

Doublethink

Doublethink is the act of simultaneously accepting two mutually contradictory beliefs as correct, often in distinct social contexts.^[1] Doublethink is related to, but differs from, hypocrisy and neutrality. Also related is cognitive dissonance, in which contradictory beliefs cause conflict in one's mind. Doublethink is notable due to a lack of cognitive dissonance—thus the person is completely unaware of any conflict or contradiction.

George Orwell invented the word *doublethink* (as part of Newspeak) in his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949. In the novel, its origins within the citizenry is unclear; while it could be partly a product of Big Brother's formal brainwashing programs,^[2] the novel explicitly shows people learning doublethink and Newspeak due to peer pressure and a desire to "fit in", or gain status within the Party—to be seen as a loyal Party Member. In the novel, for someone to even recognize—let alone mention—any contradiction within the context of the Party line is akin to blasphemy, and could subject that person to disciplinary action and the instant social disapproval of fellow Party Members.

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Origin and concepts

According to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, doublethink is:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to

the process itself—that was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word—doublethink—involved the use of doublethink.^[3]

The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just as long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies—all this is indispensably necessary. Even in using the word doublethink it is necessary to exercise doublethink. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of doublethink one erases this knowledge; and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth.^[4]

Orwell explains that the Party could not protect its near-absolute power without degrading its people with constant propaganda. Yet knowledge of this brutal deception, even within the Inner Party itself, could lead to the implosion of the State. Although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is most famous for the Party's pervasive surveillance of everyday life, this control means that the population of Oceania—all of it and including the ruling elite—could be controlled and manipulated merely through the alteration of everyday thought and language. Newspeak is the method for controlling thought through language; doublethink is the method of directly controlling thought.

Earlier in the book, doublethink is explained as being able to control your memories, to be able to manually forget something, then to forget about forgetting. This is demonstrated by O'Brien, during the time when Winston Smith is being tortured toward the end of the book.

Newspeak incorporates doublethink, as it contains many words that create assumed associations between contradictory meanings, especially true of fundamentally important words such as *good* and *evil*, *right* and *wrong*, *truth* and *falsehood*, and *justice* and *injustice*.

In the case of workers at the Records Department in the Ministry of Truth, doublethink means being able to falsify public records, and then believe in the new history that they themselves have just rewritten. As revealed in Goldstein's Book, the Ministry's name is itself an example of doublethink: the Ministry of Truth is really concerned with lies. The other ministries of Airstrip One are similarly named: the Ministry of Peace is concerned with war, the Ministry of Love is concerned with torture, and the Ministry of Plenty is concerned with starvation. The three slogans of the Party—*War is Peace*, *Freedom is Slavery*, and *Ignorance is Strength*—are also examples.^[1]

Moreover, doublethink's self-deception allows the Party to maintain huge goals and realistic expectations:

If one is to rule, and to continue ruling, one must be able to dislocate the sense of reality. For the secret of rulership is to combine a belief in one's own infallibility with the power to learn from past mistakes.

Thus each Party member could be a credulous pawn but would never lack relevant information, the Party being both fanatical and well informed and thus unlikely either to "ossify" or "grow soft" and collapse. Doublethink would avoid a "killing the messenger" attitude that could disturb the Command structure. Thus doublethink is the key tool of self-discipline for the Party, complementing the state-imposed discipline of propaganda and the police state. These tools together hide the government's evil not just from the people but from the government itself—but without the confusion and misinformation associated with primitive totalitarian regimes.

Doublethink is critical in allowing the Party to know what its true goals are without recoiling from them, avoiding the conflation of a regime's egalitarian propaganda with its true purpose.

Paradoxically, during the long and harrowing process in which the protagonist Winston Smith is systematically tortured and broken, he contemplates using doublethink as the ultimate recourse in his rebellion—to let himself become consciously a loyal party member while letting his hatred of the party remain an unconscious presence deep in his mind and let it surface again at the very moment of his execution so that "the bullet would enter a free mind" with which the Thought Police would not have a chance to tamper again.

Since 1949 (when *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published) the word *doublethink* has become synonymous with relieving cognitive dissonance by ignoring the contradiction between two world views—or even of deliberately seeking to relieve cognitive dissonance. Some schools of psychotherapy such as cognitive therapy encourage people to alter their own thoughts as a way of treating different psychological maladies (see cognitive distortions).

Orwell's "doublethink" is also credited with having inspired the commonly used term "doublespeak", which itself does not appear in the book. Comparisons have been made between doublespeak and Orwell's descriptions on political speech from his essay "Politics and the English Language", in which "unscrupulous politicians, advertisers, religionists, and other doublespeakers of whatever stripe continue to abuse language for manipulative purposes".^[5]

See also

- 2 + 2 = 5
- Alternative facts
- Frenemy
- Groupthink
- Paraconsistent logic
- Postmodernism

- Big lie
- Cognitive Dissonance
- Cultural dissonance
- Compartmentalization (psychology)
- Crimestop
- Dialectic
- Double bind
- Double-mindedness
- False dilemma
- Irony
- List of Newspeak words
- Memory hole
- Mu
- Nondualism
- One-Dimensional Man
- Reality-based community
- Relativism
- *Straight and Crooked Thinking*
- Syncretism
- Thoughtcrime

References

1. McArthur, Tom, ed. (1992). *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (<https://archive.org/details/oxfordcompanion00mcar/page/321>). Oxford University Press. p. 321 (<https://archive.org/details/oxfordcompanion00mcar/page/321>). ISBN 0-19-214183-X. "The paradox is expressed most succinctly in the novel in the three Party slogans: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength. The term is widely used to describe a capacity to engage in one line of thought in one situation (at work, in a certain group, in business, etc.) and another line in another situation (at home, in another group, in private life), without necessarily sensing any conflict between the two."
2. Such as for example, the seemingly formal brainwashing program that broke Winston Smith.
3. Orwell, George (1949). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, London, part 1, chapter 3, pp 32
4. Orwell, George (1949). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, London, part 2, chapter 9, pp 220
5. Kehl, D. G.; Livingston (July 1999). "Doublespeak Detection for the English Classroom". *English Journal*. **88** (6): 78. doi:10.2307/822191 (<https://doi.org/10.2307%2F822191>). JSTOR 822191 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/822191>).

External links

- "From 1984 to One-Dimensional Man.." by Douglas Kellner (<http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell13a.htm>)
- Commentary by Karen von Hardenberg of *The Trincoll Journal* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20081201101621/http://www.trincoll.edu/zines/tj/tj10.01.98/articles/cover.html>)

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