

# The dilemma of free will in a clockwork orange



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Following the publication of his most notable work, *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess commented on the function of literature in a mutable society. "There is not much point in writing a novel unless you can show the possibility of moral transformation, or an increase in wisdom, operating in your chief character." (Burgess viii) Consequently, this focus on the individual ethic becomes the most pervasive theme in *A Clockwork Orange*. The novel takes place in an Orwellian, antiutopian civilization where the Western world and Eastern Communist cultures have married. Alex, the main character, speaks in a combination of English and a Russian slang referred to as "nadsat." The government, however, is unmistakably suggestive of the Iron Curtain of Russian communism. The novel chronicles the atrocities committed by Alex and his "droogs", and the ensuing government supported brainwashing and alleged moral transformation of Alex. From the first page, the novel begs the question of free will. The title itself is significant in this context as *A Clockwork Orange* is a metaphor for one who has lost the power of free will, one who has the appearance of an organism (Orange) but is in reality only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God, the Devil, or the almighty state. The relevance of the title is evident in the existentialist dilemma which is the essence of the novel; Does God want goodness or the choice of goodness? (Morris 44) The initial chapter of the novel paints a very grim picture of Alex; he is unquestionably evil. Not only does Alex commit violent acts, but he finds a sadistic pleasure in it, "And, my brothers, it was real satisfaction to me to waltz and carve left cheeky and right cheeky, so that like two curtains of blood seemed to pour out at the same time, one on either side of his fat oily snout." (Burgess 17) This passage shows Alex's complete disregard for humanity and the

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law. The usage of the word "waltz" also illustrates a seemingly incongruous character trait of Alex, his love of music, classical music in particular. This irony is further evident in a scene where Alex gives two pre-adolescent "pitts" the old "in-out in-out" to the tune of Beethoven's 9th. Then I pulled out the lovely 9th and set the needle hissing on the last movement...this time they thought nothing fun and had to submit to the strange and weird desires of Alexander the Large. (Burgess 46) This poses the paradox of how a savage and vicious teen can enjoy the cultured refinement of European classical music. However, Alex views classical music and violence not as incongruous, but complementary. As seen in his aforementioned "waltz", violence, in the eyes of Alex, is a form of creative self expression. The sweetest and most heavenly of activities partake in some measure of violence. (Burgess 115) Alex operates on the hedonistic principle of self-indulgence. He satiates his desires whether they be violent urges or passions for classical music. However, the essential characteristic of Alex is that he is free to choose. Albeit he chooses evil, the ability to choose is the core of his existence. Alex's evils are undeniable, yet Burgess also presents the less evident evils perpetrated by a repressive government. The government in A Clockwork Orange controls all aspects of society from the government produced TV station "Statefilm" to the government issue housing in which Alex resides. Furthermore, Christianity has been outlawed as God has been reduced to an "Old Bog." This is the government control over individual freedom that Burgess despised. He believes that the government, in attempting to manipulate free thinking, is guilty of a moral evil greater than those committed by Alex because it violates the essence of man, free

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will. Burgess attacks what he considers the fundamental flaw of socialism, the belief that man is able to be conditioned. (Kennard 66) This sentiment is best expressed in the character F. Alexander, who is a member of an anti-government faction, "To attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation, against this I raise my sword-pen." (Burgess 22)

Although Burgess attacks the policies of the state, he does not contend they are solely responsible for the actions of Alex. Burgess believes in free will, but he also believes in the natural consequences of actions. In Part 2 of the novel, the consequences of Alex's streak of "ultra violence" come to fruition when he is arrested after murdering a woman during an attempted robbery. Alex is tried and sentenced to 14 years in the Staja (state jail). The government no longer recognizes Alex as a person, he is referred to only as 6655321, his prison number. The only one who still recognizes Alex's possibility for redemption is the far from admirable prison chaplain. He is well intentioned and opposes many of the government policies but is too much of a drunkard to say what he knows to be right and moral. Despite his frailties, he is able to convince Alex to read the Bible and even take responsibility for his actions. So I read all about the scourging and the crowning with thorns and I viddied better that there was something in it. I closed my glazzies and viddied myself helping in the flogging and the nailing in, being dressed in a like toga that was the height of Roman fashion. (Burgess 79) Clearly, Alex recognizes the sins he has committed and the hurt he has caused. The reference to the nailing on the cross presents the Christian belief that Jesus died for the sins of all humanity and that humans, by nature, are imperfect. However, in this sin and imperfection, there is also

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the possibility of redemption, and Alex begins to realize this potential.

Furthermore, the use of Christian imagery illustrates the Augustinian view of humanity endorsed by the state. Traditional Augustinianism maintains that humans are inherently evil and can only be saved by Divine Grace. The crucifixion of the son of God by man supports this theory of a tendency toward evil. However, the state in *A Clockwork Orange* has distorted traditional Augustinian theory into a rationale for having a totalitarian government that exercises absolute authority over humans. (Aggeler 110)

Burgess clearly opposes this political theory popularized by Thomas Hobbes.

