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Birth, *Sehnsucht* and Creation: Reading Buber between Plato and Kierkegaard

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Abstract: Martin Buber conceives human potential through the trope of pregnancy and birth. His portrayal of this phenomenon in *I and Thou* comprises a natural connection between mother and child during pregnancy and the potential for future, spiritual connections, articulated as I–Thou relations, which the child may accordingly achieve with their surroundings. Analyzing this model reveals Buber’s literary-philosophical engagement with the works of Plato and Søren Kierkegaard, and illuminates his perspective on human abilities and limits. Moreover, the context of Plato and Kierkegaard elucidates the way Buber connects an inborn human yearning (*Sehnsucht*) for I–Thou relations to participation in the divine creation of the world. This connection between *Sehnsucht* and creation, between I–It and I–Thou relations, diminishes the gap between human and God, emphasizing the significant role divine creation plays in the I–It reality.

Keywords: Martin Buber; *I and Thou*; I–It potential; Plato; paradox; Søren Kierkegaard; creation; learning; revelation; faith



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1. Introduction

Rabbi Bunam said to his disciples: “Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: ‘For my sake was the world created,’ and in his left: ‘I am earth and ashes’” (Buber 1991, pp. 249–50).

This commonly recited Hasidic legend, attributed to Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa (1767–1827), appears in the book *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber (1878–1965).¹ It presents two irreconcilable perspectives, both of which define the religious subject. On one hand, they must accept human insignificance relative to the world into which they were created, and therefore also in relation to the God who created this world; on the other hand, they must accept that the world was created for human beings, and God therefore accords significance to individual human actions within creation. Despite the inherent contradiction between these two perspectives, the presence of the notes in two pockets of the Hasidic master portrays the tension between them as necessary to the religious life. *Tales of the Hasidim* relates legends regarding many Hasidic masters, but it is no coincidence that Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa held particular importance for Buber.² As a religious philosopher, Buber is centrally concerned with questions relating both to the individual’s mission in the world and to the limits of human ability vis-à-vis God as creator of the world.

Towards the end of World War I, Buber began developing his philosophy of dialogue, which he formulated comprehensively for the first time in *I and Thou* (1923) (Buber 1923).³ Although this work marks the beginning of a new phase in the thought of the then forty-five-year-old Jewish-German intellectual, it nevertheless maintains a dual characterization of the human’s path in the world, consistent with Buber’s earlier writings until then (Shapira 1999, pp. 79–129). The main theoretical development he presents here and maintains in subsequent writings involves the assertion of human limitations in relation to, and dependence on his surroundings in the world and on God (Horwitz 1988, pp. 133–220;

Mendes-Flohr 1989, pp. 93–126).⁴ From the start, *I and Thou* establishes two ways in which a human being may relate to the world and to God. “I–Thou” represents a mutual and present affinity between a person and all that they may encounter, in which God is revealed. “I–It” features limiting, defining, and partial encounters; hence God, who cannot be limited, defined, or partial, is absent from, and supposedly cannot be expressed through any I–It relation.⁵ On the surface, these two relationships, represented as *Grundworte* (primary words), standing for archetypes of expression or communication, are unconnected one to the other, constituting an unbridgeable gap between human beings and God, between the finite human reality and the eternal reality of God.

In this essay, I illustrate human potential for engaging eternity as portrayed in *I and Thou* through Buber’s discussion of pregnancy and birth. I demonstrate Buber’s literary-philosophical engagements with Plato’s and Kierkegaard’s treatments of human ability and dependence, and their influence upon his own. Consequently, this essay will identify the connection between *Sehnsucht*, the innate ability of humans in the I–It reality to seek and yearn for I–Thou relations, and the creation that occurs in I–Thou reality. In this regard, I differ from Rivka Horwitz who contends that Buber “agreed with Kierkegaard in not founding his I–Thou and I–It conceptions on creation” (Horwitz 1988, p. 213).⁶ While others have compared Buber and Kierkegaard,⁷ no focused analysis has related Buber’s ‘double pregnancy’ model to Plato.⁸ This model, central to Buber’s effort to reduce the gap between humans and God, between finite and infinite, embeds divine potential in the human and her surroundings in the world and connects between the two modes of relation, I–It and I–Thou. The connections between these *Grundworten* clarify the human’s mission in the world, as God’s partner in the world’s creation.

