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RELATIVE THEORY OF GOOD IN "BRAVE NEW WORLD" AND "1984."

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ONE METHOD OF INTERESTING THE AVERAGE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN QUESTIONING INTELLIGENTLY THE NATURE OF GOOD IS THROUGH THE STUDY OF HUXLEY'S "BRAVE NEW WORLD" AND ORWELL'S "1984." IN BOTH OF THESE NEGATIVE UTOPIAS THE LOSS OF MAN'S HUMANITY, INDIVIDUALITY, AND RIGHT TO REASON THE NATURE OF GOOD ARE THE VERY QUALITIES WHICH MAKE HIM "EXCELLENT," AND WHICH ARE NECESSARY FOR A "GOOD" SOCIETY WHERE STABILITY IS THE PARAMOUNT VIRTUE, DISEASE AND POVERTY ARE ERADICATED THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF SCIENCE, AND MAN IS NEVER FACED WITH MAKING THOSE AGONIZING CHOICES WHICH WRENCH HIS PSYCHE. THE YOUNG READER, AFTER STUDYING THE TWO NOVELS AND BEING FRIGHTENED BY WHAT HE RECOGNIZES AS A POSSIBLE FUTURE REALITY--GIVEN THE COURSE OF HUMAN HISTORY, MAN'S NATURE, AND THE RISE OF SCIENCE--COMES TO STAND WITH THE SAVAGE OF "BRAVE NEW WORLD." HE REALIZES THAT IT IS THE RIGHT TO QUESTION THE NATURE OF GOOD AND EVIL IN A FREE SOCIETY WHICH PRESERVES MAN'S HUMANITY AND INDIVIDUALITY--WHICH MAKES HIM HUMAN INSTEAD OF A ROBOT. EVEN THOUGH HE MAY NEVER REALLY KNOW THE TRUE NATURE OF GOOD, THE STUDENT SEES THE IMPORTANCE OF QUESTIONING ITS NATURE. (THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 1967 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION.) (DL)

RELATIVE THEORY OF GOOD IN BRAVE NEW WORLD AND 1984

by Alice Partridge
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How can literature move the average high school reader to question intelligently the nature of good? Can good be defined most effectively for disinterested readers by establishing what is bad? From Plato's Republic to the present, humanist writers have asserted the twin principles, that the good society is the product of excellent men and that the excellences of the individual can only be achieved in the good society.¹ However, bland, positive definition of good often communicates weakly to indifferent, average youth. Surprisingly, when the shocking negative utopias of Brave New World and 1984 are debated as "good societies" which produce such "excellent men" as the dehumanizing monsters, Mustapha Mond and the brutal O'Brien, and the "excellences" of the individual are declared to be his loss of individuality, his loss of humanity, his loss of the right to reason the nature of good, most readers suddenly become involved. The bizarre debate of evil posing as good provokes even the average youth to question what really is the nature of good.

What are the issues in such a debate? The negative utopias contend that in order for the "good society" to dominate the earth, power must be maintained for power's sake. To support such a "good society" science must reduce man to an automaton. Their most provocative issue is that man has a built in flaw that will invite this dehumanization. This contention startles or intrigues most young readers.

1. H. V. S. Ogden, Imaginative Literature as a College Study.
College English, Volume 29, No. 1, p. 15. NCTE, Oct., 1967.

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Can the nature of man be changed through some kind of innate human flaw? What kind of flaw? As the negative utopias threaten him with dehumanization through this inherent weakness, he becomes concerned with searching for error in his nature. This quest leads him to a much more fundamental question. What gives him his humanity in the first place? If its loss is going to dehumanize him, he certainly wants to know what it is that he is going to lose. As the two negative utopias press these issues through their definition of "the good society" where the excellences of the individual are his vegetable like existence, his yielding every right of self determination, the young reader begins to realize what gives man his humanity. With terrible clarity, he sees that the loss of the right to reason the nature of good for oneself can literally dehumanize man. When debater O'Brien leers at him that the flaw which can prove all his undoing is an error in logic called doublethink, the young reader begins a rapid self search. Those who are capable of honesty know that, at this point, the two negative utopias have the reader pinioned. We are all guilty of degrees of doublethink.

