

Martin Buber's "Education": Imitating God, the Developmental Relationalist

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INTRODUCTION

Almost at the end of his paper, "Education," Martin Buber suggests that the educator "is set in the *imitatio Dei absconditi sed non ignoti*."¹ But what does Buber mean when he claims that the educator is "set" in the imitation of a God hidden but not unknown? This paper proposes to explore that question.

Earlier studies of "Education" have tended to ignore the influence of Buber's theological writings on his educational thought.² This has led some scholars to place undue priority upon what Buber calls the asymmetrical relationship by making static a relationship which is, by its very nature, dynamic.³ In order to understand better Buber's notion of education, this process whereby educators support children along the path to adulthood, Buber's religious ideas need to be examined. We must make his God better known. This raises the difficulty of crossing back and forth between Buber's theological and secular writings, two seemingly distinct and yet mutually coherent bodies. It also entails the daunting task of creating a cogent argument using simple and predominantly pedestrian prose out of the Buber's poetic style. The challenge, which is met by a complete reading of his work, is that of grasping the centrality of relationship and the process of its development through close examination of his theological work and then applying that understanding to "Education."

This essay will explore three specific theological ideas: the *shekina*, *teshuvah*, and Eternal Thou, concepts that lay the groundwork for better understanding Buber's God. Then, I review his paper "Education" in light of this theological understanding that will lead to a discussion of the asymmetrical relationship and the educational implications of Buber's "developmental" approach to relationship and the creation of the I. Ultimately, this is the beginning of a re-reading of Buber with an eye to extending him beyond the traditional boundaries of both the asymmetrical, educational relationship and the one-on-one human interaction.

THREE IDEAS FROM BUBER'S THEOLOGY:

(1) *SHEKINA*/THE DIVINE INDWELLING

The sparks which fell down from the primal creation into the covering shells and were transformed into stones, plants, and animals, they all ascend to their source through the consecration of the pious who works on them in holiness, uses them in holiness, consumes them in holiness.⁴

The Hasidic concept of the *shekina* recalls an Ojibwa story. Once upon a time, the world was black, without any color. The only exception was during rainstorms when the sun shone and two perfect, parallel rainbows would appear. Now, of course, the animals and plants were intrigued by this brilliant color and so one day Raven decided to investigate and flew off toward the rainbows. Raven ended up flying too close and managed to fly into the upper rainbow shattering it into an infinite number of pieces which cascaded all over the earth transforming everything

they landed upon. This is why there is color on the earth, why raven remains black, and why on some perfect, rainbow days you can see the remains of a second rainbow just above the first.

There are two aspects to Buber's God. The first, like the intact rainbow, is his own completeness that exists "above," whilst the second is the remnants of that "shattered" rainbow, the *shekina*, literally the "exiled glory of God," that is spread out across the Earth, in little pieces, each of which "burns" in every thing.⁵ In Hasidism people are responsible for finding, drawing forth, and "re-connecting" these scattered pieces, and they must approach each object with the intent of uncovering that spark and uniting it with their own. Unfortunately, sparks can be hidden through both ignorance and choice, and this creates a prison, a shell, around them.

The sparks are to be found everywhere. They are suspended in things as in sealed-off springs; they stoop in the creatures as in walled-up caves, they inhale darkness and they exhale dread; they wait.⁶

This means there is a spark, a shard of God, in everyone and everything, and our challenge is to break through and release it.

(2) *TESHUVAH*/CONVERSION

The *tesuvah*, or turning to God, is born in the depths of the soul out of "the despair which shatters the prison of our latent energies" and out of the suffering which purifies the soul.⁷

In today's culture we love stories of reformation: the poor man on drugs, living on the street, who has a blinding insight and changes into the paragon of virtue; the lost woman, living fast and loose who crashes her sports car and walks away, literally and metaphorically, to become an aid worker. This is the stuff of Hollywood legend and, for Buber, presents a dangerous picture of Christian conversion, which makes an enormously difficult project seem all too easy. Buber uses the word conversion to signify the hard work of a total reorientation of one's existence, which involves an individual in a process of transforming a hitherto pointless existence into a life directed to a meaningful goal through self-awareness and commitment.

