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What Was Orwell's Conception of Free Speech?

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Orwell's views on the nature of free speech are significantly more complex than is often recognised. This paper examines what he had to say about freedom of speech and intellectual freedom. It seeks to provide a philosophical analysis of his understanding and use of these concepts and to address some apparent tensions in his thought. In so doing, the paper identifies five dominant aspects of Orwell's account of free speech. He viewed free speech as closely related to intellectual freedom, which he highly valued; he treated free speech as primarily about the ability to say what one believes to be true; he thought that both government and various kinds of private actors posed serious threats to free speech; he believed that free speech required social safeguards, in addition to legal protection; and he recognised that free speech was a right with limits. He wrote little about the freedom of speech for liars. The paper concludes with the observation that he, therefore, left us with a number of crucial questions to discuss and think about for ourselves.

Key words: Orwell, free speech, intellectual freedom, freedom of the press, truth, philosophy

Modern thinkers often turn instinctively to Orwell when delivering warnings about perceived threats to free speech. Such appeals tend to bypass the nuance and complexity in Orwell's thinking about free speech in favour of gumming together long strips of evocative Orwellianisms from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. One might worry that such appeals use Orwell's prose less like a windowpane and more like a mirror. That is to say, one might worry such commentary often uses the cultural force of Orwell's vocabulary to bolster the commentator's pre-existing views rather than using Orwell's own ideas as a lens through which to examine assumptions about the nature of free expression and a free society.

The paper's primary goal is to illuminate how Orwell conceived of free speech by studying what he had to say about it, especially in his essays. Thus it aims to make sense of and to untangle various tensions in his thought about freedom of speech and related concepts such as freedom of the press and intellectual freedom. This

paper's secondary goal is to map Orwell's conception of free speech onto some issues and debates about free speech occurring today.

As will be shown, in some ways, Orwell's conception of free speech is broader than many modern conceptions, while in other ways it is narrower. Orwell's conception of free speech is broad in the sense that Orwell viewed free speech as requiring both legal and social protection. It is also broad in the sense that he was keenly aware of how a free speech culture could be threatened not only by government but also by private entities, such as monopolies. Orwell's conception of free speech is narrow in the sense that he interpreted free speech specifically as protecting people's right to say what they believed was true. This contrasts with a common modern perspective on which freedom of speech includes both the right to lie and the right to say things without regard for truth, even when doing so results in demonstrable harm.

Because of the narrowness in Orwell's conceptions of free speech, his defences of free speech sometimes fail to defend, or even address, certain contemporary standards for free speech. But because of the broadness in Orwell's conception of free speech, modern defences of free speech sometimes fail, in turn, to defend or address aspects of free speech about which he was deeply concerned. One need not view any of this as a weakness in Orwell's conception of free speech. Perhaps his conception of free speech is superior to those that predominate today. This paper provides reasons to think that such a favourable assessment of his understanding of free speech has merit.

This examination of Orwell's views on free speech focuses on five key points central to his thought about free speech. For Orwell, free speech is closely related to intellectual freedom, which he valued highly. He conceived of it as primarily about the ability to say what one believes to be true. He thought that both governmental and private actors – especially socially and economically powerful ones – posed a threat to free speech. He also thought, therefore, that free speech required social safeguards, in addition to legal protection. Finally, he did not view freedom of speech as an unlimited right.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND FREE SPEECH

Orwell's writing reveals that he considered intellectual freedom – which he sometimes referred to as 'freedom of the intellect' or 'freedom of thought' – to be vitally important for a flourishing human life. Crucially, for purposes of this paper, Orwell treated intellectual freedom as closely tied to both intellectual honesty and freedom of speech. This is perhaps best exemplified in his claim that 'Freedom of the intellect means the freedom to report what one has seen, heard, and felt, and not to be obliged to fabricate

imaginary facts and feelings' (*CEJL* 4: 62). Here Orwell treats the relationship between intellectual freedom and free speech as so close that he seems to *define* intellectual freedom as a type of speech freedom – namely a freedom to report. Importantly, it is not just any kind of freedom to report, but a freedom to report what one has experienced, rather than fabrications. Thus, he seems to define intellectual freedom in terms of a right to speak with intellectual honesty. But this does not make his concept of intellectual freedom narrower than his conception of free speech because, as will be argued in the next section, Orwell conceives of free speech as itself limited to an ability to speak what one believes to be true – i.e., to speak with intellectual honesty.

