

## BUBER'S DIALOGISM AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE NIGERIAN CONDITION

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### ***Abstract***

*The essay explores Martin Buber's existentialist philosophy and its applicability to Nigeria's challenges. Buber's emphasis on relationships aligns with Nigeria's journey, where the "I-Thou" dialogue offers solutions to pressing issues. The essay discusses Nigeria's history, including insecurity, kidnapping, Boko Haram, banditry, and separatism. While force has been attempted, President Yar'Adua's successful use of dialogue with Niger Delta militants resonates with Buber's philosophy. Buber's existentialism highlights the transformative potential of dialogue and genuine connections. Nigeria's leaders are urged to embrace the "I-Thou" model, recognizing the humanity of others, to address complex issues. By analysing Buber's philosophy and its implications for Nigeria, this abstract emphasizes the power of dialogue to foster understanding and create a society grounded in mutual respect.*

***Key words: Dialogism, Existentialism, Nigeria, I- Thou***

### **1.1 Introduction**

The evolution of the world aligns with the evolution of civilization. The gratitude we owe to the philosophers who have traversed each era is immense, as they have significantly propelled the progress of humanity and society. Reflecting on the liberties we presently relish in our thoughts, expressions, and beliefs, as well as considering the proliferation of educational institutions, libraries, and universities, and acknowledging the numerous ongoing reforms, we must acknowledge the profound role philosophers have played. Their influence remains integral to our achievements. As we celebrate these contributions, we also acknowledge the vital role that existentialism holds within the broader context of development.

### **2.1 The Origin and Principles of Existentialism**

Existentialism, a prominent intellectual movement emerging around the mid-twentieth Century, stemmed from humanity's weariness with life and the human experience. This led to a renewed contemplation of inquiries about human existence and the inherent significance of life itself. At its core, existentialism delves into the profound intricacies of human existence. Philosophers within the realm of existentialism, often categorized as

either atheistic or theistic, delve into inquiries surrounding the meaning, purpose, and intrinsic value of human life.

The foundation of the existentialist belief system lies in the assertion that humans possess the power of free choice. This pivotal viewpoint implies that individuals have the capacity to create purpose and imbue meaning into their lives. Central to this philosophy is a strong emphasis on individual liberty and the relentless pursuit of significance and authenticity within the realm of human existence. As a result, recurring themes like choices, anxiety, absurdity, alienation, nothingness, dread, angst, authenticity, and personal relationships emerge prominently within the discourse of existentialist philosophers.

A unifying thread among these philosophers is the fundamental concept that "existence precedes essence."<sup>1</sup> This proclamation, attributed to Jean Paul Sartre, subverts the traditional philosophical perspective that attributes greater significance to the inherent nature or essence of something over its mere existence. Instead, the existentialist stance champions the idea that existence itself holds primacy over predefined essence or nature.

What Sartre was saying in the foregoing is that existence of a thing is more fundamental and immutable than its essence or nature. The essence comes later. Human beings create their values and determine the meaning of their lives because there is no such thing as inherent value. A personality is not built based on predetermined precise purpose. As he puts it: "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards."<sup>2</sup> Man has to exist first before he thinks about other possibilities in life.

While Søren Kierkegaard is commonly acknowledged as the pioneer of existentialism, it was Gabriel Marcel who initially applied the term "existentialist" to Jean-Paul Sartre. Marcel's conviction is underscored by his assertion that a person who lacks belief in anything and relies on nothing becomes isolated and detached from the world. He articulates this perspective with the statement that such an individual is "a man without connection." In this light, existentialists actively seek connections and meaning within the realm of existence, in contrast to philosophical nihilists who perceive only emptiness.<sup>3</sup>

A notable philosopher who pursued this line of thought in his distinctive manner was Martin Buber. Buber recognized the inherently relational nature of humanity and endeavored to find avenues through which individuals could coexist harmoniously in society, steering clear of conflicts and hostilities. His proposed solution was dialogue – a means through which human interactions could transcend the barriers of war and strife, enabling meaningful connections and understanding among individuals.

