



THE DIVINE STRUGGLE FOR “I” AND “THOU” I:

Prologue: *I and Thou*^{1, 2}

A Book Review

Biography

“Martin Buber (1878-1965) was born in Vienna. . . . [He] studied philosophy and art at the Universities of Vienna, Zurich and Berlin. In his twenties, he was an active Zionist and worked closely with Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann. However, Buber is best known for his revival of Hasidism, a mystical movement that swept East European Jewry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Out of this interest evolved his dialogical, or ‘I-Thou’ philosophy. Professor Buber taught philosophy from 1938 to 1951 at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.”³

“Buber is best known for his revival of Hasidism. . . . Out of this interest evolved his dialogical, or ‘I-Thou’ philosophy.”

Philosophy of Dialogue

“The starting point of Buber’s philosophy is not man in himself nor the world in itself but rather the relation between man and the world. In *Ich und Du* [*I and Thou*] Buber distinguished two basic forms of relation — the I-Thou and I-It, into which all man’s relations, both with other men and with things in the world, can be divided. The I-Thou relation is characterized by mutuality, openness, directness, and presentness; the I-It, by the absence of these qualities. The I-Thou relation is a true dialogue in which both partners speak to one another as equals. The I-It relation is not a true dialogue in that the partners are not equals but one uses the other to achieve some end. It is

impossible to sustain an I-Thou relationship indefinitely, and it is inevitable that every Thou will at times turn into an It. The I-It relation is not evil in itself, for it is only through the I-It relation that objective knowledge will be acquired and technical advances achieved. In the healthy man and culture there is a dialectical interaction between the I-Thou and I-It relationships. As a result of this dialectical interaction I-Thou relationships become I-It relationships which find their expression in knowledge and art, and these relationships in turn contain within themselves the possibility of becoming once again I-Thou relationships.”⁴

“Buber contends that the *I-Thou* relation between the individual and God is a universal relation which is the foundation for all other relations. If the individual has a real *I-Thou* relation with God, then the individual must have a real *I-Thou* relation with the world. If the individual has a real *I-Thou* relation with God, then the individual’s action in the world must be guided by that *I-Thou* relation.”⁵

“Buber contends that the I-Thou relation between the individual and God is a universal relation which is the foundation for all other relations.”

Conclusion

Martin Buber developed the concept of the “Ich und Du” (I and Thou) relationship from his background in Jewish Hasidic mysticism. His work was prescient but unaware of (1) God’s ongoing commitment to inaugurating and ultimately fulfilling the relationality of I-and-Thou and (2) the fact that such a relationship is God’s gift to his Creation.

Endnotes

1. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), 1958.
2. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), 1970.
3. Ibid.
4. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. Maurice Friedman, “Buber, Martin.”
5. Alex Scott, “Martin Buber’s I and Thou” (2002), at www.angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/buber.html.