Landas 35:1 (2023) 29–67

ADDRESSING AND BEING ADDRESSED BY GOD AS OUR ETERNAL *YOU* IN MARTIN BUBER'S *I AND THOU*

Thomas Sherman, S.J.

Abstract. Martin Buber's main concern in *I and Thou* is how we can come to address and be addressed by the living God as our eternal *You*. According to Buber, we can address and be addressed by God as our eternal *You* vis-à-vis each other in *willing* to encounter each other as *You*, in *believing* in our own individual reality as standing apart from each other within the context of a religious destiny, and in being open to the *grace* of our mutual response. In *willing* to encounter each other as *You*, we ultimately will to encounter the eternal *You*; in *believing* in our own individual reality standing in relation to each other within a context of a religious destiny, we believe in the reality of the eternal *You* as our creator; and in being open to the *grace* of our mutual response, we are open to the divine response to us in revelation. In addressing and being addressed by God as our eternal *You* in addressing and being addressed by each other as *You*, the reciprocity characteristic of all *I-You* relations finds its perfect fulfillment.

Keywords. I; *You*; willing; belief; grace; address

According to Martin Buber in his influential work *I and Thou*,[1] there are two basic attitudes one can take with respect to the world and others in the world: an *I-You* or an *I-It* attitude.[2] These attitudes reflect how one habitually treats others in the way one addresses them. When addressing others by speaking the basic word pair "*I-You*", one respects them for who they are in themselves and, in so doing, comes to respect oneself in relation to them.[3] On the other hand, in addressing others from an *I-It* attitude by speaking the basic word pair "*I-It*" to them, one treats others as objects of one's particular interest; in doing so, one understands oneself as limited to that perspective. Throughout our lives, we relate to others and to ourselves in one of these two ways, by addressing others by one or other of these two word pairs, from taking up or relinquishing one or other of these two basic attitudes.[4]

---

[1]M. Buber, *I and Thou* and *Afterword*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 53. This will be the translation used throughout this article.

[2]According to Buber, "there is no world of appearance, there is only one world—which to be sure appears twofold according to our twofold attitude" (*I and Thou*, 125).

[3]Buber's analysis of this twofold attitude and especially his valorisation of the *I-You* attitude have been controversial; cf. M. Zank, "Martin Buber," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/buber/ and, most notably perhaps, W. Kaufmann, "Buber's Failures and Triumph," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 32:126 (1978): 1–24 and S. Katz, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 89–121 and F. Rosenzweig in B. Casper's "Franz Rosenzweig's Criticism of Buber's *I and Thou*," 90–120, both in H. Gordon & J. Bloch, eds., *Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume* (KTAV Publishing House, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 1984). Katz also offers a sustained criticism of Buber in S. Katz, "Dialogue and Revelation in the Thought of Martin Buber," *Religious Studies* 14:1 (1978): 57–68.

[4]In a later work commenting on *I and Thou*, Buber makes this explicit:

> What I mean is that when a man presents himself to the "world" or in general to others, when he takes up an "attitude", when he "speaks a primal word", it is either the one or the other—and that he actualizes either the one or the other. But I do not mean at all that the life of man

Buber's main concern in *I and Thou* is how we can come to address and be addressed by the living God as our eternal *You*. For Buber, we do this in our human *I-You* relations when we speak the basic word "*You*" to each other from three basic dispositions: *will*, *belief*, and openness to *grace*. The subject of this article is *how* we address and are addressed by God as our eternal *You* in addressing and being addressed by each other from *will*, *belief*, and openness to *grace*.

I and Thou as the Fruit of an Experience of Faith

Later in his life, Buber acknowledged that his writing *I and Thou* was the result of a number of experiences which grew into "one great experience of faith" and that it is this experience of faith to which "I owe the independence of my thought."[5] Buber was willing to concede that *I and Thou* is a work of religious thinking[6] as long as that thinking is not understood to arise from the standpoint of any

---

or even only his "inner life" represents a continuity of such attitudes, such "speakings", such actualizations. In the one moment he is over against another as such, sees him as present and relates to him thus. In the other moment he sees everything else collected around him and from time to time singles out, observes, explores, applies, uses. Both the moments are included in the dynamic of a lived life. (M. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," in P. Schilpp & M. Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, Library of Living Philosophers [New York: Open Court Press, 1967], 699)

[5]Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 689–690. And "the existence of mutuality between God and [the human being] cannot be proved any more than the existence of God" (Buber, *Afterword*, 182). Buber recognizes no convincing proof for the existence of God and if there were one he fears "the risk of faith would no longer exist" (cf. M. Friedman, "Interrogation of Martin Buber," in S. Rome & B. Rome, eds., *Philosophical Interrogations* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964], 84).

[6]This is W. Kaufmann's characterization of Buber's mature thought—a characterization which Buber himself accepts—with important reservations; cf. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 689, 691, 741–744.

particular religion,[7] nor as a theology or a particular teaching *about* God.[8] *I and Thou* can be understood more properly as a philosophical anthropology concerned not with God but with how human beings can relate *to* each other and *to* God.[9] This anthropology requires rational reflection on one's experience to understand and communicate this with others—as long as one is aware of the limits of what can be logically described according to the ordinary law of contradiction, and that one's experience of an *I-You* encounter (whether with another human being or with God) transcends logical limitations.[10] *I and Thou*, then, might be best understood as a secular religious philosophical anthropology inspired by Buber's own experience of faith.

Buber in *I and Thou* is concerned primarily with human and divine *I-You* relations.[11] He recognizes other spheres of *I-You* relations in the world, including such relations to nature and to the forms which inspire great art,[12] but he believes that *I-You* relations in human communication especially lead us into an *I-You* relation with the divine, for

---

[7]Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 689, 691, 741–744.

[8]Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 689, 691.

[9]Buber writes: "When I seek to explain the fact of [the human being], I cannot leave out of consideration that [the human being] lives over and against God. I know of no theological anthropology … only a philosophical one" (Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 690). With respect to our *I-You* relation to God and with each other, Buber writes in his *Afterword:* "The question is not about God but only about relation to [God] … we shall speak only of what God is in [God's] relationship to a human being" (180).

[10]Cf. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 690. Buber admitted as well that this use of reasoning and concepts in communicating the experience of the *I-You* encounter can treat the singular experience of *You* as an *It* (Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 689, 691, 693).

[11]In his *Afterword*, written a year after *I and Thou*, Buber states that his "most essential concern" in the work was the central significance of the close association of the relation to God with the relation to one's fellow human being (*Afterword*, 169).

[12]Buber, *I and Thou*, 60–61.

> only here does the word, formed in language, encounter its reply. Only here does the basic word go back and forth in the same shape; that of address and reply are alive on the same tongue … here that which confronts us has developed the full actuality of the You … this is the main portal into which the two side portals lead.[13]

This is such that "the relation to the human being is the proper metaphor for the relation to God—as genuine address is here accorded a genuine answer."[14]

Given the initial importance of human *I-You* relations in *I-You* relations with God, the first part of this article, corresponding to the First Part of *I and Thou*, will be devoted to an examination of the basic characteristics of human *I-You* relations in our addressing and being addressed by each other. In doing this, we hope to appreciate how human *I-You* relations from the basic dispositions of *will*, *belief*, and an openness to *grace* are for Buber the basis for our addressing and being addressed by God as our eternal *You*, which is the content of the Third Part of *I and Thou* and the subject of the second part of this essay. Finally, in the third part of this article, we will combine what we have learned in the first two parts to give us a final overview of how for Buber we can address and be addressed by God as our eternal *You* in our addressing and being addressed by each other as *You*.

I. The Basic Characteristics of Human *I-You* Relations

In the First Part of *I and Thou*, Buber describes how we address and are addressed by each other as *You* in human *I-You* relations. There are

---

[13]Buber, *I and Thou*, 151.

[14]Buber, *I and Thou*, 151. In addition to being the proper metaphor for the relation to God, Buber later added that our human relations with each other are essentially similar to our relations with God in that both relations involve a turning to the other as a *You* and both find their fulfillment in actual reciprocity; cf. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 694.

a number of basic characteristics of human *I-You* relations by which we do this.

