

MARTIN BUBER'S PHILOSOPHICAL  
JOURNEY: THE ROOTS OF *I-THOU*

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## ABSTRACT

Martin Buber, born in Vienna in 1878, underwent formative experiences that profoundly shaped his philosophy, particularly his concept of the I-Thou relationship. His childhood, marked by the serene beauty of the Danube and the traumatic abandonment by his mother, left deep psychological scars but also cultivated resilience and introspection. Buber's upbringing by his grandparents introduced him to diverse literatures and languages, enhancing his intellectual growth and leading to his deep engagement with mysticism, Hasidism, and Zionism. His philosophical evolution is evident in his influential work, *I and Thou*, where he articulates the central idea that true human existence is defined through relationships—either as deep, holistic I-Thou encounters or as detached, objectifying I-It interactions. Buber's philosophy of dialogue extended to spiritual realms, positing God as the "Eternal Thou" and emphasizing relational encounters as the pathway to genuine human and divine connection. Buber's engagement with the Jewish Renaissance and Zionist movements further reinforced his quest for spiritual and cultural authenticity, synthesizing traditional and modern elements of Jewish thought. His reflections on good and evil, political philosophy, and mysticism reveal a commitment to fostering meaningful human connections and transcending individualistic isolation. Through his life's work, Buber established a vision of human existence as fundamentally relational, dialogical, and spiritually connected.

## **Childhood and Early Learning:**

Buber was born in Vienna in 1878. His family house was close to river Danube. Buber enjoyed his childhood watching river flow with great amusement. There were many factors which left a great impact on Buber's life. Some of the events were: loss of his mother as a child, his activity in the Jewish Renaissance movement and in cultural and political Zionism, his encounter with mysticism and his discovery of Hasidism, the impact of the First World War, his work in postwar education, and his maturing from the 'easy word' to the 'hard word'---all these were the indispensable steps and roads towards his in-depth understanding of life. Through them he reached not merely the philosophy but also the life of dialogue, the *I-Thou* relationship.<sup>1</sup> He used to close his eyes and could still feel the flowing water. From this experience Buber learnt certainty and belief that nothing could happen to him. His Childhood companion in Vienna an Austrian – Jewish, Stefan Zweig says that it was quite a wonderful experience to live in that city.

Buber experienced the calmness of the city. The calmness and the certainty experienced by Buber soon shattered. His mother left the house without leaving any sign to be found. It was the cause of desolation, despair and brokenness. This event left a deep psychological impact on Buber's life. Buber silently mourned and showed sign of bereavement till he crossed the border of his youthhood. His father remarried, so Buber had to join his grandparents. They were good natured and very decent and noble people. This nobility was inculcated to Buber through his grandparents cum teachers.

His grandparents never discussed the separation of his parents in front of him. Buber's grandmother Adele took good care of Buber and made sure to educate him well. She herself read the literature which was not allowed to the Jews. That alien literature which Buber read included many German books, Schiller and Jean-Paul Sartre. She made it certain that her grandson goes through those books. She arranged for a private tutor and instructed him to teach Buber humanism and languages. She believed that these two were the main paths to education and would help her grandson to a great extent. Buber was an intelligent child and had the talent for

this. It was due to this very fact that Buber spoke various languages. He was fluent in German, Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, English, French, Italian, Spanish, Latin, Greek, Dutch and many other languages.<sup>2</sup>

The early years of Buber's life opened a path towards the creation of his famous book "*I and Thou*" which is considered a Classical work. Buber himself claimed it the mature expression of his Philosophy. He confessed that while staying with the grandfather, there were many doubts and questions in his mind, and this situation remained inside him till he reached the age of twenty. There has been many strains and reliefs, but it was all without any focus. It was a world of confusion, although he took refuge in Hasidic myth which was a sort of temporary remedy for the last and the wandering souls. But it seemed that Buber was not fully satisfied with this. He wrote: "here I lived in variegated richness of spirit, but without Judaism, without humanity, and without the presence of the divine."<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to understand that during the age in which "creativity and self - expression" was considered a great value, why young Buber felt empty, unhappy and unfulfilled, yet he started uncovering and reading multiple gifts. Creativity could be one of the many ways to express the passion. To give some direction to this neutral but un-channeled passions considered 'evil urge' he took refuge in Talmud, He emphasized in his Hasidic teachings that Talmud is 'the need for direction'. In the Vienna Student journal Buber's essay "*To Narcissus*" was published in 1900, which shed some light on Buber's life especially about the about the confusion and his soul's longing and yearning for some directions and a spiritual path to follow.

