



## Evolution of the concept of alienation: From Christian Theology to Karl Marx

Ayantika Das

Centre for Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

### Abstract

The concept of Alienation has undergone a significant historical and philosophical transformation. Karl Marx was not the first philosopher to discuss the phenomenon of human alienation. Alienation has been a subject of consideration by a whole lot of thinkers much before Marx. The term alienation has its origin in the Christian theology, as a condition of estrangement between humanity and God. The theological framework is transformed in German Idealism, where alienation becomes a philosophical category. Ludwig Feuerbach radicalizes this move by secularizing alienation. He argues that god is the projection of the human essence and therefore religious alienation is humanity's unconscious estrangement from itself. Karl Marx transforms this trajectory by grounding alienation in material social relations. He rejects both theological and philosophical reconciliation, arguing that alienation arises from historically specific relations of private property and can only be overcome by revolutionary transformation. In this article, I shall make an attempt to study the evolution of the concept of alienation. From divine estrangement to anthropological projection to material estrangement.

**Keywords:** Alienation, estrangement, human nature, Christian theology, Hegelian, Marxism, capitalism, human self

### Introduction

The origin of the concept of alienation can be traced back to the concept of Original Fall in the Bible. Several Christian theologians gave their perspectives on human alienation based on the Bible. St Augustine was one of them who considered that human beings are alienated from the time of the Fall. This is a condition which covers the entire universe of human beings. One has to strive to attain harmony with God throughout his life and then only can he overcome this alienated state. Another important theologian was Blaise Pascal who also held that man is alienated from God and as a result from himself because of the original sin, which is the Fall. He claimed that human beings can only overcome the state of alienation if they wager on God. He urged men not to resort to reason in order to prove the existence of God. Rather he insisted men to wager on God and it is only through wagering on God that they could become one with the God. Only then human beings could become free from their limitations. Later on, Ludwig Feuerbach argued that religion alienated man from himself. In his *Essence of Christianity*, he exposes the role of religion in separating man from his own human nature, that is, his species-being. In the first part of this article, I shall deal with the concept of alienation as found in the Christian theological tradition, thereby discussing theologians such as St Augustine and Blaise Pascal. Then I would examine Feuerbach's materialist conception of alienation. Finally the article will deal with Marx's concept of alienation that is influenced by the materialist conception but differs in the way that it also involves dialectics.

### Alienation in Christian Theology

In the classical Christian tradition, the term "alienation" was presented from the theological perspective. The Christian theologians suggested that man is alienated from his own self, from other individuals and from all other things in the world. Man is alienated because of the human fall from heaven. The human fall which is widely known as "The

Fall", is a "theological doctrine describing the change of humankind's state from sinlessness to depravity <sup>[1]</sup>." Christian tradition explains the fall as the consequence of Adam and Eve eating the fruit which was forbidden. They were banished from the Garden of Eden after they committed the sin.

According to Saint Paul and St Augustine, eating the forbidden fruit was the original sin committed by human beings. In both the Jewish and Christian traditions there are two views about God-People relationship. The first view about the God-people relationship is that there is a "special particularistic relationship because God created man in His own image <sup>[2]</sup>." The second view is that God and people share a relationship in which one is subordinate to the other. The people are always subordinate to God and can never become exactly like God. In the Christian tradition itself, there are differences of opinion regarding the effects of the fall on the human nature. St Augustine held that all the human beings who were born after Adam and Eve were born with sin because of the original fall. Humans born thereafter are thus morally corrupt and can only be vindicated with the help of God. It means that man becomes alienated from him and as a result from all other people and things. This condition of alienation of man from his own self, from fellow individuals and from all other things can be only addressed by restoring the image of God which was lost due to the fall of man.

