

## **Hermeneutics, Life and Dialogue: A Sketch of a Buberian Dialogue with the Past.**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I formulate an existentialist view on the dialogue with the past, based on the philosophy of Martin Buber. This view is meant to supplement the traditional, hermeneutical view on the dialogue with the past. In the first part of this paper, I argue that the traditional hermeneutic view on the dialogue with the past is somewhat restricted. In the work of people such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey or even Gadamer, dialogue is always regarded as a primarily cognitive event, focused on the 'I' rather than the 'you'. I argue that this means that they take only one aspect of the metaphor into account, and ignore the more existential dimension of dialogue. As an alternative, I use the philosophy of Martin Buber to formulate a point of view that does embrace the existential side of dialogue. I also compare the Buberian view of dialogue with that of Gadamer, and I suggest in which way a Buberian historian would differ from a Gadamerian historian.

**keywords:** Martin Buber; Hans-Georg Gadamer; hermeneutics; dialogue; existentialism; experience

### **Introduction**

When, a little over three decades ago, linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson published their epochal *Metaphors We Live By*, this book caused a stir in cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind. Metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson argued, are not simple embellishments of our otherwise straightforward use of language. On the contrary, they form the fundamental building blocks of the way we think about the world.<sup>1</sup> Our whole way of thinking is based on the identification of similarities between things, events and matters of fact that are actually very different. Almost forty years earlier, the American pragmatist philosopher Stephen Pepper already argued that differences between world views are ultimately grounded in different 'root metaphors' about what the world is like.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> S. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

I will start from the assumption, supported by Pepper and Lakoff & Johnson, that metaphors are essential for the way we think. Hence, they are essential for the way we think about history as well. Metaphors about what our relation with the past is like are not just illustrations, they are at the very core of the way we relate to the past. Classic examples of metaphors in theory of history are the past as a foreign country and the past as a teacher of life experience. But there are many other examples to be found. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, for example, famously stated that historians are either truffle hunters or parachutists.<sup>3</sup> Carlo Ginzburg on the other hand compared the work of historians to that of a judge.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I will focus on one specific metaphor: the relation between the past and the present as a dialogue, or, in other words, the idea of the writing and reading of history as a conversation with the dead. The idea that reading a text from the past is like talking to a friend in the present is not new. Petrarch, among others, once told a friend that he felt as in continuous conversation with the deceased writers of the books in his library.<sup>5</sup> We can find the same theme throughout the intellectual history of the West,<sup>6</sup> for example in the work of Michelet, Flaubert, Proust and, more recently, in the famous first sentence of Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it was only in the work of the hermeneutical tradition and Hans-Georg Gadamer in particular that this idea became the root metaphor for a more systematic philosophical point of view.<sup>8</sup> Hence, I will focus on the use of this metaphor in the hermeneutical tradition.

One of the central issues of the use metaphors such as these, is what I call the 'scope' of a metaphor. Every metaphor states that a certain phenomenon P is a lot like a different phenomenon R. More specifically, this means that P possesses a number of traits (a, b, c, d,...) that R possesses as well. Hence, the scope of R as a metaphor for P depends on the amount of

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<sup>3</sup> Ladurie's statement is often quoted, but its origin is quite unclear. Nevertheless, he himself has remarked that it can be safely attributed to him. See J. Elliott, "Reconstructing the Past" in American Philosophical Society, *Useful Knowledge: The American Philosophical Society Millennium Program* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1999), p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> C. Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian", *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1991), pp. 79-92.

<sup>5</sup> J. Pieters, "Still Speaking with the Dead. The Reinvention of a Topos". *History and Theory: Protocols*, 7 (2008), online at <http://bezalel.secured.co.il/zope/home/en/1201170255/1201170589> (last assessed April 12, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview, see J. Pieters, *Speaking with the Dead: Explorations in Literature and History* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> S. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> See especially H-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1960), pp. 344-360.

overlap between the traits of R and P. If R and P only have one feature in common (let's say a), R is a rather 'limited' metaphor. If, however, R and P have more in common (a, b and c), R is a much stronger metaphor, and can offer us a lot of insight into P. For example: if we use the metaphor "my love is a rose" to say only that love is beautiful, we use the metaphor in a limited sense. If, however, we use it to say that love is beautiful, but at the same time thorny and sometimes painful, we use the metaphor in a broader sense.

In this paper, my focus will be on the scope of the metaphor of the dialogue with the past in hermeneutical theory. I will argue two things: first, I claim that the scope of the metaphor has progressively increased in the philosophy of Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer, and hence has become increasingly more important in the way hermeneutics understands our relation with the past. Second, however, I also claim that even Gadamer does not use the metaphor of dialogue as broadly as it could be used, and I will present the basics of an alternative view, based on the philosophy of Martin Buber, that does use the metaphor to its fullest extent.

