

Featured Article

Martin Buber's Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Dialogue (Part II of II)

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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, genuine dialogue and I-Thou relation, intersubjectivity, we-relation

Martin Buber's Notion of Intersubjectivity

In this part, we focus more on Buber's view of intersubjectivity, or intersubjective relations expressed in his famous distinction between the two primary words, *I-It* and *I-Thou*, his notion of the life of dialogue, the primal movements of relation, and the interhuman and genuine dialogue. In

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the preface to *Daniel*,¹ we find Buber's first articulation of the dialogical relations through a personal experience. As Buber descended a mountain with a stick in his hand, and, wanting to rest, he pressed the stick against a tree trunk, he felt a contact with the stick at two points simultaneously, "here, where I held the stick, and there, where it touched the bark. Appearing to be only where I was, I nonetheless found myself there, too, where I found the tree. At that time, dialogue appeared to me."² He wondered how it could have been that he had experienced contact with the stick simultaneously in two places. He realized that dialogue is a kind of synthesis of *I* and *Thou*, a very special kind of synthesis where the *I* does not become a *Thou*. The duality of the self and the other remains even though it develops into a unity that includes the duality.³

We can see here that his notion of dialogue is grounded in his personal experiences. It is also based on his Jewish roots, particularly Hasidism. Hasidism is the popular mystical movement of Jews in Eastern Europe. It is opposed to traditional Rabbinism, which focuses on strict observance of the letter of the law.⁴ It was a burst of spontaneous and creative religious enthusiasm in a popular revivalist movement that flamed through the villages and ghettos of Eastern Europe.⁵ It was a popular communal mysticism that embraced half of the Jewry in that part of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, a kind of "revolt of the masses against rabbinic legalism and scholasticism."⁶ He first encountered Hasidism in his childhood days. Buber recalls that every summer, his father, Carl Buber, would take him from their estate in Bukovina to a nearby village of Sadagora, the seat of the dynasty of the Zaddikim.⁷ However, it was his grandfather, Solomon Buber, a Hebrew scholar, who taught him the religious wisdom of this doctrine. As

¹ *Daniel* was published in 1913 and was a precursor to Buber's philosophy of dialogue which was fully developed in the *I and Thou*, published in 1923. Early in his life, Buber was influenced by Hasidism—the popular mystical movement of East European Jewry. *Daniel* signaled a crisis in Buber's life, the transition from mystical to his dialogical period. In his youth, he was influenced by different forms of mysticism and did research on Indian, Chinese, and German mysticism before he studied Hasidism. See Samuel Hugo Bergman, *Dialogical Philosophy: From Kierkegaard to Buber*, trans. by Arnold A. Gerstein (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 217.

² Martin Buber, *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, trans. by Maurice Friedman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 47.

³ Bergman, *Dialogical Philosophy*, 218.

⁴ See Maurice Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: The Life of Martin Buber* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 37–38.

⁵ Will Herberg, *The Writings of Martin Buber* (New York: New American Library, 1974), 11–13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Martin Buber, *Meetings* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1973), 38. Zaddikim came from the term "zaddik," meaning a righteous or justified man, a completed man.

a child, Buber recalled, "I had received an image of the Zaddik and through the sullied reality had glimpsed the pure idea, the idea of the genuine leader of a genuine community."⁸

Hasidism is founded on real community, and the figurehead of the community is the *rebbe* or *zaddik*, the righteous or justified man. Buber studied its texts and teachings, and it gave him a "unique personal direction from which, even in the most terrible crises, he was never deflected."⁹ Buber's discovery of Hasidism brought with him the idea of a meaningful encounter, a meaningful relation both with man and with God. Hasidism appealed to him because of its emphasis on love, meeting, relation with God and fellow human, prayer, and true self. It is through Hasidism that he encountered a community based on brotherly love and interpersonal relations among its members. Here, he found the notion of a complete man and the link between uniqueness and dialogue. While we say that Buber's dialogical philosophy is based on his philosophical anthropology, such philosophy is solidly based on Hasidism's notions of love, meeting, and interpersonal relations with God and fellow human. Influenced by this tradition, Buber goes on to teach a life of relation, a life of dialogue.

The Life of Dialogue

In the earlier version of dialogue, which he articulated in *Daniel*, Buber introduced two ways of relating to the environment and others. The first way is through dialogue; if it is true dialogue, it means the commitment of one to another and implies openness and honesty. The other is social chatter and external relationships, where we use one another as a means to ends. Thus, there are two ways in which a person relates to his surroundings, other people, and things. Buber calls these two kinds of relationships *realization* and *orientation*.¹⁰

In orientation, we can observe how a man wants to find his way in a strange city. He constructs a mental plan of the city, linking one house to another even though the single house does not interest him, but at least it links one house to another or to a section of the streets in the plan of the city. For a man with such an orientation, individual things do not matter; what is of interest to him is the context of the collective. According to Buber, this is the way that science and technology relate to things, and all of us in our everyday lives relate to things in the same way. In various ways, what generally interests us is the context and usefulness of things and other people.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: Life and Works* (Great Britain: Search Press, 1982), 98.

¹⁰ See Bergman, *Dialogical Philosophy*, 219.

