

# Nineteen Eighty-Four, totalitarian lived skepticism, and unlearning how to love

Policy Futures in Education

2022, Vol. 20(3) 344–359

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DOI: 10.1177/14782103211031424

journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe



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## Abstract

This article explores what we can learn about truth and meaning from fiction, through a reading of George Orwell's (Eric Blair's) dystopic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) in the light of philosopher Stanley Cavell's notion of *lived skepticism*. The article suggests that we can conceive of the novel as portraying *lived skepticism of a totalitarian variety*. This lived skepticism is a condition of uncertainty and doubt forced upon the members of the novel's totalitarian society through indoctrination and physical and psychological torture. The article argues that the novel imagines three areas of totalitarian lived skepticism: lived skepticism with regard to the external world, with regard to language, and with regard to other minds. Among these three, the article centers on totalitarian lived meaning and other-minds skepticism. In particular, it asks who could be considered to be the main character's "best case" of knowing another mind. It furthermore asks what relationship between intimacy, privacy, love, cruelty, and knowledge the novel imagines to obtain within its fictional universe. The article argues that Orwell's novel gives us a nightmarish vision of the annihilation of the possibilities of love, by showing us The Party's perverted pedagogy of unlearning. Through the dystopic world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the reader is offered a potent object of comparison by which she can trace her own moral and sense-making boundaries: what does it mean at the end of the novel that the main character "loves" Big Brother? Can we understand imaginatively what it would be to love Big Brother? Or is the word "love" here merely carrying the illusion of sense—an illusion served to the reader as a pedagogical tool with which she may better learn how to tell sense from nonsense?

## Keywords

Nineteen Eighty-Four, Stanley Cavell, authoritarian lived skepticism, George Orwell, possibilities of love, the annihilation of love

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## Introduction

In the context of a theme such as “Fiction and Truth, Learning and Literature”, it is almost impossible to bypass George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), for several reasons. Let me just list two. The most obvious one is the two-fold fact that not only is Orwell’s fiction often *used* as a pedagogical tool, perhaps predominantly among high-school teachers, for creating a discussion among students about the dangers that totalitarianism poses to our access to, preservation of, and respect for truth. It also appears to have been written with that very pedagogical *intent*. Orwell clearly wanted to warn his readers about the real, non-fictional, risks of totalitarianism and the ills that befall a society that is ready to give up on the notion of objective truth (Orwell, 1968: 460). Secondly, in a time troubled by what seems to be a mounting disrespect for truth and science, plagued by climate skeptics who refuse to acknowledge that, as the young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg put it, “our house is on fire,” the novel’s teachings can seem ever so pertinent and timely.<sup>1</sup>

However, in consideration of the additional context of an interdisciplinary discussion between philosophy, literature, and pedagogy that the current issue of *Policy Futures in Education* seeks to engage in, it seems almost equally impossible to overlook a particular interpretative conflict between two prominent philosophers about the role of objective truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I am here referring to the exchange between the neo-pragmatism philosopher Richard Rorty and ordinary language philosopher James Conant. The debate began with Rorty’s quite unorthodox reading of Orwell in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* in which he claims “the question about ‘the possibility of truth’ is a red herring” (1989: 182). This reading prompted Conant’s counter-interpretation in *Rorty and His Critics*, in which Conant accuses Rorty of in “a fairly literal sense” being “*unable to read Orwell*” (Conant, 2000: 269). Rorty’s unapologetic response to Conant’s criticism can be found in the very same book.

That debate, however, will not be the focus of this article as I have written about it elsewhere (Löfgren, 2019). Instead, this debate will offer me a starting point and a source of potent interpretative claims with which I wish to enter into dialogue in order to turn the discussion in a slightly different, but related, direction. That is, I will not so much center on the notion of *truth* in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as I will hone in on the novel’s exploration of *doubt* in a totalitarian context. I will do so by picking up on a connection that Conant’s interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* establishes between the novel’s understanding of truth, on the one hand, and ordinary language philosophy, on the other. In making that connection, Conant, to my mind, intimates an interesting relatedness between the novel’s vision of the destruction of truth, and ordinary language philosopher Stanley Cavell’s understanding of skepticism. It is the central purpose of this article to further elaborate on this connection, expand it, and see what we can learn from the novel by doing so. In this exploration I will occasionally help myself to some of the interpretative claims that Rorty makes which I think (perhaps surprisingly) help us see this connection even clearer.

Borrowing Cavell’s notion of *lived skepticism*, I will argue that Orwell’s novel offers a nightmarish vision of a form of perverse totalitarian “pedagogy.” The purpose of that “pedagogy” is not only to obliterate truth, independent thinking, and individual judgment, as Conant—in my view, rightly—argues (Conant, 2000: 290–310). The purpose is also to destroy our very capacity to feel, express, and understand our own inner, emotional, lives; to make us existentially estranged both in relation to others and to ourselves. I use Cavell’s notion “lived skepticism” to signal both a proximity to, and a difference from, skepticism as

an abstract intellectual problem. One pedagogical, philosophical, gain that immersing oneself in the horrible vision that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers is the opportunity to try out one's own capacity to mean and feel and thus become aware of one's own conceptual, emotional, and moral boundaries. By inviting us to follow the sometimes nonsensical uses of words in the world of the Party, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* puts our moral and conceptual capacity to tell sense from nonsense to the test, thereby giving us the chance to hopefully strengthen that capacity in our non-fictitious lives.

