

# Philosophical morality in a clockwork orange and the stranger

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Many philosophers have believed for centuries that no intrinsic meaning exists in the universe. From this belief emerged many responses, including absurdism and existentialism. Although all are heavily influenced by the beliefs of Søren Kierkegaard, they have been developed further by the likes of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus himself. Existentialism is the belief that through a combination of awareness, free will, and personal responsibility, one can construct their own meaning within a world that intrinsically has none of its own. In Sartre's philosophy of existentialism, this free will entails relevant responsibility and acceptance of consequence caused by individual choice.[1] Absurdism is a philosophy credited to Camus, a belief that there is an inherent disharmony between an individual's search for meaning and the actual lack of meaning. The three practical ways to deal with such a circumstance are therefore suicide, embracing a meaning framework such as religion or accepting the lack of meaning and living on despite this.[2] Both Alex and Meursault are presented as almost absurd heroes; living in the sensual pleasure of the present moment and free of any system of values. Rather than behave in accordance with social norms, these characters try to live as honestly as they can, doing simply what they want to do.

Right from the first line of 'A Clockwork Orange' we are introduced to the recurring motif and underpinning theme of the novel - 'What's it going to be then, eh?'. This question appears four times in the first chapter and at the start of each individual part of the novel. This question Alex asks himself acts as symbol of his undulating freedom from victimizer to victim. In Part 1, as a brutish anti-hero, Alex consciously chooses to do wrong and to embody his absolute free will. His senseless brutality and violence appropriately

illustrations Sartre's 'existence precedes essence'[3]. Alex shows no interest in justifying his actions in terms of abstract or theoretical notions such as 'liberty', instead living simply as a free yet violent hedonist, qualified by his admittance that 'what I do I do because I like to do.' Burgess himself was notably philosophically informed and felt that 'the freedom to choose is the biggest human attribute', so crafted Alex with this ideology. Furthermore, as the novel was published in 1962, it's impossible to ignore the contexts of production in creating the character of Alex. Framed by the growing youth subcultures of Mods and Rockers, the 1960s became an era of rebellion against political regime, rioting and needless violence. In this sense, Alex becomes almost a hyperbolic extension on the truth – a youth rejecting reason and authority in place of violence. As explained by Robert K Morris in 'The Bitter Fruits of Freedom', Alex 'discovered that existence has always meant freedom' so 'responds predictably and inevitably to the killing burden of choice.'[4] – an authentic action in terms of existentialism.

Alternatively, you could view the constant repetition of 'What's it going to be then, eh?' as Alex desperately questioning his direction and purpose. Almost as a question directed at some higher power, it could be said that Alex adopts an absurd approach, looking for purpose where there is none. This idea is further supported by Alex's attempt to commit suicide – an escape from the meaningless and his fruitless quest to find purpose.

Similarly, Meursault subverts from social expectations and acts upon his own free will, not justifying or considering the implications of his actions.

However, where Alex makes consciously immoral decisions, Meursault seems

to acts continually amorally, seeming to never make the distinction between good and bad in his mind. When Raymond asks him to write a letter that will help him torment his mistress, Meursault indifferently on the basis that he ' didn't have any reason not to.' This implies that he does not place any value judgment on his act: a mere microcosm of his character. Meursault's actions are thoughtless and reject consequence, simply doing things because he can. In this sense, Meursault seems to display more absurd philosophical tendencies; acting as though nothing has meaning or purpose but accepting this and living on in spite of it, consequently acting amoral out of recklessness and lack of care.

However, applying psychoanalytical critical theory to both ' A Clockwork Orange' and ' The Outsider' opens up an alternative reading to Alex and Meursault. Perhaps, considering the theories of Freud, the two protagonists are driven not by philosophical notions, but by their psychological foundations. Freud hypothesised that the human personality was divided into parts, two of which are the Id and the Superego. The Id is the part of human personality that is driven by primary instinct, acting in accordance of selfish pleasure and a desire for instant gratification. The Superego acts in antithesis to the Id, driven by what the individual believes to be morally correct.[5] Both Alex and Meursault as individuals are, at least initially, dominated by their Id; acting without consideration, compassion or conscience. Alex describes murder as ' a real satisfaction', exemplifying the omission of his Superego in his psychological make up. ' I fired four more times at the motionless body', notes Meursault, ' I don't know why, but

something inside me snapped.' These further shots served no purpose: the Arab was dead. Meursault carried on firing because his Id was dominant and a burning murderous desire built up inside him. This murderous desire experienced by both Alex and Meursault is known in psychoanalytic terms as the Thanatos instinct.

