

## THE CONCEPT OF 'ALIENATION' IN RECENT AMERICAN THOUGHT

As all important philosophical terms, 'alienation' has no single meaning. If it has, then like the terms 'good', 'justice', and 'freedom', it probably would be neither so important nor the source of so much difficulty. What is obvious and simple is seldom the cause of controversy. Where men disagree and sometimes resort to violence to enforce their will on others, philosophers must assume that some concept is at issue which admits of no easy or final solution. What is complex is the source of disagreement just because in itself it allows men to define it in various ways. Each person can insist his is the only 'correct' definition, although some will propose methods which they claim can permanently solve our disagreements over important terms. Yet our continued verbal strife, and refusal to unite on any single methodological proposal, should tell us not so much that human nature is perverse as that the metaphysical core of the created order is complex at its base.

Although we cannot call 'alienation' a new term, it has come into prominence recently and has come to characterise much that is said about American life and culture. Hegel and Marx, of course, make extensive use of the concept, but what is of interest to us is its recent rise to prominence on the American scene. In the turbulent 60's, of course, Herbert Marcuse was widely read on college campuses. His stress on alienation seemed to strike a note of response in the youth of that time. Basically, 'alienation' means being estranged from something, or somebody, usually either from society or from oneself. Yet it is not a term always used with a negative connotation. For instance, if one wants to understand any person or phenomenon, we must first gain distance from our object. In other words, we must go through a period of estrangement in order to gain the perspective leading to comprehension.

To live through 'alienation' may never feel good, but it may be an experience we must go through if we are to understand what is near at hand and has become too familiar. For a student in the educational process, then, alienation or estrangement from family, state, inherited beliefs or former teachers is necessary for

maturity. What may make this change seem unnatural is merely that the experience is abrupt or forced on us from outside. This happened in the United States during the Viet Nam war, when a whole generation found itself involved in a conflict neither to its liking nor of its own choosing. Even without this, the young would still have experienced alienation from culture, except perhaps more quietly, less publicly, and without such violent outburst. Anyone who criticises his social structure, his inherited value, or himself experiences estrangement from that which formerly was close to him.

Marx, we know, traces the source of alienation to the worker's lack of control over his material product. Hegel locates its source in a lack of spiritual development, and thus it is a necessary phase to all progress. Existentialism tends to see estrangement as arising from a lack of self-acceptance of the failure to develop an independent self. Freedom almost necessitates alienation, because one who is free does not have to be any one thing. Thus, one is alienated from himself because the requisite decisions to crystallise the self have not yet been made. If freedom remains, it follows that alienation will be a constant human experience as long as choice lasts. Thus, we find that sources of alienation are many. Only if we accepted one as definitive could there be any hope for overcoming alienation permanently. Furthermore, alienation is a by-product of an increasing sense of freedom, and may have to be tolerated if the uncertainties of freedom are valued.

As long as multiple accounts of the source and nature of alienation are given, it cannot be finally overcome. Thus the basis of alienation lies in the existence of a plurality of philosophies which never allow man to view himself under one pattern only. Of course, Marx thinks his proposed revolution in the control of the material sources of power can eliminate alienation. However, that can only come about if all men ultimately accept not only Marx but also one authoritative interpretation of his teaching. As long as intellectual freedom remains, this is not likely to happen; so alienation and the philosopher's feeling of estrangement will persist. Socrates distanced himself from his society and refused dogmatic solutions to philosophical problems, so we see that to remain in this state is not all bad. In fact, one could argue that it is alienation that forms the basic philosophical attitude of questioning.

Kierkegaard finds in 'the pathos of distance' the source of the poetic spirit that produces verbal creation. Of course, he is the one in the modern age who has stressed the essential 'aloneness' of men in all crucial and decisive phases of choice. To be alienated may be to be creative, although most existentialists are disillusioned romantics. They recognise that such total aloneness and freedom is hard to bear and is also the source of self-destruction, as often as it leads to creative effort. Those who simply accept prevailing values and themselves as they are do not experience alienation, but neither do they learn the origin of philosophic attitude of criticism. In experiencing alienation on a mass scale, America may have taken a step toward creating a generation of philosophers and artists, if they survive the threat of destruction.

