

# Buber and Buberism

## A Critical Evaluation



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Writing of Buber's *Eclipse of God*, Reinhold Niebuhr observed that it "promises to give the word 'existential' a new category of meaning" and that "it is religious existentialism at its very best." Whether Buber's philosophy is "religious existentialism at its very best" will be disputed by the admirers of other religious existentialists, but there can be no doubt that, along with Tillich and Bultmann, Buber has been the most influential religious existentialist of our time. He is very much in the same tradition as Pascal and Kierkegaard, emphasizing the uselessness of rational arguments for the existence of God and the crucial importance of commitment and of belief "without holding back or reservation."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more than anybody else, he is responsible for the view that philosophical defenders of theism have misconceived God by making him into a thing or object and have in this way paved the way for the objections of unbelievers which are entirely justified when directed at the God of the philosophers. The true God is a *person* or a "Thou" and not an object and against this position the skeptical objections have no force. Prior to the appearance of Buber's philosophy, thoughtful men, according to Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, had become doubters because they "could not find words in which to express" their belief in God. Thanks to Buber, however, a thoughtful man can once again "accept his religious faith as an integral part of his being" since he "knows that his meetings with the Eternal Thou are the most valuable and trustworthy he can have for determining his life's direction."<sup>2</sup> Buber's influence, especially the idea that God is not an object whose existence is known by inference but a Thou met in a personal encounter, has not by any means been confined to Jewish believers, but has on the contrary shaped the thought of many outstanding Protestants, including for example the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, and the English theologians, John Bail-

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\* I wish to thank my friend, Donald Levy, for offering valuable criticism and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> *The Eclipse of God*, from now on abbreviated as *EG*, New York, Harper & Row, 1952, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> *A New Jewish Theology in the Making*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1968, pp. 130-131.

lie and H. H. Farmer.<sup>3</sup> Buber himself was not a systematic writer and in the following discussion we shall take into account not only his own writings but also the publications of various of his disciples, especially those who have some familiarity with philosophical developments in the Anglo-Saxon world.

In this lecture I shall deal with three of the most basic of Buber's theories—(1) his distinction between the I-it and I-thou relations on the human scene, (2) his views about the nature of God and the way in which He becomes known to human beings and (3) the doctrine of the eclipse of God developed late in Buber's career and the uses to which it has been put by some of his followers in their attempts to answer the objections of unbelievers. I shall offer a few critical comments as I proceed with my exposition of Buber's doctrines, but I shall reserve most of my criticisms for a final section. Perhaps I should say at the outset that while much (though far from all) of what Buber has to say about I-thou relations between human beings seems to me both true and important, I find his theology exceedingly confused and on the whole inferior to that of his rationalistic predecessors.

## I-It and I-Thou

It is not difficult to explain what Buber means by the I-It relationship. Another person is an "It" to me if I regard him or her simply as a *means* to the achievement of one or other of my goals. If I take a taxi in order to get to a certain place, the cab driver is an It to me—his function is the same as that of a car I might be driving in order to get to my destination. If I buy a ticket to a play, the man selling the ticket is similarly an "It" and the same is true of all people with whom my relations are purely commercial or pragmatic. However, if I am not primarily guided by self-interest I may yet treat another human being as nothing more than an It. Thus a psychologist or physiologist who is observing human beings in order to verify a hypothesis is treating his subjects as "Its" even if his devotion to research is free from any narrow selfish motives.

It is not so easy to say what Buber means by the I-Thou relationship. Buber's descriptions of it are often epigrammatic

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of Buber's influence on Christian theologians see Chapter 27 of Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber—The Life of Dialogue*, New York, Harper & Row, 1960.

and excessively cryptic. However, there is no doubt in my mind that he is referring to something very real; and on the basis of my own experiences and observations, Buber's remarks, and the rather clearer and less rhetorical accounts of certain of his disciples, I have, I believe, obtained a fair idea of the nature of the I-Thou encounter. It may happen between friends, between lovers, between a musician and in general a performer and his audience,<sup>4</sup> between a teacher and his students, and not least significantly between a therapist and his patient. It may happen between enemies when all of a sudden they recognize each other's humanity. It may happen "between two men sitting beside one another in any kind of solitude of the world" when suddenly their reserve is released in "one of the hours which succeed in bursting asunder the seven iron bands about our heart."<sup>5</sup> It may happen fleetingly when "a dog has looked at you and you answer for its glance" or when "a child has clutched your hand and you answer for its touch,"<sup>6</sup> when "you catch the glance of an old newspaper vender or exchange a smile with a chimney-sweeper."<sup>7</sup> As I understand him, Buber does not contend that we have full-fledged I-Thou relationships in all these cases, but all of them are sufficiently different from the I-It to be classified as "real dialogue."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it would be helpful, following the example of Gilbert Ryle's distinction between scientific laws and law-like propositions, to distinguish between I-Thou relationships and I-Thou-like relations. The former would possess all of certain characteristics to be discussed in a moment, while the latter possess only some of them or all of them but not in the highest degree. Buber has himself explained in some detail why the relations between a teacher and his student and between a psychiatrist and his patient cannot be full I-Thou relations,<sup>9</sup> and I am sure that he would, for reasons to be explained, not allow the meeting between a

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that in a lecture entitled "The Musician and His Audience" the great German conductor, Wilhelm Furtwängler, speaks of the I-Thou relation between the artist and the "living community" to whom he addresses himself (*Der Musiker und sein Publikum*, Zurich, Atlantis Verlag, 1955, pp. 12ff).

<sup>5</sup> *Between Man and Man*, from now on abbreviated as *BMM*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1965, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See especially *I and Thou*, from now on abbreviated as *IT*, 2nd edition, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, pp. 131ff and *BMM*, pp. 96-103.

musician and his audience to be a complete I-Thou relation either.

#### DIRECTNESS

What are the characteristics that constitute the I-Thou relationship? The first and perhaps the most basic is what Buber calls "directness."

*"The relation to the Thou is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou. . . . The Thou meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. . . . All real living is meeting. . . ."*<sup>10</sup>

By "directness" Buber means much the same as what we mean when we say that there is rapport or contact between people or, more colloquially, that things are clicking between them. Some human beings are so rigid, so utterly ruled by inhibitions or defenses, that they never establish any genuine rapport with other human beings, not even their own children if they have any. However, most human beings, including many who are generally very reserved and formal, do at least on occasions loosen up sufficiently to establish the kind of contact with other human beings that Buber had in mind. To all of them it would be readily intelligible what Buber means by directness and many of them will agree with him that "all real living is meeting," that a life devoid of any direct contacts with other human beings is hardly worth living.<sup>11</sup> It should perhaps be mentioned in passing that the word "directness" is quite generally used in certain contexts in Buber's sense or a sense closely akin to his. Thus a music critic may comment about a vocal recital that although the singer's voice was beautiful and her technique impeccable, the performance was less than satisfying because of a lack of directness; and this may be explained as due to her self-consciousness and her excessive concern for vocal effects. About another singer he may observe that although her voice is well past her prime, her incomparable capacity for directly

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<sup>10</sup> *IT*, p. 11, Buber's italics.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that people who take LSD frequently give as their motive the desire to achieve greater directness. In an article in the *New York Times* of January 8, 1968, based on interviews with a large number of LSD enthusiasts, there is the following report: "Those who take drugs talk of a desire for immediate, direct experience. They say that before they took them they felt 'dry,' 'cut off from life,' 'over-intellectualized.' Drugs, they say, helped to peel away the crust of inhibitions and habit that had blocked their senses."

reaching her audience and singing straight into their hearts made the recital an unforgettable experience. Buber observes that "in face of the directness of the relation everything indirect becomes irrelevant."<sup>12</sup> This seems to characterize very accurately what one feels when there is a direct relation. A listener may be interested in the fee a singer is receiving for her performance or in her private life but such questions will not occur where there is genuine communication between them. If such questions occur it is a sure sign that the directness of the relation has disappeared.

#### TOTAL INVOLVEMENT

Another feature of the I-Thou relationship is the total involvement of both parties. "The primary word I-It can never be spoken with the whole being," but "the "primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being."<sup>13</sup> In I-It situations "a part of us," to quote Buber's disciple and expositor Michael Wyschograd,

"remains outside the relationship and views part of it from some vantage point. In the I-Thou relationship, on the other hand, our whole being must be involved. Should I attempt to hold back any part of myself, I will find myself in an I-It situation because there will be a part of me that is not participant but spectator. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

The contrast between participant and spectator is clearly relevant to the question of involvement, but it is not sufficient to explicate all of Buber's pronouncements about this characteristic. To do this one must also make reference to different degrees or levels of depth. In one place Buber speaks about "the glances which strangers exchange in the busy street as they pass one another." Some of these glances, he observes, "reveal to one another two dialogical natures." This would be an example of real dialogue but not of a full I-Thou encounter because the meeting is "not charged with destiny."<sup>15</sup> I believe that Buber would say much the same about several of the other examples quoted earlier—the fleeting encounters with the old

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<sup>12</sup> *IT*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> *IT*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> "Buber, Martin," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 410.

<sup>15</sup> *BMM*, p. 5.

news vender, the chimney-sweep, the child and the dog. These meetings are not "charged with destiny" (so at least it seems reasonable to construe Buber's meaning) because they do not occur on a level on which the parties expose themselves to risk—to the possibilities of being deeply hurt by a rejection or disappointment. This kind of risk is likely to be present in the relation between lovers, between patient and psychiatrist and it may be present in certain cases in the relation between a student and his teacher. I believe that Buber would for the same reason regard the meeting between a musician and his audience as I-Thou-like or dialogic rather than as a full I-Thou encounter. The directness may well be there and so may the other characteristics of the I-Thou meeting yet to be discussed, the involvement may be total (without any part of the participants assuming the role of spectator) but the level on which the involvement takes place is not as deep as Buber appears to require for a true I-Thou relation.

#### OPENNESS

Before we proceed with an analysis of the various characteristics of the I-Thou relation something should be said about a feature which is a pre-condition of both directness and involvement. This is the open or receptive attitude of the parties towards one another which is contrasted with the attempt that human beings frequently make to control or at least to calculate what the other party is going to do. Such attempts at control and prediction are characteristic of I-It relationships. Unfortunately the descriptions of the open and receptive attitude that is found in Buber and his disciples are marred by thoroughly confused denunciations of determinism. "Whenever," in the words of Wyschograd,

"we take an 'objective' attitude towards a person, whenever we view him as part of the world and caught in its *causal chain* we are in an I-It relationship, even though the object happens to be a person."<sup>16</sup>

The Thou, by contrast

"who is addressed cannot be viewed in the context of any causal deterministic framework. He must be encoun-

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<sup>16</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 410, my italics.

tered in the full freedom of his otherness, an otherness that is addressed and that responds in the *total unpredictability of human freedom*. The moment the responses of the Thou are calculated, the moment the I asks itself what impression its speech and being will make on the Thou, it is relating to an It instead of to a Thou."<sup>17</sup>

"Causality," in Buber's words,

"has an unlimited reign in the world of It. Every 'physical' event that can be perceived by the senses, but also every 'psychical' event existing or discovered in self-experience is necessarily . . . caused and . . . causing."<sup>18</sup>

The unlimited reign of causality in the world of the It is "of fundamental importance for the scientific ordering of nature."<sup>19</sup> No such ordering is possible in the world of the I-Thou. "The Thou knows no system of coordination."<sup>20</sup> By contrast with the world of It, "the world of Thou is not closed. He who goes out to it with concentrated being . . . becomes aware of freedom,"<sup>21</sup> and "the reign of causality does not *weigh heavily*" on the man "to whom freedom is assured."<sup>22</sup> In the world of the I-Thou, the two parties

"freely confront one another in mutual effect that is neither connected with nor colored by any causality. Here man is assured of the freedom both of his being and of Being."<sup>23</sup>

Buber and Wyschograd are clearly right in maintaining that directness and involvement presuppose an open and uncalculating attitude at both ends, but they are just as clearly wrong in their assertion that the existence of such an attitude implies the breakdown of determinism. If I am open towards another person this does indeed require that I should not then be involved in attempts at prediction or control, but it most emphatically does not mean that whatever the other person does

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, my italics.

