
FREE WILL V. DETERMINISM: EXPLORING THE IDEA THROUGH GEORGE ORWELL'S 1984

Yashika Dhir, BA LLB, UPES, Dehradun

ABSTRACT

The concept of free will has been central in the study of criminology, from the 18th century Beccaria to contemporary world 'mens rea'. Free will plays an important role in determining the liability of a criminal. However, free will remains a matter of huge debate. The Positivist school, sociological school, and the concept of determinism challenge the notions of free will. They emphasize the presence of alternative factors such as the physical traits of Positivist school and the environment factor of Sociological School. Also, Determinism suggests that there is a cause-and-effect relationship that results in a particular behavior in an individual. Hence, challenging the notion of free will. The determinism concerns itself with the ideas of genetics, experiences and the environment of a person shaping their behavior. It also emphasizes more on rehabilitation than retribution as against the advocates of free will.

INTRODUCTION

George Orwell's 1984 is set in a dystopian world, where control and surveillance are the norm. Oceania, the country where the protagonist lives, is under a totalitarian regime of BIG BROTHER of Ingsoc Party. There is a presence of rigid hierarchy in the country – Inner Party Members, Party Members and the proles. The inner party members enjoy some freedoms while the Party has total control over every aspect of the party members' life living in the country. The proles come last in the hierarchy but are in the majority. The party controls everything, from the truth to the language of the country.

The setting of the novel serves as a great setup to explore the influence of language and control over the choices of individuals. What is wrong and what is right is so deeply ingrained in the subconsciousness of the people that they don't even require to use their conscious will to behave in a certain way which leaves little space for rational thinking.

The book poses many questions – Is free will actually free? How can one be said to have free will, when the idea of morality is ingrained in their subconscious, when their thoughts and language are restricted? How to differ, if one is exercising one's free will or is conditioned to behave in a certain way.

Through this article, we are going to delve into this classical piece and figure out how the controlled and limited society could be like while drawing parallels with criminal theories and the non-fictional world of today. It will evaluate the role of language in restricting thoughts and free will. At the same time, delving into the idea of Durkheim – Crime is 'normal and inevitable'.

FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM

Classical School and Beccaria's Concept of Free Will

Classical School emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century. The school shifted the liability from the evil spirits and devils of the pre-classical school to the 'free will' of individuals. Beccaria pioneered the role of 'free will' in crime causation. He believed that people are rational beings and have free will to choose their acts according to the principle of psychological hedonism. The '*Hedonistic calculi*' suggests that individuals behavior depends

on the pleasure attained from the said behavior or the pain avoided. He suggested that people are rational beings and try to weigh the pleasure gained from a certain act as against the pain.¹

As individuals were free and reasonable actors, the punishment, thus, was based more on stopping the crime and justified the role of State in punishing the criminals. Beccaria believed that man is free willed and act according to the pleasure and pain calculations, the punishment prescribed for the act should be such that the pain from the act outweighs the pleasure. It further humanized the justice system by proposing the idea of 'proportionality of punishment' in order to keep them just, fair and enough to act as a deterrence.

FREE WILL AND CONDITIONING IN 1984

In 1984, the protagonist, Winston, conforms to both of these ideas, i.e. free will and conditioning. He might be said to have free will as it was his rational choices and his own acts leading to his rebellious nature against the party. At the same time, the antagonist, O'Brien claims in the end that he acts of Winston are required by the party, The THOUGHTCRIME are necessary for the party which could make one wonder as if all the rebellion was not his free will but his environmental factors as set by the party which led him towards their ultimate goal.

In favor of free will

There were various instances in the book that give the impression of choice in Winston's behavior. He chose willingly to take up the risk of walking in Prole's Streets. He knew the consequences and even mentioned them so, but he goes on with his little act of rebellion. He bought the diary from the junk shop and even went ahead with finding ways to dodge the telescreen to write diary and even wrote 'DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER'² many times which could have been blasphemous according to the society he lives in. He maintained sexual relationship with Julia and chooses to trust her which was an anomaly amongst party members.

Every time he did these acts, he was conscious of the consequences of his acts, still he goes on with them. Hedonistic principles could also be applied because according to him it was worth

¹ PROF. N.V. PRANJAPPE, CRIMINOLOGY AND PENOLOGY 34 (13th ed. 2008).

² GEORGE ORWELL, 1984 17 (Arushi Book Enterprises 2020).

the pain as freedom was worth the pain even if he died. He was rational; he reasoned between the choices and acted accordingly. His rebellion was a chosen act with all its consequences.

In favor of determinism

By the end of the book, the perspective shifts. O'Brien claims that the thoughtcrimes need to be kept alive in order to justify the party's actions. The continuous surveillance and the presence of thoughtpolice derived their meaning from thoughtcrimes. Further, the setting of Oceania also suggests that hatred was necessary for the party. It keeps the mainstream problem out of people's minds, keeping them in delusion.

