

The Problem of Unity in the Thought of Martin Buber

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MAURICE FRIEDMAN HAS SUGGESTED THAT Martin Buber's thought "can best be understood as a gradual movement from an early period of mysticism through a middle period of existentialism to a final period of developing dialogical philosophy."¹ The common denominator of these stages seems to me to be Buber's unyielding concern with the problem of unity in multiplicity. In *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization* (1913) Buber wrote: "All wisdom of the ages has the duality of the world as its subject; its point of departure is to know it, its goal is to overcome it. However it names the two forces that it makes known—spirit and matter, form and material, being and becoming, reason and will, positive and negative element, or with any of the other pairs of names—it has in mind the overcoming of their tension, the unification of their duality."² It is clear that from early on Buber was preoccupied with the possibility of overcoming this state of conditionality. "Unity," he wrote in 1914, "is not a property of the world but its task. To form unity out of the world is our never-ending work."³

This interest abided throughout Buber's literary career, from the nascent mystical teaching of unity (*Einheitslehre*) to the more developed philosophy of realization (*Verwirklichung*), to, finally, the mature philosophy of dialogue (*Zwiesprache*). The manner through which the unity was to be established, however, varied with each stage of his thought. In his mystical stage Buber maintained that unity was found in the subjective experience of ecstasy whereby the individual transcends the conditional world of space and time. In his existential

¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 27.

² *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, trans. M. Friedman (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 136.

³ "With a Monist," in *Pointing the Way*, trans. and ed. M. Friedman (New York: Schocken Books, 1957), 30.

stage Buber held that unity was not found but rather created by the individual confronting the world with all his uniqueness. In his dialogical stage Buber claimed that unity is realized—continuously and never absolutely—in the “Between,” i.e., in the meeting of two beings who nevertheless remain distinct. It is to the unfolding of this development that we now set out.

1.

Reflecting on his mystical period in 1938, Buber wrote:

Since 1900 I had first been under the influence of German mysticism from Meister Eckhart to Angelus Silesius, according to which the primal ground of being, the nameless, impersonal godhead, comes to “birth” in the human soul [*in der Menschen-seele zur “Geburt” kommt*]; then I had been under the influence of the later Kabbala and of Hasidism, according to which man has the power to unite the God who is over the world with his *shekhinah* dwelling in the world. In this way there arose in me the thought of a realization of God through man [*einer Verwirklichung Gottes durch den Menschen*]; man appeared to me as the being through whose existence the Absolute, resting in its truth, can gain the character of reality.⁴

This passage is significant for it contains what is perhaps the most important theme of Buber’s pre-dialogical thought: man is the being through whom God is realized. Buber, as we shall see, entirely abandoned this idea in his mature thinking. That he nevertheless wholeheartedly affirmed it in his youth is clear from a passage such as this: “God does not want to be believed in, to be debated and defended by us, but simply to be realized through us.”⁵

Yet one must wonder: what did Buber really intend by these words? In his mystical phase he would have answered: God is realized through the experience of ecstasy (*das Erlebnis der Ekstase*). No sooner have we answered our first question, however, than a second confronts us: why is such an experience considered by Buber God-realizing? To answer this we must heed the precise meaning of the term under consideration.

Ecstasy, as Buber himself reminds us in the introduction to his anthology of mystical texts, *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (1909),⁶ is derived from the Greek *ek-*

⁴ “What Is Man?” in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Smith (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1965), 184–85 (my emphasis). In preparation of this paper I have utilized the German text of Buber’s work as presented in *Werke, Erster Band: Schriften zur Philosophie* (Munich: Kosel-Verlag, 1962). All references in the body of the paper in German are taken from this volume unless otherwise noted.

⁵ “Jewish Religiosity,” in *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum Glatzer and trans. Eva Jospe (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 94.

⁶ “Ecstasy and Confession,” in *Ecstatic Confessions* [hereafter *EC*], ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and trans. Esther Cameron (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 2. References to the German text are taken from the following edition: *Ekstatische Konfessionen* [hereafter *EK*] (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1921).

stasis, i.e. a stepping-out, a dis-placement. To step out, or to be displaced, is to be transferred from one place to another. From where and to where is the ecstatic transferred? The ecstatic, according to Buber, is transferred from the realm of "differentiated experience" to the realm of "undifferentiated experience."⁷ The experience of ecstasy, therefore, is what Buber elsewhere refers to as "the detached feeling of unity of being, elevated above life."⁸ But how is this "detached feeling of unity of being" realized? Here Buber turns to the self: "What is experienced in ecstasy . . . is the unity of the I. But in order to be experienced as unity the I must have become a unity."⁹

But where is the I that has become and thus experiences unity to be found? Echoing Hume's description of the everyday self, the I of perception (*Erkenntnis*) as "nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions,"¹⁰ Buber notes that one gives "the bundle a subject and says 'I' to it, but the subject is not a unity that is experienced."¹¹ The ecstatic, however, overcomes this fragmented self and is "embraced by the primal self" (*von dem Urselfst umschlungen*).¹² This primal self "is no longer a bundle, it is a fire."¹³ The fiery unity experienced as the unity of the primal self is, moreover, the unity of the I and the world. The ecstatic, writes Buber, "experiences the unity of the I [*erlebt die Einheit des Ich*], and in this unity the unity of I and world."¹⁴ Buber thus describes a "genuine 'ecstatic' experience": ". . . the experience of an exclusive and all-absorbing unity of his own self. This self is then so uniquely manifest, and it appears then so uniquely existent, that the individual loses the knowledge, 'This is my self, distinguished and separate from every other self'. He loses the sure knowledge of the *principium individuationis*, and understands this precious experience of his unity as the experience of *the* unity."¹⁵

To understand the transference of the ecstatic from the realm of differentiated experience to that of the undifferentiated, one must keep in mind Buber's distinction between two types of experience: *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*.¹⁶ The former is that mode of experiencing by which we individuate the world

⁷ *EC*, 3-4.

⁸ "Foreword," *Pointing the Way*, ix.

⁹ *EC*, 5; *EK* 15.

¹⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 207.

¹¹ *EC*, 1.

¹² *EC*, 3; *EK*, 13.

¹³ *EC*, 5.

¹⁴ *EC*, 2; *EK*, 12.

¹⁵ "Foreword," *Pointing the Way*, ix (my emphasis).

