

1984 by George Orwell | Lex Fridman

TRANSCRIPT

Intro

0:00

- There was truth and there was untruth. And if you clung to the truth, even against the whole world,

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you were not mad. Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell is one of the most impactful books ever written.

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It has been widely used and misused in political discourse by all kinds of ideologues.

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Into that discourse, it entered terms like Big Brother, thoughtcrime, doublethink, newspeak, Thought Police, and Orwellian.

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Strangely enough, as a synonym for the very thing that the author Orwell was against.

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It's been translated in over 65 languages, has sold over 30 million copies,

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has been banned in many countries, especially authoritarian regimes. It's been banned under Stalin

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and as recently as 2022 in Belarus. In this video I'll give a quick summary with spoilers,

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and a few takeaways. I'd like to try to make it somewhat interesting to people

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who both have and have not read the book. Let's see how it goes. The world in the book Nineteen Eighty-Four

1984 world & characters

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is a dystopian future society, nation, maybe you can say super state named Oceania.

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It's fully controlled by a totalitarian political party called Ingsoc. It's led by Big Brother, who as we might discuss,

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may or may not be a real person. He might just be as symbol used by the Party.

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The Party wants only to increase its power, also something we might talk about. It uses technology, telescreens for mass surveillance.

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It's creating a new language called Newspeak, which removes words from English that could lead to rebellion.

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It uses doublethink to control thought by, perhaps you could say, forcing you to hold contradictory beliefs

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and accept them as true. If not, the thought police arrest you for committing a thoughtcrime.

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Examples of doublethink are war is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength.

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And finally, the Party constantly rewrites history, as the quote goes, "Who controls the past controls the future.

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"Who controls the present controls the past." There are several ministries, four of them,

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Ministry of Truth, it's responsible for propaganda, and like I said, rewriting history.

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Ministry of Love is responsible for brainwashing people through torture.

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Ministry of Plenty is responsible for rationing of food, supplies and goods. And Ministry of Peace, of course,

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is responsible for maintaining constant state of war. Society is divided into three levels,

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the Inner Party, the Outer Party, and the Proles, the stands for, I guess, proletariats.

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It's the working class. The Inner Party is tiny, the Outer Party's a little bit bigger, and the majority of the people,

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I forget what the percentage is, maybe 80% is the the Proles, the working class. There's several key characters,

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Winston, the main character is a low ranking member of Ingsoc. He works at the Ministry of Truth

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where he rewrites history, like I mentioned. Julia is a dark-haired girl who Winston falls in love with,

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and she with him. They have sex, and this is maybe a good place to mention

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that passionate sex, love and passionate sex are forbidden in the society.

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Good sex, I think is a term under Newspeak. Hashtag good sex, is the kind of sex that leads to procreation,

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which is the only kind of sex that's allowed, and the only kind of sex that's good.

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O'Brien is another central character. He's the member of the Inner Party

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that convinces Winston he's part of the Brotherhood, which is a lie.

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And he eventually is the man who tortures Winston and breaks his mind, breaks his heart.

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Big Brother and Emmanuel Goldstein are these symbolic characters that we never actually get to meet. They may and may not exist.

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Big Brother is the head of the Party Ingsoc, and Emmanuel Goldstein is the leader of the so-called Brotherhood,

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which is this supposed mysterious group that lurks in the shadows and works to overthrow the Party.

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Again, may or may not exist. We'll maybe talk about the importance of that

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in a totalitarian state. So a few key takeaways, and I'll try to do my best.

Love

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I have disparate notes that I took for myself. I'll try to do my best to try to integrate them together

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to make some cohesive thoughts. And part of the reason I wanted to do this,

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while I have read Nineteen Eighty-Four many times in my life and many of the books I've put on a reading list

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that I want to read, I've read many times, I haven't often really concretized my thoughts

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about the books. I just take the journey and just let the thoughts

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kind of wander around in the background as I live my life. I wanted to kind of put on paper and maybe share with others

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to see what they think, what my concrete takeaways are from the book, what my thoughts are

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if I could try to convert them into words. So the first one for me,

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especially later in life as I've been reading this book, is that when everything else,

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or most things that make you human are taken away by those around you, by the totalitarian state,

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the last thing that's left that is the most difficult to take away is love.

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Love for other human beings, love for life itself. That's the little flame from which hope springs.

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That's the key revolutionary act is the act of love. So when the ability to speak is taken away,

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when the ability to think rational thoughts is taken away, the last thing that's left, and the thing that ultimately gives hope is love.

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That's a big takeaway for me, and the note that Julia gives to Winston,

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the note reading "I love you", is the kind of revolutionary act

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that leads to a society beyond the one they exist in.

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I think a lot of the book has an interesting hypocrisy to it

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where the main character, Winston, is almost in an animalistic way,

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obsessed with destroying the state, in rebellion and revolution.

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But I think love is the thing that allows you to believe in a place beyond the state

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in believing that you can build something better, versus destroying the thing you're in.

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I think you have to be careful as a revolutionary not to obsess 100% with destruction,

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because beyond destruction, there could be chaos that leads to something much worse.