### **3.1 Martin Buber**

Martin Buber (1878-1965), an Austrian philosopher of Jewish origin who later became an Israeli citizen, left a lasting imprint on the world of philosophy. His extensive body of work encompasses a wide spectrum of philosophical explorations, ranging from religious phenomenology to philosophical anthropology and social philosophy, Buber's writings delve into the depths of human thought. His scholarly pursuits also extended to subjects such as religion, Jewish mysticism, and biblical studies.

Among his notable works are *The Way of Man*, *Between Man and Man*, *The Legend of the*

*Baal-Shem, Good and Evil, and Eclipse of God.* These volumes offer readers a profound glimpse into Buber's philosophical and spiritual insights. A central theme that resonates throughout his writings is the significance of authentic relationships. Buber's works underscore the value of genuine connections in human interactions, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal understanding and communication.

His most renowned work, *I and Thou*, stands at the forefront of his legacy. This book delves into the intricate dynamics of relationships and delves deeply into the essential interactions between individuals. At its core lies the exploration of the profound dichotomy between the *I-Thou* relationship and the *I-It* relationship.

Buber's life was far from ordinary due to his parents' divorce when he was just three years old. Following this, his upbringing was entrusted to his grandfather, Solomon Buber, in Lamberg (now Lviv in Ukraine). Under his grandfather's guidance, a scholar of Rabbinic literature, Buber imbibed a profound understanding of Judaism, embracing it fervently. In 1892, he returned to his father's residence in Lamberg. As time progressed, he embarked on a journey of introspection, questioning aspects of the religion that had provided solace during his childhood. This internal exploration reached a pinnacle when he voluntarily chose to distance himself from Jewish religious traditions. Amid this period of internal conflict, Buber found himself prompted toward introspection, leading him to engage with the philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Kant and Kierkegaard's works, in particular, served as catalysts for his inclination toward the study of philosophy. In 1896, Buber initiated his studies in Philology at Vienna. His influence, in turn, extended to figures such as Gadamer and Emmanuel Levinas.

Initially, Buber embraced and lauded the Great War (World War I) as a momentous "world historical mission"<sup>4</sup>, envisioning Germany and Jewish intellectuals collaborating to bring about the advancement of the Near East. However, his perspective underwent a transformation, particularly in light of the emergence of the Second World War.

Having matured in his intellectual pursuits, Buber attained the esteemed position of an honorary professor at the University of Frankfurt Main. However, his principles led him to relinquish this professorship as a poignant protest immediately upon Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933. This resolute decision was motivated by the harrowing ordeals endured by the Jewish community in Germany, stemming once again from the failure of individuals to engage in meaningful dialogue. The culmination of this distressing situation was the deplorable exclusion of Jews from public education, an act that reduced them to a status seemingly less than human. Buber's dedication to addressing these challenges was manifest through the establishment of the Central Office for Jewish Adult Education, through which he extended educational opportunities to the Jewish population.

Deeply disheartened by the inhumane circumstances prevailing in Germany, Buber made the decision to depart in 1938. He relocated to Jerusalem, where he assumed a professorship at Hebrew University. In this capacity, he delivered lectures on Anthropology and introductory sociology, facilitating a deeper exploration of the essence of humanity. Following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Buber emerged as an indisputable leading philosopher of the nation.<sup>5</sup>

Through his lectures, Buber embarked on a quest to address the fundamental inquiry, "What constitutes the essence of Man?" This question evolved into the heart of his discourse. As he endeavored to embody his philosophy of "live and let live," he advocated for a bi-national state that would encompass both Arabs and Jews. In 1949, his publication *Paths to Utopia* served as a platform for elaborating on his communitarian socialist perspectives. Within these pages, Buber intricately detailed his theory of the "dialogical community," built upon the cornerstone of interpersonal "dialogical relationships."<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.1 Buber's Existential Perspective

