

Alienation in the Historical Perspective: The Origin and the Cause

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Abstract:

Even though the term ‘alienation’ is one of the most outstanding features of this era, it is not very definite what it specifically connotes. ‘Alienation’, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is “the state of feeling estranged or separated from one’s milieu, work, products of work, or self” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2017). Life nowadays is commonly characterized in terms of ‘alienation’. It is observed that there is almost no aspect of present-day life, which has not been discussed in terms of ‘alienation’. The sociologists use alienation in many different connections. They use the term in Sociology and Social Sciences in terms of alienation from others, from work and from society. Hegel’s and Marx’s discussions of ‘alienation’ are of considerable significance and they establish the background of a good deal of the contemporary ideas on ‘alienation’. This qualitative article, therefore, is an attempt to present a detailed analysis of ‘Alienation’ with a view to explaining this term, and how and when it appears and its connection to psychology, philosophy, sociology, Marxism, and existentialism briefly.

Keywords: Alienation, origin, Hegel, Marx, Sociology

Even though the term ‘alienation’ is one of the most outstanding features of this era, it is not very definite what it specifically connotes. One has to consult extensively on Hegel, Marx, Fromm and other thinkers to comprehend the complex implications of the term. The various connections in which the term has been used are restricted to include only a few meanings and applications among which most important refers to a disparity between one’s society/ Nature and one’s spiritual interests or welfare.

Life, nowadays is commonly characterized in terms of ‘alienation’. Reference is constantly made to it in connection with the growth of triviality in interpersonal relations, the impeding of personal development, the

widespread existence of obsessed personality traits, the absence of a sense of meaning in life, the uncertain relationship between man and Nature and the ‘disappearance’ of god. There is almost no aspect of contemporary life, which has not been discussed in terms of ‘alienation’.

Defining the Term Alienation

‘Alienation’, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is “the state of feeling estranged or separated from one’s milieu, work, products of work, or self” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2017). However, it asserts that:

The idea of alienation remains an ambiguous concept with elusive meanings, the following variants being most common: (1) powerlessness, the feeling that one’s destiny is not under one’s own control but is determined by external agents, fate, luck, or institutional arrangements, (2) meaninglessness, referring either to the lack of comprehensibility or consistent meaning in any domain of action (such as world affairs or interpersonal relations) or to a generalized sense of purposelessness in life, (3) normlessness, the lack of commitment to shared social conventions of behavior (hence widespread deviance, distrust, unrestrained individual competition, and the like), (4) cultural estrangement, the sense of removal from established values in society (as, for example, in intellectual or students rebellions against conventional institutions), (5) social isolation, the sense of loneliness or exclusion in social relations (as, for example, among minority group members), and (6) self-estrangement, perhaps the most difficult to define and in a sense the master theme, the understanding that in one way or another the individual is out of touch with himself (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2017).

This classification serves as a rough guide only, since radically different conceptions developed within these categories, though the experience of being powerless and the sense of self-estrangement remained persistent features.

The New Encyclopedia of Philosophy treats the term in a slightly more special sense: The term ‘alienation’ (estrangement) has many different meanings in everyday life, in science and in philosophy; most of them can be

regarded as modifications of one broad meaning which is suggested by the etymology and the morphology of the word – the meaning in which alienation is the act, or result of the act, through which something, or somebody becomes (or has become) alien (or strange) to something, or somebody else (Edwards, 1967, pp. 76-78).

This Encyclopedia also emphasizes that contemporary interpretations differ according to the way the writer chooses to understand and define the term. Some authors want the concept applied both to human, as well as, non-human entities, for instance, to God, world, and Nature; but most insist that it applies only to Man, and even here, it can refer only to individuals and not to society as a whole. In fact, ‘alienation’ for these authors is the non-adjustment of the individual to the society in which he lives. Still, some maintain that even a society can be alienated, or ‘sick’. And, therefore, failure to adapt to such a situation cannot help categorize an individual alienated.

Therefore, “Alienation” in current parlance is a port-manteau word, over-used in fact, to communicate disenchantment of all hues and variety, for, dissatisfaction, healthy or unhealthy, is at the root of all modernisms, post or ante.

