

**Bloodthink, Doublethink, and the Duplicitous Mind:
On the Need for Critical Thinking in a Just Society**

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**“Crooked people deceive themselves in order to deceive others; in this way the world comes
to ruin”**

(attributed to a medieval Confucianist)

I. Introduction

Let us examine a simple syllogism:

**All human beings have a right to liberty.
All slaves are human beings.
Therefore, all slaves have a right to liberty.**

Premise one is derived directly from the *Declaration of Independence*. Premise two states a demonstrable fact. The conclusion follows as a matter of logical necessity. The syllogism, as a matter of elementary logic, is as simple in its logical form – indeed more simple – than $2 + 2 = 4$.

How is it, then, that a number of signatories to the *Declaration of Independence* failed to notice that their slave-ownership was wrong?

In his dystopian novel, *1984*, George Orwell provides an explanation in the cognitive strategy he dubs ‘Doublethink’: “To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancel out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing both of them. . . to forget whatever [is] necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it [is] needed, and then promptly to forget it again” – this is doublethink. Doublethink is a psycho-cognitive strategy that enables the duplicitous mind to conceal from itself its own duplicity.

Doublethink provides the support for what I will call ‘bloodthink.’ I take the phrase ‘bloodthink’ from a dialogue that took place between an American journalist and a young SA stormtrooper in Hitler’s Germany, as reported in Andrew Nagorski’s recent book, *Hitlerland*. When the journalist pointed out the logical inconsistencies in the stormtrooper’s anti-Semitism, the stormtrooper dismissed the appeal to “clear thinking”: “‘Ach, thinking!’ the Nazi replied. ‘We are sick of thinking. . . The *Fuhrer* himself says true Nazis think with their blood.’”¹ Bloodthink is a mode of cognition that willfully holds as true whatever appears to satisfy passion or appetite.

The purpose of my paper is to examine the psychological proclivity for bloodthink and doublethink, and to argue that a robust program of Critical Thinking in the college curriculum, oriented specifically to identifying and addressing this proclivity, is crucial to the furtherance of a just society.

II. Bloodthink

What does it mean to be honest with oneself?

In a book entitled *Explaining Hitler* author Ron Rosenbloom poses the question of whether Hitler’s anti-Semitism was sincere or insincere. Did Hitler really believe his diatribes against the Jews, or was he merely using these diatribes as a demagogic means for advancing his political agenda?

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler represents the Jews as a mortal threat to the human race as a whole and the German people in particular. Among Hitler’s charges against the Jews is a denial of their religiosity: “The Jew,” he writes, “has. . . never [been] a religion; only in order to get ahead he early sought for a means which could distract unpleasant attention from his person. . . Due to his

own original special nature, the Jew cannot possess a religious institution, if for no other reason because he lacks idealism in any form.”²

Hitler appears ignorant that Jesus was Jewish. The spirit of ‘the Jew,’ he writes, “is inwardly as alien to true Christianity as his nature two thousand years previous was to the great founder of the new doctrine. Of course, the latter made no secret of his attitude toward the Jewish people, and when necessary he even took to the whip to drive from the temple of the Lord this adversary of all humanity.”

He accuses Karl Marx, “the Jew,” of developing Marxism for the specific purpose of advancing the Jewish goal of undermining the non-Jewish nations and thereby destroying humanity as a whole: “If, with the help of his Marxist creed, the Jew is victorious over the other peoples of the world, his crown will be the funeral wreath of humanity and this planet will, as it did thousands of years ago, move through the ether devoid of men.”³

Hitler’s anti-Semitism is closely tied to his ideology of racialism, with its emphasis on purity of “blood”: “The lost purity of the blood alone destroys inner happiness forever, plunges man into the abyss for all time, and the consequences can never more be eliminated from body and spirit. Only by examining and comparing all other problems of life in the light of this one question shall we see how absurdly petty they are by this standard. They are all limited in time – but the question of preserving or not preserving the purity of the blood will endure as long as there are men.”⁴

Thus the Jews, whose evil is rooted in their ‘blood,’ must be exposed and stopped at all cost.

