

Featured Article

Martin Buber's Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Dialogue (First of Two Parts)

Jove Jim S. Aguas

Abstract: In contemporary philosophy, philosophical anthropology focuses more on the human person and the value of a concrete individual subject. Amid consumerism, materialism, and technological advancement, more philosophers focus on the dignity and value of the human person. By studying the human person, what he is, his concerns, intentions, and relationships with the world, God, and others, we can fully understand his essence as a concrete individual and relational subject. One of those thinkers who focused on the human person as a relational subject is the Jewish religious existentialist philosopher, Martin Buber. This paper highlights Buber's philosophical anthropology and philosophy of dialogue, based on an existential and relational or intersubjective character of human existence, man's relation with God as the eternal Thou, the distinction between the two fundamental types of human relations (*I-It* and *I-Thou*), and the realm of the "between." The main focus of this paper thus are Buber's notions of man as a relational subject and thou, intersubjectivity that is anchored on his notion of dialogue, the distinction between the two types of relations and their primal movements, genuine dialogue, the interhuman and its elements, and also social relations.

Keywords: Buber, philosophy of dialogue, philosophical anthropology, relational subject

What is man? What is the human person? What is his relationship with his fellow human beings and the world where he exists? What is the purpose of his existence, of his life? These are some of the expedient questions in philosophy, and time and again, philosophers and a host of other thinkers offer their answers to these queries. While there are

2 MARTIN BUBER

other philosophical questions out there, and some could be more worthy of our attention, the question about man is one fundamental question. It is one question that has been the main concern of contemporary existential thinkers. Contemporary philosophical anthropology focuses more on the human person and his value as a concrete individual subject. In a consumerist and materialist society that is so engrossed with technological advancement, some philosophers have focused more on the dignity and value of the human person and stressed that man is a being with value and dignity. In the modern world that has provided some benefits, mostly material and practical, and has made human life less burdensome, there is a downside to advancement and progress, and that is that the human person is reduced to an “object” very much like any other object in the material, commercial, or technological world. The human person is deprived of personal qualities or individuality; sometimes, he is treated like an object or thing, and what he does is treated like a commodity. The human person sometimes experiences a loss of personal identity or a feeling of being an anonymous cog in a social machine. This usually happens when someone or society imposes or demands that its beliefs, values, or ideals be accepted and followed by everybody. This destroys the individuality of the person and makes him become whatever the people in power desire; this dehumanizes the person and reduces him to an object.

However, we are not lacking in those individuals who constantly remind us of the inherent value of the human person. There are thinkers who recognize the value of the person as a subject and are also mindful of the sad state or condition of the human person amid this advanced and fast-paced world that seemingly lacks deeper meaning and value. There are those who realize not only the value of man as a subject or person, but also that man is worthy of our attention as a subject of study. By studying man, what he is, what his concerns are, his intentions, his purpose in life, his aspirations, and destiny, we can fully understand his essence as a concrete individual subject. One of those thinkers is the Jewish religious existentialist philosopher Martin Buber. In his essay “What is Man?” he comments that since time immemorial, man has known that he is the subject most worthy of his own study.¹ He quotes the philosopher Malebranche:

Of all human knowledge, the knowledge of man is most deserving of his study. Yet this knowledge is not the most cultivated or the most developed which we possess. The generality of men neglects it completely.

¹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 118.

And even among those who busy themselves with this knowledge, there are very few who dedicate themselves to it – and still, fewer who successfully dedicate themselves to it.²

However, man must struggle to focus on the wholeness of man, that is, to treat man as a whole subject in accordance with his total character. Now, in studying “man,” man can consider all things and exclude himself; this could be problematic because man is not considered in relation to other things. Man could also be studied as being divided into different aspects that can be treated independently; such an approach could lead to a fragmented understanding of man. Thus, Buber insisted that man should be studied in his wholeness.