### **Hermeneutics: Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Gadamer**

Before the nineteenth century, hermeneutics was not much more than a specific method of interpreting (mostly Biblical) texts. Under the influence of Romanticism however, it gradually turned into a full-blown philosophical perspective. Hermeneutics achieved its first formulation as a philosophical theory in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. According to Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was not a special technique for interpreting difficult texts, but rather a fundamental part of human communication and human life in general.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he stated that understanding a text is not a matter of knowing specific linguistic meanings, but rather of establishing a certain kind of relation between a text or a work of art and human life in general. If we want to understand a text or an artefact, we have to see it as a part of the human life and the human spirit.

What is important for us is that Schleiermacher used the metaphor of dialogue to describe and explain this process. When we try to understand texts, Schleiermacher says, we engage in a dialogue with perspectives that are not our own in order to expand our minds and reach for universality.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Schleiermacher also states that interpreters, due to his

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<sup>9</sup> J. Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (New York: SUNY University Press, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Z. Bauman, *Hermeneutics and Social Science: Approaches to Understanding* (New York: Routledge, 1978), p. 7.

their outsider's perspectives, are cognitively superior with respect to that of authors<sup>11</sup>, and that understanding should always follow strict methodological rules.<sup>12</sup> Neither sympathy nor empathy have much to do with this process.<sup>13</sup>

Now, let us imagine a situation where two people are talking to each other. One person is convinced that she knows the other better than the other knows herself. Furthermore, that very same person uses a methodological manual filled with general rules to make sense of what the other person is saying, rather than trying to empathically engage with her. Despite the fact that there are certainly some dialogical aspects about this situation, I believe it is quite clear we would hesitate to call this a dialogue, or at least a dialogue in the true sense of the word. Hence, Schleiermacher uses the metaphor of dialogue in a rather limited sense, ignoring features of dialogue such as the presence of sympathy, the equality of speech partners and the openness of the procedure. According to Jean Grondin, Schleiermacher himself was actually well aware of this, more specifically of the tension between his strict, almost scientific methods and the ideal of hermeneutics as a way of understanding human life.<sup>14</sup>

Schleiermacher's formulation of hermeneutics was famously developed further by Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey agreed with Schleiermacher on the importance of life for understanding. According to Dilthey, the core of each human being is formed by an inner world that consists of a unique and thoroughly individual lived experience.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, lived experience may be individual, but that does not mean it is strictly private. It stretches out from the individual into the world of the community, as part of the human spirit in general. Through the mediating role of language, people are able to express their inner experience in a common language, and become part of what Dilthey calls the 'objective spirit', the communality between people as expressed in 'objective' entities such as words and symbols, but also in actions.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, language, for example in the form of a historical text, also allows people to access the lived experience of other people. To understand the meaning of a text is to understand the lived experiences it expresses, and understanding these experiences also means re-experiencing them ourselves. Dilthey often uses the image of a play to illustrate

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> J. Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (see above, n. 9), pp. 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> A. Bowie, "The Philosophical Significance of Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. J. Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 84-86.

<sup>14</sup> Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (see above, n. 9), p.8.

<sup>15</sup> W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1927), pp. 70-72.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 206-208.

his point: if we go to the theatre to see a play and come to know the personality, the background and the behaviour of a character, we can eventually identify with her and experience the events in the play as if they were real and happening to us right now.<sup>17</sup>

Although Dilthey doesn't actually use the term 'dialogue', he does seem to be more open to the metaphor of the conversation with the past than Schleiermacher. Dilthey does not only incorporate the back and forth of world views, but also refers to the empathic and experiential nature of dialogue. His appeal to the lived experience of the individual indicates a preference for a more humanistic, more intersubjective idea of understanding. Dilthey does indeed believe that the other's point of view is not just something which should be objectively known, but also something that should be *felt*. The image of a play is quite clear here: we do not watch plays because we want to know the personality traits of a certain character. We watch them because we want to be transported into the hearts and minds of the people on the stage, because we want to feel what it is like to be them and to live their (fictitious) lives. Hence, although Dilthey doesn't explicitly use the metaphor of speaking with the dead, his philosophy does seem to be susceptible to it.