The word ‘alienation’ is consequential to a perpetually felt threat and menace from the ‘Nature’ and/or ‘other’, and is the prime experience, but in case of Western playwright Beckett, such an interpretation would seem a misapplication. This is because what Beckett institutes on the proscenium from the very start is a universal human predicament, existence in Beckett’s perspective being aborted, apparently meaningless and futile. Therefore, there is nothing to be alienated from; the Beckett experience is uni-polar; it is an existential impasse from its inception in which a human being is neither a character in the traditional sense nor a conglomerate in its Pirandellian (characteristic of the works of Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), Italian dramatist and poet; especially describing drama in which actors become inseparable and indistinct from the characters that they play) variety. Therefore, what is instituted on stage is a manifestation of nothing. The human condition is ‘there’ on stage, which is in a perpetual swing.

But, for Ahmad, the Eastern playwright, it is very different. As the people of this region have not undergone the crisis similar to Western people and because of following different belief, Ahmad depicts alienation and

absurdity of different kind which is recognized and acquainted to the people of this part of the world – Ahmad shows the powerlessness of the people before the powerful Mother Nature or the natural forces and, the feeling that one's destiny is not under one's own control but is determined by external agents and/or by Nature. In Ahmad's write ups, the characters continuously felt threat and menace from the outward world -the 'Nature'.

Life, nowadays is commonly characterized in terms of 'alienation'. Yet, in spite of the term's recognition, few people have a detailed idea of precisely what does it mean. 'Alienation' is a term that most people realize in terms of their acquaintance with the writings of certain philosophers, psychologists and sociologists whose use of the term are most significant. In reality, it is largely through the influence of these and other recent authors that the term has come to have whatever meaning it has today.

Hegel's and Marx's discussions of 'alienation' are of considerable significance and they establish the background of a good deal of the contemporary ideas on 'alienation'. It seems to a number of contemporary social scientists who have attempted to generalize about the way term 'alienation' functions, that, however different the contexts in which it is employed may be, its various uses still share a number of common features. Arnold Kaufman, for example, offers the following general analysis:

To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features, which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction (Kaufman, 1965, p.143).

Lewis Feuer suggests, "the word alienation is used to describe the subjective tone of self- destructive experience" and states:

"Alienation is used to convey the emotional tone which accompanies any behavior in which the person is compelled to act self-destructively" (Feuer, 1962, p.132).

Kenneth Keniston opines that "most usages of 'alienation' share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed that is 'natural', desirable, or good has been lost" (Keniston, 1965, p.390).

From the linguistic point of view, and long before Hegel and Marx, an important use of 'alienation' which goes back to Middle English and has its

roots in Latin usage, is in connection with the state of unconsciousness and loss of one's mental powers.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)

It is in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) that Hegel for the first time used the term 'alienation' systematically in anything like the special ways in which it is used today. He provides an adequate discussion of 'alienation' and 'self-alienated spirit' in that book. Hegel is directly concerned with the theme of 'alienation' when he attempts to trace the entire development of the human spirit. He is less interested in accurate chronology than in what might be termed the "logical" development implicit in man's history. Hegel holds that the world in which man lives is largely a world he himself has created. Social, political, and cultural institutions constitute what he refers to as 'the social substance'. As a product of the human spirit, Hegel considers it to be essentially 'spiritual':

This world is a spiritual reality; it is essentially the fusion of individuality with being. This its existence is the work of self-consciousness, but likewise an actuality immediately present and alien to it (Hegel, 1967, p. 509).

This suggests that a spiritual nature is conveyed to everything created by human activity. Hegel even goes so far to suggest that the entire phenomenal world is 'spiritual':

Consciousness [...] must have taken up a relation to the object in all its aspects and phases, and have grasped its meaning from the point of view of each of them. This totality of is determinate characteristics makes the object per se or inherently a spiritual reality (Hegel, 1967, p. 790).

The whole of his discussion of 'alienation' occurs in a section on 'Culture and its Realm of Actual Reality', which is precisely the world of social substance.

Hegel regards this social substance as the objectification of the human spirit, in which spirit finds the objective form that is essential to its actualization.

Thus, he speaks of it as ‘objective spirit’. It is the very nature of spirit to be objective and universal.

Hegel’s concept of the nature of man underlies his use of the term ‘alienation’ and ‘self-alienation’. To Hegel, man’s nature is twofold, individuality and universality. He objects strongly to the view that the nature of man consists only in ‘individuality’ and, therefore he attaches great importance to ‘universality’. He speaks of human consciousness that universality is its ‘essence’:

Self-consciousness ... only has real existence so far as it alienates itself from itself. By doing so, it puts itself in the position of something universal, and this its universality is its validity ... and is its actuality ... its claim to be valid rests on its having made itself ... conform to what is universal (Hegel, 1967, p. 514).

