

## BUBER ON RESPONSIBILITY

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The paper deals with Martin Buber's claim that responsibility "is the basic theme of my work in general." As I show in the opening section of the article, his statement applies to the dialogical period of his work, but not the pre-dialogical. In the mystical phase of Buber's thought there is no place for responsibility because the very nature of mysticism excludes that possibility. The incompatibility of mysticism and interpersonal responsibility is confirmed in the autobiographical fragment "conversion," one of the two biographical moments I discuss in relation to the shift in his thinking on responsibility. The second is his relationship with his wife Paula Winkler, which profoundly influenced his thinking about the importance of love and marriage for an understanding of responsibility. I then explore his view of responsibility as a doctrine, which developed along with his dialogical philosophy. Finally, I examine his critical views on four basic ways of avoiding responsibility, which highlight the close connection between freedom and responsibility: belief in fate, individualism, collectivism, and religious acosmism.

**Keywords:** Martin Buber – Dialogical philosophy – Responsibility – Freedom – Ethics

### Introduction

Martin Buber responded to his critics by saying that responsibility "is a basic theme of my work in general" (Buber 1967a, 722). It is a statement that is true of the dialogical period of his work but not the pre-dialogical. In the earlier period Buber displayed a keen interest in mysticism and the experience (*Erlebnis*) of ecstasy lying at its core.<sup>1</sup> In his essay "Ecstasy and Confession" – the introduction to his 1909 anthology *Ecstatic Confessions*, which was "undoubtedly his most ambitious project" (Mendes-Flohr 1985, xix) of all his mystical writings – he describes this mystical experience. The soul of the mystic is submerged entirely in itself, reaching the very ground of itself and its

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<sup>1</sup> The end of the "mystical" phase of his thought, as he himself referred to his earlier pre-dialogical writings (Buber 1957, ix), can be dated to 1914; his philosophy of dialogue was formally inaugurated with the publication of *I and Thou (Ich und Du)* in 1923 (December 1922, to be precise) (cf. Mendes-Flohr 1989, 10; Horwitz 1978, 21 n. 22).

experiences; an ecstasy that is the most inward experience that grows from within, “free of the other, inaccessible to the other” (Buber 1985, 2). In ecstasy the mystic experiences the unity of the I but interprets it as experiencing God; the unity of the ecstatic is the subject and object of that experience, the I and the world, flowing into one, hence its unity is absolute and limitless (cf. Buber 1985, 2 – 6).

One’s unity is solitude, absolute solitude: the solitude of that which is without limits. One contains the other, the others in oneself, in one’s unity: as world; but one no longer has others outside oneself, no longer has any communion with them or anything in common with them (ibidem, 6).

The essential element in mystical experience is that of the union between the individual and themselves, God, and the world – an absolute solitude that excludes the possibility of interpersonal responsibility as it eliminates the duality of I and Thou that makes it possible.

After his dialogical turn he criticized the experience of union in both the Western and the Eastern mystical tradition. In *I and Thou*, Buber explains the experience of union in two ways. First, it is about the unification of the soul in which all the person’s forces are centrally concentrated (Buber 2013a, 62); however, the unification of the Self does not take place between the individual and God, but within the individual (ibidem, 60). Second, it is a relational act, in which the individual believes that they and their counterpart have become one. They may experience a feeling of union in their encounter with the other, but as a “union that was no union” (ibidem, 61). The union of which the mystic speaks is in fact, according to Buber, “the enrapturing dynamic of relation” (ibidem). In short “the misinterpretation of relation as union has led both eastern and western mystics to make union with God a goal in itself and to turn away from the responsibility of the I for the Thou” (Friedman 1956, 72). Thus, in the “‘mystical’ phase” of Buber’s thought there is no place for responsibility because the very nature of mysticism excludes that possibility. The mystic’s “only responsibility is that of an intense passion for the Absolute” (Šajda 2020, 36).

However, it is important to note that even at this stage there was an ambivalence in Buber’s thinking about mysticism (Šajda 2013a, 183), as is evident in his acknowledging that there was an ethical imperative in Hasidism – the Jewish mystical movement of 18th century Eastern Europe. This is also identified in his early essay “Jewish Mysticism,” which first appeared in 1906 as the preface to his *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*. Paradoxically, Hasidism is both part of the Jewish mystical tradition and indeed its apex, and yet it also denies it (Buber 1956, 10). Here the essence of Hasidism is highly concentrated: “Hasidism is the Kabbala become ethos” (ibidem).

