'In the beginning is relation':

Martin Buber's alternative to binary oppositions

Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game

School of Social Sciences and International Studies

University of New South Wales

Sydney NSW 2052

Australia

a.metcalfe@unsw.edu.au

a.game@unsw.edu.au

Biographical Details

The authors teach and write together in the School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2052. They have written four books collaboratively: *Passionate sociology; The mystery of everyday life*; *The first year experience*; and *Teachers who change lives.* Additionally, Ann is co-author of *Gender at work* and author of *Undoing the social,* and Andrew is author of *For freedom and dignity.* They are currently working on a study of everyday ritual practice.

'In the beginning is relation':

Martin Buber's alternative to binary oppositions

Abstract: In this article we develop a relational understanding of sociality, that is, an account of social life that takes relation as primary. This stands in contrast to the common assumption that relations arise when subjects interact, an account that gives logical priority to separation. We will develop this relational understanding through a reading of the work of Martin Buber, a social philosopher primarily interested in dialogue, meeting, relationship, and the irreducibility and incomparability of reality. In particular, the article contrasts Buber's work with that of poststructuralist theorists who take as their starting point the deconstruction of the Hegelian logic of binary oppositions. Deconstruction understands difference as the excess which undoes the binary, but Buber, we argue, shows how difference derives from the primacy and ontological undefinability of relation. Relational logic does not exclude the logic of separations and oppositions: relation is the primal ground that makes separations possible.

Keywords: relation, binary opposition, desire, love, difference

'In the beginning is relation':

Martin Buber's alternative to binary oppositions [i]

In this article we develop a relational understanding of sociality, by which we mean an account of social life that takes relation as primary. This stands in contrast to the common assumption that relations arise when subjects interact, an account that gives logical priority to separation. We will develop this relational understanding through a reading of the work of Martin Buber, a social philosopher primarily interested in dialogue, meeting, relationship, and the irreducibility and incomparability of 'concrete world reality' (1966: 22).

Central to Buber's thought is the distinction between I-It and I-Thou. I-It refers to the Hegelian logic of desire and opposition between subjects and objects; I-Thou refers to the relational logic of love. Buber says of the I-Thou relation: 'The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*. … No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*' (2004: 17). In the directness of this I-Thou meeting, there are no subjects produced through their desire for objects, time loses the future orientation of aim and anticipation, and space loses the Euclidean quality of a subject-object opposition. Buber's argument is that it is this relational ontology, time and space that allows for an

ethics of dialogue, that is, for a non-appropriative responsive relation with difference (2002a: 1-45). Love, he says, allows people to accept and respond openly to what is given, to the unidentifiable difference and sameness of the whole that is present.

Love's acceptance of the whole includes an acceptance of desire. When desire is accepted, its dynamic changes. As Buber says, 'desire itself is transformed as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance [of the I-Thou]' (2004: 17). As we will show, this shift from dream to appearance is a transformation from the desirous state of fantastic distraction to a state of being present to reality, from a restless state of desiring desire, which obscures the present reality of that desire, to a state of accepting this desire as an aspect of what is. We think that this transformation is what Buber has in mind when he says that in the I-Thou there is 'no aim, no lust, and no anticipation'.

Many writers, from different traditions, assume that Buber is invoking a dualism between the I-Thou of love and the I-It of desire. For some authors, the main problem with this presumed dualism is that it reduces complexity to two terms. Kaufmann, for example, in a Prologue to his translation of *I and Thou,* claims that Buber's 'twofold' distinction (2004: 11) simplifies the variety of possibilities open to humans:

Man's world is manifold, and his attitudes are manifold. What is manifold is often frightening because it is not neat and simple. Men prefer to forget how many possibilities are open to them.

They like to be told that there are two worlds and two ways. This is comforting because it is so tidy. Almost always one way turns out to be common and the other one is celebrated as superior.

