[Aus: *Philosophical Interrogations*]

IV. Social Philosophy

Arthur A. Cohen: In your discussions of Hasidism it is clear that the directness and immediacy of meeting are founded upon the fact of community. It would appear that you do not consider Hasidism a merely dead fact in man's spiritual history. Can this fact be re-created, that is to say, is the order of Hasidic existence a real possibility or only an ideal, but implausible, possibility for modern man?

Buber: It is not correct to say that in my presentation of Hasidism the immediacy of meeting is »founded upon the fact of community.« Rather, in my view, it is the other way round: the community is founded upon the immediacy of relation. The Hasidic communal group, like all genuine community, consists of men who have a common, immediate relation to a living center, and just by virtue of this common center have an immediate relation to one another. In the midst of the Hasidic community stands the *zaddik,* whose function it is to help the Hasidim, as persons and as a totality, to authenticate their relation to God in the hallowing of life and just from this starting point to live as brothers with one another. That is a great historical example of a communal reality which can arise to this or that extent, in this or that form, at different times and at different places. Why should that be implausible for modern man? He need only become radically wearied with the meaninglessness of his existence and acquire an intractable, bold desire to win again a life that has meaning. The beginning in this direction I have recently discussed in the essay »Hasidism and Modern Man« (1957).[1]

Kurt H. Wolff: 1. What is the relation between I-Thou and I-It if Thou is a civilization and It is that civilization transformed into an object of assessment? How can »every civilization … be hallowed«?[2] Assuming that the answer is: By relating It back to Thou, what is the *sociological* cogency of doing this? What, in other words, is the relation between spirit and world?

2. Another instance of the relevance of the last question is that of the significance of the I-Thou philosophy at this time. What are the safe-

1. Cf. *Hasidism and Modern Man*, Vol. I of *Hasidism and the Way of Man*, ed. and trans. by Maurice S. Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1958).
2. Buber, *At the Turning* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1952), pp. 21 f.

guards, if any, against the use of this philosophy as an instrument of political reaction; against its being seized upon as an injunction to withdraw into one's private garden? How does this philosophy escape such a danger of »ideologization« – the twin danger, perhaps, of the »politicization« of our time (cf. »Abstract and Concrete,« *Pointing the Way*)?

Buber: 1. The first question is not wholly clear to me: I cannot imagine that I address civilization as »Thou«; I cannot conceive anything at all real thereby. On the other hand, my own statement that every civilization »can be hallowed« may not be formulated clearly enough. I do not mean thereby that one can hallow any civilization as a whole; rather, I mean thereby that it is possible for man in every civilization, whatever it is, to hallow life, lived life. What the »sociological cogency« of that is I do not know; indeed, I doubt very much that anything of the sort exists. But I do certainly believe that when men who hallow their lives live with one another, this can also have, among others, the most real and significant »sociological« consequences.

But if the question is now posed in a metaphysical instead of a sociological framework, as the question of the relation between spirit and world, then by way of an answer I know only to refer to the fact that there are many different kinds of relation. What concerns me in an especial, and for me decisive, way is the spirit that enters into the human world, that wills to »realize itself« in it. It is clearly the case that the world resists this will far more than yields to it; but it also seems to be true that the longing of the world to become the body of the spirit is secretly becoming ever greater. It appears, too, that the world masks its resistance as yielding, with the intention, of course, of overcoming its longing through seeming satisfaction of it.

2. Against the danger that the I-Thou philosophy will be used as »an instrument of political reaction« there is, so far as I know, no safeguard other than that all its true friends fight this misuse; the weapons for this fight they will find within themselves. As a small example of this I cite what is said against »withdrawal into one's private garden« in my essay of 1919, »What Is to Be Done,« in *Pointing the Way.*[3]

»Ideologization« is, indeed, the worst thing that can befall the I-Thou philosophy. My friend, the Benedictine Father Caesarius Lauer, pointed out in 1951[4] that the easiest manner of evading the demand of the dialo-

3. *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, ed. and trans. by Maurice S. Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), pp. 108 ff.
4. Cf. Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, pp. 271 ff.

gic is to accept it as discussable but unbinding theory. I can only repeat in opposition to this what I wrote in 1923 and Father Caesarius quotes: »The way is there in order that one may walk on it.«

Heinz-Joachim Heydorn: 1. In the last analysis, does not all hope for the future depend upon a renewed »community« *(koinonia)*, arising as an earnest of what is to come, as the harbinger, so to speak, of a new power through which history is anticipated? How is such a power possible without hope for the meaning of history?

