

ALIENATION AS SYMPTOM: DIAGNOSTIC PERSPECTIVES ON A CONCEPT

(First Concurrent Session)

BEATRICE SARLOS
Loyola College, Baltimore

PART I

ALIENATION AS CAUSE

1. *The Problem: Breadth and Vagueness of the Concept*

The most vivid memory of my paternal grandmother is a recollection of her constant complaint about the new railroad. Every summer, as I visited her in the house on the market square of the small East Prussian town, she unfolded the tapestry of an idyllic pastoral life that had, alas, been changed forever by the new railroad. Because of this new "iron horse" strangers now frequently came to town, destroying its former *gemutlichkeit*. Because of the anonymity made possible at night on the railroad platform at the edge of town, my Uncle Otto, grandmother's youngest son, had finally managed to escape wife and children. His former escape attempts by horse buggy had always been foiled, thanks to the watchful gendarme in the next village. On this new railroad grandmother also blamed the increasing godlessness of the burghers who succumbed to the temptation of an early Sunday morning train schedule to Koenigsberg, the racing center of the province. I most vividly remember the shrugging of my grandmother's shoulders in a gesture of resignation. The old life was gone forever. How could one fight the railroad?

Contemporary talk about alienation reminds me much of my grandmother's tendency to blame all unfortunate turns of fate on the new railroad. Many see alienation as the cause of every conceivable social ill, but few feel that it is curable. One commentator has called it "America's newest frontier."¹ Erich Fromm who introduced the term into American literature claims that:²

Alienation as we find it in modern society, is almost total.³ Fromm, much like my grandmother, tends to attribute the

widespread ills of modern society to one central cause. Following the footsteps of Marx who followed the footsteps of Hegel, he finds that alienation is caused by modern technology.⁴

In fairness to Fromm and other "alienation experts" it should be said that they do offer some suggestions for remedy. We are urged to resist technological life styles in stereotype mass housing, to return to small-community life or to remodel production processes along the former lines of artisan's work. But on the other hand, we are urged not to abandon the cities; and we are told now that in spite of mass production methods the increasing world population can expect more shortages of goods. While school systems are trying to break their super administrations into smaller, decentralized units, the buildings themselves tend still to get larger and larger. Decentralization generally only means that another intermediate layer of administration has been interposed between the classroom situation and head office. Industry has not been too receptive to pleas for more humanized work models in place of the assembly line because the demand is not considered to be realistic. In the end, the advocacy of those who try to fight the alienation of technological man is considered doomed to failure, often by the advocates themselves. Technological experts seldom take it seriously. The most drastic result of blaming alienation on technology has been to refuse to admit that the problem exists at all!

Richard Schacht, in a comprehensive attempt to analyze conceptions of "alienation," states that it has become the "watchword" of our time.⁵ He also adds that the problem of dealing with this condition lies in the vagueness and inconsistency of its conception. "Alienation" is used by almost everyone to explain almost everything. In Schacht's words,

We are dealing here with a highly unsettled situation, and not with a set of established conventions of usage.⁶

This vagueness of conception and inconsistency of usage has greatly reduced the usefulness of the term for those who would like to find remedies for this condition.

As Whitehead has pointed out quite correctly, vagueness of conception need not be confused with certainty about existence.⁷ Our experience assures us that something is definitely wrong with modern society. Modern man exhibits signs of varied sufferings to which we somewhat sweepingly refer as "alienation." The schools are plagued with the problem of the turned-off student and with

the impersonality of central office in its dealings with classroom level problems. Communes have sprung up where those who reject the style of mass society find individualistic modes of rearing the young. Industry is suffering from shoddy performance by bored assembly-line workers. Minority groups in many instances have given up trying to join the mainstream. And clearly the generation gap is not entirely a figment of the imagination!

The foregoing is only a small sampling from the phenomenology of "alienation." The term is used to cover greatly differing conditions. But the reality behind it is obvious. According to Wittgenstein, we often do quite well with words that have no single strand of meaning running through their applications.⁸ While it is tempting to streamline and to tidy up this concept, it should not be done at the expense of getting a meaning that no longer corresponds to the reality it once tried to grasp. In that case, the abstract would no longer reflect the real and talk about solutions to alienation would be unrealistic.

I am concerned with trying to grasp a realistic meaning of "alienation", so that when the term is used, it corresponds to that which is being discussed. So far, discussions of "alienation" as cause of every conceivable social ill have generally suffered from vagueness and inconsistency. Generally, such vagueness of conception is blamed on loose or inconsistent thinking. However, could one not trace this vagueness to the condition of alienation itself?

