

The Role of Philosophical Counselling in Alleviating Alienation

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Abstract: Starting from the 18th and 19th centuries the concept of alienation has gradually attracted the interest of philosophers and sociologists. This phenomenon has been receiving even more attention ever since the onset of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, leading to an increase in the interest to investigate its meaning and implications. This is the theme that the current article is also examining, aiming to determine whether university students in Timisoara were experiencing alienation from others in the current context. In this endeavor, we have proceeded by investigating the concept of alienation in order to figure out which philosophers have dealt with alienation from others amongst the many that have written on the subject, continuing with an analysis of the concept of philosophical counselling and the view of philosophical counsellors on the subject of alienation. The study itself is of a quantitative nature, the participants having received a questionnaire where they were asked to rate their level of alienation from others compared to the one they were experiencing prior to the onset of the pandemic. Most respondents scored a “neutral” level of alienation, indicating a not bad, but also not good situation. This neutral result still implies a level of alienation towards others and the need of philosophical counselling in order to reduce its level.

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The Concept and Meaning of Alienation

Alienation has come to be a widely talked about phenomenon in today's society, especially ever since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has been linked with the negative effects the restrictions imposed during this period of time had on people all over the world. This theme is also the scope of the current article, that aims to investigate whether students at West University of Timisoara were confronted with alienation from others caused by the current context.

But what exactly are we referring to when we are talking about alienation? Richard Schacht has shown in his book *Alienation*, where he tried to give a unitary definition for this concept, that when it comes to the phenomenon of alienation we are definitely not dealing with a unitary concept. (Schacht, 1970)

This non-unitary aspect of the term "alienation" can actually be traced back to the very roots of the word alienation, as etymologically speaking, "alienation" is rooted in the Latin noun "alienatio" (meaning "separation, desertion, aversion, and dislike") that had already three distinct meanings, for each of the three distinct contexts in which it was employed. First, we have the legal domain, where "alienatio" meant "the transfer of ownership or rights to somebody else", secondly, the medico-psychological domain, where it was used as a synonym for "dementia", and thirdly, it was employed in the social sphere, where the meaning was referring to the idea of „the individual's separation or estrangement from other men, from his country, or from the gods" (Geyer & Schweitzer, 2012, p. 5). But the current meaning of the concept started to take shape in the 17th century, through the contributions of the social contract theorists, especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau's view on alienation, as "in his writings one finds the bridge between the now-dominant psychosocial interpretation and the legal-political interpretation that prevailed prior to his writings" (Campbell, 2012, p. xi).

Rousseau's account on alienation was a response to previous social contract theorists, especially to Thomas Hobbes' view, who linked alienation to the concept of the social contract and to the relinquishment of an individual's freedom and rights to a sovereign power. But Hobbes didn't see this as something negative, on the contrary, he believed that

human beings, in their natural state, are constantly waging war against each other, life being short and ruthless, so living in society offers humans the advantages of civilization, that they come to choose to the detriment of their freedom. Rousseau argued against this view, by advocating that human beings' natural state is actually one of peace and harmony, and that it is living in society that determines human beings to be in a constant state of war against each other, as this way of living generates an environment of competition and comparison between people. Thus, by alienating his rights, the human being becomes "not only vulnerable to the judgment of others without resort to any possibility of self-affirmation but also makes them vulnerable to forms of social domination and submission – what Rousseau calls slavery" (Forst, 2017, p. 527).

Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, points at two distinct types of alienation, one similar to what the social contract theorists had in mind, termed "Enttäusserung", and the other referring to self-alienation and coined by Hegel with the term "Entfremdung". This state of self-alienation is not the result of an intended act of the individual, whereas "Enttäusserung" is "a conscious relinquishment or surrender with the intention of securing a desired end: namely, unity with the social substance" (Schacht, 1970, p. 36).

