

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE: Burgess and Behavioral Interventions

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ABSTRACT: One of the more popular, and negative, images of behavioral interventions held by the lay public is that presented in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. It is suggested that because this image is so popular, the book and its author must be understood by behavior analysts if they are to adequately respond to claims made in the book and subsequent movie. The book was originally published in the United States with only 20 chapters, the movie also ending with the 20th chapter. The 21st chapter, first published in the U.S. in 1986, changes the focus of the book from the morality of behavioral interventions per se to the more general issue of the existence of free will and the State's destruction of same. Several of Burgess' works are examined. It is suggested that Burgess wrote his books from the standpoint of a Catholic with a belief in original sin and deity-granted free will. It is concluded that although Burgess raises an important concern, *A Clockwork Orange* fails to offer any real answers to the questions it poses. With regard to behavioral interventions, it is suggested that the conditioning Burgess describes would rapidly extinguish, that his understanding of the philosophical and political ramifications of behaviorism is lacking, and that he fails to acknowledge any good that could come from such interventions.

A Clockwork Orange, written by Anthony Burgess and converted to film by Stanley Kubrick, is one of the more popular images of behavioral interventions held by the lay public (Morris, 1985; Todd, Atwater, Johnson, Larsen, & Morris, 1984). Its portrayal of behavioral interventions was almost entirely negative, and thus the work and its author must be understood by behavior analysts if they are to adequately respond to the charges made.

I will attempt to demonstrate that the thinking regarding behavior analysis displayed in *A Clockwork Orange* was inadequate. It might be suggested that, in light of the conceptual difficulties I will describe, the mere popularity of the book does not make it worth addressing. Unfortunately, popularity is enough to make any topic worth addressing. When scientists find popularizing and the correction of popular myths to be "beneath them", then those with a less scientific agenda come to hold the public eye (Burnham, 1987) and great damage can be experienced

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by both individuals and the greater society (Hines, 1988; Randi, 1982). The disparity in public belief and knowledge between the findings and methods of the "paranormal" and those of mainstream science (Gallup & Newport, 1991) supports this notion in general. The anti-behaviorism demonstration that greeted participants of a meeting of the European Association for Behavior Therapy (*The Behavior Therapist*, 1991, 14(1), p. 3) supports it with regards to behavior analysis.

THE BOOK

Burgess himself often expresses extreme displeasure with *A Clockwork Orange* (e.g. Burgess, 1986). His problems stem, in part, from the fact that the 21st and final chapter of the book was deleted by his New York publisher. The final chapter watered down the overall effect of the book, so the publisher's reasoning went. The United States public never saw the complete novel until 1986. Stanley Kubrick's movie version of the book also ended with the 20th chapter. As stated by Burgess in the introduction to the 1986 (p. vi-vii) first publishing of the full book in the United States:

A Clockwork Orange has never been published entire in America. . . .when Stanley Kubrick made his film...he followed the American version. . . .much of my later life has been expended on Xeroxing statements of intention and frustration of intention--while both Kubrick and my New York publisher coolly bask in the rewards of their misdemeanor. Life is, of course, terrible.

The confusion regarding the book is rampant even among those who have written extensively on Burgess. So, for example, we find authors who refer to Kubrick's film as "brilliant and faithful" (e.g. Aggeler, 1979), while others call it a "perversion" (e.g. Petix, 1987). The 21st chapter is important in that it changes the book from an indictment of behavioral interventions per se to a more general critique of any system that would seek to question the existence of the free will of the individual, or attempt to interfere in any way with this free will. As Burgess has said, the central theme of *A Clockwork Orange* is "...the idea of free will. This is not just half-baked existentialism, it's an old Catholic theme" (quoted in Kennard, 1987, p. 64). As we will see, many Catholic themes are important to Burgess and run through much of his thought. Of these, free will is among the most important (Kennard, p. 67).

For those not familiar with the story, *A Clockwork Orange* is the story of Alex, a young teenager who commits "ultraviolence". The book is narrated by Alex (in flashback) in Nadsat, a Russified version of English, making the book a bit difficult to follow at first. Soon, however, the Nadsat vocabulary is learned and Burgess' created language does a better job than ordinary English ever could to describe the stark images of violence contained in the book.

