

An Unending Sphere of Relation

Martin Buber's Conception of Personhood

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ABSTRACT I reconstruct Buber's conception of personhood and identify in his work four criteria for personhood—(i) uniqueness, (ii) wholeness, (iii) goodness, and (iv) a drive to relation—and an account of three basic degrees of personhood, stretching, as a kind of “chain of being,” from plants and animals, through humans, to God as the absolute person. I show that Buber's “new” conception of personhood is rooted in older Neoplatonic notions, such the goodness of all being and the principle of plenitude. While other philosophers have used reason and memory to distinguish persons, I find that Buber instead takes these to be specific to humanity, and I explore Buber's account of a “fall” from a state of nature into a historical mode, such that our humanity threatens our personhood.

KEYWORDS Buber, Martin; God; Memory; Neoplatonism; Person

Karl Heim once described Martin Buber's account of personhood and I-Thou and I-It relations as inaugurating a revolution in thought as significant as Kant's “Copernican Revolution.”¹ The notion of personhood is important for religious and moral philosophers alike, yet while the two types of relations identified by Buber have been thoroughly analyzed, less attention has been paid to his account of personhood. In what follows I reconstruct this important aspect of Buber's thought and show that his “revolution” is actually rooted in an old approach. Buber draws on Nicholas of Cusa to use the Neoplatonic notions of the goodness of all being and the principle of plenitude to support a more modern diversitarianism. These Neoplatonic origins help explain Buber's unusual criteria for

1. As quoted in Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 4th ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 192.

personhood—(i) uniqueness, (ii) wholeness, (iii) goodness, and (iv) a drive to relation—as well as his account of three basic degrees of personhood, stretching, as a kind of “chain of being,” from plants and animals, through humans, to God as the absolute person. To elucidate Buber’s distinctive account of personhood, I compare his criteria for personhood to competing notions of personhood. This shows that what other thinkers take to be specific to persons, namely reason and memory, Buber instead takes to be specific to humans and threatening to our personhood. Fortunately, the very cause of our “fall” from personhood identified by Buber will be seen to also possess the capacity to restore our personhood.

FROM INDIVIDUATION TO PERSONHOOD

To understand Buber’s notion of personhood let us begin with his early philosophy of the individual. In 1904 Buber submitted his only recently published and little studied dissertation, “On the History of the Problem of Individuation: Nicholas of Cusa and Jakob Böhme,” to the University of Vienna.² Buber states in its introduction that his ultimate goal is to ontologically ground the “urge to personality” described by his teacher Wilhelm Dilthey and the “ethics of personality” found in Friedrich Schleiermacher and Ralph Waldo Emerson.³ To achieve this goal his dissertation was to be part of a larger project detailing the history of the problem of individuation up to Leibniz and contemporary philosophy (*HL*, 371). Though he never completed this history and did not return to Dilthey, Emerson or Schleiermacher in his later writings, the dissertation is nonetheless instructive. It shows Buber’s concern, even in his early writing, to defend the value of the individual and develop a complex notion of unity that would preserve difference. Moreover, the main figures of the dissertation point to an unexpected source of inspiration for his embrace of Hasidism and later dialogic philosophy. Shortly after completing his dissertation, Buber describes Hasidism as “an absolutely original, popular, and living

2. Inigo Bocken published a Dutch translation of the dissertation in 2005, Sarah Scott published an English translation in 2012, and Francesco Ferrari published an Italian translation in 2013. All three use the manuscript in the Martin Buber Archives of the Jewish National Library. As there is no copy in the archives of the University of Vienna it is unknown if this is final version of the dissertation. For a brief analysis of the section on Böhme, see Franz Rosenzweig, “Zu einer Stelle aus Martin Bubers Dissertation,” in *Zweistromland*, ed. Annemarie Mayer and Reinhold Mayer (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1984).

3. Martin Buber, “On the History of the Problem of Individuation: Nicholas of Cusa and Jacob Böhme,” trans. Sarah Scott, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 33, no. 2 (2012): 372. Hereafter cited in text as *HL*.

renewal of Neoplatonism.”⁴ Buber then describes Hasidism as a response to the Spinozan criticism of the Jewish teaching that God is a person.⁵ The Hasidic response to this criticism of anthropomorphism is not that God is *simply* a person, but “that God is *also* a person, and this is, in contrast to all impersonal, unaddressable ‘purity’ of God, an augmentation of divinity” (emphasis in the original).⁶ Buber’s dissertation reveals it is the same notion—the value of personhood—that renders Hasidism both an answer to Spinoza and a renewal of Neoplatonism.

