

The Problem of Intersubjectivity: A Comparison of Martin Buber and Alfred Schutz*

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Martin Buber's writings on the I-Thou relationship are generally analyzed and discussed in a theological context. There are, however, broad philosophical problems in the context of which his experience of an I-Thou relationship are of considerable importance. One of these is the problem of intersubjectivity.

Simply stated, intersubjectivity refers to one's ability to interact with others in a reciprocal and meaningful fashion. For instance, in conversing with others, my expectation is that others will hear and understand what I say, and respond appropriately. Implicit in my ability to establish such relationships is my ability to recognize those with whom I can enter into intersubjective relationships. For instance, I don't usually try to converse with statues or paintings of people, regardless of their physical similarity to other persons.

One philosopher who has discussed intersubjectivity is Alfred Schutz. Schutz, in his phenomenological studies on the social world, has systematically analyzed the nature of social relationships between individuals, and has arrived at an originating point involving intersubjectivity. This point is described by what he calls the Pure We-relationship. Comparison of Schutz's analysis of the Pure We-relationship with Buber's description of his personal experience of intersubjectivity, i.e., the I-Thou relationship, reveals a remarkable convergence. For instance, fundamental to both Schutz and Buber are the notions that intersubjectivity is tied to the lived presence of the self with the other (i.e., sharing of time in the stream of duration), and that the 'content' of this 'experience' is related to the being of the other.

These interesting features in the works of Schutz and Buber will be described by showing the similarity between the Pure We and I-Thou relationships. This similarity will be demonstrated by reviewing pertinent aspects of Schutz's inves-

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tigations on the time-dependence of experience and the place of the Pure We as the origin of social relations, and then discussing Buber's description of the I-Thou. Finally, the significance of Buber's experience of the I-Thou to the problem of intersubjectivity will be discussed.

THE PURE WE-RELATIONSHIP

To arrive at the role of the Pure We as the origin of social relations, Schutz goes through several steps. The first is to clarify how one's experiences become meaningful. The second is to establish that for there to be meaningful social relationships, there must not only be experience of oneself, but also experience of the other as one who has an analogous experience of himself. Finally, one's orientation toward the other must be seen as reciprocated by the other at the same time.

Experience and the Flow of Time

Schutz emphasizes the view that there is a fundamental difference between the time feature of life and that of thought. Life occurs in the flow of time, that is "inner time" or the "flow of duration". Thought, on the other hand, is focused on objects of the world or on itself, which occurs in "outer" or clock time. In the flow of duration, there is an ongoing stream of consciousness that is experienced prephenomenally.¹ At any one moment, however, I can reflect on isolated elements of that stream of consciousness, thereby bringing them to the phenomenal level. Therefore, my act of attention toward my experience—the very act that constitutes the objectivity of the experience—necessitates that the experience has already occurred and is past. In Schutz's words:

If we simply live immersed in the flow of duration, we encounter only undifferentiated experiences that melt into one another in a flowing continuum. . . . However, when, by my act of reflection, I turn my attention to my living experience, I am no longer taking up my position within the stream of duration. The experiences which were constituted as phases within the flow of duration now become objects of attention as constituted experiences. (Schutz 1967, p. 51)

Schutz (1967, p. 51) applies his analysis of experience to one's own behavior. "Behavior, while it is actually taking place, is a prephenomenal experience."

¹Schutz uses the term "prephenomenal" throughout the text. It should be distinguished from prepredicative experience. Only after prephenomenal experience is reflected upon does it become phenomenal, i.e., its meaning conferred and 'objectivity' constituted. Prepredicative experience, on the other hand, refers to experience taken retrospectively for granted and thus judged as not being in need of further scrutiny and definition.

Behaving occurs in the flow of time; only behavior can be thought about, and this requires that it be seen as already having occurred, at which point it stands out as a discrete item from the background of one's other experiences. Schutz concludes, therefore, that one never experiences oneself behaving—only as having behaved. Moreover, it is only in the grasping of one's behavior as a phenomenal experience that it becomes meaningful. Behaving itself is without meaning, but once reflected upon, its meaning is established according to the way in which the behavior is regarded. That is, "the meaning lies in the attitude of the Ego toward that part of the stream of consciousness which has already flowed by. . ." (Schutz 1967, p. 69).