Where and when Alex lives is not entirely clear. The book was clearly meant to be set in the near-future, the present being the early 1960s. Society was

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socialized to a large extent, although this was by no means stable (Alex is used as propaganda by two sides contesting a political election). Space exploration had apparently reached a fairly sophisticated level, and a victim of Alex's comments that while the government was concerned with the people they were putting into space, there was little concern for what was happening on Earth.

Alex and his comrades ("droogs") make a habit of committing random brutal robberies and violence, until Alex is finally turned upon by his friends and sent to prison. In prison, Alex volunteers for an experimental program that would allow him to leave the prison system within two weeks. In this experimental program, Alex is classically conditioned (via the pairing of an injected illness-inducing solution and movies of violence) to become violently ill when witnessing, or even thinking about, violence. The conditioning is successful, and Alex is released. On the outside, however, Alex is nearly helpless because of his conditioning. Alex's condition is exploited by political revolutionaries, who seek to use him as a symbol of the government's oppression (attempting to rig his suicide in the process). The government, realizing the danger Alex could pose, decondition him and promise to set him up with a good job in exchange for his support. The United States novel and movie end (chapter 20) with Alex realizing "I was cured all right", and planning to resume his life of ultraviolence. In the 21st chapter, Alex freely decides that he is wasting his life and resolves to grow up and live more responsibly.

ANTHONY BURGESS

Burgess' title, *A Clockwork Orange*, gives us a clue as to his real motives for writing the book. Although he wrote the book after reacting in horror to reports of plans to use "behavior modification" with American prisoners and the calls of British politicians for similar actions (Aggeler, 1979), Burgess had a more philosophical axe to grind. His title refers to "the application of a mechanistic morality to a living organism oozing with juice and sweetness" (Burgess, 1986, p. xi). He insists that humans, by definition, have free will (p. ix). If this free will is somehow interfered with, then the human being has become "a clockwork orange", meaning that (s)he has the appearance of "...an organism lovely with colour and juice but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State" (p. ix). "A clockwork orange" is, according to Burgess, an old cockney expression meaning "queer to the limit of queerness" (p. x), queer in the sense of strangeness. Further insight into Burgess' ideas regarding the repressiveness of the State can be gained by continuing his explanation (p. xi): "It (queerness) did not primarily denote homosexuality, though a queer, before *restrictive legislation* (emphasis mine) came in, was the term used for a member of the inverted fraternity". Elsewhere we find the quote: "...towards that mechanism, the state...we have no duty at all, certainly no duty of charity" (quoted in Aggeler, 1979, p. 182), and finally, "All governments

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are evil..." (quoted in Cullinan, 1986, p. 49). Burgess summed up his own thinking quite well when he wrote "...the novels I've written are really medieval Catholic in their thinking" (quoted in Cullinan, 1986, p. 42). Though Burgess has dabbled in many religions, expressing a particular respect for Islam, he was raised and educated as a Catholic, and is still fascinated with never-ending wars between polar opposites.

Burgess' writing is heavily influenced by themes from two thinkers who have shaped the Catholic religion, so much so that although he does not name them in *A Clockwork Orange* (as he did in other works), the factions contesting an election are easily recognized as inspired by Pelagius the "liberal" and Augustine the "conservative" (Aggeler, 1979; Kerr, 1987; Rudick, 1986). Pelagius was a British monk from the fourth century who advocated the idea that Divine Grace was not needed for salvation, therefore making the redemption a somewhat useless gesture, and suggesting that humanity could save itself. Pelagius had little use for the concept of original sin, and wrote that all actions and aspects of the human being are "done by us, not born with us". Adam did not condemn all people through his actions, and thus neither was it through Christian resurrection that they would achieve eternal life.

Augustine recognized that Pelagian thought represented a real break with traditional Christian doctrine. In mounting his attack on Pelagian doctrine, he returned to the thought of St. Paul, citing the supposed helplessness and fundamental weakness of human character. For Augustine, divine assistance was required in order to achieve a truly spiritual life. Free will has been granted to the human being by the deity, but (s)he cannot be saved without divine help.