2. The ‘Double Pregnancy’

In the first part of the book, Buber draws insight from two phenomena on the relation between the *Grundworten*. First, he turns to the “spiritual history of the primitive man”⁹ in order to identify their “fundamental difference” (Buber 1985, p. 22),¹⁰ then affirms their connections by doing so. The affinity that prevails between I and Thou precedes the stage in which the person “has recognised himself as an I”. The person’s emergence into self-consciousness occurs “when the I of the relation has [...] taken on a separate existence” (Buber 1985, pp. 22–23).¹¹ This transition from I–Thou to I–It becomes clearer through the second phenomenon Buber presents, when following the pregnancy and birth of a child: from a “purely natural combination” between a mother and her fetus during pregnancy, prior to the fetus’s independent existence, to the child’s detachment from their mother at birth. This separation enables the development of self-consciousness detached from the previous relation (Buber 1985, pp. 24–25).¹² On the surface, I–Thou and I–It differ according to the measure of self-consciousness.¹³ However, Buber’s observation of the “primitive man” leads him to distinguish more broadly between his *Grundworten*. First, I–Thou expresses a joining of I and Thou, whereas I–It expresses the separation of I and It. The second distinction between the two relations is ontological-chronological. I–Thou is primal and precedes the I–It relationship (Buber 1985, pp. 22–23). This chronology is apparent in both the “primitive man’s” development of self-consciousness and the birth of a child, and aligns with Buber’s assertion of the necessity of the transition from I–Thou to I–It: “every Thou in our world must become an It” (Buber 1985, p. 16). Therefore, the transition from I–Thou to I–It entails a clear and necessary connection between the *Grundworten*.

However, Buber sends contradictory messages regarding the ability to transfer in the opposite direction, from I–It to I–Thou, complicating the connection between the reality of I–It and its subsequent I–Thou. On one hand, I–Thou is repeatedly described as a primal, original, initial reality, especially in relation to the “primitive man” and society. It is depicted as “the original relational event” (Buber 1985, p. 22), as “the true original unity, the lived relation”, and most prominently emphasized in the statement “[i]n the beginning is relation” (Buber 1985, p. 18),¹⁴ referring to the relation (*Beziehung*) of I–Thou.

Defining I–Thou as a primal, original reality that precedes the I–It relation determines the chronology between the *Grundworte* and affirms the necessary connection of I–Thou to the subsequent I–It reality. Yet this leads to the conclusion that there is no reality prior to I–Thou, and that even if there were such a reality (I–It) at the earliest stage, it is certainly not connected to a subsequent I–Thou relation, which is by definition primal and original. Transition from I–It to I–Thou does not therefore seem possible.

On the other hand, Buber stresses that I–It can become I–Thou, portraying a clear connection between them: “every thing in the world, either before or after becoming a thing, is able to appear to an *I* as its *Thou* [. . .]. The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly” (Buber 1985, p. 17). Pronouncing that every “thing” (It) can appear to the person (I) as a Thou suggests an I–It reality that precedes I–Thou and undermines its precedence in the earlier chronology. Furthermore, Buber connects the person’s I–It relation and the I–Thou affinity that follows it with a chrysalis-butterfly analogy, indicating that the latter continues and actualizes the former. Yet, if Buber lays out a chronology between I–Thou and I–It and defines the former as a primal, original reality, it is hard to imagine a prior I–It reality that gets actualized through transition to I–Thou.

This engrained tension bears implications not only on Buber’s approach to the specific reality that precedes I–Thou, but also on his approach to the subsequent I–It reality and its potential to transition into future I–Thou relations. This tension might be better understood in light of the difference Buber presents between the two transitions: the Thou “is bound [*muß*] to become an *It*” whereas the It “may [*kann*] become a *Thou*” (Buber 1985, p. 33; 2019a, p. 58). While the transition from I–Thou to I–It is necessary, the transition from I–It to I–Thou is merely possible. I–Thou relations entail mutuality (“relation is mutual”) and require “both will and grace” to occur (Buber 1985, pp. 8–9). The person’s will for I–Thou is not sufficient since they depend on the grace of Thou as well. The transition’s dependence on the will of Thou explains why it is only possible, but not necessary. Therefore, the reality created by the I and Thou is both different and disconnected to some degree from any previous reality, even though the person is able to transition from an I–It relation to an I–Thou relation, suggesting there is somewhat of a continuum, as with a chrysalis and butterfly. Accordingly, characterizing I–Thou as a primary reality and characterizing it as an actualization of the potential embedded in the preceding reality requires a more flexible interpretation.¹⁵

A study of Buber’s conception of pregnancy and birth will illuminate the contradictory relation between the I–It and its subsequent original reality of I–Thou. He asserts that we “receive fuller knowledge” from considering the birth of a child than the insights drawn from the “primitive man” (Buber 1985, p. 24). Still, his choice of pregnancy and birth as a model for the transition from I–Thou to I–It, a singular event that does not recur, just as a specific baby cannot be reborn or return to its mother’s womb, emphasizes that, for the human situated in the I–It reality, I–Thou will always be an event taken place in the past, and its future recurrence will never be possible for them. This may seem to run contrary to his claim that every It can become Thou.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Buber consciously chose this phenomenon, signifying that even the problematic implication for the ability to transition to I–Thou holds relevance for his doctrine.