### Metaphysical or ordinary use of the word "truth," Rorty vs Conant

The interpretative conflict between Rorty and Conant revolves around the question whether objective truth is central to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a novel or not. For a neo-pragmatist like Rorty, "truth" is a word belonging to an outdated philosophical vocabulary, conceptually wedded to metaphysical realism, which he is devoted to proving wrong. This explains why Rorty is trying to "save" *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from being understood as a defense of objective truth. Instead, he argues, the work is ultimately a defense of freedom, and as such in line with his own view that if we only take care of freedom, then truth can take care of itself (Rorty, 1989: 176). Rorty's reading attempts to show how

one could be a non-Realist and still have one's moral horizon expanded by *1984*, why one could agree with O'Brien's coherentism and still be intrigued, fascinated and appalled by O'Brien's way of coming to terms with the absence of freedom [...] The idea was to say how the book looks when seen through non-Realist eyes. (Rorty, 2000: 344)

Conant, however, sees Rorty's attempt as fundamentally misguided precisely because in his view *neither* a realist *nor* an anti-realist conception of truth has anything to do with the novel's understanding of truth. The novel, according to Conant, uses the word "truth" not metaphysically, but *ordinarily*. Arguing this, Conant invokes an understanding of the term "ordinarily" which belongs to the ordinary language philosophy tradition. He writes:

In Wittgenstein's sense of 'ordinary' [...] ordinary contrasts (not with literary or *metaphorical* or scientific or *technical*, but) with metaphysical. In this sense of 'ordinary', the uses to which poetry and science puts language are as much part of ordinary language as calling your cat or asking someone to pass the butter [...]. Rorty's anti-metaphysical response bears the characteristic earmark of an anti-metaphysical metaphysics (be it Berkeley's, Hume's, Carnap's, or Derrida's): a recoil from the ordinary. (Conant, 2000: 323, n. 51–52)

Someone familiar with the work of Stanley Cavell recognizes the kind of thinking at work here.<sup>2</sup> Conant's critique of Rorty's anti-metaphysical metaphysics bears obvious semblance to Cavell's critique of the traditional epistemologist's effort to refute the epistemological skeptic head-on. Both Rorty, and Cavell's traditional epistemologist, "ends up," to quote Conant, "affirming a thesis that has the same logical form as" the thesis of his or her opponent, thereby offering nothing but "an alternative answer to" the same confusedly formulated question. Rorty—much like Cavell's skeptic—"ends up claiming that there is something we cannot do or have which the Realist [who is one incarnation of Cavell's epistemologist] claimed we can do or have" (Conant, 2000: 274). The problem with such a head-on strategy, according to Conant and Cavell, is that it grants too much sense to the

question itself. It makes it seem as if there is something substantial, logically thinkable, but perhaps practically impossible, that we are debating. Whereas Conant and Cavell would argue that, if we look more closely, *what* we in fact doubt here is not clear at all. Our formulation of the problem may contain the mere illusion of sense (see also Cavell, 2002; Conant, 2004).

## Nineteen Eighty-Four and “best cases” of knowledge

Now, I think that Conant is right here, and I think that there is much to be gained by teasing out what follows from the relatedness between Cavell’s understanding of skepticism, on the one hand, and the renderings of doubt in Orwell’s novel, on the other—a connection Conant suggests but never spells out. The most significant such parallel comes to view as he turns his attention to what *kind of* knowledge claims the novel focuses on. Conant writes:

There are two sorts of examples of truth-claims which figure centrally [. . .] throughout the novel [. . .]: perceptual judgments (claims based on “the evidence of your senses”) and elementary arithmetical judgments (two and two make four). Why do these two sorts of examples recur throughout the novel? Once a member of our linguistic community has become competent in the application of the relevant (perceptual or arithmetic) concepts, these are the sort of judgments the truth or falsity of which can easily be assessed by the individual on her own. (Conant, 2000: 299)

Conant convincingly illustrates his point by citing the following passage in the novel, where Winston muses hopelessly over the Party’s incredible power:

It was as though some huge force were pressing down upon you—something that penetrated inside your skull, battering against your brain, frightening you out of your beliefs, persuading you almost, to deny the evidence of your senses. In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it. Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their philosophy [. . .] And 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? Or that the force of gravity works? Or that the past is unchangeable? If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable—what then? (Orwell, 1990: 83–84, quoted in Conant, 2000: 298–299)

As Conant rightly points out, these are examples of claims that a mature member of a language community, once she has learned the relevant concepts, can assess by herself. What can be added is that these truth-claims are also examples of what Cavell calls typical “best cases” of knowledge. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell argues that it is by sowing doubt concerning our “best cases” of knowledge that a skeptical argument can get off the ground. The logic is that of: if I do not know *this*, then what can I possibly know? In these best cases my very capacity to make a certain *sort* of claim *at all* are at stake, which means that if it can be shown that I am possibly mistaken even about the things that I am most confident about, then my entire ability to know seems shaken.