The Pelagian-controlled government is in power at the beginning of *A Clockwork Orange*. It is somewhat lax and is considered responsible for the rampant crime in the streets. There is a general theme of disappointment with the Pelagian system, and the more draconian Augustinian alternatives (e.g. Alex's conditioning) are attempted. There is a constant struggle between the Pelagian factions, with their preoccupation with liberty and dignity to the exclusion of the realities of the situation, and the Augustinians, with their preoccupation with stability, perhaps to the exclusion of the well-being of the individual. The Augustinians hang on to their new-found power despite the bad publicity caused by the Pelagian's propaganda regarding the immorality of Alex's conditioning, and, after deconditioning him, are no longer responsible for him. The Augustinians are in a fine position. They have done what they said they would do, and it was effective. It was regarded as unacceptable, and thus they undid their work but could no longer be held responsible for the violence in the streets.

Burgess is no Pelagian. He "accepts the myth of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man" (quoted in Aggeler, 1979, p. 181). In addition to his Augustinian belief that man has fallen, however, Burgess has a great deal of Pelagian hope for mankind. Seemingly, each human being must find his/her own way on the basis

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of free choice and individual experience. If several innocents are slaughtered along the way, so it seems, then so be it: "It is better to have our streets infested with murderous young hoodlums than to deny individual freedom of choice" (Burgess, 1978, p. 96).

BURGESS AND BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS

Burgess, as a direct extension of his ideas on free will and the repressiveness of the state, cannot accept behavioral interventions. In *The Clockwork Testament* (Burgess, 1974), we find a thinly disguised B.F. Skinner in the character of Professor Man Balaglas (Rudick, 1986). From *The Clockwork Testament*, we see that the problem is not that Burgess has not read Skinner; he has apparently simply misunderstood what he has read. Balaglas paraphrases passages from *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* fairly accurately, but also expresses ideas regarding censorship, the curtailing of individual freedom, and sleep-teaching that seem to have come more from *Brave New World* than from anything Skinner ever wrote. In another work, "A Fable for Social Scientists", Burgess (1973) drops all pretensions and has some students discuss Skinner by name (while sitting over a vandalized plaque they have found which bears Skinner's image). They discuss life and art under the Skinnerian system and agree that since passion and pain would be killed, there must, of necessity, be only "calligraphic" art. Burgess ends the talk regarding Skinner's thought (p. 15) with one of the discussants drawing the curious conclusion, "...all that business about a technology of behavior--it's just classroom talk. Thank God, we don't have to worry. Skinner didn't mean it after all. We're free." Burgess' satire ends with the comment that, in English slang, "B.F." stands for Bemused Fictionalizer.

Students of Burgess have followed up on his conception of Skinner. Dr. Balaglas' first name is called ironic, given "...Skinner's apparent inability to think of man as anything but an abstract concept" (Aggeler, 1979, p. 96). (Aggeler goes on to say that *A Clockwork Orange* could be read as a direct answer to *Walden Two*, and further comments on the irony that the film version of *A Clockwork Orange* appeared in the same year as *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. We have, however, seen that Burgess was more than just a little upset with this film. He has also been rather upset with a stage version he and "Bono" of the rock band "U2" had been producing. Like Augustine, any departure from the written orthodoxy seems unacceptable.) That Burgess' ideas have been interpreted, as he hoped, as particularly damning for behavior analysis can be shown by looking at a few quotes from those who have written on *A Clockwork Orange*:

The white-jacketed doctors are evil, and as extreme versions of B.F. Skinner's behaviorists...understandably so. (Petix, 1987, p. 94).

Psychologists force upon him (Alex) what Professor Skinner might call 'the inclination to behave'. (Aggeler, 1979, p. 174).

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If one were seeking an illustration to place above a Skinnerian caption, such as 'The Inclination to Behave' or 'Operant Conditioning' or 'Beyond Freedom and Dignity', one could hardly find one more vivid and arresting than the picture of Malcolm McDowell in the role of Alex licking the sole of the actor/antagonist's shoe. (Aggeler, 1979, p. 175).

