Philosophy of Dialogue: I and Thou:Martin Buber

Buber's best-known work is the short philosophical essay I and Thou (1923), the basic tenets of which he was to modify, but never to abandon. In this work, Buber gives expression to the intuition that we need to withstand the temptation to reduce human relations to the simple either/or of Apollonian or Dionysian, rational or romantic ways of relating to others. We are beings that can enter into dialogic relations not just with human others but with other animate beings, such as animals, or a tree, as well as with the Divine Thou. The duality of relations and, at its extreme, their coincidence, may serve as the key to Buber's mature thought on everything from his approach to biblical faith to his practical politics in matters of Jewish-Arab relations in Palestine. I and Thou was first translated into English in 1937 by Ronald Gregor Smith and later again by Walter Kaufmann. In the 1950s and 60s, when Buber first traveled and lectured in the USA, the essay became popular in the English-speaking world as well.

Whereas before World War I Buber had promoted an aesthetic of unity and unification, his later writings embrace a rougher and more elemental dualism. Buber always opposed philosophical monism, which he identified with Bergson, and objected to “doctrines of immersion,” which he identified with Buddhism. Complicating the undifferentiated shape of mystical experience (as sought by the medievals, including Eckhart, as an annihilation of self), the profoundly dualistic world-view proffered in I and Thou references Cusa's coincidentia oppositorum as an expression of human limits. Buber's text reduces the relation between persons, animate objects, and deity to three expressive signifiers: “I”, “You”, and “It”. They are the elemental variables whose combination and re-combination structure all experience as relational. The individuated elements realize themselves in relations, forming patters that burst into life, grow, vanish, and revive. Human inter-subjectivity affirms the polymorphous I-Thou encounter. Resting upon the claim that no isolated I exists apart from relationship to an other, dialogue or “encounter” transforms each figure into an ultimate and mysterious center of value whose presence eludes the concepts of instrumental language. The heteronomous revelation of a singular presence calls the subject into an open-ended relationship, a living pattern, that defies sense, logic, and proportion; whereas the I-It relationship, in its most degenerate stage, assumes the fixed form, the density and duration of hyper-realist painting, of objects that one can measure and manipulate. At the core of this model of existence is the notion of encounter as “revelation.” As understood by Buber, revelation is the revelation of “presence” (Gegenwart). In contrast to “object” (Gegenstand), the presence revealed by revelation as encounter occupies the space “in between” the subject and an other (a tree, a person, a work of art, God). This “in between” space is defined as “mutual” (gegenseitig). Contrasting with the Kantian concept of experience (Erfahrung), Erlebnis (encounter), or revelation of sheer presence, is an ineffable, pure form that carries not an iota of determinate or object-like conceptual or linguistic content. Buber always insisted that the dialogic principle, i.e., the duality of primal words (Urworte) that he called the I-Thou and the I-It, was not an abstract conception but an ontological reality that he pointed to but that could not be properly represented in discursive prose.

The confusion (and/or con-fusion) between philosophy and religion is especially marked in I and Thou. While Buber seems to lack a fully worked-out epistemology and occasionally revels in paradoxes that border on mystical theology, it has been argued that Buber did indeed solve the inherent “difficulty of dialogics that it reflects on, and speaks of, a human reality about which, in his own words, one cannot think and speak in an appropriate manner” (Bloch [1983] p. 62). Debates about the strength and weakness of I and Thou as the foundation of a system hinge, in part, on the assumption that the five-volume project, to which this book was to serve as a prolegomenon (a project Buber abandoned), was indeed a philosophical one. Buber's lectures at the Freies jüdisches Lehrhaus and his courses at University of Frankfurt, as well as letters to Rosenzweig show that, at the time of its writing, he was preoccupied with a new approach to the phenomenology of religion (cf. Schottroff, Zank). In Buber's cyclical conception of the history of religions, the revelation of presence mixes into and animates the living and lived forms of historical religion (institutions, texts, rituals, images, and ideas), becoming over time ossified and rigid and object-like, but structurally open to the force of renewal based on new forms of encounter as revelation. The history of religion as described by Buber in the closing words of I and Thou is a contracting, intensifying spiral figure that has redemption as its telos. It would be artificial, however, to separate Buber's interest in religious phenomena from his interest in a general philosophical anthropology. Rather, Buber seems to have tried to find one in the other, or—put differently—to make religious belief and practice perspicacious in light of a general philosophical anthropology.

