

ON ALIENATION : PSYCHOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

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I

In this paper I propose to discuss the problem of alienation from psychological point of view. This problem is an old one and at different times it has been studied from social, political, economic, religious and even philosophical points of view. But sense of alienation being a mental reaction it deserves a psychological explanation. This will certainly add a new dimension to the comprehensiveness of the explanatory whole. First, I shall state the view of the culturalist school represented by Erich Fromm, Karen Horney and others. Secondly, I shall present possible Freudian explanation of the problem at hand. In such discussion, I shall attempt to decipher the mental factors, as well as, mental mechanisms involved in the generation of the feeling of alienation, isolation or estrangement in individuals.

II

By 'alienation' is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien being—as isolated from other persons, as well as, from himself. Thus alienation has two facets—alienation from others and alienation from one's own self. The alienated person experiences himself as without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively. He experiences life as meaningless, dull, drab and dreary. Such a person experiences himself as an automaton and unwanted to others.

The older meaning in which "alienation" was used was to denote an insane person; aliene in French, aliends in Spanish are older words for the psychotic. "Alienist" in English, is still sometimes used for the doctor who cares for the insane.

In the last century the word "alienation" was used by Hegel and Marx, referring not to a state of insanity, but to a less drastic form of self-estrangement, which permits the person to act reasonably in practical matters, yet which constitutes one of the most severe socially patterned defects. In Marx's system alienation is called that condition of man where his "own act becomes to him an alien power, standing over against him, instead of being ruled by him." (K. Marx, Capital).

But as Erich Fromm points out that while the use of the word "alienation" in the above general sense is a recent one, the concept is a much older one; it is the same to which the prophets of the Old Testament referred to as 'idolatry'. It will help us to a better understanding of "alienation" if we begin by considering the meaning of "idolatry". The prophets of monotheism did not denounce heathen religions as idolatrous primarily because they worshipped several Gods instead of one. The essential difference between monotheism and polytheism is not one of the number of Gods, Fromm holds, but lies in the fact of self-alienation. Man spends his energy, his artistic capacities on building an idol, and then he worships this idol, which is nothing but the result of his own human effort. His life force has flown into a "thing" and this thing, having become an idol, is not experienced as a result of his own productive effort, but as something apart from himself, over and against him, which he worships and to which he submits. Thus the idol represents man's life-forces in an alienated form. In contrast to it, the principle of monotheism is that man is infinite, that there is no partial quality in him which can be hypostatized into the whole. God, in the monotheistic concept, is unrecognizable and indefinable; God is not a "thing". If man is created in the likeness of God, he is created as the bearer of infinite qualities. In idolatry man bows down and submits to the projection of one partial quality in himself. He does not experience himself as the center from which living acts of love and reason radiate. He becomes a thing, his neighbour becomes a thing, just as his Gods are things.

In his book, *The Sane Society*, Fromm gives a list of alienated

conditions prevailing in different spheres of life. Monotheistic religions themselves have, gradually to a large extent, regressed into idolatry. Man projects his power of love and of reason unto God; he does not feel them any more as his own power, and then he prays to God to give him back some of what he, man, has projected unto God. In early Protestantism and Calvinism, the required religious attitude is that man should feel himself as empty and impoverished and put his trust in the grace of God, that is, into the hope that God may return to him part of his own qualities, which he has put into God. For Fromm, every act of submissive worship is an act of alienation and idolatry in this sense.

What is frequently called "love" is often nothing but this idolatrous phenomenon of alienation; only that not God or an idol, but another person is worshipped in this way. The "loving" person in this type of submissive relationship, projects all his or her love, strength, thought, into the other person, and experiences the loved person as a superior being, finding satisfaction in complete submission and worship. Just as in the case of religious idolatry, he has projected all his richness into the other person, and experiences this richness not any more as something which is his, but as something alien from himself, deposited in somebody else, with which he can get in touch only by submission to, submergence in the other person.