Those who tell of two ways and praise one are recognized as prophets or great teachers. They save men from confusion and hard choices. They offer a single choice that is easy to make … (Kaufmann, 1996: 9)

According to Kaufmann, Buber sets up a dualism that celebrates one way over another: the I-Thou of love is the good choice; the I-It of desire is to be rejected. Others have made the critique of Buber stronger by arguing that the two terms exist in a binary opposition. Sidorkin, for example, says 'It is either I-Thou or I-It, all or nothing. There is nothing else and nothing in between' (n.d.: 2). This leads Sidorkin, like Kaufmann, to argue for the need for 'a more nuanced taxonomy of relations. … a graduated scale between I-Thou and I-It extremes.' (n.d.: 2; see also Berger, 2000: 10).

The issue of binary oppositions is also central to the approach of deconstructive theorists to Buber, which has set the tone for the current reception of Buber's thought. Although a leading European intellectual of the mid-20th Century, Buber is

probably best known today for his influence on Levinas, and most commonly read in the light of the latter's critique of his work (Levinas, 1979, 1989; Derrida, 1978; Blanchot, 1995; Bernasconi, 1988; Kelly, 1995; Casey, 1999; Friedman, 2001; Duncan, 2001). This critique focuses on Buber's insistence on the central importance of the I-Thou relationship. In Levinas' terms, such an unmediated meeting is an exclusion of the absolutely other, an unethical reduction of otherness to sameness.

Presuming the ubiquity of both desire and the opposition between subjects and objects, Levinas argues that the I-Thou meeting is appropriative, and that the only possibility of difference comes from the undoing of oppositions. In making this argument, Levinas exemplifies the deconstructive approach that gives priority to separation, a non-meeting with the other, as the source of difference. This approach argues that the principle of difference lies in the repressions of the second term of a binary opposition (the feminine, the unconscious, and so on). When Buber makes a distinction between the logics of the I-Thou of love and the I-It of desire, and when he gives primacy to love, he is, according to deconstructionist thought, inadvertently, yet inevitably, reinstalling a binary opposition: in presuming the possibility of a non-oppositional logic, he is excluding oppositions. Buber, it is implied, is naïve, not only in presuming the possibility of non-desirous states, but also in failing to recognize his own desire for a metaphysical state of transcendence: the I-Thou, deconstructionists

would assume, involves what Derrida (1976) calls a desire for 'presence', a return to oneness or self-sameness.

Our argument is that, framed by the deconstruction of the Hegelian logic of binary oppositions, this critique misses the point of Buber's main contribution. Deconstruction understands difference as the excess which undoes the binary, but Buber, we argue, shows how difference is not the opposite of sameness and derives from the primacy and ontological undefinability of relation. In relational logic, the meeting of I and Thou is an encounter with undefinable difference rather than, as Levinas assumes, an appropriation of the other. In short, from the perspective of relational logic, it is possible to meet difference, and, according to Buber, we do so everyday in the here-now of the real world. An I-Thou meeting is not an exalted or extraordinary experience. Buber says:

> I am not concerned with the pure; I am concerned with the turbid, the repressed, the pedestrian, with toil and dull contrariness – and with the break-through. … Whither? Into nothing exalted, heroic, or holy, into no Either and no Or, only into this … every day (1966: 121)

We are, then, exploring an argument that challenges the assumptions of all critics who treat I-Thou and I-It as a binary opposition. Buber's I-Thou, we argue, is based on an

inclusive logic that involves the acceptance rather than the exclusion of desire and of the I-It; furthermore, we argue, when Buber talks about the 'twofold' nature of social life, he is alluding to the mutually implicated quality of the I-Thou and the I-It rather than their binary oppositionality (see Buber 1966: 34). His point, we contend, is that inclusive logic must necessarily be logically prior to exclusive logic: if terms can be separated, they must be primarily connected. In Buber's phrase, primacy must be given to relation. Thus, far from transcending the I-It, the I-Thou is the ground of being that makes I-It possible. In order to draw out the significance of the primacy of relation, we will focus on the difference between the time and space of relational logic and the linear-Euclidean time-space of the logic of separation. We will also demonstrate that giving primacy to relation has significant implications for understandings of knowledge and knowing. Most importantly, in a relational way of knowing, it is possible for difference to be present without reduction or objectification.

