

of divinity before going to India, and had understood it intellectually. But in India, and in the years after I returned, I felt it. I could see beauty in a moral code that emphasized self-control, resistance to temptation, cultivation of one's higher, nobler self, and negation of the self's desires. I could see the dark side of this ethic too: once you allow visceral feelings of disgust to guide your conception of what God wants, then minorities who trigger even a hint of disgust in the majority (such as homosexuals or obese people) can be ostracized and treated cruelly. The ethic of divinity is sometimes incompatible with compassion, egalitarianism, and basic human rights.²³

But at the same time, it offers a valuable perspective from which we can understand and critique some of the ugly parts of secular societies. For example, why are many of us bothered by rampant materialism? If some people want to work hard in order to earn money in order to buy luxury goods in order to impress others, how can we criticize them using the ethic of autonomy?

To offer another example, I was recently eating lunch at a UVA dining hall. At the table next to me two young women were talking. One of them was very grateful for something the other had agreed to do for her. To express her gratitude she exclaimed, "Oh my God! If you were a guy, I'd be so on your dick right now!" I felt a mixture of amusement and revulsion, but how could I criticize her from within the ethic of autonomy?

The ethic of divinity lets us give voice to inchoate feelings of elevation and degradation—our sense of "higher" and "lower." It gives us a way to condemn crass consumerism and mindless or trivialized sexuality. We can understand long-standing laments about the spiritual emptiness of a consumer society in which everyone's mission is to satisfy their personal desires.²⁴

STEPPING OUT OF THE MATRIX

Among the most profound ideas that have arisen around the world and across eras is that the world we experience is an illusion, akin to a dream. Enlightenment is a form of waking up. You find this idea in many religions and philosophies,²⁵ and it's also a staple of science fiction, particularly since William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. Gibson coined the term *cyberspace* and described it as a "matrix" that emerges when a billion computers are connected and people get enmeshed in "a consensual hallucination."

The creators of the movie *The Matrix* developed Gibson's idea into a gorgeous and frightening visual experience. In one of its most famous scenes, the protagonist, Neo, is given a choice. He can take a red pill, which will disconnect him from the matrix, dissolve the hallucination, and give him command of his actual, physical body (which is lying in a vat of goo). Or he can take a blue pill, forget he was ever given this choice, and his consciousness will return to the rather pleasant hallucination in which nearly all human beings spend their conscious existence. Neo swallows the red pill, and the matrix dissolves around him.

It wasn't quite as dramatic for me, but Shweder's writings were my red pill. I began to see that many moral matrices coexist within each nation. Each matrix provides a complete, unified, and emotionally compelling worldview, easily justified by observable evidence and nearly impregnable to attack by arguments from outsiders.

I grew up Jewish in the suburbs of New York City. My grandparents had fled czarist Russia and found work in New York's garment industry. For their generation, socialism and labor