If we for example take the case of so-called *external world skepticism*, it is by challenging our most basic perceptual judgments that the skeptic can get a foothold. If he or she can make me doubt (under optimal conditions) whether I really do see that there is an apple right there in front of me, or that there is a real, living goldfinch, sitting on that branch, singing close to me (and not a prop or automaton), then what else can I claim to really know? (Cavell, 1999: 129–167).

Similarly, *language or meaning skepticism* is set off by the creation of doubt concerning our most basic capacity to use and understand common human signs, say, like the mastery of the rule of addition. It may sound strange that the failure to make out that  $2 + 2 = 4$  (by someone who knows the rule of addition) can lead to *language* or meaning skepticism, but the reasons are as follows. Knowing the rule of addition can be taken as emblematic for what it is to be able to follow a rule at all. Following a rule can, in turn, be taken as emblematic for what it is to be able to understand and use *a word*. In being competent in following a rule (like the rule of addition), you need to be able to *go on* using that rule by yourself. Similarly, when it comes to words, you need to be able to meaningfully project a word into new contexts if you, as a mature speaker of a language, are to be said to know (the meaning of) that word (Cavell, 1990, 1999: 169–190). As Conant notes, Winston is, through torture, made to doubt his ability to make perceptual judgments (that he has indeed in front of him, and under optimal visual conditions, a photograph that proves that Rutherford was innocent) *and* his ability to make elementary arithmetical judgments (that two and two equals four) (Orwell, 1990: 258–264, 269–273).

### *Philosophical skepticism and totalitarian lived skepticism*

What this implies is that Winston's condition interestingly *resembles* the condition of the external world skeptic and the meaning skeptic, in that his ability to know and mean at all are questioned as doubts are raised about these best cases. As a result, Rorty is right when he claims "Winston [...] is no longer able to use a language or be a self" (Rorty, 1989: 179).

What nevertheless prevents Winston's condition from being, in my view, rightly described as a condition of philosophical *skepticism* is that the context and manner in which he has reached his doubt are completely different from the traditional skeptic's. The skeptic's failures to mean and know are, one could say, self-inflicted. Skepticism, in Cavell's view, is a condition created through a (perhaps confused but) free way of thinking. Furthermore, the rejection of a best case in a skeptical recital takes place in a context where there is *no* reason, not even room, for doubt (or it would not be a best case). It takes place against the backdrop of, and in contrast to, everyday life and practices where you usually can trust the evidence of your senses and your ability to produce and understand meaningful language.

Winston, by contrast, lives in a world where doubt (to a high degree) is the normal mode of being—you have good reasons to doubt almost everyone and everything. More to the point, Winston's doubts about these basic truths—truths he has cherished as anchors of sanity in a world characterized by very palpable, and literally crazy-making uncertainty—have not come about voluntarily, through philosophically aloof thinking, but through brutal coercion and maddening pain.

This condition of radical uncertainty and inability to know and mean, this "cousin" to skepticism that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* displays, could nevertheless, or so I will argue, be understood as a *totalitarian version* of what Cavell calls *lived* skepticism. I will therefore propose to label the two above examples from the novel—that of (a) not being able to trust

your own senses or (b) your own capacity to make sense—examples of the novel’s exploration of the authoritarian version of (a) *lived external world skepticism* and (b) *lived meaning skepticism*. I hereby suggest that the novel offers us a dystopic vision of a human form of life that allows for an *extension* of the use of the term “lived skepticism”; a vision that invites projections of the notion of lived skepticism into two new, so to speak, “areas.”

Having said so much, I nevertheless think that the novel’s most interesting area of authoritarian lived skepticism is indeed that which concerns other minds. In the following section, I will therefore discuss Cavell’s notion of lived skepticism with regard to other minds in a little more detail and compare it to what I take the authoritarian version of that problematic to be as imagined by the novel.

### *Cavell on lived other-minds skepticism and Nineteen Eighty-Four on its totalitarian variety*

Let me summarize what I have argued so far: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* shows us conditions inflicted by torture or indoctrination (through reality control and doublethink) that result in the uprooting of our capacity as knowers in primarily three areas: as knowers of the external world, of language, and of other minds. This radical undermining of our knowledge and understanding is not *skeptical* in the traditional philosophical sense precisely because it is lived: you are not at liberty to entertain it just *hypothetically*. The totalitarian version of *lived external world skepticism* is the condition of being beaten and/or indoctrinated to the point where you are no longer able to trust the evidence of your senses. The totalitarian version of *lived meaning skepticism* consists in an inability to trust your own sense-making capacity, caused by pain, fear, and doublethink that has forced you to jettison your sanity.

Now, if this is the case, what does the totalitarian version of *lived other-minds skepticism* look like in the novel? This is the main question that will animate the rest of the article. It is an important question because, while I agree with Conant that the Party sets out to obliterate the individual’s capacity to assess knowledge claims, and independent mastery of language, I do not see it as their final goal. Their final goal is not merely to crush the human mind but to *humiliate to death* the human heart and spirit. In order to do so they must obliterate our capacity to love and live lovingly. They must crush the individual’s ability to, *on her own*, single out the objects of her love—a capacity so profoundly personal that her own will cannot fully master it, order it. (Who can simply *decide* herself in or out of love?)

