The Uniqueness of Martin Buber

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AT THIS NEAR JUNCTURE of the two millennia, Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue, contained in his seminal work, I and Thou (1923), projects itself upon our consciousness with a profound awareness of its prophetic implications. Buber in his milieu was concerned with the eclipse of God, the encroachments of science, and the alienation of the individual from his spiritual essence. Newly developed disciplines had been carving out special spheres dismembering man through the microscope of scientific objectivity. Now, in the last decade of this century, similar concerns assail us in a more intense degree. The idols of the cyberspace and the incubus of high-tech communication pose a subversive threat to Buber’s sphere of genuine meeting. The nature of this threat lies in the paradox of being able to interact globally, instantaneously, and anonymously, permitting individuals to interface while rendering each of them in remote isolation. In no small measure, the reality of the “between” in Buber’s I-Thou relation has been usurped by the virtuality of the computer screen with no glimpse through to the Eternal Thou.

“IT IS A VERY DANGEROUS SITUATION when people are spiritually adrift and technologically skilled,” warns psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton. This engulfing phenomenon of screen-gazing, and the tug of its gravity, has caused disaffection among such intellectuals as Gertrude Himmelfarb and Joseph Epstein, and has elicited a note of precaution from the astrophysicist and computer security expert, Clifford Stoll: “You’re viewing a world that doesn’t exist.” The intricate maze of Webs and Nets has created a substratum of an “unreal universe, a soluble tissue of nothingness” with its potential to destroy a genuine face-to-face dialogue. In view of the onrushing reorganization of our institutions to accommodate ever-new modes of technological interaction and information, the exigency of Buber’s basic thought begs for a contextual hermeneutic.

Alongside the ubiquity of this development, a parallel and contrary trend has taken root. In spite of the vast proliferation of the human sciences, there has been a diligent effort to restore the complex wholeness of being human. To this end, Buber’s philosophy of dialogue has been ingeniously adapted. Before his death in June 1965, Buber so predicted: “In a time in which the I-Thou relation is so obscured, so disdained as it is today, I postulate its new domain.” Although Buber was keenly aware of the surround-
ing augmentation of the world of I-It, he was similarly optimistic of the future augmentation of the I-Thou relation. Of these two trends in human interaction, the technological as opposed to the existential face-to-face relation, the former is undoubtedly irreversible in scope, while the latter mandates a reconsideration of Buber’s thought.

Buber’s resistance to structured formulations imparts a diaphanous quality to his philosophy permitting a wide range of interpretations. In this regard, two volumes of essays critically evaluating and/or assimilating Buber’s works are significant in assessing his impact on postmodern thought. One, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, written by contemporary scholars during Buber’s lifetime and submitted to him for his review and response shortly before his death, and the other, the publication of *Martin Buber and the Human Sciences*, written by professionals who have applied his philosophy of dialogue to their individual humanistic disciplines. Indeed, this posthumous collection of essays is a stellar testimonial to the dormant potentialities in Buber’s thought which have been actualized across a broad spectrum of fields, including the humanities, education, psychology, speech communication, anthropology, history, sociology, and economics. Approximately three decades span the perspectives contained in these two volumes, providing us with a clear sense of Buber’s influence both in retrospect and in prospect.

Buber’s existential philosophy is addressed to each individual and is notable therefore for its absence of that metaphysical and epistemological schematization which accompanies conventional philosophical categories. “I have no inclination to systematizing,” he writes in one of his letters. “I have...no doctrine of a primal ground (Urgrund) to offer.” Buber is, in fact, the quintessential existentialist. By shunning universals and the icons of orderly systems, he has pushed existentialism to its logical extreme, affirming uniqueness, particularity, immediacy, and concrete being. His “atypical” approach reflecting the *sui generis* quality of Buber’s philosophy has a consistency of its own withal, prompting Charles Hartshorne to open his essay with the assertion: “Buber has no metaphysics; Buber is one of the greatest of metaphysicians.” (In demurral, Buber will admit only to the first half of this statement.) In similar paradoxical fashion, Walter Kaufmann sums up his essay: “One might well conclude that in reality there is only one existentialist, and he is no existentialist but Martin Buber.” Within the measure of these two statements, we have the power of Buber’s philosophy. The rest is commentary. Whether Buber was translating the Hebrew Bible into German to recapture the existential encounter between God and man, or characterizing the nature of the dialogic relation, his polestar was the primacy of the living “between” of independent entities.

