

## The Choice between Liberty and Survival in 1984

Luxin Yin\*

School of Foreign Language, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

Yinlx055@Nenu.Edu.Cn

\*Corresponding Author

**Keywords:** Choice, Liberty, Survival, 1984

**Abstract:** two focusses under discussion as far back as human records date are liberty and survival, which concerns the decision of whether people should sacrifice liberty for survival, particularly in extreme contexts. Orwell's 1984 discussed the relationship between liberty and survival. This report analyses 1984 in order to reflect on how it illustrates the choices offered by these two needs.

### 1. Introduction

Liberty and survival have been widely discussed over the course of humanity's history, and this philosophical problem has perplexed many since its proposal<sup>[1]</sup>. The core problem relevant to the controversy between liberty and survival is whether people should sacrifice liberty to survival, especially in extreme contexts<sup>[2]</sup>. Historically, philosophers widely discussed liberty and survival with varying details, such as plato, cartesian, rousseau, and kant; however, they failed to solve the controversy between the two opposing aspects<sup>[3]</sup>. It is believed that philosophers can only explain their understanding of liberty according to needs of survival determined by their contexts, they then detail their approaches to balancing connections between the two phases, ultimately, informing their philosophies<sup>[4]</sup>. However, there are no fixed explanations to the controversial problem between them, and people have not yet reached an agreement to identify which part is more important. Under this circumstance, it is valuable to place the roles of liberty and survival in people's lives under discussion. In fact, the discussion of liberty and survival is not only concerned by many philosophers, but also writers who either express their understanding of the two items in their work or provide motivation for people to personally evaluate the two aspects after reading their work. I believe the novel 1984, by george orwell, is such a book, which stimulates readers to consider the meaning and distinctions between liberty and survival, thereby, encouraging people to reanalyse how they should engage the conflicts faced when deciding between what is done for survival or what is done for liberty when in an extreme context<sup>[5]</sup>.

On the One Hand, Behaviours Aimed Towards Survival and Liberty May Either Be Natural Human Responses or Conscious Actions When They Have Acquired the Knowledge and Self-Awareness of Higher Levels of Needs. on the Other Hand, to Choose to Pursue Liberty or Survival is Not Always Determined by Needs People Are Conscious of. in This Case, the Reasons Leading to These Behaviours May Be More Complex, and the External Environment May Be More Relevant to the Motivation of People in Their Determination of These Choices. Particularly, the Political Environment Has a Strong Association with the population's Perception of Liberty and Survival Because Not All People Have the Choice to Select Liberty or to Select Survival When the Political Environment is Extreme. All These Points Drawn from the Above Academic Articles Will Be Utilised in This Dissertation with the Goal to Analyse the Novel, 1984, Because as It Illustrates Responses of People to Liberty and Survival in a Totalitarian Society<sup>[6]</sup>. This Report Refers to These Points, Which Analyses the Theme Discussed in Orwell's Novel from Different Viewpoints, Including Autonomous Needs and Choices, and the Influence of the Political Environment on the population's Needs and Choices.

## **2. Interpretation of the Ideas of Liberty and Survival in 1984**

### **2.1 A Brief Explanation of the Story Told in the Novel**

The plot of the novel can be described as follows. In 1984, the world was divided into three superpowers, which are known as Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. The three superpowers have a high degree of centralization granting the governments absolute power and control over their population. In the three superpowers, cultural systems such as historical records and languages do exist. Due to this, the three superpowers are unable to reach any agreements to achieve peaceful coexistence with each other. Thus, wars, with the goal to defeat the other two superpowers in order to unify history and language, frequently occur between them. Meanwhile, to maintain the government's governance, the three superpowers have established their monitoring systems via the telescreen allowing them to supervise the behaviours of all people. In addition, to maintain the stability of these societies, the three superpowers promote personal worship, in order to encourage the domestic populations to hate both domestic and foreign enemies.

In Oceania, the country has established a strict hierarchical system, containing three parties, the inner party which represents the upper class, the outer party which represents the middle class, and the proles which present the lower class. The members of the inner party are minimum, accounting for about 2% of the total population of Oceania; however, they dictate most of the country's power. In this story, the male protagonist, Winston Smith, is a member of the outer party, working in the Ministry of Truth, which is one of the four departments of the government, responsible for the news and propagation of the governmental policies and affairs. As for Winston, his main job is to alter history to control the population's cognition to reduce the possibility of political rebellion. Although Winston works for the government, he does not believe the expression of the leaders of the party, known as the "Big Brother", since his life is also monitored by the telescreen, as is done in other populations. Due to this, he hates his current life. He feels disappointed with the oppressed environment and the strict dictation and thinks that the rigid control has reduced his liberty. Owing to this, he has purchased a notebook for recording his life, as well as his thoughts, which are regarded as wicked by the government. At the same time, he has also recorded his suspicions of the "Big Brother." Meanwhile, Winston is attracted by O'Brien, who is an influential member of the party, and he believes that he is a member of the Brotherhood, a secret party trying to overthrow the government of the ruling party.