Alex continues to be a model prisoner and shows signs of improvement until he wakes up one night to find one of his cell mates staring at him and

â†† stroke stroke stroking away. â††? Alex and the other cellmates end up beating this â†† chelloveckâ††? to death, and Alex is held responsible.

Consequently, Alex becomes the guinea pig for the recently developed

Ludovicoâ††'s Technique. Alex is transferred to a new facility where the

â†† techniqueâ††? will be administered by Dr. Brodsky. Alex is given an

injection that induces severe nausea and is then forced to watch movies of

rapes, murders and other violent acts. Dr. Brodskyâ††'s favorites include

movies of Nazi concentration camps and Japanese methods of torture during

W. W. II. The theory behind the technique is association. Alex will associate

feeling severely ill with any act of violence. Therefore, he will no longer

desire to commit violent acts. The prison chaplain best summarizes the

theory of the technique, â†† In a sense, in choosing to be deprived of the

ability to make an ethical choice, you have really chosen the good. â††?

(Burgess 95) The moral implications surrounding Ludovicoâ††'s technique

are the heart of the thematic element in *A Clockwork Orange*. Ludovicoâ††'s

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Technique has deprived Alex of free will. If free will, that of which Alex has been deprived, is the essence of humanity, then what has Alex become? He has become a thing, a Clockwork Orange, a little machine capable only of good. The state has deprived Alex not only of free will, but also of his humanity. As F. Alexander states it, "A man who cannot choose ceases to be a man." (Burgess 156) Alex is no longer a wrong doer, yet he is no longer capable of choice. This presents the moral dilemma which defines the theme of the work, "Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some way better than a man who has the good imposed upon him?" (Burgess 95) The state's response to this question is a definitive "no." Dr. Brodsky typifies the sentiment of the state, "We are not concerned with motive, with the higher ethics. We are only concerned with cutting down crime." (Burgess 126) This is the utilitarian standpoint against which Burgess militates. The utilitarian argument contends that any method is justifiable if its result is in the best interest of humanity. It is the age old question of, "Do the ends justify the means?" Is the dehumanization of Alex justifiable because he will no longer be a threat to society? Burgess's response to this question is an emphatic "no." He contends that, "If we are going to love mankind, we will have to love Alex as a not unrepresentative member of it." (Aggeler 129) The revocation of free will can never be in the best interest of humanity because it is inherently antihuman. Furthermore, the dehumanizing of one person sets in motion the conditioning of an entire race. For Burgess, the focal point of human existence is choice. "Choice, choice is all that matters, and to impose the good is evil, to act evil is better than to have good imposed." (Kennard 67) This illustrates his view that the evil of the elimination of free

will is greater than any evil perpetrated by Alex. This viewpoint is, in part, a response to the writings of B. F. Skinner who espoused human conditioning techniques to create an utopian society. The concept of choice is also essential to the discussion of the dual nature of good and evil in the novel. The government in *A Clockwork Orange* does not view evil as a part of human nature. They view it as a disease to be eradicated by scientific means. This denial of the nature of evil is a denial of one's self. Alex states it best, "Badness is of the self, and that self is made by old Bog or God in his great pride and radosty. They of the government cannot allow the bad because they cannot allow the self." (Burgess 40) This passage again illustrates the perniciousness of the Communist denial of individualism. Furthermore, it recognizes the concept of original sin. God created us, and part of our human nature is a tendency toward evil. Yet, we are not completely evil or completely good. Goodness, like badness is also of the self, and man is both good and evil in and of himself. (Tilton 38) This is the duality which is a pervading theme in *A Clockwork Orange*. Just as good and evil are dual parts of man, a passion for violence and classical music are dual parts of Alex. This duality is destroyed when Alex is conditioned. He loses both his capability for violence and ability to listen to classical music (it was played in the background of the movies during his conditioning; the sound of it makes Alex sick). When Alex is made a machine, he loses all aspects of his humanity and duality. The result of the conditioning process is the destruction of the clockwork altogether. The elimination of his capacity for evil necessarily entails the elimination of his capacity for good. (Tilton 39) Some critics have deemed *A Clockwork Orange* unconvincing, inconclusive, or even a sensationalistic endorsement of violence. In my

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estimation, *A Clockwork Orange* is a work with profound implications. It depicts the freedoms we often take for granted and reveals the terrifying implications of their revocation. To some, it may seem to be a far fetched work set in a fantastical society. But, if it is nothing else, it is a warning, a warning against complacency, sloppy thinking, and most importantly, against overmuch trust in the state. (Aggeler 129)