

The Predicament and Coping Strategies of Self-actualization under the New Alienation of Labor

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Abstract: With the rapid development of contemporary technology, human status is facing challenges, leading to a new phenomenon of self-alienation, that is, the relationship between people and labor at the conscious level has changed. Under this new background of alienation, self-actualization has become complex, involving the repositioning of the subject-object status between humans and machines as well as the gradual weakening of people's subjectivity. In the face of such challenges, people can promote the process of self-actualization by enhancing their initiative, reducing dependence, expanding their thinking space, and maintaining a mindset of "sustainable development".

Keywords: New Alienation of Labor; Self-actualization; Initiative; Technological Alienation; Subjectivity

1. On the specific connotation of the new alienation of labor

Labor alienation is a concept of profound historical significance, first articulated to describe the estrangement of workers from the products of their own labor under capitalism. A theory of labor alienation has found enduring confirmation in the trajectory of capitalist development. With the continuous development of modern science and technology, alienation has spread to all areas of life in recent years, and now it is closely related to the concept of freedom. Given the above circumstances, the pursuit of self-realisation will necessarily involve continuous overcoming and overcoming of "alienation".

Alienated Labour Theory remains relevant to some extent in the era of artificial intelligence. He presented the fourfold nature of alienated labour and exposed the self-alienation and subordination of workers in the process of production. This indicates an irrational social structure in which labour does not bring pleasure

but rather imposes oppression, and at the same time, the path to self-realisation remains out of reach. Additionally, under digital capitalism, desire machines are employed to manipulate people's desires, and thus workers and users are unknowingly led to participate in their own exploitation in pursuit of self-realisation and identity. [1]

Labor provides the people with a living and the spiritual freedom to live in the modern era. Machinery and technology have made real progress in the development of human self-actualisation. Kang Xuan defines the new alienation of labour as a widespread sense that one's work is always lacking, and thus induces repeated self-criticism [2]. This self-doubt and negation increasingly guide the labour process and erode subjective agency. This phenomenon of new alienation in labour refers to both the subjugation to the products of one's own labour and a loss of spiritual vitality. It has gradually become a major problem of autonomous behaviour and reflects an unconscious alienation of people from their true selves. Feelings of disconnection and a loss of self-esteem in the workplace are direct results of this alienation. In addition to the production of materials, it has extended to cover services, knowledge-based work, art, and so on. Given the above, people are increasingly questioning how to achieve a sense of self through work and how to overcome this new type of alienation.

2. The Predicament of Self-Realization under the New Alienation of Labor

With all the new technology in recent years, people have been more anxious. Many traditional jobs have been displaced by new technologies, so many workers have had to adjust to working with artificial intelligence and live in a constant state of anxiety about being replaced. In seeking the ideal life at all costs, one has incurred serious harm to their own health; this is essentially a form of labour alienation.

2.1 The New Subject-Object Alienation between Humans and Machines

With the first increase in the productivity of labour caused by the Industrial Revolution, machines have been used to promote social development. Machines have gradually shifted from being simple instruments to reduce physical labour and improve efficiency to full-fledged automated and intelligent systems in recent years. These devices are no longer continuously operated by humans and will carry out many other complex operations automatically through intelligent systems. At the same time, people have also developed a sense of reliance on machines and, as such, have become increasingly integrated with technology. It has altered the mode of life for people in society considerably.

AI is now being applied in many ways across all levels of society to help people learn, work, live, etc. Although there have been some achievements in technology, such as new forms of life and other labour, many problems have also emerged. With the spread of automation and intelligent systems, more specialised technical skills are now needed, and labour market polarisation has increased. Those who lack the necessary competencies cannot adapt; they are deprived of creative and rewarding opportunities and, as a result, experience both career setbacks and increased daily anxiety. AI is transforming the division of labour through research and development, assistance, substitution, and implicit immaterial labour, reducing the space for living labour, restructuring paths of surplus-value creation, and giving rise to new forms of alienated labour [3]. Within the logic of capital, AI is now a tool for capital to control and dominate human labour, thus threatening the subjectivity of human labour and intensifying existing labour alienation and surplus-value exploitation [4].

