

**CONCEPT OF ALIENATION WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO THE THOUGHT OF KARL MARX**

The purpose of the present paper is to analyse the concept of alienation in order to delineate the main characteristics of alienation. In doing so, an attempt has been made to make a distinction between separation, objectification and alienation. Secondly, in this article the concept of alienation has been discussed with reference to the thought of Karl Marx. Marx had referred to four kinds of alienation in his work *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. I have attempted to analyse them and see whether the four kinds of alienation can be seen as aspects of self-alienation or not.

The available literature on alienation is so vast that it is difficult to merge the different, specific analyses of the term into a single conception of alienation. Nevertheless, in order to seek the essential characteristics of the concept of alienation, we can say that alienation is a state of mind in which man feels, estranged or dissociated from either external nature, other men, himself or world at large. In other words, alienation is a relational concept which presupposes a situation in which there are at least two entities involved (person and an object, person and other persons, person as an essence and person as existence). For it would be an incomplete statement to say that A is alienated unless we specify as to what A is alienated from.

The important point however is that the carrier of the feeling of estrangement has to be a person, though from what the person is alienated need not always be a person. It may be an object, an institution, a group etc. While reflecting upon the concept of alienation, consciousness seems to be an essential necessary feature of the one who is estranged. It is for this reason perhaps that we can meaningfully talk about the concept of alienation only with reference to human beings.

An inanimate thing or an animal cannot be alienated from itself or from objects. Alienation is peculiar to human beings only. Since man is a conscious being, he has the power to identify, classify, and distinguish himself from others. He has the capacity to plan, will, anticipate, create space between himself and the object of his perception. It is because of man's power of conceptualisation that he can make the blue-print in his mind before actually proceeding to make anything. Through conceptualisation he can link his present, past and future. He can imagine himself in a situation in which he is not and in which he could be. He has the power of conceiving contrafactua situations which are different from the actual situation obtaining in the world.

Alienation denotes a relationship between man's essential nature and his existence, whether we take the theological view point where man is taken to be alienated from himself when he does not conform to the will of God, or whether, it is the existentialists viewpoint, where man's essentiality lies in his consciousness or freedom and alienation is seen as man's inauthenticity and bad-faith when he does not conform to his freedom and does not own up his responsibility, or whether we take the Marxian viewpoint, where man is seen as a social, conscious, free productive being and is alienated to the extent that he does not fulfil these potentialities.

In all these views of man and of alienation, one common feature is discernible i.e., there is a separation between the essential nature of man and his actuality or actual existence. It should be pointed out that all forms of separation or gap cannot be termed as alienation. There can be a separateness between myself and my table or between me and another object or a person. But this cannot be characterized as alienation. The reason for this is that if I do not desire myself to be wedded into unity with an object, or a person then, the question of alienation does not arise. Valued separation or desirable disunion are not cases of alienation. Alienation results when one aspires for solidarity yet fails to do so. Thus, alienation is a negative state which needs to be overcome.

Within a social framework, alienation can be referred to as a lack of solidarity, an inadequate adjustment in social relationships. Alienation is a possible consequence of a situation in which there is an apriori assumption of some sort of reciprocal relationship and solidarity, as for example, between a person who is alienated and another person from whom he is alienated. To take an instance, a black man is alienated from his white master in the sense that he feels deprived of conditions which can set him at par with the white man. As a social being, the black man ought to be an equal but he perceives the white man as exerting an adverse influence on his status and image. If the black man remains neutral i.e., indifferent or apathetic, he is not acting consciously, if he acts consciously, he becomes alienated.

Speaking within the framework of capitalist society Marx believed that in this class society, worker is alienated because he feels deprived of the conditions which can set him at par with the bourgeoisie. Marx's approach to the problem of alienation was a practical one. His starting point was not the concept of

alienation itself but his practical observation of the misery of the workers under capitalism. He focussed his attention more on the identification of the manifestations of alienation than on pure analysis of the concept itself. He said, "In the real practical world self-estrangement can only become manifest through the real practical relationship to other man."¹

Infact Marx detached the problem of man, alienation, and freedom from the theological cobwebs and placed man at the root of man. Instead of painting man in transcendental colours Marx viewed man as a natural being, who could be described in terms of his powers² and needs.³ Taking the Aristotelian vitalistic view of nature, Marx held that a man not only has certain powers but also that he strikes to realise them, for example, a being with eyes cannot only see but also wants to see and feels frustrated when prevented from seeing. Marx believed that man by his very constitution is continually impelled into activity, in order to express his powers and satisfy his needs. Man cannot relinquish the realisation of his capacities as that would mean relinquishing of man himself.⁴

In his work *Economic and Philosphic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx speaks of man's alienation from (1) the activity, (2) species nature, (3) other men, (4) the product. It would be relevant to examine whether these four kinds of alienation can be explained by reference to self-alienation alone or are they different in some sense.