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So, the individual thing or individual person is always a springboard or transition to something else.¹¹

Buber illustrates this further with the example of a Swiss pine. The Swiss pine is in front of me, and I can relate to it by orienting myself to it. I then see the tree through its relation to the surrounding world. As a botanist, I can classify it and compare it to other plants. I can weigh the utility of the tree in comparison to others. But I do not know anything about the tree in these ways. If, however, I open myself to the tree with all my energy directed toward it, if I assimilate it, as it were, and commit myself to it, then I am transformed, and I become the tree itself. This is like the example of the stick: I experience a particular tree. I can identify myself with it without surrendering my unique position. I succeed, in other words, in conjoining the two: myself and the tree. In this way, I gain access to the mystery of reality.¹² The same could be said about the mother who protects her child in her arms. This is the moment of entering the mystery of reality, a higher state of activity that I initiate, through which I open myself and transform my energy into a magical strength that fascinates and glorifies. This is the moment of *realization*, according to Buber: the great miracle of realization from which the philosophy of dialogue emerges because a true dialogue has the same openness and commitment along with the preservation of the person speaking.¹³

Buber offers three more examples of the concept of realization: the poet, the child, and the primitive. The poet uses language in a way that is different from the usual use of language. His words are bright and pregnant with meaning, and he can give new meaning to words. He elevates his language above the ordinary level of speech, and the language he uses subsequently confirms him as a poet; language acknowledges the self-realization of the poet. A small child at play is completely immersed in his game and does not feel what is taking place around him. The primitive man, too, still has in him the full strength of realization. For the child and the primitive man, the power of realization is much greater than with the person who lives in a complex civilization and is not geared to realizing experience.¹⁴ Orientation does not remove the power of experience. Buber also adds the wise man, the hero, the prophet, and especially the creative person who is totally engrossed in his creation. Also included are the anonymous people who choose solitude, become monks, or choose to live a life of radical realization in a narrow circle of people.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹² Buber, *Daniel*, 55.

¹³ See Bergman, *Dialogical Philosophy*, 221.

¹⁴ Buber, *Daniel*, 71.

For Buber, realization and orientation are extremes; one must live with both as they go hand in hand or alternately. Realization demands one's entire spiritual and physical strength. If one engages only in realization, one will cease to be a person and would become a god. If one lives only by orientation, without any realization, he will annihilate himself from within. These two extremes cannot be achieved, so realization and orientation alternate continuously.¹⁵ The two complement each other, such as science and its dissemination or invention and its exploitation. The moments of maximum realization must be followed by moments of orientation in everyday life. Like the *I-It* and *I-Thou* attitudes, they swing back and forth.

In his more mature works, Buber fully developed his notion of intersubjective relation grounded in dialogue. Buber used the term dialogue to signify the life of relation. For him, the dialogic is not limited to man and fellow man; it is not only "between man and man" but also "between man and God." As discussed already, the fundamental relation of man is "triadic": the self, God, and others, and the other could be a fellow man or the world or nature. For Buber, real relationships with other human beings are possible only through a real relationship with God. The relation of man extends beyond his relationship with the infinite and divine; there is also the relationship with the finite. Hence, in dialogic meetings, man becomes and transcends himself. It is in this sense that by virtue of its dialogical character, human life touches upon absoluteness and acquires an absolute meaning that overpasses its own conditioned nature.¹⁶ Buber explains:

Human life touches on the absolute in virtue of its dialogical character, for in spite of his own uniqueness man can never find, when he plunges into the depth of his life, a being that is whole in itself and as such touches the absolute. Man can become whole not in virtue of a relation to himself but only in virtue of a relation to another self.¹⁷

This other self may also be conditioned and limited as oneself, but in being together or in a relationship, the unlimited and unconditioned are experienced. Hence, the dialogic relation is the matrix of man's "finite infinity." Buber emphasizes that authentic human existence is living a "dialogic life"; although man needs a relation that is objective and

¹⁵ Bergman, *Dialogical Philosophy*, 222.

¹⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

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manipulative, it is living in the *I–Thou* that makes human existence authentic human existence.

Kinds of Dialogue

Buber distinguishes three kinds of dialogue. First is *technical dialogue*, which is prompted solely by the need for objective understanding. In a conference or in a meeting, even in a lecture or discussion where the goal is a common understanding of the content or subject matter, there is technical dialogue. The intention or objective is to have an unequivocal understanding and interpretation of the content of the conversation. Technical dialogue always relies on spoken or written language; it always requires that one is attentive to at least what the other is saying.

The second is *monologue* disguised as dialogue. Here, one is never aware of the other as somebody who is not himself and, simultaneously, somebody with whom he nevertheless communicates. The flow of communication is one-sided. It may appear that the other is recognized as a source of inputs or ideas, but in reality, only the self or only one of the two parties dominates the discussion.