<sup>18</sup> *IT*, p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> P. 52, my italics.

<sup>23</sup> P. 51.

or feels is not caused or even that I could not have predicted what he was going to do or feel if I had been interested in doing this. Buber and Wyschograd evidently believe that determinism and freedom are incompatible because every effect is "chained" to its cause and because causes are necessarily "oppressive weights." These are exceedingly misleading pictures. A man who is driven by needs or desires which he does not properly understand and which he finds irresistible may be likened to a person in chains or even to one who is crushed by oppressive weights. However, not all needs and desires are of this kind: there are impulses which are not a mask for other hidden needs and there are many desires which are not irresistible. In such cases when a human being is not prevented from doing what he wishes to do, it is absurd to speak of chains or oppressive weights. These remarks are not meant to prove that determinism and freedom *are* compatible; but that they are not compatible will seem obvious only to those who are obsessed with the pictures of causal relations as chains and causes as oppressive weights. To a great many philosophers of very varying backgrounds, who have not been under the spell of these pictures, it has seemed that there is no inconsistency in saying about an action that it is both caused and free. Buber and Wyschograd here simply exclude by their fiat one of the most widely held theories on the subject.

#### MUTUALITY

The next characteristic to be considered is what is variously called "mutuality" or "reciprocity." We do not have an I-Thou encounter unless both persons are participating. The mental states occurring in an I-Thou encounter cannot in fact be brought about unless both parties have the appropriately giving attitude. Buber himself has expressed this point in one of his best-known epigrams: "The *I* of the primary word I-Thou is a different *I* from that of the primary word I-It."<sup>24</sup> Thus, a teacher who is open and ready to give his utmost will freeze up if his class is not receptive and the most compassionate of therapists will not be in the mental state characteristic of I-Thou encounters if he is dealing with a patient who is beyond his reach. We must therefore have a second party both for the definitional reason that, as Buber intends to use the expression "I-Thou,"

<sup>24</sup> *IT*, p. 62.

it can be applied only if two (or more) parties are involved and for the non-definitional reason that in fact one person will not ever be in the required mental state unless another person with the appropriate attitude is also present.

Unfortunately this is not the end of the story. Buber has also saddled himself and his followers with the doctrine that I-Thou relations can be established between a human being on the one hand and animals, plants and inanimate objects on the other. "It by no means needs to be a man," he writes, "of whom I become aware." ("Being aware" here stands for the states of mind that occur during I-Thou encounters.)

"It can be an animal, a plant, a stone. No kind of appearance or event is fundamentally excluded from the series of things through which from time to time something is said to me."<sup>25</sup>

I find this extremely puzzling and I know that I am not alone in this. Emil Fackenheim, one of Buber's most devoted disciples to whose views we shall return repeatedly in this lecture, acknowledges that it may not be easy to be persuaded of the reality of I-Thou encounters when the alleged partner is something non-human. "For here," he writes, "one does not have to be a fanatical devotee of I-It knowledge in order to doubt that there is an actual . . . address by another; indeed one should be lacking in intellectual responsibility if one did *not* doubt it, demanding an argument for the removal of the doubt."<sup>26</sup> I do not myself think it is farfetched to speak of I-Thou relations between human beings and animals like dogs and horses where a certain reciprocity may well be present, but I do not see how the required mutuality can occur when the non-human party is a tree or a stone. To obtain such a mutuality, it seems, Buber would have to uphold panpsychism and, what is more, a form of panpsychism far more extreme than any previously advocated. In order to obtain the required mutuality, Buber would have to attribute to plants and to objects usually regarded as inanimate quite an advanced level of consciousness.

Buber addresses himself to this question in the second edition Postscript of *I and Thou*, but I did not find there anything

<sup>25</sup> *BMM*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," in P. A. Schilpp and M. Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, from now on referred to as *PMB*, La Salle, Open Court, 1967, p. 293, Fackenheim's italics.

that answers the question how the tree or the stone can function as a human being's partner. Nor did I find anything but evasions in the writings of Buber's followers. After giving one of the most lucid accounts of the I-Thou relation that is to be found anywhere in the literature, Fackenheim offers the following answer: "The relation of dialogue . . . is a relation of address and response-to-address. The other addresses me and responds to my address; that is, even if the other happens to be a lifeless and speechless object, it is treated as one treats a person."<sup>27</sup> This tells us how the human being responds, but it says nothing at all about the response of the lifeless object. It is also in flat contradiction to what is said a moment earlier, namely, that the I-Thou relation "is, above all, mutual," that it does not exist unless "the other is for me and I for the other," unless "I do something to the other, but the other also does something to me."<sup>28</sup> Friedman is no more helpful. Thus, in his introduction to *Between Man and Man* he writes: "The tree that I meet is not a Thou before I meet it. It harbors no hidden personality that winks at me as I pass by. Yet if I meet it in its uniqueness, letting it have its impact on me without comparing it with other trees or analyzing the type of leaf or wood or calculating the amount of firewood I may get out of it, then I may speak of an I-Thou relationship with it."<sup>29</sup> This contradicts all that Buber and Friedman himself had been saying previously—that we do *not* have an I-Thou relation unless the tree too is responding to me and unless the tree's response affects me. Just what does the tree's or the stone's response consist in? This is a question that Buber and his followers must answer and it is one which they consistently ignore.

#### PRESENTNESS

Another characteristic of the I-Thou relationship is what several of Buber commentators call its "presentness" as contrasted with the chronic and inevitable "pastness" of all I-It relations. "The world of It," writes Buber, "is set in the context of space and time."<sup>30</sup> When we look at the world from this standpoint we regard it as consisting of things and events, "the things entered in the graph of space, the events in that of time;

<sup>27</sup> *PMB*, p. 279.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. xiv.

<sup>30</sup> *IT*, p. 33.

things and events bounded by other things and events, measured by them, comparable with them."<sup>31</sup> It is "an ordered and detached world," it is "to some extent a reliable world" which helps to sustain us in life and it has "density and duration."<sup>32</sup> However, insofar as we live in it we have "no present, only the past."

"Insofar as man rests satisfied with the things he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no present content. He has nothing but objects. But objects subsist in time that has been."<sup>33</sup>

The person who is engaged in the I-It relation, in the words of Maurice Friedman, "knows objects only when they are installed in the ordered world of the past, for he has no interest in their uniqueness but only in their relation to other things through which he can use them."<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to the world of It, "the world of Thou is not set in the context of space and time."<sup>35</sup> The Thou does indeed "appear in space, but in the exclusive situation of what is over against it, where everything else can only be the background out of which it emerges, not its boundary and measured limit." It also appears in time but "it is not lived as part of a continuous and organized sequence." It is "lived in a 'duration' whose purely intensive dimension is definable only in terms of itself."<sup>36</sup> Measure and comparison have disappeared from the world of I-Thou. It "has no density for everything in it penetrates everything else." It is "unreliable since it takes on a continually new appearance."<sup>37</sup> The peculiar duration we may attribute to it is really "no duration" since the I-Thou meeting "comes even when it is not summoned and vanishes even when it is tightly held."<sup>38</sup> Although or perhaps because the I-Thou has no duration, it, unlike the I-It, has a present. In fact the I-Thou meeting is the "real filled present." "Like the 'eternal now' of the mystic," writes Maurice Friedman, "it is the present of intensity and wholeness."<sup>39</sup> "The present," in Buber's own

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> *Martin Buber—The Life of Dialogue, Op. Cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> *IT*, p. 33.

<sup>36</sup> P. 30.

<sup>37</sup> P. 32.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 58.

words, "arises only in virtue of the fact that the Thou becomes present."<sup>40</sup> When you make the Thou into an object "you have no more present." The I-Thou meeting which gives you the only present you have "does not help to sustain you in life, it only helps you to glimpse eternity."<sup>41</sup>

Much of this is very puzzling. Perhaps we can get some help from Buber's expositors. Wyschograd treats Buber's remarks about the essential presentness of the I-Thou and the inevitable pastness of the I-It as a logical consequence of the assumption that I-Thou meetings occur outside any causal framework while I-It relations are "perfectly determined by the events of the past." I-It relations lack "genuine novelty" and because of this "all objective knowledge" of human beings must always be about their past and not about them as they now are. "There is never a present for the I-It relationship, only a past." I-Thou meetings on the other hand possess the required novelty, the required "break with the past in the form of a response that could not have been calculated from a knowledge of the past." In the I-Thou relation we are "genuinely living in the present because we are prepared for any and every response to our address, the expected as well as the unexpected—and it is this that constitutes genuine listening." It is important to distinguish between genuine and pseudo-listening. In the latter what the listener hears is "determined by his past knowledge of the person he is listening to or by his theories concerning the nature of man." Genuine listening, by contrast, "does not know ahead of time what it will hear; in the full uniqueness of the present it listens to the speech of the other without filtering what it hears through the screen of its own prejudgments." In genuine listening we really "hear what the other is saying, constantly being aware that he is saying something that is new and not just a revelation of his nature," a nature which we had previously identified and "fixed as the other's 'psychology.'"<sup>42</sup>

A rather different interpretation is offered by Leslie Farber, an existential psychoanalyst who greatly admires Buber. Farber defines "presentness" as the "suspension of chronological time" and contrasts it with boredom, a state in which "all manner of distraction will suggest itself for killing time, as we say." When

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<sup>40</sup> P. 12.