Buber writes Nicholas of Cusa is “the first thinker of the modern era” because he accords individuals reality (*HI*, 375). This is in contrast to earlier thinkers, such as Meister Eckhart, who maintain individuation is an obstacle to divine union that can and must be transcended. Although Buber sees this celebration of individuality as ushering in the modern age, Buber writes the worth Nicholas of Cusa accords to individuals comes from a “renewal of Neoplatonism in Renaissance philosophy,” and his account of Nicholas of Cusa revolves around two Neoplatonic notions: the goodness of all being and the principle of plenitude (*HI*, 372). Since Nicholas of Cusa accords reality to individuals, he must explain the value of individual diversity for creation. Buber identifies two explanations in Nicholas of Cusa’s work: a theological-epistemological explanation based on an account of thought as separation into different parts, and a theological-aesthetic explanation based on an account of beauty as requiring different parts. Regardless of whether God is conceived as the perfect thinker or the perfect artist, infinite diverse creatures must exist in order to express God’s infinite activity. This expression of the principle of plenitude inaugurates “the great and modern picture of the world . . . [in which] each being [*Wesen*] belongs to eternity, an unending sphere of relation. So each being [*Wesen*] must then also manifest infinite worth in its objective individuality. Just because it is at all, since being [*Sein*] is good and noble and delightful. Mainly, however, because it is particular and unique” (*HI*, 377).

4. Martin Buber, “The Jewish Cultural Problem and Zionism,” in *The First Buber: Youthful Zionist Writings of Martin Buber*, trans. and ed. Gilya G. Schmidt (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 178. For Buber’s early appropriation of the Renaissance for cultural Zionism see his “Jewish Renaissance,” in *The First Buber* and Asher D. Biemann, *Inventing New Beginnings: On the Idea of Renaissance in Modern Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

5. Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, trans. and ed. Maurice S. Friedman (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1988), 96.

6. *Ibid.*, 92.

Although this theological defense of the value of the individual uses classic Neoplatonic notions, Buber then finds in Nicholas of Cusa a thoroughly modern, indeed, romantic, diversitarianism and ethics of individuation. Individuals are good because they are unique and irreplaceable, and individuals participate in creation by developing their uniqueness. As Buber explains Nicholas of Cusa's thought, the more we individuate, the more we attain blessedness:

God Himself calls the thing upwards to itself: to the *assimilatio*, i.e., to the realization of its own predisposition [*Anlagen*]. For God, who has revealed Himself in the things, does not want the diversity of things to be overcome [*aufheben*], but consummated [*vollenden*]: not depersonalization [*Entpersönlichung*], but precisely perfection of personalization [*Verpersönlichung*], leads things to God. Each thing moves itself within its sphere, and when it has reached perfection, rests tranquil [*ruht*] in its own sphere, [for] no other [sphere] is reachable. And as man requires eternal blessedness in his own nature and wills to be blessed not as an angel but as himself, so also God allows the individual to fulfill itself as itself, and as such to reach in him the tranquility of perfection [*Vollkommenheitsruhe*]. (*HI*, 383)

Although the process of “personalization” sometimes leads to strife between individuals, it is nonetheless mutually productive since even agonistic encounters provoke further individuation or “personalization.” As Buber writes in 1907: “It is because things happen but once that the individual partakes in eternity. . . . Uniqueness is thus the essential good of man that is given to him to unfold. . . . [T]he uniqueness of man proves itself in his life with others. For the more unique a man really is, so much more can he give to the other and so much more will he give to the other.”⁷

In his dissertation Buber suggests individual and person are synonymous terms; for instance, he aims to ground an ethics of *personality* by giving a historical account of *individuation*. However, individuation is an infelicitous term as it can connote an immoral and politically dangerous

7. Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, trans. Maurice S. Friedman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 41–42. Buber's embrace of Neoplatonism is mediated through romanticism; for this connection see the chapter “Romanticism and the Principle of Plenitude” in Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 288–314. Lovejoy's discussion of Schleiermacher in this section helps fill in the narrative running from Neoplatonism to Schleiermacher's “ethics of personality” that Buber's dissertation intended but did not complete.

individualism. In recognition of this, when Buber develops his critique of individualism as concomitant with collectivism, he sets aside references to individuals and instead focuses on persons. An analysis of Buber's later works shows he characterizes persons as possessing four defining attributes: (i) uniqueness, (ii) wholeness, (iii) goodness, and (iv) a drive to relation. He writes to recognize persons *as* persons is to recognize their uniqueness: "the person is through and through nothing other than uniqueness and thus essentially other than all that is over against it."⁸ Dialogue occurs between persons who accept and affirm one another's unique otherness: "[dialogue] unreservedly accepts and confirms him in his being this man and in his being made in this particular way. The strictness and depth of human individuation, the elemental otherness of the other, is then not merely noted as the necessary starting point, but is affirmed from the one being to the other."⁹ In other passages Buber describes acting from one's person as acting as a whole being, that is, with integrity and without contradiction. He writes we find ourselves in "situations in which we feel it incumbent upon us to make the decision which, from our person, and from our person as we feel it 'purposed' for us, answers the situation confronting us. Such a decision can only be taken by the whole soul that has become one."¹⁰ The inclusion of wholeness as an attribute of persons expands the notion of the goodness of persons. Following Buber's analysis of Nicholas of Cusa, persons are good in the sense of having intrinsic value because particular, unique, and irreplaceable creatures are essentially good. However, persons are also good in the sense of being morally praiseworthy because they act as whole beings. Evil "persons" are not persons at all, for they do not act out of a state of wholeness. This suggests personhood can be gained and lost, a notion we shall return to.

