

Vis-à-vis with the Absolute Thou?



Piotr Sikora

Translated by Stanley Bill.

Piotr Sikora earned his degree in theology at the Pontifical Academy of Theology and a PhD in philosophy at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. He works at the Jesuit University of Philosophy and Education and collaborates with the Elijah Interfaith Institute in Jerusalem.

In the philosophy of religion two fundamental religious attitudes are often opposed to each other: the dominating tendency of the Far Eastern religions to seek the absolute within the subject (for the purposes of this article we might call this “immanentism”), and the orientation of the human person towards the absolute Thou which is central to the religions stemming from Abrahamic roots, that is, the attitude that we might call “dialogical.” The latter attitude is sometimes seen as radically opposed to the first, insofar as it assumes a distance between the religious subject and a personal God *vis-à-vis* with whom the subject finds himself.

But are we really dealing with a genuine opposition here? Such a question may arise when we observe that apprehending the fundamental religious attitude as a relation with the absolute Thou leads to a serious dilemma.

On the one hand, we may run up against the argument that recognition of the personal

nature of the divine reality is a condition *sine qua non* of any religious act.¹ For such an act is linked with the search for ultimate meaning in a person's life, while this meaning may be attained only in relation to an ultimate Reality of a personal nature. Moreover, it is significant that this personal nature is granted here to that which possesses the following characteristics: (i) a relation to the self, that is, self-consciousness and self-possession (freedom); (ii) the ability to respond; (iii) materialization in a dialogical space, through communication, the process of mutually sharing horizons and worlds.²

On the other hand, any consistent thinking about that-which-is-the-ultimate-reference-of-the-religious-person as an absolute reality incomprehensible under a system of human categories leads to the conclusion that the religious person is really concerned with — as Nicholas of Cusa put it — “everything that may be.” Even in the Christian philosophical and theological tradition we find thinkers characterized most frequently by apophatic inclinations, advancing serious arguments on behalf of a vision according to which “the sense of the religious idea of Transcendence is precisely the very movement of the subject toward that which is unconditioned, the movement to transcend any relative state, that which causes the symbol of God to have any meaning at all.”³ This apophatic current in the Christian tradition seems to be very close to the Far Eastern traditions, which are skeptical of any understanding of the human-Absolute relation in categories of an I-Thou encounter. Both sets of thinkers maintain that the understanding of the Absolute as a person, a Thou, is a reduction and nullification of its absolute nature: for a person is considered — at his/her very essence — to be an element of reality with a perspectival, thus limited and conditioned, nature. If the ultimate reference point of the religious person is to have an absolute nature, then it is not possible to stand opposite it, or *vis-à-vis*. For “opposite” assumes externality, distance, and, most importantly, an order in which the Absolute would constitute only one of the elements and therefore in which it would lose its absoluteness.

The defenders of the dialogical vision counter that we cannot view the I-Thou relation “from the outside,” as if it were a whole containing two elements, and therefore it is impermissible to accuse “dialogists” of reducing the Absolute to one of a pair of elements.⁴

Later on I would like to consider whether the “dialogical” understanding really must lead to reductionism, and whether the “dialogical” and “immanentist” attitudes really constitute an opposition. I shall be concentrating on Martin Buber's analysis of the “I-Thou” concept. This choice seems justified to me insofar as Buber not only referred to “immanen-

¹ See B. Welte, *Religionphilosophie*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1978; and J.A. Kłoczowski, *Między samotnością a wspólnotą. Wstęp do filozofii religii* [Between Solitude and Community. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion], Tarnów 2004.

² See Kłoczowski, op. cit.

³ See P. Sikora, *Logos niepojęty* [The Inconceivable Logos], Krakow 2010, p. 253.

⁴ This argument was advanced by Karol Tarnowski in a conversation with me. I hope that, in quoting his argument from memory, I have not altered his fundamental thought.

170 tist” conceptions in an overtly critical way, but at the same time elaborated the most developed attempt I have seen at a dialogical-relational understanding of religion, which could — at least at a first glance — avoid accusations of reductionism with respect to the ultimate “object” of reference for the religious person.