### **Influence of Zionism and the Jewish Renaissance:**

New Zionist movement of Theodor Herzl helped Buber to get out of his narcissism. A young man Eliasberg met Buber for the first time and he found Buber a Zionist. In his view the positive influence of his grandfather was very genuine, the rest was the superficial bourgeoisie culture blended with everything Jewish.<sup>4</sup>Buber also got involved in Polish Socialist circle and often lectured at the Secret meetings and Conferences of Polish students. He used to read Herzl's journal *Die Welt* and in Leipzig it was only Eliasberg who was the lone subscriber of that journal. Buber used to ask Zionist questions and had discussions with Eliasberg. Buber

still felt unsatisfied in spite of following all the religious rituals and obligations of Zionism.

In the summer of 1898 Buber spent some time at his father's place and from there he wrote to Eliasberg that at last he had discovered a work that helped him to convert to nationalism and to Zionism. That was of Mathias Acher's *'Modern Judaism'*. Judaism was transformed and revolutionized by two great movements during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Those two movements were: Haskalah (enlightenment) and Hasidism. From its very origin Haskalah turned towards Western Europe to seek inspiration, and scornfully looked at Hasidism and called it emotional. Hasidism in the same manner considered Haskalah as intellectual and skeptical and found its biggest adversary even greater than the rabbinic teachings. It was only during the renaissance that those two schools of thought started working together. It was through Buber that the synthesis of the two schools of thought found their completeness and depth.

All the early essays of Buber regarding Judaism forcefully showed the clear cut vital personal concern for the apprehension of truth, and fusion of spirit and his stance on evil and other energies of life. Almost all the statements he made and wrote in his early writings about Jewish psychology, later on he translated those into his general philosophy. According to Buber the prime purpose of the Jew association, was to remove of the split between words, deed and thoughts in order to re-establish an integrated personality. The actual resourceful individual does not have to be a person from academia or is he must be simply an artiste. Instead he must be physically powerful and all-rounded man from whom all human actions stream in order to accomplish innovative progress in aspect of life. To make use of this harmony the innovative and creative man must have his roots in the masses by whom he is strengthened and then the people through whom he is enriched and primed. Buber states that the creative man is being misled by Satan, the Satan let the creative man lose himself in unnecessary and inessential elements and leaves him to roam about aimlessly.

### **Buber's Concept of God and World**

As there is a connection between the primary unity and the multiple dimensions of the world so is between love and clash. This movement of disagreement leads to individuation that is love of God. Buber considered conflict as a bridge by which one travels to

the other 'I'. In the same way love plays the role of a bridge by which anyone can walk to God. The union of God and man paves the way for life. Everything exists through this. Buber says that Ludwig Feuerbach has expressed it very wisely. He says that when there is inter personal elation of I and Thou that is relation with God.<sup>5</sup>

Buber considered the world as of two fold. He claimed that even the attitude of man is also twofold. This attitude accords man's twofold nature. Man articulates two prime words according to this nature. These words are not separate but joined words. One combination of the words is *I-Thou*, and other primary word is the joining word *I-It*, one of the words that can replace *it* is either she or he. When man uses *I*, this *I* is also of twofold, and there is a difference between *I* of the *I-Thou* and *I* of the *I-It*. This set of primary words does not mean things but it indicates close and intimate relationship. *I* is never used alone and independently but it is always used in partnership of either *I-Thou* or *I-It*. The words *I-Thou* are used as a whole being, person is completely involved with it, whereas when *I-It* is used it only refers to be spoken partly not as a whole. *I* always refer to the other, it can never be alone, it suggests the existence of *I* and the other.<sup>6</sup>

The objective of human existence is not only the different activities. Buber believed that being a person he thinks of something, he feels something and so on, it is according to him the world and realm of *I*. On the other hand this is not the realm of *Thou*, it is entirely different. When we talk about things that means there is another thing. *I* is bound to others, but when we talk about *Thou*, it is boundless and limitless, it is not bound to things, thou has quite different base. *Thou* speak about a relation, it is always in the context of relationship. Buber sees man's existence in the context of *I-It* and *I-Thou* relation. The world of relation could be experienced in three ways. First is the relation with nature, this relation is depressing, this is a level below speech. The creatures exist and they go against human, and cannot come up to us, when we talk to them as thou, our words adhere to the threshold of speech. Second is the relation between man and man in other words this is our life with other men. This is an open relation in the form of speech. We can accept and approach the *Thou*. Third is our life with the spiritual beings, or our relation with the heavenly beings. This relation is not clear it is clouded, it uses no words yet it discloses itself. We do not perceive *Thou* however we feel that we

