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Encyclopedia of Communication Theory

I and Thou

I and Thou is the most durable and important conceptual contribution of the 20th-century philosopher of dialogue, Martin Buber, and the title of his most famous book. As often happens with such terms, it became so well known and seemingly accessible that it developed its own reputation as a pop-culture slogan. Self-help gurus and critics alike have used it in ways that surely would have surprised Buber and other Continental philosophers, such as Gabriel Marcel and Hans-Georg Gadamer, who developed similar concepts and applied them in sophisticated ways.

Although it can be mischaracterized and even parodied, I and Thou is not a simplistic exhortation to love your neighbor, to avoid confrontation or conflict, or to be your most honest and genuine self. It is neither an uncritical celebration of subjectivity nor an attack on rationality. Buber was not advocating mystical experience or a near-religious obligation to sustain intimate relationships with people who should be treated as solemn "Thous." He was creating nothing less than an ontology of, or way of characterizing, communication that could ground the human sciences: "All real living is meeting," he wrote in *I and Thou,* in a line that captures its theme. At the center of this ontology was neither the individual self, as *I,* nor others with whom the individual interacts. Buber focused instead on relationships and relational attitudes—the often forgotten realm of the "between." This entry briefly discusses Buber's biography, describes the basic I-Thou concept, and explores several relevant implications for communication theory.

Biography and Background

Martin Buber was influential on the world's intellectual stage for more than 6 decades and participated in many of the 20th century's major philosophical, theological, literary, and political controversies. Fluent in nine languages, he had a multifaceted career that involved many roles, including journalist, editor, sociologist, theologian, novelist, translator, political activist, educator, and, although he was at times reluctant to embrace the term, philosopher. He knew and corresponded with many of the century's celebrated intellectuals and was himself intellectually versatile enough to be nominated for Nobel Prizes in both literature and peace.

First published in German in 1923,*1 and Thou* has been widely translated internationally, but two important English translations exist in an uneasy relationship to each other. The first, by Ronald Gregor Smith, appeared in English in 1937 and has been available in a second revised edition (with a new postscript by Buber) since 1958. The more recent is Walter Kaufmann's 1970 translation, which he claimed made the book clearer and corrected conceptual errors from the previous version. Some scholars prefer Kaufmann's work, which kept the earlier title but in the text revised its central concept to the more familiar, if prosaic, *I-You.* Others, including Maurice Friedman, Buber's most famous biographer and scholarly commentator, believe Smith's version to be more accurate and to have more engagingly captured the poetic meaning Buber had in mind. Kenneth Paul Kramer quotes from both translations side by side in his readable explication of *I and Thou.*

I-Thou and I-It

Buber's *I-Thou* and *I-It* are what he called "primary words" for understanding human relationships. I-Thou refers to the relational attitude or orientation of regarding the other in his or her concrete uniqueness, as someone capable of full responsiveness to one's own speech.

An I-It attitude, on the other hand, primarily regards the other as an object to be dealt with, affected, changed, measured, endured, or understood in role. The hyphenated paired words are "primary" for Buber because the *I* moves into different forms of being as a result of its relation with elements outside itself. It is impossible, thus, to understand the *I* apart from its relations, or from the manner in which it is expressed. Although the I-It can be spoken—enacted—with less than one's full presence or being because it refers to the world of things, the I-Thou involves the person's whole being in its address to a mutualized, and mutualizing, person. Buber believed the potential of a dialogic I-Thou attitude distinguished the action of *persons* from mere *individuals* whose inclination is persistently toward the world of It—the conceptualization, manipulation, and accumulation of things. There is nothing necessarily wrong or deficient about the It or the I-It attitude. Both the I-Thou and I-It are essential to what Buber called the *twofold I* and to human life. In fact, Buber indicated realistically that each I-Thou relation, because it so thoroughly involves "whole being" dialogic speech, is by nature transitory and must return to the world of I-It. Treating reality in objectifying ways is not immoral or unethical but normal, natural, and even necessary; defining reality as if it is essentially objectification (measurement, strategy, disseminating facts and opinions to passive audiences) misses the interhuman potential of our existence. Buber was not worried about the existence of the world of I-It; he was worried about the tendency of his era (as surely he would have been of ours) to elevate the It to supreme status.

