

The Martin Buber Reader  
Essential Writings

*Edited by*  
Asher D. Biemann

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6. Cf. *From I and Thou* (1923) (p. 182 in this volume).
7. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 182.
8. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 183.
9. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 184.
10. On Buber's conception of knowledge as relation, see also *Philosophical and Religious World View* (1928) (p. 219 in this volume).
11. See Lecture 5, p. 178, cf. *From I and Thou* (1923) (p. 186 in this volume).
12. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 184.

## From I and Thou\*

### The First Part

The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.

The attitude of man is twofold 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.

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 twofold.

For the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It.<sup>1</sup>

★

Basic words do not state something that might exist outside them; by being spoken, they establish a mode of existence [*Bestand*].

Basic words are spoken with one's being [*Wesen*].

When one says You, the I of the word pair I-You is said too.

When one says It, the I of the word pair I-It is said, too. The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being.

The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being.

★

There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It.

When a man says I, he means one or the other. The I he means is present when he says I. And when he says You or It, the I of one or the other basic words is also present.

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Being I and saying I are the same. Saying I and saying one of the two basic words are the same.

Whoever speaks one of the basic words enters into the word and stands in it.

★

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.

But the realm of You has another basis.

★

Whoever says You does not have something for his object. For wherever there is something, there is also another something; every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others. But when You is said, there is no something. You has no borders.

Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.

★

We are told that man experiences his world. What does this mean?

Man goes over the surfaces of things and experiences them.<sup>2</sup> He brings back from them some knowledge of their condition—an experience. He experiences what there is to things.

But experiences alone do not bring the world to man.

For what they bring to him is only a world that consists of It and It and It, of He and He and She and She and It.

I experience something.

All this is not changed by adding "inner" experiences to the "external" ones, in line with the noneternal distinction that is born of mankind's craving to take the edge off the mystery of death. Inner things like external things—things among things!

I experience something.

And all this is not changed by one adding "mysterious" experiences to "manifest" ones, being self-confident in the wisdom that recognizes a secret compartment in things, reserved for the initiated, and holds the key. Oh, mysteriousness without mystery. Oh, piling up of information! It, it, it!

★

Those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is "in them" and not between them and the world.

The world does not participate in experience. It allows itself to be experienced, but it is not concerned, for it contributes nothing, and nothing happens to it.

★

The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It.

The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation.

★

Three are the spheres in which the world of relation arises.

The first is life with nature. Here, the relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language. The creatures stir across from us, but they are unable to come to us, and the You we say to them sticks to the threshold of language.

The second is life with men. Here, the relation is manifest and enters language. We can give and receive the You.

The third is life with spiritual beings. Here, the relation is wrapped in a cloud but reveals itself; it lacks but creates language. We hear no You and yet feel addressed; we answer, creating, thinking, acting. With our being, we speak the basic word, unable to say You with our mouth.

But how can we incorporate into the world of the basic word what lies outside language?

In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze toward the train<sup>3</sup> of the eternal You; in each, we perceive a breath of it; in every You, we address the eternal You, in every sphere according to its manner. . . .

★

When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things.

He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes—a dot in the world grid of space and time—nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities.<sup>4</sup> Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in *his* light.

Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines—one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity—so it is with the human being to whom I say You. I can abstract from him the color of his hair, or the color of his speech, or the color of his graciousness; I have to do this again and again; but immediately he is no longer You.

And even as prayer is not in time but time in prayer, the sacrifice not in space but space in the sacrifice—and whoever reverses the relation annuls the reality—I do not find the human being to whom I say You in any Sometime and Somewhere. I can place him there and have to do this

again and again, but immediately he becomes a He or a She, an It, and no longer remains my You.

As long as the firmament of the You is spread over me, the tempests of causality cower at my heels, and the whirl of doom congeals.

The human being to whom I say You I do not experience. But I stand in relation to him, in the sacred basic word.<sup>5</sup> Only when I step out of this do I experience him again. Experience is remoteness from You.

The relation can obtain even if the human being to whom I say You does not hear it in his experience. For You is more than It knows. You does more, and more happens to it, than It knows. No deception reaches this far: Here is the cradle of actual life. . . .

★

What, then, does one experience of the You?

Nothing at all. For one does not experience it.