Hitler regards this as his God ordained mission: “Today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.”⁵

Did Hitler believe all this? Was he employing ideas he knew to be false in order to gain political advantage, or was he just ‘innocently’ mistaken?

We get some clue to the answer from the fact that, toward the end of the war, Hitler regarded the extermination of the Jews as a top priority, ordering the acceleration of his secret program of annihilation even in the face of considerable military losses.⁶

Everything indicates that Hitler was indeed sincere in his beliefs. He believed that his endeavor to eradicate the Jews was a noble cause, a service – even a selfless service – he was performing for the sake of his people and humanity at large.

Was he therefore ‘innocently’ mistaken?

I want to argue that he was *culpably* mistaken, that his very sincerity was *insincere*, or, to put it another way, Hitler’s beliefs were the result of a more or less intentional practice of culpable self-deception.

Self-deception seems a paradoxical phrase. Deception implies the presence of a deceiver who knows the truth but is deliberately misrepresenting it, and an innocent victim who does not know the truth and is being manipulated by the deceiver. How is it possible, then, for one person to be both deceiver and deceived about the same matter, to both know and not know the truth?

The answer to this question is psychologically complex. We will consider it presently. For now, though, let’s consider why one might engage in such self-deception. The answer would seem to be that the ‘deceiver’ within one finds it psychologically satisfying to believe certain things that it knows, or intimates, are not true, and thus sets out, quite deliberately, to pervert its own cognitive processes in order to do so.

In the case of Hitler, personal grandiosity, immoderate ambition, a strong need for belonging, and extreme vitriol (whatever its real source) appear to have worked together to make his

racialist beliefs satisfying to him. He adopts them *because* they are satisfying, and regards the satisfaction they afford as sufficient reason for accepting them. As he achieves greater and greater social and political success through them, this success furthers his satisfaction and serves to cement his commitment to them.

This, then, is what I dub “bloodthink.” Bloodthink is the adoption of a belief, not on the basis of its truth or apparent truth, but on the basis of the psychological satisfaction it affords. When we consider the case of Hitler, the dangers of bloodthink are obvious. To consider how to combat it we must look more carefully at how it operates.

To do so we will examine the psycho-cognitive strategy George Orwell calls “Doublethink.”

III. Doublethink

Was Hitler stupid?

Among the many disturbing things about reading *Mein Kampf* is coming to the realization that he was not, or at least not *consistently* so. Hitler’s writing is often articulate, clear, even at times moving. He not infrequently argues coherently from premises to conclusions, appeals to evidence for many of his views (although not all), and shows astute, if cynical, insight into how to manipulate the masses for political ends. One finds, throughout *Mein Kampf*, passages in which Hitler appears to be making a concerted, and on the whole diligent, effort to carefully think matters through. Hitler’s intelligence, of course, is evidenced by the extraordinary success he actually did achieve.

His central racist ideology, on the other hand, is astonishingly dumb. It is rarely argued *for*, though it is frequently argued *from*. His argument for ‘Aryan’ supremacy is a study in tautology: He takes it for granted that every human cultural advance is due to the Aryans and then ‘argues’

that, therefore, the Aryan race is evidently superior. His anti-Semitism, whose development he gives an explicit account of in chapter two of *Mein Kampf*, was precipitated (so he tells us) by his observations of a few Jews with whom he had some disagreeable encounters. This then leads him to accept, wholesale, the diatribes of the anti-Semitic screeds he finds floating around Vienna. Not surprisingly, he doesn't appear to have made any real attempt to learn about Jewish culture, Jewish belief, or Jewish history, although he writes as if he is an authority on the subject (as said, his ignorance is so profound that he doesn't even realize Jesus was a Jew).

And, of course, this is pretty stupid. An intelligent person, sincerely seeking to solve a problem, makes some effort to learn the truth about it.

So, again, was Hitler stupid or intelligent? The answer seems to be that he was *selectively* stupid and *selectively* intelligent. He was intelligent when he chose to be, and obstinately stupid when he chose to be.

