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6 Self, Other, Text, God: The Dialogical Thought of Martin Buber

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What is Martin Buber's legacy to Jewish thought? Buber was certainly one of the most prolific and influential Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. His writings covered a vast array of disciplines, including several areas of philosophy, mystical traditions from around the world and Hasidism, as well as biblical scholarship, hermeneutics and translation. Above all, he was a visionary thinker, who sought to overcome the 'sickness of the age' by engaging in authentic relationships with others and teaching his students and readers to do the same.[1]

In assessing Buber's legacy to Jewish thought, I will outline the parallels between the development of his approach to hermeneutics and his changing view of the ideal way of relating to others, particularly other human beings and God. I will look in some detail at *I and Thou*, Buber's masterpiece of dialogical philosophy,[2] and explore the extent to which his mature philosophy of dialogue is challenged by the Shoah.

EARLY WRITINGS

Buber was born in 1878 in Vienna. Following the separation of his parents when he was three years old, he was raised until the age of fourteen by his paternal grandparents in Galicia. As a child growing up on his grandfather's estate in Poland, Buber participated in a traditionally observant Jewish life and was also exposed to the Hasidic way of life of some of his Jewish neighbours in Poland. Buber's grandfather, Solomon, was a prominent scholar in the *Haskalah* – Jewish enlightenment movement – whose critical editions of Midrash are still highly regarded.

At the age of fourteen, Buber moved back to Vienna to live with his father. He abandoned Jewish religious practises and became interested in Western philosophy, particularly the thought of Kant and

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Nietzsche, and went on to study philosophy, German literature, psychology, and history of art at the Universities of Vienna, Berlin, Leipzig, and Zurich.

Buber's interest in Judaism was rekindled through his affiliation with Zionism. He was originally recruited to the Jewish nationalist cause by Theodor Herzl and briefly edited *Die Welt*, the main paper of the Zionist party. Buber soon joined the 'democratic faction' that was led by Chaim Weizmann. Although he sometimes became disillusioned with the political aspects of Zionism, and refrained from practical political activity for extended periods, he remained a passionate advocate of a Zionist renaissance of Jewish culture. In 1916, he began publishing *Der Jude*, a journal of cultural and political Zionism. In political debates from the 1920s to the founding of Israel in 1948, Buber espoused minority opinions based on his philosophy, including pacifism (he argued against arming Jewish settlers) and, perhaps as an outgrowth of his dialogical philosophy, he proposed that a bi-national state should be established in Palestine.

From 1905 onwards, Buber immersed himself in the study of mystical traditions from around the world, and this interest in turn led him to focus on Hasidism, the popular mystical movement that became popular in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which Buber had himself experienced during his childhood visits to Hasidic communities in Galicia. Buber's study of Hasidism resulted in the publication of his well-known collections of Hasidic tales.[3] His earliest collections are free re-tellings of the classic stories, which draw upon the romantic hermeneutics that Buber developed under the influence of Nietzsche, Dilthey, and Schleiermacher.[4]

In his early collections of Hasidic tales and other writings on myth and legend, Buber sought, through empathy, to achieve union with the mind of the author of the text or with that of the original storyteller. Regarding his earliest collection of Hasidic stories, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, Buber writes, 'I experienced . . . my unity with the spirit of Rabbi Nachman.' Similarly, he writes that his work on the tales of the Baal-Shem Tov involved realizing his 'inborn binding with Hasidic truth' and an attempt to 'construct the inner process in the life of the master.'[5] Buber's romantic hermeneutics led to his belief that his empathy with the Hasidic masters gave him the license to elaborate, embellish, and distort their stories, while remaining faithful to the inner truth of their teaching.[6]

There are striking similarities between Buber's early hermeneutics and his early writings on relation. The 1913 work *Daniel: Dialogues*

on Realization, represents the early, mystical period, in which Buber presents union as the ultimate form of relation.[7] His aim in writing *Daniel* was to synthesize the Eastern concept of 'the One' with the Western realms of philosophy, religion, science, and art.[8] Buber describes two ways of being in the world. 'Orientation,' which in many ways prefigures the 'I-It' relation described in *I and Thou*, refers to the world of ordinary experiences, which fit within the laws of causality and the constraints of space and time. 'Realization,' by contrast, 'refers to that enhanced meaning of life which springs from moments of intensified existence and intensified perception.'[9]

In the first of the five dialogues that comprise *Daniel*, Buber focuses on the relationship with nature, using the example of a tree. The same example will recur, with some significant revisions, in *I and Thou*. In the earlier text, Buber presents union with the other as the path of realization. The eponymous Daniel instructs his companion not to think about the tree, not to compare its properties with those of other stone pines, other trees, other plants, but to focus on it exclusively and attempt to draw near it. 'With all your directed power,' he says, 'receive the tree; surrender yourself to it, until you feel its bark as your skin, and the force of a branch spring from its trunk like the striving in your muscles [. . .] yes truly until you are transformed.'[10] Just as Buber sought to feel 'unity' with Rabbi Nachman, Daniel recommends an extreme form of empathy as the path to true relation.

DIALOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

Both in Buber's later writings on Hasidism and biblical hermeneutics, and in his more mature philosophy, this emphasis on union is replaced by a dialogical model of relation, and it is for his writings on the dialogical, or I-Thou relation, that Buber is best known. While Buber was developing his I-Thou philosophy in the period from 1916 to 1922, his approach to interpreting texts changed radically. He abandoned the romantic quest to unite with the mind of the author, and shifted his focus from the author to the text itself. His 1922 collection of Hasidic tales,[11] and subsequent publications in this area, reflect a new respect for the integrity of the text. The later tales are much sparser, lacking the embellishments, elaborations, and romantic flourishes that earned the earlier tales the punning sobriquet of 'Buber meises' (a play on the Yiddish phrase *booba meises*, old wives' tales).

Buber's new-found respect for the integrity of the text is particularly evident in his biblical scholarship and his collaboration with Franz

Rosenzweig on translating the Bible into German. Buber and Rosenzweig undertook to restrain their own poetic enthusiasm and to retain in their translation as much as possible of the rhythm, semantics, and rhetorical style of the Hebrew text. Rather than creating an eloquent translation, which would read smoothly in German, they deliberately set out to convey the foreignness of the biblical text. In particular, they tried to preserve the oral nature of the Hebrew Bible, seeing it as a work that needs to be heard (*TAT* 43).

In addition to making this profound change in his hermeneutic practice, Buber's approach to religion and spirituality also changed radically during the period leading up to the publication of *I and Thou*. In one of his 'Autobiographical Fragments,' entitled 'A Conversion,' he suggests that the impetus for this move came from personal experience rather than from strictly intellectual considerations. Buber relates that after a morning of "'religious" enthusiasm,' he received a visit from a young man whom he did not know. Although Buber welcomed the visitor and had a friendly discussion with him, he nevertheless was not fully present in the encounter, and he failed to discern that the visit was motivated by the young man's deep existential concerns.

> Later, not long after, I learned from one of his friends – he was no longer alive – the essential content of these questions; I learned that he had come to me not casually but borne by destiny, not for a chat but for a decision. [. . .] What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a man? Surely a presence by means of which we are told that nevertheless there is meaning. (*PMB* 26)[12]

Although the episode, as recounted by Buber, might seem to suggest that the visitor committed suicide, he was in fact killed at the front in World War I (*ENR* 80). Buber's point in the fragment is not that he caused the young man's death, but that he was absent in spirit when his full presence was required – 'he failed to make real, insofar as it was up to him, the possibility of genuine dialogue that that hour offered' (*ENR* 81). Had Buber not mentioned that the young man died soon after their meeting, the episode – whilst losing some of its pathos – would still retain its essential message.

It is interesting that the lesson Buber derived from this experience was not a general obligation to be fully present to others whenever they seek us out, but a specific lesson about the dangers of mystical 'religious' experience. 'Since then I have given up the "religious" which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up.' In place of the pursuit of mystical experience, Buber relates, he was

'converted' to a religiosity of the everyday: 'I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. [. . .] I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility' (*PMB* 26).

Buber's move from his early romantic philosophy and mystical pursuits to the philosophy of dialogue may also have been triggered by his friend Gustav Landauer's critique of his early enthusiasm for World War I. Like many patriotic German Jews, Buber initially supported the war.[13] He thought that the heroic mood in Germany had 'initiated an epoch of unconditioned action in which one realizes one's *Erlebnisse* in their fullness and thereby gains "a connectedness with the Absolute."' Buber even went so far as to see the tragedy of war as being of 'marginal import compared to the war's metaphysical significance' (*FMD* 18).

Landauer, an opponent of the war, wrote to Buber in May 1916, criticising both Buber's 'perverse' politics and the asocial metaphysics from which they were derived, and his letter seems to have provoked a complete rethinking of Buber's position. All of Buber's public statements subsequent to the receipt of Landauer's letter show him to be completely opposed to the war (*FMD* 102). In addition, following receipt of the letter he began to address one of the themes of Landauer's own teaching, the insistence that any 'change in the quality of spiritual life' must be preceded by a transformation of interhuman relations (*FMD* 19). As we will see later, exploring the connection between the spiritual life and the realm of interpersonal relations is one of the central themes of *I and Thou*.

Another important factor in the development of Buber's dialogical thought was the intellectual influence of Franz Rosenzweig. As Rivka Horwitz has shown, this influence can be seen by comparing the text of Buber's 'Religion as Presence' lectures, delivered at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus in 1922, to the various drafts of *I and Thou* (*BW* 193–205). On the basis of this comparison, Horwitz argues that the dialogical basis of the I-Thou was actually 'one of the very last additions to an already existing structure' (*BW* 194). This argument is not simply of historical interest – according to Horwitz, many of the 'problematical formulations and inconsistencies present in the published version of *I and Thou*' can be explained, at least in part, as arising from the imperfect fusion of two different philosophical approaches (*BW* 194).

