

THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE EVERYDAY

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The article traces the evolution and crystallization of Buber's philosophy of dialogue. It focuses on his consideration of the epistemological and ontological issues attendant to the *principium individuationis*, the subject of his doctoral dissertation of 1904. Culminating with the publication of *Ich und Du* in 1923, this process was punctuated by life experiences that led him to affirm rather than to seek to transcend the *principium individuationis* as the ontological ground of being manifest in the matrix of everyday life, which we are beckoned to sanctify through I-Thou relations.

Keywords: The *principium individuationis* – *Erlebnis* – *Erfahrung* – *Gegenstand* – *Gegenwart* – *Gnade* – *Urdistanz* – M. Buber – W. Dilthey – G. Simmel – F. Rosenzweig – the New Thinking

*Deus est mortali iuvare mortalem.*¹

Martin Buber was wont to distinguish between his earlier writings and his “mature thought,” which developed with the publication of *Ich und Du* in 1923 onward. Yet one may detect the crystallization of the *Fragestellung* that he addressed in his philosophy of dialogue while still in his youth, especially as nurtured by his principal university teachers, and even his lifelong partner, Paula née Winkler (1877 – 1958). In a letter dated August 1899, she tells her beloved Martin:

... Our attitudes to each other ought above all to be ‘person to person’ [*Mensch zu Mensch*] – not ‘Frenchman to German’, not ‘Jew to Christian’, and perhaps less of ‘man to woman’. So, as one says in Sanskrit *tat tvam asi*. Simply: That you are! But what does that mean? Are we to blur distinctions, obliterate all contradictions for that reason? For what? To be able to deal more easily with our humanity? Would we then be able to deal more easily with it? Do we love

¹ Pliny the Elder, “God exists for man in that he [man] helps man.” See footnote 17, below.

what is least different from us? Do we love what is most polished, flattest?
Are not the contradictions the highest and ultimate and finest stimulants in
life? Do we not love fullness in color, form, and sound – fullness in
individualities (Glatzer, Mendes-Flohr 1991, 67)?

The twenty-two-year-old Paula's insistence that "*Mensch zu Mensch*" relations need not, indeed, should not deny individual difference would later be elaborated by Buber as the *Urdistanz* – the primal distance – between individuals that allows for the differentiation between I and Thou, and hence, the ontological ground of the dialogical relation (Buber 1965).

Shortly after receiving Paula's *cri de coeur*, Buber went to Berlin to study with Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 – 1911) and Georg Simmel (1858 – 1918). They taught him to focus philosophical attention on the imponderables of everyday life and relations. In a seminal lecture, "Die Kultur der Gegenwart und die Philosophie" (Present-Day Culture and Philosophy), Dilthey frequently delivered before his students, he noted that he wanted to offer them more than "*bloße Kathederphilosophie*" (mere academic philosophy):

One can convey an appropriate philosophy only on the basis of an understanding of the present age. Let us attempt then to grasp the basic features of the present that shape this generation and determine its philosophic character. The most general characteristic of our age is its sense of reality and the worldliness of its interests (Dilthey 1931a, 194).

This world-immanent realism, Dilthey contends, was heralded by Goethe, who proclaimed in *Faust*:

The earthly sphere I know sufficiently,
But into the beyond we cannot see;
A fool, that squints and tries to pierce those shrouds,
And would invent his like above the clouds!
Let him survey this life, be resolute,
For the able this world is not mute (Goethe 1888a, 309; Dilthey 1931a, 194).

Dilthey urged his students to heed Goethe's counsel: "Steep ourselves fully in this actuality, in this-worldly nature of our interests, and the mastery of science over life" (Dilthey 1931a, 197). Yet, Dilthey acknowledged that this worldliness of interests could not satisfy the human desire to understand existence and purpose (*Ziel*). Alas, he told his students, we are no wiser in this respect than the denizens of ancient Ionia or an Arab at the time of Averroes. Despite the rapid progress of the sciences, we are even more at a loss regarding the ultimate meaning and goal of life. The foundations of religious faith

and philosophical convictions of former times have been ever-increasingly undermined by the sciences. Further, “historical consciousness demonstrates with ever greater clarity the relativity of all metaphysical and religious doctrine, which in the course of time are superseded. It appears to us that the human quest for knowledge is tragic, beset by a contradiction between will and capability” (ibidem, 197 – 198). A grim pessimism has taken hold of us. “This pain of emptiness, the consciousness of anarchy at the heart of all our convictions, the uncertainty of values and life,” Dilthey held, “call forth diverse attempts in poetry and literature to address the questions of the value and objective of our existence” (ibidem).

Significantly, Dilthey’s epistemology differs from those of the Empiricists and Kant. “In the veins of the knowing subject as constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant runs no real blood, but the diluted fluid of reason in the sense of mere thought-activity” (Dilthey 1944a, 109). Accordingly, he insisted that man’s knowledge of the world and oneself is not limited to the experience (*Erfahrung*) of the world that *appears* to us as refracted by sense perceptions, preeminently that attained by sight. But we also have knowledge of the subjective, dynamic events of the human spirit. Such knowledge is mediated not by *Erfahrung* but by *Erlebnis*, lived, affective experience, which facilitates knowledge of the subjective, inner reality of others.

Whereas *Erfahrung* is the basis for explaining (*Erklärung*) the objective conditions of the world, *Erlebnis* allows for the understanding (*Verstehen*) of both others as well as oneself. For human beings share common, fundamental epistemic features, which Dilthey calls “the categories of life,” the formation of worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*) in response to the enigma of human existence (Dilthey 1957, 21 – 30). Hence,

Understanding is a rediscovery of the I in the Thou (*das Ich im Du*); mind (*Geist*) rediscovers itself on higher and higher levels of systematic connection; this identity of mind (*Selbigkeit des Geistes*) in the I, in the Thou, in every subject in a community, in every system of culture, and finally in the totality of the mind and world history, makes possible the joint results of the various operations performed in the human studies (*Geisteswissenschaften*) (Dilthey 1944b, 114; 1927, 191).