Dialogue assumes a conversation and a necessity to listen to the other. The 20th century changed the approach to a dialogue due to the philosophy of dialogue discussed in the present article. Its creator, 'father' Martin Buber indicated that a real discovery of a true 'I' lies in the encounter with 'You', and 'I' does not exist without a relation with 'You'. According to Buber the dialogue constitutes the basis of Philosophy in general due to the fact that it is the only effective form of communication in contrast to one-sided expression of opinions. Man can enter into a monologue relation with reality 'I-It', in which there is a lack of a dialogue, or in a dialogue relation 'I-You'. Whatever occurs between people is a sphere of mutual 'confrontation' and constitutes the foundations of dialogism. A dialogue should be built not based on searching for unity and common truths but on axiological experience of otherness. A dialogue becomes the aim for this philosophy. Encounter and dialogue constitute a starting point and principle of any philosophizing.

The attitude of the "I" towards an "It", towards an object that is separate in itself, which we either use or experience.

The attitude of the "I" towards "Thou", in a relationship in which the other is not separated by discrete bounds.

One of the major themes of the book is that human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. In Buber's view, all of our relationships bring us ultimately into relationship with God, who is the Eternal Thou.

Buber explains that humans are defined by two word pairs: I–It and I–Thou.

The "It" of I–It refers to the world of experience and sensation. I–It describes entities as discrete objects drawn from a defined set (e.g., he, she or any other objective entity defined by what makes it measurably different from other entities). It can be said that "I" have as many distinct and different relationships with each "It" as there are "Its" in one's life. Fundamentally, "It" refers to the world as we experience it.

By contrast, the word pair I–Thou describes the world of relations. This is the "I" that does not objectify any "It" but rather acknowledges a living relationship. I–Thou relationships are sustained in the spirit and mind of an "I" for however long the feeling or idea of relationship is the dominant mode of perception. A person sitting next to a complete stranger on a park bench may enter into an "I–Thou" relationship with the stranger merely by beginning to think positively about people in general. The stranger is a person as well, and gets instantaneously drawn into a mental or spiritual relationship with the person whose positive thoughts necessarily include the stranger as a member of the set of persons about whom positive thoughts are directed. It is not necessary for the stranger to have any idea that he is being drawn into an "I–Thou" relationship for such a relationship to arise. But what is crucial to understand is the word pair "I–Thou" can refer to a relationship with a tree, the sky, or the park bench itself as much as it can refer to the relationship between two individuals. The essential character of "I–Thou" is the abandonment of the world of sensation, the melting of the between, so that the relationship with another "I" is foremost.

Buber's two notions of "I" require attachment of the word "I" to a word partner. The splitting into the individual terms "I" and "it" and "thou" is only for the purposes of analysis. Despite the separation of "I" from the "It" and "Thou" in this very sentence describing the relationship, there is to Buber's mind either an I–Thou or an I–It relationship. Every sentence that a person uses with "I" refers to the two pairs: "I–Thou" and "I–It", and likewise "I" is implicit in every sentence with "Thou" or "It". Each It is bounded by others and It can only exist through this attachment because for every object there is another object. Thou, on the other hand, has no limitations. When "Thou" is spoken, the speaker has no thing (has nothing), hence, Thou is abstract; yet the speaker “takes his stand in relation”.

What does it mean to experience the world? One goes around the world extracting knowledge from the world in experiences betokened by "He", "She", and "It". One also has I–Thou relationships. Experience is all physical, but these relationships involve a great deal of spirituality. The twofold nature of the world means that our being in the world has two aspects: the **aspect of experience, which is perceived as I–It, and the aspect of relation, which is perceived as I–Thou.**

Examples

Buber uses an example of a tree and presents five separate relations:

Looking at the tree as a picture with the color and detail through the aesthetic perception.

Identifying the tree as movement. The movement includes the flow of the juices through the veins of the tree, the breathing of the leaves, the roots sucking the water, the never-ending activities between the tree and earth and air, and the growth of the tree.

Categorizing the tree by its type; in other words, studying it.

Exercising the ability to look at something from a different perspective. “I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law”.

Interpreting the experience of the tree in mathematical terms.

Through all of these relations, the tree is still an object that occupies time and space and still has the characteristics that make it what it is.[1]

If "Thou" is used in the context of an encounter with a human being, the human being is not He, She, or bound by anything. You do not experience the human being; rather you can only relate to him or her in the sacredness of the I–Thou relation. The I–Thou relationship cannot be explained; it simply is. Nothing can intervene in the I–Thou relationship. I–Thou is not a means to some object or goal, but a definitive relationship involving the whole being of each subject.

Like the I–Thou relation, love is a subject-to-subject relationship. Love is not a relation of subject to object, but rather a relation in which both members in the relationship are subjects and share the unity of being.