Nevertheless, there are some caveats. Dilthey's view of understanding rests on his idea of an objective human spirit. It is the objective spirit which connects us to each other, and we can only communicate because we take part in this large, encompassing whole.<sup>18</sup> Historians, for example, would recognize meaningful products of human cultural activity because they are a part of the same objective spirit as the people who created them. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this. However, the use of concepts such as 'objective spirit' does remind us of related problems with the Hegelian idea of the objective spirit. The concept seems to imply that there is one single all-encompassing way in which people create meaning. As Gadamer notices, Dilthey still believes, despite his attention for individual experience, that hermeneuticists should transcend their own, personal situation and look at the relation between past and present from a universal point of view, the point of view of the objective spirit.<sup>19</sup>

One of the consequences is that, in this way, the other is again more an object of study than an equal conversation partner. Dilthey stresses this point by offering, in the first two studies of the *Aufbau*, a complete psychological and epistemological theory of the mind of the individual. Hence, it becomes clear that Diltheyan dialogue is much more about applying a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 215-216.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 219-220. (see above, n. 8)

general scientific theory than about talking to the other in a free and spontaneous way. This idea seems to correspond more to the relation between a psychoanalyst and a patient or a case study than to the relation between two participants in an everyday dialogue. Hence, Dilthey still seems to tend to psychologism, the idea that we should understand the other by applying a scientific psychological theory to her. Just as Schleiermacher, Dilthey was definitely aware of this tension. As Gadamer states: Dilthey could never really shake off the very scientific ideals he was trying to formulate an alternative to.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, Dilthey's appeal to lived experience might indicate a broader use of the metaphor of dialogue than that of Schleiermacher. Nevertheless, the scope of the metaphor still remains rather limited, due to Dilthey's tendency to promote third-person views on dialogue (that of psychological theory, or of the objective spirit), rather than an engaged first-person point of view. As Gadamer states, Dilthey's 'lived experience' actually looks quite a lot like the Hegelian spirit.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, it is clear that Dilthey was still bound by the philosophical limits set out by Neo-Kantianism and German Idealism. Hermeneutics only became capable of transcending these boundaries when Heidegger introduced existentialist phenomenology as a new philosophical paradigm.

For us, the important thing is that Heidegger's philosophy allowed Gadamer to apply the metaphor of the dialogue with the past in a broader way. In accordance with Heidegger's analytics of *Dasein* as a contingent being-in-the-world, Gadamer consistently sticks to a first-person view of understanding, rather than a third-person view. Understanding is not a phenomenon that is described from an outside perspective, as is the case with Dilthey and Schleiermacher. Rather, it is a personal experience, an event which is tied to the way we find ourselves in the world. In this sense, understanding is a fundamental part of the human condition.<sup>22</sup>

Heidegger's ideas also allowed Gadamer to stress the fact that there is no such thing as a view from nowhere, and that human beings are essentially situated and contingent.<sup>23</sup> A large part of *Truth and Method* can easily be read as a rehabilitation of the two central aspects of our contingent place in the world: fore-meanings or prejudices on the one hand, and tradition on the other. Gadamer goes to great length to emphasize the constitutive role of prejudices

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 214-215.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 245.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 251.

and tradition.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to what followers of the Enlightenment would have us believe, there is nothing inherently wrong with tradition or prejudices.<sup>25</sup> They are simply expressions of the limits of our understanding and our contingent situation in the world. Prejudices only become a problem when we fail to make them explicit, and tradition is only dangerous when we fail to critically engage with it.

According to Gadamer, this contingent, prejudiced and traditional situation of human beings in the world expresses itself, according to Gadamer, in the phenomenon of a *horizon*.<sup>26</sup> The concept of horizon refers to the limits of what can be seen from a particular vantage point. As such, it forms the boundaries of the perceptive and meaningful world of a particular human being or *Dasein*. Gadamer also states that this particular 'globe' we all live in is a 'language world',<sup>27</sup> a particular and structured whole tied to our personal situation. Because it is made out of language, however, this whole has the potential to change. Other people can communicate (through texts for example) with us from their own language-worlds. Hence, we can come into contact with perspectives other than our own, and through them, we can break free from the confinements of our own personal point of view and expand our horizon. Eventually, understanding a text from a different language-world entails that the horizon of the text will merge with our own in a process of fusion of horizons. This will in the end result into one single, broader view of the world that includes both my own perspective and that of the text I am trying to understand.<sup>28</sup>

For us, the important thing is that Gadamer's reliance on Heidegger rather than Neo-Kantianism or German Idealism allows him to take the use of dialogue as a metaphor one step further than Dilthey. Just as Dilthey, Gadamer regards the reading of historical texts as an interaction between perspectives, and as an access to the lived experience of the other'. But unlike Dilthey, Gadamer consistently sticks to a first-person perspective, stating that the other is not a thing or an object that can be studied in itself, but rather a being that we are in a relation with.<sup>29</sup> Gadamer's emphasis on the role of prejudices and the way these can be overcome in a genuine conversation also reminds us of features of dialogue that we have not seen in Dilthey or Schleiermacher. Furthermore, and again contrary to Dilthey, Gadamer also uses the metaphor explicitly and extensively. He states that the logic of question and answer

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 261-267.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 255.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 286.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 424.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 290.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 340.

of conversation is the most important model for hermeneutics,<sup>30</sup> and he uses Plato's dialogues as a model.<sup>31</sup> He also greatly stresses the importance of openness and of the recognition of the alterity of the other, of not reducing the uniqueness of other historical periods to some general scheme or over-arching narrative.<sup>32</sup> In short, it seems as if, through Gadamer, we have finally found a way of using the metaphor of dialogue to its fullest extent.