Buber directly and resolutely polemicized with the vision of religion developed by Carl Gustav Jung. The Jewish thinker particularly opposed the Swiss psychologist’s thesis that religion is a subject’s attitude to his or her own mental processes. Thus he criticizes the Jungian identification of God with autonomous mental content, for then religion would no longer be the relation between an I and a Thou, while in Buber’s opinion that is precisely what it is, even when it demands a mystical dissolution of the elements of that relation.⁵ Buber disagrees with the thesis, attributed by him to Jung, that “what the believer ascribes to God has its origin in his own soul.”⁶ In Buber’s opinion, “Jung identifies himself with a view ‘according to which God does not exist “absolutely,” that is, independent of the human subject and beyond all human conditions.’”⁷ According to Buber, Jung’s vision constitutes “a breaking with a God (..) who is truly present opposite the soul, who manifests himself to the soul, and who in his being remains transcendental for it.”⁸ The Jungian vision turns instead (together with contemporary consciousness) to the soul itself, as “to the one sphere from which man can expect to harbor the divine.”⁹ According to Jung, in religious life the soul experiences its own self, whereas Buber does not wish to accept this. For in the Jungian vision the basis for faith disappears.¹⁰

Of course, Buber does not limit his criticism to Jung’s theory. The latter is merely an example of the numerous conceptions that have attempted to relativize the “interpersonal” aspect of religious experience. At the same time, Buber observes that religious projects for which the I-Thou relation does not constitute the ultimate religious reality differ with respect to whether this ultimate reality of identity between the subject and the absolute is only to be something we strive to achieve, or whether it has existed from the very beginning, though unrecognized.¹¹ Nevertheless, what is common to all conceptions of this type — i.e. the ultimate identity of subject and the Absolute, I and Thou — seems unacceptable to Buber. The most generous explanation of this type of religious experience that the author of *I and Thou* can muster refers to the enrapturing nature of the very relation and its dynamic, which “can put itself before its bearers as they steadily confront one another, and cover each from the feeling of

⁵ See M. Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, trans. M. Friedman et al., Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1994, p. 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹¹ See M. Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R.B. Smith, New York 1958, p. 85.

the other enraptured one.”¹² Religious traditions for which the identity of the subject and the Absolute is the ultimate state are, from this perspective, a result of a delusion (however understandable). Seeking God within oneself is, in Buber’s opinion, a reduction of the Absolute to an It — an object of experience that can be understood within a system of categories (more on differentiating the Thou from the It in a moment).

Thus it appears that Buber’s conception demands we abandon seeking the Absolute within ourselves, and that we concentrate on the subject’s relation to the transcendent Thou. Yet the matter is not quite so simple.

The strongest charge laid out by Buber against the immanentist conceptions is the accusation that they reduce the Absolute to an element of the world. This element appears to constitute the subject’s mental content, as opposed to the environment external to the subject (an environment that also encompasses other subjects). Buber’s argument is precisely the same as what opponents of the ultimate character of the “dialogical” religious relation have advanced in order to reject it. Therefore, we might ask how the same argument can be advanced by “immanentists” criticizing the “dialogical” position and yet also used against the “immanentist” by the “dialogists.” Is one of these sides right? Or are both sides, in defending their views, mistaken in assessing their adversary? Perhaps it is the case that both sides, as long as they remain juxtaposed, present a reductive vision of the Absolute? Perhaps it is possible to avoid reductionism only by going beyond the dilemma of “God in Me” versus “God the Absolute Thou”? Let us see how the question looks from the perspective of the “dialogical” vision.

According to Buber, man — or human beings — may exist in the world in two different ways, expressed in two primary words, which are really pairs of words: I-Thou and I-It.¹³ It is significant here that “primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence,”¹⁴ “the existence of *I* and the speaking of *I* are one and the same thing.”¹⁵ In other words, what Buber says about speaking the primary word or about the word itself refers to the very existence or being of the subject. What, then, are the fundamental characteristics of this relation?

First of all, “there is no *I* taken in itself, but only the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* and the *I* of the primary word *I-It*.”¹⁶ Hence, with respect to both the I-Thou and I-It relations, we may not speak of previously existing elements that at a certain moment enter into a relation with each other. The subject (I), therefore, does not possess its own pre-existing identity independent of the relations in which it exists. It exists only in relations.

¹² Ibid., p. 87.