It seems unlikely that Orwell's considered view was that intellectual freedom actually meant freedom to report with honesty and nothing else. Elsewhere, he was quite clear about at least the conceptual distinction between language and thought. However, given the close interconnection he consistently posits between speech and thought (and, more generally, between language and thought), it is easy to see why in many contexts he did not thoroughly distinguish freedom of speech from freedom of thought. Arguably, a key point in both in his *Horizon* essay 'Politics and the English language' (1946) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is that free thought cannot exist without free speech and vice versa (cf Satta 2022).

Starting from the perspective of Orwell's commitment to intellectual freedom, one can better understand many of his other commitments. And understanding these commitments can, in turn, help explain his fierce commitment to intellectual freedom and its inextricably intertwined companions, intellectual honesty and free speech. Take two examples: (i) his commitment to preserving the conditions under which good literature could be written, and (ii) his opposition to all forms of totalitarianism.

For Orwell, intellectual freedom was a precondition for the creation of literature – or at least good literature. Consider, for example, his claim in his 1940 essay 'Inside the whale' that 'Literature as we know it is an individual thing, demanding mental honesty and a minimum of censorship' (*CELJ* 1: 518). He expands on this idea in 'Literature and totalitarianism' (1941), writing that 'The whole of modern European literature – I am speaking of the literature of the past four hundred years – is built on the concept of intellectual honesty, or, if you like to put it that way, on Shakespeare's maxim, "To thine own self be true"' (*CELJ* 2: 134). For Orwell, expressing oneself in this intellectually honest way is at the heart of intellectual freedom. It is also at the heart of European literature. Thus, he saw preserving the one as necessary for preserving the other.

As will be shown later, Orwell identified a wide variety of threats to the ability to express oneself honestly. He opposed capitalism, monopoly, bureaucracy, fascism, etc., at least in part, because he viewed them as harmful to the honest self-expression constitutive of free thought. But at least from the time of his fighting alongside a Republican militia in the Spanish Civil War in 1937, Orwell viewed the chief threat to intellectual freedom to be totalitarianism. Take, for example, his diagnosis of the totalitarian threat:

> Totalitarianism has abolished freedom of thought to an extent unheard of in any previous age. And it is important to realize that its control of thought is not only negative, but positive. It not only forbids you to express — even to think — certain thoughts, but it dictates what you shall think, it creates an ideology for you, it tries to govern your emotional life as well as setting up a code of conduct. And as far as possible it isolates you from the outside world, it shuts you up in an artificial universe in which you have no standards of comparison. The totalitarian state tries, at any rate, to control the thoughts and emotions of its subjects at least as completely as it controls their actions (*CELJ* 2: 135).[1]

Given this perspective, it is unsurprising that the chief totalitarian character in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O'Brien, makes eliminating free thought the cornerstone of his attempt to break completely the protagonist Winston Smith.

If one accepts, as Orwell did, both that totalitarianism seeks to eliminate intellectual freedom and that writing literature requires intellectual freedom, one might naturally conclude that totalitarianism is a threat to writing literature. This is exactly how he reasons, concluding that 'If totalitarianism becomes world-wide and permanent, what we have known as literature must come to an end' (ibid). This reveals that Orwell's pessimism about the ability to continue producing literature was rooted in his lack of confidence about the ability to stave off totalitarianism. This is exemplified in his reasoning in 'Inside the whale':

[ind]Almost certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships — an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction. The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence. But this means that literature, in the form in which we know it, must suffer at least a temporary death (*CELJ* 1: 525).

