

# MARTIN BUBER'S PHILOSOPHY OF DIALOGUE

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## Abstract

*This research centers on Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue as a transformative thought within 20th-century existential and relational thought. Central to Buber's philosophy is the distinction between two fundamental modes of human engagement: the "I-Thou" and "I-It" relationships, articulated most clearly in his seminal work *Ich und Du*. The "I-Thou" relation signifies a mode of being that is direct, reciprocal, and dialogical—one in which the self encounters the other in their full presence and without instrumentalization. In contrast, the "I-It" relation reflects the objectifying stance predominant in modernity, wherein the other is reduced to a means, a function, or a concept. Buber's thesis is that genuine dialogue—understood not merely as verbal communication but as a mutual existential encounter—constitutes the ground of authentic human existence and ethical life. This study critically analyzes the ontological, epistemological, and ethical implications of Buber's dialogical thought, situating it within broader philosophical traditions, including existentialism, phenomenology, and Jewish theology. Particular attention is given to Buber's dialogue with contemporaries such as Franz Rosenzweig, as well as to comparative engagements with thinkers like Marcel and Levinas. Through this analysis, the paper argues that Buber offers a relational ontology that challenges the atomism of modern subjectivity and affirms the primacy of interhuman and divine relation. In doing so, Buber provides a vision of the self not as an isolated substance, but as constituted in and through dialogue—a framework with enduring relevance for ethics, theology, education, and political theory.*

**Keywords:** Martin Buber, Dialogue, Relationship, I-Thou, Existentialism

## Introduction

Martin Buber's believes that all real existence is found in dialogue and encounter. Assuming that the human person or being is incapable of realizing himself without communion with mankind, with the creation and with the creator how would life be to him and others. It then implies that humans are condemned to dialogue and cannot do without dialogue today. However, the rigorous study into Martin Buber concept of dialogue is an effort or a way of help to better the situation of mutual communication in the society where everyone is seen as an end itself. For Martin Buber all real living is meeting or encounter in this encounter or meeting, there is exchange of information and experience. Therefore, Buberian philosophy is also known as dialogical philosophy; thus which is the aim of this research work. Martin Buber had a strong inclination for

meeting people and conversing with them. Conflict is seen as failure in communication and dialogue; “the conflict between man and man has its root in the inner contradiction between oneself and the other man.”

Martin Buber's concept of dialogue is centre to his philosophical and theological work, especially as articulated in his major work *I and Thou*. Buber, an influential Jewish philosopher, developed the idea of dialogue as a way of understanding human relationships and interaction. His philosophy is grounded in the distinction between two fundamental modes of relating to the world and to others: the I-It and the I-Thou relationships. Martin Buber's concept of philosophical dialogue is centred on the idea of genuine, meaningful communication between individuals. He contrasts two types of relationships: the I-Thou and the I-It modes. In the I-Thou relationship, people engage with each other as whole, unique beings, fostering a deep, mutual connection that transcends mere utility or objectification. This form of dialogue is characterized by openness, empathy, and respect.

The context of the problem on this thesis is an attempt to address the emerging problem proffered by the existentialist in particular Martin Buber, the meaning of dialogue between man and man. The quest for a genuine dialogue in our society is a thing of question because it is no longer as how dialogue should be between man and man it is today rather it has gone beyond subject-to-subject relationship today it is now subject object wherein human being is regarded as a means to an end when he should be regarded as end itself. In Martin Buber's terms or philosophy, genuine dialogue or relation means abandoning one's field and striving to encounter the 'other' human being without taking advantage. Consequently, this research work remains a barren if it is not put into practice in today's society. This study set to enhance the understanding of Buber's philosophical contributions and to provide practical insights for fostering more meaningful and authentic human interactions for the common good of the human person and the society at large. The objective of this study is to critically examine Martin Buber's concept of dialogue, specifically the distinction between I-It and I-Thou relationships, and to explore its practical implications and applications in contemporary settings.

