietzsche expresses the idea that one rejoices for a reason, the reason being that there is a difference between what we are and what others are. Chesterton (1986:274) sees love differently: “Love is not blind; that is the last thing that it is. Love is bound; and the more it is bound the less it is blind”. What he suggests is that one may see something in all its truth and ugliness and still be compelled to love it, not because it deserves to be loved or desires to be loved, but because one chooses to love it. Love that is given to the deserving is not love at all, but justice (Chesterton 1986:125). Love is willed (Aquinas 1951:115): it is the *will to love*.¹² Love, therefore, is not fundamentally concerned with sentimentality or fluctuating emotion. The Oracle expresses that everything *needs* love (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b). It is a necessity that is demanded, and nowhere more than in the actions of the hero. “*Amor vincit omnia*,” Virgil (71-19 BC) writes in his *Aeneid*: “Love conquers all” (in Grant 1989:311).

It needs to be asked whether a hero is still considered heroic if he fails in his quest. One might ask whether the hero is still heroic if he is overcome in such a way that his cause dies with him. The answer to this question is apparent when one bears in mind that heroism is part of an ethical taxonomy, and is therefore measured according to the hero’s character, and not according to his successes or failures. This would suggest that no matter what the outcome, if the hero holds to his ideals and succeeds in courageously holding to his ideals, then even death and failure cannot steal away his heroism.

¹² The *will to love* can be seen as the opposite of Nietzsche’s *will to power*, for it asserts a position of service, rather than a position of domination.

This chapter began by exploring the death of the hero as it has been dealt with in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy. The importance of the hero's mortal status was emphasised. It was noted that the subject of death may be viewed from various religious and philosophical frameworks, and that these different views affect the ethical position of the hero. It was shown that in the *Matrix* trilogy, the hero is representative of life and that his archenemy is representative of death. This means that even in death, the hero manages to save the lives of his community. Following this discussion, this chapter turned to explore Nietzsche's idea of the *eternal return* as it relates to heroism. It was emphasised that heroism, in Nietzsche's view, finds no place for regret; which means that every action of the hero must be unapologetic. Finally, this chapter argued the importance and value of viewing the death of the hero in the light of Chesterton's concept of the *eternal revolution*, and also considered Chesterton's definition of courage and how it relates to the hero's actions. It was argued that courage defines heroism, and indeed can be taken as the highest heroic virtue. The next chapter brings this study to a close, beginning with a summary of chapters. Thereafter the contribution of this study and suggestions for further research are noted. Chapter Six ends with concluding remarks on the subject of heroism as it has been dealt with in this dissertation.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of chapters

Chapter Two examined, in brief, the philosophies of Nietzsche and Chesterton and highlighted a few of their key ideas. To begin with, it was noted that Nietzsche's philosophies, which are frequently contradictory and open to misinterpretation, seem to point to his desire to create his own type of non-metaphysical salvation, which is embodied in his conception of the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* is Nietzsche's (1933:5) answer to the question "how can man be overcome?" Nietzsche's ideas of the *will to power*, *perspectivism* and the *Dionysian/Apollonian* opposition were also touched upon as they relate to the context or *Zeitgeist* of German history within which Nietzsche was living. The aim of this discussion was to show that for Nietzsche the assertion of the *will to power* is paramount; it is this assertion that makes an action heroic, and not the motivation for nor consequences of that action.

The connection between Nietzsche's philosophies and his existentialism was stressed, since for Nietzsche the *Übermensch* is an "existential experiment". Part of this existential experiment lies in the notion that the hero places self-actualisation above service, which means that the hero may often act to serve society out of a desire for personal gain. However, Nietzsche challenges the idea that the hero is necessarily motivated by pleasure; it was observed that the *Übermensch* has an unquestionable desire to reach a goal that affirms his *will to power*, despite the possibility of a struggle.

Following the examination of Nietzsche's philosophies, Chesterton's views were then investigated in Chapter Two. It was established that for Chesterton the hero ought to serve his society not out of a will to dominate but rather out of a will to serve. Service, in Chesterton's view, requires that the hero possess a great deal of inner strength, since he functions not only for his own good but also, perhaps more importantly, for the good of his community. It was observed that ultimately the hero does not impose his own will on

history; instead, he subordinates himself to the natural course of events (Segal 2000:2). This implies that there is an interplay between the will of the hero and his fate that ultimately serves the needs and desires of society at large.

