

# ON RELATIONALITY

*Lessons from Martin Buber on Living in Relation  
With Self, Others, the World, and Life Itself*



ALEXANDER CARABI

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## ***I-IT AND I-THOU***

*“The real, filled present, exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting, and relation exist.”<sup>1</sup>*

MARTIN BUBER

In any given moment, you are embodying a stance. It's the way in which you are disposed towards what you come across. Your stance determines how you approach what you meet.

Martin Buber proposed that there are two stances or “attitudes”: *I-It* and *I-Thou*.

In the *I-It* stance, you view the world around you as a collection of objects and things. You are occupied by using these things and accumulating them in your possession. You reduce what you find to their component parts and their instrumental value. A tree is a disaggregated assemblage of roots, bark, and leaves to be used for firewood, paper, or climbing upon. A pencil is a collection of atoms, particles, and molecules. A person is a means to fulfilling your own

ends, whether practical, emotional, financial, or otherwise. Utility, control, and appropriation take center stage. In this world of objects, all is lifeless and devoid of presence and vitality. Separation dominates.

In contrast, the *I-Thou* stance establishes the “world of relation.” You become “bound up in relation” with the other.<sup>2</sup> There are no “things” per se, and the notion of “having” ceases to be relevant. What remains is the act of standing in relationship with what you meet. The other—whether that’s a person or an object, living or not—is invited to encounter you in mutual, open exchange. As you meet your *Thou*, you become the other’s *Thou*. You yield control and step fully into the relationship. Here, in this most intimate of meetings, in this “unreliable, perilous world of relation”, the present moment comes into being. In fact, it is by meeting and encountering the *Thou* that the “real, filled present” arises at all.<sup>3</sup>

In a famous passage, Buber uses a meeting with a tree to explain the difference between *I-It* and *I-Thou*:

“I consider a tree.

I can look on it as a picture ...

I can perceive it as movement ...

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.

I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law ...

In all this the tree remains my object ...

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. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.”<sup>4</sup>

Buber refers to the two stances of *I-It* and *I-Thou* as “the twofold attitude” of the human being.<sup>5</sup> It indicates a spectrum, not two exclusive states. In any given moment, we will be somewhere on the spectrum between *I-It* and *I-Thou*. Our stance will fluctuate and change over time.

Neither stance is necessarily better than the other. “Both together build up human existence”, Buber says.<sup>6</sup> The capacities that emerge from the *I-It* stance—the ability to accumulate knowledge, represent our surroundings in image and symbols, and manipulate the world around us—are precious

gifts. Living in *I-Thou* mode alone would neither be practical nor possible.

Yet it is in the *I-Thou* relationship where we fully become human. This is the realm of dignity, respect, the good, the true, and the beautiful. Life lived in *I-Thou* becomes heavy, “but heavy with meaning”.<sup>7</sup> It’s where we fully encounter the other as a person—as a living, breathing embodiment of spirit and soul. It’s the mode through which we more fully become who we are.

Meeting the *Thou* demands our full selves. I must rise up with nothing less than my “whole being” to meet the *Thou*, giving myself fully to the encounter — and there, in that threshold moment, “the *Thou* meets *me*.”<sup>8</sup>

The act of meeting the *Thou* is therefore a mutual, reciprocal exchange. It “means being chosen and choosing” – choosing to enter into the relationship with your whole being, and then being chosen to unfold who you are.<sup>9</sup> This relationship, this meeting of the *Thou*, cannot be forced, coerced, or sought. It can only be uncovered through the inherently uncertain act of meeting. “The *Thou* meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking. ... It



cannot be preserved, but only proved true, only done, only done up into life.”<sup>10</sup>

## Hemispheric realities and the union of division and union

Buber’s writings on *I-It* and *I-Thou* are a reflection on human nature and a cultural critique of contemporary ways of living. “*It*, always *It*!” Buber remarked, encapsulating humanity’s preferred mode of being in the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> One hundred years later, his assertion doesn’t feel out of place. The struggle of when and how to adopt *I-It* or *I-Thou* is a defining challenge of our time.

The consequential twofold nature of the human condition has parallels with the work of Iain McGilchrist. He has spent his career studying the differences between the two brain hemispheres and what their relationship says about the state of our world. To better understand the implications of *I-It* and *I-Thou*, exploring McGilchrist’s work can deepen our understanding of how these stances affect the world and our sense of meaning in life.