Buber acknowledges that Kant was the first to formulate the proper question about the nature of man when Kant, in his lectures on logic, noted that philosophy in the universal sense posits four questions. *What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope for? and What is man?* Kant, however, according to Buber, despite the numerous works on the knowledge of man, never touched on the real issues about man, like man’s place in the world, his connection with destiny, etc. The wholeness of man does enter into his philosophical anthropology.³ Hence, for Buber, we need to consider man as a subject and study him for his own sake, not just as a part of science or an object of study. Yes, we have to study man, but man must be considered a concrete subject, and such a concrete individual human subject is a relational or intersubjective subject who can enter into a living and mutual relationship with his fellow human beings.

As mentioned in the abstract, this paper discusses Buber’s philosophical anthropology and philosophy of dialogue. The first part deals with philosophical anthropology, focusing on man as a whole and unique being, man as a being-in-relation, man and God, and the eternal *Thou*, the realm of the “between” and the person as a *Thou*. The second part deals with the philosophy of dialogue, focusing on the life of dialogue, the kinds of dialogue, the two fundamental types of human relations, namely, *I-It* and *I-Thou* relations, the primal movements of relation, genuine dialogue and the interhuman, the elements of interhuman, and the *We* relation.

² Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth (De la recherche de la vérité)* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Quoted in Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 118.

³ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 119–120.

Martin Buber's Philosophical or Existential Anthropology

Buber is best known for his dialogical philosophy or philosophy of dialogue; however, the point of departure for such a philosophy of dialogue is philosophical anthropology, that is, the problem of man.⁴ In this discussion, we may interchange the terms existential and philosophical because Buber's anthropology, I contend, is both philosophical and existential. For Buber, philosophical anthropology is the study of the wholeness of man. His numerous writings set up philosophical anthropology as a systematic method that deals with the concrete, existential characteristics of man's life to arrive at the wholeness and uniqueness of man.⁵ The medical and biological sciences are also concerned with the question of man. Still, they focus more on man's relation with nature, reducing man to a natural object or a physical or biological organism. Science investigates man not as a whole and unique being but as part of nature; it studies man in selective aspects and as part of the natural world.⁶ The scientific method is the most perfected development of the objective way of knowing, and its method of abstracting from concrete actuality reduces the I or person into an object. Such a method is based on the *I-It* relation.⁷

On the contrary, the *I-Thou* relation makes the conception of the wholeness of man possible. Only through the *I-Thou* do we see the wholeness of the human person in unreserved relation with what confronts him rather than as a sum of parts, some of which are considered objective and therefore part of the known, and some are subjective and therefore part of the knower. However, Buber stressed that the study of the wholeness of man is connected with the questions regarding his place in the world, his destiny, his relation to the world of things, his understanding of his fellow human beings, his death, and his attitude towards the mysterious or divine. Man's essence is determined by the fact that he shares both finitude and infinity. Buber explains that we are connected with the finitude because we can only know particular things, and we participate in the infinite by our ability to know at all. While philosophical anthropology is anchored on particular metaphysics or ontology, it is not its purpose to provide a foundation for metaphysics because such an attempt will only be very general and will achieve a false unity of man, not a genuine wholeness. Buber writes:

⁴ Maurice Friedman, "Introductory Essay," in Martin Buber, *Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper & Row Publishing, 1965), 13.

⁵ Martin Buber, *Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper & Row Publishing, 1965), 15.

⁶ See Friedman, "Introductory Essay," 19.

⁷ The *I-It* and *I-Thou* relations will be discussed later in this paper.

A legitimate philosophical anthropology must know that there is not merely a human species but also people, not merely a human soul but also types and characters, not merely human life but also stages in life; only from the systematic comprehension of all these and all other differences, ... can it come to see the wholeness of man.⁸

Man as a Whole and Unique Being

For Buber, in philosophical anthropology, “man himself is given to man in the most precise sense as a subject.”⁹ The investigator or the philosopher must consider man as a whole subject and not just a part of nature; he must realize that he himself is a man and experiences his humanity in his inner experience in a way that cannot be experienced in any part of nature. According to Buber, philosophical knowledge is “essentially man’s self-reflection, and man can reflect about himself only when the cognizing person, that is, the philosopher pursuing anthropology, first of all, reflects about himself as a person.”¹⁰ Other investigators may just see man as a detached and objectivized subject; man is something separated from connection with the whole real person. However, the philosopher stakes his real wholeness, his concrete self. Hence, it is not enough that he stakes himself as an object of knowledge. Buber writes:

He can know the wholeness of the person and, through it, the wholeness of man only when he does not leave his subjectivity out and does not remain an untouched observer. He must enter, completely and in reality, into the act of self-reflection in order to become aware of human wholeness.¹¹

To do this, the philosopher must enter into this unique dimension as an act of his life, without any philosophical security; that means exposing himself to all that he can encounter in real life. Without any preconceived ideas, he encounters life, the world, and fellow men; he touches them and is also touched. Only in this way can he understand the wholeness of man. We can fully understand the person only based on his essential relation to what is. “Only the man who realizes in his whole life with his whole being the

⁸ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 123.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

6 MARTIN BUBER

relations possible to him helps us to know man truly.”¹² This is based on our recognition of man as a whole and unique being. Buber further explains: “To be aware of a man is to perceive his wholeness as a person determined by the spirit; it means to perceive the dynamic center that stamps his every utterance, action, and attitude with the recognizable sign of uniqueness.”¹³

Hence, what we need is to find the essence of man in the constant flux of individuals and cultures and try to avoid the abyss of abstract unity and meaningless relativity.¹⁴ However, by essence, Buber does not mean a universal and abstract nature of the human person because such an abstract nature of man cannot be applicable in the concrete human person. Buber recognizes that man’s essence is constituted by his participation in finitude and infinity, and his uniqueness is determined by the particular existential characteristics of his relation to “mystery,” cosmos, destiny, death, and his fellow men.

In the existential sense, for Buber, there is no absolute and abstract essence of man. Of course, he recognizes the corporeality of man. But no universal and abstract essence applies to all human persons or men. Existentially, man must be conceived as an individual person, unique in himself; he is in himself a total person determined by spirit. Man is a dynamic center that stamps his every utterance, action, and attitude with the recognizable sign of uniqueness. Buber also refuses to define man’s essence based on his being an individual or as a part of the collectivity. Man’s being is found in his being a subject, a whole subjectivity. He is a subject who is unique and who actualizes himself in relation. The person becomes fully human in relation; Buber locates the essence of man in his relationships with the world, his fellow man, and the Divine. Man is a being-in-relation, he said. Buber clearly states: “The essence of man which is special to him can be directly known only in a living relation.”¹⁵

Buber stresses that man is a creature capable of entering into living relations with the world and things, with men both as individuals and collective and with the “mystery of being.” By studying the development of the problem of a man very closely, Buber is critical of the answers offered to us by other known philosophers, from Aristotle, St. Thomas, St. Augustine, Kant and Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, and Scheler. Buber criticizes Western philosophy, beginning with post-Socratic, scholastic, rationalist, and materialist thinkers, for failing to formulate the fundamental

¹² *Ibid.*, 198.

¹³ Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 80.

¹⁴ Friedman, “Introductory Essay,” 15.

¹⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 205.

questions on which a philosophical anthropology could be founded.¹⁶ Based on his analysis, there are three deficiencies in Western philosophical traditions: first, their hierarchical ordering of thought into discrete disciplines, such as ontology and theology; second is their isolation of man the knower from the object of his knowledge; and third is their unwillingness to conceive of man as distinctively a non-rational as well as rational being.¹⁷ Buber argues that philosophy should adopt as its starting point a wide-ranging mode of inquiry extensive enough to conceive man in his wholeness and totality, his concrete existence and relatedness to the world.¹⁸ He stresses that while the Greeks comprehended man as one with nature, only man is comprehended with the world; the world is not comprehended with him.¹⁹ This notion of man as part of nature received full emphasis in the Aristotelian definition of man as a rational animal, and was later adopted and explained by St. Thomas. The philosophical anthropology proposed by Buber rejects the traditional idea that reason is the distinctive characteristic of being human; there is more to man than simply reason or the ability to think rationally. He explains:

The depth of the anthropological question is first touched upon when we also recognize, as specifically humans, that which is not reason. Man is not a centaur; he is the man through and through... The problem of philosophical anthropology is the problem of a specific totality and of its specific structure.²⁰

Buber, with his emphasis on the wholeness of man, also rejects the idea that reason is a distinctive human characteristic. We must also recognize in man that which is not reason; man is not a duality of reason and body; man is a man through and through. Man must be conceived as a specific individual person, complete in himself, a total person determined by spirit. He is a dynamic center that stamps his every utterance, action, and attitude with the recognizable sign of uniqueness. Man as a subject is a whole and unique being.