Orwell defines this fallacy as the act of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. Alan Paton pursues this phenomenon further in a recent issue of Saturday Review. He points up doublethinking in our most basic institutions as he laments that Christian civilization uses methods incompatible with

Christianity to preserve its values. He further suggests that doublethink is part of the essential nature of man with the discovery that one can love and hate simultaneously, be honest and cheat, be arrogant and humble, be any pair of opposites that one had supposed to be mutually exclusive.²

Forced to admit man is this fallible, the young readers begins to search about for refutation. Such loss of ground in the debate causes him to challenge the rationale of the two negative utopias, clashing with the "logic" of Mond and O'Brien who scramble reality into three doublethink contentions. First, war is peace, and ignorance is strength. Second, slavery is freedom. Third, reality exists only in the collective scientific mind. As the indignant reader prepares to dismiss such ridiculous argument, he is faced with the fact that history is on the side of the opposition in the debate. Is war really peace?

Erich Fromm explores this doublethink in an Afterword to 1984, by pointing out that both novels project the new mood of hopelessness which is already evident in our time though it has not become manifest and taken hold of the consciousness of people.

In this scientific twentieth century when man can produce enough for everybody, where war has become unnecessary because technical progress can give any country more wealth than territorial conquest, at the very moment when man is on the verge of realizing his hope, he begins to lose it.³

2. Alan Paton, "The Challenge of Fear", Saturday Review, September 9, 1967, p. 20.

3. Erich Fromm, Afterword to 1984, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1961, p. 260.

Man possesses the technology to relieve all human suffering caused by deprivation, but he does not possess the humanity to do so. Instead he has spent most of the twentieth century practicing the doublethink that war is peace. Confronted with such reality, youth has to concede further edge to the case of the negative utopias.

Building their argument on current change in human values, the authors celebrate the loss of individuality as a triumph of these three aspects of doublethink. Robots, not individuals, are needed to do what is relatively good for these totalitarian power structures. In 1984, slavery is freedom when the dehumanization of man is achieved by a mixture of unlimited terror combined with ideological and psychological manipulation. In contrast, Huxley's main tool for turning man into an automaton is the application of hypnoid mass suggestion, which dispenses with terror wherein man trades individuality for stability, through the doublethink that slavery becomes "freedom." Youth, who is beginning the quest for his own identity, recoils at this trap in logic.

After showing the reader how science will deny him his humanity through such doublethink, Orwell's Big Brother further clinches his argument by raising the last of the three contentions, the claim that science can change reality. Reality, so the ruling party holds, is not external. Reality does not exist in the individual mind. Whatever the party holds to be truth is truth. Whatever the party holds to be good is good. A contrast of dialogue from the novels supports the third contention that

the dehumanization of men is the price we must pay for a world controlled by science. Thought Policeman O'Brien demonstrates how this can be achieved in spite of the most powerful resistance the human spirit can offer. Brutally dehumanizing the young protagonist, Winston Smith, O'Brien accuses him of refusing to make the act of submission which is the price of sanity. O'Brien declares the Smith's right to be an individual is the act of preferring to be a lunatic, a minority of one. Reality exists not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case perishes; reality can exist only in the scientific collective mind of the party which is immortal. Such sustained assault on the reader's senses often achieves a major breakthrough.

Youth identifies with the violated Winston so strongly that he is jarred into seeing that individualism and his own right to defend good are one and the same. Being branded insane because he has the conviction to be a minority of one brings youth to a point of insight. The realization that his most basic human function is to be able to seek for what is good moves the young reader to further generalize that such a quest has a humanizing effect on the searcher. If dehumanization follows the loss of such rights, then humanization must relate to finding and exercising these rights.