The third one is dialogue as a *genuine human relation*. In genuine dialogue, spoken or silent, each participant really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between him and them.¹⁸ This kind of dialogue can happen even outside the confines of speech and gestures. Buber says, “For a conversation, no sound is necessary, not even a gesture.”¹⁹ He further expounds:

Human dialogue, therefore, although it has its distinctive life in sign, that is, in sound and gestures, can exist even without the sign, but admittedly not in an objectively comprehensible form. On the other hand, an element of communication, however inward, seems to belong to its essence. But in its highest moments, dialogue reaches out even beyond these boundaries. It is completed outside contents, even the most personal, which are or can be communicated.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Any conversation will always be within the bounds of spoken or written language; words will always have to be spoken, or even gestures will be part of the conversation. But for Buber, in genuine dialogue, speech is not even necessary; genuine dialogue can happen below or beyond the level of speech. We can say that it is a very personal communication. According to Buber, the life of dialogue may dispense with speech and communication, but it has as its minimum constitution one thing, that is, “mutuality of inner action.”²¹ This mutuality of inner action is the recognition of the presence of the other; that is, at the very least, I am aware of the presence of the other and that I turn toward him, and I give my attention to him, to his presence. Buber said that when two men are bound together in dialogue, they must obviously be turned to one another; therefore, they must, no matter with what measure of activity or consciousness of activity, have turned to one another.²² The fundamental gesture of recognizing the presence of the other is the basic ground of dialogue; for dialogue to happen, one must perceive this man or person confronting or standing in front of him as a fellow human being. The perception of a human person facing us is a fundamental component of dialogue.

Buber distinguishes three ways of perceiving a man who is in front of us or living before our eyes. First, is that of an observer who is wholly intent on fixing the observed man in his mind, on “noting” him. Hence, he fixes his attention on the traits, gestures, and expressions. He considers every detail, every aspect, every quality. Take, for example, a therapist, a counsellor, and even an educator who may perceive the person or the patient, client, or student if they are only concerned with the details and the traits or qualities; then they are just observers and not partners in a dialogue.

The second is that of the onlooker who is not at all attentive to the details. He takes up a position that lets him see the object freely and awaits what will be presented to him. He pays attention not to traits but to existence, to events, and affairs. The observer and onlooker have almost the same disposition: they are detached from what they observe or look at. They see these objects as separate from them. There is no involvement or attachment. They are not “touched” by the object; the other is just one of the many things they observe or look at. Buber says: “The observer and onlooker regard the man before them as an object separated from themselves and their personal life.”²³

Buber simply calls the third way “becoming aware.” He says:

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

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There is also the moment when a man meets me about whom there is something I cannot grasp in any objective way at all that “says something” to me.... It means he says something to me, addresses something to me, speaks something that enters my own life. He speaks something that enters my own life.²⁴

The effect of what the other says to me is totally different from that of looking on and observing. The saying is “real speech,” one that reaches my inner being. This man is not my object. This way of perceiving is “becoming aware.”²⁵ I became aware that this man is a person, a unique subject. Of course, he has his traits and details, but that is not my focus; I am just aware and pay attention to his presence. Becoming aware sets dialogue to unlimited possibilities, and the limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of awareness.

Since dialogue is based on “saying,” genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding,²⁶ responding to what happens to one, to what is to be seen, heard, and felt. In genuine dialogue, there is always that sense of reciprocity. Dialogue is not confined to the self; it is not egocentric; it reaches out, it responds, and it reciprocates. Dialogue is contrasted with monologue, which is always confined to the self, even in the most tender intimacy. The contrast between monologue and genuine dialogue must not be confused with the contrast between egoism and altruism. There are people who are absorbed in social activity but have never spoken from being to being with a fellow human. However, the dialogic should not be identified with love. But love without the dialogic, without real outgoing to the other, reaching to the other and companying with the other, the love remaining with itself, this is called Lucifer.²⁷

According to Buber, the basic movement of dialogue is turning to the other.²⁸ If one looks at someone and addresses him, he turns to him, of course, with the body, but also with the requisite measure with the soul, in that one directs his attention to him. On the contrary, the basic movement of monologue is not turning away as opposed to turning towards, but “reflexion.” Buber clarifies that reflexion is different from egoism or egotism; it is not that man is concerned with himself, considers, enjoys, idolizes himself; it is rather when a man withdraws from accepting with his essential

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by Maurice Friedman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

²⁸ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 22.

being another person in his particularity. He lets the other exist only as his own experience and as a “part of myself.” Here, dialogue becomes fiction.²⁹

I-It and I-Thou Relations

Buber is well-known for the distinction that he made between two fundamental types of relation, which he expressed in the famous primary words, *I-It* and *I-Thou*. These fundamental types of relations are based on what he regarded as the primary attitudes of man. These primary words are not to be taken as separate words but as combined words. In the first lines of his famous book, *I and Thou*, he writes:

To man, the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks. The primary words are not isolated words but combined words. The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*, and the other primary word is the combination *I-It*, wherein without a change in the primary word, one of the words, *He* or *She*, can replace *It*. Hence, the *I* of man is also twofold. For the *I* of the primary word, *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word, *I-It*.³⁰

Buber stresses that these primary words do not signify things but relations. The *I-It* and *I-Thou* are the basic relations that we can enter into. The *I* of man comes into being in the act of speaking one or the other of these primary words. The real determinant of the primary word in which a man takes his stand is not the object or the subject over against him, but the way he relates himself to the object or the subject, that is, the kind of relation which he establishes towards the other.

Buber writes, “The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. The other primary word can never be spoken with the whole being.”³¹ In the *I-Thou* relation, man enters with his whole being and takes his stand in it. He enters into that relationship as a totally genuine person; he does not have any guise or pretension about the relationship; he does not have any interior motive but the desire to establish a good interpersonal relationship. In the *I-It* relation, on the contrary, man does not enter with his

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

³⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

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whole being, not as a genuine person. He is not honest about the relationship; his purpose in that relationship is not the relationship itself; he has other motives, and interpersonal relations are only secondary to those other motives.