Nevertheless, Dilthey acknowledges the limits of his epistemology. Ultimately, he concedes, subjectivity – as manifest in the “will” – and the objective, rational ground of the world, remain irreconcilable. “Will and thought, however, cannot be reduced to one another. Logical thinking about the ground of existence ends here, and only the reflection of its vitality in and through mysticism remains” (Dilthey 1931b, 117 – 118; 1957, 73).

While still enrolled in Dilthey’s classes, Buber published in 1901 an essay “Über Jakob Boehme,” in which he reformulated his teacher’s epistemological impasse:

“The world remains an enigma that affects one, and yet is forever distant and alien. The individual is consumed in mute, hopeless loneliness” (Buber 2017, 70). The recovery of a *locus standi* from which to affirm the meaning of existence would determine both Buber’s earliest interest in mysticism and the later turn in his thought, which he would characterize as an *Ontologie des Zwischenmenschlichen*, the Ontology of the Interhuman. An I-Thou meeting between two autonomous subjects is sustained by the Eternal Thou (God), a presence that is always present in genuine dialogue.

Although Buber would until the very end of his life reverentially refer to Dilthey as “my teacher,” he also acknowledged his early indebtedness to Georg Simmel, with whom he studied in Berlin. One of the founders of the discipline of sociology, Simmel focused Buber’s attention on the transient nature of inter-personal relationships, especially in the context of modern, urban life. His seminal influence on Buber is evidenced by the series of forty sociological monographs *Die Gesellschaft*, edited by Buber from 1905 – 1912. In the Foreword to the first of the forty volumes of *Die Gesellschaft*, Buber coined the term *das Zwischenmenschliche* (the Interhuman) to designate the social space between individuals in mutual interaction. At the University of Vienna, he studied with Friedrich Jodl (1849 – 1924), who reinforced Dilthey’s rejection of metaphysical speculation, and like Simmel advanced a critical realism, which posits the factual existence of a trans-subjective reality confirmed by the Thou-experience and thus the existence of one’s fellow man. As the editor of Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Sämtliche Werke*, Jodl also introduced Buber to the latter’s anthropological critique of religion. In his essay “Über Jakob Boehme,” Buber cites Feuerbach as amending the German mystic’s teaching that everyone creates a path to a unity with the upper world:

According to Boehme, however, this is the right way to the new God that we create, to the new unity of powers. This view is confirmed and supplemented in a word by Ludwig Feuerbach: ‘... Man for himself is man (in the ordinary sense); man with man – the unity of I and you (*Ich und Du*) – is God.’ Feuerbach wants the unity he is talking about to be based on the ‘reality of the difference between I and you’. Today, however, we are closer to Boehme than to the teachings of Feuerbach, to the feelings of Saint Francis of Assisi, who called trees, birds and stars his siblings, and even closer to Vedanta [i.e., the Hindu doctrine that the seeming individualized, divisive reality of the world is but ‘a veil of maya,’ a terrible illusion fraught with pain.] (Buber 2017, 71f).

Although the youthful Buber took Feuerbach’s anthropology in a mystical direction, he would later note that Feuerbach’s “discovery of the Thou, which has been called ‘the Copernican revolution’ of modern thought,” provided him with “decisive impetus”

which after its mystical gestation of some fifteen years yielded the philosophy of dialogue (Buber 1955b, 148). The impetus would prove to be twofold. In explicit opposition to Kant and Hegel, who focused upon human cognition, Feuerbach sought to understand man anthropologically (cf. Feuerbach 1847, 1, 62 – 63, 83 – 84). Accordingly, he held, man is not to be considered purely as a cognizing subject; not as an individual *an sich*, but as being constituted by interpersonal relations. At the earlier, mystical stage of Buber's thought, however, the influence of Feuerbach's philosophical anthropology remained dormant.

A confluence of influences contributed to Buber's conception of mysticism, the most seminal of which was Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis*. As employed by Buber, *Erlebnis* transcends the cognitive limitations of *Erfahrung*, which, grounded in the *principium individuationis*, perceives reality as a confounding whirl of multiple entities, by virtue of which the cognizing self (*Erkennede*) finds itself in opposition not only to objects (*Dinge*) but also other human beings. In contrast, *Erlebnis* overcomes the scourge of individuation – the veil of Maya – and facilitates the realization of unity and the meaning of life beyond the isolation of the self, inherent in the *Erfahrungswelt*, “chaos, the swarming of darkness that knows no unity”:

But there is an experience (*Erlebnis*) which grows in the soul out of the soul itself, without contact and without restraint, in naked oneness, free of the other, inaccessible to the other. It needs no nourishment, and no poison can touch it. The soul which stands in it stands in itself, has itself, experiences itself (*erlebt sie sich*) – boundlessly. It experiences itself as a unity; no longer because it has surrendered itself wholly to a thing of the world, gathered itself wholly in a thing of the world, but because it has submerged itself entirely in itself, has plunged down to the very ground of itself, is kernel and husk, sun and eye, carouser and drunk, at once. The most inward of all experience (*Erlebnis*) is what the Greek calls *ek-stasis*, a stepping out (Buber 1985, 2).

The mystical experience (*Erlebnismystik*) frees one from the experience (*Erfahrung*) of the otherness; and, most significantly it liberates one from a consciousness of the self as particular and limited by others, human and otherwise. From the perspective of this conception of the mystical experience, Buber would write extensively on mysticism in diverse cultural traditions and the universal quest for the experience (*Erlebnis*) of a unity above the confounding multiplicity of the *Erscheinungswelt*. In his early writings on Hasidism, he highlighted the spiritual journey of the solitary ecstatic who is “above nature and above time and above thought,” who experiences (*erlebt*) all individual things of the world as one, before whom the All is nothing and the Soul is all, and whose truest life is not among his fellow men (Buber 1955c, 19). Yet, Buber acknowledges

that Hasidism is characterized by a dialectic of worldly withdrawal and return to one's community, a process that distinguishes it from other mystical traditions:

Hasidism is Kabbalah become ethos. But the life that it teaches is not asceticism but joy in God... It brings the transcendent over into the immanent and lets the transcendent rule in and from it, as the soul forms the body. Its core is a highly realistic guidance to ecstasy as to the summit of existence. But ecstasy is not here, as, say, in German mysticism, the soul's 'Entwerden' but its unfolding; it is not self-restraining and self-renouncing, but the self-fulfilling soul which flows into the Absolute (Buber 1956, 10).