¹⁶ Cf. Rivka Horwitz, *Buber's Way to I and Thou: An Historical Analysis and the First Publication of Martin Buber's Lectures "Religion als Gegenwart"* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1978), 85-86.

into distinct objects. It is a mode of experience associated particularly with cognition, i.e., knowledge marked by duality and multiplicity. The latter, on the other hand, is a lived-experience of unity, a unity which, as we have seen, is first experienced as the unity of the I and then as the unity of the I and the world. It is insofar as the ecstatic experiences this unity that we may say that he has been transferred from one mode of experience to another. "One who knows only the differentiated experience—the experience of meaning, of thought, of will, connected with one another, yet still separate in this separation, and conscious—comes to know an undifferentiated experience: the experience of the I."¹⁷

Through the experience of ecstasy, therefore, one overcomes the bifurcation of reality into subjective and objective. For the ecstatic "there is as yet nothing that points either inward or outward." The self who "experiences the oneness of I and world knows nothing of I and world."¹⁸ Indeed, the ecstatic "no longer knows anything over against him . . . nothing else exists [other] than his self, which he experiences as *the* self."¹⁹ There is here a curious identification by which all things are subsumed into the self. The unity experienced in ecstasy is, as Buber understands it, fundamentally the unity of the (primal) self with itself: all things become one in the oneness of self.²⁰ For the ecstatic "unity is not relative, not limited by the other; it is limitless, for it is the unity of I and world. One's unity is solitude, absolute solitude: the solitude of that which is without limits."²¹ This unity (*Einheit*), which is at the same time solitude or aloneness (*Einsamkeit*), cannot be expressed in words for "language is a function of community [*Gemeinschaft*]." Insofar as in the unity of the ecstatic experience the mystic contains all others in the unity of himself, there are no longer, strictly speaking, any "others" outside him. The mystic therefore "no longer has any communion [*Gemeinsamkeit*]" with his fellow men nor "anything in common with them." His experience is that of "unity, solitude, uniqueness [*Einzigkeit*]: that which cannot be transferred. It is the abyss [*Abgrund*] that cannot be fathomed: the unsayable [*das Unsagbare*]."²²

In *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* (1908) Buber describes the Hasidic phenome-

¹⁷ *EC*, 3–4.

¹⁸ *EC*, 3.

¹⁹ "Foreword," *Pointing the Way*, x (my emphasis).

²⁰ See especially Buber's comment, cited in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Early Years 1878–1923* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), 86: "As far as I understand mysticism, its essential trait is the belief in a (momentous) 'union' with the Divine or the absolute. . . . If you read attentively the introduction to *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, you will see that even then, in my 'mystical' period, I did not believe in it, but only in a 'mystical' unification of the Self, identifying the depth of the individual self with the Self itself."

²¹ *EC*, 6.

²² *EC*, 6; *EK*, 17.

non of *hitlahavut*, “the ‘inflaming ardor’ of ecstasy,” as an “envelopment in God beyond time and space.”²³ The experience of ecstasy is thus an escape from the mundane sphere of interpersonal relationships. “The truest life of the man of ecstasy is not among men.”²⁴ In a debate in October 1910 with the German sociologist, Ernst Troeltsch, Buber rejected the latter’s claim that mysticism is a “sociological category,” arguing instead that the mystic’s experience is best characterized as “religious solipsism.”²⁵ The unity experienced by the ecstatic is not a unity which unifies existence, but is rather a unity which transcends existence. “‘Above nature and above time and above thought’—thus is he called who is in ecstasy. . . . The man of ecstasy rules life, and no external happening that penetrates into his realm can disturb his inspiration.”²⁶

Ecstatic union is thus a fleeing from the common²⁷ world of space and time, the world of individuation and differentiation. Buber relates two Hasidic anecdotes which address this feature of the mystical-ecstatic experience: “It is told of one master that he had to look at a clock during the hour of withdrawal in order to keep himself in this world; and of another that when he wished to observe individual things he had to put on spectacles in order to restrain his spiritual vision; ‘for otherwise he saw all the individual things of the world as one.’”²⁸ Such a seeing indeed lies at the core of Buber’s mystical *Einheitslehre*: all things become one in the oneness of self. That is to say, one who intuitively experiences (*erlebt*) the unity of I experiences in turn the unity of I and world. From the unity of I and world, moreover, there emerges the unity of God. Hence, Buber remarks that ecstasy is “originally an entering into

²³ “The Life of the Hasidim,” in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, trans. M. Friedman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 17. A critical discussion of Buber’s treatment of Hasidism lies beyond the confines of this study. See in particular Gershom Scholem, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 228–50; Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer, “Man’s Relation to God and World in Buber’s Rendering of the Hasidic Teaching,” in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, eds. P. Schilpp and M. Friedman (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1967), 403–34; Steven Katz, “Martin Buber’s Misuse of Hasidic Sources,” in *Post-Holocaust Dialogues* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 52–93.

²⁴ “Life of the Hasidim,” 21.

²⁵ See Friedman, *Buber’s Life and Work*, 87, and the full text cited by Paul Mendes-Flohr in his introduction to *EC*, xvii–xviii.

²⁶ “Life of the Hasidim,” 19–20. Cf. also the description of religious experience in the story “A Conversion” (1914) (cited by Horwitz, *Buber’s Way*, 76, n. 8) as an “otherness which did not fit into the context of life. . . . The ‘religious’ lifted you out [and was an] illumination and ecstasy and rapture held without time.”

²⁷ In 1958 Buber dedicated an essay to the question of commonality. Cf. “What is Common to All,” in *The Knowledge of Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1965), 89–109. Perhaps there is no better indication of the “turn” in Buber’s thinking than in his revised understanding of this dictum of Heraclitus. For a comparison of the early and later views, cf. the essay “The Teaching of Tao,” in *Pointing the Way*, esp. 45, with “What Is Common to All.”

²⁸ “Life of the Hasidim,” 20.

God [*Eingehen in den Gott*], *enthusiasmos*, being filled with the god [*Erfülltsein vom Gotte*].”²⁹ It is this experience of unification, we submit, which Buber intends by his affirmation of the “realization of God through man” in the mystical stage of his thought.³⁰

2.

The so-called existentialist stage of Buber’s thought grew directly out of his interest in mysticism. He thus continued to occupy himself with the problem of unity and multiplicity. Here we meet, however, an essential turn in his thinking. The locus of unity is still sought in the self, but the emphasis shifts from a unity that is discovered to one that is created: “True unity cannot be found, it can only be created. He who creates it realizes the unity of the world in the unity of his soul.”³¹

In this phase of Buber’s career two crucial developments appear. The first is the introduction of the notion of decision (*Entschlossenheit*) or direction (*Richtung*). These terms, according to Buber, signify the unique, inner “magic” granted to each person which accounts for the particular existential predicament of the given individual: “Direction is that primal tension of a human soul which moves it to choose and realize this and no other out of the infinity of possibilities. Thus the soul strips off the net of directions, the net of space and time, of causes and of ends, of subjects and of objects; it strips off the net of directions and takes nothing with it but the magic of its direction.”³²

The second development is not, properly speaking, an innovation for it appeared already in Buber’s reflections on the nature of the experience of ecstasy. What we have in mind is the distinction between the two modes of experience, namely, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. The way in which Buber now articulates this distinction, however, takes on a new form: “[T]here is a two-fold relation of man to his experience [*Erleben*]: the orienting or classifying [*das Orientieren oder Einstellen*] and the realizing or making real [*das Realisieren oder Verwirklichen*]. What you experience, doing and suffering, creating and enjoying, you can register in the structure of experience [*Zusammenhang der Erfahrung*] for the sake of your aims or you can grasp it for its own sake in its own power and splendor.”³³

²⁹ Ibid., 4 (German text, 14).