However, so far the question of the difference between persons and non-persons is unanswered. With the exception of the added notion of their wholeness rendering them morally praiseworthy, uniqueness, wholeness and goodness could be the defining features of substances in general. It is the fourth attribute of persons, that they possess a drive to relation, which

8. Martin Buber, "What is Common to All," in *The Knowledge of Man: Selected Essays*, trans. Maurice S. Friedman and Ronald Gregor-Smith (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 86.

9. Martin Buber, "Distance and Relation," in *The Knowledge of Man*, 59.

10. Martin Buber, "Images of Good and Evil," in *Good and Evil: Two Interpretations*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith and Michael Bullock (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 128. The division and contradiction of the person, especially as indicated by lying, drives much of Buber's account of evil in "Images of Good and Evil."

comes to the fore in Buber's later work and is his most significant criterion. *I and Thou* repeats the refrain "in the beginning is the relation," laying out a sort of state of nature for man.¹¹ Although this is a beginning we have left behind, we carry this pre-history with us in our "innateness of the longing for relation [*Ursprünglichkeit des Beziehungsstrebens*]" (*IT*, 77). While the bulk of our relations are with other beings, the drive to relation is so strong that we are even moved to form relations with inanimate objects. Buber offers as evidence of the longing for relation the imaginative activities of an artist studying red wallpaper in order to grasp the soul of red, and a child that imbues a toy bear with life: "this 'imagination' [*Phantasie*] is by no means a form of 'panpsychism' [*Allbeseelung*]; it is the drive to turn everything into a You, the drive to pan-relation [*Trieb zur Allbeziehung*]-and where it does not find a living active being that confronts it but only an image or symbol of that, it supplies the living activity from its own fullness" (*IT*, 78). Buber then differentiates between two poles of human existence: egos [*Eigenwesen*], which have I-It relations, and persons, which have I-Thou relations (*IT*, 112-14). None of us is purely ego or purely person. We fluctuate between self-reflective behavior in which, even if we appear to be in a relationship, otherness is denied so that we are really in relation with our self, and genuinely relational behavior, which implies the embrace of the presence of a substantive other.¹² The same drive to relation creates both polarities, though in the former mode the desire thwarts its goal of relating and in the latter it fulfills this goal.

The uniqueness of Buber's conception of personhood can be clearly seen through a brief comparison to competing accounts of personhood. Other notions of personhood tend to emphasize activities linked to the self-reflective polarity of human existence, such as reason. Boethius, for example, defines a person as an individual substance of a rational nature. Turning to contemporary authors, Peter Singer follows John Locke in defining persons as (i) rational and self-conscious beings, aware of themselves as distinct entities with a past and a future, while adding that they must also have (ii) desires and preferences regarding their own futures

11. E.g., Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 69. Hereafter cited in text as *IT*.

12. For an analysis of Buber's notion of *Eigenwesen* as a critique of Cartesian subjectivity see Dan Avnon, *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 131-37. Michael Theunissen also situates Buber in a general anti-Cartesian movement in his *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, trans. Christopher Macann (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1984).

and (iii) autonomy, or the capacity to choose, to make and act on their own decisions.¹³ Mary Anne Warren gives similar criteria for personhood:

- (i) consciousness (of objects and events external and/or internal to the being), and in particular the capacity to feel pain;
- (ii) reasoning (the developed capacity to solve new and relatively complex problems);
- (iii) self-motivated activity (activity which is relatively independent of either genetic or direct external control);
- (iv) the capacity to communicate, by whatever means, messages of an indefinite variety of types, that is, not just with an indefinite number of possible contents, but on indefinitely many possible topics;
- (v) the presence of self-concepts, and self-awareness, either individual or racial, or both.¹⁴

Buber would likely agree that a person is an individual substance, since a person is unique, whole and good. However, he extends personhood to God, pressing the limits of our understanding of these criteria. An even more striking difference is that there is no suggestion in Buber's work that personhood necessarily includes reason or a conception of one's self over time. Other thinkers use these criteria to separate the notion of a human being from that of a person and accord *persons* a special temporal sensibility. In contrast, Buber saves these criteria for *human beings*, which, as we shall see, he analyzes as especially influenced by memory. Similarly, while the drive to relation is an important part of personhood, it is not clear that this drive indicates autonomy or self-motivation in the way Singer and Warren use these terms.