Hasidic teaching, with its emphasis on *ethos*, gradually came to form the bedrock of Buber's thought (Buber 2004e, 254).

### **I. His Marriage to Paula Winkler and “Conversion” to Responsibility**

What pathway does Buber follow “from mystical pathos to ethos” (Mendes-Flohr 1989, 104) and how does he end up at responsibility? Here I am not going to reconstruct the genesis of Buber's dialogical philosophy, its intellectual background, but will consider two key moments that had a decisive influence on both the substance and direction of his thinking: his “conversion,” as he describes it in “Dialogue” (1932),<sup>2</sup> and his marriage to Paula Winkler (1877 – 1958).<sup>3</sup>

Buber's “conversion” is one in a series of personal events experienced between 1914 and 1919 that played a crucial role in his philosophical shift from “*Erlebnis*-mysticism to the dialogical philosophy” (ibidem, 102), from ecstasy to responsibility.<sup>4</sup> His “conversion” took place during World War I in July 1914 (Friedman 1988, 187), when he was visited by an unknown young man late one morning after a session of mystical ecstasy. Buber was friendly and attentive in the conversation with him, but not present with his whole being. Two months later (ibidem, 188) Buber learned that the young man had died at the front and had come to him “not for a chat but for a decision” (Buber 2004a, 16) – a decision of life and death. He realized that he had failed in the encounter because, although he had answered all his questions, he had remained oblivious to the most important ones, that were never asked. In his description, we can identify two relations – one with God, through an ecstatic experience, and one with the young man. The main problem is separation of the two relations. Buber thought his

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<sup>2</sup> Originally published in German as *Zwiesprache*.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, there are many other biographical moments that significantly influenced the development of Buber's thought toward a philosophy of dialogue. According to various scholars, the immediate impetus for his dialogical turn was a conflict with his close friend Gustav Landauer (1870 – 1919), which took place in the spring of 1916. Landauer wrote Buber a long and highly critical letter on May 12 (Buber 1972, 433 – 438), calling him *Kriegsbuber* and accusing him of aestheticism and formalism in connection with his attitude toward the war, which he presented in his essay “Die Losung” (1916), the lead article of the first issue of *Der Jude*, and in the essay “Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum” (1916), the opening essay of the collection *Vom Geist des Judentums - Reden und Geleitworte*. See Friedman (1988, 178 – 201), Mendes-Flohr (1989, 97 – 113; 2019a, 103 – 109), Šajda (2012; 2013a, 175 – 182).

<sup>4</sup> The importance of this story is underscored by the fact that Buber included it in the “Autobiographical Fragments.” Its full significance for the reorientation of his thought is revealed only when it is read in connection with another autobiographical fragment, “Question and Answer,” about his conversation with a Reverend Hechler. Later, after this conversation, Buber realized: “‘If to believe in God means to be able to speak of Him in the third person, I do not believe in God. If to believe in Him means to be able to speak to Him, I believe in God’” (Buber 1967b, 24). According to Mendes-Flohr, these two moments “set the theological and existential horizons of Buber's philosophy of dialogue” (Mendes-Flohr 2019b, 25).

failure regarding the young man was connected to the relation to God. “The close connexion of the relation to God with the relation to one’s fellowman” (Buber 2013b, 87) later became a central idea in his dialogical philosophy.

Since then I have given up the “religious” which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fulness but each mortal hour’s fulness of claim and responsibility. Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demands a response (Buber 2004a, 16).

