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Nineteen Eighty-Four paints a picture of a terrifying dystopia. Perhaps the most disturbing thought that a philosophical reader encounters, beyond the brutalities and excesses of a totalitarian state, is the total subversion of the ideal of truth—the subversion of the notion that truth is something of intrinsic value, and that it is of value because it is an objective standard, and not merely a means to some end.

Indeed, this is a thought that George Orwell also found frightening, and one which motivated some elements of the dystopia depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In his earlier essay, “Looking Back on the Spanish War” (1943), he put this in the following manner:

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. The implied objective of this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but *the past*. If the Leader says of such and such an event, “It never happened”—well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five—well, two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs—and after our experiences of the last few years that is not a frivolous statement.

If truth were not an objective standard, most knowledge would be impossible, with perhaps the exception of an unconscious orthodoxy about

what the Party demands. As such, philosophers and scientists would be out of a job or, worse, their jobs would be inconceivable. After all, there is no word for ‘Philosophy’ or ‘Science’ in Newspeak; there are merely blanket terms like ‘oldthink’ (logical and metaphysical concepts) and ‘crimethink’ (ethical and political concepts), the purpose of which is to destroy any notion of a systematic form of unorthodox thought.

Newspeak is central to the subversion of the ideal of truth. Its complete adoption allows for the possibility that we would be unable to say most of what we can say in Oldspeak. We would be unable even to think these things, in the sense of not being able to say them even silently to ourselves. This would also make it impossible for us to express certain truths and we would be unable to know them, even if we wanted to.

Despite the central place of Newspeak in the dystopia depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the novel does not contain any actual Newspeak sentences. Instead, this is left largely to the reader’s imagination with the help of a smattering of vocabulary and some examples of a hybrid language used for internal messages within the Ministry of Truth. In addition to these examples, we are provided with basic technical and theoretical descriptions of Newspeak. For me, what stands out in these passages and, indeed, throughout the novel, is the use of opposites and contradictions, and the way in which they contribute to Newspeak and underpin the central notion of doublethink.

A Word which Is Simply the Opposite of Some Other Word

In the canteen, Winston strikes up a conversation with Syme, who is a philologist of Newspeak, about his work on the Eleventh Edition of the *Newspeak Dictionary*. Syme reports that he is “on the adjectives,” and then begins to expound enthusiastically about the destruction of words:

It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn’t only the synonyms; there are also the antonyms. After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take “good”, for

instance. If you have a word like “good”, what need is there for a word like “bad”? “Ungood” will do just as well—better, because it’s an exact opposite, which the other is not. (p. 54)

Although using ‘un-’ to construct an opposite might be possible for some words it is not clear that it is possible or desirable for all. If you think that it’s possible for something to be neither good nor bad, then you would take exception to someone saying that ‘ungood’ is a more than adequate replacement for ‘bad’. This is because if someone were to say that something is ‘ungood’ or ‘not good’, then we would not necessarily have to interpret this to mean ‘bad’, because it could also mean ‘neither good nor bad’.

The ethical nature of the example, at least as it appears to us in Oldspeak, somewhat muddies the waters here. A clearer example of this kind of relationship might be that between the words ‘hot’ and ‘cold’; ‘not hot’ does not necessarily mean ‘cold’. These kinds of opposites are called *gradable* because there is a gradation of meaning possible between them, which often matches up with a gradation or a spectrum in the world or in our experience. For example, the grades of temperature or how these temperatures feel to us, and the moral spectrum, which some people might have an intuition of, between good and bad.

Sentences that contain gradable opposites are often related to each other by what logicians call *contrariety*. For example, the sentence ‘The water is hot’ is *contrary* to the sentence ‘The water is cold’. These sentences are said to be *contrary* to each other, rather than *contradictory*. Although ‘The water is hot’ implies ‘The water is not cold’, the reverse does not hold; the sentence ‘The water is not cold’ does not strictly imply ‘The water is hot’. That is because the sentence ‘The water is neither hot nor cold’ might be true instead; the water could be neither hot nor cold.

In Newspeak, this kind of relationship cannot be constructed. The use of ‘un-’ to replace one side of an opposition degrades the relationship of opposition between those words and makes all of them of a similar kind logically. That is, all opposites become *ungradable* and sentences they are contained in, such as ‘The water is cold’ and ‘The water is uncold’ become logically *contradictory*.

In Newspeak, in contrast to Oldspeak, the sentence ‘The water is uncold’, *does* strictly imply that the water is hot or, perhaps, lacking

coldness. That is because there is no gradation of meaning between ‘uncold’ and ‘cold’. This is what Syme meant when he said that *exact opposites* are ‘better’ than others; they are better at restricting and destroying gradations of meaning.

