

BUBER AND US: RETHINKING THE DIALOGICAL APPROACH

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DOI:[10.13140/RG.2.2.16461.56809](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.16461.56809)

Abstract

Man is always caught up between his needs and wants. His choices set the tone for the difference between these. On a relative scale, they are not the same for all. What is a need for one could be a want for another. However, on the universal scale, there are basic needs distinct from wants. This is also true of the social sphere that seems to dilapidate with time. Humanity, which had pride of place, is now traded for lesser values. Man, like things, seems to have a price tag. The more this grows evident it becomes clear how human values are grossly eroded. With this, all forms of crime set in; dices are tossed, and the weak fall prey. On this ground, Buber's dialogical approach, taken in context, gives reasons for a rethink on the seemingly lost dignity of human life. His I-Thou and I-It dialogical imperatives show that man is not simply a thing. He has a value beyond any price. A rediscovery and application of the implications of what this enshrines for us today is the goal of this work.

Keywords: Being, Dialogical philosophy, Encounter, Experience, Humanity, Relation

Introduction

Dialogue is an essential attribute of man. No one completely lives in isolation. We are relational beings. Life simply presents us with opportunities to meet people. Such encounters spring up relationships. Some relationships we choose (friends, colleagues, etc) while others appear chosen for us (family relations). The way we relate to each person is (consciously or unconsciously) determined by who they are, what they do, how they live, where they are, etc. This means that to some, we relate with them as equals; to others as 'instruments' to our advantage; to others still as 'their lords', and so on. Within this web of relationships is self-discovery (the 'I' which is constant). It is through these relationships (or encounters in other words) that we see ourselves in others (as 'Thou') or distinguish ourselves from them (that is, see them as 'It'). This means

that it is within these then do we have an experience that could bring about a deeper understanding of ourselves.

Living in a world bedeviled by anti-human activities such as kidnapping, terrorism, trafficking, child abuses, environmental abuses, and various forms of human denigrating activities, there is every need for a rethink on the root causes of these disparaging behaviours for the good of humanity. Buber would insinuate that all these occur because our standpoint of relationship is the I-It by which we consider the other as a 'thing' unequal to us. It is based on this that this work seeks an understanding of the I-Thou (You, as the case may be) as a template for authentic dialogue with the other, without which the menace in our world would remain on the increase. This dialogue we must note "is not an accidental but an essential characteristic of a human being"¹ as relational beings. Does this immediately suggest that things be treated without respect? To better understand this, it is important to know what dialogical philosophy entails. Within this, the I-Thou and I-It would be espoused in line with Buber's understanding of them, what each portend, and how our openness to the former could set a pace for a better world. A simple contextual analysis and interpretation of the dialogical method would be employed. Before then, however, it is pertinent to ask: who is Martin Buber?

Martin Buber: Life and Works

The Jewish philosopher of the 20th century Martin Buber was born in Austria, Vienna to be precise in 1878. He lived with his grandfather who had a great influence on him and helped in forming a great part of his worldview. Having been well-groomed in the Jewish religious traditions, Buber studied philosophy and art history at the University of Vienna where he encountered the works of Kant, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Marx, and other great Christian mystics; and indeed all whose thoughts aided him in the formulation of his thoughts on the centrality of dialogue which he further deepened through an understanding of the Hebrew Bible. From all these came his idea of a dialogical community. While his fame grew after his most renowned work 'I-Thou' published in 1923, he lectured as a professor of Jewish religion and ethics at the University of Frankfurt, Mainz from 1930 to 1933 (when Hitler rose to power); a reason for which he had to vacate the university environment to teach and

¹ R. PETKOVSEK, *Dialogical being. Religion, philosophy and culture*, In *Dialogue and virtue: Ways to overcome clashes of our civilization*, edited by P. Hünermann – J. Juhant – B. Žalec, LIT, Berlin, 2007, p. 121.

encourage his fellow Jews in the face of tribulations through adult education and enlightenment.²