### **Explication of Terms**

#### **Dialogue**

Martin Buber says dialogue is that which takes place between conscience oriented thinkers as opposed to strategists. This simply implies that, a conscience oriented thinker will think in terms of a good outcome that maintains values and ethics, whereas strategists will think in terms of achieving individual goals without concern for ethical practices. Again, dialogue, according to Martin Buber, does not occur merely because participants love or like each other. But then, as long as there is a sense of respect and openness, dialogue can occur between people who dislike each other very much.

### **I-Thou Dialogue**

The I-Thou relationship is characterized by mutual recognition and genuine encounter between individuals. In this dialogue, each person acknowledges the other's full humanity, leading to authentic connection and understanding.

### **I-It Dialogue**

In contrast, the I-It relationship is more transactional and utilitarian. Here, the other is viewed as an object or a means to an end, leading to a lack of true engagement. This type of interaction lacks depth and authenticity.

### **Inner Dialogue with Oneself**

Buber posits that an inner dialogue with oneself can lead to self-understanding and personal growth. This self-dialogue reflects the tension between different aspects of the self, fostering a deeper awareness of one's identity and values.

### **Dialogue with God**

Buber describes the dialogue with God as a profound, personal encounter. This relationship is marked by a deep sense of presence and responsiveness, where one engages with the divine in a way that transcends traditional religious practices.

### **Spiritual Dialogue**

Spiritual dialogue encompasses conversations that explore deeper meanings and connections with the transcendent. This can occur in various contexts, fostering a communal search for understanding and shared experiences of the divine.

### **The Concept of Dialogue in Martin Buber's Existential Philosophy**

The focus of Martin Buber's philosophy is the reality of 'space' that is between persons. At the root of this is the notion that self-perfection is only achievable within the realm of relationship with others. Relationship for Martin Buber exists in the form of dialogue. However, knowledge of oneself comes to actuality only when relationships between men and creation is comprehended or understood to be a dialogical one. The most crucial thing for Buber is dialogue, which involves all kinds of relation, to self, to others, and to all kinds of beings. Martin Buber argued that all real living is meeting or encounter. In this encounter or meeting, there is an exchange of information and experience. Buberian philosophy is also known as dialogical philosophy; he has a strong inclination towards meeting people and conversing with them. Conflict is seen as failure in communication and dialogue; "the external conflict between man and man has its roots in the inner contradiction between oneself and the other man." For this very reason, Martin Buber held that, "an essential building block of a community is the concept of dialogue. People thought of dialogue as just discussion or an exchange of words. But then, Martin Buber has presented dialogue as more than just the exchange of words and talk that takes place in human interaction". He held that, dialogue takes place between consciences of two people as opposed to strategists. This simply implies that, a conscience oriented thinker

will think in terms of a “good” outcome that maintains values and ethics, whereas strategists will think in terms of achieving individual goals without concern for ethical practices.

Again, dialogue, according to Martin Buber, does not occur just because participants love or like each other, but it occurs, as long as there is a sense of respect and openness, dialogue can occur between people who dislike each other very much. Furthermore, true community is not realised simply because people have feelings for each other. However, that is crucial too, but rather on two accounts all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living midpoint, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another. He also asserts that weakness and compromise do not play any role in dialogue. As commented earlier, it is not about sacrificing one's own belief just to get along with or suit another person. The sphere is untouched, but when both enter into the realm of dialogue “the law of individual point no longer holds.” “In dialogue two individuals become a system, but an intelligent system where responsibility resides.” As such dialogue is something that happens on its own. It is not a skill that some people master together and others not. Therefore, as long as participants desire to engage in dialogue it cannot be arranged or planned, pronounced, or willed it will just occur.