By understanding the significance Orwell placed on intellectual freedom and the close conceptual connection he made between intellectual freedom and free speech, one can learn much about why free speech was such a central notion for him.

SAYING WHAT ONE BELIEVES TO BE TRUE

One of Orwell's most powerful and pithy descriptions of his conception of free speech comes in his claim that 'the controversy over freedom of speech and of the Press is at bottom a controversy of the desirability, or otherwise, of telling lies' (*CELJ* 4: 61). The larger content of the passage from which this quotation comes reveals that, on his account, the defender of speech and press freedom does not think telling lies is desirable, while the enemy of speech and press freedom does. From a twenty-first century perspective, this may seem like a mysterious claim. This is because today it is often the case that neither the truth nor falsity of speech nor whether a speaker believes what they are saying is true or false plays any role in whether speech receives protection under freedom of speech and freedom of the press.[2] This is exemplified in, for example, the commitment of the US judiciary to 'viewpoint neutrality' – i.e., a commitment to banning regulation of speech based on the perspective or viewpoint taken by the speaker, even if that viewpoint espoused consists of obvious lies or falsehoods.[3]

But his statement is not at all mysterious once one recognises that he viewed free speech as the right to say what one believes to be true. He makes this clear in the larger passage from which the above quotation comes:

> Although other aspects of the question are usually in the foreground, the controversy over freedom of speech and of the press is at bottom a controversy of the desirability, or otherwise, of telling lies. What is really at issue is the right to report contemporary events truthfully, or as truthfully as is consistent with the ignorance, bias and self-deception from which every observer necessarily suffers. In saying this I may seem to be saying that straightforward 'reportage' is the only branch of literature that matters: but I will try to show later that at every literary level, and probably in every one of the arts, the same issue arises in more or less subtilized forms (ibid: 61).

For Orwell, free speech – which at least in this passage seems to be used interchangeably with freedom of the press – is, in brief, 'a right to report contemporary events truthfully'. This is remarkably similar to the description encountered in the previous section of intellectual freedom as 'the freedom to report what one has seen, heard, and felt'. The subtle difference is that the former seems to concern a right to report the *truth*, while the latter seems to concern a right to report what one *believes* to be true. But this gap is bridged by Orwell's clarification that free speech is a right to report 'as truthfully as is consistent with the ignorance, bias

and self-deception from which every observer necessarily suffers'. Orwell recognizes the many limitations of the human psychological condition. We are highly epistemically fallible. Moreover, freedom of speech cannot protect *only* the right to say true things. This could squash expression by anyone humble enough to recognise that they may be mistaken on a matter about which they wish to speak. It is not viable – nor, in Orwell's view, desirable – for freedom of speech to cover only true speech. But he seems to think it is both viable and desirable for freedom of speech to cover only speech that aims at truth, or at the very least only cover speech that does not aim at telling lies or falsehoods.

At this point one might object that this makes freedom of speech far too narrow a freedom, for much of our speech seeks to do things other than report. Orwell seems to foresee this objection. Presumably, this is part of why he specifies that the freedoms of speech and press cover more than 'straightforward "reportage"'. Rather, he has a capacious conception of what kind of speech and writing can aim at expressing what we have seen, heard and felt and what we believe to be true. Indeed, he thinks this kind of speech extends to 'every literary level' and likely to 'every one of the arts', presumably including highly abstract forms of artistic expression.

One may provide another objection, however, that this makes freedom of speech far too narrow a freedom because it does not protect lies or other forms of reporting that aim to conceal or show deliberate indifference to the truth. Here, the Orwellian response seems to be quite different. Orwell seems to accept that free speech does not protect such things but to deny that this is a bad thing. This is the perspective he seems to have in mind when he says: 'What is needed is the right to print *what one believes to be true*, without having to fear bullying or blackmail from any side' (*CWGO* XVIII: 443; emphasis added) and: 'What matters is that in England we do possess juridical liberty of the press, which makes it possible *to utter one's true opinions fearlessly* in papers of comparatively small circulation' (*CELJ* 4: 241-242; emphasis added).