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I think love is the thing the the basic human thing that connects all of us, the messy thing that connects all of us

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that allows you to build a better society after the totalitarian one is overthrown.

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What else do I wanna say? There's an interesting tension there between love and sex or lust.

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I think there's a quote that, "Pure love or pure lust was impossible or forbidden."

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Pure love and pure lust. Pure here, meaning sort of unadulterated,

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uncensored intensity of feeling, maybe intimacy.

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And that was an interesting question raised by the book, both by Winston and Julia, what is ultimately the thing,

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the most powerful act of rebellion? Is it between us humans when everything is forbidden?

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Is it animalistic-like sex, just lust, lust for another human?

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Or is it love, a kind of love you have for a romantic partner, but even love for family, love for friends.

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I don't know. I think the book almost claims that it is sex,

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but I think what the book also shows is if sex is your manifestation of rebellion,

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that that ultimately leads to something that doesn't last. That ultimately leads to a focus on destruction

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versus building beyond the horizon when the state falls.

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So some quotes from Winston on this, "The more men you've had sex with", so Julia admitted to have sex with quite a lot of people.

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He says, "The more men you've had sex with, "the more I love you. "I hate purity, I hate virtue.

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"I want everyone to be corrupt to the bone." This kind of rubbed me the wrong way,

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because again, this seems to be obsessed with the hatred towards the state, versus a longing and a hope,

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which I think hope is really important here. A hope for better future beyond the state.

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Again, another quote from the book, "Their embrace had been a battle, the climax of victory.

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"It was a blow struck against the Party. "It was a political act." So there again, I think sex is a political act,

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an act of political rebellion. I think that's not the deeply human thing here. The deeply human thing is again, the act of love.

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It's a source of hope, it's the catalyst for building a better future beyond the revolution.

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An interesting side note here, and there could be a million interesting side notes, and I'm desperately trying not to go on a million tangent,

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and to hold myself together here, to stay focused, is on family. So there's all kinds of love,

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and I think family love is a really powerful bond that connects us,

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and that's one of the things that the totalitarian states really go after. And I should actually mention,

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sort of loosely using term "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" here.

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But I think to me at least, I don't know what others think, but to me authoritarian means where there's a government,

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a centralized, complete centralized control of political affairs.

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And a totalitarian state is a complete, is beyond that, is a complete control of not just politics

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and the functions of government, the basics of the functions of government, but also social, economic, everything.

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It's, Nazi Germany's example of that I think to me, where there's just complete control of every single thing,

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from the war effort to the social interactions, the rules that govern social interaction, to the press,

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all that kind of stuff. So I think this book is more about, at least in my definition of the term,

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about totalitarianism. Anyway, as I was saying on family,

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I think the way they destroy family, one, of course, with your romantic partner,

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forbidding passion. Passionate sex, but really just passion, longing for another, for another human being

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in that romantic way. And they also really reward and encourage children

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at a young age, they indoctrinate them, to turn their parents in for thoughtcrime, whether they're real or not,

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which of course is a silly notion because it doesn't, there's no nature of truth, there's no,

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you can just accuse anyone of anything and they're guilty by just existing. So that's a way to attack the family.

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And I should also have mentioned on the topic of love is that I think the goal of the Party,

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the final destination, as used by O'Brien through the process of torture,

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is for to break your mind, to break your heart and soul completely so that the only love you can have,

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and it could be felt as a pure love is for Big Brother.

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This is the kind of thing you see in North Korea, is that the only love you're allowed to have,
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the remaining inklings of feeling that might still exist in you,
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you can channel only, not towards family, not towards romantic partners, not towards friends, but towards this leader,
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this God-like Messianic figure, in this case who may or may not exist.
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In all cases, that figure, while there is a human associated with it, it's really much bigger than the human.
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And that's the only love you're allowed to have. So the other takeaway I have is on the topic of hate.

Hate

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I think all humans have the capacity, almost an animalistic craving for hate of the other,
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the enemy. Whether it's individuals like Emmanuel Goldstein or nations like Eurasia and East Asia,
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which I should say are the two other super states described in this book
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that are constantly at war with each other. Again, the fascinating thing about the way this book is written
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is you don't know if Eurasia or East Asia exists. You really don't know what exists or what is true
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beyond the local little interaction, local little world of the main character. And that I think is the point, when you don't really know,
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there's no steady footing on which to construct a worldview from which you can have hope about a better future,
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that longing for a better future. And so this animalistic craving for hate,
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or the capacity to have hate, especially when we're in crowds, I think is most powerfully illustrated
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in the two minutes of hate, which is practiced by the society. And the quote is,
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"The horrible thing about the two minutes of hate "was not that one was obliged to act a part,
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"but that it was impossible to avoid joining in. "Within 30 seconds, any pretense was always unnecessary.

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"A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, "a desire to kill, to torture, "to smash faces in with a sledgehammer

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"seemed to flow through the whole group of people "like an electric current, "turning one even against one's will

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"into a grimacing screaming lunatic. "And yet the rage that one felt

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"was an abstract, undirected emotion, "which could be switched from one object to another,

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"like the flame of a blowlamp." That's the point, is you get the crowd together,

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you get them to hate Goldstein, or Eurasia, or East Asia, you get them to hate anything.

