

## Aus: Philosophical Interrogations

### C. Human Life

*Perry LeFevre:* Can you point to some of the kinds of factors in the lives of individuals which make it more or less likely, which make it easier or more difficult for them to enter into dialogue? In other words, what do you believe accounts for the fact that some individuals seem more capable of dialogue than others? 5

*Buber:* This is a field into which I can venture only with difficulty. But one thing seems certain to me: There are men who allow as little as possible what befalls them in life to be dependent on something other than themselves; and there are men whom, in a deep sense, it suits that the other, until now unknown, unforeseen, shall enter into their lives. The counterstriving of the first type of man is to be understood thus: All risk that his own plans, projects, attempts, undertakings entail is, in fact, by its nature nothing at all compared with that to which one exposes oneself through the genuine contact with otherness. The aims of the first kind of man – let us call him the self-withholding man – often ripen faster and more easily than those of the man whom we can designate as exposing himself; however, the easily and quickly ripening aims often prove to be worm-eaten. With a simplification unavoidable here, I might say that these men not seldom become famous – they have success – but no sphere of existence seems to me so thoroughly penetrated by deception and self-deception as that which the man of heedless heart books as a success. 10 15 20

*Friedrich Thieberger:* The insight toward which Buber led us is this: Only after we inwardly grasp the Thou within the It of men or events or things which confront us do we enter into a real relationship with them, and only then do we have a share in true reality. 25

My question is concerned with the origin of such a comprehension and awareness, that is, the starting point of the transformation of the It into a Thou. There is doubtless no method which can be made to serve the will here. The conditions vary from case to case and become incalculable and vast. Suddenly one sees the Thou in a flash and is seized and gripped by it. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the very first phase of the illumined I-Thou relation and all subsequent ones. 30 35

Buber himself once said that a poet has entered into his own innermost being through one of his works and that he, the poet, will continue to dwell there notwithstanding that which he might create later. The ear-

liest phase is something that overpowers the individual and sets him afire; the later phases conserve the new view, deepen and broaden it. Only the illuminating breakthrough that opens the senses in a flash – the spontaneous, the unique – characterizes the origin.

5 Another characterizing distinction between the original phase and all later ones is the consciousness of a personal upheaval, of the inner transformation of the I. The later phases merely follow the new but already indicated way; they bring the I and the Thou into a kind of balance.

10 A third distinction between the original and all later phases is the encounter of ages: the encounter of the past that is still experienced as something quite different with a newborn present; on the other hand, all subsequent phases are characterized by an assurance, shielded from the storms of time, and a trust in all the future potentialities of the I-Thou relationship.

15 All these are not distinctions of a similar kind of process, but rather of qualitative differences. What we consider to be the first phase is probably connected with the I-Thou relationship as its first cause, but is not to be equated with it. Should not one, therefore, separate the »original phase« from the later ones, that is, place it before the phenomenon of the »deeply  
20 stirred,« the »awakening,« and attempt to comprehend it as a particular kind of human reality?

*Buber:* It frequently happens, indeed, that the I-Thou relation begins with an »illumination« an »awakening.« But I am in no case inclined to understand this manifestation as the rule. I cannot do this because I already  
25 find this relation – as I have maintained from the beginning – in the life of the small child, as in that of the so-called primitive man, in a directly natural form; and I also understand the meaning of most spiritual forms in their connection with the natural.

I acknowledge, therefore, the significance of »being seized,« but I can  
30 see in it no necessary presupposition for the origin of an I-Thou relation.