The first basic characteristic of our addressing and being addressed by each other in human *I-You* relations is that the basic word "*You*," spoken from an *I-You* attitude, is spoken with our *whole* being whereas the basic word "*It*" spoken from an *I-It* attitude is not.[15] This difference determines the character of the *I* that speaks these two words. The *I* spoken with my whole being is the *I* of a person (*Person*) conscious of entering into relations with other persons whereas the *I* of the spoken word *It* is my ego (*eingewesen*) as setting myself apart from other egos.[16]

Second, in speaking the basic word *You* from an *I-You* attitude, we do not *have* anything but rather we stand in *relation* to the other whom we address.[17] To have something is to experience (*Gebrauchen*) or to use (*erfahren*) that thing and to know it to the extent of merely going over its surface.[18] Experiencing the world is experiencing others in the world as *He*, *She*, or *It*. This is not to participate (*anteil*) in the world by entering into the lives of those we meet, for experience is in the subject *I* and not between (*zwischen*) the *I* and *You*.[19] The world as experience

[15]Buber, *I and Thou*, 54, 89.

[16]Buber, *I and Thou*, 112–115.

[17]Buber, *I and Thou*, 55.

[18]"Experience" (*erfahrung*) founds the world of *It*. Buber plays on the etymological root of the term in *fahren*, "to travel." To travel is to experience only the surface of life, whereas real intimacy is possible only through prolonged dwelling with the other. Buber uses the term *erlebnis*, from *leben*, "to live" (*I and Thou*, 70), to express the *I-You* relation signifying authentic human living (*I and Thou*, 59–60; cf. R. Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969], 40).

[19]Buber, *I and Thou*, 56. The between (*zwischen*) actualized in relation is central to Buber's thought in *I and Thou*. The notion of the between includes two significant elements. It points to the self-transcendence of the act in which one relates to the *You* and to the real otherness of the *You*. Cf. Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, 41.

belongs to the basic word *I-It* whereas the basic word *I-You* establishes the world of relation (*Beziehung*).[20]

A third characteristic of our human *I-You* relations is that this relation involves mutual interaction in which our awareness of each other whom we address as *You* is *immediate* or *unmediated* (*unmittelbare*).[21] There is no concept, no prior knowledge nor imagination, no goal or purpose, no anticipation that intervenes between *I* and *You*.[22]

A fourth characteristic of our *I-You* relations in addressing and being addressed by each other is that we are *present* (*gegenwart*) to each other in our speaking the basic word *You*;[23] this is in contrast to treating each other from an *I-It* attitude as objects with a past but no present.[24]

A fifth characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that in our addressing one another as *You*, our awareness of each other cannot be reduced to that of an object in space and time and as something subject to causal necessity.[25]

---

[20]Buber, *I and Thou*, 56.

[21]Buber, *I and Thou*, 65–67.

[22]Buber, *I and Thou*, 62–63.

[23]Buber, *I and Thou*, 63; cf. 58. This difference between presence (*Präesenz*) and object especially marks the real boundary between *You* and *It* (Buber, *I and Thou*, 63–64).

[24]The *I* of the basic word *I-You* directly confronts (*gegenüber*) the *You*; the *I* of *I-It* does not but rather surrounds itself with a multitude of contents (*Inhalten*) with a past but no present. Objectification reduces the present to the past in the sense that the uniqueness we meet is considered only in terms of what it has in common with other things encountered in the past; the other becomes object of experience and future anticipation of the other is based on past experience of the other as object. Cf. Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, 54.

[25]The *It*-world hangs together in space and time. The *You*-world does not hang together in space and time (Buber, *I and Thou*, 84). In the *It*-world, causality holds unlimited sway (Buber, *I and Thou*, 100).

A sixth characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that in addressing each other as *You* we experience an *exclusiveness* (*Ausschließlichkeit*) which (paradoxically) *includes* an appreciation of *everything* about each other.[26] Buber gives an example of this exclusivity when he describes the act of contemplating a natural being like a tree. If I am drawn into an *I-You* relation with the tree, I am seized by "the power of exclusiveness" as the tree becomes for me a unique whole which nevertheless includes what I once viewed simply as my object from a limited point of view or a scientific concern.[27]

In the sphere of human *I-You* relations, when we address each other as *You* we are aware of an exclusiveness in loving and taking responsibility for each other as whole human beings,[28] perceiving each other as "filling the firmament" of our awareness so that we perceive everything else in relation to each other.[29] Buber puts it thus: "as prayer is not in time but time in prayer and as the sacrifice [is] not in space but space in the sacrifice," so in addressing each other as *You* we no longer find ourselves in time or space but rather we experience time and space in our awareness of each other. This same reversal and sublimation occurs in the experience of causal necessity in our relationship.[30]

---

[26]Buber, *I and Thou*, 126.

[27]Buber, *I and Thou*, 57–59.

[28]Cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 66–67.

[29]Buber, *I and Thou*, 59, 126. Though, as we shall see, this exclusivity is limited by the duration of the presence of the *You* (Buber, *I and Thou*, 126–127) and by the introduction of another *You* (cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 148).

[30]Even causal necessity finds its place within the firmament of my *You*, or as Buber puts it, "as long as the firmament of the *You* is spread over me, the tempest of causality cowers at my heels" (*I and Thou*, 59), and

> the unlimited sway of causality in the *It*-world, which is of fundamental importance for the scientific ordering of nature, is not felt to be oppressive by [him or her] who is not confined to the *It*-world but free to step out again and again into the world of relation. (*I and Thou*, 100)

It is only when we step out of the *I-You* relation altogether and enter into an *I-It* attitude that what we once appreciated as an *aspect* of each other as our *You* is now experienced as an *object* whose spatial, temporal, and causal dimensions are located in a system of coordinates based on a limited focus of concern.[31]

The seventh characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that of the reciprocity (*Gegenseitigheit*) of the relation. Our relation with each other is reciprocal when in our addressing each other *You* act on me as *I* act on *You*.[32] This reciprocal interaction requires the mutual *will* (*Willen*) to encounter, *belief* (*Glauben*) in the actuality of our association as individuals within the context of destiny, and reliance on the *grace*

As this author interprets Buber, while the *I-You* relationship is in itself free and not subject to causal necessity, the *I* of the *I-You* attitude is nevertheless aware of the objective dimension of the *You* in the relationship as physical (and behavioral)—a dimension which involves casual necessity, for "[the human being] knows that [his or her] mortal life is by its very nature an oscillation between *You* and *It*, and [he or she] senses the meaning of this" (Buber, *I and Thou*, 101). Taking an *I-You* attitude towards *You* includes an awareness of the possibility of taking an *I-It* attitude towards *You* as one's object. Buber even maintains that *You* appears *in* space only in the exclusive confrontation in which everything else is background and not boundary and measure (*I and Thou*, 81).

[31]Buber, *I and Thou*, 60, 81. Katz ("Dialogue and Revelation in the Thought of Martin Buber," 58–67) criticizes Buber for completely separating *I-Thou* relations and *I-It*. However, while Buber does separate the two as *attitudes*, with respect specifically to *I-You* human relations, his understanding of the *I-You* attitude in human relations can, *pace* Katz, *include* an awareness of the objective dimension to the human *You*—though not as *separate* from the *You*. Cf. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 711. This *I-You* inclusion of the objective can be seen in Buber's description of community life in which the drive to experience and use is objectifying only when one's relations with others in the community are no longer *I-You* relations. The economic will to profit and the political will to power can be natural and legitimate when tied to the will to human relations (*Beziehungswillen*) and carried by it (Buber, *I and Thou*, 97). Indeed, community life in the spirit requires the *It* world—but only as properly ordered to the Spirit; cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 99–100.

[32]Buber, *I and Thou*, 67, 84.

(*Gnaden*) of each other responding.[33] This encounter (*Begegnung*) consists at once of mutual election and electing, passivity and activity.[34]

The eighth characteristic of human *I-You* relations, which flows from our reciprocal interaction, is the *spirit* (*Geist*) between us. Spirit is the word mutually spoken as *between I* and *You*.[35] We live in the spirit in speaking the word *You* to each other. This mutually spoken word, however, cannot be simply identified as something merely verbal, for the word underlies physical speech and is likened by Buber to a silence which allows each other to respond freely to the address.[36]

The ninth characteristic of our human *I-You* relations with each other is that the word *You* we speak to each other emerges from our innate longing for relation, which Buber describes as an *innate You* as the *a priori* of all relation.[37] This innate *You* as the fundamental

[33]Cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 58, 62, 108–109.