But who was doing the choosing? Was he aware of this selective process? There is no simple answer to this question, for the question itself implies a unity of the psyche that is, at best, an ideal (more about this later). What we seem to have to say is that Hitler was aware in some respects but, in other respects, unaware of his very awareness. It served Hitler to believe what he did, and, in order to allow himself to do so, he engaged in a practice of selective attention and inattention, mindfulness and forgetfulness, logical clarity when logic served his purposes and quite deliberate logical obtuseness when it did not. Hitler was, to put it simply, a liar, but the first and most regular target of his lies was himself.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman, in his book *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception*, gives a detailed account of the strategies the psyche can employ so as not to notice what it itself is doing. The self-deceiving psyche will fabricate self-satisfying narratives that it

will then, quite deliberately, refuse to scrutinize. It will selectively perceive whatever reinforces its beliefs and selectively ignore whatever does not, and then conceal from itself the fact that it is doing so. It will – again quite deliberately – refuse to *see* the illogic of its views despite its ability to employ logic quite proficiently when it suits its purposes. And it will do all this in a haze of quasi-consciousness, constantly diverting its attention away from its own machinations so as not to have to notice its own duplicity.

This is doublethink. Doublethink supports bloodthink by systematically diverting the psyche away from any recognition of anything that would call its self-serving constructions into question. It can become a habit, or, to use the Aristotelian word, a *hexis*, a character trait – over the course of time as automatic as driving a car or riding a bike; the psyche does it behind one's back, so to speak, without one's overt attention such that, in the end, one is only aware of the outcome.

What made Hitler's psyche unusually sinister was the extent to which he seems to have been willing to employ bloodthink and doublethink as a *deliberate* strategy to which he self-consciously assented. He writes of having early adopted, as one of his beliefs, the belief that it is a weakness to question one's beliefs once formed. This belief – which, then, also could not be questioned – sealed his fate, and the fate of millions.

IV. Socrates: The Un-Hitler.

In light of the above we might characterize Socratic dialectic as a form of cognitive hygiene, having, for its specific purpose, the deconstruction of doublethink so as to expose for examination the bloodthink that underlies it. It is motivated by a recognition of the cognitive distortions that result from the egoistic bias native to the human psyche as such. Its aim is not so

much to eliminate this bias as to bring it under critical scrutiny so as to foster, as far as possible, an harmonious integration of the psyche under examination. Underlying this project are two related assumptions: First, that such harmonious integration is a fundamental good for the harmonized individual, and, second, that a society composed of such harmonized individuals will itself function harmoniously; i.e., justly.

Socratic examination exposes bloodthink by revealing the inconsistencies and lacunas in the examinee's own belief system. These inconsistencies may be of three types: one's beliefs may be inconsistent with one another, with actual or potential experience (and, hence, with well-established fact), and/or with one's own basic aspirations. As these inconsistencies are resolved one arrives at an increasingly comprehensive and coherent understanding of self and world, although the process itself – as Socrates' own fate reveals – is, by its very nature, unsettling. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of Socratic examination is not to unsettle but to bring the person into constructive self-conscious harmony with herself.

Socrates' famous profession of ignorance should be seen in this light, and thereby radically distinguished from philosophical skepticism. Whereas skepticism verges toward relativism in its denial that true knowledge is possible, the Socratic profession of ignorance expresses the intellectual humility required for honest self-inquiry. It is rooted, not in skepticism, but in a commitment to the furtherance of true (i.e., honest) self-understanding.

But why should such harmony be considered a good?

Perhaps we can gain some insight into this by considering Hitler once again. Was Hitler's animus against the Jews, which appears to have been quite real, based in anything actually pertaining to the Jews, i.e., with anything true to what he did or might experience? The answer, quite obviously, is no. Hitler's actual exposure to Jews and Judaism was scanty at best; his

understanding of Jewish culture and history was altogether distorted and fantastical. It is somewhat shocking to realize this, but Hitler did not actually hate the Jews; he didn't know them well enough to hate them. Surely he hated *something*, which he falsely identified with the Jews, but just what this something was we can only guess. Hitler lived and died without ever understanding the real source of his animus, which is to say, he lived as a stranger to himself. Given the horrors he perpetrated we may not be inclined to pity him for this, nevertheless, from the Socratic-Platonic point of view, Hitler's condition was indeed pitiable. His half-baked and perverse ideology served as a screen that prevented him from entering into an honest relationship with *himself*. He lived his life chasing shadows and phantoms rather than his own true good.

