

Article

What Kind of God Does Buber's "I-Thou" Offer to the World: An Introduction to Buber's Religious Thought [†]

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Abstract: This article has three main goals: (1) To explain in a clear and comprehensible way the difficult basic-word "I-Thou", which is the basis of Buber's concept of dialogue, and in fact is the core of his entire teaching (even though it eventually spread over many fields). My main argument in this article is that "I-Thou" is not the "dialogue" that is often spoken of in the name of Buber (not only on the popular level but also in academic circles, and even commonly among those who deal directly with Buber's teaching) but, rather, that "I-Thou" is a pointing-toward-word—pointing the way for the one whose heart is willing to direct his life to the path of devotion to God—a life whose practical meaning according to Buber is the effort to make room for the presence of the divine ("Shekhinah") within the stream of earthly normal life, the flow of physical, instinctive life, the flow of life as they are, within "This-World" as it is. (2) This article attempts to follow the sources in Buber's writings to clearly explain Buber's faith (which Buber saw as the core of the movement of Hasidism that preceded him). Who is the God that Buber clings to? Why did Buber try to replace the common appellation "God" with a new term of his own: "The Eternal Thou"? (3) It aims to show how the researchers who tried to present Buber as a social or political thinker and removed from his teaching the centrality of his faith entirely distorted his teaching and displaced from it the core of the foundation on which all of Buber's teaching rests.

Keywords: Martin Buber; I-Thou basic word; faith and God in Buber's teaching; Hassidism; religious humanism; love in Buber's teaching



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1. On the Difficulty in Explaining the Primary Words at the Center of Buber's Thought

Martin Buber begins *I and Thou* with the following:

The world is two-fold for man in accordance with his two-fold attitude.

The attitude of man is two-fold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak.

The basic words are not single words but word pairs.

One basic word is the word pair I-You (=I-Thou).

The other basic word is the word pair I-It, but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It.

Thus, the I of man is also two-fold.

For the I of the basic word I-You (=I-Thou) is different from that in the basic word I-It.

Only a few have attempted to plumb the depths of meaning of the basic words "I-Thou" and "I-It" and have dared to clearly formulate this meaning. Buber himself did not make this easy for the reader,¹ and his interpreters generally feared to examine the religious nucleus of his teachings, preferring instead to engage in the external trappings of his life.

Jochanan Bloch is one of the few scholars to devote intensive efforts to explaining these concepts. He writes:

[. . .] in the final analysis one cannot make a clear distinction between Thou and It. The branching-off of Thou from It is not to be grasped in clear concepts. (Bloch 1984b, p. 60)²

The attempts by Samuel Hugo Bergman, Buber's close friend and pupil, to contend with this issue are similarly unsatisfactory. Bergman writes in his entry on Buber in the *Hebrew Encyclopedia*:

Buber distinguishes between two "primary words": the primary word of I-Thou, and that of I-It. A person's "I" also has two countenances [i.e., how he relates to the other]. The "I" of the I-Thou primary word is not the same as that of the I-It primary word. The I-Thou relation requires effort and energy from both sides of the dialogue, and this energy wanes. The "objective" "It" does not demand of us the special efforts which are required by the "Thou", with which we have a direct relation. The bounds of our capability to contain, of our preparedness vis-a-vis the other, are limited. The busy physician cannot mobilize the necessary mental powers for the realization of I-Thou, and for him the patient is transformed from "Thou" to nameless "case", to "It". This is also true for the social worker, and for all of us as regards our attitude to the other. (Bergman 1968, cols. 682–83)³

Bergman's statement forces us to conclude that the relation to "Thou" requires "effort and strength", which in most instances is beyond us in everyday life. That is, even with generally good intentions, in real life we usually address the other as if he were "It"—we relate to the other as if he were a nameless object, who has no independent existence as a subject.

Clearly, then, the meaning of the primary (or basic) word "I-It" is much more understandable than that of "I-Thou". Bergman gracefully skirts providing an explanation for the "I-Thou" minefield and focuses mainly on "I-It".

Other attempts by Bergman to contend with this question, such as the frequently cited description from his *Dialogical Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber*, do not sufficiently clarify this concept (Bergman 1991, pp. 215–45). In order to exemplify the possibility of an I-Thou encounter, he writes:

The address itself [. . .] when one person turns to another in conversation and calls him by his name—frees the Thou from the surroundings, and when the person with whom I am talking turns to me, this relationship is created. (Bergman 1991, p. 227)

This explanation, however, is insufficient. A person's calling another by name is usually no more than a pretense of being interested, a false show of friendship. In actuality, during the conversation, this person is interested solely in the benefit he can obtain from his interlocutor. For him, the latter is merely an object, and the interlocutor's existence as a subject in his own right is no concern of his.⁴

Admittedly, most people would waste no time in denying this—every civilized person would have difficulty in admitting, even to himself, that most of his ties with the world are mechanical and alienated. On this point, however, we should adopt a cautious approach, which Paul Ricoeur called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (see Ricoeur 1970, pp. 32 ff). Obviously, Buber, too, was cognizant of this, and in his essay, "Distance and Relation", he distinguished between routine existence, which is evident in "those popular discussions which misuse the reality of speech", and "genuine conversation" (Buber 1988a, pp. 58–59)

In any event, in *Dialogical Philosophy*, Bergman attempts to take another path in order to lucidly explain these basic words. He exemplifies the basic word "I-It" by means of the scientist, for whom things in the world are "side-by-side". That is, the scientist's attitude to the objects of his research is not one of "affinity or dialogue, but of detached manipulation that is apt to place things indifferently next to each other" (Bergman 1991, p. 226). He exemplifies "I-Thou", in contrast, as follows:

When Jephthah calls his daughter "my daughter" (Judg. 11:35), or when David laments "I am distressed for you my brother Jonathan" (Sam. 1:26), on the other

hand, there is in the address what Buber has called ‘exclusiveness’. The Thou is taken out of the surroundings and is no longer contiguous with it, as the paper is to the table on which it rests. (Bergman 1991, pp. 226–27)

Here, too, we still lack sufficient clarity. Anyone who has even a passing familiarity with Freudian methodology and can adopt the “hermeneutics of suspicion” for our discussion will have difficulty in literally accepting Jephthah’s grief over his daughter or David’s for the loss of Jonathan.⁵ In Freudian terminology, we can say that Jephthah and David bore a libidinous charge that became melancholy energy the moment that its objects were gone.⁶ In the simpler wording of Buddhism, the personal mourning of each of these Biblical characters might attest to a strong past attachment, with the loss causing them much suffering, as depicted in the Bible.⁷

The basis for Bergman’s explanation of “I-Thou” is then unclear. Buber repeatedly stated that when two people say to each other “Thou”, then the possibility arises of the element that he calls the “third”, namely, divine grace, being present with them.⁸ Such an event obviously exceeds the framework of regular human communication. Bergman himself writes that such an occurrence creates an opening to the mysterious, to the “mystery of reality” (I will expand on this below). Accordingly, it cannot be explained by the usual psychological tools. Such an event can be called—and not metaphorically—an “inner miracle”.⁹ We, therefore, may ask what in the Jephthah and David narratives can be understood as an “inner miracle”, direct contact with the “mystery of reality”? Where, in his opinion, is the “Eternal Thou” present between the two?¹⁰

Bergman’s explanation is not the only of its kind. The literature on Buberian dialogue contains a wealth of examples that attest to a fundamental lack of comprehension of the basic word “I-Thou”.¹¹ The above example was not cited in order to detract from Bergman’s major contribution to our understanding of Buber’s teachings, but rather to demonstrate the great difficulty lying in wait for anyone, aided by the conventional understanding, who wants to enter the “black hole” of “Thou”.¹² A clarification of this basic element requires in-depth study that goes well beyond the usual ways in which we explain the word.

2. On the Meaning of the Primary Words “I-Thou” and “I-It”

In my opinion, the basic words “I-Thou” and “I-It” cannot be understood without carefully scrutinizing examples from the flow of life itself, ones that can easily be ignored. Furthermore, they cannot be understood without considering the basic psychological fact of the existence of the ego.¹³ We should recall that we are naturally egotistical. All our relations with the ego of the other are conducted in accordance with the basic rule that “I come before the other”, which suffices for a person to erase—at least to a large extent—from his awareness the very existence of other subjects.¹⁴ Buber exemplifies this with the propagandist, who he says is tainted by:

the lust to make use [in verbal communication] [. . .] in his relation to men remaining as in a relation to things; to things, moreover, with which he will never enter into relation, which he is indeed eager to rob of their distance¹⁵ and independence. (Buber 1988a, p. 59)

If we think about this propagandist, we realize that he is not exceptional—this is how all of us talk regularly with people. Jacques Lacan formulated this in his sharp way, and said that, actually, four participate in every dialogue: two subjects and two “advocates” who present their set of manipulations to each other. Lacan was of the opinion that the main role of human speech is not to create communication with the other, but to confuse one’s interlocutor in order to obtain one’s goal.¹⁶

Jean Piaget showed in his studies that children seven years old and younger,¹⁷ even if they have mastered the use of words, do not address what they say to their interlocutors, they rather speak to themselves. Children are egocentric creatures and the other, for them, is just a sort of screen on which they can project their thoughts.¹⁸ Piaget naively thought that as the child grows, he learns to identify his interlocutor and to direct his speech to him.¹⁹ Within the limits of his discipline, Piaget was undoubtedly correct. If, however, we

employ the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, we see that as the child grows up, he does not forge any substantial connection with the other (that is, sees him as a subject), but learns how to be manipulative. He learns to pretend that he views the other as a subject and acts on his behalf—all in order to obtain, in the end, what he wants from the other (in other words, he regards him as an object). The difference between the adult and the child is not substantive: the child, unlike the adult, is still too innocent to garb himself in the cloak of a caring and considerate person, and his innocent manipulations just cause us to smile; the manipulations of the adult, in contrast, arouse our ire.

The response by the German psychotherapist Lorenz Wachinger should be useful for our discussion. In a conference held at Ben-Gurion University, Wachinger told the learned participants that they were discussing the definition of these basic words from a philosophical perspective. If, however, they were to be examined from a psychological viewpoint, their meaning would be quite clear. These basic words, in his opinion, actually define two states in our mental life when we relate to the world around us. According to him:

The evocative rhetoric of *I and Thou* misleads the reader into a feeling of having understood, which does not stand up to close examination. My objection is that the center of Buber’s thought lies outside the objectifying, noetic²⁰ domain of critical philosophy since Descartes. Our task in dealing with Buber’s work is to thematize the practical components in a philosophically appropriate manner: to pay attention not only to its concepts and logic, but also to the dynamics of intersubjective relations which accompany his logic, or are mixed in with it—the delicate or direct play of the struggle for power over and influence on the Other, the pressure toward a desired change and the resistance of the other to that pressure, in short, the game that is played whenever two or more people confront each other.²¹ Buber’s interest in problems of psychotherapy shows his sensitivity to the dynamic aspect of language, and only from this aspect can he be adequately understood. (Wachinger 1984; see also Kosman 2007a, pp. 511–16)

3. The Basic Word I-It

As an example, I will examine a seemingly unimportant event from among the many that occur every day in each of our lives (the reader will forgive me if I exchange the language of objective reporting for a literary confessional tone).

Let us assume that the following sequence of events happened to me one day:

1. I settled in with a pile of books in my living room in order to prepare the material for an article that I committed myself to write by a specific date for a prestigious journal.
2. All of a sudden, my eyes started closing and I thought that I should take a short nap.
3. I left the books, but on my way to my bed I remembered that my wife would soon return from work. I knew that she would be upset by such a pile of books in the living room.
4. Now, a silent battle is being waged within me between two voices.²² On the one hand, since I was so tired, I did not marshal my flagging strength for this paltry task to return the pile of books to my already overflowing study, knowing full well that I would have to return them to the living room when I went back to working. On the other hand, I also knew that if I would not clean up the living room and fell asleep, this would result in tension between me and my wife. This tension would not be pleasant for me, and not only that, it would waste precious time.
5. The rational consideration won out over my tiredness and laziness. I went back to the living room and returned the pile of books to my study.

I will use this chain of events, some version of which is familiar to each of us, to explain the dialogical idea. It should be stressed that this idea will always be intimately linked to the most normal events in our everyday lives. It is not really related to the abstract philosophical formulations that occupy their place of honor in the exalted realms of learned tomes. Buber himself wrote:

This essential two-foldness cannot be overcome by invoking a “world of ideas” as a third element that might transcend this opposition. For I speak only of the actual human being, of you and me, of our life and our world, not of any I-in-itself and not of any Being-in-itself. (Buber 1970, pp. 64–65)²³

An initial, and quite simple, analysis of this chain of events shows that, during the entire time, I saw my wife only as an absolute “It”; that is, an object that intruded from the outside into my territory. All the considerations that I took into account and that led me to act as I did, came from this egocentric center and its needs, and remained untouched by my wife’s inner world (that is, I did not see her as a subject). To add somewhat of an additional dimension to our inquiry, we will draw on a phenomenological analysis:

1. The striving-for: For weeks, I was driven by the need for results, to finish the academic work that I had taken upon myself. On the one hand, I wanted to remove the tenseness of this situation and enjoy some peace (homeostasis); on the other hand, there was also the desire for the pleasure I would derive from completing this work. Additionally, in my heart of hearts, I anticipated the enhanced power of the “cultural capital”²⁴ at my disposal. In my mind’s eye, I imagined that society would appreciate the greatness of my contribution and reward me for it in some way or another.
2. Physical tiredness: The tiredness that suddenly came over me prevented me from seeking a solution that would reduce my suffering. My urge to get up and leave my work in the middle ensued from the thought that sleep would assuage the physical suffering that I felt at that moment. Moreover, I knew that while sleeping I would gain new energy, which I would put to good use when I resumed my work.