By 1938, he left Germany for Palestine where he took up the professorship of the sociology of religion at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. As an active leader, he directed a movement that sought to unite Arab-Jewish relations and so create a bi-national state. Within his later years, Buber began to apply his perception of man's relationship to the world to varied fields of study which culminated in his development of a theory of psychotherapy based on the dialogical relationship and a theory of social philosophy intended as a substitute for Marxism. Martin Buber died in 1965 leaving a great influence on Emmanuel Lévinas, Franz Rosenzweig, and a whole lot of other 20th century philosophers and psychotherapists. Some of his works translated in English by various authors as noted by the *New World Encyclopedia* include *I and Thou*, *The Knowledge of Man*, *A Believing Humanism*, *On Judaism*, *On Zion*, *A Land of Two Peoples*, *Ecstatic Confessions*, *On Intersubjectivity and Cultural Creativity*, *Paths in Utopia*, *Scripture and Translation*, *The Legend of the Balm-Shem*, *Between Man and Man*, and *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential Writings*.³

Dialogical philosophy: what it is, motive in Buber

Dialogical philosophy or in other words philosophy of dialogue is a mode of philosophizing made famous by Buber. It is a philosophy of inter-subjectivity which deals with an intentional relation between people. It is against the consideration of philosophy as a solely individual venture. This takes philosophizing beyond the individual. The relationship invoked in this sort of philosophy is a subject-subject in which case reciprocity is necessary. Buber clarifies what this kind of philosophy entails. He portrayed this relation as one of “turning towards the other” with an understanding that the other is entirely not himself.⁴ Deeper consideration of what this consists of revolves around most of his works. Lipari claims that Buber expanded his idea of dialogic philosophy by his description of “how both separation and relation are central to dialogue, which involves not unification or assimilation, but rather the distance from and

² M. ZANK – Z. BRAITERMAN, *Martin Buber*, In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2014, accessed: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/buber/> [30-1-2019].

³ *Martin Buber*, In *New World Encyclopedia*, accessed: http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Martin_Buber#Life_and_work [30-1-2019].

⁴ M. BUBER, *Between Man and Man*, Macmillan, New York 1975, 22.

relation to otherness.”⁵ The opening sentences of his book around which this is built allude to this form of reasoning. It reads thus:

To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude.
The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks.
The primary words are not isolated words but combined words.⁶

The ‘twofold’ repeatedly employed indicates a dialogue between two subjects: the world, man’s attitude, two primary words which are in turn combined. This system of presentation and analysis is by nature dialogic, that is, involving two subjects. Little wonder then that Nathan Rotenstreich observed (in his forward to the *Dialogical Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber* by Bergman) that dialogical philosophy “is undoubtedly taken from Martin Buber, in whose work dialogue and the life of dialogue were the main themes.”⁷ But why?

As customary with Western philosophical cycles, the thoughts of Buber could best be seen as a response to two extreme currents of thought on the issue of religious meaning. The first group aimed at creating “a place for God within the new, modern, rational understanding of the world” that often reduced the idea of God to a rational principle, as something abstract, without qualities; this paved way for the second group (consisting of atheists such as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud)) “attempted instead to deny religion any legitimate place at all within human experience” by viewing any human notion of God as a “sign of weakness or distress.”⁸ Dissatisfied with these two currents, Buber’s reaction formed the basis for his dialogical thought. He took a third part which affirms that there are two modes of engagement with the world: the mode of experience (the level of science and reasoning) consists of that in which we gather data, analyze, and theorize thereby treating things as ‘It’; and there is also the mode of encounter (which ushers us to a religious experience), in which we simply “relate to another as a You, not as an object to be used, but as an Other with whom we must relate.”⁹ To this regard, Tallon submits: “In one sense Buber can be credited

⁵ L. LIPARI, *Listening for the other: Ethical implications of the Buber-Levinas encounter*, In *Communication Theory*, 14 (2004) 2, 126.

⁶ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, trans. R. G. Smith, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1958, 3.

