

# A Response to a Question, or: Reciprocity

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Translation of “Odpowiedź na pytanie czyli wzajemność,”  
in: *Filozofia dramatu* [The Philosophy of Drama],  
Éditions du dialogue, Paris 1990.  
Translated by Paweł Janowski.

A man appears before me and asks me a question. I do not know where he came from, and I do not know where he is going. But now he is waiting for an answer. When he poses his question, he evidently desires to have me participate in his affair. What kind of affair? That I do not know. I only know what is contained in the question. There is a moment of tension. Will I answer his question?

What are my options? I can choose to answer or not to answer; I can also provide a meaningless answer, an evasive answer or a false answer. Surely I do not have to answer: I can turn to stone and pretend not to hear the question. I cannot imagine any extrinsic force that could force me to respond. The relation between the question and the response is not a causal one. In a way, Gottfried Leibniz was right when he said that “monads are windowless.” If I respond, it will be only because I desire to. Yet, I will desire to answer.

98 How is it that I desire to answer? The “desire” results from the questioning. Before I was asked, there was no desire to answer. So what is the substance of this specific non-causal relationship between two persons, which makes it possible to ask questions and to obtain answers?

If we want to explain the possibility of answering, we must abandon ontological categories; and not just ontological categories, but logical and epistemological ones as well. Logic only probes the relation between question and answer once the answer is already prepared. It can then state whether the logical form of the answer corresponds to the logical form of the question. Logic, however, is at a loss when faced with the question as an event and the response as an event. The same goes for epistemology. One can investigate whether the state of things indicated by the answer fulfills the intention of the question, but cannot resolve the problem of why a person chooses to give any answer at all.

We call the relation which is created between the asker and the asked a dialogical one. However, providing a name does not mean capturing the essence of the problem. At the very most it means that the words in the question have been exchanged. Therefore I ask: What is the dialogical relation between two people based on?

Some time passes between the moment of the question and the moment of the answer. During this time, the tension increases. What will happen? This moment of tension sees the inception of a common dramatic motif which will connect the asked with the asker for an undefined period of time. The asker and the asked *take part in each other*. What does this mean? What does it mean if we say that the dramatic motif is mutual? How does it connect people? What is the manner of its existence? And moreover, where does it exist?

Through the question which has reached me, I, the Asked, know that that another person is present by me, but I also know that I am present by him. The word “by” can also mean before and next to. Yet this has to change. It is necessary that this change. The question forces me out of the state of being *by someone*, “next to someone,” or even *before someone*, and casts me into a new state — the state of being *for someone*. By answering the question (as long as I am actually answering the question that was posed) I start to be *for someone*. In other words, I take on responsibility. The essential meaning of the question is that it engenders a feeling of responsibility in the asked. How deep and how permanent this feeling is does not concern us at this time. The important aspect is its very essence. Responsibility is an ethical category. Therefore, if we wish to explain the genealogy of a response to a question, we must look to an ethical element. In other words, we must abandon the realms of ontology and logic in order to enter the realm of the metaphysics of the good. The metaphysics of good is, however, intimately linked to the metaphysics of evil. I suspect, therefore, that an ethical choice, a choice between good and evil, must lie at the root of any answer provided to a question. The responder provides an answer not just to the other, but also to himself, as a participant in a drama of good and evil.

What is a question?

It is a kind of petition. He who poses a question is petitioning for a response. Questions and answers are only possible where petitions are possible, i.e. in a specific type of world, a world of poverty. If there were no lack in the world, petitions would not exist, and no one would ask anyone for anything. Every question, either directly or indirectly, testifies to a lack.