In Chapter Two, it was also established that Chesterton (1993:91) sees the hero not as a greater man, but as a lesser god. However, this is not the standard reading of the hero, since it is more commonly accepted that the hero embodies not superhuman divinity but rather human dignity (Lash 1995:10). It was emphasised that if one is to see heroism as an amalgamation of Nietzsche's and Chesterton's ideas, there can be no fixed or final definition of heroism. Therefore, one's personal interpretation must be relied upon.

Chapter Three focused on the birth of the hero. It was noted that the hero is born twice, once physically and once metaphorically or metaphysically. His physical birth takes place owing to circumstances beyond his control, whereas his rebirth takes place owing to deliberate choice and action. This rebirth of the hero, which points to a shift from a neutral ethical – and therefore amoral – status to a heroic status, is bound to the act of choosing that which is “profoundly and eternally true” (Evans 2005:175). In other words, the hero aligns himself with what he believes to be the ultimate reality. This can be referred to as the *heroic choice* and is seen to point to the hero's final goal: the freedom that comes only when one aligns oneself to truth (Wagner 1881:1). This freedom is very closely linked to the autonomy of the hero (Lash 1995:6).

Chesterton's view of the *heroic choice* has been seen to allow for a freedom that is subservient to a higher ideal, which is described in the Christian Bible. This points to the idea that the hero is heroic both because he chooses to be and because it is his destiny to be (Chesterton 2003:55). For Chesterton (1909:68) the *heroic choice* is measured by two external standards: duty and love, which work together to serve justice. Justice is vital in the Chestertonian vision. Any view that denies the existence of ultimate justice is a view that negates the heroism of self-sacrifice (Walls 2005:216). Therefore, justice needs to be in place in order for heroism to be possible.

The *death of God* does not, as Nietzsche believes, lead to the glorification of man, for it takes away any hope of ultimate justice, and thus robs the hero of any claim that people ought to be treated with reverence or even rescued from that which is irreverent (Ramachandra 1996:67). This echoes Francis Bacon's sentiments on the same issue: "They that deny a God destroy man's nobility; for certainly man is of kin to the beasts, by his body; and if he be not kin to God, by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature" (in Johnson 2006:30). However, this does not concern Nietzsche, who contends that one creates one's own truth, and therefore one's own heroism; it is consequently unimportant that man has no transcendent truth to adhere to.

Chapter Four explored the heroic journey as a pivotal facet of the life of the hero. It was contended that the journey of the hero is a process that is brought about largely, if not entirely, by the fact that the hero is not in control of his circumstances. Nietzsche endeavours to release his *Übermensch* from these circumstances through what he calls the "metamorphosis of the spirit" in which the hero is able to step beyond the limitations of his context (in Steiner 1960:71). Thus the hero assumes his role as an outsider who is required to stand above his fellow man. However, it was noted that the hero is the "Everyman", who despite being an outsider is still the representative of those who are on the inside, namely his community (Tallon & Walls 2005:210; Segal 2000:8).

It was highlighted that the heroic battle is fought primarily in the mind of the hero, and also that the hero has to learn to overcome his own doctrines in order to be able to assert the *will to truth*, even if the truth is permanently in flux.¹ Part of this battle of the mind pertains to the hero's need to learn to accept the possibility of miracles. The relevance of this relates to the hero's need to transcend or overcome himself. Nietzsche (1977:235) suggests that man can transcend or overcome himself by adhering to his own *will to power*. Chesterton (1986:340), however, agrees with the mythological view that the hero

¹ The *will to truth* may be seen in two ways: firstly, it may be seen as an assertion of a personal, self-created truth; and secondly, it may be seen as an assertion to be subservient to an existing, external truth that is taken by the individual to be trustworthy on the basis of personal belief. This idea is implicit in Nietzsche's and Chesterton's writings, respectively.

can only transcend himself with the help of some external supernatural force: “[b]y insisting that God transcends man, man has transcended himself”.

Chesterton (1986:245, 325) believes that the hero’s response to miracles, which is made evident in his own actions, should come in the form of two virtues: humility and gratitude. Nietzsche, however, sees no need for gratitude, and insists that one’s response to miracles as an expression of freedom and the *will to power* should only be that of pride. It was noted in Chapter Four that Nietzsche sees the advance of the hero made possible through an encounter with opposites (Ku 2003:34). Nietzsche’s supports this contention by creating a philosophy that is largely built upon negation, especially a negation of doctrines held to be true by Christianity. The heroic aim, in accordance with the *will to power* as it is alluded to in the *Matrix* trilogy, is to let some of these opposites dominate others: good dominates evil, for instance, thereby unbalancing the equation of opposites and claiming victory. However, this is only part of the hero’s aim. He must also strive to create unity between disparate elements: mind, body and spirit.

