

Review of: "Alienation, Values and the Destruction of the Subject"

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Alienation, Values and the Destruction of the Subject – a review

What sort of alienation?

I am grateful to be asked to review this article, as it gives me an opportunity to present a riposte, some of which I hope trickles through into adjustments in the author's approach to the subject. The article begins by asserting that 'The problem of alienation is one of the main central and discussable issues in philosophy'. I think that is true, but it would be useful to justify this with citations from elsewhere. Why 'ontological' freedom? Why only 'bifurcation' of the personality? Into what halves? How does this lead to a decline in 'subjectivity' alienated individuals still have opinions, take decisions and so on. They may even have agency – the problem surely is to what ends they put it, and how they feel about their situation. So, why the idea that 'Understanding alienation depends on our understanding of the subject, his freedom and values, and his meaning of a human life that is worth living'? Why does it not depend on our understanding of the human essence, of what it truly means to be a free human being (e.g., freedom from so-called 'needs' imposed by capitalism, notably consumer goods but also many types of experiences) and how that human essence is captured, coralled and confined by capitalism? In other words, to invert the liberal, individualist perspective of this article. It is not unreasonable to reject such a perspective, but it is surely important to mention it up front, if only to disagree with it.

Freudian underpinnings

The 'ego-subject'? Does this Freudian concept not need elucidation and referencing, the first time it is introduced? What is a 'pseudo-value'? In the absence of some kind of objective, or at least inter-subjective, evaluation, this can only remain an assertion, without evidence and without proof.

The idea that individuals are in some sense 'wrong' to subsume their personal aspirations by subsuming them into 'impersonal institutions' seems to me a very dangerous one. There are plenty of people who commit themselves to institutions – to the extent indeed of identifying their personal aspirations with those of the institution. Founders of charities, political activists, teachers and other public sector workers, even to my mind unfortunately corporate executives and criminals can invest huge amounts of their own identities in institutions as diverse as wildlife charities, political parties, schools and universities, fire and police departments, companies and criminal organisations. That much seems obvious. But is it all wrong? Does it not depend on the nature of the organisation, the extent of the commitment, the consequences of the commitment?

Now, as to the specific claim that alienation lies at the root of the Freudian notion of neurosis, especially compulsion. Firstly, I do think it is necessary to make clear that the Freudian framework is what is being employed here. The idea that alienation necessarily flows across both the conscious and the unconscious, whilst perfectly logical even to a non-

Freudian, is nonetheless fundamentally a Freudian approach to the issue. For example, even the idea that many of the causes of alienation will not lose their relevance so long as humankind exists (please, not mankind) is questionable. Some will, though, for sure, even after capitalism has been superseded, as Adam Schaff long ago maintained (Schaff, 1967). That value is derived from an individual evaluation of life's meaning, apparently abstracted from their social and economic conditions, is another very individualistic and liberal conception. Does not value proceed from social and economic relations? Is there not some connection, at least, between the value we place on objects and activities and the values that others place? Even if those values transcend mere monetary value, and cannot be confused with the self-alienation of employment, for example (Bloom, 2013), is it not the case that the de-alienating aspects of my hobbies, for instance, rely on collaborative and social relations that in their absence would in fact render the same activity profoundly alienating? Playing chess on one's own, for example: Solitaire has its limits.

The article then jumps to R D Laing; whilst this might be a reasonable move, there is surely a need to cite recent research into his writings in relation to alienation, e.g., (Itten, 2019), and then to Jaeggi, again without reference to some of the more recent articles that have addressed the distinction between Jaeggi's theory of alienation and that of Marx, in particular the conception of alienation itself as a paternalistic conception that, whilst purporting to liberate, fails to recognise and differentiate between individual desires and wishes (Øversveen, 2022). Is alienation a type of human development, as argued in this article. Or a systematic exercise in patriarchal, Western oppression in its own right? The next jump is to Rae, and thence to Sartre and the concept of authenticity, which surely deserves entirely separate treatment and not to be introduced in almost the same breath as Freud and Lang. These ideas are emphatically not all of a whole; there are important differences between them which need to be elucidated. For example, Sartre's concept of existential freedom does not completely match with a purely psychological approach, whether that of Freud or Laing – a point that Lacan, who does get a mention, and Slavoj Žižek (Žižek, 2019), who does not would surely fully recognise.

Marx and alienation

The litany of thinkers on the subject then continues with Hegel, Marx and many others, Weber Hardt and Negri amongst them. Just too many, I fear. Perhaps even more crucially, the article's abstract starts with an amazingly contentious assertion, that alienation is 'chosen by a human'. Almost every idea, theory, presentation, article on alienation suggests exactly the opposite, that alienation is imposed on individuals (and groups) by a series of social and economic practices. From a Marxist perspective – and to declare an immediate interest, I am one – it is capitalism that is the main cause of human alienation (Sève, 2022). It might be worthwhile to include some comparison of Sève's view with those of Freud or other non-Marxists. It might even make sense to make a passing reference to the perspectives of a relational theorist like Jennifer Nedelsky (Graham, 2021) or even a structural Marxist like Louis Althusser ((Althusser, 1972). in their rejection of the conception of individuality and the wholeness of the personality that underlies this article. The author does cite Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse both of whom attempted to analyse alienation both from a Marxist and a Freudian standpoint, from a social and a personal perspective, and to integrate the two – as others have explained (Feng, 2020), but without passing judgement on whether the idea of alienation as a social phenomenon is without merit, and if so why – an important question as other such as An (2021) disagree. Who does the author believe, in the end? Marx or Freud? By the end of the article, I still could not tell.

Finally, and a very minor point, there are some typos, e.g., socii (p. 1,5).

Conclusion

This is a fascinating subject, and an interesting attempt at coralling it. But the ground is so extensive, it could easily form a book. For an article length contribution, there might be merit in cutting down the scope, perhaps just to a focus on contemporary perspectives of Freudian conceptions of alienation, rather than presenting both Freudian and Marxist analysis of alienation without taking a position on which has a better grasp on the truth. That would allow for a extensive, yet more focused detailed literature review and space to analyse Freud's concepts in more detail.

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