The concept of poverty, well known in Plato's philosophy but later forsaken, is the fundamental dramatic category describing the situation of man, and even of God, in the drama of being. Its intention points to some pain or arch-pain, to some danger which threatens the Creature and from which even the Creator cannot free Himself completely if He only binds Himself with the Creature through participative love. What is the poverty of the world? Lévinas uses three symbols: the stranger, widow, and orphan. He writes:

The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbor, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself. His very epiphany consists in soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow, and the orphan.<sup>1</sup>

The question requires an approach. Yet this is not just a matter of physical proximity, but rather of the spiritual proximity which makes it possible for a person to be moved by the poverty which engenders the request and the question. Only then can the answer be a gift. However, according to Lévinas this is not like the gift given to a wretch or a pauper. The one who answers does not do so out of mercy, like a rich man throwing a coin to a beggar, but rather as a pupil who has perceived an opportunity for himself in the question. Lévinas writes:

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one "puts the things in question in giving") — this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as "You" in a dimension of height.<sup>2</sup>

The paths which take form here require insightful analysis. The issue of poverty emerges. Does every question emanate from poverty? For there are questions posed by philosophers, by inquisitors; there are the questions posed by God. Are they also somehow related to the questions of the strangers, widows, and orphans?

<sup>1</sup> E. Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, New York 1979, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

We have the questions of the philosophers, among them the question of Husserl's Transcendental Ego speaking with itself. We have the questions of the inquisitors who conduct their investigations to accuse and condemn others. We have the question of God addressed to an Adam in hiding. Isn't Lévinas's symbol inadequate? Should it not be expanded?

a) The philosopher's question. Can there be rational thought without externally formulated questions? This possibility was discussed in the myth of Gyges, which spoke of the owner of a magical ring that made him invisible to others while still allowing him to see them. Gyges embodied the dream of rulers: to see without being seen, to hear without being heard, to acquire knowledge without being recognized, to extract all knowledge from oneself through questions addressed to oneself.

The myth of Gyges found its philosophical expression in Husserl's theory of the Transcendental Ego. The Transcendental Ego emerges through a transcendental reduction of the world and others. As a result of this reduction the world and the people in it become mere phenomena: phenomena of the world, phenomena of people. The potential questions the world and others pose to the Transcendental Ego are only phenomena of questions. They are not events. They do not produce an obligation. The prerogative of the question passes to the same Ego which can also give the answer. In this way the Transcendental Ego becomes the absolute source of any possible question and of all possible answers. Its consciousness develops in internal dialogue with itself. And yet it can separate into a questioning part and a part being questioned without losing its internal identity.

Does this mean that all the miseries of the world have become foreign to It? That they, too, are only phenomena of misery? Does the Ego's response not arise from any obligation? Is Its conversation with Itself only a pleasant frolic through the possibilities of thought?

In Husserl's philosophy we must distinguish the fundamental question from the secondary ones, and consequently, the fundamental response from secondary responses. What is fundamental in this philosophy is not the question of the Transcendental Ego, but the questions which arise from the present historical moment, from the crisis of European sciences. Through the crisis of European sciences, truth itself has become endangered. Wherever truth is endangered, reason, science, rationality, and man himself, as a rational being, are endangered. Husserl's philosophy originated as a response to that crisis. Thus, the entire theory of the Transcendental Ego presents itself not as the theory of a questioning Ego, but rather as the theory of an Ego responding to questions previously posed by historical events. Human poverty is present in this theory only indirectly, as the factor which engenders the question, as a crisis.

The misery of Husserl's asker is the fall of truth. The experience of this misery is what gives force to Husserl's philosophy. This force is more

of a moral than a strictly theoretical force. Theory is a response; moral- 101  
ity is a question. Though we can debate the correctness of the answer, we  
must recognize the ethos of this philosophical question. There is a fun-  
damental difference between Gyges and the Transcendental Ego: while  
the former is concerned with power, the latter cares about truth. However,  
we should also admit that a similar basis of pain can be discerned in every  
philosophy. This is because every philosophy develops out of a solicitude  
for the truth which is endangered by the drama of history. In this regard,  
the philosopher is like the stranger who must first find his bearings and  
help others to do the same before he can settle down in this world.