In Part II, I will attempt to discover whether there is any vagueness, indeed, in alienation as it exists in society. But before I do that, I would like to examine two partial meanings of "alienation" that run through all the various applications of the concept. I see these two common meanings as 1) the presence of a negative value judgment, and 2) the presence of a posture of indifference.

2. "Alienation" Contains a Negative Value Judgment

I want to stress here that "alienation," whenever it is used to refer to a social condition, points to something that is considered undesirable. However, not every commentator would agree. Walter Kaufman says that alienation is sometimes a good thing, "because you have to see that something is strange in order to improve it."⁹ In this spirit he call Plato the first alienated philosopher whose disillusionment with Athenian society resulted in a work of perennial value, *The Republic*.¹⁰

Maxine Greene, in her latest work *Teacher as Stranger*, expresses a similar thought. The stranger is the one who looks with wonder and tries to understand.¹¹ While Greene does not confuse benign meanings of strangeness or "alienation" with what is commonly and regretfully labelled as such, Kaufman comes closer to lumping together benign and detrimental meanings of the term. But I think, that excluding benign connotations from "alienation" talk would much improve the clarity of such discussions. Stretching the concept to cover benign as well as negative meanings makes it less useful to those who want to discuss remedies to alienation. For the purpose of this analysis, then, let us agree to a meaning of "alienation" which refers to a condition detrimental to human beings. Besides, an examination of the etymology of "alienation" will show that this term as introduced by Fromm was always meant to express an undesirable condition.

Fromm translated "alienation" from the Hegelian and later from the Marxian term "Entfremdung." The root word "fremd" in German has the meaning "strange," with the connotation of foreign or "strange" in the sense of "not belonging." Had Fromm chosen "estrangement" for his translation of "Entfremdung" rather than "alienation," it would have followed naturally to consider this term as always referring to an undesirable condition. Instead, in using "alienation," Fromm used a derivation of the Latin "alius," which denotes an objective difference rather than a value judgment.¹² The German adjective "anders" conveys this meaning. Its verb form "ändern" and its noun form "Anderung" also do not embody negative value judgments.

Denoting a generally undesirable human condition, the German "Entfremdung" makes specific reference to a separation of parties that were formerly joined. This meaning is conveyed by the prefix 'ent' in "Entfremdung." The prefix 'ent' denotes a withdrawal of something. (Thus, "ent-erben" is withdrawing someone's inheritance and "ent-ziehen" is depriving someone of something.) Generally, adding 'ent' as a prefix to a word denotes some kind of taking away that is painful to the one from whom something is taken. The condition of someone being struck strange, accepted as benign meaning of "alienation" by some, is conveyed in German by the term "Be-fremdung," which has a meaning quite different from the "Ent-fremdung" with which Fromm tried to translate "alienation." It should be understood that Kaufman's and Greene's sometime benign conceptions of

"alienation" correspond to "Befremdung" rather than "Entfremdung."

"Entfremdung," then, if one is to capture the condition of alienation which Hegel and Marx tried to express, refers to an undesirable condition, a separation of those who were formerly together, and who should be together. This mood of "no longer" is what adds a touch of nostalgia to the negative value judgment running through all the divergent applications of the concept, especially as it is used in existential writings.

3. *The Posture of Indifference is Common to All Meanings of "Alienation"*

The other common aspect of all meanings of "alienation" is the posture of indifference assumed by all those who are alienated. The alienated no longer care about the separation, no longer fight to overcome it. Their apathy makes it hard to alleviate the condition, because this lack of interest makes it difficult to engage their cooperation in attempts to overcome the condition.

4. *Summary and Conclusions to Part I*

Those who speak of "alienation" have often only a vague conception of its meaning. Using "alienation" to name the cause of almost any conceivable social ill has made it difficult to discuss solutions to this condition. Yet the reality of some widespread social malaise, a separation of those who once were together, cannot be denied.

A scrutiny of the German term "Entfremdung" showed that Fromm tried to convey in English a concept of a human condition which is considered undesirable. This negative value judgment is a general component of "Entfremdung" and tends to become obscured when benign conceptions of "alienation" are included. With "alienation" there is a loss of closeness between individuals or groups. This loss of closeness, however, should not be confused with a lack of closeness. A lack can be basic to a situation, whereas a loss points to a missing ingredient which was present at an earlier time.