A careful reading of Marx shows that he conceived man as a conscious, productive, species being. It seems to me that in his thought all the three are inseparably linked. For Marx, productive activity, which is the distinguishing feature of mankind is a conscious and social activity. Human being creates for a whole of the humanity. In the words of Marx,

Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that that he is a species being. Or it is only because he is a species being, that he is a conscious Being...⁵

Marx believed that while engaging in productive, creative activity, man proves himself to be conscious species being. Marx compared man's creative activity with artistic activity⁶ in order to highlight the point that labour activity gives happiness to the labourer as artistic activity gives to the artist. But unfortunately, artistic type of labour, is distorted under capitalism. The aim of the labour becomes the satisfaction of merely biological needs. Activity becomes a slave to crude needs. Hence in a capitalistic society, man makes his productive activity, his *essential being* merely a *means to his survival* and there occurs a schism between man's essence and his existence. Marx believed that since labour is coerced under capitalism it denies and kills man's intrinsic nature.

Man is alienated from his species' nature. Though Marx does not define this term yet from his writings it is clear what it means. It refers to man's consciousness of being a social being and not of being an isolated individual. Man creates and enjoys as a member of humanity. The object of thought and action of man is not merely his individuality but his sociality. Unlike the animals, man is conscious of himself as belonging to a species and creating for a species.⁷

Man is said to be alienated from his species nature to the extent that his productive labour activity instead of satisfying whole of humanity, limits its aim to the satisfaction of his individual existence. In Marx's thought man's essence consists in his life-activity, the free, conscious, activity. But this life activity is turned into merely a way of surviving. This means that Marx

conceived of man and his activity as inseparably connected. Regarding the third kind of alienation i.e. alienation from other men, Marx said :

An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour, from his life-activity, from his species being is the *estrangement of man from man*. If a man is confronted by himself, he is confronted by *other* man... Infact, the proposition that man's species nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man's essential nature.⁸ (Italics in original)

Since for Marx man's essential nature is a social or species nature which can be best expressed through his conscious, creative activity, it is evident that for Marx alienation from others is but a form of self-alienation.

Alienation from one's activity, alienation from species nature and alienation from others can, thus, be perhaps taken as different forms of expressing the self-alienation of man. But one wonders how Marx thinks man to be alienated from his product. Is this a form of self-alienation as other three seem to be? Does Marx preach a primitive society devoid of industrialization? After all under all industrial societies, there is bound to be a division of labour and commodity production and the product will be separated from labourer.

It seems that Marx spoke of alienation from product not keeping in view merely division of labour and industrialisation but also that in a class society there is a compulsory division of labour. The class which owns the means of production manages to rule in every sphere. Since the worker has no choice (without the means of production) but to work in order to survive, his work negates his essential creativity.

Alienation from the product for Marx refers to not only a separation of the product from its producer but it also signifies the independence and autonomy of a product because of the impersonal laws of market economy, wherein the product has a life of its own and it controls the dimensions of the workers, activity.

Here it will be significant to say that there is difference between objectification and alienation and Marx did maintain this distinction. He said :

Labour's realisation is its objectification. In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realisation appears as loss of reality for the workers.. objectification as loss of the object... appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.⁹

In other words, objectification refers to man embodying his capacities in an outward form or an object. It means duplicating oneself and contemplating oneself in a world that man himself has created. Hence objectification refers to a positive, desirable externalisation of man's potentialities; on the other hand, it dominates or rules over man. It emerges as something which instead of embodying the capacities of the worker thwarts his potentialities.

While concluding I may say that in Marx's view, minimization of alienation is linked with the maximization of need fulfilment and power realisation. A person is alienated to the extent that he is unable to realise his essential nature.

NOTES

1. Marx, Karl, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1944* (Moscow : Foreign Languages Publishing House), p. 79. Henceforth to be quoted as E. P. M.
2. By power he meant the ability to act and produce certain consequences. The equivalents of power as used by Marx are faculty, ability and capacity.
3. Need refers to the lack one feels for something which is not available. Need is always attached to power in Marx's writings as the means through which man becomes aware of the latter's existence.
4. It should be mentioned here that Marx did not limit these needs and powers to biological ones only but extends them to the striving of arts and sciences as well. Infact, he included all that which constitutes the domain of whatsoever is produced by human creative consciousness.
5. *E. P. M.*, p. 75.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
7. Species being (Gattungswesen) – this term Marx borrowed from Feuerbach. The following passage from Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* and quoted in the *E. P. M.* can help us to understand the meaning of the term species-being "Consciousness in the strictest sense is present only in a being to whom his species, his essential nature, is an object of thought. ... The brute is indeed conscious of himself as an individual ... but not as a species ... Man ... can put himself in the place of another, for this reason, that to him his species, his essential nature and not merely his individuality is an object of thought ... *E. P. M.*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 69.