

MARTIN BUBER'S CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE AND MORAL ORDER IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

*Buber's thesis is that of genuine dialogue. It constitutes the ground of authentic human existence and ethical life. Dialogue for him is understood not merely as verbal communication but as a mutual existential encounter. 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 major work *Ich und Du*. The "I–Thou" relation signifies a mode of being that is direct, reciprocal, and dialogical. In contrast, the I–It relation reflects the objectifying stance, wherein the other is reduced to a means, a function, or a concept. The thesis 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. However, despite its profound philosophical insights, Buber's idea of dialogue leaves certain gaps that contemporary research seeks to address. While Buber emphasizes the depth of interpersonal relations, he gives little attention to the **structural, cultural, and technological factors** that mediate modern dialogue, especially in pluralistic and digitally interconnected societies. Moreover, Buber does not sufficiently explore how power dynamics, social inequalities, and institutional constraints can hinder or reshape genuine dialogical encounters. The thesis builds on Buber's foundational concepts while extending the discussion to include **cross-cultural communication, digital dialogue, and the ethics of dialogue in contexts of social fragmentation and diversity**. By integrating Buber's existential-dialogical framework with contemporary realities, this study aims to enrich the discourse on dialogue, fostering a more holistic understanding that is both philosophically grounded and socially responsive.*

Keywords: Buber, Dialogue, Moral Order, Nigeria, Relationship

1. Introduction

Martin Buber's believes that all real existence is found in dialogue and encounter and that in the beginning is in relation. 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." This thought has led me into this research work, with the goal of bringing into the people's awareness the meaning of dialogue in Martin Buber's philosophy and its importance to man's daily endeavour among humans if the love of humanity leads to the love of God and vice versa. 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.” The I-Thou relationship represents a more profound and reciprocal engagement, where individuals encounter each other as unique beings and engage in a genuine, mutual relationship characterized by presence and authenticity. In contrast, the I-It relationship treats others as objects or means to an end, focusing on their functional roles rather than their intrinsic value. Buber argues that true dialogue, and hence authentic human connection, occurs when individuals approach each other in the I-Thou mode. This form of interaction allows for genuine understanding and relational depth, which is essential for personal and spiritual growth.

The problem in studying Martin Buber's concept of dialogue revolves around understanding the practical implications and transformative potential of his philosophical thought in contemporary contexts. Buber's distinction between I-It and I-Thou relationships presents a critical lens for analyzing interpersonal interactions and communication. There is a challenge in the mutual I-thou arrangement because of the tendency of people taking advantage of each other and objectifying them. However, the challenge lies in translating these abstract philosophical ideas into actionable insights for real-world applications, such as in education, psychotherapy, and interfaith dialogue.

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.

2. Definition 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.

3 Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue

3.1 Buber' Philosophy of Dialogue

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. 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.

Furthermore, dialogue 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. Thus, true community is not realised simply because people have feelings for each other. 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 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.

3.2 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.

3.2.1 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. 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.

3.2.2 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.

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.

3.2.3 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 dulge 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.

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.

3.3 The Realm of Being

In Buber's idea, relationship with one another is possible if and only if we become aware of the other, as being different from the self, and which stands just there, outside the 'I'. For him, genuine relationship is that which respects the otherness and the uniqueness of the other person.' Thus, if I encounter a human being as my 'Thou', and say the primary word 'I-Thou' to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things. Hence for Buber, he or she, bounded from every other he or she, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. As far as I see the other person as a mere nature able to be experienced and described or subject him to my advantage, he ceases to be 'Thou'. Thus, we talk of the two fold principle of human existence, according to Buber, which the self or the 'I' can adopt towards the surrounding beings, more importantly to his or her fellow human being. These principles are 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' relationship.

3.3.1 "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 is different from that of the basic word I-It. I-you (*Ich-su*) distinguishes and separates like subject, for instance the biblical Mosaic diction “As for me and my family we shall worship the Lord.” 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 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. Buber explains that the "Thou" is always on one on one intersubjectivity basis in this relationship is not treated as an object or a means to an end but is recognized as a whole being with intrinsic value. In this interaction, the "I" does not exist in isolation but is defined through its relation to the "Thou." The I-Thou encounter fosters true dialogue and engagement, forming the foundation of authentic human relationships and even divine encounters.