I admit that the questions and answers formulated by the philoso-  
phers do not necessarily bear explicit signs of human misery. But the basic  
questions from which philosophy begins are certainly cries of pain. We  
should add, however, that they are simultaneously cries of pain and choices  
of the path which carries the answer. Asking “Where is the truth?” from  
the depths of misery, the philosopher makes a choice; though many val-  
ues are threatened through the misery of the world, he sees the threat of  
untruth as the most dangerous, and the one which must be dealt with first.  
Only the fall of truth — lies, illusions, falsehood — is capable of spark-  
ing the absolute obligation to think from which every philosophy is born.

b) The inquisitor’s question. The questions of the inquisitors form  
a part of a greater whole, a larger text: a part of the dialogue of interro-  
gation. The dialogue of interrogation carries its own specific dramatic  
assumptions. Essentially, it is an attack of man on man, derision, accusal,  
abuse, leading into prepared traps, coercion into an admission of one’s  
guilt. The question is an essential component of this dialogue. The culmi-  
nating moment of the interrogation is when the person being asked must  
give an answer: yes or no. But does he really have to answer?

What is the relation of the inquisitor’s questions to the questions of  
the widow, stranger, or orphan? Is the inquisitor one of them? Does he,  
too, come forth from the horizon of poverty? Would it not be more correct  
to say that he creates poverty?

Appearances notwithstanding, the inquisitor’s power over other  
men consists in always attempting to act in the name of some misery.  
He accuses in the name of misery; derides in the name of misery; scorns  
in the name of misery and asks his questions in the name of misery.  
The inquisitor’s question has two aims. The first is to bring the ques-  
tioned out of his silence and only the second is to confess his guilt. What  
must be done to break the silence of the one being questioned? One must  
instill in him the conviction that here and now he has an obligation to  
speak, to answer. He must not be deaf to a request. He must not be blind  
to misfortune. It is for this reason that the inquisitor must present him-  
self as a spokesman for misery and the one being questioned must be  
brought to see himself as saving something or someone by responding to  
the question. Note that here the substance of the response does not matter  
yet. What is important is the act itself. The conversation itself is important.

102 It matters that the seed of obligation toward the inquisitor is sown, even if this seed is tiny, like the mustard seed. A response from the interrogated is the first sign that the inquisitor has become something more than a piece of wood in his eyes. Once conversation begins, the situation changes. The interrogated extends his hand to the interrogator.

It is significant that the accused tend to lie rather than to keep silent. It is easier to speak an untruth than not to speak at all. The obligation to speak is stronger than the obligation to speak the truth. Its source is the good. The obligation to tell the truth is its derivative.

It would be absurd to say that the inquisitor is an incarnation of human misery, of one of the types mentioned by Lévinas. Nonetheless, he must present himself to the interrogated as a spokesman for their misery. Only thus can he instill the desire and obligation to respond. If he does not succeed, he himself may be placed on the stand and brought to account for his designs. The dialogue of interrogation has a sort of double essence. It essentially places both parties before a choice — a choice between culpability for keeping silent and for speaking, for speaking the truth and for speaking falsely, for punishment and for merit; in a word, a choice between good and evil.

c) God's question. God asks His question only after man's fall. The question is: "Where are you?" It sounds like a cry of longing. Adam cast God into the only "misery" which can possibly touch an all-powerful and perfect Being: the misery of rejected love. He who chose has been rejected. Yet, despite the rejection, He has not ceased to love. Love longs for a loved one and searches for him. Not finding the loved one nearby, it cries "Where are you?" If the "misery" of the loving God did not exist, there would be no question, no pleading, no petition. It is because God's cry is a petition that obligation is born in Adam's soul, to break his silence and to give a response. But Adam does not respond. He flees, hides, covers himself. Adam's second fault consists in this, as does his new, hitherto unknown fear — a fear of answering God, of responsibility for God beside him, in the world. The image of the loving God's "misery" will reoccur in the Bible. The Song of Songs will speak of it, and it will take a more concrete form in the life and death of Christ.