According to Buber, the man in the *I–Thou* relation has nothing for an object; if I enter into that relation, I do not have an object but a subject. For what is an object? It is something that one perceives, something that one is sensible of, something that one imagines, and something that one wills, feels, and thinks of. But the *I–Thou* relation is not a relation of man to object; the person in the *I–Thou* does not have an object to perceive, to imagine, to feel, or to think of; he has somebody, a fellow person, towards whom he stands in relation. These and all the others, Buber says, belong to the world of *It*.

So, when the *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has nothing; he has indeed nothing, but he takes his stand in relation. The *Thou* establishes the world of relation, while the *It* sets the world as the world of experience. In the *I–Thou*, the relation is direct and mutual; no foreknowledge, system of ideas, or fancy intervenes between the *I* and the *Thou*. In this relation, there is no aim, no anticipation or lust. The *I–Thou* establishes the world of mutual relation; the *I* and *Thou* mutually affect each other. Buber writes, “my *Thou* affects me as *I* affect my *Thou*.”³² Between the *I* and *Thou*, there is mutual giving, there is mutual sharing of selves; I give myself to my *Thou*, and he, in turn, gives himself to me; I lend my ears to him in attention, and he likewise lends his ears to him in attention, and he likewise lends his ears to me. My *Thou* may not give me something material, something that will sustain me in life, but he teaches me how to meet and relate with others, and he helps me see other life.

The *Thou* appears in space, that is, in the exclusive situation of what is over against it, where everything can be only the background out of which it emerges and not in space as its boundary and measured limit. In fact, when I meet a *Thou*, I do not focus so much on the physical surroundings but on the *Thou* itself. It also appears in time, that is, in that of the event which is fulfilled in itself; “it is not lived as part of a continuous and organized sequence, but is lived in a ‘duration’ whose purely intensive dimension is definable only in terms of itself.”³³ When I meet a *Thou*, the meeting is not measured in terms of chronological events but as “duration”; I am not mindful of the time that elapsed because I am focusing on his presence. Buber contends that the world of the *Thou* appears simultaneously as acting and as being acted upon and not linked to a chain of causes: “Only the world of *It* can be arranged in order:

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

only things can be co-ordinated in time and space, but the *Thou* knows no system of coordination.”³⁴

Buber clarifies that in the world of the *Thou*, when man meets what exists and becomes simply a single being, and each thing is simply a being, every happening affects him. “Measure and comparison disappear in this world; each meeting is not organized to make the world, but each is a sign of world-order. This world has no density; it is not reliable, and you cannot hold on to it. If man makes it as his object, then it vanishes.”³⁵ The moment I focus on the physical surroundings and the time that elapsed during our encounter instead of on his presence, the *Thou* turns into an *It*. According to Buber, “The world of *It* is set in the context of time and space. The world of *Thou* is not set in the context of either of these.”³⁶

The world of the *Thou* may not offer me anything material; it may not give me something that will sustain me in this early life, for, unlike the *It*, it does not teach me how to use and manipulate others; on the contrary, it teaches me how to meet and relate with others; it certainly helps me see the other life. Buber writes:

Between you and it, there is mutual giving: you say *Thou* to it and give yourself to it, and it says *Thou* to you and gives itself to you. You cannot make yourself understood with others concerning it, you are alone with it. But it teaches you to meet others and to hold your ground when you meet them. Through the graciousness of its comings and the solemn sadness of its goings, it leads you away to the *Thou* in which the parallel lines of relations meet. It does not help to sustain you in life; it only helps you glimpse eternity.³⁷

The *I-Thou* signifies a relation which is person to person, subject to subject. It is a relationship where there is acceptance, sincerity, concern, dialogue, and care. It is characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, and intensity.

The *I-It*, on the contrary, is the primary word of experiencing and using; it is entirely lacking in directness and mutuality; whether in feeling or in knowing or in acting, it is the typical subject-object relationship; it is always mediate and indirect, dealing with others only in terms of categories

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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and qualities. The *I-It* is significant only in connection and differentiation but not in real relation. The *I-It* signifies a relation that is person to thing and subject to object. It involves some forms of utilization, manipulation, control, and domination. People in this world are not treated as persons but as objects, things, tools, and instruments. In life, the man who takes advantage of his neighbor, his employee, or his acquaintance reduces the other person to a mere object.

However, a change may happen in these relations. What at one moment is the *Thou* of the *I-Thou* may become an *It* of an *I-It*, and what at one moment the *It* of *I-It* may become the *Thou* of an *I-Thou*. As long as the relation remains to be person to person, the other remains to be a *Thou*, but when the relation shifts to a person to a thing, then the other is reduced to an *It*. Buber writes:

Indeed, to man, the world is twofold based on his twofold attitude. His first attitude is to perceive what exists around him as simply as things, beings as things, and what happens around him simply as events: things consisting of qualities, events of moments, things entered in the graph of place, and events in that of time. To man, this world is an ordered, detached, and reliable world, having density and duration; it is organized and is always there next to him. It is his object and will remain to be as long as he wishes it to be. He can take it, and it lets itself be taken, but then, it does not give itself to him. He can hold on to it for life, and it will sustain him, but then, he cannot meet others in it.³⁸

Buber clarifies that the *I-It* and *I-Thou*, like his earlier distinction between orientation and realization, continuously alternate, and both are essential types of relations or ways of living. Thus, he concludes: "And in all the seriousness of truth, hear this: without *It*, man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man."³⁹

In *I and Thou*, he discusses relations quite in a general manner, overseeing the importance of making a clearer distinction among the types of *I-Thou* relations that can be entered into and dialogue between man and man. Maurice Friedman, an authority in Buber's philosophy, writes that Buber once told him that if Buber were to write again the *I and Thou*, he would seek different categories to clarify better the distinction among the types of relation

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

I-Thou (with nature, art, animals, and God) and the dialogue between man and man.⁴⁰ In his later book, *Between Man and Man*, Buber provides a clearer description of what he calls the life of dialogue, that is, the dialogue between man and man. In *The Knowledge of Man*, he provides a clear picture of the interhuman.