¹³ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Of course, a problem arises here: if the subject possesses its own identity — if it is what it is — only in a relation, while the relations essential to its identity are multiple (if only because there exist two radically different types of relation), then can we talk about a single identity of the subject? Does the subject not break down, so to speak, into pieces? The unity of the subject would not be at risk in two cases: (1) if there existed a single, privileged relation fundamental to the identity of the subject, or (2) if all the relations formed a coherent web, while the subject attained its identity through participating in this web (as a particular place within it). How might Buber have approached this question?

It appears that for Buber the interdependence of the elements of a relation is more fundamental and distinct in the I-Thou relation: “I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say thou,”¹⁷ writes Buber. The difference between the I-It situation and the I-Thou situation depends, in part, on the fact that the primary word I-Thou “can be resolved, certainly, into *I* and *Thou*, but it did not arise from their being set together; by its nature it precedes *I*.”¹⁸ However, the second primary word, I-It, “arose from the setting together of *I* and *It*: by nature it comes after *I*.”¹⁹ The primary word I-It (called “self-being” by Buber) is a word of separation.²⁰ Self-being appears by distancing itself from other beings, becoming conscious of itself by differentiating itself from others, as “being such-and-such and nothing else.”²¹ On the other hand, the I-Thou (called the “person”) is the reality of combination,²² which becomes conscious of itself only through co-existing.²³ Thus, it appears in actual fact that the subject attains its identity in I-Thou relations and only then, with its identity thus attained, does it enter into I-It relations.

Nevertheless, do we not run up against a contradiction here in Buber’s thought with respect to the I-It relation? On the one hand, the Jewish philosopher writes that there is no *I* in itself in the primary word I-It, whereas on the other hand he asserts that the I-It relation arose from setting together the *I* and *It*, and that it occurs later than the consciousness of the *I*. This contradiction can be avoided, in my view, if we take into account the process of attaining consciousness of the *I*.

Buber assumes that, at his origins, man does not possess consciousness of his identity, but rather that there is an originary “unconscious desire for the *Thou*.” Only through this not entirely conscious entry into the I-Thou relation can self-consciousness be attained. Self-consciousness appears when man discovers that he always enters into various and changeable relations as the same subject, which can stand opposite its

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

own self in detachment from any possible Thou.²⁴ Only then can it exist in the I-It modus. 173

The above reasoning contains two weak points. Firstly, it does not explain how it is possible for the subject to gain a *single* identity through being in multiple I-Thou relations. The passage from Buber quoted above suggests that each subject gains his/her identity in the whole web (“in the weave”) of relations. The problem is that, according to other texts by Buber, each I-Thou relation is all-embracing, it occupies, as it were, the whole horizon of the I, and therefore it is difficult to explain how particular I-Thou relations can form a web or a weave.

Secondly, Buber gives no indication of how it is possible that at a certain moment the I-Thou bonds break and the subject may come to stand opposite its own self, detached from any possible Thou — “as if opposite a Thou,” that is, being a Thou for itself — and therefore that it may gain an independent identity, logically prior to the relation, and that it may then consciously (with the consciousness of its autonomous identity) enter into relations. This interpretation does not appear to be in agreement with the thesis frequently emphasized by the philosopher that the I of the I-Thou relation — that is, the person — does not exist in itself, independent of the Thou, that “a person makes his appearance by entering into relation with other persons,”²⁵ that “a person becomes conscious of himself as sharing in being, as co-existing, and thus as being.”²⁶

Buber’s above-cited description of gaining autonomous self-consciousness and identity may best be interpreted as a description, as Buber puts it, of the “fall” of the I of the I-Thou relation into the I of the I-It relation. Such an interpretation seems justified insofar as — in Buber’s opinion — “every *Thou* in our world must become an *It*,”²⁷ a bounded object, “except that [such states] do not always follow one another in clear succession.”²⁸

In order to understand the nature of this “fall” we must turn our attention to the second element in each of the primary words — the Thou and the It — and to the nature of the relation they correspond to.

Only the It belongs to the realm of experience, that is, to that which submits to conceptualization,²⁹ as a result of which the world is made manifest: “As experience the world belongs to the primary word *I-It*.”