<sup>41</sup> P. 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 410.

we experience presentness we are so totally absorbed that there is no need to seek distractions. "Presentness . . . is the quality we all seek to invoke, in the absence of mutuality and directness, as a symbol of the I-Thou" or as a first step towards such a relationship. In the place of genuine I-Thou relations, Farber observes, a great many emotions ("laughter, tears, anger . . . sex") can be exploited for the experience of presentness. Towards the same end people will take alcohol, benzedrine, marijuana, and even morphine.<sup>43</sup>

If we interpret "presentness" the way Farber does, then Buber is clearly right in his assertion that I-Thou relationships possess this characteristic. Carl Rogers, the founder of non-directional psychotherapy, has noted that presentness in this sense characterizes the therapeutic session at its best—it "acquires an 'out-of-this-world' quality . . . a sort of trance-like feeling from which both client and therapist emerge at the end of the hour as if from a deep well or tunnel."<sup>44</sup> Teachers and students have noted similar things and great artists have the capacity to bring about the same total absorption on the part of their audiences partly because they themselves are so utterly immersed in what they are doing. It is tempting to mystify this characteristic of the I-Thou relationship and talk, as Buber does, about "glimpsing eternity," absence of duration, "the immortal moment,"<sup>45</sup> "the eternal now"<sup>46</sup> or (as Rogers does) about "timeless living." If such statements are taken literally and not just as rhetorical flourishes, they are totally without foundation. It is one thing to say that one was so absorbed in a given situation that one did not notice the passage of time and quite another to maintain that the experience in question had no duration. It makes perfectly good sense to ask about all the experiences in question "when did they take place?" and "how long did they last?" It should also be observed that in this sense presentness is by no means peculiar to I-Thou relations. Farber himself mentions the various means of bringing it about *in the absence* of I-Thou encounters and there are any number of activities having nothing to do with I-Thou relations (reading

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<sup>43</sup> "Martin Buber and Psychoanalysis," in Farber's *The Ways of the Will*, New York, Basic Books, 1966, p. 136. Substantially the same essay is reprinted in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* under the title "Martin Buber and Psychotherapy."

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Friedman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>45</sup> *BMM*, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> Friedman, *Op. Cit.*

detective stories, watching exciting or even foolish movies, card games, gambling and a host of others) in which people become so immersed that they do not notice the passage of time.

Is there anything more to Buber's assertions about present and past, to the claims, endlessly repeated by his followers, that while I-Thou encounters have presentness, our relations to Its are inevitably characterized by pastness? The way in which Buber and his followers express themselves suggests that there is a great deal more. We are given the impression that Buber has made an important discovery. All of us normally believe that, as far as I-It relations are concerned, human beings do *not* always and certainly that they do not necessarily "live in the past" and we also believe that we can and do attain knowledge about objects as they are at the time at which the knowledge-claim is made. Buber and his disciples write as if he had shown these commonsense beliefs to be erroneous. However, a little reflection will show that Buber has done nothing of the sort. As far as I can see, in addition to the point noted in the previous paragraph, that in I-Thou encounters both parties are apt to be oblivious of the passage of time, Buber's contribution amounts to nothing more than a persuasive redefinition of the words "present" and "past."<sup>47</sup> It is recommended that we use "present" and "present content" in a more restricted way than we normally do so that only I-Thou situations can be said to have a present or present content while I-It relations must not be so described regardless of how clearly they have a present in the ordinary sense of the word. This verbal recommendation is of course an expression of Buber's value judgment that I-Thou encounters are so much more precious than I-It relations.

Buber and his disciples do not propose this redefinition explicitly and they use the kind of categorical language which suggests that they are opposing the commonsense beliefs about the presentness of I-It relations, but they cannot seriously mean to do any such thing. It is surely preposterous to maintain that, using the words "know," "past" and "present" in their ordinary senses, we can know objects, human or otherwise, as they were in the past but never as they are in the present. Astronomers know the present position of the moon and not only the posi-

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<sup>47</sup>I am using the word "persuasive definition" in the sense in which it was first employed by C. L. Stevenson in his article "Persuasive Definitions," *Mind*, 1938.

tion it had at certain times in the past and everybody knows that the moon at present moves in accordance with the same laws that have governed its motion throughout the time of its existence. To take a more mundane example, I know the salary scale presently in force at the City University of New York no less than I know the scale that was in force until recently. I do not have an I-Thou relation with the voice of Maria Callas, but I know its present state<sup>48</sup> just as well as I know what it was like in its prime some 20 years ago. Similarly, using words in their familiar way, it is quite absurd to maintain that, except for I-Thou encounters, everybody is always living in the past. If I am in the middle of eating a splendidly tender and tasty steak and if I nevertheless keep complaining about a tough steak I was served ten years ago in San Francisco and if this sort of thing is typical of my life, then one might justly say I keep living in the past. However, if I take pleasure in things as I experience them without always harping on past disappointments, it would be quite wrong to say that I always live in the past. It cannot be Buber's purpose to deny these facts, but it is only because his statements appear to deny them that they seem an exciting discovery and something more than a persuasive redefinition of "present" and "past."

These remarks are not meant to question the reality or the significance of the distinction that Buber and Wyschograd make between genuine and pseudo-listening. However, in order to state these differences it is not at all necessary to engage in any redefinitional maneuvers. There is a real difference between the openness that is a pre-condition of an I-Thou encounter and the treatment of a human being as nothing more than a subject for the testing of a theory. This difference can be quite easily and adequately expressed without denying that in what Wyschograd calls pseudo-listening the experience of the observer has a "present content." Wyschograd, incidentally, is mistaken in supposing that determinism implies absence of novelty, assuming that one can give some clear meaning to the word "novelty." What would imply absence of novelty is determinism in conjunction with the scholastic principle that any property residing in the effect must already have

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<sup>48</sup> It is in ruins.

resided in its cause. This principle is logically independent of determinism and is quite certainly false.<sup>49</sup>

#### INEFFABILITY

There is a further characteristic of the I-Thou relation to which Buber's followers usually refer as "ineffability." Buber does not merely mean that the expression "I-Thou relation" can only be ostensibly defined, that its meaning like for example the meaning of "yellow" or "sweet" can be understood only by somebody who has experienced instances of what the word refers to. He evidently makes the much stronger claim that the I-Thou relation cannot be conceptually represented at all. The I-Thou relation is said to be ineffable in the same sense in which the ultimate Reality experienced by mystics in their mystical states is supposed to be ineffable. "Only concerning the world of the It," writes Buber, "may you make yourself 'understood' with others."<sup>50</sup> Concerning the I-Thou world, on the other hand, "you cannot make yourself understood with others . . . you are alone with it."<sup>51</sup> The I-Thou relation is "concretion itself" and hence "it cannot be classified."<sup>52</sup> "It cannot be surveyed and if you wish to make it capable of survey you lose it."<sup>53</sup> What occurs in the I-Thou meeting can be "neither explained nor displayed, it is not a *what* at all."<sup>54</sup> "An I-Thou knowledge that can be held fast, preserved, factually transmitted does not really exist."<sup>55</sup>

This view that the I-Thou relation cannot be conceptually represented is a logical consequence of Buber's contention that the Thou, as I meet it in the I-Thou relation, is not a being with aspects or qualities and that it is hence inherently indescribable. The I-It relation

"always brings us only to the aspects of an existing being, not to that being itself. Even the most intimate contact with another remains covered over by an aspect if the other has not become Thou for me."

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<sup>49</sup> For some of the evidence showing that the principle is false see J. S. Mill's *Three Essays of Religion*, London, Longmans, Green, 1874, pp. 152f and his *A System of Logic*, London, Longmans, Green, 1893, pp. 242ff.

<sup>50</sup> *IT*, p. 32.

<sup>51</sup> *P*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> *BMM*, p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> *IT*, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> *BMM*, p. 12. Buber's italics.

<sup>55</sup> *PMB*, p. 692.

Only the I-Thou relation which

“establishes essential immediacy between me and an existing being, brings me just thereby not to an aspect of it but to that being itself.”<sup>66</sup>

This “essential immediacy” of the I-Thou relation precludes any “objective viewing” of the other person. “As soon as an objective viewing is established, we are given only an aspect and ever again only an aspect.”<sup>67</sup> “I cannot depict or denote or describe the man in whom, through whom, something has been said to me. Were I to attempt it, that would be the end of saying (where ‘saying’ means being a Thou for me).”<sup>68</sup>

Buber is unquestionably right in maintaining that it is psychologically impossible to be at the same time involved in an I-Thou relation and also to study and analyze it. Scientific detachment is not compatible with the involvement that is an essential part of the I-Thou relation. It should be observed, however, that exactly the same is true of any number of intense emotions, extreme rage, for example. I cannot, while I am in a rage, also scientifically explore it. The moment I can do any scientific exploring, the rage or at least its more violent phases must have passed. This, however, does not prevent us from engaging in a scientific study of rage and it certainly does not make rage into something ineffable. Although I cannot analyze my rage while I am raging this does not mean that I am unaware of what is going on and that I cannot give a reliable report of various details of the experience after it is over. In the same way the fact that I cannot analyze the I-Thou relation while I am in it in no way implies that it cannot be studied and analyzed or that it is ineffable. It can be studied in retrospect by me and the other party; and it can be investigated by others although their results are bound to be inadequate if they are not supplemented by the reports of those who actually experience the I-Thou encounter. Buber’s confusion is here quite staggering. Not only is the I-Thou relation not indescribable: Buber himself has spent much time and effort trying to describe it and for the most part his efforts have been successful. What else was Buber doing when he told us that the I-Thou relation

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<sup>66</sup> *EG*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *BMM*, p. 10.

is characterized by directness, total involvement, mutuality, and presentness? I agree that those who cannot experience I-Thou relations (psychopathic individuals for example seem quite incapable of the openness that is a presupposition of directness and total involvement) will not really understand what Buber is talking about. However, as already pointed out, this is not the same thing as the ineffability that Buber claims.

Buber's contrast between the "being" of a person to which I am "brought" in the course of the I-Thou meeting and his "aspects" to which I attend when I view him as an It is neither intelligible nor required to do justice to the differences between the two relations. In the I-Thou relation I do not meet a featureless, aspectless person—such language is indeed quite nonsensical. I meet an ordinary human being with very definite characteristics, physical and psychological, but the meeting differs from an I-It relation in that directness is present and that both I and the other person have attitudes that are characteristically different from those one has in I-It situations. In the I-Thou relation I am not out to analyze or study the other person's characteristics but this does not mean that they are not there and that I am face to face with an ineffable something called his "being." It is not even true that I never then notice any of these characteristics. A teacher who has excellent rapport with his class and who is, as the saying goes, getting through to his students, makes contact with very real human beings having all kinds of characteristics (intelligence, interest in a certain subject, anxieties and longings of one kind or another) and he cannot help noticing some of these although it will not be his primary concern to study them. Or, to take an illustration from psychiatry, a real I-Thou meeting may take place *after* the psychiatrist has successfully broken down some chronic defensive attitude like arrogance or superciliousness or false politeness. The writings of Wilhelm Reich and psychiatrists influenced by his technique of character-analysis are full of such accounts. After, for example, the defense of arrogance is broken down the patient is not infrequently revealed (regardless of his age) as a frightened and dependent child, overwhelmed by a sense of his inadequacy and in tremendous need of reassurance, but it is only then that he is capable of anything like directness. In such a case the psychiatrist is clearly encountering a thou with very definite features, though not the features that the patient dis-

plays or until then displayed in most of his behavior. In such cases it makes sense to contrast the apparent outward character with the real nature of the patient (his "being" if you like), but the real nature or the patient's "being" is not something featureless and ineffable.

