

Epistemology, Semantics, and Doublethink

Fashions change, in utopias as in everything else. But rarely in man's experience has a fashion changed as completely and as dramatically as the fashion in utopias in the period since 1929. In the Twenties, as in the nineteenth century, and, indeed, as it had been for hundreds of years, utopias were "ideal" societies. Their most important attributes were peace and plenty with a dash of sexual freedom. Since 1929 the whole tone of utopias has changed, and this tendency has reached its stunning culmination in George Orwell's picture of Oceania in 1984.

The change in utopias is, of course, merely a symptom of a much more fundamental change, the change in men's ideas of the nature of man. The nineteenth century felt that man was innately good and that the occasional evil in his actions arose from the oppression of bad institutions and the frustration of man's instincts by such institutions. Accordingly, the nineteenth century was convinced that all would be for the best if man could merely be freed from his social environment, and his nature given free rein to develop itself through exercise. On such assumptions, the nineteenth century was libertarian and optimistic and regarded progress as inevitable, a steady advance as man freed himself from institutional restrictions. On this basis rested liberalism in government, laissez-faire in economics, progressive education, social Darwinism, feminism, and all the movements, reforms, slogans and social cliches of the period from 1848 to 1929.

The disasters we have experienced since 1929 have undermined these beliefs so completely that they have been largely abandoned and are in danger of being replaced, in a natural reaction, by belief in their opposites. Belief in the innate goodness of man is rapidly being replaced by belief in the innate evil of man; faith in inevitable progress is being replaced by expectation of inevitable disaster; advocacy of freedom as the key to all success has been followed by advocacy of discipline as the only hope of salvation.

This, perhaps, is what might be expected. The history of mankind seems to indicate that he proceeds by a process of oscillation from one extreme to its opposite, passing through the sanity of the middle ground only enroute from one lunatic fringe to another. *see A-1*

All of this is obvious enough, and Orwell's book makes much of it. Nineteen eighty-four, in his inspired vision, is to be 180° opposed to the utopias of the nineteenth century. It is a world of war, of want, of evil, of discipline, of repression. But Orwell's book has more than this. If it had only this, it might be worth reading, but it would hardly be worth discussing. Because it has more, it demands reading, meditation, and discussion. At the central core of Orwell's utopia is a concept which raises his volume to the highest level of poetic perception. This is the concept of "double-think" with all its connotations. Orwell's book is more than the opposite side of a nineteenth century utopia because in this concept he has extended but not reversed the nineteenth century, and he has

placed this concept at the center of his whole system.

What is this principle of "doublethink" which dominates the whole social system of Orwell's book. Briefly the doublethink of 1984 is the semantics of 1945 grown up. Semantics holds that the meanings of words are fluid and change as one uses them, and that this condition is both necessary and good. Only in this way, apparently, can words reflect reality. The argument goes something like this: reality is fluid and changeable; the words with which we deal with reality must reflect this condition; if they do not but instead remain rigid and constant, they will deal with an artificial world of unreality.

. Doublethink goes further than semantics merely because it is sophisticated enough to realize that it is possible to change reality by changing the content of words. This is the explanation of the Party slogan of 1984: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." It is also evident in the Party slogans: "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength."

The process by which doublethink grows out of semantics is but one link in a long ^{chain} change of intellectual development of the most fundamental importance. In this chain there are six links of which four are historical (covering the period of the Christian era already elapsed) and two are extrapolations into the future (covering the period from the present to 2050 A.D.). The

The six links with their approximate dates are as follows:

Classical dualism	c.400 B.C.- c.1150 A.D.
Scholasticism	1150 - 1300
Modern rationalism	1300 - 1890
Semantics	1890 -
Doublethink	c.1984
Newspeak	c.2050

Classical dualism began with the discussions of the Greek rationalists, reached its highest achievement with Plato, and continued on, reinforced and corrupted by the influx of oriental ideas and religions after 330 B.C., to its defeat at the hands of Abaelard, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas. In general this point of view considered the universe to represent a dualism of spirit and matter, the first unchanging, eternal, and good and the latter mutable, temporary, and corrupt. Only the former could be the object of knowledge because it did not exist in the temporal world where the presence of time, and thus of change made all the latter impossible. This point of view, originated by Pythagoras, Plato, and others, and built into a system by Plato, was powerfully reinforced by the dualistic oriental importations of Gnosis, Manichaeanism, Zoroasterism, and others tapped by the conquests of Alexander the Great and of Rome itself.