Desire

Desire is perhaps the most fundamental concept in accounts of sociality that give logical priority to separation. We will begin with Hegel's theory of desire and then turn to poststructuralist deconstructions of this theory. Hegel makes the assumptions

that there are always two terms, self and other, and that desire is the structure and dynamic of interaction between these terms: as Kojève neatly expresses Hegel's point, 'Desire dis-quiets [man] and moves him to action' (1969: 4). Desire rescues humans from the horrifying prospect of being no one, having no thing to do, by giving them a sense of self and purpose: a person's I-ness arises through identification with a projected ideal. With desire, Hegel says, the 'I' 'leaves behind it the colourful show of the sensuous here-and-now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present' (1977: 110-1). Desire, in other words, allows the self to escape from the here-and-now and into chronology, in a future-oriented move towards an other. According to Hegel, desire is what makes humans distinctively human, giving them a sense of being an identifiable self: 'self-consciousness is *Desire*' (1977: 105).

As 'self-consciousness' suggests, Hegel links the self to knowledge. For Hegel, the self is produced through a desire for self-certainty, and knowledge is always motivated by this desire for self-knowledge. Although apparently focussed on an other, desire is always seeking to confirm a self that stands alone as a self-same, independent, finite identity. Yet, since the world *is* comprised of others and differences, the self is compelled to go out of itself, to make the other known and familiar, to master and assimilate otherness in order to return to a self more certain in its self-sameness. The

logic of desire, and a masterful knowledge, therefore, involve the negation or supersession of difference:

> The simple 'I' is this genus … for which the differences are *not* differences only by its being the *negative essence* of the shaped independent moments; and self-consciousness is thus certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life… . [I]t destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner.* (Hegel, 1977: 109)

In desire, then, the other's difference is negated through an objectification which gives the subject an objective proof of the independence of their selfhood: I am not-you. Through the negation of difference, the object becomes a mirror of the subject.

This is the context in which Hegel describes the master/slave struggle, which occurs with the encounter of two self-consciousnesses, an encounter that is the necessary step towards the achievement of the Truth of self-certainty. In this situation, simple negation will no longer work, because self-consciousness is now dependent on the recognition offered by the other's independent self-consciousness. Both self-consciousnesses want their independence confirmed, but to attain this they depend on the other's recognition, which in turn relies on the other's independent capacity to

offer or withhold this recognition. Self and other are thus caught in an infernal struggle: each wants to master the other, negating any difference, but neither can afford to do so. Hegelian sociality is thus an endless process of resolution, through assimilation, and re-establishment of oppositions.

The paradox is that, as Hegel recognises, desire depends on the existence of the other that it would negate. If otherness is negated, desire dies, taking with it the sense of self, the sense of motivation, will, and action in the world. So while desire apparently seeks satisfaction, through negation and destruction, it also depends upon the endless discovery of new otherness to negate. Self-consciousness needs an other in order to continually consume otherness. Thus, what is truly desired is desire itself: the insatiability of desire is its attraction, providing an energising, purposive force (Kojève, 1969: 6-7).

Hegel is particularly important for poststructuralism because of the deconstructive possibilities in his thought: within his own terms, mastery and self-sameness are undone. The fantasised independence of the self is always undone by the self's dependence on the other, the desire for immediacy undone by mediation. Hegel highlights this deconstructive moment when arguing that 'each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only

through this mediation [of self by self and other]' (1977: 112). A sense of independence is, for Hegel, dependent on a dependency that must be denied.

It is in this denial of dependency that poststructuralists see the possibility of an alternative: a positive, rather than negative desire, in which difference could be acknowledged rather than assimilated. Cixous, for example, speaks of a desire which 'would keep the *other* alive and different' (1986: 79), and of a movement towards the other in a proximity that avoids merger or appropriation. Insisting that any objectification is a recuperation of the same (1986: 71-2), Cixous, like Buber, imagines an other that cannot be defined: 'What is woman? ... There is nothing to say' (1986: 71). Where Cixous differs from Buber is her continued reliance on the logic of desire. Her alternative to Hegel involves a desire for a desire that 'doesn't settle down', a desire for an other that escapes, is elsewhere, is absolutely other, that cannot be met: 'I move toward something that only exists in an elsewhere' (1986: 97; c.f. Levinas, 1979: 22-8). Endless forward movement thwarts the nostalgia of masculine return, with its stasis, its self-sameness and its appropriation of the other. Cixous says: 'Not the origin: she doesn't go back there. A boy's journey is the return to the native land … A girl's journey is farther – to the unknown, to invent' (1986: 93).

