THE PHENOMENON OF ALIENATION IN
CONTEMPORARY CONTINENTAL THOUGHT

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The phenomenon of human alienation has been the concern of Continental philosophers for some time. It has caused thinkers as far back as Kant to focus much of their thought on delimiting the phenomenon within their general metaphysical terminology and, in some cases, making the concept of the phenomenon a basic category for their thought. Ever since Kant asserted categorically that if morality is ever to be possible it is imperative that one "act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never merely as a means only,"[1] the relationship between one human consciousness and another has been a central theme in both Continental Philosophy and Theology.

But to one who has made an attempt to follow the history of the phenomenon of human alienation, particularly in recent continental thought, the phenomenon has not always been made progressively clearer with each thinker's treatment of it. There are high points of hope for clarity until we come to Sartre. His phenomenological analysis of the being of consciousness[2] ends in a confusing pessimism about the nature of alienation and our capacity to overcome it. Fortunately, however, profound thinkers, such as Teilhard de Chardin and Martin Buber, have made a deliberate attempt to overcome Sartre's pessimism. But even treatments such as theirs leave questions, particularly to the scientifically minded, as to how overcoming alienation actually could take place in human relating.

I would like briefly to trace the influence of the phenomenon of alienation of several important continental philosophers and try to explain how they think it is possible to overcome both alienation from oneself and from others. I will also show how Sartre's treatment obscures our understanding of alienation rather than pointing toward a way of overcoming it.

Although Kant did not use the term "alienation" he did make overcoming the alienation of oneself, from oneself and from another, a central problem in his ethics. When we have as our primary obligation the treatment of the rational being as an end in itself instead of merely as a means, Kant is recognizing the basic moral problem of how I ought to act in order to overcome the deterministic behavior of an exclusively teleological set of values. Teleology keeps me alienated from my uniquely human essence, called freedom. Without this freedom I cannot engage in a moral act, nor can I relate to another person in any other way than in a utilitarian relationship. Without meeting the demand of the categorical imperative

then, I cannot overcome a basic anxiety of human existence, the anxiety to be free. Anything short of the good will relegates the relationship between two persons to the animal level of friendships of utility, and one's relationship to oneself as alienated and one of deterministic, stimulus-response behavior.

Hegel[3] saw the condition of human alienation as a stage in the development of the Absolute Spirit which was itself alienated from itself. He saw the overcoming of human alienation of one person from another as a crucial phase in this development of the Absolute Spirit into a self unification of the universal consciousness.

To Feuerbach[4] and Marx,[5] however, the Hegelian absolute sounded a bit too much like traditional theology. If they are correct in their interpretation of Hegel, then Hegel is guilty of failing to see the full ramifications of the alienation of human essence. Feuerbach, in particular, profoundly influenced the development of modern theology by his criticisms of Hegel. His argument centers around the concept of human alienation of a person from himself when the person treats the value and significance of his existence as having its source in an alien being, a being other than oneself, that is, in a being called God. When God is the creator of values the human consciousness can only passively receive them and be motivated deterministically by them. They cannot be the person's own chosen values. What is more important for Feuerbach is that the belief in a Divine Being as a creator reveals how human existence attempts to escape its essential humanity. Man rejects this capacity for freedom to create and choose his own meaning for his own existence, by alienating himself from this freedom. He does this by attempting to avoid the responsibility for the meaning of his existence by attributing it to a being external to himself. Feuerbach insists that when there is a faith in the existence of God, what is revealed is not the nature of a supreme being, but rather the nature of alienated human existence. The traditional theological maxim of "Man's knowledge of God is God's knowledge of himself"[6] in the hands of Feuerbach has become "Man's knowledge of God is man's knowledge of himself, his own nature."[7] This consideration has helped to inspire what is now called secular or death of God theology. With this trend if the divine qualities are human then the human qualities are divine. This means that human salvation is not concerned with the afterlife, but this life and the cultivation of the fulfilled human being, living the Christ-like unalienated and authentic existence. Such a person treats humanity whether in himself or in another never merely as a means alone.

Since Marx took Feuerbach seriously, he considered religion more than simply an opiate of the masses. Theism is an alienation of the human being from himself, and when he is alienated from himself he cannot overcome the alienation of himself from another. He is not free himself so he can never treat another as an end in himself. This is why Marxism has become a kind of secular religion to many of its adherents.[9] They consider Marx as much of a human savior as existential theologians consider the person Jesus. Both see in their secular gods the ideal man, the free value creating man, the unalienated and authentic man. In both the ultimate value is love of the human consciousness as a creator of value, and hence, worthy of treatment as an end in itself. To modern death-of-God and secular theology, then, the phenomenon of alienation has been an overriding concern. Without an awareness of alienation, to some religion might have died out as an outmoded attempt at giving life meaning.