The opening chapter of the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament give an account of the creation of man and woman and then their fall. As described in the first chapter, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" <sup>[3]</sup>. All the other matters and substances emerged out of this divine source. There are two things which operate at this level; unity between God and the entire world of matters that he creates but there is an implicit dualism as in the very act of creation, God is not what he creates so there is a line of separation between the creator and the created. This dualism can be contemplated as alienation by some. But the

dualism here symbolizes separation and does not in any way tantamount to alienation. It has been very well put in the first two chapters of the Genesis that though the creator who is God and the created, that is, the world are different, from the time the creation took place; however, they coexist in perfect balance with each other. It's the same with men, "the Lord God form[s] man of dust from the ground, and breathe[s] into his nostrils the breath of life <sup>[4]</sup>" God created Adam and Eve and they were very much in harmony with each other, with God, with the outside world and with themselves. Till the second chapter of the Genesis there is no mention of alienation. There is only a physical separation between God and the world of created objects including men. But the discussion on alienation starts in the third chapter of the Genesis. In the Judeo-Christian theology, Adam and Eve break the harmony with the Original Sin. Michial Farmer in his paper "Alienation, Existentialism, and the Theological Hole" talks about the third Genesis and how alienation is introduced as a concept in this chapter. He argues that alienation manifests itself in four ways which is found in the third chapter of the Genesis. The four ways in which alienation in man is manifested are: alienation from God, alienation from the world of nature, alienation from one another and alienation from one's own self <sup>[5]</sup>. Adam and Eve did not obey God's order and thus their relationship with the Divine is torn apart. This results in the alienation of man from the God who is the source of life for man.

The other kind of alienation is the alienation of man from the world of nature. It is only because we are alienated from the environment after the fall that we need to make efforts for the environment so that it does not disintegrate. Farmer writes that before throwing mankind from the Garden of Eden, God himself introduced violence on the nonhumans for the first time. "And the Lord made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" <sup>[6]</sup>. Before they were thrown into the world, God taught them to make use of the earth. He taught them how to convert earth for their own interests. Many theologians point out that the divine sentence of punishment was followed by a Divine act of pity. This shows that God chastised man not in anger but in affection.

The other form of alienation which is implicit in the narrative of the Genesis is the alienation of man from one another. It is said that after God confronted Adam for his sin, he blamed Eve for the sin which he committed. When God confronted Adam about the apple, he replied, "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me <sup>[7]</sup>." The genesis describes Adam as blaming both Eve and God for his own deeds. He blamed God by saying that God gave Eve to him. This reveals how man's alienation from each other is entwined with his alienation from God.

The alienation of man from God results in the alienation from man's own self. For centuries philosophy has tried to understand the nature of man's soul. Another important question which philosophy has tried to ascertain is the relationship between mind and body. The Cartesian split is the basis of all questions of mind-body problem. But here Farmer tries to say that the Cartesian split does not emerge from Descartes' Cogito but actually it begins with the eating of the forbidden fruit. For the very first time the distinction between mind and body was made. In the third Genesis it was said, "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked <sup>[8]</sup>." Thus the mind stood in contrary to the body. The reality of the body became naked in the eyes of the mind.

Alienation of man from God has been discussed thoroughly in the Bible. This discussion featured in St Augustine's Confession. He discussed about his own alienation from God and therefore his own self-estrangement. His own will was broken and torn. Throughout his autobiographical work he described the process which led to his unity with the God. He focused upon the redirection of will and reason towards their source and end, that is, the Divine. He explained that this is the only way through which the alienation of the self can be overcome.

In his work St Augustine wrote, "I would know you [God], I would know myself <sup>[9]</sup>." He declares that once he attains knowledge about God, he would know himself. He blamed the "Original Sin" for alienating men from God by separating them forever. He claimed that men would be able to know their own self once they come to know about God. Saint Augustine advances this idea in the Confessions where he states that, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee" <sup>[10]</sup>. He means to say that man remains restless until he meets God and this restlessness can only disappear when man becomes one with God.