The ultimate Thou is God. In the I–Thou relation there are no barriers. This enables us to relate directly to God. God is ever-present in human consciousness, manifesting in music, literature, and other forms of culture. Inevitably, Thou is addressed as It, and the I–Thou relation becomes the being of the I–Thou relation. God is now spoken to directly, not spoken about.

There is no world that disconnects one from God, a world of It alone, when I–Thou guides one's actions. "One who truly meets the world goes out also to God." God is the worldwide relation to all relations.

Who is to teach? By what methods? What will the curriculum be?

Buber has so much to say about who is a true teacher and what teaching should look like. In the teaching-learning process, Buber exalted the teacher-learner relationship and dialogue. The teacher, according to Buber, should take a "formative, disciplinary and highly purposeful" role.[46]

Buber uses two images to characterize the nature of teaching. He first compared teaching with the image of "birth-giving". He wrote in Teaching and Deed, "He who teaches the tradition to his fellowmen is regarded as though he has formed him and made him and brought him into the world".[47]

The second image for teacher was "the zaddik," a figure celebrated in Hasidic legend as a teacher and healer of souls, one who occupies a central place in the lives of the Hasidic communities.[48] Buber wants to see all the qualities of a zaddik in a teacher.[49] The zaddik is the one who "stands for a simple personal witness to truth, exemplifying his active and loving concern for his followers and his wholehearted communion with them".[50] A teacher, like the zaddik, is a human being with strengths and flaws who embraces his or her main functions, like teaching and counseling, as the zaddik did.

On other occasions, Buber speaks of the teacher as a filter and a selector. The teacher as a "filter" takes the task of "refining the diverse messages arriving from the surrounding." As a "selector" the teacher must "stand in contradiction to the old education characterized by a passive acceptance of tradition poured from above (symbolized by ‘a funnel’), as well as the ‘new’ education (represented by ‘a pump’) which pictures education as drawing forth the static powers of the self.[51]

Upon examination, the relationship between the teacher and students is hierarchical. A teacher, as Buber emphasized, takes the major responsibility to exert influence upon him or her students as well as their growth and development of their potentialities.[52] But Buber simultaneously condemned "interference" and "arbitrariness".[53]

And though the teacher-student relationship is hierarchic, the pedagogical realm is "entirely dialogical".[54] A teacher can "apprehend" his students, but his students are "incapable" of "comprehending" their teacher. Therefore, the teacher "must stand simultaneously at the two poles of the education scene: his own and the student’s".[55] As Politzer (1956) points out, Buber emphasizes the significance of a teacher's capability of "being totally engaged existentially with his students and of carrying on a mutually creative dialogue with them".[56] In Between Man And Man, Buber wrote: "For educating characters, you do not need a moral genius, but… a man who is totally alive and able to communicate directly to his fellow beings.[57] Passionately, Buber describes what a good teacher looks like: "A good teacher educates when speaking as well as when silent, during the lessons as well as during recess, during an occasional conversation, through his own behavior, provided he really exists and is really present".[58]

Teaching methods did not attract much of Buber’s attention even though he oftentimes stressed the importance of pedagogic efficiency in the advance of learning.[59] Dialogue undoubtedly stands out as one major method of teaching. Other means that help learners to achieve different goals of education include techniques and activities of collaborative meaning making.[60] His holistic approach to education required teacher to take him or her students' lives as a whole and in developmental experience.

Buber constantly encourages teachers to use music and art side by side with literature in dialogic reciprocity.[61] The curriculum approved by Buber definitely includes general education, religious and moral education, aesthetic education, community and adult education. General education helps students to develop their knowledge of themselves and about the world. It aims to train students to be both humans and intellectuals, using such methods as dialogue and critical meaning-making process. In religious and moral education, students learn how to interpret traditions through images and symbols in music, art, and literature, etc. and develop ways to understand their meanings. Also, it helps students build their own character. Aesthetic education focuses on the creative capacity of human beings and develops imagination and sensitivity as a preparation for a richer experience with multiple aspects of life. Buber sees this as inward movements to the outer larger world. Finally, community and adult education connects every person together as a community of communities. It promotes sharing certain ideals and reaching specific aims among members of a community as well as encourages inter-communal dialogue.

Though Buber criticizes both classical and progressive education, he does not think either one was all bad nor did he reject these positions entirely. He prefers to take the role of a critical thinker, rather than judge, pointing out the pros and cons of both conceptions of education. For instance, though the "new" education tended to hold misconceptions of childhood potentiality and the status and authority of the teacher, it did "liberate" classroom from "the repressive authoritarianism" found in the "old" education.[62] On the other hand, though the classical tradition functioned well in "transmitting the spiritual and cultural heritage and providing a genuine historical self-understanding in the child," it manifested 'will-to-power' excesses, an objectivist epistemology and impersonal teaching strategies".[63]