The idea Hegel wishes to convey is that the social substance is common to the whole of the people and, therefore, transcends the individuality of the individual. If the individual is to achieve the universal, he must make himself ‘conformable’ to it, and live in accordance with it. Hegel considers unity with the social substance essential for man to attain universality as his essential nature.

It is this clash of individuality and universality, which is termed as ‘alienation’ by Hegel. Richard Schacht strongly argues that Hegel uses the term ‘alienation’ in two different ways. He uses it to refer to a separation between the individual and the social substance or ‘self-alienation’ between one’s actual condition and essential nature. He also uses it to refer to “a surrender or sacrifice of particularity and willfulness to attain unity” (Keniston, 1965, p.35).

In the first sense, ‘alienation’ involves separation, strangeness, something becoming alien. When the person ceases to identify with the social substance and comes to limit himself to his own particular person, he then views the substance as something external and opposed to him. It has become ‘alien’ or ‘alienated’.

It is observed that Hegel uses ‘alienation’, in this sense, in connection with the ‘emergence’ of an awareness of the ‘otherness’ of something. It must have ‘become’ alien to him after a period in which he was at one with it. It is

also noted that it is the social substance when the same lack of unity exists. The two modes of expression are complementary. When the individual ceases to be at one with the social substance, Hegel contends, he loses his universality, and “therein alienates (himself) from (his) inner nature and arrives at the extreme discordance with (himself)” (Hegel, 1967, p. 535). He thus becomes self-alienated. Self-alienation is used to refer to a separation or discrepancy between actual condition and essential nature.

The second sense of alienation that Hegel explains derives from the notion – held by Hobbes (1588-1679) and Rousseau (1712 - 1778) and other social contract philosophers of the surrender or transfer of a right to another. It is something deliberate and involves a conscious relinquishing or surrender with the intention of attaining a desired end: namely unity with the social substance. Alienation in this sense is, in fact, for Hegel, a means to overcome ‘alienation’ in the former sense and to eliminate the gulf that had separated him from the social substance, and, consequently, to attain universality: “The power of the individual consists in conforming (himself) to that substance, i.e. in emptying (or relinquishing) his self and thus establishing (himself) as objectively existing substance” (Hegel, 1967, p. 517).

For Hegel, the social substance is not only the creation of spirit, but its objectification as well. This means that the social substance is spirit in objectified form. From this it follows that when the social substance is alienated from the individual, it is objectified spirit that is alienated from him, or, to put it another way, it is the individual’s own true self-objectification that is alienated from him.

There is an entire section in the *Phenomenology* (1945, in English 1962) entitled “self-alienated Spirit”, in which he describes the spirit as self-alienated when there is a discordant relation between the individual and social substance. When the social substance is alienated from the individual, spirit is divided within itself; and it is between its divided aspects that this relation of alienation holds. In short, spirit is self-alienated. When one considers the fruitfulness of Hegel’s use of the term ‘alienation’, one is confronted with the question of his reason for using it in two distinct senses. It is in fact confusing to say a person who is at one with the social substance arid of a person who is not, that each has “alienated his self”. Hegel’s twofold use creates confusion, but this does not detract from the usefulness of the term. Hegel’s use of the term to mean separation between the

individual and the social substance is not new, for it had previously been used to convey the idea of separation between individuals and between men and God. Hegel's innovation in his use of the term is that he applied it to the discordant relation between the individual and the non-personal social substance. But where Hegel seems less persuasive is when he speaks of an essential nature of man implicit in his use of self-alienation to refer to a separation or disparity between a person's actual condition and his essential "inner" nature. This obviously presupposes that he has such an essential nature. There are many who, in fact do not consider man to have such a definite and describable thing as 'essential nature'. It may be that Hegel's conception of man's essential nature is not completely satisfactory, or is questionable; but he is most convincing about his basic point that man's spiritual life involves both distinct individuality and participation in a social and cultural community.

Karl Marx (1818- 1883)

Hegel's basic concept of man's capacity for spiritual life was severely attacked by Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1932), (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 (also referred to as *The Paris Manuscripts*) are a series of notes written between April and August 1844 by Karl Marx. Not published by Marx during his lifetime, they were first released in 1932 (by researchers in the Soviet Union) which revealed a previously unknown side of him that of the passionate 'humanist', concerned with the issue of man's self-realization. From the start, Marx charges Hegel with over abstraction of his concept of alienation, "The distinctive forms of alienation which are manifested are only different forms of consciousness and self-consciousness" (Marx, 1963, p.202). They are "merely the thought of alienation, its abstract and hence vacuous and unreal expression" (Marx, 1963, p.215). Marx wanted to bring to earth Hegel's transcendental abstractions, which misrepresent the "real, corporeal man, with his feet firmly planted on the sordid ground, inhaling and exhaling all the powers of nature" (Marx, 1963, p.206). The human product, which Marx calls 'alienated' from the individual under certain conditions is not, the 'social substance' as it had been for Hegel, it is the product of the individual's labor. This is the first crucial step Marx takes to reduce Hegel's 'too abstract' (as Marx thought) account of 'alienation' to its concrete materialistic form. Marx is adapting Hegel's concept of the alienation of the social substance in terms of the objectification of personality in the product of the individual's labor. It is important to remember that Marx does not call the product