The same phenomenon exists, according to Fromm, in the worshipping submission to a political leader, or the state. The leader and the state actually are what they are by the consent of the people. But they become idols when the individual projects all his powers into them and worships them, hoping to regain some of his powers by submission and worship. In Fascism and Stalinism, Fromm holds, the absolutely alienated individual worships at the altar of an idol, and it makes little difference by what names this idol is known; state, class, collective, or what else.

Fromm adds further that one can speak of idolatry or alienation not only in relationship to other people, but also in relationship to oneself, when the person is subject to irrational passions. The person who is mainly motivated by his lust for power, does not experience himself any more in the richness and limitlessness of a human being, but he becomes a slave to one partial striving in him, which is projected into external aims, by which he is "possessed". The person who is given

to the exclusive pursuit of money is possessed by his striving for it; money is the idol which he worships as the projection of one isolated power in himself, his greed for it. (pp. 123-24). In this sense, the neurotic person is an alienated person. His actions are not his own; while he is under the illusion of doing what he wants, he is driven by forces which are separated from his self, which work behind his back, he is a stranger to himself, just as his fellow man is a stranger to him. He experiences the other and himself not as what they really are, but distorted by the unconscious forces which operate in them. The insane person is the *absolutely alienated* person; he has completely lost himself as the center of his own experience, he has lost the *sense of self*. (p. 124, *The Sane Society*, E. Fromm).

What is common to all the above mentioned phenomena—the worship of idols, the idolatrous worship of God, the idolatrous love for a person, the worship of a political leader or the state, and the idolatrous worship of the externalizations of irrational passions—is the process of alienation. It is the fact that man does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished "thing", dependent on powers outside of himself, unto whom he has projected his living substance.

According to Fromm, alienation in modern society is almost total; it pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he consumes, to the state, to his fellowmen, and to himself. Man has created a world of man-made things as it never existed before. He has constructed a complicated social machine to administer the technical machine he built. Yet his whole creation stands over and above him. He does not feel himself as a creator and center, but as the servant of which his hands have built.

Modern man's relation to his fellow men is one between two abstractions, two living machines, who use each other. There is,

rather, a superficial friendliness, and a more than superficial fairness, but behind that surface is a distance and indifference.

The relation of man toward himself, according to Fromm, is one of "marketing orientation". In this orientation, man experiences himself as a thing to be employed successfully on the market. He does not experience himself as an active agent, as the bearer of human powers. He is alienated from these powers. His aim is to sell himself successfully in the market. His sense of self does not stem from his activity as a loving and thinking individual, but from his socio-economic role.

The alienated personality, Fromm contends, who is for sale must lose a good deal of the sense of dignity which is so characteristic of man even in most primitive cultures. He must lose almost all sense of self, of himself as a unique and induplicable person. The sense of self stems from the experience of myself as the subject of my experiences, my thought, my feeling, my decision, my judgement, my action. It presupposes that my experience is my own, and not an alienated one. Things have no self and men who have become things can have no self. Fromm next takes up the question of the effect of alienation on mental health. But what is mental health? Fromm answers that if it means that man can fulfil his social function, carry on with production, and reproduce himself, alienated man can quite obviously be healthy. A look into the current psychiatric definition of mental health would convince one that we are healthy. For the concepts of health and illness are the products of those men who formulate them—hence of the culture in which these men live. Alienated psychiatrists, Fromm opines, will define mental health in terms of alienated personality, and therefore consider healthy what might be considered sick from the standpoint of *normative humanism*.

Fromm thus gives an account of mental health acceptable from the stand point of normative humanism which he advocates. "Mental health, in the humanistic sense, is characterized by the ability to love and to create, by the emergence from the incestuous ties to family and nature, by a sense of identity based on one's experience of self as the subject and agent of one's powers, by the grasp of reality inside and outside of ourselves, that is, by the development of objectivity and reason. The aim of life is to live it intensely, to be fully born, to be fully awake. To emerge from the ideas of infantile grandiosity

into the conviction of one's real though limited strength; to be able to accept the paradox that every one of us is the most important thing there is in the universe—and at the same time not more important than a fly or a blade of grass. To be able to love life, and yet to accept death without terror, to tolerate uncertainty about the most important questions with which life confronts us—and yet to have faith in our thought and feeling, in as much as they are truly ours. To be able to be alone, and at the same time one with a loved person, with every brother on this earth, with all that is alive; to follow the voice of our conscience, the voice that calls us to ourselves, yet not to indulge in self-hate when the voice of conscience was not loud enough to be heard and followed. The mentally healthy person is the person who lives by love, reason and faith, who respects life, his own and that of his fellow men." (The Sane Society, pp. 203—204).