Given the above circumstances, a large number of people are facing the rapid changes in technology and, at the same time, striving to maintain their current lives while also making self-improvements and adapting to new conditions. This difficulty will be a test of one's own strength, and at the same time, educational institutions and vocational training institutions will also need to adapt. Many people have come to know that they are falling behind the pace of social development, so they have started to

adjust their work with the rapid changes in machinery, urgently strengthened their core competencies, learned key technologies, and obtained necessary knowledge. However, they are not driven by their own intrinsic desires, but rather by the changes in the times and what is required at that moment. Therefore, there is a corresponding loss of human consciousness, and simultaneously, a larger number of people are becoming increasingly emotionally insensitive; as a result, their emotional needs are neglected and they fall into the trap of "involution".

2.2 The Deepening Crisis of Human Subjectivity

Although machines have increased people's convenience, they have also gradually reduced the extent of their own will. Some of the instructions provided by machines in practice are more scientifically grounded than those given by people, and to a certain extent, this raises questions about human subjectivity.

First, the autonomy of people has been reduced to some extent. In recent years, with the rapid development of machine technology, people have changed their working styles and been living in different places for work and life. Machines are relatively simple devices that help people solve difficult problems and save them a lot of time and effort. However, with such convenience has also arisen a problem that cannot be ignored: people have become used to being recommended by machines, and in some cases, this reliance has become excessive. Amap Navigation is a typical representative case. Although it helps people with route planning nowadays, some ridiculous "river-diving" accidents have occurred as a result. Although the cause of the above cases can be traced back to defects in the algorithm, it also indicates that the users have not been able to think and judge independently in the face of new technologies. People are showing increasing reluctance to use their own rational abilities to solve problems and are now willing to follow machine instructions blindly, even when these instructions are clearly unreasonable. Having been swept up by such a whirlwind, people are now less certain of their own choices. In the long run, we may find that we are less capable of independent thinking and more reliant on technology for problem-solving. If such a trend is not corrected, the crisis of human subjectivity will continue to deepen; freedom of choice and expression will be

reduced, and our life will be restricted. As Zhang Hua pointed out, in the context of generative artificial intelligence, digital self-consciousness is at risk of subject alienation; this includes cognitive enhancement and value penetration at the technical level, human-machine collaboration and identity reinforcement in the interactive dimension, and subject evolution and value awareness in the ethical dimension [5].

Some scholars, employing the Johari Window theory, argue that individuals are being datafied and objectified by AI, leading to a transformation of self-structure and increased self-transparency, which in turn causes alienation in human-machine and interpersonal relationships; to address the subject crisis induced by AI, we need to redefine the self and reposition human-machine relations [6].

Second, people inhabit the digital realm, where they can access information, encounter novel phenomena, and confide in strangers, thereby temporarily escaping the complexities of real-life interpersonal relationships [7]. With the proliferation of remote work and telecommuting, face-to-face social interaction has diminished, resulting in a weakening of social belonging and an exacerbation of estrangement in real life. In the past, the office water cooler was a place for talking among colleagues; now, such gatherings are infrequent. We communicate through screens now; although technology has increased the convenience of communication, it is no longer as warm and close as face-to-face interaction. It will affect the company's work arrangement and life outside work. As more family members have been absorbed in their own lives by mobile phones and computers, communication and interaction among them have declined. Children take online classes in their rooms, and their parents join the class via video conference from the living room; such scenes have become increasingly common in many families. This change in life has gradually increased a person's sense of loneliness and made them feel more out of touch with others. In addition, this mode of social interaction makes it harder and harder for people to achieve self-identification in the physical world; confined to the online realm, they are unconsciously calibrated to the standards of the Internet and strive to become "another self" in pursuit of a so-called "perfect" online persona, thereby causing increasing distress for themselves in this new form of alienation.