⁷ S. H. BERGMAN, *Dialogical philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber*, SUNY Press, New York, 1991, ix.

⁸ Cfr. *SparkNotes: I and Thou*, accessed: <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/iandthou/citing/> [31-1-2019].

⁹ *SparkNotes*.

with starting a major revolution in philosophy, while in another sense he has been a disappointment because he failed to complete what he started.”¹⁰ From the foregone, it is obvious that “though the influence of Buber is thus manifest in every fundamental sphere of human activity, it is possible to perceive both anticipatory and parallel influences at work.”¹¹ Therefore, the notion of dialogical philosophy, particularly in Buber is expressed through the use of pairs of words I-Thou (*Ich-Du*) and I-It (*Ich-Es*) that sum up our modes of being, encounter, and of course interaction with everything there is in the world. In sequel to this, he speaks of two realms of existence. This means that existence for Buber ought to be seen as a dialogue. While the former (I-You) depicts what a true dialogue entails as that which opens us to the other, the latter (I-It) suggests a monologue by which we are closed to the reality of the other as a thing. Taking this in context, Daniely avers the “Buberian dialogue is perceived as a source of inspiration for the creation of models of inter-subjective relations in various social fields, and in the educational one in particular.”¹² In fact, Górzna properly names him the father of the philosophy of dialogue in his article so titled.¹³ With this, it is only necessary that we seek to understand dialogue within the context of Buber by considering what I-Thou portents.

The I-Thou and I-It

Buber is not ignorant of the function of language in our day-to-day life, and so he begins his poetically written work by noting down what he calls “primary words” of language after laying the foundation for dialogic discourse on the principle of ‘twofold’ nature. On this dialogic foundation rests all his discourse. While they appear as a combination of two words, their usage springs up an idea of a mode of existence in a certain way different from the other.¹⁴ Existence is fundamental here as a stand point of recognition. Only what is can be spoken about. The most important primary word for Buber is I-Thou. Thus he writes: “The primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being.”¹⁵ To speak with the whole being is to engage without any form of reservation. Such an

¹⁰ A. TALLON, *Intentionality, intersubjectivity, and the between: Buber and Levinas on affectivity and the dialogical principle*, In *Thought*, 53 (1978), p. 292.

¹¹ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, xi.

¹² D. L. DANIELY, *The Buberian Dialogical man as a struggler in the field of existential choice*, In *Institute of Dialogue Studies*, 3 (2015) 1, 71.

¹³ S. GÓRZNA, *Martin Buber Father of the philosophy of dialogue*, In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 10 (2014) 5, 45-53.

¹⁴ *SparkNotes*.

¹⁵ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 3.

engagement is not with the self as in a monologue but the self before another self capable of affecting it. This implies that we must enter into this “encounter with our entire being, and allow ourselves to be changed by it.”¹⁶ Such mutuality ought not to be one-sided; it has a dual aspect since dialogue begins with two entities. Buber, on the other hand, affirms the “self-willed man does not believe and does not meet. He does not know solidarity of connexion, but only the feverish world outside and his feverish desire to use it.”¹⁷

It is a relationship that emphasizes the reciprocal openness and presence between two beings. There is no essential difference between the I-Thou, only inferential differences can be made. In fact, “Through the *Thou* a man becomes *I*.”¹⁸ It is a dialogue of self-realization and affirmation. This is a solid meeting by which these beings convene in their basic and real existence. They meet in a subject-subject relation. By this, there is no room for objectifying the other in any way. All ideas about the other are put out so that an authentic meeting or encounter can occur. This shows that there is no room for any form of artificiality in relation, rather a recognition of the parties involved since this recognition brings with it a knowledge of the other. Meaning that this engagement is one of active presence in which reality is actualized as against a mere conceptual knowledge devoid of concrete reality.¹⁹ It is an encounter of an ontological co-affirmation that demands utmost mutual respect.