For Marx, alienation is connected to his theory of labor, which Marx believed is an innate characteristic of the human consciousness, so, as Stanfield (1979) states, it was likely "that he would have looked to work for the source of alienation" (p. 259). By considering that the search for the primordial human condition, where the human being was not alienated, was pointless, Marx began an analysis of his own time society, coming to the conclusion that alienated work is the norm in capitalist societies. This interpretation of society leads him to a four-fold perspective of the concept of alienation. According to Schacht (1970), Marx sees the worker, firstly, as being alienated from the object of his own labor, as he is being stripped of any individuality, becoming a mere instrument in the process. Secondly, the worker's alienation is related to the working process, as it loses any trace of the worker's personality, the worker perceiving the process as being alien and would rather avoid it. Thirdly, the worker is confronted with alienation from others and from society, that Marx thinks is the result of the egoism of capitalist societies, where the individual's main driver is self-interest and where others are seen as mere means to individual ends.

Lastly, the worker has to face self-alienation, as he is confronted with the estrangement of his labor, man's essential characteristic.

In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, alienation is associated with the concept of "inauthentic" existence. As Schacht (1970) explains, by "inauthentic" existence Heidegger has in mind "existence which is absorbed in the present, determined by impersonal social expectations and conventions, and which exhibits a systematic refusal to face up to the above-mentioned conditions [conditions of human life (e.g., having to die, being responsible for what one is and does)]" (p. 201).

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre talks about self-alienation, which in his view is connected to the Other's objectifying look, which forces it to have an objectifying experience of itself and, thus, become self-alienated: "Thus in the shock which seizes me when I apprehend the Other's look, this happens – that suddenly I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities, which are now associated with objects of the world, far from me in the midst of the world" (Sartre, 1943/1993, p. 246)

For the Frankfurt School thinkers, alienation occupied a central position in their philosophical program, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno dealing with this concept in the School's manifesto, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they point out that the root cause of alienation laid in the philosophical program of the Enlightenment. They believed that this program could have fatal consequences, transforming men into slaves of their own technology. Along these lines was also the thought of Herbert Marcuse, who dealt with the concept of alienation in his works *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*.

Erich Fromm, also associated with the Frankfurt School, tried to give a unitary account of alienation, but, according to Richard Schacht (1970), he failed in this attempt, as in his works the term points at a broad spectrum of "possible relations of a person to himself, other men, nature, his work, and things" (p. 116). He identified the cause of the phenomenon in the organizational change that the Reformation brought in society, which had a deep impact on individual freedom, by offering the individual external freedoms, but also causing a disrupt in the individual's ties with the community, nature and himself, thus leading to his feeling of alienation.

In the social sciences the funders of the academic field of sociology, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, both dealt with the phenomenon of alienation in their works. Durkheim linked alienation, or anomie as he

called it, with the concept of suicide. He believed that anomic suicide was caused by an under-regulation on the norms society imposes upon the individual, as society could “only function when there is restraint upon human aspirations, desires, claims and hopes” (TenHouten, 2019, p. 76). As TenHouten (2019) also shows in his book, *Alienation and Affect*, from the '50 all the way up to the '80, the concept of alienation has received a lot of consideration in the sociological sphere, being linked with the risks imposed by the rise of technological advancements, but still “inquiry into alienation was beset by terminological ambiguities and conceptual and methodological difficulties” (p. 53). Melvin Seeman tried in 1959 to give a clarifying account on the significance of this concept, identifying five different uses in the works of sociologists: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement.

Later on, these meanings have multiplied, Richard Schacht (1970) pointing out that there are hardly any generalizations that can be extracted from the works of sociologists, as he identified four different meanings, each having its own subtypes: alienation as loneliness, alienation as lack of solidarity and alienation as dissatisfaction in social relations.

Having completed this short review of the literature available on the concept of alienation from a philosophical and sociological perspective, we have identified five distinct aspects that have been linked with alienation from others:

- viewed as loneliness - unhappiness determined by a lack of relationships with others that are significant to the individual;
- perceived as lack of solidarity – distress caused by awareness of not having shared tastes, views or interests with others;
- seen as dissatisfaction in social relations - dissatisfaction generated by the relationships of the individual with his associates;
- understood as cultural estrangement – linked with the rejection of the values, beliefs and interests of society;
- interpreted in Marxian view, as being an effect of the egoism characteristic for capitalistic societies.

