D Block

The Debate of Humanity and Morality in *A Clockwork Orange*

Alex, the main character in Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, transitions throughout the novel from someone who is able to choose to do wrong into someone who feels physical pain to commit wrongdoing. The novel is set in a futuristic world, under a controlling totalitarian government. During the night, they allow teens and criminals to rule while the rest of the world retreats into their homes. Alex is caught while in the midst of a crime and sent to an institution, where his freedom of choice is taken away psychologically. The question arises: Is it better to be free and have the ability to commit atrocities, or to be unable to choose to do the wrong thing? Throughout the novel, we learn that it is essential to be able to choose to do the wrong thing because without it, it takes away one’s sense of humanity. However, the crimes Alex and his droogs commit when they have the freedom to choose are deadly and inhumane. This choice determines what is essentially more important, humanity or morality.

One of the main themes of the novel is the power of choice. Each part of the book starts with “What’s it going to be then, eh?” symbolizing the choices Alex makes throughout the plot. After Alex commits numerous crimes and is eventually caught, he is sent to prison, where his identity is stripped away by being referred to as “6655321”. While having a conversation about techniques the prison uses, he is told by the charlie “When a man cannot choose he ceases to be a man” (93). Here, Mr. Alexander believes it is just as inhumane to be constantly good than to be constantly evil. Later in the novel, when Alex is talking to Mr. Alexander, he is told he was turned into something other than a human being. He believes the “essential intention is the real sin” (175), referring to the institution’s experiments. This statement, that a man without the ability to choose is stripped of his humanity, is an essential argument to why Alex shouldn’t have gone through the treatment. Mr. Alexander argues that Alex’s crimes were blown out of proportion, and that he didn’t deserve the consequences.

After the treatment, Alex is unable to enjoy normal things, like listening to music or enjoying literature and art because it brings him physical pain. Aside from these repercussions, Alex’s inability to commit any wrong has devastating effects to his character. Before, he was immortal and inhumane to others, but now, he has lost his character. Since he is forced to do the right thing, Alex lost his character because inside, he still wants to fit back. Alex believes that his crimes are bad because “it’s against like society” and everyone has the right to live without being harmed (130). However, when he is beaten up throughout the numerous times after the treatment, he still wants to fight back. From this stance, humanity is more important because Alex has lost his sense of purpose and choice, an essential part of his character.

However, before the treatment, Alex claims he felt good about his crimes (121). Clearly, if he wasn’t caught, he and his droogs would continue to pillage, rape and murder people. By allowing people to choose, violence, rape, and murder will remain a irrefutable part of their society. With the topic of morality, the question arises whether it is moral to perform this treatment to Alex or whether it’s moral to allow these crimes to continually occur. Dr Branom claims that the processes are making Alex more sane and healthy (121), and that Alex will be healthily contemplating the workings of the principle of destruction. Previously, it was discussed whether it is moral to perform the psychological operation on Alex. On the other end, is it moral to allow the crimes to occur without repercussion?

The police situation of Alex’s world is quite complex. The government allows criminals to go out at night while everyone else stays in their homes. However, Alex and his friends are caught and sent to jail, seemingly righteously. Although the police have a moral perspective from that standpoint, they are described as assaulting Alex later in the novel. Therefore, the police maintain a hypocritical reputation with the citizens. Even though the morality of the police is put into question, their decision to bring Alex to jail would be moral. In an ideal world, the police would protect its citizens and jail those that committed crimes, so Alex’s placement in jail is morally the correct choice, because they cease his ability to commit any further crimes.

So, is it morally right to force people to be incapable of performing these heinous crimes? In the novel, Alex is the first one to undergo the treatment, but not presumably the last in the future. Looking through a humanistic perspective, it takes away a person’s humanity. From a moral perspective, it prevents any of these crimes from happening ever again, especially on a wider scale of the institution treating everyone who was jailed. After his treatment, he is unable to fight or murder anymore. As a spectator, it is one’s choice to decide which is the the more atrocitous: reading Alex and his friends violently rape an innocent woman and cause her to die of shock, or watch as Alex is unable to help himself as he is beaten up and left to die by his old friends.

The question of the ability of choice and morality is presented throughout the novel. The charles addresses this when conversing with Alex in jail, asking “‘What does god want? Does God want goodness or the choice of goodness?” (106) and if a man who chooses the bad, like Alex in the beginning, is better than a man who has good imposed upon him, like Alex after the treatment. He comes to the conclusion that, because Alex has chose to be deprived of making ethical choices, he has chosen “the good”. This would depend on one’s definition of a man, because, as mentioned before, Alex is either a man without morality or ceases to be a man at all.

Later in the novel, religion comes up again. Dr Brodsky, one of the doctors who treated Alex, claims Alex will be the “true Christian” who is “ready to be crucified rather than crucify” (143). The difference between Alex and Dr Brodsky’s religious allusion is that Jesus chose to be crucified. On the other hand, Alex was forced into constantly making the right decision, to the point where he can’t defend himself, like when he is attacked by a group of old men (159). If Alex and

Eventually, it all comes down to the freedom to choose and the freedom to make the right choice. What is more important to society, for everyone to be able to choose what they do, even if it proves fatal to innocent people, or for people to be able to choose their actions. With one, history has proven that people can be brutal to the innocent, and with the other, humanity is at stake. So would the moral thing to do be to strip everyone of their ability to commit wrongdoing? Superficially, it would make more sense in a society for people to only be able to make positive decisions. In many dystopian novels, the government interferes with the citizens right to chose, either leaving them ignorant or limiting their choices, being more concerned with the stability of the state and its citizens. The fear is that this ability, an innate quality in humans that define one’s character would be taken away. In the end, humanity is more important than morality, because without the ability to choose, there would be no morality.

Citations:

Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange. N*ew York: Norton, 1962. Print.