This supposes that dialogue is an exercise for two people who even in the absence (that is not directly present), the words they use to present them are in a way existent and “mysterious center of value whose presence eludes the concepts of instrumental language.”²⁰ In other words, as Daniely suggests, “in the essential relation in which the ‘I-Thou’ encounter takes place, one complete presence stands before the other complete presence, the barriers fall and a human companionship of the beings is formed.”²¹ The I sees and recognizes itself in the Thou. From this, it is easy to observe that the I-Thou is the mode of relation or encounter which has at its core active participants as against mere observers. Here, there is shared engagement. According to Buber, the “relation to

¹⁶ *SparkNotes*.

¹⁷ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 60.

¹⁸ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 28.

¹⁹ Cfr. *Martin Buber*, In *New World Encyclopedia*.

²⁰ M. ZANK – Z. BRAITERMAN, *Martin Buber*

²¹ D. L. DANIELY, *The Buberian Dialogical man as a struggler in the field of existential choice*, 75.

the *Thou* is direct.”²² This encounter has a transformative character that calls out the other while expecting an active response without which none of the partners can take the merit. What enables this kind of encounter is the fact that it is unmediated, without prior knowledge, concepts, desires, greed, or anticipation of what the *Thou* is like. No mental the separation between both of them.

Contrary to the I-*Thou* in every respect is the I-*It* form of encounter where there exists a non-mutual rapport between the beings involved. This because there is a difference between the I involved: “The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*. The *I* of the primary word *-It* makes its appearance as individuality and becomes conscious of itself as subject (of experiencing and using).”²³ It is the mode by which we come in contact with the natural world of experience where the I subject views the other more or less like an object as is the case with the mental objects “created and sustained by the individual consciousness.”²⁴ This results in a situation where a monologue thrives because it involves a passive involvement of the parties. Buber affirms that “The primary word I-*It* can never be spoken with the whole being.”²⁵ This implies that the *I*, in this case, acts as an observer within a mediated space and time, manipulating the *It* to suit its demands. Within such mediated space and time lie the activities of experience that are associated “with thought, both scientific and every day: observing, cataloguing, calculating, analyzing, describing. The *I* views the *It* as an object to be known, manipulated, and utilized.”²⁶ No true engagement is formed in this encounter in or out of presence. It is simply a monologue where the intentional subject has edge over the object. Based on their time relation, Buber asserts: “True beings are lived in the present, the life of the object is in the past.”²⁷ This accounts for the lack of concrete meeting in the I-*It* approach. No form of commitment intended either. Buber argues:

The primary relation of man to the world of *It* is comprised in *experiencing*, which continually reconstitutes the world, and *using*, which leads the world to its manifold aim, the sustaining, relieving and equipping of human life. In proportion to the growing extent of the world of *It*, ability to experience and use it must also grow. The individual can, to be sure, more and more

²² M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 11.

²³ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 62.

²⁴ *Martin Buber*, In *New World Encyclopedia*.

²⁵ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 3.

²⁶ *SparkNotes*.

²⁷ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 13.

replace direct with indirect experience, he can “acquire items of knowledge”, and he can more and more reduce his using of the world to specialised “utilization”; nevertheless, a continual development of this ability, from generation to generation cannot be avoided.²⁸

It is by this form of relation that we gain knowledge of the universe and the objects existent in it. When forced on human relations, one of the supposedly equal subjects is objectified. For Buber, this “development of the function of experiencing and using comes about mostly through decrease of man’s power to enter into relation.”²⁹ By implication, the individual within this frame of relationship approaches all others (people as well as things) as objects of experience meant to be used. The merit rests on the I to view the world within its ambient as mere objects. In other words, everything within the I-It revolves around the self and how others can satisfy its wants and demands. This is what makes it a monologue in essence since no reciprocity is expected as is the case in the I-Thou relationship. On the whole, moreover, Buber’s dialogical philosophy implies that our lives as humans revolve around these primary words: I-Thou and I-It such that at some points, the Thou becomes an It when there is no dialogue. This is the tendency he desires that we avoid at all times; the reason being that a human being is not fully human save he opens himself to the I-Thou relation so that he can relate, as against the quest to master the world around him, other humans inclusive.