Paramount among the essays of his contemporaries is their attempt to concretize his philosophy into a construct of assailable ideas. Buber’s response, however, removes any hope for a metaphysical and epistemological formulation. The “eternal butterfly” nature of the I-Thou relation cannot be held captive in philosophical nets nor is it conveyable in its living presence. In response to Emil Fackenheim’s suggestion that an I-Thou knowledge may ensue as a doctrine of revelation from the I-Thou encounter, Buber denies that any I-Thou knowledge is transmissible. It finds its highest expression in conceptual terms which is none other than I-It knowledge. Unconditioned by classical approaches to philosophical systems, Buber provides no parameters within which to shape a course of ideas. “I have no teaching,” Buber repeats, “but I carry on a conversation.... I only point to something.... I
have nothing but the certainty that we share in the revelation." At no time does Buber veer from his canon regarding man's dual attitude as he faces the world—the I-Thou relation in a direct, whole-hearted, unpremeditated living encounter with the other, and the I-It relation in a reflective, manipulative, evaluative, and objective experience. The former remains inexpressible; the latter is communicable. Moreover, Buber informs us, "a continuity of the I-Thou relation is not attainable in this our life....[But] it is ever again possible....to establish a continuity of the I-It relation." Within the purview of his philosophy, it would seem to be quite impossible to live indefinitely in the consuming intensity of the I-Thou relational event. This is the face-to-face sphere of being. These are the moments of grace of the bare present which must inevitably flow and subside into a repository of experience describable in time and space.

In spite of the salience of the I-Thou knowledge, Buber does not however disparage scientific and aesthetic knowledge. Countering Nathan Rotenstreich's claim that in employing terms like "a priori," "inborn," and "instinct," Buber pays tribute to the trends of epistemology and psychology, Buber does not deny his dependency on the terminology of these disciplines. Such knowledge, he declares, is "necessary to man that he may do his work with precision and plunge it in the truth of relation, which is above the understanding and gathers it up in itself." For Buber, knowledge is a means towards the fulfillment of the dialogic life, but the burden of proof is not in speculation but in existence.

Looking backward, Buber was heir not only to the "God is dead" syndrome of German and French thinkers, but to the intellectualism, scientism, and institutionalism which impeded dialogue. God had been philosophically argued, scientifically scrutinized, and religiously ritualized into a meaningless formula. Against this background of hollow pursuits, Buber sought to recover the immediacy of the religious experience. Claiming that Hermann Cohen's idea of God in his Kantian system had reached the limits of conceptualization, Buber comments: "Cohen has constructed the last home for the God of the philosophers":

This means that the philosopher would be compelled to recognize and admit the fact that his idea of the Absolute was dissolving at the point where the Absolute lives; that it was dissolving at the point where the Absolute is loved; because at that point the Absolute is no longer the "Absolute" about which one may philosophize, but God.

Buber regarded the cognitive approach to the Absolute as a point of no relational return and asserted that beyond its static nature lay a higher revealed truth apodictically asserting itself as a compelling Presence.

Nurtured in part by the Bible and the vitality of Hasidism, Buber's experience of faith has its provenance in the I-Thou encounter. "The relation with man is the real simile of the relation with God." Remaining open to the primacy of this meeting is the prerequisite for the religious life. Every I-Thou relational event is a beam of understanding leading to the Supreme Thou, which Buber terms "a moment God." Like Jacob's ladder, the nexus to God does not float above the everydayness, but has its base in this world and then ascends to eternity. Buber denies a mysticism which goes beyond the reality of the concrete dialogic meeting, and vehemently rejects gnosis, considering it just another I-It structure of knowledge. Fackenheim, as well as others, brings to the fore the antinomies inherent in Buber's philosophy and rightly asks how to reconcile a God of the moment with the Eternal Thou? "How can the God of the moment at the same time be recognized as infinite and eter-
nal?" In response, Buber transcends the rigors of deductive reasoning. Maintaining that any assertions about God are limiting, Buber chooses paradox as the all-encompassing statement, and states that in logic, A and non-A cannot exist together, but in the reality of life they are inseparable. "The unity of the contraries is the mystery at the innermost core of the dialogue." Man's propensity for a neatly defined and structured understanding of God necessarily bows before the antinomy of the finite and the infinite. The supreme ontological statement of the Bible, "I am that I am," in its more literal translation supports a moment of God. "I will be that which I will be." The Infinite God of dialogue who shines through the finite I-Thou relation "speaks to a unique partner in a unique situation disclosing Himself according to the unique exigencies of each situation." For Buber, revelation itself is the ultimate proof for the existence of the Sempiternal.

