

The dangers of totalitarianism philosophy essay



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Totalitarianism “ Totalitarianism: Of, relating to, being, or imposing a form of government in which the political authority exercises absolute and centralized control over all aspects of life, the individual is subordinated to the state, and opposing political and cultural expression is suppressed” (Dictionary. com). Essentially, totalitarianism is a type of government in which the person or people in power seek to maintain absolute control over every person under their authority, with virtually all importance eliminated from the concept of an individual. George Orwell witnessed firsthand the horrific lengths to which totalitarian governments in Spain and Russia would go in order to sustain and increase their power and was deeply disturbed by the widespread cruelties and oppressions he observed. Yet the phenomenon of totalitarianism, though somewhat novel in its twentieth-century extent, is nothing new. Prominent philosophers, from the ancient Plato and Aristotle to the early-modern Machiavelli and Hobbes, discussed totalitarianism as it manifested itself in its various forms, especially monarchy or, more controversially, in Plato’s polis. In this sense, totalitarianism and its characteristics have been important concerns for writers and political philosophers throughout the ages.

1984 1984 is a political novel written with the purpose of warning readers in the West of the dangers of totalitarian government. Orwell’s primary goal in 1984 is to demonstrate the terrifying possibilities of a totalitarian society, the most extreme realization imaginable of a modern-day government with absolute power. The title of the novel was meant to indicate to its readers in 1949 that the story represented a real possibility for the near future: if totalitarianism were not opposed, some variation of the world described in

the novel could become a reality in only thirty-five years. Orwell was concerned by the role of technology in enabling oppressive governments to monitor and control their citizens every aspect of human life to the extent that even having a disloyal thought is against the law. The protagonist, Winston Smith, is the looking glass into Orwell's horrifying perfect communist society, where all of Winston's worst paranoias and fears are realities. Winston's timidly rebellious personality sets out to challenge the limits of the Party's power and attempts to gain individuality towards throughout the plot. This resistance allows the reader to understand, through Winston's eyes, the Party's harsh oppression which includes Psychological Manipulation, Physical Control, Control of Information and History and Language as Mind Control.

Psychological Manipulation The Party barrages its citizens with psychological manipulation in their attempt to control the human mind and to overwhelm the mind's capacity for independent thought. The Party seeks to eliminate all thoughtcrime, the crime of thinking anything against the infallible Big Brother. The act of thinking about committing a crime is, "the essential crime that contained all others in itself" (Orwell, 19). That action is considered by the Party the most horrible, for only with thought and a conscious decision to take action will any action be performed; without thoughtcrime, no crime would be committed. As such, the Party utilizes every possible method of eliminating thoughtcrime. Winston commits a thoughtcrime when he purchases a diary and in it writes, "Down with Big Brother," (Orwell, 19). He then reflects on the inevitable consequences of his action: "Whether he went on with the diary, or whether he did not go on

with, made no difference, the Thought Police would get him just the same,” (Orwell, 19). The Party has the power to realize any committed thoughtcrime and to punish the criminal. Additionally, the giant telescreen in every citizen’s room blasts a constant stream of propaganda designed to make the failures of the Party appear to be successes. The telescreens also monitor behavior; everywhere they go, citizens are continuously reminded, especially by means of the ever-present signs reading “ BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU,” that the authorities are scrutinizing them. 1984 reveals that technology, which is generally perceived as working toward moral good, can also facilitate the most diabolical evil. Furthermore, the Party weakens family structure by inducting children into Junior Spies, an organization which brainwashes and encourages them to spy on their parents and report any cases of disloyalty to the Party. The Party also forces individuals to suppress their sexual desires, treating sex as only a procreative duty to create new Party members.

Realizing the importance of the human mind, the Party not only threatens the society, but also channels the people’s potential into actions to benefit the Party. The Party institutes the Hate Period: for two minutes every day, a film of Emmanuel Goldstein, the pronounced enemy of the people, is shown and viewers are driven to anger. As Winston declares, “ The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining in,” (Orwell 12). By utilizing the power of the human mind, the Party is able to further their control over their society.

Physical Control In addition to manipulating their minds, the Party also controls the bodies of its citizens. The Party constantly watches for any sign

of disloyalty, to the point that, as Winston observes, even a tiny facial twitch could lead to an arrest (Orwell, Ch 6 or 7). A person's own nervous system becomes his greatest enemy. The Party forces its members to undergo mass morning exercises called the Physical Jerks, and then to work long, grueling days at government agencies, keeping people in a general state of exhaustion (Orwell, Ch 3). Anyone who does manage to defy the Party is punished and "reeducated" through systematic and brutal torture. When Winston is arrested, he is able to experience first-hand the punishment constructed by the Party. The Party fully believes in the importance and rightness of their actions, and O'Brien, who is an important member of the Party, explains how their society is different: "We are not content the negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission. When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will...Everyone is washed clean," (Orwell, 210). Winston must fully surrender to O'Brien. It does not matter what he says, but rather what he believes, for in the mind lies the ultimate power. Describing the process enacted by the Party, O'Brien says, "There are three stages in your reintegration...There is learning, there is understanding, and there is acceptance, (Orwell, 215). In order to attain the state desired by the Party, one deemed mentally deranged must undergo all three of these stages, as Winston eventually does. However, Winston initially is unable to truly believe everything said by the Party. He is able to say that he believes, and perhaps wants to believe, but doubt still remains. As the final push to belief, Winston is taken to the infamous Room 101. O'Brien tells Winston, "The thing that is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world...it varies from individual to individual" (Orwell, 233). The greatest possible torture is individualized, and with this torture, comes anything. After going

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through weeks of this intense treatment, Winston himself comes to the conclusion that nothing is more powerful than physical pain—no emotional loyalty or moral conviction can overcome it. At the end of the book Orwell writes, “ He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother” (Orwell, 245). By conditioning the minds of their victims with physical torture, the absolute power of the Party allows Winston to believe in everything that society does.