According to Fromm, the phenomenon of alienation is an effect on personality of capitalistic social system. Thus he ascribes alienation solely to social conditions and does not enter into the factor of psychodynamics operative in the individual developing alienated personality. But from psychological standpoint the individual factor cannot be ignored. A question may arise here. If people are alienated living in a capitalist society, how is it possible from Fromm himself to escape the scourge of alienation living in a capitalist society? He gives us a norm of mental health which is different from the one given by the psychiatrists, who according to Fromm, are themselves alienated personalities. It obviously implies that Fromm himself is not an alienated person. But how? It must be due to his individual mental make-up, his ego-strength, mobility and so on. If so, it further implies that individual congenital factor can withstand the pressure of social forces in some cases. Hence the force of the individual personality factor is to be reckoned with in any comprehensive account of personality patterning. In any psychological account of alienation the innate endowments of an individual must be taken into consideration.

III

Karen Horney, another stalwart of the cultural school views alienation as a neurotic manifestation. Hence her view of neurosis is explanatory for the phenomenon of alienation. She traces neurosis to

the dynamics of basic conflict which again is traceable to infant's basic anxiety. Horney in her book *Our Inner Conflicts* writes :

"Thus a theory of neurosis evolved whose dynamic center is a basic conflict between the attitudes of "moving toward", "moving against," and "moving away from" people. Because of his fear of being split apart on the one hand and the necessity to function as a unity on the other, the neurotic makes desperate attempts at solution. While he can succeed this way in creating a kind of artificial equilibrium, new conflicts are constantly generated and further remedies are continually required to blot them out. Every step in this struggle for unity makes the neurotic more hostile, more helpless, more fearful, more alienated from himself and others, with the result that the difficulties responsible for the conflicts become more acute and their real resolution less and less attainable. He finally becomes hopeless and may try to find a kind of restitution in sadistic pursuits, which in turn have the effect of increasing his hopelessness and creating new conflicts." (p. 18).

According to Horney, the neuroses of modern industrialized man are based on conflicts inherent in modern culture, although they take their energy from what she describes as the child's 'basic anxiety'. Basic anxiety is described as a feeling of being 'small, insignificant, helpless, endangered, in a world that is out to abuse, cheat, attack, humiliate, betray, envy' (*The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*). Such feelings arise in childhood in the case of children whose parents fail to give them genuine warmth and affection (usually because of their own neuroses), and who therefore have lost, or never experienced, 'the blissful certainty of being wanted', 'In an environment in which the basic anxiety develops, the child's free use of energies is thwarted, his self-esteem and self-reliance are undermined, fear is instilled by intimidation and isolation, his expansiveness is warped through brutality or overprotective "love" (*New Ways in Psychoanalysis*).

The child seeks for ways to keep going, to cope with a menacing world. He develops ad hoc strategies, but also lasting character traits which become part of his personality. Although at first a rather chaotic picture may present itself, in time three main lines of strategy crystallize : moving toward people, against them, or away from them. In the first strategy, he may accept his own helplessness, and in spite of his fears try to win the affection of others and lean on them ; in the

second, he accepts and takes for granted their hostility and determines to fight ; in the third, he wishes neither to belong nor to fight but to keep apart. In each of these three attitudes one aspect of the basic anxiety has been overemphasized—helplessness in the first, hostility in the second, and isolation in the third.

