Title: Truth and Freedom in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four

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[essay date October 2010] In the following essay, Dwan examines Orwell's treatment of truth in Nineteen Eighty-Four, finding it inextricably linked to the pursuit of freedom in the novel.

The hero of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four defends a seemingly modest claim: "There was truth and there was untruth." It may be incoherent to deny this, but, as the novel shows, those who set no store in truth will not be browbeaten by contradictions. Orwell's last novel reflects his conviction that a commitment to "objective truth" was fast disappearing from the world--a prospect that troubled him more than bombs. Truth meant little in this "age of lies" and was neither the aim nor horizon of intellectual debate (CW [Complete Works of George Orwell], 17, p. 11). Standards of rationality were opportunistically enlisted and jettisoned in the service of particular ends. Politics, he concluded, was "a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia" (p. 428). This essay studies the case Orwell makes for truth--a case that remains underexplored, partly because its worth may appear self-evident while its execution can seem rather naïve.

Yet in Nineteen Eighty-Four Orwell put his epistemological commitments under critical pressure and it produced interestingly mixed results. All attempts to demonstrate what truth is in the novel fail; yet truth remains the ground and even the goal of freedom nonetheless.

I

The political importance of truth was not self-evident for Orwell's contemporaries. By the 1920s, Hobbes's "sed Authoritas, non Veritas facit Legem" had been shorn of its context and championed as the final word on the relationship between authority and truth. Carl Schmitt invoked Hobbes to justify his own authoritarian views: moral truths were the product, not the legitimising condition of power. But liberals--as Schmitt recognized--could also find succour in Hobbes. The "first and Fundamentall Law of Nature," according to Hobbes, was "to seek Peace and follow it" and this remained a key principle for his liberal successors. But here truth remained a contingent good and in certain conditions it was a positive harm. Hobbes, for one, was well placed to appreciate that fundamentalist seekers of truth had no necessary commitment to peace.

Peace was not the ultimate goal of politics for Orwell, but nor, perhaps, was truth. Advocates of peace often undermined their own principles ("Objectively the pacifist is pro-Nazi") and failed to see that it was trumped by other virtues such as justice (CW, 13, p. 40). Orwell believed in the fundamental justice of war--or at least some wars. Equality and freedom were for him the foundation of justice, even if he was sometimes unclear about the precise connection between these two principles. He also championed another--and arguably independent--principle: solidarity. "The real objective of Socialism," he declared, "is human brotherhood" (CW, 16, p. 42). But these values had no obvious connection with truth. Even Plato had promoted lies in the name of solidarity and Orwell occasionally tolerated falsehoods for the greater good. For all his criticisms of wartime prejudice and false information, he viewed these as acceptable vices in certain contexts. "All propaganda is lies," but such lies were justified, "so long as one knows what one is doing, and why" (CW, 13,
p. 229). Truth, it seems, had only a relative value in Orwell's vision of politics.

Orwell worried less about local violations of truth than about the disappearance of the concept of truth altogether. In previous epochs people lied, but at least "they believed that 'the facts' existed and were more or less discoverable" (p. 504). Indeed, an acknowledgement of truth was built into the very concept of a lie. But trust in the existence and accessibility of facts no longer prevailed. The causes of this skepticism, he believed, were fundamentally political, although they were also bound up with social and technological developments. All regimes lied, but he traced the systematic erosion of truth to the rise of authoritarian politics. "The really frightening thing about totalitarianism," he maintained, "is not that it commits 'atrocities' but that it attacks the concept of objective truth" (CW, 16, p. 89). Some theories of objective truth were arguably equally authoritarian—modern totalitarianism, for Karl Popper, was traceable to Plato's metaphysical views of truth. But totalitarianism, in Orwell's eyes, was better characterized as an extreme relativism or even nihilism.