For Cavell, other-minds skepticism as a theoretical problem is a form of philosophical distortion of a real existential predicament. The skeptic is right in noticing that to know how things are with you, I have to rely on what you (intentionally or unintentionally) *reveal* to me. The fact that you are you and I am I, that we are *separate*, is what enables trust and distrust, friendship and hostility. We may be wrong about one another, about what goes on in the other’s mind. You can hide things from me, deceive me, and betray me. This is the grain of truth in skepticism, that “there is no general, everyday alternative to skepticism concerning other minds [. . .]: I live my skepticism” (Cavell, 1999: 437). However, the skeptic intellectualizes this predicament by taking it to mean that *at bottom—really*—we are inaccessible to one another (or at least cannot know with certainty that we are not).



However, that is a confused rejection of our criteria for intersubjective understanding, says Cavell. Philosophical other-minds skepticism is therefore

the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle. (To interpret “a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack” [...])

Tragedy is the place we are not allowed to escape the consequences, or price, of this cover: the failure to acknowledge a best case of the other is a denial of the other, presaging the death of the other, say by stoning, or by hanging; and the death of our capacity to acknowledge as such, the turning of our hearts to stone, or their bursting. The necessary reflexiveness of spiritual torture. (Cavell, 1999: 493)

Tragedy, for Cavell, becomes a form of corrective to the philosophical mishandling of the real, lived, problematic: “the form of tragedy is the public form of the life of skepticism with respect to other minds” (Cavell, 1999: 478). Among the many plays by Shakespeare in which Cavell explores the theme of lived skepticism, the most illuminating one to compare with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is *Othello*. Othello, the noble Moorish king, is lured by his advisor, Iago, into doubting the fidelity of his wife Desdemona. Enraged with jealous doubt, fueled by false evidence of her deceptiveness, he ends up killing her. According to Cavell, however, Othello succumbs to suspicion not because he lacks knowledge but *against* better knowledge. Desdemona is his *best case* of knowing another person: his loved one, his wife. Yet Othello remains receptive to Iago’s slander because he cannot bear what the truth of Desdemona’s love and faithfulness demands of *him* in return:

Othello certainly knows that Desdemona exists! So what has his more or less interesting condition to do with skepticism? [...] Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him. The content of his torture *is* the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial. (Cavell, 1999: 492–493)

It is this very *possibility* of Desdemona’s deceptiveness that in the end becomes unbearable for Othello. The fact that she is separate, with a mind she can choose to reveal or not, exposes him to an intolerable *vulnerability*: “He cannot forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain’s captain” (Cavell, 1999: 491). His “jealousy” hereby becomes unstable, tinted with madness, because his craving for absolute certainty cannot *ever* be satisfied. As long as she has the *option* to deceive him—and she will always have the *option* since a human, unlike a book, cannot be opened and read at the leisure of its “reader”—his knowledge of her mind will depend on trust, not proof. This is what turns him into a murderer: “A statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof. A human being is not” (Cavell, 1999: 496).

Let us bear this in mind as we turn to the following passage from Rorty’s interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Let us also not forget that the word Cavell uses for Othello’s emotional agony is *torture*:

Suppose it were the case that Julia had been (like the purported antique dealer, Mr. Charrington) a longtime member of the Thought Police. Suppose she had been instructed by

O'Brien to seduce Winston. Suppose that O'Brien told Winston this, giving him no evidence save his own obviously unreliable word. Suppose further that Winston's love for Julia was such that only the same torture which made him able to believe that two and two equals five could make him believe that Julia had been O'Brien's agent. The effect would be the same, and the effect is all that matters to O'Brien. Truth and falsity drop out. (Rorty, 1989: 178–179)

In this quote, Rorty hopes to demonstrate that the notion of truth is at bottom irrelevant to the novel's concern. That is not what I take him to have shown. What I do take him to have captured beautifully, however, is an important connection between what it took for Winston to "believe" that Julia had been O'Brien's agent all along, and what it took for him to "believe" that two and two equals five. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is actually not clear whether Winston, during torture, suspects Julia of belonging to the Thought Police. What is clear is that he finally betrays her. He does not merely say, but truly *means*, "do it to Julia" as he faces his ultimate fear during the last stage of the torture: the rats (Orwell, 1990: 295–300). Through his betrayal, he is irretrievably lost to himself. If Winston's intellect was broken when he was forced to believe that  $2 + 2 = 5$ , the betrayal of Julia breaks his heart and soul: he no longer *has* a recognizable self to make sense of.

In-between the scene where he is tortured into believing that  $2 + 2 = 5$ , and the torture scene with the rats in room 101, Winston thinks something similar himself: "Julia! Julia! Julia, my love Julia! [. . .] [I]n the mind he had surrendered, but he had hoped to keep his inner heart inviolate" (Orwell, 1990: 293). Rorty correctly notes "that there is no way of going back and forth between a Winston who loves Big Brother and the Winston who loved Julia, cherished the glass paperweight, and could remember the clipping which showed Rutherford was innocent" (Rorty, 1989: 179). After his betrayal, that Winston is shattered, dead.