The Party members in Oceania were in constant surveillance, but Winston had a blind spot at home, where the telescreen couldn't reach. He was able to go about in the streets of Proles without the thoughtpolice noticing him. He rented the room from a party member disguised as a prole. He was the one to get the evidence, a cutting of a newspaper, against the party. There were several other instances of this which gestured towards the party's intention to use him.

Hence, it could be concluded that his acts were a product and a reaction to an environment which was specially designed for him. His small misadventures were given space to proliferate, hence giving him confidence to be bolder in his actions. Further the dream he had in relation to O'Brien is questionable as

1. He had never met O'Brien at that time. He might have seen him but never met him. He had no reason to believe that he was against party other than if O'Brien himself was working around him in the manner to give him the idea.
2. In his dream, O'Brien mentions that they will meet again 'at the place where there is no darkness', it gives Winston a hope for freedom, but the line also described the 'Ministry of Love' about which Winston had no idea.

Hence, it could be inferred from this that Winston was put into a setting where his choices align with the needs of the party. Making it less free will and more influence of the environment, thus, determinism.

Overall environment of Oceania

The government of Oceania is omnipresent. It is everywhere, controlling the very existence – from beliefs, languages to choices. The author in the first chapter itself creates a picture in our mind of the BIG BROTHER watching over the country from every nook and corner. His face and the words on the poster “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU”³ sounds quite authoritative demanding obedience. The poster generates fear among people, which in turn affects the attitude and behavior of the people. This also highlights that it’s not surveillance but also the idea of being watched by an authoritative personality at all times, that can have an impact on individual or society’s behavior.

Further every move of the person in the house, offices or any other public or facilities leads to the complete rejection of personal space, which it seems like also projects in their inner behavior. The outside reality of surveillance and being watched all the time, where one crack can be a gamble on life, seeps its way into human consciousness and then starts being controlled from deep inside too. Moreover, Winston too in many instances explains that it was important to even maintain the right facial expressions or you give away yourself. Even a little crack in the expression could give you away. The telescreens were on all day and night, even words spoken in dreams could be punished leading to even subconscious mind under an obligation to behave in certain way as a survival instinct.

The authority of Big Brother and surveillance, kept aside, there were other propagandas that party was using to control people.

1. **Newspeak** – the language of Oceania.
2. **The telescreens**
3. **Doublethink** – The idea of two paradoxes to exist together as truth and the making people believe both as true at the same time subconsciously.
4. **The Ministry of Truth** – All the historical data and records were easily changed to match the present. It strengthened the stance of the party as the data was regularly

³ GEORGE ORWELL, 1984 5 (Arushi Book Enterprises 2020).

altered to hide the imperfections of the party. The constant manipulation of numbers leads to the party being always right as there could never be any proof against it anyway.

5. Posters of Big Brother at every nook and corner.

6. Brotherhood – The brotherhood itself was propaganda of the party. It kept the hatred alive; it kept the thoughtcrime alive. It gives hope to people like Winston even though there is nothing they can do.

7. The “two-minute Hate” – The party needed the hatred of people not just to divert the attention from real causes but also to make them puppets. The strong emotions of hatred, constant fear of war, making it easy for the party to make people insensitive to the pain of others and even other human emotions other than hate.

8. State of Continuous War – War was also to keep hate alive. It also served as an excuse for the absence of necessities. No one could ask more as war is an important issue at hand.

All this including the Goldstein, public execution was propaganda to instill fear and hatred among people to make them serve the party and it also kept the idea of nationalism alive in people followed by servitude to the party.

The Proles had less restrictions, but they were kept distracted and aloof from the affairs of the party. From literature to music, everything they could enjoy was controlled by the party, hence, hardly anything for them to understand the affairs. The constant warfare also makes the party important for them. The bombing justified everything.

LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT CONTROL

Can rational choice exist in a world where there is neither freedom of thought nor the words to express them?

Free will requires choices, but what if there is no choice. There is just one way of living, everything other than that is punished. The thoughtcrimes penalized intent and not actions, making it harder for people to even have an intent to do something. To even think of an act which is not in line with the ideology of the party. To accept the idea of doublethink, which is

to accept the two contradictory ideas as true or as Winston explains, Doublethink is to even remove the idea from your mind completely and subsequently forget the part where you removed it even.⁴

“The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the worldview and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible.”⁵

The appendix at the end of the book explains the unique language curated to cater to the interest of the Ingsoc. As the author explains it deeply, the language was different than the contemporary ones, as instead of having additions, there were always some major deductions waiting to happen. On the surface it was just the language getting shorter with every edition but as said in those lines, it was also the thoughts that were being limited.