Importantly, in the first stages, the realization that I would cause my wife mental anguish never entered my mind. When I did think of this consideration, its motivations were purely egotistical. The inevitable—albeit unpleasant—conclusion is that, at that moment, my wife was a limiting factor—an element that entered my life from outside and endangered my “kingdom of the self”.²⁵ This conception, obviously, is based in the hubris that developed in my childish imaginary world, a sort of image of the “I” as a monarch who is unbridled in his rule of all around him.²⁶

This penetration into my “I” gives me no rest, whether I am totally aware of it, or whether it flickers somewhere in my subconsciousness, since it suffices to endanger the imagined status of the ruling “I”—that closed and impervious egocentric kingdom. It forces me to unwillingly consider my wife and her wishes and to take them, too, into account. I suddenly realize that my wife and her needs limit the endless expansion of my imagined “kingdom of the self”. It seems that this is the hidden, primal root of human violence. The egocentric center responds aggressively to any such invasion from the outside.²⁷

At that moment, even if it is embarrassing to admit this, the ego, which is closed within itself, does not at all want the existence within its realm of the wife or any other person. The primitive energy of aggressiveness bubbles up from the depths of the ego; if it only could, at this moment it would choose to destroy all that threatens the territory that it rules.²⁸ In Jean-Paul Sartre’s precise and brutal formulation:

The fact of the Other is incontestable and touches me to the heart. I realize him through uneasiness; through him I am perpetually *in danger*. (Sartre 1966, p. 275)²⁹

Theodore Dreyfus explains Sartre’s analysis of our attitude to the other:

The other is not only the one whom I see; to the same degree, he sees me. And just as, while seeing, I turn him into an object, so, too, while seeing, he turns me into an object. By his turning me into an object, by clipping my wings, by his freezing me, the other constitutes for me (and I for him) a constant threat. (Dreyfus 1993, p. 152)³⁰

In Buber’s thought, the word “It” equals the word “something”.³¹ At that time, my wife was for me “something”—an object that penetrates into me and endangers the territory of my “I” (and that, in other instances, causes me pleasure).³²

It should be stressed that even if we attempt to explain the action of removing the books from the living room by means of rational philosophical–moral considerations (which, presumably, are more sublime), for example, as an action required by Kant’s categorical imperative, we will still remain in the closed territory of the “I” and in the context of its needs.³³ As Buber puts this:

The life of a human being does not exist merely in the sphere of goal-directed verbs. It does not consist merely of activities that have something for their object.

I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something. The life of a human being does not consist merely of all this and its like.

All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It. (Buber 1970, p. 54)

Schopenhauer, who formulated many of the insights that Buber would later draw into clearer focus, already highlighted this egocentrism, through his penetrating scrutiny of the unwitting psychological motives behind this action, in complete accordance with the “hermeneutics of suspicion”:

Now I confidently maintain that what opens the hand of the above-described [. . .] loveless doer of good, who is indifferent to the sufferings of others, can never be anything [. . .] but a slavish *deisidaimonía* [=Greek: superstition, irrational fear], no matter whether he calls his fetish “categorical imperative” or *Fitzlipuzli* [=a Mexican deity]. For what except fear could move a hard heart? (Schopenhauer 1995, p. 66)³⁴

4. The Basic Word I-Thou

Now, to imagine another chain of events, a different “script”. Let us assume that when I decide to stop working, I visualize my wife bearing a burden, in a completely different corner of the world. This burden is shared by both of us: work, shopping, and endless everyday concerns. At that moment, I might even be able to see in my mind’s eye her distress, and sense how she wages the daily struggle for survival, just the same as I do.

In that moment, I see her in my mind’s eye, coming up the stairs in the building, opening the door, and seeing before her the daunting pile of books that I left in the living room—a “red flag”. Like someone who returned after an exhausting day at work to find that a stranger has invaded his “kingdom” and disturbed the harmony that reigned in it.

Obviously, if I had seen these pictures of the suffering subject (namely, my wife) in my mind’s eye, it would not have been difficult for me to patiently delay by a few minutes the sleep I longed for and clear the living room of the pile of books.

And this is not all—I might even have continued to tidy up the house for her, and I might even have discovered that this action filled me with joy and “recharged all my batteries”. I would be flooded by totally unexpected positive thoughts and creativity. For example, I might have gone to the florist’s shop on the corner and bought some blushing roses to put in the vase on the white tablecloth in the living room, to greet her on her arrival home.³⁵ This possibility, that usually is not realized in our lives, is what Buber suggested when he described the basic word “I-Thou”.

“I-Thou” is not necessarily a face-to-face encounter, or some sort of verbal communication, but the possibility of the occurrence of an “inner miracle”; that is, my egocentric center will be weakened for a moment, and room will be made in my inner world to sense the other, to see him as a subject, and to act toward him as if his inner considerations were mine. Even though this is not the total negation of the ego and the ecstatic experience of union, Buber maintains that the quality of such an encounter is spiritually superior to that of the ecstatic experience, since I can accept responsibility for another only by means of my functioning ego. Accepting responsibility is the mark of an I-Thou relationship.

Needless to say, in the situation described above, too, despite the pretty flowers, I must use the “hermeneutics of suspicion” to sincerely ask myself if I did not act out of unconscious utilitarianism, self-deceit in the guise of generosity and morality. It seems that

the answer to this pointed question is that the very question attests to doubt, which is a sure sign that this is not the true realization of the basic word “I-Thou”. If this were truly realized, no question would arise.

To explain this, the certainty of the believer cannot be examined, explained, or proven with physiological or psychological tools. Certainty is a state of mind of inner assurance that results from contact with the absolute.³⁶ For the person of faith, the clearest sign of this certainty is the disappearance of the dual status,³⁷ which is the normal situation, and to be filled instead with power and vitality.³⁸ Being filled with a sense of spiritual energy drives loving action, which derives its certainty from the absolute (I will expand on this below). From Buber’s viewpoint, this is the only realistic interpretation of revelation. Revelation is always accompanied by a feeling of being filled with power and vitality due to contact with the absolute, and keeping one’s distance from the doubts that accompany life in the kingdom of the It.

If the skeptic were to question this teaching of Buber and declare that he does not know what he is saying, Buber’s response would be silence (see [Katz 1984](#), p. 116; cf. [Kosman 2002a](#)). This silence means that he and the skeptic are standing at a crossroads, and from here their ways must part.

Here is a fine parable, an example of that “crossroads”, from another discussion. Michael Wischogrod attempted to explain one side of the “crossroads”,³⁹ and said to the participants at the above conference held at Ben-Gurion University:

I am sure you all know the story of the engineer who wrote a very long and learned paper about how the bumble bee cannot possibly fly by the laws of aerodynamics; but the bumble bee *does fly* [...] Therefore the trick is not to ground the bumble bee, but to adjust the laws of aerodynamics [...] **The “I-Thou” flies**, and the job of the philosopher is not to show that the “I-Thou” doesn’t fly, but to show how we must readjust our ontology, our logic, our categories of thought, to deal with this, or at least cope with it. ([Wyschogrod 1984](#), p. 115)⁴⁰

Steven Katz, who took the role of the skeptic here, was somewhat shocked when he responded to this, and stated decisively: “your [Wyschogrod’s] point of view, that the ‘I-Thou’ flies by itself, is false”.⁴¹

At this point, we should return to what was written by Schopenhauer.⁴² After he completely rejected the possibility raised by Kant that people will conduct themselves morally on the basis of rational considerations, he concluded that only love of people (*Caritas*) can bring a person to act in a truly moral manner, because then:

[...] another’s suffering in itself and as such directly becomes my motive [...] not only restrains me from injuring another, but even impels me to help him. Now according as, on the one hand, that direct participation is keenly and deeply felt, and, on the other, the distress of someone else is great and urgent, I shall be induced by that purely moral motive to make a greater or smaller sacrifice for another’s needs or distress. Such sacrifice may consist in an expenditure of my bodily and mental powers on his behalf, in the loss of property, health, freedom, and even life itself. ([Schopenhauer 1995](#), p. 163)⁴³

How are we to describe what happens in such an encounter? Schopenhauer relates:

But now how is it possible for a suffering which is not *mine* and does not touch *me* to become just as directly a motive as only my own normally does, and to move me to action? As I have said, only by the fact that although it is given to me merely as something external, merely by means of external intuitive perception or knowledge, I nevertheless *feel it with him, feel it as my own*, and yet not *within me*, but *in another person*; and thus there occurs what is expressed by Calderon:⁴⁴

que entre el ver

Padecer y el padecer

Ninguna distancia habia.

“No siempre el peor es cierto”, *Jornale*, II, p. 229)

“that there is no difference between suffering and seeing suffering”) (Schopenhauer 1995, p. 165)

Now we must ask: how does something so mysterious happen? We should realize that now we are moving from one field of discussion to another; that is, from philosophy to faith,⁴⁵ from everyday speech to poetry.⁴⁶ Our discussion will now touch the most sensitive nerves of the concept of “religiosity” (which, for Buber, is not the same as the declared belief of religion).⁴⁷ Schopenhauer writes on this:

But this presupposes that to a certain extent I have identified myself with the other man, and in consequence the barrier between the ego and non-ego is for the moment abolished; only then do the other man’s affairs, his need, distress, and suffering, directly become my own. I no longer look at him as if he were something given to me by empirical intuitive perception, as something strange and foreign, as a matter of indifference, as something entirely different from me. On the contrary, I share the suffering *in him*, in spite of the fact that his skin does not enclose my nerves. Only in this way can *his* woe, *his* distress, become a motive *for me*; otherwise, it can be absolutely only my own. I repeat that this *occurrence is mysterious*, for it is something our faculty of reason can give no direct account of, and its grounds cannot be discovered on the path of experience. (Schopenhauer 1995, p. 166)

Buber said of this that “the unity of the contraries is the mystery at the innermost core of the dialogue” (Buber 1948b, p. 17)⁴⁸ and the mystery happens when there is the “act of inclusion” between the two.^{49,50} We can also speak here of love,⁵¹ which, according to Buber, contains the best possibility for the existence of an I-Thou relation (Buber 1970, pp. 67–73, 92–95; see also Shapira 1994, pp. 54–55). He maintains that such love “does not invalidate the ‘I’; on the contrary, it binds the ‘I’ more closely to the ‘Thou’” (Buber 1970, p. 210; see also Buber 1970, pp. 67–68).

The possibility portrayed here, which is actually the innermost core of Buberian faith,⁵² is totally opposed to Sartre’s harsh depiction of the encounter with the other. In Buber’s view, my territory can be open to penetration by the other as a subject, to the extent that his being and mine, to a certain degree, become one—and the momentum of the energy of love fills my relation to him with grace.⁵³

Nevertheless, Buber’s stance on this issue becomes even clearer when we follow his disagreement with Simone Weil,⁵⁴ who, for Buber, represented the ecstatic–mystical Christian notions that demand man’s complete negation of his ego. Buber summarizes Weil’s understanding as follows:

Simone Weil’s idea was to serve mankind and so she again and again took to heavy manual labor on the land, but her soul was always put to flight by reality. And she began with her own reality: she contested the “I”; it was one’s duty, she thought, to slay the “I” in oneself. “We possess nothing in this world”, she wrote, “other than the power to say I. This is what we should yield up to God, and that is what we should destroy”. (Buber 1967c, p. 210)

Buber then argues against this in the name of Judaism:

Such a basic orientation is, indeed, diametrically opposed to Judaism; for the real relationship taught by Judaism is a bridge that spans across two firm pillars, man’s “I” and the “I” of his eternal partner. It is thus the relation between man and God, thus also the relation between man and man. Judaism rejects the “I” that connotes selfishness and pride, but it welcomes and affirms the “I” of the real relationship, the “I” of the partnership between I and Thou, the “I” of love. For love does not invalidate the “I”; on the contrary, it binds the “I” more closely to the “Thou”. It does not say: “Thou are loved” but “I love Thee”.⁵⁵

Thus, for Buber, in the state of mind in which there is a functioning “I”, but which is not “the ‘I’ that connotes selfishness and pride”, the manipulative entity that usually conducts an individual’s life is noticeably weakened. Akibah Ernst Simon, Buber’s student and close friend, defined this state of mind as one in which a person is “without the human desire to have the object for producing pleasure or to change it” (Simon 1985, p. 263). During such a true encounter with another, a miracle can happen, with man being filled with energy whose source is divine.⁵⁶ In the manipulative entity’s regular state, in which it dominates us and channels the movements of our life, it would like to receive something in return for that commendable behavior. But in a moment of revelation, the “I-Thou” rises to the ascendant within us and we are filled with the energy of giving, while the manipulative entity loses some degree or other of its control of the “steering wheel” that directs our actions.

The state of mind evident in the weakened power of the manipulative entity should be called “humility”.⁵⁷ This, then, is the attenuation of the ego, that usually is vigorously engaged in the manipulations meant to take advantage of the other for one’s own purposes; that is, to act toward him as “It”.⁵⁸ Making room for the other begins with our volitional intentionality, and concludes when the blessing of “Thou” rests upon us, and an opening unfolds before us to the mystery of which Schopenhauer spoke, and which Bergman calls “the mystery of reality”.⁵⁹ Humility facilitates openness in our contacts with the world of subjects around us and the acceptance of responsibility.⁶⁰ Jean Klein finely described this:

In intimate or problematic situations, each must speak in humility of how they feel. It is simply a statement of facts with no justification, no interpretation. We must not look for a conclusion. If we allow the situation complete freedom from evaluation and judgment and pressure to find a conclusion, many things appear which do not belong to our memory.

