

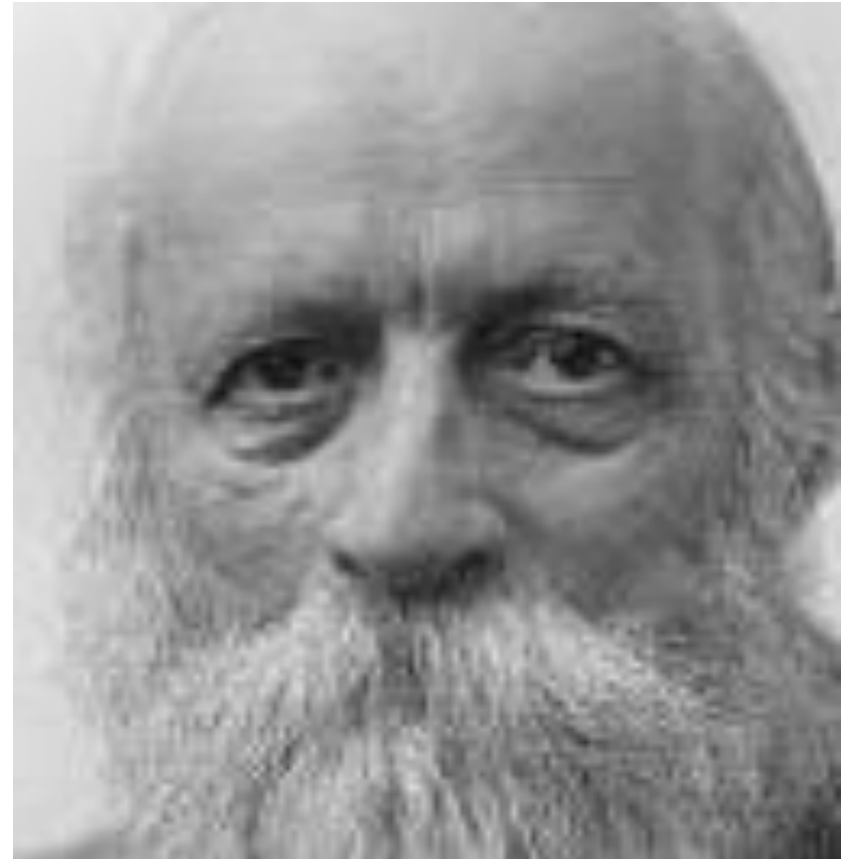
Unorthodox: Thoughts on Tradition from Non-Traditional Thinkers

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Outline of this course

- 15th May – Isaiah Berlin
- 22nd May – George Steiner
- 29th May – Erich Fromm
- **5th June – Martin Buber**
- 12th June – Cynthia Ozick



Martin Buber– Early Life and Intellectual Background

Born: 1878, Vienna, Austria-Hungary

Raised in Lvov (Ukraine) by his grandfather, a renowned Jewish scholar

Studied philosophy and literature in Vienna, Leipzig, and Berlin

Influenced by Hasidic Judaism, German idealism, and mysticism

Became known for translating Hasidic tales and reviving interest in Jewish spirituality

Advocated for Zionism, but emphasized cultural and ethical renewal over nationalism

Buber– Major works and legacy

Best known for “**I and Thou**” (1923) – a seminal work in existential and dialogical philosophy
Distinguished between two modes of relationship:

- * **I-It** (objectifying, utilitarian)

- * **I-Thou** (mutual, present, sacred)

Taught at Hebrew University of Jerusalem after moving to Palestine in 1938

Promoted dialogue between Jews and non-Jews, and later Jews and Arabs

Died in 1965, remembered as a profound thinker on human relationships, ethics, and faith

I and Thou – Summary

Buber's main proposition is that we may address existence (engage with reality) in two ways:

- 1 The attitude of the "I" towards an "It", towards an object that is separate in itself, which we either use or experience.
- 2 The attitude of the "I" towards "Thou", in a relationship in which the other is not separated by discrete bounds.

One of the major themes of the book is that human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. In Buber's view, all of our relationships bring us ultimately into relationship with God, who is the Eternal Thou.

I-It

The "It" of *I-It* refers to the world of experience and sensation. *I-It* describes entities as discrete objects drawn from a defined set (e.g., he, she or any other objective entity defined by what makes it measurably different from other entities). It can be said that "I" have as many distinct and different relationships with each "It" as there are "It"s in one's life. Fundamentally, "It" refers to the world as we experience it.

I-It and a tree

Buber uses an example of a tree and presents five separate relations:

- 1 Looking at the tree as a picture with the color and detail through the aesthetic perception.
- 2 Identifying the tree as movement. The movement includes the flow of the juices through the veins of the tree, the breathing of the leaves, the roots sucking the water, the never-ending activities between the tree and earth and air, and the growth of the tree.
- 3 Categorizing the tree by its type; in other words, studying it.
- 4 Exercising the ability to look at something from a different perspective. “I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law”.
- 5 Interpreting the experience of the tree in mathematical terms.

Through all of these relations, the tree is still an object that occupies time and space and still has the characteristics that make it what it is.