PART II

ALIENATION AS SYMPTOM

1. *A Change of Perspective*

Much of the "alienation literature" today is so vague and so all encompassing that it provides little opportunity for planning specific actions against this social malaise. This analysis is undertaken as an attempt to contribute some clarity and specificity to the discussions of those who look for solutions. Perhaps we need to get away from looking at alienation as the almost universal cause of present human predicaments. Perhaps we need to get away from looking at alienation from the perspective of cause altogether! Generally in life, when someone is overwhelmed by a situation, those less involved urge him to "take a fresh look." Perhaps this advice may also apply to our analysis.

Let us now explore the meanings of "alienation" when we conceive of it as symptom instead of cause.

Take the case of a persistent headache which, you consider, causes you to stop working. You reach automatically for your aspirin. You take your pills . . . you wait . . . yet nothing might happen. A repeated dose of pills could prove equally ineffective. You need now to take other measures to combat the headache. You might begin treating it as a symptom, indicative of some deeper trouble. If you don't, if you continue the aspirin program, you could add an upset stomach to your headache and further complicate your misery.

In looking at alienation as a symptom, the direction of our examination is changed. Instead of looking forward at the social ills we assume caused by it, our attention is now focused backward on the conditions which may have given rise to alienation. This backward look initiates the kind of diagnostic process which is essential to coming up with a prescription against it.

The remaining part of the analysis will now be carried on from the perspective of alienation as a symptom. Three models of meaning will be developed for "alienation" as a symptom. They will be found quite distinct in their specific meanings, showing that the pathology of alienation is indeed diverse and not susceptible to a uniform conceptualization. The vague and inconsistent meanings of alienation can then be explained as sensitivity to the different background conditions to the ill and not as the result of fuzzy thinking.

2. "Alienation" From Feelings of Powerlessness

It has already been said that a common meaning which runs through all the divergent conceptions of "alienation" is the posture of indifference. Alienated individuals or groups often have learned that their voice carries no weight, that they are powerless. When they no longer care to press for influence an absence of interest sets in to which we refer here as indifference.

One should realize that those who are alienated are not indifferent throughout. They only have lost interest with regard to their particular powerlessness. Often the adjective "alienated" is used—or misused—to suggest that to be alienated is to be incapable of interest. Thus, we think of alienated students frequently as "dull" or "unmotivated," probably because it shifts the guilt of failure from the educational system to the learner. Yet, only one look at these dull students at recess—or better even, at dismissal time—proves how active and enthusiastic they can be whenever they find themselves outside the instructional situation. Their posture of indifference concerned only their relationship to those who teach them.

How are feelings of powerlessness generated? This question is more appropriate for psychological investigation. But psychologists, who carry on such investigation, need to work with meaningful concepts and it is here where this analysis seeks to make a contribution. Let us then investigate the background to powerlessness as leading to possible alienation.

Take an ordinary citizen like myself. Recently I have lost a battle with the computer. A cash payment to a charge account remained unrecorded. In spite of telephone conversations, extensive correspondence and a personal visit, I remained listed as deficient in payments till finally "they" threatened to cut off my credit. The persons in charge of my account seemed understanding, but I was told that the computer sometimes rejected information. How can one fight a computer? The day came when I returned my charge card, together with the already paid sum, to protect my credit rating. The overpayment has since been returned to me, together with many apologies. But I have stopped dealing with the firm. You might say that I am "alienated." I feel myself powerless fighting electronic circuits!

Stanley Charnofsky, in a sensitive book, says that schools continue programs which render large segments of American children powerless.¹³ He suggests that we fail to recognize the necessity for diversity. Education, according to his assessment,

directs its energies toward a "mythical central culture which does not exist."¹⁴ Thus, when there is never a response to one's needs, to one's point of view, a feeling of powerlessness sets in. If there is continuous experience of powerlessness, initial feelings of frustration and anger might eventually turn into indifference: alienation has set in.

The failure to respond can have its origin in a variety of conditions. Those in power may not want to respond. Here again, the denied response can be caused either by cruelty or by insensitivity. In the case of my computer mixup, neither was the case. Rather, the complexity of technology is to blame and we have a legitimate explanation of alienation in Erich Fromm's style. But even at this early stage of analysis it becomes obvious that the background conditions for this one type of alienation can be quite diverse. In addition to cruelty or insensitivity on the part of those from whom the response is expected, the background condition to "alienation" from feelings of powerlessness can also originate in the alienated himself. Thus, a sense of insecurity may so distort a person's perception that he does not recognize the desired response when it is made.

In summary, it can be said that even one single meaning of "alienation" has shown an amazing internal diversity when viewed from symptomatic perspective.