³⁰ It is important to stress, however, that even in his mystical period Buber did not affirm the possibility of *unio mystica* in the sense of union between the individual and the Absolute or God. See the comment cited above, n. 20.

³¹ *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, 141.

³² Ibid., 56.

³³ Ibid., 64. With respect to Buber’s use of *Erlebnis* to name the preconceptual lived experience and the *Zusammenhang der Erfahrung* as the coherent structure of experience which shapes this experience and informs the everyday mode of perception, it is more than probable that Buber was influenced by his teacher at the University of Berlin, Wilhelm Dilthey, who likewise

The orienting or classifying attitude involves our cognitive apprehension of the spatio-temporal world. Buber, closely following Kantian epistemology,³⁴ maintains that our perceptual experience (*Erfahrung*) is an ordering and structuring of phenomena in accordance with the fixed categories of understanding. If our relation to experience is that of orientation, then we do not realize the unique—relationless—element of an experienced event or thing, but rather “force it into a chain where it represents just as much meaning as every other link in the chain: joining it as a link with another link.”³⁵ The attitude of orientation (i.e., classification) thus yields a coherent structure (*Zusammenhang der Erfahrung*), explicated by scientific disciplines, which facilitates our use and manipulation of objects for the sake of our practical needs and utilitarian aims.

Besides this relation to experience, however, there is another opened to man, namely, realization (*Verwirklichung*). This attitude is associated with *Erlebnis* for it involves an intensified awareness of reality, an awareness not bound by the forms and laws of *Erfahrung*. “To realize,” writes Buber, means “to relate life-experience to nothing else but itself.”³⁶ For Buber, it is precisely the orientating posture which finds a place in time and space for that which is experienced and orders it with respect to cause and effect, in short, transforms the experience into something universally comprehensible. Through the attitude of realization, by contrast, one intuitively experiences the unique, unclassifiable dimension of a given, concrete reality. What we experience as *Erlebnis* cannot be subsumed under the categories of understanding nor can it be of any use to us. On the contrary, *Erlebnis* refers to the primary level to which all experience, including *Erfahrung*, must be related. In his words: “The structure of experience [*der Zusammenhang der Erfahrung*] appears to me . . . an elaboration of life-experiences [*eine Bearbeitung des Erlebnisses*].”³⁷ This elaboration is a reworking of lived experience, a reworking which proceeds ultimately according to our utilitarian aims.

made use of precisely this terminology. See Rudolf Makkreel, *Dilthey, Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), s.v. “experience”; Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 109–21. (I thank Professor Makkreel for suggesting this relation to me.) On Buber’s indebtedness to Dilthey, see Grete Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, trans. Noah Jacobs (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 41–46, and *passim*; see pp. 107–43 for an excellent review of Buber’s twofold characterization of experience as orientation and realization.

³⁴ The influence of Kantian and Neo-Kantian Idealism on both the early and mature Buber is a topic which still needs to be studied in detail. For a discussion of the influence of Kant on Buber’s dialogical thinking, see Steven Katz, “Martin Buber’s Epistemology: A Critical Appraisal,” in *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 1–51. See below, n. 64.

³⁵ *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, 64–65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

Buber distinguishes the two attitudes to experience again in terms of the problem of unity. The world apprehended by the orienting attitude is a fragmented world, i.e., a world of discrete and determinate bodies. To this world there belongs no reality for, as Buber put it, "nothing individual is real in itself."³⁸ The world experienced through *Erlebnis* is, on the other hand, a unified, and hence, a realized world: "Realizing life-experience creates the essential form of existence. . . . What we call things and what we call I are both comprehended in what is thus created; both find their reality here; both can only find it here. For all life-experiencing is a dream of unification [*Verbundenheit*]; orientation divides and sunders it, realization accomplishes and proclaims it. Thus all reality is fulfilled unification."³⁹

Reality is coextensive with unification, *Verbundenheit*, bondedness. What is unbounded, i.e., individual (*Einzelne*), is unreal, or, as Buber put it, "only preparation"⁴⁰ for a state of unification. Buber's emphasis has clearly shifted: from the experience of *Einheit* in ecstasy to the act of *Verbundenheit*. Man has an active part to play in realizing unity. "The creative hours, acting and beholding, forming and thinking, are the unifying hours."⁴¹ Reality is unified by a unity that has been realized. The realizing unity is a unified reality, the "undivided man" (*Ungeschiedene*)⁴² who "must . . . bring forth the totality of his being in order to withstand a single thing or event."⁴³ "The realizing man" is he who has realized his power to be one, i.e., his direction, and is therefore "the genuinely real."⁴⁴ Only one who is inwardly directed can render reality real: "[L]ife-experience calls to the man who is ready to realize it. For he may do that only as a whole and united person."⁴⁵

Buber thus no longer viewed unity as absolute submission to ecstasy. Indeed, he suggests that "he who surrenders himself to ecstasy with undirected soul" will suffer the fate of Dionysus of whom it was said that "the Titans enticed him by means of a game and tore him in pieces and devoured him."⁴⁶ The one who, on the contrary, is directed will suffer the fate of Orpheus who "enters into

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Buber uses this expression in "The Teaching of the Tao," 51, to describe the man who has realized the unity of the Tao within and without.