### **Martin Buber's "I-Thou"**

Martin Buber a Jewish philosopher, is best known for his existential and dialogical philosophy, particularly as outlined in his major work *I and Thou*. His philosophy centres on the nature of human relationships and the modes of existence through which individuals engage with the world. Buber identifies two fundamental types of relationships: the I-Thou and the I-It relationships. These two modes of interaction define the way individuals experience and relate to others, objects, and even the divine. The I of the basic word I-You is different from that of the basic word I-It. The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego and becomes conscious of itself as a subject (of experience and use). The I of the basic word I-You appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity (without any dependent genitive). The I-Thou (*Ich-Du*) relationship is characterized by mutuality, presence, and direct engagement. It occurs when two beings meet in a genuine, reciprocal dialogue, where each fully acknowledges the other as a unique and autonomous presence. This relationship is marked by a deep connection that transcends objectification or instrumentalization.

### **The "I-It" Relationship**

In contrast, the I-It (Ich-Es) relationship is characterized by objectification, utility, and detachment. Here, the "I" treats the other as an "It"—an object to be used, analyzed, or manipulated rather than a being with intrinsic value. This mode of interaction is essential for practical and functional aspects of life but lacks the depth of genuine human connection.

### **The Three Kinds of Dialogue**

Martin discusses three different kinds of dialogue in his philosophy. Martin Buber's concept of philosophical dialogue is centred on the idea of genuine, meaningful communication between individuals. He contrasts two types of relationships: the I-Thou and the I-It modes. Dialogue that is unique because it evolves through a process and particular quality of communication whereby parties achieves a connection is central.

#### **a. Genuine Dialogue**

Martin Buber's concept of genuine dialogue is very original and fascinating. Genuine dialogue does not exist in human terms and in the philosophical realm. Dialogue whether spoken or not, is whereby each of those participating has in mind the other in his current and specific being and they turn to each other with the aim of starting a living mutual relation. In terms of process and attitude, dialogic communication is the polar opposite of monologic communication and may well be the foundation of the higher standards for ethical business communication and ethical religious communication. Dialogue communication is characterised by the relationships and attitudes the participants have towards each other. Dialogue communication, can therefore lead to genuine conversation between the two parties. In an I-Thou mode of relation both participants exist as polarities of relation whose centre lies in between. Communication is not one-way transmission, but a two-way dialogic transaction.

Furthermore in genuine dialogue, the meeting involved is infrequent, but a meeting of souls. Turning to each other is an ingredient of dialogue most importantly a genuine one. This is not found by seeking but by grace, all human beings are called to genuine dialogue rather than looking for it. It is very rare to experience this type of dialogue among modern contemporary men, in the case where it is found no matter how 'unspiritual,' witness is borne on behalf of the continuance of the whole substance of man's spirit. To engage in genuine dialogue, each one should consider his partner as the very one he is. According to him I became aware of him, aware that he is different, essentially different from myself, in the definite, unequal way which is peculiar to him, and I accept whom thus I see, so that in all sincerity can direct all that I say to him as a person he is. Perhaps from time to time I most offer strict opposition to his view about the subject of our conversation. But I accept this person, the personal bearer of a conviction, in his definite being out of which his conviction has grown- even though I must try to show, bit by bit, the wrongness of this very conviction. I struggle with him as his partner, I confirmed him as creature and as creation, I confirmed him who is opposed to me as him who is over against me. It is true that it is now depends on the other whether genuine dialogue, mutuality in speech arises between us. But if thus give to the other who confronts me his legitimate standing as a man with whom I am ready to enter into dialogue, then I may trust him and suppose him to be also ready to deal with me as his partner. A dialogic relationship is one where genuine dialogue occurs between partners. However, Buber does not claim, "Dialogic is not to be identified with love", nor is it sentimental in nature (i.e., a vehicle for delicate feelings). That is not to say, according to

Buber, that love (as affection and caring between persons) cannot be dialogic. In fact, he maintains that, ...love without dialogic, without real outgoing to the other, reaching to the other, and accompanying with the other is false. However, It Is possible for genuine dialogic to occur without the presence of love, while love without the presence of dialogic is a love in appearance only. Love without dialogic is I-It in nature. Man sees the beloved as an object (It) for his own gain (e.g., his emotional wellbeing, his sense of security, the receiver or returner of his affection, etc.). This promotes the occurrence of a mis-meeting, known each other for years.

