

A Reflection on Martin Buber's *I and Thou*

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Getting oriented

Martin Buber's *I and Thou* is probably in league with Steven Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* as the most highly celebrated but least read books of the 20th century. My personal history with *I and Thou* began over a decade ago when I gave up after an hour of puzzlement and embarrassment. I knew Buber's book to be an important piece, something I should be aware of, but I found it dense and inaccessible. I couldn't find an entrance point. But such frustrations require persistence. This is the kind of text that one reads because of its reputation, I said to myself; one simply must trust that the journey will be worth the effort.

Before you attempt your own reading of *I and Thou* let me suggest an analogy of what you are likely to experience. Reading *I and Thou* is like trying to make one's way through a dense and unfamiliar forest. One stays at it because one has heard good reports from other hikers in the "Buber woods". It comes with relief and delight then, when one breaks into a beautiful clearing. And then it happens again, and then again -- clearings full of an in-breaking light of basic human understanding and wisdom. One then understands what the other hikers have seen in the toil of the dense brush. And so one makes one's own report about the wonders in these woods, as I do now, but with this caveat to all other hikers: beware, the traveling isn't always easy.

So why bother? Simply because *I and Thou* is such a formative book, the reading of which can help you sort out your own sense of self in the "booming and buzzing" world before you. Its value lies in revealing what is basic, in naming the shape of our human relatedness to the world, in giving us a way to sort out the real essence of the human dilemma. After all, we dwell not only in the land of the living but in the land of the lie; truth is often hidden, obscured by busyness and activity, concealed by urgent agendas and loud voices. What Buber does is clear the ground for our thinking, pushing aside the trivial pursuits of acquisition and experience, making us look at ourselves as creatures

made in God's image. He orients us to the basic categories of our being-in-the-world, that is, he gives us a way of understanding our relational and dependent human existence. In doing this he shows us our essential nature.

This is why, I think, that *I and Thou* is so helpful to the question of Christian life and spirituality. It is essential that our Christian lives be grounded in our true humanity and (repeating myself) in the truth of our relational and dependent existence. Without a true orientation to life as God has shaped it, we can easily find ourselves practicing a kind of Christian faith that in many ways is antithetical to the soul: piety without personalness, practice without presence. Such ungrounded Christian life becomes nothing less than another carrier of cultural dysfunction, the echo of the blindness and idolatries of the world we live in. Without a deeper sense of how this world is fundamentally broken, all our proposed solutions simply miss the point. Jesus talked about the foolishness of building life on the foundation of false premises, making collapse inevitable. If what we make out of our lives is not personally present to God – real as in human and heartfelt – it ends as an exercise in futility. The essence of all Christian understanding is the sense that God is personal and that we are persons before him. One wonders whether C.S. Lewis has just read Buber when he spoke of the necessary prayer before all other prayer: “May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.”¹ Buber, then, gives us an orientation to the real *I*, and calls us to see the real *Thou* before us.

So let me introduce *I and Thou* to you and suggest that you get a copy and struggle with it as I have. It carries a potent medicine. So much so that I have come to believe that whether or not one reads Buber, one must understand Buber's premise as foundational to authentic spiritual life. Of course, as I have already said, few have read Buber. But I would venture to say that wherever authentic spiritual life is found, there you will find an illustration of what Buber speaks about in *I and Thou*. The following comments are an attempt to relate the genius of this taxing little book to those of us who seek after

¹ Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer. p. 82

that authentic spiritual self. Buber orients us to the personal and the relational, categories that need to be reclaimed in a depersonalized, technicized world.

Idea

I and Thou contains a fairly straightforward idea, even if the language is difficult to follow. Buber asserts that there are two basic postures or attitudes that define the way a person relates to the world beyond the self. The first posture he calls an *I-It* attitude, that is, the relationship of the personal self to the impersonal world of objects and things and ideas. This is a basic aspect of ordinary human existence, of course, for all of us must relate to impersonal things, and on a constant basis. Nevertheless, it is helpful to notice the dynamics of this posture/attitude. Buber sees the relationship of the personal *I* to the impersonal *It* as one of detachment; personal and impersonal can share no real communion. It is a relationship in which the personal *I* cannot be truly engaged in any meaningful sense.