#### F. I-Thou Relation with Nature

*Malcolm L. Diamond:* There is a common misunderstanding of the philosophy of I and Thou which presents the I-Thou attitude as one proper to man's relation with other men and the I-It attitude as proper to man's  
35 experience of things. *I and Thou* insists that the I-Thou attitude is as appropriate to man's relations with things, ideas, and works of art as it is to man's relation to other men. It is the quality of relatedness, not the object of the relation, that determines whether an I-Thou or an I-It atti-

tude is to prevail. Therefore, it would seem that all beings are of equal worth as Thou's, and that within the framework of the philosophy of I and Thou there would be no basis of evaluation between different I-Thou meetings or between different Thou's. If this is the case, the exploiting of children in a sweatshop would be no more reprehensible than the exploiting of a forest. Is this a fair picture of the consequences which follow from the emphasis upon the quality of man's relation with all beings in lieu of traditional moral concern with the nature of the objects to which man relates, as well as with the quality of relation? If so, is there any basis within the philosophy of I and Thou for affirming the humanistic distinctions which value a child above a tree?

*Buber:* Here I must again refer to the Postscript to *I and Thou*: there are several different grades of the capacity for mutuality. But I am by no means of the opinion that from this alone a »basis of evaluation« can be established. To this end, rather, our whole knowledge about the world must co-operate, a knowledge that is ever again renewed through the I-Thou relation, but is not borne by it.

#### G. I-Thou and I-It

*Maurice Nédoncelle:* What place would Professor Buber give to the impersonal in the evolution and elevation of dialogue?

*Buber:* The essential significance of the impersonal for the »evolution and elevation of dialogue« seems to me to lie in the fact that it is at times common to two men and yet not common to them. That of which the other and I speak, that of which the other and I think, both describing it with the same word, indeed, what we perceive at the same time as this particular thing, is problematic just herein: we mean the same and not the same; we see the same and not the same; the word with which we designate it has for both of us the same and not the same significance. Thus the impersonal ever again involves a tension between the partners in dialogue. But the tension is fruitful; more precisely, it can be fruitful in that between what this »impersonal« is for you and what it is for me a fusion can take place, which is only possible in dialogue. That over which we have »come to an understanding« is then not in the least more pallid than what existed before on the one side and on the other; it can even be stronger, clearer, more definite. The difference that at

times again exists after the dialogue is in any case different from that which existed before.

On this theme there is still much to say; here I must content myself with what I have just said.

5 *Malcolm L. Diamond*: 1. According to the philosophy of I and Thou, man in his meetings with other beings must assume either the I-It attitude of distance and detachment or the I-Thou attitude of engagement and relation. As I understand it, a pure I-Thou meeting would be one in which the total self was engaged, so that all the material channeled from  
10 the I-It attitude of detachment would be transformed into the I-Thou mode of relatedness and engagement. Is such a pure I-Thou meeting possible? If so, is it a rare phenomenon analogous to mystical experience or a comparatively frequent occurrence?

2. In an I-Thou meeting one is seized by the power of exclusiveness.  
15 The whole man is absorbed into the relation which exists between himself and his Thou, so that all else exists in the light of the relation. Would it therefore be correct to say that if a person becomes aware of being involved in an I-Thou relation, this would itself be a sign that the element of detachment characteristic of the I-It attitude has entered into and vi-  
20 tiated the I-Thou relation? If so, how is a consciousness of an I-Thou relation possible? Is it possible only in retrospect?

*Buber*: 1. I speak very reluctantly of perfection as of something empirically verifiable. Since the perfect I-Thou relation in general makes no statement concerning itself, I do not know how frequent or how rare it  
25 is. But I am not at all concerned about perfection, either here or in general. I am concerned that the I-Thou relation be realized where it can be realized, and I cannot declare where it cannot be realized. I am concerned that the life of man be determined and formed by it. For I believe that it can transform the human world, not into something perfect, but  
30 perhaps into something very much more human, according to the created meaning of man, than exists today.

2. One must be careful about the double meaning of the concept »consciousness.« If what is understood by it is that one becomes conscious of an object, an It, then naturally the I-Thou relation must from time to  
35 time come to an end with this becoming conscious – for the present. But the interhuman I-Thou relation does not belong to the unconscious, even in its most exclusive form, although its roots, of course, are sunk in the »unconscious,« that is, in the ground of being of the person. The consciousness of the I-Thou relation is a highly intensive one; but it is a

direct, an elementary consciousness. It does not make itself an object; it does not detach itself from itself; its knowing about itself is given it with its being.