It was, however, not this dialectic that captured the imagination of the young Buber. In a seemingly autobiographical passage in *Daniel* (1913) – a work that anticipates his break with *Erlebnismystik* – he acknowledged that he – in the person of the “faithful one (*Getreue*)” – had been tempted by “the sublime wisdom which commanded one strip off the world of duality as the world of appearance, like a ‘snake its skin’, and enter the world of unity, or rather to recognize himself as standing in it, as being it” (Buber 2018, 91). But “the faithful one” ultimately resisted this temptation, and resolves to find “unity” as a human being who

lives through the whole oscillation of duality, who receives and endures a terrible blessing... What does it matter henceforth that this world is an illusion? ...Henceforth he will not retreat before the fluctuating, raging, whirling world of division and contradiction; he will stand standfast therein, in the midst of it standfast and dare just out of it to derive and create unity (ibidem).

This declaration is voiced at the conclusion of *Daniel*, and thus heralds a seminal shift in Buber's quest to overcome the *pricipium individuationis* by a revised conception of the duality that torments the soul. From time immemorial “the longing for unity is the glowing ground of the soul” (ibidem, 90). The overcoming of duality is the *philosophia perennis*; variously named and differently understood (spirit and matter, being and becoming, reason and will, and other pairs of names), but, at bottom, “the duality remains in tension.” The “faithful one” (Buber) came to the conclusion that “none of the ways that the wisdom of the ages takes could satisfy him” (ibidem). Duality is not to be overcome by eliminating the tension “but to embrace it” (ibidem). The I is not to be detached from the world; indeed, “There is in reality no I except the I of the tension” (ibidem, 97). Although human life cannot escape the fact that it is conditioned by the imperious laws of the *Erfahrungswelt*, one also has the power to act upon and shape reality. “The soul experiences (*erlebt*) world-wide its own freedom and its own bondage,

its own spontaneity and its own being conditioned” (ibidem, 96). The “faithful one” is attuned to the tension inherent in universal human experience. “The man takes upon himself the tension of being and becoming, and the soul experiences (*erlebt*) world-wide its own stillness and its own movement, its own fixity and its own whirl, as its own continuance, and its own transformation” (ibidem, 96). One is to affirm this twofold “mystery of his life-experience (*Geheimnis seines Erlebens*)” (ibidem, 91) and thereby create its unity. “He creates it by bringing together in himself the tension that he has taken upon him: by *awakening the I of this tension*” (ibidem, 91). Indeed, “the unity must be able to be lived, to be *realized*. . . . True unity cannot be found; it can only be created” (ibidem, 94 – 95).

This tension perforce also yields a contrasting response to one’s experience (*Erlebnis*): Realization and Orientation. Either one lives and realizes within oneself the unity of the contending claims of reality, or, one surrenders to the laws governing experience of the world of appearance (*Erfahrungsgrundgesetze*), and seeks to rationally orient one’s life accordingly. While remaining on the temporal and spatial “surface of things,” this attitude provides the chimera of security, albeit a “false security” (ibidem, 32) for it condemns the self to isolation amidst the multiple and inherently instable pull of *Erfahrung*. To be sure, a rational orientation to the world governed by the *principium individuationis* is necessary, but “a purely orienting man degenerates into nothingness” (ibidem, 23). “Orientation, which acts as the all-embracing, is thoroughly godless” (ibidem, 44). On the other hand, “a purely realizing man would disappear in God” (ibidem, 23), and thus fail, as Buber emphasized especially in his presentation of Hasidic lore, to hallow the everyday. Orientation and realization are dialectically complementary as they are necessary. “Human life cannot escape the conditioned. But the unconditioned stands ineffaceably in the heart of the world” (ibidem, 98).

As Buber later noted, *Daniel* gave expression to “the great duality of human life” (Buber 1975, 537; cf. Friedman 1964, ix)² – realization and orientation corresponding embryonically to what Buber presents in *I and Thou* as man’s twofold attitude to the world, the I-Thou and the I-It manner of relating to the world. But in *Daniel*, Buber underscored, the duality is expressed “only in its cognitive and not yet in its communicative and existential character” (ibidem). It was still in the individual and not *between* being and being. “But I had already prepared the way for this distinction presented in my book *Daniel* (1913) between an ‘orienting’, objectifying basic attitude and a ‘realizing’, making-present one, [that is, affirming the presence of the Other]. This is a distinction that coincides at its core with that is carried through in *I and Thou*

² Buber to Friedman, March 2, 1962.

between I-It and I-Thou relations, except the latter is no longer grounded in subjectivity but the sphere between the beings” (Buber 1966, 216).

The crucial moment in the transition to “a new kind of thinking” is grounded in the concept of the interhuman encounter (*zwischenmenschliche Begegnung*), as Buber attested: In reality [the concept] arose, on the road of my thinking, out of the criticism of the concept of *Erlebnis*, to which I adhered in my youth, out of a radical self-correction” (Buber 1967a, 711 – 712). In the process, he reached the realization that

what really matters is not the ‘experiencing of life’ (*Erleben*) – the detached subjectivity – but life itself; it is not religious experience, which is part of the psychic realm, but religious life itself, that is, the *total* life of an individual or of a people in their relationship to God and the world. To make the human element absolute means to tear it out of life’s totality, out of reality (Buber 1967c, 8).