Explanation: In the address entitled »Hope for This Hour« given in Carnegie Hall, New York City, in 1952, it was said:

The Hope for this hour depends upon the renewal of dialogical immediacy between men. But let us look beyond the pressing need, the anxiety and care of this hour. Let us see this need in connection with the great human way. Then we shall recognize that immediacy is injured not only between man and man, but also between the being called man and the source of his existence. At its core the conflict between mistrust and trust of man conceals the conflict between mistrust and trust of eternity. If our mouths succeed in genuinely saying »thou,« then, after long silence and stammering, we shall have addressed our eternal »Thou« anew. Reconciliation leads towards reconciliation.[5]

Complete reconciliation of man with creation is an idea which we are apt to associate with the end of human history, in which our destiny is expected truly to fulfill itself. But is not hope for a relative reconciliation with history necessary if the meeting between man and man is to grow into community? Surely in every genuine meeting the deeper reality of our existence is present. »Community,« however, if it desires to be real community in this world and for the sake of this world, requires faith in a new revelation in human history in which the Eternal becomes more visible. I would not here exclude those communities which rely exclusively upon their trust in the activity of God alone. Only this faith lends strength to a community to start on its way and develop the power of its activity, while dialogue can become a conversation in the desert, a kind of final confirmation that the True and the Eternal continue to exist without manifest revelation – like a stream which for ages seeks its way below the surface. Active community with others is community under the image of

5. *Pointing the Way*, pp. 228 f.

the future. For the present, we live on the mass graves of visions of the past.

2. The question as to whether man will have a place in the society of the future, in the sense of a spiritual understanding of his own nature, undoubtedly depends to a large extent on the question of whether this society will succeed in developing a rich inner diversity. What are the existing objective prerequisites for this?

Explanation: In *Paths in Utopia* we read: »An organic commonwealth – and only such commonwealths can join together to form a shapely and articulated race of men – will never build itself up out of individuals but only out of small and ever smaller communities: a nation

is a community to the degree that it is a community of communities.«[6]

The faith of our fathers during the past century was to a great extent a faith in history, in the fulfilling principle which history discloses through its own activity. Today on the European continent, except in the Communist lands, this faith has broken down completely and has been replaced by its exact opposite. However, enough of this awareness of history remains so that we cannot pose any problem without immediately connecting it with the question concerning the meaning of history, that is, concerning the objective possibilities which are held in store by history. The idea of progressing beyond a capitalistic society to dwell in the new community and to live for the day when this present society will be overthrown has led to the formation of the modern communes. These communal associations have, however, all too often and to a large extent adapted themselves to the economic structure of their surroundings and thus have lost their original character. They do not now represent an historically potential power. At the same time that traditional forms that belong to the past are dying – a process that has been going on uninterruptedly since the beginning of modern times – man has hardly ever succeeded for long periods of time in preserving new forms in their original meaning. The reality of industrial society, its unifying and rationalizing power which results in the isolation of the individual, has proved to be stronger. In spite of occasional and noteworthy exceptions, the general drift in the development of society is toward a weakening of the interior diversity of our forms and ways of life.

In his *Das Problem des Menschen*,[7] Martin Buber rightly calls the spirit an »event,« but this event depends at the same time upon the ex-

6. *Paths in Utopia*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), p. 136.
7. »What is Man?« trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith, *Between Man and Man* (Boston: Beacon Press paperback, 1958), pp. 118-205.

istence of objective conditions which must be evident in the reality of society itself and which the spirit helps to make visible.

3. To what extent is the agreement of way and goal conceivable within the possibilities of historical existence?

Explanation: In the address »Education and World-View,« delivered in 1935 at the *Freien Jüdischen Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt am Main, it is stated:

How far the future community will correspond to the desired image depends essentially upon the life-attitude of present-day persons – not only of those who lead but of each individual in the ranks. The goal does not stand fast and wait. He who takes a road that in its nature does not already represent the nature of the goal will miss the goal, no matter how fixedly he holds it in sight. The goal that he reaches will resemble the road by which he has reached it.[8]

Certainly these sentences contain a decisive insight. However, the will to realize the future in the present is limited by the deep opposition between image and reality, which opposition we may well diminish but which we can never totally remove. In our decisions, wherever we carry responsibility, we cannot avoid the painful realization that there is no action which is without guilt, without failure toward the goal and thereby also toward our neighbors. Does not the greatness of the human potentiality lie rather in the constant striving toward this agreement of way and goal, in the midst of and in spite of contradictions which we inevitably meet whenever we assume responsibility?

