George Orwell on the Relationship Between Food and Thought

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This paper examines Orwell’s views on the relationship between food and thought. By examining Orwell’s nonfiction books, the paper argues that Orwell understood food as impacting thought in a variety of important ways. These ways include the creation or elimination of boredom, the provision or removal of sufficient comfort to think and write, the ability or inability to choose the objects of one’s thought, and the forced reconceptualisation of what it means to be human. The paper then argues that Orwell’s writings on the relationship between food and thought exemplify a broader focus on embodied cognition in his work. Finally, it examines the ways in which Orwell’s views on the relationship between food and thought influence the plots of Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four, in which food functions as a locus for propaganda, memory, motivation and revolution, among other things.

Keywords: food, thought, embodied cognition, propaganda, George Orwell

Two common topics in George Orwell’s writing are food and thought. This is not a new observation. Yet, there has been little discussion concerning Orwell’s views about the relationship between food and thought, especially the extent to which Orwell takes food to influence thought.

The paper begins by looking at some of Orwell’s earlier nonfiction works in which he writes about the impact of food and hunger on thought. It then argues that Orwell’s views on the relationship between food and thought are part of his larger interest in what is often referred to today as embodied cognition – i.e. the view that cognition is deeply dependent on aspects of the body beyond the brain. Finally, the paper examines how Orwell’s views about the relationship between food and thought influence his most famous works, Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four. The analysis suggests that part of what makes Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four so vivid are the ways in which the thoughts and actions of the characters are propelled by the sorts of things that do, in
fact, propel human thought and action, such as the desires to eat good food and to avoid hunger.

**FOOD AND THOUGHT IN ORWELL’S EARLY WRITINGS**

Eric Blair, who wrote under the pen name George Orwell, began his career as a British officer in Burma (now Myanmar) as part of Britain’s Indian Imperial Police. He spent five unhappy years (1922-1927) in this administrative position before resigning and returning to England in the hope of becoming a professional writer (Crick 1980: 98-133; Shelden 1991: 85-123). It was Blair’s unconventional choices upon arriving back in Europe that transformed Blair, the colonial functionary, into Orwell, the writer.

In preparation for his first book – and perhaps also out of a sense of penance for his participation in the ‘evil despotism’ of British imperialism (Orwell 1958 [1937]: 146-150) – Orwell decided to live among the poor in both Paris and London. While Orwell’s Eton education and his family’s limited resources kept him in some sense separate from the completely destitute, Orwell lived in genuine poverty at this time. By his own account, he was without savings, had very few belongings and often struggled to find work (Orwell 1961 [1933]). He eventually took up a position as a tutor and, in 1933, published his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which recounted his experiences during this stage of his life.

The link between food and thought was a common theme in the book. For example, in describing what it is like to be poor, Orwell writes:

> You discover what it is like to be hungry. With bread and margarine in your belly, you go out and look into the shop windows. Everywhere there is food insulating you in huge, wasteful piles; whole dead pigs, baskets of hot loaves, great yellow blocks of butter, strings of sausages, mountains of potatoes, vast gruyère cheeses like grindstones. A snivelling self-pity comes over you at the sight of so much food. You plan to grab a loaf and run, swallowing it before they catch you; and you refrain, from pure funk.

You discover the boredom which is inseparable from poverty; the times when you have nothing to do and, being underfed, can interest yourself in nothing. For half a day at a time you lie on your bed, feeling like the *jeune squelette* in Baudelaire’s poem. Only food could rouse you. You discover that a man who has gone even a week on bread and margarine is not a man any longer, only a belly with a few accessory organs (Orwell 1961 [1933]: 18-19).
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Here, we see several Orwellian themes about the impact of food, or the lack of it, on thought. First, hunger alters how you see the world. When you are hungry, food is everywhere and it insults you with its unobtainability. Orwell frequently offers long lists of food when discussing the hungry, as he does here. This seems to be an intentional choice, reflecting the hungry person’s attention to food. We are given a glimpse into the thoughts of the hungry with their long lists of delicious, unobtainable food. For the hungry, food becomes the central focus of thought.