[34]Buber, *I and Thou*, 62; cf. 124–125.

[35]In a later work, Buber describes "the between" in a genuine dialogue as that reality shared by the partners which is nevertheless neither their physical presence in speaking and gesturing nor the psychic phenomena they experience within themselves; cf. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 706–707.

[36]Buber, *I and Thou*, 89.

[37]Buber, *I and Thou*, 78–79. Buber believes that the development of the child's soul in its prenatal life in the womb is connected to this longing for the *You* as an innate drive for contact with another being, which appears originally in tactile contact followed by optical contact from which the drive for reciprocity and tenderness appears. While his description of an innate *You* as an *a priori* of all relation realized in the *You* we encounter (cf. *I and Thou*, 79) makes use of recognizably Kantian terminology, what Buber means by this description need not be construed as referring to anything more than the natural human desire for personal relations with others, a desire that is rooted in human rationality and so present as a natural *potential* in the human infant—a potential which is subsequently actualized in his or her relations with others throughout his or her life. However, for another interpretation and critical evaluation of Buber's philosophical dependence on Kant's epistemology in *I and Thou*, cf. Katz, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 89–99 and S. Katz,

natural human longing for relation is actualized in each finite *You* we encounter;[38] however, it impels us beyond the finite *You* towards the *eternal You*[39] in which that desire is perfectly realized in an immediate relationship to that *You* that cannot be an *It*.[40]

The tenth characteristic of human *I-You* relations is the transience or evanescence (*vergänglichkeit*) of awareness of each other as *You*.[41] Every actual relationship in the world alternates between actuality and latency (*Latenz*)[42] as every *You* in the world is compelled by its nature to become a thing for us—or at least to enter again and again into thinghood.[43] Yet this loss of the actuality of presence among us is not irreversible, for the individual *It* can again become *You* by re-entering the event of relation.[44]

"Lawrence Perlman's 'Buber's Anti-Kantianism': A Reply," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 15:1/Spring (1990): 109–117.

[38]Buber, *I and Thou*, 78.

[39]Buber, *I and Thou*, 128.

[40]Buber, *I and Thou*, 123.

[41]Buber, *I and Thou*, 146–147.

[42]Buber, *I and Thou*, 68–69, 84–85, 147. By "*Latenz*" as opposed to actuality, Buber might be understood as referring to a state of soul akin to an Aristotelian habit or fixed disposition formed as a result of repeated action; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.1.

[43]Buber, *I and Thou*, 68–69, 147. Genuine contemplation, for example, never lasts long; the natural being that only now revealed itself in the mystery of reciprocity has again become describable, analyzable, classifiable (Buber, *I and Thou*, 68). The inherent limitation of the *You* in the world seems to be reciprocal in Buber's understanding as based on the physical dimension of beings in the world. *I* am limited and so *I* cannot sustain my *I-You* attitude to you and you yourself as limited are susceptible to my reducing *You* to an *It* for me.

[44]Buber, *I and Thou*, 84.

Interpretive Summary of Human *I-You* Relations

For Buber, our addressing and being addressed by each other as *You* in human *I-You* relations presupposes three basic dispositions: a mutual *will*, *belief*, and reliance on the *grace* of the other's response.

> Free is the man that wills without caprice. He believes in the actual, which is to say: he believes in the real association of the real duality, I and You. He believes in destiny and also that it needs him. He must proceed toward it without knowing where it waits for him. He must go forth with his whole being: that he knows.… He must sacrifice his little will … to his great will that moves away from being determined to find destiny.… He listens to that which grows, to the way of Being in the world, not in order to be carried along by it but rather in order to actualize it in the manner in which it, needing him, wants to be actualized by him.… He believes, I said, but this implies: he encounters.[45]

In human *I-You* relations, *I* and *You* confront each other freely,[46] and this freedom consists in willing (*willen*) without caprice (*ohne wollende*), a willing which depends on a belief (*glauben*) in the duality of *I* and *You* and in what Buber calls "destiny" (*die Bestimmung*). Let us consider these two aspects of belief.

Belief in the real duality of *I* and *You* is a recognition that we as partners in dialogue are two substantially existing individuals standing over and against each other.[47] Though existentially *distinct*, we are *united* in the *I-You* relation in our will to encounter each other as *You* by our mutual address in speaking and hearing the basic word "*You*." However,

---

[45]Buber, *I and Thou*, 108.

[46]Buber, *I and Thou*, 100.

[47]What Buber understood as *belief* in *I and Thou* becomes, in his later work "Distance and Relation," an awareness of a primal setting at a distance, the first of a twofold principle of human life of which *will* is the second; cf. "Distance and Relation," in M. Buber, *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*, trans. & ed. with an introduction by M. Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 59–71; "Appendix II: A Tentative Answer," in M. Buber, "Autobiographical Fragments," in Schilpp & Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 35; and Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 691.

in our addressing each other, the basic word "*You*" is not a description of each other; rather, it is the means by which we mean (*meinen*) or intend who we are as unique individuals who cannot be described in conceptual terms or linguistic categories.[48] This use of the basic word "*You*" in addressing each other is not unlike the metaphorical finger pointing at the moon. The finger is not the moon but by use of the finger we orient ourselves to the moon as the reality we intend. Similarly, our speaking the basic word "*You*" in addressing each other orients us to the reality of who we are.[49] While it may be possible to give a phenomenological description of our *attitude* in speaking the basic word "*You*" to each other, there can be no such description of the *reality* intended, for that reality (who we are in ourselves) can only be encountered and cannot be described in words, images, or concepts.[50] In this sense, the other as the unique individual person intended in speaking the basic word *You* transcends phenomenology or any type of intentional idealism.[51]

---

[48]As Buber explains, the term *You* points to the reality intended, or "to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen" (cf. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 693).

[49]This, incidentally, is true in its own way when I speak the basic word "*It*" to the other from an *I-It* attitude as from a limited but legitimate interest, e.g., psychological or natural (chemical, biological, etc.). My speaking *It* to the other in this way orients me not to the other as a whole substantial reality but rather to an aspect of that reality according to my limited interest. Thus, both the basic words "*You*" and "*It*", spoken from their respective attitudes, are important in orienting us *to* the reality of the other we intend.

[50]Buber distinguishes the reality intended from the word "*You*" of address, as is apparent in "Replies to My Critics," where he contrasts *being* with the *relation to* being (cf. 693), and in his reply to Emmanuel Levinas, where he states that "only in the relation is [the other] my Thou; outside the relation between us this Thou does not exist" (697; cf. also *Afterword*, 180, where Buber distinguishes God *in God's self* from our *relationship* to God [italics added]).

[51]This author takes Buber's presentation of speaking the basic word "*You*" as an act intentionally directed to the *You* as the real unique individual before oneself; cf. M. Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger,*

However, the freedom of willing without caprice is based on the belief not only in the *real duality* of *I* and *You* as substantially existing individuals but also in what Buber calls *destiny*. While he leaves the word "destiny" undefined, his use of the term seems to refer to a personal, religious reality—one "*believes* in destiny" and that "destiny *needs* [him or her]," and that in proceeding towards destiny "one *sacrifices* one's little will to a great will" but in such a way that one actualizes destiny "as destiny *wants* to be actualized by [him or her]," and by so "believing in destiny one *encounters*."[52] Without actually identifying this destiny with God, the use of the term seems to refer to something quite like God or at least as connected to God (the will of God?) as a personal invitation to cooperate in a providence. Willing without caprice in accordance with this belief in destiny allows one to *encounter* the other in the *I-You* relation. This is in contrast to the capricious person who wills without this belief by living in an *I-It* world devoid of sacrifice and grace but shot through with mere ends and means.[53]

In speaking the basic word "*You*" to each other, we *will* to encounter each other *believing* in the duality of the relationship between really distinct individuals and in destiny. Moreover, along with this twofold *belief*, our *will* to encounter each other as *You* appears to be the result of the dynamism of an innate *You* as our naturally innate human desire for *I-You* relations. This innate *You* is actualized in addressing each other as *You* but is *fully* actualized only in addressing the eternal *You*.[54] And,

---

Sartre, and Buber (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1986), chapter 8, "The Destruction of the Transcendental Model of Intentionality" (291–307).

[52]Buber, *I and Thou*, 108–109.

[53]Buber, *I and Thou*, 110.