This universe of an antithetical dualism was sharply challenged by the arrival of Christianity, because the Christian belief that Christ was both True God and true Man made it necessary to work out a philosophy able to reconcile the opposition of eternal idea and temporary matter. The debate continued for more than a thousand years (150-1250) during which period one dualistic heresy after another was defeated. The area of conflict shifted from pulpit to church council, from field of battle to heretics stake, from monastic cloister to university lecture hall. Neo-Platonism, Gnosism, Arianism, Manicheism, Catharism and others were overcome or driven underground, ultimately, if we can believe Denis de Rougement, to take refuge under the disguise of the troubadours romantic poetry. The Christian answer to dualistic heresy reached its culmination in Aquinas. This answer might be summed up as follows. Reality is not dualistic but hierarchical, being a gamut from matter without form to form without matter, or expressed differently from pure potentiality to complete all-inclusive realization, from amorphous matter (which can do nothing but to which anything can be done) to pure Reason (which can do anything but to which nothing can be done), from slavery to freedom. In this hierarchy all development is upward, the unfolding of potentialities into actualities, a process which clearly establishes that the achievement of beatitude can be made only by living through the lower levels. Salvation is found only by living in this world and living through the flesh not by rejecting the world and the flesh. Indeed, salvation for all required that the divinity become flesh as well. The Incarnation became the ultimate

repudiation of ancient dualism and its^u horrible progeny of heresies."

This Christian ideology worked out a philosophy of three parts: logic concerned with the rules of thought; metaphysics concerned with the nature of reality; and epistemology concerned with the relationship between the two. In this system the logic was clear and rigid, and the necessary adjustments between thought and reality were made in the epistemology. A sharp distinction was made between validity and truth. Logic gave validity to a conclusion, if its rules were obeyed. But this conclusion was not necessarily true-- that was something to be tested according to the^u "rules of epistemology." Truth rested in ^{reality} metaphysics and not necessarily in the mind. When Aquinas said "Nothing exists in the intelligence which was not first in the senses" and added "It is not possible to transfer from the ideal to the actual," he at once destroyed the ancient rationalistic dualism and established the real basis of modern science. Unfortunately, the victory was a precarious one.

When the Protestant revolution of the sixteenth century rejected the Catholic religion it felt compelled to reject the Christian philosophy: the Aristotelian logic, the Thomistic epistemology, and the hierarchial metaphysics were thrown together on the trash heap. The work of destruction was made easier and more complete because the Catholic practice had never been completely consistent with the Catholic philosophy, and, indeed, many Catholics were ignorant of the philosophy in all its panorama of logical and empirical consistency. The old Platonist corruption was still alive,

not merely underground, but in the inner fortress of the Church itself, notably in the Augustinian tradition and in the Augustinian order, of which Luther was a member. This Platonist tradition now revived, and, in accordance with its teaching, the hierarchical metaphysic of the medieval church was replaced with a dualistic rationalism. The Thomistic epistemology was discarded and replaced by nothing. The Aristotelean logic was rejected in form but was preserved in substance by the continued acceptance of classical mathematics whose rules were almost identical with the rules of Aristotelean logic.

The new rationalistic dualism provides the third link in our chain. According to its assumptions, idea and actuality * existed in an opposed parallelism. This is the parallelism of the subjective and the objective world. It was assumed that the objective world was rational and logical and that its nature could be found by logical, that is mathematical, processes alone. This belief is the basis of the whole system of Descartes and of Newton and thus the basic of the whole modern (as opposed to contemporary) ideology. Since the objective world is not logical nor rational, life, for these modern rationalists, became a bitter and disillusioning experience. From this disillusionment came three divergent developments: scepticism, empiricism, and semantics. All three were reactions to the discovery that reason cannot, by logic alone, find actuality, since actuality is not necessarily logical or rational.

Of the three results from rationalistic disillusionment only one, empiricism, offered the slightest hope for the future. Scepticism led straight to frustration and stalemate; semantics led to disaster and doublethink; only empiricism offered any hope for the future. This hope rested in the fact that empiricism was dealing with the area between thought and actuality where the Reformation's rejection of epistemology had left a great gap. Epistemology was the keystone of the arch; it was the key to science, to reality, and to sanity because it was the connecting link between thought and the external world. Empiricism offered hope because of the possibility that it might, if examined diligently, be able to reconstruct some of the lost principles of epistemology, and because of the fact that its own obvious inadequacy if it did this, would compel it to proceed into logic on the one hand and into metaphysics on the other. This hope has to some extent been realized. The development of modern science, along this path, from Galileo to Einstein and Oppenheimer, has succeeded in creating the only widely held ideology possessing an adequate epistemology available in the modern world. As a result such men as Einstein, Schrödinger, Leccmte du Noüy, and Oppenheimer provide the only really hopeful sign in this field. The line which they follow converges with that of the neo-Thomists who seek to cope with the ideological crisis by going back to the philosophy which the Reformers rejected. If these two lines converge it may be

is possible to save what, really the core of the Western Christian tradition--the belief that **Truth exists as a fact beyond the reach of whim or propaganda and that sanity and the good life can be obtained by the struggle to find that Truth and cling to it.** But this possibility is menaced by the terrible threat of semantics.