Second, hunger impacts imagination. When you are hungry, you not only think about food, you imagine food. You imagine obtaining it, consuming it, stealing it. And you imagine little else. Third, hunger impacts how we view ourselves. For example, we become objects of self-pity. More dramatically, hunger drives us to reconceptualise what kind of being we are. When hungry, we are not Descartes’s thinking person. Rather, we are ‘a belly with a few accessory organs’. Hunger changes one’s self-conception from thinker to digester.

Fourth, hunger limits thought. While thoughts of food abound, most other thought is suppressed. Without food, we lose interest in other things. Boredom predominates. We are not easily roused. And the only escape from this condition is food. These themes appear throughout the work. For example, Orwell later writes that hunger ‘reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else. It is as though one had been turned into a jellyfish, or as though all one’s blood had been pumped out and luke-warm water substituted. Complete inertia is my chief memory of hunger’ (ibid: 38). Here, again, we see Orwell’s recognition of how hunger robs us of thought by putting us in a ‘brainless condition’ and changes how we relate to and conceive of ourselves.

The relationship between food and thought also serves an important role in many of the stories that Orwell tells in the book. For example, Orwell recounts that after many failed attempts at finding work, he and his friend Boris decide to spend some of their small amount of remaining money on food. Orwell describes the significance of the food on his friend as follows: ‘When we had got back to my room we spent another one franc fifty on bread and chocolate. Boris devoured his share, and at once cheered up like magic; food seemed to act on his system as rapidly as a cocktail. He took out a pencil and began making a list of the people who would probably give us jobs. There were dozens of them, he said’ (ibid: 31).

This scene is contrasted with another evening Orwell spent with Boris in which they did not have anything to eat. ‘We were too
hungry even to try and think of anything except food. I remember the dinner Boris finally selected for himself. It was: a dozen oysters, bortsh soup (the red, sweet, beetroot soup with cream on top), crayfishes, a young chicken en casserole, beef with stewed plums, new potatoes, a salad, suet pudding and Roquefort cheese, with a litre of Burgundy and some old brandy’ (ibid: 53). Here, then, is the theme of hunger’s ability to curtail thought about everything except food, and we are again given a glimpse into the thoughts of a hungry person: a list of things they would like to eat but cannot.

The passages covered so far focus on the effects of hunger on thought in the short term. But Orwell also notes long-term effects of food deprivation on a person. Orwell writes the following about a travelling companion during an itinerant period in London:

Nevertheless, he was a good fellow, generous by nature and capable of sharing his last crust with a friend; indeed he did literally share his last crust with me more than once. He was probably capable of work too, if he had been well fed for a few months. But two years of bread and margarine had lowered his standards hopelessly. He had lived on this filthy imitation of food till his own mind and body were compounded of inferior stuff. It was malnutrition and not any native vice that had destroyed his manhood (ibid: 153).

Here, Orwell encounters someone whom he considers to have a mind and body ‘compounded of inferior stuff’. Orwell is quick to note that this is not some intrinsic feature of the man, but rather the product of being sustained for two years by a ‘filthy imitation of food’.

This sample of Orwell’s views about the relationship between food and thought focuses largely on hunger or the absence of food, but Orwell also espoused views about the significance of which foods you eat. Perhaps the best source of Orwell’s views here is The Road to Wigan Pier, published four years after Down and Out in Paris and London. Like Orwell’s first book, The Road to Wigan Pier was the product of Orwell’s on-site observations. At the suggestion of his publisher, Orwell went up to England’s industrial north to observe how the poor and working class lived there (Crick 1980: 232-233). Of special focus in the book are the lives of coal miners and the unemployed. As part of his research, Orwell asked people how they spent their limited funds and what food they purchased (Orwell 1958 [1937]: 92). In discussing one of those responses, Orwell writes:

Would it not be better if they spent more money on wholesome things like oranges and wholemeal bread or if they even, like the writer of the letter to the New Statesman, saved on fuel
and ate their carrots raw? Yes, it would, but the point is that no ordinary human being is ever going to do such a thing. The ordinary human being would sooner starve than live on brown bread and raw carrots. ... A millionaire may enjoy breakfasting off orange juice and Ryvita biscuits; an unemployed man doesn’t. ... When you are unemployed, which is to say when you are underfed, harassed, bored, and miserable, you don’t want to eat dull wholesome food. You want something a little bit ‘tasty’... That is how your mind works when you are at the P.A.C. level. White bread-and-marg and sugared tea don’t nourish you to any extent, but they are nicer (at least most people think so) than brown bread-and-dripping and cold water. Unemployment is an endless misery that has got to be constantly palliated, and especially with tea, the English-man’s opium (Orwell 1958 [1937]: 95-96).

Basic sustenance may be required for thinking about things other than food but eating ‘tasty’ foods helps us continue to believe that life is worth living even when we are ‘underfed, harassed, bored, and miserable’. There is a trap in ‘how your mind works’ when you barely have enough money to buy the things you need to survive: food and drink provide the mental drug needed to find joy, but the foods that do this are not always the most practical, economical or nutritious choices. Thus, the millionaire experiences the mental freedom to ‘enjoy breakfasting off orange juice and Ryvita biscuits’ precisely because the millionaire’s life is not so miserable that eating dull food seems unthinkable.

Elsewhere in The Road to Wigan Pier, Orwell revisits some of his ideas about food from Down and Out in Paris and London, while adding new thoughts about the power of food that connect with his growing interests in the relationship between thought and politics. Here is a notable example:

A human being is primarily a bag for putting food into; the other functions and faculties may be more godlike, but in point of time they come afterwards. A man dies and is buried, and all his words and actions are forgotten, but the food he has eaten lives after him in the sound or rotten bones of his children. I think it could be plausibly argued that changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty or even of religion. The Great War, for instance, could never have happened if tinned food had not been invented. And the history of the past four hundred years in England would have been immensely different if it had not been for the introduction of root-crops and various other vegetables at the end of the Middle Ages, and a little later the introduction of nonalcoholic drinks (tea, coffee, cocoa) and also of distilled liquors to which the beer-drinking English were not accustomed. Yet it is curious how
seldom the all-importance of food is recognized. You see statues everywhere to politicians, poets, bishops, but none to cooks or bacon-curers or market-gardeners (ibid: 91-92).

Orwell expresses the bodily centrality of the digestive organs of the human over things like the mind and heart. Digestion is given primal supremacy over thought both in that it precedes thought and that its consequences outlast thought. Something present here, that was less central in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, is the large-scale political influence of food. We can conceive of history in terms of food and beverage, and the preparers of food deserve to be remembered alongside those who work in politics, writing and religion.

Before turning to the topic of Orwell on embodied cognition, here is one final quotation showing the development of Orwell’s views on the relationship between food and thought leading up to his post-World War II fiction. This quotation comes from *Homage to Catalonia*, which recounts Orwell’s time fighting with the Spanish Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Here Orwell is discussing the significance of rhetoric as part of the strategy of the war:

The man who did the shouting at the PSUC post down on our right was an artist at the job. Sometimes, instead of shouting revolutionary slogans he simply told the Fascists how much better we were fed than they were. His account of the Government rations was apt to be a little imaginative. ‘Buttered toast!’ — you could hear his voice echoing across the lonely valley — ‘We’re just sitting down to buttered toast over here! Lovely slices of buttered toast!’ I do not doubt that, like the rest of us, he had not seen butter for weeks or months past, but in the icy night the news of buttered toast probably set many a Fascist mouth watering. It even made mine water, though I knew he was lying (Orwell 2015 [1938]: 45).

This passage shows Orwell’s growing recognition of propaganda’s ability to influence our thought, specifically propaganda about food.