Writing just after the publication of *Ich und Du*, Buber acknowledged that he may have contributed “to this ‘absolutizing’ – so far, as I know, unintentionally – I now feel duty-bound to point all the more emphatically to the dimensions of reality...” (ibidem). In the Foreword to *Pointing the Way*, a collection of his essays from the years 1909 to 1954, Buber further explained that his *Erlebnismystik* was “a stage I had to pass through before I could enter into an independent relationship with being” (Buber 1957a, ix). He proceeds to offer what amounts to his most elaborate explication of the “radical self-correction” that led to his emphatic differentiation of the I and the Thou, and, he explains, that unity he sought is not in the self but *between* the I and the Thou. The essays, entitled *Ereignisse und Bewegungen*,³ marked a clear transition from *Daniel* to *Ich und Du*. In the pivotal essay of this volume, “With a Monist,” he voices his opposition to mysticism. He explains that “the mystic manages, truly or apparently, to annihilate the entire world, or what he so names” (Buber 1957b, 28) – that which his senses present to him in perception:

one may call it [the earlier stage in my thought] the ‘mystical’ phase if one understands as mystic the belief in a unification of the self with the all-self, attainable by man in levels or intervals of his earthly life. Underlying his belief, when it appears in its true form, is usually a genuine ‘ecstatic’ experience. But it is the experience of an exclusive and all-absorbing unity of

³ *Ereignisse und Bewegungen* (1914). These essays are included in *Pointing the Way*, where Buber brought together eleven short essays written between 1907 – 1914. The essays are organized in three parts; in a prefatory note to the second edition (1925) of the volume, he indicates that the second and third parts are comprised of essays written in the spring and fall of 1914, that is, after the publication of *Daniel*. “Mit einem Monist” was first published in the periodical *Die Weissen Blätter* I/6 (February 1914): 615 – 620.

his own self. This self is then so uniquely manifest, and it appears then so uniquely existent, that the individual loses the knowledge, 'This is my self, distinguished and separate from every other self.' He loses the sure knowledge of the *principium individuationis* and understands this precious experience of his unity as the experience of *the* unity.

When this man returns into life and in the world and with the world, he is naturally inclined from then on to regard everyday life as an obscuring of the true life. Instead of bringing into unity his whole existence as he lives it day by day, from the hours of hardship and of existence, instead of living this existence as unity, he constantly flees from it into the experience of unity, into the detached feeling of unity of being, elevated above life. But he thereby turns away from his existence as a man, the existence into which he has been set through conception and birth, for life and death in this unique personal form. Now he no longer stands in the dual basic attitude that is destined to him as a man: carrying being in his person, wishing to complete it, and ever again going forth to meet worldly and above worldly being over against him, wishing to be a helper to it. Rather in the 'lower' periods he regards everything as preparation for the 'higher'. But in these 'higher' hours he no longer knows anything over against him: the great dialogue between I and Thou is silent; nothing else exists than his self, which he experiences as *the* self. That is certainly an exalted form of being untrue, but it is still being untrue. Being true to the being in which and before which I am placed is *the one thing that is needful*.⁴

I recognized this and what follows from it five years after setting down this small work [i.e., 'Die Lehre vom Tao,' written in 1909⁵ and which Buber held was an essay that marked the conclusion of his mystical phase]. It took another five years for this recognition to ripen to expression...." (Buber 1957a, ix – x).

In 1914 Buber published a collection of essays marking the overcoming of his mystical, otherworldly quest⁶ – in order, "with new disembodied senses, or wholly supersensory power, to press forward to his God" (Buber 1957b, 28). In contradistinction to the mystic, Buber declares, "But I am enormously concerned with just this world, this painful and precious fullness of all that I see, hear and taste" (ibidem), that is, the world of *Erfahrung*, the world of appearance, later to be called the It-Word. Therefore "I cannot wish away any part of its reality.... Reality is no fixed condition, but a

⁴ Cf. "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but *only one thing is needful*" (Luke 10:41). The phrase "one thing is needful" is a recurrent trope in Buber's writings.

⁵ Cf. Buber (1957c, 31 – 58.)

⁶ See footnote 3, above.

quantity, which can be heightened” (ibidem). For, “how can I give this reality to my world except by seeing the seen with all the strength of my life, hearing the heard with the strength of my life, tasting the tasted with all the strength of my life?” (ibidem). Hence, I am to encounter the Other, and all that springs up to meet me encounters the Other: “the things that spring up to me (*das Gegenübertretende der Dinge*) ... so that I know the world in it” (ibidem).⁷

“*Das Gegenübertretende der Dinge*,” however, does not yet expressly apply to I-Thou encounters. Moreover, in “With a Monist,” Buber still focuses on heightened *Erlebnisse* and nurturing the moments of religious illumination. This preoccupation with oneself, Buber tells us, was decisively challenged in 1914 when during World War he was unexpectedly visited by a young soldier who urgently sought his advice. Although the visit intruded upon an hour of “religious enthusiasm,” Buber cordially received his visitor and thoughtfully replied to his questions, but he was not genuinely present and failed to address the questions not borne by speech but, as it were, etched in the very bearing of the young man. When Buber later learned that his visitor fell in battle,⁸ he realized that he had failed to “listen” attentively to those unspoken questions.

Since then, I have given up the ‘religious’ which is nothing but the exceptional, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. It possesses 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 hour’s fulness of claim and responsibility (Buber 1955a, 14).

Henceforth, as he noted in his preface to *Pointing the Way*, “Being true to the being in which and before which I am placed is the one thing that is needful” (Buber 1957a, x).

In the days just prior to the outbreak of the World War, Buber had another visitor who challenged his understanding of God. Hitherto God had been for him an impersonal Godhead who was manifest in the soul of the solitary mystic. In the course of the exchange with his visitor, Reverend William Hechler (1845 – 1931), who greeted the prospect of the war with apocalyptic enthusiasm as the imminent advent of redemption as prophesied in the biblical book of Daniel. Noting that Buber did not seem to share his exuberant expectations, the English pastor placed his hand on Buber’s shoulder and said, “My dear friend, we live in a great time.... Tell me: do you believe in God?” (Buber 2017b, 145; cf. 1988, 104). Buber hesitated to answer in the affirmative, but after a moment in order to not to offend his distinguished guest, he replied that he did.

⁷ See Michel (1926).