It can be argued that men are away or estranged from their own self and that is how human nature has evolved through ages. The origin and the nature of human condition can be debated upon. The theologians call it "basic alienation" or "original sin" or "primal brokenness" <sup>[11]</sup>. St Augustine discussed that men are restless until they rest in God. The human soul desires God the most and throughout their lives they desire to meet God. Though they try to be at peace with the disturbed self but doing so is a tedious job and is actually not possible. Men try to make peace with their self but in doing so they are actually acting against God. St Augustine claims that God had devised a plan in which he directs things to attain their inner fulfilment. Therefore to live just a self-centred life is against this Divine mechanism. The purpose of the creation of man was not to live a life which is self-serving.

### **Feuerbach's Concept of Alienation**

Ludwig Feuerbach was a left-Hegelian. In the post Hegelian era, Feuerbach had an important role in the history of German philosophy and in the transition from idealism to materialism. Feuerbach though a disciple of Hegel, was highly critical of him for his idealism and views on Christianity. Feuerbach considered religion to be a form of humanity but Hegel had set it as an abstraction in the name of the Absolute. Thus the basis of Hegel's philosophy is theology and religion. Feuerbach on the other hand did not see religion as the foundation for everything. Rather he spoke about man to be the principal of all systems. Feuerbach interpreted Hegel's outlook towards matter in two ways; he says that Hegel argued that the subject which is the Divine objectifies itself in and through nature and then it struggles with this nature to achieve self-consciousness. Therefore matter could only be taken as one phase in the struggle of the Divine life. He suggested that Hegel should be called a "materialistic theist" as he sees "the history of nature and humanity as the life of God" <sup>[12]</sup>. Marx argues that Feuerbach rejects the fixed abstraction of the infinite, that is, the Divine thereby rejecting the Hegelian idea of the Absolute. Feuerbach postulates the actual real, finite world by rejecting the Hegelian abstraction of the Absolute. As Marx writes in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, "Feuerbach thus conceives the negation of the

negation only as a contradiction of philosophy with itself—as the philosophy which affirms theology (the transcendent, etc) <sup>[13]</sup>.” Feuerbach declares that Hegel in his philosophy negates the negation and therefore affirms God.

Hegel’s conception of alienation lies on his idealism. Hence Feuerbach did not agree with Hegel’s notion of alienation as he maintained that the foundation of Hegel’s philosophy was faulty. Hegel considered the human as spirit. Feuerbach says that Hegel believes, “the non-material being or being as a pure object of the intellect, is the only true and Absolute Being, that is, God <sup>[14]</sup>.” Even then Feuerbach sees Hegel and the other philosophers before Hegel differently because Hegel views the relationship between “material sensuous being and the non-material being differently” <sup>[15]</sup>. The philosophers before Hegel did not take nature into account. They spoke about self-liberation in itself. Rather they differentiated the divine from nature. Feuerbach considered nature as matter. Hegel also “turned the subjective activity into self-activity of the Divine Being. Even God must subject himself to this toil” <sup>[16]</sup>. As matter is postulated in the Absolute therefore the Absolute can only attain self-liberation from matter. In this way the Absolute postulates itself as matter. In Hegel’s philosophy, human alienation is comprehended as manifestation of the Spirit whereas in Feuerbach’s philosophy, human beings lose their self because of religious alienation. The basic principle of Feuerbach’s theory was the social relationship of “man to man”.

As mentioned in the first part of this article, both the Jewish and Christian traditions provide a twofold image of the God-people relationship <sup>[17]</sup>; the first being the “integrative” and the second, the “alienative”. The first view holds that God and people stand in a special relationship with each other as God created men in his own image. The other view holds that man and God stand in a “superordinate-subordinate relationship” and man can never become like God. It is this second view which has been turned upside-down by Feuerbach in his *The Essence of Christianity*. The reason I say that he turned the view upside down would be discussed in the next paragraphs.