This autobiographical fragment proves the incompatibility of mysticism and interpersonal responsibility as well as the fact that Buber was not concerned with responsibility in the mystical phase of his thought. The “conversion” was the moment that Buber began to turn away from inner realization towards a life of dialogue with otherness, which led to the publication of his most famous book *I and Thou*.<sup>5</sup> His mismeeting<sup>6</sup> with the young man was the source from which responsibility gradually emerged to become the basic theme and leitmotif of all his mature work<sup>7</sup> – his writings on Hasidism, Judaism, the Bible, and the philosophy of dialogue generally.<sup>8</sup> And yet, as Filek (2010, 413 n. 19) notes, Buber “did not write explicitly about responsibility in his book or any of his articles.”<sup>9</sup> It is true that Buber’s ideas about responsibility are

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<sup>5</sup> In the “Foreword” to *Pointing the Way* (1957), he writes that his break with mysticism and recognition that “the one thing that is needful” is “being true to the being in which and before which I am placed” took place five years after the publication of “The Teaching of the Tao” (1909) and “it took another five years for this recognition to ripen to expression” (Buber 1957, x). The year 1914 was thus a key year.

<sup>6</sup> Buber coined this new word (*Vergegnung*), denoting the failure of a real meeting (*Begegnung*) between people, in connection to his relationship with his mother, who had abandoned him when he was three years old (Buber 1967b, 3 – 4).

<sup>7</sup> Friedman (1961, 223 – 224) and R. E. Wood (1969, 18 – 19) see this as a crucial moment in Buber’s turn to responsibility.

<sup>8</sup> These different areas are closely related in Buber’s thought, but it is important to distinguish between them. I believe that his dialogical understanding of responsibility is expressed in various areas of his work. I will therefore refer to them in a few places in what follows, but in a way that preserves the unity of his understanding of responsibility. On the Jewish, especially Hasidic, sources of Buber’s concept of dialogical responsibility, see Siegfried (2010, 344 – 348; 2013, 255 – 256; 262); Margolin (2013).

<sup>9</sup> There are a few short articles in Buber’s corpus that relate directly to the problem of responsibility. For example, there is the very short article “Freiheit und Verantwortung” (1928) (Buber 2019a); “Verantwortung – Worte an die Jugend” (1929) (Buber 2005) which later forms part of *Zwiesprache* (1932); an article on political responsibility “Zur Ethik der politischen Entscheidung” (1933) (Buber 2019b), later included in *Die Frage an den Einzelnen* (1936).

scattered throughout his writings and that there is no systematic account of responsibility in them, but I would argue that his essay “The Question to the Single One” (*Die Frage an den Einzelnen*) published in book form in German in 1936, is entirely devoted to this problem. The title makes this clear, for although it indirectly refers to responsibility, it asks a question of the single one and thereby expects a response – and responsibility features in the motto on the title page of the book: “Responsibility is the umbilical cord of creation.” This is followed by the initials P. B. – Buber’s wife Paula – highlighting the significance of Buber’s reflections on the importance of love and marriage in *I and Thou* and “The Question to the Single One” as well as the key role his marriage to Paula played in his intellectual development.<sup>10</sup>

Marriage plays an important role in his critique of Kierkegaard’s religious acosmism, which leads him to redefine his category of the single one. According to Buber, there is a close connection between the ethical commitment of marriage and the socio-political realm (Šajda 2013a, 87). In marriage we learn that our relationship to God is only possible as a relationship to another human being, that our response to God’s address is only possible as a response to the address of others, as responsibility for the other entrusted to me (Buber 2004b, 71). “Love is the responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*” (Buber 2013a, 11). The fact that we take responsibility for the other in marriage “directly prompts” us “to take responsibility for others” (Šajda 2013a, 87). The essential relationship to the other within the marriage is – from the perspective of the human relationship to God – an essential relationship to creation, which makes individuals realize that they cannot exclude creation from their relationship to God – indeed, on the contrary, they must include it in it. Marriage is “the exemplary bond, it carries us as does none other into the greater bondage” (Buber 2004b, 71) and it “brings one into an essential relation to the world” and to the body politic (*das öffentliche Wesen*) (ibidem, 70).