Thoughts and imagination require a space to flourish, words to be described. We have various forms – art, writing, acts – which provide that space. Although the members of the inner party lacked those spaces. The idea of expression through those means was limited to hate, as can be seen in Hate Speech. Other than that, there was no means. Writing, which is the most common way to express your thoughts, was abandoned. Members were only allowed to do what is required of them and writing was not one of the activities. Winston, the protagonist, brings in a diary and pen home, the author underlined that it was unusual, writing with the pen was unusual for him and what he was doing was already a thoughtcrime. Further Winston was working in the Record Department, where he made changes to the articles, there too he was only required to say the changed statements or work in SPEAKWRITE, instead of writing it.

Moreover, the language includes only the words that favor the ideas of the Ingsoc. Ideas like freedom, justice, etc., were either completely abandoned or were strapped off their wider meanings so as to completely render them useless. This, as suggested by the author, was going to completely abolish those ideas, as what one cannot put a name to cannot exist.⁶

‘THOUGHTCRIME’ or ‘CRIMETHINK’ - The word had quite a significance, as it was the major crime a person can commit in Oceania. It refers to doing anything which disfavors the

⁴ GEORGE ORWELL, 1984 177 (Arushi Book Enterprises).

⁵ GEORGE ORWELL, 1984 246 (Arushi Book Enterprises 2020).

⁶ GEORGE ORWELL, 1984 Appendix (Arushi Book Enterprises 2020).

party and as the name suggests, even the thoughts were punished. The crime was not limited to conscious acts but also the subconscious. The Parsons, the other character from the book, was taken to MINILUV, a place where thoughtcriminals were bought in, for words he said in his dreams.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT: ID, EGO AND SUPEREGO

Id, Ego and Superego are part of psychoanalytical theories given by Freud. According to him - Id indicates primal instincts and desires. It is an “unconscious” part and seeks immediate gratifications. Superego, also the unconscious part of our brain, is related to the moral compass of our society. Superegos are internalized beliefs, morals and ethics, learned at a young age. The ego is the only conscious part, and it is responsible for reasoned decisions and negotiations between the id and superego. Reward and punishment play an important part in the building of superego.⁷

In 1984, the kids at a very young age are taught the moral standards set by the party, thus leading to its moral system being internalized in them. Even strict punishment and continuous surveillance had internalized the beliefs in the party members too (Superego). The instincts (Id) that were considered undesirable by the party were completely controlled. The ego who is supposed to negotiate must be working more on protecting the individual as the pain of going for id would have outweighed the pleasure coming out of it.

Winston and Julia, on the other hand, were able to give in to their desires. They still were very practical and calculated their every move and planned all their meetings beforehand (Ego trying to negotiate).

The superego works by making a person guilty of their actions if not according to the morals they have learned. This could be seen when Parsons was brought to the Ministry of Love, he was guilty of uttering “DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER”⁸ in his dreams. He was himself feeling guilty about it and was fine with the punishment and appreciated his daughter for turning him in showing how deep the morals set by the party were.

⁷ Saul McLeod, *Id, Ego and Superego*, SIMPLE PSYCHOLOGY, (May 03, 2025, 5:40 P.M.), <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html>.

⁸ GEORGE ORWELL, 1984 193 (Arushi Book Enterprises 2020).

DEVIANCE

Emile Durkheim in his book “The Division of Labour in Society”⁹ suggests that crime is inevitable in all societies. According to him even, “*the angelic societies*” will have deviant behavior which according to them will be a crime. He also attributed deviance as a forebearer of change. He further explains that ‘crime is necessary’ as it is always followed by the punishment which keeps the undesired behavior in check. As the punishment works as a reminder or disincentive to not act in a certain way.

In the book, O’Brien’s conversation with Winston inside the MINILUV reflects the idea given by Emile Durkheim, although distorted. In Oceania, thoughtcrimes were important to instill the fear of punishment among the people at the very level of mens rea, the intent. In this way, it was easier for the Party to justify the presence of thoughtpolice and surveillance through the telescreens.

However, the party’s idea was quite the opposite to that of Durkheim. The party takes the crime as necessary not to bring in change but to arrest any attempts at it. The party maintained the status quo by letting the thoughtcrimes proliferate.

CONCLUSION

Orwell’s 1984 describes how society and environment can shape ourselves that our actions which might feel like exercising free will are actually the influence of our environment and societal beliefs. Free will is only an illusion in a world which is systematically controlled. The party challenges free will through restrictions on the language, constant surveillance and even controlling the psychological conditions - “Id, Ego and Superego”. This does help to understand how the societal structure can affect or rather shape criminal behavior.

⁹ EMILE DURKHEIM, THE DIVISION OF LABOUR IN SOCIETY, (The free press of Glencoe).