⁴³ *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, 69.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 55. For Buber's own critique of his earlier view regarding the positive value of *Erlebnis* as a religious category, see the comments of Horwitz, *Buber's Way*, 76, n. 8, and sources cited here. Cf. also Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 157: "The moment of encounter [*Begegnung*] is not a 'living experience' [*Erlebnis*]." See below, n. 54.

ecstatic death with the lyre.”⁴⁷ This act symbolizes the directed soul for such a person, like the musician, is one who has brought ecstatic passion (death) under control (represented by the lyre). Only he who has controlled passion can unify reality. “Music,” notes Buber, “is the pure word of the directed soul.”⁴⁸ In a somewhat paradoxical manner, it may be said that, for Buber, it is the perfected individual who overcomes individuation. As Buber instructs us: “Not over the things, not around the things, not between the things—in each thing, in the experience of each thing, the gate of the One opens to you if you bring with you the magic that unlocks it: the perfection of your direction.”⁴⁹

Buber’s conception of *Verbundenheit* thus stands in marked contrast to his earlier notion of *Einheit*: the former involves an enhanced experience of reality in its concrete wholeness, whereas the latter involves the ecstatic, solitary feeling of unity above time and space. Notwithstanding this difference, it may be argued that there is a fundamental similarity between the two, namely, the unity which Buber affirms in both cases is realized by the withdrawal of the self into itself. That this is so even in the case of *Verbundenheit* is clear from Buber’s well-known example of the experience with a piece of mica:

On a gloomy morning I walked upon the highway, saw a piece of mica lying, lifted it up and looked at it for a long time. . . . And suddenly as I raised my eyes from it, I realized that while I looked I had not been conscious of “object” and “subject”; in my looking the mica and “I” had been one; in my looking I had tasted unity. I looked at it again, the unity did not return. But there it burned in me as though to create. I closed my eyes, I gathered in my strength, I bound myself with my object, I raised the mica into the kingdom of the existing. And there . . . I first felt: I; there I first was I. The one who looked had not yet been I; only this man here, the unified man [*Verbundene*], bore the name like a crown.⁵⁰

A careful reading of this text lends support to our previous claim, namely, unification is complete when the I withdraws into itself, when what is over against the I is shut out, when, in short, the I closes its eyes. This is not to say, however, that the other is absolutely dispensable. Indeed, confronting that which is other is the preliminary phase of the unification process; Buber thus begins his phenomenological account: “I walked upon the highway, saw a piece of mica lying,” etc. It should be noted, moreover, that even in this stage there is some sort of unification: in the looking the “I had not been conscious of ‘object’ and ‘subject’ . . . the mica and ‘I’ had been one.” But here we must pay special attention to the German text: *in meiner Anschauung waren der Glimmer und ‘ich’ eins gewesen*. The placing of the pronoun in quotation marks is a

⁴⁷ *Daniel: Dialogues on Revelation*, 55.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

fact that should not be overlooked: the I of which Buber here speaks, i.e., the I looking at the phenomenal object, the mica, is not yet *Ich*, i.e., the completely realized I. The *Ich*, in contrast to *ich*, appears only when one stops gazing upon the object. Paradoxically, the I is bound to, i.e., becomes one with, its object when the I closes its eyes. The I of the looking, the perceiving subject, is not the unified—realized—I. “The one who looked [at the mica] had not yet been I.” The I is first felt in its fullness with the closing of the eyes, when there is no longer an other over against the I. Realization of self thus demands a turning away from the phenomenological field.

Buber’s teaching finds succinct expression in the words of Jesus to Martha: one thing is needful (Luke 10:42). That which is needful is the one thing, i.e., the thing that is one, that unifies. In the essay, “The Teaching of the Tao” (1910), Buber elaborates this theme: “The teaching has only one subject: the needful. It is realized in genuine life. From the standpoint of man, this realization means nothing other than unity . . . the unity of this human life and this human soul that fulfils itself in itself, the unity of your life and your soul, you who are seized by the teaching. Genuine life is unified life.”⁵¹ The unified soul is the “soul that fulfils itself in itself.” “The unity of the world,” continues Buber, “is only the reflection of his unity; for the world is nothing alien, but one with the unified man.”⁵² Reality is thus subsumed into the self. For the Buber of the mystical-existential period, as Hugo Bergman notes, “there is no other reality than through man who realizes himself and all being.”⁵³ Buber did not yet embrace the independent being of God or world vis-à-vis man. The locus of unity in both stages of Buber’s pre-dialogical thought remained the individual consciousness, whether understood as the “isolated” and “detached subjectivity”⁵⁴ of the ecstatic or as the experiencing subject of the directed soul.

3.

Paul Mendes-Flohr has pointed out that while in his early career Buber occasionally addressed sociological issues, his real concern with such matters as

⁵¹ “The Teaching of the Tao,” 34.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵³ Hugo Bergman, “Martin Buber and Mysticism,” in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 299.

⁵⁴ Buber uses this expression to describe *Erleben*, the “experiencing of life,” in the preface to the 1923 edition of *Reden über das Judentum*. See the English translation, *On Judaism*, 8. It is clear from the context that Buber’s characterization of certain modes of experience is a veiled reference to some of his own earlier positions which at the time of the composition of this preface he had rejected. Cf. also the following remark in “Herut: On Youth and Religion,” in *On Judaism*, 153: “[A]n individual entertains the illusion that he has surrendered himself to the unconditional . . . having had an ‘experience’ [*Erlebnis*]. His being remains wholly unperturbed. . . . He does not know the response; he knows only a ‘mood’ [*Stimmung*]. He has psychologized God.” See above, n. 46.

interpersonal relations began during the First World War.⁵⁵ At first Buber maintained that genuine community, *Gemeinschaft*, could be restored only through the inner lived-experience of individuals. He thus enthusiastically endorsed the war which, insofar as it demanded heroic action, he took as an impetus for re-establishing *Gemeinschaft*. In the course of the war, however, he became disillusioned. A seed of transformation had begun to germinate in his thinking: the locus of the realization of unity was no longer considered to be the individual consciousness, but rather the realm of relations between individuals. This transformation can be clearly detected in the 1918 address, "Der Heilige War: Ein Wort an die Juden und an die Völker." In this address Buber specifically discusses the problem of the realization of divine unity:

God may be seen seminally within all things, but He must be realized between them [*er ist zwischen den Dingen zu verwirklichen*]. . . . The Divine may come to life in individual man, may reveal itself from within individual man; but it attains its earthly fullness only where . . . individual beings open themselves to one another . . . where the sublime stronghold of the individual is unbolted, and man breaks free to meet other men. When this takes place, where the eternal rises in the Between [*Dazwischen*], the seemingly empty space: that true place of realization is community [*der wahre Ort der Verwirklichung ist die Gemeinschaft*], and true community is that relationship in which the Divine comes to its realization between man and man.⁵⁶

There appears in this passage what is perhaps the most crucial word in Buber's dialogical thought, namely, *zwischen*, "between." Concerning this word, Buber was later to write: "I call this sphere, which is established with the existence of man as man but which is conceptually still uncomprehended, the sphere of 'between' [*die Sphäre des Zwischen*]. Though being realized in very different degrees, it is a primal category of human reality."⁵⁷ The "between" is, for Buber, "double-faced."⁵⁸ In one sense it is ontologically prior to all relations for it is that which makes all relations possible; in another sense, however, it is continuously reconstituted by, and thus posterior to, the particular events of relation. Notwithstanding this twofold nature of the "between" as cause and effect, one thing is certain: the pre-eminence of this concept in Buber's dialogical thinking points to the fact that the partners of relation are established through the mutuality of relation. "I require a You to become;

⁵⁵ Cf. Paul Mendes-Flohr, "From Kulturmystik to Dialogue: An Inquiry into the Formation of Martin Buber's Philosophy of I and Thou" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1973), 3-4.