The more technical and philosophical treatments of the phenomenon of alienated human existence were attempted by Heidegger and Sartre. Heidegger has been particularly successful in clarifying what human alienation involves and what it takes to overcome it. He does this in his phenomenological analysis of Dasein.[10] The analysis of Dasein is much broader in scope than a simple analysis of alienation, or to use Heidegger's term, inauthenticity. His purpose is to inquire into the meaning of Being and in the course of that inquiry he shows how Dasein's inauthentic and authentic modes of existing reveal the meaning of Being as the temporality and freedom of Dasein.

Heidegger's contrast between inauthentic and authentic existence is precisely what I have been calling alienated versus unalienated human existence. Heidegger maintains that it is very easy to exist inauthentically and to lose oneself in the It-World, the world of things. We lose ourselves in the it-world when we allow ourselves to become a thing which is used and manipulated by others, while at the same time we use and manipulate other persons or things. In this mode of existence we are predisposed to judge ourselves in terms of the functions which we perform. For example, if I consider myself as a teacher, a student, or a welder, I am alienated from my true human essence if I consider my dignity and worth as a human being as equal to the dignity and worth of the function I perform. If I am a teacher my existence has the value of a teacher, if I am a student my worth is only that of a student, and if I am a welder my self esteem is only that of a welder. In other words, while I am identifying myself with any object or function that an object can perform I am comporting myself as one thing is related to another thing. I am an it related to another it and the value which both of us have is completely determined by our utilitarian value for others than ourselves. We are not the source of our own value but we receive it passively from others. Also, our actions are not free because we act as a good teacher is supposed to act, we act as a good student is supposed to act, or we act as a good welder

is supposed to act. It is to become a thing used and manipulated by others while at the same time we use and manipulate others as things.

What is important for Heidegger, however, is that others could perform these functions, in fact, it does not matter who performs them. If I view myself primarily as a person doing a certain job, wearing a certain style of clothes, living in a particular section of town, these things could never define my particularity as an existing human being. In inauthentic existence I *become* all these things by escaping into the anonymous safety of the masses and its conventions, and gain reassurance and comfort because I am not making decisions of my own. They are all made for me by social conventions and the laws of psychological and social behavior. I am doing what *any-thing* would do in these circumstances. Things are interchangeable and so are inauthentic existences. In the inauthentic mode of existing one does what is expected of one: one is successful, one is loyal to one's country, one respects one's friends, one worships one's God. In our inauthentic mode of existence there is no person, we enjoy and amuse ourselves as *One* enjoys; we read, see, and judge literature and art as *One* sees and judges, etc. In short, in our inauthentic mode of existence there is no Particular One. This could be anyone, it need not be me. This impersonal mode of existence is not distinctly human, and it is a confusion of a human being with a thing. It is a relationship between an object and an object, or an it and an it.

What Heidegger means by this phenomenon of the It-World is that when we exist in such a mode, we are alienated from our human essence. We *are* not what we could be, that is we are not *a* human. Our relating to others could never be one which could achieve a moral or religious action. We could never for example, be a true friend because the friendship would always be a utilitarian one. That is, we would always treat friends as one is expected to treat one's friends. Similarly, we could never indulge in a religious act because there would always be an egoistic motive, such as a pleasant eternal afterlife as a basis for the action. Heidegger thinks that this inauthenticity is our most common mode of existence primarily because he considers the authentic mode of existence somewhat overwhelming. When it is achieved few have the courage necessary not to recoil from it. Heidegger's version of alienation requires the conscious existent to face his finitude as a real possibility. He must confront the possibility of his own death before he can view his existence as a whole, from beginning to end. Once he has done this he will realize that it is precisely this finitude which makes his individual existence possible. Without it there can be no authenticity because one's existence could never be seen as unique and as a whole. The authentic man will not try to deny that he will die, nor will he try to evade the full significance of his

death. Recognizing the ambiguity concerning when and how he will die, and the inevitability of death, he chooses to live *now*, as the unique being that he is. He is unique and individual because the phenomenon of his own death as a possibility requires his unique existence. Consequently, if he is to exist authentically he must realize that nothing can save him from himself and what meaning his existence will have. He cannot lose himself in the crowd or in any other realm of the world of it or the world of things. The authentic consciousness will choose from moment to moment the meaning of its existence thereby becoming a unique, self-determining, unalienated individual.