Tom Morris (2005:52) suggests that the hero’s strength is physical, mental and spiritual, and that the spiritual strength of the hero is measured by strength of character, which is always guided by virtues such as courage, resilience, persistence, integrity and compassion. Thomas Aquinas (1951:319) argues that heroic virtue does not differ from the “normal run of virtue except by its more perfect form of activity”; heroic virtue is that which claims “values higher than those generally accessible”. In other words, heroism is found only in rare and unique individuals. It was also argued that Neo as the hero is as much a priest as he is a warrior; and that part of his aim as a hero is to rebel against the false religion of the *herd morality*. In fact, the very concept of heroism implies a type of rebellion.

Finally, in Chapter Five, the death of the hero was considered. It was noted that the hero’s mortality and finitude are crucial to his heroism. It was also noted that one’s view of death has a significant impact on one’s view of heroism. There is a sense in mythology and in the *Matrix* trilogy that the death of the hero is predestined or even preordained. It

was argued that the hero goes to his death out of choice and that he may either be considered a martyr or a suicide, depending on whether one accepts the Nietzschean or Chestertonian definition of courage.

Chapter Five also explored Nietzsche's idea of the *eternal return*. It was noted that while the *eternal return* is implausible in scientific terms, it does support Nietzsche's (1977:253) idea that the hero should always be an affirmer of the truth that he has created through his existential experiments. This implies that regret is an un-heroic emotion.

The hero is symbolic of life and its highest ideals, and Chesterton (1986:313) argues that these ideals need to be "fixed and familiar". Chesterton's view of heroism rests largely on the idea that a sense of permanence is attainable. The hero must have standards to guide his actions, otherwise he is merely chasing his shadow, something that always moves and cannot be captured (Lash 1995:27). Chesterton (1986:320) argues that heroism requires an *eternal revolution*, which continually seeks to repair or renovate a given situation so that it does not run into ruin. Heroism, therefore, requires sustainability. In Chesterton's view, the sustainability of heroism lies in the *will to love*.

In *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski, Wachowski & Silver 2003b), the Oracle's final words, which are also significantly the final words of the *Matrix* trilogy, are remarks to the effect that she did not at any point "know" that all the preceding events would lead to such a good outcome, but that she did "believe" in such an outcome. These same words are significant at the close of this study, for if one agrees with either Nietzsche or Chesterton, that agreement is arguably based more on belief than on knowledge. However, it is possible for one to completely disregard the views of these philosophers in order that one might discover an altogether different 'truth'.

6.2 Contribution of the study

This study explored how the *Matrix* trilogy presents the viewer with a postmodern vision of the hero and his heroism according to the assumption that truth is formulated to a great

extent by differences of opinion. In order to demonstrate this, Nietzsche's and Chesterton's philosophies regarding heroism were discussed and contrasted. The Wachowski brothers' claim that an understanding of Nietzsche's writings is essential to the decoding of the *Matrix* trilogy has been explored and verified. Moreover, it was demonstrated that Neo's heroism might also be interpreted from a non-Nietzschean perspective.

Prior to the writing of this dissertation, a literature study indicated the existence of only one piece of writing that explores the relationship between Nietzsche's and Chesterton's writings: Stephen Conway's short article, *Masks and paradox, passion and joy: an analysis of Chesterton and Nietzsche* (1992). Accordingly, this dissertation is the first in-depth discussion concerning how Nietzsche's and Chesterton's ideas relate to each other, and the only study to date to focus on and explore the breadth of Chesterton's views on heroism.

This study also links Neo to his mythological predecessors, affirming the Wachowski brothers' claim that the *Matrix* trilogy was written to conflate various references to a range of mythological and philosophical frameworks within a single narrative. The fact that Neo can be seen as a culmination of so many intertextual ideas from countless historical and mythological sources ratifies his status as a postmodern hero.

