On Orwell's "1984" and Common Sense

Orwell is not a philosopher and *1984* is not a philosophic work. However, Orwell forces us to consider philosophic issues by arguing that modern tyranny is caused not by technology but by something more fundamental: the comprehensive rejection of the idea of nature. The emancipation of technology described in *1984* is sensible only if a decision has been made that nature is devoid of meaning. The terrible tyranny of Oceania is successful because it embodies an idea which in fact its subjects accept, that there is no objective reality or nature which should be respected. Orwell warns his readers that this idea, which is so widespread in modern times, is the true source of modern tyranny. In other words, Orwell reminds us of a very basic point: our ideas have political consequences. Once the idea of nature has been rejected, it is impossible to defend freedom over slavery. It makes perfect sense to love Big Brother if there is no external standard of nature by which he can be judged. Orwell's *1984* is a plea for sanity in a world which seems to be losing its grip on reality. He asks us to cling to the common sense notion that good and bad, right and wrong, noble and base are real. Oceania is nothing more than the political manifestation of their denial. This study of *1984* will explore Orwell's argument about the cause of modern tyranny and the alternative which he offers us. Is common sense sufficient as a bulwark against the ideas which foster modern tyranny? In order to approach these issues, three topics must be analyzed: first, the significance of time in *1984*; second, Orwell's view of human nature; and third, the effect which the rejection of nature has on language.

The Significance of Time

The fundamental characteristic of the ruling party in Oceania is its control of time, as is evident from the party slogan: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." (32, 204)[1] This slogan is the embodiment of an idea which is a threat to the very existence of politics and human nature itself. The party stands for the enforcement of transience through the ab-

1. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: New American Library, 1949). All quotations from *1984* are from this edition.

solute control of the past. "The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc [English Socialism]." (176) Winston Smith, the main character in *1984*, has the job of rewriting history in what is called the Ministry of Truth. But Orwell suggests that embracing transience is tantamount to abandoning any possibility of establishing standards of truth and falsehood. "Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth." (64) One can only make a distinction between truth and falsehood by looking beyond the moment; if nature establishes no standards of truth which are eternal, then what is right can only be determined by force. O'Brien, Winston's inquisitor, says: "do you realize that the past, starting from yesterday, has actually been abolished? . . . History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right." (128)

The abolition of the past is the rejection of eternity, and this results in complete groundlessness. Orwell's primary focus in *1984* is this problem of groundlessness; Oceania is the logical extension of the rejection of eternity. In other words, *1984* is an inquiry into an idea more than it is an account of tyranny. In an essay of his, Orwell says that "to be corrupted by totalitarianism one does not have to live in a totalitarian country. The mere prevalence of certain ideas can spread a kind of poison . . . ."[2] Modernity presents us with ideas which are essentially tyrannic, and one has an obligation to confront them whether or not they are actually the ruling ideas of a political party. He says in one of his letters:

> My recent novel is *not* intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical conclusions.[3]

2. George Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature," in *1984: Text, Sources, Criticism*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), 269.

3. George Orwell, "Letters," in *1984: Text, Sources, Criticism*, 287.

What seems to frighten Orwell is that ideas which have dangerous ramifications are openly accepted by those who live in free societies and who believe that they are defenders of freedom. He says that "the direct, conscious attack on intellectual decency comes from the intellectuals." Orwell's *1984* explores the crisis of our time by drawing out the terrifying implications of our thoughts. Tyranny has always been a potential threat to political life, but in our time the real danger is not merely that tyranny might threaten us, but that we will find ourselves unable to say that tyranny is bad. "What was terrifying was not that they would kill you for thinking otherwise, but that they might be right." (69) The enemy in modern times is not technology or a particular political party, but the view which is gaining acceptance that one cannot determine in an objective manner how technology should be used or which political party to follow.