This tension can be resolved by attending to Buber’s description of two connections that culminate in birth, one natural (*naturhafte*) and the other spiritual (*geisthafte*). While the natural connection of pregnancy represents an originary event that precedes a person’s existence and belongs to their past, the spiritual connection is an event that may occur in their future. The person could enter into a new I–Thou relation, replacing the initial connection which existed with their mother: “Time is granted to the child to exchange a spiritual connexion, that is, *relation*, for the natural connexion with the world that he gradually loses” (Buber 1985, p. 25). This model echoes Buber’s reflection on his relations with his own mother, who left him at the age of three as a result of her divorce arrangements with Buber’s father. As Buber relates in *Autobiographical Fragments*, this separation had an impact on him as a boy and fueled his anticipation of their reunion thirty years later.

Although this longed-for reunion with his mother was eventually a failure, inspiring Buber to coin the term *Vergegnung* (mismmeeting), it did not prevent him from believing in the possibility of engaging in future I–Thou relations (Buber 2002b, pp. 21–23; 2016, pp. 274–75).¹⁷ In the narrow sense, the problem of the single-event birth as paradigm has been addressed, since, in addition to the initial natural connection, every person is capable of entering into future, spiritual I–Thou connections.

However, from a broader perspective, presentation of these natural and spiritual affinities has great relevance to our understanding of Buber’s doctrine. There is no requirement to renounce the implications of the natural single-event birth. Rather, it clarifies the necessity of describing I–Thou in the contradictory combination of initial characterization and primal potential. For this purpose, it is helpful to summarize the elements of Buber’s *naturhaftes-geisthaftes* (natural-spiritual) pregnancy model. Quoting a Talmudic *midrash*, he maintains that throughout the natural connection, the human being knows all, and at birth this knowledge is forgotten: “this connexion has such a cosmic quality that the mythical saying of the Jews, ‘in the mother’s body man knows the universe, in birth he forgets it’”.¹⁸ Every person is separated at birth from the primal *naturhafte* connection with their mother, a connection that precedes their existence. Thus, the primal connection is embedded from the start in each person’s separated I–It reality, “as a secret image of desire,” a longing and yearning (*Sehnsucht*) to be actualized in a new *geisthafte* connection (Buber 1985, p. 25; 2019a, p. 53).¹⁹ But this *Sehnsucht* that begins with the human being’s birth is not the only significance of the primal *naturhafte* connection. The natural connection embeds in each human being (I), and in every It around them, the latent potential of entering spiritual affinities in the world. That is to say, every *geisthafte* affinity (I–Thou) is possible, owing to the preceding I–It reality, as each I–It reality itself springs from a primal *naturhafte* connection. Actualizing this potential through a spiritual I–Thou affinity is also original and involves a new *geisthafte* birth.²⁰ Buber’s definition of an original reality bound up with birth enabled by a prior reality and may subsequently enable a later original reality, calls for further attention. Since the elements of Buber’s pregnancy-birth model correspond with Western philosophical traditions, explicating this correspondence will clarify Buber’s insistence on characterizing his I–Thou affinity as an initial reality, while also actualizing a potential embedded in its preceding reality.

3. Reading Buber between Plato and Kierkegaard

The components of Buber’s pregnancy-birth model, as well as the rooted tension in the relation I–It has to its subsequent I–Thou reality, resonate with the opposing doctrines presented in Plato’s *Meno* and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*, on the topic of human potential for knowledge and the manner in which this knowledge is acquired.²¹ In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates summarizes a paradox presented to him by Meno:

[A] man cannot inquire either about what he knows or about what he does not know? For he cannot inquire about what he knows, because he knows it, and in that case is in no need of inquiry; nor again can he inquire about what he does not know, since he does not know about what he is to inquire (Plato, *Meno* 80e).²²

It is not possible to inquire, look, or search (translations vary)²³ for something that one does not know, since one can neither know what to look for, nor recognize its absence and thus the need to ‘search’ for it. Therefore, if learning is a ‘search’ for a truth that one does not know, learning is not possible. Socrates solves this by explaining that a human soul is immortal, having been born numerous times and seen all, and therefore “has acquired knowledge of all and everything” (Plato, *Meno* 81d). Nevertheless, during each birth the soul forgets its knowledge and therefore learning is actually an act of recollecting, a ‘search’ for that which has been forgotten.²⁴ Great similarity obtains between Socrates, Buber, and the Talmudic *midrash* which Buber refers to in the above citation.²⁵ In all three, the human being knows all in their mother’s womb and then forgets it at birth.²⁶

The similarity between Plato's *Meno* and Buber highlights that both embed a realizable potential within the human being based on a primal reality. For Plato, the forgotten knowledge is the primal reality of the human being that enables the 'search' for knowledge as an act of recollection, and its eventual achievement or acquisition. For Buber, the *natürhafte* connection, separated at birth, is the primal reality of the human being and their surroundings, the manifest *Its* in the world, which embeds within them the potential to enter a future *geisthafte* affinity. The act of *Sehnsucht* (yearning) for a future affinity, which also appears later as *Beziehungstreben* ("effort to establish relation"),²⁷ is innate in the human being (Buber 2019a, p. 54). Buber's *Sehnsucht* is very similar to the Platonic 'searching', referring to a striving for truth. It even shares resemblance to some of the translation possibilities of this term (Plato's 'search') from Greek (ζήτησις) to the German language (*Suche*; *Forschung*), as in various translations of *Meno*.²⁸