Where does this lead us with regard to the matter of lived skepticism? If *Othello's* lived skepticism interprets the problem of other minds in terms of a death-bringing jealousy—a jealousy that kills the mind it wants to penetrate completely—then how does *Nineteen Eighty-Four* interpret that problematic? In contrast to *Othello*, Winston is equally much a victim of his own betrayal of Julia as Julia is: they are both *forced* to betray each other (Orwell, 1990: 305). Desdemona dies because of Othello's jealous doubt, and Julia and Winston are both, as the novel calls them, "the dead" (Orwell, 1990: 230). So what would be the novel's counterpart to Othello's death-bringing jealousy? Is there one? What would be a counterpart to Othello's failure to acknowledge Desdemona as his best case? To answer these questions, we must turn to a third party, namely, O'Brien.

### *Privacy, intimacy, mind-reading, and rape*

Desdemona was Othello's best case. At the beginning of Shakespeare's tragedy, Othello and Desdemona love and trust each other. They are newly married with the prospects of freely consummating that mutual love. Winston's love of Julia, however, takes shape in a context where you have no reason to trust anyone, where intimate relations such as friendship and romantic love, as well as pleasurable sex, are criminalized. Marriage is a duty to the Party, the purpose of which is to produce new members. It is a world where your wishes and desires will have next to no chance of being fulfilled. You are a body and a mind living in *solitude*. It is a world where "[n]othing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull" (Orwell, 1990: 29).



This makes a person's *mind* and *sexuality* something threatening for the Party for two reasons. First: these are areas of *privacy*. It is not just that you can keep your thoughts and desires to yourself, which is bad enough. The very fact that the individual mind *exists*, forming its own thoughts and desires *independently*, is an affront to the Party. Second: the individual mind and the individual sexuality make possible for alternative communalities that are not the Party: these are sites of possible *intimacy*. This is of course also an affront to the Party. At bottom, these two reasons make one, as it is the very existence of the individual self that makes intimacy and communality possible.

It is with regard to these two "areas" of possible intimacy that we must look at Winston's relation to Julia, as we try to answer whether Julia can be considered Winston's best case of knowing another mind. And we must do so in tandem with looking at Winston's relation to O'Brien.

The first time the reader encounters Winston meeting with Julia she is—and I think this is significant—seen together with O'Brien. Winston meets them both as he and they are on their way to the Two Minutes of Hate.<sup>3</sup> There are two episodes during the hate minutes I want to highlight. Winston does not talk to either Julia or O'Brien during the hate minutes but, in his mind, he fantasizes about them in the following ways:

Winston succeeded in transferring his hatred from the face on the screen to the dark-haired girl behind him. Vivid, beautiful hallucinations flashed through his mind. He would flog her to death with a rubber truncheon. He would tie her naked to a stake and shoot her full of arrows like Saint Sebastian. He would ravish her and cut her throat at the moment of climax. (Orwell, 1990: 17)

These are Winston's initial feelings about Julia. He hates her and he is sexually attracted to her. He suspects her of being part of the Thought Police and therefore he is also afraid of her. In response to these conflicted feelings he imagines himself as torturing her, raping her, and killing her, and he takes great delight in these "vivid, beautiful hallucinations" of cruelty. The sexualization of the violence is important here. Beyond the explicit rape fantasy, the rest of the violence is also sexualized: the phallic weapons of a truncheon, of arrows, and (what we can assume is) a knife. The images are those of penetrating, beating, stabbing, cutting. These are images of someone violently and painfully *opening* someone else up, and of *entering* that person against her will, followed by the *complete destruction* of that other person once the invasion is complete. The pattern of this particular fantasy will repeat itself in a different constellation later in the novel, which I will come back to.

Just a few moments after he has fantasized about raping and murdering Julia, Winston's thoughts and feelings turn to O'Brien:

Momentarily he caught O'Brien's eye. [...] [T]here was a fraction of a second when their eyes met, and for as long as it took to happen Winston knew—yes, he *knew!*—that O'Brien was thinking the same thing as himself. An unmistakable message had passed. It was as though their two minds had opened and the thoughts were flowing from one to the other through their eyes. "I am with you." O'Brien seemed to be saying to him. "I know precisely what you are feeling. I know all about your contempt, your hatred, your disgust. But don't worry, I am on your side!" And then the flash of intelligence was gone, and O'Brien's face was inscrutable as everybody else's. (Orwell, 1990: 19)

While Winston feels physically attracted to Julia, his attraction to O'Brien is of both mind and body. What Winston, at least overtly, invests himself most in, though, is his attraction to O'Brien's *mind*.<sup>4</sup> He imagines them as sharing thoughts and ideals. In fact, the image above is that of pure *mind-reading*. Nothing is said; still, Winston imagines himself knowing what O'Brien feels and thinks, and that the condition is mutual—they are willingly open and transparent to one another: “It was as though their two minds had opened and the thoughts were flowing from one to the other through their eyes.” This is not a violent picture. It is a picture of souls blending, and of deep intimacy. It is a fantasy of sharing those “few cubic centimetres inside your skull,” which is all you have in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with someone who will truly understand you. It is also a fantasy about overcoming human separateness, finitude, and fallibility; it is a fantasy of not having to express oneself to someone else in order to be understood (understanding just flows, effortlessly); it is a fantasy of overcoming the vulnerabilities of being a creature of language, dependent on words (that can be misunderstood). It is, furthermore, a fantasy unfulfillable outside fictions and dreams (unless we understand it metaphorically). Lastly, it is a fantasy particularly understandable in a world where to open your mouth and let yourself be known constitutes a lethal risk. The hope of sharing his mind with someone who understands him is what motivates Winston to take up a diary, despite all risks: he will eventually be writing the diary *to* O'Brien.<sup>5</sup>

