



Title	A Philosophical Analysis of the Concept of Alienation
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### Abstract

The term 'alienation' has many different meanings in everyday life, science, and philosophy. Alienation is the act or result of the act through which something, or somebody, becomes strange to something, or somebody, else. In our days, since science and technology have developed, human beings may face the very actual problem of alienation. Alienation is not a problem of what a man can have but a problem of what a man is. It is a problem of man's attitude towards himself and towards the society in which he lives. This paper will discuss alienation as a philosophical problem and will present the way that can cure alienation and it is provided by the Buddhist tradition in Myanmar society.

Key words: alienation, philosophical problem

### The Meaning of Philosophy

The concept that is considered to be the most difficult to understand in the study of philosophy is that of philosophy itself. Scholars consider that except religion, philosophy is the oldest of human knowledge, yet its meaning is so elusive that it is still quite hard for us to grasp it firmly. There is no universally acceptable meaning of philosophy.

Generally, philosophy means 'the vision of truth' in the East and it means 'love of wisdom' in the West. Even among the philosophers of the East, 'the vision of truth' does not convey the same meanings to them. For the orthodox philosophers of India, 'the vision of truth' means 'to be one with *Brahman*'. The heterodox philosophers of India cannot reach the uniform interpretation even of 'the vision of truth'. The School of Jainism says that to have 'the vision of truth' is to have 'the vision of the union of all souls forming into one infinite spiritual Reality'. The Buddhists say that to have 'the vision of truth' is not to realize 'the union of all souls' but to realize 'the constantly present, ever changing consciousness', which is called *Anatta* or the non-self.

The Chinese philosophers have their different versions of 'the vision of truth'. The vision of truth is used here in a wider sense. It means to know truth not through metaphysical speculation but through intuition and practice.

For Lao Tzu, to realize the version of truth is to realize the Way (*Tao*) not through intellect but through intuition. For Neo-Confucians, to realize the vision of truth is to realize *Li* or Principle.

In the West, philosophy is the love of wisdom. But the love of wisdom does not refer to the same thing. Different philosophers of different Ages have their different meanings of love as well as of wisdom. Thales and Milesians say that love of wisdom means to love the study of the physical world. To love means to exercise one's power of speculation and wisdom means to have the knowledge of the physical world. During those days philosophy was not so much different from science.

Socrates interprets love of wisdom in an entirely different way. For him love of wisdom is love of the study of the nature of man. Love of the study of the nature of man is to study the nature of man through the use of dialectical method.

Heraclitus says that 'to love wisdom' is 'to see the world of change', and 'to see the world of change' is to know the world of change through the senses. Parmenides says that love of wisdom is 'love of the unchanged'. Love of the unchanged is to know the unchanged through the use of rational thinking. Zeno goes a step further than Parmenides and asserts that the world is not only beyond change in time but also beyond movement in space. The world does not change and does not move.

Plato follows Parmenides and Zeno halfway. He says that there are two worlds: the world of the unchanged and the world of the change. The world of the unchanged is known through rational thinking and the world of the change is known through the senses. 'To love wisdom' is to see the difference that stands there between the world of unchanged and the world of the change, and to accept the world of unchanged as real world.

Aristotle, a student of Plato, contradicts his teacher and says that there should be no separation line between the world of the unchanged and the world of the change. Change is possible only when there is the unchanged, and the unchanged is meaningful only when there is the change. There is no absolute unchanged, as there is no change. But in later days, he abandoned this view and accepted the Unmoved Mover as the First Principle.

In contemporary philosophy, we find philosophers bringing with them this elusive character of philosophy. Hegel says that whatever is real is rational and that the whole is more real than any of its parts. The Existentialists say that what is called 'what is rational in Hegel' always stands between the nature of reality and us. Reality is not rational but existential, and the existence is to be known not through abstract rational thinking but by living with it.

The Positivists go against all these ideas and say that whatever real is to be confirmed by experience. The philosophers of language say that whatever real is determined not so much by experience as it is determined by the way that language is used.

So it seems that philosophers agree only on one point and that is that they agree to disagree. Some say that man is created by his Creator. Some say that like a stone, man is thrown into the world. Some say that man comes into the world through his own effort, called *Kamma*. Here, we start to think about man with flesh and blood and bones living in the world. We do not know what kind of world man comes from, but we do know that he really exists because his mother has given birth to him. At the time when he has grown up, he sometimes feels by himself that he is helpless and lost. He is to be alienated from himself and from the world in which he lives. In this way he becomes a stranger to himself, and he also becomes a stranger to the physical and social surroundings in which he lives.

### **Alienation in Modern Society**

When science and information technology advanced, the people of industrially developed countries face the problem of alienation. Moreover, at the time of the world economic crisis, man can have the feeling of helplessness. He feels that he is all-alone by himself. He lives in the crowd, yet he is lonely.