Winston's crime against the state is that he will not accept the rejection of eternity through the abolition of the past. Thus, Orwell invites us to witness a conflict between Winston and the state as a conflict between two views of time. But Winston proves an unworthy opponent. He is infatuated with the past, but his memories of it are confused and fragmentary. His memories come in dreams (132), in response to smells (70, 118, 141), and while he is under the influence of Victory Gin. (243) Winston's mind is not strong enough to hold on to a vision of the past without assistance from other people or objects. This is what leads him to question an old man at a bar which is frequented by proles (proletarians). Winston is desperate for another human being to confirm that the Party is not the sole source of meaning in the world through its control of time. But the old man cannot help him. (79) The same desire to obtain objective confirmation of the existence of the past is in evidence when Winston receives through a Party error a photograph of three men who had been executed for treason. The photograph proves conclusively that the men could not have been guilty of the crimes with which they had been charged. The significance of the photograph is not that it opened Winston's eyes to something new, but that it confirmed what he knew was not merely subjective. "This was not in itself a discovery . . . . But this was concrete evidence; it was a fragment of the abolished past, like a fossil bone which turns up in the wrong stratum and destroys a geological theory. It was enough to blow the Party to atoms . . . ." (67) Winston understands that the Party's power is derived from a view of time and not from

technology. Tyranny in our age cannot be opposed if one denies the existence of the truths which depend on an external reality. As C.S. Lewis says, "a dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery."[4] Winston is not confident of his own mind; hence, he needs crutches to support his conviction that truth and falsehood do exist. But Winston's strength has been sapped by his own lack of intellectual assurance.

Orwell illustrates the importance of eternity in *1984* through his treatment of a paperweight that Winston buys in an antique shop. He buys it because it is "a beautiful thing." (81) He is attracted to it because it belongs to "the vanished, romantic past, the olden time as he liked to call it in his secret thoughts." (141) And the paperweight itself is indirectly responsible for his decision to risk his life by renting a room for the purposes of a love affair. "The idea had first floated into his head in the form of a vision of the glass paperweight mirrored by the surface of the gateleg table." (114) The beauty of the paperweight urges him to act in a way consistent with its beauty. He knows that he will be caught and executed for his actions, but the paperweight, like the news clipping of Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford, gives him the confidence of his convictions. He somehow knows that life will be meaningless if he fails to meet privately with Julia.

> He turned over toward the light and lay gazing into the glass paperweight. The inexhaustibly interesting thing was not the fragment of coral but the interior of the glass itself. There was such a depth of it, and yet it was almost as transparent as air. It was as though the surface of the glass had been the arch of the sky, enclosing a tiny world with its atmosphere complete. . . . The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal. (122)

The paperweight reminds Winston of the past and therefore of eternity. But these thoughts are as delicate as the glass itself, because they are not based on long and serious reflection. (183) Winston has a strong feeling that some truths must be eternal, but he cannot give an account of either transience or eternity. Therefore, his resistance to transience crumbles when he is forced to confront it directly.

4. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 85.

O'Brien understands this when he says to Winston: "You are no metaphysician." (205) And as he is being questioned, Winston comes to see the significance of O'Brien's remark. "What most oppressed him was the consciousness of his own intellectual inferiority." (211) He tries to disagree with O'Brien, but he is only capable of responding "feebly, without arguments, with nothing to support him except his inarticulate horror of what O'Brien had said." (222)

O'Brien's argument is simply that "reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else." (205) Once this is accepted, it makes no sense to oppose tyranny. Nietzsche denied that nature is capable of providing standards for life and suggested that science itself is interpretation.[5] O'Brien makes a similar point:

> There is nothing that we could not do. Invisibility, levitation—anything. I could float off this floor like a soap bubble if I wished to. . . . You must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of nature. We make the laws of nature. (218)