God as the Eternal Thou

The most profound aspect of the I-Thou relationship is the opportunity to encounter the Divine. Buber identifies the Thou of God as the eternal Thou by which a person has contact with God as a Person rather than some mental construct (of him). There is a fulfilment that the I imperfectly finds in the Thou, which is only perfected in the eternal Thou. The eternal Thou is the perfect being in whom we find the completion of the I-Thou relationship. However, the I-Thou by this becomes a template by which we reach the eternal Thou. While all relations reflect some kind of contact with God, this is only attained through an open encounter in the I-Thou in which case any other means would rather be a reduction of God to the It. Accordingly, building the trace of the eternal Thou as something very familiar even among ‘nature peoples’, Buber states:

²⁸ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 38.

²⁹ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 43.

This initial and long-continuing relational character of every essential phenomenon makes it also easier to understand a certain spiritual element of primitive life that is much discussed and observed, but not yet properly grasped, in present-day study. I mean that mysterious power the idea of which has been traced, through many variations, in the form of the beliefs or in the knowledge (both being still one) of many nature peoples.³⁰

Petkovsek posits that the “dialogue between God and man was translated into the language of philosophy by Martin Buber... the basic mental category is a relationship. In the beginning is a relationship: as a category of being [...]. A-priori of relationships; the innate Thou.”³¹ In discussing this Buber identifies three spheres in which the world of relation arises: the first being nature which is ineffable or beneath the level of speech; the second is with men through speech (or language as the case may be), and the third with spiritual or intelligible beings which begets or possesses a condition for the possibility of speech.³² This implies that any relational experience to the Thou is a relational experience to the infinite Thou. He holds strongly that “In every sphere in its own way to each process of bearing that is present to us, we look out towards the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal Thou; in each Thou, we address the eternal Thou.”³³ In other words, “God is fully manifested through another man. It is about establishing an authentic dialogue with another ‘I’, constituting the announcement and reflection of the dialogue with God, with the highest ‘You’.”³⁴ With God being the eternal Spirit, Buber synthesizes the Thou of the Spirit in the following words:

Spirit in its human manifestation is a response of a man to his *Thou*. Man speaks with many tongues, tongues of language, of art, of action; but the spirit is one, the response to the *Thou* which appears and addresses him out of the mystery. Spirit is the word... Spirit is not the *I*, but between *I* and *Thou*. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe. Man lives in the spirit, if he is able to respond to his *Thou*. He is able to, if he enters into relation with his whole being. Only in virtue of his power to enter into relation is he able to live in the Spirit.³⁵

³⁰ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 19-20.

³¹ R. PETKOVSEK, *Dialogical being*, 125.

³² M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 6.

³³ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 6.

³⁴ S. GÖRZNA, *Martin Buber Father of the philosophy of dialogue*, 47.

³⁵ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 39.

The I-Thou as a focal point for authentic Relationship

As we had noted above, we speak the I-It with only part of our being. It is only a partially engaged way of talking to another person. The primary temporal modality of the I-It is the past. Meaning that it is a way of treating each person mostly by what we know about them from our past experience as well as our past habitual pattern within our action. One way to think about the I-It in our lives is to think about the way we try to objectify each other in our everyday interactions. It is basically about trying to manipulate other persons based on what we know about them from our experience in almost the same way that we do with other things. Most of the time, we are not acknowledging each other's deep humanity. The truth is that we just try to use each other to get what we want. This is a pseudo-perception of the other person. Granted that "without It man cannot live," Buber himself added that "he who lives with It alone is not a man."³⁶ How then is an authentic relationship feasible in a world dominated by the It?

