

Martin buber's – i and thou essay sample

[Philosophy](#)



Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (Ich und Du, 1923) presents a philosophy of personal dialogue, in that it describes how personal dialogue can define the nature of reality. Buber's major theme is that human existence may be defined by the way in which we engage in dialogue with each other, with the world, and with God. According to Buber, human beings may adopt two attitudes toward the world: I-Thou or I-It. I-Thou is a relation of subject-to-subject, while I-It is a relation of subject-to-object. In the I-Thou relationship, human beings are aware of each other as having a unity of being. In the I-Thou relationship, human beings do not perceive each other as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, but engage in a dialogue involving each other's whole being. In the I-It relationship, on the other hand, human beings perceive each other as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, and view themselves as part of a world which consists of things. I-Thou is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, while I-It is a relationship of separateness and detachment. Buber explains that human beings may try to convert the subject-to-subject relation to a subject-to-object relation, or vice versa.

However, the being of a subject is a unity which cannot be analyzed as an object. When a subject is analyzed as an object, the subject is no longer a subject, but becomes an object. When a subject is analyzed as an object, the subject is no longer a Thou, but becomes an It. The being which is analyzed as an object is the It in an I-It relation. The subject-to-subject relation affirms each subject as having a unity of being. When a subject chooses, or is chosen by, the I-Thou relation, this act involves the subject's whole being. Thus, the I-Thou relation is an act of choosing, or being chosen, to become

the subject of a subject-to-subject relation. The subject becomes a subject through the I-Thou relation, and the act of choosing this relation affirms the subject's whole being. Buber says that the I-Thou relation is a direct interpersonal relation which is not mediated by any intervening system of ideas. No objects of thought intervene between I and Thou. 1 I-Thou is a direct relation of subject-to-subject, which is not mediated by any other relation.

Thus, I-Thou is not a means to some object or goal, but is an ultimate relation involving the whole being of each subject. Love, as a relation between I and Thou, is a subject-to-subject relation. Buber claims that love is not a relation of subject-to-object. In the I-Thou relation, subjects do not perceive each other as objects, but perceive each other's unity of being. Love is an I-Thou relation in which subjects share this unity of being. Love is also a relation in which I and Thou share a sense of caring, respect, commitment, and responsibility. Buber argues that, although the I-Thou relation is an ideal relation, the I-It relation is an inescapable relation by which the world is viewed as consisting of knowable objects or things. The I-It relation is the means by which the world is analyzed and described. However, the I-It relation may become an I-Thou relation, and in the I-Thou relation we can interact with the world in its whole being. In the I-Thou relation, the I is unified with the Thou, but in the I-It relation, the I is detached or separated from the It.

In the I-Thou relation, the being of the I belongs both to I and to Thou. In the I-It relation, the being of the I belongs to I, but not to It. I-Thou is a relation in which I and Thou have a shared reality. Buber contends that the I which has

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no Thou has a reality which is less complete than that of the I in the I-and-Thou. The more that I-and-Thou share their reality, the more complete is their reality. According to Buber, God is the eternal Thou. God is the Thou who sustains the I-Thou relation eternally. In the I-Thou relation between the individual and God, there is a unity of being in which the individual can always find God. In the I-Thou relation, there is no barrier of other relations which separate the individual from God, and thus the individual can speak directly to God. The eternal Thou is not an object of experience, and is not an object of thought. The eternal Thou is not something which can be investigated or examined. The eternal Thou is not a knowable object. However, the eternal Thou can be known as the absolute Person who gives unity to all being.

Buber also explains that the I-Thou relation may have either potential being or actual being. When the I-It relation becomes an I-Thou relation, the potential being of the I-Thou relation becomes the actual being of the I-Thou relation. However, the I-Thou relation between the individual and God does not become, or evolve from, an I-It relation, because God, as the eternal Thou, is eternally present as actual Being. Buber contends that the I-Thou relation between the individual and God is a universal relation which is the foundation for all other relations. If the individual has a real I-Thou relation with God, then the individual must have a real I-Thou relation with the world. If the individual has a real I-Thou relation with God, then the individual's actions in the world must be guided by that I-Thou relation. Thus, the philosophy of personal dialogue may be an instructive method of ethical inquiry and of defining the nature of personal responsibility.