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

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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).

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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Further Readings


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