Thirdly, the depth of people's thought has decreased. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence technology, many applications of AI are now being implemented, such as writing assistance, question answering and information retrieval. It is not uncommon to see in daily life that when faced with difficult problems, people often turn to intelligent devices out of habit; they feel unable to solve the problem themselves and are unwilling to spend more time pondering and trying to find a solution, so they choose to use a machine for assistance directly. This may be due to the rapid development of modern society and people's desire for instant gratification at present. At the same time, there are concerns that it may raise questions about the purpose of life, and extended use of technology could lead to a decline in cognitive abilities and even a reduction in intelligence. With the development of technology, we have begun to lose some confidence in our own ability to think and be creative; we often find ourselves thinking that "what I write is not as good as what AI produces," "AI has processed all the information better than I have," and "the ideas generated by AI are truly original." Although we can enjoy the convenience offered by technology, we should be cautious about how to manage our relationship with machines in this era, and we need to ensure that in an intelligence age, our thinking ability and independence do not gradually fade away due to over-reliance on others, falling victim to self-doubt out of fear or envy.

3. Strategies for Self-Realization under the New Alienation of Labor

When algorithms are given the power to decide, recommend and even "feel" on our behalf, the very process of thinking changes from an effort we must personally undertake into a choice that can be delegated or avoided. In the absence of intentional modification, this process of cognitive outsourcing will continuously generate a "passive subject" who, despite having access to abundant information and personalised services, has effectively lost the ability to critically evaluate the sources of this information, determine values, or feel emotions. Therefore, in light of the above social circumstances, the quest for self-actualisation must be conducted in the following three ways.

3.1 Actively Recognizing the Subject-Object Status of Humans and Machines

First, people need to have more initiative in life and improve their ability to think independently and think critically. Given the deep technological changes in recent years, many people have become overly reliant on computers and can no longer exercise their own thinking ability independently. Therefore, we must be cautious about technological isolation and avoid letting people be led astray by the system without thinking. Education, culture and social institutions should work together to motivate people to remain rational in the face of new technologies, proactively explore profound questions such as “Who am I?” and “What kind of person do I want to be?”, and thus establish a subject position in the era of information. In the current era of rapid technological change, people should know themselves better and not be carried away by the changes in society; at the same time, they should not lose their original identity.

Second, the necessary attributes of machines should be reasonably understood, and their lower-level role as instruments should be clarified. No matter how advanced technology is, machines are still tools created by people to serve the goals of life, not ends in themselves. To deify machines or to give them a status superior to that of people is to lose the subject-object relation and may also lead to the erosion of human values. Therefore, at the same time, one should also exercise a certain degree of “technological restraint” in the application of technology, avoid excessive dependence, get back to the basic needs and life activities of people, and achieve self-worth through genuine social interaction and meaningful labor. Thus, it is necessary to explore an application logic for artificial intelligence that is in line with the development of humanity itself, and to base this exploration on criticism and avoidance of the logic of capital [8].

Third, the path to self-realisation should return to the lifeworld and concrete practice. Technology offers convenience, but it is not in line with the people’s sense of emotion, morality and creativity. Continuously cultivate one’s own judgment, sense of responsibility and creativity through daily practice, engage in social participation, serve others, pursue truth and goodness, and discover and realise one’s own purpose. This practice-oriented way of

self-realisation will help individuals grow better and promote the construction of a people-centered social ecology for technology.

Only by constantly strengthening human subjectivity can we address the problem of the subject-object relationship between people and machines properly and avoid technological invasion of all aspects of life. It is a problem of philosophy, but it is also serious in practice. In the future, we will continue to advance technology with a humanistic spirit, better integrate technology and the humanities, and make sure that all development is focused on promoting the all-round growth of people and building a stable society. At the same time, people should be able to recognise that machines are merely tools created by humans to promote progress, and that humans are capable of producing far greater value than machines ever could.

3.2 Overcoming “Mental Laziness” and Strengthening Human Agency

With the spread of artificial intelligence in daily life, a problem of “mental laziness” has gradually arisen and is now worrying all sections of society. First of all, people need to learn to cultivate a sense of “loving thought” in society; that is, they should learn to engage in critical thinking for the common good and self-improvement. Through public discussion, cooperative writing, cross-disciplinary dialogue and other situations, thought can be reintroduced to the public sphere and receive continuous external motivation and internal satisfaction. We know of our own shortcomings in thinking and will not rely on artificial intelligence alone. Organise all kinds of activities to motivate people to participate in life and stimulate their minds.