The notion that the I-Thou relation is ineffable is not only a mistake, but a very harmful mistake. If accepted it would obstruct the scientific investigation of an important area of human life. There clearly are conditions which help to bring about I-Thou meetings and there are others which make them difficult or impossible; and there is no reason why one should not attempt a scientific study of these conditions. Wilhelm Reich's work on the negative transference of the patient and his insistence on bringing into the open the patient's suspicion and hostility to the therapist is one example of a study of factors militating against the direct relation in the therapeutic situation. Again, it is undeniable that some people find it relatively easy to establish I-Thou relations while others are so "armored" (the word is both Reich's and Buber's)<sup>59</sup> that it is exceedingly difficult for them to participate in any I-Thou encounter. Especially if one values I-Thou relations one is bound to ask what kind of education and early environment produces the armored and the free type of human being respectively. Surely this question, like the one concerning conditions favorable and unfavorable to the occurrence of I-Thou meetings, is of great human interest and it is not at all obvious that these questions are unanswerable. However, we shall not even ask them if we regard the I-Thou relation as something that is in principle beyond the realm of scientific investigation.

#### FRAGILITY

Buber repeatedly observes that the I-Thou relationship cannot be sustained. "Two friends," he writes,

"two lovers must . . . experience ever and again how the I-Thou is succeeded by an I-He or I-She."<sup>60</sup>

"This is the exalted melancholy of our fate, that every *Thou* in our world must become an *It*. It does not mat-

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<sup>59</sup> Buber's use of the word will be found in *BMM*, p. 10; Reich discusses armoring throughout *Character Analysis* and *The Function of the Orgasm*.

<sup>60</sup> *PMB*, p. 705.

ter how exclusively present the *Thou* was in the direct relation. As soon as the relation has been worked out . . . the *Thou* becomes an object, "perhaps the chief, but still one of them, fixed in its size and its limits."<sup>61</sup>

This fragility of the I-*Thou* is not altogether regrettable; for although such meetings are "lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical," they are also dangerous, "loosening the well-tried context and . . . shattering security." The truth is that although life without I-*Thou* encounters is not worth living, man cannot live without the *It*.<sup>62</sup>

### The Eternal *Thou*

Our relationship to God, according to Buber, is in many respects similar to human I-*Thou* relationships. "With regard to the relation between the human way to God and that to the fellowman," Buber wrote in one of his last publications

"I was and am simply concerned that both relationships are essentially similar, because both signify the direct turning to a *Thou* and both find their fulfillment in actual reciprocity."<sup>63</sup>

However, there is at least one crucial difference. Human beings can and frequently do become *Its*, but the divine *Thou* cannot "by its very nature become *It*."<sup>64</sup> We can meet God only in an I-*Thou* relationship

"because of Him, in absolute contrast to all other existing beings, no objective aspect can be attained. Even a vision yields no objective viewing, and he who strains to hold fast an after-image after the cessation of the full I-*Thou* relation has already lost the vision."<sup>65</sup>

We are thus in a peculiar and extreme predicament in any attempt to describe the divine *Thou*. We are unable to describe human beings insofar as they are *Thous*, but we are not condemned to complete silence about them since they also become objects for long stretches of time; and, insofar as they are

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<sup>61</sup> *IT*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> *PMB*, p. 694.

<sup>64</sup> *IT*, p. 75.

<sup>65</sup> *EG*, p. 128.

objects they have aspects which can be conceptually represented. Since "no objective aspect" of God can ever be attained, it follows that He cannot be "expressed" at all by which Buber clearly means that God cannot be described. However, although God cannot be described, he can be "addressed,"<sup>66</sup> or "spoken to,"<sup>67</sup> for example, in prayer.

"It is not necessary to know something about God in order really to believe in Him: many true believers know how to talk *to* God but not *about* Him."<sup>68</sup>

Without embarking on a detailed critique at this stage it must be pointed out that there is something very confused in Buber's notion that God can be "addressed" but not "expressed." A sincere believer may indeed lack the skill of stating or defending the finer points of his religion, but he cannot be a believer unless he assigns *some* characteristics to the object of his prayer and worship. A person who is addressing God and who is using the word "God" in some reasonably familiar way automatically assumes that the object of his address has such characteristics as spirituality, power, goodness and others besides. Addressing *God* and not just a featureless *x* presupposes that God can be "expressed"; and in fact, as we shall see shortly, Buber seems to possess a good deal of information about God in spite of His alleged ineffability.

#### THE SUPREME MEETING

However, to proceed with our exposition. A human being cannot be "satiated"<sup>69</sup> by his meetings with finite Thous. Final satisfaction can be achieved only in "the supreme meeting"<sup>70</sup> with the "endless Thou."<sup>71</sup>

"I-Thou finds its highest intensity and transfiguration in religious reality, in which unlimited Being becomes, as absolute person, my partner."<sup>72</sup>

In fact, in the meeting with finite Thous we have already "a glimpse of the eternal Thou." "By means of every particular

<sup>66</sup> *IT*, p. 81.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>68</sup> *EG*, p. 28, Buber's italics.

<sup>69</sup> *IT*, p. 88.

<sup>70</sup> P. 77.

<sup>71</sup> P. 80.

<sup>72</sup> *EG*, pp. 44-45.

Thou the primary word addresses the eternal Thou,"<sup>73</sup> but the truly "consumating event" is

"the meeting with the Meeter, who shines through all forms and is Himself formless, knows no image of Him, nothing comprehensible as object. It knows only the presence of the Present One."<sup>74</sup>

From such a "supreme meeting" a human being cannot return unchanged. In the moment of the meeting "something happens to the man." "At times it is like a light breath, at times like a wrestling bout, but always—*it happens*."<sup>75</sup> When he leaves the meeting, the person knows that as a result of "the act of pure relation" something new "has grown in him," that he has received something he had not previously possessed. His life has become

"heavy with meaning. . . . Meaning is assured. Nothing can any longer be meaningless. The question about the meaning of life is no longer there."<sup>76</sup>

The God thus met is not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Buber quotes with approval a similar statement found in the famous confession of Pascal written after "the two ecstatic hours"<sup>77</sup> of his overwhelming religious experience. The God of the philosophers is merely an idea, but the real God, the God whom Abraham loved is "not an idea—all ideas are absorbed in Him." The God of the philosophers "occupies a definite position in a definite system of thought" while the true God cannot be included in a philosophical system "in any conceptual form." By their cogitation the philosophers make "the absolute into an object" but in fact it is a Thou and not an object. The true God is not "'the Absolute' about which one may philosophize," but the Absolute that is loved.<sup>78</sup> The scholastic philosophers who used *a priori* arguments to prove the existence of God just like later empiricist believers who relied on *a posteriori* considerations engaged in projects that were both hopeless and unnecessary.

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<sup>73</sup> *IT*, p. 75.

<sup>74</sup> *EG*, p. 45.

<sup>75</sup> *IT*, p. 109, Buber's italics.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>77</sup> *EG*, p. 49.

<sup>78</sup> *EG*, pp. 49-50.

"The existence of mutuality between God and man cannot be proved, just as God's existence cannot be proved."<sup>79</sup>

"God cannot be inferred in anything—in nature, say, as its author, or in history as its master, or in the subject as the self that is sought in it. Something else is 'not given' and God then elicited from it."<sup>80</sup>

Such inferences are illegitimate, but they are also unnecessary. God is so close to us that inferences are not needed.

"God is the Being that is directly, most nearly, and lastingly, over against us."<sup>81</sup>

I believe that Buber's meaning here is something like the following: I am aware that I have a right hand in the most direct and immediate possible way by seeing and using it; and it would be absurd and totally unnecessary for me to argue in support of this proposition. In the same way mankind, perhaps not all men, but many men and some very vividly, have had direct and immediate awareness of God. Hence arguments of the kind that were criticized by Kant and Hume are altogether out of place.

"The great images of God fashioned by mankind are born not of imagination but of real encounters with real divine power and glory."<sup>82</sup>

Buber again and again stresses the "immediacy" of such encounters. "The immediacy and, as it were, bodily nearness" that man experiences in his meetings with the divine, overwhelm him, "whether they fill him with awe, transport him with rapture, or merely give him guidance."<sup>83</sup> Buber assures us that these encounters are entirely trustworthy and beyond the reach of skeptical criticism:

"That this glance of the being exists, wholly unillusory, yielding no images, no other court in the world attests than that of faith. It is not to be proved; it is only to be experienced; man has experienced it."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *IT*, p. 137.

<sup>80</sup> *IT*, p. 80.

<sup>81</sup> *IT*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>82</sup> *EC*, p. 14.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *EC*, p. 127.

## THEOPHANY

It is Buber's position that this "wholly unillusory glance" takes place not only in "hours of great revelation,"<sup>85</sup> in the "all-overthrowing moments"<sup>86</sup> of the visions of the mystics, but also, though perhaps not so overwhelmingly, in prayer and in various daily activities when these are carried out in the right religious spirit. "We call prayer, in the pregnant sense of the term," Buber writes,

"that speech of man to God which, whatever else is asked, ultimately asks for the manifestation of the divine Presence."<sup>87</sup>

What is presupposed in a "genuine state of prayer," is

"the readiness of the whole man for this presence, simple turned-towardness, unreserved spontaneity. This spontaneity, ascending from the roots, succeeds time and again in overcoming all that disturbs and diverts."<sup>88</sup>

Buber is most emphatic that "conversations with God" do not happen "solely alongside or above the everyday." On the contrary "God's speech to man penetrates what happens in the life of each of us, and all that happens in the world around us, biographical and historical, and makes it for you and me into instruction, message, demand."<sup>89</sup> A mysticism such as that of Simone Weil which disparages the world and man's earthly happiness in order to get close to God is "diametrically opposed" to Buber's viewpoint.<sup>90</sup> A truly religious man "must put his arms around the vexatious world, whose true name is creation; only then do his fingers reach the realm of lightning and of grace. . . . It cannot be that the relation of the human person to God is established by the subtraction of the world."<sup>91</sup> At times, indeed, especially in some of his later writings, Buber even plays down the ecstasies of the "all-overthrowing moments." In one place Buber tells how, after a morning of "religious enthusiasm," he received a visit from a young man who

<sup>85</sup> *EG*, p. 15.

<sup>86</sup> *EG*, p. 50.

<sup>87</sup> *EG*, p. 126.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *IT*, p. 136.

<sup>90</sup> *On Judaism*, from now on abbreviated as *OJ*, New York, Schocken Books, 1967, p. 210.