Recognition of these logical relations is important to our understanding of what a speaker is saying. Indeed, some speakers seek to exploit unfamiliarity with these distinctions in order to cause us to think in an unnuanced manner, allowing them to convince us of their point of view by avoiding critical examination. For example, there are rhetorical strategies that employ the use of *false dichotomy* or *false dilemma*. These are to be found readily in political speech. Here are two famous examples from mainstream political leaders in the US and UK, which were slogans that were repeated often and in various forms:

Either you’re with us, or you’re with the enemy; either you’re with those who love freedom, or you’re with those who hate innocent life. (George W. Bush, Fort Hood, Texas, January 3rd 2003)

This implies that someone can be either with or against and there are no neutral parties, and that either someone loves freedom or hates innocent life and there is no third position.

It’s a choice between strong and stable leadership under the Conservatives, or weak and unstable coalition of chaos led by Jeremy Corbyn. (Theresa May, at a campaign visit to Bolton, April 19th 2017)

This implies that only one of these two outcomes is possible and no others.

In light of these actual uses of opposites in Oldspeak, with-against, love-hate, stable-chaotic, it should be clear that Newspeak’s use of ‘un-’ to degrade *gradable* opposites would create possible false dichotomies involving other *exact opposites* in the language. In fact, it would be even worse because it would be possible to express only the two sides of the dichotomy. A third or further option would not even be thinkable.

At least in Oldspeak we can communicate that there are more than two options. If this were not possible, we would not even be able to describe what a false dichotomy is, because in a certain sense there would not be any

of them to describe. It is reasons such as these and others that would also prevent disciplines such as philosophy from getting started. There would be no possible critique to make of such sophistry, because the language required would not be available. Hence, oldthink and crimethink are entirely avoided in such cases.

The Spirit of Man

At first sight, it can seem like pairs of opposites are equal in their oppositeness, the only difference being which side of the opposition they name. However, opposites are often used in a way that is unequal in that one opposite can be used to refer to both sides of a distinction and, because of this fact, is used more often. This inequality of status between opposites is called *markedness*.

A simple example of markedness is the generic use of the word ‘man’ in Oldspeak to refer to all of humankind, for example, in the sentence ‘The spirit of Man will defeat the Party’; that is, ‘man’ is *unmarked* because it can be used in this way while ‘woman’ is *marked* because it cannot. Markedness can also be found readily in questions; for example, we more often ask how tall (*unmarked*) someone is rather than how short (*marked*) they are, and we speak of ‘height’ as opposed to ‘lowth’ or ‘shorth’.

There are various complex reasons for these asymmetries, which we need not go into here, except to say that it is ubiquitous to language use in general. One reason for this is that it simplifies the vocabulary of a language to have fewer words denoting things that are relevantly similar to each other, and which can be distinguished by context. An *unmarked* word used generically can be thought of as the default position that could be modified as needed or distinguished further by the context in which it is used.

In Oldspeak, it is often the case that the marked side of an opposition is given a distinguishing mark on paper or in speech. For example, ‘unhappy’ is *marked*, while ‘happy’ is *unmarked*. The mark on paper in this case is the initial ‘un-’ of ‘unhappy’, which indicates that the word names an absence or negation of something, and that the word ‘happy’ is more primary or *unmarked*. So, in addition to ‘un-’ in Newspeak having the effect of

degrading the normal relationships between opposites, it can also have a secondary effect of marking the *marked* side of an opposition. Orwell briefly mentions something akin to this in the appendix to the novel, entitled “The Principles of Newspeak”:

Given, for instance, the word *good*, there was no need for such a word as *bad*, since the required meaning was equally well—indeed, better—expressed by *ungood*. All that was necessary, in any case where two words formed a natural pair of opposites, was to decide which of them to suppress. *Dark*, for example, could be replaced by *unlight*, or *light* by *undark*, according to preference. (p. 315)

The choice of the *polarity* of the markedness, in each case the suppression of one opposite or the other of a pair, seems to be arbitrary. However, the Party may prefer to suppress one rather than the other for some reason. For example, if it wants to suppress or eliminate thought relating to badness, then it chooses the polarity that makes ‘good’ the *unmarked*, default, or root word.

It’s unclear from the novel whether the Party reverses the polarity of the markedness whenever it wishes, along with, for example, whomever Oceania is at war with, or if it merely chooses one polarity and sticks with it. However, I think that most of the oppositions in Newspeak are always marked in the same way and do not change. The reason for this is that, as was mentioned earlier, one of the main characteristics of the development of Newspeak is the *destruction of words*. This undermines the possibility of reversing markedness, because there would be no other polarity to reverse to, since the use of ‘un-’ has completely replaced the required root word.