**ORWELL’S PHILOSOPHY OF EMBODIED COGNITION**

In the previous section, the paper offers evidence that Orwell saw eating, food and hunger as capable of exerting significant control over human thought. In this section, the paper argues that this is just one example of Orwell’s general embrace of embodied cognition. While Orwell would not have been familiar with the phrase ‘embodied cognition’, he shows an intimate understanding of the idea.
Robert A. Wilson and Lucia Foglia state that cognition is ‘embodied when it is deeply dependent upon features of the physical body of an agent, that is, when aspects of the agent’s body beyond the brain play a significant causal or physically constitutive role in cognitive processing’ (Wilson and Foglia 2017). This is contrasted with views in which, outside the brain, the body is viewed ‘as peripheral to understanding the nature of mind and cognition’ (ibid). On this understanding of embodied cognition, Orwell’s writings suggest he viewed cognition as embodied. This includes, but is not limited to, his writing on the relationship between food and thought. This section offers some additional examples of Orwell linking the conditions of thought to the conditions of the body.

A first example is the relationship between insufficient sleep and thought. In describing his experiences as a soldier in Homage to Catalonia, Orwell writes:

In my first three or four months in the line I do not suppose I had more than a dozen periods of twenty-four hours that were completely without sleep; on the other hand I certainly did not have a dozen nights of full sleep. Twenty or thirty hours’ sleep in a week was quite a normal amount. The effects of this were not so bad as might be expected; one grew very stupid, and the job of climbing up and down the hills grew harder instead of easier, but one felt well and one was constantly hungry — heavens, how hungry! (ibid: 43).

Of note is how a lack of sleep simultaneously affected Orwell’s thoughts (‘one grew very stupid’) and appetite (‘one was constantly hungry’). Orwell also discusses the relationship between sleep and thought in describing what it was like to be an overworked plongeur in the restaurant at a French hotel.

For nothing could be simpler than the life of a plongeur. He lives in a rhythm between work and sleep, without time to think, hardly conscious of the exterior world; his Paris has shrunk to the hotel, the Metro, a few bistro and his bed. … On his free day he lies in bed till noon, puts on a clean shirt, throws dice for drinks, and after lunch goes back to bed again. Nothing is quite real to him but the boulet, drinks and sleep; and of these sleep is the most important (Orwell 1961 [1933]: 90-91).

Here the demands of work and sleep leave one ‘without time to think’. Whatever thinking does occur is highly constricted, and this constricted thought life shrinks the world of the plongeur to just a few blocks in his immediate vicinity. Orwell later makes these connections between overwork, sleep and thought even more explicit:
I think one should start by saying that a *plongeur* is one of the slaves of the modern world. … His work is servile and without art; he is paid just enough to keep him alive; his only holiday is the sack. … One cannot say that it is mere idleness on their part, for an idle man cannot be a *plongeur*; they have simply been trapped by a routine which make thought impossible. If *plongeurs* thought at all, they would long ago have formed a union and gone on strike for better treatment. But they do not think, because they have no leisure for it; their life has made slaves of them (ibid: 116).

Here, we see how Orwell views one’s general life circumstances as influencing the capacity for thought. Orwell thinks that a certain level of leisure, provision and security is required for some forms of thought. He discusses similar themes in *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

But there is no doubt about the deadening, debilitating effect of unemployment upon everybody, married or single, and upon men more than upon women. The best intellects will not stand up against it. Once or twice it has happened to me to meet unemployed men of genuine literary ability; there are others whom I haven’t met but whose work I occasionally see in the magazines. Now and again, at long intervals, these men will produce an article or a short story which is quite obviously better than most of the stuff that gets whooped up by the blurb-reviewers. Why, then, do they make so little use of their talents? They have all the leisure in the world; why don’t they sit down and write books? Because to write books you need not only comfort and solitude … you also need peace of mind (Orwell 1958 [1937]: 81-82).

Orwell’s statement that even ‘the best intellects’ will not stand up against ‘the debilitating effects of unemployment’ is a clear repudiation of the idea that one’s thoughts can proceed unencumbered by one’s physical circumstances.