<sup>91</sup> *BMM*, p. 65.

had come to seek his advice. Buber relates that he was friendly and answered all the questions asked by his visitor but that he was not "there in spirit" and did not answer the more important questions which the young man was too shy to ask. Not long after, during the earlier stages of the first World War, his visitor was killed and Buber learned from one of his friends that the young man had intended to ask some fateful questions. Since then, Buber writes, "I have given up the 'religious' which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. . . . I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility."<sup>92</sup>

It is by means of love of one's neighbor in *this* world that one can meet God. "Meet the world with the fullness of your being," Buber writes, "and you shall meet Him." The Biblical command to love one's neighbor has often been misunderstood. Its true meaning "is not that it is a command from God which we are to fulfil, but that through it and in it we meet God."<sup>93</sup> "Love thy neighbor as thyself, I am the Lord" is the complete wording in the Bible and the proper interpretation of the phrase "I am the Lord" in this context is "You think I am far away from you, but in your love for your neighbor you will find Me; not in his love for you but in yours for him."<sup>94</sup> Even the atheist who has I-Thou relations and whose love is genuine has encountered God. In fact there are no "invulnerable heathens." "All men, somewhere, in some loneliness of their pain or of their thought, come close to God."<sup>95</sup> Rabbi Borowitz, quite in Buber's spirit, speaks of a "natural knowledge of God common to all men." In any I-Thou encounter, Borowitz adds, again following Buber, both persons "dimly know that they are accompanied by Him." The two parties, we are told, always really "meet as three for God is with them making . . . their meeting possible."<sup>96</sup>

Later I shall offer a number of reasons for doubting whether anybody ever in fact meets the Eternal Thou either in all-overthrowing moments of ecstasy or in more humble everyday situations. Here I wish to enter a protest against the extreme

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>93</sup> *OJ*, p. 213.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 132.

presumptuousness of Buber and more especially Borowitz in their claims that atheists, no less than believers, have encounters with God. This is a variant of the old game played by religious apologists in which they come up with the pronouncement that really, truly, there are no atheists or at least no atheists worthy of consideration. Such a surprising conclusion is usually reached by a series of arbitrary and misleading redefinitions, for example, by defining an atheist as a person who believes that "life is shallow" or who has "no object of ultimate concern" so that a great many people who say with unquestioned sincerity that they do not believe in God nevertheless fail to qualify as atheists.<sup>97</sup> This, however, is not the kind of thing that Buber and Borowitz have in mind. When they maintain that unbelievers meet God they do not thereby merely redescribe some purely secular phenomenon whose existence is perfectly consistent with atheism in the usual sense of the word. But if what Buber and Borowitz are doing amounts to more than a redescription of such secular facts as that unbelievers are capable of loving other human beings or that they on occasions feel pain and grief—if Buber and Borowitz assert that such atheists meet God in a sense in which atheism clearly excludes the possibility of such meetings, what is the evidence for their claim? The atheist emphatically denies that he meets God even "in the loneliness of his pain" and he insists that when he meets a human Thou he does not meet any additional non-human Thou as well. Are we to suppose that atheists are lying when they issue these denials? If they are not lying can one seriously believe that something as momentous as the presence of the Eternal Thou is supposed to be would escape their notice? If no voices or visions are experienced just what is it that goes on and that escapes the atheist's attention? I trust that Rabbi Borowitz, whose confidence in his theological pronouncements seems boundless, will oblige us with an answer in due course.

The appeal to encounters with the divine is not regarded by Buber or by his supporters as an *argument* from religious experience. Aside from the fact that the argument from religious experience is logically just as vulnerable as the older rationalistic arguments, there are two reasons why Buber and his disci-

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<sup>97</sup> For a discussion of these Tillichian and other devices to eliminate atheism by verbal trickery see my article "Common Consent Arguments for the Existence of God," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, pp. 152ff.

ples will have no truck with it. In the first place the argument does not do justice to the *immediacy* of human encounters with God. It would be preposterous to suppose that Elijah or any other prophet *inferred* that it was really God who was addressing him. Fackenheim tells us that a supporter of the argument from religious experience would have us translate Elijah's message from "Thus saith the Lord," into "I have a feeling of the Lord speaking, and hence make the probable inference (a) that there is an actual divine speech, and (b) that *Adonai* and not Baal is the speaker."<sup>98</sup> This would totally miss the fact that "Divinity is immediately present to the believer."<sup>99</sup>

"Man does not have private feelings from which he infers the Divine. *If related to God at all, he is primordially open to Him; and his subjective feelings and the images of God he fashions are mere by-products of this primordial openness.*"<sup>100</sup>

An argument from religious experience, furthermore, would be unable to support the faith of the Biblical believer, whether Jewish or Christian, which is marked by "*certainty of standing in relation to an unprovable and irrefutable God.*"<sup>101</sup> Kierkegaard had rejected all attempts to support belief in Christianity by evidential considerations on the ground (among others) that what the believer needs is certainty and that arguments would at the very most amount to an "approximation" i.e. that they would at best give us probability. Fackenheim now makes the same point against the argument from religious experience:

"A God inferred to explain religious feelings would at most be a probable inference, capable of refutation and never really certain."<sup>102</sup>

The true Biblical believer does not treat his belief in God as a hypothesis, as the best available theory to account for a certain range of observed facts. Anybody adopting such a position does not merely abandon the certainty of Biblical faith, but, since in all likelihood the theological explanation is not the most plausi-

<sup>98</sup> "Elijah and the Empiricists," in D. Cutler, ed., *The Religious Situation*, 1969, Boston, The Beacon Press, p. 859; from now on referred to as *EE*.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> "On the Eclipse of God," from now on referred to as *OEG, Commentary*, 1964, p. 59, Fackenheim's italics.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57, Fackenheim's italics.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

ble one available, he in effect "executes, so far as his core-commitment is concerned, immediate and total surrender" to the unbelieving empiricist.<sup>103</sup> The Buberite flatly refuses to execute such a surrender. Empiricism itself will be criticized by him "in terms of the doctrine of encounter, as articulating the vice of withdrawal from the present Divinity into mere feeling."<sup>104</sup>

#### GOD'S ATTRIBUTES AND INTENTIONS

In his "Reply" in the Schilpp volume Buber declares: "I am absolutely not capable nor even disposed to teach this or that about God."<sup>105</sup> Such a declaration is quite consistent with the view that God's nature is ineffable. However, in spite of God's ineffability Buber appears to possess a good deal of communicable knowledge both about God's nature and His intentions concerning human beings. Buber's list of divine attributes contains no surprises and is such as could be accepted by most orthodox Jews and Christians. The first of the attributes we have already mentioned—it is God's eternity. As far as our experience goes, God is indeed a "moment-God." "The God of dialogue," writes Fackenheim, "like any Thou of any dialogue, speaks to a unique partner in a unique situation disclosing Himself according to the unique exigencies of each situation."<sup>106</sup> "If we name the speaker of this speech, God," to quote Buber himself, "then it is always the God of a moment, a moment God."<sup>107</sup> Out of these moment Gods "there arises for us with a single identity the Lord of the voice, the One."<sup>108</sup> We may be sure that although, in Fackenheim's words, He "can only be encountered in each here and now," He is nevertheless eternal.<sup>109</sup> Next, the Thou we encounter in the supreme meeting is identical with the Creator of the Universe: our "Meeter" is also our Maker. Buber repeatedly affirms that the universe was created by the eternal Thou and he also claims to know the purpose of man's creation. "Everything," he writes, "is waiting to be hallowed by you; it is waiting to be disclosed

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<sup>103</sup> *EE*, p. 859.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 860.

<sup>105</sup> P. 690.

<sup>106</sup> *PBM*, p. 285.

<sup>107</sup> *BMM*, p. 15.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Op. Cit.*

in its meaning and to be realized in it by you.”<sup>110</sup> It is for this that “God created the world. He has drawn it out of Himself so that you may bring it closer to Him.”<sup>111</sup> “Creation,” we are also told, “is incomplete because discord still reigns within it and peace can emerge only from the created.” It is the task of human beings to “take part in the still uncompleted work of creation.”<sup>112</sup> These passages were written in 1951, but apparently Buber held exactly the same view in several publications almost 30 years earlier. “It is our duty,” he wrote in 1923, to “prepare the world for God” which means “to make reality one.” This is “the one thing for whose sake we are on earth, the one thing that God will not achieve without us.”<sup>113</sup> Similarly, in *I and Thou*, also published in 1923, Buber insists that just as man needs God, so God also needs man:

“You know always in your heart that you need God more than everything; but do you not know too that God needs you—in the fullness of His Eternity needs you? How would man be, how would you be, if God did not need him, did not need you? You need God, in order to be—and God needs you, for the very meaning of your life.”<sup>114</sup>

Buber’s knowledge of God’s desires extends even to the period of His eclipse when, as I understand it, God is no longer available for meetings or anything else. Even during this trying period

“God desires that men should follow His revelation, yet at the same time he wishes to be accepted and loved in his deepest concealment.”<sup>115</sup>

Is God a person? Buber admits that this is not an easy question to answer. When we say of somebody that he is a person in the familiar sense of this word we imply that he is limited in his “total being by the plurality of other independent entities,” but this “cannot of course be true of God.”<sup>116</sup> God’s

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<sup>110</sup> *OJ*, p. 212.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>114</sup> *IT*, p. 82.

<sup>115</sup> *EG*, p. 60.

<sup>116</sup> *IT*, p. 136.

“absolute character . . . prohibits any such statement.”<sup>117</sup> “The concept of personal being,” is thus “completely incapable of declaring what God’s essential being is.”<sup>118</sup> We must, however, remember two things—first, that whatever God’s essential being may be, He does enter “into a direct relation with us men in creative, revealing and redeeming acts” and, second, that in talking about God we are obliged to make “paradoxical use” of concepts taken from ordinary experience. When a concept is used in this way its “content . . . is revolutionized, transformed and extended.”<sup>119</sup> With these considerations in mind we can offer “the paradoxical description of God as the absolute Person, i.e. the person who cannot be limited.”<sup>120</sup> Whatever else God is, he is “*also* a Person.”<sup>121</sup> “God loves as a personality and wishes to be loved like a personality.”<sup>122</sup> “It is as the absolute Person that God enters into direct relation with us.” Thus the “contradiction” in talking of a person who cannot be limited “yields to deeper insight.”<sup>123</sup> Such contradictions and paradoxes are unavoidable when we wish to describe “the reality between us and God.”<sup>124</sup> However, they need not overly concern us since we are dealing with the “superlogical” here and for this sphere “the law of contradiction does not hold valid.”<sup>125</sup> Reason is indeed a “trustworthy elaborator” in certain contexts, but we must not allow it to become an autocrat:

“The living reality of meeting is not subject to the logic forged in three millenia; where the *complexio oppositorum* rules, the law of contradiction is silent.”<sup>126</sup>

I have left to the end the more obvious traditional characteristics like omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness. As far as I know Buber does not provide a discussion of these attributes that is as detailed as his discussion of God’s personality, but there is no doubt that both he and his disciples believe in a God with these attributes and that they would never be satisfied with a finite deity of the kind endorsed by John

<sup>117</sup> *EG*, p. 60.

<sup>118</sup> *IT*, p. 135.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>120</sup> P. 136.

<sup>121</sup> P. 135, Buber’s italics.

<sup>122</sup> *EG*, p. 60.

<sup>123</sup> *IT*, p. 135.

<sup>124</sup> *PMB*, p. 700.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 690.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 701.