The political and societal function of markedness is not unique to Newspeak. Marked language can be used to oppress sections of a population, and this is often countered by a corresponding change in markedness. For example, some Feminists choose to alter the markedness between the words ‘man’ and ‘woman’ in Oldspeak by giving them alternative spellings and etymology. This has the effect of removing or altering their traditional markedness, which is seen as a consequence of, or even a contributory factor in, the oppression of women and other sections of society by *patriarchal* systems of power.

In the case of Newspeak, as we have seen, there is no possibility of using such a strategy to reverse markedness, at least in the case of opposites that are constructed upon a single root word using ‘un-’. The goal of the Party and its systems of power, including its own apparent patriarch, Big Brother, is to oppress all humans, and to oppress humanity absolutely, or, as O’Brien puts it in more graphic terms: “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever” (p. 280).

Duckspeak

It was not speech in the true sense: it was a noise uttered in unconsciousness, like the quacking of a duck.

Not only does Newspeak degrade the normal relations between opposites, or mark them differently, in some cases words can have two contradictory meanings. As Syme tells Winston, a little too plainly to be safe, this is the case with the word ‘duckspeak’, which means to speak like a quacking duck without any conscious thought, either in an orthodox or unorthodox manner:

“There is a word in Newspeak,” said Syme, “I don’t know whether you know it: *duckspeak*, to quack like a duck. It is one of those interesting words that have two contradictory meanings. Applied to an opponent, it is abuse, applied to someone you agree with, it is praise.” (p. 57)

This, of course, is not unique to Newspeak. Oldspeak also has what are called *auto-antonyms* or *Janus words* (after a two-faced Roman god). These are words that are either their own opposite or can be construed to have two opposed meanings in different contexts. A good example for comparison with ‘duckspeak’ is the Oldspeak verb ‘sanction’, which can mean either to approve or to disapprove of an action. Whole ambiguous sentences can be constructed using such words, and having a greater proportion of these words in a language would certainly lead to more ambiguous sentences. In the case of Newspeak, these would be sentences whose meaning could be easily reinterpreted in the context of other changes, such as changes to history and the doctrine of the Party.

Later in the novel, when Winston is reading Goldstein's book, another example of a Newspeak auto-antonym is discussed, 'blackwhite', which is especially interesting because its contradictory meanings are themselves about contradiction:

Like so many Newspeak words, this word has two mutually contradictory meanings. Applied to an opponent, it means the habit of impudently claiming that black is white, in contradiction of the plain facts. Applied to a Party member, it means a loyal willingness to say that black is white when Party discipline demands this. But it means also the ability to *believe* that black is white, and more, to *know* that black is white, and to forget that one has ever believed the contrary. This demands a continuous alteration of the past, made possible by the system of thought which really embraces all the rest, and which is known in Newspeak as *doublethink*. (p. 221)

This part of Goldstein's book describes the mental training and basic skills that the members of the Party must adopt as children. Blackwhite is the name for one of these basic skills. Black and white are used as merely a simple instance of a pair of opposites; the same skill applies generally to any pair of opposites.

Philosophers undergo comparable training as children, or at least training that corresponds to spotting and avoiding blackwhite. Blackwhite is essentially the habit of denying instances of what philosophers call the *principle of non-contradiction*. If there were to be a list of thought crimes in philosophy, then denying or otherwise contravening this principle would be a strong contender for thought crime number one. Assuming that history is accurate, an early version of the principle was formulated around two thousand four hundred years ago, by Plato, and in terms of opposites:

It is obvious that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time. (*Republic IV*, 436c)

For example, something cannot be both black and white at the same time and in the same way; although, something could be black and white at the same time in different ways, like a chessboard or an issue of *The Times*, or indeed at different times, like hair turning from black to white.

As is the case with the word 'duckspeak', the only difference between the two meanings of 'blackwhite' is the Party's attitude, in this case, to black being white or not. 'Blackwhite' can mean the ability to *suspend*

belief in the principle of non-contradiction and to believe or ‘*know*’ that black is white if the Party demands it. I put ‘know’ in scare quotes here to indicate the well-founded suspicion, held by many philosophers, that it is impossible ever to know a contradiction, even on pain of torture.

How Many?

I suppose there are four. I would see five if I could. I am trying to see five.