6.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

While the aim of this study has been achieved, various subjects have been left unexplored. To begin with, this study has not sought to relate Nietzsche's and Chesterton's philosophies to heroes represented in other contemporary films; nor has it sought to compare their views on other subjects. In another study, one might analyse the heroism of Neo through conceptual frameworks laid out by entirely different philosophers. Additionally, this study has not attempted to be a reading that focuses at all on the complex and unique representations of gender and identity in the *Matrix* trilogy, and a study on such subjects would certainly prove interesting.

While this study does examine visuals as they relate to the life of the hero, a great deal of the symbolism dealt with in the *Matrix* films has been left unstudied. A shot-by-shot semiotic analysis of the *Matrix* trilogy, unlimited by the confines of a specific subject like heroism, would certainly be fascinating and informative. Also, while this study has explored a number of mythological perspectives in terms of their relation to the *Matrix* trilogy, Egyptian and Arthurian mythology was only hinted at occasionally for the sake of keeping the focus of this dissertation more specific; selectivity in any study is not only unavoidable, it is essential.

Theories on authorship, which have been neglected in this dissertation, might also be related to the intertextual nature of the *Matrix* trilogy through further research. Finally, this has not been a primarily Marxist reading of the text, although his theories have been incorporated; thus, a review could be done that relates a Marx's philosophy to the text of the *Matrix* trilogy.

It needs to be noted that intertextuality, as it has been employed in the narrative of the *Matrix* trilogy, is by its very nature impossibly expansive; it allows for an endless chain of referents and signifiers even in the reading of the visual text. This study has endeavoured to limit this chain of signifiers in order to focus on the chosen subject: Heroism in the *Matrix*: an interpretation of Neo's heroism through the philosophies of Nietzsche and Chesterton.

6.4 Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to show that a single topic, that of heroism, may be interpreted in different ways depending on the philosophical or ideological foundation one works from. It has revealed that one may interpret the *Matrix* trilogy as a text that may be aligned with the contrary philosophies of both Nietzsche and Chesterton. This is not to say that the *Matrix* is an entirely Nietzschean text, nor is it entirely Chestertonian. However, one's understanding of heroism, both in the *Matrix* films and in general, is assisted when one employs two or more distinctive stances.

To borrow from Chesterton (2003:55), one might say that this study has sought to reflect stereoscopically on the ethical existence of the hero, since seeing two different pictures creates a three dimensional view of the hero that would otherwise be impossible to attain. This stereoscopic view has, however, frequently brought about contradictions. Both Nietzsche and Chesterton acknowledge the inevitability of such contradictions in the pursuit of truth. Nietzsche (1977:36) writes that the *Übermensch* “wants and evokes contradiction so as to acquire a guidepost to his own acts of injustice. The ability to contradict calls for a good conscience in enmity towards the customary, the traditional and the sanctified”. And Chesterton (1986:230) contends that the ordinary man who pursues a heroic ideal has “always been sane” because he allows for paradoxes. He continues:

He has always had one foot on earth and one foot in fairyland. He has always left himself free to doubt his gods; but (unlike the agnostic of today) free also to believe in them. He has always cared more for truth than for consistency. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them (Chesterton 1986:230).

Claude Lévi-Strauss writes that “[t]he purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction. We use myths to hide contradictions in the beliefs of our societies” (in Fitch 2004:1). Perhaps the *Matrix* trilogy as a contemporary post-modern myth functions for this purpose.

This study has not set out to be an either/or reading of Neo as the hero in the *Matrix*, but instead allows the ideas of Nietzsche and Chesterton to be juxtaposed and contrasted in order to explore an application of the postmodern assumption that the validity of an opinion is relative to other opinions rather than an absolute (Godawa 2002:83; Zacharias 1997:82). This study supports Jean Baudrillard’s contention that knowledge is always subjective (in Hanley 2003:1), and Jacques Derrida’s (1987:19) assumption that essential truth, if it exists at all, is infinite and therefore impossible to capture in its entirety. Thus, it is left up to the reader to make a judgment concerning which, if any, position to agree with.

This dissertation has shown that the hero is, in a sense, a coin that can be seen from two sides. Perhaps the hero is truly all things to all people, a Janus-faced individual who

points in whichever direction his current context demands. However, one characteristic of the hero seems to remain fixed despite his many transmutations: his *persistence of will*.

APPENDIX 1

A SYNOPSIS OF THE *MATRIX* TRILOGY

The following synopsis seeks to be only a rough outline of the plot of the *Matrix* trilogy and does not in any way hope to replace the actual viewing of the films. Many of the details in the narrative of the trilogy are excluded from this synopsis in order to highlight Neo's heroic journey.