3. Alienation from Feelings of Meaninglessness

Man is a purposive being and planning is therefore a necessary human activity. To plan, however, one must be able to discern the pattern of things, the network of causes and effects. Whenever this is not possible, the world around us cannot be interpreted and things seem to have no meaning. Indeed, writers refer to alienation as an inability to perceive meaning. This sense of "alienation" applies to those who are separated because they are unable to see the reason or structure of activities or arrangements. I would like now to explore under what conditions such feelings of meaninglessness could occur.

Meaninglessness is felt whenever there is a lack of understanding. When a student is unable to understand the language in which a teacher speaks, and if other forms of communication have also failed to convey the message, then one can expect this student to feel separated from what is going on. However, students often understand very well their teacher's message but fail to understand the reason behind it. This ob-

scurity of purpose causes presently a great deal of alienation. Many students are "turned-off" because they cannot see where their education is supposed to lead them. This form of alienation is prevalent also among teachers when they are not aware of the political structure of their administration. This happens especially in large city systems where the psychological distance between policy making at head office and classroom practice causes a lack of understanding and a subsequent lack of enthusiasm which parents and administrators sometimes misinterpret as "lack of commitment."

Feelings of meaninglessness occur also when one is forced to choose from a set of alternatives which do not seem essentially different.¹⁵ The lack of participation of young voters during some recent elections points to this type of alienation, where not one candidate seemed to express their view. This alienation exists in schools when students do not find among the various curriculum "choices" any one which seems patterned to engage their interest, to serve their needs.

Of course, it is possible that a potentially meaningful activity or arrangement is perceived as meaningless, simply because not enough information is available. The fundamental issue here is lack of information. Large city police forces have become aware of this and are now trying to establish better relationships with the public by developing information centers and programs. Industry, too, is making efforts to acquaint assembly-line workers with the overall picture of the production process of which they are part. Yet, orientation programs on the high school and college level are generally still too narrow in scope and often serve to cause feelings of alienation rather than to prevent or remedy them. Prisoners are another group of persons who often become more alienated during incarceration than they were before, because little serious effort is made to help them understand the meaning behind society's treatment of them. Thus, they often construe false and detrimental meanings which make rehabilitation more difficult.

Finally, we have to face the fact that some will always lack the intelligence to perceive meanings. To perceive meanings is to be able to recognize relationships. This is a cognitive process, and some will tend to remain alienated because of limitations on their part. Those who work with the mentally retarded have recently begun to make efforts to combat the potential alienation of such individuals.

It seems that "alienation" as feeling from meaninglessness

has shown an internal diversity which is similar to the internal diversity of "alienation" as feelings from powerlessness, ranging from lack of information to lack of intelligence. Looking at "alienation" from the perspective of symptom is yielding a variety of background meanings. We are beginning to understand why the concept has been so hard to streamline when it was examined from the perspective of cause.

4. *Alienation from Experiences of Irrelevance*

In discussing "alienation" as stemming from feelings of meaninglessness we had focused more or less on cognitive aspects of meaning. However, it is frequently the case that someone understands the meaning of that in which he is requested to take part and that he still is not willing to be engaged. This happens when there is no personal meaning, when that which is considered "meaningless" by someone is perceived as having no inherent value for him. Students often understand the reason for the curriculum decisions according to which their educational experiences are shaped, but the inherent aims are completely rejected by them. Their education has no appeal for them. The alienation which may result from this "unappealing" curriculum stems from the fact that the students' value system and the value system inherent in the curriculum do not touch. If the situation is not remedied, these feelings of irrelevance may lead to alienation. An example is the current withdrawn stance of the formerly militant counterculture. Whenever value systems do not touch, and wherever there is no response to specific needs, wherever dialogue has ceased, alienation may set in. Where institutions no longer express cherished values, the desire for participation ceases!

Whereas "alienation" as feelings from meaninglessness showed itself to have cognitive aspects, "alienation" from an experience of irrelevance has strong connections to the question concerning the nature of values. Current discussion of the nature of values tend toward emotive interpretation. It is sometimes thought that the apprehension of values is intuitive rather than intellectual. Values, it is sometimes felt, float on the surface of things, as it were, and are easily discerned. Yet, can one ever talk about valuing if there is no thought about the cherished thing? It seems, the entire problem of valuing needs to be examined in much greater detail. Only then can the meaning of "alienation" as

feeling from irrelevance be fully examined toward a prescription for cure.