Stuart Mill, William James and E. S. Brightman. It is because of their belief in a God who is both omnipotent and perfectly good that Buber and his followers feel it incumbent on them to deal with the problem of evil—something that is not required of a believer in a finite deity.

## The Eclipse of God

Late in his career Buber propounded a doctrine which, in at least one of its formulations, is theologically highly unorthodox. This is the theory of the "Gottesfinsternis" or the eclipse of God. Fackenheim refers to this doctrine as "perhaps the greatest achievement of Buber's career" and he speaks in this connection admiringly of the "steadfastness" with which Buber moved "from an original resort to romantic illusions (in *I and Thou*) toward an ever-greater realism."<sup>127</sup> Buber himself advanced the eclipse-theory in explicit opposition to the atheism of Nietzsche and Sartre. Fackenheim describes it as "an indirect response to all modern secularism and, in anticipation, to all the 'God-is-dead' theologies."

There seem to be two versions of this doctrine. The milder version resembles Heidegger's claim that modern man, because of his immersion in beings and his excessive concern with technology, has "forgotten Being." Modern man, in Buber's terminology, is so absorbed in I-It dealings that he has lost the capacity for the I-Thou relationship; and this has made it impossible for him to find God:

"In our age the I-It relation, gigantically swollen, has usurped, practically uncontested, the mastery and the rule. The I of this relation, an I that possesses all, makes all, succeeds with all, this I that is unable to say Thou, unable to meet a being essentially, is the Lord of the hour. This selfhood that has become omnipotent, with all the It around it, can naturally acknowledge neither God nor any genuine absolute which manifests itself to men as of non-human origin. It steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> "On the Self-Exposure of Faith to the Modern-Secular World," *Daedalus*, Winter 1967, from now on abbreviated as *OSF*, p. 212.

<sup>128</sup> *EG*, p. 129.

"Often enough we think there is nothing to hear, but long before we have ourselves put wax in our ears."<sup>129</sup>

It should be noted that, as here interpreted, the eclipse of God is not theologically unorthodox at all. It has very generally been held by theologians that in many ages human beings are, for one reason or another, psychologically incapable of meeting or even believing in God. On this view God is not deliberately hiding himself from men—it is they who have become incapable of seeing Him.

The more radical version of the eclipse-theory however, maintains precisely that God himself has in our age concealed himself from the world; and this is certainly theologically very unorthodox, although, as Buber rightly observes, it is clearly implied in various passages in the Bible. Men cannot in our times find God, not or not just because they have become incapable of I-Thou relationships, but rather because God has turned his back on the world. This "divine silence," in Fackenheim's words, "persists no matter how devoutly we listen."<sup>130</sup> In an essay entitled "Un nouveau mystique" Sartre had written "God is dead—he spoke to us and now is silent, all that we now touch is his corpse." Buber discusses these remarks at some length and expresses his disapproval of Sartre's conclusion that God is dead and of his "shockingly trivial" remark that all we can now touch is God's corpse. However, Buber appears to endorse Sartre's statement that "God spoke to us (in the past) and now is silent" provided it is not interpreted along atheistic lines:

"Let us ask whether it may not be literally true that God formerly spoke to us and is now silent, and whether this is not to be understood as the Hebrew Bible understands it, namely that the living God is not only a self-revealing but also a self-concealing God. Let us realize what it means to live in the age of such a concealment, such a divine silence."<sup>131</sup>

The silence of God is real and indicates that something has taken place not or not merely "in human subjectivity but in Being itself."<sup>132</sup> We need not despair, however, since the future

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<sup>129</sup> *IT*, second edition postscript, p. 137.

<sup>130</sup> *PMB*, p. 289.

<sup>131</sup> *EG*, p. 66.

<sup>132</sup> P. 68.

may not be as dark as the present. Before long God's self-concealment may come to an end:

"The eclipse of the light of God is no extinction; even tomorrow that which has stepped in between may give way."<sup>133</sup>

We have to "endure the divine silence" and "at the same time move existentially toward a new happening, toward that event in which the word between heaven and earth will again be heard."<sup>134</sup>

Emil Fackenheim believes that the doctrine of the eclipse of God can be made the basis of a decisive reply to various of the objections of unbelievers. To understand the decisiveness of this reply we must realize the difference between Biblical faith and the scientist's attitude towards his hypotheses. "In the Bible," writes Fackenheim, God is never "accepted hypothetically only as a mere assumption in need of confirmation and capable of refutation."<sup>135</sup> Neither times of external nor of internal darkness are regarded by "adherents of Biblical faith . . . as evidence against God, but rather—to use Martin Buber's expression—as evidence of an 'eclipse of God.'"<sup>136</sup> Science is "forever" hypothetical. The exact opposite is true of Biblical faith. "What could one make of a religious faith which was forever hypothetical, wavering between belief in good times and unbelief in bad?"<sup>137</sup> If a scientist's hypothesis is disconfirmed he will modify or abandon it. The Biblical believer will do nothing of the sort. What, asks Fackenheim, would Elijah have done, "if the heavenly fire had devoured the sacrifice of the priests of Baal rather than his own?" Of one thing we may be sure: he would not have concluded that Baal controls the physical world. "He would have lamented that, already forsaken by men, he was now forsaken by *Adonai* as well, and would have continued to do His work, alone."<sup>138</sup> It is thus apparent that "*religious faith can be, and is, empirically verifiable; but nothing empirical can possibly refute it.*"<sup>139</sup> This is true of Christian and Jewish faith alike, but it is particularly

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<sup>133</sup> *EG*, p. 129.

<sup>134</sup> *EG*, p. 68.

<sup>135</sup> *OSF*, p. 204.

<sup>136</sup> *OEG*, p. 56.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *EE*, p. 857.

<sup>139</sup> *OEG*, p. 55, Fackenheim's italics.

obvious in the case of Jewish faith: "That the Jew's faith, at any rate, is no hypothesis is shown by its very survival; if empirically refutable, it should stand refuted a thousand times."<sup>140</sup>

Once the nature of Biblical faith is understood it is easy to see why the evil that unquestionably exists in the world does not disprove it. If there is good fortune, it "reveals the hand of God." If fortune is bad and if this cannot be explained as just punishment, the conclusion is that "God's ways are unintelligible, not that there are no ways of God." Tragedy does not destroy Biblical faith—it merely tests it. What is true of evil equally applies to the empty heart within. "A full heart within indicates the Divine Presence; an empty heart bespeaks not the non-existence or unconcern of God, but merely His temporary absence."<sup>141</sup> The considerations which show that neither the evil without nor the empty heart within can disprove belief in God equally apply to any and all scientific discoveries. The argument of those who maintain that the discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud have undermined religious belief is seen to be "utterly invalid." Biblical belief is empirically irrefutable and hence "scientific evidence can no more affect it than the evidence of historical tragedy or the evidence of an empty heart." We must keep in mind that although the Biblical God has always revealed Himself he has also always concealed Himself. "At most, therefore, modern science should have had no greater effect on Biblical belief than to show that its God was even more inscrutable than had hitherto been thought, and His revelations even more ambiguous and intermittent."<sup>142</sup>

## Objections

I now propose to offer a number of objections to Buber's theology. I do not propose to go into nearly all of Buber's claims and arguments that seem to me objectionable. For example, I shall not discuss Buber's highly unsatisfactory and superficial treatment of the "paradoxical" use of ordinary concepts when these are applied to God and his tendency to resolve difficulties by verbal fiat. However, I believe that my

<sup>140</sup> *OSF*, p. 204.

<sup>141</sup> *OEG*, p. 55.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

remarks will be sufficient to show that Buber's theology cannot withstand critical scrutiny and that it is a melange of dogmatisms, non-sequiturs, inconsistencies and evasions.

1. Maurice Friedman has remarked that human beings "know God *only* in dialogue"<sup>143</sup> and Buber himself summarized his view on the subject by saying that he knows "no other revelation than that of the meeting of the divine and the human in which the human takes part just as well as the divine."<sup>144</sup> If there is no other way of supporting theological statements, the question arises how Buber can possibly know the various things he claims to know about God's nature and intentions. For example, how does he know that God must always be a Thou and cannot possibly be an It? This is surely nothing but a *Machtspruch*. The most Buber has a right to assert is that during the meetings God is known as a Thou. He has no means of knowing what God is like when he is not a partner in an encounter, e.g. what he is when he is in self-concealment. Again, we are told that the Meeter is also the Maker of heaven and earth and that he created us in order to abolish the discord in the world. How can these claims possibly be based on what transpires in the meetings? Surely Buber and the other meeters do not observe God's creation of the universe in the course of their meetings. Perhaps indeed there is a Maker of the universe and perhaps the Meeter and the Maker are one; but if so this could be known only on the basis of something other than the meetings. We are also constantly told that God is eternal, but I do not see how this can be known through meetings in which it is conceded that we encounter a "moment God." Fackenheim is the only one of Buber's disciples who (to my knowledge) has attempted to answer this question. "He is eternal," Fackenheim writes, "because it is known in the here and now that He cannot turn into an It in any here and now."<sup>145</sup> Fackenheim expresses himself here more modestly than Buber. He does not claim that God can never be an It but merely that *we* cannot ever come across Him as anything but a Thou. My guess is that this is a slip on Fackenheim's part and that he meant to assert that God cannot ever *be* anything except a Thou. Whichever of these two propositions we take as the premise of the

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<sup>143</sup> Introduction to *BMM*, p. xviii, my italics.

<sup>144</sup> *PMB*, p. 698.

<sup>145</sup> *PMB*, p. 287.

argument for the Meeter's eternity, what we are offered is a glaring non-sequitur. The essential or inherent Thouness of the Meeter (whether it is inherent in Him as such or whether it is inherent only to his presence in meetings with human beings) does not imply that He is eternal in either of the two senses in which this word might be used here. It certainly does not imply unlimited duration since there is nothing about Thouness that is incompatible with extinction. It equally does not imply that God is "timeless."<sup>146</sup> Both Buber and Fackenheim have insisted that our meetings with God are meetings in the here and now. They can be dated and *we* at least are not timeless. How then could the fact, if it is a fact, of God's inherent Thouness establish his timelessness? Finally in this connection I do not see how the omnipotence or perfect goodness of the Eternal Thou could be known on the basis of the meetings. Let us grant that the Meeter is also the Ruler of the universe and that he announces in the course of a meeting that he is an omnipotent and perfectly good ruler. This statement would still need to be tested against what happens in the universe just as any other statement the Meeter might make that goes beyond what is or can be given in the meeting.<sup>147</sup> In this discussion I have allowed for the sake of argument that there is a Meeter and that Buber and others have "unillusive glances" of Him. As we shall see shortly, these are highly questionable assumptions.