Although Buber says that philosophical anthropology does not intend to provide a metaphysics or an ontology, we can imply an ontological

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 123–200.

¹⁷ Daniel Murphy, *Martin Buber's Philosophy of Education* (Great Britain: Billing and Sons, 1988), 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 127.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

8 MARTIN BUBER

foundation of his philosophical anthropology. His entire dialogical philosophy and his notion of intersubjectivity are based on an anthropology that recognizes the wholeness of man. And this anthropology is based on the recognition of the totality of human nature. Human nature is not only reason or animality; man is a unique and specific totality. His philosophical anthropology is, at the same time, an ontology. It is an ontology in the sense that it does not only explain what man is and how we ought to conceive man, but it also explains and depicts the basic reality of man, the true nature of man, and the “whatness” of man, and how he relates with the world and the infinite. As far as Buber is concerned, it offers us the ultimate ground, the foundation of man’s being, and further explains how this nature of man is actualized.

The reality of man is not found in a dual nature but in his wholeness; it is found not only in his reason but in his being a specific subject. Only when we consider man as a whole being can we fully grasp man’s true nature. The reality of man is his being unique; his every action and utterance is always stamped with his uniqueness. Man’s essence is not ontologically based on his being an individual nor on his being a part of the collectivity. Man’s being is found in his being a subject, a whole subjectivity, a subject who is unique and a subject who is actualized in relation. Relation is what actualizes man’s being. Man becomes fully human in relation: man is a being-in-relation. This is the ontological basis of man’s very being, to be in relation.

That is why, for Buber, it is not enough to be a being-with; one basic fact of human existence is not a man with himself; it is a man with another man. Human existence is between man and man. Human existence is grounded in the realm of the “between.” The reality of man’s existence in the world is not isolation but relation. Buber considered man to exist in an intersubjective world, in a world that is not only a world of things but also a world of fellow men.

Man as Being-in-Relation

At this point, we need to explore more Buber’s notion of man as a being-in-relation. While Buber recognizes that man is part and related to nature, he emphasizes the difference between man and the other beings in nature. Man is different from the other beings in nature; even man’s hunger is not an animal’s hunger. Man is a specific nature, and we have already laid down his philosophical anthropology that man is given to himself in the most precise sense as a subject, that is, a subject in his wholeness. As a subject, he is a being that is different from things or from objects and must not be considered as a being understood in duality; man as a whole subject is different and unique from other beings. But how is man different from other

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things or beings? For Buber, man is different from other beings because he is a being-in-relation. Man “experiences his wholeness not in virtue of his relation to himself but in virtue of his relation to another self.”²¹

Buber, therefore, refutes Heidegger’s notion of man as Dasein, that is, man as being thrown into existence. Man is not just a being thrown into existence; he is a being-with-others; he is a being-in-relation. For Heidegger, man is a being in the world, but for Buber, man is a being in the world together with others.²² Man is not just a being-in-the-world, he is a being-with-others, a being-in-relation. Man should be distinguished from objects; he is a unique subject because he relates with others. This is a central theme of Buber’s philosophy; his entire dialogical philosophy is anchored on the value of the person as distinguished from things and objects, the person who is able to stand in relation with others.