During his work, he falls in love with another member of the Outer Party, Julia, and both of them suspect the works of the "Big Brother." Finally, they live together, renting a room in an old antique shop without a telescreen. At the same time, O'Brien connects with them, and introduces them to the Brotherhood when O'Brien thinks that they share the beliefs. Meanwhile, O'Brien gives Winston a book written by the leader of the Brotherhood, Emmanuel Goldstein. Winston reads the book to Julia, but their actions are found by the Thought Police, due to the report by the owner of the antique shop, because the boss, Mr. Charrington, is a member of the Thought Police.

When Winston is arrested, he is separated from Julia, and he is sent to the Ministry of Love. When he awakens, he learns that O'Brien is a spy of the Party, rather than a real member of the Brotherhood. He uses the identity of a member of the Brotherhood to connect with Winston because his mission is to discover members of the party who have rebellious mindsets. Thus, when Winston is arrested, O'Brien spends several months torturing Winston, wanting to brainwash him, but Winston struggles against O'Brien's brainwashing. Finally, Winston is sent to Room 101, which is the most dreaded room used to cope with members who are against the Party. Under horrible punishment, Winston finally complies with the Party, and he is finally released when he shows that he has entirely accepted the belief of the Party, loving the "Big Brother". When he is released, he meets Julia; however, both of them have compromised their beliefs, and have complied to those of the Party. At this point, Winston is drunk all day long, and he finally gives up his thoughts, and chooses to accept the Big Brother's thoughts.

## 2.2 The Conflicts between Liberty and Survival Told in the Novel

The central conflict between liberty and survival in this novel is that the population is forced to accept the thoughts of the governors to obtain the choice to survive. This conflict is clearly reflected by the Big Brother's slogans, saying that "liberty is slavery" and "ignorance is a strength"<sup>[7]</sup>. This slogan directly reveals that the governors do not want the population to form their own thoughts, and only accept what is told to them by the governors to obtain an idea of liberty. If a figure has formed their own thoughts, and they desire to seek real liberty, they will be violently transformed until they finally surrender to the governors' thoughts, just as what is been experienced by Winston in this novel. When he is arrested because of seeking liberty, he is sent to Room 101, a place that violently transforms prisoners<sup>[7]</sup>. Prisoners are not released until they have expressed that they have changed their minds and have accepted the thoughts of Big Brother and during their imprisonment they endure violent transformation activities until they pronounce their acceptance of Big Brother's thoughts. The action most extreme in the torturous proceedings is that the governors do not directly kill these people who seek liberty. In contrast, the governors mainly want to transform the population's thoughts, thus, driving them to accept the name of liberty promoted by the government, that is, "liberty is slavery." In other words, the governors do not want to deprive people of their rights to survival and liberty. Conversely, instead of allowing the population to manifest their own thoughts of liberty and survival, the governors mainly want the population to accept the style of liberty and survival proposed by them.

In this novel, the conflicts between survival and liberty are not caused by human needs or choices. Instead, the conflicts are caused by the external context, the extreme political environment<sup>[8]</sup>. The government strictly controls the country, supervising the activities of all people and regulating their behaviours, as well as thoughts<sup>[7]</sup>. As a result of this regulation, the natural needs of the population in the country are highly compressed. Owing to this compression, the awakening of a personally constructed idea of liberty is not due to the natural needs of humans, but the outcome of a resistance to restrictively pressured governance<sup>[9]</sup>. Therefore, the conflict between surviving and having liberty is more likely a reflection of the conflict between individuals and the government. An individual's decision to abide by the requirements for liberty in these societies is more likely a social trend, rather than any one particular individual's requirements. For this reason, Winston represents the group of people who have already formed the idea of real liberty rather than a ruled liberty or slavery liberty dictated to them.

## 2.3 The Ideology Expressed by the Novel

Considering the perspective of liberty and survival, this novel expresses the idea that liberty is more likely to be an object of leisure while a human's need for survival will drive people to abandon thoughts of liberty when they are living in an extreme environment. In 1984, a totalitarian society was formed that granted the government absolute power to regulate the population<sup>[10]</sup>. Under this state, aside for the acceptance of Big Brother's thoughts, the population has no alternative choices, if they wish to survive in society. Due to this, the male protagonist in this novel ultimately gives up his thoughts of liberty to accept Big Brother's thoughts, regardless of his own autonomy to decide against this. This reveals that individuals are disallowed from their own personal choices aligned to their own needs and may only accept the cruel political environment<sup>[11]</sup>. Considering this perspective, the requirement of survival takes the dominant position to determine the behaviour of individuals when they are in an adverse political context. Thus, the male or female protagonists in this novel must choose to accept the condition of survival forced upon them, giving up their initial pursuit of liberty, no matter the efforts they have once made. The cruel fact of this political society is that they have no decision to make other decisions. Hence, the results of the novel reveal that an individual's needs for liberty and power are valueless when their conditions for survival come under threat.