The significance that Cixous ascribes to the concept of desire, and to the desire for desire, is common to poststructuralist thought. On the one hand, desire is 'the only

way out, the only adventuring outside oneself toward the unforeseeably-other'

(Derrida 1978: 95). On the other hand, desire for desire ensures that the other cannot

be appropriated: the other is excess, located elsewhere, in an endlessly receding end.

Derrida, for example, describes the other of desire as 'absolutely irreducible

exteriority' (1978: 93), and says that 'the metaphysics of desire is a metaphysics of

infinite separation', which 'precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community'

(Derrida 1978: 93, 95). This idea of irreducible separation also underlies Levinas's

complaint that Buber's I-Thou 'has not taken separation seriously enough' (1989: 74).

Despite the claim that a positive desire is fundamentally 'anti-Hegelian' (Derrida,

1978: 92), this desire retains the basic non-relational, exclusionary qualities of Hegel's

desire. Thus when the constant future-oriented movement of desire is valued, a

negation or exclusion is involved: the desirous self flees the reality of the non-

chronological present, which can only be imagined, from the perspective of

oppositional logic, as the stasis of self-sameness. In this state, there is no relation or

meeting with the reality of the restless state of desire itself; when desire is desired, it

cannot be accepted. In terms of this logic, then, 'getting out of oneself' involves a

state of future-oriented projection, rather than being present to or in-relation with the

wholeness and difference of being, both within and without.

Love and desire

Buber uses the term I-It to describe the Hegelian world of desirous subjects and objects located in linear-Euclidean time-space, a world of oppositions and exclusions. Far from being ubiquitous, the I-It of desire is, for Buber, only one way of being in the world. The I-Thou of love refers to a relational and inclusive logic that underpins and embraces I-It. It follows that, from the perspective of this inclusive logic, I-Thou and I-It are not binary oppositions but forms that unfold into each other (2004: 21; c.f. Bohm, 1985). In the I-Thou, the I-It is present as potential; in the I-It, the I-Thou is the enduring presence of primal no-thingness that makes I-It possible. The inclusiveness of the I-Thou is the key to Buber's relational understanding of sociality.

In Buber's understanding, the I is never self-generating; it has no existence prior to I-Thou and I-It: 'The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words. The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*. The other primary word is the combination *I-It*' (2004: 11). However, since I-It and I-Thou are different ontological states, the I is not the same in each: 'The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*' (2004: 51). The I of I-It is an identity, existing in the world of numbers (one, two, three), desiring to be number one, and fantasizing that it is independent. The I of I-Thou is no-thing and no-one, existing in the world of relation, characterized by a difference and sameness that cannot be located or

defined. The I of I-Thou does not seek identity because it accepts and finds incomparable uniqueness through being part of a relation. Whereas the world is a mirror of the self in an I-It interaction, a difference and sameness is present in an I-Thou relation that cannot be identified or located in things.

In giving primacy to I-Thou as an inclusive logic, Buber is insisting on the primacy of relation:

> It is simply not the case that the child first perceives an object, then, as it were, puts himself in relation with it…. [T]he thing, like the *I,* is produced late, arising after the original experiences have been split asunder and the connected partners separated. In the beginning is relation… (2004: 27-8; c.f. Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 346ff; Bateson, 1972).

Although Buber sometimes seems to be talking about this original relation in a chronological sense, strictly speaking, as he often says, chronology is a quality of splitting: the 'original' connection is not a *first* connectedness but a timeless or eternal connectedness. For Buber, connectedness always occurs in 'the present', which 'is not fugitive and transient, but continually present and enduring' (2004: 18). He says: 'creation does not merely take place once in the beginning but also at every moment throughout the whole of time… . Creation did not "really" take place once for all, nor is it now merely "carried on"' (1966: 146). In short, in inclusive logic, 'the beginning'

is always the non-chronological *now*, which allows and is made known through chronology.