Humility arises when there is no reference to an ‘I’. This emptiness is the healing factor in any situation [. . .] Be open to non-concluding. In this openness the situation offers its own solution. (Klein 1988, p. 23)⁶¹

It should be stressed in this context that the tool of speech changes its usual direction. In most cases, its purpose is to transmit messages from me to the other; while here, it is meant to provide an opening for my attentiveness to the other’s speech. Here, silence is more appropriate. Buber writes:

The more powerful the response, the more powerfully it ties down the You [=Thou] and as by a spell binds it into an object. Only silence toward the You [=Thou], the silence of *all* tongues, the taciturn waiting in the unformed, undifferentiated, prelinguistic word leaves the You [=Thou] free and stands together with it in reserve where the spirit does not manifest itself but is. All response binds the You [=Thou] into the It-world. (Buber 1970, p. 89)

Following the study of the essence of human speech by Chaim Nahman Bialik (the Israeli national poet), we can assert that such speech, with the opening to the other that it enables, is transformed from the “husk of speech” to poetry, in which the words are not the main thing but, rather, as Bialik writes about this element in the language of the famous Kabbalistic work, *Sefer Yetzirah*, “there is *belimah* [holding action, restraint]; man’s lips are closed”.⁶² Thus, we may now say, that the words in a dialogue in which “Thou is present” are constantly being pulled out from their settings [. . .] Meanwhile, between concealments [of the words]⁶³ the void [Nothingness, *Ayyin*] looms”.⁶⁴

Now, we can understand why the world of “I-Thou” has only a single criterion, that of “How”, namely, what is the quality of the inner intent with which a person comes to a meeting. In the world of “I-It”, on the other hand, there is only an external criterion that gauges the “What” or the “How many”. Buber writes:

This truth is not a What but a How. Not the matter of a deed determines its truth but the manner in which it is carried out: in human conditionality, or in divine unconditionality. Whether a deed will peter out in the outer courtyard, in the realm of things, or whether it will penetrate into the Holy of Holies is determined

not by its content but by the power of decision which brought it about, and by the sanctity of intent that dwells in it. Every deed, even one numbered among the most profane, is holy when it is performed in holiness, in unconditionality. (Buber 1977a, p. 87)⁶⁵

This passage is consistent with Bialik's conclusions regarding touching "concealments of the words":

It has come to the point where the human language has become two languages, built upon one another's destruction: one, an internal language, that of the individual and the soul, in which what is essential is 'how?' as in music—the domain of poetry; the other, the external language, that of abstraction and generalization, in which the essential is 'what?' as mathematics—the domain of logic.⁶⁶

We now can state more clearly regarding the ego, the egocentrism inherent in humans—that blinds us to the existence of the other as a subject: we are not speaking here of narcissistic obtuseness regarding the existence of the other; on the contrary, this rather refers to the ego's focused and precise identification of the existence of the other. But I am immediately overcome by the egotistical element within me, and I waste no time in swooping down upon the other, like a hunter on his prey. Before my very eyes, the other is transformed from a living person to an object, whose entire purpose (from my perspective) is to aid me in realizing my goal.⁶⁷

5. Belief in God and Revelation in Buber's Thought

The question of belief in God seems to me to be the most difficult of all in Buber's thought. It obviously is intimately related to his distinction between the two basic words, "I-Thou" and "I-It".

A study of Buber's theological writings shows the need for a comparison between the revolution in theological thought brought about by Buber and the effect that Descartes had on Western philosophy. Buber, similar to Descartes, consistently refused to accept any theological statements regarding the reality, unless they could be examined, personally experienced, and seen whether they contain any substance or are mere extensions of the imagination. Buber maintained that he could make a definite theological statement only if based on personal experience. In this respect, Buber's entire thought is an account of an explorer who set forth to an unknown land and who delivers a first-hand—and rational—report, one that is subject to exacting self-criticism.

It should be stressed that this is not like someone who undergoes a profoundly moving experience during which he sees mystical visions of which he reports to his audience. The divine revelation of which Buber speaks is experienced in quite regular moments of everyday life, as Buber repeatedly underscores.

Already in his initial probing for these primary words, Buber formulated the following sweeping statements:

Religions speak of God in the third person, mostly as a He. People seldom realize the extent to which this pronoun is already an anthropomorphism or, more correctly, to what extent this pronoun means a displacement of God into the world of things [. . .] into the creation that has run away from God. In other words, in [the] history [of religions] God is a thing. (From the seventh of the "Religion as Presence" lectures, in Horwitz 1988, p. 108)⁶⁸

Rivka Horwitz explains:

The third-person God was invented [according to Buber] by human imagination, a figment of the imagination which is fed by the worldly at the expense of the experiences from this world. This is a creation in the image of man which is anthropomorphic. It can take shape in the image of God or the image of an idol or in the nonmaterial abstraction of metaphysics. (Horwitz 1989, p. 179)⁶⁹

Buber's rejection of the common religious conception of a third-person God explains why he does not speak like a theologian trying to persuade people to believe in something

far from us, but as a researcher of the consciousness, a phenomenologist, who argues for the patent presence of divine revelation in our inner lives.⁷⁰ Why are we not aware of this? Because we have not been attentive,⁷¹ and perhaps because we could not name it when we encounter it, thinking that this was a marginal matter, one of no importance in the flow of everyday events.

Buber refrained from searching for a method in thinking about God that would be based on the premises made by human intellect,⁷² just as he abstained, in a certain stage, from seeking out the ecstatic experience.⁷³ He wanted only to describe what he had actually experienced in his life.⁷⁴ Since he refused to view God “in the third person”, because of the constant danger that the image of God is simply a product of human imagination,⁷⁵ Buber rejected the theoretical possibilities of the type prevalent in the various religions. He was not occupied with the image of God in any form. His religious conception plainly, and totally, disclaims the usual human imagination, that portrays God in terms of directions in space; as if God, the “really super”, resides somewhere above us, at the top of an imaginary pyramid. Buber writes on this point (in a response to Nathan Rotenstreich):

But I have not been at all concerned about a metaphysical thesis. Rather, I have been concerned about establishing the simple fact that I do not mean by ‘God’ the highest idea but that which can be fit into no pyramid as its apex, and that, accordingly, the link between God and man does not go by way of the universals, but by way of concrete life. (Buber 1967b, p. 694. The translation is mime)

This was so obvious to him that he refused to call himself a theologian, not even to identify, if even for a fleeting moment, with the theology of negation. He writes:

But I am absolutely not capable nor even disposed to teach this or that about God. Certainly, when I seek to explain the fact of man, I cannot leave out of consideration that he, man, lives over against God. But I cannot include God himself at any point in my explanation. (Buber 1967b, p. 690)⁷⁶

Buber’s precise formulation is noteworthy. He does not argue with any side in the theological speculations about God, and merely states that he has no interest in expressing an opinion of what lies totally beyond the bounds of his world. This entire theological debate has no meaning for him, since it does not pertain to real life.

Walter Kaufmann presents Buber’s religious conception simply yet trenchantly:

He [Buber] wanted a religion in which the individual could address God and be addressed by God,⁷⁷ but a religion that left no room to talk about God. (Kaufmann 1984a, p. 17)

All this is closely related to a response, in the name of Judaism, to Spinoza (see Buber 1948a, pp. 95–116). Buber maintains that Spinoza erred when he attempted to discuss an all-encompassing concept of “God”, and he did not understand he was not permitted to discuss God Himself, His “self”. “From being the place of meeting with God, the world becomes to him [Spinoza] God’s place” (Buber 1948a, p. 100). Buber uses the Kabbalistic–Hasidic model of the divine *Sefirot* (the ten stages of divine emanation) to explain the Jewish position. According to this model, nothing can be said about God Himself, since God’s “self” is beyond human comprehension, and this infinite and eternal existence cannot be discussed in human language. But from this point on, as for everything related to the emanation of the divine light through the *Sefirot*, we can speak of the divine that is revealed to man within the world, but only within the world, and through it—that is, through the objects that were created in this world.⁷⁸

God, says Buber, is “infinite and nameless, “but also”—at the same time—“a father who teaches his children to call him”. God speaks to man solely through the world, through the things and people that surround him.⁷⁹ If man will be attentive to God, he will hear Him speaking to him at every moment, by the agency of whatever he comes into contact with: other people, all the surrounding world, and his inner world.⁸⁰

From this respect, we could say that Buber was the most cautious empirical researcher in recent generations who dared to fearlessly explore the theological thicket.⁸¹ If we were

to ask which “tools” he took with him on his inner journeys, it seems that he brought with him the most precise research tool available to the phenomenologist of our inner worlds: distance. From a distance, the individual can objectively observe the impressions left in this inner world, his moods and thoughts, as if they were a research object (see [Mendes-Flohr 1980](#), p. 89). Distance affords man the ability to carefully observe his experience and what occurs in his inner world, with the caution of a researcher. This, of course, entails a major difficulty, one which Buber himself wrote about in many of his writings: we cannot ignore the fact that ‘Thou’ becomes ‘It’ in the process of scientific observation. Nevertheless, as we saw above, for Buber, the ‘It’ is not a negative tool, as it is created in order to serve us—when we use it in a proper way. In this regard, Putnam even reinforces this point by arguing that:

Buber’s ‘I-You [=Thou]’ relation is one that can only be of short duration, but its significance is that after one has had an ‘I-You [=Thou]’ relation with the divine, the ‘It-World’ is transformed. There are, so to speak, [according to Buber] two sorts of ‘I-It’ relations: mere ‘I-It’ relations and transformed ‘I-It’ relations. ([Putnam 2008](#), p. 63)⁸²

Profound thinkers have already argued that the discovery of the I-Thou primary word in Buber’s inner journeys is an event of equal importance to the Copernican revolution, since it completely changes human thought.⁸³ What things, then, that Buber discovered in his life experience led him, like “Abraham the Hebrew”, to stand on one side of the divide, with the entire world on the other?⁸⁴

Buber himself admitted that in his past he, too, had been completely blind to the possibility of God being revealed to man in the most banal everyday moments in his encounters with all that surrounds him. This was the case, as Buber explained, because he had previously sought God in “the-something-beyond”, in a quest that included “the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy” ([Buber 2002c](#), p. 54). But then, “I know no fullness but each mortal hour’s fullness of claim and responsibility” ([Buber 2002c](#), p. 55). He attests, however, that he was not always successful: “Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility and know who speaks and demands a response” ([Buber 2002c](#), p. 55). As to whether this discovery belongs to the realm of religion, he continues: “If that is religion, then it is just *everything*, simply all that is lived in its possibility of dialogue” ([Buber 2002c](#), p. 55).

It should be stressed that the I-Thou relation fundamentally differs from the ecstatic experience. Ecstasy does not address the other, nor does it oblige me to accept any responsibility for his fate. And this is not all: it is directed to the ego, which always acts on its own behalf (even when it seeks to neutralize the ego). The “I-Thou” primary word, in contrast, by its very nature builds a bridge to the other. It demands of the ego to exceed itself and share the burden with the other.

It should also be emphasized that Buber concluded that there is an unfathomable chasm separating the ecstatic experience from that of I-Thou. Ecstasy is the result of a process. A person seeks such a type of experience, which he finds at the end of the search process. At times, to reach an ecstatic state, a person can be—and sometimes is—aided by drugs or other chemical substances. Experiencing I-Thou, on the other hand, is in no way a process—it is revealed to a person only when he himself ceases to hunt for it. Buber thought that the Thou is a fact from the very creation of all; that is, it is the ego that blinds us and by its very nature conceals the fact of our existence on the solid ground of the reality of the Thou. Accordingly, this solid ground—the reality of the Thou—will be palpable to us only if we do not seek the Thou, do not regard it as our possession, as an object that can serve us.⁸⁵ Buber writes:

Feelings dwell in man, but man dwells in his love [. . .] love does not cling to an I, as if the You [=Thou] were merely its “content” or object; it is between I and You [=Thou]. Whoever does not know this, know this with his being, does not know love. ([Buber 1970](#), p. 66)⁸⁶

Moreover, a matter mentioned above bears repeating: experiencing I-Thou, unlike any common experience, is singular in its being some sort of mix of will and grace: **will** on our part (“Only when two say to one another with all that they are, ‘It is *Thou*’, is the indwelling of the Present Being between them”),⁸⁷ and **grace** on the part of the divine presence that dwells in the space **between** two who are engaged in true dialogue. Buber says on this: “The You [=Thou] encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking” (Buber 1970, p. 62).

He explains, when speaking of Hasidic thought, how these elements are so intertwined that they cannot be isolated within the processes that occur in the reality:

[. . .] it is senseless to ask how far my action reaches, and where God’s grace begins; there is no common border-line; what concerns me alone, before I bring something about, is my action, and what concerns me alone, when the action is successfully done, is God’s grace. The one is no less real than the other, and neither is a part-cause. (Buber 1948a, p. 110)⁸⁸

6. “Hebrew Humanist” versus the “Arbitrary Man”

A description of Buber’s attitude to faith will aid in explaining his complex position: on the one hand, he was a humanist and professed ideals similar to those championed by secular humanists; while, on the other, he was an advocate of passionate faith, who spoke for adhering to God with all one’s heart.⁸⁹ He writes at the beginning of the third section of *I and Thou*:

Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You [=Thou].

Every single You [=Thou] is a glimpse of that. Through every single You [=Thou] the basic word addresses the eternal You [=Thou]. The relationship of the You [=Thou] of all beings accounts for the fullness of our relationships to them—and for the lack of fulfillment. The innate You [=Thou] is actualized each time without ever being perfected. It attains perfection solely in the immediate relationship to the You [=Thou] that in accordance with its nature cannot become an It. (Buber 1970, p. 123)

Buber says here that by means of our sincere and loving contact with someone with whom we have an I-Thou relationship, we also encounter the Eternal Thou, namely, God. This is, as he explained, an “extending” that results in meeting God Himself.⁹⁰ Buber forges a strong bond between love of man, which is one of the foundations of humanism, and belief in God: “Our faith is based on our humanity, and our humanity is based on our faith” (Buber 1966, p. 19). Buber assumes that:

Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself. We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another. Creatures are placed in my way so that I, their fellow-creature, by means of them and with them find the way to God. (Buber 2002d, p. 60)

And in another formulation:

Above and below are bound to one another. The word of him who wishes to speak with men without speaking with God is not fulfilled; but the word of him who wishes to speak with God without speaking with men goes astray. (Buber 2002a, p. 18)⁹¹

It seems, however, that this is still not sufficiently clear. What distinguishes the atheist humanist from the believing humanist who adheres to God? Loudly declaring that God exists or adopting a worldview that asserts this is not enough. What is the substantive difference between the nature of the simple human encounter between an empathic person and another—and that between the I and the Thou, which, by means of this “extending”, joins with the encounter with the Eternal Thou?