Part 1: *The Matrix*

In the early twenty-first century, humanity created AI – artificial intelligence – a singular consciousness that generated an entire race of machines. These machines grew in both might and intelligence until they realised that mankind's domination over them could be challenged and conquered; thus began a war between humankind and the machines. Politicians and other leaders of men saw that machines relied on solar energy for power, and so, hoping that it would stop the machines from surviving, they scorched the sky, blocking out the light of the sun. However, the machines were resourceful enough to see that the human body is a battery of sorts. And so they captured humans and began to grow new infants in vast panoptic farms. In order to control these captured and grown people, and to keep their minds occupied without informing them of their real place in existence, the machines developed a gigantic artificial reality simulation – a simulacrum – known as the Matrix. The machines literally 'plugged' the humans into the Matrix, allowing them to live in blissful ignorance of their enslavement.

Just when all seemed lost for the humans, a man was born inside the Matrix who was able to manipulate and reshape the Matrix according to his own desires. This man, who was known as the "One", freed the first few humans from the Matrix and taught them the truth about their condition: the truth that they were slaves to the machines and to the unreal façade of the Matrix. It was then established that humankind would never be free as long as the Matrix existed. All those who had been freed from the prison of the Matrix built Zion, a subterranean city that was hidden from the machines near the warm centre of

the earth. These free people sent representatives, or rebels, back into the Matrix to help free other people.

The One – the first human to be free from the machines – then died, and yet the war between humankind and the machines was not over. The Oracle, the intuitive program that helped to build the Matrix, prophesied the end of the war in the knowledge that the One would return to fight for humans one day. The Oracle also prophesied that Morpheus, the captain of a ship called the Nebuchadnezzar, would find the new One.

Morpheus eventually discovers the man whom he thinks to be the One: Thomas A Anderson, a man who by day works at an IT company called Metacortex and by night works as a hacker under the alias ‘Neo’. Morpheus manages to get Neo unplugged from the Matrix. Thus begins a process that will change Neo from being just an ordinary human being into the saviour of humankind. Morpheus takes Neo to see the Oracle, but the news she has for him is not good. She tells him that not only is he not the One, but that Morpheus, believing so blindly that Neo *is* the One, will at some point sacrifice himself to save Neo's life. Neo is told by the Oracle that he will have to make a choice at some point: either Morpheus will die or he will die.

Meanwhile, one of the members of the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar, Cypher, who takes the role of the Judas-figure, has told the Agents – machine programs whose sole aim it is to seek and destroy all those rebels who are free from the Matrix – where to find Morpheus. This allows the Agents to capture Morpheus and take him to a military-controlled building for questioning. Their aim is to get the codes for Zion's mainframe through brutal and incessant interrogation. Fortunately, Neo and Trinity are able to escape from the Agents and exit the Matrix, but two of the other rebels, Apoc and Switch, are killed.

It is clear to Neo that if Morpheus gives the Zion mainframe codes to the Agents, it will spell doom for the free people of Zion, and so he is left with a choice: either Morpheus must be killed (by unplugging him from the Matrix), or he, Neo, must go into the Matrix

to save Morpheus. Neo chooses the latter, knowing full well that the Oracle predicted he would be the one to die if Morpheus were to be saved. With Trinity he breaks into the building in which Morpheus is being held and rescues him from the Agents.

This time, Morpheus and Trinity manage to escape the Matrix, but Neo remains trapped. He is forced to face the lead-Agent Smith in an underground train-station. Neo puts up a good fight to begin with, but Smith, with his superior speed and strength, is impossible to beat. Eventually Neo manages to buy enough time to escape by throwing Smith in front of an oncoming train. Agents, however, do not die as people do, since they have the ability to shift from body to body at will. Smith shifts into another body and begins to chase after Neo, who is busy making his escape through the city. To make matters worse for Neo, other Agents join Smith in his pursuit.

Neo runs into the mostly-abandoned *Heart O' The City* hotel and manages to keep the Agents at bay for a while but fails in the end. Smith meets Neo in the corridor and shoots him six times in the chest, at point-blank range, killing him. In the real world, Trinity, seeing that Neo is dead, stands over Neo's real body and confesses that she loves him. This confession and a kiss supernaturally revive Neo and activate his powers as the One.