However, I argue that this is not the case. It is true that Gadamer advocates a more personal form of understanding than Dilthey or Schleiermacher. It is also true that Gadamer does indeed use dialogue as the foundation of hermeneutical theory. Nevertheless, I claim that Gadamer's use of the metaphor of dialogue is still not as broad as it could be. Let us think of a typical everyday dialogue: a conversation with a friend on the street or in a bar, with a family member over dinner, or with a colleague in the coffee room. In each of these dialogues, events of people talking to each other, there are always different elements at work. There is of course a certain exchange of information ("how was your weekend?", "did you manage to find a job yet?", "what are your holiday plans?"). And in some cases a genuine conversation can do more than that, and broaden our horizon. Think of a respectful dialogue between two friends with opposing political sympathies for example. These then, are aspects of dialogue that are indeed incorporated in Gadamer's theory.

But there is still more: the relevance of dialogue does not stop at the intellectual level. Dialogues can be cognitively enriching by giving us new information or change the way we organize this information by expanding our world view. But they can be also much more than that. Engaging in a dialogue can be a way of showing that we care about someone else, that we empathize with her and are interested in her as a human being. Dialogues can be soothing, friendly or welcoming. In other cases, they can also be a display of resent, jealousy or even hatred. Dialogues can forge or break relationships, they can create friends, comrades and lovers, but also rivals and enemies. Dialogues, in short, comprise the whole spectrum of the experiences of the human condition, of which the cognitive dimension, the acquisition of knowledge and the organisation thereof, is only one aspect among many.

When we take a closer look at the way Gadamer uses the metaphor of a dialogue with the past, it is quite clear that he limits himself to this cognitive aspect of the spectrum. Gadamer explicitly says that, while art critics or literary scholars might still be touched by the artistic and emotional quality of a text, historians only use texts to learn new facts about the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 360.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 344-351.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 341-344.



past.<sup>33</sup> True, Gadamer does stress the importance of being open to the alterity of the text.<sup>34</sup> But he still only talks about the openness to the *truth claims* of texts from the past, and not, for example, about the openness to be touched by the concrete lives of the people from the past. Gadamer is very explicit about this: hermeneutics is about dialogues with texts, not with persons, and hermeneuticists are only interested in the truth claims of the text, and not in texts as expressions of individual, concrete, emotional and experiential life-worlds.<sup>35</sup> It may be that Gadamerian dialogue can still lead to a certain kind of emotional experience, for example to the surprise and excitement of discovering a new perspective, or the curiosity towards new facts. Nevertheless, these are still emotions that are closely connected to the cognitive dimension. One can imagine that a Gadamerian dialogue with the past might lead to emotions such as curiosity, wonder, excitement or surprise. But it will never lead to pity, sympathy, admiration or disgust. Furthermore, the emotions and experiences associated with Gadamerian dialogue are strictly connected to one's own views and ideas. They are experiences and emotions that are the result of the expansion of one's own world view, and not of a connection with another human being.

Gadamer does of course refer to our contingent place in the world, and he definitely does not regard human beings as mere abstract intellectualist entities. Nevertheless, for Gadamer, our concrete situatedness in the world, in a social context and as beings of flesh and blood, is not something that should be affirmed or valued in its own right, but rather something that should be *overcome*, something that eventually should be dissolved in a fusion of horizons.<sup>36</sup>

One way of replying to this is that this is just how it is. Maybe Gadamer was right to use the metaphor of a dialogue with the past in this limited way? Is it not possible, many people would say, that historians are only interested in learning to know new facts about the past and in expanding their own horizon? Maybe all they want is to expand their own view of the world by using the views of people from the past as a collection of interesting hypotheses from which they can take their pick?

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 317.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 341-344.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. xxiii, 344, 360.

<sup>36</sup> See also F. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) and R. Sneller, "Should we Understand? Gadamer's Supererogation of Hermeneutics", in *Hermeneutics and the Humanities: Dialogues with Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. M. Kasten, H. Paul & R. Sneller (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012), p. 232.

