

# Nineteen eighty four argumentative essay



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“ It does not matter whether ‘ two plus two is four’ is true, much less whether this truth is ‘ subjective’ or ‘ corresponds to external reality’” (CIS, 176). What Rorty means by this is that it does not matter what one’s beliefs are, or whether those beliefs are true or not... What defines a free society is that people are able to voice their beliefs and opinions without being scared about any repercussions. Winston wrote, “ Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows” (1984, 69). It can be seen why he thinks this is true by noticing that it encompasses the three necessities to freedom – the freedom to think the truth, to speak the truth, and to act on the truth. This can be linked to Rorty.

Rorty believes that if a society is granted freedom of speech, “ truth can take care of itself” (CIS, 176). What Rorty means by this is that in a society where everyone has the ability to say what they think and others give them a fair chance, it will lead to conversations that will make people question their final vocabularies, making them ironists as well as ultimately resulting in ‘ truth’ as defined for them. The definition of truth for those who lived in Oceania is quite different from our definition. The Party obliterated their memories, lies were turned into truths and the past was altered.

“ Whatever the party holds to be the truth is the truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party” writes Winston (1984, 205). The Party slogan was “ Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.” This was where ‘ doublethink’ came into play, minds were trained to hold contradictory positions simultaneously and unquestioningly- for example you had to believe at the same time that Democracy was impossible and that the Party

was the guardian of democracy. Winston could remember a time when the Party did not rule, when Big Brother had not become all-powerful; but according to the Party they had always existed and this lie was repeated enough number of times until it ‘ became’ the truth.

Winston’s own job was, under the Ministry of Truth, to alter the documents from the past to make them consistent with what the Party was saying in the present. The concept of ‘ Newspeak’ resonates strongly with Rorty’s views and the importance he gives to one’s vocabulary. The Party’s belief that if they eradicate certain words from the dictionary and people’s spoken language, then they will not be able to express the concepts associated with those words; is something that Rorty has talked about in his book. As Winston realizes, by the creation of Newspeak, it is not just language that is being destroyed, the attempt is to annihilate consciousness and thought itself.

Once Newspeak has taken over completely, ‘ thought crimes’ will be impossible, because there will be no language to express rebellious thoughts in. The reason Orwell is likely to have chosen to use two plus two is four as a ‘ truth’ that the Party refuses is that it is one of the basic questions “ the truth or falsity of which can easily be assessed by an individual on her own” (Conant, 96). This is probably why Winston realizes early on that given the inexorable nature of the Party’s project, sooner or later, they would declare that two and two are five and if he questioned it, he would probably be considered a lunatic. He says “ What was terrifying was not that they would kill you for thinking otherwise, but that they might be right”. For, after all, how do we know that two and two make four?... If both the past and the

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external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable- what then” (1984, 84)? The concept of physical pain is given a lot of importance in 1984.

Winston thinks, “ nothing in the world is as bad as physical pain” (1984, 251). It is due to immense physical pain that his process of re-educating himself begins. After being tortured in the dreaded Room 101, Winston set about educating himself in the way the Party wanted. He wrote the Party slogans on the slate they provided him and made himself believe them. He convinced himself that two and two was five; he acquired, laboriously the stupidity required to do that.

“ It is not easy to become sane” (1984, 263).“ He wondered, as he had many times wondered before, whether he himself was a lunatic. Perhaps a lunatic was simply a minority of one. But the thought of being a lunatic did not greatly trouble him: the horror was that he might also be wrong” (1984, ch 7).

Initially, when Conant says that one of Rorty’s doctrines is that “ solidarity should replace objectivity” (Conant, 87), what this seems to imply is that one’s beliefs should be in accordance with that of one’s peers instead of blindly believing something without having discussed or ‘ justified’ it to others. However, when he talks about objectivity in relation to Orwell’s description of the Spanish civil war, what objectivity seems to mean in that context is objective reporting of events in the media. From my understanding of Rorty, this does not go against his beliefs. In Oceania, however, the Party controlled the media and they decided how to represent

an incident to the people. What was frightening to Orwell was that this was not being done truthfully, as people base their beliefs on these reports.

“ If all records told the same tale- then the lie passed into history and became truth” (1984, 32). This is where the Party slogan about “ who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past” (1984, 32) comes from. On reading Conant’s article that describes Rorty’s reading of Orwell and “ illuminates the shortcomings of some of Rorty’s central doctrines” (Conant, 86), I was surprised to find that it seemed like he and Rorty would agree on a lot more topics than he seems to believe. His reading of Rorty appears to give him a more extremist opinion than needs to be attributed to him. For example, Conant says that Rorty would believe that the people of Oceania actually believed that the Party created airplanes while the Party itself would be happy as long as people answer ‘ the Party’ in response to “ who does practically everyone say invented the airplane” (Conant, 104)? What he fails to notice is that the fact that ‘ practically everyone’ else says that implies that that is what the Party is promoting as the truth and hence is what the people will believe.

Rorty would not disagree with this interpretation. Similarly, Conant says “ If a Winston Smith comes along and challenges the coherence or integrity of the community’s beliefs, the truth is to be arrived at through a process of conversation between Winston and his peers. The ‘ true’ story will be the one that prevails as the outcome of that conversation” (Conant, 106). However, after reading 1984 and CIS, my impressions of Rorty and O’Brien seem to be the opposite of Conant’s. This remark is more likely to be something that

Rorty would agree with as he talks about discussing one's opinions with one's peers to get a better idea of what the ' truth' is.

One is tempted to think that when O'Brien wants Winston to say that he is holding up five fingers even though he is clearly holding up four, he doesn't want him just to say it because he thinks that's what the party believes- O'Brien wants him to truly believe it. For this he may have to remove memories that tell him otherwise and then forget that he did that. Similarly, he doesn't want him to say it because his definitions of four and five have changed. What O'Brien is trying to achieve is an actual change in Winston's beliefs. This is consistent with Conant's views on the topic.