Relation, however, is not limited to man and fellow man; it is not only between man and man, but it is also between man and God. According to Buber, the fundamental relation is “triadic,” the self, God, and fellow man. Real relationship with other human beings is possible only in terms of a real relationship with God. In this aspect, Buber was influenced by Kierkegaard, from whom he found the importance of direct relations between God and the individual. The individual person must constantly risk all in the concrete uniqueness of each new situation and, in this process, emerge as a genuine person before going out to relate with others. He agrees with Kierkegaard’s insistence on being a “*Single One*.” The *Single One* refuses to be swallowed up in the “crowd” out of his own subjectivism and finds himself in relation with God. He also agrees with Kierkegaard that man realizes the image of God through having become a *Single One*: “To become a *Single One* is to fulfil the first condition of all religiosity . . . the *Single One* corresponds to God. . . man can have dealings with God only as a *Single One*.”²³

Hence, Buber comes up with his interpretation of the *Single One*. For Buber, the goal of the *Single One* is to enter into relation, for the real person can have a complete relation of his life to the other self. Buber does not interpret Kierkegaard’s “To Become a *Single One*” Socratically; that is, it is not intended for the “right” life, but rather, to enter into relation with the other, not just the finite other but also the infinite or mysterious other. He explains:

To “become” means here to become for something, “for” in the strict sense, which simply transcends the circle of the person himself. It means to be made ready for the one

²¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

²² See *Ibid.*, 168–169.

²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

10 MARTIN BUBER

relation which can be entered into only by the *Single One*, the one; the relation for whose sake man exists.²⁴

Unlike Kierkegaard, Buber refuses to limit the relation of self to itself and with God. As opposed to Kierkegaard, who insists that man should essentially speak only with God and himself, Buber stressed that the fundamental relation is “triadic”—self, God, and others. He refutes Kierkegaard’s stand that the relation of the *Single One* is exclusive. He points out that a real relationship with God cannot be achieved on earth if the real relationship between the world and mankind is lacking. Hence, a relationship with other human beings is possible only in terms of a real relationship with God. He refers to Jesus in the Bible, who, when asked about the greatest commandment, answered that we should love God with all our hearts, with all our minds, and with all our souls, and we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves.²⁵

Man for Buber is not a being-in-isolation but a being-in-relation. He is that being who can have complete relations with God, nature, and his fellow human beings. Man can have an authentic and meaningful existence only through his living relationship with others. In virtue of his nature and his situation, man has a threefold living relation. He can bring his nature and situation to full reality if all his living relations become essential. Man’s living relation is: first, his relation to the world and things; second, his relation to men—both the individual and the many; third, his relation to the mystery of being—which is dimly apparent through all this but infinitely transcends it—for the philosopher he is the Absolute, while for the believer he is God.²⁶

Man and God: The Eternal Thou

Buber refuses to subsume God under the Aristotelian law of contradiction. God is the Absolute Person who is not a person but becomes one, so to speak, in order to know, be known, to love, and be loved. Non-contradiction does not sum up our relationship with God/another. God is not an idea or an image; he is a person to whom we can talk to.²⁷ If some philosophers have reduced God to the concept, illusion, or mere image, it is because the God that they considered has been confined to a subject-object type of relation. But man’s relation with God is a subject-subject relation. God is not an object that can just be conceptualized or imagined; he is a subject—

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁷ See Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1952).

an Other. He is the God whom man can talk to, the God whom man can relate to, the God whom man can communicate and depend on. Buber says that if to believe in God means to be able to talk about him in the third person, then he does not believe in such a God, but if to believe in him means to be able to speak to him, then he believes in God.

Many people speak to God but do not know how to talk about God; many people talk about God but do not speak to God. The believer or the faithful may not even know how to talk about God, but he constantly speaks to God.²⁸ The conception of God as an illusion or a mental contract, a concept, just an image, or a silent God reduces God to just a “thing” or an “object” or an “image.” For Buber, such conception is based on an *I-It* relation and not an *I-Thou* relation.²⁹ He distinguishes between knowing God and knowing about God. The person who knows God talks to God, and the person who knows about God talks about God. So, if believing in God is to be able to talk about him in the third person, then for Buber, it is not belief, but if believing is to be able to talk to him, then that is a true belief. The true God is the God to whom Daniel prayed in his suffering, and he is the real God, the God of all.³⁰ The real God that believers believe in is a personal God who relates and communicates with us.