Orwell also makes explicit how embodied cognition shapes our thoughts about literature and politics, two themes of abiding interest and great importance to him. In his critical essay ‘Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of *Gulliver’s Travels*’, published after *Animal Farm* and before *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell writes that when ‘you are frightened, or hungry, or are suffering from toothache or seasickness, *King Lear* is no better from your point of view than *Peter Pan*. You may know in an intellectual sense that it is better, but that is simply a fact which you remember; you will not feel the merit of *King Lear* until you are normal again’ (Orwell 2000 [1946]: 384). Here a wide variety of physical miseries are put forward as having the ability to alter the aesthetic judgements we might otherwise have absent those miseries.
In his essay ‘Looking back on the Spanish War’, Orwell expresses similar views concerning human thought about politics, writing that people ‘forget that a soldier anywhere near the front line is usually too hungry, or frightened, or cold, or, above all, too tired to bother about the political origins of the war’ (Orwell 2000 [1943]: 217). This suggests Orwell recognises that controlling another’s physical circumstances can give one control over their political perspective. For Orwell, part of manipulating thought is manipulating the body.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOOD AND THOUGHT IN ANIMAL FARM

The allegorical novella Animal Farm, published in 1945, was Orwell’s first big commercial success. In the story, the animals of Manor Farm rebel against and drive out their human overlords to establish a more equal community, Animal Farm. However, the animals err by ceding a great amount of power to the pigs who step by step re-enslave the remaining animals. By the end of the story, the animals can no longer tell the difference between their previous masters and their new ones.

Food plays an important role in every step of this progression. Matters are set in motion by a speech from Old Major, an elderly pig nearing death. Old Major’s speech consists in painting a bleak picture of the animals’ current circumstances and a vision for better times after the overthrow of humans. Both aspects of his speech appeal to food. In describing current circumstances Old Major points out that the animals ‘are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies’ (Orwell 1956 [1945]: 6). He later sings to the animals a song meant to capture the vision of an animal-run future. In keeping with Orwell’s proclivity to list foods, one of the song’s seven verses is devoted to food:

Riches more than mind can picture,
Wheat and barley, oats and hay
Clover, beans, and mangel-wurzels
Shall be ours upon that day (ibid: 12).

Old Major passes away shortly after giving his speech, and the focus turns to the animals’ discussion of his message. Many of the animals begin preparing for the overthrow of the humans. Others have worries, the most prominent of which deal with food. For example, Orwell writes, with tongue in cheek, that the ‘stupidest questions of all [about the possible rebellion] were asked by Mollie, the white mare; The very first question she asked Snowball was: “Will there still be sugar after the Rebellion?”’ (ibid: 16). In contrast to the narrative framing, one cannot help but think that Orwell considers such a question about life after rebellion among the smartest questions one can ask.
But just as food was a primary concern in considering the rebellion, so too food was the direct catalyst for the rebellion. It is after the farmer fails one day to feed the animals that they rebel because ‘they could stand it no longer’ (ibid: 19). It was ideology combined with hunger that led the animals to rebel.

Because discussion of food in *Animal Farm* is so ubiquitous, discussion will be limited to just three additional anecdotes about the role of food in the story, with each anecdote touching on food’s connection to thought. First, Orwell makes unequal apportionment of food and drink the first step the pigs take in turning Animals Farm’s collective ownership into a porcine dictatorship. The other animals learn that the surplus milk has been mixed into only the pigs’ food and that the windfall of ripening apples, which the ‘animals had assumed as a matter of course would be shared out equally’, will be given only to the pigs. In order to calm some of the animals’ misgivings about this, the most rhetorically inclined of the pigs, the aptly named Squealer, provides the other animals with the following explanation:

‘Comrades!’ he cried. ‘You do not imagine, I hope, that we pigs are doing this in a spirit of selfishness and privilege? Many of us actually dislike milk and apples. I dislike them myself. Our sole objective in taking these things is to preserve our health. Milk and apples (this has been proved by Science, comrades) contain substances absolutely necessary to the well-being of a pig. We pigs are brain-workers. The whole management and organization of this farm depend on us. Day and night we are watching over your welfare. It is for your sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples’ (ibid: 35-36).