There is one criterion that, at first glance, seems to point to a possible agreement between Warren and Buber: the capacity to communicate may seem comparable to the drive to relation. By emphasizing the drive to relation, Buber brings the notion of person closer to its roots in the Greek and Latin *πρόσωπον* and *persona*, terms that have their origin in the masks worn by actors in Greek dramas. In this etymological account the person is the face or presence through which their voice or character sounds,

13. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 90–99, 110–11.

14. Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," *The Monist* 57, no. 1 (1973): 55. Since the context of laying out these five criteria is an argument in defense of abortion, Warren does not argue any of these are necessary attributes of persons, just that one must meet at least one criterion to be recognized as a person.

suggesting the person first becomes manifest in relational, communicative acts. This means that even here Buber differs from Warren, for the person communicates themselves—their individuality—not a variety of potentially impersonal topics, as Warren suggests. Buber would hold that the communication of one’s self still would be indefinite, for who one is, and hence what one communicates, dynamically changes in response to one’s relations. Steven M. DeLue describes Buber’s notion of self-development: “as I relate to others and discover my possibilities, I work to fulfill them and as I do, I end up inevitably creating new relationships or new variants of existing relationships to others, each of which makes me aware of new possibilities for myself.”¹⁵ At this point the “revolutionary” character of Buber’s conception of personhood should be evident: if a person is unique, whole, good, and driven to enter into relation with others, that is, to communicate themselves in a dynamic individuating dialogue with other persons, then a person need not necessarily have the capacity for human-like reason, robust self-concepts and time-concepts, or identifiably autonomous behavior. Indeed, personhood may be extended to plants, animals, and God.

DEGREES OF PERSONHOOD

The broad reach of Buber’s notion of personhood—that it may incorporate not just rational beings with a sense of personal continuity over time but also plants, animals and God—is one of the most controversial features of Buber’s philosophy, and Buber devotes much of his 1957 Afterword to *I and Thou* to addressing the perplexed responses his readers had to this account of personhood. Perhaps because it is one of the most controversial aspects of his thought, the broadness of Buber’s use of personhood is also an aspect that tends to be brushed over. For instance, it is a commonplace that Buber took the phrase “I and Thou” from Ludwig Feuerbach. However, this ignores his distance from Feuerbach’s more limited use of “I and Thou,” which Buber announces as early as 1901:

Ludwig Feuerbach [writes]: “. . . Man in himself is man (in the conventional sense); Man with Man—the unity of I and Thou—is God.” Feuerbach wants to protect the unity of which he speaks, for the “reality of the difference between I and Thou.” However today we are closer to Böhme than we are

15. Steven M. DeLue, “Martin Buber and Immanuel Kant on Mutual Respect and the Liberal State,” *Janus Head* 9, no. 1 (2006): 119.

to the teachings of Feuerbach, [closer to] the ideas of St. Francis of Assisi, who called the trees, birds, and stars his brothers and sisters, and nearer yet to the Vedanta.¹⁶

Here the I-Thou relationship is extended to other organisms and even inorganic matter; man with trees, man with birds, and man with stars is God as much as is man with man. In his later writing Buber no longer characterizes these relationships as constituting God—God is also a distinct partner we are in relation with, not simply the sum of creaturely relations—but he retains the expanded notion of I-Thou partners. The community of potential members of an I-Thou relation is even more extensive than the community of persons, for Buber includes artistic engagement with immaterial entities, such as the artist studying red, and purely imaginative activity with inorganic entities, such as the child with his toy bear. One may have a quasi I-Thou relation with anything that displays *Gestalt*; such an entity would include the first three criteria for personhood: uniqueness, wholeness and goodness.¹⁷ However, only actually responsive beings display the fourth criterion of a drive to relation, though, as in the case of the child and his toy bear, we may be driven by our desire to relation to project this capacity onto entities that display the first three criteria. Persons are hence a subset of potential I-Thou partners. We can in turn split persons into three broad types according to their capacity for mutuality. We have relationships with nature, below language; with man, in language; and with spirit, where the relationship lacks but creates language (*IT*, 56–57, 150). Given the comparatively uncontroversial nature of the claim we have person-person relations with other humans, this section shall focus first on relations with nature and then relations with spirit, specifically, God.

An early mention of the term dialogue in Buber's work occurs in the context of describing an encounter with a tree. *Daniel* begins with the protagonist leaning his walking stick against an oak tree. Buber writes, "Then I felt in twofold fashion my contact with being: here, where I held the stick, and there, where it touched the bark. Appearing to be only where I was, I nonetheless found myself there, too, where I found the tree. At that time

16. Martin Buber, "Über Jakob Böhme," *Wiener Rundschau* 5, no. 12 (1901).

17. For a brief analysis of Buber's distinction between *Form* and *Gestalt* see Zachary Braiterman, *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern Jewish Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 33–36. In Buber *Form* generally denotes the static concept of thing, such as emerges in an I-It relation, while *Gestalt* denotes the living whole we encounter in an I-Thou relation.