What, then, does one know of the You?

Only everything. For one no longer knows particulars.<sup>6</sup> . . .

★

The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being; it is my essential deed.

The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus, the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once: An action of the whole being must approach passivity, for it does away with all partial actions and thus with any sense of action, which always depends on limited exertions.

The basic word I–You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me; can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You.

All actual life is encounter. . . .

★

This, however, is the sublime melancholy of our lot that every You must become an It in our world.<sup>7</sup> However exclusively present it may have been in the direct relationship, as soon as the relationship has run its course or is permeated by *means*,<sup>8</sup> the You becomes an Object among objects, possibly the noblest one and yet one of them, assigned its measure and boundary. The actualization of the work involves a loss of actuality. Genuine contemplation never lasts long; the natural being that only now revealed itself to me in the mystery of reciprocity has again become describable, analyzable, classifiable—the point at which manifold systems of laws intersect. And even love cannot persist in direct relation; it endures but only in the alternation of actuality and latency. The human being who but now was unique and devoid of qualities, not at hand but only

present, not experienceable, only touchable,<sup>9</sup> has again become a He or She, an aggregate of qualities, a quantum with a shape. Now I can again abstract from him the color of his hair, his speech, his graciousness; but as long as I can do that he is my You no longer and not yet again.

Every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again. In the language of objects, every thing in the world can—either before or after it becomes a thing—appear to some I as its You. But the language of objects catches only one corner of actual life.

The It is the chrysalis; the You, the butterfly.<sup>10</sup> Only not always do these states take turns so neatly; often it is an intricately entangled series of events that is tortuously dual. . . .

★

The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.

He perceives the being that surrounds him, plain things and beings as things; he perceives what happens around him, plain processes and actions as processes, things that consist of qualities and processes that consist of moments, things recorded in terms of spatial coordinates and processes recorded in terms of temporal coordinates, things and processes that are bounded by other things and processes and that are capable of being measured against and compared with those others—an ordered world, a detached world. This world is somewhat reliable; it has density and duration; its articulation can be surveyed; one can get it out again and again; one recounts it with one's eyes closed and then checks with one's eyes open. There it stands, right next to your skin if you think of it that way, or nestled in your soul if you prefer that: It is your object and remains that, according to your pleasure, and it remains primally alien both outside and inside you. You perceive it and take it for your "truth;"<sup>11</sup> it permits itself to be taken by you, but it does not give itself to you. It is only about it that you can come to an understanding with others; although it takes a somewhat different form for everybody, it is prepared to be a common object for you, but you cannot encounter others in it. Without it you cannot remain alive; its reliability preserves you. But if you were to die into it, then you would be buried in nothingness.

Or man encounters being and becoming as what confronts him—always only *one* being and everything only as a being. What is there reveals itself to him in the occurrence, and what occurs there happens to him as being. Nothing else is present but this one—but this one cosmically [*welthaf*]. Measure and comparison have fled. It is up to you how much of the immeasurable becomes reality for you. The encounters do not order themselves to become a world, but each is for you a sign of the world order. They have no association with each other, but every one guarantees your association with the world. The world that appears to you in this way is unreliable, for it appears always new to you, and you cannot take it by its word. It lacks density, for everything in it permeates



everything else. It lacks duration, for it comes even when not called and vanishes even when you cling to it. It cannot be surveyed: If you try to make it surveyable, you lose it. It comes—comes to fetch you—and if it does not reach you or encounter you it vanishes; but it comes again, transformed. It does not stand outside you; it touches your ground. And if you say “soul of my soul” you have not said too much. But beware of trying to transpose it into your soul; that way you destroy it. It is your present. You have a present only insofar as you have it, and you can make it into an object for yourself and experience and use it—you must do that again and again—and then you have no present any more. Between you and it there is a reciprocity of giving: You say You to it and give yourself to it; it says You to you and gives itself to you. You cannot come to an understanding about it with others; you are lonely with it, but it teaches you to encounter others and to stand your ground in such encounters. And through the grace of its advents and the melancholy of its departures it leads you to that You in which the lines of relation, though parallel, intersect. It does not help you to survive; it only helps you to have intimations of eternity.

The It world hangs together in space and time.

The You world does not hang together in space and time.