Indeed, it is not at all obvious that Buber was primarily concerned with philosophical consistency when he wrote *I and Thou*. Buber often seems to be more concerned with conveying a teaching intended for spiritual guidance than with elaborating a philosophical doctrine.[14] The book is written in a direct, at times intimate, style. No preface or

conceptual introduction stands between the reader and the opening words of the work:

> The world is twofold for man, in accordance with his twofold attitude.
>
> The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the basic words which he can speak.
>
> The basic words are not single words but word pairs.
>
> One basic word is the word pair I-Thou.
>
> The other basic word is the word pair I-It; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It.
>
> Thus the I of man is also twofold.
>
> For the I of the basic word I-Thou is different from that in the basic word I-It.[15]

The general impression created by this style is that the author does not so much have an argument to make as a vision to communicate. Buber himself later described the genesis of *I and Thou* as his response to a 'vision'. In his 1957 'Postscript' to *I and Thou*, he wrote that he had been 'impelled by an inner necessity' to write the book. 'A vision that had afflicted me repeatedly since my youth but had always been dimmed again, had now achieved a constant clarity that was so evidently suprapersonal that I soon knew that I ought to bear witness of it' (*IT* 171).[16]

The opening section of *I and Thou*, which we quoted earlier, sets out the central ideas of the work as a whole. Buber presents a binary system for analyzing and describing the whole of human experience. Our everyday way of relating to objects in the world, and indeed of relating to other people, as a means to an end, as things that we can use, enjoy, and experience, is termed I-It. By contrast, the moments of true encounter with another being, in which the I responds to the whole being of the other with its whole being, are termed I-Thou encounters.[17]

Buber sees I-It as the default mode of human existence. I-Thou encounters do not endure through time. Even with regard to people whom one loves it is impossible to remain in I-Thou mode all, or even most, of the time. Every Thou must become an It again;[18] at the same time, however, every It can potentially be encountered as a Thou (*IT* 69).[19] Moreover, Buber insists that although a person can willingly prevent I-Thou encounters from occurring, it is not possible to create such

an encounter through an act of will. Rather, I-Thou encounters happen through 'grace' (*IT* 62).

Buber outlines three different spheres in which I-Thou relations can take place: the natural world, the inter-personal world, and the spiritual/artistic world. Of the three spheres, that of inter-personal relations is the easiest to analyse according to Buber's binary model. Experience teaches us how easy it is to disregard or feel indifferent to the 'whole being' of the other person. (In London, for example, the Underground stations have automatic ticket dispensers that often break down. I would hazard a guess that most commuters who end up purchasing their tickets from a human being do so only because the mechanical dispenser has broken down and that they are not interested in relating to the ticket seller in his or her wholeness.) On the other hand, most people can remember times when they have let go of all plans, presuppositions, and conceptual frameworks and simply responded to the person in front of them.

Of the three spheres in which encounters can take place, only the relationship between self and other allows for a literal 'dialogue.' However, Buber's primary metaphors for the I-Thou relation derive from speech. He uses the terms 'word,' 'speech,' 'dialogue,' and so forth to convey the qualities of presence, dynamism, and reciprocity that are characteristic of I-Thou but not of the I-It relation. For Buber, 'the very act of turning to another in relation is an act of speaking, even when not a word is uttered between them.'[20]

Buber emphasizes the mutuality of the encounter: 'My Thou acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us' (*IT* 67). Although the relationship is reciprocal, it is not necessarily symmetrical – for example, there is a built-in asymmetry to the teacher-student relationship (*IT* 178). In addition, the degree of mutuality that can be achieved will also differ depending on whether the Thou is a plant, an animal, a human being, or a 'spiritual form.'[21]

As an example of relations with the world of nature, Buber presents a fairly elaborate discussion of ways of relating to a tree. Most of the section is dedicated to listing a number of different ways I could approach the tree as It: I can consider it as a picture, as movement, as a botanical sample, as a mathematical object to be counted, or as a material object to be studied according to the laws of physics. To adopt any of these attitudes is to relate to the tree in the mode of I-It. However, it is also possible, without forgetting any of my knowledge of the tree gained in I-It mode, to relate to the tree as Thou. In this mode, I focus exclusively on the tree, and my approach to it is not mediated through any of the conceptual, aesthetic, instrumental, or mathematical categories that

characterize the I-It approach. Instead, in relating to the tree I relate to it not according to one or more of its aspects but in its wholeness (*IT* 57–58).

The discussion of the tree in *I and Thou* represents a significant departure from the mystical inclinations of his earlier work. In *Daniel*, Buber had presented the ideal relation with a tree as one in which I would identify with it to the extent that I felt its bark to be my own skin and its sap my own blood. The insistence on mutuality in *I and Thou* makes it clear that mystical union with the other term of the relation is not the goal of I-Thou encounters.

The third sphere Buber discusses is that of relations with 'spiritual beings,' and the example he uses is the form that inspires an artist to create a work. For Buber, the work of art arises when 'a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him. Not a figment of his soul but that which appears to the soul and demands the soul's creative power' (*IT* 60). This passage shows a marked contrast with Buber's earlier understanding of the origin of the work of art. Dilthey's hermeneutics, which, as we have seen, influenced Buber's early Hasidic writings, is based on the idea that the work of art results from and expresses the *Erlebnis*, the lived experience, of the author; the understanding of the act of interpretation as the attempt to identify with the author's *Erlebnis* follows naturally from this view of the origin of the work. By contrast, in the passage just quoted, Buber presents the work of art as a response to a 'form of spirit,' a 'Thou,' whose existence is independent of the artist.

The 'spiritual being' that the artist confronts is an intangible form that calls upon the artist to bring it into the world. Buber presents the 'commandment' that arises in such an encounter as a significant difference between other I-Thou encounters and the artist's moment of inspiration. However, the work that the artist is enjoined to produce is but the most concrete manifestation of a feature that is common to I-Thou encounters: I emerge from the encounter changed in some way, and I carry something of it into the world of It.