The Christian religion of dialogue between man and God has been made possible because God Himself has become like a stranger, orphan and widow. Religion no longer consists in a lofty fascination which elevates man toward heaven, nor in rational speculation about the Supreme Being, but rather in the awareness of an obligation to respond which the person who is asked and called experience toward the One asking and calling.

## Presence

Being asked a questions leaves its mark on me: I know that a response must be given. This response must be given here and now. This *here and*



now means that the one who asked me the question is *present*. He will remain by me until he receives an answer. There befalls a moment of silence, quietude, pervaded by a sense of expectation — of *his* expectation of my response. Every moment of delay is a moment of *my* delay in answering him. In this way a special time, a *dialogical time*, is established between myself and the other, and in it his presentness. The asker exists in the present. This presence is dialogical. The dialogical presence is in the here and now, in which the asker awaits a response that the asked has not yet given. The other remains present by me for the duration of the silence between the question and the response. Thus, this dialogical time is not the same as Husserl's interior awareness of time, a time described by the triple aspects of retention, protention, and the immediate presence, for which the other's question and my response are of no importance, a time with neither the presence nor the absence of the other. Dialogical time is a time of dramatic tension. Therein, retention is the immediate awareness of the weight of the question which was just posed, protention is the movement toward a response which takes place in a spirit full of expectation, and the immediate present is *a presence* — my presence for the other and his presence for me. And precisely because the other is present, I am capable of knowing that an answer must be given. The immediate future is revealed to me as a *moment for* the other. This moment must entail a donation. A "yes" or "no." It is a secondary matter whether this donation must be made to dispose of the other, for example an inquisitor, or to keep him by our side, for example a brother or God.

## The Asker

The presence of the other — the one who in asking petitions and in petitioning asks — is the presence of poverty. Of itself poverty demands charity. Should, then, the answer to the question be an act of charity? Should it be like alms thrown in passing to a beggar? We know from Lévinas's text above that this is not so. But what does this mean more specifically?

In all of the symbols of poverty Lévinas discovers the mark of the master. The stranger, widow, and orphan are not just manifestations of human misery, but also marks of human greatness. From them truth and wisdom flow to the one being asked. The true master's wisdom has its roots in an experience of poverty, in an awareness of tragedy. Such a master truly teaches, not in making statements and forcing others to memorize them, but rather in asking questions and waiting for the respondent to find the answer in himself. True tutelage is a question. To be a master does not consist in providing many answers, but in being capable of asking the fundamental and key questions. We are familiar with this characteristic of great masters in the persons of Socrates and St. Augustine.

Therefore, the role of the one who asks the question is a privileged one. By asking he is in a superior position to the one being asked.

104 He demands an answer, as he is capable of leading the respondent on the path of truth. His is a stronger position. Inquisitors are keenly aware of this! Thus to walk toward the truth means, above all, to intently listen to the questions of others.

It should, however, be noted that for the one asked the asker presents an ambivalent value. The master asks and in so doing he promises truth. Yet, at the same time the asked is knocked out of his *status quo*. The master calls into question. To call into question means to dispute, but with a promise. The master disputes, forces the respondent out of his solitude, out of his narrow-minded fascination with the world, out of his habits, out of his holy complacency. This is a painful experience. Ultimately every master is an inquisitor to some degree. To answer, one must conquer oneself. And even before: one must conquer oneself to even hear at all. To answer, one must leave oneself. But what will I receive in return? How far must I venture? To what extent leave myself? I do not know. This is why I fear those who ask, despite the promises they offer.

## The Respondent

I answer the question. I answer. Why do I answer? What is my responding I? What do I think of myself; what *can* I think of myself as the one who responds?

I answer because the question was a petition and a summons, and a petition and a summons constituted ethical responsibility. I respond so as not to kill. To keep silent would be to commit a crime against the asker's face. My silence would be an act of disdain, of metaphysical disdain against which no argument can be made, by either physics or ontology. One *must provide* an answer. It does not matter who poses the question: the philosopher, the passer-by, the inquisitor. Only the face remains. The totality of human misery has become focused in this face with which I dialogue. It is this which petitions, this which teaches.