O'Brien's arguments are frightening when applied to politics, but his views are hardly unfamiliar to us. O'Brien might be a character in one of Sartre's or Beckett's plays.[6] And his arguments lurk just beneath the surface of most of what passes for political science in our time, for what is the fact-value distinction but a polite version of this. If one can reason only about facts, and if values are wholly arbitrary, then there is no reason to choose reason over madness in politics. O'Brien asserts that since nature itself is meaningless, it can be replaced as a standard with arbitrary human creation. In other words, man is the measure of all things. "Outside man there is nothing." (219) Since the Party creates nature out of nothing, it has no purpose or goal in mind. "The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake." (217)

Orwell shows us that the abolition of eternity makes it impossible to oppose arbitrary power. He also presents Winston to us as a decent man who somehow senses that what the Party stands for is bad, and yet Winston is incapable of arguing against the evil that he sees. His decency cannot withstand the onslaught of O'Brien's arguments.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 21.

6. Compare O'Brien's arguments to those of Sartre in *No Exit* and Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*.

In this respect, Winston is like most of us. We oppose tyranny, but we have been so influenced by the destructive ideas made popular by modern philosophy following Nietzsche that we really cannot defend our opposition to tyranny. Orwell's *1984* warns us that we must face the consequences of our opinions; once we realize that most of us could not make a reasonable argument in opposition to tyranny, then there is hope that we will change our opinions before it is too late. There is hope for the future only if we can learn from the picture which Orwell gives us of our own thoughts.

Groundlessness and Human Nature

Orwell informs us in a rather unambiguous way that Winston represents "the spirit of man." (222) It is this spirit which is threatened by the abolition of eternity. We learn early in the book that Winston is sick; he has a debilitating cough and troublesome varicose veins. He also drinks excessively, even though he dislikes the taste of Victory Gin. The mood which most characterizes Winston is that of "complete helplessness." (10, 78, 204, 205) Orwell suggests that our spirit cannot remain healthy and strong if it is cut off from eternity. He makes this point more directly when he has Winston say:

> The sacred principles of Ingsoc. Newspeak, doublethink, the mutability of the past. He felt as though he were wandering in the forests of the sea bottom, lost in a monstrous world where he himself was the monster. He was alone. The past was dead, the future was unimaginable. (25)

Winston has become a kind of monster. He has, in effect, become something less than human as a result of living a life based on radical transience. Stanley Rosen argues that this is the dilemma which faces all of us who accept nihilism in some form. "For given the nonexistence of the future and the valuelessness of the past, how can a radically temporal present stand on its own . . .?"[7] Once man has divorced himself from eternity, how can he find meaning in the moment?

In order to retain our humanity, we need to hold on to the past and the future, to memories and to dreams. Winston is different

7. Stanley Rosen *Nihilism* (New Haven: Yale, 1969), 141.

from most of those around him in that he has both memories and dreams. (32, 52, 63, 101, 103, 243) However, the key to time in *1984* seems to be the past, because the control of the past implies control of the future.[8] Therefore, Winston's main offense against the state is that "his memory was not satisfactorily under control." (32) This is what makes it possible for him to notice the fact that Oceania has not always been at war with Eurasia, even though the Party denies this. Although it is true that Winston does not have any real confidence in his memories, he is constantly plagued by them. He resents the way of life represented by the Party, and this resentment is tied to the fact of memory. "Always in your stomach and in your skin there was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something that you had a right to . . . . Why should one feel it to be intolerable unless one had some kind of ancestral memory that things had once been different?" (52) O'Brien recognizes that Winston's ties to the past through memory are a significant problem. He says: "You know perfectly well what is the matter with you . . . You are mentally deranged. You suffer from a defective memory." (203) Finally, Winston is cured. His triumph over memories is the key to his transformation from someone who hates Big Brother into someone who loves Big Brother. "He was troubled by false memories occasionally. They did not matter so long as one knew them for what they were." (243) Winston's memories of the past were his primary link with eternity and hence with objective truth. To be cured of such memories is to be bound to transience.