### **b. Technical Dialogue**

Martin Buber says that Technical dialogue can be prompted solely by the need of objective understanding, a need that impels someone to understand something without engaging the soul. Unlike genuine dialogue which engages the soul, technical dialogue belongs qualitatively to the alienable sterling of the modern existence. Concrete dialogue is continuously hidden in all sorts of strange corners. In other words, According to Martin Buber, technical dialogue is communication driven solely by the need for objective understanding, contrasting with genuine dialogue, which focuses on establishing a living mutual relationship. This type of dialogue is focused on achieving a specific goal or understanding, treating the other person as an object to be used for information or action. .

In Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, *technical dialogue* can be understood as a form of communication primarily aimed at exchanging information, coordinating actions, or achieving a specific practical goal. Unlike **genuine dialogue**, which fosters deep interpersonal relationships and mutual presence, technical dialogue is instrumental—it serves an external function rather than creating a meaningful connection between individuals. A conversation limited to functional communication, such as workplace discussions, military commands, or scientific exchanges. Technical dialogue is a common phenomenon in our world today, in which people engage in dialogue with no sense of fellow-feelings. Here people who are engaged in this dialogue do not really reorganise each other's spiritual nature. The soul of a person is not involved in dialogue. Since modern existence does not seek the spiritual welfare of man, so does its approach to human relations become technical and mechanistic. Human relations are characterised by materialism and objectification which diminishes the true and concrete relation that can be expressed in dialogue. In such a dialogue, there is no true human relation because there is no involvement of physical contact with the other. Rather machines and devices like telephone, telegram, internet, radio and the like take the place of the physical contact which includes the soul.

### **c. Monological Dialogue**

Monological Dialogue, which Martin Buber refers to as dialogue, is a weak or distorted form of dialogue. In his terms, this kind of dialogue has no connection with the otherness of the other. It is monologue but concealed or disguised as dialogue. Here, two people

come together in space and speak to each other in a strange, tortuous (not simply direct; long complicated and difficult to understand) and circuitous (long and not direct) manner and yet imagine that they have been indulged in the confusion or torment being thrown again on their own resources. The concept monological dialogue is a contradiction in terms. How can a monologue be a dialogue at the same time? Martin Buber is very much aware of this contradiction, for this reason he called it dialogue in disguise. For example, if I hit my foot on a rock then I start talking to myself as a result of the pain sustained from the rock. The thought I express within or to myself is what Martin Buber is held as monological dialogue. For Martin Buber, monologue is the opposite of dialogue, representing a self-centered, one-sided communication where individuals focus on their own thoughts and experiences rather than engaging with others. Buber's concept of monologue is closely linked to his philosophy of I-It relationships, where individuals treat others as objects or things to be used or manipulated, rather than as unique, valuable individuals. Buber believed that monologue is an impasse, a form of communication that prevents genuine connection and understanding.

According to Martin Buber, this type of dialogue is one in which the thoughts are not clearly expressed in the way they exist in the mind of the speaker but in saying them out they will strike home in the sharpest ways, and again the people being addressed are not present in person. It is good to note that, dialogical life is not the type in which one has much to do with men, but one in which you actually have to do with people with whom you have to do. It is not the man who lives in isolation that lives the life of monologue, but one who is not capable of making concrete in the way of being in the community in which, in the aspect of his destiny, he goes about.

Buber warns that this must not be confused with the contrast between egoism and altruism as taken by some moralists. It is in monologue that people relate to the *Other* as contents of once experience, where words are said and uttered but there is little or no connection. This is an experience one encounters with men and things around him. It is very existential for man to live in the society, not because he is conditioned but the fact of his nature. A mosquito does not know that he lives in the society, because he does not know that he exists. Only a man can live a life of monologue, because he knows that he exist and his exists and his existence has modes in which he realises himself among other created beings.

