

I and Thou This Sunday Morning

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Philosopher Martin Buber in his book 'Ich und Du' published in 1923 variously translated from the German as 'I and Thou' or 'I and You', focuses on an individual's relationship with the world. Buber is interested in how a person relates to the outside world. In order to better understand what it is we are dealing with Buber starts off really at the ground floor of philosophical questions 'what does it mean to 'be'?' He defines two modes of relationships.

'Ich-Es' or 'I-It' is the predominant mode in our modern world. The 'I' being doesn't really encounter the other, only aspects of the other. I have here a smart phone. Every time I deal with this object, I relate to certain aspects of it. I may call a person with it, or take a picture, or use the flashlight feature or the calendar or web-browser. At any given time I'm focused on a certain way of applying the smart phone to my use. It is a device, an object, and I manipulate it. I never consider all the aspects the smart phone has. It is the sum of its parts. In a similar way we look at trees, mostly as objects which may provide us with shade, fruit, lumber, ascetic qualities. I've had this smart phone for well over a year and I imagine I will replace it in the near to medium future. Its' replacement will be much the same, perhaps improved in ways I can't imagine. I don't expect to miss this individual smart phone.

When I interact with a cashier at the supermarket, or a bank teller I am focused on the task at hand and relate to the person behind the cash register or drive-thru closed circuit TV screen in this same way. Even if I am polite and wish them a good morning or ask them how their day is, I don't really expect them to say 'actually today is a pretty bad day for me'. Welcome to the shallow end of the swimming pool of socialization. Perhaps it is so shallow that you don't even get wet. These activities Cashiers and Tellers are being replaced by machines which are obviously 'its'. Like Facebook Friends, many apps on the smart phone can also wish me a good morning. Treating people as objects has become more obvious and ubiquitous than ever. Election consultants for example openly look for ways to manipulate the voters, pull them by the strings as puppets. Searching for dog whistles that will get people out to vote for their candidate without the voters even being aware of the manipulation. That person that used to ask 'can you hear me now' became one with Verizon. Recently he has switched teams and is with Sprint, I think; literally changing from one object to another. The puppet/person has a new hand at the controls.

'I-Thou' is a mutual and holistic relationship, where I, as a whole human being, relate to you as a whole human being. Mr. 'Can you hear me now' has, I presume a more meaningful relationship with his mother. When we fall in love, we don't love an aspect of a person with their blood type or their hair color or their voice or their kiss, we love that person in their entirety. In fact if someone says they love blondes, that is an objectification and therefore falls under the 'I-It' mode.

Sometimes we may use a different way to express this holistic aspect of the person. Someone's spirit or their soul represents that person as a whole. Furthermore, souls are not divisible, whereas a person's hair may be cut, their lifespan may be halved, their reason may diminish, their soul is indivisible. It is equivalent to all aspects of them: their habits, physical aspects, their accomplishments and their

intentions, it is this holistic quality of a person which is meant by the soul that is the reason why people who believe in the soul are called dualists. The person counts as one, in the flesh as the sum of the parts, and once in the soul, a sort of short hand representing all the parts. The 'I-You' mode of relating to the other has I think been described as a soul-to soul moment. Buber uses the term 'encounter' for this mode and 'experience' for the 'I-It' mode. The 'I-You' mode of relationship could also be applied to inanimate objects if they are conceived in their entirety. Buber uses a tree as an example

Quote:

"I contemplate a tree.

I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground.

I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air—and the growing itself in its darkness.

I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life.

I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I recognize it only as an expression of the law—those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate.

I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and eternalize it.

Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.

But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me.

This does not require me to forego any of the modes of contemplation. There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and instance, law and number included and inseparably fused.

Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars—all this in its entirety.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently.

One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity.

Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible?

What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.”

End of Quote.

Another Quote from Buber: Daniel- Dialogues on Realization (1913): “On a gloomy morning I walked upon the highway, I saw a piece of mica laying, lifted it up and looked at it for a long time; the day was no longer gloomy, so much light was caught in the stone. And suddenly as I raised my eyes from it, I realized that while I looked I had not been conscious of ‘object’ and ‘subject’; in my looking the mica and I had been one; in my looking I had tasted unity. I looked at it again, the unity did not return. “

End of Quote.

His style is simple, descriptive yet profound and poetic. Many of his critics indeed fault him for being imprecise in the manner of poets.