Second, set up an explicit division of labour for humans and machines. Machines are good at high-speed computation and pattern recognition; people, however, have values and emotions, as well as the sense of responsibility. Only when there are clear boundaries can complementarity be realised as symbiosis rather than substitution. Third, we need to go back to the idea that “the essence of man is the ensemble of social relations” and reaffirm the general direction of “instrumentality” and “purposiveness” for technology that the emergence and development of artificial intelligence are, in the end, aimed at improving the quality of life for all people, not

at reducing people to mere resources for the technological system. The prevalent sense of “nihilism” among some sections of contemporary society can be traced back to the loss of this value chain; when technology is incorrectly viewed as an end in itself, human creativity is obscured, and society shows a trend towards closure and cynicism.

To break this cycle, it is necessary to adopt a dialectical perspective on the duality of “threat and opportunity.” The challenges posed by machines are not external catastrophes but rather the externalization of internal contradictions—they compel us to revisit fundamental questions such as “who controls the forces of production” and “who should enjoy the fruits of development.” Grasping this principal contradiction entails not only in-depth investigation into the objective laws of algorithmic operation but also proactive participation in the formulation of technological rules and ethical auditing. Through all the above channels, the ideas of ‘controllability’, ‘usability’ and ‘accountability’ should be embedded in the entire life cycle of artificial intelligence.

Only in this way can we use technology to create a high-spirit society instead of being led by it; only then, through open social learning and institutional innovation, can we reiterate that “people are always the main driving force in shaping the world,” achieve a harmonious coexistence of humans and machines, and make a collective leap forward in life.

3.3 Expanding the Mind and Maintaining a “Continuous Development” Mindset

First, at the level of cognition, proactive measures need to be taken to counteract algorithmic narrowing through interdisciplinary reading. Use a structured “3+2” reading model, participate in “other-oriented writing” with a delayed response, practice daily “micro-courage” exploratory rituals, stimulate both the breadth and depth of cognition, deepen engagement with reading and writing, activate suppressed curiosity and empathy, enhance openness, and ensure the expansiveness of thought and the flourishing of vitality.

Second, at the level of emotion and behaviour, public expression should be reconstructed in an “other-oriented” way. Through “delayed response” experiments and face-to-face debate scenarios such as “slow reading salons”, emotional expression can be recovered from

quantifiable “likes” to embodied co-presence, thus repairing the mirror neuron mechanisms that have atrophied due to digital interaction. Restoration enables people to reestablish close ties and trust in life after a long period of separation, thereby reducing the sense of existential loneliness caused by self-isolation. By paying more attention to emotions in thought, one can reduce behavioural closure, encourage participation in society, increase self-awareness, and motivate self-affirmation, thus creating a positive feedback loop of continuous growth.

Third, at the level of institutions and values, strengthen social capillary connections by building “public reading and discussion” platforms. Through cooperative platforms for communities, enterprises and universities, practices of exploration, reading habits and public expression can be combined into a long-term “mind-body” integration. Thus, people in the age of artificial intelligence will still have a sense of self and the ability to learn throughout their lives, allowing technology to serve humanity’s long-term interests and promote all-round development.

The inherent characteristics of technological development have rendered communication between individuals and society, as well as among individuals themselves, increasingly and estranged. People have become progressively more preoccupied with their own development while neglecting external information, and interpersonal relations have grown increasingly indifferent. Immersed in the pursuit of self-realization, they have overlooked the expression of their emotions toward the external world. This has created a sense of crisis that originates from the inherent nature of people and their heightened response to the era of artificial intelligence [9]. Lacking a deep understanding of scientific and technological knowledge, and being acutely aware of their own deficiencies, individuals in this situation remain incomplete and cannot guarantee the breadth of their thinking. Therefore, we need to keep being curious, continue to read, and let life be more colourful. Continue to advance and promote all-around development of the body and mind.

4. Conclusion

Given the intensifying crisis of new labour alienation and the pain it has caused, we must fully accept this reality and actively pursue self-realisation. Consciously recognise the

subject-object relationship between humans and machines, overcome mental inertia, and strengthen subjective agency to help people escape the constraints of alienation. Develop a mind of openness and a development-oriented attitude to create more chances for self-actualisation. At the same time, there should be strong social support and institutional improvements. Only when individuals and the society they live in work together can the true value of labour be realised, and humanity can handle the changes brought by rapid development in life in a balanced way to build an ideal society.

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