But will a psyche in harmony with itself thereby be a *just* psyche? Is it possible for a person to be in perfect harmony with herself and, nevertheless, *unjust*? Socrates' answer to this question is no. The Socratic claim is that injustice is to the soul as disease is to the body; only those ignorant of their own true good will be disposed toward injustice.

Is this true? Have we good reason to suppose so? This is a difficult and involved question whose consideration would take us beyond the bounds of this brief essay. But we need not decide this question in order to recognize the importance of Socratic dialectic for social justice. Bloodthink and doublethink are invariably to be found where injustice is found. The reason for this is not difficult to understand. Justice entails giving due consideration to the concerns, interests, and circumstances of everyone affected by a given action or social structure. Bloodthink is a mode of cognition that privileges one's own passions and perceived interests above all. Thus, cognition based upon bloodthink will tend toward injustice. Hitler, of course, is a prime example of this. His racialist ideology, in which he declares his own race inherently

superior to all others – as if this were a theoretical truth rather an expression of sheer egoism – would be comical in its self-conceit, had its consequences not been so dire.

Socratic dialectic *exposes* bloodthink by disentangling the doublethink used to conceal it. Such exposure will not in itself yield a just result, but it does force a decision on the part of the one thus exposed: She must now either explicitly affirm her injustice or seek to modify her unjust views in a just direction. Very few of us would be prepared to do the former, if for no other reason than that it would undermine the framework of mutual regard on which our own social well-being depends. Thus, Socratic dialectic, pursued honestly and diligently, serves as a corrective to our native tendency to produce, promote, and defend self-serving, unjust, narratives and ideologies. As such, it is critical to the establishment and maintenance of a just society.

V. Conclusion

Contemporary society increasingly disparages critical thinking of the Socratic sort. The reasons for this are many and complex. Consumer-capitalism, and specifically the advertising industry it spawns, bombards us continuously with messages that encourage us to base our lives on the pursuit of appetitive and egoistic gratification rather than on any broader conception of a societal, or even an interpersonal, good. Empirical science – the one domain in which intellectual rigor is still consistently valued – is, by its very nature, blind to ethical concerns. This leads many who care about such concerns to assume that the intellect – ‘the head’ – is inherently at odds with the emotive-axiological dimension of life – ‘the heart.’ The existentialist and ‘post-modern’ critique of reason – which might better be seen as a critique of the usurpation of reason by scientific reductionism – has, perhaps inadvertently, helped to foster belief in this schism. The notion that ‘head’ and ‘heart’ are antithetical has become a popular truism in our

time; an exceedingly dangerous one, for it prevents us from employing our ‘heads’ – our analytical reasoning – to critically examine the many perilous entanglements of the ‘heart’; Hitler, God help us, was a man almost entirely driven by his ‘heart.’

Our conclusion, then, is nothing new; it is the same conclusion Plato arrived at twenty-four hundred years ago, and which inspired him to found the Academy: A just society requires a citizenry skilled at critically examining the sophistries – the bloodthink and doublethink – we inflict upon one another and, even more insidiously, upon ourselves. Sadly and disturbingly, contemporary academia seems to be increasingly losing sight of this, as it relegates the liberal and philosophical arts to the sidelines or eliminates them entirely from the standard curriculum, precipitating what Martha Nussbaum has called a “world-wide crisis in education.”⁷ Alas, this tendency does not bode well for the furtherance of justice in our time.

¹ Nagorski, Andrew, *Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazi Rise to Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 100.

² Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (The Noontide Press: Books Online), accessed 5/20/15, www.angelfire.com/folk/bigbaldbob88/MeinKampf.pdf, Volume I, Ch. 11.

³ Ibid., Volume II, Ch. 1.

⁴ Ibid., Volume I, Ch. 11.

⁵ Ibid., Volume I, Ch. 2.

⁶ See John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York, Doubleday & Co., 1976), 759; 771.

⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 2.

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