The ontological condition associated with Buber's eternal present is no-thingness ('the thing…is produced late'). This is not the nothingness of a void or lack, not the opposite of thingness, but a no-thingness that is 'continually present and enduring'. It is worth pausing on this point, at which Buber offers an alternative to the logic of deconstruction. The latter presumes that any originary state of connection is a state of fantasized oneness or merger, a desire for presence (Derrida, 1976), the 'origin' to which Cixous will not return (1986: 93). In their concern to avoid sameness, such theorists make splitting originary (eg Lacan, 1977: 1-7). In contrast, Buber's originary connected state of no-thingness is the state of undefinable difference and sameness. There is no question of return to this originary state because, as Buber says, creation is always now.

The presence of this undefinable difference and sameness is what Buber has in mind when he says that I-Thou is a state of love. It is his point when he describes 'strong-winged Eros' as dialogic, in contrast to the 'lame-winged Eros' of monologic desire:

> Those who are loyal to the strong-winged Eros of dialogue know the beloved being. They experience his particular life in simple presence… . That inclination of the head over there – you feel how the soul enjoins it on the neck, you feel it

not on your neck but on that one over there, on the beloved one, and yet

yourself are not as it were snatched away, you are here… (2002a: 33-4; see also

Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968).

As this passage shows, the primal beingness of the I-Thou is sensuous and embodied,

but this embodiment takes a relational form rather than the form of a subject's finite

body (Buber, 2004: 70). Thus, when Buber is describing the dialogic connection, he is

not talking about the appropriative Euclidean logic of identification or analogy, in

which you know the other by occupying their shoes. Analogy works through a

mirroring process: in the other, I see myself, so the other is both at a distance and the

same as me (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 352). In dialogue, 'here' and 'there' are not separate

locations; the here-*and*-there is an implicated or ecological space in which insides and

outsides are intertwined, in which the inside is also outside, and the outside is inside

(see also Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 354, 1968; Bateson, 1972; Bohm, 1985). In Buber's

dia-logic, there is simultaneous presence of difference-and-sameness. Difference is

maintained, not because it is an unreachable elsewhere, but because sameness and

difference are not locatable. In other words, this space of here-*and*-there is the non-

finite *here*, the counterpart to the eternal *now*.

Dialogic ontology and space indicates that Buber's primal love is not a feeling or

desire of one subject for another. Instead, it is the quality of the I-Thou relation that

arises without any*one* bringing it about. Love is not something we do but a state we are in:

> Feelings are 'entertained': love comes to pass. Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its 'content', its object; but love is *between I* and *Thou*. The man who does not know this, with his very being know this, does not know love… . Good people and evil, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real to him [who takes his stand in love]; that is, set free they step forth in their singleness, and confront him as *Thou*. … Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou (2004: 19-20).*

Feelings, Buber says, 'are a mere accompaniment to the … fact of the relation' (2004: 65). He points out that feelings are things that can be identified and scaled, that they exist in the realm of binary oppositions, one negating the other (2004: 65). When he speaks of the I not having the Thou for its 'content', he is insisting that I does not turn Thou into an object, desiring the other for their identifiable characteristics. Such a reduction involves the Hegelian desire for self-sameness ('clinging to the *I*') and a negation of the difference and sameness that I-and-Thou share through the relation. Whereas desire presumes identifiable characteristics, love is a state where no-thing, no identifiable 'content', is seen. The implication is that love does not have to exclude

any part of the whole: the beloved can be seen as 'good and evil', 'wise and foolish', but these adjectives do not define the other.

If the Thou of the I-Thou is unjudged and undefinable in this way, so too is the I of the I-Thou. The I of I-It desires self-certainty through a negation of difference, including the I's difference to itself, but the I of I-Thou accepts that it is as it is in the present, even if it cannot say *what* that is. One of the attributes accepted in this non-desirous state is desire itself, which Buber assumes is part of what is. When desire is accepted, rather than desired, it is itself transformed: 'desire itself is transformed as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance [of the I-Thou]' (Buber, 2004: 17). What was lack in a desirous state becomes emptiness in a state of love; what was humiliation, becomes humility: acceptance of emptiness in love transforms lack to the fullness of potential. Whereas desire seeks to be elsewhere, for love everything connects with and unfolds in the present.