### **The Two Poles of Dialogue**

Man is a social being, most of the existentialists philosophers believe that only man exist other things are. Here, Buberian understanding of 'making present' or 'mutual response' which is essential for an authentic relation 'between man and man would be discussed.

### **a Mutual Responds**

This concept of 'present' is very essential for dialogical life, and it is one of the characteristics features of 'I-thou' relation. Thus, it is good for us to clarify what Buber

means by this notion. 'Making present' is that attitude of approaching somebody as he or she is here and now, and not as he or she was, or as he or she will be. Thus, in a genuine 'I-Thou' relation, 'I' has to view the 'Thou' not according to the past what he or she knows or heard about him or her instead, the 'I' should view the 'Thou' as he or she is here and now, as something new and this not the case with 'I-It' relation. There is never a present with 'I-It' relationship, only a past. This is so because all objective knowledge about human beings is knowledge about his past, of what he has been rather than of what he is. If the present moment is to have a genuine novelty, if it is not perfectly determined by the events of the past, then it must be possible for the present to produce a break with the past. In form of a response that could not have been calculated from the knowledge of the past. In the 'I-Thou' relationship we are therefore genuinely living in the present because we are prepared for any and every response to our address, the expected and it is this that constitutes genuine listening.

This can be made clear by giving a number of instances. The entire 'I-It' world is only based on the past experience. A human being will relate with a chair because of his past experience with it, the importance or the usefulness of the chair for him or her. Thus, no rational human being will relate with a thing which he or she had a negative experience with a child will not touch the fire again just because of the past experience of unpleasantness. The interest is how the thing is in the past, which will help to determine its present state, and determine one's approach to it. This is the same when we treat the other person as an object 'I' and adopt a permanent attitude towards him or her, regarding the past experience. Thus the value of a person is attached to what he or she was in the past; in the same way, a person is bad because one knows him or her to be bad in the past. The changing aspect or nature of a human person gives way to the stagnant or static aspect; hence becomingness is no longer attainable. With such a manner it is not possible to have or set up an authentic relationship with the 'Thou.' Consequently, we need to make a transition from 'making past' to 'making present.'

### **b. Responsibility**

Martin Buber traces the origin of responsibility from the domain of special ethics, of an 'ought,' something that passes free in the air into lived life experience. Genuine responsibility exists only where there is a concrete response from the person. Response is made to what happens to someone, to what is to be seen, heard and felt. Responsibility for him becomes a metaphor of morality when it does not respond to a word. The existence of responsibility depends on a court to which one is responsible, and one-self-responsibility becomes a reality only when the 'self' to which one is responsible becomes obviously clear into the absolute. One who really practices responsibility in a dialogical life does not need to name the one he is responding to, because he knows him in the word's substance which presses on and in the rising and fall of an interest in feelings and emotions, which stirs a man in his heart of hearts. "A man can ward off with all his strength the belief that "God" is there, and he tastes him in the strict sacrament of dialogue."

Man is required to engage in 'I-Thou' relationship because he is responsible for the other 'Thou'. Man, as long as he exists as 'Thou,' is not free from responsibility. He has exchanged the torment of the infinite in pursuing the effects of the motive power of the infinite. Therefore, man has the enormous responsibility of love for the entire world-event which is not "traceable for the profound belonging to the world before the face of God." God has to be clear enough to do away with ethical judgements once and for all. Man is simply commended for a larger responsibility, one who is more in need of love, which he has to put into practice till he dies. Having discussed at length the need to take a genuine responsibility of the other 'Thou' no matter the provocations we are under because the other exists equally as we do. In this light, we shall delve into the next paragraph that will discuss the realm of being.

### **Dialogue and Existence**

Martin Buber's philosophy is the reality of 'space' that is between persons. At the root of this is the notion that self-perfection is only achievable within the realm of relationship with the others. Relationship for Martin Buber existed in a form of dialogue. However, knowledge of oneself comes to reality only when relationship between men and creation is comprehended to be a dialogical one. The most important thing for Martin Buber is dialogue, which involves all sorts of relation, to oneself, to the others and to all kinds of created beings.