A few years ago Bill Bradshaw described fleeting spiritual moments, that he has had with nature. Both Buber and Bradshaw described the feeling of losing track of time and also of space or awareness of your own dimensions. I think Buber and Bill both were describing an I-thou encounter if you like, with a tree/ mica/ nature.

I think that having heard Buber’s description of his I-thou encounter with a tree and with a rock, the ‘I-thou’ encounter between two humans is self-evident when it does happen. I think it is our birthright to have I-thou encounters. I-Thou encounters are what makes life worth living. Just like there is no ‘up’ without ‘down’, no ‘cold’ without ‘hot’ there is no ‘I’ without a ‘Thou’. In order to completely be you need to, at times, comprehend the ‘thou’ as it is. But remember that ‘Thou’s are holistic and not objectified or manipulated. If we stop to break down the qualities of the thou then we are objectifying it- the thou ceases to be a thou and becomes an it. Similarly, if we set out as a goal to have an I-thou encounter then we are manipulating the thou, trying to force it to comply with our will, like an election consultant objectifying the target voter and we will not have the I-thou encounter. A sort of Catch-22 then, how to achieve these encounters? Buber says we must be open to them, receptive for these moments, ready for them to happen. If we objectify things and people less, then we also would improve our chances. The ‘I-thou’ encounters fade after a time to ‘I-It’ experiences. Bill Bradshaw too said that you can’t live your life in the awe of the spiritual moment. It is a moment after all.

The ‘I-Thou’ moments of awareness are like having hummingbirds flutter in the kitchen window of your life. How can we have more of these? Cultivate a garden and plant some honeysuckle in the right spots, this is the practice of objectifying less and treating things, and people, with respect. Then still you cannot know exactly when the hummingbird will come or how long it will hover but you improve your odds a whole lot compared to the window with the bare parking lot view.

Sunday Morning Coming Down – Play the song, it is 4:30 minutes long.

Kris Kristofferson wrote that song in 1969, and this performance released by Johnny Cash in 1970, I think speaks exactly to what we have been talking about. The narrator leads a life that is flawed, he leads a life full of I-It experiences, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, having a hang-over from God only knows what. He clearly is not satisfied with this existence, wishing Lord that he was stoned. Then gradually through all his senses he smells fried chicken, hinting at a family dinner; he sees the little girl laughing as her daddy swings her, he listens to the songs of the children singing at Sunday school, all these are 'I-Thou' encounters that took him back to something that he lost somewhere somehow along the way.

Moreover he clearly states that he is lonely, that he lost himself (I) without the 'thou' to better define himself. The narrator speaks to me as I too am alienated through being solely in the I-It mode and missing a deeper form of existence.

And Finally, Kris Kristofferson via Johnny Cash, as well as Buber addresses God. God as the ultimate Thou

Warning: Just like nerdy physics geeks who start off on sound ground with Newtonian mechanics end up in strange places like worm holes, black holes and time-space convergences, so does yours truly, usually straight-forward, cerebral, rational turn a bit 'new-age'.

Buber doesn't agree with this but, it may be possible to experience God in an 'I-It' mode. Shall we try to manipulate God? We probably all had this little voice go off in our head before: "God if I could only get out of this mess I will..." But I think this is an unsatisfactory way of relating to God. All other, that is to say meaningful forms of relating to God, are in the 'I-Thou' form. I think Buber would say that the bartering mode is self-delusional and not really encountering God at all.

Why is God not an 'I-It'? What attributes does God have? Is God blonde? Is God just? As a deist this part of Buber dovetails nicely with my own world view, God is beyond my mental abilities of comprehension. I can only encounter it without understanding let alone objectify or manipulate or control God.

Through the Awe of nature, through the 'Thou', seeing another person in the image of God we encounter God. To pull this off, as before, we need to depress the 'I-It' mode of existing. You might say 'living in the moment' dampens the 'I-It' mode of existence.

Secondly, that we must not try to self-justify our actions, suppress our self-affirmation. Accept reality as it is. Reinhold Niebuhr's prayer has it: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change"

Finally Buber says we must want to encounter God. If we deny God it would be hard to find God. We must hold it together, i.e. be patient and keep at it, Buber assures us that once we are ready for this absolute encounter with God no matter what conception we have of him, Buddha, Christ, the God of Israel, Allah, or whatever if one addresses God with their whole being a mutual 'I-Thou' encounter will occur.

May it be so.