Huxley moves the reader to this same insight from another direction. Where Orwell uses violence to dehumanize the individual, Huxley approaches loss of individualism from a

more subtle angle. Unlike the brutal O'Brien who tortures Smith into trading reason for doublethink, Mond, from his venerated pinnacle of scientific rationale, debates the merits of life where science is god contrasted with life where the individual is still free to define the nature of good, to choose between good and evil and to suffer the consequences of his choice. Under Brave New World science, he explains that all physical and mental suffering are eliminated by biological selection and drugs. The family is completely removed when live birth is replaced by artificial hatching. He clarifies that God and the individual's search for good are not compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness. He labels relative good for the largest number as stability, and then wryly announces that Brave New World has traded freedom for stability. Science has made people safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death; they've got no wives, or children or mothers or fathers or lovers to feel strongly about, because science has taken the suffering of love and human choice out of the nature of man. And if anything should go wrong there is soma, the Brave New World sophistication of contemporary drugs.

Through a cataloguing of all the current ills that science now controls, Mond establishes sciences as the genie who places man into the bottle. He argues that when man places freedom of choice above science he has chosen the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer;

the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind. Who would claim these "rights" in the name of freedom?

Youth pauses with the Savage. "I claim them all," the young Savage replies. In this statement volumes on the nature of good are reduced to one generalization which is the hidden thesis of both novels. Man's freedom of choice gives him his humanity, his reality, his individuality. Without this freedom he is nothing. As Mond claims, "He is man the genie of science has placed into the bottle."

But is man in the bottle? At this point the sharp reader can cite the Savage's spirit as refutation for the entire negative utopian cases. In spite of the two different approaches to the disintegration of the individual there is one basic question common to the two works which destroys the argument of the negative utopias.

According to Erich Fromm's Afterword, the question is a philosophical, anthropological and psychological one, and perhaps also a religious one. It is: can human nature be changed by this detached acceptance of relative good defined by the state or the party? Can trading freedom and individualism for stability cause man to forget his longing for freedom, for integrity, for love; that is to say, can man forget that he is human? Or does human nature have a dynamism which will react to the violation of these basic human needs?⁴

4. Ibid.

Herein lies the young reader's edge in this debate. At this point the student can separate doublethink from reality.

He can point out, along with Erich Fromm, that

the two authors do not start out with the assumption that there is no such thing as qualities essential to man which permit him to judge good according to his own insight; and that man is born as nothing but a blank sheet of paper on which any given society may write its text. They do assume that man has an intense striving for love, for justice, for truth, for good. In fact, they affirm the strength and the intensity of these human strivings by the description of the very means they present as being necessary to destroy them.⁵

The young reader also feels this striving. He senses through the threat of such loss, his own instinct for justice, for love, for truth, for good.

Thus, we see the justification for leading students through a contrast of these two novels. In this simulated debate of the reader versus a distortion of good, learning has happened to the adolescent. He has had to sort reality from doublethink. In fact, he has achieved four ultimates of imaginative reaction to literature in that he has:

- (1) achieved an enlarged awareness of the possibilities of human life, (by the threat of its being altered),
- (2) achieved the development of self-consciousness (as he has discovered what makes him human and gives him his value),
- (3) achieved his "liberation" as an individual and the establishment of his personal identity (as he sees the pathos of the beaten Winston Smith's "I love Big Brother"),
- (4) achieved the formation of a criticized hierarchy of values (as he realizes they can be possessed only when weighed and chosen voluntarily).⁶

5. Ibid.

6. Ogden, Op. cit., p. 11.

Though he may never really know the true nature of good, he sees the importance of questioning its nature. Through such searching the young reader will claim the right to be a minority of one, if that is what it takes, to arrive at his own view. Like the Savage, he will refuse the comfort offered by science in exchange for his human worth, as he accepts man's two most basic challenges, that of rebelling against the regimentation of the human mind, and reasoning his own interpretation of good.