These questions cannot be answered without understanding the profoundly religious considerations underlying Buber's arguments. Buber wrote about what he learned from Hasidism, and it seems that this element is the basis for his entire teaching:

I do not know of any other proper way to convey what I believe, what Hasidism taught me to believe: that the divine being is concealed in things and objects, and that I have no way to sense this being, but only incidental to sincere contact with them, incidental to contact of I and Thou. In this contact, however, I have the way to act upon it, I have the way to perform a 'redemptive' action upon it. (Buber 1945, p. 6)

This passage presents the first concept by which the I-Thou relation differs from any other empathic stance. We can say that for Buber, following Hasidic teachings, something deep and primal in our being is hidden from us (others would say: is flawed, and needs mending), and man is to uncover and redeem this. In other words, if we let things flow in the world as they are, sooner or later we will find ourselves alienated, and inner and external conflicts will fill our entire world. If we are not prepared to face this fundamental flaw in our mental reality, we will be doomed to stand at a distance from the divine source. The human state of consciousness is such that if we allow things to flow as they are, and if we do not understand that something in the manner in which we are thrown into the world and act in it is basically faulty, the ego will take control of our lives like a monster and will blacken our world. The "kingdom of the ego" is imperfect, since it is only illusion. It is ruled by only a single egocentric center, for whom all was created to serve it, and it, therefore, distorts our perception of the reality.⁹²

What, then, is the opposite of the humanism that follows the path of faith of which Buber speaks? Not the "secularist", who might live his life in closeness to Thou and the fervor of faith, even though he does not belong to any community of believers, but rather the "capricious man", namely, the one who is thrown into his arbitrary life with no direction, the one who "does not believe and encounter" (Buber 1970, p. 109). This is a person who is "a slave to his emotions and desires, and a slave to the historical forces that act upon the society to which he belongs" (Barzilai 2000, p. 207). Buber found a close connection between seeing the other as an object and denying the existence of God, or perhaps in the opposite direction: between denying the existence of God and viewing the other as an object.⁹³ Buber explains this point in an essay in which he responds to Sartre's philosophy:

But the Other for Sartre is he who "looks at" me, who makes me into an object, as I make him. The idea of God, moreover, he also understands as that of an inescapable witness, and if that is so, "What need have we of God? The Other is enough, no matter what other". (Buber 2016c, pp. 55–56)

Buber argues against this notion:

But what if God is not the quintessence of the Other, but rather its absoluteness?⁹⁴ And what if it is not primarily the reciprocal relation of subject and object which exists between me and the other, but rather the reciprocal relation of I and Thou? (Buber 2016c, p. 56)

Now, we come to the second element that makes Buber's humanism profoundly religious: the concept of sacrifice. In Buber's view, "in all realms of human existence, including language, [the position of the person of faith] is viable only by means of sacrifice".⁹⁵ This element is of the greatest import for understanding the argument that was highlighted above, regarding the importance of humility and making room for the other when we meet—just as the "sacrifice" of which Buber speaks is nothing other than the sacrifice of one's ego.⁹⁶ This element, however, is completely lacking in atheistic humanism. Dana Freibach-Heifetz, who described atheistic humanism, attempted to defend what she calls "secular grace". She compares Buber's teaching with her notion regarding secular empathy, that is detached from belief in God:

[. . .] there are other differences between secular [i.e., empty of any foundation of faith, in Freibach-Heifetz's definition] grace and I-Thou relationship. The most

important of them concerns individuality: secular grace is not understood as a foundation of the self,⁹⁷ indeed the opposite, grace (at least from the perspective of the inviter) is an existential choice of the self that is already established, as an expression of individualistic self-realization, completely unlike Buber's self-individualist position. The difference is also expressed in the understanding of self-love: according to Buber, self-love is a delusion, and it's possible for a person to love himself only by means of mutual love with the other.⁹⁸ In secular grace, self-love does not depend on love of the other, but vice-versa. This also means that the I-Thou—unlike grace—involves responsibility. (Freibach-Heifetz 2017, pp. 94–95)

This teaches that grace that does not come from faith cannot intrinsically include the central element of dialogue: sacrifice. Accordingly, central concepts taken from the religious world cannot apply to the relation between the two: self-abnegation, humility, and self-sacrifice. For this reason, I dare to state that we should be suspicious of the “secular grace” proposed by Freibach-Heifetz, which, by its very nature, can exist only superficially, as the seeming appearance of momentary empathy, but which will lack the depth dimension provided by the vertical line,⁹⁹ which facilitates the acceptance of the power that is expressed, in the final analysis, in the acceptance of responsibility for the world of the other.

It should also be noted that the religious experience, that seeks to draw the individual to the other side, to withdraw from this world and to adhere to God—Buber deemed this experience, too, concentrating on oneself, and one of the seductions of the ego. Buber said, against Kierkegaard:

Precisely what appears to us as the highest form of piety—to let everything earthly go—is the highest egoism. (Buber 2002d, p. 66)

7. Applying the Dialogical Idea in the Everyday Life of the Modern Individual: The Disagreement between Buber and the Opponent

To exemplify what Buber meant when he spoke of the believing humanist and how he contends with the difficulties of everyday life, we should bring an example provided by Buber. The following passage is from a conversation between Buber and the “opponent” who raises harsh arguments regarding the possibility of applying Buber's philosophy in the reality. Buber cites the words of the opponent:

“In all this actuality of our present life, the conditioned nature of life as a whole is not taken into account. All that you speak of takes place in the never-never-land, not in the social context of the world in which we spend our days, and by which if by anything our reality is defined. Your ‘two men’ [=in the imagined ‘dialogue’] sit on a solitary seat, obviously during a holiday journey. In a big city office, you would not be able to let them sit, they would not reach the ‘sacramental’ there [...] That may be quite interesting for people who are not taken up with any duty. But is the business employee to ‘communicate himself without reserve’ to his colleagues? Is the worker at the conveyor belt to ‘feel himself addressed in what he experiences’? Is the leader of a gigantic technical undertaking to ‘practice the responsibility of dialogue’? You demand that we enter into the situation which approaches us, and you neglect the enduring situation in which everyone of us, so far as we share in the life of community, is elementally placed”. (Buber 2002a, pp. 39–40)

Buber responds to these claims by first declaring that he does not demand anything of anyone. This answer teaches something fundamental about the essence of dialogue: a person who is aware of his inner state must clearly know when he slips into preaching, in which the demon of the ego dominates the address to the other:

I beg you to notice that I do not demand. I have no call to that and no authority for it. I try only to say that there is something, and to indicate how it is made: I simply record. And how could the life of dialogue be demanded? There is no

ordering of dialogue. It is not that you *are* to answer but that you are *able*. (Buber 2002a, p. 40)

Second, Buber proclaims, with all the ardor typical of his faith, that his message is totally relevant for every individual, in every situation in which he finds himself in the tumult of life, provided that he has faith in the possibility of redemptive dialogue:

Yes, precisely him I mean, him in the factory, in the shop, in the office, in the mine, on the tractor, at the printing-press: man [. . .] Dialogue is not an affair of spiritual luxury and spiritual luxuriousness, it is a matter of creation, of the creature, and he is that, the man of whom I speak. (Buber 2002a, p. 41)

Buber explains to the opponent that he is inclined to bring ideal, “pure” examples in what he writes “in order to make myself intelligible about what has become so unfamiliar, in fact so sunk in oblivion. For this reason, I appear to draw my tales from the province which you term the ‘intellectual’” (Buber 1977b, p. 41). All this, however, is for explanatory purposes only. Buber knew full well that the situations we encounter in daily life are very murky, complicated, conflicted, and replete with hostility and bad features—and under such condition, the ego dictates to us how to respond to those around us:

But I am not concerned with the pure. I am concerned with the turbid, the repressed, the pedestrian, with toil and dull contraryness. (Buber 2002a, p. 41)

Third, Buber wanted to explain that he did not intend to present us with the challenge of fundamental change, but rather something much more modest: what he called a “break-through”. In our wording, we might say “a spark of understanding” or “a spark of sight”, the intent being to the possibility of expressing the basic word I-Thou in everyday life:

With the break-through and not with a perfection [. . .] not with the great catastrophic break-through which happens once for all (it is fitting to be silent for a while about that, even in one’s own heart), but with the breaking through from the status of the dully-tempered disagreeableness, obstinacy, and contraryness in which the man, whom I pluck at random out of the tumult, is living and out of which he can and at times does break through.

Whither? Into nothing exalted, heroic or holy [. . .] only into this tiny strictness and grace of every day [. . .] glance to glance, look to look, word to word [. . .] And now, in all the clanking of routine that I called my reality,¹⁰⁰ there appears to me, homely and glorious, the effective reality, creaturely and given to me in trust and responsibility. (Buber 2002a, pp. 41–42; cf. Frankl 1963, pp. 212–13)

Buber explains to the opponent that the latter charges Buber with having an “all or nothing” attitude and, therefore, attempts to “then prove the impossibility of my alleged demand”.¹⁰¹ All this enables us to understand the following example, which Buber puts forward to clarify his arguments against the opponent by observing the gray lives of factory workers or office employees:

No factory and no office is so abandoned by creation that a creative glance could not fly up from one working-place to another, from desk to desk, a sober and brotherly glance which guarantees the reality of creation which is happening—*quantum satis* [the amount which is enough]. And nothing is so valuable a service of dialogue between God and man as such an unsentimental¹⁰² and unreserved exchange of glances between two men in an alien place. (Buber 2002a, p. 42)

If there is a single life lesson, a sort of abstract of all of Buber’s teaching that we can adopt today, it is this: the ladder that ascends to the heights is never in heaven, but is always firmly planted in the earth, in the commotion of life: in the office, the marketplace, the kitchen, the kindergarten, and the bedroom. Those are the places where God demands that man sanctify himself, and the world around, by constant openness to the sincere encounter, I-Thou, with the other.

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Notes

- 1 Some translations of I and Thou merely added to the difficulties in understanding the book. Take, for example, the first translation to Hebrew, that was done carried out during Buber's lifetime, and which he probably examined closely before its publication (see the translation by Wislavsky in [Buber 1959a](#), pp. 1–103; on Buber's intense personal involvement in the translations of his books, see, for a typical example, Kaufmann's testimony in [Kaufmann 1984a](#), p. 39). Yochanan Bloch complained to an audience of German-speaking scholars: "You cannot imagine what a tangled-up, mysterious book I and Thou is in the available Hebrew translation [...] Here, as with Nietzsche, a certain gracefulness of language can be misleading" ([Bloch 1984a](#), p. 65). On the difficulties in translating the book, and on the errors in Wislavsky's translation, see also ([Kosman 2007a](#), p. 519, note 23). Kaufmann adds an even stronger claim. He argues that the book was written in a vague and artificial style: "The most obvious of these [failings] is the style, which is affected rather than ruthlessly honest [...] We are confronted by a pose without redeeming wit or irony. It approximates the oracular tone of false prophets [...] Hence the note of falseness in I and Thou cannot be discounted" ([Kaufmann 1984a](#), pp. 8–9). Kaufmann explains why he claims that Buber's voice rings false: "in Ich und Du there is in places a false, oracular tone that is affected and brings to mind role-playing. Buber certainly was not beyond doing that; but at his best he transcended that, and there was an electrifying directness that spoke directly to the listener" ([Kaufmann 1984b](#), p. 19). For Buber's own testimony about the writing of the book "under the spell of an irresistible enthusiasm", see ([Kaufmann 1984a](#), p. 9). Admittedly, there is a kernel of truth in Kaufmann's harsh criticism of the book's murky style, and Buber himself wrote in a letter to Franz Rosenzweig on 19 September 1922, that, in his estimation, I and Thou is nothing more than "rather a sparse and difficult beginning, and yet will have to go out into the world that way" ([Buber 1991](#), p. 282). While he was engaged in writing the second volume (he planned to write five volumes, but in the end, only I and Thou was published), he wrote, in the same letter to Rosenzweig: "The second volume, on which I am toiling [...] will turn out simpler and clearer, it seems to me".
- 2 Logic would dictate that Buber would not agree with this. It seems to me that Bloch confuses our subjective difficulty in identifying "Thou" situations (i.e., "I-Thou") and those of "It" ("I-It") with the two objective situations. Even when a person finds himself in an I-Thou situation, this is not a permanent state, but rather one of rapid fluctuation. This is like a person who watches a movie, and the pictures merge before his eyes until it seems to him to be a single reality, even though the motion picture is composed of separate pictures. Moshe Schwarcz writes on this: "A person can pay attention to the changes that occur at times in relation situations by the wondrous forces that are hidden from sight, but he cannot understand the inner connection between these changes" ([Schwarcz 1976](#), p. 125). See also ([Silberstein 1989](#), p. 142).
- 3 The term "primary words" refer to what I call (following Kaufmann) "basic words" (Bergman is variously spelled "Bergman" or "Bergmann". For the sake of consistency, I use the former spelling throughout.)
- 4 For an expansion of this, following Jacques Lacan, see Kosman 2012, pp. 11–18.
- 5 For our purposes, the question of whether we regard them as literary or historical figures is unimportant.
- 6 Freud distinguishes between egotism and narcissism (see [Freud 1963](#), pp. 417–18), but this distinction is not directly related to our discussion, since in each of these instances the contact is between objects and not subjects. Even when someone is "completely in love", in which "altruism converges with libidinal object-cathexis" (p. 418), this does not refer to "I-Thou", since being in love is merely a consequence of the various needs of the self-centered "I" projected onto the other. On love and being in love, see also below, notes 51, 102.
- 7 In Buddhist terminology, this attachment is called "upadana", and it ensues from "thirst", which represents the desire to attain (in Pali, "tanha"). Upadana and tanha give birth to suffering ("duhkha") ([Keown 2004](#), pp. 317, 310, 81, respectively). In their explanations of the word dukkha, Buddhists frequently mention this situation of parting (see [Rahula 1974](#), pp. 16–20). Keown writes that dukkha describes all the types of suffering in life, such as sickness, death, separation from loved ones, or the nonacceptance of things that we desire ([Keown 2004](#), p. 81).
- 8 The "third" element (which, of course, is not to be confused with "the third person", which means relating to an object in the world (see below, notes 11, 84, 90)) is the "secret of life" (on that "secret" in Buber's teaching, see [Kosman 2021](#), pp. 114–16) is present between the two in a true meeting, in which each opens up to the other. This secret is what the person of faith calls "the presence of God". The possibility of identifying it is a sort of crack that opens in the world that is dominated by the law of cause and effect, that acts only for the benefit of the ego. This is the opening to the fervent belief that "Nature, as a whole and in all its elements, enunciates something that may be regarded as a self-communication of God to all those ready to receive it" ([Buber 1977b](#), p. 221; see also, on this third element in the Thou-meeting according to Buber: ([Barzilai 2000](#), p. 229). Koren writes that the "third" element that is present between the two in dialogue is Buber's interpretation of the ancient term "*Shekhinah*" (that already appears in the Rabbinic literature): "The dialogical principle is a redemptive dialogue between man and God, whether by means of the created beings or directly with 'the Eternal Thou' requiring both an active encounter between the two entities and their