²⁴ “Through the *Thou* a man becomes *I*. That which confronts him comes and disappears, relational events condense, then are scattered, and in the change consciousness of the unchanging partner, of the *I*, grows clear, and each time stronger. To be sure, it is still seen caught in the web of the relation with the *Thou*, as the increasingly distinguishable feature of that which reaches out to and yet is not the *Thou*. But it continually breaks through with more power, till a time comes when it bursts its bonds, and the *I* confronts itself for a moment, separated as though it were a *Thou*; as quickly to take possession of itself and from then on to enter into relations in consciousness of itself.” (IY 28–29).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

174 The primary word *I-Thou* establishes the world of relation.”³⁰ Experience, in Buber’s view, always has an objective character. It is an experience of *something*,³¹ while “something” is always a specific object constituted by conceptualizing, which, first of all, introduces a distance between the I and the It, and secondly, marks the boundaries between various Its. The I-Thou situation, on the other hand, is different: “When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds. When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no *thing*; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation.”³² Consequently, “the relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*. The memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole.”³³ When somebody (something) is treated as *Thou*, “he is not a thing among other things (...) *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* and *She*,” but incomparable and unbounded, he “fills the heavens,” so that “all else lives in his *light*.”³⁴

We should note that, on the one hand, Buber constantly relies on a vision of man as a *zōon logon echon* — a creature possessing speech. The world of the *It* is established through conceptualizing, and thus through discourse, language, and speech. In the same way, the I-Thou relation occurs through *speaking* the *Thou*. On the other hand, the two aforementioned ways of speaking are radically different. For speaking the *Thou* does not have a conceptual nature. Clearly the question arises: What is non-conceptual speaking? Is Buber talking about something that Marion will later call the language of praise or of adoration?³⁵ And if so, would Derrida’s reservations with respect to Marion’s concept not apply, namely, his warning that one can entirely avoid conceptuality (that is, discursive definition) only at the cost of bringing speech to the expression of an indefinite longing?³⁶

After all, the passages cited above suggest that Buber’s conception excludes the possibility of entering into multiple I-Thou relations, which would solve the problem of attaining a single identity in multiple relations (that is, *de facto* in the whole web of relations). Despite the all-encompassing character of the I-Thou relation, Buber nevertheless does not deny elsewhere that in his lifetime a man may enter into relations of this kind with multiple partners. However, in my view, this is possible because no

³⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

³¹ Ibid., p. 41.

³² Ibid., p. 4.

³³ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁵ Cf. J.-L. Marion, *In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of “Negative Theology”*, in: J. Caputo, M. Scanlon (eds.), *God, Gift, and Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 26–27.

³⁶ See J. Derrida, *Response to J.-L. Marion*, in: J. Caputo, M. Scanlon (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 42–46. For more on the subject of the debate between Marion and Derrida on this question, see P. Sikora, *Logos niepojęty*, Krakow 2010, pp. 136–148.

inter-human relation has a purely I-Thou character, but rather “falls” into the I-It category. In the case of finite beings this is an inevitable process; it is even indispensable in constituting the I-Thou relation, since “every real relation in the world rests on individuation,” and therefore “every real relation in the world is consummated in the interchange of actual and potential being; every isolated *Thou* is bound to enter the chrysalis state of the *It* in order to take wings anew.”³⁷ In my opinion, what matters here is that human beings might become partners in the I-Thou relation only based on previous experience of the I-It, that is, based on both empirical and ideational cognition. We must first meet somebody in the world and distinguish her/him from the background in order to enter into an (I-Thou) relation with her/him³⁸: “one can enter into relation only with being which has been set at a distance, more precisely, has become an independent opposite.”³⁹ On account of this too, the interhuman I-Thou relation is never perfect, or “full,” as Buber says. In every interhuman relation we are dealing with two differentiable elements, both conceptually and experientially; that is, with two persons, each possessing her/his own pre-existing identity independent of the relation existing between them, and thus remaining at a certain distance, making it possible for boundaries to be drawn between the partners. Moreover, both the I and the Thou of this “fallen” relation find themselves against the broader background of a world that includes many other “fallen” Thous, as well as many other Its.