Hitler and Stalin had eroded truth by undermining free speech and circulating lies, but the totalitarian assault on truth had also a more theoretical character. Fascism, for instance, attacked the universality of truth and reason; both were relative to a particular historical community or racial group. This relativism was not restricted to moral issues alone and incorporated even empirical truths: "Nazi theory indeed specifically denies that such a thing as 'the truth' exists. There is, for instance, no such thing as 'science.' There is only 'German science,' 'Jewish science' etc." For Orwell, this relativism led to a "nightmare world in which the Leader or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but the past" (CW, 13, p. 504). Nazism may have represented a direct attack on universal reason, but the necessary connection that Orwell drew between relativism and totalitarianism was problematic. Arguably, the same relativism could be invoked to defend difference and tolerance between nations.

Orwell did not even countenance this as an argument, presumably because he assumed--all too swiftly--that relativism was self-refuting: it adopted a universal viewpoint to deny the possibility of any such outlook. It thus embodied the public "schizophrenia" he despised and bred a widespread skepticism about truth. However, relativism was also not skeptical enough--its proponents usually remained committed to a notion of truth, but restricted it to a particular group or social domain. In this context truth could remain as uncompromising as it had been under a more expansive schema: all who lived within a particular regime of truth were bound by its rules. Orwell's most alarming--and contentious--claim was that political leaders could control the rules of an epistemic space. Relativism thus endowed governors with a demanding notion of truth, while rejecting any means for assessing its validity. In Nineteen Eighty-Four the Party sets the epistemic standards and there is no "external standard" to which one can appeal (NEF, p. 290).

Orwell sometimes presented Nazism as an extreme case of a pervasive nationalism from which a range of evils arose. Nationalism was a fairly plastic term for Orwell and his views of it shifted; it was invariably blind, but it was sometimes benign. The British prejudice for freedom, for instance, was not to be sniffed at. But he was also convinced that a host of "mental vices spring ultimately from the nationalistic habit of mind" (CW, 16, p. 415). National chauvinism was the cause and symptom of a breakdown of communication between states and regions. "Indifference to objective truth," he explained, "is encouraged by the sealing-off of one part of the world from another, which makes it harder and harder to discover what is actually happening" (CW, 17, p. 148). Relativism was self-perpetuating and produced the atomisation of truth that it described in theory. He championed international socialism as an escape from parochial loyalties, but the relationship between socialism and truth was often unstable, not least within Marxism itself.

Marx had not provided a theory of truth, perhaps because he judged most metaphysical discussions of this kind to be fruitless. Engels was more receptive to metaphysical enquiry, but his views on truth were ambivalent. He was clearly a realist and believed in a reality independent of mind that was accessed through experience. Truth involved a correspondence between representations and the world: all ideas were "reflections--true or distorted--of reality." But Engels also distinguished between absolute truth and forms of justification, which were relative to historical circumstances. This allowed him to preserve a demanding conception of truth, while remaining skeptical about its accessibility. Some truths, perhaps, were transparent to everybody: Paris is in France and, as Winston Smith would also insist, "twice two is four." But beyond these platitudes there was little definitive knowledge. Even the truth-status of mathematics was questionable: "the virgin state of absolute validity and irrefutable proof of everything mathematical was gone forever" (pp. 109-10). In the physical sciences, "final and ultimate truths are rare"; in the moral sciences they were rarer still. For these reasons, scientists should ultimately "avoid such dogmatically moral expressions as error and truth" (p. 115).

Subsequent Marxists would criticise Engels' apparent eclecticism about truth, while others would amplify his skepticism about scientific certainties. According to Alexander Bogdanov, "Marxism contains a denial of the unconditional objectivity of any truth whatsoever, the denial of all eternal truths." This remark drew an angry response from Lenin who took it upon himself to re-assert the genuine epistemological tenets of Marxism. The radical empiricism of Ernst Mach and lesser men such as Bogdanov had eroded belief in the existence of matter, which, for Lenin, was equivalent to denying of the existence of an external world. Thus, the virtues of commonsense realism needed to be defended:

The "naïve realism" of any healthy person who has not been an inmate of a lunatic asylum or a pupil of the idealist philosophers consists in the view that things...
environment, the world, exist independently of our sensation, of our consciousness, of our self and of man in general. [...] Our sensation, our consciousness, is only an image of the external world, and it is obvious that an image cannot exist without the thing imaged, and that the latter exists independently of that which images it. Materialism deliberately makes the "naive" belief of mankind the foundation of knowledge. (p. 108)

The epistemology was hardly subtle, but its realism was sincere. Orwell presented a realist outlook as an essentially "liberal habit of mind," but it was also, in fact, orthodox Leninism (CW, 16, p. 89).