Turning is capable of renewing a man[sic] from within and changing his position. But turning means here something much greater than repentance and acts of penance; it means that by a reversal of his whole being, a man who had been lost...finds...a way to the fulfillment of the particular task.⁸

One cannot will or force conversion to occur, but one can prepare for it by means of deliberate thought and effort. Buber's point, when translated to educators, is that the idea of instantaneous change happening miraculously is troublesome because it removes thoughtful intention, preparation, and awareness from the process. Conversion does not mean that we do nothing to prepare ourselves. On the contrary, it requires both the teacher and the student to take responsibility for very deliberate preparation.

Buber's understanding of conversion was based upon the human individual deliberately choosing to enter into relationship with God and not simply being the passive recipient of grace. Since God is always ready to engage and enter relationship, the onus falls upon the individual, or on an entire people, to reciprocate and, in order to do that, they must "turn."

(3) ETERNAL THOU

Buber believes that true dialogue, the I/Thou relationship, is the temporal manifestation of unity consciously sought. It is true dialogue with each other and the world, as opposed to the more objective I/It relationship, which will unify the shattered *shekina* and assist in the process of conversion and the unification of the individual. It is also in these moments of dialogue that we rise above the temporal and catch sight, however momentarily, of what Buber calls the “Eternal Thou.” The briefest glimpse of God’s immanence, the momentary apprehension of *shekina* in some everyday object, is an opportunity for us to be aware of the Eternal Thou, the unity beyond the *shekina*, the unity of the complete rainbow.

The Eternal Thou is always present in the world around us, and Buber believes all children are born with the innate ability to form I/Thou relationships and to encounter the I/Eternal Thou.⁹ However, the infant is unaware of this ability and, at first, the “I” begins to take shape through encounters with the “It” as a means of navigating within the objective world. This process must occur and, in the best-case scenario, the child begins to internalize its particular historical, social, cultural, and economic reality with thoughtful, conscious caregivers providing the background relationship that allows the child to explore. However, if the child only discovers the I/It, it receives a dangerously passive notion of I, since tools, animals, and even humans become just objects of knowledge, of religious dogma, or of passive consumption, and the child’s growth is thereby stunted.

Under the auspices of a good mentoring relationship, the child begins to recognize experiences of I/Thou and to perceive the opening of new opportunities. It is here that children truly begin to discover themselves, but also to encounter despair, since the challenge of the new experience is such that they often react negatively, and their own inner conflicts may come to the surface with the result that they avoid their problems rather than examine their inconsistencies.¹⁰ Success or failure at this stage is essential to the process of self-discovery, which stalls at a certain level, until one can commit oneself more consciously to relationships. More conscious work feeds the increased sense of self-awareness which, in turn, helps to strengthen the ability to relate to others. Thus, the I and the I/Thou develop in harmony and synergy within the protective care of the parent or teacher who acts, like God, at another level. When the ability to relate reaches a certain depth, experiences of I/Eternal Thou begin to emerge, and as the individual becomes more conscious of this last level of relationship, so I/Thou relationships are deepened and the I is reinforced.

My purpose in discussing Buber’s Eternal Thou is not that of promoting Buber’s God or religious education, but in order to point out that the individual is immersed in a larger community beyond the political and social boundaries which we currently erect. Buber sees an individual life as a progression of one-on-one relationships developing in concert with a growing awareness of a larger connection to the world around. The image of the *shekina* is a beautiful way of representing this idea of connection, and the concept encapsulates the active role humans must continue to play in bringing that larger community together.

The current state of the earth and politics as a whole would suggest that this kind of thoughtful relating and connecting is long overdue, and it behooves us to be more thoughtful about it in our schools and homes in the hope that the next generation can feel more empowered to engage the world actively and build significant relationships across what are currently deep divides and powerful boundaries of mistrust.

"EDUCATION": IMITATING GOD AND THE ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIP

When I first encountered Buber, I thought there was a conflict between his idea of relationship in *I and Thou* and his proposed educational relationship in "Education." It was not until I began to study Buber's history and his religious thought more completely that I realized the conflict was not within Buber but in my initial interpretation of "Education."

Buber's essay is written to follow the trajectory of life, and so it begins with the infant. He proposes that every infant is born with the two instincts involved in all learning, *origin*, the "instinct to do," and *communion*, the instinct for "sharing an undertaking." The former instinct is not to have, but to do: "the originator instinct—the child of man wants to make things" (*Education*, 85). The significance for educators is to assist that instinct to grow into passion, not lust or greed, for it is not the instinct *per se* that is important but the "educative forces" that nurture that instinct.

