

George Orwell warned us, but we didn't listen.

In his prophetic novel *1984*, Orwell imagines a futuristic dystopia where one of the measures the all-powerful government takes to control the lives—even the thoughts—of its citizens is the deliberate unraveling of language. Billboards proclaim, “Love Is Hate” and “War Is Peace.” Winston Smith, the novel’s central character, works for the Ministry of Truth, where, along with hundreds of others, he manufactures lies, including the removal of any record of people who have fallen afoul of the government. They are now nonpersons, people who never existed.

Winston, too, undergoes arrest, for falling in love. Unauthorized personal attachments are illegal. No loyalties other than loyalty to Big Brother, the face of the government, are permitted.

The secret agent who got the goods on Winston is assigned to reeducate him. That reeducation begins with reengineering the way the “thought criminal” perceives the world. Our hapless hero has electrodes attached to his body, and when the inquisitor asks him, “How many fingers am I holding up?” Winston takes a look and answers “four,” whereupon he receives a painful jolt of electricity.

What if Big Brother says the answer is five?

But it's not five, it's four.

Z-z-zap.

It turns out that the correct answer is sometimes five and sometimes four. It depends. And after a while Winston can't tell the difference.

We live in a time when a lot of voices insist that male anatomy might or might not denote a male person and that an objection to aborting baby girls is actually part of a war on women.

It seems that we have followed Alice down the rabbit hole, where a word can mean whatever the Cheshire cat wants it to mean.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

A complete answer would take a book, but I can offer a defensible, if streamlined, analysis in a much smaller space.

I was in college and graduate school in the 1960s, when radical subjectivity was rapidly gaining momentum. Henry Thoreau, dismissed by most of his Concord neighbors and even despised by some, would have been astonished to have witnessed his elevation on college campuses. Ralph Waldo Emerson, his older friend and mentor, had written, “The only obligation I have is to do what I think is right,” and Thoreau had lived out that philosophy in ways that got him a night in jail.

Thoreau's voice echoing down the decades urged young people to

march to the beat of their own drummer. For some that meant forming communes and living free of social and sexual norms, often assisted by mind-altering drugs that supposedly offered alternate realities. What drug-free people would call hallucinations were, the claim went, visions of deep truth. "Turn on, tune in, drop out," Timothy Leary urged. He took some of his own advice and left his academic post at Harvard to travel the country telling eager young listeners to give LSD a try.

At the same time a lot of students had read the existentialists, wore berets, and held cigarettes between thumb and forefinger a la Jean Paul Sartre, the French philosopher who said, "Existence precedes essence."

HERE'S WHAT I THINK HE MEANT:

We do not inherit identity; we have to construct it. We do this by making choices, often difficult ones. Taken together these choices, if we're consistent, will mark us as free agents.

Sartre and his friend the novelist and essayist Albert Camus (Kuh moo') spoke of the idea of the *absurd*. They used the word not to denote something silly, but the crisis of consciousness that occurs when the human need for meaning confronts a meaningless universe.

The twentieth century was less than half over when the world had twice been engulfed in the two greatest wars in human history, now pitting human beings against monstrous killing machines with predictable results: losses in the millions.

And as the Allies finally penetrated deeper and deeper into German territory, they found things that shocked even battle-hardened veterans: death camps, most of whose victims had been guilty of being born Jewish.

The best estimates are that the Nazis had engineered the murders of around six million Jews as well as Romani (Gypsies) and other *untermenschen*, or subhumans. Shooting them one at a time had been, in the Nazis' view, inefficient, so at Wannsee, a pleasant German resort town, officials met to devise "the final solution" to the problem of Jewish presence.

Before long, cattle cars jammed with human cargo hurried to places like Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz, where children, the elderly, and the infirm were sorted out and sent straight to gas chambers and waiting ovens, while the rest were worked and starved to death. No need to waste gas on them; just gather the bodies every morning and shovel them into the crematoria.

Meanwhile battles between Imperial Japan and American naval and marine forces, along with British and Australian allies, were fought with grim ferocity and appalling casualties. Island after island was soaked in blood until August 1945, when a new weapon showed that it was now

possible to destroy a whole city and tens of thousands of people in a moment with a single bomb.

From that time on the world has lived in the shadow of the mushroom cloud.

Sartre and Camus were not the only ones who, seeing that murderous aggression had been stopped only by measures horrible themselves, concluded that divine purposes were impossible to discern. “God is dead,” we heard over and over in the sixties, meaning, apparently, that the idea of a loving deity with oversight of human affairs—a deity who protected the innocent from the wicked—was an idea that events of the twentieth century had killed off.

But the existentialists were right about this: human beings need meaning. “All we are is dust in the wind,” a popular song asserted, but nobody lives as if that were true.

WHAT THEN?

If meaning could not be found externally, there was nothing to do but look internally, to construct our own meaning. So “your morality” may not be mine, and you can’t “impose” yours on me. Don’t challenge my moral autonomy.

But, of course, this philosophy is applied selectively. People who actually believe this and act on it wind up in prison. And even there, I learned from teaching evening classes in a number of Oregon’s prisons, inmates generally subscribe to a surprisingly stern moral code. Bank robbers, for example, enjoy a level of prestige, while child molesters are despised, and informers live an especially dangerous life. It turns out that there is honor among thieves.

Scripture tells us who we are—not cosmic dust, not products of our own imagination—but beings created in the image of God, now mortally damaged by pride and rebellion. We have made ourselves sick, but redemption and healing are waiting if we repent and, like the Prodigal, return to our Father’s house, where we belong.

“Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). ■

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