

## Orwell's Moral Teaching

Luigi Bradizza

Review: *Slave State: Rereading Orwell's 1984*, by David Lowenthal (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2021). Paperback; E-book, 92 pp., \$14.

David Lowenthal was for many years a professor of political science at Boston College, where he taught political philosophy. His recent passing and the occasion of this review justly prompts a brief eulogy in these pages. His wisdom and good humor were matched by the quality of his scholarship and teaching. His long and fruitful career stretched from the 1940s, when he was an early student of Leo Strauss, to the publication of the current volume, which came at the end of a long and academically productive retirement.

Lowenthal's *Slave State* is slender yet engrossing, and it fittingly caps his life's work. Lowenthal writes as a longtime admirer of Orwell, and as a political theorist who acknowledges that, while "[t]here is no positive political message in 1984," there is nonetheless "a positive moral message—one often missed by commentators because ... it is woven into the fabric of the novel as a whole" (2). Lowenthal's aim in this book is to show us that positive moral message—that humanistic teaching—along with the deeper causes of totalitarian tyranny (3). Lowenthal would also illuminate threatening trends in our contemporary Western society that have moved us closer to tyranny.

Part one of the book discusses Orwell's political and moral development leading up to his mature depiction of tyranny in 1984. Orwell was a man of the Left. At the same time, he was also a critic of the exuberant and unbounded hopes of so many others on the Left. Orwell rejected religion as merely mythological, as otherworldly. In his view, it mistakenly confined man's happiness to the life to come. Orwell embraced a humanism that locates our happiness in this world, but that at the same time moderates our expectations of an earthly utopia by accepting the ineradicable imperfections of human nature. Orwell would have us view normal human beings, with all their flaws, as noble creatures, and he would prompt us to accept them as they are and as worthy of our best political and moral efforts.

Orwell's understanding of worldly happiness places him at some distance from so many on the Left who seek merely the relief of man's estate, equally and for all. The relief of pain as the goal of political life threatens to turn man into a soft creature incapable of higher

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human tasks. To be sure, Orwell is centrally concerned to see to men's basic material needs. Once those are secured, he would turn their attention to those noble pursuits that place us above the beasts. Orwell thus situates himself between religious men who propose noble but mythical human ends and his fellow men of the Left who propose as their utopia what amounts to a dehumanizing hedonism. He recognizes that his precarious political position requires of him a moral teaching that is neither religious nor conventionally socialist. Orwell himself tells us that we need "warmth, society, leisure, comfort, ... security[,] solitude, creative work, and a sense of wonder" (20). Some of that sense of wonder is to be experienced by way of nature. For Orwell, the Left's aim to conquer nature thus threatens a source of wonder and also, to the extent that human nature becomes a target of that conquest, man himself.

Politically, Orwell hopes for an end to class and national divisions that he regards as the sources of the exploitation of man by man. He sees hope for universal brotherhood in an extension of family feelings to humanity at large, even if those feelings go no farther than a decent respect for the rights of others. His political goal, then, is "a humanized liberal socialism" extended over the whole earth (29). That goal might seem to be out of reach, but Orwell would repurpose otherwise atavistic nationalistic impulses in order to impel men, first toward patriotic loyalty to a decent English society, and then toward the eventual extension of these sentiments to the whole world. He contrasts this gradual and peaceful approach to human development with the aggressive and destructive path chosen by more intemperate leftists, for whom power worship occupies a place in the human soul left empty by the passing of religious worship.

Later in life, out of a belief that all revolutions empower the worst among us, Orwell came to think that any revolution would bring about tyranny. Yet Orwell was unable to stop calling for political reform, believing, at times apparently inconsistently, that a coming totalitarianism cannot be permanent, and that his proposals for reform might therefore bear fruit.

In part two, Lowenthal turns to his study of the moral teaching of 1984. Lowenthal locates the fundamental strength of the Party in its capacity "to generate opinions and emotions that render the ruled either harmless to the state or its fervent supporters" (44-45). Not brute strength but rather a certain education constitutes the greatest source of power for the Party. Winston Smith comes to rebel by noticing his own dissatisfactions, the gaps between regime

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propaganda and objective facts, and his own memory of the past. These are, respectively, “the bad,” “the false,” and “the good” (46). The regime thus fails at the key task of controlling all thoughts and reactions. Winston recovers his contact with what is natural: the love of a mother for her child, natural scenery, the natural sexual desire of Winston and Julia for each other, and the more natural cultural life of the world that has been lost to totalitarianism. Orwell offers us his understanding of natural social attachments in two senses: the particular attachments of those who know and love each other; and the broader natural sympathy men can express for mankind in general.

Orwell also shows us Winston struggling to grasp truth and resist the Party’s falsehoods. He attempts through speech to articulate his understanding of the true, and this gets him into trouble as he speaks with the wrong people. Winston’s rebellion is thus rooted in his natural desire to satisfy his “social, intellectual, and physical needs” (52).