In this encounter with the Supreme Thou, something stirs in the soul of man so that he emerges with a new understanding of this world. The reality of this encounter cannot be expressed, nor proven, nor can it be explained—it can only be lived. There are three discernible aspects of relation: the reality of the full Presence in mutual relation; the confirmation of a new meaning unknown to man before; and, the confirmation of meaning in this world and not of something beyond. It cannot be transmitted as a prescribed duty. It can only be confirmed in its living truth in this world.

Emmanuel Levinas, assessing another aspect of Buber's thought, claims Buber sees the peak of the I-Thou relation in the all-spiritual friendship (amitié toute spirituelle). "On the contrary," says Buber, "the relationship seems to win its true greatness...precisely...where two men...each of opposite dispositions...accepts and confirms the other, even in the severest conflict...." It is in the face of such dissension, when the I continues to hold the experience-side of the Thou present to himself, that dialogue quickens. Buber's own dialogue with Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and other non-Judaic religions can be summed up by his remark "that he stood on the threshold of his 'ancestral house' and faced the world outside that house, in openness to what was out there." At further issue, where Levinas praises solicitude as the access to the otherness of the other, Buber asserts that he who has this access apart from solicitude will also find it. But he who has no access to the other, "may clothe the naked and feed the hungry all day and it will remain difficult for him to say a true Thou." Man is a solitary being who needs to be confirmed by others in his genuine exclusivity and not merely out of concern. "It is not solicitude, but the essential relation, which is primal." A persistent and legitimate murmur among his contemporaries is Buber's lack of definitive directions and a system of ethics leading towards the dialogic meeting with the Absolute. Buber acknowledges that "the deficiency exists." To furnish such directives, Buber rebuts, would be to negate the core of his emphasis on the particularity and uniqueness of each concrete being. The most proximal universal directive that Buber offers is indicated in the "two primary words...and their true relation to each other..." The who confirms the uniqueness of the other has shared in a genuine moral responsibility. The culmination of good is to discover the light of the Absolute Thou from the sparks of human dialogue.

Buber's legacy of faith and revelation provides no security against the "necessity to live in fear and trembling" which accompanies each individual on the "narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge." Because Buber's philosophy
lacks an objective criterion for judgment, the question arises: How does one distinguish between the deceptive and the genuine I-Thou encounter? Buber replies that the true encounter will be authenticated in the lived existence. In concluding comments to his contemporaries, Buber expresses a similar indeterminate assurance: "Many of my readers...will protest...such a 'subjectivism.' Those with whom I am in dialogue and whose experience confirms mine know otherwise."19

Perhaps the best way to educe the singularity of Buber's existentialism as compared to previous thinkers is to telescope the major distinctions. Both Buber and Kierkegaard renounce institutional religion as that which obscures the knowledge of God. Both speak of freeing themselves in order to address God. But where Kierkegaard seeks to free himself from human relationship in order to find God, Buber speaks of freeing oneself in order to achieve human relationship and thereby to find the everlasting Thou.

From the philosophy of Nietzsche, Buber was influenced by the need of man to unshackle himself from shallow, hypocritical, traditional values and to affirm life in its present reality. Nietzsche, however, in saying "God is dead," leaves solitary man as the being through whose subjectivity the world exists. Since God is dead, one must therefore give it meaning and value. Buber asserts that values have directions when one has discovered them, not invented them. "It can be for me an illuminating meaning, a direction-giving value only if it has been revealed to me in my meeting with Being, not if I have freely chosen it for myself from among the existing possibilities..."20