Just as food was the impetus for rebellion, so too food is the pigs’ initial impetus for seeking to swindle the other animals. In one sense, this passage contains a clear relationship between food and thought inasmuch as Squealer makes one: the pigs need the milk and apples because they are ‘brain-workers’. It is the pigs who do the important work of ‘management and organization’. It is in the best interest of everyone else to sacrifice certain tasty foods so that the pigs can have the mental stamina to run things.

Of course, Squealer is an untrustworthy rhetorician, and it is clear that he is attempting to trick the other animals with his explanation. This might lead one initially to doubt Squealer’s claim that milk and apples are somehow particularly good for the brain. But on reflection, this is not the best interpretation. Rather, Squealer’s real swindle is convincing the animals that the only ‘brain-workers’ are the pigs. Tacit acceptance of this premise is required to justify the pigs getting the extra goods. Our earlier survey of Orwell’s views on food and thought suggest Orwell might see the extra milk and...
MARK SATTAA apples as, in fact, very good for one’s brain. In depriving the other animals of milk and apples, not only do the pigs give themselves extra brain-stimulating food, they also deprive the other animals of sustenance that could help them develop their own thoughts, which might be thoughts contrary to the ones the pigs would like them to have.

Later on, after a series of misfortunes and missteps, the animals find themselves running short on food. In order to procure food, the tyrannical and cunning leader of the pigs, Napoleon, contracts with a man named Mr Whymper to function as the animals’ intermediary with the human world outside the farm. Rumours of the food shortage on Animal Farm have begun circulating. Napoleon is concerned about the impact these truthful rumours would have on Animal Farm’s prospects and concocts a plan to avoid this.

Napoleon was well aware of the bad results that might follow if the real facts of the food situation were known, and he decided to make use of Mr Whymper to spread a contrary impression. Hitherto the animals had had little or no contact with Whymper on his weekly visits: now, however, a few selected animals, mostly sheep, were instructed to remark casually in his hearing that rations had been increased. In addition, Napoleon ordered the almost empty bins in the store-shed to be filled nearly to the brim with sand, which was then covered up with what remained of the grain and meal. On some suitable pretext Whymper was led through the store-shed and allowed to catch a glimpse of the bins. He was deceived and continued to report to the outside world that there was no food shortage on Animal Farm (Orwell 1956 [1945]: 75).

There are at least two notable aspects of this anecdote. First, food is used here as propaganda. Napoleon uses food and discussion of it to convey a political message to Whymper about the animals’ state of affairs. This message is then circulated through the larger community surrounding Animal Farm. Second, assessments of food are closely tied up with assessments of sustainability and self-sufficiency. Orwell does not need to spell out that the surrounding community assesses the sustainability and self-sufficiency of Animal Farm in terms of how good their food situation is.

A final anecdote takes us back to a topic introduced at the start of the tale: sugar. In the penultimate chapter of the novella, the quality of life for most of the animals has deteriorated substantially. Amid tales of hardship for most animals, Orwell slips in a quick piece of information: Napoleon has sugar for his own table, yet ‘forbade this to the other pigs, on the ground that it made them fat’ (ibid: 114). The answer to Mollie’s ‘stupid’ question turns out to
be that there is sugar after the rebellion, but it is reserved only for the animals’ new master. Animal Farm has captivated the attention of readers for more than seventy-five years. Part of the reason is because we, the readers, can relate so easily to the hardships and desires the animals feel.

FOOD AMONGST THE DYSTOPIAN GLOOM OF NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR

Food does not play as central a role in Nineteen Eighty-Four as it does in Animal Farm. This may be because other aspects of embodied life – sex, physical pain and intoxication – loom larger there instead. Still, food is used in powerful ways in the story. Here are two examples. The first concerns a particular type of food: chocolate. As in Animal Farm, Orwell uses food as a topic for propaganda. The novel’s protagonist, Winston Smith, learns one day that the chocolate ration is being cut from 30 grams to 20. The next day Winston is tasked with rewriting a past speech of Big Brother’s where Big Brother made a ‘categorical promise’ that chocolate rations would not be lowered. In the rewritten speech, Big Brother instead predicts the decrease (Orwell 1950 [1949]: 38-39).