Lowenthal accounts for the evil depicted in 1984 by arguing that, for Orwell, the cause lies with “external factors frustrating or distorting human nature” (53). Men are taught to hate. They are also taught an unnatural and frustrating chastity that is manipulated into the desire to hate. In general, by thwarting men’s natural and healthy impulses, the Party is able to control their souls and use them as instruments of oppression.

The human ideal in 1984 is represented by O’Brien in his role as rebel leader. All of the other characters, good and bad, are measured by Orwell against this standard. It is here that Lowenthal properly calls our attention to a lapse in Orwell’s account of the rebel O’Brien, because no indication is given of how such a man can come into being, or even how it is that he must serve as the one model for all mankind (57). Lowenthal accounts for the natural attraction to the rebel O’Brien with reference to his “intellect and sociability” (58). These two qualities recall the “man of wisdom and virtue described in classical philosophy” (59). However, whereas the ancients proposed a rigorous education aimed at producing such men, Orwell seems to think that they can arise spontaneously if only men are relieved of material privation.

The final section of 1984 gives us Orwell’s view of the roots of totalitarian evil. The Party aims to overcome human mortality by proposing itself as an unerring and eternal organization. Loyalty to the Party by ordinary, mortal men is thus a path to a faux immortality that relieves them of their fear of death. So that it is not suspected of peddling falsehoods

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that its followers are merely compelled to mouth, the Party must persuade everyone to support it willingly and wholeheartedly. The control of beliefs and emotions is thus the central means by which the Party retains power. The great evil depicted in 1984 is rooted in a reaction to mortality. By contrast, at least before he is broken, Winston accepts his mortality as an objective fact and seeks instead to live a life focused especially on care for “his intellect and his concern for others” (64).

O'Brien destroys Winston by relying on a point of common agreement between the two: their fear of death. O'Brien expresses that fear of death by his utter loyalty to the Party. Winston expresses it by betraying Julia. Lowenthal notes, though, that O'Brien has not refuted the possibility of heroic action in the face of death (67). That nobility is enhanced by human imperfection—and the consequent will and exertion required by noble efforts if they are to overcome our frailty and our impulse to retreat (68). In Lowenthal's view, despite the fact that Winston is broken, Orwell would have us see Winston's morality as noble because it can only be defeated when he is destroyed by others. By contrast, O'Brien is only able to win struggles for power at the cost of his grip on reality (68). Thus, O'Brien's victories are really personal defeats.

In part three, Lowenthal explores Orwell's understanding of the rise of totalitarianism by analyzing “The Theory of Oligarchical Collectivism” treatise within 1984. Orwell believes that, as the modern world seeks to free us from religion and the constraints of nature, it in consequence unleashes unprecedented hunger for power, fueled by technology, and ultimately dedicated to the destruction of human nature (74). Orwell looks ahead and pessimistically predicts that the whole world will descend into totalitarianism because it has been betrayed by its intellectuals. He predicts “the victory of power-hungry intellect over humane intellect” by modern elites freed from the restraint of religion (79). Orwell is pessimistic about the politics of the future because the same industrial forces that permit the necessary amelioration of the human material condition also offer tools for unbounded oppression to the power hungry. Lowenthal here criticizes Orwell for not taking seriously enough an escape from this mechanized modern tyranny into the pre-modern world depicted by classical political philosophy. Despite Orwell's apparent certainties about the future, Lowenthal argues that Orwell must have had a positive political purpose in writing 1984. Orwell approaches that purpose very indirectly, by appealing to and hoping to shape

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men's moral lives. He especially wants to educate decent intellectuals who will otherwise become "Outer Party" instruments in the coming totalitarian tyranny.

Lowenthal has given us an impressive analysis of 1984. Though he clearly shares neither Orwell's irreligion nor his unwillingness to revisit the West's classical heritage, he sympathetically portrays Orwell's decent humanism and ably draws out the moral teaching of 1984. We are left with three blind spots exhibited by Orwell upon which Lowenthal has chosen not to dwell. First, Orwell's irreligion must be challenged. Revelation cannot intelligently be dismissed as myth-making without the most serious and sustained theological and philosophical account. Second, Orwell's desire for human equality and fellow feeling grants too little to the demand that we pursue, and the reality that we unequally attain, virtue as a fulfillment of our highest nature. Finally, Orwell's socialism must be set against defenders of the free market, particularly those involved in the "calculation debate," and those who locate a necessarily restrained if also vibrant place for free market economic production in the lives of ordinary men. These reservations aside, Lowenthal shows us the heights that unorthodox and decent socialists can attain when they face squarely the worst impulses of secular utopians.

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*Luigi Bradizza is associate professor of political science and chair of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Salve Regina University in Newport, RI. His research interests include political philosophy and American political thought.*