It also remained the doctrine of Stalinism. For Stalin, "Marxist materialist philosophy holds that matter, nature, being, is an objective reality existing outside and independent of our mind." Matter was "primary" and mind was entirely "secondary" or derivative. Reality was "fully knowable" and science provided us with "objective truth" (p. 113). But Stalin would also claim that knowledge was historically constituted and relative to a particular social formation. Fortunately, history saved us from total relativism through its dialectical constitution—a logic derived from history and serving as its explanation. The category through which history became transparent to itself was the proletariat—Marx's universal class. The Party was the means through which the proletariat acquired self-understanding. Thus, in effect, the Party became the criterion of truth in ways that strained against Stalin's own realist commitments. Now things were true because Stalin said so. As Orwell maintained: "If the Leader says of such and such event, 'It never happened'—well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five—well, two and two are five" (CW, 13, p. 504). In this dark world, Orwell felt compelled to defend the proper virtues of truth.

II

Nineteen-Eighty Four champions the idea of truth, but it is never made explicit in the novel what truth really is. Winston holds certain things to be true—he insists that stones are hard, that water is wet and he believes for most of the novel that two plus two equals four—but a list of "true" statements does not amount to a description of truth. For many of Orwell's contemporaries, descriptions of this kind were either redundant or mistaken. For A. J. Ayer—whom Orwell regarded as "a great friend" (CW, 18, p. 242)—platitudes such as "p is true = p" exhaust the meaning of a word such as truth. However, in the face of truth-deniers such as O'Brien, Winston thinks that there are substantive principles of truth that are worth defending. He seems to believe—although much of this remains implicit—that truth is the way our statements correspond with the world; sometimes it is the way our beliefs cohere; at other points truth is a set of statements that can be properly verified. However, the novel suggests that none of these criteria are sufficient and when cast as wholesale theories of truth they all seem to fail.

For much of the novel, Winston believes that the world is independent of mind. Reality, he maintains, is "external" and beliefs are accountable to it (NEF, p. 84). This realism does not entail that truth should be cast as a form of correspondence between beliefs on the one hand and a set of independent facts on the other, but it remained an attractive option to many of Orwell's contemporaries and, perhaps, to Orwell himself. However, long before Winston enters Room 101 this theory faces problems that are basic to its very formulation. The notion of an external world is itself a belief—if it is not, it lacks truth-status. But to say that this belief (in an external reality) is true because it corresponds with an independent reality is to argue in a circle. Nor is it clear what correspondence is: if it implies an identity between reality and its representation, then it undermines the distinction between facts and thoughts that Winston wishes to defend. If correspondence makes a likeness, then the terms of this relation are problematically vague. Further criteria are necessary for determining the nature of this likeness and these will presumably need other criteria in turn.

Yet Winston feels that much of reality is simply given to him through sensory awareness. His perceptions need no rules of application: they are direct and self-interpreting copies of how things really are. Indeed, so trustful is he of his perceptions that he is prepared to overrule arithmetic when it conflicts with sensory evidence: in Room 101, he "sees" five fingers when mathematical logic suggests that there could only be four. But this flouting of logic is really an indictment of the notion of an immediate sensory knowledge. Perceptions are not only unreliable; they are also insufficient evidence of anything external to themselves. Pushed by O'Brien to demonstrate the existence of a mind-independent world Winston struggles. "The belief that nothing exists outside your own mind—surely there must be some way of demonstrating that it was false?" (p. 279). But this demonstration eludes Winston; Comrade Lenin was never around when you needed him. Ultimately, the theory of truth as correspondence culminates in irresolvable doubt.

