

Martin Buber and Muhammad Husain Tabatabaei:

A Comparative Study

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Introduction

In this paper, I want to compare some of the ideas of Martin Buber, a distinguished existential philosopher, with Muhammad Husain Tabatabaei, one of the significant figures of contemporary philosophy and Sufism in Shia Islam. In the first section, I shall briefly introduce these two important philosophers and in the second part, I will consider the relationship between God and the creatures from their point of view. In this section I will show that there is a similarity between Buber's conception of "I-Thou" with Tabatabaei's view on "I" as the only way toward reality. In section three, I will compare their perspectives towards *good* and *evil*. In the fourth section, I will explain Tabatabaei's novel argument for an *eternal reality* and I will show that how it is similar to Buber's *Eternal Thou*.

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I

1.1 Martin Buber

Martin Buber (1878-1965) a prominent Jewish philosopher, religious thinker and political activist, was born in Austria and spent most of his life in Israel and Germany. Most of his works are written in German and Hebrew and includes a variety of different fields, from Mysticism to biblical studies. He was the professor at the university of Frankfurt before the time that Adolf Hitler takes the power in 1933. He then went to Israel and was the professor at Hebrew University till his death in 1965. (Scott, Martin Buber in IEP)

Buber was a cultural Zionist who was disagreed with Herzl's political and cultural approach toward Zionism. He emphasized on the cultural and spiritual aspects of Judaism and not just on the Jewish *nation*. Some of his major works are as follows: *I and Thou* (1923), *Between Man and Man* (1920s), *The Knowledge of Man* (1952). Buber named himself a philosophical anthropologist. (Zank, 2014, SEP)

1.2 Muhammad Husain Tabatabaei

Muhammad Husain Tabatabaei (1904/1981) was one of the most influential Islamic thinkers in contemporary era. He was born in Tabriz, Iran and spent most of his life in Iraq (Najaf) and Iran (Qom). He was a Sadraian philosopher (the followers of Mulla Sadra)² and Shia Mystic. He has written many books in Philosophy, Sufism and mysticism, theology, Quran exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence. Some of his major books are as follows.

². For more information on Mulla Sadra, see: Afroogh 2012 and Afroogh 2015.

- *Al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an* (exegesis of Quran)
- *Gloss on al-Asfar* (interpretation of Mulla Sadra's major book *al-Asfar*)
- Risalah Al- Wilayah (in mysticism)

He was one of the most important figures in contemporary Shia thought especially in Iran. He was influenced by Mulla Sadra (in philosophy) and Ibn Arabi (in mysticism).

There are three main approaches in Islamic philosophy; the first is *Peripatetic philosophy* (the followers of Aristotle in Islamic world) which is established by Avicenna. The second is *Illuminationism philosophy* by Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi, and the third is *Transcendental philosophy* founded by Mulla Sadra. Mulla Sadra was the last comprehensive philosopher in Islamic world and some of his followers (such as Tabatabaei) have inclined to Sufism specially Ibn Arabi's thoughts.³

II

The Relationship between God and Creatures

2.1. Buber's perspective

³. You will find on Mulla Sadra's works in the followings (M. 'Abd al-Haq 1970; Alizada1998; Amin 1986; Amuli 1995; Ashkivari 2008; Ashtiyani 1980; Corbin 1962)

Martin Buber's *I and thou* is about two important relations: *I-Thou* and *I-It*. The former refers to the relation between *man* and *other* in a dialog. In this relationship, you know *others* not through some universal categories or definition. In contrast, the *I-It* refers to a monolog state. In this relation you classify things based on the differences between them and some universal definition. You can face with these objects and predicate their changes. (Scott, Martin Buber in IEP)

“The “I” of man differs in both modes of existence. The “I” may be taken as the sum of its inherent attributes and acts, or it may be taken as a unitary, whole, irreducible being. The “I” of the “I-It” relation is a self-enclosed, solitary individual (*der Einzige*) that takes itself as the subject of experience. The “I” of the “I-Thou” relation is a whole, focused, single person (*der Einzelne*) that knows itself as subject. In later writings Buber clarified that inner life is not exhausted by these two modes of being. However, when man presents himself to the world he takes up one of them.” (Scott, Martin Buber in IEP)

Buber states that there are three kinds of dialogue i.e. “I-Thou”: dialogue with man, dialogue with nature and dialogue with spirit. He offers Socrates as a prominent figure for dialogue with man and Goethe as a major figure for dialog with nature, and Jesus as paramount figure for dialogue with spirit. (Scott, Martin Buber in IEP)

Dialogue with man is the clearest one in this regard, and as we see in Socrates, it is one of the best ways toward reality. Actually through dialogue we can see how to discriminate the metaphysical and epistemological realities from nonexistent entities.