2. Buber and his followers insist that they are not offering us an argument from religious experience. In fact, however, this is precisely what they do. The difference between them and philosophers who openly advance such an argument is that, unlike the latter, Buber and the Buberites present an *incompletely stated* argument and hence what they do is not so easy to criticize. It should first of all be pointed out that unillusive glances and self-authenticating encounters have been claimed

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>147</sup> Buber himself was very ready to reject other people's theories when they were not based on adequate evidence. Werner Kraft reports a discussion with Buber concerning a theory by a German philologist which Buber curtly rejected because there was no good evidence for its truth. "The only thing that matters is truth," Buber went on, "one understands this fully only when one has reached old age. . . . Today various important thinkers construct an 'Überwelt' (a world above the observable world) that does not correspond with reality. This is a dangerous game as one can see in the case of Heidegger." (*Gespräche mit Martin Buber*, Munich, Kösel Verlag, 1966, p. 36.) I could not agree more, but Buber's eternal, omnipotent, perfectly good Maker is just such an Überwelt.

by a great many people who would be dismissed by Buber and Fackenheim as clearly the victims of delusion. Michael Rohan, the Australian farm-worker who a few months ago set fire to the Al Aksa Mosque (and who was acquitted on the grounds of insanity) did so on orders of God who had chosen him to be King of Jerusalem and Judea. Charles Guiteau, the man who assassinated President Garfield, also acted on instructions from God.<sup>148</sup> The "blessed" Margaret Mary Alacoque encountered not only God but also Christ's sacred heart "surrounded with rays more brilliant than the Sun, and transparent like a crystal. The wound which he received on the cross visibly appeared upon it. There was a crown of thorns roundabout this divine Heart, and a cross above it." At the same time she heard Christ's voice tell her that "unable any longer to contain the flames of his love for mankind" he had chosen her to be his instrumentality in spreading the knowledge of his love. In what can only be described as an amazingly early double transplant, Christ "thereupon took out her mortal heart, placed it inside his own and inflamed it, and then replaced it in her breast, adding: 'Hitherto thou has taken the name of my slave, hereafter thou shalt be called the well-beloved disciple of my Sacred Heart.'" Buber and Fackenheim, like other non-Catholics (and I suppose emancipated post-ecumenical Catholics as well) would probably not treat Margaret Mary's visions any more seriously than the divine encounters of Michael Rohan and Charles Guiteau. Her pious biographer, however, refers to them as "the most important of all the revelations which have illumined the Church since that of the Incarnation and of the Lord's Supper."<sup>149</sup> Nor are encounters by people who are clearly insane the only ones that Buberites would dismiss as delusions. Sir John Baillie, a distinguished English theologian, an admirer of Buber, and a man whose sanity was beyond question, had encounters that no Jew could regard as veridical. After presenting a general position that is strikingly similar to Buber's in which rationalistic arguments for the existence of God are rejected, Baillie tells us that "our knowl-

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<sup>148</sup> Guiteau was quite clearly insane. He was nevertheless found guilty and hanged. The presiding judge described him as "the most cold-blooded and selfish murderer of the last sixty centuries." See Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau*, University of Chicago Press, 1968.

<sup>149</sup> My information about Margaret Mary is derived from William Jones, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Collier Books edition, pp. 273ff.

edge of God rests rather on the revelation of His personal Presence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>150</sup> It "comes through our direct personal encounter with Him in the Person of Jesus Christ his Son our Lord."<sup>151</sup>

Although they do not realize the implications of such an admission, both Buber and Fackenheim quite explicitly acknowledge the possibility that a person may be mistaken in his assertion that he encountered God. When the world presents me with a problem, writes Buber, I do indeed "experience what God desires of me for this hour,"<sup>152</sup> but this does not at all mean that my answer is necessarily the right one. "Certainly in my answering I am given into the power of his grace, but I cannot measure heaven's share in it, and even the most blissful sense of grace can deceive."<sup>153</sup> "The man living in responsibility can make even his political decisions properly only from that ground of his being at which he is aware of the event as divine speech to him." Supposing that somebody now were to ask "if one may be certain of finding what is right on this steep path, once again the answer is *no*; there is no certainty."<sup>154</sup> Similarly there are false as well as true prophets and the false prophets are not necessarily less sincere than the true ones: "The false prophets make their subconscious a god whereas for the true prophets their subconscious is subdued by the God of truth."<sup>155</sup> Fackenheim is even more emphatic about the fallibility of the believer's claims to have met God.

"... for the believer himself the 'knowledge' obtained is shot through with the gravest risks. After all, does not disguised self-love, being disguised, mistake itself for love of God? Are not god-projections, being unconscious, mistaken for real gods by those who are prey to them?"<sup>156</sup>

That there cannot be any such thing as an infallible experience of the divine Presence is shown "by pointing to the fact of serious but conflicting religious claims or to the more exotic

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<sup>150</sup> *Our Knowledge of God*, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 132.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>152</sup> *BMM*, p. 68.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>155</sup> *The Prophetic Faith*, p. 179, quoted by Fackenheim in *EE*, p. 862.

<sup>156</sup> *OEG*, p. 60.

varieties of religious enthusiasm, not to speak of madness taking itself for prophecy."<sup>157</sup>

Now, if some encounters are merely apparent and not real, if some "glances" are illusory, we need criteria to distinguish the merely apparent and illusory encounters from the real ones; and this is one of the things that arguments from religious experience have attempted to do. The difference between the Buberite position and the more traditional one is that the Buberites have not even attempted to specify such criteria. It is not unfair to comment that they have given us a broken-backed argument from religious experience. Without questioning his sincerity, we cannot simply take it on Buber's word that certain of his glances are "wholly unillusory" and that he or his followers have had "real encounters" with the divine. Presumably the same claim would be made by those who, by Buber's own acknowledgments, have had illusory glances and merely apparent encounters.

In fairness it should be mentioned that Fackenheim very emphatically disowns the view that there are or could be self-authenticating encounters with God and that he here parts company with Buber who "under undue Protestant-subjectivist-individualist influence" erred on this topic "against his better Jewish judgment."<sup>158</sup> What Fackenheim does not see is that, once the claim to self-authenticating encounters is retracted, he is in the same position as the defenders of the argument from religious experience. Fackenheim grossly misstates their position. They do not argue from religious *feelings* to the existence of God unless the word "feeling" is used in an extremely broad and rather unusual sense. They argue from visions and voices, from experiences in which God appears to be directly present. If they used Fackenheim's language they might say that many of these experiences occur while the person in question is "primordially open" to the divine and they would agree with Fackenheim that religious *feelings* like awe and admiration do not constitute but are a consequence of the religious experiences. What these writers recognize is that for a religious believer the

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<sup>157</sup> *EE*, p. 860.

<sup>158</sup> *EE*, p. 861. Fackenheim admits that this view is found in "the very individualistic *I and Thou*" but it does not "represent the most mature statement of Buber's teaching." This is not true. Several of the quotations I reproduced in the text show that exactly the same doctrine is found in the very late *Eclipse of God*.

appeal to encounters is of no value at all unless reasons can be given for supposing, first, that not all encounters are delusions and, second, criteria can be specified to distinguish those which are veridical from those which are not.<sup>159</sup> The defender of the argument during religious experience, furthermore, does *not* maintain that during the encounter the prophet (or whoever is involved) engages in any inferential process. What he does maintain—and what Fackenheim is also committed to once he has abandoned self-authentication—is that there is a step from the report of the encounter to the claim that the Eternal Thou was really present and that this step requires justification.<sup>160</sup>

It is difficult to see why the Buberites should look with disdain at an argument which cannot achieve more than probability. In one place Fackenheim admits that when faced with the secularist challenge, “modern faith” must recognize a “shattering possibility”—the possibility that there is no God and hence that “all human witnessing to a divine presence ever made might have been based on radical illusion: the possibility that man is, as secularism holds him to be, radically alone.”<sup>161</sup> But if the possibility cannot be ruled out that all encounters have been and always will be delusions how can Buber and Fackenheim possibly achieve anything more than probability assuming that they could ever achieve that much?

3. It is difficult to see how treating God as a person and not a thing—and this is regarded as Buber’s greatest achievement by a number of theologians—overcomes or avoids any of the traditional difficulties of theism. It will be sufficient to confine ourselves here to two of these difficulties. One is the problem of reconciling the all-powerful and all-good God with the evil in the world. The other is the extremely serious semantic problem arising from the fact that believers regard God as a purely spiritual entity. If this is so, how can we meaningfully apply to God the various predicates, like “intelligent,” “powerful,” “just,” which are originally introduced in connection with

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<sup>159</sup> On one occasion Fackenheim realizes the need for “criteria to distinguish between true and false prophecies” (*EE*, p. 862), but he nowhere even attempts to supply them.

<sup>160</sup> For an excellent discussion of the tendency, common among religious apologists, to confuse biographical questions about the content of a religious experience with epistemological questions concerning the justification of claims based on the experience see Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, London, Hutchinson and Company, 1966, Chapter 6, especially pp. 134ff.

<sup>161</sup> *OSF, Op. Cit.*, p. 211.

individuals possessing a body? What for example does it mean to say about a bodiless being that he or it is intelligent? It would surely be nonsense to say "Professor X, who unlike my other colleagues has no body at all, is a highly intelligent philosopher." If this is nonsense why does the same kind of language become intelligible if the subject is a non- or super-human being? Philosophically informed and logically sensitive believers are acutely aware of this difficult problem.<sup>102</sup> Now, granting for the sake of argument that a believer who loves God is in some respects more admirable than somebody who impersonally accepts God as an entity established by certain logical arguments, granting even that the former alone can qualify as a "true believer," the fact remains that the loved God, the Thou, no less than the merely intellectually accepted God, is regarded as a purely spiritual being to whom we are nevertheless supposed to apply such predicates as "intelligent," "powerful," and "just"; and the difficulty of attaching any meaning to these terms when they are applied to a purely spiritual being are exactly the same whether that being is loved or merely intellectually acknowledged. The problem of evil also remains exactly where it was. The eternal Thou no less than the unloved or less loved God of the philosophers, is described as both all-powerful and perfectly good; and the evil in the world presents exactly the same difficulty for the position of the loving as it does for that of the cold or colder believer. The theologians who maintain that Buber has somehow circumvented the traditional difficulties simply have not thought very much about the nature of these difficulties.

4. Buber is very unfair to the "philosophical believers" or at any rate he states the difference between their position and his in a highly misleading fashion. We are told that their God occupies a definite place in a certain system while his God does not. Buber also frequently denies that he has a "theology." However, he too puts forward a set of assertions about God and

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<sup>102</sup> For a discussion of this question by a believer who is well acquainted with contemporary objections to theism see John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1963, Chapters 6 and 7 and the same author's "Meaning and Truth in Theology," in S. Hook, ed., *Religious Experience and Truth*, New York, New York University Press, 1961. For a fuller presentation of the semantic difficulties of any believer in a bodiless God, see my "Atheism," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. I, pp. 183ff and my "Difficulties in the Idea of God," in E. H. Madden, R. Handy and M. Farber, eds., *The Idea of God*, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, Illinois, 1968.

God's relations to man—assertions which are supposed to be true descriptions of the universe; and that is precisely what the philosophical believers are doing. What we have, in other words, are two competing systems, or if the word "system" is used in a very restricted sense so that Buber cannot be said to have a system, we at any rate have two competing sets of theological claims. Perhaps Buber's claims are correct or nearer the truth, but it is quite inaccurate to say that the alternative before us is love versus a system.