THE ETERNAL THOU

Following his discussion of the third sphere of relation, Buber introduces a new idea to his presentation of I-Thou relation: each particular I-Thou encounter is simultaneously in some way an encounter with the Eternal Thou. In each Thou, he says, 'we address the eternal Thou' (*IT* 57). The full significance of this idea only becomes clear in the final

section of *I and Thou*. It is interesting to note that in 1922, Buber wrote to Rosenzweig about the book he was working on, and told Rosenzweig that it would comprise three sections, 'which can be named: Word, History, God' (*BW* 209). In fact, he omitted these subtitles from the published work, but the tripartite structure remained.

Part Three deals specifically with God, or the 'Eternal Thou.' Buber states explicitly that the special quality of all other I-Thou relations arises from the fact that in each of these encounters, one addresses the Eternal Thou: 'The mediatorship of the Thou of all beings accounts for the fullness of our relationships to them' (*IT* 123). This section of the book presents a radical critique of both theology and traditional religions, insofar as Buber insists that God can only be 'addressed,' never 'asserted' or 'expressed.' God cannot be deduced from either nature or history. Rather, the God of whom Buber speaks is 'what confronts us immediately and first and always' (*IT* 129). To speak about God is necessarily to use It language. But God can never be an It – to worship an It is not to relate to God at all (*IT* 147). Buber acknowledges that a religious person's experience includes not only awareness of God's nearness, but also experiences of his remoteness. However, he insists that 'whoever knows God also knows God's remoteness and the agony of drought upon a frightened heart, *but not the loss of presence. Only we are not always there*' (*IT* 147; emphasis added).[22]

Buber's view of religions is that they grow out of genuine encounters with the Eternal Thou. Human beings are inclined to devise strategies to cope with two of the troubling characteristics of the I-Thou relation – its lack of continuity in both time and space. God becomes an 'object of faith' to fill the temporal gaps between moments of encounter, and cultic practises arise to represent the community's relationship to God. Gradually an objectified 'faith' and communal prayer come to replace, rather than supplement, authentic relation with God (*IT* 162).

In contrast to his earlier writings, Buber explicitly rejects the ideal of renouncing the ego, which is a common theme in mysticism. He insists that 'the I is indispensable for any relation, including the highest, which always presupposes an I and a Thou' (*IT* 126). Nor is renunciation of the world the path to true relation; to actualize the relation with the Eternal Thou, one must not turn away from the world, but see the world in the Thou (*IT* 126).

Revelation takes place in the encounter with the Eternal Thou, but Buber insists that it is a revelation without expressible content. What one receives in this revelation is the guarantee that there is meaning (the affirmation he failed to communicate to the young man in 'A Conversion') – yet nothing is communicated that could be expressed in language.

Nevertheless, Buber insists that the revelation both confirms the meaningfulness of everyday human life and takes the form of a command. However, the prescription is not a universal – it is a unique call to the unique person, which must be realised in his own unique way and cannot be expressed as a universal 'ought' or maxim.

Fackenheim explains the philosophical reasoning behind Buber's assertions about revelation. Buber is able to reject doctrinal statements about God and still know that He is eternal and infinite, because these attributes are not known through speculation but through the encounter itself. God's eternity and infinity are therefore the minimum content of any revelation. But there is also specific content to each encounter with the Eternal Thou, because in each encounter there remains an independent human I, and the I, of course, is finite and temporal. In the encounter, the divine Thou speaks to the human I in its concrete situation. The specific content of the revelation is a mixture of the divine speech and human response (*PMB* 287–88).[23]

The concluding pages of *I and Thou* offer an antidote to the 'sickness of the age.' Buber prescribes 'return' to a life of relation with the Eternal Thou. In opposition to the misguided strategies that human beings have developed for trying to preserve continuity by making God an object of faith and by substituting cults and rituals for true prayer, Buber enjoins the reader to embody pure relation in 'the whole stuff of life.' That is not to say that one can leave the world of It behind; this is clearly impossible. However, Buber insists that a person's life can become so permeated with true I-Thou relations that moments of encounter are no longer like 'flashes of lightning in the dark' – instead, they would be like 'a rising moon in a clear starry night' (*IT* 163). Perhaps surprisingly, given his emphasis on the importance of I-Thou relationships in the interpersonal sphere, Buber also suggests that communities achieve authentic existence by placing God at the centre. He portrays the ideal community by using the image of a circle, at whose centre lies the Eternal Thou. The periphery is made up of 'I-points,' representing the members of a community. It is the radii, the lines of relation between each individual person and the Eternal Thou, that create the true community (*IT* 163).

ETHICS

Buber's ethics, as presented in *I and Thou*, is ultimately based not simply on the I-Thou relation between self and other, but on the self's relation to the Eternal Thou. In fact, it is not so much an ethics as a transcendence of ethics. 'Duties and obligations one has only towards the stranger,' Buber writes. But a person who has stepped before the

countenance of the Eternal Thou and 'always has God before him' is kind and loving towards others, who are no longer strangers but 'his intimates.' The person who lives this way leaves the third-person dictates of ethics behind, but does not in any way eschew responsibility for others; on the contrary, such a person takes on responsibility for the world before the face of God (*IT* 157).

