

Article

Extending the Dialogical Array

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Abstract: The *I-You* dialogue of mutually reciprocal engagement makes a difference of heaven and hell. In the first out of four suggested types of *I-You* dialogue discussed in this article, all the *I*'s—of the primary word *I-You*—own a dialogical perspective. In the other three, it is the *I* who has an experience of creating and engaging in a dialogue that shortly achieves some kind of mutuality with *You*. Epistemologically, the four suggested types differ by the qualities of the *I* who engages in dialogue. The second stance is an *I-You* dialogue of sympathy. A third possibility is an *I-You* dialogue of empathy. A fourth possibility aims higher to a dialogue that transcends *human* mutuality by compassion and reaches a *heavenly dialogue*.

Keywords: Buber; dialogue; *I-You*; sympathy; empathy; compassion



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1. Introduction

For a Buberian *I-You* dialogue, there should be a mutual willingness to enter into a conversation with one another. In a genuine intimate relationship, each person addresses the other person directly as a partner, with reciprocity and eye-to-eye communication. Dialogue, as “the art of an unmediated listening” (Mendes-Flohr 2015), requires quieting down inner voices, and suspension of any preliminary view one has of the other.

Here is a revealing anecdote. After a public talk in Tel-Aviv by Dr. Yaguri on Martin Buber's *I-You*, an elderly gentleman approached, excitement in his eyes. He shared a memory from a time when he was an elementary school boy living in Jerusalem. One day as he was walking home from school, he was approached by an old man with twinkling eyes and a white beard. The man asked what grade he was in, what subjects he studied, and so on . . . The next day, the man was waiting for him again and they continued their conversation. The boy was invited to the man's apartment. Their meetings became regular. The boy would return from school and stop to talk and share tea and biscuits.

One day the gentleman apologized. The next day he would not be able to meet. As the boy took his usual way home the following day, he discovered security personnel blocking the street. He took a detour. Then he learned that a foreign state leader was visiting Martin Buber in his Jerusalem apartment. Thus, the street was blocked, and he could not meet with his friend.

The purpose of this anecdote is to suggest that philosophy and practice are intertwined in Buber's life. In the Conclusions section, this anecdote will assist in bringing together the four types in the dialogical array.

Paul Mendes-Flohr's definition of dialogue as a leveled situation (*ibid*) seems to rule out two other options in communication: one who is higher might address someone lower, or one who is lower might address someone higher. The element that would preclude it from being a dialogue is a lack of mutual willingness by one of the participants. It seems there could not be an *I-You* dialogue unless they already share a mutual willingness to enter into a conversation.

This requirement of mutual willingness for an *I-You* dialogue should be reformed. We all find an *I-You* dialogue in many uneven situations—mother-child, teacher-student,

boss-employee, and so on. In addition, there could be an *I-You* dialogue that acknowledges the state the other is in and respects its ambiguity. A dialogue, in that case, does not start with a mutual willingness to enter into a conversation. It starts with someone who prepares the ground and cultivates some conditions that would ignite willingness and allow a dialogue. This is the case when the rabbi tells his students: Each one of you needs two pockets, so you can use one or the other according to the need. In the right pocket is the saying “for my sake the world was created”, and in the left pocket “who am I but dust and ashes” (Buber 1994, pp. 9–10).

Within a Buberian dialogue—one-on-one or small group—we are “Exploring the Territories of Dialogue” (Anderson et al. 2004). Dialogue is viewed as a more open process, oriented toward shared understanding (Ibid). We fine-tune the possibilities of dialogical arrays to show new directions.

This article is an attempt to expand our understanding of different types of Buberian dialogue. It is written in a somewhat Buberian poetic style, and should be read along the lines of an existential account.

The current discussion comprises four parts: 1. It’s You and Me—*Mutuality*; 2. For Your Sake “the World Was Created”—*Sympathy*; 3. You Are “but Dust and Ashes”—*Empathy*; 4. *I-You*—Humans in a *Compassionate* Dialogue.

Each of the four suggested types of *I-You* dialogue highlights an angle of acknowledgment. The first is the most obvious—a dialogue of mutual engagement: *it’s You and Me*. The second emerges from what seems like a condescending approach to the other: *for my sake the world was created*. Apparently there is no mutual willingness for a dialogue here. The third can seem like submissiveness. One could be suspicious of those who share with him the existential notion of “I am but dust and ashes”. The fourth suggests growth that is not mutual: *I am talking with heaven*. Each of these four types of *I-You* dialogue involves momentary intimacy and an experience of wholeness.

