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4. Martin Buber

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4. Martin Buber

Abstract

In 1957 a little man of about eighty years gave a series of lectures at the Washington School of Psychiatry. He had come to the United States from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to speak under the auspices of an institution concerned with restoring to health the mentally ill or aberrant. The guest was a philosopher, not a renowned therapist. Yet for Martin Buber (1878-) himself such a designation is both acceptable and unacceptable. On the one hand he concerns himself with the objective world as philosophy conceptualizes it. On the other hand his primary concern is not speaking about God in an abstract or an objective manner as a philosopher might do. Rather, in what Buber calls the life of dialogue, he would speak with God in the concrete immediacy of human experience. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Martin Buber, Philosophy, Theology

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Comments

This is a part of [Section XXIII: Theological Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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4. Martin Buber

In 1957 a little man of about eighty years gave a series of lectures at the Washington School of Psychiatry. He had come to the United States from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to speak under the auspices of an institution concerned with restoring to health the mentally ill or aberrant. The guest was a philosopher, not a renowned therapist. Yet for Martin Buber (1878-) himself such a designation is both acceptable and unacceptable. On the one hand he concerns himself with the objective world as philosophy conceptualizes it. On the other hand his primary concern is not speaking about God in an abstract or an objective manner as a philosopher might do. Rather, in what Buber calls the life of dialogue, he would speak with God in the concrete immediacy of human experience.

This may be intelligible if one first accepts the premise of Martin Buber's special mode of reflection. The meaning of life, or rather life itself, is experienced in "the between." The powerful little man who thinks like this moved his Washington audience no less than he has moved Western theology and philosophy since the publication of his famous book, I and Thou, in 1923. But in Washington the effect was gained in a characteristic but inauspicious way.

In the fourth lecture he approached his audience with a consistent, but nonetheless disturbing, exhortation. Speaking out of the religious tradition of Judaism, he insisted that a therapist does not stand called to mediate salvation; his task is to further a healing. But as a person in a two-way conversation the therapist ought to lead the patient to a tower from which his personal destiny may be seen. Notice that the doctor, either as a specialist or as a person in dialogue with another person, is urged not to lay desperate hands upon the psyche of

the other for purposes of integrating or socializing the personality. He must do nothing that implies a claim of prerogative over the other person, even though that person be called a patient. The relationship, no matter how professional, must not be allowed to lapse into one of crude domination and sub-mission. We do not have to do here with any kind of sentimental mutual toleration. Nor is this a recommendation for democracy carried through to the therapist's office.

Buber finds that the relationships between man and man may be the reflection of a more profound and subtly difficult relationship between man and God. Just as any significant relationship among men is no mere matter of friendship or sociability, neither is the relationship between man and God. The later relationship cannot be accidental or arbitrary and it cannot be direct. When Buber talks about God as the "Eternal Thou," he is not employing a symbol for God. "Thou" signifies the human relationship with God, but God is not known in Himself. The claim to such knowledge must be left to a philosophy that Buber claims is based on the presupposition that the human mind apprehends the absolute in universals, that is, in abstractions. Religion on the other hand means the covenant of the absolute with the particular, with the concrete. Obviously the word "covenant" is crucial here, for it points back to one of our initial assertions about Buber's point of departure. A covenant is a relationship that implies the mutuality of the parties involved. But the truth is not to be found in either isolated person. It is in "the between" that truth is revealed and is known. For him truth is not prior to the human knowledge of the truth or to the human knower. Only when a person confirms the truth in his own experience does he really find the truth. Knowledge for its own sake is likely to provoke a non-committal response from the person who ought to be concerned with his reconciliation with God. The truth that emerges in "the between" is the only truth man really has. Buber almost suggests that philosophical exercise with absolutes and abstractions and with logical analysis offers little of significance to man as man. The problem of meaning then must be approached on the human level, or, as Buber would say, in dialogic terms.

In an advertisement for a major weekly news magazine the following appeal is made to solicit subscriptions: "eight great news departments provide the news of personal significance to you, your family and your future!" In the body of the advertisement the reader is rhetorically asked: "What turn will our dynamic economy take -- and how will it compel you to revise your thinking about your job, your business and your future?" In short, the entire effort of the magazine is "designed to focus the news which affects your life." Would Martin Buber subscribe? Does not this magazine promise to fulfill his philosophical method and hope by casting the news of the world into personal terms? So it may seem. But we must caution ourselves about an important distinction. The term "personal" cannot be equated with the term individualistic. Man in his isolation does not know the truth, for the truth is "situational" and is

to be experienced by men who live and suffer in the unreduced immediacy of the moment. Hence Buber finds meaning in, not through or by, dialogue.

This shows itself in his definition of history as "a dialogue between Deity and mankind." But the dialogue is not two simultaneous monologues. For man can understand history's meaning and significance only when he is the one addressed, and only to the degree to which he renders himself receptive and addresses God in response. The truth and meaning of events lie in their challenge to persons. What is everyday becomes meaningful because there "the spontaneity of the mystery" of living is felt. In brief, meaning is grasped by and grasps its subject in the sacred moment between.

In the selection that follows, Martin Buber discusses the conflict between philosophy and religion. He characterizes both sides, defines their proper limits, and finally gives a certain priority to religion. This he defines broadly as "genuine intercourse" with God approached as the "Eternal Thou."

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