dialogue appeared to me.”¹⁸ A few pages later Buber describes looking at a pine tree and distinguishes between reductively classifying it and “surrendering” to the tree in order to “feel its bark as your skin . . . until you recognize your children in the soft blue cones; yes, truly until you are transformed.”¹⁹ This passage foreshadows Buber’s description of an encounter with a tree in *I and Thou*. There he similarly starts by criticizing reductively classifying the tree: “I can overcome its uniqueness [*Diesmaligkeit*—this-time-ness] and form [*Geformtheit*] so rigorously that I recognize it only as an expression of the law” (*IT*, 57–58). However, unlike in *Daniel*, he also includes feeling the tree as a mode of ego. Rather than identify with the tree, in *I and Thou* Buber is concerned to maintain its otherness, indeed, its minimal degree of personhood. It is not hard to see that we can develop our own capacities by relating to a tree, and that we can recognize the uniqueness, wholeness and goodness of a tree. However, it seems rather different to suggest that the tree has a drive to relation and enters into a relationship with us. The reciprocity of this relationship may seem purely imaginary, akin to that of the child with his toy bear. Yet as a living organism the tree responds to the presence of other organisms, altering its growth patterns, for instance. Buber does not fully elaborate this notion, other than to insist that while plants are surely far below the depth of relating implied by language, they nonetheless still exist on the threshold of relationality.

A greater degree of personhood is found in animals. Buber writes, “the eyes of an animal have the capacity of a great language,” and especially mentions looking into the eyes of a house cat (*IT*, 144). Owners often know the personality of house cats and other domesticated animals; Buber maintains animals possess an intrinsic degree of personhood even if they are not domesticated. The domesticated animal does not receive its ability to relate and communicate (its “‘eloquent’ gaze”) from domestication, only its ability to relate to *us* (*IT*, 145). In a move as bold as announcing the notion of dialogue by discussing a tree, Buber writes he most understood the two poles of human life—that we oscillate between I-Thou and I-It modes—when reflecting on relating with a cat: “No other event has made me so deeply aware of the evanescent [*Vergänglichkeit*] actuality in all our relations to other beings, the sublime melancholy of our lot, the fated lapse into It of every single You. . . . At least I could still remember it, while the animal had sunk again from its stammering glance into speechless anxi-

18. Martin Buber, *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, trans., with an introductory essay, Maurice S. Friedman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 47.

19. *Ibid.*, 54.

ety [*Bangigkeit*], almost devoid of memory” (*IT*, 146). The main difference between them comes down to memory and language, not relationality, for both the cat and he are present in the relationship. Indeed, the cat is perhaps more present for, perhaps because of limitations of memory and language, animals are not “two-fold,” that is, they do not oscillate between being an ego and being a person, but are on the cusp of both (*IT*, 172–73).

The highest degree of personhood is found in God, who is the “absolute person” (*IT*, 181). Late in life Buber explained that his one basic insight is that “the I-Thou relation to God and the I-Thou relation to one’s fellow man are at bottom related to each other.”²⁰ In light of his extension of a degree of personhood to plants and animals, we could add that relationships with them are also related to relationships with God. Although the partners of the relationship may be infinitely different, they have in common that they approach and address one as genuine others, that is, in an indefinite variety of unanticipatable ways:

Speaking with God is something *toto genere* different from “speaking with oneself”; whereas remarkably, it is not something *toto genere* different from speaking with another human being. For in the latter case there is common the fact of being approached, grasped, addressed, which cannot be anticipated in any depth of the soul; but in the former case it is not common in spite of all the soul’s adventures in doubling roles.²¹

In calling God a *person* Buber identifies God as “him that, whatever else he may be in addition, enters into direct relationship to us human beings through creative, revelatory, and redemptive acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relationship to him” (*IT*, 181). In calling God the *absolute* person Buber identifies God as our interlocutor who always embraces us as Thou, unlike humans who oscillate between I-Thou and I-It relations and unlike lower degrees of personhood who are on the threshold of these relations.

Just as a comparison to moral philosophers employing the notion of person elucidates the distinctiveness of Buber’s conception of personhood, a comparison to other descriptions of God as person illuminates Buber’s

20. Martin Buber, “Interrogation of Martin Buber,” conducted by Maurice S. Friedman, in *Philosophical Interrogations*, ed. Sydney and Beatrice Rome (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 99. Hereafter cited in text as *IMB*.