I believe this is untrue. Many great works of history have in fact originated from experiences and emotions that have little to do with the epistemically oriented experiences Gadamer describes. Think, for example, of 19th century historiography that aims to evoke admiration for the heroes of history, or identification with the glorious history of a nation. Or think of the social historians of the 1960's, or the feminist and postcolonial historians of the 1970's and 80's, who thrived on indignation about the injustices suffered by minority groups. Many feminist historians, for example, do not just want their readers to know the point of view of the nameless women of history. They also want them to *feel* it, to empathize with them, and to experience the injustices of history for themselves. The same goes for many cultural historians, especially those inspired by cultural anthropology, who try to evoke forgotten and peculiar life-worlds, and give their readers a sense of being-there, an experience of taking part in history rather than simply reading about it.<sup>37</sup>

So, at least in theory, there is no real reason why we would not interpret the metaphor of the dialogue with the past in a more radical way. If dialogue as a phenomenon harbours all these existential<sup>38</sup> aspects, then there is no reason to exclude them from the writing of history. In the following pages, I will explore what it would mean to interpret the dialogue with the past in this new, more radical way.

### **Buber: Living Dialogically**

As we have seen, hermeneutics traditionally perceives dialogue as a form of understanding each other's points of view. Although this is definitely a part of dialogue, I have argued that dialogue also has a number of other aspects that are not taken into account by hermeneutics. If we stick to the idea that dialogue is a matter of merging points of view and in this way discover (or approach) the truth about a certain topic, we miss out on the existential aspects of dialogue: its relation to life, its role in the way how we experience the world and how we relate to other people. Hence, we are in need of an alternative view, a view which goes

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<sup>37</sup> See A. Jones, "Reporting in Prose: Reconsidering Ways of Writing History" *The European Legacy*, 12 (2007), pp. 311-336, A. Jones, "Vivid History: Existentialist Phenomenology as a New Way to Understand an Old Way of Writing History, and as a Source of Renewal for the Writing of History", *Storia della Storiografia*, 54 (2008), pp. 21-55, A. Abbott, "Against Narrative: A Preface to Lyrical Sociology" *Sociological Theory*, 25 (2007), pp. 67-99, C. Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

<sup>38</sup> In this paper, I use the term 'existential' to refer to aspects of life and reality themselves, and the term 'existentialist' for the theory thereof.

beyond dialogue as a mere means to truth-seeking. I believe the best place to find such a view is in the philosophy of the Jewish existentialist philosopher Martin Buber.

If one would be asked to summarize Buber's philosophy in only three or four words, the best way to respond is by referring to the subtitle of *Zwiesprache*, an essay from 1929: *Traktat vom dialogischen Leben*, or "A treatise on dialogical life". The core of Buber's philosophy is that dialogue is not just another secondary phenomenon. It is a way of living, and the fundamental element of the human condition. Dialogue is not a matter of thinking or understanding, but of living, of encountering other persons, real people, in real and concrete situations.

Quite often we see dialogue as something which only comes in after we have established our identity. Gadamer for example does state that we always live in a social world, in the sense that we are always part of a community and a cultural tradition. Nevertheless, the way he looks at this community is always tied to the point of view of the I: in describing the hermeneutic process, Gadamer always starts from the presupposition that the historian finds herself within a certain horizon or a language world particular to her as an individual. Only when this presupposition is in place, when the identity of the historian is determined, Gadamer describes how this perspective can be expanded by interacting with the perspective of the other. And even then, Gadamer does not want us to dwell on the relation with the other itself, but rather to use that relation as a stepping stone to be able to take part in the objective spirit. Hence, when Gadamer talks about relations between people, he always treats the relation of the I to some collective entity (either tradition or the objective spirit), and not the relation of the I with an equally individual 'You' that is on equal footing with the I.

For Buber, however, things are different: we are relational beings from the very start, and our own identity only arises as a consequence of the relations we have with people who are and think differently than we do. To formulate it in his own words: the "I" can only exist as a part of the word-pair 'I-You'.<sup>39</sup> Next to the 'I' of 'I-You', there is also the I of 'I-It', which corresponds to the I that relates to the world in an instrumental or objectivist way. Buber, however, is very clear about this: 'I-It' relations might be important, but they are always secondary.<sup>40</sup> It is the ability to genuinely say 'You', to relate to other people not as things,

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<sup>39</sup> M. Buber, *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983), p. 9. Buber's term *'Ich und Du'* is traditionally translated as 'I and Thou', but this does not really do justice to the original German. *'Ich un Du'* is quite an intimate expression, and is better be translated as 'Me (or I) and You', than as 'I and thou'. Translated into German, the latter term would rather result in *'Ich und Sie'* than *'Ich und Du'*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

tools or means, but as human beings with a value of their own, that determines who we are. The I that is able to say the word 'You' is the I of engagement, responsibility and sympathy rather than the I of knowledge, the I of an interpersonal, living and experiential world rather than the I of the static world of material things. It is also the I of dialogue, of living interaction, through the medium of language, with the other. For Buber, the human condition is essentially dialogical rather than monological.<sup>41</sup>

