

A Phenomenological Sketch

Alienation

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Original E-text:

[<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboeree/alienation.html>]

People want lives in folk societies, wherein everyone is a friendly relative, and no act or object is without holiness. Chemicals make them want that. Chemicals make us furious when we are treated as things rather than as persons. When anything happens to us which would not happen to us in a folk society, our chemicals make us feel like fish out of water.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was talking about alienation. The word comes from the Latin "to be made into a stranger," and it once referred to being deprived of your birthright. But feeling like a fish out of water expresses the feeling quite well.

The sociologist Seeman analyzed alienation into six aspects that still have meaning:

1. *Powerlessness*: "Nothing I do makes a difference." "You can't fight city hall."
2. *Normlessness*: "Being 'good' just won't cut it anymore." "Nice guys finish last."
3. *Meaninglessness*: "I can't make sense of it all anymore." "What's it all about?"
4. *Cultural estrangement*: "My culture's values aren't mine." "What is 'success,' anyway?"
5. *Self-estrangement*: "My work doesn't mean much to me." "What I learn in school isn't relevant."
6. *Social isolation*: "I'm alone." "I don't fit in." "No one visits me anymore."

Who hasn't felt at least one of these? Or know others who feel them? Some psychologists and sociologists have suggested that alienation is a sign of our times.

Alienation test at: (<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboree/alientest.html>)

Will

Psychological distress is the feeling we experience when we face problems; psychological delight is the feeling we experience as we solve these problems. So delight depends on distress, because solving problems means first having problems. Now, although we spend a lot of time running away from problems – through defensiveness, or aggression, or mindless conformity – occasionally we *take on* problems. This requires will.

Will is putting aside present distress in order to reach future delight. Or staying hopeful, even eager, in the face of anxiety. Or taking on problems with the intention of solving them. I'm sure you can think of many things that require will: dieting, for example – ignoring the cheesecake and attending to the image of a future god or goddess. Or going to work or to class.... You can see why, in the research literature, will is often referred to as *delay of gratification*.

When we talk about will, we usually think immediately of what I shall call *instrumental will*. This is where the means and the ends are artificially connected: The distressful things you have to go through are not "naturally" connected to the delightful goals you are attempting to achieve.

Instrumental production – working for money and such – is the most obvious example: You put up with boredom, fatigue, anxiety, and all sorts of crap at work, so you can experience a little delight at other times (due almost exclusively to your paycheck!). Also qualifying as instrumental production for many people is school: You go to class and read books, not for the joy of learning, but for the almighty grade, followed by the glorious diploma, and hopefully ending with the financially-rewarding job.

In much of research, the motivation behind instrumental production is called *extrinsic motivation*.

Another example is *instrumental association*. You find this a lot at work, too. Think of all the people you have to be friendly to, even if you don't want to be. Think of the last time you had to talk to someone you didn't like – perhaps you recall how much your face hurt from smiling at this person all day! But this is a big part of business: You have chickens; Joe has chicken coops; You can't stand him, but for the sake of business, you put up with him.

Another name for instrumental association is *Gesellschaft*. Instrumental production and association together make up the central concern of economics-style social theories such as exchange theory.

It should be obvious at this point that I have another form of will in mind as well. I call it *natural will*, and it involves means and ends that are "naturally," even intimately, tied together. With natural will, the distress you put up with is due to the same problem which, when you solve it, provides the delight. Like instrumental will, it comes in two flavors:

Natural production includes much of what we call craftsmanship, art, and even science. The artist "sees" the end result of his efforts in the uncut marble, "sees" the final brush strokes on the blank canvas, "hears" how his unwritten song should sound. The artist knows what he wants, but must struggle to arrive. You sweat, you curse, but in the end you feel much like the child who proudly presents his clay ashtray to his parents.

The motivation behind natural production is often called *intrinsic motivation*.

There is, of course, also *natural association*. Lovers, families, friendships, clans, neighborhoods... You sweat with them, too, and curse. But you "hang around" anyway, even if you don't have to. Although it takes will, we are supported by that totally irrational feeling that makes us want to "hang around" – love, or a sense of belonging at least. Your well-being is tied to another's well-being.

This is also called *Gemeinschaft*.

It is this natural production and association that does *not* operate by the economic rules of exchange theory, is *not* directed towards "outcomes," is done, in fact, for no economic reasons at all. It operates, rather, by non-mathematical principles having to do with increasing complexity in the service of life. Mystical stuff.

Examples abound: The bond between parent and child is often highly unrewarding, considered economically, yet it is a hard bond to break; the loyalty among soldiers will occasionally lead one to sacrifice his very life for the others; there's unrequited love...; the starving artist.... If you consider what we value most in life – honesty, generosity, caring, bravery – you will notice that these things *require* a lack of concern with costs and benefits! Running into a burning building to save a child only after being promised a million dollars isn't considered brave – just greedy.