What do I, the responder, know about myself? I know one thing: by answering, that is, by responding to the asker's petition, I already know what it means to be good. I know this from direct experience. But not in the sense that I have discovered this suddenly: I am so good! This would be pride and stupidity. Rather in this sense: I know what it means to be good here and now. I give what I have been asked for. This is good. But I give so that they will go away and stop asking. I only give this much. Nothing more. The rest I keep for myself. This is bad. I respond and in so doing I prove that I am responsible. But I would like to terminate my responsibility already, leave and not come back again. I save the other. But I also save myself from him. I give the word in order to keep myself. I keep myself by giving the word. Being good means not being good, being bad, at the same time. One always remains within the boundaries of the finite. The answer and the question are also two manifestations of the human



## Reciprocity

Let us recall the path we have traveled so far: the question is a petition. The philosopher's question, the inquisitor's question, God's question, is a petition in which the poverty of finite existence is expressed. Through it we know that the other is present; the other is a master. I, the one who answers, know what it means to be good here and now, in this world. The dialogical bond implies responsibility.

Where does this analysis lead? To a better understanding of what is meant by *reciprocity*. We will return to this matter, but for now let us give an initial description of what it means.

There is a chasm between you and me. We are windowless monads. What occurs in you is not a result of my actions, and what occurs in me is not a result of yours. We are bound by no known causal relations. Nor is there a logical relation between what we think. Our experiences are different. Each of us experiences the world in his own way. I do not even know if what you call yellow is the same as what I describe with this word. The metaphor of the windowless monad is no exaggeration.

And yet, you ask me a question, and I answer it. This is astonishing. A great philosophy, the philosophy of dialogue, is born precisely from this astonishment. We converse. This means that you call me into question, and despite that, I confirm you in your act of calling me into question. It also means that through the act of questioning you have also called yourself into question in order to confirm me in what I will tell you; you lean forward and await my response. In answering your question, I confirm myself. For in the end, it is *I* who answer. In receiving my answer, you confirm me — me, whom you previously called into question — and simultaneously you confirm yourself, whom you also called into question when you approached me. After the question and the response — more generally, after the dialogue — we are no longer the same as we were. We are indebted to each other for something. We can accuse ourselves of something.

What is reciprocity?

Reciprocity means that we are who we are because of each other. This *because of* means that we can accuse each other or be grateful to each other.

Nothing expresses structure better than reciprocity.

An analysis of the situation between the question and the answer sheds new light on the meaning of the words I-Thou. Ferdinand Ebner wrote, “Because I and Thou exist exclusively in reciprocal reference to each other, just as there is no I absolutely deprived of Thou, one cannot imagine Thou deprived of I. It is through the word that not just existence, but above all the relation between one and the other is objectively constituted, or ‘instituted’.”<sup>3</sup> Ebner expresses views typical of the philosophy of dialogue. There is not and cannot be an I without a Thou and a Thou without an I. What does this impossibility mean? Is the concept of I related to the concept of you as the concept of “bigger” is related to the concept of “smaller”? But this would mean that these concepts have a relational meaning which does not touch the essence of what they signify. Meanwhile, every time I say “I,” I am aware that I am extolling that which is absolutely mine, which is me. If, however, they are not supposed to be relational, how can we say that one is impossible without the other?

An explicitly or implicitly but nevertheless clearly assumed ontological viewpoint burdens the most well-known philosophical conceptions of the I. Consequently, ontological concepts are used to describe it. Two concepts present themselves: the subject and the totality. Philosophies tending toward idealism tend to identify the I with the subject, which then necessarily leads to identifying the world with the object. The relation between the I and the not-I is reduced to a relation between subject and object. Philosophies leaning toward positivism seek the structure of *totality* in it — a totality which embraces *contents* from sensations, experience, impressions, etc. as its component parts. But neither in the first nor the second case is the I related to a Thou, although this does not mean that it is accorded the quality of an independent being. As a subject, the I is relative to an object, as the whole is to one of its parts. The concept of the I-Thou proposed by Ebner and other proponents of the philosophy of dialogue breaks the illusions which come from an exploration of ontological concepts outside of ontology’s proper realm and returns the proper space of dialogue to the meaning of both words. But does it fully defend their specific nature? Is not saying that their meaning is *relational* (Ebner, Buber) simply replacing one ontological form by another?