Burgess (1978), for his part, mentions *Walden Two* in a chapter on "Bakunin's Children" (Bakunin was a Soviet anarchist; to Burgess, a failed revolutionary with occasionally violent dictatorial tendencies). He adds to the previous sentiments in a section on "Clockwork Oranges" (pp. 89-99):

The techniques for total manipulation of the human soul were in existence in 1932...Ivan Pavlov had four more years to live, he had done his work, and had been able to see something of the possibilities of its social application. . . 'How like a dog is man', as Shakespeare, if he had read B.F. Skinner, might have said. . . Skinner's title appeals in itself. Beyond truth, beyond beauty, beyond goodness, beyond God, beyond life. Big Brother does not go so far. . . What God has joined together, even though it be an unholy trinity of a human brain, let no man put asunder. Pray for Dr. Skinner. Let Pavlov rest in peace. Amen.

The first question we should ask regarding *A Clockwork Orange* is "would such a conditioning procedure work"? Probably not. Perhaps in a controlled environment such as Alex's prison, where scenes of violence would only be paired with illness, the conditioning might last. On the outside, however, his getting ill would drop out via one of two routes. On the outside, Alex would inevitably be exposed to scenes of violence that were too minor to be illness-inducing (e.g. a play argument). Gradually, via a desensitization process, Alex would be able to experience greater and greater scenes of violence without illness, and would eventually partake of violence himself once again. The second route, flooding, would be the more probable end of his conditioning. In a society as fraught with violence as the one described in the book (or ours), Alex's anxiety would have extinguished rapidly. In the book it is not clear how the government actually deconditions Alex. Alex has dreams (of dirty water in his body being replaced with clean water, for example), but that's as detailed as it gets. We are left to draw the conclusion that, while Alex was recovering from an attempted suicide and lying unconscious in a hospital bed, somehow the conditioning process was reversed. Whether or not Burgess' novel is consistent with what we know about the effectiveness of behavioral interventions is not the real issue, however. Burgess was not trying to present a scientifically accurate case study. He was trying to make a point about the morality of conducting behavioral interventions and about the morality of government intervention in our lives.

Burgess seems not to be offended by the use of contingencies per se. The fact that Alex is jailed (a presumed punisher) is not morally questioned. The fact that it is ineffective is also not questioned (Alex commits a murder while in prison). It is apparently only when the treatments become effective that they destroy free will and become unacceptable. Burgess seems to want it both ways. He wants to maintain the claim that free will is inherent in humanity. He also wants to say,

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however, that behavioral interventions seem to be able to override this free will. He also apparently believes that maladaptive behavior is somewhat excused because it too is conditioned by existing social contingencies, whether we acknowledge it or not (Morris, 1987, p. 47). In this insistence on free will Burgess is hardly original. The argument has been made before, and in more well-reasoned and less contradictory fashion (e.g. Lamont, 1982).

The system Burgess presents in *A Clockwork Orange* is based entirely on aversives. This is ironic, given that Skinner made some of the best arguments against the use of aversives (Cook, 1991), that he deemphasized aversives in *Walden Two* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, and given that behavior analysts have long recognized that aversives are often counter-productive (e.g. leading to avoidance and counteraggression; Sidman, 1989). In other works, Burgess does not make a distinction between contingencies based on punishing or reinforcing stimuli, however. He regards both as abhorrent challenges to free will: (from *The Clockwork Testament*, a comment directed at Balaglas/Skinner, p. 101) "Well I think its bloody monsters (?). Human beings are defined by freedom of choice. Once you have them doing what they're told is good just because they're going to get a lump of sugar instead of a kick up the ahss (!) then ethnics no longer exists" (punctuation marks and spelling from the original). Within this same exchange, Balaglas/Skinner (p. 99) explains that punishment is inefficient and "positive rain forcemeat" is the method of choice.