If it were possible to hold consistently to any one attitude, the individual might be able to get through life reasonably safely. But the person suffering from basic anxiety cannot adopt any one more whole-heartedly, since, in the conditions under which they have developed, all three attitudes are bound to be present and clash with each other. It is Horney's contention that the conflict between these three tendencies constitutes the core of any neurosis and it is therefore described as the 'basic conflict',

But the basic conflict is only the beginning of the neurosis ; for the individual, even if he reaches some kind of equilibrium through defense mechanism for a brief period, is soon torn by the new conflicts and new anxieties which are secondary in character. The secondary anxiety is a result of the adoption of defense against the basic anxiety and conflict. A vicious circle is formed in which anxiety produces defenses, which provoke new anxiety, which in turn causes the formation of new defenses and so on. Defenses can produce two types of situations which are provocative of new anxiety. First, increasing one's vulnerability. The person now not only has to adjust to other people and their attitudes, he has to adjust to them without in any way disturbing the defense system. This makes relationships with others more dangerous and inflexible. Secondly, neurotic defences can increase anxiety in another way : they may conflict with each other. The pyramiding of defenses, each defense coping with anxiety, but in turn laying the ground for new anxiety, constitutes the danger from within, according to Horney. One of Horney's most interesting examples of this is the idea of the "Idealized Image". This is the defense of having a false or at least faulty picture of oneself and of one's virtues and assets. In forming an idealized image of himself the neurotic as if wants to say : 'I am not really the miserable creature you may take me to be—look at my high ideals of generosity, independence, honesty and purity—that is the person I really am'. The more unrealistic this picture is the more vulnerable is the person to the vicissitudes of life.

Thus the last resources, the defenses, being of no avail the neurotic is soon lost in a tangle of self-created problems. His plight consists of hopelessness, helplessness, misery and alienation from himself, as well as, from others.

But even admitting the weight of social factors upon personality build-up it must be said that the grave mistake of Horney and other members of the cultural school lies in assuming that the child perceives the social reality as it is—whether favourable or unfavourable. It is the everyday experience of analysts that the perception of reality in early infancy and childhood is very much subjectively conditioned. It is found that a child reared up in a very much giving and liberal atmosphere may interpret the parents as ungenerous, depriving and hostile. It is an important discovery of psycho-analysis and it has mended psycho-analytic theory to a great extent. Freud in his early days of analytic career believed the neurotic's reports of seduction at childhood by the elders as true and based his theory of neurosis on this seduction incident. But in course of analytic experience, to his utter dismay, he discovered that the early memory of the childhood seduction was only fantasy without any reality basis. And he discovered child's unconscious wish to be seduced behind the fantasies narrated by the patients. Thereafter Freud revised his earlier theory of neurosis. This finding of Freud has been further vindicated by Melanie Klein's study of child's early fantasy life. Ignoring of this subjective factor in any account of mental malady is highly misleading. Analysts now-a-days have to be specially alert to this aspect of childhood experiences narrated by the patients in the course of analysis.

IV

I shall conclude my paper with a brief account of probable Freudian explanation of the fact of alienation. I call the explanation 'probable' because as far as I know, Freud himself has nowhere dealt with the specific problem of alienation. The explanation presented here is a construction of mine based upon my acquaintance with Freudian thought, as well as, my clinical experience. My assumption as to why Freud did not deal with this fact of alienation specifically is due to his idea that it was not a special problem apart from the general fact of anxiety. With this assumption, I explain the experience of alienation as a subtle form of persecutory anxiety blended with a

mild dose of narcissism. An individual feels alienated because he, due to his hostility alienates others from himself first. Subsequently, he projects this hostility onto others and perceive the people around him and sometimes the world as a whole hostile to him, unresponsive to his aspirations. He may ultimately blame his luck as an alienating agency.