If Buber thought Kierkegaard’s renunciation of his marriage to Regina Olsen, “representing woman and the world,” (Buber 2004b, 46 – 47) was key to his thought, then the same applied to his own marriage to Paula and his thought. If the crucial “mismatching” in Buber’s life was his mother’s failure to return, then his marriage to Paula was the crucial meeting in his life (Friedman 1988, 367). The importance of his marriage to Paula in terms of his dialogical turn can be seen in the motto from Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan* included in the first edition of *I and Thou*: “*So hab ich endlich von dir erharrt: In allen Elementen Gottes Gegenwart*” (Buber 1923). Grete Schaeder (1972, 39) and Walter Kaufmann (1970, 26 – 28) suggest that these verses of Goethe’s were a “concealed dedication” to her. According to Kaufmann (ibidem), the “You” (*dir*)

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<sup>10</sup> According to Hans Fischer-Barnicol (1966, 8), these words could be the motto for his entire intellectual and poetic oeuvre.

in the epigraph refers to Paula, that is, Buber acquired God's presence in all the elements precisely through his essential relationship with her. Both also argue in support of this claim that Buber dedicated also other writings to his wife, such as *Zwiesprache* – Buber's "libellus cordis mei" (Buber 1973a, 450) – or the novel *Gog und Magog* (1941). This interpretation is confirmed by the lines from Goethe's poem that follow Buber's motto: "Wie du mir das so lieblich gibst! / Am lieblichsten aber dass du liebst." Kaufmann (ibidem, 28) concludes that the book was based on a real relationship between the human I and the human You.<sup>11</sup> If Kaufmann is correct, then it is plausible to assume that the passages in which Buber discusses the meaning of love and marriage are clearly the fruit of deep and personal life experiences.<sup>12</sup>

Buber's decision to use his wife's words as the motto of the "Kierkegaard book"<sup>13</sup> can be seen as a tacit confession that his attention was drawn to the reality conveyed by these words by his wife and his life with her.<sup>14</sup> We can conclude, as Friedman does (1988, 336), that Buber's relationship with his wife was probably by far the most important event or encounter for the development of his dialogical philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

## II. Responsibility as Response

Although Buber does not directly address the question of responsibility in *I and Thou*,<sup>16</sup> he does lay the theoretical foundations for his "alteric model of responsibility" in it (Siegfried 2013, 225), which can be very briefly summarized by the following three points. The first is "understanding the I-Thou relationship as a happening of living speech" (Filek 2003, 85). The second is that Buber did not limit the I-Thou relation to the realm of interpersonal relations but extended it to the realm of the relation with

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<sup>11</sup> This is the reason why Kaufmann translates the German *Du* with the English You and not Thou as R. G. Smith does.

<sup>12</sup> Y. Hadad (2022, 9 – 10) makes the same claim: "When Buber spoke about love and marriage, he spoke about Paula, and it is no accident that he dedicated his most intimate book, *Zwiesprache*, to her. ... Buber's critical response to Kierkegaard's rejection of marriage may also illuminate his own love for Paula."

<sup>13</sup> As Emil Brunner, in correspondence with Buber in a letter dated December 10, 1936, called the book *Die Frage an den Einzelnen* (Buber 1973a, 627).

<sup>14</sup> K. P. Kramer, a disciple of M. Friedman, also believes that there is a close connection between Buber's relationship with his wife Paula and his understanding of responsibility. He states, "Undoubtedly, he [Buber] had her [Paula] in mind when he talked about a person's taking responsibility for life" (Kramer 2012, 65).

<sup>15</sup> On the importance of his marriage to Paula on his thought, see Friedman (1988, 336 – 340), Kaufmann (1970, 26 – 28), Schaefer (1972, 34 – 40).

<sup>16</sup> There are only two short passages in *I and Thou*, where Buber explicitly discusses responsibility (cf. Buber 2013a, 11, 75).

nature and the forms of the spirit (*die geistige Wesenheiten*) (Buber 2013a, 5, 70).<sup>17</sup> The third concerns the relation to God: every I-Thou relation is at the same time a relation to the eternal Thou (ibidem, 53), and the relationship between the person and God is the only relationship that is “unconditioned exclusiveness and unconditioned inclusiveness” (ibidem, 55, 69).