I think that any being-with-others, however, requires overcoming one's own self-alienation before one can treat another person as an authentic being himself. A person must first be capable of relating to the world of things as a free being, that is, in an I-it relation instead of merely in an it-it relation before he can achieve an authenticity with another human consciousness. Even at the level of I-it the it is usually treated only in terms of its practical utility for the I. As long as another person is still part of the I's it-world (thing world) they are alienated from one another and the I is still one level of consciousness short of complete authenticity. Only when the I recognizes the I-ness or the self-consciousness of the other, is there achieved a complete transcendence or alienation into what Martin Buber has called the I-Thou relationship.[11] To Buber and other theologians influenced by Heidegger, the achievement of the I-Thou mode of existence has become a kind of secular salvation.

The phenomenon of alienation at the hands of Heidegger and Buber is clarified a great deal. But since Sartre's essay on phenomenological ontology, *Being and Nothingness*,[12] the phenomenon of alienation has taken a turn toward the obscure.

The major reason for the uniqueness of Sartre's treatment is that he takes a very narrow interpretation of the structure of consciousness as adequate. He argues that since consciousness is always an intentional relation then consciousness is always conscious *of* something other than itself.[13] He insists that we have a pre-reflective awareness which can never catch itself reflecting on itself as though it were some object of contemplation or some being-in-itself.[14] Since consciousness is always conscious *of* something, everything other than consciousness can not *be* consciousness. This means there could not be any possible category of Being which can be used to describe the being of consciousness. We could never say, for example, that consciousness is a substance because substance would then be an object of consciousness and then something other than itself. Given these assumptions about the nature of the intentional conscious act, Sartre is naturally led to the conclusion that consciousness is a

nothingness, but a nothingness is a very active sense. He actually sees it as the negation process of consciousness. An existent consciousness *is* or exists when it is intentionally related to the object of its consciousness, that is, when it is not what it is conscious of. It is the nihilation of Being-in-itself as something *other* than itself. To contrast this mode of existence from objects existing in themselves Sartre employs the phrase "Being-for-itself"[15] to describe the being or nature of the nothingness of consciousness.

Being-in-itself is everything other than Being-for-itself, it is a massive, undifferentiated, meaningless plenum of existence. Nothing more can be said about it except that it is everything except the human consciousness. It is what is there to confront the human consciousness when it arrives upon the scene.

Sartre maintains that Being-in-itself is just what it is, inert and unintelligible, while Being-for-itself never *is* yet but continually has to become. It fundamentally contrasts with being-in-itself which already is and which has no becoming. Man alone is characterized as a being-for-itself, because there is always some gap between man's consciousness of himself and any attempt to describe him as an object or thing with a completely determinate nature. Since Being-in-itself completely exhausts substantial existing being, then being-for-itself must be no thing, or a nothingness. Man as being-for-himself has no essence. He will only become what he will make of himself by his free choices. To put the matter in Sartre's words: "If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not *be* anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills."[16]

Since Being-for-itself is essentially a lack, a hole, a void in the density of being-in-itself, there is always a desire to fill this void by becoming something substantial. Being-for-itself is always attempting to define itself in terms of being-in-itself. One of the ways in which we attempt to overcome this lack is by seeking satisfaction through the accumulation of possessions. In this way consciousness attempts to freeze its being by an identification of itself with its possessions. When I do this I try to give up the responsibility for the value of my existence to the conventional value of my possessions. This form of alienation is made explicit when one tries to identify his individual worth with the worth of his possessions. But Sartre insists that this is a moment of inauthenticity or "bad faith"[17] to consciousness. Consciousness always knows that it *is not* what it has appropriated because the objects of appropriation will always be being-in-itself. The attempt at fleeing from oneself must always fail for Sartre because the

particular person is always a unity of being-for-itself and being-in-itself. In bad-faith we are attempting to flee the eternally recurring responsibility for continuous choosing of the meaning of our existence. For Sartre, the mode of existing that he calls bad-faith is a form of self alienation. Overcoming self alienation is simply not living in any of the inauthentic attempts at self-deceit about the nature of our existence. The unalienated person does not attempt the self-deceit of bad-faith, he assumes the total and continual responsibility for the meaning of his existence.

This cleavage of the human consciousness into Being-for-itself and Being-in-itself commits Sartre to abandoning any possibility for overcoming alienation between two persons. He has a way of overcoming alienation from oneself, but because of his analysis of the nature of consciousness, man is condemned to fail at the latter half of Kant's categorical imperative. Sartre insists that it is ontologically impossible to ever treat another person as an end in himself because he will always be an object of my attempt to freeze his being-for-itself. Sartre's analysis leads him to conclude that another consciousness will always be part of that world which I am not and yet he is an object which stands out among the other objects of being-in-itself. He stands out because he is a peculiar threat to me. He is making me an object of his consciousness and I am making him an object of my consciousness. In this relationship, human consciousnesses are alienated from one another completely.