But the pertinent question that arises here is : why some individuals become hostile and others not? An answer to this question must direct our attention to the early emotional development of the children. The child mostly lives in a world of wishes disconnected from reality. In very early stage much of his wishes are fulfilled by the nursing mother. But it is not possible for her to fulfil all his wishes for all the time. Naturally, some wishes at times may go unheeded. This may enrage the child and provoke unbridled hostility toward the mother or a nursing maid. However, from his repeated experiences of deprivation, the child gradually learns to tolerate the frustration and bind his hostility taking into account many giving aspects of the mother. If it so happens the child in the future will develop normal personality with a good deal of tolerance of frustration. Such children will generally remain immune from the future development of feeling of alienation. But others who due to some congenital factor fail to tolerate frustration are likely to harbour unalloyed hostility in their unconscious and (they) in later life may project such hostility onto the parents, as well as, other people of his surrounding. They will perceive the world as ungenerous, unresponsive and either hostile or indifferent to them. This feeling may take the shape of a feeling of estrangement or isolation. Thus the feeling of alienation or isolation is at core a feeling of hostility felt to be directed toward oneself from the outside world. The result is individual's alienation from others. Besides this, the child's own hostility may be self-directed and in such case the super-ego of the individual will develop unusual harshness. The harshness and oppression of one's super-ego on one's ego may produce the feeling of helplessness, despair and alienation from one's own self. Thus, both the aspects of alienation are largely subjective creations.

To be more specific, it must be said that occasions of isolation and separation which are unpleasant to the child are inextricably connected with everyone's developmental history. The first such

occasion occurs with the very birth of the child. The experience of birth is very very shocking to the child. It acts upon the child as a trauma. It is his first separation experience of his life. The separation consists in the break of the child's unity with the mother. In fact, according to Otto Rank and Freud this birth trauma works as a prototype for all future anxieties. However, after the birth the symbiotic relation between the child and the mother continues for sometime through sucking at the mother's breast. But this connection after sometime is snapped through weaning. This is the second traumatic experience for the child. The third instance appears at the time of toilet training. At this period the child is tutored to evacuate regularly at fixed place and time. However, the faeces is looked upon by the child as a part of himself and therefore valuable. He is not willing to part with it, yet ultimately he has to yield to the social pressure. The child also experiences isolation and separation grievously at this stage. The final blow comes at the Oedipus stage. At this stage the child develops a carnal desire for the parent of the opposite sex and a hostility to the parent of the same sex. This emotional tangle continues for some time, but here also the child has to yield to the pressure of reality. Finding the parent of the opposite sex unresponsive and apprehending retaliation from the other parent, the child represses both the incestuous carnal desire, as well as, the hostility. Instead he develops filial affection and tenderness towards the parents. This is the final stage of separation of the child from its love object. Those who can smoothly overcome the different traumas of successive stages of emotional development, remain more or less steady throughout life amidst vicissitudes of reality factors. But in those cases where such smooth overcoming of conflictual situations is not possible, and the child being overwhelmed by frustration react violently against the depriving agent or agents, and sticks to it ignoring reality, become vulnerable to emotional upset in future under conditions of stress. They cannot stand the pressure of reality and may give way to mental breakdown either in the form of neurosis or psychosis of which feeling of alienation appears as one syndrome among many others.

I have referred to narcissistic factor as one of the components of the phenomenon of alienation. This requires an elucidation. Being afflicted with the emotional conflict from the early stage, as the child grows

up, he fails to achieve success in life's struggle one after another or achieve success with much strain which is not upto the standard fixed upon by the individual. Such failures which are due to his internal conflict are ultimately interpreted by the ailing individual as due to unfavourable environment or bad luck. He perceives all events which are not in his favour as intended punishments inflicted on him by unknown and undefined hostile agent or agencies. Thus he gradually shrinks from life's struggle and feels alienated. However, he cannot consciously admit his shortcomings and accept failures as due to his own inability: for such admission injures his narcissism. As an escape from this unpleasant situation, he develops as a defence, the belief that the reality is frustrating and ill-disposed towards him in particular. He assumes the role of a fallen hero and silently declares to others: "Look! How forlorn I am in the life's struggle and how unhelpful the world is towards me. But I am still somehow walking alone along the path of life." It is a pretension no doubt, but unconscious. It provides at least partial nourishment to the alienated person's wounded narcissism. Thus the experience of alienation is not all painful to the experiencer. He unconsciously utilizes this otherwise painful experience of alienation as compensatory to his decreasing ego value. It is thus an indirect and futile way of restoring one's self-esteem and self-love. This is the narcissistic aspect of alienation.