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And because that feeling, that drug, that hypnotic,

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that mass hypnosis that you feel can be directed by the state into any direction. And because you have complete control of history,

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you can direct it on a day by day basis towards any target. And as long as the hate is catalyzed

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to these kinds of rituals, as long as the hate is there, it can overpower the individualistic feeling of love

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we have for each other. So that hate is a more animalistic desire.

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I don't know what to make of it. And of course it's also important to say that this book, I think I've read many places

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that it was intended originally by Orwell as a satire, although a satire that has quite a lot of torture at the end

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and doesn't seem to have much humor. But I think if you read it as a satire,

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that's the way it's better to understand it's relevance in our society today.

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Because a lot of things, like two minutes of hate is almost like a caricature of what hate looks like in a mass gathering.

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But if you take it as a caricature, it can now reveal you some of the elements that already exist in human nature

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that are there and that we should be very cautious about. So it reveals the very thing

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that if not monitored by ourselves,

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can result in a slippery slope that leads to, yeah, destruction of the tribalism,

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destruction of other groups, and then control of the collective intelligence

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of our species through the totalitarian state. I think there's elements of this that are just under illustration in social media today.

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I don't wanna overstate it. I think just like comparing things to Hitler, comparing things to Nineteen Eighty-Four,

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I think is a reach in most cases. But social media does reveal this kind of mass hysteria,

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this capacity of humans to be outraged, of outrage based on tribalism.

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So we have to understand it, we have to resist giving into it on the individual level. And I do believe we have the responsibility

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to create technology that helps us resist it, that incentivizes us not to be cruel to each other

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just because all the people in whatever tribe we define ourselves in are being cruel to a particular person

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or a particular group. Another takeaway I have is about power.

Power

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Ingsoc, the totalitarian states wants only one thing, and that is power.

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Power is both the means and the end, absolute power. That's what O'Brien describes, and there's a lot of quotes about this

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in the torture part of the book. O'Brien says, "The real power,

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"the power we have to fight for night and day "is not power over things, but power over men.

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"Power is inflicting pain and humiliation. "Power is in tearing human minds to pieces

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"and putting them together again "in new shapes of your own choosing. "Power is not a means, it is an end.

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"One does not establish a dictatorship "in order to safeguard a revolution. "One makes the revolution

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"in order to establish a dictatorship. "The object of persecution is persecution. "The object of torture is torture.

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"The object of power is power. "This of course is another aspect of human nature.

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"The will to power, "and the tendency of that power to corrupt."

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O'Brien says also, "The weariness of the cell "is the vigour of the organism".

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Through the torture of the individual, through the breaking of the individual, through the death of the individual that doesn't exist according to the history,

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all of that doesn't matter. What matters is the organism. And there's been a lot of brilliant comments

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throughout social media and on Reddit. I just wanna highlight something about this 'cause I had the exact same feeling as I was this time rereading it.

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There's a comment from Reddit user whose name is BraveSky6764.

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He said, "The conversation between Lex and Michael Levin", who is a brilliant biologist engineer,

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"came to mind when O'Brien made an analogy to an organism "which survives even as the individual cells pass away.

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"And the great purges are analogous "to the cutting of a fingernail."

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If you see society as an organism,

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and which I think is the way a totalitarian state sees it,

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then the destruction of a large percentage of that society, the murder, the torture, all kinds of atrocities in genocide

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become justifiable as long as the organism flourishes. And that's how you get to the ideas that Stalin had,

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it's okay to break a few eggs to make an omelet.

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This devaluation of a human being

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as of fundamental importance in a society,

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that's a slippery slope into atrocities. It's not just deeply unethical

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from our understanding of morals and ethics, it is also very unproductive.

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It destroys the human spirit. And the human spirit is essential for a building of a great society of constant progress.

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I think that's also one of the other messages of the book is about utopia, that totalitarianism results when you chase perfection,

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when you chase, when you present this idea of utopia. There is no utopia, there is no perfect society.

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I think at least for me, that's takeaway. I think the optimal state of being for an individual

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and for a state is a constant turnover, constant change.

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In the case of a state, it's a constant turnover of leaders, of ideas, and always hopefully in the long term,

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making progress towards a better world.

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But it's always going to be messy. Perfection only exists in a oppressive state.

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Perfection only exists when you remove the basic humanity of the individuals that make up that state,

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when you destroy the human spirit. Although when you suppress and you destroy all the freedoms,

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because freedom's going to be messy, it's going to be very chaotic. But that freedom ultimately is at least in the long arc of history

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is going to create progress. So yes, as the the Redditor, BraveSky6764 says,

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that does actually give you a perspective of a biological system where it's a bunch of living organisms.

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Each one of us are made up of a bunch of living organisms, and we take that for granted of all the atrocities that are happening there.