Buber's brand of existentialism, akin to that of his forerunners, bore the deep imprints of personal observations forged against a backdrop of global conflict and turmoil. The pervasive climate of war and discord profoundly unsettled him, unveiling what appeared to be an immense chasm of disconnect among individuals. This unsettling isolation, in Buber's view, serves as a force that drives humanity apart, fostering a profound lack of comprehension between/ among individuals. Buber was able to trace this pervasive isolation to the very origins of the Second World War. He contended that by uniting in reason, fostering open dialogues, and empathetically comprehending one another's perspectives, the specters of conflict and discord could be expunged from the fabric of human society.

Buber's existential philosophy finds its foundation in the conviction that the essence of human existence is inherently tied to relationships. He staunchly upheld the notion that individuals are not, and should not be, solitary entities, but instead find their place within a profound interconnectedness with the world that envelops them. At the heart of this interconnected web lies the pivotal "I-Thou" relationship, which forms the locus of human encounters. This very essence is eloquently encapsulated within the pages of his seminal work, *I and Thou*.

Within "I and Thou," Buber delineates two distinct realms of relationships: the "I-It" and the "I-Thou." The "I-It" dynamic embodies detachment, where individuals interact with others as mere objects to fulfill personal agenda. In stark contrast, the "I-Thou" relationship signifies a mutual and equitable turning toward each other, underscored by openness and ethical commitment. This profound bond is characterized by dialogue and a state of complete presence. Here, each participant's regard extends to the well-being of the other, transcending mere utility.<sup>7</sup> Central to the "I-Thou" relationship is a reverence for the individual's intrinsic dignity, elevating it above mere utilitarian considerations.

At the core of Buber's comprehension of God lies the ethical resonance of the "I-Thou" relationship. According to Buber, God assumes the mantle of the "Eternal Thou." Within this context, God remains the sole entity that steadfastly resists transformation into an "It." In simpler terms, while interactions with fellow humans may carry inherent utilitarian facets, an authentic connection with God transcends any inclination to instrumentalize the Divine as a mere means to an end.

Moreover, Buber posits that our connection with God constitutes the bedrock upon which all our "I-Thou" relationships with fellow beings rest. In this framework, every interaction characterized by an "I-Thou" dynamic, whether with an individual or an

entity, becomes a rendezvous with the Divine. In essence, God assumes the role of an all-encompassing contextual backdrop, serving as the convergence point for every profound human engagement. According to Buber's perspective, one's encounters with the world and other individuals provide the avenues through which one's connection with God is realized. The directive is clear: fully immerse oneself in worldly encounters, and therein lies the very path to encountering the Divine."

When one encounters the world in this way, revelation occurs. "God speaks to man in the things and beings he sends him in life," Buber wrote. "Man answers through his dealings with these things and beings."<sup>8</sup>

Martin Buber is recognized as an existential thinker due to his unwavering attention to lived existence. Despite his reluctance to be explicitly labeled as an existentialist philosopher, his association with the term stems from his profound emphasis on subjective encounters and the consequential impact of personal interaction with the world. Buber's exploration encapsulates quintessential existential themes encompassing human autonomy, the exercise of choice, and the pursuit of significance. His ethos revolves around individual responsibility manifested through the prism of dialogue, staunchly opposing the objectification of human beings.<sup>9</sup>

Buber's philosophy of dialogue constitutes an existentialist framework rooted in the delineation between the "I-Thou" and "I-It" relationships. Within our daily interactions, we commonly engage with others through a lens of utility and objectification – an approach Buber labels the "I-It" (*Ich-Es*) connection. In this context, the other is perceived as a mere entity (or "it") subject to manipulation and control. Conversely, the "I-Thou" (*Ich-Du*) relationship distinguishes itself through a foundation of reciprocal acknowledgment and reverence for the other's distinct individuality.