Why existence? It is within the realm of existence that dialogue takes place. It is within existence that dialogue brings about his philosophy using the word pairs of 'I-Thou' and 'I-it' in order to categorize the manner of consciousness, interaction, and being by which the individual engages with others, inanimate objects and all reality within him. In his book "I-Thou," a person is always engaged with the world in one of these modes. The general pattern Martin Buber uses to explain these modes of existence or being in dialogue- 'I-Thou' and 'I-It'. Dialogical life is not limited to man's movement with one another; it has demonstrated itself as a relationship to men, to one another, which is represented only in their movements. In dialogue two or more people must turn to each other in mutuality and bond; it should not be seen as something that has inseparable connection with human action. In his dialogical argument, he makes known to all not only the awareness and appearance of dialogue of life but also the essence. He describes dialogue of life but also the essence. He describes dialogue as the opening of oneself to the otherness of the other as contrast to monologue.

Dialogue involves both silence and speech especially where people are open to 'I-Thou' relationship. In dialogue, a person is present to the other; they are attentive and aware, listening and waiting. Again, Martin Buber talks about the heart as the point of unmediated impressions. The heart is an integral point, which involves our being; it includes our moral sense and spirit: to open the heart is to allow one to see and experience what goes beyond the immediate. Martin Buber presents us with three kinds of dialogue, whether they are spoken or not, each one involves and has in mind the other in the present

and particular being. Each one turns to the other with the intention of establishing a concrete mutual relationship.

### **Conclusion**

The dialogue, which is referred to by Buber, is a life dialogue distinguished by its uniqueness and individuality. It lacks universal schemes, methodology or external criteria and, therefore, cannot be unambiguously defined. Therefore, it can be stated that Buber's dialogic communication opens up a dialogue as a mystery of human existence. The essence and goal of this dialogue is the very being of two individuals' together, closeness of their souls rather than a certain overall achieved result. Martin Buber writes that, "love without dialogic, without real outgoing to the other, reaching to the other, and accompanying with the other, the love remaining with itself- this called Lucifer! This 'love is Evil because it is monologicals. The monologicals man is not aware of the "otherness" of the other, but instead tries to incorporate the 'other' into himself." Thus, it is kind of dialogue that has brought us thus far in answering the question of genuine dialogue between man and man.

Hence, we find that 'I-Thou' philosophy can aid in addressing the various moral decadence which affects our society today and makes the life of human person difficult and impossible to relate with one another. Many evils in society in particular have been the outcome of insincere relationship with the self and the other. When the other person is treated as a mere thing among things which can be at will, there is evil. Moral order and genuine dialogue between man and man is shore only when each human person treats the other as ones true 'Thou' to encounter and not as 'It' to be exploited for a sordid gain or selfish end. Martin Buber emphasizes genuine dialogue, in the modern time and contemporary society. The current era sees man as strange to his nature; this is because of the glorification of reason, scientific and technological progress. The current age glorifies reason and despises the subject-to-subject relationship and give rise to subject-object, which Martin Buber calls 'I-It' relationship. For Buber, the term dialogue refers to a unique kind of immediacy and connection of two beings that have no conscious intent of influencing the other. As noted previously, Buber's radical opposition between the I-You and the I-It is a distinction between two very different modes of being, but it can also be viewed as a conflict between two ethical positions. Indeed, Lisbeth Lipari characterizes this conflict as one between the inter-subjective, ethical, dialogical relation of the I-Thou and the instrumental, goal-oriented, monological relation of the I-It. The former is based on attitudes such as care and acceptance of difference while the latter rests on a feeling of superiority and a desire to control the world. Although Buber stressed that both the I-You and the I-It are necessary modes of being, he clearly believed that we exist too little in the former and too much in the latter. For him, human beings fully emerge as persons not as isolated individuals or as part of a collective, but rather in a dialogue or relation with other beings.

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