⁸ In a candid conversation with one of his disciples, Buber related that he had actually learned that shortly after their meeting, the young man committed suicide (Hodes 1971, 10f.).

Upon bidding Reverend Hechler farewell, he wondered why despite his hesitation, he nonetheless reassured the Reverend that he did believe in God. “Had I said the truth? Did I ‘believe’ in the God whom Hechler meant” (Buber 1967b, 24)? The answer occurred to Buber later,

about a half-year later, as I was riding on a train to a meeting with several friends, there arose suddenly, without my having thought of it previously... a sentence precisely composed of words of which I had not thought in advance. ... The answer was not that which I could (or would) have been able to give, when I myself would be asked, in the right way. The answer was: If to believe in God means to speak of Him in the third person, then to be sure I do not believe in God, or at least I do not know whether I am allowed to say I believe in God. Because I am well aware that I speak of Him in the third person, then... then my tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth so quickly that one cannot even call it speech (Buber 2017b, 145 – 146; cf. 1988, 104 – 105).

The God who gives Daniel such foreknowledge of this hour in human history, this hour before the ‘world war’, that its fixed place in the march of ages can be foredetermined, is not my God and not God. The God to whom Daniel prays in his suffering is my God and the God of all (Buber 1967b, 24 – 25).

The conjunction in the summer of 1914 of the exchange with Reverend Hechler and the ill-fated meeting – *Vergegnung* – with the young visitor would set the theological and existential horizons of Buber’s philosophy of dialogue.

The concept of dialogue would slowly gestate; the first “cursory outline” of *Ich und Du* was penned in the spring 1916 (Buber 2019, 233). He subsequently undertook a “spiritual asceticism” (ibidem)⁹ to allow his thoughts to crystalize. It was another three years before Buber wrote in the autumn of 1919 “the first still unwieldy draft of ‘Ich und Du’” (ibidem). This document “was originally to be the first of a five-volume work” (ibidem).¹⁰ Although this draft is no longer extant (Horwitz 1978, 163), we do have from the same period a published record of his initial formulation of his philosophy of dialogue. As Buber tells us, “the clarification took place first of all... in connection with the interpretation of Hasidism: in the Preface written in September 1919 to my book

⁹ In a letter from January 1, 1919, to Hugo Bergman Buber reported that: “I am currently working on the general foundations of a philosophical (social and religious) system, to which I will devote the coming years” (Buber 1973, 28).

¹⁰ Cf. letter to Hugo Bergmann, May 13, 1922: “I am now pressing out the vintage. The prolegomena volume of work on religion, *I and Thou*, which deals with primal phenomenon, will be coming out soon; I hope the first part of the work itself will follow in the fall. If the blessing upon my work holds as it has done for some time, the whole will be finished in 1924” (Glatzer, Mendes-Flohr 1991, 226). The larger project envisioned by Buber never came to fruition.

Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge (1921), the Jewish teaching was described “wholly based on the two-directional relation of the human I and the divine Thou, on reciprocity, on meeting” (Buber 1966, 214 – 215). The goal of Hasidic piety is no longer the mystical experience (*Erlebnis*) of the solitary individual. He now held that “ascetic ecstasy... is not divine, but of a demonic nature. One should not kiss the ‘evil impulse,’ the passion in oneself, but serve God with it” (Buber 2016, 60). To be sure, asceticism and its impulse to reach the Infinite left its mark on Hasidic spirituality, but it was to be mastered by “the teaching of healing of the everyday.” The core principle of Hasidism is no longer the realization of the impersonal Godhead in the depths of the soul; rather it is the event of meeting, in response to God’s address as refracted through all aspects of one’s creaturely life. By virtue of the response to God’s dialogical address the unification (*Jichud*) of the world is achieved. And God Himself, “a Unity without Multiplicity” (*die Einheit ohne Vielheit*) (ibidem, 64), comes to dwell in the “Unification of Multiplicity” (*Jichud der Vielheit*) effected by the Hasid. The acknowledgement and attentive response to the otherness of the Other, the otherness of God is manifest in the world. Although fateless (*schicksalslos*), God chooses to enter the world and share in its fate by addressing man. “World history is not God’s game but God’s destiny (*Schicksal*)” (ibidem, 65). Divine immanence is not to be accomplished by God alone, nor by man alone. God and man are to collaborate in work of creation.

Man, this miserable creature, is in the original sense, the helper of God. The world was created for his sake, the one who ‘chooses’, the God-choosing one. ... The [created order and God] have diverged so that (man) may draw nearer to God. The creature awaits God. And God awaits man. The impetus for redemption must emanate from man, from ‘below’. Grace is God’s *answer* (ibidem, 58).

Grace (*Gnade*) will be a key-term in *Ich und Du*,¹¹ for it denotes the free act of a transcendent Other, whom Buber in a short book proposal, dated February 5, 1918, referred to as *das Gegenüber*, He who stands over against one (cf. Horwitz 1978, 156 – 165).¹² In that proposal, *das Gegenüber* is God, but as Buber would develop his concept of dialogue it designates every dialogical partner, whose radical otherness is constituted by an *Urdistanz*, a primal distance, “the anthropological basis” (Buber 1958b, 124) of every dialogical relation. By virtue of the *Urdistanz* between all being, “every real relation in the world rests on individuation, this is its joy – for only in this way is mutual knowledge of different beings won ...” (Buber 1958a, 99).

¹¹ “The Thou meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking” (Buber 1958a, 11).

¹² On the basis of a detailed analysis of this one-page document, Horwitz surmises that it served as the outline of part three of *Ich und Du*.