Later, based on these premises, in his writings – especially in “Dialogue” and “The Question to the Single One” – Buber elaborated his understanding of dialogical responsibility, which in its most fundamental meaning means responding when addressed – “response is responsibility” (Buber 1965, 108). Responsibility “presupposes one who addresses me primarily, that is, from a realm independent of myself, and to whom I am answerable” (Buber 2004b, 52; cf. 1948a, 19). That implies, on the one hand, that true responsibility is not and cannot be the responsibility to oneself and on the other hand, that it cannot be the responsibility “in face of reason, of an idea, a nature, an institution” (ibidem, 52 – 53), because we can only be answerable to a human being or God (ibidem 53). Friedman (1956, 206) argues that one is ultimately responsible to the eternal Thou because the eternal Thou, unlike the human Thou, can never become an It. Thus, responsibility “is essentially ... answering to a divine address” (Buber 1973b, 220). The answer to the question *To whom are we responsible?* is to God. But what are we responsible for? To what do we respond? Everyone is responsible for the realm of life allotted and entrusted to them and to which they can respond (Buber 2004c, 109). To be responsible means responding with one’s whole being to every moment, to everything that, to “happens to one, to what is to be seen and heard and felt” (Buber 2004a, 18 – 19). All that goes on in an hour, every situation in one’s life, is a speech – speech that “is directed precisely at him” (ibidem, 19). In “Dialogue,” he offers several examples of such everyday events: “A dog has looked at you, you answer for its glance, a child has clutched your hand, you answer for its touch, a host of men moves about you, you answer for their need” (ibidem, 20). How can we respond to these situations? The language of our response is the language of our actions and attitudes, our reactions and abstentions (Buber 1973b, 216; 2004a, 20).

All situations are unique and therefore require a unique – not a universal – prepared response from the individual (Buber 2004d, 135). Their own decision. That does not, however, mean that we cannot take advice or that we should not take any lessons into account, but it does mean that this advice cannot replace a personal decision.

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<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, this extension allows us to consider the individual’s relationship to nature from the perspective of being responsible for it and the perspective of environmental philosophy, see Heinze (2013), Kuchtová (2022). On the other hand, Buber has been criticized more frequently for extending the I-Thou relation with nature than he has for any other element of his philosophy (Friedman 1991, 341 – 342), see Bizoň (2017).

A great character “satisfies the claim of situations out of deep readiness to respond with his whole life, and in such a way that the sum of his actions and attitudes expresses at the same time the unity of his being in its willingness to accept responsibility” (ibidem). The unity of a person forms gradually from the situations confronting them and their responses to them (ibidem). On the one hand, a person can never achieve complete unity, but on the other hand, any decision made with their whole being brings greater unity (Buber, 1958a, 150).

It has to be said that moral norms still apply to responsible persons, and they are not alien to them (Buber 2004d, 135). Indeed, norms are manifest in and through situations that call for a response. A person cannot experience what is demanded of them prior to it being demanded. There is no rulebook on what one ought to do in this particular situation (Buber 2004b, 79). Nor can the Ten Commandments be considered a catechism because they are Thou statements – in God’s address to the one who listens (Buber 1958b, 130).

The Ten Commandments are not part of an impersonal codex governing an association of men. They were uttered by an *I* and addressed to a *Thou*. They begin with the *I* and every one of them addresses the *Thou* in person. An *I* ‘commands’ and a *Thou* – every *Thou* who hears this *Thou* – ‘is commanded’ (Buber 1948c, 85).

Buber does not deny that universally valid norms exist but stresses that even the most universal of norms have to be interpreted in dialogue with God – the situation furnishes the interpretation (Buber 1967a, 697). One has to recognize what a given norm means “here and now.”

Even a moral norm that takes the form of a prohibition such as “Thou shalt not kill” expresses a direction, a Yes. For Buber good is the presence of a direction. Evil is the absence of one; in other words, a whirl or chaos. Good and evil are not opposites, in the way that, for example, right and left, or up and down, are (Buber 2004b, 92). Good and evil differ in essence. Good can be understood either as directing man to God or as “the direction to the realization of what God in creating him has meant for him” (Buber 1967a, 721; cf. Buber 1953a, 141). One can only do good with one’s whole being. But one can never do evil with one’s whole being (Buber 1953a, 130). Good relates to the decision, but evil to one’s inability to decide. Buber even goes as far to say that “if there were a devil it would not be one who decided against God, but one who, in eternity, came to no decision” (Buber 2013a, 37).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Later, in *Images of Good and Evil* (1952), Buber (1953a, 125 – 138) distinguished between two stages of evil. In the first stage, evil means indecision or pseudo-decision, and only in the second stage does evil mean truly deciding for evil.