But Winston lays claim to other criteria of truth. He sets great store not only in logical consistency, but also in a broader form of coherence between beliefs. What matters is not the way belief corresponds to an independent reality; rather, it is the way beliefs fit with each other in a coherent and comprehensive system. The Party repeatedly flouts the most basic pre-requisites of this kind of truth. It sponsors Doublethink—the "power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them." But this seems to violate the basic grammar of belief. For something to be believed it must be deemed true (it is difficult to see how one can "tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in...
them") and for something to be true, it must at least make sense. Yet much of what the party endorses is totally senseless. In some situations, it encourages its members "to believe that black is white," but literal nonsense of this kind cannot form the basis of a belief (pp. 221-23). Here the text strains to depict a world that has turned its back on truth altogether. As Wittgenstein suggested, we cannot say what an illogical world would look like and Orwell clearly struggles to describe how it looks.\(^\text{14}\)

These logical constraints on what the novel can imagine or on what its readers find plausible merely confirm its epistemological thesis: coherence is a constitutive principle of thought and a reality without it is unthinkable. Yet if logical coherence is a necessary feature of truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is also insufficient. There is, after all, a grim consistency in much of the Party's principles. These constitute a bleak parody of Marxist-Leninist tenets: (a) truth is immanent to human history; (b) the proletariat is the category through which this truth is constituted and described; (c) the Party is the concrete embodiment of the proletariat's will. For O'Brien, the inference is clear: "Whatever the Party holds to be true, is truth" (p. 261). This is coherent within a set of premises, yet it arguably makes a mockery of truth. Winston believes that O'Brien's arguments are unanswerable, but he also regards them as "mad" (p. 272). Truth thus requires something more than the simple absence of contradictory beliefs.

Winston sometimes suggests that the only true beliefs are those that can be justified and he bases his sense of justification on the use of empirical evidence. However, his tendency to equate truth with empirical verification leads to despair. Verificationism was a popular position in the 1940s, although it was more plausibly presented as a theory of meaning rather than of truth. For Ayer, it was a semantic issue: "a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express" (LTL *Language, Truth, and Logic*, p. 35). He acknowledged that there were different ways of verifying claims, but he believed that an empirical observation must ground our statements if they are to mean anything. Orwell sometimes subscribed to a similar theory of meaning, albeit with less philosophical self-consciousness. He maintained, for instance, that words which lack an empirical referent are devoid of sense: terms like "romantic, plastic, values, human, dead, sentimental, natural, vitality ... are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly even expected to do so by the reader" (*CW*, 13, p. 425).

Such tests of meaning were extraordinarily reductive, but they had obvious uses: they allowed Orwell to attack much of the pretentious jargon that had dominated criticism of art and discussion of politics. Verificationism also challenged the verbiage of metaphysics; for Ayer, metaphysical statements were neither tautologies nor empirical hypotheses and were thus strictly meaningless. However, the demand for verification was not itself a tautology, nor was it verifiable; thus it failed to satisfy its own test for meaning. Moreover, the stricture was either too permissive—an empirical description could be applied to a host of idiotic claims—or too severe. Winston is caught between both these extremes. He believes that many of our most basic beliefs are meaningful, but they are not—in Oceania at least—verifiable. He knew, for instance, that the Party did not create airplanes and yet this is no longer demonstrable. In Oceania, "you could prove nothing. There never was any evidence" (*NEF*, p. 39). But, according to an extreme verificationism, claims that can never be proven or can appeal to no evidence are utterly meaningless.

Yet not all verificationism is so crude. What arguably matters is that Winston's beliefs about the past are theoretically verifiable, even if they are no longer practically demonstrable. They thus remain meaningful even if they cannot be shown to be true. However, given Winston's strongly empirical view of human understanding—his trust in the "evidence of your senses" as the foundation for all epistemic claims—the verification of historical descriptions remains problematic even in principle (p. 83). The past, as O'Brien suggests, seems to lack an empirical status: "Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?" (p. 260). Winston turns to the sense-data of memory as a form of verification, but his mental records are potentially mistaken. As he puts it: "I don't know with any certainty that any other human being shares my memories" (p. 162). He seems to rule out the possibility of memory being self-validating: the correctness of one private image of the past cannot be established by simply insisting on the veracity of another.