Still with me? The second posture Buber calls an *I-Thou* attitude. This is the relationship of the personal self with other personal beings. The dynamic of this kind of relationship is one of engagement, for only persons can speak back to persons. Buber suggests then that these two postures, *I-It* and *I-Thou*, are the two poles that mark out the extremes of our relational attitudes, that of detachment or that of engagement. This is a fairly simple idea but it does not take long to see how definitive this is of our human daily existence. For very soon we see that we are not very good at dividing our attitudes rightly, relating in *I-Thou* fashion at times with inanimate objects (personalizing them and so idolizing them) and relating in an *I-It* fashion with persons (depersonalizing them and reducing them to objects). This is at the heart of our human dilemma.

It happens this way: when we objectify something (or someone), we do so in order to understand, use, or control; we make that object or person an *It*. This happens constantly and is somewhat necessary to our normal existence. In the *I-It* relationship, our personal self is active while the impersonal object before us is passive, unresponsive. Buber suggests that the *It* can be known as “content” to us, a thing, an item, something

we believe that we can know sufficiently enough to control and use. This is not wrong or evil, for if what is before us is truly inanimate – a thing, an object, an idea – then we are in proper relationship by seeing such as an *It*. We get into trouble when we confuse our categories such as in the case of seeing persons this way, as merely an *It* to be known or used or controlled. The shape of contemporary life, the way so many relationships come and go constantly, is greatly responsible for this dynamic. We see the people before us as merely their role or function -- the bank teller, the teacher, the lady driver. Nevertheless, such is entirely reductionistic of the persons that daily come into our lives.

The *I-Thou* relationship is of a different order and something we must be firmly cognizant of. *I-Thou* is the relationship of two persons, each mutually knowing the other, each active. In an *I-Thou* relationship, each cannot know the other as specific content for there is mystery to the personal, and mystery in every person. But we can “know” another person, and know them in the unique sense that they are present to our person, effecting who we are because we are engaged with them. In *I-Thou* relationships we are known even as we know – there is reciprocity and mutuality. The relationship is not defined by content but by what Buber called “presence”. He also calls this dynamic “presence as power” because the relationship of persons with persons is mutually transformative. Try having an effect on an inanimate object simply by being present and sharing your heart (you get the idea). *I-Thou* relationships are of an entirely different order from *I-It* relationships.

It should not be hard to see how Buber’s analysis is helpful to the discussion of Christian spirituality. For it is in the *I-Thou* pole of human relational existence that we find the proper sphere of the spiritual and religious (although even in the spiritual/religious the *I-It* can subtly and insidiously take over). Though man relates of necessity to the impersonal world of things (and rightly so), it is in *I-Thou* relationships that persons become most human, most themselves, as Buber says, “... without *It*, man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not man” (p. 34). Buber thus shows how central interpersonal relationships are in making an individual self into a person and not an *It*.

The power of Buber's basic idea is the way it clarifies the differences between personal and impersonal relationships. Though, as persons, we must relate to both the world of other persons and the impersonal world of things, we need to be aware of the fundamental differences in how each pole of relationship affects us. We must understand the fundamental distinctions in order to grow in our own personal-ness. Buber's classification helps us understand how we are changed by our relationships, personal and impersonal. The way to spiritual life, health, and growth is through *I-Thou* relationships. Ultimately, this distinction provides a basic orientation to a relationship with the *Absolute Thou*, the personal God of Jewish and Christian faith. Buber's great service to the Christian faith is to delineate the strength and power of the Jewish-Christian vision of the personal God, a vision that is absolutely distinct among the various religions and competing spiritualities.

Because the *I* (the person) is dynamically affected by relationship to both the impersonal and the personal, an orientation to this dynamic is necessary. Simply put, we need to be aware of how our relational stances, *I-It* and *I-Thou*, truly affect us. A large part of our human woundedness comes from the way we are often treated as "*Its*" by the world we live in: functions, roles, cogs in the societal machinery. This can even take place, in fact does take place, in the contemporary church where so much depends on what we do rather than who we are. Our *It*-ness overtakes our *Thou*-ness. And the joy of community suffers accordingly. We simply must have ways to be personal, present, engaged. The explanatory power of this construct also gives us a way to understand what sin is and does – both personal sin and societal sin – as our tendency to reduce the persons we encounter to impersonal "*Its*". We fail to see or feel or hear people as persons, living impatiently, judging by outward appearances and performance, living without thankfulness for the persons we journey with. Simply put, Buber's categories give us a way to conceptualize the Christian life in a way that counteracts present cultural distortions and cultural sins.