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And we don't seem to give a damn. I think that's a really good metaphor for us to help,

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if you want to put yourself in the mind of the Inner Party, of Big Brother,

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of the people that are in power in those situations, I think a lot of them, if most of them, if not all of them,

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see themselves as doing good for the world, that's doing good for the society. And they're able to justify that

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the way we justify the murder of the different cells in our body. You don't even think of them as worthy of consideration.

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You don't think of them as living beings, of having the same values as you. And that's one of the really powerful ideas

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that the founding of the United States, that all men are created equal, that there's an equal worth to a human being

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no matter who that human being is. That idea, at the very least, as flawed as its implementations have been,

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is a really, really powerful idea and it's a non-trivial idea. And that idea resists the drug of totalitarianism,

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the drug of power. I do believe that on the topic of power in politics,

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that Nineteen Eighty-Four, as I've mentioned, has been I would say misused by political ideologues.

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I've seen it for example, on Conservatives in the United States, have used Nineteen Eighty-Four

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to call left-wing policies Orwellian.

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I think that's an overstatement, and of course used for dramatic effect, but it should be at least said

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that Orwell was a Democratic socialist. Nineteen Eighty-Four is not a criticism of socialism,

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it's a criticism of totalitarianism. And I think the point is a warning against totalitarianism

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in all forms, that all political ideologists can succumb to the allure of power and be corrupted by it.

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And I think people on the left in the United States and people on the right can both be corrupted by power.

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So this kind of one way criticism of left-wing policies as Orwellian is a very kind of convenient shorthand,

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but the reality is all men and politicians are capable of creating an Orwellian world.

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And I think one of the things that is highlighted in the book very well, I would say,

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if I interpret it correctly, is the hypocrisy of Winston. When O'Brien asks Winston what he's willing to do

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to overthrow the Party, what he's willing to do for the Brotherhood, Winston admits that he's willing to do atrocities,

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he's willing to do evil unto children, unto anybody, murder anything.

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And I think this is a really powerful illustration that both the totalitarian and the blind immoral resistance,

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rebellion against the totalitarian state can both be evil. And I think that's where I return to love

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is the thing that carries hope for a world beyond this battle, this very important battle for freedom.

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But you have to have that. Otherwise it's the Orwellian state

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and the resistance to Orwellian state can both destroy basic human rights and freedoms.

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And I think sort of in the character of Winston, that's illustrated well.

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And I should also mention that there's interesting writing, no, I'm not obviously a scholar of Orwell,

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and there's a lot of books' been written, and I should probably recommend them somewhere. There's just great books written on Nineteen Eighty-Four,

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on Orwell, on the historical context in which he was operating and all that kind of stuff.

1984 applied to today

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But as far as I see Orwell, also with Nineteen Eighty-Four and himself politically,

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he was not espousing the complete opposite of totalitarianism. There is, again, with democratic socialism,

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that there is value to the connection between human beings, that you have to lean on each other, help each other,

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that society is fundamentally a cohesive collective

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than a completely sort of disparate set

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of sovereign individuals. It's both. And I think he was torn about that idea,

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because in order to resist a totalitarian state, you have to fight for those basic individual freedoms.

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But at the same time, a society, a well-functioning society allows for that freedom to manifest as collaboration.

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And so that's the difficult challenge there. Again, that's why he was a Democratic socialist, and the criticism of the book was against totalitarianism,

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of a centralized state that controls speech, thought,

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you know, the press, and all the basic human freedoms, controls truth.

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And I think a lot of people would ask the question, and I hear this tossed around, you know, do we live in the world

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of Nineteen Eighty-Four today? And I think that's used as a shorthand to sort of criticize different policies

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and different governments. I generally don't like the use of that kind of language

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because it's basically crying wolf. If everything is Nineteen Eighty-Four, if everybody is Hitler, then you're not going to,

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there's no way to kind of properly normalize the discussion

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of what's, of the lesser of two evils kind of thing, which is ultimately what democracy is about.

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You have a collection of things you're picking, they all kind of suck, but you want to pick the one that sucks the least.

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That's human society, you know, that's human nature, it's messy.

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And so I don't think we live in a Nineteen Eighty-Four state, but there's a lot of elements that this book reveals

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about human nature and about the operation of a totalitarian state that we should be on the watch for. So surveillance state of doublethink,

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of controlling language, of being in a constant state of wars, a way to control the population and the flow of resources.

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All those things have elements of almost like useful tools

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for the establishment of complete control of a populace. And the moment you notice those elements,

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it's our job to resist those elements. So I think the point is we have to be vigilant

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to the slippery slope of the will to power in centralized institutions.

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Another thing I wanna mention is that I think a lot of people rightfully complement Orwell to have,

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predict some of the elements of future society, especially with technology, technological capabilities that are with,

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for example, telescreens used by the state to control the population. Maybe I can make a few comments on technology in general.

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People who criticize technology will often use Nineteen Eighty-Four as an example that,

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you know, technology is a tool for a totalitarian state. It's a way they can achieve full control

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and should be extremely cautious of it. And I think that's, there's a kernel of truth to that,

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but it's not obviously to me that on the whole, technology is a tool for totalitarian control,

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that I think it is also a tool for freedom. The internet is an incredible tool for freedom.