21. Martin Buber, “The Question to the Single One,” in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 58–59.

account of God as the absolute person. One argument for God as person is the argument from revelation:

- (i) Only persons communicate.
- (ii) Revelation is a kind of communication between God and man.
- (iii) God is a person.²²

Since Buber's description of God as the absolute person rests on an account of personhood as driven to relation, and in relation persons communicate themselves, his description of God might initially appear supported by the argument from revelation. However, Buber does not make such an argument and likely never would. By the time one makes an argument demonstrating the personhood of one's partner, one is already no longer in a dialogic relation with an unanticipatable other. One is instead in a relation with the memory and concept one has of one's partner, and is concerned to analyze that memory and concept, not to actually relate to the person. For this reason Buber never gives an argument for the personhood of God. Andrew Kelley explains, "In saying 'I-Thou,' I do not experience the other as a person for to do so would be to make the other into an It. Nor does 'Thou' refer to the person to whom one says 'Thou.' 'Thou' is simply an utterance that indicates that I am turning to another person and addressing this person" (emphasis in the original).²³

Moreover, the argument from revelation assumes that the term person is unequivocal. Yet Buber believes that when one applies concepts to God that the meaning of the concept is transformed. He explains that he tried to capture the transformation of person by calling God the *absolute* person, and that to say any more about the personhood of God would be a fruitless simplification (*IMB*, 88). Indeed, Buber denies possibility of knowledge of the divine mind (*IMB*, 55). This sets his use of the term person off from other common applications of person to God. Herbert C. Wolf, for instance, identifies five ways the term person is used in conjunction with God, each linked to five methods of knowing God:

- (0) "God as not-not-person," which comes from the *via negativa*,
- (1) "Personality in God," which is a metaphysical claim rooted in trinitarianism,

22. Gary Legenhausen, "Is God a Person?," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 313.

23. Andrew Kelly, "Reciprocity and the Height of God," In Atterton, Calarco, and Friedman, *Levinas and Buber: Dialogue and Difference* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 229.

- (2) “A personally-related God,” which is an analogic claim,
- (3) “The personality of God,” which comes from the *via eminentiae*,
- (4) “God as a person,” which rests on the univocity of being.²⁴

With the exception of the trinitarian use of “personality in God,” Buber could initially appear to employ each of these ways. God as the *absolute* person suggests the perfection of a human category or creaturely spectrum (3). His claim that relations with other creatures are not *toto genere* different from relations with God could suggest the univocity of relating (4), or, more likely, an analogic claim (2). However, his comments about the equivocity of concepts and our inability to know the divine mind would seem to best fit the *via negativa* (0). Yet Buber does not fully exemplify the *via negativa* either, for he neither describes what God is not, nor gives a full argument for the inapplicability of concepts to God. Buber’s own explanation of his stance undercuts comparison to all theological descriptions of God as person: “If to believe in God means to be able to talk *about* him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in him means to be able to talk *to* him, then I believe in God” (emphasis added).²⁵

This emphasis on talking *to* rather than *about* raises the question of the meaningfulness of Buber’s statements such as “God is the absolute person.” In his Afterword to *I and Thou*, Buber writes:

The concept of personhood [*Personhaftigkeit*] is, of course, utterly incapable of describing the nature of God; but it is permitted and necessary to say that God is *also* a person. If for once I were to translate what I mean into the language of a philosopher, Spinoza, I should have to say that of God’s infinitely many attributes we human beings know not two, as Spinoza thought, but three: in addition to spiritlikeness—the source of what we call spirit—and naturelikeness, exemplified by what we know as nature, also thirdly the attribute of personlikeness [*Personhaftigkeit*]. From this last attribute I should then derive my own and all men’s persons [*Personsein*], even as I should derive from the first two my own and all men’s being spirit and being nature. (*IT*, 181)

24. Herbert C. Wolf, “An Introduction to the Idea of God as Person,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32, no. 1 (1964): 26, 31. Wolf has the five uses begin with zero instead of one to recognize the lack of knowledge maintained by the *via negativa*.

25. Martin Buber, “Autobiographical Fragments,” in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber: The Library of Living Philosophers*, vol. 12, edited by Paul A. Schilpp and Maurice S. Friedman (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1967), 24.

As a *translation* into philosophic language this use of Spinoza's theory of attributes cannot fully capture Buber's intentions. Nevertheless, the use is suggestive, especially given Buber's assessment of Hasidism as a response to Spinoza's criticism of the "anthropomorphic" extension of personhood to God. All living things would seem to possess the first three criteria for personhood (uniqueness, wholeness, and goodness), with the drive to relation or capacity for mutuality serving to differentiate beings into different steps on a spectrum culminating in God, who both is the highest point and transcends the spectrum, as the term absolute attempts to indicate. This extension of the notion of personhood initially appears to be related to the *via eminentiae*. However, the comparison to Spinozan attributes suggests the inference does not run from humans to God, but from God to all creatures. Hence it is better understood as an example of the "retrotransitive method"—the rule that whatever is empirically found in or associated with the more complex and highly evolved natural entities must inferentially be read back into the simpler and earlier ones."²⁶