2. It’s You and Me—*Mutuality*

In *Momma and the Meaning of Life*, Jewish-American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom tells a Hassidic story of a Rabbi who converses with God about heaven and hell (Yalom 2000, pp. 28–29). God leads the Rabbi into a room in which there is a large round table. Seated around it are famished, desperate people. A huge pot stands in the middle of the table, holding a mouth-watering stew. A spoon with a long handle sits before each of the diners. It just reaches the pot but is too long to bring the food to their mouths. “That’s hell”, God says to the Rabbi.

Then God takes the Rabbi to another room. There’s the same large table, a stew in the middle, and people holding long spoons. But the people seem happy and not at all hungry. God explains: This is heaven. In this room, they have learned how to feed one another. One’s long spoon is too long for oneself, but just right for feeding a neighbor.

Heaven and hell are imaginative constructs. Heaven is interpersonal giving and acceptance, flowing communication, emotional intelligence, humor, and sympathy. The person beside me is perceived as identical to me when it comes to basic needs and desires. However, in the absence of interpersonal giving and acceptance, flowing communication, emotional intelligence, humor, and sympathy, human existence turns into hell.

Each person’s inner life is influenced by his or her environment. Our existence is not detached from others. Who I am is echoed in what others attribute to me. Our desires, preferences, and choices are consolidated and shaped by our interactions within circles of close others and the environment we create. An individual remains her own master within her consciousness. Developed psychological awareness means seeing things, as much as possible, as they are, without embellishment, without repression or adornment. Developing self-awareness resembles seeking philosophical truth.

A willingness and ability to monitor one’s inner life—self-awareness—is like standing naked before a large mirror to observe one’s body. What is reflected can be attractive or repelling, encouraging or frustrating. Self-awareness is healthy in the same way that

exercise is healthy. It's not a one-time-only glance but part of a lifestyle. Becoming familiar with oneself is a daily matter. "A self-aware existence is psychological meaning in life. Awareness is a guiding value, awareness for the sake of awareness." (Yaguri 2018, p. 111).

Self-awareness is an outcome of precise expectations that integrate desire, ability, and implementation. It reaches a peak of fulfillment when desire and ability, ideals and practical ambitions, are coordinated. We want not the impossible but what we can achieve, and we act to fulfill our desires. This leads to self-fulfillment.

In a mutual dialogue, each person is self-aware. Each acknowledges that their own wisdom and experience does not necessarily make them a better person. What makes a person in dialogue a *mutual* partner includes *humility* and a *commitment* to the other. Commitment attests to a person's willingness to collaborate in a shared psychological journey of self-awareness. Neither knows beforehand what this journey will reveal.

Both engage in the here-and-now of emerging dialogue. They have more than a matter-of-fact focus on what brought them together. They immerse themselves in their unfolding dialogue itself. Although issues from outside are not dismissed, and will intrude, the here-and-now of an emerging dialogue is the primary reality they share. Equipped with self-awareness, being in the here-and-now allows each to experience profound *I-You* mutuality.

3. For Your Sake "the World Was Created"—*Sympathy*

An *I-You* dialogue can emphasize *You*. This creates a sympathetic relation. Sympathy is the perception, understanding, and reaction to the distress or need of another (Davis 2020). When a person holds that the world was created for him/her, they might seem self-absorbed and self-centered. But this is not quite true. It doesn't necessarily exclude an *I-You* dialogue.

"For my sake the world was created" is rabbinic, from the Talmud (Mishnah, tractate Sanhedrin 4:5). It says that each of us is special, of inestimable value. It carries an affirmation of individual uniqueness. Although all mankind is created in the mold of Adam, no two people are the same. This uniqueness suggests that each person holds meaning *in the world*. That the world was created for my sake is not *simply* a slip of paper to put in my pocket. It is something every human being should recite: "For my sake the world was created". These words are to be internalized because all human beings are uniquely created. "For my sake the world was created!"

Martin Buber tells the Hasidic story of an aged pious man, Rabbi Susya, who became fearful as death drew near. His friends chided him, "You're a pious man, you have no reason to fear!" Rabbi Susya replied: "I'm not afraid that I'll be reproached that I wasn't Moses. I'm afraid that I'll be reproached that I was not Susya." (Buber 2005, p. 208.)

The difficulty for Rabbi Susya lies in his self-imposed obligation to achieve authentic self-identity. He is tormented with doubt. Perhaps his understanding of his uniqueness is erroneous. If it does *not* mean choosing to follow the laws of the Torah, aiming to be as pious as Moses, then he may have led his life falsely. Yet if it means becoming an individual solely true to oneself, he was wrong in trying to be like Moses. If being a pious Jew does not require identifying oneself with the paradigmatic Jew, Moses—*what* ethical standards and norms apply? (Aylat-Yaguri and Stewart 2013, p. 74).