The Experience of Other Selves

My experience of an other self occurs similarly as described above. That is, the other, as an object, is constituted by my reflection on and interpretation of my experience of the other, after it has already occurred. Social relations, however, presuppose not only that I confer meaning upon my behavior, but also that the meaning will be understood by the other. Thus, somehow, I am aware that the other will experience himself and me in a manner analogous to the way in which I experience myself and him. As Schutz (1967, p. 108) puts it, my sphere of "solitary consciousness" must be transcended somehow so that I grasp that "simultaneous with my lived experience of you, there is your lived experience which belongs to you and is part of your stream of consciousness."

For Schutz, the key to understanding how the above transcendence occurs resides in the difference between how we experience ourselves and how we experience the other.

From my point of view as observed, your body is presented to me as a field of expression on which I can watch the flow of your lived experiences. . . (These expressive movements) enter into a meaning context, but only for the observer, for whom it is an indication of the lived experiences of the person he is observing. The latter is barred from giving meaning to his own expressive movements as they occur, due to the fact that they are inaccessible to his attention, or prephenomenal. (Schutz 1967, p. 117)

Therefore, I can experience the lived behaving of the other (i.e., in the flow of duration) even though it is inaccessible to the other. Similarly, the other can experience my behaving even though it is inaccessible to me. As a result, I can define the alter ego as "that subjective stream of thought which can be experienced in its vivid present." One's experience of the other's stream of consciousness in the vivid present, Schutz (1962, p. 174) calls the "general thesis of the alter ego's existence."

(this) stream of thought which is not mine shows the same fundamental structure as my own consciousness. This means that the Other is like me,

capable of acting and thinking; that his stream of thought shows the same through and through connectedness as mine; that analogous to my own life of consciousness his shows the same time structure . . . ; that consequently, he has the genuine experience of growing old with me as I know that I do with him. (Schutz 1962, p. 174)

The Origin of Social Relations

It can be understood from the previous discussion, that by reflecting on my experience of an other, I can confer for me an objective meaning on that experience. At the same time, however, I can adopt an attitude toward the other as itself being both "conscious and experiencing" (Schutz 1967, p. 146). An essential feature of this "Thou-orientation" is that the other person exist, but not that he have characteristics of one kind or another. As Schutz (1967 p. 163) puts it, "It is the pure mode in which I am aware of another human being as a person." This awareness of being, however, occurs at a prephenomenal level rather than as a part of phenomenal experience. The content of this awareness, therefore, cannot be defined.

In its pure form the Thou-orientation consists merely of being intentionally directed toward the pure being-there of another alive and conscious human being. To be sure, the pure Thou-orientation is a formal concept, an intellectual construct, or, in Husserl's terminology, an ideal limit. In real life we never experience the pure existence of others; instead we meet real people with their own personal characteristics and traits. (Schutz 1967, p. 164)

For there to be social relationships, however, there still must be more than the Thou-orientation itself. This is because "it can, in principle, be one-sided: while it pertains to its essence to be related to an other, it can both exist and continue without any reciprocation on the part of the other" (Schutz 1967, p. 146). Thus, nowhere in the concept of the Thou-orientation is it implied that the partner must respond by a similar orientation of his own. On the other hand, the Thou-orientation is necessary for a social relationship to begin because "I can ascertain that my partner is oriented toward me . . . only if I first orient myself toward him" (Schutz 1967, p. 156). The social relationship, therefore, consists of a mutual Thou-orientation between the person and the other. It takes place in the "face-to-face" situation that is characterized by "spatial and temporal immediacy" between the individuals. It is the occasion when there is "an actual simultaneity with each other of two separate streams of consciousness" (Schutz 1967, p. 163), as was described earlier. This relationship in which the partners are aware of each other and sympathetically participate in each other's lives, for however short a time, Schutz calls the "Pure We-relationship." But, the Pure We-relationship is likewise (as the pure Thou-orientation) only a limiting concept (*Limesbegriff*), devoid of all traces of content. The directly experienced

social relationship of real life is the Pure We-relationship concretized and actualized to a greater or lesser degree and filled with content" (Schutz 1967, p. 164).