David Dwan has noted how this same perspective on the importance of being able to say what one thinks is true underlies the famous Orwellian aphorism from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that 'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.' Dwan puts the matter as follows:

> The key thing here, some argue, is that we should be free to say our sums, not that they should be correct. But this seems to miss Orwell's point. Free speech is important but it is not enough; as the trolls and the cyber-thugs reveal each day, freedom of expression is a dangerous licence when it is severed

> from any commitment to truth. Such freedom erodes freedom itself, undermining our ability to account for ourselves and to hold others to account. Orwell was wrong about many things, but he was right to suggest that a world that turns its back upon truth also gives two fingers to freedom (Dwan 2018a).

I agree with Dwan, especially if we read him as using the terms 'free speech' and 'freedom of expression' in a common twenty-first century manner as meaning something like the ability to say whatever one wants. However, from the perspective of trying to elucidate Orwell's conception of free speech, another way of putting a similar point presents itself: freedom to say what one wants is important, but protecting speech severed from a commitment to truth is not what freedom of speech is about. On the Orwellian conception, freedom of speech, at its core, is about protecting the ability to say and write what one believes to be true, or more generally protecting the ability to say and write that which honestly expresses or reflects one's perspectives, feelings or experiences.

As is the case of intellectual freedom, there are close connections between Orwell's ideas about free speech and his views about the nature of literature and the role of writers. This shows up in some of his most important works on literature, such as his statement in 'Literature and totalitarianism' that 'The first thing that we ask of a writer is that he shall not tell lies, that he shall say what he really thinks, what he really feels. The worst thing we can say about a work of art is that it is insincere' (*CELJ* 2: 134). Similarly, in 'The prevention of literature', he writes: 'Everything in our age conspires to turn the writer, and every other kind of artist as well, into a minor official, working on themes handed down from above and never telling what seems to him the whole of the truth' (*CELJ* 4: 60). Glenn Burgess illuminates the underlying logic connecting Orwell's views on free speech and on the responsibilities of writers: 'It was freedom, especially the freedom to write and say what you thought, that mattered most to Orwell, in part because this sort of freedom was fundamental for someone who lived by writing and cared to write with integrity' (Burgess 2023: 122).

While I think a holistic look at Orwell's corpus makes it fairly clear that he took the freedom to say what one believes to be true to be at the heart of free speech, that observation alone risks making his thoughts on free speech tidier than they in fact were. There is sometimes a second conception of free speech in his writing. This second conception is more frequently promoted by those quoting Orwell's claim that 'If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear' ('The freedom of the press'). Granted, this is a statement about the value of liberty

generally, not specifically freedom of speech. But surely Orwell saw freedom of speech as a, if not the, crucial component of liberty. Besides, he elsewhere said, in a very similar vein, that 'freedom of the press, if it means anything at all, means the freedom to criticize and oppose' (*CELJ* 4: 59).

But sometimes what people do not want to hear are lies and one can criticise and oppose the truth just as one can falsehoods. This seems to suggest that at least freedom of the press, if not also freedom of speech, includes the right to lie and to criticise and oppose the truth. But this seems to be in tension with the Orwellian ideas covered earlier that 'the controversy over freedom of speech and of the Press is at bottom a controversy of the desirability, or otherwise, of telling lies' and that 'What is needed is the right to print what one believes to be true, without having to fear bullying or blackmail from any side.' What is the best way to understand what is going on here?

One option would be to conclude that this is merely an instance of Orwell being inconsistent. Orwell's brilliance is not typically thought to rest on his consistency or systematic thinking. Indeed, it should not surprise us if he had various narrower and broader conceptions of liberty, intellectual freedom and free speech in mind when he wrote at different times. Given his love of individualism and unorthodoxy, it is at least plausible to think that he believed that, on some level, even the liar deserved some speech and press freedom – especially when that liar was unorthodox and unpowerful. Perhaps this is part of the answer.