Until recently, popular science claimed that the two brain hemispheres were responsible for distinct

activities. The left hemisphere was said to handle reasoning, analysis, and abstraction, while the right hemisphere was said to deal with emotion and creativity. But McGilchrist has made a strong case for why that is a profound mistake. Both hemispheres are involved in every identifiable human activity.<sup>12</sup> What distinguishes them is not what they do, but how they do what they do. Each hemisphere has its own way of attending to the world.

The left hemisphere attends to the world by means of narrowly targeted attention. It is concerned with utility and use, and it seeks to control what it meets for its own ends. It has an affinity for the fixed, certain, and mechanical. It is literal and explicit in nature. The left-hemisphere grasps, classifies, abstracts, manipulates, and isolates the parts of the whole.

In contrast, the right hemisphere attends to the world with a broad, open, sustained, and uncommitted attention. It seeks harmony and context, and meets what is without preconceived notions. It's on the lookout for new, unfamiliar, in-the-moment experience, and understands change, metaphor, and flow. The right-hemisphere prefers

the animate, and “has a relationship of concern or care ... with whatever happens to be.”<sup>13</sup>

McGilchrist makes it clear that both hemispheres are essential. A life without one or the other would be a life devoid of its full range of possibilities. Without the left hemisphere we couldn’t analyze and simplify, and without the right we couldn’t deal with complexity and nuance. It should be noted, however, that the right hemisphere has primacy over the two, as it grounds and integrates material before and after left hemisphere processing.<sup>14</sup> Still, both hemispheres are indispensable. However, cultural contexts can arise where the hemispheric relationship becomes incentivized to fall out of balance. This is what McGilchrist claims is occurring today. The left hemisphere, the “emissary”, has come to dominate our world. A corrective movement of restoring balance, and the primacy of the right hemisphere, is required.

Although they come at it from different angles, Buber’s and McGilchrist’s propositions tell a similar story. They both claim that we have the capacity, and the distinct privilege, of simultaneously inhabiting two very different ways of being, and thereby the possibility of creating two very different worlds.

Through one we objectify, reduce, and extract from the world. Through the other we encounter, connect, and reciprocate with what we meet. Neither mode is sufficient on its own. Both are necessary for a life well-lived. Yet we get into trouble when we lean too heavily on one—especially when the emissary (the left hemisphere) betrays the master (the right hemisphere), or, to use Buber’s language, when the assistant (the *I-It* relation) usurps the architect (the *I-Thou* relation).<sup>15</sup> We start sculpting our surroundings through the dominant lens; soon the entire world becomes a shrine to that way of being.

Buber and McGilchrist both point toward a deep, dynamic tension that sits at the heart of the human condition. This is perhaps most famously represented by the *taijitu*, the Chinese symbol representing the yin and the yang. The list of universal polarities is long: light and dark, waking and dreaming, being and becoming. These dynamic tensions are built into the very fabric of our being. They are the manifestations of a human experience that is “filled with burning contradictions”; a reflection of “the mystery at the innermost core of the dialogue.”<sup>16</sup>

It can be tempting to resolve such tensions by choosing one pole over the other. But we can also cultivate a “union of division and union,” as McGilchrist says.<sup>17</sup> By acknowledging the two distinct yet complementary ways of relating to the world, we can begin to explore the possibilities that the two stances provide. Like with a battery, we require both the negative and the positive poles. Neither is better than the other, and both sides are necessary to produce a phenomenon that couldn’t emerge without its constitutive parts. Similarly, our humanness lies precisely in our ability to embody both *I-It* and *I-Thou* stances.

Rather than trying to remove the tension between them, we can sink into the tension itself. With curiosity, we can get to know our own unique styles of *I-It* and *I-Thou* and learn to adopt each of them when they are relevant, instead of relying on a hammer when there’s not a nail in sight. We can notice the moments when we cling to *I-It* when the moment is actually calling for *I-Thou*. Slowly but surely, we can develop the capacity to make different choices in how we stand toward life.