THE I-THOU RELATIONSHIP

For Buber, there is no analysis. There is only experience of the world, which can occur in two ways. "The world as (constituted) experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-Thou establishes the world of relation" (Buber 1970, p. 56). Buber (1970, p. 54) calls these basic "words" because they are the two ways of saying "I", and the individual, by saying "I" in one way or the other, thereby establishes his identity. "when a man says "I", he means one or the other."

The essential distinction between I-Thou and I-It is that the I-Thou refers to a non-objectified relationship between I and an other, whereas the I-It refers to the I taking an other as object. As will be pointed out, the I-Thou corresponds to the Pure We described by Schutz. The I-It is the I-Thou concretized and thereby filled with objective content.

The I-Thou relationship is one of inclusion. Its elements are: first, a relation, of no matter what kind, between two persons, second, an event experienced by them in common, in which at least one of them actively participates, and third, the fact that this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other. (Buber, 1965 p. 97)

In no way, however, is this relationship to be confused with empathy in which one's own concreteness would be excluded. Instead, what is experienced is the being of oneself with the other. "The I of the basic word I-Thou appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity" (Buber 1970, p. 111). "The person becomes conscious of himself as participating in being, as being-with, and thus as a being" (Buber 1970, p. 113).

Thus, the I-Thou occurs in the face-to-face situation in which the being of the self with the other is realized. Of critical importance is the fact that this realization lacks conceptualization and has no objective content. In Buber's words, "The relationship to the Thou is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and Thou, no prior knowledge and no imagination" (Buber 1970, p. 62). There is "self-realization of the I through his awareness" but this occurs without the I "reflecting on itself so as to become an object" (Schlipp and Friedman 1967, p. 695). "When I confront a human being as my Thou, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things" (Buber 1970, p. 59). In the realm of the I-It, however, "I perceive something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something" (Buber 1970, p. 54).

The lack of objective content in the I-Thou is related to its having the characteristic of inclusion; that is, within the I-Thou, there is no differentiation. "Where Thou is said, there is no something. Thou has no borders." But, where It is said, there is something and "wherever there is something there is also another something; every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others" (Buber 1970, p. 55). Thus, the I-Thou is "spoken with one's whole being," whereas, the I-It "can never be spoken with one's whole being" (Buber 1970, p. 54).

The clearest example of (mutual inclusion) . . . is a disputation between two men, thoroughly different in nature and outlook and calling, where in an instant . . . it happens that each is aware of the other's full legitimacy, wearing the insignia of necessity and meaning. . . . We have become aware that it is with the other as with ourselves, and that what rules over us both is not a truth of recognition but the truth-of-existence and the existence-of-truth of the Present Being. (Buber 1965, p. 99)

Another feature of the I-Thou relationship is that it occurs in the living present; that is, in the flow of time. This, Buber describes as

The present—not that which like a point and merely designates whatever our thoughts may posit as the end of elapsed time, the fiction of the fixed lapse, but the actual and fulfilled present—exists only insofar as presentness, encounter, and relation exist. Only as the Thou becomes present does presence come into being. (Buber 1970, p. 63)

"Presence" here refers to the immediacy of relationship in the duration of time. This presence is "not what is evanescent and passes but what confronts us, waiting and enduring" (Buber 1970, p. 64). On the other hand, "the I of the I-It has only a past and no present." The "object is not duration, but standing still, breaking off, standing out" (Buber 1970, p. 63). Objects are characterized by the "lack of relation, the lack of presence" (Buber 1970, p. 64). They exist in the past. Thus, Buber (1970, p. 63) concludes that "insofar as a human being makes do with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past and his moment has no present." "The It-world hangs together in space and time"; the Thou world does not (Buber 1970, p. 84).

Since the I-Thou occurs in the living present and is a prephenomenal, unobjectified experience, what then can be its content?