But here we face a new difficulty. The word “I” forces us to think about the concrete, the unique, the unrepeatable. There is not, never was and never will be a second such I in the whole world. Yet at the same time, I enters under the general concept of *We*. If something is radically unique and unrepeatable, how can it be subject to a general structure? If indeed it is subject to it, then it bears a mark of repeatability.

Let us go back to the situation of the question and the response. What is the I being asked and what is the Thou that is asking?

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<sup>3</sup> F. Ebner, *Das Wort und die geistigen Realitäten*, Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 18.

To answer this question, we must shift our reflections from the ontological level to the axiological level, from being and its forms to values. The concept of *I* has many meanings. Among the many meanings of *I*, some are fundamental and some are derived. The most fundamental is the meaning which indicates a value — the axiological-*I*. The concept of the *axiological-I* touches the very essence of egotistic experience. These experiences are marked by the fact that they can be described with the word *mine*. For all that is *mine* — my feelings, my experiences, my thoughts, my decisions — points to the *I*. But the *I* is not identical to what is *its own*; rather, the *I* transcends all that, but not like the substance transcends its accidents, nor like the thing-in-itself transcends its phenomena, but rather like how in a work of art the special value of the masterpiece transcends the qualities (the matter) on which it is based, or like the logic of a melody transcends the sounds of the instruments through which it is created. The axiological-*I* can be compared to a special *force of attraction* which gathers around itself all the content which, unable to be *no one's*, is precisely mine. However, this force is different from the force of feeling or experience — it is the force of that which is important, the very force of “importance.” The axiological-*I* is, because the *important* is. But it is not *important* (*does not have its weight, its meaning*) because it is. In this sense it goes beyond ontology.

Only reflecting on the axiological level can we agree with the following statement by Mosés, who was evoking Rosenzweig’s thought:

God can only say *I* to the extent that man says *thou* to him, that is, to the extent man submits his *I* to an exteriority that infuses him. But the *I* of man only constitutes itself if it has first been spoken to as a *thou*. This does not mean, tritely, that the *I* can only be defined in relation with that which it is not, but rather that the *I* is *I* only because more primordially it is a *thou* for someone else. The *I* is the response called for by the question “Where art thou?”<sup>4</sup>

The question “Where are you?” is full of meaning. It is among the fundamental questions which one man can ask another. Other questions are only possible after, when the asker already knows the answer to this first question. Only then can he ask for directions, for the time, for one’s name. When I ask for directions, I know where the asked person is. I do not know this when I ask “Where are you?”. I do not know *his level, his extent, his path*. I cannot say what is important to him. I do not know if I am important to him, if we are on the same wavelength, if we can hear each other. Therefore the question “Where are you?” has the power to awaken. Through this question sleep passes away, an awakened state begins, and people *are made apparent to each other*.

Thus Rosenzweig writes:

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<sup>4</sup> S. Mosés, *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. C. Tihanyi, Wayne State University Press 1992, p.108.

“Where art Thou?” This is none other than the quest for the Thou, and for the present only for the Where of it, not for its nature, for this is at this moment still far out of sight. Where is there a Thou altogether? This inquiry for the Thou is the only thing that is already known about it. But the question already suffices for the I to discover itself. By the very act of asking for the Thou, by the Where of this question, which testifies to its belief in the existence of the Thou even without the Thou’s coming into its purview, the I addresses and expresses itself as I. The I discovers itself at the moment when it asserts the existence of the Thou by inquiring into its Where.<sup>5</sup>

So what, ultimately, is the I being asked and the Thou which asks?