The Primal Movements of Relation

Buber's philosophy of dialogue is not just a phenomenological description of types of dialogue based on the twofold attitude of *I-It* and *I-Thou*. It also entails an ontology, which identifies the "between" as the real, that is, as the real ground of human existence. But to understand this ontological basis, we need to discover the two basic movements of man from which the principle of human life is derived. But first, what is this principle of life? Buber starts with what nature offers us, which is that we are part of nature, and that man belongs to the association of living beings. However, Buber does not proceed by noting the characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of nature; instead, he examines the ground of being of those characteristics as a whole. By proceeding in such a manner, Buber discovers that such characteristics constitute not only special types of being but a special way of being. Buber then arrives at what he calls the twofold movement of the principle of human life.⁴¹ He calls the first movement the "primal setting at a distance" and the second "entering into relation."⁴² Man is different from all other living beings because "man stands over against a world from which he has been set at a distance and unlike all other living beings can, again and again, enter into a relationship with it."⁴³

According to Buber, the first movement is the presupposition of the second because we can only enter into relation with a being that is set at a distance, that is, both of us are independent opposites. This double movement cannot be demonstrated by looking at man's inner life but through the phenomenon of his "connection with an otherness which is constituted as otherness by the event of distancing."⁴⁴ But through this phenomenon we can have a clear view of the inner life of man.

Science, modern biology in particular, speaks of an environment like that of animals as a "world." But the notion of "world" only applies to man.

⁴⁰ Maurice Friedman, "Introductory Essay," in *Knowledge of Man* by Martin Buber (New York: Harper & Row Publishing, 1965), 27.

⁴¹ See Martin Buber, *Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper & Row Publishing, 1965), 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Martin Buber, *The Way of Response*, ed. by N.N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 104.

⁴⁴ Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 60.

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It is only man who can replace the unstable conglomeration of various objects by a unity that can be imagined and thought by him as existing for himself. With man and with his human life, a world exists. But a world is only conceivable by an act of setting at a distance. Buber explains, "Only when a structure of being is independently over against a living being, an independent opposite, does a world exist."⁴⁵ Indeed, "only through this act of setting at a distance does man have a 'world'—an unbroken continuum which includes not merely all that he and other men know and experience, but all that is knowable now on in the future."⁴⁶

Now, when a world exists, there is also the man who conditions it, and man is there not as a species of living creatures but as a being who has moved into reality. But man does not only exist and condition the world; he enters a relationship with it. Buber describes the act of entering into a relation with the world as "synthesizing apperception," that is, the apperception of a being as a whole and as a unity.⁴⁷ The conception of wholeness and unity in its original sense is identical to the world to which man turns. Buber further elucidates:

He who turns to the realm which he has removed from himself, and which has been completed and transformed into a world – he who turns to the world and looking upon it steps into relation with it, becomes aware of wholeness and unity in such a way that from then on he is able to grasp being as a wholeness and a unity; the single being has received the character of wholeness and unity perceived in the world.⁴⁸

However, man does not attain this view by just "setting at a distance" because this will only offer the world as an object, which is nothing but an aggregate of qualities that can be added at will; in other words, he attains not a genuine wholeness and unity. Only the view of the world in its full presence that man has set for himself, the world that is present in his whole person; only the view of the world as related to himself will offer him a world truly whole and one.

While entering into relation means entering into an *I-Thou* relation, it does not mean that setting at a distance is an *I-It* relation. When man fails to enter into an *I-Thou* relation, the distance widens and solidifies; hence,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁶ Friedman, "Introductory Essay," 21.

⁴⁷ Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

instead of making the *I-Thou* relation possible, it obstructs it. It is not the *I-It* that sets the distance, but it is the failure to enter into an *I-Thou* relation that widens the distance, and this failure corresponds to the *I-It*. Distance is a presupposition to both *I-It* and *I-Thou*. But entering into relation is an act of the whole being; hence, it can only be possible through the *I-Thou* relation. Through this act, we constitute ourselves as human, and it must be repeated over and over again in new situations. Distance and the failure to enter into relations are not acts but states of being. Distance is an ontological state but pre-personal. It is set in man as man and precedes both the *I-It* and *I-Thou*. Through distance, man is able to have the twofold attitude of *I-It* and *I-Thou*, the basis of the two types of relations of man. It is through the *I-Thou* relation that provides the basis for personal existence. So, while distance sets man as man, it is by entering into an *I-Thou* relation that he attains personal existence; the *I-It* relation constitutes his objective and individual existence.

The *I-Thou* relation changes nothing in the primal state of things because, in the primal state, everything through distance is the independent opposite. However, the widening of distance into *I-It* because of the failure to enter into an *I-Thou* relation changes the whole situation of the other being because it is reduced to an object. This change in the situation applies not only to humans; it also applies to other beings or objects in the natural world. By looking at and observing a particular object, we make it a part of the objective world. These attitudes are attitudes of the *I-It* relation.