In addition to having a faulty memory, Winston has a frustrating sexual existence. His wife, Katherine, disliked sexual intercourse, but submitted to it for the sake of the Party. (58) This led Winston to a series of disgusting encounters with female proles, one of whom is described as quite old and toothless. (60) When Winston finds himself attracted to someone else—to a young, attractive woman named Julia—his desire first manifests itself as violence; he takes pleasure in imagining various ways he could do her harm:

> Vivid, beautiful hallucinations flashed through his mind. He would flog her to death with a rubber truncheon. He would tie her naked to a stake and shoot her full of arrows like Saint Sebastian. He would ravish her, and cut her throat at the moment of climax. Better than before,

8. Martin Heidegger, "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" in *The Journal of Metaphysics*, 1967.

> moreover, he realized why it was that he hated her. He hated her because she was young and pretty and sexless, because he wanted to go to bed with her and would never do so . . . . (16)

Winston recognizes that the Party is responsible for the sexual frustration he feels, but he does not understand why. However, he does realize that there is a connection between eros and the political community. The Party cannot allow human desire its natural outlets.[9] "The sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion. Desire was thoughtcrime." (59) O'Brien openly admits this when he states that the Party plans to abolish the orgasm. (220) When Winston actually gets a chance to meet Julia privately in the country, he does not feel desire for her at first. And when they do have sexual intercourse, he feels that "the embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act." (105) The political significance of their union is not lost as their relationship continues, but Winston does begin to feel true desire for her. (115) He becomes more human through her.

Julia, who is defined almost completely by her sexuality, understands the antagonism between the Party and sex more fully than Winston. She believes that the feverish devotion that people feel toward the Party is merely "sex gone sour." (111) Her view is that there is a "direct connection between chastity and political orthodoxy." Human desire turns Winston towards Julia and away from the Party. It suggests to him a standard of happiness beyond the control of the political community. Eros is transpolitical; if allowed its freedom it will be in a constant state of tension with the political community. Socrates understands this when he constructs his city in speech. As Bloom points out: "Attraction and love in themselves know no limits of propriety, exigency, law or country. They are most dangerous to a city . . . ."[10] In this respect, Winston's love affair is a threat to the Party in the same way that his memories are a threat.

> He wondered vaguely whether in the abolished past it had been a normal experience to lie in bed like this, in the cool of a summer evening, a man and a woman with no clothes on, making love when they chose,

9. Allan Bloom, ed., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 473.
10. *Ibid.*, 384.

> talking of what they chose, not feeling any compulsion to get up, simply lying there and listening to peaceful sounds outside. (119)

Winston benefits from his relationship with Julia, because sexual intercourse is a healthy, human activity. It is also a link with eternity; even those trying to avoid pregnancy are reminded of it in their attempt to avoid it. Orwell emphasizes the importance that true desire has for Winston by indicating that his health actually improves. His constant gin-drinking stops, his varicose ulcer subsides, and his coughing fits end. (124) Julia is making him happy, and this implies that the Party does not define happiness. The attempt by the Party to abolish the past must involve an assault on sexual desire. Julia re-awakens desire in Winston, and this is a threat to the Party because it is a direct challenge to their claim to be the only source of truth.

The Party's claim that existence is subjective means that human nature must be denied.[11] O'Brien makes this clear in his interrogation of Winston. He says: "You are imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us. But we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable." (222) Again, Orwell's book seems to be a critique of a philosophic position more than an attack on tyranny. We are warned about the idea itself through a picture of its consequences. If human nature does not exist or is not admitted, then how can one criticize any form that manipulation or oppression of human beings takes?