Buber: 1. I too hope in history (as I have clearly stated in the concluding section of »Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour,« *Pointing the Way*[9]). And that means: I too hope in the growth of »community« in society, in the growing capacity of society to contain community. But this growth is naturally not at all conceivable otherwise than in intimate union with a transformation of men and their relations to one another, and this union not otherwise than as a reciprocal influencing. One must not lose sight of the fact that »society« very easily insinuates itself into the attempt at a realization of »community.« I have observed that here in the land of Israel, in the not unproblematic development of the *kibbutzim,* and, in fact, in two manifestations: as a result of the economic

8. *Pointing the Way,* p. 105.
9. Pp. 203 ff.

principle, the growing subjection to the market, which had as its consequence the fact that in times of crisis the *kibbutzim* could not arouse the courage and energy needed for taking the initiative in the reduction in price of the products; and, as a result of the political principle, the cleavage of unified fellowships into party groups fighting one another, which has repeatedly led to the selfdestruction of communities. What can be hoped for in the face of such dangers? Just for those men in whose hearts genuine relation and the striving for its taking effect are so strong that they dare to take their stand against the alleged necessity, the economic or the political. Here as everywhere – in this direction goes my bold hope – will the inner battle, the battle of the spirit, ultimately be the decisive one.

That this hope is deeply connected with trust in God – however one may call him – is clear. But I by no means identify this trust with a »trust in the exclusive activity of God«; I do not believe in *such* an activity, I contest it, I number it among those »visions of the past« to whose »mass graves« Heydorn points. I believe that man is created as a partner of God; which means that I believe in a co-working of the deed of mortal man and the grace of eternity incomprehensible to the human mind.

2. The argument is incontestable on the plane of argumentation; how could it be contested that the spirit has no starting-point for its working outside the currently given reality! Nonetheless, I dare to believe in the implausible. Where the spirit begins may be foreseen; what it attains to from that point cannot be foreseen. Whatever may be inferred from history until now, it cannot be inferred how mighty the spirit can become, perhaps at the time of an elevation of man in his uttermost crisis to the great will to remain man.

3. I said that from the soul. But I have not talked of all that whereby the man who is underway, on the right road taken by him, time after time loses his way; rather I have said and can only repeat it: »He who takes a road …«

Walter Goldstein: Since our first exchange of letters in 1942, Professor Buber has known that for a long time this present train of thought has been disturbing me greatly. There are many kinds and conceptions of socialism. But in actuality only one; for effective socialism on earth has until now been unable to do without Marxism, that is, without historical materialism. The various types differ from one another only in degree, which to be sure does not amount, as in Russia, to 100 per cent. I know of only one statement in a letter from Martin Buber to me which is completely unequivocal and clear. Everything else of his about socialism

which I have read leaves the door open to historical materialism. I therefore ask Professor Buber once more: Can there be in any form at all a rival material kingdom beside the not-to-be-doubted Kingdom of God?

Buber: I can hardly imagine a rejection of Marxism still clearer than I have expressed in my books *Between Man and Man* (»What Is Man?«) and *Paths in Utopia.* Of course, I reject Marxism just because it is unsocialistic. And what is powerful in a given historical time I can in no case acknowledge as »valid.«

Paul E. Pfuetze: Professor Buber, many of your friends as well as your critics have said that they find a strain of romanticism in your social philosophy. I too have thought that there is a certain perfectionism, even utopianism, in your understanding of man and society, which expresses itself, for example, in your optimistic faith in the Israeli *kibbutzim* and in a failure to deal realistically with the dynamics of large-scale social and political movements.

This criticism strikes home to me personally because your position here is so close to my own; and in the past I too have been charged with the same perfectionism. So I raise this issue with you, seeking some reassurance and answer to my own problem.

My most serious reservations arise at the point of asking whether and how the intensity of I-Thou attitudes and »we-feeling« can be maintained in any but primary groups whose size permits face-to-face relations?

How adapt the I-Thou theory to the practice of great industrial aggregates, of cities like Detroit, New York, or Essen, of highly industrialized nations like England or Germany?

How can the small decentralized organic groups, based upon an ethic of primary group attitudes and loyalties, maintain the I-Thou relation without becoming sectarian and separatist?

I believe that the small sectarian group is always an answer for the few. I would encourage the wider spread of small, functional, autonomous groups of all sorts as both desirable and possible. But does the spread of such communities, even the larger confederacy of such small organic communities, constitute an adequate total social strategy for the renewal of community?