The primacy of relation

The distinction between the I-It of desire and the I-Thou of love refers to different understandings of knowledge and knowing. Relation is epistemologically primary because, being inclusive, only relation allows for different ways of knowing. In this

concluding section of the article, we will show how a relational way of knowing includes and thereby transforms desirous knowledge.

As we have said, in the Hegelian scenario, the subject of knowledge desires self-certainty through an appropriation or objectification of the other's difference. Knowledge is a reflection or representation of the world: subject and object mirror each other, and therefore can never meet in difference and sameness. By contrast, I-Thou is a meeting with difference and sameness; knowing is based on participation in what is present (see also Steiner, 1989; Shotter, 2003; Barthes, 1984; Metcalfe and Game, 2004; Game and Metcalfe, 2008). This presence cannot be defined or appropriated; as Buber puts it, when Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for their object, for Thou is unbounded (2004: 17).

Buber illustrates his point by considering the ontologies of different ways of seeing a tree. When he is in an I-It form of being, a subject in a world of objects, Buber says he can see a tree as picturesque, he can admire its vitality, he can classify it as a species and study it as a type, he can see it as an example of a scientific law or turn it into a number. But, in all of these cases 'the tree remains my object, occupies space and time' (2004: 14). Reified, the tree, like the subject, is locatable in Euclidean space and linear time. This is the representational categorised world of identities. But it is not the only world.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. …

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and the stars are all present in a single whole (Buber, 2004: 14).

When Buber says that he can become 'bound up in relation' to the tree, he is referring to the unmediated directness of an I-Thou relation. Everything relies on the preposition *in*, which can be used in either Euclidean or wholistic terms (see also Heidegger, 1962: 70-85). In the former sense, *in* implies containment: there are insides and outsides demarcated by walls. Just as chalk is *in* a box, the tree is *in* the categories that define it. But in the wholistic sense, *in* implies involvement and implication. When we are *in* love, or engaged *in* our work, we are *in* a relation that does not locate insides or outsides or identities. There is just *this*, whatever is present, *here*, *now*.

Although *this* is always surprising and disconcerting, because different to any categories I may have deployed to appropriate its uniqueness, I accept *this* in its undefinable wholeness, without needing to deny those aspects (of both I and Thou) that would threaten my identity in the world of I-It.

The presence of I-Thou, then, is not a denial or negation of the I-It world of categories and identities: Buber does not have to forget or turn his eyes from classifications, but that is only possible because he is not subjectively attached to or identified with them. This is to say that, within an I-Thou relation, classifications lose their reductive quality, becoming openings that renew a sense of potential; when not treated subjectively or objectively, concepts augment our sense of wonder (see also Serres, 1995: 267-8), revealing the primal reality of I-Thou that always underpins I-It.

When Buber's critics call for a 'more nuanced taxonomy', they are misunderstanding the epistemological implications of his argument, mistaking micro-definition for particularity. As Buber says:

> I know as a living truth only concrete world reality which is constantly, in every moment, reached out to me. I can separate it into its component parts, I can compare them and distribute them into groups of similar phenomena, I can derive them from earlier and reduce them to simpler phenomena; and when I have done all this I have not touched my concrete world reality. Inseparable,

incomparable, irreducible, now, happening once only, it gazes upon me with an awesome look (1966: 22).

While taxonomic definition presumes to grasp a total, Buber's point is that it can never contain the non-finite whole. It is the particular, the 'inseparable, incomparable, irreducible', that leads to an appreciation of the whole. Because Buber insists, nonetheless, that the I-It of classifications is necessary for analysis, the ethical issue is whether 'It' concepts are put into dialogue with concrete reality or are used as categories to master reality.

The question arises: how is it possible for I-Thou forms of knowledge to accept I-It forms without themselves becoming desirous? We will consider this question by taking, as an example, the experience of dialogue. We have chosen this example because dialogue is, for Buber, synonymous with the I-Thou, and because it provides a recognizable everyday experience of knowing.