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And so of course, we have to fight for that freedom. But I believe in general, the greater,

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let's just take the internet broadly as an example, and there's a lot of sub-elements of that, and like more sort of platonic sense

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of what the internet is, which is digital interconnectivity. We have to fight for the freedom, but in general,

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the greater reach and access that the internet has, the more powerful the resistance to totalitarianism.

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Technology is a double-edged sword. It provides the tools for oppression,

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and the tools for the ongoing fight for freedom. And as long as the will to fight arises in the human heart,

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technology, I think, helps humanity win. And of course there's been a lot of discussion

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about free speech and the freedom of thought, and there's a lot to be said there that's much more nuanced

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than the book Nineteen Eighty-Four provides. I think Nineteen Eighty-Four just shows the end,

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horrible conclusion of complete totalitarian control over speech, over thought, over feeling, over everything.

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But in general, my view of it is kind of inspiration to,

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in order to prevent ourselves from slipping into an authoritarian until totalitarian state,

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you know, Orwellian type of dystopias, to avoid them, we have to value critical and independent thought.

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I think thought first before speech, just thought. I think you have to learn to think deeply

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from first principles, independent of whatever tribe you find yourselves in, independent of government, independent of groups,

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independent of the people around you, the people you love, that love you. You have to learn at least sometimes to think independently.

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Now this is the Nietzsche, "If you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you." If you think too independently, you can break your mind.

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I mean, we are social creatures, we need that connection. But I think it's like with the Tom Waits,

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"I like my Tom with a little drop of poison". I think of truly, deeply independent thought as a little drop of poison that's necessary

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for your own mind. Most of your life you live, you kind of assume most things around you are true,

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and that's very useful. We stand on the shoulders of giants, but you on a regular occasion have to question,

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question your assumption, question your biases, question everything. Question the things you've taken for granted,

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question what everybody's telling you, but not too much. It's a tricky balance.

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But the act of rebellion against the totalitarian state, against the slippery slope into that state is that independent thought.

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And of course speech is a manifestation of that thought. So if to avoid echo chambers in both thought and speech,

32:33

like I said, you have to question your assumptions, challenge your biases. I think that's the way out.

32:38

Or maybe that's a resistance mechanism to slipping into authoritarianism.

32:44

And maybe I have a few more things to say about the latter part of the book, the part where there's torture,

32:50

where there's room 101 that has the thing you fear the most,

32:56

which is different for all of us. And for Winston, that's rats.

33:02

Makes you wonder what that thing is for each of us. I left a mental note for myself to do more research

33:09

into the historical context, the psychology of the neuroscience,

33:15

the effectiveness of torture.

33:20

I think there's probably a lot of really good work. I had a brief conversation with Andrew Huberman on the phone

33:26

about this topic. Andrew Huberman, the brilliant Andrew Huberman, host of The Huberman Lab Podcast that you should listen to.

33:32

And then he mentioned to me that there's a bunch of papers in these topics that has been studied, sort of the carrot and the stick

33:39

of the ability of incentives and disincentives to control the perception and the mental state

33:45

of people and animals. And he mentioned to me a few folks that I could talk to

33:51

on a podcast about this topic and a few books, so I'll definitely look into this more. I think Nineteen Eighty-Four is probably,

33:57

it uses torture as a philosophical description, as a caricature of the operation of a totalitarian state.

34:08

But at the same time, a lot of those elements were all done under Stalin

34:15

in the Soviet Union. So it's not like it's very different or very far from reality.

34:21

It's very, very real. The question is about the actual effect it has

34:28

on the human mind, which I really have to think, because torture in this case breaks Winston.

34:37

In fact, I'd like to believe that many people in the most fundamental ways can't be broken in this way.

34:42

I've seen science, again, without extensively reading, so please correct me if I'm wrong,

34:49

but I've seen science that shows that torture, for the purpose of intelligence gathering is not effective.

34:55

It's not effective to get accurate information because people will tell you anything, really, to stop the torture, stop the physical and the mental,

35:03

the emotional suffering. So that, but I think this book is about the use of torture

35:09

to completely break your ability to think and to perceive the world. One of the things I talk to Andrew about

35:18

is whether it's possible to control perception through these kinds of things. And it seems that there is literature that shows

35:26

it's possible to literally change your perception of the world, like in this case in Nineteen Eighty-Four,

35:31

it's when you're holding up four fingers, can you actually make the person believe

35:37

that you're holding up five fingers, not because of some weird delusion, or just because your vision is blurry or any of that,

35:45

but you literally when you look, I'm holding four fingers, and what you see is five fingers. Not because your vision is poor, no.

35:51

Your visual cortex, the way you're processing that information, something about the processing

35:56

changes completely your perception. If I tell you there's a straight line, through incentive or disincentive,

36:02

can you start seeing like a crooked line or something like that? Anyway, I think that there's literature that supports that,

36:10

which is by the way, terrifying. But the thing I'd like to research into more

36:19

is if that can be long-lasting, is that I just don't believe it can't be.