Nonetheless, Buber and Plato disagree regarding the way the primal reality is attained. In Buber's doctrine, using Plato's terms, prenatal knowledge depends upon the *natürhafte* connection of I (child) and Thou (mother), and accordingly, attaining any knowledge of the truth post-partum will only be possible in a new *geisthafte* connection, through an encounter between two. In contrast, according to Plato, a person's prenatal soul knows everything through seeing,²⁹ and therefore the post-partum individual is able to know all through the autonomous act of recollection. Knowing all is an ability of the independent individual, if only they will recollect, since the knowledge is embedded in them. For Plato, the ability to attain knowledge of truth derives from the individual's independent mind, while for Buber, it is limited and dependent on an additional factor.³⁰ The critical point of this comparison for the purposes of the current argument is its engagement of potential and actualization generally, without necessary relation to specific epistemological concerns regarding the acquisition of knowledge.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, written under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard (1813–1855) disagrees with Plato, arguing that knowing all is not embedded in the human and that the ability to search for knowledge is limited (Kierkegaard 1985, pp. 9–13).³¹ The context for this controversy is the hypothesis of divine truth. Kierkegaard's Climacus attempts to deal with its revelation to the human being, whose reality is finite. In order to discuss the relationship between God and human beings, and between the eternity and history, Kierkegaard distinguishes human knowledge, which is the product of reason, from revealed knowledge, which is beyond it. Truth acquired by divine revelation cannot be acquired by human philosophy. While Socrates views all truth as deriving from one natural source,³² Kierkegaard separates human-worldly truth, philosophy dependent on reason, from divine truth, dependent on revelation. For this reason, Kierkegaard renounces the Socratic model of human potential, which embeds knowledge of all in the human mind, and consequently the person's ability to search and obtain it, leaving knowledge of all dependent on divine revelation. Kierkegaard agrees with Meno's paradox, i.e., that a person cannot search for what is unknown to them, since for this purpose they had needed to know about it, and therefore, the act of searching for divine knowledge is impossible for the human.³³ Ergo, learning, through which one can receive revelation and acquire divine knowledge, must also come from God. According to Kierkegaard, one may have 'faith' that there is truth beyond the worldly reason, but even such 'faith' could not be supported by worldly reason alone, and is therefore paradoxical (Kierkegaard 1985, pp. 62–65).

Kierkegaard defines Socratic primal knowledge as a condition, both for the human ability to know all and for learning as an act of recollection that will enable actualization of innate ability. For Kierkegaard, both eternal knowledge acquired through revelation and the conditions that enable the learning of this knowledge, in the sense of comprehending it, come from God.³⁴ Since the conditions for learning, i.e., the ability to understand revealed divine knowledge, are not within the human's autonomous reach, God must create them in humans before revealing himself. This new creation within the human being generates a reality unlike the one prior to it and separate from it. Kierkegaard compares this new creation to planting an acorn in a clay pot, which breaks as a result of its growth into an oak,

and to old leather bottles bursting as a result of filling them with fresh wine (Kierkegaard 1985, p. 34). As in a difficult birth, which Kierkegaard includes among his allegories, divine creation of these conditions in humans is both separate from the reality that precedes it and independent of them, and is to be related to as a rebirth. Hence, God's revelation, in which the eternal enters temporal human reality, is an event that includes both the creation of a new reality, i.e., new conditions, and the revelation of divine truth.

Having established the similarity between Buber and Plato, Buber's similarity to Kierkegaard, Plato's adversary, now becomes evident as well, especially on the point that explains the significance of characterizing Buber's I–Thou relation as an initial reality. In both philosophies, knowledge of all, which is acquired through divine revelation, is beyond the ability of the human mind and not dependent upon it alone.³⁵ Not only the person is unable to generate revelation, but the entrance of the divine into temporal worldly-human reality originates in a creation of a reality different from any that preceded it. Thus, this encounter between eternal and temporal must be initial.³⁶ Divine revelation is separate from that which precedes it and involves the creation of a new reality in the person's rebirth.

While the similarity between Kierkegaard in his *Philosophical Fragments* and Buber suggests the former's influence on the latter,³⁷ Buber diverges from his predecessor by making the human a partner in the creation of the new reality and replacing Kierkegaard's 'faith' with potential embedded in the I–It reality, expressed through *Sehnsucht*, a discussion of which I return to below.³⁸ The fact that Buber integrates elements from both Kierkegaard's and Plato's doctrines in *I and Thou* helps clarify the importance and implication of the two conflicting elements in his theory: the original and initial character of I–Thou affinity and the potential that precedes it. This integration testifies to the fact that Buber does not fully accept either Plato's or Kierkegaard's doctrines.