Neither in *I and Thou*, nor in any of his subsequent writings, does Buber present a systematic account of ethics.[24] In the subsection on ethics in his 'Reply to My Critics,' he acknowledges that supporters and critics alike reproach him for neither endorsing a traditional framework of laws and duties nor creating his own system of ethics. This lack is not accidental: on the contrary, for Buber, filling it would be unthinkable; to do so would be to 'injure the core' of his thought (*PMB* 717). Thus he offers no system of ethics; nor, he emphasises, does he know of any universally valid system.[25]

Buber's contribution to philosophical reflection on ethics and morality is similar to that made by Emmanuel Levinas.[26] Neither thinker provides moral guidelines or a systematic inquiry into the contents of ethical obligation. Rather, Buber's 'I-Thou' and Levinas's 'face-to-face' enrich our understanding of what it means to encounter another human being. Through their respective accounts of the relationship between self and other, they provide answers to a fundamental moral question – why should I be concerned about others at all?

For the Buber of *I and Thou*, as noted earlier, moral responsibility is ultimately based on the relation with God or the Eternal Thou, and God remains central to Buber's thinking about ethics throughout his career. In his 'Reply to My Critics,' Buber re-affirms that he sees moral values as absolute because they come from the Absolute. He writes:

> I have never made a secret of the fact that I cannot hold the decision of a man [. . .] as to what is right and wrong in a certain situation to be a decision valid *in itself*. In my view, rather, he must understand himself as standing every moment under the judgment of God. (*PMB* 719)

DIALOGICAL PHILOSOPHY AND POST-HOLOCAUST THOUGHT

This discussion of *I and Thou* has shown that Buber's answer to the 'sickness of the age' was not simply for people to open themselves to I-Thou relations with one another. Part Three of *I and Thou* shows that Buber saw a relationship with the Eternal Thou as essential to the

highest form of ethics, to authentic communal life, and to providing the individual with assurance that human life is not absurd. Yet the possibility of such a relationship in a post-Holocaust age is called into question by many Jewish thinkers, not least by Buber himself.

Readers often look to Buber's *Eclipse of God* for his response to the Shoah. The phrase 'eclipse of God' evokes the traditional Jewish notion of *hester panim* ('the hiding of the face') and may sound as though it were used by Buber specifically to describe the silence of God at Auschwitz. However, Buber applied it to the entire twentieth century, which he saw as a time of spiritual and moral eclipse. The concluding chapter of *Eclipse of God* repeats the idea first presented in *I and Thou*: the contemporary age is 'sick,' and its sickness consists in the ever-increasing preponderance of I-It.

> The I of this relation, an I that possesses all, makes all, succeeds with all, this I that is unable to say Thou, unable to meet a being essentially, is the lord of the hour. This selfhood that has become omnipotent, with all the It around it, can naturally acknowledge neither God nor any genuine absolute which manifests itself to men as of non-human origin. It steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven.[27]

It is interesting to note, however, that Buber did not end the book with this image of despair. Indeed, as Fackenheim observed,[28] the impermanence of an eclipse means that it is, in a sense, a hopeful image. Buber himself wrote, 'The eclipse of the light of God is no extinction; even tomorrow that which has stepped in between may give way' (*EG* 167).

The image of an 'eclipse of God' is, in fact, consonant with a major theme of Buber's biblical hermeneutics, that of the alternation between the presence and absence of God in the history of Israel. According to Buber, the Bible has a unifying theme, which is relevant in all generations. In his 1926 essay 'The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible,' Buber identifies this theme: the Bible is concerned with 'the encounter between a group of people and the Lord of the world in the course of history.' The different genres of biblical text are variations on this theme:

> Either openly or by implication, the stories are reports of encounters. The songs lament the denial of the grace of encounter, plead that it may be repeated, or give thanks because it has been vouchsafed. The prophecies summon man who has gone astray to turn, to return to the region where the encounter took place, promising him that the torn bond shall once more be made whole.[29]

For Buber, the God of the Bible (like the 'Eternal Thou' of *I and Thou*) is a God of personal encounter, not the God of doctrinal belief systems. The biblical stories, songs, and prophecies speak to readers of all generations because they deal with a contemporary concern, the individual and collective relationship with God.

In his 1949 work *The Prophetic Faith*, Buber traces the changing nature of the relationship between God and Israel, emphasizing the intimacy of God with the patriarchs and with Moses, and examining the distancing that occurs at other times, such as when the Israelites sin by worshipping the golden calf (Exodus 32). Moses and subsequent prophets attempt to overcome this distance by bringing the people back to the true service of God. According to Buber, the seeds of Jewish Messianism can be found in the prophecies of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, who envision a future return to the nomadic faith of the past. Isaiah in particular prophesies that a descendant of the house of David will establish political kingship over Israel. According to Buber, this is 'not a prediction but an offer' – the Messiah will come when the people have made a decision to return to God.[30]

This section of *The Prophetic Faith*, with its emphasis on the role of human decision-making in bringing the Messiah, remains theodic and, as such, it does not address the issues raised by the Holocaust.[31] However, in the final chapter of the same work, Buber does discuss the suffering of the innocent. In this chapter, he focuses on the 'suffering Messiah' of Deutero-Isaiah, a figure that Buber interprets as the community of Israel rather than as an individual. Buber also draws on the Book of Job and the Psalms to further develop the theme of innocent suffering. Although he does not explicitly link these biblical texts to the Shoah, it seems likely that Buber concluded the work with images of human suffering and separation from God as a way of grappling with the theological issues raised by the Holocaust (*TAT* 136).