3.3..2The "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 I-It relationship is necessary for many aspects of human existence, these include scientific and analytical, Economic and social Interaction and technological and bureaucratic system.

3.3.3 Differences Between I-Thou and I-It Relationships

Buber's distinction between these two modes of relationships can be understood through several key contrasts: Buber argues that modernity increasingly prioritizes I-It relationships, leading to alienation and a loss of genuine connection. However, he does not suggest that I-It relationships are inherently negative; rather, he emphasizes the necessity of balancing both modes of existence. While I-It relationships help structure practical life, true fulfillment comes from embracing I-Thou encounters.

Buber's philosophy presents a compelling framework for understanding human relationships and the conditions for authentic existence. His I-Thou and I-It distinctions reveal the contrast between deep, personal engagement and detached, utilitarian interaction. While both types of relationships are necessary, he warns against an overemphasis on I-It interactions, which can erode meaningful human connections. His ideas remain highly relevant in contemporary society, where digital communication, economic structures, and institutional frameworks often prioritize I-It relationships. Buber

challenges individuals to seek genuine encounters, fostering relationships that affirm the dignity and presence of the "Thou" rather than reducing the other to an "It."

By emphasizing the importance of dialogue, presence, and mutual recognition, Buber's work serves as a reminder of the profound impact relationships have on human existence. His philosophy continues to inspire those seeking deeper connections in an increasingly impersonal world.

3.4 The Two Poles Of Dialogue

3.4.1 Mutual Response

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 know, 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 being 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.

3.4.2 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."

4. An Applicability of Martin Buber's Concept of Dialogue as a way of Help in Restoring Moral Order in Nigeria.

After going through Buberian dialogical philosophy- the 'I-Thou' philosophy- the question is how useful or workable this philosophy is for the Nigerian man or woman today? Is it a mere speculation or abstraction which has nothing to do with our nation today, having no connection to the facts? If true, all our work will be useless for any existential philosopher today. Nevertheless, we think that Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy is useful for us today, especially in our Nation Nigeria. Our daily experience has shown how today's Nigerian man and woman are in crisis of genuine dialogue: they have lost their dignity, essence and have been reduced to an object of experience 'It'. Human beings for example have become a commodity to be bought and transported to another country just for gain. Moreover, killing of one another has become a daily routine in our nation Nigeria. The human person is reduced to a thing, an object of experience or a thing to be exploited for sordid gain.

Again, the outcome of this is that, human beings have lost their identity. The reason or purposes of his creation is distorted or tarnished by the bomb blast, religious crisis, kidnapping, tribal wars, human trafficking, abortion, armed robbery, political thuggery, drug addiction, embezzlements of government funds, government strikes here and there. These accumulated ill behaviours have come to settle as part or nature of human beings in our nation Nigeria today. When we tend to clarify what human beings; are it is very easy and clear to say that he is an animal, but a higher animal with rationality and it is this composition that makes us different from other animals. As such, who has the capability of knowing what is right and wrong actions. If this is a true fact about what man is. Then, the whole truth implies that, we are bound to see the other human person as 'Thou' not as 'It'. According to Martin Buber, in the beginning is relation; hence human being is by its very nature, *homo dialogus*; that is incapable of realizing himself without communion with mankind, with creation and with the creator.

However, on the other hand, it is disturbing to know that our nation Nigeria today is characterized by inter-tribal wars and tensions of all sorts between man and man as is clearly seen in some of the States of the country today. For instance, recently there was a religious crisis in Nigeria, particularly in Jos Benue and Northern.