But what does it mean, exactly, to genuinely say 'You' to the other? Buber explains that the key element of genuine dialogue is to regard the other as a whole.<sup>42</sup> To really speak to someone is to engage with her as a whole and complex human being. If we are only interested in what the other *thinks*, and not in what she *feels* or *wants*, we are not in a genuine dialogue. I have argued that the latter is exactly the situation Gadamer finds himself in: for him, the main goal is always truth. Feelings, experiences and social circumstances might play a role, but they only do so because they are constitutive for thought, not because they are valuable in themselves. Buber disagrees: too really engage with the other means to regard all aspects of her life, her thoughts as well as her feelings and experiences, as equally valuable.<sup>43</sup>

In one of the more ecstatic passages of *Ich und Du*, Buber makes this clear by listing the different ways in which one can look at a tree. This might seem a bit confusing, since Buber does emphasize that there is a qualitative difference between the way we engage with people and the way we engage with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the 'you' of the 'I-You' is not strictly a privilege of human interaction. Saying 'you' is about being touched by and engaged with the world, and not does not depend on the nature of things themselves. Hence, one can just as well say 'you' to animals, works of art, or even trees.<sup>44</sup>

I am looking at a tree. I can take it up as an image, a steep, rising pillar that collides with the light, or spiritizing green, pervaded with soft fragments of blewish grey in the background. I can see it as movement: the flowing veins of a sticky core of wood, the sucking roots, the breathing leaves, an endless relation with the earth and the sky, and the dark process of growing itself. I can categorize it as a species, and look at it as an example of a kind, according to the way it lives and is structured. I can detach myself to

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<sup>41</sup> M. Buber, *Zwiesprache* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1978), pp. 44-45.

<sup>42</sup> Buber, *Ich und Du* (see above, n. 40), p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Of course, the argument also goes the other way: a purely sentimental relation that is solely interested in the affections of the other is as inauthentic as a purely intellectualist conversation.

<sup>44</sup> See also M. Buber, *Ich und Du*, (see above, n.40), p. 15.

such an extent from the concrete shape of the tree, that I only see him as an expression of general laws of nature. Laws that consist of opposing forces which gradually come to an equilibrium, or laws that determine how chemical agents mix and separate. I can let it volatilize itself in the eternity of numbers. In all of this, the tree is still an object to me, and has a place, a time and a structure. However, it might also occur, through a combination of will and mercy, that I look at the tree again, and that I am drawn into a relation with it. Then, it is not an object anymore. I have been pervaded by the power of exclusiveness. In this, I do not have to forget any of the ways in which I was looking at the tree before. I do not have to blind myself in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I should be ignorant of. On the contrary: everything that I have mentioned, image, movement, number, is intimately united and connected.<sup>45</sup>

As I said, it might be confusing that Buber talks about a tree here, and not about people. Nevertheless, it should be clear by now that Buber's concept of the 'I-You'-relation is an existential and phenomenological description of the way we relate and engage with each other and the world we live in. Hence, its application does not depend on the objective nature of things.<sup>46</sup> It is true that the core of 'I-You'-relations is formed by relations between people, but this does not mean that there is a perfect one-to-one relationship. The same goes for dialogue: two people who are talking to each other are not necessarily in dialogical relation. Conversely, it is perfectly possible for two people sitting next to each other, listening to a Mozart concerto for example, to take part in a genuine dialogue without uttering a single word.<sup>47</sup> Although Buber greatly praises the spoken word as the privileged medium of dialogue, this does not mean that the use of language is a necessary and sufficient condition for a genuine dialogue.

Contrary to what one might think, the 'I-You'-relation is not a synonym for altruism or empathy. Although there is little doubt that Buber believes that people who are able to genuinely say 'you' will, on average, behave more altruistically, this does not mean that it is impossible to be altruistic without saying 'you'. We can imagine, for example, that we behave altruistically simply because we think it is our duty, or because it makes us feel good about ourselves, without actually engaging with the beneficiaries of our altruistic actions. The same

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14, my translation. For matters of convenience, I have not kept the original layout.

<sup>46</sup> See Buber, *Zwiesprache* (see above, n. 42), pp. 25-27.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16.

goes for empathy: people who have an inclination to engage in authentic dialogical relations will, on average, be more empathic. But Buber, again, warns us that empathy can also be dangerous: it can make us think that we know the other better than herself. Buber uses the example of the relation between teacher and pupil. This educational relationship can only be a genuine dialogue when the teacher acknowledges the otherness of the pupil, and when the teacher does not reduce the pupil to a younger version of herself.<sup>48</sup>

### **Buber, Gadamer and the Ethos of the Historian**

But what does all of this tell us about the writing of history? Would it be possible to apply Buber's views to history? And in what sense would this make a difference when compared to a more traditional hermeneutical approach?