But there is a better way of resolving the apparent tension in Orwell's writing about free speech and about freedom more generally. This solution begins by taking seriously his claim in 'Why I write' (1946) that 'Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism, as I understand it' (*CELJ* 1: 5). It seems that, in so doing, he wrote with a constant enemy in mind: totalitarianism. If we have that enemy in mind when reading all of his claims about liberty, free speech and the free press, his thinking appears more consistent. What does the totalitarian not want to hear? Criticism, opposition, the truth. These are antithetical to totalitarianism's need for complete control at the expense of truth. The totalitarian does not want people reporting matters truthfully or as they have seen, heard and felt them. The totalitarian wants people to report matters as the totalitarian says they are, regardless of what people have heard, seen or felt. In short, the totalitarian does not want people to say what they believe to be true. This is to show loyalty to truth over loyalty to the totalitarian state. Similarly, the ability to criticise and oppose the totalitarian – who rejects the

concept of objective truth in favour of ultimate power – is the ability to tell the truth despite pressure to speak, instead, the totalitarian's lies. This helps explain the apparent tension in Orwell's claims about free speech. In resolving the tension this way, it gives priority to the view that his central understanding of free speech was an ability to speak what one believes to be true. Burgess summarises the matter well: 'Free speech was, in Orwell's eyes, the willingness to speak frankly, to speak one's mind, to refuse orthodoxy of any sort. When this honesty of speech was characteristic of a culture, accountability would follow. The lie could not escape exposure' (Burgess 2023: 6).

NON-GOVERNMENTAL THREATS TO FREE SPEECH

If the core of Orwell's conception of free speech is the ability to say what one thinks is true, then it would be natural for him to find anything that hinders the ability of people to say what they think is true to be a hindrance to free speech. His writings reveal that he thought a great many forces hindered the ability of people to say what they think is true. Thus, unsurprisingly, he also had a long list of forces that he thought hindered free speech. This is significant because traditional defences of free speech often implicitly, if not explicitly, treat government as the sole real threat to free speech. He saw the government as just one of many threats to free speech.

This section uses Orwell's own words to identify a set of entities beyond the government that he viewed as threats to free speech. Notably, many of these threats are associated with capitalist economic structures. Thus, identifying what Orwell considered the full set of threats to free speech helps show the consistency in his fight for both a free speech society and a democratic socialist society.

The existence of multifarious threats to intellectual liberty and free speech is a key theme in his essay, 'The Prevention of Literature'. Orwell puts the matter bluntly writing that 'in England the immediate enemies of truthfulness, and hence of freedom of thought, are the press lords, the film magnates, and the bureaucrats, but that on a long view the weakening of the desire for liberty among the intellectuals themselves is the most serious symptom of all' (*CELJ* 4: 64). Once again, he shows how a commitment to truthfulness is central to his notion of intellectual liberty. The enemies of truth are the enemies of free thought. Here he identifies four discrete threats to free thought (and, given his other commitments, thus also threats to free speech): the press lords, film magnates, bureaucrats and intellectuals with their weakening desire for liberty. Orwell provides a more detailed explanation of why these forces are threats to free thought and speech:

> In our age, the idea of intellectual liberty is under attack from two directions. On the one side are its theoretical enemies, the

> apologists of totalitarianism, and on the other its immediate, practical enemies, monopoly and bureaucracy. Any writer or journalist who wants to retain his integrity finds himself thwarted by the general drift of society rather than by active persecution. The sort of things that are working against him are the concentration of the press in the hands of a few rich men, the grip of monopoly on radio and the films, the unwillingness of the public to spend money on books, making it necessary for nearly every writer to earn part of his living by hackwork, the encroachment of official bodies like the M.O.I. and the British Council, which help the writer to keep alive but also waste his time and dictate his opinions, and the continuous war atmosphere of the past ten years, whose distorting effects no one has been able to escape (ibid: 59-60).