To Buber’s somewhat metaphorical conception, I would propose the following interpretation: one difference between I-(conditioned)Thou and I-It relations consists in the fact that every Thou, in distinction from an It, is a “responding” subject. A central aspect of every I-Thou relation is conversation; these relations are realized within the space of the logos, discourse, language. These relations constitute the identity of the I because “personal” identity is at least co-defined by what the I thinks about itself, how it understands the history of its life, its place in the world, and how it can speak about itself (which is impossible without language).⁴⁰ However, language is something that everyone inherits; everyone is brought into it by those with whom they hold relations. Thus I-Thou relations are prior to I-It relations insofar as the world (being a particular system of diverse Its, a cosmos) is accessible to us only within a defined conceptual scheme or symbolic universe, a universe created, maintained and developed by a certain community, a system of I-(conditioned)Thou relations.⁴¹ Never-

³⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 99–100.

³⁸ Perhaps this does not concern the primal relation in which a child finds itself with its parents, especially with its mother, before it learns to speak. However, I think that, for lack of data, all theories on this subject remain pure speculation and are impossible to verify or test. For this reason I pass over such theories in my discussion.

³⁹ M. Buber, *Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy. Essays, Letters, and Dialogue*. New York 1999, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 113–168.

⁴¹ Cf. e.g. J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, 1994; H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge University Press 1981; H. Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense, and*

176 theless, I-It relations do not remain entirely meaningless to the identity of the subject (I), because the bonds between the conceptual scheme and the world are two-sided: the conceptual scheme defines what is manifest (and accessible) to us as the world, but, on the other hand, extralinguistic reality and relations (interaction) with it affect the form taken by the conceptual schemes we apply.⁴²

In this world of our experience we recognize certain “beings” as similar to ourselves — subjects willing and coming to know — that is, as “responding” beings, who co-create the language and the systems of categories in which we then understand ourselves, them, and the whole world. In this sense, every I-(conditioned)Thou relation demands of each partner “acts of response” to a mutual “addressing” (initiation of the relation). Such acts of response, which preserve an intellectual and conceptual aspect, are necessary:

Spirit in its human manifestation is a response of man to his *Thou*. Man speaks with many tongues, tongues of language, of art, of action; but the spirit is one, the response to the *Thou* which appears and addresses him out of the mystery.⁴³

At the same time, however, all acts of response contaminate the I-Thou relation, because they turn its partners into elements conditioned by discourse or the logos, in the space of which the relation develops and plays out, thus objectifying both parts (the I and the Thou). Consequently the ideal I-Thou relation must move by beyond all discourse:

The stronger the response the more strongly does it bind up the *Thou* and banish it to be an object. Only silence before the *Thou* — silence of *all* tongues, silent patience in the undivided word that precedes the formed and the vocal response — leaves the *Thou* free, and permits man to take his stand with it in the reserve where the spirit is not manifest, but *is*. Every response binds up the *Thou* in the world of *It*.⁴⁴

The I-Thou relation may be, in Buber’s opinion, pure, perfect, and full only when the Thou is shorn of all aspects of an It, when it therefore constitutes the pure and absolute Thou. According to Buber, this Thou — the eternal Thou — is precisely God. In this case, however, no adequate “response” is possible, nor is there any linguistic or conceptual apprehension that would precisely differentiate this relation from the whole of the subject’s existence, and thus the partners of the relation from each other. The word Thou in this relation is pre-linguistic and is therefore — as Derrida would probably accept with some satisfaction — more an unarticulated expression of an indefinite longing, a striving without a defined aim.

the Senses. An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind, Journal of Philosophy, 91, 1994, pp. 445–517; P. Sikora, *Słowa i zbawienie* [Words and Salvation], Krakow 2004, pp. 102–148.

⁴² More on this subject in P. Sikora, *Słowa i zbawienie...*, op. cit., pp. 102–148, 167–211.

⁴³ Buber, *I and Thou*, op. cit., p. 39.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

Here we recognize the radical otherness of the relation to the eternal, absolute Thou, called God, when compared with all other I-Thou relations. Thus, Buber observes that “only in relation with God are unconditioned exclusiveness and unconditioned inclusiveness one.”⁴⁵ The subject finds itself in a relation to the absolute Thou, not apart from, but through all other non-absolute I-Thou relations,⁴⁶ so that “every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*.”⁴⁷ All other I-Thou relations may find their fulfillment only when the subject establishes through them a relation toward, and addresses himself to, “the true *Thou* of his life, which cannot be limited by another *Thou*, and to which he stands in a relation that gathers up and includes all others.”⁴⁸ But what does it mean that through all its relations with conditioned subjects the I is in a relation with (the linguistically undefinable) absolute Thou, and that only through it do conditioned relations find their fulfillment?