## 2.4 Physical and Spiritual Needs

Considering the perspective of physical and spiritual needs in extreme living conditions, the two

types of needs are reduced to basic needs when individuals are restricted in their capacity to fight for higher level of needs without the sacrifice of their lives. McCarthy points out that when individuals have not formed the idea that their needs are dependent on self-sacrifice, they are unable to realise these needs. Just as Winston in 1984, the male protagonist has the needs of liberty, but he only wants to meet the needs by following the thoughts dictated by another group, and he has never thought that the needs of liberty could be based on his own capacity to fight. In this case, when he is arrested, he quickly gives up his thoughts following a period of violent transformation and his life coming under threat. This scenario illustrates that he does not want to sacrifice his life for the needs of liberty. Hence, his responses also reflect that people's physical needs are more important than spiritual needs, which play the dominant role in the behaviour of orient individuals.

Meanwhile, the choices guided by physical and spiritual needs are valueless in an extreme context when the external environment greatly exceeds a population's power. In 1984, the power of the government was too strong, as they had governed all individual lives through constant supervision of their daily behaviours, regulation of their minds and other techniques. Additionally, the government had also strictly controlled the channels through which individuals connect to the external environment.

In this case, no matter what Winston had done before, his actions are controlled by the government. Even when, he thinks he is connecting with the revolutionary group, the figure with whom he connects to is a spy of the government. Therefore, his efforts to achieve his needs are valueless, because all these actions are under the supervision of the government. Hence, when individuals live in an extreme environment, it seems that they have no other choice but to adapt to the environment to maintain survival. Satisfying their higher levelled needs would be impossible, as a result of their lack of choices to meet these needs.

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article has made an in-depth analysis of the relationship between survival and liberty in an extreme society via analysing Orwell's novel, 1984. To process the analysis, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the choice theory are referenced, and the critical review method is used. Based on the in-depth analysis of the novel, the following points are obtained. First, individuals' needs are profoundly impacted by an external environment that may reduce their physical and spiritual needs to the basic needs. When the lives of individuals are threatened by the external environment, survival will become the only need to satisfy, and individuals may do whatever they need to do to acquire the choice to survive. Other needs, such as liberty, will become valueless. Individuals may have needs driven by liberty, but they may quickly relinquish such needs when their lives are threatened by the external environment in extreme society. Second, to achieve a higher-level need, such as liberty, in an extreme society, individuals must have the awareness that these needs are based on an equivalent sacrifice. In an extreme society, liberty and survival becomes two contrasting aspects, which cannot coexist in this society. In this case, when people want to attain liberty, they will have the mindset that they may lose their lives in order to gain liberty. If an individual has not prepared to sacrifice their life in a fight for liberty, it is impossible for them to embrace liberty, just as Winston in 1984 finally did. Third, in a totalitarian society, the government's power has exceeded the population's total capacity and pushed them to realise that their efforts to gain liberty may be valueless. In this instance, liberty is regarded more as an object of leisure, and survival may become the more critical need for individuals. Overall, survival and liberty are two needs primarily derived from physical and spiritual needs, but it is not easy to meet or even maintain a balance between these when people are living in an extreme society. Under these conditions, how individuals behave depends on the intentions underlying these needs and the choices granted to them by the external environment.

### **References**

[1] Shoshani, M. and B. Shoshani.(2003). "Chapter 7 Psychic Survival versus Psychic Liberty:

- Reflections on Symington's Theory of Narcissism." *Progress in self psychology*,no.19,pp.133-151.
- [2] Veenhoven, R.(2010). "Capability and happiness: Conceptual difference and reality links." *The Journal of Socio-Economics*,vol.39,no.3,pp.344-350.
- [3] Yu, L. I. U.(2009). "Autonomous Activities--An Interpretation of Liberty Based on the Survival Theory." *Journal of Wuyi University (Social Science Edition)* no.4, pp.17-25.
- [4] Xie, Wenyu.(2007). *Liberty and Survival: Tracing the View of Liberty in the History of Western Thought*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- [5] Martin, M. W.(1984). "Demystifying doublethink: Self-deception, truth, and liberty in 1984." *Social Theory and Practice* pp.319-331.
- [6] Eckstein, A.(1985). "1984 and George Orwell's Other View of Capitalism." *Modern Age* no.1, pp.1-19.
- [7] Orwell, George.(1949). 1984. Secker & Warburg.
- [8] Bregha, F. J. (1980). "Leisure and liberty re-examined." *Recreation and leisure: Issues in an era of change*, pp.30-37.
- [9] Ingersoll, E. G.(1989). "The Decentering of Tragic Narrative in George Orwell's" Nineteen Eighty Four"." *Studies in the Humanities*, pp. 69-79.
- [10] Gleason, A.(1984). "'Totalitarianism' in 1984." *The Russian Review* 43.2, pp.145-159.
- [11] Kellner, D.(1990). "From 1984 to one-dimensional man: Critical reflections on Orwell and Marcuse." *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* no.10, pp.223-252.