The term alienation has many different meanings in everyday life, science, and philosophy. Alienation is the act, or result of the act, through which something, or somebody, becomes strange to something, or somebody, else. In everyday life, alienation often means turning or keeping away from associates. In law, it usually refers to the transfer of property from one person to another. In medicine and psychiatry, alienation usually means deviation from normality, i.e., insanity. In contemporary psychology and sociology, it is often used to name the individual feeling of alienness toward society, nature, other people or oneself.

For many sociologists and philosophers, alienation is the same as reification, i.e., the act (or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties and actions of things independent of man, and governing his life. For others, alienation means the same as self-alienation, namely the process, or result of the process, through which a self becomes strange to himself (i.e., to his own nature) through himself (i.e., through his own acts).



### **Alienation as a Philosophical Problem**

The concept of alienation has been philosophically elaborated by Hegel. He holds that alienation is the failure of the will of the individual to identify with the larger will of the society. It is the condition in which man no longer identifies himself with the public morality and institutions of his society. He views alienation as the opposite process, the counter process, to social identification.

According to Marx in the 1844 Manuscripts, human alienation takes four main forms: man is alienated from the product of his work, from the act of producing, from his own social nature, and from his fellow men. Marx holds that in the alienated world the people are in bondage to greed. Greed has been the motivating force throughout all of human history, alienating man from his human essence and dehumanizing him. Man worships money as the all-powerful master that can turn all values and relationships into their contraries.

Jean Paul Sartre holds that bad faith and inauthenticity involve us in alienation. Bad faith is self-deception that man is not free and responsible for what he is and does, when in fact he knows that he is. Inauthenticity is the attempt to free himself by the projects which he chooses, and totally responsible.

Twentieth century writers differ greatly in their enumeration of the basic forms of alienation. Melvin Seeman has distinguished five basic forms: powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, normlessness, and self-estrangement. According to him, powerlessness is the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes. Meaninglessness results when the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe. Normlessness is the characteristic of a situation in which there is a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals. Isolation is the characteristic of those who assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society. And self-estrangement is the degree of dependence of the given behavior upon anticipated future rewards.

A man who has the feeling of normlessness is still a stranger to the norms laid down by his society. In contemporary sociology and philosophy, alienation is generally understood as the sense of being an outsider who has the feelings of normlessness, meaninglessness, powerlessness.

### A Solution to the Problem of Alienation

Alienation is not a problem of what a man can have but a problem of what a man is. Alienation is not the problem relating to facts; it is a problem of man's attitude towards himself and towards the society in which he lives. Thus alienation basically is a philosophical problem.

It can be said that an attitude expresses not a fact but a value judgment regarding a fact. Two men having the same fact may have different attitudes towards it. The people in the East and those in the West are living in the same planet, yet they have different attitudes towards it. The people in the East are more interested in the problems of man's inner life whereas the people in the West are more interested in the problems of the physical world.

The fundamental difference between the East and the West has created the differences in their philosophical temperaments. Those in the East have tried to solve the problem of man who is alienated from himself, and those in the West have tried to solve the problem of man who is alienated from his physical surroundings. To eliminate the feeling of alienation of a man from himself is to help him to know himself. To eliminate the feeling of alienation of a man from his physical surrounding is to help him to know his physical surrounding.

Therefore, though the Eastern philosophers are different from those of the West in the expressions of their philosophical views and though the philosophers in the East among themselves as well as the philosophers in the West among themselves differ from one another in the expressions of their philosophical views, they all start from the perennial problem of all human beings – the problem of alienation.

Some think that the absolute dealienation is possible; all alienation, both social and individual, can be once and for all abolished. However, some think that only the relative dealienation is possible. It is impossible to eliminate alienation completely and finally, because human nature is changeable. It is possible to create a basically nonalienated society that would stimulate the development of nonalienated, really, human individuals. Dealienation of the society and dealienation of the individuals are closely connected; one cannot be carried out without the other.

In Myanmar, as we make advances in science and technology, there may appear the problem of alienation. But it can be solved by Buddhist philosophy. It originates in the mind and we must confront it at the mental level. We try to realize *yoniso manasikāra* ယောနိသော မနသိကာရ or thorough attention and accepting this world as a changing world. And we try to learn the

knowledge of science and information technology. Moreover, on the other hand, we must undertake the practice of *Bhāvana* or meditation. *Bhāvana* includes the two trainings of concentration (*Samādhi*) and wisdom (*Paññā*). The practice of concentration is called the development of tranquility (*Samatha Bhāvana*), and that of wisdom is called the development of insight (*Vipassanā Bhāvana*). The practice of *Bhāvana* is to become master one's own mind. This way can cure the problem of alienation.

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