[54]In "Distance and Relation," Buber understands the principle of human life as a twofold movement, the first a primal setting at a distance and the second an entering into relation, and that the second movement, which involves the *will* to relation, presupposes the first; cf. "Distance and Relation," 59–71. This first movement as the act of setting at a distance seems to be understood as a basic characteristic of human rationality similar to what Buber understood as *belief* in *I and Thou* (108), while the second movement as the act of the will is rational human desire for the good of entering into relation with the other. Buber's

along with this mutual *will* and *belief*, addressing and being addressed in human *I-You* relations also depends on a mutual reliance on the *grace* of the other's response.

In addressing and being addressed, we are *immediately* and *exclusively present* to each other. However, this immediacy and exclusivity includes an awareness of our own unique physical nature, particularly our bodies in their temporal, spatial, and causal dimensions.[55] This makes our mutual presence to one another ineradicably physical or *bodily* so that the basic word *You* we share as the *spirit between* us must also be in some way physical. While Buber describes but does not explain either the nature of spirit or the transience of the actuality of our *I-You* relations, we may infer that the human spirit rooted in the mutability of the physical, bodily dimension of our human being is the basis of the transience of our *I-You* attitude. That is, as physical beings we simply cannot sustain an *I-You* attitude in addressing and being addressed by each other and in lapsing into an *I-It* attitude we can no longer address and be addressed as *You*. And what we once perceived as the whole of who we are (which really included our physical dimensions as parts of that whole) now becomes perceived as an *It*—the object of a particular concern we may take of each other. However, as we are more than simply physical—for we are capable of living in the spirit as the between—our awareness of who we are in ourselves can be regained once we recover our *I-You* attitude towards each other.

In summary, then, Buber's religious philosophical anthropology under the inspiration of his "one great experience of faith" can be described as concerned with human *I-You* relations based

---

recognition of "[the human being's] great desire to enter into personal relation with things" in "Distance and Relation" (66) is in effect the realization of the natural innate *You* he recognized in *I and Thou*.

[55]For Buber, I am bodily confronted by a *You* (*I and Thou*, 63, 65). The human being I bodily encounter as my *You* is one being (*I and Thou*, 83), a human person in relation to me as a human person (*I and Thou*, 112), an individual (*I and Thou*, 148). It is as an individual person whom I confront bodily that the *You* steps forth to confront me in its uniqueness (cf. *I and Thou*, 126), an independent individual relativized by other independent individuals (cf. Buber, *Afterword*, 181).

a) on a reciprocal *willing* to encounter the *You* that stems from an innate desire for *You* (and ultimately for the eternal *You*) in

b) the *belief* of the separate individual reality of each other as *I and You* within the context of destiny and

c) on a mutual reliance on the *grace* of each other's response.

The final characteristic of human *I-You* relations in the First Part of *I and Thou* is that in addressing and being addressed as *You*, there is some intimation of an eternal *You*.

> In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze toward the train of the eternal You; in each we perceive a breath of it; in every You we address the eternal You.…[56]

In the next and second part of this essay, we will examine the Third Part of *I and Thou* to explore how for Buber we come to have this intimation. This second part will be divided into two sections, the first dealing with how we address God as the eternal *You* in our human *I-You* relations and, in the second, how God addresses us in those relations.

II. Addressing and Being Addressed by God as Our Eternal *You* in *I-You* Relations

1. Addressing God as our Eternal *You* in the *I-You* Relation

As we have seen, our addressing and being addressed as *You* in human *I-You* relations involves mutual will, belief, and grace. In this second part of this article, we will examine the Third Part of Buber's *I and Thou* to understand how we can address God as our eternal *You* according to *will* and *belief* and how by *grace* we can be addressed by the revelation of the divine presence.

[56]Buber, *I and Thou*, 57, 84.

At the beginning of the Third Part of *I and Thou*, Buber presents us with a startling image to express how every single *You* can be an intimation of the eternal *You:*

> Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You. Every single You is a glimpse of that.[57]

Y. Amir has suggested that the image Buber presents here is that of a straight line of three points: A, B, and an extended end point C, with A standing for the *I* in the *I-You* relation, B the finite *You* in that relation within the world, and C that of God as the eternal *You*.[58] According to this image, as the three points lie on one and the same line, so our access to the eternal *You* is through that of the finite *You* in the world.

However, we read further on in the Third Part that

> the demanding silence of forms, the loving speech of human beings, the eloquent muteness of creatures—all of these are gateways into the presence of the word. But when the perfect encounter is to occur, the gates are unified into the one gate of actual life, and you no longer know through which one you have entered.[59]

Here, in this image of gates leading to one gate, when "the gates are unified into the one gate of actual life," the eternal *You* is no longer described as merely glimpsed in any single *You* but is now immediately present. However, the immediacy of this presence seems to imply that the presence of any single *You* that provided a glimpse of that divine presence has now lost its own immediacy, or, as Amir puts it, "you know that the earthly encounters have led up to this gate but everything that encounters you has now become One."[60]

However, does the finite *You* lose its presence in the immediate presence of the eternal *You*?

---

[57]Buber, *I and Thou*, 123.

[58]Y. Amir, "The Finite Thou and the Eternal Thou in the Work of Martin Buber," in Gordon & Bloch, eds., *Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume*, 83.

[59]Buber, *I and Thou*, 150.

[60]Amir, "The Finite Thou and the Eternal Thou in the Work of Martin Buber," 84.

Following his image of the extended lines leading to the eternal *You*, Buber writes of the *mediatorship* of the finite *You* in addressing the eternal *You*:

> Through (*Durch*) every single You the basic word addresses the eternal You. The mediatorship (*Mittlertum*) 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 its perfection solely in the immediate relationship to the You that in accordance with its nature cannot become an It.[61]

Here, too, we might wonder whether the *You* of finite beings as *mediating* the eternal *You* loses its presence once the immediate presence of the eternal *You* is realized.

Now, if the eternal and the finite *You* were of the very same nature, the immediate presence of one would necessitate the loss of presence of the other, for, as Buber maintains, the *exclusiveness* of any actual relationship in the world is limited to the duration of its presence and from any other relationship from breaking in to avenge its exclusiveness.[62]

However, the eternal *You* is not of the same nature as the finite *You*, and so the immediate presence of the eternal *You* does not necessarily prevent an awareness of the presence of the finite *You* that led up to or mediated the immediate presence of the former. Indeed, for Buber, the nature of the eternal *You* clearly transcends the finite *You* in a number of ways. First, the eternal *You*, unlike any finite *You* in the world, is by nature a *You* that *cannot* be an *It*. One manifestation of the nature of this unique *You* is in the uniqueness of its *exclusivity*. The exclusivity of the finite *You* in human *I-You* relations, even while filling the firmament of our awareness so that we see everything else in *his* or *her* light, cannot allow an awareness of *another You* without breaking this exclusivity.[63]

---

[61]Buber, *I and Thou*, 126.

[62]Buber, *I and Thou*, 126–127, 148.

[63]Buber, *I and Thou*, 126–127, 148.

However, in relation to God, "unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness are one … for entering into the pure relationship does not involve ignoring everything but seeing everything in the You."[64]

In the presence of the eternal *You*, unconditional exclusiveness *is* unconditional inclusiveness so that an awareness of the eternal *You* includes in its light not only everything but also every other finite *You* as well, for

> entering into the pure relationship does not involve ignoring everything but seeing everything in the You, not renouncing the world but placing it upon its proper ground … whoever beholds the world in him stands in his presence … but leaving out nothing, leaving nothing behind, to comprehend all—all the world—in comprehending the You … to have nothing besides God but to grasp everything in him, that is the perfect relationship.[65]

Another manifestation of the unique nature of the eternal *You* is that in an actual relationship this *You* is not subject to the *transience* of a finite *You* in *I-You* relations. As the eternal *You* is by nature a *You* that cannot be an *It*, there is no transience or alteration between actuality and latency in the divine presence. The eternal *You* is always, actually, and immediately present to us, though for our part who by nature are *You* that *can* become an *It*, we cannot be always, actually, and immediately present to our eternal *You*.[66]

However, if the nature of the eternal *You* as a *You* that cannot be an *It* is crucial in appreciating the possibility of remaining aware of a finite *You* in the immediate presence of the eternal *You*, the foundation of this difference between the eternal and the finite *You* is the creative act by which the eternal *You* as *creator* gives us being and relates to us as creatures of the eternal *You*.[67] However, this fundamental relation

---

[64]Buber, *I and Thou*, 127, 148.