As shown elsewhere in his corpus, Orwell saw totalitarianism as the most significant threat to free speech in the sense that it sought to eliminate free speech and thought *completely*. But here he identifies another sense in which monopoly and bureaucracy were a greater threat to free thought because they were forces that were actually operating in his own time and country. Thus, monopoly and bureaucracy were the 'immediate, practical enemies' of free speech given their current power, even if the level of suppression they threatened was less than the total suppression of successful totalitarian rule.

It is noteworthy but unsurprising that Orwell pivots directly from the threats to intellectual liberty to threats to the integrity of a writer or journalist. No doubt the kind of integrity he has in mind here is integrity through intellectual honesty. All the threats to free thought that he identifies here have in common that they exert pressure on the writer to say what the writer thinks others want them to say rather than what they really think. When the gatekeeping is strong enough or the economic pressures significant enough, Orwell recognises that this pressure can come to have a coercive function.

As already shown, Orwell did not perceive all threats to free speech and thought to be of the same kind. It is useful to distinguish at least three levels of threat that he generally kept separate. There were threats to:

(i) the ability to reach an audience,

(ii) the ability to say things freely at all, and

(iii) the ability even to think freely.

Orwell saw totalitarianism as a threat to all three. Many of the other threats he identified were only to (i) or, occasionally, to (i) and

(ii). Thus, the other threats were less extreme but more proximate. Orwell expresses some of these differences writing that:

> … totalitarianism has not fully triumphed anywhere. Our own society is still, broadly speaking, liberal. To exercise your right of free speech you have to fight against economic pressure and against strong sections of public opinion, but not, as yet, against a secret police force. You can say or print almost anything so long as you are willing to do it in a hole-and-corner way' (*CELJ* 4: 70).

Orwell acknowledges that, despite economic and social pressure, one can engage in (ii) and (iii), but by being required to voice certain views in 'a hole-and-corner way', economic and social pressure may remove one's ability to do (i). These distinctions track contemporary debates over the nature and scope of free speech. There is disagreement, for example, about when, if ever, removing someone's access to a platform from which to speak violates freedom of speech (cf Chemerinsky and Gillman 2017, Simpson and Srinivasan 2018, Satta 2021). .

Orwell also distinguishes how bureaucratic and market forces in England secure a limited form of free speech while suppressing a more robust form of free speech:

> What matters is that in England we do possess juridical liberty of the press, which makes it possible to utter one's true opinions fearlessly in papers of comparatively small circulation. It is vitally important to hang on to that. But no Royal Commission can make the big-circulation press much better than it is, however much it manipulates the methods of control. We shall have a serious and truthful popular press when public opinion actively demands it. Till then, if the news is not distorted by businessmen it will be distorted by bureaucrats, who are only one degree better (ibid: 241-42).

Here Orwell recognises the vital importance of 'juridical liberty of the press', which seems to amount to a legal freedom to say as you want, while simultaneously recognising the limiting effects forces like monopoly capitalism and bureaucracy have on free expression. But he is still keenly aware of the significant ways in which market forces shape our ability to think and speak freely. This is shown clearly by his reasoning in 'Poetry and the microphone' (1945):

> Broadcasting is what it is, not because there is something inherently vulgar, silly and dishonest about the whole apparatus of microphone and transmitter, but because all the broadcasting that now happens all over the world is under the control of governments or great monopoly companies which

> are actively interested in maintaining the status quo and therefore in preventing the common man from becoming too intelligent. Something of the same kind has happened to the cinema, which, like the radio, made its appearance during the monopoly stage of capitalism and is fantastically expensive to operate. In all the arts the tendency is similar. More and more the channels of production are under control of bureaucrats, whose aim is to destroy the artist or at least to castrate him (*CELJ* 2: 334-35).