However, even in the last chapter of *The Prophetic Faith*, Buber expresses theodic sentiments. His reading of Job does not emphasize the antitheodic moment of protest, but the eventual re-establishment of Job's relationship with God. According to Buber, Job, at the end of the book, 'knows that the friends, who side with God, do not contend for the true God.' Previously, Job had recognized the true God as the 'near and intimate God.' At the end of the book, Job only experiences God 'through suffering and contradiction, but even in this way he does experience God' (*PF* 192). Buber therefore summarises the book as a tale that 'narrates the man of suffering, who by his suffering attained the vision of God (*PF*, 197).' Ultimately, this reading of the book of Job is

theodic in nature; it is not so much about the suffering of the innocent (*GAA* 64).

By contrast, Buber's 1952 essay 'The Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth,' which also comments on the Book of Job, explicitly addresses the post-Holocaust situation, and reaches a much more disturbing conclusion. Buber asks 'how is life with God still possible in a time in which there is an Auschwitz?' He acknowledges that one might still 'believe in' a God who permitted the Shoah to happen, but he questions the possibility of hearing God's word, let alone entering into an I-Thou relationship with Him.

> Can one still hear His word? Can one still, as an individual and as a people, enter at all into a dialogical relationship with Him? Dare we recommend to the survivors of Auschwitz, the Job of the gas chambers: 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever'?[32]

Buber's question about the possibility of divine-human speech after the Holocaust is never really answered. The question, however, has far-reaching consequences for Buber's dialogical philosophy, since, as Fackenheim has pointed out, 'the centre of Buber's thought is dialogical speech' and, moreover, it is 'divine-human speech that confers meaning on all speech.'[33]

Returning to the biblical Job, Buber presents a different perspective on the end of the book. Instead of emphasizing the re-establishment of the relationship with God as he had done in the earlier essay, Buber stresses the inadequacy of the response that Job receives from God, the fact that God's response not only fails to answer the charges raised by Job, it does not even touch upon the issues. 'Nothing is explained, nothing adjusted; wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness. Nothing has happened but that man again hears God's address' (*OJ* 224–25).

The conclusion to Buber's essay focuses on the response of the Jewish people to the Shoah.

> And we?
>
> We – by this is meant all those who have not got over what happened and will not get over it. Do we stand overcome before the hidden face of God like the tragic hero of the Greeks before faceless fate? No, rather *even now we contend, we too, with God,* even with Him, the Lord of Being, whom we once chose for our Lord. We do not put up with earthly being, we struggle for its redemption, and struggling we appeal to the help of the Lord, who is again and

> still a hiding one. In such a state we await His voice, whether it comes out of the storm or out of a stillness that follows it. Though His coming appearance resemble no earlier one, we shall recognize again our cruel and merciful Lord. (*OJ* 225; italics added)

This essay is Buber's most strongly antitheodic piece. He presents Job not simply as the man of faith who awaits the return of God, but as the brave believer who (like Abraham) argues with God, and who protests rather than simply lamenting. Even more radically, God, for His part, is recognized as being cruel as well as merciful. However, despite using the figure of Job to express disappointment and anger at God's hiding, Buber nevertheless appeals to the help of God and awaits His voice (*GAA* 67).

BUBER'S LEGACY

Given the antitheodic motifs expressed in 'Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth,' it seems clear that had Buber published *I and Thou* in the 1960s instead of the 1920s, it might have been a very different work. At the very least, the confident assertions that God is always present[34] would have been formulated in a more nuanced way, taking into account the possibility of an 'eclipse of God,' and the inscrutable – even cruel – divine silence. Nevertheless, Buber never repudiated the philosophy of *I and Thou*; nor, despite the Shoah, did he abandon his biblical conceptual framework. What, then, is Buber's legacy to Jewish religious thought?

Unlike Richard Rubenstein, for whom the Shoah led to the conclusion that 'we stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources,'[35] Buber saw contemporary Jewish life as a continuation of the dialectic of biblical Israel: the alternation of distance and nearness between God and the Jewish people. Buber's writings do not offer a solution to the theological problems raised by the Shoah. However, they do explore the possibility of maintaining faith whilst awaiting the end of the eclipse of God.

Buber's 1952 book *Good and Evil* includes interpretations of a number of Psalms, each of which relates to the theme of innocent suffering. Without claiming that the Psalms provide complete and satisfying answers to the problem of evil, Buber suggests that sufferers can achieve a renewal of faith and hope through reading them. Buber understands the power of reading Psalms as dependent on an existential exegesis, in which the reader's own life experience is seen 'in and through the psalmist's narrative' (*TAT* 142). This experience involves making a narrative from Judaism's common memory part of the interpreter's personal

memory – a movement that Buber saw as essential to the contemporary reader's ability to relate to the biblical text (*TAT* 142).