Dialogue with spirit is the most important one for Buber. He consider it as the dialogue with the *Eternal Thou* which is eternally *other* and sometimes he called it God.

Buber consider *I-Thou* relation as the most important one in human beings life which basically form our social and cultural aspects of life. He emphasizes that if we want to reach to our social and spiritual goals we should concentrate on these relationships with others.

It seems that Buber's *I-Thou* is mind dependent and through this we can have such relation even with the *stranger* persons and *others*.

As you see, the notion of "I" and the dialog with "eternal Thou" or "eternal other" play central roles in Buber's interpretation of the world. In what follows I will elaborate on these two notion form Tabatabaei's point of view.

2.2 Tabatabaei's view on "I"

"Who am i?" is one of the most important questions in Islamic Mysticism. Many of the Islamic mystics and Sufis try to give an appropriate answer to this question. Besides the different theoretical answers, Sufis try to give some practical exercises and meditations for comprehending the reality of self. Even though, some of them have tried to describe their intuitional comprehension of "I" in a theoretical philosophy. One of the most successful people in this regard is Tabatabaei who are both practicing Sufi and theoretical philosopher, and actually because of this his works are very important for Islamic scholars. He has tried to formulate Sufi's knowledge in terms of philosophical tools.

According to Tabatabaei, to answer of the question “who am I?” we need some more fundamental concepts about the nature of objects in the world.

Tabatabaei, in correspond to Mulla Sadar, believe that there is nothing in the world but *pure* and *Absolut existence*, and actually because of the fact we call the objects in the world as *existents*. However, there is a difference between *Absolut existence* and *existents*. The former, as opposed to the latter, don’t have any identities and shapes. He wants to state that in reality we have just *Absolut existence* and it is our mind which put this in different shapes and forms. All objects or existents have two dimensions: the first is their reality which is *Absolut existence*, and the other is their *identity*, shape, face or appearance. So, there is no any difference between wood and stone and human beings in the reality and in their being existence; the only difference is in their identities and shapes which is partially constructed by our minds.

He explains that these differences by shapes are necessary for our living in this world. For without these differences we cannot know and identify different objects and we cannot know ourselves. However, he calls such knowledge as *appearance* knowledge as opposed to *real* knowledge. He insists that for having real knowledge we should go through another way. Mind is a way toward different existents and *identities* in the world not pure and *Absolut existence* in the reality. He says this new way toward our reality is “I”. Every person has a very intuitional, subjective and existential way toward reality and it is their *selves*. He defines “I” as a simple existence which is the entrance of the Absolut existence, which can cover all the *others*.

So it seems to me that his definition of “I” is very similar to “I” in “I-Thou” in Buber’s philosophy. On one hand, Buber says that through *I-Thou* we can have the

relation even with the *stranger* persons and *others*; on the other hand, Tabatabaei believes that “I” is our only way toward “Absolut existence” which covers all the existents including strangers and others. Seemingly, both of them believe that we can have a better understanding of the universe through our “I”. However, it seems to me that Buber’s theory is more mind-dependent and Tabatabaei’s theory is more mind-independent.

2.3 Tabatabaei’s view on “eternal other”

Buber in the third kind of *I-Thou* states that Jesus is the ideal type of this relation and he call God with the world “*eternal Thou*” which is *eternally other*.

It seems to me that there is a very similar relationship between Buber’s “eternal Thou” and Tabatabaei’s conception of “absolute reality”.

Tabatabaei defines “absolute reality” as follows:

“بسيط الحقيقه كل الاشياء و ليس بشيء منه”

It means that “the Absolut reality or the pure existence is all the existents without their shapes and identities.”

He state that the *reality* of all the things is the same and it is who walks or runs, drinks or eats, gives or takes, sits and stands. All the power and beauties are originated in it. All the goods are comes from it. But all the evil are from shapes and identities.

He defines God as the reality who can be proving by mind but can be grasped just through “I” by heart.

From Tabatabaei’s point of view, the real relationship between “I” and “God” is an existential relation and he believes that there is no way for knowing an “Absolute existence” from a nonexistence and conceptual way. Our mind at most can prove some theoretical concepts which describe God.

It seems that this way of grasping the reality is very close to something which Buber says about the dialog between “I” and the “eternal other”. However, I think there are some differences between them. Why Buber describe God by the notion of “other”? It seems that we can answer to this question from Tabatabaei’s viewpoint.

According to Tabatabaei, making theoretical differences between things and objects are necessary for human knowledge. But he considers this kind of knowledge as theoretical and *appearance* knowledge not *real* knowledge. In theoretical knowledge, using our mind, we identify a verity of objects and we consider them as *others*; something other than ourselves. And in this project, God is the strangest things for us especially by comparison to the other strangers. It seems that because of the fact, for Buber, God is considered as the *eternal other*.