Buber's doctrine blurs the controversy between Plato and Kierkegaard by interpreting these elements in combination. Like Plato, Buber embeds the knowledge of truth within the human primal reality as a potential, yet, like Kierkegaard, he implies that God's revelation, in which knowledge of truth is achieved, has no connection whatsoever to its prior reality. This should be seen as a new-initial reality. The use of a prior reality as a basis for potential, as in Plato, is established through the human's independence and unlimited ability, while the use of revelation as an event detached from the human reality that preceded it, as in Kierkegaard, is established through the human's dependence on God and the minimization of their ability. Consequently, Buber's 'double pregnancy' model, which includes a primal *naturhafte* connection as well as a new, future *geisthafte* connection, seems to incorporate conflicting elements in Plato and Kierkegaard. This model implies that the human possesses an unlimited ability to bring about I–Thou relations in which truth is acquired, and at the same time positions this reality, including the truth obtained through it, as reliant on divine grace.

Buber combines Kierkegaard's definition of conditions embedded within the human as the potential to search (as in *Sehnsucht*) for I–Thou relations with the contrasting human dependence on the new divine creation that begins this relation. This contrast is at the center of Meno's paradox and question: "Why, on what lines will you look, Socrates, for a thing of whose nature you know nothing at all? Pray, what sort of thing, amongst those that you know not, will you treat us to as the object of your search?" (Plato, *Meno* 80d). It is impossible to search for the future *geisthafte* connection if it is separate and different from the primal *naturhafte* connection. On the other hand, it is not possible to create a reality (the future I–Thou) separate and different from its previous one if such a reality stems from a primal existence. Unlike Plato's and Kierkegaard's solutions, Buber leaves this paradox as is and avoids choosing one or the other. Instead, he combines them in *I and Thou* and embraces both this impossible 'search' and ironic 'creation'.³⁹ Buber presents the searching as the person's *Sehnsucht* for a new, future I–Thou relation that differs from that which preceded it: "Not as though his yearning meant a longing to return". But he also describes how a person "has stepped out of the" I–It reality, which originated in the *naturhafte* connection, and "into [...] creation", the *geisthafte* connection (Buber 1985, p. 25).

Buber thus connects the person's *Sehnsucht* with the I–Thou reality that succeeds it and between creation and the I–It reality that precedes it, as though these exist on a continuum, despite their essential paradox.⁴⁰

4. *Sehnsucht* and Creation: The Human-Worldly Potential

For Buber, humans and God both play roles in *Sehnsucht* and creation. Any answer to the question of whether a person is able to search for God using the finite conditions of the world or whether they depend on God to create eternal conditions in the world would simply recapitulate the division between the Platonic human search and the Kierkegaardian divine creation. Buber is neither willing to renounce the gap between the human and the divine, nor between finite and eternal reality, but blurs this gap through divine potential, which he grants to the human and their worldly reality. To establish this claim, it is essential to clarify that I–Thou is first and foremost a connection between the human and the world,⁴¹ and that only through interacting with the world does the human meet God: “He who truly goes out to meet the world goes out also to God” (Buber 1985, p. 95). First, the *natürhafte* connection between child and mother is that of human and world: “Every child that is coming into being rests, like all life that is coming into being, in the womb of the great mother, the undivided primal world” (Buber 1985, p. 25). The separated I–It reality to which the child is born corresponds to a separation between human and world. Accordingly, the future *geisthafte* connection, I–Thou, is also one that is formed between human and world, as the It becomes Thou. For this precise reason, the human is able to yearn for it. Second, Buber teaches us that meeting the divine, the eternal Thou, can only be possible through a human's (I) affinity with her surroundings in the world (Thou): “[...] in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*” (Buber 1985, p. 6). The human's interaction with the world is the condition that qualifies them to receive divine truth, the ‘creation’ of the new reality within which God reveals himself.

Therefore, a person can yearn among the Its of the world for I–Thou affinity within which the eternal conditions will be created, but, contrary to Plato, successful *Sehnsucht* does not depend on the person alone, but on the connection between the human (I) and world (Thou). The eternal conditions that are created are not attained by the individual, since their creation requires both human and world. However, contra Kierkegaard, the fact that the human plays a part in this eternal creation, and that it occurs between them and the finite world, expands their abilities and reduces their dependence on God. The I–It reality is finite while the I–Thou reality is eternal. Nonetheless, both realities are formed by the relation between human and world, and God's revelation is determined according to their type of relation. This point is crucial, since it accentuates the connection of the human and world, creating an eternal reality together with the human who had previously searched (yearned) for affinity with the (then-separate) world, actualizing the potential embedded within them. This also distinguishes Buber's *Sehnsucht* from Kierkegaard's faith, which is when a person is paradoxically drawn away from the existing worldly conditions—reason—to what may be beyond the world.⁴² *Sehnsucht* for I–Thou affinity is not an act of evading the world with which the human comes into contact, since the transition into creation requires contact with the world as well.

