Buber, Martin, 1878–1965

Definition: Buber, Martin from Philip's Encyclopedia

Austrian Jewish philosopher. An ardent early advocate of Zionism, he edited Der Jude (1916–24), the leading journal of German-speaking Jewish intellectuals. He opposed the Nazis in Germany until forced to move to Palestine in 1938. His most important published work is I and Thou (1922), on the directness of the relationship between man and God within the traditions of Hasidism. He also wrote on the ideals of the state of Israel.

Summary Article: Buber, Martin from Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was a prominent 20th-century philosopher, Jewish religious thinker, and cultural Zionist whose well-known distinction between I–Thou and I–It relations formed the basis for a unique philosophy of education, with distinctive conceptions of learning for meaning, teacher–student relations, and the role of education in the cultivation of community. In addition to its impact on Jewish thought and education in Israel and abroad, Buber's philosophy of dialogue exercised considerable influence on Nel Noddings's (1984) ethics of care, Emmanuel Levinas's (1998) ethics of responsibility, and the work of Protestant theologians such as Paul Tillich (1948, 1952).

Born in Vienna in 1878, Buber was raised by his paternal grandparents in Lemberg (Lvov). His grandfather, Solomon Buber, was an important Jewish communal leader and scholar who edited the first critical edition of the traditional rabbinic biblical commentaries. Martin was educated in Vienna, Leipzig, Zurich, and Berlin, after which he was appointed the first lecturer in Jewish Religious Philosophy and Ethics at the University of Frankfurt, where he taught until 1935, when he accepted a chair in Social Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is best known for his 1923 classic I and Thou (Ich und Du) and a series of influential works on the philosophy of dialogue, but he also published extensively on the Hebrew Bible, which he translated into German with his colleague Franz Rosenzweig, and the modern Jewish mystical sect known as Hasidism, from which he drew inspiration for his dialogical thought. Buber died in Jerusalem in 1965.

According to Buber (1970), life's meaning and purpose are discovered in moments of I–Thou, or subject–subject, relation—in which one receives another into oneself for the sake of meeting as an end unto itself—but they are implemented through I–It, or subject–object, relations—which are maintained for utilitarian purposes. Whereas subject–subject relations cannot be contained within rules or formulas, subject–object relations are so constrained. Indeed, any attempt to express the pure encounter of an "I" with a "Thou" in rituals or laws already transforms the meeting into an instrumental relation. God, in Buber's view, is uniquely and "eternally Thou," to be glimpsed in the meeting of one subject with another. Encounters of this kind transpire not only between people but also between people and texts, objects, natural settings, musical pieces, and artistic creations.

The Hebrew Bible, the prophetic tradition in particular, records just such an encounter between God and the people of Israel, and the mystical tradition in Judaism represented by Hasidism constitutes an especially authentic representation of the divine–human encounter (Buber, 1958). In contrast to many
orthodox interpretations of Jewish tradition, Buber held an antinomian view of religion believed to share much in common with Protestant Christianity, especially as interpreted by the likes of the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1952). Buber (2003) held, however, that the Hebrew Bible grounds faith in mutual trust between God and human beings whereas Christianity places greater emphasis on specific beliefs about God, that He exists, for example, or took a human form as Jesus of Nazareth, who suffered and sacrificed Himself to redeem humankind from sin.

Buber (1963) translated his religious existentialism into a utopian political theory called Hebrew humanism, tied closely to his Zionist convictions. In this view, the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel offers a unique opportunity to reinvent the sort of political community envisaged by the Hebrew Bible, grounded in the qualities of dialogue and mutuality that he saw in Hasidism. The kibbutz movement of collective farming villages, which mixed socialism with a drive to connect physically to the land of Israel, is a good example of such a utopian community. Similarly, he envisaged the State of Israel as a binational state in which Jews and Arabs would live in peaceful coexistence grounded in mutual respect and dialogue (Buber, 1983).

Buber (2002) also made important contributions to educational thought. In his inaugural lecture at the opening of the Lehrhaus Judaica in Frankfurt in 1920, Buber extended his distinction between subject–subject and subject–object relations to the curriculum by distinguishing between Lehrnen and Lehrnstat. The former engages matter to be studied as a subject for encounter, to be incorporated into one's being as a source of value and direction, while the latter formalized information as an object, for the purpose of the discovery or construction of knowledge. Instruction in modern schools and universities has tended to emphasize the latter; the Lehrhaus, which he launched with Franz Rosenzweig as an updated rabbinic house of study, would cultivate the former (Rosenzweig, 2002). This subject–subject pedagogy requires a distinctive relation between teachers and students grounded in dialogue. However, as Nel Noddings (1984) would later emphasize in her “ethic of care,” teacher–student dialogue is not completely mutual; the teacher gently guides the student in ways that need not be reciprocated, confirming his or her more elevated qualities along the way. An education grounded in Lehrnen, in which teachers confirm the ability of their students to develop into unique people in their own right, is essential to the sort of utopian community that Buber envisaged.

Buber's Jewish and philosophical positions were criticized on a number of grounds. Gershom Scholem (1937), who founded the academic study of Jewish mysticism, argued that Buber overly romanticized Hasidism and underestimated the power of divine commandment in Jewish mysticism. The Modern Orthodox theologian Elieser Berkovits (1962) extended this critique to Buber's antinomian account of religious law altogether, and Walter Kaufman (1983), who translated I and Thou into English, similarly suggested that Buber's conception of relation mistook “deep emotional stirrings for revelation.” Franz Rosenzweig (2002) asked why it is impossible to encounter religious practices in dialogue, since Buber held that we can meet texts, nature, music, and art in this way. Surely, Rosenzweig reasoned, we should be able to transform objective laws (Gesetz), which derive their extrinsic authority from the divine, into subjective commandments (Gebot), in which the call to observe is heard intrinsically, from within. Finally, the phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1998) challenged the role of mutuality in Buber's conception of dialogue, arguing that in relation one has an absolute obligation to accept responsibility for the other regardless of whether or not this attitude is reciprocated by the other toward oneself.

See also Noddings, Nel; Phenomenology; Religious Education and Spirituality; Utopias

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