The second instinct, the shared undertaking, is the "true food of earthly immortality" (*Education*, 87). It is distinguished from individual achievement which is, no matter how gratifying and celebrated, a "one-sided" event. It is "only if someone grasps his hand...as a fellow creature lost in the world, to be his comrade of friend or lover...does he have an awareness and a share of mutuality" (*Education*, 87). The act of putting things together may help the child to learn possibility, origin, structure, and connections, but it is the "instinct for communion" that allows the individual to build a life. This is not the end of education, merely the beginning, for it is through the application of these two elements of education that the "almost imperceptible and yet important influence begins — that of criticism and instruction" (*Education*, 88).

Buber then makes a distinction between old and new education. Old education, the traditional authoritarian form, acts through the will to power and misconstrues the half of education Buber calls, "the raising of a finger...or a questioning glance" (*Education*, 89). New education, the overly permissive form, misconstrues freedom. Neither old nor new satisfies Buber, for in his opinion communion is where education occurs; it neither forces its will through authority, history, and tradition nor does it lose itself in false freedom:

That raising of the finger, that questioning glance, are [the teacher's] genuine doing.... Through him the selection of the effective world reaches the pupil...It must be concentrated in him; and doing out of concentration has the appearance of rest. Interference divides the soul in his care into an obedient part and a rebellious part. But a hidden influence proceeding from his integrity has an integrating force (*Education*, 90).

Buber continues his attack on "new education," which prioritizes what he calls "lower freedom," which is simply an ill-defined potential. "Higher freedom" is growth itself, and is the "soul's freedom of decision" but it is still just "the run before

the jump” without communion, for it is through communion that we “become free” in a process that removes the things we lean on one by one (*Education*, 90-91). The child, says Buber

is educated by the elements, by air and light and the life of plants and animals, and he is educated by relationships. The true educator represents both; but he must be to the child as one of the elements (*Education*, 90).

This reminds us of our previous discussion, the educator reaching out to sustain that fundamental relationship as the child strives to discover himself and have the “spark” within begin to burn.

The educator must work with the students in the classroom, whoever they might be and whatever their capacities. She

enters the school-room for the first time... sees them crouching at the desks, indiscriminately flung together, the misshapen and the well-proportioned, animal faces, empty faces, and noble faces in indiscriminate confusion, like the presence of the created universe; the glance of the educator accepts and receives them all (*Education*, 94).

It is the role of the educator to begin “the real process of education” by “experiencing the other side” and this implies a profound experience (*Education*, 96). Buber uses the example of a man striking another and receiving “in his soul the blow which he strikes” (*Education*, 96). The educator must experience what it is to be the students, must “feel” how her own actions impact them. However, this can only happen through inclusion and communion.¹¹ “Relation in education is one of pure dialogue” and trust “the most inward achievement of the relation in education” (*Education*, 98). The educator must have “gathered the child into his life” so that the “reality between them... is mutuality” (*Education*, 98). It is through this connection that the students begin to discover themselves. At this point Buber sketches what I believe to be the three examinable steps of relational dialogue in education, reflecting the individual process we saw previously in our discussion of his religious thinking.

THE ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIP:

THE STEPS IN THE TEACHER/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

The three steps in teacher/student relationships are: the abstract dialogue, the asymmetrical relationship, and true dialogue. The first form of relation is “an abstract but mutual experience of inclusion” (*Education*, 99). By this, Buber means a moment of illumination where one becomes able “to acknowledge” another person, and the two individuals mutually discover one another as being distinct but with whom they can relate. They

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 (*Education*, 99).

This is not complete inclusion, as Buber defines it, but it is the first taste of the possibility of relationship, a miraculous moment of I/Thou, the glory of belonging, the conscious awakening of that instinct of communion. But this form of relation leaves out the full reality of the other person. It is more of an intellectual discovery of the potential for relationship.