Freedom is another necessary precondition of personal responsibility, and thus of a genuine decision. Buber distinguishes between freedom as arbitrary self-will (*Willkür*), which plays with the spinning whirl of possibilities to act, and true freedom, which finds its direction out of this whirl, and proves itself in decision-making (Buber 2019a, 110). This spinning whirl of freedom (*qua Willkür*), though not true freedom, is the possibility from which one's personal responsibility can arise (Buber 2004c, 120 – 121). Since the connection between freedom and responsibility is crucial, I will discuss it in more detail at various points in the next section of the article.

### III. Four Ways to Escape Responsibility

Buber began his famous book on spirituality, *Der Weg des Menschen nach der chassidischen Lehre* (1948),<sup>19</sup> with the Hasidic tale that personalizes the question God addressed to Adam in the book of Genesis after he ate from the Tree of Knowledge and hid: “Where are you?” In his commentary on this story, Buber writes:

Adam hides himself to avoid rendering accounts, to escape responsibility for his way of living. Every man hides for this purpose, for every man is Adam and finds himself in Adam's situation. To escape responsibility for his life, he turns existence into a system of hideouts. And in thus hiding again and again 'from the face of God,' he enmeshes himself more and more deeply in perversity (Buber 1958a, 133).

The first necessary but insufficient step to becoming responsible is the decisive heart-searching that accompanies that acknowledgement made by Adam “I hid myself” (ibidem, 134 – 135). There are many ways an individual can escape responsibility. In Buber's writings, we can identify four such basic ways that he criticized: belief in fate, individualism, collectivism and religious acosmism.<sup>20</sup>

In the second part of *I and Thou* and the discussion on the dichotomy of the basic words I-Thou and I-It, Buber distinguishes between two forms of freedom relating to human will and two forms of destiny relating to things that do not fall within the power of human will. He distinguishes between freedom (*Freiheit*) and arbitrary self-will (*Willkür*) and between “wise” destiny (*Schicksal*) and “oppressive” fate (*Verhängnis*). On one side we have the I-Thou relationship, which is the unity of freedom and destiny, which complement each other and are linked in meaning (Buber 2013a, 41). On the other side we have the I-It relation, which is the unity of arbitrary self-will and fate, which are opposites (ibidem). Arbitrary self-will refers to the power of the subject to

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<sup>19</sup> In English *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism* (1951).

<sup>20</sup> One form of religious acosmism is the mysticism as I discussed at the beginning of this paper. There are of course many more ways to escape responsibility.

dominate and determine the world of objects. Fate, on the other hand, refers to the determination of the subject by the world of objects (Theunissen 1984, 342).

Buber identified four contemporary forms of belief in fate, or “the abdication of man before the exuberant world of *It*” (Buber 2013a, 40).

[I]t is the ‘law of life’ of a universal struggle in which all must take part or renounce life, or the ‘law of the soul’ which completely builds up the psychical person from innate habitual instincts, or the ‘social law’ of an irresistible social process to which will and consciousness may only be accompaniments, or the ‘cultural law’ of an unchangeably uniform coming and going of historical structures – whatever form it takes, it always means that man is set in the frame of an inescapable happening that he cannot, or can only in his frenzy, resist (ibidem).

The belief in fate “leaves no room for freedom” (ibidem) or therefore for responsibility. Individualism, in which the individual is seen as an end in themselves, is based on liberating the individual from external constraints and removing obstacles to freedom. To clarify the nature of true responsibility, Buber confronts Stiner’s category of the “unique one” (*der Einzige*) with Kierkegaard’s category of the “single one” (*der Einzelne*) in the first chapter of *Die Frage an den Einzelnen*. Max Stirner (1806 – 1856) is a radical individualist who took liberation to its extreme in his book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1845). He claimed that the “unique one” is the sole creator of “his” world. In this world there is nothing and no one, apart from the “unique one” and the world that belongs to him, where humans are free of oppression and the domination of all the not-I’s (Glinkowsky 2005, 188). The unique one is liberated from the obligation to obey because there is no one to make demands. The absolute freedom that Stirner demands entails becoming “free” not only of the false responsibility to engage in reason, ideas, nature, or institutions, but also of true responsibility, which “only exists when the court is there to which I am responsible” (Buber 2004a, 20). Individualists know only the relation to themselves and thereby only pseudo-responsibility for and to themselves.