5. What are we to say of Buber's doctrine that during our age God is concealing himself and of Fackenheim's employment of this doctrine to reconcile tragedy, the empty heart and anything else whatsoever, actual or conceivable, with the existence of God? The first, the most obvious and as far as I can see an altogether decisive objection is that God's self-concealment is inconsistent with his perfect goodness or indeed with any kind of goodness on his part. If the Bible also preaches such a doctrine, then either the Biblical God is not a good God or else the Bible, too, is inconsistent on this question. If a child is in terrible trouble and his father knows about it and could come to the child's help but refuses to do so, i.e. begins to "conceal" himself, this would not, surely, be the mark of a perfectly good father. On the contrary, we would regard him as a monster. It is difficult to see what other response could be justified towards a deity behaving in this fashion. If a Jew in Auschwitz desperately needs God's assistance, if God knows about the Jew's need (and he must know it since he is omniscient), if God furthermore is capable of coming to the Jew's assistance (since he is omnipotent he can do this) and if he nevertheless refuses to do so but instead "conceals himself," then this is not simply a deity falling short of complete goodness but a monstrous deity in comparison with whom, as Bertrand Russell once put it, Nero would have to be regarded as a saint.

What about Fackenheim's contention, advanced in all seriousness, that although Biblical faith is empirically verifiable nothing can possibly refute it? This may not unjustly be called the "heads I win, tails you lose" strategy. It clearly involves a confusion between psychological (and philosophically quite irrelevant) considerations and the real logical issues at stake between the believer and his critics. The question at stake is whether, in the light of the evil in the world and various

other considerations, the assertions, the claims of the believer have not been shown to be false or highly improbable or in some other way absurd or untenable. This question is in no way even approached if we are told that a truly Biblical believer will not abandon his faith, no matter what he finds in the world. From the *unbudgeability*, the immovability, the unconvertability of the Biblical believer, nothing whatever follows about the *undisprovability* of his position. Fackenheim is here simply misled by the ambiguity of certain expressions he employs like "destroy" and "test." The horrors of the world may not in fact destroy a given religious person's faith in the sense of *causing him to abandon it*, but this in no way shows that they do not destroy it in the sense of *disproving* the assertions which are the content of his faith.

There is of course no doubt that human beings are frequently so attached to their beliefs that they will not give them up, come what may. Bigots believe all sorts of things about Jews, Negroes, Catholics and other groups which are not in accordance with the facts. What they believe usually fulfils some deep emotional need and no amount of evidence to the contrary can shake them out of their prejudices. In spite of the most abundant evidence concerning the monstrosities perpetrated by Stalin and his associates, to take another illustration, a sizable number of Communists and fellow-travellers throughout the world refused to give up their support of the Soviet system. During the Hitler period Nazi sympathizers throughout the world persistently denied that there were any such places as concentration camps were reputed to be. When the British troops liberated Bergen-Belsen and other concentration camps in Western Germany they took pictures of what they found and these were subsequently shown in theaters in the United States among other countries. The pro-Nazis refused to see these movies on the ground that they were the usual Jewish propaganda. Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. It is not precisely news that human beings behave in this way. What is remarkable is that a philosopher should admire conduct of this kind and advocate it as an intellectual policy of great virtue.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Fackenheim is not of course alone in this. The strategy he adopts is, to all intents and purposes, identical with Kierkegaard's doctrine that truth is subjectivity, that a religious believer is "in the truth" regardless of the state of the objective evidence so long as he entertains his belief sincerely and without reservations. See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Part Two, Chapter II.

The glaring inconsistency between traditional theism and the view that God conceals himself during certain periods is not completely lost on Buber and Fackenheim. When reflecting on Auschwitz and God's absence during the holocaust that overtook the Jews of Europe during that period, Buber and Fackenheim show some awareness of the difficulties besetting the believer's position. Thus, in a very late paper, "The Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth" (1951) Buber remarks:

"One asks again and again: how is a Jewish life still possible after Auschwitz? I would like to frame this question more correctly: how is a life with God still possible in a time in which there is an Auschwitz? The estrangement has become too cruel, the hiddenness too deep. . . . Dare we recommend to the survivors of Auschwitz, the Job of the gas chambers: 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever!'"<sup>164</sup>

Fackenheim expresses himself in a similar vein in two of his most recent articles:

"The events that are associated with the dread name of Auschwitz still pass human comprehension. But they have shaken Jewish existence to the core, even when they are uncomprehended. They call everything into question: for the believing Jew, for the unbelieving Jew, for the Jew who is neither believer nor unbeliever but merely asks unanswered or unanswerable questions. Only one thing is as yet clear. The Jew may not authentically think about religion, or its modern crisis, or the goods and ills of the modern secular world as though Auschwitz had not happened."<sup>165</sup>

"There is not, and never will be, an adequate explanation. Auschwitz is the scandal of evil for evil's sake. . . . This is the rock on which throughout eternity all rational explanation will crash and break apart. . . . No purpose, religious or non-religious, will ever be found in Auschwitz. The very attempt to find one is blasphemous."<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> *OJ*, p. 224.

<sup>165</sup> *OSF, Op. Cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>166</sup> "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust," from now on referred to as *JFH*, *Commentary*, 1968, p. 31.

"Would we (like Job) be able to say that the question of Auschwitz will be answered in any sense whatever in case the eclipse of God were ended and He appeared to us? An impossible and intolerable question. . . . The question *is* impossible and intolerable. Even Job's question is not answered in God's presence, and to him children are restored. The children of Auschwitz will not be restored, and the question of Auschwitz will not be answered by a saving divine presence."<sup>167</sup>

Buber and Fackenheim state the difficulties with admirable force in these passages, but such a display of critical power is almost instantly submerged in the usual pious rhetoric. "Do we," asks Buber,

"stand overcome before the hidden face of God like the tragic hero of the Greeks before faceless fate? No, rather even now we contend, we too, with God, even with Him, the Lord of Being, whom we once, we here, chose for our Lord. We do not put up with earthly being; we struggle for its redemption, and struggling we appeal to the help of our Lord, who is again and still a hiding one. In such a state we await His voice, whether it comes out of the storm or out of a stillness that follows it. Though His coming appearance resemble no earlier one, we shall recognize again our cruel and merciful Lord."<sup>168</sup>

If we are to believe Fackenheim, the "coming appearance of the Lord" predicted by Buber in 1951 has now become a reality. A voice,

"a *commanding* Voice is being heard, and has, however faintly, been heard from the start. Religious Jews hear it, and they identify its source. Secularist Jews also hear it, even though perforce they leave it unidentified. At Auschwitz, Jews came face to face with absolute evil. They were and still are singled out by it, but in the midst of it they hear an absolute commandment: *Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories to Hitler*. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36. Fackenheim's italics.

<sup>168</sup> *OJ*, p. 225.

<sup>169</sup> *JFH*, p. 32. Fackenheim's italics.

The irrelevance of these admonitions is truly hair-raising. Buber and Fackenheim are surely making things a little too easy for themselves. The advice that we should go on struggling against evil in spite of all that has transpired makes good sense and no decent human being would deny the right of the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies. But how does any of this reinstate the Eternal Thou? How does it answer the unbeliever's challenge which Buber and Fackenheim saw quite clearly for one fleeting moment? How does it show that we can be justified in believing that the world is the work of a being at once all-good and all-powerful who deserves our admiration and worship? Buber's remark about the "cruel Lord" cannot be taken literally. Aside from the fact that belief in a cruel and all-powerful God is tantamount to abandonment of theism, as theism has been understood by Jews and Christians alike, there would be no problem of evil if this were the initial position: it is no problem to reconcile Auschwitz or other evils with such a God. Furthermore we are supposed to worship God, but it would be monstrous and not at all our duty to worship a cruel deity. As far as I can see Buber's description of the Lord as cruel is nothing more than an expression of his bad conscience over continuing to believe in the eternal Thou in spite of Auschwitz and the other horrors that even pious men cannot overlook.

Fackenheim's remarks about Auschwitz call for some additional comments. In all of his publications Fackenheim continues to talk about the irrefutability of Biblical faith, but if Biblical faith were really irrefutable, there would be no ground for any (theoretical) concern over Auschwitz. If Biblical faith is irrefutable by anything that may happen, then it would not be refuted by Auschwitz or a super-Auschwitz or Auschwitzes continued indefinitely for billions of years without hope or relief. If, on the other hand, Auschwitz really calls "*everything* into question," then Biblical faith is after all not irrefutable. Here for once Fackenheim seems to see, though not very clearly, that there is a logical issue and not merely a psychological question about the tenacity of this or that believer. It is also necessary to protest against Fackenheim's dragging in of the "unbelieving Jew." As a human being, a decent unbeliever, Jewish or otherwise, will no doubt be as shaken by Auschwitz as anybody else, but he does *not* have the believer's problem on his

hands. Since he does not believe in an all-powerful and all-good God neither Auschwitz nor any other evil in the world contradicts *his* philosophy.

One final word about the commanding Voice which Fackenheim claims to have heard. I find it truly amazing, not that Fackenheim should hear a voice, but that after all has happened he should be glad to hear it and that he should be so ready to treat the orders issued by this voice as "absolute commandments" which have to be obeyed. I am often, I am sure very justly, accused of spiritual blindness and I fully recognize that I am not primordially open to the presence of God, but I am not altogether devoid of self-respect and a sense of decency. Rather than humbly obey, it seems to me more appropriate and dignified to address the owner of this voice in words like these:

If you are the same God who could have rescued the Jews but who went into self-concealment instead, then do me the favor of not meddling in my life or in the life of the Jewish people. Your absenteeism disqualifies you from any position of moral adviser or commander. You, who let the children of Auschwitz die, you did nothing to stop these and countless other infamies throughout the ages, you who are as guilty as the exterminators that were allowed to ply their trade undisturbed, from you, Sir, I want no advice and need no advice and your commandments I will not obey. I will help to defend the Jewish people against aggression and injustice because *I* regard aggression and injustice as wrong and not because of anything that you may say or command.

The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living"—just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Students' Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lecturers for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy. The following lectures have been published, and may be obtained from the Department at a price of fifty cents each.

1961. "The Idea of Man—An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology."  
By José Ferrater Mora, Professor of Philosophy, Bryn Mawr College.
1962. "Changes in Events and Changes in Things."  
By A. N. Prior, Professor of Philosophy, University of Manchester.
1963. "Moral Philosophy and the Analysis of Language."  
By Richard B. Brandt, Professor of Philosophy, Swarthmore College.
1964. "Human Freedom and the Self."  
By Roderick M. Chisholm, Professor of Philosophy, Brown University.
1965. "Freedom of Mind."  
By Stuart Hampshire, Professor of Philosophy, Princeton University.
1966. "Some Beliefs about Justice."  
By William K. Frankena, Professor of Philosophy, University of Michigan.
1967. "Form and Content in Ethical Theory."  
By Wilfrid Sellars, Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh.
1968. "The Systematic Unity of Value."  
By J. N. Findlay, Clark Professor of Philosophy, Yale University.