joining in the encounter with the attribute of *Hesed* [loving-kindness] which, as I have shown, is identical to the revelation of the Shekhinah" (Koren 2010, p. 231). On the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*) as an immanent element in the Rabbinic literature, see (Urbach 1987, p. 43). For a discussion of the feminine aspect of the *Shekhinah* (in the Rabbinic literature as well), see (Kosman 2009, p. 56, n. 36). On this topic in the Kabbalistic sources, see (Roi 2003, pp. 132 ff).

9 I took this fine expression from the diary of Etty Hillesum, which is one of the rare texts that so powerfully highlights the very possibility of the basic word I-Thou. See (Hillesum 1996, p. 333 (letter from 18 August 1943)).

10 These expressions will be explained below.

11 In another place, Bergman offers an example even weaker than those discussed here. He discusses the response to the Priestly Blessing (see Num. 6: 23–26) of the congregants in the synagogue in which he prays, and writes that whoever "secretly derides his neighbor, [. . .] Mr. Cohen or Mr. Katz [i.e., those whose only 'claim to fame' is their being of priestly descent] [. . .] who dares to bless him, and sees the time of the blessing as propitious for chatting with the one next to him" (Bergman 1967, p. 255). On the other hand, he identifies the basic word I-Thou in the attitude of the one who "hears the Priestly Blessing as it was spoken, as it has been recited from Aaron the priest to this day, from one generation to the next, with trembling and awe" (Bergman 1967, p. 255). This example, too, naturally arouses the need for the "hermeneutics of suspicion", because those who prepare themselves with trembling and awe to receive the Priestly Blessing usually do so in an I-It state. This is so because they believe that this blessing, that is delivered by the *kohanim* (those of priestly lineage), is sufficiently powerful to shower them with bounty and protect them from the difficulties of life outside the synagogue; for them, God is an anthropomorphic God whom they address in the third person (see also below, notes 84, 90).

12 Walter Kaufmann (who translated *I and Thou*), too, exhibited such a misunderstanding. He attacks the polarity of the basic words I-Thou and I-It, and argues that, in Buber's view, "a genuine relationship to another human being can be achieved only in brief encounters from which we must always relapse into states in which the other human being becomes for us merely an object of experience and use", (Kaufmann 1984a, p. 10) while, Kaufmann maintains, this is not the case in the reality. He brings as an example the world of the painter: "But the painter does not lapse from the genuine I-You [=I-Thou] relationship into a deplorable attitude in which he notes the color of the hair or other qualities, reducing the You [=I-Thou] to a mere It. On the contrary, he must pay some attention to qualities and details to reveal the You [=Thou] on the canvas" (p. 12). This example, however, does not support his objection to the polarity argument. The "revealing" for which the artist strives when he examines the inner world of the person whom he paints (which presumably is the revealing of "Thou") could express the artist's cynical use of his capacity for empathy, whose end is only to win glory, at the expense of the person in the portrait. Only in rare instances, in which the artist's ego is silenced and he does not seek to attain some goal by observing the physical object, can we say that this is a true encounter with "Thou".

13 A conceptual clarification: my use of the word "ego" does not allude to the trait we usually call "egoism", it rather refers to what we call "egocentrism", which is expressed in inner blindness to the existence of the other as a subject (which is also the conception of Buber, who states in "Dialogue": "This [the contrast between the two basic words] must not be confused with the contrast between 'egoism' and 'altruism' conceived by some moralists" ("Dialogue", p. 24)). Everyone suffers to some degree from egocentric blindness. But not all people are egoists. Piaget argued that children seven years old and younger are naturally egocentric; that is, they are inclined to place the self in the center. They cannot think about things from an objective perspective; that is, one outside themselves. At this age, law or moral law, as well, are given an egocentric interpretation (Ormian 1969, cols. 379–81; see also below). The typical egocentric orientation of childhood is often at work in adulthood, too, with the adult tending to see his interlocutor as an object meant for his use. This inclination ensues from the striving-for to which (in psychoanalytical terminology, following Lacanian interpretation) the phallic dimension alludes (see Kosman 2012, 1–25; and in this context, we could also mention the concept of "will" in Schopenhauer's thought). Heidegger draws a similar distinction. As Hubert Dreyfus puts this: "*Dasein* is simply oriented toward the future, doing something now in order to be in a position to do something else later on, and all this makes sense as oriented toward something which that person is finally up to but need not have, and probably cannot have, in mind" (Magee 2009, p. 265). Buber naturally took note of this, and called this inclination "reflexion", which "is something different from egoism and even from 'egotism'" (see Buber 2002a, p. 27; and at length: Kosman 2007a, pp. 513–14; Kosman 2021, pp. 106–16). The Hasidic term "*bittul ha-yesh*" teaches of the possibility of swimming against the regular tide of life, that is driven by striving-for.

At this point, we need to clarify the relationship between striving-for, that is, the individual's egocentric striving for achievements, and the Freudian concept of ego. For Freud, the ego is an intermediary. This is the part of the id in which changes occur because of its proximity to the outer world. It is meant for the reception of stimuli, while at the same time protects against them (see Quinodoz 2005, pp. 203–6; Shatil 1994, p. 45). The ego also mediates between the opposing energies in the superego and the id, operating by the reality principle. From our perspective, however, these three components are a whole single unit that seeks to expand (i.e., phallically; since this is an inner image, it should be located, following Lacan, in the imaginary dimension (Evans 1996, pp. 85–87)). What characterizes them as a whole single unit is only the striving-for, the desire to expand. Freud would argue that the "ego" or "self" that we are discussing is not composed of a single simple element, as it might seem superficially. Freud maintains that observation of the self teaches that its activity is composed of three factors that are quite conflicted with one another. This, however, does not suffice to contradict the straightforward viewpoint that encompasses the activity of all these factors together to attain a shared goal (it is noteworthy that scholars of Freudian thought found a lack of clarity on this

question in his writings. On this, and on the discussions on the definition of the ego or the self in post-Freudian psychoanalysis, see (Laplanche 1976, pp. 50–55; Noy 2006, esp. pp. 22–24). On the way in which this process of integration takes place at the beginning of life according to Winnicott, see (Phillips 1988, pp. 70–76). On relevant theological aspects in the teachings of Levinas and the Kabbalistic doctrine of Rabbi Ashlag, see (Ahituv 2007).

- 14 In the same spirit, this idea could be described by saying that such blindness is also the source of all of man's bad attributes. All ethical teachings are to be found in the gap between the two basic words. Importantly, however, the causal relationship depicted by Buber acts in the opposite direction: it is not improving one's virtues, or character traits, that draws a person closer to the level in which he can sense Thou, but the opposite: making room for the encounter with the other inherently generates the good attributes (Buber 2016b, p. 86, and his preceding discussion). Plato declared: "But the truth is that the cause of all sins in every case lies in the person's excessive love of self. For the lover is blind in his view of the object loved, so that he is a bad judge of things just and good and noble" (Plato 1942, 5:731, vol. 1, pp. 338–39; see also Halevi 1972, pp. 42–43). Cf. the observation by Reines: "Self-love: this attribute, that is inherent in the heart of every individual, brings much evil on its wings, for all snares, disputes, and all manner of punishments by which a person controls another to do evil to him originate in this attribute" (Reines 1926, vol. 1, p. 11). The opposite connection that Heschel observed, between devotion to God and sympathy for the other, should, therefore, not be surprising (Heschel 1962, pp. 307–23). Buber, as well, although his conception of revelation is different from that of Heschel, asserts that "the word of him who wishes to speak with men without speaking with God is not fulfilled" (Buber 2002a, p. 18); see also below. Levinas wanted to take this basic lack of confidence in man a step further, and argued in the name of Judaism that, "this heteronomy among the conditions of autonomy in human fraternity is acutely thought in Judaism with the category of divine paternity as its point of departure" (Levinas 1994, p. 104). The truth be told, this view was already voiced in the past by several Jewish sages, who, in some instances, even expressed a more extreme approach, and viewed the system of commandments (including the ritual commandments "between man and the Omnipresent [=God]") as a sort of spiritual training meant to prepare a person to be better to his fellow (see *Leviticus Rabbah* 1993, 13:3, p. 277). A clear example of this approach can be found in the commentary of R. Obadiah Sforno (thirteenth century; see (Sforno 1992, p. xi, chp. 3), and editor's note). Max Kadushin asserted that the Rabbinic literature already evidences the notion that "man's attitude to the Creator is the decisive and primal factor in his ethical consciousness [i.e., his attitude to others]" (see Holtz 1978, p. 131).
- 15 The term "distance" denotes man's turning inward to distance himself from the other, which is not necessarily a negative step. Buber thought that a person must constantly move between relation and distance, because "in order to be able to go out to the other you must have the starting place, you must have been, you must be, with yourself" (Buber 2002a, p. 24). In *I and Thou* Buber speaks of the encounter with three possible spheres: "Three are the spheres in which the world of relation arises. The first: life with nature [. . .] The second: life with men [. . .] The third: life with spiritual beings" (Buber 1970, pp. 56–57). Somewhat later, he also added a fourth realm: "Besides man's threefold living relation there is one other, that to one's own self" (Buber 2002e, p. 213). See also the extensive exposition in (Shapira 1994, pp. 177–83).
- 16 See (Hill 1977, pp. 25–35). Wittgenstein, as well, noted this, in his own way: "Language disguises the thought; so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized" (Wittgenstein 1922, 4.002, pp. 62–63). See also Kosman 2012, pp. 14–15, note 31.
- 17 There might be a need for greater flexibility in these determinations according to the specific culture, but that is not our concern here.
- 18 See above, note 13.
- 19 See (Schlesinger 1969, col. 484): "This egocentric speech wanes as a result of life-experience, to be replaced by the social speech that serves the communicative purpose".
- 20 The term "noetic", that originated in Husserl's philosophy, refers to the consciousness's ways of subjective intentionality to objects in the world: perception, remembering, and the like.
- 21 The ego's most conspicuous trait is its inherent manipulative nature. This should be especially emphasized when we discuss the basic word I-It (see also below).
- 22 In earlier generations, they were simply called "the Good Inclination" and "the Evil Inclination". See, e.g., the midrash's fine use of the expression, "appointed [literally, gave rulership to] the Good Inclination over the Evil Inclination", in the context of seeing the other (*Eccl. Rabbah* 9), and the explanation, in the spirit of the current discussion, in (Kosman 2009, pp. 101–6).
- 23 The intent is to the term coined by Pierre Bourdieu.
- 24 See note 23 above.
- 25 Based on the expression that presents this notion: "I will be king [*ani emlokht*]", in I Kings 1:5, that took root in the Hasidic literature (in the Kabbalistic context of the *Sefrah* of *Malkhut*).
- 26 On the essentiality of the development of the infant's consciousness of omnipotence (that does not completely disappear when we mature and face the reality) for the building of the sense of being and the self, see (Gamlieli 2006, pp. 228–32). Donald Winnicott emphasizes that the sense of being on which the existence of the self is based is limitless in regard to the reality in general (Gamlieli, p. 222). In his view, each child must undergo the primal experience of omnipotence, in which he feels as if he rules all. Thanks to the fact that in the beginning of his way in the world he feels as if he possesses infinite powers, he will

later be capable of developing a self sufficiently confident in itself to waive the “subjective ‘throne’ and enable the existence of others besides himself” (Gamlieli, p. 228). In Freudian terms, this is the transition from the “oceanic feeling”, in which the pleasure principle dominates the child’s mental life, to the stage in which the reality principle begins to act (p. 222). According to Gamlieli, the challenge facing the child who is deposed from his “throne” (when he is about a year old, he begins to hear the word “No” and gradually comes to learn the limitations to which he is subject (p. 217)) corresponds to the Kabbalistic notion of the primordial “breaking of the vessels”, which requires man’s rectifying action (pp. 222, 224–25). Parallel descriptions are to be found in Buber’s teachings, since he, too, stresses that the possibility for a person to pass from the basic word I-It to I-Thou comes about only when the “I” reaches the level of separate being for itself. Buber writes about the primal, oceanic stage: “Every developing human child rests, like all developing beings, in the womb of the great mother—the undifferentiated, not yet formed primal world. From this it detaches itself to enter a personal life, and it is only in dark hours when we slip out of this again (as happens even to the healthy, night after night) that we are close to her again. But this detachment is not sudden and catastrophic like that from the bodily mother. The human child is granted some time to exchange the natural association with the world that is slipping away for a spiritual association—a relationship” (Buber 1970, pp. 76–77). On Buber’s approach, see the extensive discussion by Koren 2010, pp. 247–314. In this context, it would be instructive to draw a comparison with the following midrash, which gives mythical expression to the inner struggle to limit the primal demonic and limitless expansion in the human psyche: “R. Judah said that Rav said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, it continued to expand like two strips of warp, until the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked it and halted it, as it is said, ‘The pillars of heaven were trembling, but they were astonished by His rebuke’ [Job 26:11]. This is what Resh Lakish said: What is the meaning of ‘I am God Almighty’ [Gen. 35:11, *El shaday*]—I am He who said to the world: Enough [*Day* in Hebrew]! Resh Lakish said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the sea, it continued to expand, until the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked it and caused it to dry up, as it is said: ‘He rebukes the sea and dries it up’ [Nahum 1:4]” (BT Hagigah 12a).