The report written by [Victor Ulasi](#) says that, “The numbers of casualty and dead toll have increased in the religious crisis between the Muslim and Christians in Joss, Plateau State, which had led to the death of dozens of people while others injured in fresh sectarian violence leading to the imposition of a dusk-to-dawn curfew.” And some of these tensions tend to suggest to us the true reality of human beings following the assertion made by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his state of nature, “that man is a threat to the other man therefore, man has the liberty to guard himself from attack however he could.” And it seems there is no doubt about this because, today in our Nation Nigeria when one picks up any newspaper around him or her it is certain to see how human beings are being treated, exploited by the other human beings as a mere thing or object. But, on the other hand, Martin Buber will not seem to agree with Thomas Hobbes's assertion for the reason that,

human beings are by nature, social beings; which simply implies that we cannot do without the other person. On this note Martin Buber in his own words will say that human beings are by nature *homo dialogus*; meaning that, we realize our being in communion with the other person(s). On the other hand, we act contrary to our nature as social beings when we treat the other person as an object of experience. The person estranged from self; will be estranged by others; more so estranged from the world and lastly estranged from God. For this very purpose, we need to be conscious no matter our state of origin in this country Nigeria in the care and service to one another.

At this juncture, let us now look at how Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy can be of help in restoring moral order in our Nation Nigeria. Issues confronted by the Nigerian men and women at large are enormous. It is by establishing a genuine dialogue with one another that we will be capable of restoring moral order in our nation Nigeria today because the country needs it in order to grow. In addition, to restore moral order we need to improve our social arrangement through genuine dialogue (I-Thou) relationship. In view of this, Martin Buber writes that, True community can only be found on the changed relations between men, and these changed relations can only follow the inner change and preparation of the men who lead, work and sacrifice for the community.

But unfortunately, in our Nation Nigeria in particular people find it difficult to have or establish a genuine dialogue with one another. The difficulty comes from the attitude of talking or looking one's position as the climax which should and cannot but depend by all; in genuine dialogue each of the partners, even when he or she stands in opposition to the other, heeds, insists and confirms his opponents as an existing other. Only then can conflict and corruption certainly be eradicated from the world and in Nigeria in particular, but be humanly arbitrated and led towards its overcoming." By and large the popular use of dialogue is one of the only genuine ways to the restoration of moral order in our nation Nigeria today. Therefore, people must engage in talk with one another through their truly human men if the great peace is to be restored and the devastated life of the earth renews itself. Every human person is bound to know this reality and uphold to make a change in his or her way through conforming to a true dialogical life in the aforementioned places; politics, economic, moral, religion, government and education where the one sees other human person not 'I' but as 'Thou' he is and who is to be encountered and lived with, in a mutual relationship. By and large this can only be reality in our Nation Nigeria through the application, acknowledgement and practice of Martin Buber's genuine dialogue which is an essential building block of a community or nation in disarray then we can be shore of restoration of order in the country.

Conclusion

Martin Buber writes that, "love without dialogic, without real outgoing to the other, reaching to the other, and companying 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 in today Nigeria. Since, no human person can exist without the other human person for we are by nature, *homo dialogues*; which implies that, we are incapable of realizing ourselves without the communion of others and as well with the creation and with the creator. It this type of genuine human relationship that Martin Buber preaches but then, the question to ask oneself is; how to go further in sincere dialogue with the other. Since, it is very clear that in our world today precisely Nigeria there are confusion, corruption and tension here and there and with recourse to our genuine dialogue with the 'other' which is the root or responsible to moral decadence in Nigeria.

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. I have been always interrogating myself about the happenings and miss-happenings that are prevailing and eating up the fabric of our society today. If I may ask is there any true and genuine dialogue today in Nigeria? If at all, how do we experience it? In fact these are questions that come to my mind each moment of the day. But, I think, I have not discovered yet any appropriate answer to these questions, however reading through the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber, I came to realized how to deal with such questions because Martin Buber concept of dialogue is an essential building block of community especially one characterized by moral decadence in particular Nigeria.

Finally, the concept is also useful and can be of help to a Nation in particular Nigeria one characterized by moral decadence. It will be of help because, the concept creates an awareness of what it takes to create a community or an atmosphere of support, and to establish genuine relationship where one can see the other human person as the 'Thou' he is and not as an 'It' with this dialogue is restored in the aforementioned places for a better Nigeria.

Endnotes

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