The ultimate example of this is not what O'Brien does to Winston, but rather what Winston accomplishes by himself quite early in the book. In his office he is confronted with a difficult task: he has to rewrite a speech of Big Brother's, in which a vaporized person is praised. Winston decides he must write a completely new speech in order to correct the defects of the old one. "What was needed was a piece of pure fantasy." (41) Winston therefore creates a completely new human being named Comrade Ogilvy. This is creation *ex nihilo*, and it means that in his role as a representative of the Party, Winston assumes the role of God and becomes the source of being. The Party rejects eternity and replaces it with momentary willful creation. "Comrade Ogilvy, who had never existed in the present,

11. Irving Howe, "The Fiction of Anti-Utopia," in *1984: Text, Sources, Criticism*, 303.

now existed in the past." (43) He is therefore as real as anyone else under the rule of the Party. The rejection of eternity invites us to replace nature with creativity.[12]

Because he sees human nature crushed and remade by the Party as a result of its rejection of nature, Winston believes that "if there is hope it lies in the proles." (60) The proles are not monitored in the way that Party members are, and they constitute eighty-five per cent of the population. The problem with them is that they are dominated by their own petty selfishness. Winston thought one day that he had heard the beginning of a true revolt. "His heart had lept. It's started! he had thought. A riot!" (60) But when he arrived at the spot where he had heard the commotion, he discovered that it was just the sound of some women complaining that there were not enough tin saucepans for sale at a street market. This leads him to conclude that placing any hope on the proles amounted to "a mystical truth and a palpable absurdity." (70) In spite of this, Winston does understand something fundamental about the proles. "The proles had stayed human." (136) They held on to their emotions and to their personal relationships. In a sense, the proles have the common sense that Winston lacks; he is too educated to be able to avoid a conversion to the ranks of the Party faithful. But the proles are "people who had never learned to think but were storing up in their hearts and bellies and muscles the power that would one day overturn the world . . . The proles were immortal." (181) Orwell presents us here with a dilemma. Is he implying that the rejection of eternity is theoretically sound but disastrous in its consequences? Are the educated condemned unless they reject what they have learned in favor of memories of a time when things were better and in favor of honest desire? Are we most human when we turn to what is most common in us?

It is unlikely that Orwell intends that we understand him this way. Intellectuals today should, however, learn a lesson from the proles. A renewed appreciation of what is common in us can refresh the intellect. It can put it back in touch with the real world. It is hard to deny the objective reality of the world when caught up in the heat of passion.

12. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* and Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (New York: International Publishers, 1969).

The Problem of Language

If our nature is defined by our capacity to speak, then it follows that the rejection of nature has consequences for our speech. Orwell never defines man as a rational being, but the attention he devotes to language in *1984* suggests that he may accept this time-honored view. Language is completely controlled in Oceania. At one level this control seems to be nothing more than a tool of oppression. The ruling party can consolidate its power by taking care that speech is regulated in various ways. Orwell's work has encouraged some discussion of political rhetoric and propaganda from this perspective.[13] But Orwell is making a more complicated point; he is suggesting that the rejection of nature affects human speech. Our ability to speak is related to the existence of an objective reality. Oceania is not merely a tyranny which controls language, but an example of what must happen to language when it has been deprived of its foundation in what Socrates called the good. Orwell therefore alerts us to the problem of language in our time, a problem more general than the problem of tyranny or political oppression.

Newspeak is the language being developed by the Party in *1984*. One of the authors of the Party dictionary, Syme, explains that "the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought." (46) He illustrates his argument by using the word "good." He explains that when Newspeak has been perfected, all references to good and bad will be able to be made with variations of one word. (46) If the Party is founded on the rejection of eternal nature, then ideas of good and bad have no objective validity. Consequently, language itself must be adjusted. When there is no truth to be expressed in language, it loses its coherence. It is logical under these circumstances to eliminate words from the language. Syme says to Winston: "You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We're destroying words—scores of them, hundreds of them, every day." (45)

Doublethink is not an exotic technique of control used by an imaginary tyranny, but a necessary result of the destruction of language. Doublethink is the ability

13. Sidney Drell, "Newspeak and Nukespeak" in *On 1984*, ed. Peter Stansky (New York: Freeman and Co., 1983), 33.

> 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. (32)

This is, of course, absurd, and yet it is logical that this view of thought follows from the abolition of eternity. If there is no truth, then speech of any kind is indefensible; therefore, it is more absurd under these circumstances to demand consistent, coherent thought. Orwell teaches us that the rejection of nature leads to the destruction of language and the destruction of thought itself. Oceania is a literary device for making this fundamental point. Insofar as our humanity is defined by reason, it is threatened by the rejection of eternal truth.