I-Thou

By contrast, the word pair *I-Thou* describes the world of relations. This is the "I" that does not objectify any "It" but rather acknowledges a living relationship. *I-Thou* relationships are sustained in the spirit and mind of an "I" for however long the feeling or idea of relationship is the dominant mode of perception. A person sitting next to a complete stranger on a park bench may enter into an "I-Thou" relationship with the stranger merely by beginning to think positively about people in general. The stranger is a person as well, and gets instantaneously drawn into a mental or spiritual relationship with the person whose positive thoughts necessarily include the stranger as a member of the set of persons about whom positive thoughts are directed. It is not necessary for the stranger to have any idea that he is being drawn into an "I-Thou" relationship for such a relationship to arise. But what is crucial to understand is the word pair "I-Thou" can refer to a relationship with a tree, the sky, or the park bench itself as much as it can refer to the relationship between two individuals. The essential character of "I-Thou" is the abandonment of the world of sensation, the melting of the between, so that the relationship with another "I" is foremost.

I-Thou – human relationships

If "Thou" is used in the context of an encounter with a human being, the human being is not He, She, or bound by anything. You do not *experience* the human being; rather you can only relate to him or her in the sacredness of the I-Thou relation. The I-Thou relationship cannot be explained; it simply is. Nothing can intervene in the I-Thou relationship. I-Thou is not a means to some object or goal, but a definitive relationship involving the whole being of each subject.

Like the I-Thou relation, love is a subject-to-subject relationship. Love is not a relation of subject to object, but rather a relation in which both members in the relationship are subjects and share the unity of being.

I-Thou – God

The ultimate Thou is God. In the I-Thou relation there are no barriers. This enables us to relate directly to God. God is ever-present in human consciousness, manifesting in music, literature, and other forms of culture. Inevitably, Thou is addressed as It, and the I-Thou relation becomes the being of the I-Thou relation. God is now spoken to directly, not spoken about.

There is no world that disconnects one from God, a world of It alone, when I-Thou guides one's actions. "One who truly meets the world goes out also to God." God is the worldwide relation to all relations.

Hasidut

Mordecai M. Kaplan notes that, "Hasidism had provided Buber with the main fuel, so to speak, for the flame of his Jewishness which was sparked by Zionism." Zionism by itself lacked substance. Buber felt that the Jewish religious tradition "is the indispensable means of achieving that inner transformation of the Jewish people both individually and communally, without which the outer transformation which Zionism has been fostering is less than half the task."

Hasidic Tales

Martin Buber's *Hasidic Tales* is a collection of stories drawn from the teachings and lives of Hasidic masters in Eastern Europe, especially from the 18th and 19th centuries. Buber, deeply inspired by the spiritual depth and human warmth of Hasidism, sought to present these tales not just as folklore but as expressions of a profound religious and existential worldview.

The stories emphasize values such as: Joy in worship, Devotion to God in everyday life, Humility and compassion, The sacredness of human relationships, and The importance of the tzaddik (righteous leader).

Buber used these tales to illustrate his own philosophy of dialogue and presence, showing how Hasidic spirituality fosters direct, heartfelt connection—between people, and between the human and the divine. His storytelling preserves the mystical vitality and ethical sensitivity of Hasidism, making it accessible to modern readers and renewing interest in Jewish spiritual traditions.

Zionism

In 1939, Gandhi remarked that “Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English. It is wrong and inhuman to impose Jews on the Arabs ... Why should they not, like other peoples on earth, make that country home where they are born and earn their livelihood?”

Buber penned an open letter to Gandhi saying that he hoped for a peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Israel, setting up his stance as a proponent of binationalism later on. He framed the letter with saying that he belongs “to a group of people,” implying that his views are shared by others. Buber was certain that peace between Jews and Arabs would be unusual and unprecedented, but not impossible. He also believes that no objective judgment can be made over which side is just – both Arabs and Jews have claims that must be reconciled. Already, among the people, Buber noticed that there were hints of peace. Arab farmers came to learn the innovations that Jewish farmers brought to the field.

Bible translation

Martin Buber, in collaboration with Franz Rosenzweig, created a notable German translation of the Bible, "Die Schrift," which aimed to capture the biblical sense of each word. This translation, a collaborative effort begun in 1925 and completed by Buber in 1961, sought to recast German language on the model of biblical Hebrew, striving to reproduce the spoken quality, structure, and poetic devices of the original texts. It was a philosophical and linguistic undertaking that aimed to re-connect German Jews to their tradition and faith.

In 1961 Gershom Scholem gave a speech in Jerusalem on the occasion of the completion of Buber's work. Scholem explained that the translation was intended as a gift for German Jews, yet due to historical tragedy, the "Jews for whom you undertook this translation are no longer alive, and those among their children who escaped this catastrophe no longer read German."

Even so, the Buber-Rosenzweig translation today remains the only one that "communicates Jewish creativity in a German context."

Buber's Legacy

The Legacy of Martin Buber for an Israeli Society after Zionism: Joseph Agassi

As non-observant yet avowedly religious, Buber seemed to observant Jews a heretic and to non-observant ones a compromiser. This should make him a model for the growing public of non-observant Israeli Jews who cherish Jewish tradition. His liberal politics prevents this. Any way one looks at him, he seems to have been one step ahead of the crowd. Morally, this may be an asset; politically it is not.

Conclusion

“That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don’t you know also that God needs you—in the fullness of his eternity, you? How would man exist if God did not need him, and how would you exist? You need God in order to be, and God needs you—for that which is the meaning of your life.”

I and Thou

Next week – Cynthia Ozick

"When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them."