Orwell's recognition of the threat that 'great monopoly companies' pose to intellectual freedom and freedom of speech has proven remarkably prescient. His insights are highly relevant to those worried about the power that social media companies and mammoth news conglomerates play in shaping public thought and public discourse. His work can be viewed as a forerunner to political economy approaches to journalism, communication studies, law, philosophy, and elsewhere about the significance of attention and controlling what it is that people attend to (cf. McCombs and Shaw 1993; Wu 2016; Castro and Pham 2020). For, according to Orwell: 'The freedom of the Press in Britain was always something of a fake, because in the last resort, money controls opinion; still, so long as the legal right to say what you like exists, there are always loopholes for an unorthodox writer' (*CELJ* 1: 337).

LEGAL AND SOCIAL FREEDOM TO SPEAK

In examining the wide range of what Orwell considered threats to free speech – including many non-governmental organisations and persons – it becomes clear that he viewed free speech as more than just a legal right. For Orwell, it seems, true freedom of thought and speech required participating in a society that permitted one to think and speak views that were unpopular. This understanding of free thought and speech helps explain his disdain for 'orthodoxy sniffers' and others who required conformity of thought or speech on matters of importance. It is deeply in line with his views that 'What is needed is the right to print what one believes to be true, without having to fear bullying or blackmail from any side' (*CWGO*, XVIII: 443) and that 'To exercise your right of free speech you have to fight against economic pressure and against strong sections of public opinion' (*CELJ* 4:70).

Given that Orwell extended his conception of free speech to include cultural and social freedom to speak and think freely, it is natural to apply Orwell's thinking to questions raised in current debates over 'cancel culture' and 'no platforming' campaigns (cf Romano 2021, Srinivasan 2023). However, it is less clear when Orwell might consider cancelling someone or depriving them of

a platform to be a restriction on free speech. On the one hand, he railed against those who sought to control the public narrative through economic or social coercion. This might suggest he would have been wary of using social pressure through cancelling or no platforming to limit the reach of speech or ideas. But there are several other considerations that suggest he might see cancelling or no platforming as permissible, depending on the substance of the views and the modes by which such cancellation or deplatforming might occur.

First, Orwell had little tolerance for lying or indifference to truth. Often those who are denied platforms or who lose sponsorship for their speech experience these consequences because they are liars, ill informed, or indifferent to truth. Orwell's deep commitment to allowing people to say, in good faith, what they believe to be true does not seem to extend to facilitating the speech of those acting in bad faith. Second, Orwell thought there was at least some room for platform providers, such as newspapers, magazines and book publishers, to make editorial judgments as to what kind of content they would approve. For example, from his perspective as the literary editor at *Tribune*, Orwell wrote: 'Obviously we cannot print contributions that grossly violate *Tribune's* policy. Even in the name of free speech a Socialist paper cannot, for instance, throw open its columns to antisemitic propaganda' (*CELJ* 3: 312). It seems natural to use this line of reasoning to suggest that it is obvious that democratic institutions, including universities or publishing houses committed to liberty and democracy, should not throw open their doors to propaganda rooted in antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, sexism or other pernicious ideologies.

Significantly, Orwell combined his position about the need for the *Tribune* to exclude certain views based on content (e.g., antisemitic propaganda), with a general policy of trying to include a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives. Still writing about *Tribune*, he noted: 'Looking through our list of contributors, I find among them Catholics, Communists, Trotskyists, Anarchists, pacifists, left-wing Conservatives, and Labour Party supporters of all colours' (ibid). Orwell combines a commitment to ideological diversity with a recognition that platforms that have a guiding purpose or perspective must use some editorial discretion in declining to provide platforms for certain objectively odious views.

Orwell's position is not without its internal tensions. How can one both promote a culture of free speech where people are neither afraid to say what they believe nor restricted to doing so in a 'hole-and-corner way' while also granting the powers that be the editorial discretion to deny a platform for views antithetical to their purposes? I know of no place where he clearly resolves this tension.