Embracing an *I-Thou* spirituality, we are helped to see life differently, more truly. Then, as persons, we can open up to the beauty, wonder, and meaning of the world in which

we live. Without this orientation, the world is seriously reduced, and we, as persons, are as underdeveloped and undiscovered as the *I* in an *I-It* relationship. Without this orientation, we become reduced to consumers, workers, roles, bodies. Most tragically, without this orientation, the *Absolute Thou*, the personal God of scripture, is distorted and unknown to us who live in the habits of an *I-It* world where everyone and everything is merely an object to be used – even God.

Value

Since the book lays out basic categories, the value of the book can be seen in its helpful orientation to spiritual life and existence. While Buber's thoughts spring from Jewish theistic understanding, basic Christian understanding is helped as well. To be sure, his orientation does fall short in presenting what is most personal about the Christian revelation, that God was in Christ reconciling men to himself. Nevertheless, some of the most basic values of the book are to be found in these areas:

The question of how we relate to God. Buber helps us see how easy it is to distort true spirituality. This is the problem of idolatry, a category which does not belong to the past. Idolatry is the reduction of God to the impersonal, a very contemporary problem. Our corrupted human nature (sin) tends not only to depersonalize and use people, but to do the same with God: "... in accordance with our nature we are continually making the eternal *Thou* into *It*, into something – making God into a thing" (p.112). Buber considers this is the great problem with monistic spiritualities (another contemporary trend) because in monism "there is no *Thou*" (p.92). One understands then that the great battle for spirituality in this and every age is the fight for the truly personal.

Although Buber is not a Trinitarian, it is in Trinitarian theology that the heart of personal spirituality is found. In my opinion, the richness and wonder of Trinitarian theology must be both understood and embraced by each generation of Christians. Trinitarianism is not to be assumed only as a traditional formulation but as the heart and dynamic of the Christian experience, the life of God in love for the other. When the Trinitarian nature of God is misunderstood, Christians are tempted to reduce God into a content to

be mastered, a subject to be understood, a thing to be used. Buber's "way", though not expressly Trinitarian, is the antithesis of such a utilitarian spirituality for only in mutuality, in encounter, in submission and hearing, is there relationship with God as the eternal *Thou*.

The question of personal transformation. How can I put this without losing myself in language like many accused Buber of doing? I'll try: what one is as an *I* differs according to whether one relates to the personal *Thou* or the impersonal *It*. The *I* of the *I-Thou* relationship is different from the *I* of the *I-It* relationship. The truly personal is developed only in and through relationship with a *Thou*: "Through the *Thou* a man becomes an *I*" (p.28). The genius of Buber's analysis, and its absolute definitiveness for the question of personal transformation is that the *I* cannot so much be found in itself, but only in relationship. Therefore the personal is in flux; it develops and becomes. This is a fundamental insight for those who think that through the use of techniques and ideas persons change, grow, are healed, or become in some way "self-actualized". Buber's categories suggest that it is in the move toward strengthening the *I* in the *I-Thou* relationship where a person becomes most real or personal.

Finally, personal transformation recognizes that it is not a matter of separating "real" persons from "unreal" for no such division exists. Authenticity is an existentialist idea that does not fit well within a Biblical understanding of personhood. It is better to recognize the poles of possibility within every person: "There are not two kinds of man, but two poles of humanity... None is wholly real and none is wholly unreal. Every man lives in the twofold *I*" (p.65). Buber would suggest that the move toward the more fully personal is found in maximizing the engagement of *I-Thou* relationships, and this is the practice that distinguishes an authentic spirituality from every false way.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that the difficult language of Buber's prose may be off-putting, but then again, this may be his art. When something is not immediately clear, one must take time to think through what the author means. Did Buber write in such a way to force the

reader to take things in slowly and deliberately? Perhaps I am justifying his style too much. But I am reminded of the enigmatic way that Saint John had of using words with double meanings and the way that played out in the art of his text: “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend [seize] it.” (John 1:5). The Greek verb *katalambano* can be understood as “comprehend or understand” as well as “overtake or seize”. We can see the related, yet distinct ambiguities in the choice of word: “not understood” means also “not seized”. Both were true of the light that was Christ: he was very much “not understood” and therefore “not seized”. He revealed himself only to those who were in relationship with him. John’s choice of words revealed Jesus’ way. Only in the willingness to stay engaged with him would more light dawn and more understanding come. Not all at first, but more and more as one stood in relationship.

Perhaps this is what we should expect from Buber’s book – that more insight is revealed the longer we stay in relationship with his text.