The study conducted took into account all of these aspects, hoping thus to get a better glimpse of the degree of alienation university students were experiencing.

Philosophical Counselling: Role and Methods

Philosophical counselling, part of the practical philosophy movement, first emerged in 1981 with the setup of Dr. Gerd Achenbach's practice in the vicinity of Cologne, Germany. Ran Lahav (1996) defines the practice as "an approach for addressing the dilemmas, predicaments, and life-issues of the person in the street through philosophical self-examination" (p. 259).

The foundations of philosophical counselling have been said to lay in the Socratic tradition and nowadays many philosophical counselors are using forms of Socratic dialogue as their method or incorporating parts of Socratic dialogue within their practice. In order to become a philosophical counselor, one must hold a master's degree or a Ph.D. in philosophy.

Even though philosophical counselling appeared only 40 years ago, philosophy has been seen as an aid for the soundness of the soul ever since antiquity, where we have the clear example of the stoics, whom, according to Pierre Hadot (1995) were practicing a series of spiritual exercises through their philosophy, which was "a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being." (p. 83). Studying the literature on the field, Tim LeBon (1999) has identified four distinct areas that are within the scope of philosophical counselling, as follows:

- "Decision-making dilemmas, including career choices and ethical dilemmas;
- Relationship problems;
- Emotional issues, including depression, anxiety and the lack of self-confidence;
- Difficulties regarding meaning and/or direction and in life." (p. 2)

Philosophical counselling includes methods both for individual practice, as well as group sessions. With regard to individual practice, the methods and techniques employed vary from one philosophical counselor to another. Thus, some use logic in order to analyze the client's arguments, such as Elliot Cohen's LBT, others are dialogical in nature, like Oscar Brenifier's Socratic technique, while others imply an educational step, where the philosophical counsellor teaches the client a set of philosophical

tools and ways of reasoning that were employed during the sessions, as the four-stages method of Peter Raabe.

When it comes to group sessions, the methods most commonly employed are those of philo-café and communities of inquiry. Philo-café were first setup in Paris, France by philosopher Marc Sautet, in December 1992. They offer the space for philosophical debates about the big questions in life, to which anyone can participate. These discussion sessions are organized and facilitated by a philosopher, who guides the debate starting from a subject that is chosen in the beginning of the debate.

Communities of inquiry are based on a concept first introduced by C.S. Peirce and John Dewey, and later further developed by Matthew Lipman, as a method included in teaching Philosophy for Children. He described the community of inquiry as a place where participants “listen to one another with respect, build on one another’s ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another’s assumptions” (Lipman, 1991/2003, p. 20).

There aren’t many philosophical counselors that have dealt yet with the theme of alienation, making it a somewhat marginal subject, pertaining more to the field of existential-phenomenological psychotherapy, where Rollo May, Ludwig Binswanger, and Irvin D. Yalom are great examples of how this phenomenon is interpreted in the existential-phenomenological psychotherapy sphere.

Therefore, it is of no surprise that the philosophical counselors who have dealt with the theme of alienation are of existentialist-phenomenological affiliation. Among them: Maria daVenza Tillmanns with her article “Philosophical Counseling: Understanding Self and Other Through Dialogue”, Shlomit C. Schuster’s article “The practice of Sartre’s philosophy in philosophical counseling and existential therapy” and her co-authored book *Philosophy Practice: An Alternative to Counseling and Psychotherapy*, and also, Emmy van Deurzen, who deals more at length with this concept in her 1998 article “Existentialism and Existential Psychotherapy”, where she endorses the thesis that philosophical counselling, as well as existential psychotherapy, are succeeding more in alleviating “existential crisis”, such as: alienation, anxiety, guilt, the meaning of life, paradoxes, how one should live their lives. She provides a list of philosophers that she considers relevant in this matter, as they have

considered the issues of daily human life within their works, naming Kant, Spinoza, Rousseau, Hegel and Hume, as well as existentialist philosophers Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre and phenomenologists Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau Ponty. Van Deurzen (1998) sees alienation through the eyes of the existential philosophers, as a consequence of the fact “that human living takes place in the tension between opposing forces”, “represented by Heidegger’s description of the tension between life and death, or by Sartre’s descriptions of the tension between being and nothingness” (p. 230).