One reason that is given for why it’s impossible to know a contradiction is that there could never be a contradictory state of the world to know. As Aristotle put it (*Metaphysics*, IV. 3), the principle of non-contradiction is a principle not just of our thought, or of logic, but also of the world itself; that is, it is a *metaphysical* principle that is true of all things. Although some modern philosophers unbellyfeel Aristotle on this point, we should for present purposes merely note this internal debate between oldthinkers and file it away for safekeeping using the nearest memory hole.

If someone attempted to deny the principle, then, roughly speaking, they would nonetheless need to make tacit use of the same principle; for what is denial without contradiction? The principle is not merely akin to a law of nature that we cannot break, like the laws that govern the climate or the force of gravity, it is a principle that is written into *what it is to be anything at all*. It’s also the foundation of our ability to deny, or prove false, a statement that is made. If both a statement and its denial could be accepted without breaking the law, then there would be no real contest between them and no real reason to reject one of them.

A denial of the principle of non-contradiction would also entail that the world is radically indeterminate or that there isn’t a certain way that it is. Although a radically indeterminate world is impossible to imagine, a useful substitute here is the description of the indeterminacy of Winston’s experience under torture, when he is trying to see five fingers where he sees only four:

Behind his screwed-up eyelids a forest of fingers seemed to be moving in a sort of dance, weaving in and out, disappearing behind one another and reappearing again. He was trying to count them, he could not remember why. He knew only that it was impossible to count them, and

that this was somehow due to the mysterious identity between five and four. The pain died down again. When he opened his eyes it was to find that he was still seeing the same thing. Innumerable fingers, like moving trees, were still streaming past in either direction, crossing and recrossing. He shut his eyes again.

“How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. You will kill me if you do that again. Four, five, six—in all honesty I don’t know.”

“Better,” said O’Brien. (p. 264)

Winston never sees five fingers and, indeed, how could he if he sees only four? In this situation, Winston’s merely no longer being able to *know* was enough for O’Brien’s approval. This is because doublethink, or ‘reality-control’ in Oldspeak, had started to affect Winston to the extent that his very experience of the world was becoming indeterminate, at least to some degree. It is a kind of “controlled insanity” that is imposed in order to accommodate the contradictions that he must accept. Goldstein explains the motivation for this in that, for the Party, “it is only by reconciling contradictions that power can be retained indefinitely” (p. 225).

There are, perhaps, philosophers who would be able to wriggle out of this and salvage some knowledge. Strictly speaking, there is no formal proof of the principle of non-contradiction that does not *beg the question* against the oldthinkers who unbellyfeel it, or the Party who deny it when they wish to—there’s no proof that does not rely on or assume the principle to be proved. However, there are perhaps certain intuitive or performative elucidations. For example, a medieval Persian philosopher called Avicenna famously said that anyone who denies the law of non-contradiction should be tortured until they admit that there is a difference between being tortured and not being tortured:

Those who deny such things need punishment or perception, because—according to Avicenna *Metaphysics* I ch.9 (74vab)—those who deny a first principle need to be flogged or exposed to fire until they admit that to be burned and not to be burned, to be flogged and not to be flogged, are not the same thing. (John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*)

Similarly, Goldstein reports in his book that “Between life and death, and between physical pleasure and physical pain, there is still a distinction, but that is all” (p. 207). So, it seems that blackwhite, the denial of the principle of non-contradiction, and doublethink, which stems from this, may indeed

have some limits involving basic human necessities, which cannot be avoided.

Here we can begin to see why the basic training of philosophers is so important, and why that of members of the Party is so important to the Party. Philosophers are engaged in investigation by means of reasoning and in search of knowledge, while the members of the Party are engaged in following the Ingsoc orthodoxy, even if that leads to a view of the world as indeterminate. Philosophers also combat illicit uses of *exact opposites*, suppression of one side of an opposition, ambiguity, duckspeak, blackwhite, doublethink, and other forms of fallacious or sophistic thinking.

In this way, philosophers are not unlike the Thought Police. We just won't kidnap you or try to persuade you by means of torture . . . that is, with perhaps the exception of Avicenna.

Unpersons

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KEITH BEGLEY is an Adjunct Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Trinity College Dublin, Oceania. His current research interests include an unorthodox obsession with opposites, and using computers to disprove some trivial duckspeak about hidden patterns in the oldthink of Heraclitus. He's a suspected thought criminal. He was born in 1984, and so, for most of his life, he's been preparing to write his chapter by working as an unpaid undercover operative in the dystopia known as modern Ireland. There, two political forces are locked into a permanent civil war. They are not divided by any genuine ideological difference. Their aim is no longer to achieve a decisive victory over one another, rather, it is to maintain their power entirely for its own sake. This is not a joke; please send help!

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