Eugen Schoenfield in his paper writes that Feuerbach started with the contention that the world outside is the product of human consciousness. Therefore, reality is nothing but the product of human consciousness. He argued that self-knowledge gives rise to consciousness in men. First he knows himself and thereby he develops his consciousness. Feuerbach contends that it is through self-knowledge that one becomes conscious of human qualities in general. One can know about certain qualities only when he himself has those qualities. It is not possible for one to know about certain qualities if he himself or the fellow human beings did not have those qualities. Thereafter, knowing the general human qualities, man bestows the same qualities upon God <sup>[18]</sup>. Feuerbach writes,

In fact, it would be impossible for me to predicate omniscience of an object or being external to myself, if this omniscience were essentially different from my own knowledge, if it were not a mode of perception of my own, if it had nothing in common with my own power of cognition. That which is recognised by the senses is as much the object and content of the divine omniscience as of my knowledge <sup>[19]</sup>.

In the first part of this article, I have already discussed the Biblical story which says that God created men. Feuerbach

proposed that, as opposed to the Biblical story, it was man who created God and not the vice-versa. He did this by attributing human qualities to God. It is this process because of which man becomes alienated from himself. Feuerbach in the very beginning of his treatise wrote, “Religion is the disuniting of man from himself” <sup>[20]</sup>. According to Feuerbach the relationship of God and man is one of dialectics. He writes,

..he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is – man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes: God is the absolutely positive, the sum of all realities; man the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations <sup>[21]</sup>.

Feuerbach argues that after creating God and endowing him with certain qualities, man starts portraying him as someone opposed to God. The qualities which are human qualities are now endowed upon God. Man posits God as an antithesis of himself. God is conceived as the bearer of good and positive qualities and thus man who can never become like God happens to possess all the negative and bad qualities as opposed to God. Man has to create God and therefore endow him with good qualities so that religion can continue to flourish. Feuerbach says that the “Man-God” relationship is the relationship between “human and God predicates”. The consequence of this creation of God is human self-alienation. Man by giving his own qualities to God denies himself the same qualities. Man negates his own essence by doing so. This leads to self-alienation in man.

Feuerbach states that man can sense the outside world through his sense-organs. But man’s senses have a limitation. Man can sense objects one at a time and successively but God can sense all objects in the world at the same time. He writes, “God sees all sensible things at once, all locality in an unlocal manner, all temporal things in an untemporal manner, all objects of sense in an unsensational manner” <sup>[22]</sup>. Feuerbach maintains that it is man who in his imagination extends the realm of his senses beyond his own limitations. In doing so he forms a “confused conception of the whole of things”. This conception of the whole of things reveres man “above the limited standpoint of the senses” and therefore he postulates this as the Divine. Man breaks his limitation of sense-perception and imagines an absurd condition which he then posits as the omnipotent, omniscience God. But Feuerbach says that even if Man endows God with omniscience, the difference between it and man’s knowledge is only of degrees. Feuerbach argues that there cannot be any qualitative difference between both. Feuerbach contends that the quality of knowledge is same for both. He says that if omniscience would have not been a mode of perception for man and if it would have been something completely unknown and external to man, he would have never been able to know of this omniscience. Therefore, man would not have been able to view God as omniscient. He says that all that which can be cognised by the senses is the object of the divine omniscience as well as man’s knowledge. The limitation of man’s knowledge symbolises that he knows less and not everything in the world.

### **Karl Marx’s Theory of Alienation**

Many scholars have articulated that men remain in a state of alienation. Some have maintained that men can transcend

their state of alienation and others have believed that it is impossible for man to surpass alienation because it is in his very being that he gets alienated. Marx mentioned about alienation for the first time in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. He first coined the term “estranged labour” in the Manuscripts and devoted a full chapter to it. In the notes section of the Manuscripts it has been mentioned that Marx used the two similar German terms, Entausserung and Entfremdung to mean ‘alienation’. He mainly used the term Entausserung to mean ‘alienation’, that is, the dissociation of one person from his own products.