However, our understanding of God has been saturated by the “God talk” of the philosophers who do not even talk to God. And these “God talks” of the philosophers caused the disappearance of the real God. It has caused, according to Buber, the “eclipse of God,” a phenomenon or a situation where the real God has been concealed by the various and often contrasting views and conceptions about God.³¹ This is the character of the historical hour, an eclipse of God on the human side experienced as the silence of God, through which the world is passing.³² To this experience, Buber writes, “He who refuses to submit himself to the effective reality of the transcendence ... contributes to the human responsibility for the eclipse.”³³

God is not an “It”; he cannot be expressed but only addressed. Buber says: “God is the Being that is directly, most nearly, and lastingly over against us, that may properly only be addressed, not expressed.”³⁴ Further, he writes:

²⁸ Jove Jim S. Aguas, “The Challenge of Secularization to the Christian Belief in God,” in *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 20:2 (2019), 247, <<https://doi.org/10.46992/pijp.20.2.a.6>>.

²⁹ See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd ed., trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958).

³⁰ Buber, *Eclipse of God*.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 21–32.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 81.

12 MARTIN BUBER

“God is the wholly Other; he is also the wholly Same, the wholly Present. Of course, he is the *Mysterium Tremendum* that appears and overthrows... the mystery of the self-evident, nearer to me than my I.”³⁵ We do not find God in staying or leaving the world, for God is not to be sought in things. But in every relation we have with things, in every finite *thou* we encounter, we encounter God as the *eternal Thou*. There are three spheres in which relation is built: first, our life with nature, which is below the threshold of speech; second, our life with fellow men in which relation takes the form of speech; and third, our life with spiritual beings which is outside of speech and yet begets it. In each of these spheres, we encounter the breath of the *eternal Thou*. In each *thou*, we address the *eternal Thou*.³⁶ Only God is this unlimited, *eternal Thou*. The ultimate *Thou* is always *Thou* without being limited by the *It* in space and time, thus an *eternal Thou*, the *Thou* that never becomes an *It*.³⁷

We encounter God as the *eternal Thou* in a dialogue. For Buber, the dialogical man is a religious man, and vice versa. The religious man commits his whole being to God’s dialogue with the world and stands firm in this dialogue. As Buber writes: “God made no tool for himself; he needs none; he created for himself a partner in the dialogue of time.”³⁸ Also: “In this dialogue, God speaks to every man through the life which he gives him again and again. Therefore, man can only answer God with the whole of his life—the way in which he lives this given life.”³⁹ Thus, the basis for all statements about faith is the dialogical relation of trust, not the belief in dogmatic contents. Religious faith does not result from the mindless recitations of religious formulas or from the adherence to unintelligible liturgical routines but from the total commitment of one’s being and one’s life to the *eternal Thou*. God, the Absolute Person, becomes a person to meet man in a “supreme meeting.” In dialogue, man turns to God; this turning is nothing less than our redemption in God—the *eternal Thou*, the Absolute Person. By turning towards God, we enter into a life-altering relationship. We receive the presence of God as a power, as a gift, and as a revelation. Our lives become laden with meaning, a meaning which, while heavy to bear, is nonetheless real, palpable, and reassuring. And neither synagogue nor church nor mosque nor university can determine what this meaning is for us. Buber sees man as essentially oriented to God, the *Eternal Thou*. He sees life as a

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁷ George Kovacs, “God as the Ultimate Thou and Meaning of Life in Martin Buber,” in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 17 (March 1994), 33–49.

³⁸ Martin Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 131–132.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

“summon and sending,” and every man has his unique being as a gift from God, and it is his responsibility to realize it in its wholeness. Man’s relationship with God is one of dialogue; the religious man commits his whole being to God’s dialogue with the world and stands firm in this dialogue.