The form that confronts me I cannot experience nor describe; I can only actualize it. And yet I see it, radiant . . . far more clearly than all the clarity of the experienced world. Not as a thing among the internal things, nor as a figment of the imagination, but as what is present. Tested for its objectivity, the form is not there at all; but what can equal its presence? And it is an actual relation: it acts on me as I act on it. What then does one experience of

the Thou? Nothing at all. For one does not experience it. What, then, does one know of the Thou? Only everything, for one no longer knows particulars. (Buber 1970, p. 61)

The content of the I-Thou, however, cannot be known immediately. There is a constant flow between I-Thou and I-It and to become knowledge, the I-Thou must cross over into the I-It. Buber describes this as a distinction between the "first lightning flash of self-consciousness and the second elaborated one" (Schlipp and Friedman, 1967, p. 695).

An I-Thou knowledge that can be held fast, preserved, factually transmitted does not really exist. That which discloses itself to me from time to time in the I-Thou relationship can only become knowledge through transmission into the I-It sphere. (Schlipp and Friedman 1967, p. 692)

This, then, for Buber (1970, p. 68) is the "sublime melancholy of our lot, that every Thou, must become an It in our world." "Every Thou in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again." (Buber 1970, p. 69)

DISCUSSION

The above considerations reveal that, for Schutz, the pure We-relationship was an ideal limit. For Buber, the I-Thou relationship was a goal. Keeping in mind their opposite points of departure, one can find a number of similarities in their conceptions of intersubjective relationships, and these are presented below.

1. Both relationships take place in the face-to-face situation. Relationships between the self and others who are not in the face-to-face situation (e.g., contemporaries, predecessors, and successors, all described by Schutz, 1967, Chapter 4) usually fall into the category of the I-It. The exceptions are when an ongoing I-Thou relationship can continue even when the individuals separate in space "as the continued potential presence of the one to the other" (Buber 1965, p. 97), or when a quasi face-to-face relationship is established during certain forms of communication (Schutz 1964, pp. 171-172).
2. The Pure We and I-Thou both refer to reciprocal relationships. Without reciprocity, the Pure We becomes a pure Thou-orientation. In the case of the I-Thou, if the relationship is one-sided as could occur in a teacher-student interaction, then it is analogous to the pure Thou-orientation.
3. The Pure We and I-Thou relationships both refer to a prephenomenal level of experience. This is most clearly seen from the fact that they occur in the actual present of duration and not in objectified time, and that they lack conceptualization. What is referred to in these relationships is the being-

ness of the self with the other. This is to be distinguished from experiences in which the self and other are experienced as being this way or that.

4. The Pure We and I-Thou both refer to relationships of inclusion. In the Pure We, inclusion is described as the intersection of streams of consciousness. In the I-Thou, inclusion is described as the lack of differentiation, the occasion of being and being-with. The fact that these relationships refer to being and not to being in some particular way, which was mentioned above, is a natural outcome of their inclusiveness.
5. The Pure We and I-Thou both flow into their objectified counterparts: "the actualized content-filled We relationship" (Schutz 1967, p. 155) and the I-It. This transition occurs when the self reflects on the relationship and in doing so moves out of the flow of duration and experiences the relationship as past and having objective content.

Notwithstanding the similarities between the Pure We and I-Thou relationships pointed out above, there remains an essential difference. Schutz realized that in actual life, We-relationships are attainable only to varying degrees, without ever approaching the ideal limit. Buber (1970, p. 61) on the other hand, describes the 'experience' of the I-Thou relationship, as a result of which one knows "Nothing" but "Everything". This curious description requires further explanation.

When Buber says that the I-Thou is an experience of "Nothing", what is meant is no thing, no differentiation, no borders. The experience of "no thing" is a common feature of mystical experiences. Otto (1932, p. 67) describes it as "to see no other, to perceive in Unity, beyond space and time—to see yourself and all else in one, and all as in yourself".