### *The split between body and mind, and between Julia and O'Brien*

Winston's fantasies will, however, be brutally broken by reality; both the fantasy of cruelty with regard to Julia, and that of understanding and sympathy with regard to O'Brien. (In another sense, however, O'Brien will fulfill both, which I will come back to.) With Julia, the clash occurs the moment Winston's dreams of hurting her confront the reality of her actually getting hurt:

A sharp cry of pain was wrung out of her. She must have fallen right on the injured arm. Winston stopped short. [...] A curious emotion stirred in Winston's heart. In front of him was an enemy who was trying to kill him: in front of him, also, was a human creature, in pain and perhaps with a broken bone. Already he had instinctively started forward to help her. In the moment when he had seen her fall on the bandaged arm, it had been as though he felt the pain in his own body. (Orwell, 1990: 111)

For a split second two aspects under which to view Julia fight each other in Winston: is she to be seen as an enemy, or as a fellow human being in pain? Winston is himself split between the human who was born and raised before the absolute reign of the Party, and the man whose emotional life has been battered severely by the Party's destruction of intimacy. But his spontaneous reaction is that of empathy, not cruelty or glee: it is *as if he feels her pain in his own body*, and before he has even made up his mind he has rushed forward to help her.<sup>6</sup>

This scene takes place at the beginning of part II and is the turning point for their relation. The rest of part II is mainly about Winston and Julia's affair. But even as they begin to love each other, it remains clear that their love is mostly taking place in and through *the body*: they eat, drink, and make love. Julia is not a thinker and she cannot appreciate intellectual matters. She finds Winston's passion for things like objective truth, and unalterable historical facts, cute at best and sometimes so boring she falls

asleep! In other words, she loves him, and is loved by him, but she does not *understand* him and he can hardly be said to understand her either.

Is Julia Winston's best case of knowing another mind? When they, in the second half of part II of the novel, contact O'Brien, it is with the hope of joining the underground resistance movement. It is impossible, however, not to think that Winston makes that contact also with the hope of finally being understood. He has intimacy of the body and the heart, but not of the mind. Winston remains split: his heart and body belong to Julia, but his mind longs for O'Brien.

This is where the second reality check comes in: O'Brien is not with the resistance but with the Thought Police. In part III they are brought to The Ministry of Love to be tortured. This is where Winston's rape fantasy from the beginning of the novel will come true, but with some vital changes. The victim is now Winston, the perpetrator is O'Brien, and it is not so much a rape of his body (though his body is severely broken down) as it is a torture, a rape, and a destruction of his *mind*. The torture also carries with it overtones of sexual violence, as when O'Brien says:

What happens to you here is for ever. Understand this in advance. We shall crush you down to the point from which there is no coming back. Things will happen to you from which you could not recover, if you lived a thousand years. Never again will you be capable of ordinary human feeling. Everything will be dead inside you. Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves. (Orwell, 1990: 268–269)

Who is Winston's best case of knowing another mind? Answering this question will lead us to the second fantasy fulfillment; during the torture, O'Brien seems to be *literally* able to read Winston's mind:

Then why bother to torture me? thought Winston, with a momentary bitterness. O'Brien checked his step as though Winston had uttered the thought aloud. His large ugly face came nearer, with the eyes a little narrowed. "You are thinking," he said, "that since we intend to destroy you utterly, so that nothing that you say or do can make the smallest difference—in that case, why do we go to the trouble of interrogating you first? That is what you were thinking, was it not? 'Yes,'" said Winston. (Orwell, 1990: 267)<sup>7</sup>

This is a mysterious part of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is not just that O'Brien knows Winston well because he has studied him secretly for seven years, or because he has read his diary. None of that can explain this curiously non-realistic element of the novel. It is worth recalling here what Winston read in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, namely, that there are "two great problems which the Party is concerned to solve. One is how to discover, against his will, what another human is thinking, and the other is how to kill several hundred million people in a few seconds without giving warning beforehand" (Orwell, 1990: 201). This might suggest that the party has invented some mind-reading device.

In any case, Winston is indeed *read* as an open book by O'Brien, thereby fulfilling Winston's fantasy of overcoming the metaphysical limit of being separate, being a self. Only this reading—in contrast to Winston's fantasy of them sharing minds—is forced, painful, and not reciprocal. Winston is (just as he fantasized Julia being) broken open,

invaded, and then finally destroyed. Still, in a nightmarish, perverted way one could say that O'Brien is Winston's best case of knowing another mind: no one else *understands* Winston as perfectly as O'Brien does. Only O'Brien uses that knowledge to hurt and undo him.