Construed as private sensations, memories are not simply unreliable; lacking public means of validation, they are arguably meaningless. The problem goes deeper than memory, however, and erodes Winston's confidence in the relationship between feeling and truth. At the heart of his empiricism is a commitment to states of feeling that are entirely private and possibly empty. He sets great store in a feeling of "certainty," but there is nothing to vouchsafe the correctness or even identity of this feeling. Rightly convinced that public life is thoroughly corrupt he takes refuge in "an inner heart, whose workings were mysterious even to yourself." But here he seems to take refuge in nonsense: if, as he suggests, the inner heart is utterly "impregnable," it is also inaccessible to public standards of truth and meaning (p. 174). His verificationism and his empiricism pull in opposite directions and he finds himself in a bind. His feelings, he believes, are meaningful; yet his verificationism suggests otherwise.

Oceania does not lack verified beliefs: here documentary evidence and statistics constitute an elaborate system of verification. But these practices are also deeply incoherent. Evidence is usually at odds with its own presuppositions and people construct facts while claiming to track them. Systems of proof are not rationally constrained by the way the world is. "Anything could be true" in Oceania because everything can be proven (p. 291). To confute the true with the verified in this setting is to relinquish one's grip on the world.
Verificationism is wholly unreliable in Oceania: it either sets the bar too high, asking for proofs where none are available, or it sets it too low, and identifies the proven with the true. Of course, nothing is ever really proven here, since all systems of justification are incoherent. Arguably a coherent system might have served as a sufficient measure of truth. Yet the problem of verifying this system would still remain and there would be no non-circular way of doing so. One might appeal to ideal standards of verification, but it would be difficult to know what makes these standards ideal outside of being true. Verificationism begins by reducing truth to verified beliefs, but it ends up making true beliefs criterial for justification.

The appeal of verificationism is that it appears to make justification independent of consensus: it sets tests for truth that operate independently of what a majority might believe. But arguably, this simply pushes the issue of consensus further back: truth-tests are themselves the product of consensus and therefore there is no criterion that these have been met outside of the agreement they engender. Here consensus is not just a condition but is a criterion of justification. Winston, however, is horrified by this view. Truth, he feels, has nothing to do with consensus--majorities are often mistaken, while he remains committed to "a truth that nobody would ever hear" (p. 30). His belief in the objectivity of the past may make him a lunatic, but this does not trouble him: "the horror was that he might also be wrong" (p. 83). He later equates truth with sanity, but insists that neither are a product of consensus. " Sanity," he concludes, "is not statistical" and membership of a minority, even a minority of one, did not make one mad (p. 227). By the end of the novel, however, Winston has abandoned this conviction. He has become accountable to his leaders and can no longer account for the world.

In the end, Winston abandons his defence of objective truth, but that is not to say that the novel does. It promotes no comprehensive theory of truth and exposes the shortcomings of some classical positions. Theories of correspondence, coherence, verification and consensus fail in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as total descriptions of truth. But this form of failure simply indicates that truth is not exhausted by our theories. For figures like Orwell, truth is less an object of thought than its simple horizon; it eludes our grasp, but it places basic constraints on our thinking. On the one hand, truth demands that we show how the world is answerable to our beliefs and to our particular systems of justification (this is where a coherentism and verificationism work well) but it must also show how our conceptual schemes are answerable to the world and are constrained by its existence--hence, perhaps, the intuitive appeal of correspondence theories. But the governors of Oceania acknowledge few of these rational demands and it leads to moral disaster.

III

In Oceania, it would appear that Lenin's fantasy Machians have taken over and that radical idealism has triumphed. The credo comes in different guises: "reality is not external" (p. 261); "All happenings are in the mind" (p. 291); "Outside man there is nothing." O'Brien is alive to the solipsistic implications of these nostrums, but he also dismisses the problem: "This is not solipsism. Collective solipsism, if you like. But that is a different thing: in fact the opposite thing." O'Brien's rejection of a mind-independent reality leads him to repudiate all restrictions on the will. He makes no concessions to the friction of the world: "I could float off this floor like a soap bubble if I wished to" (pp. 277-79). Ultimately, he claims a kind of freedom that some believers had denied even to God. Relevant here is Grotius' famous assertion that "God himself cannot effect, that twice two should not be four." 