*David Baumgardt*: Has the life of dialogue a supremacy also over the intensity of the scientist's impersonal exploration of, and submersion in, the It of inorganic matter? 5

I fully agree with what you say in *Zwiesprache*.<sup>1</sup> Even in the *Betrieb* of huge industrial plants, a far-reaching *Durchdrungensein von Vitaler Dialogik* (being soaked in vital dialogic) is possible and needed; and the worker may *seine Beziehung zur Maschine als eine dialogische empfinden* (experience his relation to the machine as one of dialogue). 10  
Moreover, as the philosophies of nature in the early European Renaissance and modern romanticism show, everything inorganic can be *angesprochen* (addressed) in this way.

But would you not agree that it may be no less of a profound attitude 15 to abandon age-old vagueness of the dialogue in favor of a precise impersonal description of inorganic matter by means of exact mathematical formulas? For any kind of dialogue in this direction would do no justice to what is to be explored in this field; and it would even undermine and destroy the profoundly impersonal devotion of the scientist to his »object 20 of investigation.« Is there not the grave danger of human vanity in expecting »personal« or even emotional response, in whatever sense, from the nature of dead matter which was wisely created not in the way of living personalities?

Does it not follow from these two basic experiences – the *amor fati* 25 and the reverence for the impersonal character and the mathematical structure of natural processes – that it is not the life of dialogue which makes the difference between true and minor value but exclusively the *how* of saying Thou or It?

*Buber*: I do not speak of a general supremacy of the life of dialogue, but 30 rather of its especial importance for the personal existence of man. The series of meetings that a man has taken part in is more important for this personal existence than his total possession of impersonal scientific knowledge, no matter how highly this too is to be prized. It is the former that builds up the core of the person. That holds also for the life of 35 the investigator, even for his life as an investigator. What an »original«

1. Pp. 96 ff. Cf. *Between Man and Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, paperback, 1958), pp. 36 ff.

investigator discovers, what he »finds,« he discovers and finds in his contacts with the unique: in the vision of a familiar and yet in-this-moment surprising natural phenomenon, in the »penetration« into a text granted to the genuine philologist from which the intention of the author shines forth to him, in the visions of the great historian that show him long-past events in their interconnection in which not only his presentation of the happening, but also his interpretation of the epoch has its origin. Certainly, an I-Thou relation in the full sense of the term does riot, for the most part, prevail here, but the essential is there: a person and what he stands over against, which in this hour is, to begin with, only presence, not yet object, the contact of the unique with the unique, still prior to all transposition into the general. What the investigator has relinquished when he proceeds to this transposition is no »age-old vagueness,« but the act of standing before concrete reality. Certainly, he must from time to time radically relinquish it in order to attain general insights or even exact formulae, but at the beginning of the way he is ever again led by the genius of meetings until it can deliver him to the reliable spirit of objectification.

That it is not by any words of mine that »human vanity« may be summoned to its expectation of a »personal or even emotional response from the nature of dead matter« I have ever again, and even ever more strongly, stressed.

*Peter A. Bertocci:* The underlying ambiguity which for me casts a deep shadow over almost every problem touched in Buber's thought seems to center in two incompatible modes of being, process and relation, which this »brink« philosophy would »somehow« bring together. First, and so far as I can see, the dominating one in Buber's thought: the part-whole relationship. To be sure, this is a very dynamic conception of part-whole as opposed to Spinoza's essentially logical substance-mode relation<sup>1</sup> and is closer to Hegel's experiential dynamism of the *Phenomenology of the Mind*. But the part-whole model of metaphysical relationship, when it escapes a rigid logicism, falls into a spatializing interpretation of metaphysical relationships, which deduces what seems to me to be the essentially *non-spatial interaction* involved in all personal experience. Thus the fundamental relation of I-Thou is conceived of in such words as *meeting, participation, inclusive, exclusive, entering*. While absorption in God is explicitly denied, we are told to »include the whole world in the *Thou*, to give the world its due and its truth, to include nothing *beside*

1. Cf. *I and Thou*, pp. 78-79.

God but everything *in* him.«<sup>2</sup> Thus, curiously enough, we find ourselves using terms to describe an I-Thou relation which fit, I would say, It relations but never personal relations.

