

FIRST THINGS

I, IT, THOU

by
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Martin Buber's classic *I and Thou* describes a doubleness in human life that is captured by two "primary words," *I-It* and *I-Thou*. The contrast is not merely between two modes of human contact with the world. The *I* itself is different, depending on whether *I* is connected to an *It* or a *Thou*.

When engaged with things, the *I* is one pole of an *I-It* duality. Encountering an *It*, I stand at a distance to analyze and dissect, classify and count, and formulate laws. The *I* that faces *It* is a partial *I*, a subject over against objects, an individual that is not yet a full person.

The world of *I-Thou*, by contrast, is a world of relation, in which the *I* becomes fully personal. *I-Thou* is perfected in a relation unmediated by ideas or aims, foreknowledge or fancy. In this world, "every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about." *I-Thou* is a relation of sheer presence and presentness.

Among primitive peoples, things are personal, so that even contact with a tree is an *I-Thou* relation. Infants, too, enter the world longing for a *Thou*. In short, "in the beginning is relation—as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul."

Children outgrow their primitive yearning for relation. The "I" shrinks "to a functional point, to a subject which experiences and uses." Non-primitive people—that is, moderns—have done the same at a macro-level, abandoning a universal *I-Thou* to become consumers and users of things. Modern society is "sunk in the world of *It*."

Buber links *I-Thou* with freedom, personhood, and reality, but he doesn't want to return to childhood or disparage the world of *It*. As soon as we respond to a *Thou*, we reduce it, in some

degree, to an *It*. That reduction is the basis for knowledge, work, and the formation of images and symbols. That reduction is both the “melancholy” and the “greatness” of man.

Though we can't retreat into a pure realm of *I-Thou*, modern society can be healed if *I-Thou* flows into, penetrates, and fructifies our *I-It* experience. A well-lived life oscillates between *I-Thou* and *I-It*, between individuality and personhood. Most especially, the world of *I-It* must be infused with relation to an absolute *Thou*, an encounter with a *Thou* who cannot be reduced to an *It*.

Even if few read Buber anymore, his description of modern life persists, rhyming with theories structured around the contrast of community versus society, *Gesellschaft* versus *Gemeinschaft*, pre-modern personalism versus modern individualism.

Buber's Kantian personalism provides materials for a powerful indictment of our cultural maladies. Nature is reduced to raw material to be manipulated by technique. Modern economic systems reduce workers to cogs, judged by utility and profitability. Our pornographic sexuality turns the bodies of men and women into instruments to gratify our desires.

Yet, at base, Buber's dual frame is misleading. A tree isn't always just a tree. My father recently had to cut down a large oak in his back yard. He told me how much it saddened him. For more than fifty years, the tree had looked back every time he looked out the dining room window. His children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren had played on a rope swing that hung from one of the lower branches. My father's connection with the tree was anything but *I-It*; the oak was so invested with memories that he took its demise personally.

The *I-It* world is cluttered with things that are more than things. My family sometimes eats off the Menaboni bird plates that my mother-in-law received when she opened an account at an Atlanta bank half a century ago. The bird plates hold food, but we don't keep them for their functionality. They are sacraments of a family heritage.

Buber recognizes that *I-It* experiences come in various shades and colors, some of which approach an *I-Thou* relation. But he doesn't see how deeply this concession cuts into his original binary paradigm.

And he doesn't consider the opposite truth—that the world of *I-Thou* is thoroughly cluttered with things. He makes it clear that *I-Thou* doesn't mean absorption, but his ideal relation is a mystical present of unmediated contact with another *I*.

That is rarely how we encounter a *Thou*. An *I* typically relates to a *Thou* through things. That's not true just in the marketplace, where meetings happen only because sellers want to sell and buyers want to buy. A loving *I* enters into and deepens his relations with a beloved *Thou* through flowers, candies, diamond rings, words.

Buber might admit as much, but he would regard mediated relation as a shadow of true *I-Thou*. But then his binary leaves out most of human experience and leaves the *I-It* world largely untouched. Buber merely adds a zone of ineffable encounter to the drab workaday world of users manipulating things.

We strike nearer the root of secular order when we recognize that things aren't just things and, even more, when we recall that even our encounters with the absolute *Thou* are mediated by Shabbat and sacrifice, through water, bread, and wine.

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