Individualism is only about being free from external constraints, not being free to responsibility (ibidem, 37). In individualism, responsibility lies with the person addressing the individual and to whom the individual is responsible and so is an obstacle to the individual’s freedom and therefore rejected. There is no genuine freedom without genuine responsibility, and vice versa, there is no responsibility without freedom. Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin and cannot be separated from each other without freedom-and-responsibility ceasing to exist and both sides becoming caricatures. Freedom that is merely being “free” of responsibility is not true freedom, but arbitrary self-will – an aimlessly circling whirl of possibilities. “Life lived in

freedom is personal responsibility or it is pathetic farce” (Buber 2004c, 109). Only responsibility can lend freedom its substance and direction (ibidem).

The rise and existence of collectivistic formations stems in large part from the synergy between two different movements. On the one hand, we have the collective and its interests, striving with all its might to eliminate individual free will to achieve the conformity of opinion required for the effective realization of its “programme.” The collective removes decision-making powers from individuals and reduces them to a passive, working element of the whole. People are merely workers or the tools of the collective. The purpose of the first movement is to dissolve the person. On the other hand, people try to escape the fate of loneliness by joining groups and ‘dissolving’ in them as it were. That way the individual becomes part of the whole, but it is one in which there are no essential relations between the members. Individuals take on the general will of the collective and so give up their own will. They voluntarily abandon their own decisions for those of the group. Whereas in individualism individuals “free” themselves of true responsibility for the sake of illusory freedom, in collectivism they “free” themselves from true freedom for the sake of illusory responsibility. They let their own personal responsibility for their life, the life of the community and the world dissolve within the impersonal responsibility of the group of which they are a member. Loyalty to the group becomes responsibility. But it is a responsibility that is no longer related to personal decision-making, but to following and obeying the commands and rules of the group. The false responsibility rejected by Stirner returns in the form of ideological discipline. From the moment the person joins the group, they need never again stand at the cross-roads. Never again do they have to choose the right action, because the right action has already been decided (ibidem, 78).

In times of crisis the individual and collectivism come to each other’s aid. Individuals sometimes throw themselves eagerly into the arms of the group. They deprive themselves of their own freedom and accept the responsibility of achieving the programme, thus facilitating the group’s total control over them. The group suppresses the individuals’ own activity, making it easier for them to relinquish the burden of responsibility. Individuals may lose personal responsibility in the group if it becomes their only instance, regardless of whether it forms part of a totalitarian or democratic regime (Buber 2004d, 131). Their personal responsibility is potentially under threat when prevented from listening and responding and if whispered to. The dissolution of the essential unity of freedom-and-responsibility leads either to arbitrary self-will and irresponsibility or to ideological discipline and unfreedom.

But Buber’s critique of collectivism does not mean the individual cannot belong to a collective or group. Being a member of a group need not mean escaping from responsibility: “it can be the place for the truest and most serious responsibility, and its

constant test” (Buber 1948b, 47). Likewise, not all groups necessarily relieve the individual of responsibility; for a group to be a true community *qua Gemeinschaft*, “each individual accepts full responsibility for the other” (ibidem).<sup>21</sup> Members should not leave their group just because they disagree with some of its decisions, but should be willing to resist at times. Members must be prepared to fight for the truth within their group and thereby establish an inner front within it. According to Buber (2004b, 82), this inner front is more important than all fronts between groups.

