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THE PROMPT

Discuss your reaction to *1984*. What commentary does the book have to make on modern American society today?

THE JOURNAL ENTRY

There are countless elements of George Orwell's *1984* that could serve as the basis of interpretation and discussion, from the erasure of history to the indifference of the proles to the elimination of sexual pleasure. One category ripe for analysis is the extent to which the tactics of control employed by the Party exist in our contemporary society—whether it's the deliberate evocation of fear and hatred of an enemy or the maintenance of “perpetual war” at the expense of the material comfort and standard of living of the general population. However, I intend to focus this discussion on two instances of Orwell's apparent rejection of modern, liberal, or radical ideas in favor of traditional beliefs and established practice.

The first is Orwell's seeming defense of absolute rather than relative truth. Winston—and, by extension, Orwell—adamantly defended the objective existence of reality (until his experience in the Ministry of Love, of course). Two plus two, maintained Winston, must always equal four. O'Brien, on the other hand, expressed the (ostensible) relativism of the Party when he declared that reality exists only in the mind, not concretely in space. By rejecting objective truisms in favor of subjective judgments, Orwell seemed to be saying, the Party was able to portray its own assertions as reality.

This attack on the relativism of truth is, however, fundamentally flawed. Genuine belief in the relativity of truth inherently entails the understanding that no single doctrine can be regarded as absolute, that differences in perception lead to

differences in belief. Even the most seemingly universal of human values is recognized by true relativists as the result of the nearly identical environment, genetics, and biology that all humans share; for example, the truth of the expression $2 + 2 = 4$ is only widely accepted because almost everyone adheres to the same conception of numbers and addition. Consequently, when the Party enforces its dogma with unyielding severity, as in the Ministry of Love, it is demonstrating anything but the toleration and open-mindedness that must invariably accompany relativism. Indeed, its actions evince a rigid adherence to absolutism of truth—perhaps not the instinctive, seemingly self-evident truisms defended by Winston, but absolute truth nonetheless. O’Brien states this very explicitly: “Whatever the Party holds to be truth *is* truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party” (205). Thus, where Orwell condemns relativism, he should actually be inveighing against the dangers of corrupted, perverted absolutism.

The second instance of Orwell’s repudiation of modern ideas is his assault on the rationalization of human-designed systems of expression. Winston sympathized with the old prole man in the bar who asked for a pint instead of a liter or half liter (75), indicating Orwell’s contempt for the metric system. Orwell more extensively assails the simplification of the English language in the form of Newspeak. I wholeheartedly agree with Orwell’s caution against chipping away at the number and complexity of words, for it is precisely the rich vocabulary of English that makes it such an expressively powerful language. But Orwell was mistaken to tie the reduction and sterilization of vocabulary with other aspects of Newspeak that make rational sense and do not restrict the range of potential thought. The sensible replacement of “bad” with “ungood,” for example, is really a harmless change. All that the switch has to entail is an alteration of spelling; all of the complexity and depth of meaning associated with the old word could ideally

be transferred to the new word. And the change could come without compromising the wealth of synonyms that the original word possessed. Furthermore, such standardized grammatical rules as pluralization exclusively through the addition of “-s” or “-es” (so that, for example, “women” would be expressed as “womans”) would involve no constriction of thought capacity or expressiveness whatsoever. I understand that the purpose of Newspeak as Orwell described it is, indeed, to strip away complex meaning and “superfluous” synonyms in order to render thoughtcrime impossible. But Orwell’s sweeping assault on language simplification in all forms seems to ignore the potential benefits that certain aspects of it could have. By making spelling, grammar, and words themselves more systematic and logical—without diminishing vocabulary or complexity of meaning—it might actually become easier to express intricate and heretical ideas, inasmuch as the broad spectrum of verbal choices would become more readily accessible.

1984 is one of my favorite novels of all time. It is replete with ideas of amazing insight and novelty that a reader cannot help contemplating. This criticism of two of my interpretations of Orwell’s ideas is but one example of this fact.