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Philosophy of the Second Person - *The Ethics Driven Philosophy*

At the heart of the Philosophy of the second person is a fight with traditional, materialist conceptions of man and the world in which he lives. It fights an inherent solipsism plaguing the unknown in both how we understand others and our relationship with God. This paper seeks to reconcile the I-Thou relation, found in the Philosophies of Buber and Levinas, with the materialist notion of considering the world as I-it, in a vein similar to Heidegger's 'readiness-to-hand,' concluding that viewing the world as that of relationships should be adopted not for the sake of its empirical evidence, but rather based on its ethical imperative.

The great elevator of the I-Thou relationship was Martin Buber, whose philosophy was laid out in the aptly named "I and Thou." His central claim is declared in the first sentence: "To man the world is twofold in accordance with his twofold attitude." (Buber 15) This twofold attitude is that between the relationships of 'I-it' and 'I-thou.' "As experience (*Erfahrung*) the world belongs to the primary word (*Grundwort*) I-it." (Wodehouse 18) When we look at a tree, we observe it in a spatial-temporal state, at some distance away from us. It is a static object, one which derives its meaning from the value it provides us.[1] Our I-it attitude extends beyond the object, for we frequently see our fellow humans through a similar lens. For example, "Buber claims that the success of the economist and the statesman requires that each of them treat other persons not as unique individuals but as "centres of work and effort, whose particular capabilities it is his concern to estimate and utilize." (Charmé 170-171) Such thinking is natural, since "I-it includes all our normal mental processes." (Charmé 166) If we wish to move beyond such a world of thinking, we must see the world through I-thou relationships. Under the I-Thou view of the tree, we view it not how it "relates…to a human being," but rather as "the tree itself." (Wodehouse 18) We view humans as individuals. We even view our thoughts as individuals, "which desires to be made through him [the I] into a work." (Buber 18) Under this lens, "I-Thou exists in the 'spaceless, timeless present on the shore of existence.'" (Charmé 165) The world consists no longer of objects some distance away at some time, but as a world of relationships, dimensionless and present. We view the I as "not a single transcendental subject but the realm of meeting that is constitutive of subjectivity: "the between." (Lumsden 228) Buber describes this

[1] Bizarrely, this relationship between ourselves and the tree is explained best in the children's novel "The Giving Tree," in which man through different stages of life strips a tree bare through the utility of its parts.

life as that of Socrates, whose "*I* lived continually in the relation with man which is bodied forth in dialogue." (Buber 65-66) Buber proposes two imperatives as to why we should view the world in this latter way: the theological and the ethical.

Buber saw our relationship with fellow man as mirroring that of God. Originally, he saw three elements constitutive of an I-thou relationship with God: "first, 'actual reciprocity'; second, 'the inexpressible confrontation of meaning'; and third, that meaning touches our life in the here and now." (Forman-Barzilai 160) Such a relationship with God is not dependent on tangible, empirical evidence, since we also have no tangible or empirical evidence of the individual. He says "when one addresses someone as a person there is no experience or consciousness of that person." (Charmé 172) It is necessarily true that we cannot put ourselves into the heads of others and we thus have no empirical evidence that others are conscious beings. Nevertheless, Buber believes we still come in contact with the Thou in subtle ways. "The master looks into his cat's eyes while his own heart and mind say Thou to it." (Wodehouse 20) But this Thou is uncomfortable, the same way that continuous eye contact is uncomfortable. Thus, "the animal [sinks] back out of the stammer of its glance into the disquietude where there is no speech and almost no memory." (Buber 97-98) Although Buber is at odds with Kierkegaard on certain accounts, he here advocates for a 'leap of faith' both in terms of our relationship with others and our relationship with God. We must believe in the Thou to preserve a pure and direct relationship with God, as God is the eternal Thou, and "in each Thou we address the eternal Thou." (Buber 101) "The 'I and Thou' relation among human beings," Forman-Barzilai summarizes, "originates from and culminates with the dialogue between the 'Eternal Thou.'" (Forman-Barzilai 156) Such an argument depends on a mysticism, one which recognises the power of objects unable to express their consciousness, like the tree or the moon or a cat, and extends such an argument to the power of God. But we do not need to rely solely on such an argument to buy into the I-Thou relationship, for Buber also posits an ethical imperative for believing in the I-Thou.

The ethical imperative of the Thou is derived from Kant, who believed you must always "use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." (Kant 93) But unlike Kant, Buber extends the ethical community to that which cannot directly express its consciousness. For example, seeing forests as Thou allows us to preserve the environment just as we would preserve human life. And as for

our treatment of humans, "we consider their freedom and individuality, and we do not see them as machines or servants with purely functional values." (Charmé 173) Gone would be the days of 'human resources,' and we could face the world with such an implicit empathy that an individual truly believing in the I-Thou relationship would find it very difficult to be unkind to his fellow man. The ethical portion of this theory is strong for the same reason that Kant's is strong: it relies intrinsically on its metaphysics. The way one views the world necessitates morality if one is to buy into this theory. One could argue that Buber's ethical theory is stronger than Kant's since Kant had to extrapolate his metaphysical theory into his categorical imperative, whereas Buber's metaphysics stands alone as an ethical theory in and of itself. The question now is whether Buber's two justifications, the theological and the ethical, are independent of one another. Charmé believes so, saying "Whether this type [the theological] of I-Thou relation is convincing in itself, however, does not depend on Buber's ethical vision of I-Thou where knowledge of a non-reductive type *is* present." (Charmé 173) Whether such a question matters will be discussed in the conclusion, but for now we can understand the validity of this claim by understanding Buber in relation to the Holocaust.