However, a tension now arises between the equality of all beings and their hierarchal ordering on the "chain of being." In his dissertation Buber describes Nicholas of Cusa's theory of participation as maintaining God puts himself entirely in each thing, so that all are equal in value, and yet nonetheless maintaining God is in each thing differently, so that each thing has its own degree of actuality and consciousness, suggesting a hierarchy (*HI*, 379). Since personhood is often taken to confer moral consideration, the equality of all beings with respect to the first three criteria suggests the impossibility of distinguishing between the strength of moral obligations to different types of beings. Malcolm L. Diamond, for example, asks Buber if a tree is of equal moral status to a human being (*IMB*, 37). Buber does not explicitly answer in the negative, though he does reaffirm there are different degrees of the capacity for mutuality, implying a negative response. A few pages prior he has just responded to a question from Emmanuel Levinas concerning the asymmetry of one's Thou, whom Levinas takes to be higher than the I in the relationship. Buber rejects this limitation of both I-Thou and moral relations to an asymmetrical, higher Thou. He insists relationships to animals and plants occupy the "lowest floor of the ethical building," and mentions Hasidim even include basic moral obligations to their tools and that there must also be a ethical obligation to

26. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 276–77.

care for one's self (*IMB*, 28).²⁷ However, despite the language of "floors" of obligation suggesting a hierarchy, he rejects that one could use the different degrees of the capacity for mutuality for the purposes of calculating moral obligation (*IMB*, 37). Buber's criteria for personhood and discussion of degrees of personhood hence serve a different function than the use of these notions by moral philosophers and theologians. Buber leaves us with a broadly expanded moral circle that would include the whole chain of being, while persistently directing us away from responding to beings through classification and argumentation and moving us toward an ideal of perfect relationality.

THE HUMAN THREAT TO PERSONHOOD

Buber's extension of personhood to a range of beings raises the question what, if anything, is peculiar to humanity. While other thinkers use the presence of memory and time-concepts as a principle criterion for personhood, Buber identifies memory as the distinguishing feature of humanity and as threatening to personhood. In the state of nature presented in *I and Thou*, humans begin in direct relations ("in the beginning is the relation"). However, Buber then describes a "fall" into a historical mode, which creates the subject-object distinction, language, and discursive knowledge. Although this fall can inhibit direct relations it is nonetheless motivated by the drive to relation. Desire for the security of the absolute relationship appears to be threatened by the spontaneity and transience of creatures, moving us to use memory to create controllable and permanent entities. Through memory the Thou that was initially simply encountered becomes reified and turned into an object of experience (*IT*, 71). Memory further "educates itself" and creates out of the initial unmediated relationships three conceptual categories: actions, which are derived from that which stand out in memory as eventful relations; objects, gradually arranged into groups and species and derived from that which memory experiences as changeful in relations; and the "I," which is derived from that which memory experiences as the same in every relation (*IT*, 72). Still using memory, contemplation goes further, and splits both the "I" and the initial Thou into substance, qualities, and laws of relating (*IT*, 81).

27. For an argument that Levinas' philosophy is weaker than Buber's insofar as Levinas is "speciesist," while Buber accounts for relationships to non-humans, see Peter Atterton, "Face-to-Face with the Other Animal?," in Atterton, Calarco, and Friedman, *Levinas and Buber*.

Buber repeatedly places I-Thou relations in the present and I-It relations in the past, for example, writing, “what is essential is lived in the present, objects in the past” (*IT*, 64) and “the pure present knows no specific consciousness of time.”²⁸ In Michael Theunissen’s analysis, the tension between the present of I-Thou relations and the past of I-It relations is actually a tension within the present, which is twofold. I-It relations are concerned with the past of the present: “The present of the It precisely only presents the ‘conclusion of time elapsed’ and, therefore, not being self-sufficient, at bottom itself only belongs to the past. Hence this conclusion is only posited ‘in thought’ and is therefore unreal because it disappears on account of its punctuality.”²⁹ In contrast, the present of I-Thou is the futural present: “the act of speaking to swings out beyond itself and its immediate correlate. It maintains itself in the future, as it were, without already anticipating this future itself. For the one doing the speaking precisely awaits the decision about the future from the answer of the one spoken to. . . . I ‘let myself’—to use a vulgar expression to characterize a non-vulgar reality—be ‘taken by surprise’ by the Other.”³⁰ Although both temporal relations stem from our drive to relation and hence personhood, an excess development of our ability to place things in the past undermines our personhood. We lose our wholeness as in self-reflection we split ourselves into subject-object; we lose our sense of our own uniqueness as we see ourselves as simply the manifestation of substance, qualities and laws; we lose our sense of the goodness of beings since they are no longer taken to be whole, unique and diverse; and we lose our ability to enter into relations with others since their alterity and ability to surprise us is no longer recognized.³¹

However, while our human capacity for memory taken to excess can lead to a corrupt manifestation of our desire for relations, the right use of memory can also heal our personhood. Buber writes that the man whose capacity for memory has taken over his personhood

is inextricably entangled in unreality; and he becomes aware of this whenever he recollects his own condition. Therefore he takes pains to use the best part of his mind to prevent or at least obscure such recollection. But

28. Martin Buber, “What is Man?” in *Between Man and Man*, 167.

29. Theunissen, *The Other*, 309.

30. *Ibid.*, 309–10.