Hegel thought philosophy could itself provide a feeling of triumph over alienation. Kierkegaard essentially denies this by reversing the role of the philosopher. The philosopher is one who by nature must be immersed in the ordinary world with its inevitable alienations. Hegel could escape by idealised thought; Kierkegaard could not. If all of us as souls are divided, we all experience alienation to the extent that we do not discover a final unity. If as selves the world around stays alien to us in the sense of being 'other', to live in the world among men is never to escape a feeling of alienations. Estrangement from one's fellowmen and from society often coincides with a period of great productivity. To think that man's experience could be other is to yearn to achieve heaven on earth. It is, as Sartre says, to face becoming God as one's project, to want to have one's essence and existence become identical. But as long as time lasts, man remains free, and contingency is real, this cannot happen.

'Alienation' means to be out of touch with one's time and in that sense inaccessible. This may explain why the generation of the sixties in America experienced alienation so intently that they spoke as if they were the first generation ever to discover it. The age preceding theirs had an unusual sense of identification and 'at-oneness' with their time and society. Individually the youth of the 50's undoubtedly experienced self-alienation as all men and women do, but the outward harmony made it seem minor or less evident. The sense of alienation increased too for those who have high ideals; for them, the disparities between real and ideal

are seemingly magnified when the goal is higher. A lethargic or satisfied generation disguises its estrangement with contentment. The sixties in America were dominated by an intense idealism. Thus, estrangement from the social values of the day seemed more intense and less a matter of the normal break-away of maturing youth.

“We shall overcome, some day”, the lyrics of the '60's civil rights theme song runs. “We shall overcome” a sense of alienation in ourselves and in society. But this Negro spiritual which the activists of the '60's borrowed for their theme originally referred to the second coming of Jesus, God's judgment, and the total reconstruction of the world at that time. The political activists changed it to mean “right now”, and then they experienced a greater sense of alienation between their ideal world and the actual society around them. This is not to say that one should give up his ideal strivings, but it does mean that those who move for brave new worlds, inevitably experience a greater sense of alienation from their present society. The non-conformist, by his action, alienates himself from society and should not expect his experience to be any different. Marx thought the modern world dehumanised man, and Marcuse extended this idea. But all worlds dehumanise one who holds ideals and goals that are not supported in the society around him.

Marx thought all forms of alienation stemmed from one source, as did Hegel. In the first place, they differ as to this source, which should make us suspicious of ever gaining complete agreement to eradicate alienation. Secondly, we might suspect that the sources of alienation and estrangement are many. In this case, to stamp out one source is not to eliminate all. This is essentially the disheartening discovery of the American activist youth of the '60's. Essentially they won the Viet Nam war protest and even most of their civil rights demands. The war stopped and civil rights laws were passed, but all alienation did not disappear. Like the parable in the New Testament, we may sweep our house clean only to find it occupied by more devils by the next morning. We may push the rock up the hill only to see it roll back down again.

Martin Luther King had a dream and so did Marx. King wanted to see the promise of freedom for all realised. Marx wanted to build a Utopian society where all divisions between

classes were permanently dissolved. Ideally, there is nothing wrong with either dream; progress can be made. The difficulty comes if we expect all sources of alienation to be removed, never to return again. The affluent American achieved financial wealth, only to find other barriers still preventing his total self-enjoyment. Thus, at the same time they both felt estranged from the values of their society. Those who embodied these values in the 'establishment' found themselves strangely unsatisfied, even though their material ambitions had been achieved. From both sides Americans experienced painful estrangement, but from different sources and for different reasons.

If the sources of alienation are multiple, the sense of personal estrangement is not peculiar to capitalist countries but common to all men. Certainly the prominence of Russian dissidents today gives evidence that not everyone is happy with the fate of society under communism. Party leaders in Moscow surely must be wondering now if alienation is not a necessary part of the life of all intellectuals and thus remains a possible experience under communism also. Alienation is increased by education, an experience common to both Berkeley and Moscow. As the educational level rises, so does the level of social and individual criticism and the sense of alienation. Of course, it may lie dormant for a time, until it burst forth when events reveal its presence and make it impossible to ignore.

Some religions by their nature call on us to alienate ourselves from society and its ways. In fact, all must do this to some extent or they cannot be religious. Christianity wants its followers to be "in the world but not of it", which certainly means a sense of outward estrangement. The observant Jew does not live like other men, nor does the strict Hindu. It is just that, even in religious life, we experience times of harmony and identity man to man, society to man, and man to his religion. But eventually the time will go "out of joint". Now the alienation experienced for a time comes back with double impact. Those religions which exhort man to a higher, purer life are alienation-inducing; Marx did not see religions performing this function in his day, but then it is a commonplace of religion that all fall degenerate and need to be reformed back to a condition of purity from time to time.