But, in this context, it is useful to acknowledge his commitment to the idea of objective truth (cf *CELJ* 2: 258). Orwell was not a pure proceduralist. That is to say, Orwell did not think that fair procedure alone was all that mattered. He thought that, as a matter of substance, some views were better than others. And he seemed to think in one's role as the custodian for a platform – such as *Tribune* – it was appropriate to make some substantive judgments about what content should be permitted. This does not mean on its own, of course, that he thought there were views that should be banned from *all* platforms, even those with small circulations or from public forums open to all-comers. Generally, he was highly tolerant of dissident, unpopular and odious speech, so long as the speaker was sincere. But even this tolerance was subject to limitation.

LIMITS ON FREE SPEECH

While Orwell's conception of free speech varies in some important ways from many popular modern conceptions, it is no doubt still fitting to call him a champion of free speech. But like any reasonable champion of free speech, Orwell did not see the free speech right as completely unlimited. As shown in the previous section, he allowed that the social and cultural dimension of free speech could be limited in certain narrow ways based on the editorial discretion of those who controlled access to various platforms. But he also seems to allow for even legal restrictions on free speech. For example, Orwell wrote in 'The freedom of the press' that 'If the intellectual liberty which without a doubt has been one of the distinguishing marks of western civilisation means anything at all, it means that everyone shall have the right to say and to print what he believes to be the truth, provided only that it does not harm the rest of the community in some quite unmistakable way.' Noting this, David Dwan aptly concludes that while 'Orwell was certainly an advocate of free speech' this 'support for the principle was not unqualified' such that Orwell saw freedom of speech as 'constrained by the notion of harm – and what constituted harm was left open' (Dwan 2018b: 258-259).

Orwell did, indeed, leave this matter open. He never explained what types of harms would allow for speech restrictions in which sort of way. But it was clear that he thought some restrictions were warranted, although he probably condoned fewer restrictions than many of his contemporaries. This is exemplified by the position he takes in 'The freedom of the press' about the imprisonment of the British fascist leader Oswald Mosley in the 1940s: 'In 1940 it was perfectly right to intern Mosley, whether or not he had committed any technical crime. We were fighting for our lives and could not allow a possible quisling to go free. To keep him shut up, without

trial, in 1943 was an outrage.' Glenn Burgess summarises the matter nicely: 'Orwell consistently defended a minimalist view of what limits should be placed on free expression, and he consistently defended the right to be heard even of those who disgusted or appalled, whether morally or politically' (Burgess 2023: 147).

CONCLUSION

Orwell was a staunch defender of the freedoms of speech, press and thought. But his conception of those freedoms is much more nuanced and counter-cultural than is often acknowledged by the pundits who mine small chunks of his writing to bolster their pre-existing views. The essence of free speech for Orwell was the freedom to say what you believed to be true, without fear of legal sanctions and without undue social or economic pressure. Because he typically thought of free speech in these terms, his writing about free speech says little about the speech of the liar or the willfully ignorant speaker. Thus, a simple appeal to Orwell cannot answer the complex contemporary questions about the extent to which free speech should protect even prevaricators and the epistemically insouciant.

Orwell was not a particularly systematic thinker – although he did have a consistent set of themes and ideas that he wrote about. Nor was he particularly consistent in how he used terms. Nor was he inclined to provide clear definitions of those terms. These features of his thought and writing make critical philosophical analysis of Orwell challenging, including philosophical analysis of his conception of free speech. But this paper rests on the assumption that the challenge is worth it.

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NOTES

[1] While Orwell sees totalitarianism as a threat to free thought, he seems to view free thought and socialism as highly compatible. For example, Orwell claims that 'we believe that anyone who upholds the freedom of the intellect, in this age of lies and regimentation, is not serving the cause of Socialism so badly either' (*CEL*J 3: 312). For a detailed and compelling case for the compatibility between Orwell's commitments to socialism and free speech, see Burgess 2023

[2] There are exceptions to this generalisation, of course, such as laws against perjury, defamation and false advertising. But they are just that: exceptions

[3] A notable example of this position can be found in the 2012 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Alvarez*, 567 US 709 (2012)

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