Although Fackenheim, amongst others, criticizes Buber for not making the breakthrough to a radically new post-Holocaust philosophy, we can nevertheless appreciate Buber's work as a rich resource for the faithful. Buber's understanding of the central theme of the Bible – 'the encounter between a group of people and the Lord of the world in the course of history' – entails that it can be meaningful and accessible to readers in every generation, even that of the 'eclipse of God.' Buber's biblical writings therefore continue to be relevant to religious Jews, and elements of his hermeneutic approach continue to influence translators and educators.[36] If we adopt Buber's approach to biblical hermeneutics, the absence of God does not render the Bible irrelevant or a closed book. Instead, it makes our reading of both the biblical stories that narrate episodes of divine-human encounter and, especially, of the stories and Psalms that lament the absence of such encounter, even more poignant.

Buber understood his task, at least in writing *I and Thou*, as that of 'bearing witness' to a vision. All of his subsequent writings, including those of the post-Holocaust era, ultimately bear witness to Buber's faith that 'God can speak even though He may be silent; that He can speak at least to those who listen to His voice with all their hearts' (*PMB* 296).[37]

Notes

1. Paul Mendes-Flohr has shown, however, that Buber's early work is profoundly asocial in nature. His diagnosis of the sickness of the age in his pre-dialogical period was focused on 'the crisis of *Kultur*, the decline of spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities putatively wrought by industrial, urban *Zivilisation*.' Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989, p. 15. Hereafter cited as *FMD*.
2. According to Pamela Vermes, *I and Thou* is 'Buber's masterpiece. It is the receptacle into which he pours the learning and wisdom accumulated over the years, and the vessel in which he re-words them to express his own vision of the good life. Everything that he wrote afterwards can be traced back to it.' Pamela Vermes, *Buber on God and the Perfect Man* (London: Littman Library, 1994), p. 27.
3. *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (1906) and *Die Legende des Baal Schem* (1908). English translations: *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* (1956) and *The Legend of the Baal Shem* (1969).
4. For a detailed discussion of the development of Buber's hermeneutics, see Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), hereafter cited as *TAT*.

5. Buber, 'My Way to Hasidism,' in Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper, 1966) p. 62.
6. Kepnes elaborates on the connection between Buber's early approach to the Hasidic tales and Dilthey's hermeneutics. For Dilthey, the goal of interpretation in the human sciences is to arrive at 'the mental state, the subjective, personal lived experience of the author, as he or she produced the work' (*TAT* 9). However, in his mature hermeneutics, this is not the final goal of interpretation. Through the process of empathizing with the mental state of the author, a sufficiently adept interpreter can 'not only experience the event as the author experienced it,' but can transcend the text itself by following the line of events 'to a conclusion that did not exist in the mind of the author' (*TAT* 11).
7. Indeed, Mendes-Flohr argues that prior to the development of Buber's dialogical thought (that is, before 1916), all of Buber's writing in different spheres was based on his doctrine of unity. 'All his literary activity, be it as an interpreter of mysticism and folk myths, as a speculative philosopher, or as a Zionist publicist, can be viewed as an elaboration and refinement of his doctrine of unity.' (*FMD* 63)
8. Rivka Horowitz, *Buber's Way to 'I and Thou'* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988), p. 195. Hereafter cited as *BW*.
9. Maurice Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life Of Martin Buber* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), p. 36. Hereafter cited as *ENR*.
10. *Daniel*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 54.
11. *Der Grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge* (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten and Loening, 1922).
12. Martin Buber, 'Autobiographical Fragments,' trans. Maurice Friedman in Paul A. Schilpp and Maurice S. Freidman, eds. *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1967), p. 26. Hereafter cited as *PMB*. The idea that what one seeks in an encounter with the other is reassurance that 'nevertheless there is meaning' parallels Buber's assertion in *I and Thou* that the confirmation of meaning is an essential aspect of the I-Thou encounter. (See following.)
13. Pamela Vermes, op. cit., pp. 20–22.
14. Emil Fackenheim asks whether Buber's teaching regarding dialogical relations is a doctrine – 'a body of metaphysical and epistemological assertions' – or pure homily (*PMB* 280). He argues that Buber does indeed present a philosophical doctrine, and that it is this doctrine that distinguishes his work from poems, sermons, and so forth (*PMB* 281). Nevertheless, Fackenheim's essay concludes with the suggestion that Buber is perhaps not really a philosopher after all, but a 'Hebrew sage in modern garb' (*PMB* 296). See note 33.
15. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Scribner's, 1970), p. 53. Hereafter cited as *IT*. (All citations of *I and Thou* refer to Kaufman's translation; however, for the sake of consistency, I have followed Ronald Gregor Smith in translating 'du' as 'thou' rather than 'you'.)