It is easy to imagine a group of people coming together through a desire for resolution of a significant issue. Each person comes to the discussion with aims and positions on the matter. This gathering is an example of desirous knowledge: subjects of knowledge are positioned in Euclidean space, and are purposefully orientated to the future. It is likely that what will ensue are a series of monologues and expositions, attempts to persuade others to a position, and attempts at compromise through

exchange. We could call this a discussion, but it is not a dialogue (Bohm, 1985: 175, 1996; Buber, 2002a, 2002b; Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 354; Metcalfe and Game, 2008). The di- of dialogue is often taken to imply that it is based on an exchange between two terms (eg Burbules and Bruce, 2001: 1106), but the etymological prefix is actually dia-, meaning through. Dialogue unfolds *through* participants but is not the product of separate subjects. Even if the subjects desire dialogue, it will not be possible for them to make it happen. If the I is a subject trying to produce a dialogue, this I is alienated; that is, it is not present to the reality of the process but rather is projected into the fantasized future through an aim. And dialogue can *only* occur in the non-linear present.

Dialogue, then, is recognizable because of its distinctive ontology, space and time. Dialogue is not produced, dialogue *happens*; it is brought about by no-one and everyone. What emerges in the flow of ideas does not come from identifiable sources: Thou reveals potential in the thought of the I, without it being possible to define what is I and what is Thou. The participants in a dialogue are no longer subjects defending positions or anticipating outcomes. Dialogue involves an implicated or ecological space in which insides and outsides are intertwined; dialogue is simultaneously carrying and being carried by participants, in a time-space characterized by the simultaneity of flow and stillness. There is both a sense of surprise, with ideas emerging that no-one could have anticipated, and a sense of recognition, of ideas that

were always present. Whereas desirous knowledge involves a restless energy, in dialogue there is curiosity in the face of what is unfolding and there is patience as ideas arise and fall into place just as they are needed. In dialogue, therefore, everything emerges in the present, and nothing in the present is irrelevant. Every utterance is both unique and unanticipated *and* is the connection that the dialogic participants need. It is this openness of the non-finite that distinguishes dialogue from the unity of a group mind. Dialogue does not privilege sameness: the meaning of sameness changes when *what is* is both same-*and*-different. This process is inexhaustible: the infinite potential of the whole unfolds in the present.

What has happened to the initial desires of participants with the transformation to dialogue? Once relaxed, engaged in the dialogue, participants are no longer identified with positions and projected aims. Aims arise (to pursue a line of thought as far as it will go, for example) but they are held and released lightly, becoming openings to further ideas which turn out to be unexpected ways to develop the original aim. This relational state also opens participants to aims and ideas that were previously denied, without any of these becoming points of identification. Not being subjects, participants do not have to censor the aims and ideas that occur to them.

Buber is talking about the ongoing emergence of aims or ideas without an end point of objectification. This might seem like Cixous' deconstructive method of 'never

settling' as a way of avoiding totalization or appropriation of the other (see also Levinas, 1979: 25-40; Derrida, 1978: 93-5). There are, however, very significant differences between Buber and deconstructive theorists. While critical of Hegelian desire, deconstructive theorists nevertheless presume that the source of knowledge is a desirous subject. This desirous subject is the I of Buber's I-It, the I that presumes to be separate. Buber, on the other hand, argues that the source of knowledge is the I-Thou *relation*. Whereas deconstructive theorists preserve difference (the opposite of sameness) through endless deferral, through *différance* (Derrida, 1987: 26-9), in Buber's dialogue, difference emerges as the sameness-*and*-difference of an I-Thou meeting. Desirous knowledge is necessarily at a distance from the world, but I-Thou forms of knowledge are participation in the world, and it is this very participation that makes totalization impossible.

While the I of I-It is a choosing subject (Derrida, 1994: 11-12, 123), the I of dialogue's I-Thou is, according to Buber, chosen *and* choosing, suffering *and* acting:

> The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking….
>
> The *Thou* meets me. But I step into relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one….
>
> The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through

my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my

relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting (2004:

17, see also 62).