Moreover, Tabatabaei has a novel proof for an eternal and absolute reality which I will elaborate on it in the section IV. It seems that his conception of “eternal reality” is very similar to Buber’s conception of “eternal God”

III

Good and Evil

3.1 Buber on *good and evil*

Buber in the book *Good and Evil* tries to define good and evil based on the possibility and actualization. From his point of view, we can say that:

“Evil is a formless, chaotic swirling of potentiality; in the life of man it is experienced as endless possibility pulling in all directions. Good is that which forms and determines this possibility, limiting it into a particular direction. We manifest the good to the extent we become a singular being with a singular direction.” (Scott, Martin Buber in IEP)

Buber clarifies that our imagination contains both good and evil. And there are both possibilities in it; however, it becomes evil when it diverges from direction. Our task is not to try to eliminate evil, but we just should try to reunite it again with good to become a whole good. He calcifies evil to two stages. The first is sin and the other is wickedness. He says that because of the possibilities of evil, one cannot always be good. It is a continues effort for being good and trying to balance good and evil. (Scott, Martin Buber in IEP)

Furthermore, he states that evil is originally nonexistence and insubstantial. He explains that we don't have any essential and whole evil; it just comes up from an inner contradiction.

3.2 Tabatabaei on good and evil

Tabatabaei's view on good and evil is very similar to Buber's. According to Tabatabaei all the goods are originated from God and all the evil comes up from creature's identities. He says that *pure* and *absolute existence* is good in itself; this is our constructive identities and the contradiction between them which cause some evil in the world.

In other words, he says that we don't have any absolute evil in the world. For all the world is formed from Absolute existence and it is completely good. All the apparent evils that we see in the world are relative evil not absolute evil. Here, he divides evil to two kinds:

- *Absolute evil* which refers to the evil in reality, and because Tabatabaei believes that the reality and the existence are equivalent with good, it concludes that absolute evil is nonexistence. So, we don't have any absolute evil in the world.
- *Relative evil* which refer to some constructive evil in our mind which comes from some contradiction in the world. It means that many of the apparent evil stuffs or pains in the world is bad and unfavorable for us, not for the entire universe. So, he states that a wise man should be content of such evil and know that all of these pains have some roots in a whole good system.

As we see, there is a similarity between Buber and Tabatabaei. Both of them see evil as nonexistence.

IV

Buber's "eternal other" and Tabatabaei's proof for the "eternal reality"

Buber refers to God as “eternal other” and he explains how “I-thou” relation helps us to understand God. As I explained in section 2.2, it seems that his conception of “eternal God” is very similar to Tabatabaei’s conception of “eternal reality”. Tabatabaei in his glosses on the book *Asfar* (by Mulla Sadra), presents a novel argument for the existence of God which is very similar to the *Ontological arguments* in the western theology. Through this argument he proves an “eternal reality”. His argument is as follows:

“The Existence is an objective truth.” (Mulla Sarda, 1966, Vol. 6, p. 12)

—and this objective truth is the very reality which based on it, we deny sophism and find that every reasonable individual inevitably accepts it. This reality is one that cannot adopt inexistency and nullity in its essence. Even the supposition of the inexistency and nullity of reality itself necessitates its existence. [To explain what is meant,] If we suppose that all realities are invalid and inexistent in a particular time or always, this means that in reality, all realities are inexistent (and this in turn will prove the existence of a reality again). Likewise, if the sophist assumes that all things are illusionary, or doubts in their reality, indeed, in his view, those things are really illusionary and their realities are really dubitable (this means that reality is proven from the very point it was rejected), while reality in essence, cannot adopt any inexistency and nullity, resulting in its necessity in itself. Therefore, there is a reality that is necessary in itself that makes other things that are real, dependent on it in their reality and existence. It is from this that the thinker finds that the existence of a necessary being is obvious for everyone and the proofs for the existence of the necessary are actually nothing but reminders.” (Tabatabaei, 1982, Vol. 6 VI, P. 16)

Tabatabaei begins with an axiomatic concept (i.e. existence and the proposition that “there is a reality). In the second step, he concludes by *redaction ad absurdum*, that reality is necessary and it is such that it is impossible for it to be inexistent. He concludes that there is an “eternal reality”, and it is very similar to Buber’s conception of “eternal God”.

V

Conclusion

To sum it up, with all the aforementioned arguments taken into account, I think there are some important similarities between Buber’s theology and Tabatabaei’s religious philosophy. The similarities between their definition of “I”, “eternal God” and the nature of good and evil simply revealed that their ideas are representing the same facts. It seems to me that this similarities between the ideas of two thinkers who are born and raised in two completely different contexts is a good confirmation for their common ideas.

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