This does not revoke God's role in creation, but affirms that divine potential is already embedded in the human (I) and world (It) in the reality preceding creation (I–It), and is actualized in their affinity (I–Thou). Of course, revelation of divine truth that is beyond human knowledge and abilities requires, as Kierkegaard argues, the creation of a new reality within the human, finite reality, a creation that emanates from God, a condition that does not exist within or depend on the human. While Buber agrees that the creation of a new reality needs to be divine, unlike the reality that preceded it, and out of human reach alone, he departs from Kierkegaard's approach, claiming that the human takes part in God's creation: “We take part in creation, meet the Creator, reach out to Him, helpers and companions” (Buber 1985, p. 82).⁴³ God created the world that includes humans, and when humans act in the world, by engaging with it in I–Thou relations, they take part in

world creation as God's partners. In fact, a double creation is actualized with every I–Thou relation. I–Thou relation is both an action that the world, created by God, exercises and applies on the human ("Creation happens to us, [...] we submit". Buber 1985, p. 82), as well as an action that the human performs in the world, as God's partner, taking part in the creation of the world.

Buber explicitly refers to God as "the Creator" of the world, in which and with which humans engage in I–It relations, thus undermining the position of Rivka Horwitz that Buber does not offer "a theory of the creation of a relation between God and the world" (Horwitz 1988, p. 211). As Maurice Friedman shows, the centrality of a primordial divine creation in *I and Thou* is consistent with Buber's later writings (Friedman 1993, pp. 113–14).⁴⁴ Hence, according to Buber, divine potential is embedded within the human and the world in the I–It reality in order for humans to create eternal conditions through their I–Thou affinity. The world is a "divine destiny" and God needs Man in it: "[...] do you not know too that God needs you—in the fullness of His eternity needs you?" (Buber 1985, p. 82).⁴⁵ This teaches that I–It relations are significant to Buber's philosophy, both because the world plays an essential part in the human's *Sehnsucht*, and because the reality of I–It bears divine potential embedded in its original creation.⁴⁶

Buber's concept of creation and the potential embedded in the reality of I–It match the 'double pregnancy' model. The primal, *natürhafte* connection between mother and child, created by God, embeds in the human's relations with the world divine potential to engage in future *geisthafte* connections, I–Thou relations, and create new eternal realities in which revelation may occur. Analysis of this model in *I and Thou* in the context of the doctrines of Plato and Kierkegaard elucidates Buber's perspective on human abilities and limits and the connection of *Sehnsucht* to creation. Unlike the Platonic search, the potential of the Buberian *Sehnsucht* is limited, as the human alone is incapable of creating eternal reality, and therefore incapable of searching for God. Unlike Kierkegaardian faith, the human's *Sehnsucht* is directed towards the world through I–It relations, with which they can engage in mutual I–Thou relations, thanks to primal divine potential that creates the eternal reality. In this way, Buber connects *Sehnsucht* and creation, I–It and its subsequent initial reality of I–Thou, and reduces the gap between the human and God without eliminating it. This understanding correlates with Buber's statement that "there is no such thing as seeking God, for there is nothing in which He could not be found" (Buber 1985, p. 80). Buber's 'double pregnancy' model offers, above and beyond this simplistic statement, a comprehension of the human's divine potential in the world, from birth into the I–It reality, through *Sehnsucht* to creation.

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Notes

- ¹ The book (in German: Buber 2015) mainly comprises selections from two earlier books: *Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge* (Buber 1922) and *Das verborgene Licht* (Buber 1924). See further (HaCohen 2015).
- ² This can be perceived, for example, in the role given in Buber's *For the Sake of Heaven* (Buber 2009) to Rabbi Bunim, a central figure in the school Peshischa.
- ³ This book has been translated into many languages, twice into English. Unless otherwise noted, I will be quoting and citing in English from Gregor Smith's translation: (Buber 1985). In German, I will cite from (Buber 2019a).
- ⁴ For a concise description, see (Horwitz 1989).

