

Martin Buber's *I and Thou*

Ronald Gregor Smith

Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*, 1923) presents a philosophy of personal dialogue, in that it describes how personal dialogue can define the nature of reality. Buber's major theme is that human existence may be defined by the way in which we engage in dialogue with each other, with the world, and with God.

According to Buber, human beings may adopt two attitudes toward the world: *I-Thou* or *I-It*. *I-Thou* is a relation of subject-to-subject, while *I-It* is a relation of subject-to-object. In the *I-Thou* relationship, human beings are aware of each other as having a unity of being. In the *I-Thou* relationship, human beings do not perceive each other as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, but engage in a dialogue involving each other's whole being. In the *I-It* relationship, on the other hand, human beings perceive each other as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, and view themselves as part of a world which consists of things. *I-Thou* is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, while *I-It* is a relationship of separateness and detachment.

Buber explains that human beings may try to convert the subject-to-subject relation to a subject-to-object relation, or vice versa. However, the being of a subject is a unity which cannot be analyzed as an object. When a subject is analyzed as an object, the subject is no longer a subject, but becomes an object. When a subject is analyzed as an object, the subject is no longer a *Thou*, but becomes an *It*. The being which is analyzed as an object is the *It* in an *I-It* relation.

The subject-to-subject relation affirms each subject as having a unity of being. When a subject chooses, or is chosen by, the *I-Thou* relation, this act involves the subject's whole being. Thus, the *I-Thou* relation is an act of choosing, or being chosen, to become the subject of a subject-to-subject relation. The subject becomes a subject through the *I-Thou* relation, and the act of choosing this relation affirms the subject's whole being.

Buber says that the *I-Thou* relation is a direct interpersonal relation which is not mediated by any intervening system of ideas. No objects of thought intervene between *I* and *Thou*.¹ *I-Thou* is a direct relation of subject-to-subject, which is not mediated by any other relation. Thus, *I-Thou* is not a means to some object or goal, but is an ultimate relation involving the whole being of each subject.

Love, as a relation between *I* and *Thou*, is a subject-to-subject relation. Buber claims that love is not a relation of subject-to-object. In the *I-Thou* relation, subjects do not perceive each other as objects, but perceive each other's unity of being. Love is an *I-Thou* relation in which subjects share this unity of being. Love is also a relation in which *I* and *Thou* share a sense of caring, respect, commitment, and responsibility.

Buber argues that, although the *I-Thou* relation is an ideal relation, the *I-It* relation is an inescapable relation by which the world is viewed as consisting of knowable objects or things.

The *I-It* relation is the means by which the world is analyzed and described. However, the *I-It* relation may become an *I-Thou* relation, and in the *I-Thou* relation we can interact with the world in its whole being.

In the *I-Thou* relation, the *I* is unified with the *Thou*, but in the *I-It* relation, the *I* is detached or separated from the *It*. In the *I-Thou* relation, the being of the *I* belongs both to *I* and to *Thou*. In the *I-It* relation, the being of the *I* belongs to *I*, but not to *It*.

I-Thou is a relation in which *I* and *Thou* have a shared reality. Buber contends that the *I* which has no *Thou* has a reality which is less complete than that of the *I* in the *I-and-Thou*. The more that *I-and-Thou* share their reality, the more complete is their reality.

According to Buber, God is the eternal *Thou*. God is the *Thou* who sustains the *I-Thou* relation eternally. In the *I-Thou* relation between the individual and God, there is a unity of being in which the individual can always find God. In the *I-Thou* relation, there is no barrier of other relations which separate the individual from God, and thus the individual can speak directly to God.

The eternal *Thou* is not an object of experience, and is not an object of thought. The eternal *Thou* is not something which can be investigated or examined. The eternal *Thou* is not a knowable object. However, the eternal *Thou* can be known as the absolute Person who gives unity to all being.

Buber also explains that the *I-Thou* relation may have either potential being or actual being. When the *I-It* relation becomes an *I-Thou* relation, the potential being of the *I-Thou* relation becomes the actual being of the *I-Thou* relation. However, the *I-Thou* relation between the individual and God does not become, or evolve from, an *I-It* relation, because God, as the eternal *Thou*, is eternally present as actual Being.

Buber contends that the *I-Thou* relation between the individual and God is a universal relation which is the foundation for all other relations. If the individual has a real *I-Thou* relation with God, then the individual must have a real *I-Thou* relation with the world. If the individual has a real *I-Thou* relation with God, then the individual's actions in the world must be guided by that *I-Thou* relation. Thus, the philosophy of personal dialogue may be an instructive method of ethical inquiry and of defining the nature of personal responsibility.

FOOTNOTES

¹Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 26.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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