alienated from its producer merely because in it his labor becomes an object, as Hegel does, but he explicitly states that it is alienated from its producer only when “the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force”. Marx adds “The alienation of the worker in his labor becomes an object, assumes an external existence, but that it exists independently, outside himself, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him” (Marx, 1963, p.222). Thus, Marx distinguishes clearly between externalization and the alienation of the product.

The actual source of its hostility lies in the powers, which govern it, in the other man for whom it is produced. If my product is related to me, Marx argues, as an alien and hostile object, this must be because it belongs to someone who is alien to me. Its alienation from me must be attributed to my surrender of it to another person. Here, Hegel’s two aspects or senses of alienation have come together. The alienated product is separated from its producer because he has surrendered it to another. In Marx the separation is the result of the surrender; whereas; in Hegel the separation of the individual from the social substance is overcome through the surrender of the individual to the social substance.

Not only the product of labor but also labor itself is described by Marx as alienated. The major part of his discussion of alienation in the first manuscript bears the title ‘Alienated Labor’. He argues that labor becomes alienated when it ceases to reflect one’s own personality and interests:

What constitutes the alienation of labor? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased (Marx, 1963, pp.124-125).

A man’s labor is truly his own labor, for Marx, only when it is ‘spontaneous’, and ‘free and self-directed activity’.

According to Marx, the alienation of product and labor has the direct consequence that “man is alienated from other man” (Marx, 1963, p.129). The alienation from other man is to be understood by Marx as involving a complete absence of fellow feeling and antagonism based on a feeling of rivalry and self-centeredness” (Marx, 1963, pp. 22-26).

The expression ‘self-alienation’ is used by Marx to characterize the alienation of labor. The point he wishes to stress is that a man’s labor is his life, and his product is his life-objectified; and that, therefore, when they are alienated from him. When his personal physical, and spiritual energy as manifested in his productive activity or labor, is subjected to the direction of another, his very life is no longer his own. He is, therefore, ‘self-alienated’.

Self –alienation is used by Marx also to refer to one’s separation from one’s true human self, or essential nature. ‘Alienated labor’, he states, “alienation from man his own body, external nature, his mental life and his human life” (Marx, 1963, p. 129).

Erich Fromm (1900 -1980)

Erich Fromm has had a great deal to do with the dissemination of the term ‘alienation’. He was much influenced by Marx’s *Early Manuscripts* (1932) and incorporated them in his book *Marx’s Concept of Man* (1961). The problem of alienation has been a constant theme in his write ups starting with *The Fear of Freedom* (1941). Indeed, it is the central issue in one of his significant books, *The Sane Society* (1955), where he says:

I have chosen the concept of alienation as the central point from which I am going to develop the analysis of the contemporary social character (Fromm, 1990 p.110).

In this book, Fromm speaks of alienation as though it were a single phenomenon and uses it to characterize certain possible relations of a person to nature, other man, his society and himself.

Concerning man’s relations to nature, Fromm never spells out precisely what he means by ‘nature’. Sometimes it would appear to refer to purely physical life. At other times it seems to mean something like man’s natural environment; where one would need to exist in unity with it as he is an integral functioning part within it. This ambiguity makes it difficult to comprehend what it precisely is that man is alienated from.

The essence of the concept of alienation, according to Fromm, is that others have become alien to man. An alienated person is “out of touch with any other person” (Fromm, 1990 p.120). Fromm speaks of alienation from others

in connection with the lack of ‘harmony’. In this context, a man is alienated who fails to relate himself to others.