[65]Buber, *I and Thou*, 127, 148.

[66]Buber, *I and Thou*, 148.

[67]In a later work, Buber admits that the fundamental importance of creation and all its implications are established by his faith; cf. Buber, "Replies to My

between creator and creature in an *I-You* dialogue can only be expressed paradoxically and in antinomies:[68]

> Creation—happens to us … we participate in it, we encounter the creator, offer ourselves to [the creator], helpers and companions…[69]

> Yes, in the pure relationship you felt altogether dependent—and yet also free as never and nowhere else; created—and creative … you felt both at once.[70]

> I need God for my being but God needs me for that which is the meaning of my life.[71]

> In prayer and sacrifice we step before the countenance of the eternal You and pour ourselves out to God, acting on God without exacting anything from God … praying "let your will be done"—through me whom you need.[72]

> God embraces but is not the world and God embraces but is not myself. On account of this which cannot be spoken *about*, I can say in my language, as all can say in theirs: You.[73]

> In the pure relationship … God and man are consubstantial: actually and forever two partners of the primal relationship that from God to man is called mission and commandment; from man to God, seeing and hearing; between both, knowledge and love.[74]

Critics," 702. However, he is anxious to understand the act of creation in such a way as not to threaten his belief in the *mutuality* of an *I-You* relationship with God: "I believe not merely in the creative act in the beginning but also in the creation at all times, in which [the human being] has a share as God's comrade in the work of creation" (Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 714).

[68]Cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 144.

[69]Buber, *I and Thou*, 130.

[70]Buber, *I and Thou*, 130.

[71]Buber, *I and Thou*, 130.

[72]Buber, *I and Thou*, 130–131.

[73]Buber, *I and Thou*, 143.

[74]Buber, *I and Thou*, 133.

The relation between the eternal *You* and the finite *You* as between creator and creature is the foundation for appreciating not only how the immediate presence of the eternal *You* can include the finite and mediating presence of the finite *You* but also, and even more importantly, the very nature of the *I-You* dialogue between the human and the divine partners as a duality in unity. This duality is not only in the radical difference between creator and creature and the utter dependence of being of the latter on the former but also in the radical unity of the partners in the relation as the one creates the other as a living partner who, by *will*, can accept (or reject) freely the creator's invitation to enter into dialogue. This is the ultimate paradox in *I-You* relations with the eternal *You* that cannot be *explained* but rather *lived*.

However, the *will* to enter freely into an *I-You* dialogue with the eternal *You* depends on the *belief* that this is possible—that the eternal *You* as creator is radically other than the human partner and yet radically interested in the dialogue. And this *will* to encounter the eternal *You* is, fundamentally, the dynamic of an innate *You*, that *You*-sense that cannot be satiated until it finds the infinite *You*, that which impels the human *I* towards its fulfillment in the perfect relationship with the eternal *You*.

> The You-sense of [the human being] who in [his or her] relationships to all individual Yous experiences the disappointment of the change into It, aspires beyond all of them.… Every encounter is a way station that grants [him or her] a view of fulfillment … but once [he or she] has found … [he or she] now encounters everything in the one … for this finding is not an end of the way but only its eternal center. It is a finding without seeking, a discovery which is most original and the origin. The You-sense that cannot be satiated until it finds the infinite You sensed its presence from the beginning; this presence merely had to become wholly actual for it out of the actuality of the consecrated life of the world.[75]

[75]Buber, *I and Thou*, 128. It is worth noting that the image of the relation between the finite and the eternal *You* in this particular passage is not that of extended lines intersecting at the line's ultimate point but rather that of a circular line drawn around a center where the many instances on that circular line point to their common center.

Indeed, this *innate You* impels the human being to address the eternal *You* even in solitude—that is, even *apart* from any mediating encounter with a human *You*. Such a *direct* address in solitude is also a legitimate portal to the eternal *You* as long as this desire for the eternal *You* does not involve a rejection of *I-You* relationships with others or a desire to possess the eternal *You* within.[76]

This dynamic of the innate *You* as described by Buber is not unlike what Saint Augustine describes in his prayer to God in the beginning of his *Confessions:* "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."[77] As the eternal *You* for Buber is the creator, the innate *You*, that fundamental desire for encountering the *You* in each other and ultimately in that eternal *You*, is already the creative action of God in our dialogue with God. Our desire for God as our eternal *You* can be understood as a manifestation of the creator's desire for a relationship with us. This desire for an encounter with the eternal *You* will be in accord with our belief in God who as our creator enables us to be partners with God in dialogue. This can be understood as our belief in destiny (*die Bestimmung*) as providence.

In summary, then, from what we have learned so far in the Third Part of *I and Thou*, we can address God as our eternal *You* by our *will* to encounter the eternal *You* and our *belief* in this as a possibility since this eternal *You* is our creator.

---

[76]Buber, *I and Thou*, 152; cf. 155. In his later works, Buber fully acknowledges the actuality of a direct relation to God, insisting only that this essential relation to God find its complement in the essential relation to the human person; cf. Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 710.

[77]Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. H Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), i (1).

2. Being Addressed by the Eternal *You* in *I-You* Relations: Revelation of Presence

All *I-You* relations as reciprocal involve not only *addressing* but also *being addressed* as *You*. We can address each other by *will* and *belief* but we must rely on the *grace* of each other's free response. In this human *I-You* relationship, we can address the eternal *You* by our will for such a relation and our belief in its possibility, although we must also rely on the *grace* of the response of the eternal *You*. The grace we rely on in being addressed by the eternal *You* in an *I-You* relationship is what Buber calls *revelation* (*Offenbarung*).

Buber considers revelation in the final section of the Third Part of *I and Thou* when he asks,

> What is it that is eternal: the primal phenomenon, present in the here and now, of what we call revelation? … it is [the human being's] emerging from the moment of the supreme encounter, being no longer the same as [he or she] was when entering into it.[78]

In this revelation,

> [the human being] receives and what [he or she] receives is not a content but a presence, a presence as strength. This presence and strength includes three elements … first, the whole abundance of actual reciprocity … second, the inexpressible confirmation of meaning … third, the meaning not of "another life" but of this our life … of this our world.[79]

In fact, the eternal revelation appears identical to the divine presence itself:

> I neither know of nor believe in any revelation that is not the same as its primal phenomenon. I do not believe in God's naming [God's self] or in God's defining [God's self] before [human beings]. The word of revelation is: I am there as whoever I am there … the eternal voice sounds, nothing more.[80]

---

[78]Buber, *I and Thou*, 157.

[79]Buber, *I and Thou*, 158–159.

[80]Buber, *I and Thou*, 159.

This is such that

> only the acceptance of the presence is required … as we have nothing but a You on our lips when we enter the encounter, it is with this on our lips when we are released from it into the world.[81]

This revelation is an

> encounter with God [which] does not come to [human beings] in order that [they] may henceforth attend to God but in order that [they] may prove its meaning in action in the world. All revelation is a calling and a mission.[82]

Buber's understanding of revelation is controversial. S. Katz, for one, has called its intelligibility into question. First, Katz notes that for us, recognition of each other as *You* requires *beliefs* about each other, beliefs we have acquired through objectivity conditions in observable human behavior and spatio-temporal conditions.[83] In the case of a husband and wife, for example, the couple can recognize each other as their *You* and can continue to do so across time and space because they can recognize (and remember) each other's physical traits and characteristic behavior. Yet while the couple's awareness of each other as their *You* is certainly more than their recognition of these objective conditions, a human recognition of a *You* would be impossible without those conditions. However, in *I-You* relations with the eternal *You*—that *You* Buber claims cannot be an *It*—no such objectivity conditions are available.[84] Without such conditions, how can we know whether we are in an *I-You* relation with the eternal *You* and are being addressed by that *You*?[85]

---

[81]Buber, *I and Thou*, 159.

[82]Buber, *I and Thou*, 164.

[83]Katz, "Dialogue and Revelation in the Thought of Martin Buber," 58–68.

[84]Katz, "Dialogue and Revelation in the Thought of Martin Buber," esp. 61–68.