Buber's existentialism further underscores the significance of authenticity within the realm of human existence. In his view, authenticity encompasses the capacity to remain faithful to one's own essence and to harmonize one's life with this innermost core. Achieving authenticity necessitates a readiness to confront life's intricacies and uncertainties head-on, coupled with an unwavering commitment to assuming accountability for the decisions and deeds one undertakes.

By engaging in dialogue, individuals can enrich their comprehension of both themselves and the environment they inhabit. Moreover, dialogue opens avenues for delving into opportunities for personal development and the potential for profound transformation.

Buber's existentialist stance bears noteworthy consequences for our comprehension of ethics and morality. According to him, ethical conduct finds its anchor in the "I-Thou" relationship, wherein individuals acknowledge and honor the inherent value and dignity of each other. This recognition serves as a foundation for aligning one's actions with the principles he deems uplifting and virtuous.

Buber's existential philosophy extends its ramifications to our comprehension of religious encounters as well. According to him, the bedrock of religious experience rests within the "I-Thou" relationship, within which individuals can perceive the divine as a revered "Thou" rather than as an objectified "It." Within this context, individuals are empowered to immerse themselves in a profound sense of reverence and wonder upon

encountering the divine. This encounter allows them to plumb the depths of their understanding of both the divine essence and their own beings.

### **5.1 Buber's Existentialism in the Nigerian Context**

As Nigeria achieved independence in 1960, a new era of freedom emerged, promising to alleviate the grievances that had arisen from colonial rule and other challenges. This transformative period was characterized by the essence of an "I-Thou" relationship. Within and beyond the nation's borders, Nigerian nationalists engaged in numerous discussions with colonial authorities. The prevailing optimism centered on the belief that post-independence, Nigeria would cultivate an elevated level of dialogue among her citizens, while collectively advancing the well-being of the nation.

However, the trajectory of Nigeria's journey took an unforeseen turn, marred by setbacks that culminated in the agonizing civil war of 1967 to 1970. Despite concerted efforts to employ dialogue as a means of preventing the war, exemplified by significant meetings including the prominent "Aburi" assembly, certain influential figures, in contradiction to Buber's principles, displayed a notable absence of authentic openness. The subsequent challenges faced by our nation find their origin in this shortfall, as a sequence of events unfolded, leading to a reality that strayed far from the ideals of dialogue and cooperative progress that Nigeria's independence had initially symbolized.

In the present day, after sixty-three years of independence, the trajectory of affairs appears to be fraught with challenges. A plethora of issues afflict the nation, with the most recent including the pressing concerns of kidnapping, the presence of herdsmen, the menace of Boko Haram, the activities of bandits, and the emergence of separatist agitations.

The issue of kidnapping initially surfaced within the Niger Delta region, driven by a sentiment of perceived neglect by the broader Nigerian populace. The people of this region lamented that despite their contributions to the nation's prosperity, their reward amounted to a deteriorated environment, marred by the destruction of their delicate ecosystem. Notably, some impassioned environmental activists from the area, fighting to get attention from government including Ken Saro Wiwa, met a tragic fate, falling victim to brutal violence during the presidency of Gen Sani Abacha.<sup>10</sup>

Subsequently, the situation took a turn for the worse. In response, particularly when the Government's attempts at engagement faltered, a significant portion of those affected transformed into militants, launching a reign of terror across the nation. Their efforts proved successful in disrupting the economic lifeline of the nation, severely impacting the flow of crude oil for export. This persisted until the tenure of Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua as President. In a manner echoing Buber's principles, Yar'Adua initiated an approach that entailed attentive listening and understanding. By extending amnesty and implementing comprehensive rehabilitation strategies, he managed to quell the crisis.<sup>11</sup> This pivotal move led to a drastic reduction of over 90% in kidnapping incidents within the region.