⁵⁶ "The Holy Way: A Word to the Jews and to the Nations," in *On Judaism*, 109-10. I have also made use of the original German text, *Reden über das Judentum* (Berlin: Schocken, 1932).

⁵⁷ "What Is Man?" 203. See the detailed phenomenological analysis of Michael Theunissen, *Der Andere: Studien zur Sozialontologie der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1965), 243ff.

⁵⁸ This expression is used by Nathan Rotenstreich to describe Buber's notion of the "between." Cf. Rotenstreich, "Buber's Dialogical Thought," in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 98.

becoming I, I say You.”⁵⁹ Buber thus accords ontic primacy to the category of “between” for it is the ground out of which emerges the identity of the relata. The relata, according to Buber, are not self-contained entities but rather entities-in-relation.

The realm of the “between” is a primal reality in both the religious and social spheres. God, concludes Buber, is realized neither in contemplative ecstasy nor in intensified life-experience, but rather in that “seemingly empty space”⁶⁰ which dwells between men, that space wherein man meets man. “The radiance of the ineffable’s glory . . . glows dimly in all human beings, every one of them; but it does not shine in its full brightness within them—only between them.”⁶¹ “The realization of the Divine on earth is fulfilled not within man but between man and man . . . it is consummated only in the life of true community.”⁶²

Buber insists, moreover, that relation necessitates the distinctness of the relata. Hence, in the religious relation, God and man must be viewed as distinct. “A phenomenon of religious reality,” writes Buber, is “something that takes place between man and God, that is, in the reality of their relationship, the mutual reality [*der Wirklichkeit der Wechselwirkung*] of God and man.”⁶³ God is no longer conceived of by Buber as being realized by man if we understand realization as ‘making real,’ ‘bringing into actuality’. If God were not ontically real, the “Absolute,”⁶⁴ “Eternal” (*ewigen*)⁶⁵ or infinite (*unendliche*)⁶⁶ Thou, then there could be no dialogical relation between God and man. Here we touch upon a fundamental notion for Buber, one to which we shall return at a later point. In short it may be stated: relationship involves a turning-towards-the-

⁵⁹ *I and Thou*, 62. In preparation of this study I have made use of the German original, *Ich und Du* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1923).

⁶⁰ This is not to say that the “between” is truly empty; on the contrary, as the space in which the “encounter” or “meeting” arises, i.e., the place of realization, it is truly full. There is a paradoxical implication in Buber’s referring to the “between” as the “seemingly empty space.” It is not impossible that Buber’s choice of terminology reflects the Lurianic concept of the “primordial space” within the Godhead which is the clearing that remains after a primal act of withdrawal (*zimzum*) of God into himself. On this Lurianic concept, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 260–64. Like Buber’s “between,” the “space” in the Lurianic system is best characterized as “seemingly empty,” for it is in truth most full.

⁶¹ “The Holy Way,” 109.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 113.

⁶³ “Preface,” *On Judaism*, 4.

⁶⁴ Buber makes use of this expression in the lectures “Religion als Gegenwart”; cf. Horwitz, *Buber’s Way*, 107–10. It should be noted, moreover, that in the lectures as well as in the earlier address “Herut” (see *On Judaism*, 150) Buber also referred to God by the Kantian expression, “the Thou in itself,” *das Du an sich*. See Horwitz, *Buber’s Way*, 109, n. 32, who has already noted the Kantian influence here; cf. 164, n. 28, and 174. See above, n. 34.

⁶⁵ Cf. *I and Thou*, 57.

⁶⁶ *I and Thou*, 128.

other (*Hinwendung*) as Other. In the religious relation, therefore, the distinct otherness of both partners, God and man, must be upheld. To be sure, Buber continues to speak of realizing God,⁶⁷ but by this he now means “to prepare the world for God, as a place for this reality—to help the world become God-real [*gottwirklich*]; it means, in other and sacred words, to make reality one.”⁶⁸ That the world becomes God-real does not imply that God becomes real in the world; the difference between these notions marks the difference between Buber’s pre- and post-dialogical thought.

The “between” likewise plays an essential role in Buber’s social thinking. In the writings which chronologically preceded and conceptually anticipated the fully developed dialogical philosophy, Buber maintained that “community” is “the realization of the Divine in the shared life of men.”⁶⁹ “God is truly present when one man clasps the hand of another.”⁷⁰ Mendes-Flohr has aptly summarized Buber’s opinion in this period: “By working for *Gemeinschaft*, men affect the realization of God in the world.”⁷¹ Here again Buber turned to Judaism to find a concrete embodiment of his thinking. The Jew experiences a perfect harmony between his religious and ethical duties: to love God is to love one’s neighbor, to love one’s neighbor is to love God. “In genuine Judaism ethics and faith are no separate spheres; its ideal, holiness, is true community with God and true community with human beings, both in one.” Indeed, Judaism’s “wait for the Messiah is the wait for the true community.”⁷²

This convergence of the religious task and the ethical is reiterated in the context of Buber’s dialogical thinking. Instead of speaking about community as the realization of God in the world, however, he speaks of the “living, active Center” (*die lebendige wirkende Mitte*) which is the “builder” of “true community” (*die wahre Gemeinde*).⁷³ The “genuine existence of a community” is alone assured by “the common relation to the Center” [*die Gemeinsamkeit der*

⁶⁷ As Rivka Horwitz has pointed out, *Buber’s Way*, 214–15, the concept of “realization” (*Verwirklichung*), which continued to play an important role in Buber’s lectures “Religion als Gegenwart” given in 1922, was eventually abandoned by Buber sometime in 1923, the year in which *Ich und Du* appeared. Thus, for example, in one place in the lectures (92) Buber states: “I do not have to experience [*erfahren*] the Thou that confronts me, but to realize it [*verwirklichen*].” Or again, in another place (103) he writes that the Thou-Relation cannot be fulfilled through perception (*Erkenntnis*) but only through realization (*Verwirklichung*). And cf. *I and Thou*, 61: “The form that confronts me I cannot experience [*erfahren*] nor describe; I can only actualize [*verwirklichen*] it. And yet I see it, radiant in the splendor of confrontation [*Gegenüber*] . . . it is an actual relation [*wirkliche Beziehung*]: it acts on me as I act on it.” See Kaufmann’s n. 4, *ad loc.*

⁶⁸ *I and Thou*, 9. See Horwitz’s comments regarding this passage in *Buber’s Way*, 224.