## A Bridge over an Abyss

In a sense, we are windowless monads. I do not know what is happening in You and You do not know what is happening in me. Nevertheless, I know that You — You for me — are an I for yourself and likewise that I — I who am an I for myself — am a You for you. This knowledge is an abutment on which the bridge between you and I can be built.

The key word here is *for*. Something is something *for* someone. Something has a particular meaning for someone, a particular significance, a particular value. This signifies — to repeat once more — that in order to attain the true essence of I and Thou, we must place ourselves firmly on the level of axiological reflection on which we ask not about being, but about values. The telling characteristic of values is that they “have importance,” or *Geltung* as the Germans call it. What does this mean? It means that they can or even should be recognized by others as masterpieces of sorts. The greater the breadth of possible recognition, the greater the value and, conversely, the greater the value the greater the scope of importance. When I say “I,” I am a value for myself. When I hear that someone calls me You, I know that I am “important” to him, and then he also becomes important to me. When I say “He,” I know that someone is important for me, but I am not important for him. Which does not at all mean that “He” is just an object, as Buber suggests. When I say “We,” I know that we are important for each other: I for all of you and all of you for me. When I say “You [plural]” — I know that you are important for me and I for you. When I say “They,” I know that I am not important for them, even though they are important for me.

Importance is what connects the concrete to the universal. The I does not cease to be concrete when it takes on a greater breadth of importance, just as every work of art does not cease to be concrete even though so many admire it. It has a universal value: it can and should be recog-

<sup>5</sup> F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. W. Hallo, University of Notre Dame Press, London 1985, p. 175.

nized in its value always and by all. The I is an axiological-I in the most radical sense of the word. As such, it is addressed by questions, and it is the one who provides the answer. 109

The generality, *respective* “universality,” of the I is not the generality of an abstract concept which encompasses the individual referents. This generality is essentially based on the universal claim of value to be recognized, and with a recognition which is properly realized in dialogue. However, we should remember that this conversation and this recognition would not come to be were it not for those who converse with each other, who approach each other after leaving the profundity of the horizon of good and evil. Only because of those horizons can the I *exist* as an axiological-I, an I-value.

## Carry the Burden and Be Burden

The axiological level of reflection (and the agathological level, to an even greater extent) opens yet another possibility before us — to understand the concepts of *being a burden for someone* and *having someone as a burden*. A deep meaning is hidden in this poetic expression.

You asked me a question. Let’s assume you were just asking for directions. You want to get to a nearby village and you ask, “Which way?” Your question has knocked me out of my train of thought. I had to rouse myself and see the world through your eyes, take your affair upon myself, put myself in your place; for a moment I had to practically become you. But if we consider it closely, to even be able to ask me the question, you had to do the same thing: leave your inner world, put yourself in my place, as if you were me and not yourself. The windowless monads had to commence a conversation. It is here that we touch an aspect which solicits admiration. There is no I without Thou, nor a Thou without I. This does not only mean that I and Thou reflect each other like mirrors on opposite banks of a river; it also means that You are in me and that I am in You, because we carry each other like our *burdens*. You are in me. I am in You. You are part of the history of my I, and I am part of the history of your You. Despite this permeation, we are ourselves. Ourselves through and through. Indelibly ourselves. We are ourselves when you are a burden and when you are my liberation, because in truth, that is what you are as well. When I met you, in a way I felt liberated. From what? From whom? Perhaps from my own thoughts, perhaps from some other I which followed me like a shadow? This experience of burden/lightness is very important. Yet, it is not the form which enslaves the matter, the form of the Thou which enslaves the matter of the I. And it is not the matter which frees itself of the form, the matter of the I which frees itself of the form of the Thou. This ontological vocabulary is improper here. Everything here constitutes a value. There is the value of the burden and the value of the lightness. As

110 a value, you can be one or the other for me. And I for you. We can elevate each other or bring each other down.

We are who we are through each other. And through each other we are where we are. This is how we play out our drama, for better or for worse.