This passage highlights the word 'and' ('chosen and choosing, suffering and action'),

which was also emphasised in the phrase 'will and grace', which Buber used to

describe the occurrence of the I-Thou relation with the tree. From the perspective of

I-Thou, the *and* is not simply connecting two separate terms because 'in the beginning

is relation', and the beginning is always now. The *rightness* of moments of grace

describes an experience in which there is no wavering between choosing and being

chosen: in the choosing there is a being chosen, and in being chosen, there is a

choosing. Relation is not a merger or unity, but in the time and space of relation there

is no temporal sequence or spatial distance to separate states of, for example,

choosing and being chosen. The relational 'and' always implies same *and* different.

References

Barthes, Roland (1984) Camera Lucida. London: Fontana.

Bateson, Gregory (1972) Steps to an Ecology of Mind. Frogmore: Paladin.

Berger, Arthur Asa (2000) Media and Communication Research Methods. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Bernasconi, Robert (1988) '"Failure of Communication" as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas', in Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (eds) The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other. London: Routledge.

Blanchot, Maurice (1995) 'Do Not Forget' in Michael Holland (ed) The Blanchot Reader. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bohm, David (1985) Unfolding Meaning. London: Routledge.

Bohm, David (1996) On Dialogue. London: Routledge.

Buber, Martin (1966) The Way of Response. New York: Schocken Books.

Buber, Martin (2002a) Between Man and Man. London: Routledge.

Buber, Martin (2002b) Meetings. London: Routledge.

Buber, Martin (2004) I and Thou. London: Routledge.

Burbules, Nicholas and Bruce, Bertram (2001) 'Theory and Research on Teaching as

    Dialogue', in Virginia Richardson (ed) Handbook of Research on Teaching, 4th

    Edition. Washington DC: American Educational Research Association.

Casey, Damien (1999) 'Levinas and Buber: Transcendence and Society', Sophia 38(2):

    69-92.

Cixous, Hélène (1986) 'Sorties', in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, The Newly Born

    Woman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cixous, Hélène (1993) Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing. New York: Columbia

    University Press.

Derrida, Jacques (1976) Of Grammatology. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Derrida, Jacques (1978) 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel

    Levinas', in Writing and Difference. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Derrida, Jacques (1987) Positions. London: Athlone Press.

Derrida, Jacques (1994) Given Time. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Duncan, Roger (2001) 'Buber or Levinas? A Response to Maurice Freidman',

    Philosophy Today, 45(4): 405-9.

Friedman, Maurice (2001) 'Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas', Philosophy Today

    45(1): 3-11.

Game, Ann and Metcalfe, Andrew (2008) 'The Significance of Signs', Social Semiotics 18(4): 493-502.

Hegel, Georg (1977) Phenomenology of Spirit. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, Martin (1962) Being and time. London: Routledge.

Kaufmann, Walter (1996) 'Prologue', in Martin Buber, I and Thou. New York: Touchstone.

Kelly, Andrew (1995) 'Reciprocity and the Height of God: A defence of Buber against Levinas', Sophia 34(1): 65-73.

Kojève, Alexandre (1969) Introduction to the Reading of Hegel. New York: Basic Books.

Lacan, Jacques (1977) Écrits. London: Tavistock.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1979) Totality and Infinity. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1989) 'Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge' in Sean Hand (ed) The Levinas Reader. Oxford: Blackwell.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1962) Phenomenology of Perception. London: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1968) 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm' in The Visible and the Invisible. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Metcalfe, Andrew and Game, Ann (2004) 'Everyday Presences', Cultural Studies 18(2/3): 350-62.

Metcalfe, Andrew and Game, Ann (2008) 'Significance and Dialogue in Teaching and Learning', Educational Theory 58(3): 343-56.

Serres, Michel (1995) Angels. Paris: Flammarion.

Shotter, John (2003) '"Real Presences": Meaning as Living Movement in a Participatory World', Theory and Psychology 13(3): 359-92.

Sidorkin, Alexandre (n.d.) 'Toward a Pedagogy of Relation' http://sidorkin.net/pdf/towardPR.pdf, accessed 21 April 2010.

Steiner, George (1989) Real Presences. London: Faber.