⁶⁹ “The Holy Way,” 145.

⁷⁰ “Herut,” 151.

⁷¹ Mendes-Flohr, “From Kulturmystik to Dialogue,” 173.

⁷² “The Holy Way,” 111.

⁷³ *I and Thou*, 94.

Beziehung zur Mitte].”⁷⁴ True community “is an event that arises out of the Center [*die Mitte*] between men.”⁷⁵ “When individuals really have something to do with one another, when they share an experience and together existentially respond to that experience—that is, when men have a living Center about which they are constellated, then *Gemeinschaft* is established between them.”⁷⁶ It is through the reciprocal relationship that people have to the Center that they are reciprocally related to one another. Yet, insofar as in every finite Thou one addresses the eternal Thou,⁷⁷ it follows that through the inter-human relationship the relationship between God and man is likewise established. The Center thus simultaneously brings together that which is set at a distance and holds at a distance that which is brought together;⁷⁸ the “between” is the separation-gathering, the meeting-ground of that which is distinct. The other remains ‘other’ through the Center whereby it is related to another.

It is at this point that we are prepared to determine what meaning the concept of unity receives in the framework of Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. Buber begins *I and Thou* by distinguishing the twofold attitude (*zweifaltigen Haltung*) one has to the world and the two basic words (*Grundworte*) which one can speak in accordance with that attitude.⁷⁹ The basic words Buber distinguishes as I-It and I-Thou. The speaking of the former corresponds to our cognitive experience (*Erfahrung*) of the world comprised of discrete objects (*Gegenstände*) causally connected through a spatio-temporal nexus. “The It-world hangs together [*die Eswelt hat Zusammenhang*] in space and time.”⁸⁰ The It-world is a world wherein we experience “things that consist of qualities and processes that consist of moments, things recorded in terms of spatial coordinates and processes recorded in terms of temporal coordinates, things and processes that are bounded by other things and processes and capable of being measured against and compared with those others—an ordered world [*geordnete Welt*], a detached world [*abgetrennte Welt*].”⁸¹ The experienced world, in

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷⁵ *Martin Buber—Abende*, 5 unpublished lectures, 1923, lecture 5, p. 3, quoted by Mendes-Flohr, “From Kulturmystik to Dialogue,” 176.

⁷⁶ “Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?” in *Worte an die Jugend* (Berlin: Schocken, 1938), 54, cited in Mendes-Flohr, “From Kulturmystik to Dialogue,” 339.

⁷⁷ “Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?” 57.

⁷⁸ Cf. Robert Wood, *Martin Buber’s Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 41: “The notion of the Between carries two significant elements. First, it points to the self-transcendent character of the act whereby one relates to the Thou. Second, it points to the ultimate inaccessibility, i.e., the real otherness of the Thou.”

⁷⁹ *I and Thou*, 53. This clearly corresponds in part to the distinction Buber made at an earlier stage between the orienting and realizing attitude; cf. *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, 64.

⁸⁰ *I and Thou*, 84.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

short, is a world of coordination, coherency, structure, reliability. In such a world things do not meet us; they stand apart from us and are used by us. Such experience is, therefore, merely surface or superficial knowledge (*Erfahrung*).⁸²

Yet, man is capable of speaking another basic word, that of the I-Thou. By speaking this word one no longer dwells in the world of experience; one enters the world of relation (*Beziehung*). In saying Thou I do not experience an object bounded by countless other objects in a "spatio-temporal-causal-context";⁸³ instead I encounter that which is not, properly speaking, an object at all, namely, the *sui generis*.⁸⁴ The world of relation is not a structured cosmos for the Thou cannot be measured, coordinated, or classified in terms of other Thous. Indeed, every Thou is utterly unique.⁸⁵ Hence, Buber concludes, the Thou is not an object (*Gegenstand*) which stands apart from us to be categorized and used, but rather a presence (*Gegenwart*) which "confronts us, waiting and enduring [*Gegenwartende und Gegenwährende*]."⁸⁶

It is through the presence of Thou that the present comes to be. For Buber, the present exists only insofar as there is relationship, encounter. "Only as the You becomes present [*gegenwärtig wird*] does presence come into being [*entsteht Gegenwart*]."⁸⁷ The presentness (*Gegenwärtigkeit*) of presence is that which cannot be re-presented. What can be re-presented is only that which exists in the past, i.e., the object. The presentness of presence, however, can only be confronted, encountered. Relation thus is, for Buber, a noumenal event.⁸⁸ "The You-world does not hang together in space and time."⁸⁹ In the immediacy of relation I do not experience an object, I encounter a presence. "When I confront [*gegenüber*] a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament."⁹⁰

Notwithstanding the noumenal, unconditional nature of presence, every relation must be "consecrated" into the world of phenomenality and conditionality: "The You also appears in space, but only in an exclusive confrontation in

⁸² Ibid., 55, and see Kaufmann's n. 4, *ad loc.*

⁸³ Buber's locution; see *I and Thou*, 81.

⁸⁴ *I and Thou*, 55.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁸ I deliberately use Kantian language here. See Katz, "Buber's Epistemology," esp. 8–23; see also Friedman, *Buber's Life and Work*, 26–32.

⁸⁹ *I and Thou*, 84.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 59.

which everything else can only be background from which it emerges, not its boundary and measure. The You appears in time, but in that of a process that is fulfilled in itself—a process lived through not as a piece that is a part of a constant and organized sequence but in a ‘duration’ whose purely intensive dimension can be determined only by starting from the You.”⁹¹ That every relation must enter the spatio-temporal realm represents the “sublime melancholy of our lot” for it entails that “every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again.”⁹² “All response binds the You into the It-world.”⁹³ Such is the melancholic fate of man, but from another perspective it may be considered his greatness, for it bestows upon man the task of consecration, i.e., of lifting up the world from a fallen state of objectness to a redeemed state of relatedness. The task of man is to make the world God-like, to prepare it for encounter. Redemption is “the God-side of the event whose world-side is called return [*Umkehr*],”⁹⁴ i.e., turning, meeting, confronting. Just as every Thou must become It, so every It can again become Thou; to make it so is the redemptive—messianic—task of man.

In the consecration of the I-Thou relation the “world-order” (*Weltordnung*) discloses itself. What Buber intends by this phrase “world-order” is a difficult thing to express. Indeed, the difficulty of expression stems from the very fact that, according to Buber, the presence revealed in the “world-order” can only be addressed, not articulated. What is clear, however, is that the “world-order” stands in sharp contrast to the “ordered world.” The latter signifies the phenomenal world of conditionality, fragmentation, and individuation; in this world there is structure and coherence but no unity. The former, on the contrary, signifies the noumenal world of unconditional unity. As of yet, however, we do not grasp this unity except negatively.