This is where Buber "emphasised the necessity of real experience of a dialogue relation, without which contemporary philosophical anthropology cannot be grounded."³⁷ This dialogue experience has to do with recognising the other person's full humanity with our full humanity. It happens in the here and now; unmediated because "No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou. . . . No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between I and Thou. . . . Every means is an obstacle. Only where every means has collapsed does the meeting come about."³⁸ This is what relation or encounter truly means that there is no form of mediation in our meeting (with) the other person. It has to do with our being present to another person rather than only being partially engaged. By implication, it demands that we are fully engaged. It also has to do with addressing each other with the sense of mutuality in reciprocity with recognising and affirming the other person's whole being. Here, the spontaneous present rather than the past is in play.

In sequel to this, the I-Thou is important in our lives for many reasons. Experiencing the I-Thou is one of the most precious parts of our human birthright. That is to say that it is the locus of all genuine creative activity, spirituality, and all forms of transcendence. Getting to understand that we cannot stand alone through life nor grow alone helps us to better appreciate this

³⁶ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 34.

³⁷ S. GÖRZNA, *Martin Buber Father of the philosophy of dialogue*, 46.

³⁸ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 12.

encounter. This means that all moments of genuine becoming require the Thou. “Living mutual relation”, Buber contends, “includes feelings, but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective Centre.”³⁹ The I is at the heart of this unavoidable encounter. It needs the other in a subject-subject relationship necessary for our good. This can only happen when we are aware of each as having a unity of being. We do not need to perceive others as consisting of specific isolated qualities but rather engage in a dialogue involving each other’s whole being.

One of the main indicators of whether we are in the I-It or I-Thou mode is the way we use the I which is a basic ground of how we address things in the world. The I-It way of using the I more or less maps out the egoistic sense of the self that we often operate from. This is not the case when the latter non-egoistic mode is used. While it is true that the opportunity to constantly experience the I-Thou does not simply arise from wilful experience but grace which occasionally presents itself in our experience; we have to choose to enter into it. In other words, the I-Thou requires both will and grace. It beckons to us always, but we must also choose to enter into it. The best we can do is to be sensitive to moments as these and then cultivate the courage to enter into it.

Practical implications of the I-Thou and I-It for our world today

Buber’s dialogic philosophy has a way of changing our social perception or structure in divergent ways. The motive here is to show how his thought translates into more concrete realities for a better world. While the submissions made here might not be all perfect, they would rise from the perceptions therein. According to Kabuk, “the Buberian dialogic imperative contains a simple conviction which makes it a model for the modern world, by breaking through the conventions of normal lines of demarcation that inculcates new dialogic oriented thought in people’s consciousness.”⁴⁰ Its poetic nature paves way for the possibility of various interpretations of the text in ways that could be quite profitable. A community-oriented perception of the I-Thou has far many implications for the different sectors of human lives: be it family, education, ecclesial, psychology, etc. In an educational environment for example, if mutual respect and otherness-centred virtues are imbibed, students will grow to appreciate and explore their God-given talents while respectfully helping others

³⁹ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 45.

⁴⁰ V. S. KABUK, *Martin Buber on dialogic imperative: A remedy for a ‘broken world’*, In *NAJOP*, 3 (2018) 1, 130.

to attain their great potentials as against exploiting it for egocentric reasons. Teachers will see the students for who they are, not for what they are and so effectively play their role to attain the human project. This means:

a teacher and an adult educational practitioner, believed in an educational system that is based on mutual relations-dialogue of inclusion at all levels and also an educational system that values the direct relation or appropriation of education in an emotional way by the community so as to make education the builder of the community with the appropriate ethical system i.e. character development.⁴¹

This approach equally applies to other spheres of life be it in psychotherapy, ethics, religion, and the likes. What the environment sows in its populace is what it receives in return. No doubt that within the Buberian spectrum, the idea of slavery, human trafficking, drugging, robbery, murder, caste system, and other social vices would exist simply because we have reduced human relationships to the I-It status. From this point, the other person is seen as a 'thing' rather than a person. People are viewed from their sociological relevance as a butcher, a patient, doctor, banker, farmer, and all of such considerations. As result, what they can do to benefit us becomes the motive to seek them. With this in mind, we seek them for what they are against who they are; what they can do as against our pairs in need of mutual existence. Treating people as Thou in health care, for example, requires: listening and getting to know them as real persons, showing them love irrespective of where they come from, humbly assisting them to accept their present conditions as a way of ameliorating it. In Buber's wide range consideration of this,