27 Often, this violence is not outwardly visible, but rather is directed inward, resulting in tension, which people try to conceal from society, with different character types acting in disparate ways. See (Shatil 1994, pp. 40–41).

28 “But the question remains: do we know about the origin of this force that is inherent in human beings and that underlies destructive activity or its equivalent in suffering under self-control? Behind it all is *magical destruction*. This is normal to infants in the very early stages of their development, and goes side by side with magical creation. Primitive or magical destruction of all objects belongs to the fact that (for the infant) objects change from being part of ‘me’ to being ‘not me’, from being subjective phenomena to being perceived objectively. Ordinarily such a change takes place by subtle gradations that follow the gradual changes in the developing infant, but with defective maternal provision these same changes occur suddenly, and in ways that the infant cannot predict” (Winnicott 1987, pp. 238–39).

29 From the perspective of the It, we should add to what Sartre wrote that not only does the other cause anxiety due to his facing me, by the very fact of his seeing me as an object, the encounter with him frequently reflects a hidden struggle between “slave” and “master”. In Hegel’s view, the relationship between people is dictated by a concealed power struggle. Each side wants to be the “master”, and force the other to acknowledge him, and not look at him only as an object that can be used. This aggressive domination of the submissive slave by the master brings the slave to only externally view the master as a “subject”. See (Evans 1996, pp. 32–33).

30 For Buber’s response to Sartre, see below.

31 See (Buber 1970, p. 54). It should be reiterated that the It, or in my formulation the striving-for or the ego, is not, for Buber, something bad which should be annihilated. It rather is a positive element, for when it is directed to the good, it serves as “a chariot to the Throne of Glory”. In this respect, as well, Buber follows Hasidic thought, with its characteristic claim that evil is a ladder to the good; furthermore, divine service with the Evil Inclination is cardinal—for it is there that the highest divine sparks are to be found (see the literature referenced by Rosenak 2007, pp. 56–57, note 86, and his comparison to other Jewish conceptions). This enables us to understand the dictum of the Baal Shem Tov to desire everything with one’s entire inclination (see Scholem 1975, p. 321; see also Kosman 2007b, pp. 134–39, and the entire discussion in this chapter). Buber thought that this was the main difference between Judaism, that represents a monistic faith, and Pauline Christianity, that represents the dualistic position, which cannot contain the other or the Evil Inclination as an element that calls upon men to use it as a “ladder to the good”. Buber concisely expressed this profound difference with a quotation from Rabbi Hanokh of Aleksander: “The other nations too believe that there are two worlds. They too say: ‘In the other world’. The difference is this: They think that the two are separate and severed, but Israel professes that the two worlds are essentially one and shall in fact become one” (Buber 1988c, p. 166). Using Buberian terminology, we can say that a sincere encounter in which the two parties to dialogue are truthful is conceivable only after the constitution of the “It” of the other (see Koren 2010, pp. 299–301); see also below, n 82.

32 It could be argued against this claim, in a Heideggerian spirit, that most of our everyday actions are automatic and are unaccompanied by any thought. Such an assertion is to be rejected, because an entity that uses the other as if it were an object to attain something hides behind our automatic actions. Furthermore, the more automatic the action, the less the probability that we will view the other as a subject.

33 The need of the Kantian moral man to say to himself (or to those around him) that he adheres to the framework of a moral life is itself an egocentric need, that results from high self-esteem, since his aspiration to be more moral than others apparently attests to his moral superiority.

34 He continues: “A good deed performed merely out of regard for Kant’s moral principle would at bottom be the work of a philosophical pedantry” (p. 170).

35 Here, according to Buber, is the early basis of the classical Jewish term “*mitzvah*” (commandment): an action accompanied by power and good energy, that results from entering into a “Thou” relation with the other. See (Kosman 2002b, p. 236, note 73).

36 For the absolute in Buber’s thought, see (Buber 2016b, p. 86); see also below, notes 52, 56.

37 For an explanation of the dual status in people’s lives according to Buber’s teaching, see (Shapira 1994, pp. 29–55).

38 We will expand on this point below, in the discussion of the meaning of revelation for Buber. The status of the Thou, as Buber frequently emphasizes, is characterized by a person not being split, he rather is entirely within the Thou. Shmuel Yosef Agnon (according to the testimony of Zvi Kurtzweil) explained this once, saying that the state of Thou requires “*rikuz atzum*’, enormous concentration or powers of concentration” (see Kaufmann 1984b, p. 21); at that moment, there is nothing else before me, only this Thou that I face (p. 21).

Noteworthy in this regard is the debate (which exceeds the scope of the current essay) between Bloch (“The Justification and the Futility of Dialogical Thinking”) and Theunissen (“The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology”). Theunissen—based on the negative descriptions of the “Thou” in Buber’s various statements, argued that Buber’s “Thou” belongs to the transcendental plane, i.e., beyond what exists in the reality of the world. Gilad (2005, pp. 190–97) discusses this debate in length, and joins Bloch in opposition to Theunissen. This debate, for me, is further proof that it is not suitable to try to grasp the “I-Thou” relationship with logical-philosophical tools (cf. Lorenz Wachinger, quoted above). The “Thou” manifests itself as a certain state of mind—of being filled with “energy”, which Buber describes in different places (e.g., Buber 1970, p. 158: “man receives, and what he receives is not a ‘content’ but a presence, a presence as strength”). From a phenomenological point of view, the logical-philosophical discussion that Gilad explains at length there seems unnecessary, since the state of “Thou” manifests itself phenomenologically, first and foremost, as a “change of the heart” (otherwise it has no meaning at all!—see (Buber 1970, p. 158): “The man who steps out of the essential act of pure relation has something More in his being, something new has grown there of which he did not know before and for whose origin he lacks any suitable words”), filled with a sense of power and divine energy, seeking peace and unity in each and every meeting in the world (this, of course, is in contrast to the usual egocentric state of the mind, which lacks this divine power). Buber’s statement regarding the tension between the options of determinism versus free choice can be applied to this debate as well, as an example of the pointless attempt to fully understand logically the state of mind of the “Thou”. Buber argues: “[. . .] it is senseless to ask how far my action reaches, and where God’s grace begins; there is no common border-line; what concerns me alone, before I bring something about, is my action, and what concerns me alone, when the action is successfully done, is God’s grace. The one is no less real than the other, and neither is a part-cause” (see below, Buber’s citation near note 90). Here, then, as well, a leap of faith is required beyond normal logical thought. Buber himself made a clear statement in regard to the question of rational considerations in the discussion on the “Thou”: “The difference regarding this question, however, is by no means that between the “rational” and the “irrational”, but that between the reason that detaches itself from the other forces of the human person and declares itself to be sovereign and the reason that forms a part of the wholeness and unity of the human person and works, serves, and expresses itself within this wholeness and unity” (Buber 1967b, p. 710; and see Kosman 2021, pp. 106–16).

To be perfectly clear: I do not maintain that Buber understood that the state of “Thou” is a mystical state (at least not that of the “Unio Mystica”). My intention is only to say that the rational effort to clearly define the state of “Thou” must necessarily end in failure, since it belongs to that which is beyond our understanding, of which Buber thought that “what can be comprehended in this world is only a ‘footstool’ of what cannot” (see below, note 82). Buber himself says: “The clear and firm structure of the I-Thou relationship, familiar to everyone with a candid heart and the courage to pledge it, has not a mystical nature. From time to time we must come out of our habits of thought in order to understand it; but we do not have to leave the primal norms which determine human thinking about reality. As in the realm of nature, so in the realm of spirit—the spirit which lives on in word and work, and the spirit which wishes to become word and work: what is effected upon us may be understood as something effected by the ongoing course of being (Seiendes)” (Buber 1967b, p. 710).

In our case, this is especially evident, since the logic used by Theunissen in his analysis of citations from Buber would completely destroy Buberian thought, especially for those who are aware of the Hasidic background of Buber’s thought. Gilad (2005, p. 197) himself asks that question—namely, to what extent is it possible to view Buber’s statements on the “Thou” as part of the philosophical discourse? Gilad believes that the answer is positive, and to this end he adapts the arguments of Herman Cohen, in order to clarify Buber’s “Thou” concept. I, however, do not agree with this forced line of thought. Suffice it to say, that from a phenomenological point of view, the statements of Buber on the “Thou” are quite well understood. It seems to me, however, that the attempt to explain the “Thou” with rational tools stems from an inability to distinguish between the rational understanding of the phenomenon itself and the analysis of the phenomenon. I will explain this point by the following example: the emanation of the artistic work, a poem for instance, which “appears” in the mind of the poet, is obviously a mysterious phenomenon (see Lester 2021). It is possible to surround the poem with a rational understanding, analyse it, and find parallel literary tools, allusions, puns, and the like, but the poem itself is not something that can be created with rational tools. As a matter of fact, Buber himself says it, i.e., that with the move toward the Thou we are moving from seeking answers to our daily questions in the realm of the “logic”—toward another realm (ueberlogische, beyond the logic), namely, the direct “hearing” of God. See his discussion with Tovia Ben-Chorin, in (Ben-Chorin 1978, pp. 172–73).

- 39 In his response to the lecture delivered by Steven Katz at the conference at Ben-Gurion University, on the difficulty of rationally comprehending the possibility of the existence of the basic word I-Thou (and see note 38 above).
- 40 Bold emphasis added. The moral of this parable by Wyschogrod is what Mendes-Flohr portrayed as the insight of a circular reasoning (*Petito principii*) of the dialogical man. This is expressed in the need for a person to have a dialogical predisposition in order to break through to dialogue. Without this disposition, Wyschogrod's parable would be incomprehensible. See the discussion of this in (Barzilai 2000, p. 22).
- 41 (Katz 1984, p. 116). Nonetheless, Katz does not rule out the possibility of the realization of the basic word I-Thou, he merely does not accept it as self-understood, and attempts to systematically analyze Buber's ideas. See Katz, p. 116. According, however, to Mendes-Flohr (see the preceding note), Katz's goal is unattainable. Accordingly, Mendes-Flohr would argue that either a person, as "I", "flies" to meet the dialogue with the other, as "Thou", or not.
- 42 Buber, however, opposed the duality inherent in Schopenhauer's thought (see, e.g., Buber 2002e, pp. 221–22). Rivka Horwitz presented the early Buber as tending to dualism (see Horwitz 1984, pp. 127–29; Horwitz 1978–1979), but Koren highlights Buber's rejection of viewing the "It" as representing evil (Koren 2010, pp. 235–36 and note 31). Buber writes in *I-Thou* (p. 95): "The basic word I-It does not come from evil—any more than matter comes from evil. It comes from evil—like matter that presumes to be that which has being". See (Kaufmann 1984a, pp. 14, 18; Kaufmann 1984b), and see below, near note 82 (Putnam's important observation on the status of the "It" in Buber's teaching).
- 43 Horwitz showed that Buber first came across the distinction between these two basic words in Ebner's thought (see Horwitz 1988, pp. 151–59). It should be noted, however, that Schopenhauer preceded both Ebner and Buber in this profound understanding of the Thou (without using this specific terminology). On the sources of the dialogical idea, see also below, note 83.
- 44 The reference is to the Spanish playwright Pedro Calderon de la Barca (1600–1681).
- 45 When Buber was asked whether he should be defined as a philosopher or theologian, he defined himself as "an atypical man", since the starting point for his thought is "one great experience of faith", and the aim of his writing was to "insert" his experiences "into the human inheritance of thought". Buber explained that his choice of philosophical language, of all the various forms of expression, does not teach that he viewed himself as a philosopher, only that this language suited him more than other forms of expression (Buber 1967b, p. 689). See also (Barzilai 2000, pp. 59–63), for the standing of logic and methodicalness in Buber's thought, and (Amir 1987, pp. 290–91). See also below.
- 46 Therefore, it is not surprising that the young Buber thought that he was meant to be a poet. For the assertion that Buber, following the German philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), thought that poetry is a "natural form" of prophecy, see (Schaefer 1991, p. 14). The unique—and difficult—lyrical style of *I and Thou* might be connected to Buber's special relation to poetry. On *I and Thou* as a philosophical–dialogical poem, see (Diamond 1967, p. 235).
- 47 On the gap between religion and religiosity according to Buber, see (Amir 1987; Kosman 2002b, pp. 226–30). Rosenak, following Mary Douglas, proposed a useful typology for classifying the types of religious thought (Rosenak 2007, pp. 411–21). Rosenak correctly defined Buber as an individualistic religious type who lives his religiosity without a fixed outer norm (pp. 416–17).
- 48 Buber, Martin. (1948b, p. 17). This mystery, Buber explains there, is also the unifying secret between man's active act and his being entirely passively in the hands of God.
- 49 On this expression, see (Bergman 1991, p. 225).
- 50 Another important term of Buber in this regard is "umfassung" (inclusion). See (Levinas 1967, pp. 142 and 148–149).
- 51 It should be recalled that the word "love" has many meanings not intended by Buber—romantic love, for example. Buber wrote on this: "Love without dialogic, without real outgoing to the other, reaching to the other, and accompanying with the other, the love remaining with itself—this is called Lucifer" (Buber 2002a, p. 24; see above, notes 10–11 and below, note 102). On the I-Thou relation as the thought of love, and a discussion of Eros and love between man and woman in Buber's thought, see (Koren 2010, pp. 315–38; Cherniak 2014, pp. 51–52; cf. the parallel discussion of Levinas's thought in Meir 2007).
- 52 From which bursts forth a doctrine so ramified that, in my opinion, some Buber scholars go astray in the thicket of the forest and cannot see what is the trunk and what its branches. As an example, I will mention Theunissen's puzzling claim that Buber was primarily concerned with social reform and, therefore, any diversion from this goal into questions of faith does not naturally ensue from Buber's theses. Theunissen finds something artificial in the extension of the I-Thou relation to the eternal Thou (see Theunissen 1984, pp. 333–46, and see the opposing view of Sagi(e) 1981, pp. 149–51). For Buber, we can speak about the anthropological aspect of humanism without religiosity, but for him, this is a sort of movement that was stopped in its tracks on its way to a more complete view of the reality. Such a view would realize that this is merely a single relation in a whole array of relations that point to the Absolute Thou (see also below note 56). Buber himself attests that he had no method, but we cannot conclude from this the lack of any single and primal nucleus in his thought (see Shapira 1994, pp. 15–19).
- 53 The element of giving is indeed central in this context, but it should be noted that it ensues from the understanding of the oneness of the I and the other, and may be attributed here to the negation of the gap between the giver and the recipient (or, to be more precise, the merging of the two to the extent that the gap between the two is somewhat blurred). See (Kosman 2002b, p. 235).
- 54 A French religious Christian thinker of Jewish origin (1909–1943), who expressed in his writings forceful opposition to the Jewish tradition. For this disagreement, see also (Shapira 1994, pp. 188–89).