Semantics, like scepticism and empiricism, is a direct consequence of the disappearance of epistemology and the subsequent discovery of the inadequacy of rationalism. The rationalists believed that the truth could be found by the use of reason and logic alone because they had assumed that the world was rational and logical. Because the world is not rational and logical they had failed. The sceptics accordingly doubted the capacity of the mind to know; the empiricists rejected the use of reason and tried to deal with the world by the senses alone; the semanticists tried to deal with the world by bringing its lack of logic and rationality into the mind itself. They did this, not by rediscovering the rules of epistemology but by changing the rules of logic. To them the old logic--Aristotelean logic, as they called it--was the source of all modern confusion, error, frustration and insanity. Accordingly, they tried to replace it by a non-Aristotelean logic whose basic innovation was that it rejected the principle of contradiction. The abandoning of this principle--which they called the "either-or principle"--meant that they rejected all rigid categories or definitions and were prepared to act with vague, variable and over-lapping

definitions whose content varied during use in order to reflect the admitted dynamic quality of the external world. Thus the semanticists tried to make thought more effective and contact with fact more immediate by introducing the irrationality, dynamism, and vagueness of the external world into the mental processes. They were satisfied that the best way to deal with the mess we call the world would be to introduce this messiness into the mind. Their arguments for doing this, always based on persuasive everyday evidence, were convincing to those who had never heard of epistemology. Aristotelean logic says "night is not day and day is not night". The semanticists answers "what is twilight?" and we are expected to abandon Aristotelean logic. If Aristotelean logic says "male is not female and vice-versa", the semanticists says "what about homosexuals?" and we are expected to give up Aristotelean logic.

Such arguments are very persuasive. But, as a matter of fact, the semanticists' analysis is mistaken both in its diagnosis and in its remedy. Our errors do not arise from the mistakes of Aristotelean logic but from the loss of epistemology as an intellectual discipline. Moreover, Aristotelean logic is not mistaken when it fails to reflect the characteristics of actuality because it was never intended to do so, and neither Aristotle nor Aquinas was so naive or stupid as to believe it did. The rules of Aristotelean logic applied to (the conceptual world), (to the ideal portion of reality), and could be applied to the physical world of

space-time only by undergoing the rules of epistemology. And among these rules of epistemology one of the basic ones stated, "It is not possible to transfer from the ideal to the actual."

As long as the Aristotelean-Thomistic tradition insisted that the ideal is not the same as the actual we are protected from doublethink. But once the semanticists can make us believe that the ideal must be the same as the actual we are wide open to doublethink. The old Aristotelean tradition believed in both the ideal world and the actual world and regarded both as part of objective reality, the ideal forming the upper levels of the hierarchy and the world of space-time forming the lower levels. The contrast between the two had nothing to do with our modern contrast between subjective and objective since, for example, the rules of mathematics were ideal but still objective truth quite independent of any thinking human mind.

The efforts of the semanticists to bring the variety of reality into the mind makes it necessary for them to abandon the Aristotelean-Scholastic belief that concepts are rigid and fixed and to adopt, in its place, what they sometimes call "multiordinal terms". According to this belief every word has an infinite number of meanings since the meaning varies with the context, and there are an infinite number of contexts. The "is" of identity is rejected as impossible. There is no identity of facts in actuality, and each fact exists in actuality in a different relationship to its surroundings (context). Accordingly every word (which seeks

to represent a fact) cannot be identical even with itself but must have a different context every time it is used. "Even 'yes' may have an indefinite number of meanings, depending on the context to which it is applied....all speculations about such terms in general--as, for instance, 'what a fact or reality is'--are futile, and, in general illegitimate, as the only correct answer is that 'the terms are multiordinal and devoid of meaning outside of a context'" Thus spoke Korzybski.

Just as semantics is one of the logical results of the abandonment of epistemology so Orwell's doublethink is one of the logical results of semantics. According to Orwell, the vocabulary of doublethink has two meanings, one meaning when it is applied to an enemy and the opposite meaning when applied to a friend. "Black-white" is such an expression. Applied to an enemy it means that he is such a degraded scoundrel that he would be willing to say that black is white. Applied to a friend it means that his loyalty exceeds all logic or reality to the point where he would be willing to accept black as white. In the Oceania of 1984 the propaganda ministry which deluges the people with lies is called the Ministry of Truth; the ministry which wages war is called the Ministry of Peace; the economic agency, whose chief task is to curtail production and ration artificially-created scarcity, is called the Ministry of Plenty. Freedom is called Slavery and Slavery is called Freedom.

We do not have to wait until 1984 to see the approaching shadow of this ill-begotten child of semantics. Already the prophets of

the political Right and the political Left are making use of doublethink. We are told that an election in the United States, in England, or in Italy is an example of brutal class oppression while an election in Poland, Russia, or Bulgaria is an exercise in free democracy. People like James Burnham tell us that the situation now existing between the United States and Russia is war and that the only way to establish peace is to make an immediate military assault on Russia. People like John Flynn are given access to the nine million subscribers of The Readers Digest to tell us that the New Deal is slavery, while Senator Bricker tells us that the Truman administration is Socialism. The subjection of millions of miners to the whims of John L. Lewis is called independence and freedom.

The final link in our chain, the Newspeak which Orwell envisions for 2050, is perhaps hypothetical but is again a logical development of doublethink and of semantics. If words have no fixed meaning (semantics) then the meanings can be changed for political and propaganda purposes (doublethink) and ultimately people can be kept in complete intellectual subjection by being deprived of all words which refer to politically unacceptable ideas (Newspeak).