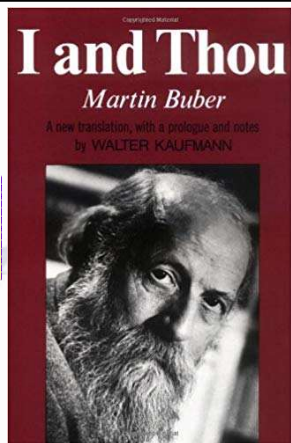


Martin Buber I-Thou and I-It

Mick Cooper
Professor of Counselling
University of Roehampton
mick.cooper@roehampton.ac.uk



The Text

- Originally written in 1923 (references from 1958 2nd ed., R. G. Smith translation, T & Clark Ltd. [Note: original uses masculine pronouns])
- Steeped in tradition of Jewish mysticism and spirituality: Chasidism

Basic Premise

To human beings the world is twofold, in accordance with their twofold attitude.

The attitude of human beings is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which they speak.

The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words.

The one primary word is the combination I-Thou,

The other primary word is the combination I-It; wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words He or She can replace It.

Hence the I of humans is also twofold.

For the I of the primary word I-Thou is a different I from that of the primary word I-It. (p.15)

Facets of the I-Thou and I-It relationships

- Number of elements to Buber's (1958) distinction between I-Thou and I-It attitude....
- but Buber's philosophy fundamentally holistic ∴ elements not isolated,
- each fundamentally inter-related to, and implied by, others;
- ∴ differences = facets of difference-as-a-whole.

'EXPERIENCING' OTHER – I-IT

- Distancing self from other
- Surveying, studying, measuring and observing her
- Other becomes something apart from I: something to which I direct attention and extract knowledge
- Encounter is mediated through 'aims', 'anticipations' or 'lusts'

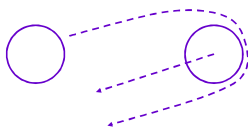
RELATING TO OTHER – I-THOU

- *When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation (p. 17)*
- Do not face Other, but stand alongside her; part of Being-in-relation
- *I do not experience the man to whom I say Thou. But I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word. Only when I step out of it do I experience him once more (p. 22)*
- *Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about (p. 25)*

'EXPERIENCING' OTHER – I-IT



RELATING TO OTHER – I-THOU



IT-IFYING	HUMANISING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other is experienced as 'thing': object, entity, 'it' • 'He is then thought of as a being of size, surface area, weight, function, desire, consciousness, characteristics and capability of all sorts' (von Weizsäcker, 1964, p. 407): e.g. Other as 'a depressive' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I face my human being as my <i>Thou</i>, and say the primary word <i>I-Thou</i> to him, he is not a thing among things (p. 21) • Encountering the other as a vibrant, dynamic humanity: a 'psychic stream' • Other affirmed as <i>subject</i>, not object


FRAGMENTING	RELATING TO WHOLENESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other (thing) divided into sub-things: analysed, reduced, broken down into essences, laws, or such parts as 'id', 'ego' and 'superego' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other is beheld and revered in its totality


*I consider a tree....
I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.
I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognise it only as an expression of law....
I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.
In all this, the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.
It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer it. I have seized by the power of exclusiveness.
To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather, is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in the event.
Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours a chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole. (pp.19-20)*

CONSTRUING AS DETERMINED	ACKNOWLEDGING FREEDOM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other is construed in mechanistic terms: driven by forces and mechanisms • <i>Causality has an unlimited reign in the world of It (p. 71)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other encountered as freely choosing and deciding its way of being • Encountered in its freedom and spontaneity

EXPERIENCING IN THE PAST OR FUTURE	ENCOUNTERING IN THE PRESENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other is experienced in terms of pre-defined schemata: in terms of what has previously been experienced and known • Or, experienced in terms of future projects and needs ⇐ other becomes instrument for the actualisation of I's possibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement beyond a solipsistic engagement with the I's own past or future; ∴ Breaking-through of a true otherness into the I's world

GENERALISING	INDIVIDUATING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiencing of an <i>It</i> – an entity that is stripped of its complexity and individuality and experienced as a we-remember-it or as a I'll-do-this-with-it – can be repeated over and over again: formulaic, general, and endlessly repetitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encounter with a particular being at a particular 'now', which can not be replicated or repeated • <i>Every real relationship in the world is exclusive (p.128)</i>

NON-CONFIRMING	CONFIRMING
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'An act of love through which one acknowledges the other as one who exists in his own peculiar form and has the right to do so' (Friedman, 1985, p. 134) cf. UPR • Acceptance of Other in her wholeness and uniqueness • Acceptance of Other in potentiality as well as actuality: who he or she is meant to become: • may sometimes involve helping the Other 'against' herself • Not fusing or merging with other: to become the other is not to encounter her