Control of Information & History The Party also has a control over all sources of information. It manages and rewrites the content of all newspapers and histories for its own ends. The Party does not allow individuals to keep physical records documenting the past which prevents people from challenging the government’s motivations, actions, and authority. Citizens become perfectly willing to believe whatever the Party tells them. Winston believes having no physical records such as photographs and documents, makes one’s life lose its outline in one’s memory. Winston only vaguely remembers a time before the Party came to power, and memories of his past enter his mind only in dreams, which are the most secure repositories for thoughts, feelings, and memories that must be suppressed in waking life. Furthermore, Winston considers Oceania’s relationship to the other countries in the world, Eurasia and Eastasia. According to official history, Oceania has always been at war with Eurasia and in alliance with Eastasia, but Winston knows that the records have been changed. Winston remembers that no one had heard of Big Brother, the leader of the Party, before 1960, but stories about him now appear in histories going back to the 1930s. By controlling

the present, the Party is able to manipulate the past. And in controlling the past, the Party can justify all of its actions in the present. (Chapter III)

Language as Mind Control One of Orwell's most important messages in 1984 is that language is of central importance to human thought because it structures and limits the ideas that individuals are capable of expressing. The Party has introduced Newspeak to replace English. Its purpose is to alter the structure of language to make it impossible to even conceive of disobedient or rebellious thoughts, because there would be no words with which to think them. Syme, an intelligent Party member who works on a revised dictionary of Newspeak, says, " Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it" (Orwell 46). The Party is constantly refining and perfecting Newspeak, with the ultimate goal that no one will be capable of conceptualizing anything that might question the Party's absolute power.

Conclusion on 1984 & Intro to Philosophers The party's methods, from its implementation of psychological manipulation and absolute physical control to its control of information and history and its use of language as mind control, point toward the ultimate aim of the party itself: absolute, centralized control over the lives of the inhabitants of Oceania. This goal characterizes the ruling power of Oceania squarely as totalitarian. The line between the private and public spheres, present in every single other regime, is blurred to such an extent that every action becomes inherently political. Before the twentieth century, the idea of such a regime was itself unconceivable; nevertheless, the philosophers of the past such as Plato,

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Aristotle, Machiavelli and Hobbes provide a glimpse to power similar in extent to the one Orwell chronicles in 1984.

Plato's Republic gives this ancient perspective on the subject of powerful political orders. It is not difficult to advance the claim that the polis Plato presents in his Republic is fundamentally totalitarian. The guardians of the polis itself use several of the same methods as those of Oceania, and one of the aims of the polis is to create a harmonious structure, one which is often identified with an idea of unity-is similar to that of a totalitarian regime which, by destroying the difference between the public and private spheres and by bringing every action to the political realm, strives to create a unity among the men subject to it. While two things separate the polis from the Party-popular satisfaction with the rulers and the lack of incentive to rule-some of the ideas present in the Republic, such as the concentration of political power and the exertion of power over daily life, are clear even in Orwell's 1984.

The first major component of the totalitarian-like regime in the polis is the extent to which political power is concentrated in the guardian class of citizens. In the polis, as in other totalitarian orders, there is no alternative to the ruling party. The guardians are meant to be the only power capable of ruling, and the entire structure of the polis is founded upon the idea that they will in fact be the rulers. A similar structure is found in totalitarian systems, wherein power is firmly concentrated on one bloc or person.

Socrates insists that this concentration of power does not indicate anything more than a means to a good end and that the producers will be grateful to those above them for ruling philosophically. There is no such guarantee in a

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totalitarian regime, but for better or worse, whether in Plato's utopian (or dystopian) society or in potential systems of the future, once power is centralized to such a great extent, there is no guarantee that the rulers will not abuse of their subjects for their own benefit, tangible or otherwise, except for their good will and magnanimity.

The second major totalitarian feature of the polis is its control over the daily life of citizens, which is accomplished by means of education, itself a form of psychological manipulation. Control over popular forms of media constitutes one of the key assets of the rulers of the polis, just as it does in 1984, and poetry, music, theatre, and other such arts, a vital part of the culture of a city in Ancient Greek times, would be subject to the regulation and approval of the city's ruler. The introduction of the noble lie adds to the totalitarian nature of the guardians. The noble lie, despite the good it intends to bestow upon the populace, is still a lie, and it represents a propagandistic concern with regard to how much the populace is actually able to consent to the leadership itself. In addition, education itself poses an issue in this respect. Given the extensive control over education by the guardians, the possibility of mass deception, a feature most often associated with totalitarian regimes, becomes real. Despite Plato's insistence that these methods are to be used for good, they are in reality frighteningly similar to those utilized by the Party in 1984.

The third similarity between the polis and a totalitarian regime is found in the notion of collectivism. The terms by which Plato refers to the members of his society provide some insight into this strong collectivism. Never is any individual member of society referred to as an individual. This fact

emphasizes the collective sense of unity and harmony for which Plato's polis strives. However, it is important to remember that one of the ultimate aims of totalitarian government is to eliminate the distinction between the individual and other members of society, creating the same sense of concord found in the Republic. Yet Plato takes this collectivism one step further, instituting the sharing of wives and the mass, rather than familial, upbringing of children, much in the same way that more communistic totalitarian regimes remove any trace of natural ties found through familial bonds in favor of those artificially created by the state.