To state otherwise was a manifest contradiction and the laws of logic were binding even for God. For some voluntarists, however, this was tantamount to a denial of God's omnipotence: God was the author, not the subject, of nature's laws and could alter them through a reflex of his will. The Party is a secular parody of this voluntarist God.

O'Brien is understandably skeptical of spatial metaphors, which suggest that "somewhere or other, outside oneself, there was a 'real' world where 'real' things happened" (p. 291). It seems that if the world is to be intelligible, it must disclose itself within a conceptual scheme--and this scheme has no outward limit. But this simply means that reality is thinkable; it does not entail that the world is exclusively mental, nor does it suggest that there are no constraints on how it might be conceived. O'Brien may question the realism of mathematics, but it remains a rule-governed activity nonetheless; his flouting of its rules yields simple nonsense. Winston believes that thoughts are rationally constrained by the independence of the world. He regards stones as hard and water as wet because the world dictates that we deem them so. The world's independence from thought is thus a rational requirement of thought itself: without this its concepts would lack content; without content they would not be thoughts. But this realism remains largely intuitive--Winston, partly to his credit, is "no metaphysician" and he remains helpless in the face of O'Brien's arguments (p. 260).

For O'Brien, the Party makes the truth and there are no restrictions on this making. Orwell had insisted that those who resisted the constraints of truth would come a cropper, particularly on the battlefield. Here the world's independence from what we might wish to believe became brutally apparent. Truth--in the most basic form of accuracy--might have a purely instrumental value in battle, but it helped one to stay alive (CW, 18, p. 163). Orwell re-iterated the point in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Physical facts could not be ignored. In philosophy, or religion, or ethics, or politics, two and two might make five, but when one was designing a gun or an aeroplane they had to make four. Inefficient nations were always conquered sooner or later, and the struggle for efficiency was inimical to illusions" (NEF, p. 206). However, Goldstein declares that accuracy is no longer necessary, but this does not
strictly square with Oceanic life: here the need for accuracy still exists, yet the epistemic norms that make it possible in one domain are--through the force of Doublethink--suspended in another. In Oceania, accuracy has only an instrumental value and when it does not serve a purpose it can be set aside.

For Winston, however, truth cannot be suspended in this way: it is not only built into the fabric of thought, it is also the very fulcrum of freedom. As he famously puts it: "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two equals four. If that is granted all else follows" (p. 84). Initially, it may seem that truth is not the issue here at all, but freedom of speech: the crucial point is not that the arithmetic is true, but that it can be freely asserted. But this freedom is not a sufficient guarantor of justice or other liberties--the intellectuals who write "mentally dishonest propaganda and degrade literary criticism to mutual arse-licking" are nominally free (CW, 18, p. 399). On its own, freedom is insufficient: it needs to be buttressed by truth. The point, therefore, is not simply that Winston is free to do his sums, but that his piece of arithmetic is interpreted as an exemplary instance of truth. 17

For Orwell, truth and freedom depend on each other in a way that is circular but not viciously so. The practice of truth presupposes basic liberties: freedom of speech is not a sufficient condition of truth, but it is necessary for its discovery and maintenance. Truth is not reducible to justification; yet for something to be true it must be capable of being shared with others. One might even stipulate conditions for proper sharing and present these as conditions of epistemic justification: as O'Brien fails to appreciate, torture can never give rise to justified belief. If truth demands liberty, freedom needs truth for what might seem to be purely strategic reasons. Truth is a tool for keeping people free, allowing them to scrutinize their masters and to hold them to account. It places rational restrictions on power by committing both rulers and ruled to the same canons of justification; all become bound to the same anonymous sovereign.

The type of freedom truth guarantees might be cast as strictly "negative": it implies an absence of coercion in the formation of belief and it helps to preserve this independence from those who exercise power. Here truth and freedom are independent goods and have a purely instrumental relationship. But Orwell also seems to have a more positive form of freedom (NEF, p. 84). Human beings are rational animals and truth is internal to reason itself, serving as its ground and regulative ideal. Truth, therefore, is a constituent of human thriving and is the basis for a positive form of freedom. To deprive human beings of their relationship to truth--as O'Brien does to Winston--is to destroy what they are: truth-seeking creatures.

Notes


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