The statements above may, I believe, be understood as follows: the identity of the subject constituted through the fabric of I-(conditioned) Thou relations is “incomplete” and in each situation the subject experiences “the disappointment of the change to *It*,”⁴⁹ that is, the disappointment of the conditioned nature of the situation. Every state of the subject, and of the world, is at the same time, however, open to development, “every relational event is a stage that affords him a glimpse into the consummating event.”⁵⁰ That which is conditioned exists within a certain broader space, against the background of an apparently unlimited horizon, and thus it develops precisely through reference to this horizon. This reference may be called the relation of the I (constituted as a place in a weave of relations with conditioned Thous) and the absolute Thou.

A consequence of this apprehension of the relation with the absolute Thou is a specific conception of revelation and the encounter with God. God does not address man in the style of “something happening solely alongside or above the everyday,” since “God’s speech to men penetrates what happens in the life of each one of us, and all that happens in the world around us.”⁵¹ Thus revelation cannot be understood as an element of human experience, as words like human words, heard in a community. Revelation is rather the manifestation of the possibility for unlimited development of the world, that is, of the I and all the relations in which it exists.

Similarly, the correct response of man cannot consist in his addressing himself “directly” to God, since “in such a reflexion, [man] is no longer confronted by a *Thou*, he can do nothing but establish an *It*-God in the realm of things, believe that he knows God as of an *It*, and so speak

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 80.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 136.

178 about Him. Just as the ‘self’-seeking man, instead of directly living something or other, a perception or an affectation, reflects about his perspective or reflective *I*, and thereby misses the truth of the event, so the man who seeks God (though for the rest he gets on very well with the self-seeker in the one soul), instead of allowing the gift to work itself out, reflects about the Giver — and misses both.”⁵² The correct response of man consists in conscious striving, in conscious development, in “fulfilling his mission,”⁵³ in realizing all his life aims with the consciousness that “this finding is not the end, but only the eternal middle, of the way.”⁵⁴

In contrast with all other I-Thou relations, in the relation with the absolute Thou there is therefore no previous distancing and the absolute Thou never becomes an “independent Opposite.” Buber is therefore inconsistent when he states that “the relation with man is the real simile of the relation with God; in it true address receives true response.” For the explanation that immediately follows — “except that in God’s response everything, the universe, is made manifest as language”⁵⁵ — forces us to doubt the correctness of the first thesis. Every interhuman relation (to a human Thou) assumes distance, the possibility of response, facing “directly” towards the partner, the differentiation of his or her “voice” from my address and my response. All of this constitutes “being opposite.” In the I-(absolute)Thou relation one cannot differentiate the voice of the partner from the whole of the subject’s life, face the Thou directly, or give a “distinct” response, and thus there is no distance here. The I-(absolute)Thou relation is not one of the I-Thou relations in which the subject lives, yet it occurs precisely in these relations.

Therefore, we find that the I-(Eternal/absolute)Thou relation is radically different from all other I-Thou relations. The difference is, in my opinion, significant enough that we might acknowledge the former as a relation *sui generis*. In Buber’s terms, the word “I-(Absolute)Thou” is the third primary word of man, alongside I-It and I-Thou. This is not exactly correct, however, since the I-(Eternal)Thou is *sui generis*, insofar as it is a non-word, a non-response, a non-relation. As such, it falls outside both the opposition of the words I-It and I-Thou and the opposition of the relational (dialogical) and identity-based (immanentist) apprehensions of the human relation to the divine. When Buber writes: “God comprises, but is not, the universe. So, too, God comprises, but is not, my Self,”⁵⁶ since “in the perfect relation my *Thou* comprehends but is not my Self,”⁵⁷ he is not entirely consistent in his thinking. In light of what I have presented above, the phrase “but is not my self” is doubtful. It sets a certain boundary to the Absolute You, which ultimately, Buber admits, “by its nature it cannot be established in measure and bounds, not even in

⁵² Ibid., pp. 115–116.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 116.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

the measure of the immeasurable, or the bounds of boundless being.”⁵⁸ It would be much more appropriate to state that God, while encompassing the self, is neither exhausted by it nor enclosed within it. From the point of view of the subject, however, such a statement marks a radical change: it does not force the subject to differentiate God from himself, it only forbids identifying any current state with the ultimate aim. The proper relation to the Absolute is identified with a functioning in the world that is a ceaseless “growth,” a perfecting of the subject.