The first question we should answer is whether it is at all possible to apply Buber's philosophy to historical representation, and see writing or reading history as a way engaging with the past dialogically. Gadamer talks extensively about historians, historical understanding and historical writing. Buber, however, does not. Hence, we will first have to determine whether his philosophy allows a dialogue with the past, and if so, what its place would be, before we start wondering what a Buberian historian would be like.

At first sight, it might seem as if Buber's privileging of the real, concrete encounter in the here-and-now excludes a dialogical relation with the past, which, after all, can never be as real and concrete as a person standing or sitting right in front of us. But we have seen that the 'I-You' is a phenomenological description of a relation between two entities, whatever they may be. As such, it does not refer to specific parts of reality, but rather to relations. Hence, there is no *a priori* reason why a relation with the people from the past could not be a dialogue. Buber himself seems to confirm this when he talks about the status of the "We" in relation to the 'I-You'. In short, the "We" is the community of people who are in a dialogical relation with each other, made possible by language. The important thing here is that Buber states that the "We" also includes the dead, the people from the past.<sup>49</sup> Hence, a dialogical relation with the dead might not be as self-evident as one with the living, but the possibility is definitely there.

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<sup>48</sup> M. Buber, "Elemente der Zwischenmenschlichen", in M. Buber, *Das Dialogische Prinzip* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1973), pp. 288-289.

<sup>49</sup> M. Buber, "Dem Gemeinschaftlichen Folgen" in M. Buber, *Logos: Zwei Reden* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1962), p. 67.

A second point concerns the nature of writing as a means of creating a dialogue. Again, it may seem as though Buber prefers the spoken word over the written, and to a certain extent this impression is certainly justified. Nevertheless, just as in the previous case, this is never absolute. There is no special reason why written language could not create or affirm a dialogical relation. One might say that the missing of a direct contact with a living person is a problem here, but Buber also states that the visual arts, who are equally lacking in direct, human contact, are forms of an 'I- You'-relation.<sup>50</sup> Hence, there is again no *a priori* reason to exclude the written word from genuine forms of dialogue.

One way of understanding a possible Buberian view on the writing of history is by thinking of Martha Nussbaum's and James Wood's ideas about the relation between ethics and literature, more specifically the portrayal of literary characters and the way we relate to them.<sup>51</sup> Both scholars state that there is an important ethical aspect to fictional writing. However, they do not see this in the traditional way, as if fiction should provide us with edifying stories that promote virtuous behaviour. Rather, they believe that literature is of moral importance because it introduces us to real and complex characters, with all kinds of different thoughts, emotions and desires. Seen in this way, fictional literature can convince us of the multiplicity and complexity of human life. Nussbaum is of particular importance to us, since she stresses that the key element of this, the one thing that well-written fictional literature can contribute that other forms of moral education cannot, is a rich and full description of life and of human beings, in which the wealth of different aspects of the situations they find themselves in can come to the fore.

The Buberian approach to the writing of history that I have in mind corresponds largely with what Nussbaum and Wood are saying. Of course, the big difference is that the latter are talking about fictional works, while I am applying Buber's philosophy to what is essentially a genre of non-fiction. Hence, I believe the writing of history is somewhere in the grey zone between the 'pure' Buberian dialogue with a real person right in front of us, and a literary dialogue with fictional characters. Following Hayden White, the descriptions we can find in historical representations might be seen as fictional descriptions, but every historian will be very conscious that these 'fictional' descriptions always pretend to refer to people that actually existed. Carlo Ginzburg once stated that this endows the historian with a moral

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<sup>50</sup> see M. Buber, *Der Mensch und Sein Gebild* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1955).

<sup>51</sup> M. Nussbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature" *The Journal of Philosophy*, 82 (1985), pp. 516-529, J. Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London, Cape, 2008).

responsibility towards her subject of study (the people from the past) that is not present with fictional writers.<sup>52</sup>

Having established that it is at least possible to speak of a Buberian dialogue with the past, we can now start wondering what difference it would make, compared to a more traditional, Gadamerian hermeneutic approach. Bluntly put, the central difference between a Buberian and a Gadamerian approach comes down to this: whereas a Gadamerian historian sees the past as valuable because it contains ideas that may expand his knowledge, a Buberian historian would see the past, or rather the people from the past, as beings that have a value of their own. The reason why a Gadamerian historian would engage in a dialogue with the past, is that she sees an opportunity to broaden her scope. The reason why a Buberian historian would do so, are the people from the past themselves, and nothing more. Furthermore, a Buberian historian does not *decide* to study the past. Rather, she, as it were, sucked into it. One can think of friendship as a way to understand this: engaging in a friendship is not something we just decide. Rather it is something that, without really knowing it, we suddenly find ourselves in. In the same way, a Buberian historian would be drawn to the past itself. As an example, one could think of Johan Huizinga: Huizinga got his basic motivation and ideas for *The Waning of the Middle Ages* not by theoretical contemplation, but by an emotional experience that befell him when he was taking a walk on the Flemish countryside.<sup>53</sup>