To understand unity positively, we must further examine the moment wherein the “world-order” is disclosed. This moment is, at once, absolutely exclusive and absolutely inclusive. That the moment is absolutely exclusive follows from the fact that the basic movement of dialogue is a “turning towards the other” (*Hinwendung*).⁹⁵ Dialogue is a “real outgoing to the other” (*Zum-Andernausgehen*), a “reaching to the other” (*Zum-Andern-gelangen*), a “companying with the other” (*Beim-Andern-verweilen*).⁹⁶ “The genuine saying of ‘Thou’ . . . means . . . the affirmation of the primally deep otherness of the other.”⁹⁷

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁹⁵ “Dialogue,” in *Between Man and Man*, 22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁷ “What Is Common to All,” 96.

The It that we experience is a thing among things, an object situated alongside others in a spatial-temporal-causal context. The experience of the It is not yet the grasping of the other in its absolute exclusivity. Such a grasping belongs to the encounter of the Thou. The Thou cannot be compared, defined, analyzed, or measured. In saying Thou one meets the irreducible and ultimately inaccessible other. "The chief presupposition for the rise of genuine dialogue is that each should regard his partner as the very one he is. I become aware of him, aware that he is different, essentially different from myself, in the definite, unique way which is peculiar to him, and I accept whom I thus see, so that in full earnestness I can direct what I say to him as the person he is."⁹⁸ In the turning towards the other one faces the other as other—not as a knowable object or subject but as independent subjectivity; in dialogue I confirm the otherness of the other. This affirmation of the other in his unconditional otherness is what Buber calls the "personal making present" (*personale Vergegenwärtigung*).⁹⁹ The dialogical situation lives in and through the tension of the "personal making present," i.e., of the meeting of two who nevertheless remain other to one another.

The meeting of the other is thus an event of absolute exclusivity: "Every actual relationship to another being in the world is exclusive. Its You is freed and steps to confront us in its uniqueness."¹⁰⁰ This event may be rendered the realization of cosmic unity by which is meant the concentrated turning towards the other in his absolute otherness. In this turning the other is encountered "cosmically" (*welthaft*), i.e., as a cosmic unity: "[M]an encounters being and becoming as what confronts him—always only one being and every thing only as a being. What is there reveals itself to him in the occurrence, and what occurs there happens to him as being. Nothing else is present but this one, but this one cosmically."¹⁰¹

In the act of meeting, however, another unity is realized. This unity, in contrast to the first, is a unity of absolute inclusiveness. We shall call this unity existential oneness.¹⁰² Before discussing it, however, we must make some preliminary remarks concerning the nature of the self according to Buber.

Not only is the other distinguished in the two basic world-attitudes, so too is the I: the I of the basic word I-It "appears as an ego [*Eigenwesen*]"¹⁰³ and

⁹⁸ "Elements of the Interhuman," in *The Knowledge of Man*, 79.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰⁰ *I and Thou*, 126.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰² Both expressions, "cosmic" and "existential" unity, are used by Mendes-Flohr, "From Kulturmystik to Dialogue," 177–78.

¹⁰³ Literally, "own-being" or "self-being." On this difficult expression, see the extended comment of Kaufmann, *I and Thou*, 111–12, n. 7.

becomes conscious of itself as a subject," whereas the I of the basic word I-Thou "appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity."¹⁰⁴ While the person "stands in relation" and "participates in actuality," the ego "sets himself apart from everything else and tries to possess as much as possible by means of experience and use."¹⁰⁵ The I that participates in relation is the I in its wholeness—the person; the I that appropriates through experience is the I in its partialness—the ego. "The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being."¹⁰⁶

The "vital primal words" (*der vitalen Urworte*) of the I-Thou relation are described by Buber as "I-acting-You and You-acting-I" (*Ich-wirkend-Du und Du-wirkend-Ich*).¹⁰⁷ Such speaking is a "bodily speaking," i.e., a speaking with one's whole being. In the event of relation, "the firmament of the You is spread over me."¹⁰⁸ The I in its entirety is encompassed by the radiant countenance of the Thou. The address of the Thou summons me in the wholeness of my being; the response must accordingly be that of the absolutely inclusive I. "Whoever commits himself may not hold back part of himself."¹⁰⁹ It is thus that existential oneness is realized in and through the dialogical moment.

Relation is thus the turning of the absolutely inclusive I—I and no other—to the absolutely exclusive other—Thou and no other. Buber writes: "Relation is reciprocity [*Gegenseitigkeit*]. My You acts on me as I act on it."¹¹⁰ The dialogical relation is at the same time a dialectical one. That is to say, the Thou is made present vis-à-vis the I, and I vis-à-vis the Thou. One being-as-a-whole faces another being-as-a-whole, each affirming the other through the otherness of their being. As Robert Wood expressed it: "In the I-Thou relation the undivided self meets the undivided Other. . . . One turns to the Other and stands in a relation of undivided to undivided which constitutes the actualized realm of the between."¹¹¹

At this juncture we can clearly articulate Buber's unique contribution to the philosophic discussion of the problem of unity. The unity of the dialogical relation is a unity realized and sustained through mutuality and difference. By the latter we do not intend to impart to Buber any Hegelian notion of unity-

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ *I and Thou*, 113-14.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

¹¹¹ Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, 41.

through-difference whereby opposites are held together by means of a synthetic resolution (*Aufhebung*), but rather that the lived unification of the meeting of I and Thou requires that both relata be preserved in their personhood. Though absolute distinctness would make relation as such impossible, it is also the case that absolute identification would make it equally impossible. To confront the other in dialogue is to confirm the other as other. In no uncertain terms Buber writes: "In genuine dialogue the turning to the partner takes place in all truth, that is, it is a turning of the being. Every speaker 'means' the partner or partners to whom he turns as this personal existence. To 'mean' someone in this connection is at the same time to exercise that degree of making present which is possible to the speaker at that moment . . . , he (the speaker) receives him as his partner, and that means that he confirms this other being, so far as it is for him to confirm. The true turning of his person to the other includes this confirmation, this acceptance."¹¹²