31. For more on the temporality of I-Thou and I-It relations and Buber’s notion of history, see the section “Hidden History: The ‘Two Streams’ of Adam” in Avnon, *Martin Buber*, 81–118.

if this recollection of one's falling off, of the deactualized and the actual I, were permitted to reach down to the roots man calls despair and from which self-destruction and rebirth grow, this would be the beginning of the return. (*IT*, 110)

Memory suppresses the memory of how its excessive growth has strangled the capacity for personhood, but if one could fully remember one's beginning and how one went astray, one could heal. Buber likely hopes his account of a state of nature and genealogical account of the growth of I-It relations serves as a reminder for the reader that will spur them to begin this healing process. However, the healing will truly take place when the reader sets the text aside, forms I-Thou relations with other beings, and the reader's memory learns how to fulfill rather than undermine the drive to relation. Buber writes, "memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness," and emphasizes that this healing remembrance is not the same as the self-analysis of modern psychology (*IT*, 62). The intention of the recollection is not to analyze and reduce memory to what is assumed to be repressed, but to simply recall it "unreduced and undissected. Naturally, the memory must be liberated from all subsequent deletions and trimmings, beautifications and demonizations; but he can do this, to whom the confrontation with himself, in the essential compass of the past, has proved to be one of the effective forces in the process of 'becoming what one is.'"³²

An example of how this type of critical memory might help restore the ability to relate comes from Buber's own life. In the context of explaining the development of the I of the I-It relationship, Buber relays a memory he has of being eleven years old and stroking the neck of a horse:

Beginning from the still very fresh memory of my hand . . . When I stroked the mighty mane . . . and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of Thou and Thou with me.³³

The relation becomes broken when one day he becomes conscious of his hand and how much he enjoys petting the horse; the horse now exists

32. Buber, "Images of Good and Evil," 123.

33. Martin Buber, "Dialogue," in *Between Man and Man*, 26-27.

not as the elemental other, but as just part of his own experience. As if in recognition the horse has been reduced to an It, the horse ceases to raise his head to him, and Buber writes that at the time he felt himself judged. Although the story describes a fall from an I-Thou relation into an I-It relation, by recalling the event memory acknowledges such a fall took place and hence that there is some other mode of being than the one that has come to dominate. Moreover, the alternative mode is seen as somehow more primordial and essential than the existing mode, thus awakening a desire to return to it. "Beasts of prey have no history," Buber writes, emphasizing the peculiar historical nature of man. He continues, "Man has acquired history by entering fundamentally on something that would be bound to appear to the beast of prey as senseless and grotesque—namely, on responsibility, and thus on becoming a person with a relation to the truth."³⁴ This relation to truth leads us to form "relationships" with ideas rather than with beings as we rely evermore on language and discursive knowledge, but it also moves us to reform ourselves so that we can once more directly relate to beings. Buber explains that beginning with the philosophy of Hegel and culminating in that of Heidegger the historical nature of man was taken to be man's reality. However, he cautions, "with this perception of the 'historical' we are still far from having come sufficiently close to the reality of man, indeed, that thereby we have not at all obtained a glimpse of the most characteristic fact, the open mystery of the person" (*IMB*, 33). In the end, our personhood is more fundamental than our humanity, and our drive to relation and capacity for mutuality will move us to perfect our humanity, and with it, our personhood.

Buber's conception of personhood certainly differs from that of many other thinkers. Most striking is his replacement of memory, reason, and autonomy as criteria for personhood with an emphasis on individuality and a drive to relation, along with his concomitant description of humanity as possessing a potentially dangerous capacity for memory. The dangers of excess memory notwithstanding, Buber's "revolution" may be seen as a healing act of critical memory, for it marks a rebirth of older ideas, such as the goodness of all being, the principle of plenitude, and the chain of being. Although Buber gives us criteria for personhood and describes differing degrees of personhood, he does not show us how to use the notion of personhood to determine moral obligations. Since many other thinkers use the distinction between human and person for

34. Buber, "The Question to the Single One," 85.

just this purpose, we are left wondering what upshot, if any, Buber's account of personhood has for moral philosophy. Buber's "revolution" in the concept of personhood leaves us with four primary insights: (i) a moral circle expanded until it recalls the goodness of all being; (ii) the value of individuality and uniqueness, rooted in the principle of plenitude and related diversitarianism; (iii) a replacement of the ideal of self-sufficiency with the ideal of relationality, such that we praise God as the absolute person, where personhood entails relationality and is nonetheless an augmentation of divinity; and (iv) that our human capacity for memory, and concomitantly, language and reason, threatens our personhood, but that this same human capacity possesses the ability to heal itself and bring us ever closer to the perfection of personhood.

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