Why shouldn't I follow the universal pattern Moses sets for being a pious believer? Well, I am a *particular* person—"for my sake, the world was created". I'm not just an individual belonging to a community of believers who take Moses to be the paragon of piety. As a *particular* person, I am defined by characteristics that differentiate me from others. The *particular* person I am is unique, singular, and irreplaceable (Inwood 1992, pp. 302–5). Here, there is no way to derive what I am from a collectivity or universal like the example of Moses.

An authentic individual cannot simply share objective traits with others of a universal or class. A boy preparing for his Bar Mitzvah shares traits with the collectivity of boys also preparing. Particularity, in contrast, highlights a boy's uniqueness. What makes him

incomparable, quite unlike any other? It can be hard to communicate the *particular* aspect of a person.

Rabbi Susya feels discouraged and disconsolate. It's time for him to reach into his *right* pocket. There he finds the words: "*For my sake was the world created*". This isn't selfishness. A sympathetic interlocutor will begin a dialogue with a discouraged Rabbi Susya by encouraging sympathy with Rabbi Susya's *particularity*.

4. You Are "but Dust and Ashes"—Empathy

A person who holds to the notion "I am but dust and ashes" might seem to be attesting to their worthlessness. This person still says *I*, and he or she can still turn to a *You*—and it is in the relations to others that the feeling of inferiority or low self-esteem unfolds. Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within *their* frame of reference (Longley 2020). With that person it would be challenging to create an empathetic, genuine intimate relationship, where each person addresses the other person directly as a partner, with reciprocity and eye-to-eye communication.

Abraham utters "I am nothing but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27) as an expression of *humility* as he questions God's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. His humility is in the service of his attempt to change God's mind. "I am but dust and ashes" reminds us that humans are made from Earth's dust (Genesis 2:7) and that they return to dust (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 12:7). This note in the left pocket instills humility and recognition of fallibility.

Martin Buber describes Job as a servant of God, a "faithful rebel" (Buber 2000, p. 188). Job's wife asks, "Are you still loyal? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). He sits among ashes, scraping the sores and boils that afflict him. She is *worse* than Satan, who agrees there is none like Job on the Earth: "He is blameless and upright." (Job 2:3). Job's wife doesn't see him for who he is. She sees him as "nothing but dust and ashes". Yet although dust cannot say anything, Job responds: "You are talking like a foolish woman." (Job 2:10). Job's wife maybe invites him to a final fight with God: face to face, in a direct dialogue, and in the awareness that this can be the very last one. His response attests that her conflictual conversation with him does not amount to an *I-You* dialogue.

Job's three friends, unlike his wife, demonstrate a sympathetic *I-You* relation. They can hardly recognize him. They can hardly believe their eyes. In a dialogue *beyond words*, "they began to weep, they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads" (Job 2:12). Their empathy is extensive and prolonged: they share his agony, identify with what he is going through. "They sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word because they saw how great was his suffering." (Job 2:13). If sitting on the dust and sprinkling dust on one's head is the same as becoming dust, they become "nothing but dust and ashes".

Job does not feel high and mighty. In his left pocket he finds "I am but dust and ashes". Empathy—whether cognitive, affective, somatic, or spiritual—is the capacity to place oneself in another's position (Longley 2020). My empathetic *I-You* response joins *You* in your sorrowful misfortune. In spirit, there could be some formation of being "dust" in between birth and death, which dissolves in the end. Yet, in empathy, perhaps momentarily, we will share Job's condition even without words: we are *all* nothing "but dust and ashes", formed from dust and returned to dust.

5. *I-You*—Humans in Compassionate Dialogue

We opened with the psychiatrist Irvin Yalom telling the story of selfish diners who try to feed only themselves—and so fail. Yet all are rewarded when each at the table feeds another. This is heaven, the opposite of the hell of separation and starvation (Yalom 2000, pp. 28–29). Being fed means recognizing the other. Entering into a mutual relationship with others at the table creates a classic *I-You* dialogue in which every other, he or she, is "a specific point in space and time within the net of the world" (Buber 1958, p. 8). There is nothing higher in intimacy and wholeness.

The *I-You* dialogue of mutually reciprocal engagement makes the difference between heaven and hell. Out of the four suggested *I-You* dialogues, in the first both *I*'s enter into a dialogical perspective characterized by a mutual willingness to enter into conversation. In the other three, the *I* who initiates a dialogue achieves limited mutuality with *You*. Epistemologically, the four suggested types differ by the qualities of the *I* who engages in dialogue. The second, "for my sake the world was created", can be compatible with *I-You* dialogue. A third *I-You* dialogue could seem *from the outside* to be submissive: *You* are "but dust and ashes", and so am *I*. But from the inside it needn't be.