36:24

If you're not pushed to your death, yes, maybe perception,

36:30

maybe your willingness to think. But your ability to think, your actual ability to think independent thoughts,

36:36

maybe you're terrified. I understand if you're terrified of any more kind of thinking

36:45

that leads to rebellious thoughts. Like the book mentions the idea of facecrime where you can reveal your thoughts,

36:52

the inner workings of your mind by the subtleties of your expressions in your face.

36:58

And I think also like Winston or O'Brien says,

37:03

"If you want to keep a secret, 'you must also hide it from yourself.'" So I can understand that, I can understand that.

37:10

And maybe that is the basic mechanism that torture leads to, that you just learn your body,

37:18

your mind learns to hide the truth from yourself.

37:25

Like you're not, you don't even allow yourself to think it because you know if you think it, it's going to lead to facecrime and thoughtcrime,

37:31

and that's gonna lead to more torture. That's possible, that's possible. But I just can't imagine the capacity for love

37:41

in the human heart to be extinguished through torture, finally extinguished. Temporarily, yes, but finally irrecoverably,

37:50

which I think is the basic claim of the book that they break.

37:55

So, because through the worst of the torture, Winston gives up Julia, the object of his love.

38:06

He says that, "Some things like that, 'the fact that you said torture her, not me,

38:15

'anything to make this stop. 'The fact that you said that, the fact that you thought that

38:20

'is a statement, is a thought 'you can't walk back to yourself.

38:26

"So it's irrecoverable. 'You just destroyed your faith in love."

38:32

I don't think so, I think it's possible, we have to remember that this is one particular character, that this is one particular story.

38:39

I think there's a lot of people in which the capacity to love cannot be broken

38:45

no matter the torture. But that's an interesting scientific question, but it's also a human question. It's just, I think man search for meaning.

38:53

There's a lot of books that explore these kinds of question in the worst of conditions that humans had to suffer through

38:59

what still persists, what is the source of meaning? And I just think that the flame of love persists

39:07

through atrocities, through torture, through suffering, through all of it.

39:12

But the claim of the book that yes, the totalitarian state can use torture to break even that,

39:19

even that which leads to the only love you're allowed to have, which is the love for Big Brother.

39:25

So I think the, practically speaking, from the Party perspective,

39:32

I think the point of O'Brien's torture of Winston

39:38

was to suffocate the hope in his mind and heart,

39:45

so there is no hope. By completely destroying the knowledge of what is and isn't true, so being betrayed,

39:53

and this kind of Goldstein's book about the society, not knowing if that's true,

39:58

not knowing anything about Julia, so basically having no emotional or intellectual ground to stand on,

40:05

it's very difficult to have like a sense of where you are. Like to have hope, you have to have a sense of where you are

40:12

and where things could be, and that. And then you also betray yourself,

40:17

like to force you to be a hypocrite on your own deepest feelings of love, I think that basically puts you in a place

40:25

where there's no hope, there's no point. It's apathy, it's nihilism,

40:31

and there, a hardworking member of society that is nihilistic is probably what the Party wants,

40:39

because that human will not rebel. But on the point of hope,

40:45

I should mention that there's kind of a long-running theory that since the appendix,
40:52
the appendix is about the details of Newspeak, the language that the Party is creating,
enforcing,
40:58
because that appendix was written in the past tense and is talking about Newspeak in the
past tense, and it's written in English, sort of non-Newspeak,
41:07
that means the Party in Newspeak and all of its elements that we see in the story is in the
past.
41:13
That the world from which the book is created has escaped that.
41:19
And that's a message of hope, that whatever the rebellion against the Party, whether it's
passionate, lust and sex, whether it's love,
41:29
whether it's the seeking truth
41:34
in a world full of lies, whatever it is, there's a way out.
41:40
Again, to me, the way out is love. But that's a hopeful message in this dystopian novel
41:47
that even these perfectly executed totalitarian states will fall.
41:53
I took a few random notes here that maybe I'll comment on. I wrote a quote,
41:58
"The masses cannot rebel until they become conscious." That might be either a Winston
observation
42:04
or an O'Brien statement, I'm not sure. But yes, so you have to think 80% plus
42:10
are Proles, the working class. They have the power if they want it,
42:15
but they don't want it, they don't want to take it, that's the whole point of the totalitarian state
is to break your will for freedom, your desire for freedom,
42:24
break your ability to know that you're not free. And that's where all of it, the changing of
history,
42:31
the doublethink, the thoughtcrime, all of that comes into play. That the torture in the Ministry
of Love,
42:37
all of that is about preventing the populace from becoming conscious.
42:43
And again, as per the cells discussion earlier, I wrote down the O'Brien quote,
42:49

"The death of the individual is not death. "The Party is immortal."

42:55

And this is just a interesting observation about the operation of a totalitarian state,

43:01

that it's the idea and a kind of amorphous symbol

43:09

of the Messianic figure in Big Brother is all you need for the Party to persist.

43:14

That person doesn't actually have to exist. Any one individual doesn't have to exist, it's just the division of society

43:20

into high, middle, and low. And the oppression of the low by the high,

43:27

by the centralized Inner Party, that's all you need. And the individual does not matter in that.