are being addressed, we also answer by forming, thinking and acting. Although the words Thou are not uttered. *Thou* is present in each of these three spheres, we feel his breath. As Buber puts it “In each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*”<sup>7</sup> This could happen only when we treat each and everything as *Thou* not as *It*. The relation of *Thou* is the relation of reverence, respect, dignity, admiration, care, concern, wellbeing and comfort. Every person and everything can be Thou for us. On the other hand the relation of *it* is the relation of maltreatment, using others as instrument and object. It is an attitude of using thing and person as objects, it is a disruptive behavior. It is an unequal relation. Buber believed that it is not possible for man to live his life without *I* but *any man who just lives his life only with it must not be considered human person*.<sup>8</sup>

In *I-Thou*, Buber states that;

The I-thou relation is not only with fellow men but it could be maintain withal beings with which we encounter living in this world. What makes a difference between these two relationships is the mutuality.<sup>9</sup>

The word as perceived by man is twofold as the attitude of man is also twofold. He grasps things and beings, and all the events and happenings around him. All these things posses’ qualities and some properties, the events consist of moments. All things are bound to some place and events happen in time. In a way man perceives a prearranged and separated world. This world is some degree a reliable world which has some solidity and duration. The organization of the world can be reviewed time and again; one can go over it with close eyes and can confirm it with open eyes.

Man’s response to his *thou* is the human spirit. Man communicates in many languages and tongues, in form of arts, in different actions, but the spirit is one and its response is also one and only, that is the *Thou* which converse and address him out of mystery. Spirit is a word like the word of same language. As when we talk it takes the form of words in the language, then it is stored in the mind and then takes the form of sound in our throat, however both are the bending and the motion of real event, because the speech does not reside in man, rather man takes his stand in speech and talks from there, in his every word and spirit.<sup>10</sup> Buber claims that spirit is not in the *I*, but between *I and Thou*. The spirit is not like the blood that circulates in the body but it the air in which we breathe. Man lives in spirit. Furthermore if he is able to respond to *Thou* only the he is able to enter into relation with whole

being. It is through this virtue of relation man is able to live in the spirit.<sup>11</sup>

According to Buber God is dwelling in the world and becomes perfect through the world and the life of the human person. God is the undivided origin, widely spread world, fusion, aim and goal of all things, everything is included in God. "The activation and realization of the spiritual power of God is the goal of the creation and every particular thing."<sup>12</sup> Each and everything represents the universe. Everything finds its fulfillment and perfection in God. Every concrete thing rests and finds its perfection by becoming one with God. Each species has its own aspect of accomplishment and perfection but God is the final end where every perfection and fulfillments has to meet. God reveals Himself through different things and He does not want to eliminate diversity rather He perfects Himself in those things. For Buber *I-Thou* relation is like a relation of self and world they are two interacting but independent realities.

*I and Thou* was published in 1923, Buber delivered an informal lecture on "The Psychologizing of the World" for the Psychological Club of Zurich that was the most eminent of Jungian therapy at that time. The notes of the lecture shed light on the central theme of the book. One of the themes is the *self and the world* in entirely different context and language. When Buber used the term Psychologizing of the world that meant including the world in the soul, from which our life received its meaning. According to *Psychologism* the world is taken as an idea. *Cosmologism* considers the soul as a product and an element of the world. For Buber neither psychologism nor cosmologism but he gives the third apportion where the psychic and cosmic elements be united without abolishing the autonomy of each other. Talking about the perfect world Buber claims that the world has not yet completed, it is on the process of becoming, and we should not accept the world as it is given but we persistently generate it. We produce the world in such a way that without knowing we transform our perfection, attention and determination which make them into actuality. This means deep down we willfully produce the world in order that our strength may run through it, so we become the eternal part of it.<sup>13</sup>

Human life is the carrier and certainty of all transcendence. Tao, 'the way,' is concord in change and conversion, and the great disclosure of Tao is the person who unites the greatest change with the purest union. While Tao is the way, a path, an order, and

harmony of everything, its existence in things is only potentially until it becomes living actuality and revealed by its relation with cognizant being of man. Tao is the unifying energy in man that enables him to overcome all divergence from the very beginning of life to its completion and it has the power to cure and mend all the wounds and whatever was broken.<sup>14</sup>

The Tao is a lived unity which could not be achieved through actions and knowledge as men attain this usually. Man considered action that is the combination of attention and action. Knowledge for him is part of mental force and senses.