It is true that the instrumental side of life has always been with us. It seems, for example, that we invented tools before we were who we are (*homo sapiens*), and tools are the very symbol of instrumentality. Nevertheless, I feel comfortable calling the natural *natural* because it seems likely that it was far more common in our early history than it is today. The anthropologist Robert Redfield called the hypothetical situation of our earliest ancestors the *folk society*, and described it so:

[It is] small, isolated, nonliterate, and homogeneous, with a strong sense of group solidarity. The ways of living are conventionalized into that coherent system we call a "culture." Behavior is traditional, spontaneous, uncritical, and personal; there is no legislation or habit of experiment and reflection for intellectual ends. Kinship, its relationships and institutions, are the type categories of experience and the familial group is the unit of action. The sacred prevails over the secular; the economy is one of status rather than the market.

That is, it is a society marked by predominantly natural associations and natural production. Our society, I think you would agree, is highly instrumental in comparison.

Alienation

When, in our highly instrumental society, we find ourselves without natural association and production, we feel alienation.

Normally, living instrumentally doesn't lead to alienation. After a hard day of instrumental association, I can go home and relax with family and friends – my natural associations. I may even have some friends at work. And, at the end of the week, after all my hard instrumental work, I get my paycheck, which (after taking care of the necessities) brings me some natural pleasures – movies, books, restaurants, hobbies, sports.... And I may even get some natural satisfaction in my work itself.

Unfortunately, in a largely instrumental society, these things are easily undermined. First, we may discover that we lack natural associations – that we are rather lonely people. There may be a fundamental scarcity of natural associations: Our families are very small, we move around a lot, friends and lovers come and go. One death in a modern day "subnuclear" family, for example, can be far more devastating than many deaths in a tribal community.

We can also *lose faith* in people. We teach our kids "never judge a book by its cover," "all that glitters is not gold," "never take candy from a stranger...." We teach them to take people *not* as they appear to be, but to look for hidden motives, to look for what they are really after – to look at them instrumentally. But what happens, then, when the child decides to put Daddy in the same category he has been taught to use with the used-car salesman? The natural is undermined by the instrumental.

We also discover our lack of natural production – our boredom. Again, the scarcity of natural production is a problem: How many "creative" jobs are there, really? How much of even a good job is actually interesting? How much time and money can we spend on our rather contrived (i.e. instrumental) hobbies and sports?

Further, as with association, instrumental production tends to drive out natural production. Remember Deci's research? Give kids gold stars for what they enjoy doing and, before you know it, they no longer do it unless the gold star is waiting! Paying an artist for creativity or a thinker for inventiveness is like paying someone for sex... the thrill soon evaporates.

But even with little in the way of natural association and production, we can get along quite well. The instrumental life still has its rewards. There has to be something that *triggers* alienation, that makes us aware of it: This happens when instrumental association and production *fail*, that is, when we are faced with the fact that all that work actually does not lead to happiness.

The failure of instrumental association and production can happen in two ways. First, it can be a matter of *means*: If we lose our jobs, to use the obvious example, we can't pay our bills – and our pleasures are the first things we have to sacrifice. If you flunk out of college, there is no degree, and no fine career, waiting for us.

The failure of the instrumental can also be a matter of *ends*: Money can provide an opportunity for natural enjoyments, but it can't buy them. Our inclination, when life begins to bore us, is to throw more money into "entertainment." But when the entertainment fails to entertain, we ask ourselves "is this all there is?"

Back to the beginning

We can go back and review Seeman's six aspects of alienation using the preceding analysis: In regards to production, we too often find ourselves facing an absence of the natural or intrinsically rewarding (*meaninglessness*). Further, we face the failure of instrumental means (*powerlessness*) and the ultimately unsatisfying nature of instrumental ends (*self-estrangement*).

Likewise, in regards to association, we find ourselves facing an absence of the natural (*social isolation*), the failure of instrumental means (*normlessness*), and the ultimately unsatisfying nature of instrumental ends (*cultural estrangement*).

The solution to alienation is now clear: Correct or reverse the courses described above. First, the alienated person needs to find work that does in fact lead to rewards that are in fact rewarding! This, more often than not, is a social and political issue: Where does one find such work and how does one train for it?

But beyond this, the alienated person needs to find and maintain sources of natural production and association – meaningful activities and loving relationships. A part of this, too, is social and political, and often even a matter of luck. But it may also require changes in a person's ways of perceiving and thinking about work and people and themselves.