43:35

And again, the way to fight that is to fight for the individual freedoms.

43:40

Interesting side note is just the quote I wrote down from Julia, I think.

43:46

"If you keep the small rules, you can break the big ones." And so she, in the book,

43:52

is somebody that follows to the T, all the rules of the Party.

43:57

She attends all the committee meetings and all that kind of stuff, and just is like the model citizen

44:03

from the perspective of the Party. And so that allows her to break the big rules, like have passionate sex with people

44:10

like the really, or fall in love, all the forbidden things. And I think that's actually a good way to exist in the world.

44:16

I think for a lot of us, there's probably a bunch of things that bother us in the local world around us, in the bigger world.

44:23

And I think you have to pick your battles. You have to not get lost in the muck of small battles

44:34

if you want to have at least one or a few big victories in your life

44:39

that make for a better world. I think at least in my sense,

44:44

it's easy to get distracted by the little things that bother you in life. And I think staying focused on the big things,

44:52

again, picking your battles, and staying with that for as long as possible.

44:57

Working your ass off to solve one problem for as long as possible. Not giving up against impossible odds,

45:05

against all the criticism, all of that, that's the way to solve those big problems. And of course that's not what Julia is talking about,

45:12

but in a sense she is also, because in that particular case, a totalitarian state is the problem.

45:17

And the way to rebel is to plant that seed of rebellion in each of the people she has sex with.

45:27

That we are human, that we have lust for each other, that we have the ability to love each other.

45:33

And that is the necessary act of rebellion there. That is the big leap for her at least

45:40

in that kind of society. I should also mention that there's a lot of interpretations

45:46

of the different, the small and the big things in this book. So it's very possible in the case of Julia, that Winston was played, he was set up with Julia.

45:56

He was set up to feel all those things. He was set up to have that little secret cove

46:01

where he can write on his desk in the diary, and dream of rebelling against the state,

46:08

dream of the Brotherhood. It's unclear to me why an oppressive state

46:16

would want people to have that little journey of desiring freedom in all its manifestations.

46:25

I'm not sure, but maybe O'Brien's statement that the purpose of torture is torture, holds some wisdom.

46:36

That to attain absolute power, you also have to have a willingness

46:46

and a mechanism to attain absolute suffering in the populace.

46:53

And maybe this is a way to maximize suffering, is to give them hope before you crush it.

47:03

Again, the way out to me, and the takeaway from this book,

47:12

the way out is love. Perhaps this is a good place to also mention

Twitter reading list drama

47:17

a little bit of a fun, a little controversy that evolved over Twitter.

47:23

So I posted a reading list quickly before heading off to a New Year's party,

47:31
of books that I hope to read in 2023. And these are based on books that I asked people to vote on,
47:39
and these are the ones, many of the ones they selected. And they happened to be many of the books I've read many times throughout my life and really enjoyed.
47:46
And they were like old friends that I love visiting and revisiting, and every time I read them I get something new,
47:53
and they're just read different throughout life.
47:59
You know, the way in my teens when I read *The Stranger* by Camus is very different than it was in my 20s,
48:04
and different in my 30s. I'll say my favorite book now by Camus is probably *The Plague*, and all of that has evolved.
48:12
Dostoevsky, I read *The Idiot* several times, I read *Brothers Karamazov*, both in English and Russian,
48:18
Notes from *Underground*. I mean I love Dostoevsky, and a lot of these books are just,
48:25
yes they're classics, but they're also deeply profound, and they move me on a intellectual level,
48:30
but also just as a human being. They're like travel companions, they're like old friends, old dead friends.
48:37
So yeah, so I wanted to celebrate my love for books, and it was very strange to me that,
48:45
and if I'm just being honest for a second, it was kind of painful that some prominent figures
48:53
that I respect were kind of cruel about the list, and they responded, they mocked it
49:00
and all that kind of stuff, and basically taking the worst possible interpretation.
49:05
And I have to be honest and say it was,
49:14
it wasn't fun. 'Cause it was just, it was just a silly kid me,
49:23
kind of in a joyful New Year's mood, sharing with the world, books I love.
49:32
And I think what was happening, and this seems to be happening a bit more,
49:39

is there's a bunch of people that are just almost waiting or hoping that I fail, or maybe that I'm some kind of bad human being,

49:46

and they're looking, they're trying to discover things about me that reveal that I'm a bad human being,

49:52

and maybe somehow this reading list reveals that,

49:58

I don't know. I don't know.

50:04

So one criticism was that everybody read these books in school, and they're basic.

50:12

I think my response to that criticism is, no, first of all, most people have not read them in school.

50:18

Maybe they read Cliff Notes. And they're not basic, they're deeply profound, some of the greatest words ever written.

50:26

But also I don't think I've ever gotten a lot from books

50:32

I was forced to read in school when I had to read them for like an assignment. Some of these books I think I read in school,

50:38

but most of them not. But it's only when I read them outside of school on my own volition, that I really gained a lot from it.

50:46

And especially throughout my life, regular times as a teenager, in my 20s and in my 30s.