But chocolate also has a more personal role to play in Winston’s story. Later, Winston is given a piece of illicitly obtained chocolate by his girlfriend Julia. Orwell describes the scene as follows:

Even before he [Winston] had taken it he knew by the smell that it was very unusual chocolate. It was dark and shiny, and was wrapped in silver paper. Chocolate normally was dull-brown crumbly stuff that tasted, as nearly as one could describe it, like the smoke of a rubbish fire. But at some time or another he had tasted chocolate like the piece she had given him. The first whiff of its scent had stirred up some memory which he could not pin down, but which was powerful and troubling (ibid: 121).

Winston later recovers the full memory as the last time he saw his mother and little sister. Winston, still a boy at the time, had wanted more than his fair share of a small amount of chocolate his mother had obtained. He absconded with the chocolate and ran out of the house to devour his acquisition. Later in the day ‘hunger drove him home,’ but his mother and sister had been taken (ibid: 162-63). Here we see a new connection between food and thought, namely, food as a catalyst for memory. We also again see food as a motivating force for action and Orwell’s interest in the significant difference between food that tastes good and food that tastes ‘like the smoke of a rubbish fire’.
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A final anecdote from Nineteen Eighty-Four returns us to the theme of embodied cognition and how our physical circumstances—especially circumstances of deprivation, fear and hunger—influence our thoughts. Winston is eventually captured by the ‘Thought Police’ and left in a holding cell with other thought criminals. There Orwell describes Winston’s thoughts as follows:

If you made unexpected movements they yelled at you from the telescreen. But the craving for food was growing upon him. What he longed for above all was a piece of bread. He had an idea that there were a few breadcrumbs in the pocket of his overalls. It was even possible—he thought this because from time to time something seemed to tickle his leg—that there might be a sizeable bit of crust there. In the end the temptation to find out overcame his fear, he slipped a hand into his pocket (ibid: 226).

There was no bread in his pocket. But the thought of bread lingered with him anyway. Winston’s thoughts continued to be restricted. ‘His mind sagged round and round on the same track, like a ball falling again and again into the same series of slots. He had only six thoughts. The pain in his belly, a piece of bread, the blood and the screaming, O’Brien, Julia, the razor blade’ (ibid: 232). While confined, Winston’s thought life boils down to hunger, food, torture, his torturer, his girlfriend, and suicide—with the first of these being hunger and food. When our thought life breaks down, thoughts of food stay with us until the end.

CONCLUSION

Like Descartes, Orwell was keenly aware of the importance of thought for human beings. Only someone who recognises that humans deeply value thought would create a dystopian story in which the only real offence is ‘thoughtcrime’. But unlike Descartes, Orwell’s writings reflect a keen understanding and abiding interest in the dependence of thought on body. Orwell’s recognition of the significance of the material for human intellectual flourishing may help explain why Orwell was drawn to the political left. It may also help explain why he was such an effective political writer.

Orwell’s views on the relationship between food and thought represent just one way in which Orwell united the cerebral and the corporeal. Orwell brings worlds to life—the real and the fictional—by providing the reader with sensations to feel and ideas to ponder. Both the sensations and the thoughts are richer in virtue of how they are juxtaposed with one another. This juxtaposition forms part of his political outlook. We see this play out in Animal Farm, where the animals’ material conditions work in tandem with their ideology to drive their actions.
This paper covers only one way in which Orwell connects the material with the ideological. There is plenty of room for further examination of these connections in his writing. This paper also covers only one of many ways in which Orwell’s writing implicitly contains within it an expression of a philosophical idea, which in this case is the idea of embodied cognition. The philosophical dimensions of Orwell’s writing provide another area in which there is abundant space for further study. Orwell, both as a thinker and writer, leaves readers with much food for thought.

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