With his new abilities, Neo is able to see the code of the Matrix and is thus able to stop bullets as the Agents fire repeatedly at him. Neo seemingly destroys Smith – in *The Matrix Reloaded* we discover that Neo actually frees Smith from the rules of Matrix – and escapes from the Matrix. At the end of the film, Neo informs the viewer that this is just the beginning of the journey and not the end. Neo then flies off, displaying a new-found skill that he possesses as the One.

Part 2: *The Matrix Reloaded*

Around six months after the events of the first film, the remaining free humans learn that a massive army of machines is tunneling towards Zion, threatening to break the walls of the city within 24 hours. Neo enters the Matrix to consult the Oracle for advice on how

the machines might be beaten. The Oracle tells Neo that if he is to save Zion he must find a programme called the Keymaker who is being held hostage by a dangerous programme called the Merovingian; the Keymaker will give Neo access to the Source, the place where the Architect can be found. The Oracle then leaves Neo, at which point he comes face to face with Smith, the Agent-programme he believes he has already destroyed.

Smith has constantly been copying versions of himself onto other people and programmes for quite some time now, and Neo is forced to fight an impossibly large number of Smiths. Despite their advantage in numbers, Neo manages to fend off the Smiths off long enough for him to fly out of harm's way.

Following this, Neo, Trinity and Morpheus go to see the Merovingian in order to determine whether they can get to the Keymaker. The Merovingian refuses to help, explaining that they have nothing valuable to give to him as a trade for the Keymaker. Fortunately for the rebels, the Merovingian's wife Persephone is disgruntled with her adulterous, philandering husband. She meets Neo, Morpheus and Trinity on the ground floor of the building and explains that in exchange for a single kiss from Neo, she will take them to the Keymaker. After kissing Neo, Persephone tells him and Trinity that their love is not going to last: a prediction of the inevitable truth that death will part the two lovers.

Neo, Morpheus and Trinity find the Keymaker, but are then faced with a number of obstacles: the Merovingian's men as well as the Agents give chase in order to try and apprehend the rebels. After a long pursuit, and a few battles, Neo, Morpheus and Trinity manage to get the Keymaker to safety. When this aim is achieved, the Keymaker tells them how to get to the Source.

When Neo gets to the Source, the Architect informs him that there have been a number of 'Ones' and a number of previous versions of the Matrix; that he is by no means unique, and that the idea of the 'One' is yet another system of control. The Architect intends that the Neo, as the One, return to Zion to select sixteen women and seven men who will then rebuild Zion's population once the city has been destroyed by the machines. However,

the Architect makes Neo aware of the fact that Trinity has entered the Matrix to save him, and that she is about to die by the hand of an Agent, unless she is saved by a miracle. Thus Neo has a choice between saving Zion and trying to save Trinity. He chooses the latter.

Trinity, it turns out, has already been shot by the Agent and is falling from a high building towards the ground. Neo, who has the ability to move at lightning-fast speed, manages to catch her in mid-air. He carries her to a place of safety where he hears her utter a brief apology before dying. Neo, refusing to let Trinity die, begins to adjust the code of the Matrix that affects how Trinity's heart functions. He manages to revive Trinity, just as she revived him in the first film.

Neo and Trinity return to the Nebuchadnezzar to inform Morpheus that the war between humankind and the machines is far from over. Just then, a group of three Sentinels – squid-like machines – throw a bomb at the Nebuchadnezzar, forcing the crew of the ship to escape. As the Nebuchadnezzar is destroyed Neo realizes that his powers as the One extend beyond the bounds of the Matrix and into the real world. Neo manages to disable the Sentinels, but at great cost to himself: he is sent into some kind of a coma, leaving Morpheus and Trinity to find a way to bring him back to wakefulness.

Part 3: *The Matrix Revolutions*

While unconscious, Neo finds himself in another underground train station, a place that exists between the machine mainframe and the Matrix. It is in this train station that Neo learns about the Machine City before he is rescued by Morpheus and Trinity. Before leaving the Matrix, Neo revisits the Oracle for the last time. She explains that there is still a chance to save Zion, but it involves going to the Machine City and facing off against Smith, who, as the Oracle reveals, as Neo's opposite cannot survive if Neo dies, since the Matrix is built on equations that must always balance. If one half of an equation is changed, the other half will be forced to readjust or else the Matrix will implode.