In a fourth possibility, an *I-You* dialogue embodies an individualistic-subjective growth towards what Buber calls "religiosity" (Buber 1967). Far from the seclusion of the 'irresponsible' mystic, here, the verbal and non-verbal dialogue transcends the heaven of inter-human mutuality. Here, "I can neither experience nor describe the form which meets me, but only body it forth." (Buber 1958, p. 10).

Transcendence, in this case, could appear, paradoxically, as the "invisibility of God's transcendence". It becomes visible "in the human response to it" (Welz 2007, p. 173). "(T)he concept of human personhood is too narrow to harbor God's hidden, overflowing presence: God's presence can neither be reduced to embodied presence in one place nor to metaphysical presence in an inaccessible 'beyond'." (Welz 2015, p. 74). A human being to whom God makes himself known as a living presence—someone like Jesus, Socrates, or Goethe—relates absolutely to the absolute (Buber 1958, pp. 66–67), that is, relates to the "eternal *Thou*" (ibid: p. 74). This eternal *You* is *within another human being*, even though it cannot be merely reduced to a human *You*.

What *enables* this experience that is both mundane and heavenly? The first step is to share attention with persons, animate objects, or deity *beyond* instrumental *I-it* relations. One doesn't treat the people and things in the world solely as things to be used for one's own benefit. As I swing my hammer, I know it's just a thing, an *it*. As I lovingly pet my cat, I *know* it's a *You*. At a different level, I learn to address a limitless *You* within *me*. This is a *subjective elevation towards religiousness* or religiosity, the liquid core from which religions are born.

Religion is a body of received beliefs and rituals, but Buber sees *religiousness* as something more. He advocates a "religiousness—without religion" (Buber 1967, p. 79)—a religiousness beyond belief and ritual that is a universal spiritual humanism. An individual who embodies this connects with others in *heavenly dialogue*: "[...] so long as the heaven of *Thou* is spread out over me the winds of causality cower at my heels, and the whirlpool of fate stays its course" (Buber 1958, p. 9). *Heavenly dialogue* is not with God as a person. Any notion of a divine person or divine personhood as well as any concept of God are necessarily insufficient (Welz 2016). God is not only a dialogue partner in that God remains unknown and unthinkable: "[...] the definition of God as 'absolute person' merges aspects of human persons with the idea of a God who *surpasses all of them*" (Welz 2015, p. 72). *Heavenly dialogue* is an encounter with a *You*, an encounter that becomes "the essentially relational constitution" of the human '*I*' (Šajda 2011, p. 42). This *You* is *recognized as divine* in another human being.

Consider prayer. "When a human being prays, the question of whether or not God is a person is already decided, because praying means addressing oneself to God." This "[...] presupposes that there is a personal counterpart who can be approached and who not only hears but is also able to comply with requests. [...] It is difficult to argue convincingly for God's personhood *remota oratione*, apart from prayer." (Welz 2015, pp. 79–80). For Buber, we are "completely incapable of declaring what God's essential being is, but it is both permitted and necessary to say that God is [...] a person" (Buber 1958, p. 135).

Here, we can link Buber's notion of *I-You* to Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivities. Kierkegaard avows that "truth is subjectivity" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 189). He values a truth *for* subjectivities. Truth becomes a deeply personal, existential, *subjective* investment that moves from a focus on the *what* to a focus on the *how* (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 199). Subjective

truth is a way a subject relates to an object. “Objectively put, the question of truth focuses on *what* I believe; subjectively put, on *how* I believe.” (Westphal 1996, p. 114).

In truths *among* subjectivities, an *I* is a subjectivity, and so is a *You*. Truth is defined as a certain mode of the God relationship. If our relationship—my subjectivity relating to yours—is to be “in the truth”, then each of us must take our being as souls, our being-as-subjectivities, as primordial truth, as *faith*.

As traveling arcs of subjectivity, words can shape an intimate communion that forms part of a *communication*—which then radiates outward and aspires to realize *universal community*. If they ring true, the conditions of the soul that a Kierkegaard or Plato bare for us begin to resemble a general condition. I gain access to a soul that is not mine, that begins to become mine, that can belong as much to others as to Kierkegaard or Plato, as much to the present age as to another, as much to me as to him or to my neighbor. It’s as if spirit lies in common trust, even as I avail myself of it as the particular and irreplaceable individual that I am. [. . .] We know, too, that words are not the only force in town. There’s brute power, blindness, and famine to contend with (Mooney 2013, p. 15).