The difference between Heidegger and Buber is most manifest in the presentation of their respective philosophies. Heidegger is the abstract, systematic thinker, the academician whereas Buber meets his readers with the direct personal awareness of addressing his philosophy of dialogue to a potential other. Heidegger follows up Nietzsche's statement claiming God is dead, and through this negation of God he erects a new position of pure ontological being, which "for him is bound to and attains its illumination through the destiny and history of man." Buber counters that "for me a concept of being that means anything other than...existing being, namely that it exists, remains insurmountably empty."21

Sartre continues the cry of Nietzsche and Heidegger that "God is dead," declaring that man should forget God. He views the subject-object relation as the primary and exclusive relation. God is an object, the "quintessence of the Other...who makes me into an object, as I make him."22 Buber, on the other hand, pleads for man to find God and proclaims the subject-subject or I-Thou relation to be primary. God can never be an object. The Ineffable may be addressed but never expressed. He Is the Eternal Thou in the reciprocal I-Thou relation. Sartre declares God is silent and therefore dead. Buber regards God’s silence not as an extinction but as an eclipse in which God is waiting for man to turn to Him.

In retrospect, Buber is the existentialist par excellence unyielding in the uniqueness and primacy of the I-Thou meeting. With biblical persistence Buber chooses life—the life of dialogue.

The new I-Thou domain that Buber postulated before his death in 1965 came to fruition three decades later in an interdisciplinary conference held at San Diego State University, under the aegis of Maurice Friedman, Buber's ambassador-at-large. The impact of Buber's philosophy of dialogue resonated throughout the presentations, culminating in a volume of essays, Martin Buber and the Human Sciences. The resolve by the essayists to apply Buber's philosophy to their special disciplines was a promethean endeavor given the absence of a struc-
tured system. Buber himself recognized the fundamental dialectic inherent in his philosophy of dialogue. To illustrate the nature of this dilemma, Buber speaks of Rabbi Bunam, one of the last great teachers of Hasidism who wanted to write a book about Adam, which would be about the whole man, but then decided not to write it. Buber concluded that Rabbi Bunam's decision not to write it was an acknowledgment of the inundating character of such an attempt. Although man is a proper study for man, yet he cannot cope with its immensity. He is left therefore with the alternative of "either to consider all things in heaven and earth save man, or to divide man into depart-
ments." Even philosophical anthropology, which concerns itself with the whole of man, cannot concretize the real living being. The philosophical anthropologist can have knowledge of the whole person only if he does not abandon his immediate subjectivity. But in this position, he can never set down the principles required by an objective discipline. On the other hand, as an observer, he cannot "attain to knowledge by remaining on the shore and watching the foaming waves," but he must swim himself in the tides of living waters. The individual in his uniqueness and his wholeness cannot be reduced to the exactitude of a science.

Maurice Friedman's introductory essay focuses on this theme of dialogue and dialectic with an insightful and nuanced diagnosis of Buber's dual attitude of I-Thou and I-It as it applies to the various human sciences. Designating the I-Thou as the dialogic and I-It as the dialectic, Friedman asserts that the immediate, direct, and external nature of the I-Thou meeting alternates with the mediate, indirect, and internal nature of the I-It thought processes. He thus suggests the unsustainability of the dialogic "between" as against the human need to assess, digest, and reflect. In Buber's words, "Without It man cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man." This outward and inward oscillation in human interaction is especially fragile in psychotherapy, which has a dynamic of its own. Drawing upon Buber's ontology of particularity, therapists tread a narrow rocky ridge between the I-Thou of uniqueness and the I-It of scientific observation. "The real master," says Buber, "responds to uniqueness." Buber anticipated the profound implications for psychology, sociology, education, and religion, and the delicate balancing act involved in the dialogic approach. Simply rendered, Buber cautions that the psychologist cannot remain the detached observer, but he must participate to ascertain what is unique and what is typical in man. The sociologist must see man as an individual within society rather than as an aggregate within the density of the institution. Buber rejects both individualism and collectivism. In the former, one merely asserts his own will. In the latter, he does not exist because he has become depersonalized by a corporate identity. Instead, Buber favors small organic communities wherein people interact in direct face-to-face relationships. "If you consider the individual by himself, then you see of man just as much as you see of the moon; only man with man provides a full image. If you consider the aggregate by itself, then you see of man just as much as we see of the Milky Way..." The individual comes into being when he relates to the other. In the reciprocal affirmation of the I-Thou meeting, the reality of the "between" emerges.