For is it not true to experience to say that the distinguishing characteristic of persons is that they are dynamic-unities-in-striving-and-purpose?<sup>3</sup> But purposes do not »meet« or »participate,« and when they »include« and »exclude« they do so because their growth-of-meaning, their creativity, their directive goals are distinctive. The unity of purposes, human and divine, then must be conceived in admittedly difficult, unpicturable, nonspatial terms: but the analogy must be closer to that of husband and wife and children, each coming closer in a directive, controlling purpose and in action at different levels. *Interaction* is not the flow of energy from one to another *within* a common medium. It perhaps can be better conceived in terms of stimulated-evoked growth of common meanings, which are possible to individuated I's because such commonness is potentially present in their *created* being. There is much in Buber's exposition<sup>4</sup> which is consistent with this conception of interpersonal unity as a growth in purposeful community, but his thinking at all explanatory levels seems to be closer to the unity of an organic whole rather than to the growing unity (or disunity) of created-creative purposes with their Creative Purposer.

*Buber:* Bertocci's objections appear to me to rest in great part on a deep misunderstanding of some of my basic concepts. But that he finds in my thought the idea of an evident all-embracing »unity of an organic whole« or of a »part-whole relationship« I cannot even explain to myself in this way. This completely erroneous conception of my philosophy must have formed itself very early in Bertocci's thinking and then he has apparently understood, that is, misunderstood, this-and-that concept as a confirmation of it.

I have, since I matured to independent thought, never sought to explain man as a »part« of God. All that I have thought and said of the relation between man and God proceeds from the fixed presupposition that man, the human person, stands over against God from birth till death (my thinking about man does not extend further); nothing that befalls us in our lives, and nothing that happens through us, can attenuate this primal fact of standing over against. Therefore, since I wrote *I*

2. *Ibid.*, p. 79. Italics added.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

*and Thou*, I have ever again designated the conception of a *unio mystica* as a mistaken interpretation of the unification of the person himself. Therefore, too, I have treated pantheism, where I have had to deal with it, as a speculative oversimplification.

5 The words »to include ... everything in him« can then only be misunderstood as pantheism if one does not pay sufficient attention to the context; they correspond to the phrase that stands shortly before, »to see everything in the Thou.« What concerns me fundamentally is that our relation to our fellow man and our relation to God belong together, that  
10 their basic character, that of a reciprocal I-Thou relation, joins them to each other; practically speaking, that in reality there does not exist a special sphere of »religion« and a special sphere of »ethics.«

Although I say and mean that reality exists only where there is mutual action<sup>1</sup>, yet I can in no way accept the characterization of the person as a  
15 »dynamic-unity-in-striving-and-purpose.« It does not do justice to the most essential in the person, the connection of full uniqueness and full capacity for relation. And now Bertocci continues thus: »But purposes do not ›meet‹ or ›participate‹« – now, instead of persons, only »purposes« are being talked of. But real persons really meet each other, not merely in  
20 space, but also, for example, when they think of each other at the same time, therefore in pure time. »To participate,« however, is only seemingly a »spatial« concept; in reality, »to participate in each other« is so much a category of spiritual existence that the primal metaphysical ground of the expression is no longer even perceptible. And only by means of their  
25 difference, by means of the uniqueness of this man and the uniqueness of that one, can men participate in one another.

But now Bertocci misses in my thought a »doctrine of real yes-and-no freedom.« I am, on the contrary, of the opinion that just such a doctrine is to be found in the second part of *I and Thou*.<sup>2</sup>

1. *I and Thou*, p. 89.

2. Pp. 57-61.