Both Hegel and Marx would say that alienation is a human condition in which man is separated from his basic nature. He basically becomes what he is not ought to become. When there is a diversion from the usual self then the self is considered to be alienated. Marx claims that alienation is a condition which can be found only in the capitalist society. Therefore, to understand alienation, one needs to start from the system itself which is capitalism. To understand why men are alienated, one needs to understand the features of capitalism itself. Capitalism rests on certain pillars. Marx criticizes the way political economists like Adam Smith and Ricardo have tried explaining capitalism. In trying to understand capitalism they started out with the concepts of private property, division of labour, capital and land, profit of capital and wages, etc. Marx accuses them of just stating these as mere facts and not explaining them as connected to each other. Marx on the other hand makes an effort to understand capitalism which is the whole by understanding all these concepts as interconnected.

Marx avows that he uses the same language as given by the political economists. But once these concepts are presupposed which Marx actually does, it exposes the flaws of capitalism as a system in totality. He writes, “On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities <sup>[23]</sup>.”

Marx says that even if one follows the explanations of the political economists it gets clear that it is capitalism which forces the workers to work under horrible work conditions and the worker suffers even in the most glorifying times when the society is actually progressing economically. Capitalism demands the workers to produce more and more. This rise in production actually results in the “wretchedness of the worker”. The more the worker produces the more his condition deteriorates. The worker is forced to sell his labour to the capitalist not because he wants to but because he does not have any choice. It is because of his material condition that he is coerced to sell his labour. If he chooses to not to sell his labour, he would be left to die. Therefore, he chooses to be a part of this production relation though the relation is based on exploitation.

Capitalism reinstalls monopoly because in capitalism capital gets accumulated in the hands of very few. This results in the formation of two classes, the ones who own property, that is, the capitalist class and the other who are property less; the proletarian class or the working class. The classical Marxist approach to determine class depends on whether one owns any private property or not.

Marx criticized the political economists of his time for not being able to see the interrelation between the concepts of private property, wage labour, division of labour, rent of land and their role in the capitalist society. They could not

ascertain that feudalism developed into capitalism because that was inevitable. Marx on the other hand tried to demonstrate the “intrinsic connection between private property, avarice, the separation of labour, the separation of labour, capital and landed property; the connection of exchange and competition, of value and the devaluation of men, of monopoly and competition, etc – we have to grasp this whole estrangement connected with the money system <sup>[24]</sup>.”

Thus, Marx connects all the points together and analyses alienation as an inevitable condition in capitalism. According to Marx, there are four types of alienation which man undergoes in the capitalist formation of society. The first type of alienation is man’s alienation from the products he creates; the second is his alienation from the production process; the third is the alienation of man from his species-being and the last is man’s alienation from fellow human beings. Marx gives a detailed analysis of these four types of alienation. Marx maintains that alienation is most significant and prominent in the workers as they are directly involved in production. The workers are the ones who are involved in material production and they form the production relation in capitalism. The workers and capitalists are both tied to each other through production relations in capitalism.

### Conclusion

The idea of alienation has travelled a long intellectual journey across different philosophical traditions. In the Christian theology, alienation was understood primarily as a spiritual condition. Human beings were estranged from God because of the Fall and reconciliation with the Divine was considered the only way to restore harmony. Thinkers such as St Augustine and Blaise Pascal interpreted alienation in this theological sense, where the human condition was marked by sin, restlessness and the longing to reunite with God. This undergoes a major transformation with Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach shifts the focus from divine estrangement to human self-estrangement. Religion in his view does not reveal the nature of God. In turn, it reveals the nature of human beings themselves. When human qualities are projected onto a divine being, humanity becomes alienated from its own essence. Alienation, thus ceases to be a purely theological problem and becomes a human and philosophical issue. Karl Marx situates alienation within the materialist conditions of society. For Marx alienation is a historically produced condition rooted in the capitalist society. Through private property and wage labour, workers become alienated from the products they create, the process of production, from their own human essence and from other human beings. Alienation, therefore, reflects a structure of economic and social relations rather than a spiritual separation.

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