Sartre sees the essence of this human relating as one of conflict. Because of the ontological structure of consciousness, a simple experience such as two persons noticing or looking at one another becomes for Sartre an ontological battle of nothingnesses attempting to nihilate and enslave one another. He is convinced that all that human relating can hope for is more alienation from one another in a never ending battle between the attempts of two masters attempting to enslave one another. This master slave relationship, where I am always the master and the other consciousness is always the slave, will always exist so long as there is a consciousness composed of being-for-itself and being-in-itself. For Sartre, we are fated, because of our ontological structure, to always relate to one another in the relation of alienation. Even our most cherished attempts at love and friendship he reduces to a series of sado-masochistic battles between two human beings. Our beloved or friend can only be a utilitarian object, and never a consciousness worthy of intrinsic respect. Because of this, our closest friend, at the hands of Sartre, becomes only our most useful friend. If Sartre is correct, then we can never achieve the I-Thou relationship where a truly altruistic act binds human beings into what Teilhard de Chardin has called the "Omega Man."[18]

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I think Sartre's analysis is fundamentally mistaken, and that the source of his mistake began with his view of consciousness as only the two poles of the intentional act of consciousness. If Sartre would have maintained his allegiance to the demands of the phenomenological method he would not have had to reduct all the phenomena of existence to the two categories of Being-for-itself and being-in-itself. It is precisely because of this reduction that those who feel that they have overcome alienation with at least some other human beings feel uneasy when Sartre tries to explain this authentic being-with-others as really a form of alienated sadism or masochism. Sartre's analysis does not allow for treating another person not merely as a means alone but it relegates all relations with others as a deliberate treatment of them as only means for our ends. For Sartre, the phenomenon of alienation of ourselves from others is here to stay. We can not overcome it because it is part of our human existence.

I think Sartre's analysis is a distortion of human existence and its possibilities. Fortunately there have been several important continental thinkers who have realized Sartre's mistake. Led by their belief in the possibility of overcoming alienation, men like Martin Buber and Teilhard de Chardin have attempted to reconstruct Sartre's damage.

Martin Buber[19] argues that one's self alienation can only be overcome if one actually accomplishes the I-Thou mode of relating. That is we only overcome our own self alienation when we are capable of meeting the full demand of Kant's categorical imperative. The I-Thou relation is acting so as to treat humanity never merely as a means, it is treating others as we would treat our beloved or our friends, it is treating them as ends in themselves. Their value does not depend upon our egoistic motives but is intrinsic to their human existence and our altruistic treatment of them is a recognition of their dignity and worth.

Teilhard de Chardin [20] has adopted a similar solution. His concept of the Omega Man is an ideal human consciousness composed of all persons in the mode of unalienated I-Thou relating. Chardin sees alienation as a kind of metaphysical phase of evolution that is in the process of being overcome with the growth of love. The Omega point in evolution is a hyperpersonal point beyond the collective mass of loving individuals. Chardin thinks of it as not only human alienation overcome but also the alienation of the universe overcome.

With both Buber and Chardin, Sartre's theory of consciousness has a more optimistic alternative. There are undoubtedly others who have done the same, but at least with these figures the Sartrean eclipse of truly moral human relating is overcome and humanity has a chance at meeting the demands of the Kantian categorical imperative.

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NOTES

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by T. K. Abbott (Indianapolis, 1949), p. 46.

[2] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by H. E. Barnes (New York, 1969).

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. by J. Baille (London 1931).

[4] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by M. Evans (London, 1881).

[5] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. by D. J. Struik, trans. by M. Milligan (N. W. Int. Pub. Co.).

[6] Feuerbach, p. 231.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 231.

[8] See, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, ed. by E. Berthge, trans. by R. H. Fuller (New York, 1962).

[9] See, for example, Eric Fromm's emulation of Marx in his *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York, 1971).

[10] The following analysis is primarily based upon M. Heidegger's *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York, 1962).

[11] For a further explanation see Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, trans. by W. Kaufman (Scribner).

[12] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

[16] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism From Dosteovesky to Sartre*, ed., trans. by W. Kaufman (New York, 1957), pp. 290-291.

[17] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 86.

[18] Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. by B. Hall (New York, 1961), p. 257.

[19] See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*.

[20] See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*.

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