This point corresponds to the different role of the I in Gadamer and Buber's views on dialogue. I have argued that Gadamer, despite his emphasis on dialogue and context, always puts identity and the I first. For Buber, however, dialogue is central, and identity, the I, derivative. If we apply this to the writing of history, we get two very different views. A Gadamerian historian starts from his own identity, his language-world in the present, and then tries to correct or expand it by engaging with the past. A Buberian historian would be engaged with the past from the start. From a Buberian perspective, our present-day identity is not a given, but is rather constructed in a continuing dialogue with the people from the past. Hence, writing (or representing, reconstructing, re-enacting) history is not a choice, but rather a fundamental part of our human (historical) condition.

As a second point, a Buberian historian will always be personally engaged with the past, whereas a Gadamerian historian will still keep a certain distance. Although Gadamer

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<sup>52</sup> C. Ginzburg & Trygve Riiser Gundersen, "On The Dark Side of History. Carlo Ginzburg talks to Tygve Riiser Gundersen", *Eurozine*, online at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2005-10-31-ginzburg-de.html> (last assessed on 01/04/2014).

<sup>53</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (see above, n. 37), p.126.



states that prejudices and context are inevitable, the aim is always to rise above them. Gadamer wants us to use the historical text to be able to look at our own point of view critically. Buber, on the other hand, would want historians to express their own perspective in relation to the other of the past, and not try to leave it behind. More concretely, this means that a Gadamerian historian would be afraid to express his or her emotions in the texts she writes. Emotions, context, ideology and experiences are things that should be overcome. A Buberian historian, however, would express and affirm her engagement with the past as a whole by showing how she feels about it, how she experiences it, and what it means to her personally, as well as her interest in the intellectual aspects of the past. She would not hesitate to show feelings such as sympathy, compassion and admiration, but sometimes also abhorrence, disgust, and maybe even jealousy or hatred. As examples, we might think of E.P. Thompson's sympathy for the working classes, or of Natalie Zemon-Davis' admiration for Bertrande de Rols, the female protagonist of *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

A third point concerns the way a Buberian historian would portray the people from the past. As we have seen, Buber greatly stresses the contingent nature of every dialogue, as well as the importance of recognizing individuals as unique human beings, here and now. The greatest sin for a Buberian historian would be to reduce someone to nothing more than a case or an example of some general, objectivist law. Of course, this does not mean that all general conclusions should be banned from history. Buber himself does say that the 'I-You'-relation of dialogue is more important than the 'I-It' relation of objective science, but he does not mean that science is something bad, or that it should be avoided at all cost. On the contrary, science and technology are an important and valuable part of our lives. But they should always be in service of the relations between people, and not the other way around. Likewise, a Buberian historian would use scientific methodologies and general concepts as a way of bringing the other to the fore, but she would not let these concepts get the better of her and obscure the real, concrete and unique people from the past.

### **Summary & Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that the hermeneutic use of the metaphor of a 'dialogue with the past' is not as straightforward as it might seem. Although hermeneuticists such as Schleiermacher and Gadamer use this metaphor extensively, they do so in a limited way. More specifically, hermeneutics only takes the cognitive, intellectual dimension of dialogue into account, and not its more existential, emotional, relational and experiential meaning for human life. This holds for Schleiermacher as well as for Dilthey and Gadamer. It is true that

Gadamer, under the influence of Heidegger, avoids the third-person perspective of objective science, and also pays attention to the contingent situation of the historian. Nevertheless, the particular context and the social and psychological background are always something that hermeneutics needs to overcome in its search for critical distance and fusion of horizons. In this paper, I have offered a sketch of a Buberian alternative to the dialogue with the past. The key of this alternative is the 'I-You'- relation, a relation in which the other is not approached because of some interest in truth, but as a whole that bears meaning and value in itself.

One could be tempted to think that in presenting this Buberian alternative, I have simply created a new and very particular niche within theory of history. I sincerely hope that this is not the case. Although I have used Buber as my main perspective here, the argument I have made reaches beyond the confinements of Buber's theory. The basic idea that I have been advocating here, that the writing of history is as much a personal and existential relation as a cognitive one, could just as well be made in terms of other theorists. Elsewhere, I have made a plea for a Levinasian approach to the dialogue with the past, and I can imagine that one could make a similar case by using philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre or Gabriel Marcel. So even if one would not agree with a Buberian view on ethics, this does not mean that one should disagree with the core of my argument. That core is that hermeneutics, the most dialogical of current-day historical theories, only takes some aspects of dialogue into account, and that it is possible to develop a more radical, broader and more existential interpretation of the metaphor of the dialogue with the past, one that has a stronger link to what dialogue actually means for us, concrete and unique human beings living our lives in dialogue with others.