## Embracing *I-Thou* by embracing who we are

We experience the world through relationship. Whether through *I-It* or *I-Thou*, everything happens in the between. Buber claims even suggest that relationship is at the foundation of existence itself.<sup>18</sup> “In the beginning is relation—as category of being,” he says. “[T]he sphere of ‘between’ ... is a primal category of human reality.”<sup>19</sup>

Many contemporary physicists would agree with Buber. “The world we observe is continuously interacting,” says physicist Carlo Rovelli:

“It is a dense web of *interactions*. ... To speak of objects that never interact is to speak of something – even if it existed – that could not concern us. ... Instead of seeing the physical world as a collection of objects with definite properties, quantum theory invites us to see the physical world as a net of relations. ... This is a radical leap. It is equivalent to saying that everything consists *solely* of the way in which it affects something else.”<sup>20</sup>

These are indeed radical notions to the modern mind. They strike at the heart of our world's obsession with reductionism and so-called objectivity. What Buber, Rovelli, and others<sup>21</sup> claim is that relationality is the ground of being. Relationship is *all*. I *am* and you *are* relationship. Relationality is what *is*. "Indeed, though this may sound paradoxical at first," McGilchrist says, "relationship comes before the *relata* – the 'things' that are supposed to be related. ... [R]elations are primary, and form the bedrock of our existence."<sup>22</sup>

When speaking of ontological matters such as this, the word "relationality" requires a closer look. It can actually be an unhelpful term if one assumes that it refers to an existence where "things" happen to be "relating". That would be akin to a subtle form of the *I-It* stance: it presupposes separation, which it then tries to quickly overcome through "relating." Instead, what Buber and company suggest is that a relational field comes first. The "things" that relate are epiphenomena of the relational field. Relation is happening – then things exist.<sup>23</sup>

This implies that relationality lies at the heart of our humanity. We are relating beings who can't help but relate. To adopt the *I-Thou* stance is therefore a

process of reconnecting and remembering. We don't need to learn anything new; we only have to get back in touch with the "*inborn Thou*" to experience our relational nature.<sup>24</sup> It's a return – a coming home to where we are coming from.

Like anything that inspires awe and wonder, we can never fully know the *Thou*. Even though everyone has "somewhere been aware of the *Thou*", the *I-Thou* relationship is one of mystery and uncertainty.<sup>25</sup> Buber himself described it as being on "a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains, undisclosed."<sup>26</sup> The lack of "sureness" is its magic and appeal.

Depending on one's unique personal history, the narrow rocky ridge can feel more than just adventurous. For people who have grown up learning that relationships are dangerous, letting go of *I-It* can mean letting go of a sense of safety. Entering into the *I-Thou* stance can feel like choosing one's own demise.<sup>27</sup>

With enough care and support, these challenging moments can be precious gems. Far from being barriers, they are steps on the path toward deeper connection and resonance. Here, on the narrow



rocky ridge—when we get triggered into fear or frozenness when entering into relation—is where our work needs to be done. In those tender moments, if we observe our state with both distance and intimacy, we have the opportunity to get to know ourselves more fully. The material we uncover in relationship can help us to meet our troubled past so that we can be more fully here, now.

In contrast to the presence of *I-Thou*, the *I-It* stance “has no present, only the past.” It’s an objectified world of things that “subsist in time that has been.”<sup>28</sup> When we only relate from *I-It*, we are living from the past in relation—embodying old, outdated relational models we once adopted but have often outlived their best-by date. These frozen patterns disaggregate our lives into abstraction and separation. But when we take the steps to meet and digest our past—by fully feeling what couldn’t be felt at the time of their creation—we can integrate those old patterns, and more of us comes online. We step into a greater sense of presence. More of who we are becomes available here and now. We become more capable of meeting our *Thou*.

To be truly responsible and response-able to meet the challenges of our world, we are invited to come

into presence. The world needs us to respond to what *is*, not what was. By melting the frozen patterns of our past, we free up capacity to meet the world now. This affects more than just ourselves and those around us. “I believe”, says Buber, “that [the *I-Thou* relationship] can transform the human world, not into something perfect, but perhaps into something very much more human<sup>29</sup> ... than exists.”<sup>30</sup>

This is not necessarily easy, nor is it comfortable. Embracing relationality means facing the stark, terrifying yet powerful reality that we are always affecting and being affected by everything we meet.

“Relation is mutual. My *Thou* affects me, as I affect it. We are moulded by our pupils and built up by our works. ... How we are educated by children and by animals! We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe.”<sup>31</sup>

We can't escape our relational fate. When we acknowledge this fully, we come to realize that our encounters are continually asking us how we will approach what we meet. Our responsibility is continually being tested and questioned. We are invited time and time again, in every waking

moment, to enter into the world of relation, midwifing “pure relation” into being by embodying it “in the whole stuff of life”.<sup>32</sup>

We will inevitably fall short, never completely nor eternally living in the *I-Thou* stance alone. But we would do well to increase our awareness of how we relate, and take the steps required to expand our relational capacity. How we relate becomes our fate.