Further illustration of Alex and Meursault's dominant Id comes when they both fulfil, to some extent, the Oedipus Complex.[6] With Alex's passive parents and their somewhat distanced relationship to him, he finds comfort and a father figure in F. Alexander. In raping F. Alexander's wife, Alex transgresses boundaries in committing symbolic incest, rape and adultery, showing the lack of balance in his personality and the triumphant dictatorship of the Id in his mind. The raping of F. Alexander's wife could be of symbolic significance to Burgess himself who's own wife was raped, representing the unbalanced personality of such a criminal and the shockingly disturbing whilst personal nature of the crime. Meursault's instance, however, is less explicit. Only one day after his mother's funeral Meursault finds himself lusting after and sleeping with Marie. Almost instantly after meeting Marie he recounts how he 'brushed past her breast' before he 'fondled her breast' then later describes her outfit when he meets her in prison - 'You could make out the shape of her firm breasts.' This repetition of breast creates a sense of obsession around a powerful symbol of motherhood and nurture. Despite his distant relationship with his mother, Meursault seems to need to replace this nurturing female figure immediately but takes it immediately to a sexual level, acting solely on the desires of the

Id. However, you could look at this psychoanalysis from a different perspective. It could be argued that acting solely on the Id is simply a consequence of absurdism for the two protagonists. If Alex and Meursault see no meaning or purpose then they have now motivation to be moral. In this sense, the omission of purpose removes the need for the Superego.

According to Sartre, we are thrown into existence without a predetermined future and construct our own nature or essence through our free choice and actions.[7] Hence, human beings, regardless of their personal nature, should never be deprived of their freedom of self-determination. Clearly influenced by some outlook of existential philosophy, Burgess discusses throughout 'A Clockwork Orange' how forcing man to be good is worse than allowing a man to choose evil; the truest malevolence is forced benevolence. 'Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some way better than a man who has the good imposed upon him?' questions the Chaplain in criticism of Alex's treatment. The chaplain echoes the notion of Sartre, that good acts (or anything for that matter) are morally valueless if performed without free will. This point is reinforced when Alex leaves prison, a 'free' and harmless man. However, now lonely and bereft of spirit, he's beaten, used and suicidal. Alex only reaches maturity, conscious morality and safety when his conditioning is removed and he is 'cured', going as far as comparing good without will to a disease. This moral maturity comes in part 3, chapter 7 - the 21st chapter of the novel. Alex reflects on his violent youth and hopes for a wholesome future, finally making his own purpose in wishes for marriage and children. 21 was significantly the voting age in England in 1962 when the novel was

published, thus a structural reinforcement of moral maturity for Alex. The structure of the whole novel in fact is significant. With 3 parts each divided in to 7 chapters, the novel assumes an ABA structure echoing that of an operatic song[8] - a symbol of Alex's musical interest that is used against him. Only by chapter 21 - the 'end of the song' - does Alex have the free will to do good, forge his own meaning and purpose, and live an existentially authentic life.

However, its the ending of 'The Outsider' that determines it an absurdist novel rather than the existentialist denouement of 'A Clockwork Orange'. Meursault becomes an absurd hero both literally and figuratively. Literally, he perfectly exemplifies the absurd characteristics of revolt, freedom and passionate carelessness. On a figurative level, Meursault now sits in prison waiting for death, a metaphor for the human condition. Like Alex, Meursault too encounters a Chaplain while in prison. The Chaplain tries to bring the atheist Meursault to God in his final days but he refuses, summarizing his absurd worldview that nothing really matters and the only point of living is to die - 'Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter.' By narrating the story through Meursault's indifferent voice, and the use of pronouns like 'we', the reader is drawn into his point of view, feeling the absurdity of the events like Camus almost certainly intended. In the final pages of the novel Meursault enjoys almost an epiphany: 'For the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world...I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again.' It is in those lines that Camus describes Meursault's ironic joy at the

recognition of a universe without meaning and without hope. He comes to a full acceptance of his absurd position in the universe and finds comfort in that, dispelling any criticism that absurdism attracted for its alleged pessimism in the religious early 1940s. The use of the positive adjective 'gentle' along with the imagery of vitality in his surroundings reinforces this positive look at the philosophy whilst seeming to juxtapose Meursault's coming execution. It could certainly be argued that Meursault represents Camus himself. Our author also had a distant, relatively cold relationship with his mother (as described in 'L' Envers et l' Endroit'), before leaving home and rushing in to a relationship. Camus too only found solace when he had familiarised himself with the philosophy of absurdism. He even often used the pseudonym 'Jean Meursault' for some of his articles as a young reporter.[9] At the end it becomes clear that 'The Outsider' is simple a hyperbolic, semi-autobiographical description of the emerging popularity of absurdism.

In conclusion both 'A Clockwork Orange' and 'The Outsider' present themselves as novels with philosophical morals. Whilst 'A Clockwork Orange' seems to lean more towards an existentialist philosophy, heavily influenced by Burgess' own opinions, 'The Outsider' concludes as an absurdist work describing absurdism in it's truest form and articulating the thoughts of Camus, the father of absurdism himself. Both Alex and Meursault seem to be characters void of morals and higher purpose, creating any purpose they can in immorality or selfishness. Whilst Alex is given the chance and will to change, creating his own purpose, Meursault is condemned. Both characters



end up surprisingly content, comfortable in their change – Alex to a good man and Meursault to a man at peace with his personal philosophy. Both Burgess and Camus similarly present their own views through their texts and do so in an almost persuasive light, highlighting the positives an individual can unlock in their philosophy.

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