### **Concept of Good and Evil:**

Talking about opposites such as *good and evil* in the realm of morality and *beautiful and ugly* in the field of aesthetic, Schmitt says that only when person is able to understand the significance of the good and beautiful, only then he is would be able to define evil and ugly. When we talk about friend and foe, it does no depict the normative idea, but a situation. Buber claims that behind these common pairs of opposite, Good and Evil and beautiful and ugly there exists other concepts in which the negative idea is closely connected to the positive concept. He gives the examples of such pairs are: chaos to cosmos and emptiness to fullness. Ethically looking at the opposite of good and evil we find that it is direction and absence of direction and aesthetically viewing the idea of beautiful and ugly we see that there stand the concepts of form and formlessness. For Buber there are no pairs of *concepts* in the political dominion because it is impossible and complicated to award sovereignty to the negative pole. Buber says that the possible pair that exists at background is the order and absence of order, but the order must get rid of decline that usually clings to it. For Buber, right order is direction and form in the political system.<sup>15</sup>

Buber says that in Schmitt's analysis all genuine political theories presupposed that man is evil. Schmitt clarifies that this evil is dangerous and problematic. Schmitt supported this claim from theological doctrines through his association with Friedrich Gogarten, especially the theological doctrine of the *absolute sinfulness of man*. Gogarten claimed that the essential evil of man and his absolute sinful state is the outcome of his confrontation with God, in which he stands alone. Buber says that Gogarten made use of Christian theology, according to which the man is sinful, fallen man and not saved or he is unredeemed and immoral and degenerated.

Buber says that God is God and man is man, there is an absolute distance between God and man. Due to this distance and by His virtue man is redeemed. Buber believes that for him man is not radically this or that. Man is neither good nor evil but man is good and evil together in a pre-eminent manner.

In this view *good and evil* cannot be a pair of opposites, and same is true for right and left, above and beneath. Good, according to Buber is a direction towards home, where as evil is an aimless twirl of human possibilities and potentialities, without these potentialities human persons cannot achieve anything, especially when these are without any direction nothing can be gained, everything goes away. The man who cannot see the two poles (good and evil) is blind. Buber does not consider evil as pure delusion but as a negative and harmful force that interacts with the good in a procedure leading back to the original unity. Both for Buber, and Baal-Shem, evil is not an essence but the lack of goodness or deprivation of good it is like the 'shell' that covers and cloaks the fundamental nature (essence) of a things. There is no doubt that the evil is negative but its existence cannot be denied. Therefore, man must try his level best to work for deliverance and redemption whole heartedly.

Referring to Kierkegaard, Buber tells that man can find the truth of Single One when he presents himself through his actions. In a précised manner man can find truth to be true only when he is able to go the trough the test and clears it. Both believe that human truth is linked to responsibility. Man must have faith in truth that is his utmost need. This truth is independent and man cannot acquire for himself but he gets into relationship with his very life, the faith in truth that sustains all. This truth discloses itself in the fact of responsibility. Man is always in the need of the Single One; all things present the Single One.<sup>16</sup>

### **Living God versus the God of Philosopher: The Eternal Thou**

For Buber, the only relation, which is inclusive and exclusive is the relation with *theeternal Thou*. It is further said that eternal Thou is met in each particular Thou, yet it cannot be attached to any of them. The *Eternal Thou* can never become *It*. Man could find God living in this world as the Christians believe that the *kingdom of God is in the midst of the people*. Buber claims that men cannot seek God while being associated with worldly possessions nor they find God by isolating them from the world. Only those could find and meet

God who submits then completely to Him, and this could happen living in the world.

The above said statements do not suggest that, this is neither pantheist nor transcendent but in other words it is *coincidentia oppositorum* as Karl Barth called it “wholly Other”; he is also wholly Same and wholly Present. He is also *Mysterium Tremendum* of Rudolf Otto, who appears and overthrows, He is the mystery of the self – evident, which is closer to me than my *I*. This all embracing, actual being, the one, whose nature never ceases to be *Thou* for people. The man who comes forward to meets the eternal *Thou*, he is a free man about which Buber has discussed in the part two of his book *I and Thou*, that man is the man of dialogue. When a man meets God, it does not mean that, man is concerned with God, but he meets that the words is meaningful, in other words there is meaning in the world. Buber takes an opposite stance of Kierkegaard, and says that there is no such relation as *I-Thou* with God if the person runs away from his fellowmen and the world. In *I and Thou* Buber further says that man who enter into *I-Thou* relation he never runs away from any such relation. But such man completes the relation in the face of God. The world of *It* is always seen in the context of time and space, whereas, the world of *Thou* is the core where all relations meet, that is the eternal *Thou*