The turning of dialogue, if it is a genuine turning, can occur only between beings who stand at a distance from one another. To meet the other is to confront the other, i.e., to be over against (*Gegenüber*) the other. To be over against the other here means to face the other, i.e., to be in the presence (*Gegenwart*) of the other. While it is certainly the case that the I-Thou attitude sets this over-againstness in a qualitatively different relation, the fact is that the being-at-a-distance is never absolutely transcended through the dialogical encounter. Indeed, it is precisely such a condition which renders the relationship possible. Buber develops this theme in his "Distance and Relation" (1951): "[T]he principle of human life is not simple but twofold, being built up in a twofold movement. . . . I propose to call the first movement 'the primal setting at a distance' [*Urdistanzierung*] and the second 'entering into relation' [*In-Beziehungtreten*]. That the first movement is the presupposition of the other is plain from the fact that one can enter into relation only with being which has been set at a distance, more precisely, has become an independent opposite."¹¹³ In the event of relation, therefore, two beings meet who nevertheless remain distinct. Meeting (*Begegnung*) the other is an enduring-against (*Gegenwartende*) the other. To be sure, the event of meeting, the being-with another, is always more than being-against. But, as Buber himself has told us, the entering into relation, and, we might add, the sustaining of that relation,

¹¹² "Elements of the Interhuman," 85. Cf. Philip Wheelwright, "Buber's Philosophical Anthropology," in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 69–95. See esp. 75 where the author points out that this "making present" of the other clearly distinguishes Buber's thought from that of mysticism. The mystical striving is a striving for unification which often eventuates in the loss of self. Dialogic relation, on the other hand, is possible only through the meeting of two beings who remain unique and distinct.

¹¹³ "Distance and Relation," in *The Knowledge of Man*, 60.

presupposes the setting at a distance: "Only men who are capable of truly saying Thou to one another can truly say We with one another."

The concept of unity in Buber's philosophy of dialogue embraces the paradoxical: unity arises in and is sustained through difference. In the "between" opposite beings face one another. In this facing of that which is opposite union—through relation and not identification—is achieved. Hence, the "between" engenders unity while maintaining difference. That is to say, the unity of relation does not dissolve, but rather preserves the otherness of the other, for without this otherness no relation is possible. The presence of relation is therefore an abiding of difference. This is the meaning of Buber's claim that the "primal setting at a distance" is the presupposition of "entering into relation." According to Buber, as Emmanuel Levinas put it, "the act whereby the I withdraws and thus distances itself from the Thou . . . is the same act which renders a union with it possible. In effect, there is no union worthy of the name except in the presence of this sort of otherness: union, *Verbundenheit*, is a manifestation of otherness."¹¹⁴

That unity, for Buber, presupposes a "difference" that is never absolutely transcended in the relation is substantiated further by his revised treatment of the God-man relation. Revelation, according to Buber's philosophy of dialogue, is the reciprocal meeting of the eternal Thou and the finite I. "I-Thou finds its highest intensity and transfiguration in religious reality, in which unlimited Being becomes, as absolute Person, my partner."¹¹⁵ Inasmuch as revelation is dialogical, it follows that it will involve the meeting of that which is mutually exclusive. "Man's 'religious' situation, existence in the presence, is marked by its essential and indissoluble antinomies."¹¹⁶ That is to say, God stands over against man, and man over against God; neither partner can be reduced to the other. The one who would affirm only the thesis (the human pole) and thereby repudiate the antithesis (the divine pole) violates the sense of the situation, whereas one who would think only in terms of the synthesis (unification of the individual and the Absolute) destroys the sense of the situation. The religious situation is such that it must be "lived in all its antinomies . . . without any possibility of anticipation or prescription."¹¹⁷ "What is decisive for the genuineness of religion," therefore, is that "I relate myself to the divine as to Being which is over against me. . . . Complete inclusion of the divine in the sphere of the human self abolishes its divinity."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Cf. E. Levinas, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge," in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 141.

¹¹⁵ "Religion and Philosophy," in *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 44-45.

¹¹⁶ *I and Thou*, 143.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143-44.

¹¹⁸ "Religion and Philosophy," 28.

Such considerations forced Buber to alter his conception of the realization of God. To "realize God" does not mean to make God real but rather to "prepare the world for God . . . to make reality one."¹¹⁹ That God is independent of man is the very basis of the religious life: "Religious reality is called precisely that because it constitutes an undiminished relationship to God Himself. Man does not possess God Himself, but he encounters God Himself."¹²⁰ God and man stand in a relation of "vis-à-vis." That God becomes, therefore, means only that "the unity without multiplicity . . . dwells in the unification of multiplicity."¹²¹ In this dwelling, however, God remains Other; indeed, it is as the Other that God comes to dwell in the world, to address man in the dialogical moment.

Buber's revised concept of realization parallels his revised notion of *Yihud*, unification. The unity of the world is not an abstract, mathematical oneness. It is rather the dynamic unity of dialogue. To unify the world is to prepare the world for the divine encounter which is, as we have seen, the turning toward the eternal Thou. Unification of God and world is not the identification of God and world. Buber categorically rejects the unification of God and world if that entails "the abstract dissolution of the difference between God and world."¹²² In the unity of dialogue, the difference is not eliminated but preserved. That "the separation between 'life in God' and 'life in the world' . . . is overcome in genuine, concrete unity"¹²³ does not signify that the distance between God and world is dissolved. The union of relation is not an identification.

God addresses, man responds; in the reciprocity of relation the partners retain their irreducible otherness. God does not become man nor man God. In the event of revelation, God as an undivided whole turns to man as an undivided whole. "In lived actuality there is no unity of being. . . . The strongest and deepest actuality is to be found where everything enters into activity—the whole human being, without reserve, and the all-embracing god; the unified I and the boundless You."¹²⁴

Revelation does not obscure but rather highlights the distance which stands between God and man; it is only through this distance that man receives his task to unify the world, i.e., to prepare the world for the dialogical relationship. Hence, Buber concludes, revelation is fulfilled only when it takes the form of action in the world. "The encounter with God does not come to

¹¹⁹ "Preface," *On Judaism*, 9.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

¹²¹ "Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement," in *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed. and trans. M. Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), 133.

¹²² "Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi, and the Baal-Shem," in *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 99.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *I and Thou*, 137.

man in order that he may henceforth attend to God but in order that he may prove its meaning in action in the world. All revelation is a calling and a mission."¹²⁵ Paradoxically, for Buber, the turning towards God may result in a turning away from God, while the turning away from God may result in a turning towards God: "When you are sent forth, God remains presence for you; whoever walks in his mission always has God before him: the more faithful the fulfillment, the stronger and more constant the nearness. . . . Bending back, on the other hand, turns God into an object. It appears to be a turning toward the primal ground, but belongs in truth to the world movement of turning away, even as the apparent turning away of those who fulfill their mission belongs in truth to the world movement of turning toward."¹²⁶ Here Buber's thought reaches the quintessence of paradox: what appears to be a turning toward is in truth a turning away, while what appears to be a turning away is in truth a turning toward. Man is unified with God, i.e., stands in the presence of the eternal and boundless Thou, when he sets himself at a distance from God in order to act upon the world. Union for Buber is, to paraphrase Levinas, always a manifestation of otherness.

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¹²⁵ Ibid., 164.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 164–65.