There is no mention of any good that behavioral interventions can accomplish in *A Clockwork Orange*. The effectiveness of behavioral interventions is seemingly acknowledged, but somehow the fact that these interventions can be used to alleviate suffering, teach skills or solve problems seems to have been missed by Burgess entirely. Such deficits make the book a rather poor commentary on the morality of behavioral interventions. If anything, the book serves as an insistence on the existence and importance of free will and moral choice, and a warning regarding the danger of the State's intrusion into our lives. Little is provided in support of these former assertions, however, and Burgess' latter warning regarding the State (which might actually be quite warranted) is diluted in his effort to tear down the discipline which he apparently misunderstands.

SOLUTIONS ARE LACKING

A discussion of the free will/determinism debate is beyond the scope of the current paper, but since it is a central theme in *A Clockwork Orange*, a concluding note is in order. If Burgess' novel gives behavior analysts anything, it is an impetus to reexamine the free will controversy, and to decide whether or not behavioral interventions actually destroy the dignity of the individual. Arguments on both sides of these controversies are voluminous. On the free will/behaviorism destroys individual dignity side, Rogers (1956) and Carpenter (1974) provide starting points.

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On the other side, Skinner (1956) and *Walden Two* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* provide starting points. Perhaps this whole controversy can be avoided, however. If free will does indeed exist, then destructive interventions attempted by behaviorists will be ineffective and they will therefore be discredited. This will do more to destroy the influence of behaviorists than any philosophical treatise (as flippantly suggested by Papanek, 1973 and very nicely amended by Nord, 1974). If the behavioral interventions are successful, however, then we had better take them seriously. Those with a less-than-democratic agenda will use them, even if those in favor of democracy do not. In this same vein, it is interesting to note that champions of free will (including Burgess) do not dispute the effectiveness of behavioral interventions. Even supposed anti-behaviorist Aldous Huxley (1958, p. 139) mentioned *Walden Two* as a possible solution to the problems pushing society towards his *Brave New World*, and described (in glowing terms) a society that used "Pavlov for positive purposes" in his last novel, *Island*. From a pragmatic standpoint, it would therefore seem that we cannot ignore behavioral interventions. To challenge the standpoint that such interventions destroy human dignity, we can point to those who have been helped by behavior therapy to communicate, self-toilet, self-help, learn skills, overcome problems in living, and avoid institutions and join society. If effective behavioral interventions are not used with individuals who need such help, I don't think they'll find much solace in the fact that they're being treated "morally". To return to the subject matter of *A Clockwork Orange*, the thousands of crime victims I met during my employment in New York City's Crime Victims Board did not feel that they had been treated morally. In all probability, the inmates of our current prison system probably feel that they are being treated less morally than did those who experienced the behaviorally structured *A New Learning Environment* (Cohen & Filipczak, 1989).

Burgess' novel is troubling and frustrating on a number of levels. He has presented us with a stark image of evil, and perhaps of a greater evil in attempting to counteract it. He has warned us of a slippery slope. If we allow the conditioning of violent offenders, then the conditioning of the whole populace might not be far behind (Aggeler, 1979). Burgess offers us no real answers, however (Morris, 1987). At the end of the 20th chapter, it is clear that Alex intends to resume his life of ultraviolence. Seemingly little thought is given to those he has killed, or those he is likely to kill. (This is remarkable, particularly given the fact that Burgess' first wife was attacked by muggers, causing the death of her unborn child and later her own death [Coale, 1981]. That Burgess can maintain his beliefs in the face of such trauma speaks of the power of his convictions.) In the 21st chapter, we find that Alex has grown up and intends to live a more responsible life. Would Burgess have us patiently wait for such serious and destructive behavior to work itself out? Would he suggest that the obviously ineffective social contingencies continue to be used? That seems contradictory and rather pointless, to allow techniques meant to punish as long as they are ineffective. We are left with no answers, only warnings

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and assertions regarding the paramount importance of moral choice. In discussing the difference between *A Clockwork Orange* with and without the 21st chapter, Burgess (1986, p. xi) wrote, "I leave what I wrote with...frigid indifference to the judgement of the .00000001 of the American population which cares about such things. Eat this sweetish segment or spit it out. You are free." Clearly, given the last twenty years of research into behavioral interventions, this final note on the matter seems inadequate.

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