Alienation from Others during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Almost two years ago, the world was faced with a health crisis, ignited by the rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, that lead countries to enforce all sorts of restrictions limiting the population’s freedom of movement, starting from travel restrictions, closing non-necessary shops, cancelling large events, theater performances and concerts, and ending up with a total lockdown of two months, where people were not allowed to go outside their houses except for essential work or medical urgent matters. Most people ended up working from home, some people lost their jobs due to the pandemic, while students and pupils, as well as their teachers, were faced with a new challenge: online education.

A number of studies conducted on university students show the negative psychological impact of the pandemic. 24.9% of respondents to an investigation conducted in May 2020 in China (Wenjun et al., 2020), have registered as experiencing various level of anxiety, starting from severe anxiety to mild anxiety. These results were corroborated by research conducted in Spain (Odriozola-González et al. 2020), at the University of Valladolid, findings that have shown that 21.34% of respondents were experiencing moderate to extremely severe anxiety. The study also reported that 34.19% of participants were experiencing moderate to extremely severe states of depression and 28.14% of respondents were going through moderate to extremely severe degrees of stress. Our own research was conducted from the 29th of June until the 30th of June 2021 at West University of Timisoara. The 75 respondents of the study, were all students of the university at the time of the research, with the majority of participants being females, in the age range of 16 - 25

years, studying in the Humanities department, at Bachelor level, in the first year of studies. The respondents were sent a questionnaire using the help of online platforms, such as e-mail, Facebook and WhatsApp groups. This questionnaire was devised starting from the five different types of alienation from others mentioned above (viewed as loneliness, perceived as lack of solidarity, seen as dissatisfaction in social relations, understood as cultural estrangement, and interpreted in Marxian view), being divided into five sections each corresponding to a distinct type of alienation from others. Each section contained 7 questions rated using a linear scale of 1 = “Strongly agree” to 5 = “Strongly disagree”.

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms, so the raw data was extracted from the platform and then manipulated through data reduction procedures. Tables, column charts and pie charts were used to display the results. Data was analyzed using a scale for rating the average index of alienation, along these lines:

- index ranging between 1-2,5 = alienated;
- index ranging between 2,5-3,5 = neutral;
- index ranging between 3,5-5 = not alienated.

Using this scale, the results have pointed at a “neutral” level of alienation from others among university students at West University of Timisoara, with a percentage of 76% of participants rating as “neutral” on our average index of alienation, 16% being identified as “alienated” and 8% as “not alienated”. Alienation from others interpreted as cultural estrangement was the most affected section, with 32% of participants being rated as “alienated”.

Males were deemed more alienated than females, with 20% of male participants scoring as “alienated” and a notable lack of “not alienated” male participants. The impact was registered to be higher in the Humanities field more than in the Sciences, having 18% of respondents studying in Humanities programs scoring as “alienated” in comparison to only 6% of the participants attending studies in the Sciences field. Students attending Master programs seem to have been more affected than Bachelor students, with 20% of Master students scoring as “alienated” versus only 13% for Bachelor students, with second year students being the most alienated in all the year cycles.

At the time the study was conducted, most circulation restrictions were lifted in Romania, in light of an increase in the rate of vaccinations,

which was pointed out as a possible cause for the highly “neutral” responses received. But a neutral situation is not a great state of affairs, as things could easily slip into a state of alienation, as new and new waves of the pandemic are announced. The ideal would be to move from this “neutral” state to a “not alienated” one. This is the place where philosophical counselling comes into play, by suggesting possible improvements through specific methods of practice.