The individual You *must* become an It when the event of relation has run its course.

The individual It *can* become a You by entering into the event of relation.

These are the two basic privileges of the It world. They induce man to consider the It world as the world in which one has to live and also can live comfortably; and that world offers us all sorts of stimulations and excitements, activities and knowledge. In this firm and wholesome chronicle, the You moments appear as queer lyric-dramatic episodes. Their spell may be seductive, but they pull us dangerously to extremes, loosening the well-trying structure, leaving behind more doubt than satisfaction, shaking up our security—altogether uncanny, altogether indispensable.<sup>12</sup> Since one must eventually return into “the world,” why not stay in it in the first place? Why not call to order that which confronts us and send it home into objectivity? And when one cannot get around saying You, perhaps to one’s father, wife, or companion, why not say You and mean It? After all, producing the sound “You” with one’s vocal cords does not by any means entail speaking the uncanny basic word. Even whispering an amorous You with one’s soul is hardly dangerous as long as in all seriousness one means nothing but experiencing and using.

One cannot live in the pure present: It would consume us if care were not taken that it is overcome quickly and thoroughly. But one can live in pure past; in fact, only there can a life be arranged. One only has to fill every moment with experiencing and using, and it ceases to burn.

And in all the seriousness of truth, listen<sup>13</sup>: Without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human.<sup>14</sup>

### The Second Part

... The basic word I—It does not come from evil, any more than matter comes from evil.<sup>15</sup> It comes from evil-like matter that presumes to be that which has being.<sup>16</sup> When man lets it have its way, the relentlessly growing It world grows over him like weeds, his own I loses its actuality, until the incubus over him and the phantom inside him exchange the whispered confession of their need for redemption.

### The Third Part

Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You.

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

Men have addressed their eternal You by many names. When they sang of what they had thus named, they still meant You: The first myths were hymns of praise. Then the names entered into the It language; men felt impelled more and more to think of and to talk about their eternal You as an It. But all names of God remain hallowed because they have been used not only to speak *of* God but also to speak *to* him.

Some would deny any legitimate use of the word God because it has been misused so much. Certainly it is the most burdened of all human words. Precisely for that reason it is the most imperishable and unavoidable.<sup>17</sup> And how much weight has all erroneous talk about God’s nature and works (although there never has been nor can be any such talk that is not erroneous) compared with the one truth that all men who have addressed God really meant Him? For whoever pronounces the word God and really means You, addresses, no matter what his delusion, the true You of his life that cannot be restricted by any other and to whom he stands in a relationship that includes all others.

But whoever abhors the name and fancies<sup>18</sup> that he is godless, when he addresses with his whole devoted being the You of his life that cannot be restricted by any other, he addresses God.

### Notes

Source: *Ich und Du* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1923). Translated first by Ronald Gregor Smith, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937). The present selection follows the translation by Walter Kaufmann, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1970; now: New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone Books, 1996), pp. 53–57; 59–60; 61; 62; 68–69; 82–85; 95–96; 123–24.

Editor’s note: Undoubtedly, *I and Thou* is Martin Buber’s best-known work. It appeared in December 1922, but was conceived, by Buber’s own account, in 1916 (see also Introduction, p. 8, n. 40). Initially, *I and Thou* was to become what Buber called in 1919, the “Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion.” But after 1922, the larger project itself was abandoned, possibly because

Buber became aware of the overall significance of the dialogical conception. Whether Buber had indeed read the manuscript of Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* (1921) or merely "glanced" at it (as he suggests) is still subject to a scholarly debate (see, in particular, Rivka Horwitz: *Buber's Way to "I and Thou": The Development of Martin Buber's Thought and His "Religion as Presence" Lectures* [Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1988], pp. 161–74). A similar question remains open concerning Ferdinand Ebner's *Das Wort und die geistigen Realitäten* (1921). What is certain is that Buber sent Rosenzweig the galley proofs of *I and Thou* in September 1922 and received a letter of rather frank criticisms that is published in Grete Schaefer, ed., *Martin Buber. Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1973), vol. 2, no. 103 and subsequent letters. Rosenzweig, as well as Florens Christian Rang (1864–1924), who too read the proofs, was particularly critical of what he considered Buber's simplistic dichotomization of "You" and "It," which left the "It" a "cripple" compared to the "You." For Buber, however, the "It" was filled with the intrinsic value of a "You" potential, that is, potentially a "You" and, therefore, not bound to a strictly dualistic conception. It should be noted that Kaufmann's translation of 1970 employs the much more personal "You" for the German "Du," whereas Ronald Gregor Smith (1937) uses the more formal "Thou."