The Realm of the “Between”

One of Buber’s most profound ideas is what he called the “realm of the between.” At the center of his philosophical anthropology is man with man. As we have discussed, man is by nature a being in relation, and according to Buber, the reality of man with man is found in the notion of the “between,” which he refers to as the ultimate ground of relation. The fundamental fact of human existence is man with man, and one peculiar characteristic of the human world is that something takes place between one being and another. There is that sphere or realm that is established with the existence of man as man; this is the “between.” Buber writes:

“Between” is not an auxiliary construction but the real place and bearer of what happens between men; it has received no specific attention because, in distinction from the individual soul and its context, it does not exhibit a smooth continuity, but is ever and again re-constituted in accordance with men’s meeting with one another.⁴⁰

The realm of the between is found in moments of relation or encounter. And it is found not in each participant in a human encounter but between them. In a real conversation that is direct and spontaneous, in a real lesson that develops in mutual surprises, in a real embrace, and a real duel, in all these activities, what is essential does not take place in each of the participants, rather, it takes place between them in the most precise sense. If a person and another come up and meet each other and interact with each other, there is always that “remainder” between them; the totality of the interaction or encounter cannot be exactly divided because of that remainder, and that, according to Buber, is what is essential. This fact exists even in the tiniest and most transient events that barely enter into our consciousness. Buber further stresses:

⁴⁰ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 204.

In the most powerful moment of the dialogic, where in truth “deep calls unto deep,” it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle around the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where *I* and *Thou* meet there is the real of “between.”⁴¹

For Buber, the reality of the “between” provides the starting point for a genuine philosophical anthropology; the central subject of this science is man with man. The essence of man which is special to him can only be known in living relation; *I* and *Thou* exist because man exists and the *I* moreover exists only through its relation to the *Thou*. Only man with man can provide a full image; only man with man is a wholly outlined form. Consider man with man, and we see human life, dynamic; twofold, the giver and receiver, he who does and he who endures, the attacking and the defending force, the request begged and granted—and always both together, completing one another in mutual contribution, together showing forth man.

We come to fully grasp the answer to the question of what man is when we consider man with man. “Only man with man provides a full image.”⁴² Thus, for Buber, if we are to conceive a genuine philosophical anthropology that will lead to the true knowledge of man, it should be centered on the realm of the “between,” that is, what happens in the relation between man and man. With this philosophical anthropology, Buber rejected individualism and collectivism. An individualistic anthropology, an anthropology that is substantially concerned only with the relation of the human person to himself, with the relation within this person between the spirit and its instincts, cannot lead to a knowledge of man's being. Neither is collectivism because it is only concerned with the collective whole and not with man. Individualism understands only a part of man; collectivism understands man only as a part: neither of the two advances the wholeness of man. Buber writes: “Individualism sees man only in relation to himself, but collectivism does not see man at all; it only sees the society.”⁴³

Individualism and collectivism are all imaginings and illusions; when these barriers are overcome, then man is able to meet his fellow man, and this meeting takes only when a man knows the other in all his otherness as himself, as man, only when the person treats each other as a person does the between happen. There is genuine relation only between genuine persons.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 200.

Buber writes: “The fundamental fact of human existence is neither the individual as such nor the aggregate as such.... it is man with man.”⁴⁴ The uniqueness of man is not to be found in the individual nor in the collective but in the meeting between *I* and *Thou*. In the concluding paragraph of his essay “What is Man?” Buber writes:

Consider (a) man with man, and you see human life as dynamic, twofold, the giver and the receiver, he who does and he who endures... Now, we may come nearer to the answer to the question of what man is when we come to see him as the eternal meeting of the One with the Other.⁴⁵

Buber consistently stresses that man exists anthropologically not in his isolation but in the completeness of the relation between man and man; humanity is fully grasped in man with man, in relation to what humanity is, and can be grasped only in vital reciprocity.⁴⁶ Man should not be conceived of as an individual isolated from his fellow men or as a member of a conglomerate or a collectivity wherein his uniqueness fades away and is engulfed by the “general will” of the whole. Man exists not in his isolation nor in collectivity but in the completeness of his living relation with others. Man’s existence is actuated through relation; he lives a meaningful life and an authentic existence through his living relation with his fellow human beings.