Neo then returns to the real world, where he takes a ship called the Logos to the Machine City, accompanied by Trinity. Neo's plan is almost ruined when Bane, who is possessed by Smith, attacks both Trinity and himself. Bane/Smith then attacks Neo and manages to blind him when he shoves electric cables into his face. The strange result of this act is that Neo is able to see the energy fields that underlie the world of the machines, and because of this he is able to defeat and kill Bane/Smith. After this, Neo and Trinity carry on their journey to the Machine City. Sadly, just when Neo and Trinity are about to reach their destination, the engines of the Logos fail and the ship crashes, killing Trinity.

Neo walks through the Machine City until he meets Deus Ex Machina, the machine that acts as the ruler over all machines in the city. Knowing that Smith has copied himself onto everyone in the Matrix and has therefore grown beyond the control of the machines, Neo makes a deal with Deus Ex Machina. The deal is that he will fight Smith, on behalf of the machines, in exchange for peace in Zion. Deus Ex Machina agrees.

Neo then enters the Matrix for the last time to fight Smith. In the end, however, Smith is too strong and he conquers by copying himself onto Neo. Neo has at this point already worked out that Smith's existence is bound to his own; if one of them dies, the other will die too. This is exactly what happens. Smith is destroyed when Neo dies, and peace is restored between the people of Zion and the machines.

In the end, the Oracle is seen speaking to the Architect. She tells him that the peace (or truce) will last as long as it can, implying that she understands the inevitability of war. When the Architect walks away, the Oracle mentions to those around her that Neo will definitely return one day. Therefore, even if peace does not last, it is clear that the hero will come back to save his people once more.

APPENDIX 2

MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE *MATRIX* TRILOGY

Neo

Neo is the hero and protagonist in the *Matrix* trilogy played by Keanu Reeves. It is Neo's primary task to save humankind from the prison of the Matrix and the impending doom of Zion. He does this with the help of Morpheus, Trinity, the Oracle, and various others who support the cause of the One. In the end, Neo gains victory by defeating Smith, who is his nemesis.

Trinity

Trinity, played by Carrie-Anne Moss, is the lead female character in the *Matrix* trilogy. Her name is representative of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Ghost. In the beginning of *The Matrix*, she is introduced to the viewer as the first officer of the *Nebuchadnezzar*, working under the captaincy of Morpheus; later she plays a more pivotal role as Neo's confidant and lover. She is a fierce warrior and frequently throughout the narrative of the *Matrix* trilogy is seen to place her life on the line in order to help Neo fulfill his purpose as the One.

Morpheus

Morpheus, who is played by Laurence Fishburne in the *Matrix* trilogy, is the captain of the *Nebuchadnezzar*. His character seems to be based on the title character of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comics, but more importantly, his presence is a reference to the god of dreams in Greek mythology. The Oracle tells Morpheus that his purpose is to find the One, and so he makes it his ambition to search for Neo in order to help him win victory for the people of Zion and those trapped in the Matrix.

The Oracle

The Oracle is played by Gloria Foster (in *The Matrix* and *The Matrix Reloaded*) and Mary Alice (in *The Matrix Revolutions*). The Oracle is a sentient programme, whose purpose it is to ensure that good outweighs evil so that people and machines can co-exist peacefully. She is allied to the rebels who fight the machines, and is opposed to the cold rationality of The Architect, who designed the Matrix with her help. The Oracle, whose name is reminiscent of the Oracle at Delphi in Greek mythology, has the ability to foretell the future. She uses this ability to help Neo achieve his purpose as the hero.

Smith

Smith is played by Hugo Weaving in the *Matrix* trilogy. He starts out as an Agent of the Matrix, but is later freed by Neo. His intention is to conquer the Matrix; he does this by copying himself onto every human being in the Matrix. In the *Matrix Reloaded*, Smith arrives in a car that has a licence plate that refers to Isaiah 54:16 in the Old Testament, which reads, “Behold, I have created the *smith* that blows the coals in the fire, and that brings forth an instrument for his work; and I have created the waster to destroy” (emphasis added). This reference, among other things, positions Smith as a negative force in the narrative of the *Matrix* trilogy.

The Architect

The Architect is the one who designed the Matrix. He is played by Helmut Bakaitis in the films. The name of the Architect is probably a reference to an alternative name for the archetypal ideology of “God” in some traditions. Perhaps the most obvious link is to the name that the Freemasons give to God: Great Architect of the Universe. The Architect is the opposite of the character of the Oracle. Both of these characters are said to have worked together to create the Matrix, but it is clear that both have different ideas on how it should be run.

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