Syme says that "the Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect." (46) Orwell says in his appendix on Newspeak that the perfection of the new language means that "the last link with the past [will] have been severed." (225) The example he gives of his point is the Declaration of Independence. He quotes the passage which begins: "we hold these truths to be self evident . . . ." This passage simply cannot be translated into Newspeak. "A full translation would only be an ideological translation, whereby Jefferson's words would be changed into a panegyric on absolute government." (256) This statement of Orwell's helps us see that there is a complex and subtle relationship between philosophic views of truth, politics, human nature and language. This is important because our time is characterized by widespread rejection of nature as a standard for human affairs. We face the abolition of human nature whether or not we succumb to an actual tyranny, though actual tyranny becomes more likely when language cannot identify good and bad.

Winston strikes out against this by deciding to keep a diary. His first entry begins with a date: April 4, 1984. As soon as he writes this, he realizes the tremendous difficulty of his project. He has no way of knowing whether or not it really is 1984. The abolition of eternity makes the act of writing senseless. This is suggested by Orwell's statement that Winston began writing "in sheer panic." (11) His first piece is almost incomprehensible; it is missing capital letters, verbs, and most punctuation. Winston is terrified by the thought that true communication is impossible. Only by rejecting transience can Winston write. Shortly, his thoughts begin to take a

more coherent form: he writes that the diary is dedicated "to the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free . . . to a time when truth exists . . . ." (27)

Orwell addresses this issue clearly in "Politics and the English Language." He admits in the essay that the English language is "in a bad way," but he denies that we must submit to its "general collapse." He asserts that there is a reciprocal relationship between politics and language. One can, he argues, have an effect on our thoughts and ultimately on politics if we are successful in improving our language.

> The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think more clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration.[14]

His essay is completely sensible, and can be helpful to anyone who shares the basic belief that eternal truth exists to be articulated by language. However, Orwell's analysis ends here. His call to save language is weak because it depends on a more comprehensive defense of eternity.

Orwell's *1984* is a stern warning about the consequences of the rejection of eternity. He shows us that once we abandon it, we cannot defend freedom over slavery, human nature over barbarism, or language over silence. Orwell's attempt to address the most important modern problems is noble, but it is ultimately insufficient. He asks us to hold on to the idea of eternity because it simply does not make sense to reject it. In the book, Winston is unable to make any real argument against the view that truth is completely subjective and temporal. He cannot say why the Party is wrong, and yet he knows in his heart of hearts that the Party is wrong. Orwell leaves his readers in Winston's position. We are presented with a terrible picture of the consequences of rejecting eternity, but we do not see a serious defense of eternity itself. It is a violation of common sense to embrace transience, but common sense itself needs a defense. In a way, Orwell's arguments in *1984* are reminiscent of Samuel Johnson's rejection of Berkeley's proof of the non-existence of

14. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *1984: Text, Sources, Criticism*.

matter. As Boswell reports it, he was troubled by the doctrine because he knew it was wrong but thought it impossible to refute it. Johnson responded to Boswell by kicking a stone with his foot and saying: "I refute it *thus*." [15] Orwell strikes out against the absurd view that eternity should be rejected, but he leaves us hoping for more of an argument.

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15. George Birkbeck Hill, ed. *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (New York: Bigelow, Brown, and Co.), 545.