### *Totalitarian lived skepticism—the annihilation of love*

Let us take a further look at how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thematizes knowledge, inner privacy, and intimacy. Before Julia and Winston attempt to join the resistance, they try to prepare themselves for what may happen if they are caught:

“They can make you say anything—*anything*—but they can't make you believe it. They can't get inside you.” “No,” he said a little more hopefully, “no; that's quite true. They can't get inside you. [...]” Facts, at any rate, could not be kept hidden. They could be tracked down by enquiry, they could be squeezed out of you by torture. But if the object was not to stay alive but to stay human, what difference did it ultimately make? They could not alter your feelings: for that matter you could not alter them yourself, even if you wanted to. They could lay bare in the utmost detail everything you had done or said or thought; but the inner heart, whose workings were mysterious even to yourself, remained impregnable. (Orwell, 1990: 174)

This “inner heart” is what Winston and Julia hope, in vain, to preserve. I think we should note how, once more, sexualized language is used to describe the inner life and privacy of the (*impregnable*) individual. Let us compare this, as well as Winston's mind-rape in the Ministry of Love, with the following passage from Cavell:

The life of skepticism with respect to (other) minds will next require a history of its imagined overcomings, particularly of its idea that to know or be known by another is to penetrate or be penetrated by another, to occupy or to be occupied. This idea would be prepared by the idea, or creation, of the self as private (hence, as said, as guilty). Hence its overcoming will take the form of violating that privacy. [...] It is to be expected that the idea of knowledge as the violation of privacy (or punishment for it) will be eroticized, enacted in forms of sexual life. So our history will have to account for the romantic obsession, or theatricalization, of what we used to think of as sexual perversion, in particular sadism and masochism; at any rate, with the wish for absolute activeness and absolute passiveness; which is to say, for absolute recognition of and by another. (Cavell, 1999: 470)

The way *Nineteen Eighty-Four* imagines the annihilation of the self through torturous violations of the mind's privacy seems intimately linked to a sadistic, sexualized conceptualization of knowledge of the other that fits Cavell's description very well. In a perverted nightmarish sense then, the novel imagines Winston's split between mind and body as being reconnected through torture by O'Brien; once the love of Julia and all the happiness in his body is burnt out of him, he is left in a helpless, confused state, completely dependent upon O'Brien.<sup>8</sup> The conflict between his attraction to Julia and his attraction to O'Brien is gone; only O'Brien remains as an intimate, which in turn can be seen in how the very idea of intimacy becomes twisted for Winston:

[Winston] had never loved him so deeply as at this moment, and not merely because he had stopped the pain. The old feeling, that at bottom it did not matter whether O'Brien was a friend

or an enemy, had come back. O'Brien was a person who could be talked to. Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood. O'Brien had tortured him to the edge of lunacy, and in a little while, it was certain, he would send him to his death. It made no difference. In some sense that went deeper than friendship, they were intimates. (Orwell, 1990: 264)

Winston had never loved him so deeply. . . ? But is this *love*? What does this word mean *here*, as O'Brien is ripping Winston's mind to shreds? Has Winston (or O'Brien, or Orwell?) succeeded in making a new, radical (non-normative?) projection of the word "love"? The novel, I suggest, poses this question to its reader, as the reader is trying to make sense of this particular use of the word "love." My answer to that question is *no*. Winston has not succeeded in creating a new, unorthodox, use of the word "love." What he has done, instead, under O'Brien's guidance and the Party's perverted pedagogy of double-think and torture, is *unlearned* how to project certain words meaningfully, as he has simultaneously unlearned how to *feel* certain things coherently. That is the ultimate goal of O'Brien; he himself is merely a stepping-stone for Winston's "love" and he knows it. The real price is getting Winston to "love" Big Brother:

O'Brien took Winston's shoulders between his strong hands and looked at him closely. [...] "You are improving. Intellectually there is very little wrong with you. It is only emotionally that you have failed to make progress. Tell me Winston—and remember, no lies: you know that I am always able to detect a lie—tell me, what are your true feelings towards Big Brother? "I hate him." "You hate him. Good. Then the time has come for you to take the last step. You must love Big Brother". (Orwell, 1990: 295)

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty writes: "When Winston comes to love Big Brother, for example, it is irrelevant that Big Brother is in fact unlovable" (Rorty, 1989: 179). On this point, I must disagree. When Winston comes to "love" Big Brother it is of *utmost* importance that Big Brother cannot be loved. Because when that happens we know that any understanding of, and ability to, *love* in Winston is gone. Gone in such a way that he does not even understand that it is gone. "Cannot be loved" should be treated as a grammatical remark in Wittgenstein's sense; as we try to imagine what it would be to *love* O'Brien or Big Brother, we draw a blank, we fail to make sense—just as Winston does. What he and we get is merely *imagined* sense. This is something I think the novel wants to impart on us. At the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, when Winston is released from The Ministry of Love and sits down at the Chestnut Tree Cafe, he thinks to himself:

"They can't get inside you," she had said. But they could get inside you. "What happens to you here is *for ever*," O'Brien had said. That was true word. There were things, your own acts, from which you could not recover. Something was killed in your breast: burnt out, cauterised out. (Orwell, 1990: 303-304)

Winston's very capacity to love, his "inner heart," is gone. That *that* is his condition is something he is not fully aware of, though. He knows that *something* is gone, but what?