Have recent historical events or your own experiences in Israel done anything to change either your general social philosophy or your faith in the decentralized co-operative settlements as the solution for the social problem?

Buber: I by no means see in »decentralized co-operative settlements« »the solution for the social problem.« I explicitly call them »experiments,« and even the federative unification of »the most diverse social forms existing side by side« I see only as »*aiming* at the new organic whole.«[10] Even the *kibbutzim* I discuss merely as »an experiment that did not fail,«[11] and I have not concealed my critical attitude toward its development (cf. also my answer to Professor Wolff, in this same section, pp. 69, 70). I am of the opinion that the co-operative experiment, developed, can make a fundamental contribution to a restructuring of society; nothing more, but also nothing less.

My socialism is not a perfectionist but a meliorist one; what is decisive is what shall be and remain the *direction* of the always renewed melioration, ever adapting itself to the new historical conditions. The direction is determined for me by a single goal, but by a double motive in its attainment: a negative motive, the reduction of the political in favor of the social principle, of »government« in favor of »administration« so far as it is admissible under the current historical conditions;[12] a positive one, the increasing unfolding of the forces of community within society. Many kinds of things can contribute to this unfolding outside of the communal experiments, things of such different nature as, for example, a more organic ordering of the choice of political representatives, the fostering of neighborliness, even in the streets of New York, the fostering of comradeship, even in the factories of Detroit, etc. Utopian? Thus the road to a new topicality is always regarded, before this road has been seriously taken. Romantic? I am used to this reproach; to the answer that I made to it more than a quarter of a century ago in the third part of »Dialogue« *(Between Man and Man)*, I have today hardly more to add than this: that by the »community,« the unfolding of whose forces I desire, I understand nothing that has already found its form in some past time; and that, when I talk about realization, I think of certain conditions that will presumably be given for it.

Jacob B. Agus: What is your view at present of the nature of romantic nationalism?

Explanation: In your early writings and addresses, you expounded a profound conception of Jewish romantic nationalism. Specifically, in your series of lectures published under the heading *Reden über*

10. *Paths in Utopia*, pp. 58 ff.; p. 79.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 139 ff.
12. Cf. »Society and the State« in *Pointing the Way*, pp. 161 ff., and also »The Validity and Limitation of the Political Principle,« *ibid.*, pp. 208 ff.

das Judentum (»Talks on Judaism«), you speak of a person's true self as being contained in the history and aspirations of his people. »The past of his folk is his own personal memory, the future of his folk is his personal task. The way of his folk teaches him to understand his own self and to will his own self.«[13] Your philosophy of Zionism was at that time a reflection of your conception of the organic unity of a people. You discovered in the »national soul« of the Jew »unique« tendencies – such as are calculated to save the world. In general, you asserted the primacy of the people as against the individual, maintaining that »only the one truly bound to his people can answer with his whole being.«[14]

Three great events of our generation may have led you to modify your views on this subject:

1. The development of demonic Nazism out of the seeds of romantic nationalism in Germany. Evidently, the »voice of the blood« cannot be trusted.

2. The emergence of the State of Israel, proving in its brief career its similarity to all other nations, its unwillingness and incapacity to rise above immediate, narrow, national gains.

3. The demonstration in recent decades that the soul of democracy is respect for the sanctity of the individual and the universality of the divine law. These ideas are the basic foundations of Anglo-Saxon democracy, where the individual is viewed as primary. Democracy in Germany was wiped away by the very idealization of the concepts of »folk« and »state,« which loom so large in the thought of German political philosophers. In view of our recent experience with both these systems of political thought, do you still assert the primacy of the »folk«?

Buber: This question surprises me, for it is formulated as if I had not long since answered it in print.

My all too simple treatment of the national problem in my »Talks on Judaism« of 1909-1914 I have already corrected with all requisite clarity in my talk on »Nationalism«[15] in 1921, thus quite a long while before the historical evolution of Nazism, on the one side, and of the State of Israel, on the other, to which Agus points. At that time, during the Zionist Congress of 1921, I pointed out that »the spirit of nationalism is fruitful just so long as it does not make the nation an end in itself.«

13. *Reden über das Judentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1911), Lecture 1.
14. *Cheruth* (Vienna: R. Löwit Verlag, 1919), p 8.
15. *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 214 ff.