It is the second step of the process toward true dialogue that Buber describes as the “asymmetrical relation.” It is a concrete “but one-sided experience of inclusion”

and it is "the relation of education" (*Education*, 99). The asymmetrical relation traps the educator in a paradox where what "is otherwise found only as grace, inlaid in the folds of life — the influencing of the lives of others with one's own life — becomes here a function and a law" (*Education*, 100). Teachers become the official purveyors of grace. This trap is dangerous since it can lead the educator to arbitrariness or propaganda. Here the teacher becomes like the master actor. He describes the teacher's role thus:

Without the action of his spirit being in any way weakened he must at the same time be over there, on the surface of that other spirit which is being acted upon — and not of some conceptual, contrived spirit, but all the time the wholly concrete spirit of this...unique being who is living and confronting him, and who stands with him in the common situation of "educating" and "being educated" (*Education*, 100).

The educator must attempt to act simultaneously as both teacher and student, for the student, at this point in the process of self-discovery, is unable to do so. It takes a thoughtful educator to sense the nuances of the student's sensibility, while at the same time offering experiences, allowing creativity, and providing instruction. So, rather like a parent who monitors a toddler at the beach, the teacher watches over the student, allowing him to experience, risk, and discover without being aware of the protection. And this is just the beginning of an on-going process whereby the child must become aware, must discover herself, must become conscious of the nature and significance relationships, and must be able to offer support to others. Ultimately the educator is striving to do herself out of a job:

in the moment when the pupil is able to throw himself across and experience from over there, the educative relationship would be burst asunder (*Education*, 101).

At this point the educator is no longer a guide but a true friend, because the child is now able to truly enter into "the third form of the dialogical relation, which is based on a concrete and mutual experience of inclusion. It is the true inclusion of one another by human souls" and it is the final step in progression of dialogue (*Education*, 101). This is the goal of education and of life. It is important that educators do not get confused here. Buber is not suggesting that education only occurs when the dynamic of the asymmetrical relationship is in place. What he is suggesting is that we are to support children on their path to adulthood, to true dialogue, at which point the educational relationship becomes a more mutual process. Buber's most significant learning relationship was the one he had with his wife Paula. This was not an asymmetrical relationship but a coming together of two individuals as equals in dialogue who were then able to act as support to each other and facilitate each other's learning.

Before leaving the teacher/student relationship, we should mention the role of the teacher as facilitator. Having entered a relationship with a student, the teacher gets a sense of the student's needs and the direction he is likely to take in life. It is the teacher's responsibility to choose "the forces of the world which the child needs for the building up of his substance" (*Education*, 101). Thus, the educator becomes a facilitator and a foil for providing the child with what it needs when it needs it.

The educator is set now in the midst of the need which he experiences in inclusion, but only a bit deeper in it. He is set in the midst of the service, only a bit

higher up, which he invokes without words; he is set in the *imitatio Dei absconditi sed non ignoti* (*Education*, 103).

The educator must never forget that even the relational neophyte has the ability to teach us something. Even if the asymmetrical relationship is burst asunder the project is not at an end and, as Buber suggests, “our students teach us, our works form us....How are we educated by children, by animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity.”¹² As teachers we may be more adept and aware of relationship but we are by no means static or complete, and keeping this in mind is helpful as we encounter those inevitable conflicts. Conflict can only assist us in the educative process if we see it as potentially being an external reflection of our own inner conflict.

So, Buber ends his essay, “Education,” claiming that the educator acts “in imitation of a God hidden but not unknown.” The teacher acts like God as she offers relationship, even to those who are so new to relationship that they are unaware of the offer being made, and then allows that relationship to change and grow as the student climbs toward full dialogue. Just as man is responsible for God’s return to the temporal world through the *shekina*, and God remains ever-present for the individual but is not “making” things happen, so the teacher provides support, offers relationship and meets the students where they are. However, the teacher is not almighty God, and can only do her best. With every relationship she will discover more about herself and become better able to support the next student along.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

There are many educational implications of Buber’s developmental relationalism. First, in order to do justice to the idea of the *shekina*, the onus has shifted onto the educator to continue to search for the good, the shard of the rainbow, within all our students. The challenge is to come to understand the student and get through his shell. This also changes the way we encounter students and increases our responsibility toward them, for the task of humankind is to seek out and form connections. Second, we have seen, both in “Education” and in the image of the *shekina*, how Buber’s idea of relationship goes beyond the simply human. This means that educators must be conscious of their approach to everything. They must consider what they are putting in their classrooms and why. They must also be thoughtful about providing opportunities for the students to interact with the world around. The third implication relates to what Buber might call “God’s immediacy.” The teacher in the classroom is immersed in the real world and the task is to facilitate both projects and relationships that allow students to open themselves and begin to develop awareness.