At the behest of Franz Rosenzweig, Buber delivered in January and February 1922 a series of lectures at the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt a. M., which Rosenzweig had founded and directed. These lectures, under the general title “Religion as Presence” (*Religion als Gegenwart*), served to clarify further Buber’s *Gedankengang* (train of thought) (Buber 2019, 233). These eight lectures, particularly the fourth, fifth, sixth and eighth, formed the basis of *Ich und Du*.¹³ In these four lectures, he addresses the question he posed in the very first lecture:

We want to explore together to what extent religion exists as a present (*Gegenwart*), not as a memory and hope, but as a lived present (*gelebte Gegenwart*). This also means, however, that this question is not asked to be investigated within the context of the age (*Zeitalter*) in which we live, no matter how much that question is imposed on us, but rather we must ask to what extent is religion an absolute present, which can never become past and thus becomes and must be a present (*ein Gegenwart*) in every age and for every age. For otherwise this question would be part of the whole problematic specific to our time and would thus have to be asked again and again and could never really be answered. Only by positing it so absolutely, so timelessly and everlastingly, do we pose it completely. We ask ourselves: To what extent is religion an absolute present that cannot become the past? To what extent is it a presence that is not limited by any other actuality (*Wirkliches*), and which therefore cannot be canceled by any other actuality? At the same time, this means: To what extent is religion an unconditioned reality and yet not bordering on any actual reality (*Wirkliches*), not to be differentiated apart from anything actual, not to be corrected by any other actuality, but rather it exists out of itself, in and of itself an unconditional reality. And third, it means: How is religion present for everyone? How is it something that is there for everyone (Buber 2017b, 88; cf. 1988, 19 – 20)?

Rosenzweig arranged for a stenographer to record Buber’s lectures as well as the interventions of the audience and Buber’s response to the comments and questions raised. The stenographer’s typescript of the lectures was first published by Rivka Horwitz (1978, 43 – 152). Rosenzweig sought to attend the lectures as much as his failing body would allow; when that was no longer possible, he would review the stenographer’s transcript of the lectures. He shared with Buber his critical reflections,

¹³ In the first three lectures, Buber criticizes conceptions of religion as a function of, or being dependent on, various spheres of human life. In doing so, he is implicitly critical of his earlier, pre-dialogical positions. For a comprehensive philosophical analysis of “Religion als Gegenwart,” see Noor (2017, 39 – 50).

as he later did when he read the printer's proofs of *Ich und Du*. Buber would gratefully respond to Rosenzweig's critique and duly attend to the clarifications and revisions his friend suggested: "I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your thorough, magnificent criticism. May I ask you to maintain the same kindly rigor and stringent candor with respect to the galleys" (Glatzer, Mendes-Flohr 1991, 280).¹⁴ Their exchange was also interspersed with reflections on the nature of religion – a term Rosenzweig vehemently rejected as constricting and distorting the genuine life of faith. Buber shared Rosenzweig's fear that "religion" often deflects one from God and heeding the call to what in his Hasidic writings he celebrated as the "hallowing of the everyday." In an essay he wrote shortly after the publication of *I and Thou*, he observed:

It is far more comfortable to have to do with religion than have to do with God, who sends one out of home and fatherland into restless wandering. In addition, religion has all sorts of aesthetic refreshments to offer cultivated adherents.... For this reason, at all times awake spirits have been vigilant and have warned of diverting forces hidden in religion (Buber 1967d, 110).

In a similar vein, while cautioning Buber not to privilege I-Thou relations at the expense of the world of It (which constitutes God's created order), Rosenzweig mused: "What is to become of I and Thou if they have to swallow up the entire world and the Creator as well? Religion? I am afraid so – and shudder whenever I hear it [religion]" (Glatzer, Mendes-Flohr 1991, 280).¹⁵

Rosenzweig and Buber shared a conviction that since the Enlightenment, the life of religious faith, which had hitherto governed all human existence, has been lamentably constricted and confined to one of the disparate, competing spheres of activity and value that characterize modern society. Thus, consigned to the domain of individual choice, religious faith became a subjective option. One either had, as Max Weber (1864 – 1920) famously noted, an "ear" for religion or not. (Weber frankly admitted that he did not, despite his interest in the sociology of religion.) At the very outset of his lectures, Buber roundly rejected this view. Religious faith is, he averred, "not a gift alongside other gifts that one has or does not have. Nor is one as religious as one is artistic, nor even as one is ethical" (Buber 2017b, 89; cf. 1988, 21). Limiting the religious to the personal inclinations, to "*Seelenmomenten*," Buber decries, is tantamount to its "negation"

¹⁴ Buber to Rosenzweig, September 14, 1922.

¹⁵ Rosenzweig to Buber, undated. Cf. Rosenzweig to Buber, December 9, 1921: "It is true I don't particularly like the word 'religion,' because it has become too much a foxhole from which the idealistic evasions escape by the rear exit just when you thought you had the fox at last and could not get away this time. But just because there is a security factor to several exits, the public is readier to venture into the den of this word [religion] to the exitless lion's den (from which tracks lead only in, never out) of the word *God*" (Rosenzweig's emphasis) (Glatzer, Mendes-Flohr 1991, 263).

(ibidem, 111) and the “suicide of the spirit” (ibidem, 91). Rather, he argued, the religious is attuned to the ground of the true life, and which to “unlock” one does not need an “especially spiritual talent” (*geistige Begabung*) (ibidem, 89). The religious is responsive to “the mandate of a being, the task of being” (*der Auftrag eines Seienden, der Auftrag des Seienden*) (ibidem, 97) we usually call God, who Buber calls in his *Lehrhaus* lectures the Absolute Presence, and in *I and Thou*, the Eternal Thou.