In “The Question to the Single One,” Buber launches his most extensive polemic with Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855), by asserting that his category of “‘single one’ cannot be understood without his solitariness,” which is radical in nature (ibidem, 46). According to Buber, and as I noted above, Kierkegaard’s breaking off his engagement to Regina Olsen was the most important event in his life and the crystallizing point of his thought (ibidem, 46 – 47). From a historical and anthropological perspective, Buber approves of the fact in Kierkegaard’s single one, humans enter into an essential relationship with another for the first time, namely, God. Hence Buber, referring to Kierkegaard’s statement “Being in a crowd either releases from repentance and responsibility or weakens the responsibility of the Single One, since the crowd leaves only a fragment of responsibility to him” (ibidem, 53; cf. Kierkegaard 1998, 107), concludes that Kierkegaard acknowledges true responsibility, which is based on the dialogical relation of address and response between one person and another – God and the single one (ibidem, 53). He is critical of the idea that “Everyone should be chary about having to do with ‘the others,’ and should essentially speak only with God and with himself” (ibidem, 58; cf. Kierkegaard 1998, 106). Buber argues that the acosmic nature of man’s relationship with God follows from this. Any essential relationship between the individual and a person other than God is an obstacle to the essential relationship with God. The essential relationship with God is both exclusive (*ausschließliche*) and excluding (*ausschließende*), that is, it “in virtue of its unique, essential life expels all other relations into the realm of the unessential” (ibidem). Humans are faced with the choice of God or the world (ibidem, 63), but that choice runs contrary to the understanding of God the Creator in the Judeo-Christian tradition because it places God’s creation in an irreconcilable opposition to the Creator. Any relationship with God that excludes a relationship with other creatures is no longer a relationship with the God of all creation (ibidem, 60). For Buber, “creation is not a

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<sup>21</sup> At this point, it should be noted that in *Paths to Utopia*, Buber (1966, 131) speaks not only of individual responsibility but also of the importance of mutual collective responsibility, which is necessary for the existence of a genuine human society (*Gesellschaft*) made up of a multiplicity of true communities in which its members form essential relationships of mutual regard, trust, and responsibility.

hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself”; moreover, God wants us to come to Him through our relationships with the “Reginas” whom He created, but not by renouncing them (ibidem). God does not rival the world. The essential relationship with God may be exclusive, but it does not exclude. On the contrary, the relationship between man and God is the only relationship in which “unconditioned exclusiveness and unconditioned inclusiveness are one” (Buber 2013a, 55, 69).

On the one hand, Buber’s critique of religious acosmism is indicative of a deformed image of God. On the other hand, Buber highlights the consequences that follow from the fact that the “religious” man stands alone before God. The exclusivist relationship with God is *per naturam* acosmic, asocial and apolitical (Šajda 2013b, 13) and therefore prevents the individual from taking responsibility for all of creation. One can only be responsible for the other if one stands in an essential relationship with them.

### **Conclusion**

After overcoming the mystical phase of his thought, in which Buber regarded “everyday life as an obscuring of the true life” (Buber 1957, ix), responsibility for everyday life becomes the central theme of his philosophy of dialogue and the central concept of his ethics. He warns of the obstacles that prevent man from taking responsibility for his life, whether in terms of his understanding of God and his relationship with him or in terms of human freedom. From the perspective of dialogical philosophy, one cannot view the realm of ethics simply as a dogmatic system of norms on how individuals ought to act in relation to a counterpart. “The idea of responsibility is to be brought back from the province of specialized ethics, of an ‘ought’ that swings free in the air, into that of lived life” (Buber 2004a, 18). The essence of Buber’s ontological ethics (Buber 1953b, vi) lies not in the observance of moral norms, but in encountering the other with one’s whole being and responding to their call. Buber’s ethics has been described as a kind of “situation ethics.” But that does not imply universal ethical relativism; on the contrary, his concept of responsibility is based on a personal relationship with the Absolute, which can only give rise to the absoluteness of ethical co-ordinates (Buber 2016, 86).

Thus, whenever Buber refers to responsibility, he means personal responsibility and not the impersonal responsibility that can “hide the face of our fellow-man” (Buber 2004a, 21). But that is at most simply a “metaphor for morality” (ibidem, 20) and not true moral responsibility. For that reason, it is important to distinguish between the two and not confuse them. Although we need both personal and impersonal responsibility in our world, it is personal responsibility that makes it truly human. Responsibility, for Buber, is neither a Kantian pure autonomy in which the subject imposes a universally valid categorical imperative on itself, nor a pure heteronomy in which “responsibility”

is “simply imposed moral duty without any genuine freedom” (Friedman 1956, 198 – 199), which comes to the person from outside (cf. Buber 2016, 86 – 87). His understanding of responsibility is anchored in dialogical addressing and responding, in the sphere *between* I and Thou.

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