[85]For some of the philosophical issues involved here, see S. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mystical Pluralism," in S. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22–74. In a later work,

In addition to this basic problem of recognition, Katz also queries the intelligibility of Buber's claim that revelation does not name or otherwise define God.[86] Can one reveal a bare presence without any otherwise identifiable content? For Katz, the answer is no. And, in point of fact, Buber himself relies on his own interpretation of the Exodus account of Moses's encounter with God in his claim that the word of revelation has no more content than "I am there as whoever I am there." Buber, in fact, is describing not some direct existential experience of the divine presence but an experience *interpreted* by his own experience of faith.[87]

Buber goes so far as to deny that *any* knowledge *about* God is necessary in order to believe in God, "since many believers know how to talk *to* God but not *about* [God]" (M. Buber, *Eclipse of God* [New York: Humanity Books, 1998], 28), to which Katz responds by asking how one could go out to meet God if one knew nothing about God.

[86]According to Katz, even the intelligibility of Buber's statement about the "unknowable Thou" assumes at least *four* objective metaphysical propositions: a) God exists (otherwise it would be absurd to recommend that one believe in God), b) God is the sort of being who is capable of being addressed, c) God is the sort of being whom one can address, and d) not only does God exist and not only is God the type of being capable and worthy of being addressed but also that God enters into relation with human beings (Katz, "Dialogue and Revelation in the Thought of Martin Buber," 68).

[87]Indeed, for Katz, Buber's "teaching" that formed the core of the dialogical philosophy in *I and Thou*, which included God as the *eternal Thou* that can never be an *It* and that God searches for the human being to enter into a mutual dialogue with them, was influenced by a lifelong involvement with Hasidism and the direct, transforming address of God at the center of biblical revelation; cf. S. Katz, "Martin Buber in Retrospect," in M. Zank, ed., *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 22 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 255–266. And, as other biblical scholars have pointed out, even Buber's interpretation of biblical revelation itself was influenced by his reading of the prophets whom he understood as concerned not with the temple and sacrifice but for the people and for social justice as signs of God's presence. This prophetic concern, as Buber understood it, led Buber to downplay any developmental history of faith that might include apocalyptic books and their imagination of the Beyond. Cf. L. Wachinger, "Buber's Concept of Faith as a Criticism of

However, E. Fackenheim has endeavored to defend Buber's views on revelation as *philosophically* defensible.[88] In his defense of Buber's understanding of revelation, Fackenheim begins by pointing out that while Buber recognizes knowledge by rational inquiry as *I-It* knowledge, Buber also believes that *I-You* relations can provide us with a cognitive access to a reality which is otherwise inaccessible from the *I-It* perspective.[89]

Fackenheim thinks Buber's reasoning can be understood along the following lines: Since all genuine religion is an *I-Thou* relation with God, religion must involve some form of revelation[90] in the form of an address of a *You* who is present *in* what this *You* gives rather than in revelation as translated into human statements, such as in dogma or a law (though it can issue in a commandment).[91] However, in revelation the divine *You*—as giver who is present in what the divine *You* gives—is

---

Christianity," in Gordon & Bloch, eds., *Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume*, 444. Cf. also M. Buber, *The Kingship of God* (New York: Humanity Books, 1990); M. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); M. Friedman, "Martin Buber's View of Biblical Faith," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 22:1 (1954): 3–13; and B. Offenheimer, "Buber and Modern Biblical Scholarship," in Gordon & Bloch, eds., *Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume*, 163–166.

[88]E. Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," in Schilpp & Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 273–296.

[89]According to Fackenheim, this means that for Buber we are capable of knowledge in one or the other or both of these fundamental attitudes without special doctrinal provisions for the reconciliation of the category of revelation with the principle of rational inquiry (Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," 282–283). However, Buber himself appears to deny that any doctrine of *I* and *You* can be classified without qualification as *I-You* knowledge when he writes: "that which discloses itself to me from time to time in the I-Thou relationship can only become such a knowledge through transmission into the I-It sphere" (Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 692).

[90]Buber, *I and Thou*, 161.

[91]Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," 265. Here Fackenheim cites Buber:

not a timeless presence but the God of dialogue who, like any *You* in any dialogue, speaks to a unique partner in a unique situation, disclosing God's self according to the unique exigencies of each situation. If we name the speaker God, then, it is always the God of a moment, a moment God, and if God has a name at all it is "I shall be who I shall be" since God cannot be comprehended as God may be in God's timeless essence; God can only be encountered here and now as God may show God's self in each, here and now.[92]

Now revelation, Fackenheim argues, must be distinguished from being addressed in any other *I-You* relation, the divine *You* from any other *You*, otherwise the very words "religious," "divine," and "revelation" would be meaningless to those not—or not yet—actually participating in such a human-divine dialogue.[93] But how is revelation to be distinguished from being addressed in any other *I-You* relation? God, as Buber asserts in *I and Thou*, is the *You* that cannot become an *It*.[94] The nature of God as this *unique You* distinguishes the religious relationship from every other *I-You* relation. However, how in this relationship is God *recognized* as this unique *You* that cannot be an *It*?

In attempting to answer for Buber, Fackenheim cites a comment Buber makes in a later work with respect to a biblical *miracle:*

> The real miracle means that in the astonishing experience of the event the current system of cause and effect becomes, as it were, transparent

---

> There is no revelation without commandment. Even when He who addresses us talks to us about himself, he is really talking about us. What he says about himself does not refer to his own being, but gives the reasons for and elucidation of his demands on us. (M. Buber, *Israel and the World* [Syracuse University Press, 1997], 209)

[92]Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," 285. Fackenheim here quotes Buber in M. Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publ., 2014), 15.

[93]Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," 286.

[94]Buber, *I and Thou*, 75, 112.

> and permits a glimpse of the sphere in which the sole power, not restricted by any other, is at work.[95]

As in the singular experience of the miracle event when the *I-It* relation between cause and effect becomes transparent so as to permit a glimpse of the power of God, so too, Fackenheim argues,

> in the moment of the revelation no *It* retains its independence. In that moment every *It* becomes either a symbol through which God speaks, or the partner to whom [God] speaks. In making transparent every *It* in the moment of [God's] presence, God discloses that no *It* can remain opaque to [God's] presence.[96]

Hence, God can be known as *infinite* in the moment of encounter because in that moment, no *It* can limit God, and as *eternal* because in that moment, one knows God cannot be an *It* at any moment.[97]

In the moment of revelation, the infinite and eternal divine *You* speaks into the temporal situation of the finite human *I* who can respond only out of that situation. What the divine *You* says to the human *I* in the situation transcends all conceptual anticipation and the appropriate human response to the divine address is tied to a particular situation. So just as every act of revelation reveals the divine *You*, so each and every human response must be to that *You*, and what distinguishes each response is the situation in which that response is made.[98]

Yet even after this attempted defense, Fackenheim admits that for Buber, the relation between the divine address and human response remains an antinomy for, if in speaking to me the infinite *You makes* me its listening *I*, there can be no *I-You* relation unless I *freely allow*

---

[95]M. Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (Victoria, BC: Must Have Books, 2012), 77; citing also Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, 46 and M. Buber, *Israel and Palestine* (London: East and West Library, 1952), 26: "wherever the action of nature as well as spirit is perceived as gift, revelation takes place."

[96]Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," 287.

[97]Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," 287.

[98]Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," 288.

myself to be its listening *I*. This real antinomy between divine causal determinism and human freedom cannot be resolved by thought; rather, it must be lived.

And Fackenheim seems forced, in the end, to admit a final antinomy in Buber's understanding of revelation. For while the core of revelation is the event of God's presence, this revelation requires a content, for an address calls for a response. But any *content* to such a revelation can only be recognized by the individual in the moment of receiving the revelation, and such content cannot be determined by philosophy as *I-It* knowledge.[99] Thus, Fackenheim's attempt to give a philosophical defense of Buber's understanding of revelation itself ends in antinomy as the reality of *I-You* knowledge transcends philosophy in so far as philosophy is limited to *I-It* knowledge.[100]

Like Katz's criticisms, Fackenheim's failed attempt to give a philosophical defense for Buber's understanding of revelation leads us to conclude that Buber's understanding of revelation as presence must, like the content of *I and Thou* in general, be the fruit of an experience of *faith* rather than of philosophical reflection.[101]

However, this still leaves us with the question as to why Buber is so intent on maintaining that in revelation "[the human being] receives and what [he or she] receives is not a content but a presence."[102] Buber appears to minimize the importance of content in revelation because of his worry over how revelation is received. In *I and Thou*, Buber laments the human "desire to have God continually in space and time"[103] in

[99]Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," 290. Here Fackenheim quotes Buber: "I experience what God desires of me for this hour … not earlier than this hour. But even then it is not given me to experience it except by answering before God for this hour as my hour" (Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 68).