6 Summary and Conclusion of Part II

The vagueness and inconsistencies of meaning which we found attached to "alienation" as a cause resolved themselves largely when the perspective of the analysis was shifted to examine the concept as symptom. A diversity of background conditions were then discovered which gave it a legitimate diversity of meaning. To be able to keep its diversity of meaning and its inconsistency seemed important. Those who try to work for relief of alienation need realistic concepts for their discussions and their plans.

Three basic meanings were seen as realistic for "alienation;" 1) "alienation" from feelings of powerlessness, 2) "alienation" from feelings of meaninglessness, and 3) "alienation" from experiences of irrelevance. Each of these three meanings showed internal variety, as established by casual backgrounds to the various conditions. Interestingly, while most of the background conditions stemmed from attitudes and behaviors of those not considered alienated, some forms of alienation seemed self-inflicted.

One basic difficulty remains which needs a different examination than can be undertaken here. Existential thinkers make frequent use of the concept "alienation." They emphasize that alienation denotes a lack of togetherness which negatively affects both parties and not only the one that exhibits the overt signs of the condition. Our analysis has examined meanings of "alienation" by focusing mainly on those who are generally held to be in that condition. Besides, this examination remained mostly on the level of language. It did not deal with the more speculative philosophical problem of mutual suffering in the case of alienation as a human predicament.

By preserving the many varied meanings of "alienation" it now becomes possible to focus on specific senses and to generate plans for definite programs of action against this or that type. One of the difficulties will consist of trying to find ways of rekindling the interest to participate in those who are presently indifferent. In connection with the question of remotivation we might perhaps take a second look at such militant actions as the takeover of Wounded Knee by Indians. While aggression and hostility and violence are hardly desirable in general, perhaps in this case they

are more hopeful than the type of alienation Indians have heretofore displayed. There was a change of attitude from open indifference to aggressive representation of their own interest. Hostile actions, while not desirable in themselves, require strong feelings about one's situation. Such hostile actions can still be taken as a response. It is possible to answer that response. On this answer to the aggressive act will hinge the fate of the future interaction which may replace alienation. In the case of the Indians at Wounded Knee the hopeful factor is that they themselves initiated the action, however hostile it was.

Perhaps we need also to re-evaluate the pleasure with which we regard the current calm on campuses and in schools. It may be the return to more amicable relationships between students and establishment. But it could also be a sign of indifference, a posture of alienation. We need to find out why things are as calm as they are now, so that we will not be trading past irritation for present apathy. Without motivation, education is in bad shape!

It seems that I have slipped from an analysis of the meanings of "alienation" into a discussion of more practical matters. But to talk about "alienation" as symptom initiates the kind of diagnostic process that makes it very tempting to prescribe cures.

To talk about "alienation," then, is to talk about social problems. Talk about problems leads to talk about solutions. It is interesting to note that there is no term which is the direct opposite of "alienation." "Alienation" is a term which serves as a kind of absence-indicator for what is thought or felt to be missing. Yet, it will be hard to come to agreement about solutions to alienation. According to our pluralistic tradition we have no consensus on what the good society is. But it is comforting to know that as long as there is talk about "alienation," there will be reflection on social ideas.

¹Stanley Charnofsky, *Educating the Powerless* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), p. iv.

²Walter Kaufmann, "The Inevitability of Alienation," in the introduction to *Alienation*, Richard Schacht (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971), p. xxii.

³Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1955), p. 114.

⁴For a comprehensive historical treatment of the evolution of the concept "alienation" see Schacht's first chapter "The Linguistic and Intellectual Background," pp. 9-14.

⁵*Alienation*, p. 1.

⁶*Ibid*, p. 255.

⁷Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Capricorn Press, 1958). The discussion weaves through the entire book, most noticeably through "Lecture #4, Perspective," pp. 89-116.

⁸*Alienation*, p. 255, where Schacht comments on this and Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, German text, trans. G. E. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), pp. 155ff, pp. 66ff.

⁹"*Inevitability of Alienation*" (Kaufmann) pp. xxiv-xxix.

¹⁰*Ibid*, loc cit.

¹¹Maxine Greene, *Teacher As Stranger* (Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), p. 267.

¹²There are some special uses of "alienate" which I am not treating in the discussion which do not contain the "strangeness" meaning I am trying to bring out in the analysis of "alienation." One is the now rare use of "alienist" for "psychiatrist" formerly used uniformly in Britain. The other is "alienation" as used in legal terminology when reference is made to the transfer of property from one party to another.

¹³*Educating the Powerless*, Wadsworth, 1971.

¹⁴*Ibid*, p. iii.

¹⁵*Alienation*, p. 178.