50:53

So no, these books are profound and deserve returning to. And like I said, they are old friends that give me a lot of meaning

51:00

every time I return to revisit the ideas, and they give me a new perspective on life.

51:06

Another criticism was very kind of nitpicky, and the list was put together really quickly,

51:11

and the goal, I like setting tough goals. The goal was to read a book a week, and you know, on one week I had Little Prince,

51:21

followed by Brothers Karamazov. And people criticized that how can you possibly read

51:27

Brothers Karamazov in one week? Maybe I won't, maybe I'll fail miserably. But I love trying, but that wasn't actually the goal.

51:36

I should have said, I intend to finish reading it by the end of that week. So you start earlier, 'cause Little Prince takes,

51:45

you know, an hour or two to read, and then Brothers Karamazov, I could have the two weeks, it should take about 30, 40, 50 hours to read it.

51:52

That said, friends, I've read it already in English and in Russian.

51:59

I'm interviewing the world famous, I would say amazing translators of Brothers Karamazov,

52:07

of Dostoevsky, of Tolstoy, Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky,

52:13

probably across multiple days. So this book means a lot to me. I'm not somebody just kind of rolling in,

52:19

what are the cool kids reading these days? These books have been lifelong companions to me. And the fact that people just wanna stomp on that,

52:25

and a large number of people did, people I respect,

52:31

yeah, I'll be lying if I said it wasn't, it didn't suck a bit.

52:38

Anyway, the love for reading persists.

52:45

I have to say after that, I was very hesitant to even make this particular video

52:51

on Orwell on Nineteen Eighty-Four. And I'm not sure I want to be public with my reading

52:57

after this. And I know a lot of people will say no, there's like, we're here with you,

53:04

we're very supportive and I love you. I mean, I meet so many incredible people, but the reality is it does suck to be vulnerable

53:10

and share something with the world and receive that kind of mockery at scale.

53:16

So I will definitely, I will not be affected or broken

53:21

by any of that kind of stuff for something that's actually meaningful. Like the conversations are some of the very difficult conversations

53:27

I'm going to do. But a silly side hobby thing of reading that I do throughout my life,

53:35

for that to be a source of mockery, I'm just gonna do that privately. So I'm a little torn on that, and I'll try to figure out a way.

53:42

Also I should say that that list, like a lot of things is kind of aspirational, because if I take a job at a tech company,

53:52

or if I start a tech company, or if I have to travel across,

53:58

I have to travel for extremely difficult conversations and really have to prepare for them, all that kind of stuff,

54:03

I think that's going to affect my ability to both read and enjoy reading, which I think is a prerequisite for this kind of reading.

54:10

But in general what I do is I read about one hour a day of Kindle,

54:15

so on the sort of, in my eyes, physical device. And depending on the workout I do, and the chores I have,

54:25

it's going to be about two hours of audiobook. So most of the things I do during chores is audiobooks.

54:30

And when I run, and I usually run about 10 to 15 miles, so you're talking about, like I often run over two hours.

54:38

It's like a slow pace. Like when the days are not insane, it gives me a chance to think,

54:43

and it gives me a chance to listen to audiobooks. So I love that process, it's an escape for the world,

54:48

a chance for me to collect my thoughts. And yeah, it's again, a source of happiness and joy, and I wanted to share that.

54:55

And I think you can get quite a lot of reading done through that process,

55:01

especially if it's book you've read before. It is very challenging to do this kind of takeaway video,

55:07

or to concretize your thoughts down on paper, especially when you have to present them in this kind of way.

55:12

I'm not sure I'm going to do that much, 'cause it's an extra bit of effort, but it's also a chance to share that joy with the world.

55:18

So to find cool people that also enjoy it, so it's a trade off. Anyway, you know, it's just a temporary thing,

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but it did suck for a short amount of time,

55:31

for a few hours for a couple days. But in general, you know, I'll persist with my level of reading,

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but I might not talk about it publicly as much. But again, let me sort of emphasize

55:43
that this kind of response and mockery

55:48
will not affect anything of importance that I do. Like, I always, I try to read comments,

55:56
I try to see criticism. I really value, especially high effort criticism.

56:01
I try to grow and constantly try to improve. But that's for things that I take very seriously,

56:09
like the podcast conversations that I do. But for silly things like book lists, Spotify,

56:18
music playlists, the food I like to eat, I don't know, what else, anything,

56:26
any fun like side thing, it's not that important. If it's something that others don't enjoy, then
whatever.

56:35
I'll enjoy them privately with my friends locally here or the people I meet. So anyway, I love
reading, I love reading classics,

56:43
I love returning to old friends, and in book form, and making new ones.

56:49
There's a bunch of science fiction that I embarrassingly have not read and would love to,

56:57
because those worlds are so meaningful to so many of the people I'm friends with that I
can't wait to visit those worlds,

57:03
and sort of make new friends in the form of books. So definitely the love for books,

57:09
the love for reading persists, and if you share in that love, that's beautiful. So thank you for
joining me on this journey.

57:16
Thank you for watching this silly little video, and I hope to see you next time.

57:23
Love you all.