The fourth implication is that the teacher, in imitation of the Eternal Thou, must always be present, be available to the student even if the student is uninterested, unwilling, or unable to consciously accept it. This is just as important before the first steps of the conversion as it is thereafter. But, although the conversion must come from the student, the process is not magical. The teacher must be both the role model and the questioning glance, walking delicately the line between “old” and “new” education. Through modeling, in their own lives, the process of becoming and

through examining their intentions with respect to others, teachers are imbuing that way of acting with value for the student. Teachers also act as arbiters of wonder, as they offer new experiences to students which can open exciting vistas in possibility, or creators of doubt, as they act as mirrors, feedback mechanisms, allowing the student to see herself more clearly. The teacher may know better the significance of the relationship and may even have a sense of a student's particular path, but the conscious involvement of both parties is required for the relationship to develop, and the onus is not solely on the teacher. There is a fine line between educating and propagandizing that must be continually monitored. Each individual student must be considered as the teacher tries to help precipitate the possibility of conversion and a deepening awareness of I/Thou. Understanding that specific students' abilities to come into relationship, their relational history, and where she is with respect to her own *teshuvah* are all deeply important to this educational process.

Finally we have seen that this is a process. The goal of education is to "burst asunder" the asymmetrical relationship, to allow each student to regain his innate ability for true dialogue, and to support each individual in the process of becoming. For this to happen the child must first discover the world as an object within the protective care of the teacher/caregiver. But, then the child must begin to discover I, and that can only happen through more conscious interactions in relationship with both the human and non-human world, as the child begins the process of self-creation. This means that the teacher must be willing to change the asymmetry of the relationship to meet the changing awareness of the student. Thus, in *imitatio Dei absconditi sed non ignoti*, the teacher leads the student to true dialogue, and what is burst asunder is not only the asymmetrical relationship but also the role of "teacher."

1. Martin Buber, "Education" (1926), in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 103. This essay was originally presented at the Third International Educational Conference, "The Development of the Creative Powers in the Child," held in Heidelberg, Austria, in 1925. This essay will be cited as *Education* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Buber's theological literature is referenced in support of educational discussions only rarely, and then without explicit use of Hasidic concepts. See, for example, Leonard Grob, "Buberian Peace Education in the Mideast: A Buberian Critique," *Teachers College Record* 35, no. 4 (1985): 423-35; Haim Gordon, "Would Martin Buber Endorse the Buber Model?" *Educational Theory* 23, no. 2 (1973): 215-23; and Haim Gordon, *Dance, Dialogue, and Despair: Existentialist Philosophy and Education for Peace in Israel* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986).

3. Scholars who understate or misstate the asymmetrical relation include Kenneth Winetrou, "Buber: Philosopher of the I-Thou Dialogue," *Educational Theory* 13, no. 1 (1963): 53-57; Maurice Friedman, "Martin Buber's Philosophy of Education," *Educational Theory* 6, no. 2 (1956): 95-104; and, John Scudder, "Freedom With Authority: A Buber Model for Teaching," *Educational Theory* 18, no. 2 (1968): 133-42. Other scholars miss the importance of the imitation of God and the processional nature of the educational relationship: Edward David Kiner, "Some Problems in a Buber Model for Teaching," *Educational Theory* 19, no. 4 (1969): 396-403 and Henry McHenry, "Education as Encounter: Buber's Pragmatic Ontology," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 3 (1997): 341-57.

4. Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 37.

5. *Ibid.*, 81.

6. *Ibid.*, 103.

7. Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 134.

8. Buber, *Hasidism*, 164.

9. The Primitive Thou: Buber believes that children arrive as the “innate Thou,” with the ability for forming relationships in “natural association.” See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970), 76-78. This ability to relate provides the “pre-reflective” support, a well of relational history, for the more conscious adult to return to relationship at a later time in life.

10. These conflicts are between the actual self and that self-postulated through the act of conversion.

11. Inclusion is empathy without the loss of self.

12. Buber, *I and Thou*, 67.