One interesting feature of our situation in America has been that those who write about alienation have not been primarily philosophers but psychologists and social critics. This may tell us that philosophers have fallen on comfortable and decadent days. Thus, they fail to experience alienation in pursuing their craft as they should. However, alienation is often first experienced in religion as estrangement from God, and the lack of religious interest in recent philosophers may have deprived them of this primal experience. Spiritual death is alienation from God, as both St. Paul and Kierkegaard agree. But if God and the spiritual life are both neglected, alienation can appear to be overcome, until some rupture in events uncovers it again. Perhaps true unity exists if the self is overcome and individuality is transcended. But if this ceases to be a human goal, a resurgence of alienation is inevitable.

Intellect and feeling must be harmonised if self-estrangement is to be overcome. But have philosophers of late taken this as their task, or simply the refinement of intellect? If the harmony of intellect and feeling is neglected, a disproportion in the human soul is bound to appear. However, we need to ask whether philosophy itself can achieve this reconciliation, or whether it must come simultaneously in religion, in art, or in a life of action. We should not assume the removal of alienation by following any one means until we have experienced such final harmony. Even then, we can never be sure that our way is the way for all men. Of course, in recent American life the prominence of alienation has been attributed to a rising consciousness among black and other minorities. *The Invisible Man* portrays a sense of the alienation experienced by the black man in a white society. The writings of James Baldwin and others outline the feeling of poetic distance from society that is the black experience. We came to experience greater alienation in America just because we finally came to expect that it should be overcome.

Yet, just as this sense of alienation rose to a crescendo, so did black creative effort in literature, dance, theology, and art. One does not justify black suffering by pointing this out, but it does highlight the relationship between alienation and creativity. Alienation occurs when a person's self-conception changes. He is no longer what he was, and his sense of estrangement from his past is

painful. Thus, no new awareness can come without its price in personal pain. Any other worldly consciousness is by nature alienated, as is any reformer or revolutionary. Momentous events outside the person seem to result from his internal condition of disproportion. Internal alienation becomes manifest in outward disruption if not even chaos. If Hegel is correct in contending that alienation can only be overcome by achieving universality, then to the extent that we remain individual as Kierkegaard wanted us, we cannot overcome alienation and we will continue to experience it. Hegel and Marx differ only about the type of universalisation desirable and the means to achieve it. Neither considers individuality as prize as Kierkegaard does. Recent American experience has been to reject uniformity, to stress individuality, but this proportionately increases the sense of alienation. Only the romantic considers individually an exhilarating experience. The disillusioned romantic knows that individuality means to live alone and that means pain, no matter how productive the experience may be otherwise. Unity with society can be achieved only by surrendering the particular self, and this is precisely what American youth of 60's found they did not want to do.

Marx wanted to release private property from its alienation, but the important question being asked with increasing frequency, is, "What price will man pay to achieve a state of contentment?" Communism overcomes human self-alienation by universalisation, Marx contends, and so it provides a definitive resolution to the antagonisms between man and man. But, we must ask, is Marx's tracing of the source of alienation to a single root correct, and is the loss of individuality a price man is willing to pay for a sense of oneness? To answer "no" to either count puts us back where Greek tragedy began and denies that Hegel's age, or Marx's, is superior to any other. The issue is whether definite solutions not available before have been revealed in a new theory, or whether new solutions can always be proposed but each will remain as one among many in an enduring human situation.

Erich Fromm had a great deal to do with popularising the term 'alienation' in America. In general, he simply meant by it that something is not as it should be. Sometimes he uses it to mean simply loneliness, and at other times, 'alienation' is a sense of powerlessness in the face of vast social structures. Americans,



then, discovered in the '60's in a painful way the disparity between the way something is and the way it ought to be. They experienced alienation, the loss of a sense of progress, and the conviction that the modern world had in its hand the tools needed to put man on a different plane from where he had traditionally been. Things went well in the '50's, and the discrepancies in ourselves and in society were hidden. It seemed as if the millennium was at hand. But as disturbing factions and disillusionments crept in, aberration was experienced again, and all the more intently then because we thought it could be banished by the achievements of the modern scientific world.

Disunity is always involved where alienation is felt, so that Americans did experience disunity of purpose and a separation from their general goals and ways of life. If unity is achieved again, the American sense of alienation is overcome, but the catch is that we now believe such unity to be momentary if desirable, and not a permanent achievement. Church and state in America seemed to have a unity of purpose and an agreed way of life for a time. When these came into conflict and alienation was experienced, our notions of religion had become so happy and accepting that the reappearance of alienation in the '60's led us to think religion had failed. All that really happened is that Americans have again experienced the primal religious situation of standing alone before God as sinners.

Pomona College,  
U.S.A.

**Frederick Sontag**