- 5 In Buber's words, "The eternal *Thou* can by its nature not become *It*," suggesting any relation to God can only be made within I–Thou relation (Buber 1985, p. 112).
- 6 She writes this based on Franz Rosenzweig's September 1922 review of the *I and Thou* drafts, in which he criticizes Buber's doctrine of the I–It reality for lacking a relation towards God's role as creator of the world. Franz Rosenzweig to Martin Buber, estimated after 4 September 1922 (Rosenzweig 1979, pp. 824–27). For an English translation, context and analysis of the letter see (Horwitz 1988, pp. 210, 226–29).
- 7 For comparisons of Buber and Kierkegaard, see (Bergman 1991; Diamond 1956, pp. 173–85; Golomb 2006; Gordon 1997; Levi 1983; Osin-Ganani 1998; Perkins 1984; Rose 2002; Šajda 2011).
- 8 Leora Batnitzky compares Buber to Plato, as well as to Kierkegaard, but not in light of *I and Thou*'s pregnancy and birth phenomenon: (Batnitzky 2003, pp. 346–47, 349–50).
- 9 Although Walter Kaufmann translates *Geistgeschichte* as "history of the [...] mind" (Buber 1970, p. 73; German: Buber 2019a, p. 51) and not as "spiritual history", it is important to mention that Buber later on clarifies that "Geist ist Wort", which even Kaufmann translates as "Spirit is word" (Buber 1970, p. 89; German: Buber 2019a, p. 60).
- 10 Referring to the primitive man and society as archetypes of human (social, cultural, religious, psychological and linguistic) phenomena is common in many studies and philosophies, to name a few important examples: (Taylor 1958; Durkheim 1965; Freud 1952; Lévi-Strauss 1966).
- 11 See further discussion on this matter: (Rotenstreich 1991b, pp. 29–30).
- 12 See Israel Koren's Kabbalistic interpretation of the child's separation and development of consciousness (using Buber's Hasidic writings): (Koren 2010, pp. 299–300).
- 13 To expand on this subject, see (Katz 1984).
- 14 Both Smith's and Kaufmann's ("In the beginning is the relation". Buber 1970, p. 69) translations are faithful to the original German phrase ("In Anfang ist die Beziehung". Buber 2019a, p. 49) which relates to the relation in present tense. That is because every I–Thou relation is an initial reality according to Buber. In this context, compare Koren's understanding of this phrase: (Koren 2010, p. 295).
- 15 For further discussion on this topic, see (Varman 2019, pp. 11–19).
- 16 "[...] every thing in the world [...] is able to appear to an *I* as its *Thou*" (Buber 1985, p. 17).
- 17 Paul Mendes-Flohr demonstrates how Buber saw in his future wife, Paula, a person who could replace the relation he was hoping to have with his mother (Mendes-Flohr 2019, p. 3). On Buber's relation towards the separation and reunion with his mother, see further (Ibid., pp. 1–14).
- 18 See Rabbi Samlai's *midrash* to which Buber probably referred: "[...] And a candle is lit for [the fetus] above its head, and it watches and gazes from one end of the world to the other, and it is taught the entire Torah [while in the womb] [...] And once [the fetus] emerges into the airspace of the world, an angel comes and slaps it on its mouth, causing it to forget the entire Torah" (Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 30b, my translation).
- 19 Smith translates *Sehnsucht* as "yearning" and Kaufmann as "longing" (Buber 1970, pp. 76–78).
- 20 Compare (Koren 2010, pp. 296–98).
- 21 My discussion here concerns the doctrines presented in *Meno* and *Philosophical Fragments*, and does not intend to give a full account of the complexity of Plato's and Kierkegaard's thought throughout their respective works. For the sake of convenience, I will henceforth refer to the opposing doctrines presented in these specific writings simply by the names of their authors, Plato and Kierkegaard.
- 22 The quotes are from the English translation of (Lamb 1977).
- 23 See the original Greek language and its translation to English, where the word occasionally appears as "search" and at other times as "inquire" or "research": (Lamb 1977, pp. 298–303).
- 24 In the words of Socrates: "Seeing that the soul is immortal and has been born many times [...] research and learning are wholly recollection" (Plato, *Meno* 81d). It should be noted that Plato is not the first to claim this. See (Guthrie 1975, pp. 249–50).
- 25 "[...] that the mythical saying of the Jews, 'in the mother's body man knows the universe, in birth he forgets it'" (Buber 1985, p. 25). The concept of this Talmudic *midrash* was probably borrowed from Plato. See (Halevi 1982, p. 22). According to Ephraim Urbach, Adolf Jellinek (1821–1893) was the first to point out this connection (Urbach 1975, p. 246).
- 26 Of course, Buber is concerned with the relation of I–Thou, in which revelation occurs, not knowledge per se. Likewise, considering forgetfulness in context of Buber's dialogical philosophy would concern the relation to I–Thou. The subject of forgetfulness in Buber's thought has been studied by Yemima Hadad: (Hadad 2017, pp. 210–16). With regard to Plato on this subject, see (Wygoda 2019).
- 27 Unlike Smith (Buber 1985, pp. 26–27), Kaufmann chose to translate both *Beziehungstreben* and *Sehnsucht* as "longing" in order to emphasize the coherence of this tendency (Buber 1970, pp. 76–78).
- 28 Buber was probably familiar with Plato's works in their original Greek, a language he acquired in his youth, and for reasons of convenience preferred reading in German. The Plato edition that Buber used is unfortunately not kept in the Martin Buber

Archive at the National Library of Israel. However, see Otto Apelt's translation into German, which was available during the period that Buber wrote *I and Thou*: (Apelt 1914, pp. 37–39).

Since the soul has no physical body with eyes to see, the meaning of such sight ("has beheld all things". Plato, *Meno* 81c) is peculiar. For further discussion, see (Klein 1965, p. 96). Interestingly, Buber also uses eyes and looks in order to describe human action in I–Thou relation: "takes with him, in his eyes [...] visual power [...] we look" (Buber 1985, pp. 117–18).