[100]Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 45.

[101]Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 689.

[102]Buber, *I and Thou*, 157–158.

[103]Buber, *I and Thou*, 161.

an attempt to *possess* God, thereby transforming divine presence into an *object* of *faith* which then becomes a *substitute* for that presence.[104]

> Thus God becomes an object of faith. Originally, faith fills the temporal gaps between these acts of relation; gradually, it becomes a substitute for these acts. The trust-in-spite-of-it-all of the fighter who knows the remoteness and nearness of God is transformed ever more completely into the profiteer's assurance that nothing can happen to him because he has the faith that there is One who would not permit anything to happen to him.[105]

For as an "object" of faith, God becomes a cult object:

> The cult, too, originally supplements the acts of relation, by fitting the living prayer, the immediate You saying into spatial context of great plastic power and connecting it with the life of the senses. And the cult too gradually becomes a substitute as the personal prayer is no longer supported but pushed aside by communal prayer; and as the essential deed simply does not permit any rules, it is supplanted by devotions that follow rules.[106]

Despite this,

> God is near his forms as long as man does not remove them from him. In true prayer, cult and faith are unified and purified in living relation. That true prayer lives in religions testifies to their true life; as long as it lives in them, they live. Degeneration of religions mean[s] the degeneration of prayer in them: the relational power in them is buried more and more by objecthood, they find it ever more difficult to say You with their whole undivided being.[107]

---

[104]For Buber's understanding of faith, cf. Friedman, "Martin Buber's View of Biblical Faith," 3–13; for his development in that understanding, cf. Wachinger, "Buber's Concept of Faith as a Criticism of Christianity," 437–455.

[105]Buber, *I and Thou*, 162.

[106]Buber, *I and Thou*, 162. For Buber on religion in *I and Thou* and in his thought in general, cf. I. Kajon, "*Religio* Today: The Concept of Religion in Martin Buber's Thought," in P. Mendes-Flohr, ed., *Dialogue as a Trans-Disciplinary Concept* (Berlin: CPI Books, 2015), 101–111.

[107]Buber, *I and Thou*, 167.

Buber's distinction between faith as trust-in-spite-of-it-all and confident assurance in a dogmatic content is the basis for the distinction he later draws between two types of faith: the *emuna* of early Israel and the *pistis* of Pauline Christianity.[108] The former type of faith, he thinks, allows for a revelation of presence as divine mystery while the latter too easily lends itself to dogmatic theological formulations.[109]

Years later, in his *Replies to My Critics*, Buber admitted that content *is* necessary in revelation.[110] However, he finds the binding nature of such content problematic:

> I have many times pointed out that I cannot understand the events of divine revelation in which I believe as a divine content that pours into an empty vessel … I know no other revelation than that of the meeting of the divine and the human in which the human takes part just as well as the divine … anything that proceeds directly or indirectly (i.e., through the oral or written tradition) out of the actual revelation, be it word or custom or institution, I cannot, therefore, understand simply, in the form in which we possess it, as spoken by God or instituted by God. In other words, I possess no security against the necessity to live in fear and trembling: I have nothing but the certainty that we share in the revelation.[111]

---

[108]M. Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 7–12, 170–174.

[109]In his *The Prophetic Faith*, which preceded *Two Types of Faith*, Buber, interestingly enough, recognized a distinction between *spirit* and *logos*, *ruah* and *dabhar*, as stimulus received and a content, but that in the experience of the prophet (*nabi*) these two are *not* divided; cf. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, 64.

[110]In Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 696–697. Buber affirms that dialogue in human *I-You* relations includes content and that as spirit seeks the body in speaking the basic word, the content of dialogue is more important the more concrete it is. However, in this dialogue the given and received contents are "so manifold that [one] who treats the nature of dialogue as a basic relation of human existence cannot keep them in mind" ("Replies to My Critics," 697). While the content of the dialogue does allow for binding propositions that can be transmitted, dialogue as the basic relation of human existence is lost when this content is codified and separated from the dialogue. Of the dialogue of God with the human being, however, it must be said that even the most universal commands attain unforeseen interpretations as the situation furnishes the interpretation.

[111]Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 698–699.

> Revelation, historical revelation, can bind us because the divine has a share in it. But what does this binding signify? An unhampered believer in revelation may trustfully follow, without reservation, a traditional codex that appeals to God's word, because the share of heaven and earth are not objectively to be measured. But another [person] believes in revelation yet is tormented by the all-too-human character of the human share in it, and resists obeying human prescriptions as divine commands. Such a [person] may find no other way than holding [his or her] own soul open to the whole traditional shall and shall not, in order, in the absence of objective criteria, to examine honestly in [his or her] own subjectivity what [he or she] can acknowledge as bidden and forbidden by God and what not. That is the lot of the "beggar."[112]

Historical revelation, as Buber understands this, allows for the mystery of the divine—a mystery that cannot be intellectually comprehended—and at the same time allows for the mystery of a free human response. In his case in particular, Buber concludes:

> Therefore I have not been able to accept either the Bible or Hasidism as a whole; in one and the other I had to and I have to distinguish between that which had become evident to me in this manner. Many of my readers, both of the "right" and of the "left," will protest against such a "subjectivism." Those with whom I am in dialogue and whose experience conforms [with] mine know otherwise.[113]

So, while Buber admits that revelation is a mutual sharing of personal presence which *also* involves content of what is being shared, he wants to maintain the primacy of presence in revelation and he fears that undue attention to content might distract from the fundamental importance of mutual presence between *I* and *You*.[114] What Buber does recognize is a legitimate content in revelation which allows for

[112]Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 699–700.

[113]Buber, "Replies to My Critics," 744.

[114]One possible critical response to Buber here might be to appeal to the human experience of communication as shared self-revelation in which the content of that revelation expresses the personal truth of who the dialogic partners understand themselves to be, so much so that appreciating the content of that revelation could arguably *enhance* the partners' appreciation of their mutual presence.

a subjective reception and interpretation according to the particular circumstances of the revelation.

From this analysis, we might return to the thesis of this essay and conclude that Buber's understanding of revelation as a sharing of the divine presence can be understood as how the eternal *You* addresses us in our addressing and being addressed by each other. That is, by the grace of our response to each other we are thereby open to the grace of the divine response as the revelation of God's presence among us.

At this point, we are in a position to combine what we have learned about human and divine *I-You* relations in the First and Third Parts of *I and Thou* to appreciate how for Buber we can address and be addressed by God as our eternal *You* in our addressing and being addressed by each other as *You*.

III. Basic Characteristics of Human and Divine *I-You* Relations

As we have seen, the human being for Buber is the proper metaphor for the relation to God.[115] Nevertheless, because of the radical difference between the divine and human partners as between creator and creature, the *I-You* relation we have with God as our eternal *You* cannot be exactly like the relation we have with one another. Indeed, any description of this relation is going to be "contradictory" or "paradoxical"—a relation that we are called on to live rather than define.[116]

To appreciate the paradoxical description of an *I-You* relation with God as our eternal *You*, we will re-examine the basic characteristics of human *I-You* relations in the light of the nature of God as our eternal *You*.

It will be recalled that the first basic characteristic of human *I-You* relations, in the First Part of *I and Thou*, is that the basic word "*You*" is

[115]Buber, *I and Thou*, 151.

[116]Cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 144 and *Afterword*, 180.

spoken with one's whole being. Without giving myself completely in addressing *You*, I cannot encounter *You*. This first basic characteristic of human *I-You* relations is also fundamental if we want to encounter God as our eternal *You*. Buber describes this in an arresting way: "When [one] addresses with [one's] whole devoted being the You of [one's] life that cannot be restricted by any other, [one] addresses God."[117]

God, the living God, that *You* of our lives that cannot be restricted by any other, cannot be addressed except by doing so with our whole devoted being. To this extent, human and divine *I-You* relations are the same—they both require our whole-hearted commitment. What appears to distinguish the two *I-You* relations is that in the divine *I-You* relation, we address the *You* that we believe cannot be restricted by any other. *Belief* in this unique nature of the eternal *You*—ultimately as *creator*—enables us to address each other as *You* in addressing God as *You* and enables us to address God as our unrestricted *You* in addressing each other as *You*.[118]

Addressing the eternal *You* with the whole of our devoted being, that is, with a *will* to encounter the eternal *You*, we will to address each other as a finite *You*. This the completion and fulfillment of our addressing others as *You*.