Buber for Communication Theorists

In the 4 decades following the publication of *I and Thou,* Buber extended his ideas about dialogue expressed there. Six implications for communication theorists of *I and Thou* and Buber's subsequent writing on dialogue are discussed below.

Listening and Turning

Speech and the between are intricately woven in how humans co-construct a meaningful world. The element of spokenness, or enactment through communication, in fact, was Buber's entrée to understanding what makes us human, and it is in the occasions of speaking that readers most clearly glimpse his concerns. His analogy of embodiment, *turning,* set the stage for his distinction between monologic performance—to which creative response is neither expected nor required—and dialogic "genuine spokenness," which demands a responsive listening presence. Listening is a relational, not a psychological, phenomenon. We turn toward others when we expect meaningfulness. If we are interested merely in hearing or accumulating messages, any posture will do; monologue is fine. The problem of monologue is not that someone fails to hear a message but that he or she does not listen as a potential interlocutor. The difference, Buber thought, has enormous implications for what it means to be a person, and a person in relation to others, which he called "philosophical anthropology." Monologue works well for some purposes, such as announcing cast changes before a theater production, but is ill-suited for deliberative bodies, citizen mobilization, or family problem solving. Thus, the baseline implication of Buber's thought for communication studies is how it recommends a philosophy of *turning toward and listening* as a guiding center for personal discipline. As communication researchers study voice and persons' availability for relational difference and surprise in personal, organizational, cultural, or political relationships, they discover a focus for their theoretical concerns.

Mutual Definition and Polar Reality

For Buber, causality, traditionally defined, is an outgrowth of the world of It. In the "world of relation," I and Thou freely confront one another with plural, mutual, and interdependent consequences that cannot be traced to one-way causes. Each side in effect helps to define the other(s)—an interdefinition—that brings things into existence without causing. Thus, human categories are not static, dualistic, or mutually exclusive, despite Buber's tendency to describe polar opposites in dialectical or transactional terms. Although skeptical readers have suggested that he encouraged exclusivist either-or dichotomies ("you're either dialogic or you're not" "'I-Thou' communication must replace the 'I-It'"), he forcefully denied this interpretation. Instead, he described an approach in which two contrary principles could be held simultaneously, in tension with each other, each influencing the other while being influenced by it.

For example, when Buber wrote about dialogue and monologue, he was not describing a relation of one *versus* the other, as if one is always right and the other wrong: he saw them as polar possibilities, each influencing the other, both as constant choices in human existence and both valuable, although in different ways, to human beings. They exist in tension with, not separation from, each other. Buber saw no inconsistency between standing one's ground in an argument and being radically available for, even vulnerable to, another person's assertions. Each defined the other. Being persuaded means little if your position was not strongly held in the first place. Another example of this necessary tension of polarities can be seen in Buber's treatment of the relationship between *distance* and *relation.* Although it would be easy to think he would favor relation over distance (the too-easy assumption that communication, a "good thing," bridges distance, a "bad thing"), Buber showed how genuine communication relies as much on difference and gaps between persons as on the friendly sounding goal of interpersonal closeness or bonding.

Narrow Ridge

Buber was suspicious of what he called the *psychologizing* of human experience—the tendency, even among scholars, to believe that genuine reality is based on inner phenomena such as the "self," which govern perception, thought, and emotion. Yet Buber was equally suspicious of the collective social tendencies he saw around him, and how they impeded the uniqueness of individuals. How to resolve the dilemma? Again: Keep the tension. Between these twin threats—immersion in the self or in the collective—dialogically conscious persons must walk as if on a narrow ridge, equally aware of the challenges on either side. In this engaging metaphor, humans need not reconcile oppositions into an artificial unity; rather, the human task is to seek contact with them both by walking the ridge between. Maurice Friedman considered this concept so important that he put it in the foreground with the title of his one-volume biography of Buber.