Precisely this aspect of ceaseless growth alone, this going beyond the current state of the “I,” justifies this use of the I-(absolute)Thou. For these grammatical categories have their own everyday meaning only in oppositions, as elements of a broader structure of I-you-he/she/it-we-you-they. From this point of view, the term I-Thou is inadequate. Its meaning and value do not consist in pointing to a defined correlate of a relation into which the religious subject enters, but rather in suggesting a certain way of existing for the subject. Orienting oneself toward the Thou would have to be understood as a way of existing that is concentrated neither on oneself (I, ego, egocentrism) nor on anything defined, on anything about which it is possible to say something (it). Orienting oneself toward the Thou is an undefined striving beyond (the self that I currently am).

Moreover, since the I only has meaning within the weave of multiple I-Thous or I-Its, and since it therefore does not constitute an isolated monad but a place in the relational structure of the world, then what matters here is not the growth of the individual subject, but a certain orientation of the entire reality, which goes beyond its every current, finite state, and aims towards infinite fulfillment. In this sense, we might say that the I-(absolute)Thou relation is the relation of the whole, finite, conditioned reality to the absolute, infinite Thou. From this perspective, presenting the relation of the human person to divinity in terms of turning to one’s own interiority might be considered inadequate. However, this is not because God/divinity is external to the subject, but because the representation of the spiritual interior as something opposed to the subject’s external surroundings is inadequate.

Hence the conclusion follows that the use of metaphor according to which the ultimate reality must be sought “within,” as one’s own most profound reality, as well as the use of metaphor defining the Absolute as Thou, each have their valid boundaries of application. In making use of the first of these, we draw attention to the fact that there is in fact no distance between the life of the subject — what is for him or her most personal, most his or her own — and that which is the ultimate. In applying the second, we underline rather that the religious subject cannot identify the Absolute with any temporary or limited state of his or her own.

On the one hand, we must remember that, in defining his vision of the I-(absolute)Thou relation, Buber pits himself against the boundaries

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

180 of language. He attempts to speak (and in the third person, no less) about that which cannot even be addressed in the second person (if addressing is to be understood as articulated discourse) and in the face of which third-person discourse is entirely helpless. Hence the paradoxes and contradictions of Buber's conception. Neither of the two methods of representation can be treated as an adequate description of the religious attitude, much less of the ultimate horizon of reference for this attitude. Indeed, treating either one of them as such (and not just the "immanentist" method, as Buber would claim) can only spring from a "colossal illusion."⁵⁹

It is worth observing here that the I-(absolute)Thou relation, as it appears in the interpretation of Buber's thought presented here, is similar in character to ideas present in the Christian apophatic tradition, which emphasizes the complete absence of distance between man and God. As Meister Eckhart emphasizes: "Some simple folk fondly imagine they are going to see God as it were standing there and they here. Not so. God and I are one in knowing."⁶⁰ Similarly, the analyses of Buber himself indicate that an understanding of the primary religious attitude as an I-Thou relation apprehended in its resemblance to the interhuman relation must be associated with the reductive treatment of its second, divine element. The essential aspect of the interhuman relation is that the partners participating in it stand opposite each other. This "opposite," however, opens up for precisely the same reason for which the interhuman relation takes on an objective (i.e. falling into I-It) and limited character. Buber avoids the reduction of the Absolute — that is, he preserves the absolute character of the divine Thou — at the cost of depriving it of all the essential characteristics of that which among finite beings might be made manifest as "thou," that is, as something we might find ourselves opposite.

Therefore, taking into account Buber's concern for the preservation of the dialogical character of the fundamental religious attitude of man, as well as the point at which this dialogical method of representation breaks down, the following conclusion appears convincing: no Thou with whom one can stand *vis-à-vis* can possess an absolute character. The Absolute is, so to speak, too close to the religious man. However, this does not mean that it is closed inside his finite existence.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 93.

⁶⁰ Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer, London 1956, p. 163.