Another grave challenge plaguing the nation is the presence of Boko Haram. Defining this group presents an intricate task. Founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram, translated as "Western Education is Forbidden," constitutes a radical Islamic entity. Their adoption of armed conflict has led to prolonged confrontations with the

Government, resulting in the capture of various territories. Their actions have inflicted immense damage on the country, manifesting through abductions, hostage situations, and demands for substantial ransoms.<sup>12</sup> Despite concerted endeavours to rein in their activities, all attempts thus far have yielded no substantial success.

In 2002, after their leader Mohammed Yusuf was killed, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, the former president of Nigeria, paid them a visit. During an interactive session, they conveyed to Obasanjo that their main issue revolved around unemployment. They disclosed that their ranks included graduates struggling to secure employment. Upon his return, Obasanjo shared that the key to addressing their concerns was to engage with them and comprehend their situation. He emphasized the importance of seeking solutions through effective governance that could cater to everyone's needs. This approach aligns with the dialogue principles popularized by Buber.

A significant challenge faced by Nigeria pertains to the rise of banditry in the North-West and North-Central regions. In the year 2021, more than 1000 instances of bandits kidnapping innocent individuals were reported. Notably, in March 2022, a bandit attack on an Abuja-Kaduna bound train resulted in casualties and abductions.<sup>13</sup> Currently, armed banditry, encompassing activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, murder, cattle rustling, and rape, stands as the nation's most pressing security issue.

The states of Katsina, Sokoto, Kaduna, and Zamfara in the North-west are particularly affected by the activities of these armed bandits. Additionally, there is a growing trend of collaboration between armed bandits and Islamist terrorist groups like Boko Haram, involving recruitment, training, logistics, weaponry, and assaults on vulnerable communities.

Numerous measures have been attempted to address this menace, but none have yielded effective results. Could it be time for the Nigerian government to genuinely engage with these groups to find a lasting solution?

The East and West of Nigeria are grappling with a troublesome challenge of separatist movements, which pose a significant threat to the nation's peace and progress. The relationship between the Eastern group and the Government soured dramatically after their leader, Nnamdi Kanu, was apprehended in a brutal manner in Kenya on June 27, 2021, and subsequently brought back to Nigeria under deplorable conditions. Since then, the Government has made extensive efforts to mitigate the forces that pull Nigerians together.

Even in the face of disruptions caused by the Monday sit-at-home protests that hamper economic activities, the then President, Gen. Muhammadu Buhari displayed a seeming lack of awareness about the situation. The pleas from concerned Nigerians for President Buhari to address the issue with a paternal approach, by genuinely listening to the people, went unheeded.

The evident takeaway is that Nigeria is currently grappling with a multitude of security challenges, which are being inadequately addressed. Unfortunately, this subpar management has resulted in the emergence of additional security issues. As a result, Nigeria has regrettably earned a reputation as one of the most challenging countries for conducting business with ease. Presently, the prevailing insecurity has made it arduous

for Nigerians to travel between different regions of the nation.

Nigerians must confront their challenges head-on and devise effective solutions to address them. It's important to recognize that Nigeria isn't the sole country to have grappled with significant issues globally. Speaking in recent times, the Dalai Lama emphasized the need for thoughtful and caring dialogues across all levels of society to address the issue of violence worldwide. He pointed out that simply desiring peace is insufficient; instead, the underlying causes of violence should be resolved through meaningful dialogue.