16. Buber took this inspiration so seriously that he later refused to revise *I and Thou*, even where the meaning of certain passages was not clear to the author himself! In his 'Replies to My Critics,' Buber explains that he wrote *I and Thou* 'in an overpowering inspiration. And what such inspiration delivers to one, one may no longer change, not even for the sake of exactness.' (*PMB* 706)
17. Franz Rosenzweig criticised Buber's system as overly simplistic. Rosenzweig was particularly concerned that with the I-It, Buber had given the I-Thou 'a cripple for an opponent' (*BW* 208).
18. As we will see later, the one exception to this rule is that God, or the Eternal Thou, can never become 'It.'
19. Buber acknowledges that the process is not always that clear-cut; there can be a confusion and entanglement between I-It and I-Thou (*IT* 69).
20. A. Kohanski, *Martin Buber's Philosophy of Interhuman Relation* (London: Associated University Presses, 198), p. 268.
21. The subject of reciprocity and mutuality has given rise to much discussion. Buber addresses some of the issues in his 1957 Postscript to *I and Thou* and in his 'Replies to My Critics' (*PMB* 707–10). Questions of symmetry, reciprocity, and mutual relation are also very much at issue in the complex dialogue between Levinas and Buber.
22. See what follows for a discussion of whether this claim that it is only human beings (and not God) who absent themselves from the relationship remains valid in Buber's later philosophy.
23. Fackenheim's essay ('Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation,' *PMB* 273–96) is of particular interest not only because it is a carefully argued philosophical analysis of Buber's concept of revelation, but because it pre-dates Fackenheim's criticisms of Buber for failing to respond adequately to the Shoah.
24. Although Buber never presented a systematic account of ethics, his corpus includes many different discussions of moral values and judgments. Bringing together strands from Buber's different writings on the subject, Marvin Fox argues that Buber presents a paradoxical, if not self-contradictory, account. On the one hand, Buber insists that moral values are absolute and that they have their source in the Absolute, in God. On the other hand, he insists that human beings never receive revelation in a completely pure form; rather, it is always modified in some way as it is received. Thus, although Buber's ethics is not ultimately relativistic, as he insists that values are absolute, nevertheless the individual who needs to make a moral decision has no clear method of distinguishing between the true voice of God and his or her own thoughts. Fox therefore charges Buber with presenting a moral philosophy that is 'an attempt to defend moral anarchy while pleading for moral order' (*PMB* 170). Buber's response to Fox, although interesting in itself, is not sufficiently robust to deflect this critique of his ethical teaching.
25. However, he insists that it is both natural and legitimate that 'everyone should accept moral prescriptions, *whatever helps him to go the way*' (*PMB* 718, italics added). Nevertheless, according to Buber's philosophy,

there is no set of rules, no way of knowing in advance when it will be sufficient to act in accordance with traditional moral prescriptions and when one will need to forge one's own response to a unique situation. Ultimately, whether I choose to follow traditional teachings or to create my own response, I am equally responsible for the course of action I choose.

26. Despite – or perhaps because of – the important similarities between the two thinkers, Levinas repeatedly expressed significant reservations about Buber's account of the I-Thou relation. Although the precise content of his various critiques of Buber varied, it would be fair to summarise Levinas's position as asserting that the I-Thou relation is insufficiently 'ethical.' Robert Bernasconi surveys Levinas's numerous studies of Buber in his essay '"Failure of Communication" as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas.' This essay has recently been re-printed in Atterton et al. (eds.), *Levinas and Buber: Dialogue and Difference* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2004). Michael Morgan's review of that volume highlights some of the main issues in the debate between dialogical philosophy and Levinasian ethics. (*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, www.ndpr.nr.edu, first published 17 November 2005.)
27. Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God*, trans. Maurice Friedman et al. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988), p. 167. Hereafter cited as *EG*.
28. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, 61. Fackenheim argues that although the image of an eclipse of God can sustain Jewish faith when it is confronted with modern secularism, its very hopefulness may render it insufficient to sustain faith when confronted with Auschwitz – perhaps hope itself has been destroyed (GPH pp. 78–79). Fackenheim's dialectical explication of the '614th commandment' reinstates not hope itself, but the 'commandment to hope' (*GPH* 88).
29. Martin Buber, *On the Bible*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1982), p. 1.
30. Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949), p. 144. Hereafter cited as *PF*.
31. I am following Zachary Braiterman in distinguishing between theodicy (discourse that attempts to justify, explain, or accept 'the relationship between God and evil') and its opposite, antitheodicy. Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 20. Hereafter cited as *GAA*.
32. Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, (New York: Shocken Books, 1967), p. 224. Hereafter cited as *OJ*. Buber is quoting a verse from Psalms that is one of the refrains of *Hallel*, a liturgical expression of praise of God the Redeemer.
33. Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 196.
34. See the earlier discussion of Part Three of *I and Thou*, particularly the idea that the Eternal Thou confronts us 'immediately and first and always' and that only human beings, not God, can be at fault when there is an absence of relation with God.

35. Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) p. 172.
36. For example, Everett Fox's translations of the Bible into English follow many of the principles of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation. See, for example, *In the Beginning: New English Rendition of the Book of Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1989).
37. The quotation is from Fackenheim's final sentence in the essay 'Buber's Concept of Revelation.' Fackenheim's conclusion leaves open two possibilities: (1) Buber's position is that philosophy, at its most profound, is not I-It knowledge but a dialectical critique of I-It knowledge that points to the commitment of the I-Thou standpoint. In this case, the doctrine of I-Thou is properly philosophical. (2) Buber's position is that philosophy is only I-It knowledge and the doctrine of I-Thou is derived from I-Thou knowledge. In the latter case, Buber would not be a philosopher but a 'Hebrew sage in modern garb' because 'the ultimate basis of his doctrine is an unargued commitment to the dialogue with the ancient of God of Israel, a commitment the reader is called upon to share' (*PMB* 295–96).