

# Another Perspective on Orwellian Pessimism

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George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often interpreted as portraying ultimate pessimism about the condition of humanity. The message is said to be a prophecy that there is no hope: we are destined for an existence in which human nature has been expunged and truth is no longer viable. An alternative interpretation, somewhat less dire, is that Orwell has presented not a prophecy but a warning, with the possibility that twentieth century man might yet right the wrong course he now pursues, and avoid the destruction represented by life in Oceania. What both of these interpretations accept is that in Oceania the metaphysical and epistemological groundwork of humanity has been lost: when or if we reach the state of affairs Orwell depicts, the species man is no longer deserving of the name.

There is, however, still another interpretation, one which leaves room, albeit modest, for hope even within the horrific conditions presented in the novel. Human nature and truth have been severely repressed, but they have not been lost. While return to their former prominence is problematic, their continued existence is assured.

Human nature is multiform, including among its elements intellect, sensuality, and will. The Party allows the proles freedom with their sensuality, and their will is channelled in this direction and away from connection with the intellect. The proles' intellect is kept in a state of arrested development, but each individual of each succeeding generation must be subjected to a thorough and continual program of indoctrination in order to be restrained, that is, to prevent development of the intellect and its alignment with the will. The point is that in spite of the Party's repressive tactics, the proles retain the essence of their humanity. If at any time in the future the repressive tactics were to cease (because, for instance, the Party's watchful eye was fallible, or the resources necessary for successful repression dwindled, or dissident Party members sabotaged the indoctrination program), we would expect the proles thus liberated to again develop intellectually and to assert their will upon this basis.

What about the Party--to what extent have Party members lost their humanity? Their sensuality has been repressed, especially the sexual impulse, but it has not been eliminated. Just as with the intellect of the proles, the sensuality of Party members must be repressed anew with each new generation. Further, the repression is only partial. Winston and Julia make love illicitly, and she not only intimates that she has done so with other Outer Party members, but avers that Inner Party members too would have her if they could. And sex is not the only indulgence of which we are aware. The Inner Party is found to enjoy certain delectations of the palate (chocolate and wine) which are unavailable to all other people. Although in theory Party members' sensuality is to be held in check, enforcement of this principle is sometimes lax or ineffective.

Control of the sensual element of human nature, of course, is of less importance to the Party's program than control of the intellect and prevention of willful acts of defiance based on intellectual independence. Party members have intellects which are well developed, but at the same time under strong controls. The aim of these controls is to disallow the thinking of thoughts contrary to the current Party line. Thus the Party distorts the history it presents for public consumption and erases records of the truth about the past. To use Winston's metaphor, "All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed

exactly as often as was necessary."<sup>1</sup> It would seem that all hope is lost if humanity is denied such a primary ingredient in its epistemological foundation. But, we may ask, has the past been lost entirely?

Winston finds a record inimical to the currently accepted rendition of history. Is the existence of this record merely an oversight by someone who should have destroyed it, or could it be that the Inner Party retains accurate documentation of the past, in spite of the distortions presented to the proles and Outer Party? When Winston disposes of the record, he does so in the routine way, by putting it into a chute. It is easy to assume the record is destroyed, yet there is the possibility that it is returned to a permanent file. Further, if the record Winston has seen is in fact destroyed, is it the only copy?

The existence of this one record, and conjecture about its fate, raise the possibility that historical records are kept intact by the Inner Party. Further support for this possibility lies in a consideration of the value such records would have to the likes of O'Brien. The continual revisions of documented history performed at the Ministry of Truth are overseen by the Inner Party, and in order to do this they need an accurate knowledge of the past. The more accurate their records, the more thorough can be the revisions they order. Still, there remains a question about whether it would be necessary to maintain records going back beyond the most recent revisions; history has been revised many times. Here we should recognize the driving force behind the Inner Party: their lust for power and the enjoyment they derive from dominating other people.

The Inner Party's domination over others is related directly to the knowledge they possess, and that others do not, of what truly happened in the past. One perspective here says that the fuller this knowledge is, and thus the greater the difference between those who know and those who do not, the greater will be the former's potential for enjoying their domination. Another perspective recognizes that this enjoyment also requires a certain degree of recollected truth by those who are dominated.

The Inner Party's enjoyment of power stands to be fuelled not only by the knowledge gap between themselves and others, but also by the presence of dissidence among the others. Without dissidence, dominance would become mechanical and the thrill would be lost. O'Brien needs people like Winston Smith to recognize the truth about the past and the falsity of the public version of it. That is, he needs among the people he dominates those who exercise their intellect on the truth about history, and who thus establish the contrariety he finds enjoyment in overcoming.

O'Brien's stated desire is the complete powerlessness of humanity, with his ultimate image that of a "boot stamping on a human face forever."<sup>2</sup> He would strip human beings of their essence, especially their intelligence. And to the extent intelligence remained, it would be only at the minimal level necessary for workers to function as automatons. This is what many readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* see as humanity's fate in the novel, in sum, humanity's demise. But we must remember that there is a counter point, of which O'Brien is aware. The sensual aspect of human nature is still very much in evidence among the proles as well as at least some Party members. Human will has been redirected but not expunged, and the faculty of intelligence also remains. While arresting the development of intelligence among the proles, the Party fosters it among its members, and then controls their use of it by denying them the truth about the past. But the Inner Party needs to

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: New American Library, 1961) 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 220.

preserve the truth of the past in order to direct the construction of lies, and, perhaps most importantly, to enjoy the thrill of dominating other people. To employ an expression familiar to Orwell, we might say that humanity is down but not out. The controllers, the Inner Party, have not demonstrated the capability to put it out, and could not afford to do so even if they were capable.