In relation, man turns to others in their essential life, and he can raise every form of living relation not only to the technical and psychical level but to the real and essential. Buber writes: “Man is to be understood as the being who is capable of the threefold living relation and can raise every form of it to essentiality.”⁴⁷ Buber also clarifies the relationship between the person and the individual based on the fundamental human relations: *I-It* and *I-Thou*. The person is the *I* of the primal relation *I-Thou*, and as such, it is conscious of itself as subjectivity. The individual, on the other hand, is the *I* of the primal relation *I-It*, and as such, it is conscious of itself as the subject of experiencing and using. The individual makes its appearance by being differentiated from other individuals, while the person makes its appearance by entering into a relationship with other persons. As Buber writes: “The one is the spiritual

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁴⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 205.

⁴⁶ Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 84.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

form of detachment, and the other is the spiritual form of natural solidarity, of connexion."⁴⁸

Buber further states that the aim of self-differentiation is to experience and to use; its aim is life that lasts the span of man's life. On the other hand, the aim of relation is the relation's being, that is, contact with the *Thou*. According to him, through our contact with other *Thou*, we are stirred with the breath of the *Thou*, that is, of eternal life.⁴⁹ The person becomes conscious of himself as sharing in being, as co-existing, and thus as being. But the individual becomes conscious of itself as being such-and-such and nothing else. The person says, "I am," and the individual says, "I am such and such." "Know thyself" means, for the person, "know thyself to have being"; for the individual, it means "know thy particular kind of being."⁵⁰ The person, thus, looks at himself; the individual is concerned with its My—my race, my color, my kind, my creation. It differentiates itself from others and seeks to appropriate as much of it as it can through experience and use. Buber, however, makes it clear that despite the person's focus of attention to relation, the person does not lose its uniqueness since there is a link between uniqueness, dialogue, and relation.

The Person as a Thou

Buber stresses that the person, or the individualized concrete man, should be distinguished from things and objects, for he is a subject, a *Thou*, not an *It*. The person, as he is capable of, must enter into a living interpersonal relationship with others, he must enter into an *I-Thou* relation. The person who confronts me is a person as long as I regard him as a person, but for him to be my *Thou*, I must enter into an elemental relationship with him. He is not yet a *Thou* for me until I step into a personal relationship with him; thus, if I do not enter into this elemental relationship, he is not a *Thou*. When I address a fellow man being as my *Thou*, I recognize him as a person, not a thing. Buber states: "If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things and does not consist of things."⁵¹ When the *Thou* is spoken, the speaker does not have a thing for his object; rather, he has a partner, a person, and he takes his stand in relation with him. Buber explains:

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 62

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 63

⁵⁰ Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 64.

⁵¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 8.

When the *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds. When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing, he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation.⁵²

The *Thou* as a person is neither something to be experienced nor to be described. If I address somebody as my fellow man, as my *thou*, I must not focus my attention on his qualities, his traits, or his characteristics. The *Thou* is likened to a melody; it is not a mere enumeration of notes or verse of words or statue of lines; rather, it is the unity of these scattered pieces and places. Each time that I focus on his qualities, his color, his race, and age, he ceases to be a *Thou*, and knowingly or unknowingly, I demote him to a mere object or thing, to an *It*, a *She* or *He*, not a *Thou*. Buber writes:

Thus, a human being is not a *He* or *She*, bounded by another *He* or *She*, a specific point in time and space within the net of the world, nor is he, as nature, able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of qualities. But with no neighbor and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heaven. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in his light.⁵³

This person whom I speak as my *Thou* will remain to be my *Thou* as long as I regard him as a person, as long as I focus my attention on our relation, but the moment I focus my attention on his qualities and traits, I step out of that interpersonal relation, and he is reduced to a mere *It*. This is where the swinging back and forth between the *I-Thou* and the *I-It* happens. It is impossible to sustain the *I-Thou* attitude; at some point, the *Thou* will be objectified, and the other human being will be treated like an object. This happens many times and, on many occasions, when we treat each other objectively. But to be objective does not mean in a negative or bad way because it is just the case that we can be objective in our attitude and dealings with each other. However, the challenge is to swing the attitude back to an *I-Thou* attitude.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 8.

*Department of Philosophy
Center for Theology, Religious Studies, and Ethics
University of Santo Tomas, The Philippines*

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