The religious is “based on the foundation of a bond to being (*Seinsbindung*), a bond to beings (*Seiende*)” (ibidem). Bereft of this bond, all religious concepts and practices are vacuous, at most a “variety of art” (ibidem), a free creation of the human spirit. Nor is “the bond of being” properly called faith. This bond is established by virtue of a relation (*Beziehung*) to the Absolute Presence, the Eternal Thou. Derived from the verb to pull (*ziehen*), *Beziehung* denotes the dynamic quality of a mutual relationship between two autonomous subjects, an “I” (*Ich*) and a “Thou” (*Du*). The familiar second person pronoun, *Du* is restricted in conventional German discourse to addressing close friends, relatives, and children. But one also addresses God as *Du*. It is precisely this continuum of the *Du-sagen* as worldly and sacred that Buber sought to capture by referring to the *Ich-Du Beziehung*, a relationship between two individuals which is to be understood as “bonding in and with being (*einer Seinsbindung, einer Bindung an das Seiende*),” as the quintessential religious act. God’s Presence (*Gegenwart*) is refracted through the Presence of a *Gegenüber*, he or she who faces one in the everyday, “secular” life. For, “the I-Thou relation to God and the I-Thou relation to one’s fellow man are at bottom related to each other” (Buber 1964, 99).¹⁶

Entering-into-a-relation with the eternal Presence does not take place in aloneness (*Einsamkeit*), “but precisely when one enters the world, in the world where meaning is secured” (Buber 2017b, 156; cf. 1988, 123). Rosenzweig voices a similar understanding of the commanding voice of revelation. In a passage of *Der Stern der Erlösung*, which Buber underlined in his copy of the volume (Horwitz 1978, 145 n. 16), we read: “Love thy Neighbor. That is, as Jew and Christian assure us, the embodiment of all the commandments. With commandment, the soul is declared of age, departs the paternal home of divine love and sets forth into the world” (Rosenzweig 1971, 250). In an essay that Buber and Rosenzweig would later co-author, they presented the this-worldly calling of revelation as the kerygmatic core of biblical religiosity: “[The] ‘social’ and the ‘religious’ commandments in the Torah are to be distinguished: the religious is the direction, but social in the way” (Buber, Rosenzweig 2012, 66). In one of his earliest letters to Rosenzweig, Buber held that this teaching was epitomized by a dictum of the first century Roman scholar Pliny the Elder: *Deus est mortali iuvare mortalem*, which

¹⁶ Cf. Holiness “is true community with God and true community with human beings, both in one” (Buber 1967e, 111).

Buber explains to Rosenzweig is to be properly understood as “God exists *for* man in that he [man] helps man” (Glatzer, Mendes-Flohr 1991, 275).¹⁷

What constitutes the “help” one is to extend to the other distinguishes Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. The cumulative insights he garnered, especially in the period just prior to and during World War One, about the human condition and, he would emphasize, about himself¹⁸ led him to realize that to heed God’s commandment to “love the neighbour” is not limited to ethical deeds. Rather, it is an act of “meeting” the other, of “being true to the being in which and before which [one] is placed” (Buber 1957a, x). Although meeting the other is “the one thing needful,” there are no fast prescriptions and precepts how do so, other than “the full acceptance of the presence (*Gegenwart*)” of the other (Buber 1958a, 78). What Buber learned is that there are “moments” in one’s life with others in which one is called upon to relate to them without the guidance of established cognitive categories and codes of interpersonal and social life. To meet the other as a Thou is to suspend the secure knowledge and norms provided by these categories and codes; indeed, the I-Thou relation entails insecurity, but a holy insecurity. “*Das ist aber die erhabene Schwermut unseres Loses*” – the sublime melancholy – that it is necessary to anchor one’s life in the given cognitive and normative structures of one’s *Lebenswelt*. But as necessary as they may be for the orderly conduct of life, one courts the danger of relating to the other who stands before one as a Presence in existential need as an It, a mere *Gegenstand*.

Buber presents the life of dialogue as determined by the alternating dialectic of *Gegenwart* and *Gegenstand*. As deployed by him, the etymology of these terms is significant: *Gegenwart* – a subject that is *waiting* before one, waiting to be acknowledged, to be responded to as a Thou, and not as an object, a *Gegenstand* – something (an It) *standing* before one to be used, or placed within an epistemological web of spatial-temporal categories to determine its relation to other objects. In contrast to a *Gegenstand*, a *Gegenwart* transcends the matrix of time and space; as such, the *Gegenwart* of another human being – as well as the flora and fauna of the natural order,

¹⁷ Buber to Rosenzweig, August 24, 1922. Cf. Buber to Gustav Landauer, August 9, 1913: “I just came across a wonderful saying by Pliny (apparently quoted by Poseidonios); it might virtually serve as a motto for the Socialist League: *Deus est mortali iuvare mortalem*. Probably the finest definition of God” (Glatzer, Mendes-Flohr 1991, 150).

¹⁸ Cf. “In the year before the First World War, the approach of the first stage of the catastrophe in the exact sense of the word became evident to me. At the time I gradually I began to realize what later, at the end of the war, fulminated in me to certainty: that the human spirit is either bound to existence or, even though it be of the most astonishing caliber, it is nothing before the decisive judgment. Note well, this is no philosophical conviction; it was not a question of what is usually described as existentialism. It was a question, rather, of the claim of existence itself, which had grown irresistible. The realization at that time grew in me, that of human life as a possibility of a dialogue with being, was only the intellectual expression of just this certainty or just this claim” (Buber 1958c, 23 – 24).

and the works of art and literature that embodied the creative spirit of one's fellow human beings – is grounded in God, the Absolute Presence, the Eternal Thou. Indeed, as Rosenzweig held, God is a Presence, eternally present. Both he and Buber would, accordingly, render *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, God's reply to Moses's request to reveal His name (Exodus 3:14), as "I shall be present as I shall be present" (*Ich werde dasein, als ich dasein werde*).

In her detailed analysis of Rosenzweig's seminal contribution to the clarification (*Klärung*) of Buber's philosophy of dialogue, Rivka Horwitz surmises that he urged Buber to remove from the inaugural edition of *Ich und Du* (1923) an epigraph drawn from a poem by Goethe: "*So hab ich endlich von dir erharrt: In allen Elementen Gottes Gegenwart.*" (So, waiting, I have won for you the end: God's presence in every element) (cf. Goethe 1888, 223). Upon receiving a copy of the book, Rosenzweig vehemently protested the inclusion of the epigraph (Horwitz 1978, 225). Buber complied with his friend's imploration. When asked why he deleted the Goethe epigraph from all subsequent editions of *Ich und Du*, Buber replied that because of its pantheistic ring it could be misunderstood. He had also changed some phrases in later editions of *Ich und Du* into order to distinguish his position from pantheism. Walter Kaufmann (1921 – 1980) speculates that the *dir* of the epigraph refers to Buber's wife Paula (Kaufmann 1970, 27). In support of this supposition, Kaufmann noted that the sequel to *Ich und Du*, *Zwiesprache* (1932) was dedicated to Paula with a four-line verse:

An P.
 Der Abgrund und das Weltenlicht,
 Zeitnot und Ewigkeitsbegier,
 Vision, Ereignis und Gedicht:
 Zwiesprache wars und ists mir dir.

