

Symbolic Alienation in the Information Society

(Abstract)

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After the agricultural revolution and industrial revolution in the history of mankind, the information revolution happened in the twentieth century. Now we live in the information society, where information technology, such as computer and the internet, plays the most important role. In the information society the philosophy of information arose. In the field of the information philosophy, there are many complex philosophical problems ahead of philosophers, one of which is symbolic alienation, or information alienation. In order to simplify the problem, in this essay “information alienation” is a synonym of “symbolic alienation” due to the fact that information is indissolubly linked with symbol.

The so-called alienation means that people do something like lifting a rock only to drop it on their own feet, just as a Chinese proverb says.

As a complex phenomenon, alienation appeared in the early period of civilization. Li Zehou, a famous Chinese philosopher, pointed out that Zhuang Zi was the first philosopher in the history of philosophy to study alienation [1]. In the Period of Warring States (475-221 B.C.) in China, as a Taoist philosopher, Zhuang Zi became aware of the nature of alienation and analyzed this kind of phenomenon. In Section Twelve of *Zhuang Zi, Haven and Earth*, the author made up an edifying story about “Zhu-kung traveled south to Chu” to expose the essence of alienation[2], in spite of the fact that Zhuang Zi did not use the term alienation.

In Europe, Hegel advanced a theory of alienation and after Hegel Marx advanced another kind of theory of alienation in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*[3]. Different from Zhuang Zi who investigated and criticized the alienation that happened in the agricultural society, Marx investigated and criticized the alienation that happened in the industrial society.

Is it possible that as a kind of phenomenon alienation be wiped out in the society?

On the eve of the information revolution, some scholars, especially some futurologists, for instance, Alvin Toffler, described a new form of society from an optimistic point of view and showed an alluring prospect in the information society. According to what these futurologists said, information technology would not be a double-edged sword. However, when having entered on the information age, people found that the new information technology also turned out to be a double-edged sword.

In the information society, people unexpectedly witnessed the negative side of information technology, such as computer crime, internet defraud, internet addiction, etc. From the philosophical point of view, the fact that the new information technology unavoidably leads to many bad consequences gives philosophers a hint that a new kind of alienation has appeared in

the information society. This new kind of alienation can be referred to as information alienation or symbolic alienation.

Alienation, which has become a more and more serious social problem since the Industrial Revolution, can be expressed itself in various forms.

Norbert Wiener says, "Information is information, not matter or energy. No materialism which does not admit this can survive at the present day"[4]. This aphorism suggests that information should not be confused with matter. Based on this thesis, we can come to a conclusion that there are at least two kinds of alienation, matter alienation (material product alienation) and information alienation (symbolic alienation). The former is the principal form of alienation in the industrial society and the latter is the principal form of alienation in the information society.

Matter alienation is an old problem. However, information alienation is a new problem. It is certain that information alienation or symbolic alienation is one of the major themes in the field of information philosophy.

On the one hand, we must accept that matter alienation and symbolic alienation share a lot in common. On the other hand, we must pay attention to many differences between matter alienation and symbolic alienation, especially differences in their causes and characteristics.

In regard to the cause and characteristics of labor alienation and machine alienation, which fall into the same category, matter alienation, in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx pointed out that it is not machinery itself but the capitalist employment on machinery that results in alienation [5].

However, in the information society, the situation changed a lot. Although the danger of matter alienation, as a kind of social phenomenon, is lessened to a certain degree, the danger of information alienation, as another kind of social phenomenon, increases to a high degree.

In the information society, various phenomena which result from symbolic alienation or information alienation, such as network fraud and hacking, frequently crop up.

The cause and characteristics of information alienation is different from that of matter alienation. While matter alienation results often from actual materials, information alienation results often from false information.

To make a long story short, the basic difference between matter alienation and information alienation is that the information alienation or symbolic alienation relates to the true and false question, especially to false information, while the matter alienation or material product alienation relates to real problems in the society. For example, when conducting research on (matter) alienation in the industrial society, Marx investigated the actual social phenomena happened in the society, while when conducting research on information alienation, scholars in information society often have to investigate the influence and consequence of false information.

In the field of philosophy, Francis Bacon's theory of the idols, especially the idols of market place, touched upon information alienation in essence. In the field of information philosophy, scholars should carry the research on information alienation to a new stage.

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