Fromm often speaks of our society and culture as alienated. He speaks of alienation in modern society rather than from it. When Fromm says that society is alienated, he means that it tends to make individuals alienated from their work, their production, from themselves and from nature. Fromm follows Marx in tracing the source of man’s alienation to the contemporary socioeconomic structure. Generally speaking, Fromm is strongly opposed to unity with society. Contrary to what Hegel holds, it is precisely the person who is completely at one with society. Contrary to what Hegel holds, it is precisely the person who is completely at one with society whom Fromm calls alienated: “we all conform as much or more than people in an intensely authoritarian society would” (Fromm, 1990 p.138). This is the height of alienation from oneself. Fromm complains that modern man “suffers from a defect of spontaneity and individuality which may seem incurable” (Fromm, 1990 p.24), and he argues that man can realize his ‘self’ only if he abandons conformity to society and recovers his individuality.

Perhaps the most important of these separations is that of the individual from himself. When Fromm says that the ‘alienated person’ is ‘out of touch with himself’ he seems to mean that ‘alienation from one-self’ consists of something like the loss or lack of individuality or spontaneity. “By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as alien [to himself]” (Fromm, 1990 p.120).

Not only does Fromm understand ‘alienation’ in terms of man’s relations to nature, to others, to society and to himself, but also uses it in a variety of other contexts as well, Fromm’s weakness is that he uses the term so freely that the results are not very illuminating.

Karen Horney (1885 -1952)

The expression ‘alienation from self’ is in vogue in the writings of a number of psychoanalysts, particularly those under the influence of Karen Horney, Horney distinguishes between two types or dimensions of the ‘self’: the ‘actual self’ and the ‘real self’:

I would distinguish the actual or empirical self from the idealized self on the one hand, and the real self from the idealized self on the other. The actual self is an all-inclusive term for everything that a person is at a given time... The real self... is the 'original' force toward individual growth and fulfillment, with which we may again achieve full identification when freed of the crippling shackles of neurosis (Horney, 1950, p.158).

The 'actual self' is further characterized in terms of ones 'feelings, wishes, beliefs, and energies' and also his past. The 'real self', on the other hand, is to be conceived as 'that most alive center of ourselves', which "engenders the spontaneity of feelings" and "is the source of spontaneous interest and energies" (Horney, 1950, pp.156-57). Having distinguished these two types or dimensions of "self", Horney then introduces two types of 'alienation from the actual self' and 'alienation from the real self'.

"Alienation from the actual self" is said to consist of the "dimming of all of what a person actually is or has, including even his connection of his present life with his past" (Horney, 1950, p.156). According to Horney, the self-alienated person:

Talks about his most intimate personal life experiences. Yet they have lost their personal meaning. And just as he may talk about himself without 'being in it', so he may work, be with friends, take a walk ...without being in it. His relation to himself has become impersonal; so has his relation to his whole life" (Horney, 1950, p.161).

'Alienation from the real self' involves ceasing to be animated by the energies springing from his 'real self' which is characterized as 'that most alive centre of ourselves ... the source of spontaneity of feelings ... the original force toward individual growth and fulfillment'. To be alienated from the real self is to be cut off or deprived of access to this source of energy. The difference between the two types of 'alienation from the self' is indeed too slight. Of the former type, she says:

"It is the loss of the feeling of being an active determining force in his own life. It is the loss of feeling himself as an organic whole. These in turn indicate an alienation from that most alive centre of

ourselves which I have suggested calling the real self”(Horney, 1950, p.157).

The failure to be ‘an active determining force in one’s own life’ seems to differ very slightly from the failure to develop ‘a spontaneous individual self’, which is characteristic of ‘alienation from the real self’.

In spite of the fact that Karen Horney’s notion of the ‘real self’ and the differentiations she attempts are not sufficiently clear, her use of the term ‘alienation’ does not become meaningless. She is considerably more selective in her use of the term than Erich Fromm is.

Modern Sociology

In recent years in the field of sociology and social sciences, ‘alienation’ has proved a heuristically fruitful concept. Though very few generalizations can be concerning the way the concept of alienation is understood by social scientists, yet they do not use it in any of the major contexts in which Fromm or Horney do. Many sociologists understand alienation precisely in terms of some forms of separation of the individual from some aspect of society. In Fromm, conformity to society goes hand in hand with alienation. Sociologists differ from Hegel, Marx and Fromm in another respect. For almost all sociologist’s alienation is a psychological state of an individual. It is conceived solely in terms of the presence of certain attitudes and feelings. The question of an essential nature of man does not even arise.

The use of ‘alienation’ in connection with some form of separation of the individual from some writers do use the term in connection with the phenomena of ‘powerlessness’ and ‘meaninglessness’. In addition, the use of the term in connection with separation from other people has long been a common one. The sociologists use alienation in many different connections. They use the term in Sociology and Social Sciences in terms of alienation from others, from work and from society.

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