Following the Holocaust, "Buber had to reconcile God's inaction and silence in the Holocaust with his well-known apodictic presuppositions that humanity and God are bound together in eternal dialogue." (Forman-Barzilai 156) Buber's ethical imperative, if anything, was bolstered by the atrocities of the holocaust. He used the Holocaust "to amplify his call for the world's attention to the vital need for dialogue in the unprecedented time of global crisis." (Forman-Barzilai 158-159) Hitler and the Nazis were certainly not thinking in terms of 'I-Thou' relationships with the Jewish People. Rather, through depersonalizing this group as subhuman, considering them as 'it,' they were able to justify their evils. But the dialogic and reciprocal relationship that the individual had with God had to be resolved concerning God's inaction in the face of evil. Buber thus moved to a 'faith in the sake of agonism' in a vein similar to Kierkegaard. He claimed (1) "that we cannot speak of God but only our relationship with him and (2) that "our relationship to him is as supra-contradictory as it is because he is as supra-contradictory as he is." (Forman-Barzilai 160) God is necessary to preserve 'I-thou' relationships, as he is the 'eternal Thou,' so we must maintain our belief. That being said, large atrocities like the Holocaust attack our idea of whether we can have an 'I-Thou' relationship at

all with a benevolent God and whether that 'I-Thou' relationship is possible to adopt in the face of horrible people. The words of an unknown concentration camp prisoner haunt this argument: 'If there is a God, he will have to beg my forgiveness.'

Buber shows comparatively less interaction with the atrocities of the holocaust than another philosopher of the second person: Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas believed that since the subject "realizes his own separateness in a process of subjectification which is not explicable in terms of a recoil from the Thou." (Lumsden 229) The *I* can exist independently from the Thou and It. We do exist merely in the relationship between ourselves and others, rather "Thou and It are nothing other than the intentional "for which" of the comportment corresponding them." *Thou* and *It* in this sense are a tool for the *I*, identified by Levinas as *The Other.* We are thus "being for others." Similarly to Buber, Levinas maintains that the world is made up of relationships, but he diverges in that these relationships cause us to be self-conscious. We understand ourselves as a subject, as an *I*, but also understand that others can view us as an object, as *the Other*. His view is best expressed in his recurrent use of the Dostoevsky quote: "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than others." (Toumayan 55) He uses this quote to illustrate "the notion of asymmetry or nonreciprocity that it expresses so radically and so strikingly…, but also the manner in which this asymmetrical 'more than all the others,'... *singularizes*, *identifies*, or *elects* the speaking subject." (Toumayan 56) Levinas thus posits a dualistic Philosophy of relationships, where he "treads the line between a transcendental conception of subjectivity and a reciprocal I-Thou relation." (Lumsden 230)

The non-reciprocity and alienation between the *I* and the *Other* contribute directly to Levinas' biblical orthodoxy. Levinas "equates 'revelation' with the call of the text to *each* reader or listener, who thereby becomes responsible for its interpretation," and "here we see the structural analogy between the call of the other and my response." (Bergo) Buber, by defining God by a personal and reciprocal "I-Thou" relation, has projected his consciousness onto God. Rather, we must look at objective texts to understand what God says. Levinas also has a theological response to the holocaust, although his comes in the form of a "plea to stop all talk about the nature of God after Auschwitz, and to start inquiring instead about the real, concrete nature of man." (Meskin 513) While Levinas was a religious thinker, his primary goal was an "attempt to displace the centrality of Cartesian thinking and to recenter it around

ethics." (Meskin 513) His 'first philosophy' took the form of an ethical imperative to our fellow man, rather than the typical "metaphysics or theology" (Bergo) base of most Philosophies. He is thus not as concerned with the Theological basis of his thought as much as Buber is, but rather maintains an 'ethics first' backing.

Ironically, the religious Philosophies of Levinas and Buber embody the spirit of one of the world's staunchest atheists: Friedrich Nietzsche. In beginning with an ethics, then building a metaphysics around that imperative, they embody the 'playful' role that metaphysics plays in *The Gay Science*. For Levinas even more so than Buber, the empirical truth of these theories is irrelevant, since ethical action is the first philosophy, coming before a "truthful" understanding of reality. So do such philosophies provide us with a better understanding of human nature? I don't believe they do, nor do they need to. As long as people continue to see the world through the lens of 'I-it' posited by traditional philosophical approaches, and continue to commit great crimes and atrocities towards their fellow man, man cannot embody the individual who sees the world as that of relationships. But I believe a better question is *should* such philosophies provide us with a better understanding of human nature. To this, I argue yes. A spatial-temporal view of the world may sound appealing to martyrs of true speech and thought, but will prove fruitless compared to philosophies of the second person in our relationships and moral growth.

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