In the acquisition of knowledge according to Plato's teacher-student relation, one may identify dependence in the Socratic process of learning, as the teacher helps the student recollect what has been forgotten. However, the teacher merely assists and is not essential for attaining knowledge, similar to the midwife who assists the mother in doing what is already in her capacity, i.e., to give birth. Moreover, the Platonic allegory of birth testifies to the human ability to search without assistance from the teacher, just as a mother can deliver her baby without the midwife's assistance. See also: Plato, *Theaetetus* 149b–151d.

Kierkegaard used pseudonyms in many of his works as a mechanism for distancing himself from the different perspectives presented in them. Although the pseudonym Climacus reflects Kierkegaard's method of indirect communication, it should be noted that in *Philosophical Fragments*, particularly, Kierkegaard does name himself as publisher of the edition. See further on the relation between Kierkegaard and his pseudonym Johannes Climacus: (Evans 1983).

"For as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things" (Plato, *Meno* 81d).

In Kierkegaard's words: "[...] he must not even be a seeker" (Kierkegaard 1985, p. 13). Thus, is not possible to know God by using the human mind prior to revelation in Kierkegaard's view, and proving his existence (through an inquiry) is paradoxical.

According to this hypothesis, the irony of the human condition is that by using limited abilities, humans are untruthful and, as Climacus concludes, are in fact "polemical against the truth", hence forfeiting the condition for understanding divine truth. This is why Climacus refers to this state as "sin", and describes God as the "teacher [...] who [...] prompts the learner to be reminded that he is untruth". In this way, God both "gives the condition and gives the truth" (Kierkegaard 1985, pp. 14–15). Based on this hypothesis, the irony of *Philosophical Fragments*, may obscure Kierkegaard's own theology; nevertheless, the theological discussion developed in this work is relevant to the inquiry in this article. See further (Evans 2004).

Compare (Batnitzky 2003, pp. 349–50).

On this tension between the eternal and temporal see: (Shapira 1999, pp. 182–84).

Although Buber refers here to Kierkegaard's philosophy inexplicitly, he does respond to him explicitly in other writings, most prominently in two essays: "Die Frage an den Einzelnen" (Buber 2019b) and "On the Suspension of the Ethical" (Buber 1952). See further on the relations between Buber's writings and Kierkegaard philosophy: (Šajda 2011).

As opposed to the approach presented in *Philosophical Fragments*, signed texts by Kierkegaard indicate that all humans have an inescapable "longing for the good", which brings him closer to Buber's *Sehnsucht* discussed here. For example: "[A] longing that demonstrates that [...] a person, despite all his defiance, does not have the power to tear himself away completely from the good" (Kierkegaard 2009, p. 33).

While Malcolm Diamond has already pointed out that paradox is essential in Buber's thought, he did so emphasizing divine revelation in contrast to human-worldly relations, and not the tension between search and creation. Respectfully, his research overlooked the tension between the precedence of the I–Thou relation and its primal potential (Diamond 1956, pp. 173–85).

Of course, from the individual's viewpoint, the transition from *Sehnsucht* (I–It) to 'creation' (I–Thou), depends on the Thou. Hence Nathan Rotenstreich points out that according to Kierkegaard, Franz Rosenzweig, and Buber, "given man's limits" there is a discontinuity between the two realities such that "the transition from possibility to actuality involves a leap" (Rotenstreich 1991a, p. xii). Still, Buber implies some continuity in this transition. Paul Tillich writes how Buber's religious ideas are "less paradoxical and less forced" than those of Kierkegaard (Tillich 1948, p. 517).

Be this relation with humans, objects in nature or "spiritual beings" (Buber 1985, p. 6).

"the object of Faith is not the teaching but the Teacher" (Kierkegaard 1985, p. 62).

There are many similarities between this perspective and Buber's words from 1919, in his essay "The Holy Way": "God's 'partner in the work of creation,' (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 119b) to finish the work begun on the sixth day, and to realize the unconditional" (Buber 1967, p. 112). See also later on in the article: "God [...] 'renews the work of creation each day.' And He truly does renew it, within us and through us, desiring to enter by our means into a new reality" (Ibid., p. 137).

Friedman demonstrates this in three writings, including "The Question to the Single One," where Buber directly criticizes Kierkegaard: "Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself" (Buber 2002a, p. 60).

Because of the divine potential embedded in the world, Buber does not relate to the reality of I–It as "sin", unlike Kierkegaard's treatment of finite reality.

Besides Friedman, many have overlooked the centrality of creation in Buber's thought and the implications it has for the I–It reality: "Nothing is more central to *I and Thou* than Buber's understanding of creation. Creation in a biblical sense underlies Buber's assertion that man is given a ground on which to stand and that he is able to go out and meet God, man, and world from that ground. [...] The paradox of creation is that God sets the world and man at distance and yet remains in relationship with them, that he gives man ground on which to stand and yet that the very meaning of man's free standing on this ground is that he can go forth to meet the Creator who addresses him in every aspect of his creation" (Friedman 1993, p. 113).

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