Concreteness and the Particular

I and Thou, or dialogic thinking, as Buber developed it, is a curious blend of the intensely particular and the poetically abstract. It is not systematic enough in elaborating intellectual principles to qualify as philosophy for some academic philosophers, but it offers a philosophical perspective with a particularly *applied* tone. Buber invited readers and listeners to use his examples to flesh out their own. This may explain the lasting appeal of *I and Thou,* despite its challenging syntax and sometimes obscure language: While it might appear to float above acts of everyday organizational and political life, it also enfolds such contexts, inviting readers' own recognition.

Buber's focus on difference and particularity suggests cultural implications as well. By insisting that real meeting is uniquely immediate, that persons must encounter the other with as few prior conceptions as possible, his nonprescriptive ethic of dialogue applies especially well to intercultural relations. Knowledge about others' situations and practices can help people respond to unfamiliar cultural encounters. But knowledge is not enough. The other is not simply a representative of a culture or group, and a preoccupation with knowledge about group characteristics can lead communicators to miss the uniqueness of the very person(s) before them. Similarly, too much conscious reliance on one's own cultural or group affiliations can mean the difference between being (and being perceived as) a genuine "person," on one hand, and a self-absorbed "individual," on the other. The former can speak and listen in the moment, while the latter becomes caught in the web of "my"—*my* characteristics, *my* race or ethnicity, *my* habits, *my* way of doing things.

Surprise

One of the traditional problems of conceptualizing communication often lurks just below the discursive surface of everyday life: What is communication for? Is it to be understood in terms of fidelity to intention? To express clearly what we already believe and feel? To persuade others of the validity and appropriateness of our beliefs? To hear what another is saying? Or, as Buber and other dialogue theorists would have it, is it also to generate creativity out of a conversational meeting with otherness and difference? In dialogue, in other words, surprise is a key criterion.

Communication scholars have often studied occasions of persuasion or influence, arising from speakers' entrenched positions, commitments, or certainties; they have been relatively less interested in exploring occasions of genuine surprise in which communicators find themselves taken to places and ideas they never expected they would go. Thus, the newfound interest in dialogue theories is encouraging. Ironically, perhaps, given that some have celebrated the Socratic method as a model for dialogue, Buber believed that it was not motivated by an appreciation of dialogical surprise; Socrates' questions were like "moves" in a game designed to reveal the deficiency of the learner's position. For Buber, the questioner's or teacher's more dialogic impulse would be to ask *real* questions—those that explore what is not already known. In Buber's philosophy of I and Thou, teachers can be changed by their students, just as students are changed by their teachers. Despite his admiration for Socrates the man, Buber considered his dialectical method, however skillful, as a monologic event of one participant, set in the participant's own beliefs, applying a technique to persuade another. The student was surprised, of course, but only by recognizing his own deficiency and the answers the teacher had already decided were necessary. Socrates, of course, seemed not to be surprised at all. Neither became a genuine Thou for the other.

Inclusion

Dialogic meetings are characterized in part by *inclusion,* the willingness of partners to attempt to imagine what others' reality might be, how the world looks and sounds "over there," without relinquishing one's own personal ground. At various times in his career, Buber invoked similar concepts, such as *imagining the real* or *making present,* to indicate communicators' responsibilities to each other as well as to standing their own ground. Inclusion could be distinguished from *empathy,* he thought, because empathizing encouraged persons to forgo their own side in order to see the other. This distinction became an issue in the famous 1957 public dialogue between Buber and the American psychologist Carl Rogers.

Presence as Confirmation

Not surprisingly, Buber's *I and Thou* has become known in communication studies as an evocation of the power of dialogue. Yet, contrary to a popular misconception, Buber's dialogue is not an extended state of being to be desired; it appears to spark only in transitory moments of meeting. It is not a transcendence of everyday mundane reality but an immersion in its concrete detail. Dialogue is associated with an intense presence in the immediate situation that cannot be sustained for long. It is not the skill of knowing exactly what the other is thinking, or of predicting the future, but the willingness—even between opponents—to include the other in one's own experience, listening for responses. Buber asks whether communicators could persistently be open to such moments. This openness is what counts as confirmation. Through it, we become human.

- dialogic
- Martin Buber
- Socrates
- communication studies
- biographies
- uniqueness
- listening

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See also

- Dialogue Theories
- Interpersonal Communication Theories
- Ontology
- Relational Communication Theory
- Rogerian Dialogue Theory

Further Readings

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