In the actual development of a particular person, beginning at the earliest part of his life, that is, when he is still in the womb of his mother, the *I-Thou* precedes the *I-It*, and the entering into relation is prior to any widening of the distance. Buber explains in the first part of the *I and Thou* that while the baby is, in fact, separated or different from the mother, by entering into relation with its mother completes this distance and only later on when he ceases to enter into a relation with her that the *I-It* takes shape, and the distance becomes elaborate. As the consciousness of one's identity and separateness grows, so does the difficulty of overcoming the distance and renewing the *I-Thou* relation.

Genuine Dialogue and the Interhuman

In *The Knowledge of Man*, Buber further articulates his philosophy of dialogue and conceives of the notion of the "interhuman." He notes that it is usual to always ascribe to the social realm whatever happens and takes place between man and man without really understanding the other important area in our life: the interhuman. He himself acknowledged falling into the same error and, from then on, realized the necessity of drawing a line between the two essentially different areas of our human life. So, aside from the social, we

must have a separate category of our existence, and that is the realm of the interhuman.⁴⁹ We may speak of a social phenomenon wherever the lives of a number of men live with one another, bound up together, bringing in its course shared experiences and reactions.⁵⁰ However, according to Buber, to live together and be bound up only means that each individual existence is contained and enclosed in a group existence. In a group, it does not mean that there exists a personal relation among the members. One can join any group, association, or organization without being personally related to any of the members. Yes, belongingness may be felt, but it does not presuppose personal relation. The realm of the interhuman goes beyond living and sharing experiences together. It goes beyond belonging to a particular group. In the interhuman, there is a personal relation that exists among the members of the group, not only sympathy.

The essential thing in the interhuman is that each of us regards each other as a person, unique in our own way, as partners in every event of our life. The only thing that matters is that for each of the two men, the other happens as a particular and is thus related to him in such a way that he does not regard and use him as his object but as his partner in every living event.⁵¹

In the sphere or realm of the interhuman, the participation of both partners is indispensable, that is, that the partners confront each other. There must not be any form of utilization, objectification, and control, for if such acts creep into the relation, such relation ceases to be an *I-Thou* and becomes *I-It*. Buber regards the life of dialogue as the mutual sharing of our inner selves in the realm of the interhuman. He distinguishes it from technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need for objective understanding, and monologue, which disguises itself as dialogue.⁵² Genuine dialogue has the sole intention of establishing a living mutual relationship between or among the participants. Buber stresses:

There is genuine dialogue—no matter whether spoken or silent—where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between him and them.⁵³

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

However, before we can establish a life of dialogue, we must first have a kind of perception, which Buber calls “becoming aware.” As discussed previously, Buber distinguishes three ways we perceive the man living before our eyes. The first is that of an observer who is wholly intent on fixing the observed in his mind and in “noting him.” The observer is focused on the traits and qualities of the man before him. The second, the onlooker, is not at all intent. He just lets the object or the man present himself to him; he just sees the object freely. The onlooker and the observer both see this man before them as an object separated from themselves and their personal lives.⁵⁴ The third one is when I perceive a man, not in an objective way, but I understand that he is addressing and saying something to me. This man who “says” something to me is not my object; I perceive him not as a thing but as a man as a person, and I am concerned about him. This is what Buber regards as “becoming aware.”

Genuine dialogue is possible when two are mutually aware of each other as persons and both avoid objectification. We must always be aware of that man confronting us as a person, not as an object, because “the limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of our awareness.”⁵⁵ Buber, however, admits that it is common for a man to be the object of observation on the one hand and to be an observer on the other hand. But because we are human beings, we are able to impose limits on our objectification. Only as a partner can a man be perceived as an existing wholeness. The basic movement of the life of dialogue is the turning towards the other, which Buber distinguished from the basic movement of the life of monologue, which is the turning away from the other. This turning towards the other implies that we physically turn towards the other and focus our attention on him. Buber writes, “If you look at someone and address him, you turn to him, of course, with the body, but also in the requisite measure of the soul, in that you direct your attention to him.”⁵⁶

Elements of the Interhuman

Genuine dialogue, that is, the sharing of inner selves in the interhuman, can only unfold through the so-called elements of the interhuman and by avoiding the essential problems of dialogue. Buber enumerates three: being, personal making present, and unfolding.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

Being and Seeming

According to Buber, the essential problem of the sphere of dialogue or of the “between” is the duality of being and seeming. He distinguishes two types of existence: “The one proceeds from what one really is, the other from what one wishes to seem.”⁵⁷ He points out that some people are too concerned about their appearance and the impression that they make upon others, so they produce looks and appearances and masks to conceal their real selves. They tend to pretend that they are a certain person, but in reality, they are not; they tend to project the image that they want or wish to impress upon their audience and not their true selves. For Buber, these people live in a world of seeming. However, there are also people who are entirely independent of the impression that they make upon others. They do not pretend; they do not wear false appearances and impressions or masks; they just present to their audience or partners their real selves, the ones they really are; they are honest and sincere about themselves. In a word, they live in the light of truth. Buber differentiates how these two kinds of people deal and relate with others. Certainly, the one who lives in the world of being or the light of truth deals with the other in a spontaneous way, without reserve, because he is honest and sincere about himself and the relation: he is not hiding anything about himself. He looks at the other just as one looks at somebody with whom he is acquainted or has personal dealings. Of course, he wants to be understood by the other, but he is not concerned by the thought of the image that he can project upon the other.