- 55 That means: In true loving relations, the concrete, actual “I” (not the egocentric center which deceptively call itself “I”) turns to the other and says to him: “I love you”. The destruction of the self of which Weil speaks could also be interpreted as a type of apathy and departure from the true encounter with the other, and certainly an abandonment of the responsibility implicit in such an encounter. See (Kosman 2009, pp. 9–11).
- 56 See (Buber 1970, pp. 157–60): “What is it that is eternal: the primal phenomenon, present in the here and now, of what we call revelation? It is man’s emerging from the moment of the supreme encounter, being no longer the same as he was when entering into it. The moment of encounter is not a ‘living experience’ that stirs in the receptive soul and blissfully rounds itself out: something happens to man. At times it is like feeling a breath and at times like a wrestling match; no matter: something happens. The man who steps out of the essential act of pure relation has something More in his being, something new has grown there of which he did not know before and for whose origin he lacks any suitable words. Wherever the scientific world orientation in its legitimate desire for a causal chain without gaps may place the origin of what is new here: for us, being concerned with the actual contemplation of the actual, no subconscious and no other psychic apparatus will do. Actually, we receive what we did not have before, in such a manner that we know: it has been given to us. In the language of the Bible: ‘Those who wait for God will receive strength in exchange’ [Isa. 40:31] [. . .] Man receives, and what he receives is not a ‘content’ but a presence, a presence as strength”. And in the same passage: “This is the eternal revelation which is present in the here and now. I neither know of nor believe in any revelation that is not the same in its primal phenomenon. I do not believe in God’s naming himself or in God’s defining himself before man. The world of revelation is: I am there as whoever I am there. That which reveals is that which reveals. That which has being is there, nothing more. The eternal source of strength flows, the eternal touch is waiting, the eternal voice sounds, nothing more”. See the discussion by (Amir 1987, pp. 191–93). This imparting of power gives a person a certainty that cannot be attained by normal mental faculties (even for a person who seeks to live a moral life), and which is a gift from above: grace. See (Buber 2016b, p. 86): “The man who seeks distinction and decision in his own soul cannot draw from it, from his soul, absoluteness for his scale of values. Only out of a personal relationship with the Absolute can the absoluteness of the ethical co-ordinates arise without which there is no complete awareness of self” (on the Absolute, see also above notes 36, 52). In light of this, we can understand, and Buber indeed said that, in the final analysis, God demands of man “not much more than the fundamental ethical” (Buber 2016a, p. 103); but, we cannot conclude from that, as did Sagi (2000, p. 155), that “Buber was of the opinion that morality realizes all that God wants from man”. This formulation omits the most basic condition, which for Buber is the be-all and end-all: God does not demand of man more than basic morality—provided that this morality ensues from his adherence to God, and that his activity in the world drives from the power given him by his very adherence to the I-Thou relation. Buber’s intent is not to every person who fulfills the demands of morality for other reasons, such as the individual whose way of life is based on Kant’s categorical imperative. The assertion by Sagi and Statman (1993, p. 135) that Buber thought that “belief is the source of spiritual force and trust [in God]”, is similarly inaccurate. Buber did not think that belief itself is the source of power. He rather maintained that **at times** the power given to man is the result of divine revelation; that is, the intervention of grace in will. And this grace, that might or might not be present between two individuals, is not a condition for the encounter with the other. For Buber, faith is merely a condition that prepares a person for his entry to the encounter, while the encounter itself only contains the **possibility** of the person’s receiving of power. See, in this regard (Buber 1967a, pp. 186–87, note 7).
- 57 Now, we can understand why at times Buber dared to describe himself as a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov (see Buber 1948c, p. 43: “Listen only to a saying like this, which more than forty years ago made me into a Hasid of the Baal-shem-tov”). For Buber’s attitude to Hasidic teachings, see the extensive discussion: (Koren 2010, pp. 187–219). Buber does not use Hasidic terminology in his philosophical doctrine, but he found the distinction between the two basic words in Hasidism as well, albeit formulated differently (see Koren 2010, pp. 270–73; see also, Simon 1985, p. 259). Buber himself offers the reader a precis of the teaching of R. Bunam of Przysucha (Pzhysha), who depicted two fundamental human states that clearly express the two basic words in Buber’s thought: “In like manner, Rabbi Bunam saw the advance of human history on its way to redemption as an interaction between two types of humans. One type is the arrogant one who always has the self in mind, even when expressed in the most elegant style. The other is the humble one who always has the world in mind. Arrogance will be redeemed only when it submits to humility, and only after arrogance is redeemed can the world be redeemed” (Buber 1988c, p. 22; see also, Buber 1988b, pp. 102–14).
- 58 See the discussion by (Statman 1995), and my response: (Kosman 1997).
- 59 See (Bergman 1991, pp. 220–21). This sentence should be cleansed of any nuance of achievement, since this point is the very heart of contact with the “mystery”. Anyone who, out of a lack of awareness or out of spiritual ignorance, turns his experience of contact with the mystery into a new inner “possession” all at once rids his world of the presence of God, since this presence does not tolerate such a coarse appropriation. As regards the degree of mystery and how the later Buber viewed the dimension of mystery in dialogue, see (Koren 2010, pp. 147–83). See also below.
- 60 On responsibility, see (Buber 2002b, pp. 109–10; Vogel 1970; Margolin 2013; Mendes-Flohr 1988; on the humility of the educator, see Buber 2002b, p. 112) and see above note 50. For what Buber writes about the element of humility in Hasidism, see (Buber 1988b, pp. 109 ff).
- 61 From a sociological point of view, Weigert (1981, pp. 111–12) writes that such a meeting is therapeutic and facilitates profound insights. He then writes: “The power of dialogue to manifest the what and how of persons’ lives and their worlds derives from the direct and immediate contact with each person’s symbolic presentation of self and world. The full flesh and spirit of self

and other is given as a unified event; two momentarily become one—to the dismay of quantified and mechanistic thinking. The oneness is a symbolic achievement, a merging of minds and hearts, and perhaps bodies, which can occur only by means of and within the symbolic worlds of human lives” (p. 113).

62 (Bialik 2000, p. 16). The normative meaning of “*belimah*” is “restraint”.

63 “Every speech, every pulsation of speech, partakes of the nature of a concealment of nothingness” (Bialik 2000, p. 16).

64 Bialik 2000, p. 25. He also writes: “human beings when they speak [. . .] without having any conception of how shaky is their bridge of mere words, how deep and dark the void is that opens at their feet” (Bialik 2000, p. 15). In Lacanian language, we can say that, according to Buber, we have here an opening to the transition from the symbolic and the imaginary to the real (for an explanation of this, see Evans 1996, pp. 157–59). See also (Liebes 2000, p. 153): “Such *Belimah* is, first and foremost, a waiver of the ego, of the hubris inclination generally found at the basis of human creativity. Just as the correct awareness demands the trait of humility [. . .] so, too, is it necessary while creating”.

65 See also (Buber 1988c, p. 13): “God does not say: ‘*This* is the way to me but *that other* is not’. God does say, ‘Whatever you do can be a *way* to me, provided that *way* leads you to me’”. See also (Buber 1983, p. 234). Scholem (1976, p. 140) indicates that Buber never abandoned this view, although he formulated it in different ways over the course of time.

66 Bialik 2000, p. 14. I slightly amended the English translation to what I believe to be more accurate (AK).

67 Buber’s early formulations in his book, *Daniel*, aid us in clarifying the meaning of the basic words. We can say, in this case, the realization approach was replaced by an orientational one. Bergman writes: “What invariably interests us [in the interaction with the people or things we encounter on the way to our goal] is the context and the usefulness [. . .] of what we can derive from the individual thing [what we find in the interaction with it, in accordance with the orientation]. The individual thing is always a springboard or transition to something else” (*Dialogical Philosophy*, p. 219). On the other hand, in the realization approach (which Buber some time later replaced with the more accurate basic word “I-Thou”), “the individual who realizes, or actualizes, and gives himself totally to whatever he is with. He takes it in with all his senses” (p. 219).

68 Bergman related that already when he met Buber in Prague in 1909, the latter declared, “I do not know the transcendent” (Horwitz 1989, p. 174). Paul Mendes-Flohr reminded me in this regard that Buber himself writes in his memoirs that he clearly realized this only after Reverend Hechler visited Buber in his home in May 1914 (see Buber 2002c, pp. 50–53). Hechler, as reported by Buber, put him in a quandary when he asked him directly if he believes in God. Buber evaded answering the reverend immediately, but he wanted to clarify for himself what was his answer to the question. Then, Buber relates, “Suddenly in my spirit [. . .] there arose without having been formulated by me, word for word distinct: ‘If to believe in God means to be able to talk about him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in him means to be able to talk to him, then I believe in God’. And after a while, further: ‘The God who gives Daniel such foreknowledge of this hour of human history, this hour before the “world war”, that in its fixed place in the march of the ages can be foredetermined, is not my God and not God. The God to whom Daniel prays in his suffering is my God and the God of all’” (pp. 52–53).

69 The theory that explains how God became a sort of inner superego that pursues man was first presented by Freud and was later developed by the psychoanalysts who succeeded him. The version that was developed by the proponents of the objects relations theory seems to be the most convincing. See, in this regard (Gamlieli 2006, pp. 165–252, esp. pp. 243–45).

70 Mendes-Flohr wrote about Buber’s religious philosophy: “Buber understood his religious philosophy to be a phenomenological elaboration of what is experienced in the divine-human encounter, which in his view was preeminently refracted through man’s dialogical encounter with his fellowmen and with the world in general” (Mendes-Flohr 1991, p. 238). Buber’s view challenges the Jewish rabbinic tradition, since this understanding of the concept of revelation implies that, in practice, it is suitable for every man. Thus, for Buber, the idea of revelation underwent a process of democratization: every person who is capable of directing himself to hear the word of God can experience revelation, without needing the mediation of rabbinic teaching. The assumed cessation of prophecy, that for so many years gave Judaism its unique rabbinic coloration, ensued, in Buber’s opinion, from a misunderstanding of the phenomenon of revelation and the tendency to impart it excessive exaltedness (see Kosman and Hadad 2020, p. 245 and note 148). For this, see also (Diamond 2011, especially pp. 338–39). Although I cannot completely accept his position regarding Buber in this matter, still, as an introduction to this question, his presentation is very helpful.

71 It seems that we can say about the existence of the ego what Heidegger argued about being, that we are unaware of it because it is so basic to our existence that we do not discern it (Bergman 1984, p. 126 explains it as follows: “Being tends not to see itself. It is cloaked by the world within which it dwells”). Usually, we can be aware of the ego only when we encounter distorted phenomena that spring from the egocentrism of someone who hurts us—but we have difficulty in identifying similar distortions when they result from our own egocentrism. On Jung’s position regarding this problem in relation to the Western person, see (Jung 2020, p. 154).

72 For this reason, Buber also opposed his close friend Franz Rosenzweig’s methodical thoughts about God in his book, *The Star of Redemption*. Buber argued: “*Es passt zu gut*”, meaning: this seems too fine (as attested by Samuel Hugo Bergman (cited by Horwitz 1989, p. 184, note 31)).