True public and true personal life are two forms of connexion. In that they come into being and endure, feeling (the changing content) and institutions (the constant form) are necessary; but put together they do not create human life... the central presence of the *Thou*, or rather, more truly stated, by the central *Thou* that has been received in the present.⁴²

One can as well look at Buber's thoughts from an ecological point of view. It is no doubt that the I-It mode is bound by the connection between things thereby resulting in our seeing them in different parts of existence. Buber portrayed the It in the following lyrics:

⁴¹ Y. A. AKINKUOTU – Y. A. QUADRI, *Martin Buber's philosophical idea of the I-Thou (You) and its relevance to modern education in Nigeria*, In *British Journal Publishing Inc*, 8 (2012) 1, 90.

⁴² M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 46.

I consider a tree.

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air – and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.

I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law...

I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation. In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.⁴³

From the above quotation, we note that Buber looks at the tree from its different isolated parts as to how we come to know it. He enumerated in sum: picture, movement, species, law, and numbers. This is what happens in the I-It monologue, we separate the different aspects of a thing such that it loses its wholeness. But come to think of it: what if we maintain a perception of the tree as a uniform whole that possesses value? How? By consolidating these different aspects (picture, movement, species, law and numbers), we can be able to recognize a 'uniform wholeness' that needs to be preserved because of the intrinsic values it has to offer us and for whom we owe it a duty to preserve. This can be some sort of a relational experiment. This is the point that deep ecological movement seeks to underscore; the attitude that nature is inherently valuable to itself as an entity. A tree exists as itself and deserves to be what it is in virtue of existing not only as a means to human ends but also as an end in itself.

This will appear as a partial form of transformation of I-It to I-Thou because the more of such efforts we make, the better appreciative we become of our environments. If we consider the fact that the oxygen we need for respiration comes from plants while the carbon dioxide we exhale is a necessity for them, we can have an opening for a slight mutual relationship that exists at the basic natural state of life. This of course is a form of symbiotic relationship which aims at mutually complementing each other. In a sense, we can say that we have a mutual connection with the tree as a being that complements us. While this might sound absurd, it is nature's way of self-preservation. What an effective

⁴³ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 7.

power! We could consider another poetic expression in Buber that paves the way for a profound connection within the sphere of the I-It mode. He speaks here in aesthetic terms:

This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desire to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out and the work arises.⁴⁴

This seems to present an abrupt encounter with a work of art that brings about an awe-inspiring moment that keeps us lost for a while in the present. Here we feel a deep sense of connection with a work of art that everything appears resonated in mutual reciprocity. This is important because a language does not only consist of spoken words; it also involves other signs and gestures at times too deep for words to explain. Within this sphere, the art communicates something of itself to me in a profound way that evokes a response from me; a response that is self-giving. Buber quickly adds: "The act includes a sacrifice and a risk. This is the sacrifice: the endless possibility that is offered up on the altar of the form."⁴⁵ By this, I risk losing myself to understand art. Every aesthetic encounter demands this experience. It is a situation where we stand in awe of what we encounter, an amazing moment that makes us short of words to experience the unmediated happenings within the shortest period. Stumbling on a magnificent building at an instant of time and it marvels us so much so that we seem to lose ourselves to it is a clear example of this. Such a sense of loss seizes us that if we are not careful we risk losing our minds. That is the sacrifice we make to have a genuine connection with it (Thou) in this case.

The words of Górzna on these issues are very interesting. They appear in what he tagged as the two factors that prompt a man to ask about himself. This is particularly important because they help us to understand the importance of this point of turning back or retracing our steps for the common good. He contends that according to Buber:

special factors should occur in order for man to start asking about himself. Firstly, the sociological factor is an internal disintegration and a loss of spiritual powers of the organic forms of human life, e.g. family and small

⁴⁴ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 9-10.