In a compilation of essays titled "The Significance of Dialogue during Periods of Conflict and Uncertainty,"<sup>14</sup> published by the British Council, Ciarán Devane expressed in the preface:

The essays in this collection are informed by first-hand experience of negotiating tables in places that have become by-words for misunderstanding. More than one author makes the point that successful dialogue requires us to engage with those who are considered beyond the pale. It is the hard conversations, not the easy ones, that in the end make the difference. The writers also offer the kind of fascinating detail that only comes from direct experience – including the observation that success or failure in dialogue can come down to something as apparently minor as the kind of hotel in which your talks take place. That's a strange but all-too human realisation – but then this is a collection of essays about being human, and trying to be better humans, under some of the, under some of the most demanding circumstances imaginable.<sup>15</sup>

Considering the imperative of prioritizing the constructive potential of dialogue over the destructive nature of war, Lord Lothian contemplated: "I hold no fondness for terrorists; their actions are beneath contempt. Nevertheless, while striving for conflict resolution, one need not harbour affection for their adversaries. Conversely, cultivating a sense of respect is beneficial, and exploratory dialogue plays a role in fostering such respect."

Here is where Martin Buber's existentialist philosophy becomes pertinent. Within his concept of "I-Thou," deeply embedded in his philosophy of dialogue, Buber underscores the significance of words. He delves into the dual dialogue between individuals, the "I-Thou," which enhances shared comprehension due to its relational essence. Buber contrasts this with a relationship in which others are treated as mere objects to be utilized and discarded, referred to as "I-It." In the realm of "I-It," genuine dialogues seldom take shape; instead, they often resemble one-sided monologues.

Dialogue unfolds when individuals interact with others, driven by a shared sense of respect, authenticity, and a desire for reconciliation. Given the inherent complexities of human nature, societies are prone to misunderstandings. Yet, the degree of peace achieved is closely tied to the extent to which individuals are prepared to actively participate in dialogues.<sup>16</sup>

Buber outlines three categories of dialogue: genuine dialogue, technical dialogue, and

monologue. The first, often termed the "genuine dialogue," according to Buber, represents the pinnacle of interpersonal communication (I-Thou). When exploring this form of dialogue, the philosopher highlights its essential attributes: immediacy, mutual engagement, authenticity, parity, and a deep spiritual connection between souls.

The second form of dialogue, known as the "technical dialogue," emerges primarily from the pressing necessity to attain objective comprehension, with the aim of mutual gain. In Buber's writings, this type of dialogue is also referred to as the "soulless dialogue." It relies on logic, specific external regulations, and predetermined objectives. This technical level of dialogue can be likened to certain forms of business communication, whose effectiveness can be evaluated using established criteria and attained outcomes. It's reasonable to assert that the technical dialogue fosters partnership rather than friendship.

The third category involves what might be termed a "monologue masquerading as dialogue." An intriguing paradox arises here – while a monologue seemingly involves another individual, genuine reciprocal communication remains absent in such instances. This occurs because, as per Buber's perspective, a monologue does not arise from the compulsion to convey information or the need to engage with someone. Instead, a monologue emerges solely from a person's internal drive for self-affirmation. In essence, everyone engages in a monologue when speaking to oneself. Consequently, a monologue can be perceived as an opposition to true dialogue, akin to an "anti-dialogue."<sup>17</sup>

True dialogue is assuredly present within the I-Thou relationship, where the speaker and the listener are both actively engaged. For dialogue to flourish, every interaction must evoke a reciprocal reaction. The most conducive environment for achieving this dynamic exchange is one characterized by peace, fostering harmonious coexistence.

### 6.1: Moving Ahead

Ever since insecurity took root in Nigeria, consecutive administrations have attempted to quell it through the application of force. Ironically, the more force is exerted, the more the problem seems to spread. As previously mentioned, during Yar'Adua's brief presidency, the use of dialogue in addressing the Niger Delta militants proved to be more productive than the forceful methods employed by others. The current circumstances indicate the need for a shift in approach. The present moment is ripe for embracing dialogue, a strategy aptly exemplified by Buber.

Nigerian leadership necessitates authentic dialogues with the citizens to effectively address the array of challenges. This dialogue should not stem from a stance of superiority, where the state seeks to assert dominance. What is essential is a genuine dialogue – embracing the I-Thou mode – that acknowledges the shared humanity of all and treats others with due respect.

### Endnotes

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