73 For more on this, see below. At this stage of his life, Buber regarded the ecstatic experience as another way of focusing on the self, its aim of attaining pleasure, and its achievements (even if, in this case, they are en clothed in pseudoreligious garb).

- 74 He, therefore, thought that the mystic, who seeks the peak experiences of ecstasy, is sunken within his egocentric tendencies. For Buber, the mystic sees in his “I” (the ego)—the divine “I”—and as proof of this: mysticism, unlike relation, does not impose responsibility on a person. See (Bergman 1958, pp. 10–11). Buber himself expressed a quite decisive opinion on this matter. He declared that he was not a mystic, since “I still grant to reason a claim that the mystic must deny to it. Beyond this, I lack the mystic’s negation. I can negate convictions but never the slightest actual thing” (Buber 1957, p. 28). See the discussion in (Koren 2010, pp. 147–83).
- 75 In most instances, Freud would say, and rightly so, that this is a projection of some sort of father figure. See above, note 69.
- 76 This is why Buber consistently avoided any theosophical hypothesis that would turn mystery into knowledge (what he called “gnosis”). See (Bergman 1958, pp. 10–12).
- 77 God calls to man in encounters which happen, every day and every moment. Every such meeting is a question or speaking that the Absolute Thou directs to man. Buber says: “In the signs of life which happen to us we are addressed” (Buber 2002a, p. 17). See also (Kosman 2002b, pp. 230–34).
- 78 In several places in his writings, in this context, Buber uses the phrase “the realization of God”. To prevent misunderstandings, he stresses to the reader that this is not simply a meaningless play on words that masks a lack of belief in God, “for this term lures us into the glittering notion that God is an idea that can become reality only through man” (Buber, *On Judaism*, p. 8). He calls such a position (that God is an idea) a “hopelessly wrong conception”, which contains a (Feuerbachian) assumption (see Buber 2016b, p. 96) that “God is not, but that He becomes—either within man or within mankind” (Buber, *On Judaism*, p. 8). According to Buber, this view is “hopelessly wrong, not because I am not certain of a divine *becoming* in immanence, but because only a primal certainty of divine *being* enables us to sense the awesome meaning of divine becoming, that is, the self-impacting of God to His creation and His participation in the destiny of its freedom, whereas without this primal certainty there can be only a blatant misuse of God’s name” (Buber, *On Judaism*, p. 9; see Simon 1985, p. 247).
- 79 (Buber 1945, p. 10). Accordingly, it cannot be claimed that Buber did not delineate a clear boundary between the transcendental and the immanent (see Dreyfus 1993, p. 156), since he vigorously rejected any direct or indirect occupation with the transcendental God Himself.
- 80 The following passage by Buber is relevant for this question: “‘Faith’, however, should not be taken in the sense given to it in the Epistle to the Hebrews, as faith that God exists. That has never been doubted by Jacob’s soul. In proclaiming its faith, its *emunah*, the soul only proclaimed that it put its trust in the everlasting God, *that he would be present* to the soul, as had been the experience of the patriarchs, and that it was entrusting itself to him, who was present” (Buber 1948d, p. 29). In this context, Paul Mendes-Flohr reminded me of the connection that Hebrew makes between *emun* (trust) and *emunah* (faith). See, in this regard (Margolin 2021, pp. 409–13). That faith, *emunah*, is not faith in the existence of any object, but has a different meaning: to **entrust** my life in a practical way into God’s hands. Faith means to trust in His faithfulness, to give my life to Him out of trust. Buber explains that only God can be trusted, one can have faith in an idol only in one’s own imagination, because how can one give life to a statue. Buber adds that the Torah is a set of testimonies about the surrenderer’s life relationship with God. The entire Torah is a chain of “stories” about God’s guidance of this people of *emunah* in their way of life—as this God is always the God of man’s way (see Buber 1961, first introduction (this introduction is missing in the English translation: (Buber 1960))). It should be added that faith is a “daring leap” of which Buber was fully cognizant. He thought that only one who dares can be a person of faith (see Horwitz 1989, p. 176 and note 8; the question Horwitz raises there can be answered by noting that this was stated outright in *I and Thou*, p. 60: “The deed involves a sacrifice and a risk”). Buber does not refer to the daring of the skeptic, who chooses to gamble regarding belief, in the spirit of Pascal. He rather asserts that the one who truly experienced an encounter, too, tends to fear drawing the necessary daunting conclusions (on the ensuing total claim of this faith, see Schweid 1992, p. 168). Consequently, he could find himself fleeing from God, whom he encountered for a moment, in order to hide in the everyday of routine life.
- 81 For introspection, in the spiritual sense, and research, in its conventional sense, as two objective possibilities for studying the reality, see (Aren 1993, pp. 25–27).
- 82 See above note 42. It also should be mentioned that Buber thought that all that can be comprehended in this world is only a “footstool” of what cannot. See (Buber 1957, p. 27; Koren 2001, pp. 110–14).
- 83 See, e.g., (Brunner 1967, p. 309). Buber was not the first to realize the significance of the basic words. Although we may assume he had some glimmerings of this notion even before he was familiar with Ferdinand Ebner’s writings (see Brunner 1967, p. 309; Horwitz 1975; Horwitz 1989, pp. 176–77), nonetheless, at least chronologically, Ebner’s book was published before Buber’s publication of the I-Thou relation. Gabriel Marcel, too, developed this idea at about the time that Buber began to fashion it (see Marcel 1967, p. 41). For Rosenzweig’s possible influence on Buber in the development of this thought, see (Horwitz 1975, pp. 171–80), and for the distinctions drawn by Schopenhauer regarding the basic words, see the text at note 43 above. It should be stressed that although the idea itself might have been expressed in various formulations before Buber wrote *I and Thou*, Simon correctly wrote on this question: “[Buber’s] independent and decisive contribution to the I-Thou philosophy should be defined in that only he, by his singular conception of Hasidism, transformed it into a defined concept. Actually, we cannot speak of ‘dialogical thought’ before Buber” (Simon 1985, p. 259).
- 84 This division can have two different meanings. The first, most of the modern educated Jews at that time (including many of Buber’s colleagues in the Zionist movement) totally refuted the possibility of God’s existence, and certainly the possibility of His

revelation to human beings. The second, most of those professing religious stances struggled to imagine God in their mind's eye, based on the mythos of religion, as a "third person (see above, note 11)" When Buber formulated his dialogical position, a third meaning came about, as well: Buber stands on one side, and all the mystics of the various religions (who seek to attain a trance state) stand on the other.

85 Cf. a similar sentiment preserved from the teachings of the Hasidic rabbi, R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (the Piaseczner Rebbe): (Shapira 1991, pp. 406–7).

86 Cf. (Stace 1961, pp. 326–29), on the place of the emotion of love in the heart of the mystic. In my opinion, Buber is much more accurate than Stace in defining the interim state. Despite the importance of Stace's discussion, he confuses the different types of love. Love that has a biological origin and is built on identification and attachment should not be included in the same discussion with the type of love of which Buber speaks, which consists of totally giving oneself over, without attachment, to the other.

87 (Buber 2002a, p. 35). See (Dreyfus 1993, pp. 150–51).

88 I explained this issue at length in (Kosman 2007a, pp. 519–24).

89 Buber (1959b) called this stance "Hebrew humanism" (see his essay by this name: "Hebrew Humanism"; see also Bergman 1968, col. 681). In a more specific Jewish context, Buber termed this path the "holy way" (see Buber 1977c; Schweid 1992, p. 164). On the background for the writing of "The Holy Way", see (Mendes-Flohr 1980, p. 92; Shapira 1994, p. 109, note 29).

90 For the development of the term "the Eternal Thou" or "the Absolute Thou" (instead of the word "God"), see Horwitz 1988, pp. 143–60. Horwitz notes that this conception, on which Ferdinand Ebner's writings were based, assumes that "God is always the true 'Thou'" (Horwitz 1989, p. 176). Every I-Thou encounter is, therefore, an encounter with God, who can no longer be called "He" or "It", since third-person appellations are anthropomorphic (see above, notes 8, 84). See (Horwitz 1989, pp. 151–59) and "Martin Buber's Concept", pp. 176–77. See also the note by J. Amir and M. Ron, the translators and editors of Buber's collected correspondence (Buber 1990, vol. 2, pp. 116–17, note 4).

91 For a precise understanding of what Buber says in this passage, see Sagi(e) 1981, p. 151, and below, note 93.

92 The Buddhist worldview is remarkably similar on this point, although it usually relates to it from the perspective of the experiences of the egocentric world accumulated from within a series of states of consciousness that create *samsara*. See (Aren 1993, pp. 36–40). On the affinity between Buber's ideas and Buddhist notions, see (Raz 2013). On Buber's closeness to several elements of Eastern teachings, see also (Buber 1967d). Buber asserted that "the Jews are the Orient's latecomers" ("Spirit of the Orient", p. 63). Cf. Koren 2001, pp. 106–9.

93 In order to avoid misunderstandings, it should be stressed that Buber assumed that there is a place for humanism without religious faith, even though such humanism will lack the depth dimension that is present in religiosity. On the other hand, Buber emphasized that the opposite possibility—of belief without humanism—is a serious error, see (Sagi(e) 1981, pp. 149–51). Many psychological doctrines, that ascribed importance to dialogue only on the human level, might have "borrowed" parts of Buber's teachings, based on this intuitive understanding. See, as one of many possible examples, the use that Gestalt psychology makes of Buber's teaching, with extensive quotations from his writings, in (Saruk and Rabinovitch 1984, pp. 144–61). Note should be taken of Buber's criticism of Ludwig Feuerbach's method. Buber argued that Feuerbach sought to reduce the Thou relation to the level of a plain meeting between humans and rid it of the divine element. See (Meir 2002, p. 265, note 27). See also (Margolin 2021, pp. 23–24). Even according to Silberstein's claim, that from the 1950s onwards Buber began to hide the religious basis of his teaching (for rhetorical reasons) in some of his writings, still, as Silberstein emphasizes, "This does not mean that Buber no longer grounded his view of humanity in religious faith. On the contrary, religious faith continued to occupy his attention, and he devoted many writings to it. However, in his later writings on dialogue and the interhuman, he no longer found it necessary to support his philosophical-anthropological and social position by recourse to religious rhetoric. His writings therefore became more useful to social scientists and psychologists" (Silberstein 1989, p. 146).

94 Buber apparently means to say that God is not a sort of limited, bodiless copy of the other (which Sartre obviously rejects), but rather the total Absolute who faces him and who can never be "It". See also above, note 36.

95 See (Simon 1989, p. 23). Incidentally, even though Koren is correct, in great measure, when he shows that Buber was inclined to negate the vertical axis of ascent to the divine and to emphasize the horizontal axis of religious strivings (see Koren 2010, pp. 212–19), Buber does not entirely reject the vertical axis. Rather, in his thought, the down–up axis (that is, man's will and religious strivings; "up–down", in contrast, expresses the descent of the Divine Presence, the imparting of divine grace) is understood as the inner effort of sacrifice, namely, man's disengagement from the obtuseness of the ego, so that he can be aware of the existence of the other and be ready for the encounter with him.

96 In this context, see Bergman's conversation with Buber on the question of sacrifice. In this conversation, Bergman spoke with Buber about the approach of Rabbi Zalman Schachter. Schachter was said to speak about different possibilities for renewing the service of God in daily life, and raised the following possibility: "When you sit on the dentist's chair, you can bring the pains you feel as an offering to God". Significantly, Buber unreservedly accepted this idea (Buber 1992, p. 148).

97 Freibach-Heifetz refers to the statement by Buber: "I require a You [=Thou] to become" (Buber 1970, p. 62; in simple words: 'I' become more and more **me** (myself)—only by my meeting with the "Thou"). On this point, Buber writes elsewhere: "the individual does not have the essence of man in himself [...] man's essence is contained in the unity of man with man" (Buber 2002e, p. 203). See also (Barzilai 2000, pp. 193–94; Cohen 2019).

- 98 I do not agree with this statement by Freibach-Heifetz, but I cited it because of the importance of this passage for the continuation of our discussion.
- 99 See above, note 95; see also above, note 14.
- 100 That is, the world in which I find myself, based on my inner reality, with all its accompanying inner tumult. This is the world that Hinduism calls “maya”.
- 101 Buber (2002a, p. 42). For Buber’s opposition to perfectionism (since this is a product of the demand by the egocentric center, or the superego, in this case, and contains an element of hubris—the humble person will never be inclined to perfectionism, but will try to act according to his ability), see (Buber 1983, p. 234): “improvement where improvement is possible—improvement and not perfection”. In another conversation, with A. Ch. Elhanani, Buber explained that he kept his distance from perfectionism, and called himself a “millieurist” (see Stern 1989, p. 196). Consequently, our constant drifting into the It is unavoidable, even for individuals exceptionally sensitive to the Thou (see Buber 1970, pp. 68–69). It should be emphasized that this minimal demand, of the modest aim of the first glimmerings of encounter and no more, does not contradict the fact mentioned above, that when the “Divine Presence” rests between two, this opens the way for the appearance of the element that Buber called the “third” (see above, note 8). There is no inconsistency here because, as was explained above, what is important is not to be found in the “what” or the “how many”, but in a person’s inner intent; that is, the “how”. If the two are rewarded by having the “third” present between them, this experience will be intensified—and it might be possible to speak of the revelation of the Divine Presence or of the “mystery of reality” within the flow of life. Obviously, the two who understand the secret of dialogue do not open their hearts to each other **in order** to attain this experience, nor do they do so **on condition** that this happen.
- 102 Buber uses this term to thwart the possibility of including in the I-Thou relation falling in love and similar sentimental fantasies, which, according to him, have nothing to do with this relation (see above, notes 6, 7, 51). Buber’s words here are nothing other than an expression of the purest possible openness to the other—which is, at the same time, an expression of the openness to those who are **created by God**—and were sent to us for the meeting by (**and with**) God.

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