For Buber, the eternal *Thou* does mean God. But God means the eternal *Thou*. The eternal *Thou*, is not another modern approach to reintroduce the God of theologians and philosophers, whose existence could be justified and proved, whose characteristics, properties, and nature could be explained. Person who gains benefits from the world will also profits from God. The man who articulate the *Thou*, he means the eternal *Thou*. It is said that Buber found a house in the *I-Thou* which he lost as a young child. This he said is a very appropriate world for the modern man<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Calmness Buber experienced in his native city soon shattered because of his parents’ separation. It caused desolation, despair and brokenness in Buber. This event left a deep psychological impact on Buber’s life. Buber silently mourned and showed sign of bereavement reaching at the age of youth hood. Buber had to join his grandparents. Buber’s early encounter with mysticism was within the social context; especially The New Community that was established by brothers Heinrich and Julius

Hart in Berlin. This community emphasized on the divine. Furthermore, Buber believed that the activation and realization of the spiritual power of God is the goal of the creation. Everything concrete attains rest in God as its perfection. During the time of confusion, Buber took refuge in Hasidic myth which provided temporary remedy for the lost and the wandering souls. But Buber was not fully satisfied with this, he wrote: “here I lived in variegated richness of spirit, but without Judaism, without humanity, and without the presence of the divine.”

While talking about God and its relation with world Buber was convinced that; as there is a connection between the primary unity and the multiple dimensions of the world so is between love and clash. This movement of disagreement leads to individuation that is love of God. Buber considered conflict as a bridge by which one travels to the other *T*. Love is that bridge by which man can reach to God and meet him. This union becomes the source of life through which one is united with God. This idea finds its fulfillment in the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach who claimed. The early years of Buber's life opened a path towards the creation of his “*I and Thou*” which is considered the Classical work, and Buber himself claimed it the mature expression of his Philosophy.

I of the *I-Thou* and I of the *I-It* indicates close and intimate relationship. *I* is never used alone and independently but it is always used in partnership of either *I-Thou* or *I-It*. The words *I-Thou* are used as a whole being person is completely involved with it, whereas when *I-It* is used it only refers to be spoken partly not as a whole. *I* always refers to the other, it can never be alone it suggests the existence of *I* and the other. The world of *It* is always seen in the context of time and space, whereas, the world of *Thou* is the core where all relations meet, that is the eternal *Thou*. The man who comes forward to meets the eternal *Thou*, he is a free man about which Buber has discussed in the part two of his book *I and Thou*, that man is the man of dialogue. When a man meets God, it does not mean that, man is concerned with God, but he meets that the words is meaningful, in other words there is meaning in the world.

For Buber mysticism is the belief in a (momentous) union with the Divine or the absolute not after death but in the course of mortal life. Mysticism should be understood as a religious solipsism, a completely personal experience of the individual person. There is only on real relationship and that is the relation of

the individual person with God. The real mystic is not concerned with outer freedom but he gives preference to inner freedom.

### Notes and References

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- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Works* (London: Search Press Ltd., 1982), p.4.
  - <sup>2</sup> Cf. Maurice Friedman, *Ibid*, pp.5-7.
  - <sup>3</sup> Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, ed., and Trans. with and Intro. By Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Books, 1993) pp. 55-58.
  - <sup>4</sup> Cf., Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Works*, Op. cite, P-3; Cf., Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Works*, Op. cite, P-37.
  - <sup>5</sup> Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Works*, (London: Search Press Ltd., 1982),P. 81.
  - <sup>6</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *I And Thou*, Second Edit.Tran. Roland George Smith, (London: Continuum, 2011), Pp. 11-12
  - <sup>7</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*,Op. Cite, P.14.
  - <sup>8</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *Ibid*,P. 32.
  - <sup>9</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *Ibid*, P.94.
  - <sup>10</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, P.36
  - <sup>11</sup> Cf., Martin Buber, *Ibid*, P.37.
  - <sup>12</sup> Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Works*, P. 81.
  - <sup>13</sup> Cf. Maurice Friedman, *Ibid*, P. 81.
  - <sup>14</sup> Cf., Maurice Friedman, *op .cit.* Pp.87-88.
  - <sup>15</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, Ninth print, Trans. Ronald G. Smith, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975),Pp. 74-75.
  - <sup>16</sup> Cf., Martin Buber, *Between Man And Man*, op. cit, P. 82
  - <sup>17</sup> Maurice Friedman, op. cite, p.357.