The second characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that in addressing each other we do not *experience* each other as *things* but stand in relation to each other as the *You* whom we address. Since the eternal *You* cannot by nature be an *It*, God, of course, cannot be possessed or experienced as a physical thing, for "God [as] the eternal presence, cannot be had … [and] as surely as God embraces us and dwells in us, we never have [God] within."[119]

---

[117]Buber, *I and Thou*, 124.

[118]In the perfect relationship, we see everything *in* God's presence (Buber, *I and Thou*, 127), everything is comprehended *in* God (Buber, *I and Thou*, 148). While he recognizes that God embraces us and dwells in us, Buber does not describe an experience of seeing God *in* everything, *in* each other, or of having God *within* ourselves as something to be possessed; cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 155, 152.

[119]Buber, *I and Thou*, 152, 155.

Now, as we have seen, the *will* to encounter the eternal *You* (as the *ultimate* intention of our innate *You*) is in accord with a *belief* in the reality and otherness of that *You* in the *I-You* relation and our openness to the *grace* of the response of the eternal *You* in revelation.

However, this belief in the reality and otherness of God cannot be the same as our belief in the reality and otherness of each other in so far as God, as a *You* that cannot be an *It*, is not physical and so cannot be physically perceived. As such, our belief in the existence of God as our eternal *You* must be in accord with a belief more explicitly *religious* than the belief we can have in the existence and otherness of each other as *You*.[120] In Buber's case, that religious belief is based ultimately on his own experience of faith.

A third characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that our presence in addressing each other is immediate, that is, unmediated. Again, since we cannot perceive God physically as we can with each other, we can only address God as our eternal *You* by our will to encounter that *You* according to a religiously inspired belief in the existence and otherness of that *You*. When we are able to do this, we become immediately present to that *You* without intermediary reasoning, concepts, or images.

> It is not as if God can be inferred from anything … this is what confronts us immediately and first and always and legitimately[;] it can only be addressed, not asserted.[121]

A fourth characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that in our addressing each other as *You* we are *present* to each other. This human presence, of course, includes an awareness of each other's physical dimension. Now, even though the eternal *You* has no physical dimensions, if we are open to the *grace* of a divine response, then,

---

[120]It is the relation of the human being to their Creator that grounds the revelation of God as other. Cf. M. Buber, "Das Unbewusste," in *Nachlese* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1965), 151; M. Buber, "The Faith of Judaism" and "The Power of Spirit," in *Israel and the World*, 27, 180; Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, 64.

[121]Buber, *I and Thou*, 129.

"emerging from the moment of supreme encounter … [the human being] receives … a presence, a presence as strength."[122]

A fifth characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that the *You* we address in each other is not *limited* to categories of space, time, or causality. However, while our awareness of each other as a finite human *You* is not limited to space, time, and causal dimensions, it certainly includes them such that our awareness of each other as *You* includes our perception of these conditions. God, however, is not a physical reality at all, and so our addressing God as our *eternal You* cannot rely on *any* physical dimension of reality. Without any possible perceptual experience of God as *You*, our belief in the existence of God as our partner in an *I-You* relation, our belief in the existence and otherness of the eternal *You*, must be akin to a type of religious faith.

A sixth characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that in addressing each other as *You* we experience an *exclusiveness* (*Ausschließlichkeit*) of our *You* which can include all else except another *You* in the relationship.[123] In *I-You* relations with God, however, "unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness are one … everything is included in the relationship … in comprehending all the world in comprehending the You … [having] nothing besides God but to grasp everything in [God]."[124]

A seventh characteristic of human *I-You* relations is the mutuality or reciprocity of the encounter. We act on each other in speaking and listening to the mutual word "*You*." As such, there is a paradoxical reciprocity in *I-You* relations with a partner who creates us as their partner such that

> in the pure relationship you felt altogether dependent and yet altogether free; created and creative … creation—we participate in it, we encounter the creator, offer ourselves to [the creator], helpers and companions … in prayer [the human being] pours [himself or herself] out … knowing

[122]Buber, *I and Thou*, 157–158.

[123]Buber, *I and Thou*, 126, 148.

[124]Buber, *I and Thou*, 127, 157.

> that incomprehensibly [he or she] acts on God albeit without exacting anything from God.[125]

The eighth characteristic of human *I-You* relations, which flows from the reciprocity of interaction in mutually speaking the word *You*, is *spirit* as the reality *between I* and *You*. In addressing each other, we interact in the spirit, in the between of who we are as different substantially existing finite individuals. In the divine *I-You* relation with God as our eternal *You*, however,

> God embraces but is not the universe just [as] God embraces but is not my self. On account of this, which cannot be spoken about, I can say in my language, as all can say in theirs: You. For the sake of this there are I and You, there is dialogue, there is language, and spirit whose primal deed language is, there is eternality, the word.[126]

The ninth characteristic of human *I-You* relations is that the word *You* is spoken freely out of a will to encounter a *You* that is impelled by an innate *You* which finds its actualization in our addressing each other. However, this innate *You* is finally fulfilled in becoming wholly actualized in an *I-You* relation with the *eternal You*.

> Every encounter is a way station that grants [the human being] a view of fulfillment: … the You sense that cannot be satiated until it finds the infinite You sensed its presence from the beginning; this presence merely had to become wholly actual for it out of the actuality of the consecrated life of the world.[127]

The tenth characteristic of human *I-You* relations is their evanescence. However, this is not true of our *I-You* relation with God as our eternal *You*, for

> every actual relationship in the world alternates between actuality and latency … in the pure relationship, however, latency is merely actuality drawing a deep breath during which the *You* remains present. The eternal

[125]Buber, *I and Thou*, 130–131.

[126]Buber, *I and Thou*, 143.

[127]Buber, *I and Thou*, 128.

> You is You by its very nature[;] only *our* nature forces us to draw it into the It-world and It-speech.[128]

According to Buber, then, in *I and Thou*, we can address and be addressed by God as our eternal *You* in addressing and being addressed by each other as *You*. This happens when we address and are addressed by each other while *willing* to encounter each other as *You*, *believing* in our own individual reality as standing apart from each other within the context of destiny, and open to the *grace* of our mutual response. Moreover, by the dynamic of the innate *You* in willing to encounter each other as *You*, we ultimately will to encounter the eternal *You*, and in believing in our own individual reality standing in relation to each other within a context of destiny, we believe in the reality of the eternal *You* as our creator, and in being open to the grace of our mutual response, we are thereby open to the divine response in revelation. Thus, we can conclude that for Buber, in addressing and being addressed by God as the eternal *You* in our addressing and being addressed by each other as *You*, the reciprocity characteristic of all human *I-You* relations finds its completion in the *I-You* relation between human beings and God.

Katz, in his own way, sums up this conclusion of ours in a summary comment on Buber's *I and Thou:*

> Consistent with the hasidic, and more generally Jewish notion that God searches for [the human being] as [the human being] searched for God, Buber agreed with the provocative and wonderful assertion that God needs friends and cares about the world. This teaching of Divine Love, which makes possible human love, is at the heart of Buber's teaching of dialogue.[129]

About the Author. Thomas Sherman, S.J., was an associate professor of philosophy at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, USA, and has taught philosophy at Sogang University in Seoul, South Korea

[128]Buber, *I and Thou*, 148.

[129]Katz, "Martin Buber in Retrospect," 263.

and at Arrupe College in Harare, Zimbabwe. He currently lectures in philosophy and spirituality at the Gregorian University in Rome. His doctoral dissertation is entitled *The Nature and Place of Perfect Friendship in the Practical Philosophy of Aristotle*. He is the author of a number of articles and book reviews on various aspects of Aristotle's ethics, the philosophy of Laozi in the *Dao De Jing*, and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. He is co-author, with Christopher Kaczor, of *Thomas Aquinas on the Cardinal Virtues* (Catholic University Press, 2008).