Meanwhile, the one who lives in the world of seeming is concerned about the image that his appearance produces on the other, so he makes his own look. He is worried about the image that he projects. Seeming, Buber points out, is the threat to genuine dialogue. If the dialogue between two persons is mingled with and by seeming appearances and impressions, the very existence of the relation and dialogue is threatened: these seeming appearances could ruin a harmonious and honest relationship.⁵⁸ Adherence to truth is essential to the establishment of an authentic and honest personal relationship, and truth means that we communicate to the other the one we really are and that we present to the other our real being.⁵⁹ We must not allow any seeming creep into our relationship with others. “To yield to seeming,” Buber emphasizes, “is man’s essential cowardice; to resist it is his essential courage.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 76.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

Personal Making Present

Another important essential for the blossoming and establishment of genuine dialogue is the affirmation of the other as a person and as a unique and distinct personality; the acceptance of the person who is before me as the bearer of his personal belief, ideas, and conviction even though I may sometimes disagree with him. It is only in this manner that I can address him as a real partner in a genuine and authentic dialogue. Buber stresses:

... each should regard his partner as the very one he is. I become aware of him, aware that he is different from myself, in the definite, unique way which is peculiar to him, and I accept whom I thus see, so that in full earnestness, I can direct what I say to him as the person he is.⁶¹

I must, at certain points, offer opposition to his beliefs and personal conviction, but what is essential, according to Buber, is that I accept this person with whom I struggle. I struggle with him as his partner; I oppose his conviction, but I affirm him as a person. This is the true meaning of confirmation, that I confirm my partner as this existing unique being even while I oppose him and his conviction. It is true, Buber notes, that it now depends on the other whether genuine dialogue can arise between us, but I must trust him and suppose that he is also ready to deal with me as his partner.⁶²

However, before I can confirm the person confronting me, I must be first aware of him who is over against me. And to be aware of something is to experience it as a whole without reduction or abstraction. But to define awareness of man in this general fashion and sense is to categorize him with all the other beings. Thus, as discussed before, to be aware of a man in its strict sense is to experience him as a whole person gifted by spirit, to perceive him as a dynamic center and unique person. However, this awareness is impossible if my partner remains to be the object of my contemplation and observation. For the wholeness of man can never be known by contemplation and observation. It is impossible unless I enter into a personal relationship with him, unless he becomes “personally present” to me. Making the other present means “imagining the real” to imagine quite concretely what the other person is wishing, feeling, thinking, and perceiving. Buber explains: “I prefer the name ‘imagining the real’ for in its essential being, this gift is not a

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 80.

looking at the other, but a bold swinging—demanding the most intensive stirring of one's being—into the life of the other.”⁶³

In another passage, Buber claims that to imagine the real is “to make the other as a whole and unique being, as the person that he is.”⁶⁴ But more than that, “he receives him as his partner, and that means he confirms him as this other being, so far as it is for him to confirm,” and the true turning to the other includes a confirmation or acceptance.⁶⁵ Such confirmation does not mean approval, “but matter in what I am against the other, by accepting him as a partner in genuine dialogue I have affirmed him as a person.”⁶⁶

The realm of this genuine imagining is the particular real person “who steps out to meet and confront me, whom I can attempt to make present to myself just in this way and not otherwise his wholeness, unity and uniqueness and with his dynamic center.”⁶⁷ This making present enables me to “experience the other side” of the relationship without losing anything of my own reality and to live through the common event from the standpoint of the other. Buber admits this attitude of confirmation may be unanswered, and the possible dialogue may die, but if mutuality exists, then the interhuman blossoms into a genuine dialogue.

Imposition and Unfolding

For Buber, there are two basic ways of affecting men in their views and attitudes about life: imposing oneself upon the other and helping the other recognize for himself (other) what is good and right for him.⁶⁸ In the first one, which Buber calls imposition, man tries to force and impress his opinions, ideas, and his own point of view upon the other in such a way that the latter feels that the result of his acts came out because of that influence. The second way, which Buber calls *unfolding*, is when man wishes to find in the soul of the other the disposition toward which he has recognized in himself as the right.⁶⁹ The other man has his own potentialities, and he has only to recognize and open out these potentialities. In other words, he is in the “process of becoming.” He has his own opinions, ideas, and points of view, all of which may still be potentialities, and they only need to be actualized. This actualization, this opening out, happens essentially through a meeting, through the “existential communication between someone that is

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁴ Buber, *Way of Response*, 105.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 81.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

actual being and someone that is in the process of becoming.”⁷⁰ Through this meeting, one becomes the “helper of the actualizing forces.” He does not impose himself, for he believes that what is right for a person is established by that person in a single and uniquely personal way. The one who imposes, or the propagandist, does not actually trust and believe that he can attain his purpose. He does not actually expect much that his methods, say, the use of loudspeakers and ads, would really affect the other. In contrast, the one who helps with the unfolding, or the educator, is confident that the other will grow and develop, for he believes in the primal inherent power in every human being.