1. In the first edition the next section began: "Basic words do not signify things but relations [Verhältnisse]." This sentence was omitted by Buber in 1957 and in all subsequent editions. (W. Kaufmann).
2. Cf. *Religion as Presence* (1922) (p. 170 in this volume). In linking the German *erfahren* (experience) to *befahren* (go/drive on the surface of something), Buber manages to intimate a superfluity inherent in experiences. (See also W. Kaufmann, trans., *I and Thou* [New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone Books, 1996], p. 55, n. 4).
3. W. Kaufmann suspects an allusion to Isa. 6:1 here ("...and his train filled the temple.") The German is *Saum* (hem, edge).
4. Cf. *Religion as Presence* (1922) (p. 172 in this volume).
5. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
6. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
7. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
8. Buber sets up a contrast between "direct" [*unmittelbar*] in the previous sentence and "means" [*Mittel*] in this sentence. Kaufmann translates "*unmittelbar*" both as "unmediated" and "direct" and explains his choice in *I and Thou* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone Books, 1996), p. 62, n. 7 and p. 68, n. 1.
9. Before 1957: "*erfüllbar*" (fulfillable) (W. Kaufmann).
10. Before 1957: eternal chrysalis... eternal butterfly (W. Kaufmann).
11. Buber renders the German "*wahrnehmen*" literally. Cf. *Dialogue* (1932) (*Wahrnehmen*; p. 198 in this volume).
12. "*Unentbehrlich*," before 1957, "*entbehrlich*" (dispensable). R. Smith translates from the first version "...moments we can well dispense with." W. Kaufmann points out the consistency of "dispensable" with the ironic character of the first version and considers the second a change "for the worse." (W. Kaufmann, trans., *I and Thou* [New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone Books, 1996] p. 85, n. 4.)
13. The German says "*du*," not "listen;" an expression of intimacy that cannot be reproduced in English. R. Smith translates: "hear this."
14. The wording resonates Hillel's saying in *Sayings of the Fathers* 1:14 (W. Kaufmann).
15. W. Kaufmann suspects an allusion to Matt. 5:37.
16. *das Seinde zu sein*.
17. Buber uses a word play here: *das unvergängliche und unumgängliche*.
18. *wähnt*; before 1957, *glaubt* (believes). Buber might have changed the word for its relatedness to *Wahn* (madness).

## From Dialogue (1932)

### Part 1. Description

#### *Silence that is Communication*

Just as the most eager speaking at one another does not make a conversation (this is most clearly shown in the curious sport, aptly termed discussion, that is, "breaking apart," which is indulged in by men who are, to some extent, gifted with the ability to think); so no sound is necessary for a conversation, not even a gesture. Speech can renounce all the medium of sense, and it is still speech.

Of course I am not thinking of lovers' tender silence, resting in one another, the expression and discernment of which can be satisfied by a glance—indeed, by the mere sharing of a gaze that is rich in inward relations. Nor am I thinking of the mystical shared silence, such as is reported of the Franciscan Aegidius and Louis of France (or, almost identically, of two rabbis of the Hasidim) who, meeting once, did not utter a word but "taking their stand in the reflection of the divine Face," experienced one another. For here, too, there is still the expression of a gesture, of the physical attitude of the one to the other.

What I am thinking of I will make clear by an example.

Imagine two men sitting beside one another in any type of solitude of the world. They do not speak with one another; they do not look at one another; not once have they turned to one another. They are not in one another's confidence; the one knows nothing of the other's career; early that morning they got to know one another in the course of their travels. In this moment neither is thinking of the other; we do not need to know what their thoughts are. The one is sitting on the common seat, obviously in his usual manner—calm and hospitably disposed to everything that may come. His being seems to say it is not enough to be ready; one must also be really *there*. The other, whose attitude does not betray him, is a man who holds himself in reserve—withholds himself. But if we know about him, we know that a childhood spell has been laid on him,