In education, Buber stresses the interaction between teacher and pupil in an actual—not just a virtual—face-to-face encounter. This mutuality is somewhat modified insofar as the youthful student is unable to express a coordinate Thou to his mentor. Applying Buber's idea of "inclusion," the disparity dissolves when the teacher "has gathered the child's
presence into his own as one of the bear-
ers of his communion with the world, one of the focuses of his responsibilities for the world.” This does not necessi-
tate—nor should it be—a constant pre-
occupation with the pupil, but the child
knows and relies upon the teacher’s pres-
ence in a steady, potential enduring dia-
logue. “Trust, trust in the world, because
this human being exists—that is the most
inward achievement of the relation in
education.”30 Buber’s approach avoids
the two extremes of teaching, of the au-
thoritarian transmission of traditional
values on the one hand, and the permis-
sive freedom of expression on the other.
The former provokes abject obedience
or rebellion, and the latter separates free-
dom from purpose. Buber’s direction is
an I-Thou relation, a communion, in which
the educator “brings the precious ore in
the soul of his pupil to light and frees it
from dross.”30

The man of faith is the one who hal-
lows this world not through ritual, cer-
emony, or precepts, but through his
meeting with others. Martin Buber criti-
cized Kierkegaard, who renounced
Regina Olsen as an object of worldliness
standing between him and his love of
God. “God wants us to come to him by
means of the Reginas he has created and
not by renunciation of them.”31 Buber
maintains that you cannot truly love God
if you do not love his creations. One does
not find God if he explores the world. He
does not find God if he denies the world.
He finds the living God when he speaks
Thou in the world.

Openness to the Thou of Buber’s dia-
logic encounter extends beyond the
interhuman to nature and to forms of
human creativity. The relationship is
modified in that it is beneath the thresh-
old of speech. Yet there is a dialogue in
the sense that a tree, a symphony, a
poem, or a work of art may “say” some-
thing to us. It is a spontaneous response
of one’s whole being which is grounded
in the suspension of all distractions and
intrusions. In this meeting, the created
form is “not left out as a detached object
of observation, use and analysis,”32 but
responds as a Thou to the speaking I.
Ruefully, this exquisite moment of in-
finite grace necessarily recedes as a
memory of experience retrievable again
through I-It channels of recollection. Ap-
plying the dialogic approach to the un-
derstanding of literature, Pat Boni corre-
lates excerpts in Buber’s philosophy and
Shakespeare’s King Lear. Skillfully and
perceptively she juxtaposes these pas-
sages in describing the denouement of
King Lear’s journey from the isolated
unreality of his existence to the living
Lear, albeit in decline, who says Thou to
his daughter Cordelia. In her reading of
Shakespeare through the lens of Buber,
Boni imparts a redemptive aspect to a
tragic conclusion.33

In spite of the global scale of reticu-
lated systems, human scientists have
conscientiously embraced Buber’s phi-
losophy to restore an interpersonal di-
mension to their diverse disciplines. Con-
fronted with the complexities of political-
economic entanglements and centraliza-
tion, Robert C. Hoover similarly mitigates
the harsh realities of the facelessness of
It through a rendering of Buber’s gentle
way of preserving individuality. In the
propinquity of small group formations of
varying interests and scope within the
conglomerate, it is possible to develop
genuine community through person-to-
person relationships. The emerging
“We”34 from I-Thou interactions will serve
to guard the moral, material, economic,
and technological essentials to sustain
the core of centralization without de-
stroying the communal character. “For
to the It of the State is owed what is of
survival necessity; but to the Thou of
community relationship...is owed all that
is possible....” Hoover applies Buber’s
vision of communitarian socialism in
workable details to matters of food and

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energy resources with proactive concern for the whole planet and all its life forms.35

As we enter the twenty-first century, the efflorescence of Buber’s teachings contained in this posthumous volume comes as a prophetic fulfillment of his words. Buber’s philosophy affirms man’s ability to choose to free himself from the engulfing world of It; to choose to meet the other with the responsibility of mutuality; to choose “participation in true, fulfilled existence,”36 and thereby to choose to find the everlasting Thou.