Hence, in genuine dialogue, man must turn to the other, his fellow man and partner in all truth; the turning must be a “\turning of the being.” Man must make the other present as a whole and unique being as the person that he is. This turning to the person includes acceptance and confirmation of the other as a person. Man must not impose himself upon the other but rather help the other unfold his potentialities and assist in the actualization process. For the blossoming of the interhuman, it is necessary that the semblance does not intervene to spoil the relation of a personal being to a personal being. It is further necessary that each one means and makes the other present in his personal being and that neither should wish to impose himself on the other.⁷¹

These elements of the interhuman are in no way exhaustive. Other elements can be added to this list to make genuine dialogue blossom further. Compassion and generosity towards the other can further enhance genuine dialogue, especially if the other is disadvantaged.

The “We:” Social Dimension of Intersubjective Relations

The other dimension of intersubjective relations is the social dimension. This is signified by the essential *We* relation. If there is the *Thou*, there is also the *We*. Buber says: “What corresponds to the essential *Thou* on the level of self-being, in relation to a host of men, I call the essential *We*.”⁷² As discussed in the preceding, the person who is merely an object to me is not a *Thou* but a *He* or *She*; in the same manner, the faceless and nameless crowd in which I am entangled is not a *We* but a *one*. Buber explains that the *We* signifies a community of several independent persons who have reached a self and self-responsibility, the community resting on the basis of this self and self-responsibility and being made possible by them.⁷³

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 175.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

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The *We* can arise in every kind of group; its essential character is the relation existing among the members, regardless if it is only temporary. What is essential is the genuine communion among the members, the openness of one another, and the fact that the members set aside their differences to work for a common goal. Its structure includes the potential *Thou* relation. Buber stresses that the genuine *We* is to be recognized in its objective existence and that in whatever form it is “an essential relation between person and person, between *I* and *Thou*, is always evident as actually or potentially existing.”⁷⁴ But the moment any one of the members uses others for his own interests, this is enough to prevent the essential *We* from further growing. What is important is a concrete universal around which social cohesion is maintained in order to promote order through mutual recognition and interpersonal coordination.

The *We* relation belongs to the realm of the social; though it includes the potential *Thou*, it cannot be regarded as interhuman. Men can live with one another, bound up together, bringing in their train of shared experiences and reactions. But to live together and be bound up only means that each individual existence is contained and enclosed in a group existence; there is a feeling of belongingness, just like in an association or organization. For Buber, the *We* relation is the basis of a community or a society. A society is neither an abstract structure that organizes social existence from “above” nor a conglomerate of separately acting individuals who are brought into harmony by an omnipotent mechanism like the capitalist market designed for that task; rather, it is a community where life is lived towards one another.⁷⁵ A community exists only when individuals exist with one another through dialogue and form an essential *We* relationship. An essential *We* orientation is neither individualistic nor collectivistic in design but emerges from the sphere *between* these two poles. The *between* is the dimension of direct social contact that is always reconstituted in accordance with men’s meeting with one another.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Certain attempts to study man have reduced him to an object. In order to uplift and promote the dignity of the human person against political and social ideologies and the emerging consumerist and materialist orientations that undermine the value of the human person, a philosophical

⁷⁴ Buber, *Way of Response*, 108.

⁷⁵ John W. Murphy, *The Social Philosophy of Martin Buber: The Social World as a Human Dimension* (Washington: University Press of America, 1983), 48.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

anthropology or a philosophy of the human person which regards everyone, regardless of race, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identity, or political orientation as a human being with dignity must be promoted. In a world engulfed by falsehood, violence, hate, apathy, indifference, greed, and utter disregard for the human person, what we need is a philosophy that promotes and respects the dignity and welfare of the human person.

Buber is definitely one of those who promoted not only the study of man as a human person but one who treated man both as an individual and a social being, both as a self and an other, as an *I* and a *Thou* with the utmost respect. Buber stresses that the person should be distinguished from things, from objects, for he is a subject, a *Thou*, not an *It*. The person must enter into a living interpersonal relationship with others, and he must enter into an *I–Thou* relationship and establish a genuine dialogue with others. Buber is one of the contemporary thinkers who insist on studying man in his radical singularity and concreteness; man is a subject who enters into intersubjective relations and is constantly faced with making momentous decisions that spell the difference between authentic and inauthentic existence.

Buber is not alone; there are many others like him. Gabriel Marcel criticizes modern society for its tendency to treat human beings as mere objects to be studied, described, or manipulated. Marcel singles out applied science as one field of human interest that manifests such attitude and tendency. While applied science has made significant development, such a view, according to Marcel, has led to an impoverishment of our inner lives.⁷⁷ Like Buber, he insists on establishing authentic relationships with others. Karol Wojtyla also notes that the political and social upheavals happening in our time affect our appreciation and understanding of the human individual. He observes that our time is a time of great controversy about human beings, controversy about the very meaning of human existence, and thus about the nature and significance of human beings.⁷⁸ Like Buber, he stresses the importance of acting with others through participation. There are other philosophers whom we can aptly call philosophers of the human person because they have recognized and promoted the value and dignity of the human person. They may not agree on certain aspects of the human person, but they certainly recognize the human person as a subject focusing on the concrete subjectivity of man. They recognize that man is, first and foremost, a human subject; the human person is a being with dignity that must be respected at all times and under all circumstances.

⁷⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 184.

⁷⁸ Karol Wojtyla, "Person, Subject and Community," in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. by Theresa Sandok (OSM. New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 220.

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