⁴⁵ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 10.

professional communities. Involved man (usually involved in professional activity) lives the pretences of community and in fact is deeply lonely. The second factor is a crisis which Buber calls “man’s falling behind his own work”, which takes place not only in the field of technology but also in politics and economics. Individualism and collectivism are not able to manage the feeling of existential loneliness.⁴⁶

If only we could have this quest to right the wrongs we have done; if only we could seek the I-Thou encounter as much as possible; if only we could desire to move away from the I-It to other-centred relationship; if only humanity could learn to appreciate the good of the other as something intrinsic to his being and so accept him (the other) always; if only this ideas could be inculcated in children from their early stages of life; what a wonderful world we would have! It would pay attention to Buber’s suitable choice of expression:

Every great culture that comprehends nations rests on an original relational incident, on a response to the *Thou* made at its source, on an act of being made by the spirit. This act, strengthened by the similarly directed power of succeeding generations, creates in the spirit a special conception of the cosmos; only through this act is cosmos, an apprehended world, a world that is homely and houselike, man dwelling in the world, made possible again and again. Only now can man. Confident in his soul, build again and again, in a special conception of space, dwellings for God and dwellings for men, and fill swaying time with new hymns and songs, and shape the very community of men.⁴⁷

In the long run, all forms of dehumanization are devaluations of the worth of the human person. Acts of terror, banditry, trafficking, destruction of lives and property, etc. are forms of pricing this human worth as those the victims have no right to live. This right to live is not negotiable based on the ideals of life. It secures the place of the I-Thou. Does that mean the I-It should be treated with disdain? Are non-human resources meant wasted? In both cases, the answer is no. Moreover, one thing is very clear: “our excessive exploitations of nature’s gifts everywhere come with divergent consequences.”⁴⁸ Pope Francis’s *Laudato si* addresses this in-depth too: “Everything is connected... interrelated... and

⁴⁶ S. GÒRZNA, *Martin Buber Father of the philosophy of dialogue*, 48.

⁴⁷ M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, 54.

⁴⁸ G. T. OKAFOR, *Querida Amazonia: The echoes of the long-lasting cry of Africa*, In *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 19 (2021) 2, 109.

interconnected.”⁴⁹ It is a call to be conscious of the impact our lives have on the world. “This implies”, he insists, “a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature”⁵⁰; the I-Thou and the I-It. Hence, while the right to life must be sustained, the security of the things that maintain this sustenance must be guaranteed.

Conclusion

This work *ab initio* indicated the necessity of human communal living. No one is simply an island nor can one do or live alone without a natural quest for his peers. This quest gains satisfaction in what Buber describes as the I-Thou encounter by which we have profound participation in the life of others. It calls us to an even much deeper realm of relationship with the eternal Thou whose infinite existence spurs on our terrestrial passage in search of the happiness that He alone truly fulfills. Bearing in mind that nature in some way reveals the eternal Thou, it becomes an honourable exercise to appreciate what it offers us and reciprocate its gifts by seeking more moments of the I-Thou encounter which ignite mutual respect and appreciation of being. It also calls us to the right use of the resources around for promoting this relationship. Only where this right use is missing does a lack of appreciation of human beings set in. This is why we must strive to maintain both dialogical encounters as sources of balance for the human good. The dialogical philosophy of Buber guided this adventure through what dialogue entails; the modes of dialogue in his thoughts that culminate in a relationship with God. Centring on the I-Thou as the pivotal point for an authentic relationship, the work in line with Buber insists on how a constant affirmation of the other is an affirmation of the self. Most worthy of note too is the fact that there are possible avenues in Buber that bring us to ascend gradually from the monologue of the I-It to higher grounds of true encounters of intersubjectivity. With this, the human project and the environment gain increased mutual relevance for the good of all. It is worth the quest!

⁴⁹ Cfr. POPE FRANCIS, *Praise be to you. On care for our common home*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 2005, n. 118, 120, 240.

⁵⁰ POPE FRANCIS, *Praise be to you*, n. 67.