But already in those early »Talks on Judaism« the *core* was not romantic. Essentially, it only modernized the fundamental biblical concepts of »seed« and »land« (Gen. 12:7). It was important at that time to state that in order to be able to develop fully what was intended in it, a community needs biological and territorial continuity. This development is by no means produced by this continuity; and it is just not possible without it.

To the monstrous abuse of these two fundamental concepts by National Socialism, I have again, with all requisite clarity, made a reply, in the midst of Hitler's Germany, in a public speech of 1936 on »The Power of the Spirit.«[16] Again, it is sufficient here to quote a sentence from it: »Blood and soil are hallowed in the promise made to Abraham, because they are bound up with the command to be a blessing« (Gen. 12:2).

But as for the State of Israel, the hour for a verdict on it has by no means arrived. He who lives here senses how in the hearts of a growing segment of the young is ever more strongly fought out the battle between the two kinds of nationalism, the opposition between which I pointed out in that speech of 1921.

Reinhold Niebuhr:[17] I am afraid that I must completely disagree with Buber on his attitude toward political problems. In every respect he seems to think that there can be an ideal dialogic relationship if one could only »restructure society.« As a matter of fact, all these personal relations exist in transcendence over the basic structure of society, which is partly organic and partly an artifact. It is an artifact insofar as the justice, particularly in modern technical society, depends upon artfully constructed equilibria of power. If one leaves out the structure of the nation or other group and considers the relation of groups to each other, the East-West conflict, for instance, one realizes that there is a tremendous chance of influencing the relation by moral and religious factors. For instance, the mitigation of fanaticism and self-righteousness, the recognition of the humanity of the other side, and so forth. And yet all these relations are not personal but collective. This is a dialogue, as it were, between America and Russia.

With all my appreciation of, and devotion to, Professor Buber, I think it is slightly ironic that he should have such a rigorous personal, not to

16. *Israel and the World*, pp. 173 ff.
17. This statement is taken with Professor Niebuhr's permission from a letter he wrote June 22, 1956, in reply to a letter of mine concerning his criticism of Buber's social philosophy. Professor Buber's reply also comes from letters to me in July and November, 1956 (Friedman).

say individualistic, interpretation of human relations, when I have always regarded Hebrew thought superior to Christian thought because it had the norm of justice rather than the norm of love, or rather it had the two norms of justice and love, while Christian thought always tended to be perfectionist in terms of the love doctrine.

Buber: I am very far from thinking that »there can be an ideal dialogic relationship if one could only ›restructure society.‹« I never thought an ideal dialogic relationship possible in our world as it is. I am a meliorist and not an idealist, and so I want only as much dialogic element as can be realized in human life here and now.

The real strength of »collective relations« depends on the strength of the personal relations involved in them. A »dialogue between America and Russia« cannot lead to a real understanding (which goes beyond the »understanding« expressed in pacts and manifestos), except through persons here learning to see in their mind's eye persons there, and vice versa; that is, really meeting the others.

I have no doubt whatever concerning the influence of »moral and religious factors.« But what seems to me of most importance is that their decisive action is done by them not in the form of »principles,« but of elements of interpersonal relations.

There is no »norm of love« at all. The commandment of love cannot command other than to be ready to love and willing to act lovingly »with all thy soul.« But there is indeed a norm of justice. I have spoken of it at length in *At the Turning,* in the Amos chapter of *The Prophetic Faith,* and in several chapters of *Moses.* But man tends to accept and to realize this norm only in general and abstract laws (*nota bene:* Torah does not mean law, but instruction!) and without justice in personal relations, justice becomes poisonous.

As to Niebuhr's statement on the »transcendence« of personal relations, it is obviously a part of the truth. But what he calls the basic structure of society is historically and even prehistorically (as I think in opposition to the prevailing opinion of ethnologists) based on personal relations, and where it subdues them it becomes wrong. As to modern technical society, of course it depends upon »artfully constructed equilibria of power,« but what depends on them is its order and not its justice. If Niebuhr cannot concede this, then obviously we shall have to distinguish carefully between two very different kinds of »justice,« and I for myself am harassed by the thought that the concept of justice must be split in two, bearing even different names. I cannot see the God-willed reality of justice anywhere other than in »being just,« and this means of

course: being just as far as it is possible here and now, under the »artful« conditions of actual society. So in my opinion it is not the justice that depends upon them, but ever again the realizable »how much« of it. Sometimes, striving to be just, I go on in the dark, till my head meets the wall and aches, and then I know: Here is (now) the wall, and I cannot go further. But I could not know it beforehand or otherwise.