RELATING IN FRAGMENTS	RELATING AS WHOLENESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual engages with another in only a partial, non-transparent, or superficial way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [T]he primary word [I-Thou] can only be spoken with the whole being. He who gives himself to it may withhold nothing of himself (p. 23) • Engagement with Other in transparent and open way, in which nothing is deliberately held back or obscured; cf. congruence • Requires the I to transcend a purely cognitive mode of relating, and to encounter the other as a cognitive-affective-embodied whole. – embodied empathy (Cooper, 2001)

PROTECTIVENESS	WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other is experienced in a predictable and controllable – i.e. safe – way • Part of the self is always held back • Never a full commitment to, or involvement with, the other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement with Other in an immediate and spontaneous way • ∴ Perilous' and 'unreliable' encounter: 'the well-tried context' is 'loosened' and one's 'security shattered' • The human being who emerges from the act of pure relation that so involves his being has now in his being something more that has grown in him, of which he did not know before and whose origin he is not rightly able to indicate (p. 140)

MONOLOGUE	DIALOGUE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Much talk in world today is 'monologue disguised as dialogue' • Spontaneity and transparency are replaced with artifice, phoniness and manipulation • Has a semblance of interpersonal openness and receptivity, but is essentially a turning towards, and concern with, oneself: a 'reflexivity', rather than a reaching out to an other • <i>Two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely torturous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources (1947, p. 37)</i> • e.g. 'speechifying': <i>people do not really speak to one another, but each, although turned to the other, really speaks to a fictitious court of appeal whose life consists of nothing but listening to him (1965, p. 69)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A turning towards the other: an openness to being addressed by the Other in her present and particular otherness • Each respondent brings what is really in her head to the dialogue, without artifice, seeming or pretence • Can take place in silence

Silent connection

I remember one occasion with a girl of seven years old. She was brought along by her father because she had stopped talking. He brought her into my room and he left. She sat on the floor, crossed her legs, and just sat there—not particularly withdrawn but certainly not looking as though she was interested to play or to have any conversation. She sat there like a sort of miniature Buddha, and I was sitting in my chair and I couldn't imagine how I might get to her. I asked if she'd like to talk and she had nothing to say. So I got off my chair and sat there on the floor in front of her. There was no plan that I worked out. She allowed me to touch the tip of her little finger with the tip of mine and gradually allowed me to touch the tips of [all] her fingers with the tips of mine....

I allowed myself to become completely absorbed in the kinesthetic sensations at the tips of her ten fingers. And for something like forty minutes or so, nothing [happened] except a gradually developing movement/dance with the tips of her fingers... It became absolutely imperative that I not lose touch with the tips of any of her little fingers. And I imagine it began to feel as important to her as it did to me. After about forty minutes, I opened my eyes and as I opened my eyes I found her eyes opening just at the same moment, without a word having been spoken. So we withdrew our fingers from each other, and went back to my chair. I said to her, bring your dad along now if that's all right with you, and she nodded.

He told me later [that] as he was walking along the road with her towards his car he turned to her and said, 'what went on between you and Dr. Laing?' She turned to him and said, 'it's none of your business!' And these are the first words she had spoken in about two months!

From R. D. Laing (1985)'s Theoretical and practical aspects of psychotherapy [cassette recording]. Seminar at the conference on 'The evolution of psychotherapy, Phoenix, AZ, and available from the Milton H. Erickson foundation, Inc.

Moments of I-Thou

- Buber not proposing that we can consistently relate to others in an I-Thou, dialogic way
- Inevitable that we will sometimes relate to others and the world in an I-It manner
- I-Thou attitude is best understood as something that we can experience *moments of* (Anderson and Cissna, 1997)

Not I-It alone

- Not suggesting that I-It attitude is inherently negative:
 - through objectifying, and separating from, entities and people human beings can progress from an undifferentiated state of connectivity towards a deeper and more profound encounter (Woods, 1969).
- But we should not become so seduced by a technical and manipulative way of experiencing the world that we forget a more contemplative and relational possibility:
- *Without It man cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man* (p. 52).

Therapeutic significance of I-Thou meetings

- Therapy: opportunity for client to re-establish *I-Thou* mode of relating. Why?
 - Creates container and safety for very in-depth work;
 - 'Spark', 'glimpse' that can carry client through life;
 - May help client to develop *I-Thou* relationships with others:
 - Inability to engage with other intimately and dialogically, is key source of psychological distress, e.g.:
 - Loneliness
 - Depression
 - Narcissism
 - Anti-social behaviour/lack of ability to empathise
 - Boredom
 - Social anxieties
 - Interpersonal problems and conflicts
 - Relapse into schizophrenia
 - Counteracting disruption of basic intersubjective capacity (Stern, Beebe, Trevarthan)