Things and events so far as they are conceived by this "intuitive" vision, are no longer multiple, separate, divided, but are, in an inexpressible way an All. Further, within this One all otherness as opposition immediately disappears—things are no longer distinguished as this and the other. But, rather, this is that, and this is this; *here is there and there, here.* (Otto 1932, p. 63)
[my italics]

James characterizes the two qualities that entitle any state to be called mystical as:

1. Ineffability. . . The subject of it (the mystical experience) immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.
2. Noetic quality. . . mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations,

full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain. (James 1961, pp. 299–300)

It is suggested, therefore, that in Buber's account of the I-Thou relationship the mystical experience of intersubjectivity can be found. While mystics and mystical experiences are rare indeed in the Western world, Buber's account has significance for any attempt to understand the problem of intersubjectivity, particularly because of the special sense in which the I-Thou is a relationship of inclusion. If the self and the other were accessible as one and the same, then intersubjectivity would be immediately verifiable. In normal experience, however, I have the index of "here" and the other's body is seen as "there" (Husserl 1973, Sec. 53). It is precisely because I cannot experience an other's stream of consciousness from the other's point of view, that intersubjectivity becomes a problem. In the mystical experience of intersubjectivity, however, here and there disappear, and I and the other are experienced as an inclusive One. Thus, for the mystic, the problem of intersubjectivity disappears.

Buber did not remain exclusively in the mystical realm. He suggested that studies on the developing child were a possible source of clarification for the origin of the I-Thou relation. He suggests that the basic word I-Thou emerges from the natural association between the child and its mother, and the basic word I-It develops from the subsequent discriminations that the child makes as he objectifies the world (Buber 1970, p. 76). In this regard, it is interesting that, according to Piaget (1967 Chapter 1), at the beginning of the infant's mental evolution, there is no differentiation between self and non-self. Impressions that are experienced do not appear to be internal or attached to external objects. Rather, they are disseminated. The external world subsequently becomes objectified to the extent that the self becomes aware of itself. This "intellectual revolution" of the first two years of life leads to the construction of practical (not theoretical) categories of object, space, causality, and time. Evidence from genetic psychological studies, therefore, indicate that early in life the individual lives in what could be called the situation of inclusion.²

The mystical experience of intersubjectivity provides an interesting counterpoint to the problem of intersubjectivity posed from a phenomenological point of view. Husserl (1973, p. 90) attempted to describe intersubjectivity at the transcendental level. His goal was to "obtain for ourselves insight into the explicit and implicit intentionality wherein the alter ego becomes evinced and verified in the realm of our transcendental ego." The solution resided in appresentational-pairing.

²An important distinction should be made, however. That is, in the case of the child awakening to consciousness, inclusion occurs because the child is unable to set himself over against other persons or objects. The mystic, on the other hand, abandons his intellectual construction of the world by fiat in order to unite himself mystically with it.

The concretely apprehended transcendental ego (who first becomes aware of himself, with his undetermined horizon, when he effects transcendental reduction grasps himself in his own primordial being, and likewise (in the form of his transcendental experience of what is alien) grasps others. In myself I experience and know the other; in me he becomes constituted—appresentatively mirrored, not constituted as the original. (Husserl 1973, p. 148)

Schutz (1965, p. 82), however, concluded that Husserl did not succeed in accounting for the constitution of transcendental intersubjectivity in terms of the transcendental ego. He suggested, in fact, that intersubjectivity was not a problem that could be solved within the transcendental sphere, but was a fundamental datum of the life world.

As long as man is born of woman, intersubjectivity and the we-relationship will be the foundation for all other categories of human existence. The possibility of reflection on the self, discovery of the ego, capacity for performing any epoché, and the possibility of all communication and of establishing a communicative surrounding world as well, are founded on the primal experience of the we-relationship. (Schutz 1965, p. 82)

The meaning of mystical experience and its relationship to other experiences is an interesting problem for phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenological analysis requires self-reflection, which can then be verified by others. Mystical experience isn't self reflection, and only a few individuals have mystical experiences. Nevertheless, to a certain extent such experiences are verifiable in terms of their structure, that is, by common features of ineffability, noetic quality, and inclusiveness, which were already discussed. It seems, therefore, that such experiences cannot be discounted. The radical solution to the problem of intersubjectivity that emerges from Buber's mystical experience of the I-Thou, warrants serious consideration.

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