For P.
 The abyss and the light of the world,
 Time's need and craving for eternity,
 Vision, event, and poetry:
 Was and is dialogue with you.

Kaufmann thus concurs with Grete Schaeder (1903 – 1990), who edited Buber's *Briefwechsel* (Correspondence) that the epigraph from Goethe may have been "a concealed dedication" to Paula (Shaeder 1972, 39). This reading, Kaufmann suggested, is supported by the two lines in Goethe's *Divan* that follows Buber's epigraph: "*Wie du mir das so lieblich gibst! / Am lieblichsten aber dass du liebst.*" (How you give to me in such a lovely way! But what is loveliest is that you love (Kaufmann 1970, 27 n.).

Hence, “rightly understood,” Kaufmann surmises, the epigraph to *Ich und Du* “serves notice that the book was grounded in an actual relationship between a human I and human You” (ibidem, 28).

In the lectures on “Religion as Presence,” Buber noted that Judaism exists to give witness to this religious reality – a reality, however, that is “*nicht etwa das Vorrecht einzelner Religionen*” (“not the prerogative of particular religions”) (Buber 2017b, 151; 1988, 112). In *Ich und Du*, the only Jews he mentions are Jesus, Peter, Stephen and Paul, but also and far more extensively Buddha and the Hindu Upanishads. Divine revelation, he underscored in the preface to the 1923 collection of his essays and lectures on Judaism, is not the privileged knowledge of any religion;

revelation does not flash from the cloud, but from the lowly things themselves; it whispers to us in the course of every ordinary day, and it is alive quite near us, quite close; the *shekinah* [God’s presence] dwells about us, sharing our exile and our wait... This is the history of Israel, as it is of the human person; and may well be the history of the world (Buber 1967c, 6).

The elaboration of this thesis – that the authentic religious life is realized in the I-Thou encounter – would henceforth set Buber’s life’s project. In his lectures on “Religion as Presence,” Buber assumed a conversational voice, often pausing to appeal to the audience to consider this thesis by reflecting on their own life-experience: “And I cordially ask you to what you know directly from own Thou-relations (*Du-Beziehung*) and [to reflect] on them as concretely you can” (Buber 2017b, 135; cf. 1988, 89). In *Ich und Du*, Buber similarly seeks to prompt his readers to introspective reflection but now not by a direct appeal. Rather he adopts poetic pathos to evoke an “Aha! effect” and the acknowledgment of what he regards to be a common human experience. *Ich und Du* thus abounds in aphoristic formulations, evocatively inflected figures of speech, and a high-musical cadence. Indeed, the work is configured into a quasi-musical form of three parts, akin to the movements of a sonata, each with a distinctive internal rhythm, punctuated with adumbrative thematic motifs, inscribed in sixty-two segments of “measures” of varying length, that are recurrently repeated, developed and enhanced with a fuller conceptual resonance.¹⁹ *I and Thou* has thus been characterized as a philosophical poem.

Buber’s deployment of a poetic rhetoric was in consonance with his rejection of traditional forms of philosophical discourse. He regarded the function of philosophical thinking to be that of *deixis*, pointing, rather than *apodeixis*, demonstration. Accordingly,

¹⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of *I and Thou* as “a kind of romantic symphony in three movements, each with a different internal structure and rhythm,” see Wood (1969, 29 – 33).

he viewed cognition to be recognition, and knowledge as acknowledgement. He thus conceded that he had no “teaching” in a conceptually rigorous sense.

I only point to something. I point to reality, point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching but carry on a conversation (Buber 1967a, 693).

It was precisely the poetic voice in which this conversation was conducted that the celebrated Argentinian poet Jorge Luis Borges found so compelling about Buber’s writings. Recalling a *bon mot* of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882) that “arguments convince nobody,” Borges remarked that:

When something is merely said or – better still – hinted at, there is a kind of hospitality in our imagination. We are ready to accept it. I remember reading...the works of Martin Buber – I thought of them as being wonderful poems. Then, when I went to Buenos Aires, I read a book by a friend of mine, and found in its pages, much to my astonishment, that Martin Buber was a philosopher and that all his philosophy lay in the books I read as poetry. Perhaps I accepted these books because they came to me through poetry, through suggestion, through the music of poetry, and not as arguments (Borges 2000, 31f.; cf. Fischer-Barnicol 1966).

It is not certain that Rosenzweig would have fully endorsed Borges’s assessment, but he did share Buber’s reservations about traditional philosophic discourse, advocating an alternative he called “New Thinking”:

In the new thinking, the method of speech replaces the method of thinking maintained by all earlier philosophies. Thinking is timeless and wants to be timeless. With one stroke it will establish a thousand connections. It regards the last, the goal, as the first. Speech is bound to time and nourished by time and cannot nor wants to abandon this element. It does not know in advance just where it will end. It takes its clues from others. In fact, it lives by virtue of another’s life..., while thinking is always a solitary business, even when it is done by several philosophers together... In actual conversation something happens. I do not know in advance what the other person will say to me, because I do not even know whether I will say something at all... ‘Speaking’ means speaking to some and thinking for someone, and this someone is always a definite someone, and he has not only ears, like ‘all the world,’ but also a mouth (Rosenzweig 1998, 198 – 200).

And like Buber, Rosenzweig turns to his readers to confirm the validity of this observation from their own everyday experience, an experience which he refers to as “sound common sense” (*gesunden Menschenverstand*), which “holds for everyday matters, and everyone grants it” (ibidem, 197).

Buber shared Rosenzweig’s conviction that philosophical and religious discourse is to be refocused on the everyday experience of speech-thinking, of the life of dialogue.

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