The book concludes with Winston's triple "deaths." He "dies" as our literary companion (his story ends) as he is daydreaming of being shot in the head in a moment of perfect orthodoxy to the Party. During that fantasy, he gets his deranged "epiphany" that he truly

loves Big Brother, an epiphany synonymous of him having finally lost his emotional and moral integrity and sanity.<sup>9</sup>

The novel's final words "He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother" are served to the reader as a foul but instructive medicine that hopefully revitalizes our moral and conceptual resistance (Orwell, 1990: 311). We are *supposed* to ponder whether it makes sense to call Winston's mental muddle and emotional brokenness "love"—even though that is what *he* takes himself to feel. The book's pedagogical purpose (or one of them) is to make us realize that it does not. After having tried to enter those words imaginatively—and failed—we are to throw them away as a no longer needed ladder.

## Concluding remarks

What can we then conclude about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s explorations of authoritarian lived skepticism? Othello avoided love through a perverted romantic "jealousy," and O'Brien and the Party destroy love through a fanatic political "jealousy." Neither Othello nor the Party can accept human separateness, human privacy, or that humans cannot *and must not* be force-read as rape-able and disposable information containers. But while they share the fantasy of penetrating that other mind completely, absolutely—with deadly result in both cases—only O'Brien and the Party can be said to have had the success they actually wished for. For them, obliterating privacy and the inner heart of individuals through mind-rape and torture, and killing several hundred millions in seconds, are two sides of the same coin, two paths leading to the same goal. If Cavell registers, in his readings of the tragedies of Shakespeare, lived skepticism as an *avoidance* of love, Orwell has written a novel about totalitarian lived skepticism as the *annihilation of the possibilities* of love. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers a vision in which lived meaning skepticism and lived other-minds skepticism go hand in hand: it is a world where you cannot love, and you can no longer understand what love is or means. It is a world in which you can only survive as "dead."

The pedagogical, philosophical, gain of immersing oneself in such a horrid vision is that it offers the reader an opportunity to test her own capacities to mean and feel, and in that process explore where the limits of her own sense-making run. This is not just a lukewarm disinterested conceptual matter; it is equally a matter of moral imagination and backbone. The novel offers us a potent object of comparison, a rendering of a world that is both different and similar to our own. What forms of oppressive cruelty have gone by, and still go by, the name of "love" in our world? Feminists—just to name one motley crew of thinkers—have struggled with that question for hundreds of years and still struggle with it. Our ability to make, or not make, sense of certain projections of words unite as well as separate us. Occasionally we may find that in some regions of life we do not share worlds, that one person's love story seems nothing but a dystopic tale of sublimated cruelty to someone else. Not all abysses revealed are worth trying to bridge. Tracing such lines of division can be as painful as it can be liberating. Busting illusions of sense can sometimes not only protect, but also free, your inner heart.

## Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The article is funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

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## Notes

1. Greta Thunberg's speech at the World Economic Forum at Davos, January 25, 2019. Last visited on July 22, 2021. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U72xkMz6Ppk>
2. Conant also expresses his gratitude to Cavell in this text, see 2000: 317, note 10.
3. The Two Minutes of Hate are the mandatory hate gatherings where the traitor, Emmanuel Goldstein, "Enemy of the People," is shown talking on a tele-screen. Party members are supposed to lambast him and express shared feelings of hatred during these two minutes.
4. "O'Brien was a large, burly man with a thick neck and coarse, humorous, brutal face. In spite of his formidable appearance he had a certain charm of manner. [...] [Winston] felt deeply drawn to him, and not solely because he was intrigued by the contrast between O'Brien's urbane manner and his prizefighter's physique. Much more it was because of a secretly-held belief—or perhaps not even a belief, merely a hope—that O'Brien's political orthodoxy was not perfect" (Orwell, 1990: 12–13).
5. I find it significant in the context of imagined mind-reading that he devotes a text that belongs to the most solipsistic of genres—the private journal written only for the author's own eyes—to O'Brien: "He knew, with more certainty than before, that O'Brien was on his side. He was writing the diary for O'Brien—to O'Brien: it was like an intermittent letter which no one would ever read, but which was addressed to a particular person and took its colour from that fact" (Orwell, 1990: 84).
6. This way of describing their intimacy, in *bodily* terms and in terms of him feeling her pain, returns when they are caught by the Thought Police at Mr Charrington's shop. One of the men punches Julia in the stomach and "[e]ven in his terror it was as though he could feel the pain in his own body, the deadly pain which nevertheless was less urgent than the struggle to get back her breath" (Orwell, 1990: 232).
7. See also Orwell, 1990: 257, 276.
8. Cass R. Sunstein (2005) reads *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as structured around a love triangle between Winston, Julia, and O'Brien, in which O'Brien extinguishes the erotic connection between Julia and Winston, marking the triumph of the Party. This triangle also contains, she argues, an Oedipal dimension with O'Brien as a punitive father. She also reads O'Brien's torture of Winston in terms of a rape scene and furthermore claims that the "rape" is followed by a scene of "castration" when O'Brien pulls out one of Winston's teeth.
9. I read this climatic end as a further parallel to his rape fantasy about cutting Julia's throat at the moment of climax: now the climax of the epiphany slices through his mind and kills his own self.

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