Philosophical Counselling as Support in Alleviating Alienation from Others

In the case we are discussing, of alienation from others, the best methods to employ would be those designed for group sessions, namely the philo-café and the community of inquiry. Philo-café could be organized on themes starting from a general view on the concept of alienation, to our topic at hand, alienation from others, for each of the five sections, and all the way down to question level, if needed be. A few examples to illustrate such group sessions have been devised and presented below. The first example is a philo-café where the topic is built around the general meaning the concept of alienation holds, and that starts from a text fragment from Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

“When Dasein, tranquilized and ‘understanding’ everything, thus compares itself with everything, it drifts along towards an alienation [Entfremdung] in which its own most potentiality-for-Being is hidden from it. Falling Being-in-the-world is not only tempting and tranquilizing; it is at the same time alienating.” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 171)

Structure of the first example of philo-café:

1. Topic: alienation as “inauthenticity”
2. Ask participants to find examples from life experience when they have felt that they were living inauthentically
3. The philosophical counsellor suggests a general question about the topic: “Is lack of authenticity something that could serve a greater good?”
4. Ask participants to answer the question and give arguments for their replies
5. Open discussion (Vlaicu, 2021, p. 49)

The second example is also a philo-café setup, this time revolving around the more specific topic of alienation from others and is based on a text fragment from Erich Fromm's work, *The Sane Society*.

"Man has to relate himself to others; but if he does it in a symbiotic or alienated way, he loses his independence and integrity; he is weak, suffers, becomes hostile, or apathetic; only if he can relate himself to others in a loving way does he feel one with them and at the same time preserve his integrity." (Fromm, 1956/2001, p. 66)

Structure of the second example of philo-café:

1. Topic: What does alienation from others refer to?
2. Ask participants to find examples from life experience when they have related to others in an alienated or symbiotic way
3. The philosophical counsellor suggests a general question about the topic: "What does a loving way of relating to others mean to you?"
4. Ask participants to answer the question and give arguments for their replies
5. Open discussion (Vlaicu, 2021, p. 49)

And the last example illustrates the proceedings in case of a community of inquiry organized around the topic of defining alienation, by using as stimulus the following fragment from Slavoj Žižek's 2015 talk held in Vienna at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (Žizek, 2015).

The philosophical counselor, as facilitator, will introduce the stimulus by giving a short account on the meaning of alienation, the philosophical perspectives on this concept, and on Slavoj Žižek and his philosophical views. After playing the video for the participants, the philosophical counselor will guide the debate with the help of questions, such as:

1. "Should we strive to understand other people or is it impossible to understand others, as Žižek claims?
2. Does multiculturalism lead to alienation and how?
3. Is politeness a form of forced closeness?
4. Is politeness the "beauty of alienation" as Žižek names it or is it rather a mask for alienation?
5. Does being polite and practicing political correctness generate feelings of repulsion towards the other?
6. How could alienation be a good thing? Could it ever be a good thing?

7. Could alienation be a part of human evolution?
8. Do you think Žižek's ideas that we need more alienation are actually the ideas of a person that is alienated himself?" (Vlaicu, 2021, pp. 53-54).

At the end of the session, the philosophical counsellor should encourage participants to draw a conclusion on the topic discussed.

Conclusion

The current study had the aim of determining whether university students in Timisoara were experiencing alienation from others in the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic context, where social distancing, online studying and circulation curfews have become a norm, and to figure out how philosophical counselling could aid in the alleviation of this situation. The results we received indicated a "neutral" level of alienation, which points out to an unclear situation, that could easily deteriorate with new waves of the pandemic being announced.

Ideally, the situation should evolve from "neutral" to "not alienated" and we believe that philosophical counselling could play a major role in this, as it benefits both from holding the knowledge about this phenomenon and its effects, as well as from having the necessary set of techniques and procedures to aid in this endeavor. The few examples we have provided have the purpose of illustrating how philosophical counselling could serve its role in the betterment of this situation.

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