Buber puts it this way: “Just as the melody is not made up [only] of notes nor the verse [only] of words nor the statue [only] of its outlines, but [the words and notes] must be tugged and dragged till their unity is no longer scattered into these many pieces, so with the man to whom I say *Thou*.” (Buber 1958, pp. 8–9). Saying *Thou* pulls an otherwise fragmented self together. “According to Kierkegaard, a person meets his or her neighbor only through God, who is the ‘middle term’ [. . .] of the relation, that is, the ‘through-which’ of the relation. God is, so to speak, the ‘catalyst’ that binds the two.” (Welz 2015, p. 70).

An *I-You* relationship is a subjectivity-subjectivity relationship. Subjectivity is not a private realm hidden from view. My anger or love are vectors of my subjectivity, and when you *respond* to my anger or love, they are no longer hidden from view. Even in private interpersonal meetings, your subjective response will be as public, as “interpersonal”, as can be. Your truth, in relation to me, will be your subjectivity, in which subjectivity as “untruth” is excluded. Of course, we can feign our feelings. But it is because we have a grasp of a subjectivity *true to itself and true to the power that has set it* that we can sense when subjectivity is distorted or false, authentic or mendacious. Subjectivity lets us come alive in relationship.

Living voice and words work seas of subjectivity. Launched by a friend or a Socrates, words take on power from deep cultural roots. It’s as if they flow with an indigenous strength from an opaque, even mythic, or archetypal timeless past (Mooney 2013, p. 16).

Kierkegaard even says that “the ‘I’ is oneself and one’s neighbor at once” (Kierkegaard 1996, p. 92). We attend, it seems, to “inter-animating moments in fields of widening (and contracting) subjectivity” (Mooney 2013, p. 16). That is our truth, and that truth is subjectivity. At our best we relate as subjectivities to other subjectivities.

Attaining a Buberian religiousness combined with a Kierkegaardian truthful subjectivity is evident in compassion. Compassion literally means “to suffer together”. It is the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion is a benevolent concern that we feel for another being’s welfare. It rejects the preeminence of self-interest of evolved human nature (Keltner 2010, p. 8). Compassion is not the same as empathy or sympathy, though the concepts are related. While empathy and sympathy refer more generally to our ability to take the perspective of and feel the emotions of another person, compassion is when those feelings and thoughts include a desire to help. In compassion, “helping others brings the same pleasure we get from the gratification of personal desire” (ibid., p. 10). It prepares *not to fight or flee, but to approach and sooth*. Cultivating compassion and acting compassionately is essential: “human communities are only as healthy as our conceptions of human nature” (ibid., p. 15).

Laughter begets laughter. Tears beget tears. Affections beget affections. Passion begets passion. Compassion begets compassion. Thus, a dialogue with someone like Jesus,

Socrates, or Goethe is heaven. *I* and *You* are joined together in a unique moment. In that moment, we are not things among things but subjectivities among subjectivities. Buber affirms Kierkegaard when he writes, “If I face a human being as my *Thou* and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things” (Buber 1958, p. 8). The heavenly dialogue does not translate into objective knowledge. “I do not experience the man to whom I say *Thou*. But I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word. [. . .] Even if the man to whom I say *Thou* is not aware of it in his experience, yet relation may exist. Here is the cradle of the Real Life.” (Buber 1958, p. 9).

6. Conclusions

Let’s return to Paul Mendes-Flohr’s definition of dialogue. He takes it to be a leveled situation that includes “the art of an unmediated listening” (2015). It requires quieting down inner voices, and suspension of the preliminary view one has of the other. Buber practiced what he preached as we have seen in the anecdote on Buber befriending an elementary school boy, mentioned above.

For an elderly man and a young boy, an *I-You* dialogue of mutually reciprocal engagement seems improbable. How can both *I*’s deliberately and willingly enter into a mutual dialogue? For an *I-You* conversational dialogue between them, something else has to take place. We may assume that Buber applied “the art of an unmediated listening” with the boy. The boy was convinced that the old man was genuinely curious about him and interested in what he cared to share.

To create an *I-You* dialogue with the boy, Buber applied sympathy—perception, understanding, and reaction to the boy’s needs of connection and companionship. More than sympathy, Buber showed empathy—the capacity to understand or feel what the boy was experiencing from within the boy’s perspective.

We cannot expect a young boy to acknowledge a highly spiritual *I-You* dialogue. He needs to form a subjectivity and to become an individual. Decades passed before the boy realized the meaning of the elevated experience he had in his *I-You* dialogue with the old man. The excitement in his eyes attested to his recognition of their compassionate heavenly dialogue.

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