

“Martin Buber” meets Martin Buber

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The 1957 conversation between Martin Buber and Carl Rogers includes the following exchange:

51. ROGERS: Well now, now I'm wondering uh who is Martin Buber, you or me, because what I feel —

54. BUBER: I'm, I'm not, I'm no, eh, so to say, “Martin Buber” eh, as how do you say, with uh-uh the signs, brackets? Yes-no?

55. ROGERS: In that sense, I'm not “Carl Rogers” [Buber: I'm not—] either. [Laughter].

56. BUBER: You see, I'm not a quoted man that eh thinks so and so and so on.¹

Buber disallows the use of quotations because he rejects the common practice of building connections with his own previous work. There is no reason to suspect that he did not want people to read his entire body of work. Yet in this specific case, he rejects the validity of juxtaposing what he says today with what he has said in the past. The reason seems quite clear to me: Buber the person does not want to be confused with “Buber” the sum of his texts. In other words, Buber claims not just the right to contradict himself, but also the right to disconnect from his own previous writings as he responds to new situations. He wants his words to be taken in the unique context of that conversational moment, rather than in the context of his scholarship as a whole. It is not my intention to suggest that the latter has no place; rather, I want to understand which context could be used for which purposes. The argument here is that philosophy of education will gain more from talking to Buber than from interpreting “Buber.” Sean Blenkinsop begins his essay with an argument based on appeal to the quoted man, “Martin Buber.” He claims that those writing before him failed to understand Buber, because they did not consider the entire body of the philosopher’s work. Because I belong to the army of casual readers of Buber, a philosophical self-justification is certainly appropriate here. Specifically, Blenkinsop asserts that Buber’s educational writings must be understood in connection with his theological texts. This is a very common, widely accepted move, and this critique is aimed not at Blenkinsop, but at the venerable philosophical practice that he so ably represents. Most philosophers who examine other philosophers make this hermeneutic move in one form or another. Let us call it the “quoted man argument.” It assumes that several texts written by the same author will be understood better if taken as a whole. Each text illuminates all other texts; later texts especially benefit from comparisons with previous texts to show how certain ideas or concepts have developed. Blenkinsop, for example, takes a close look at Buber’s concepts of *shekinah*, *teshuvah*, and the Eternal Thou and links them to Buber’s ideas about educational relation. The purpose here is to “better understand” Buber’s notion of education, and highlight implications of this improved understanding. One must say that the method works well. I reread Buber’s essay with different eyes, and walked away with an impression that I understood and appreciated Buber’s thought more deeply. While it was fun, I am not so sure if it was useful.

This is a critique of the method that implies necessary connections among one

writer's texts. It seems that this method results in a somewhat artificial construct, "Martin Buber," that never existed; a theory of the man, not the man himself. Such a theory must compete with a number of other theories, and its premises may not assume the air of indisputability. Paradoxically, if you emphasize the holistic properties of the super-text, you also rob individual texts of integrity, since they become incomplete fragments of the whole. The major premise of the quoted man argument is that all of the writings of one person fit together to form a whole. Of course, *each individual* text written by any author by definition possesses integrity, certain coherence of vocabulary, overall intention, and conceptual structure. Let us remember, that even within each text, heterogeneity often overwhelms coherence, but at least the author wanted to tell us something by putting all the fragments in a single text. Yet when the entire body of the author's work is treated as one super-text, one wonders about the rationale for such interpretations. It would be reasonable to suggest that a philosopher separates her work into chunks not only because of practical considerations, but also because these texts are meant to be read separately. Therefore treating each text individually is a valid way of reading, at least according to the authors' wishes. The practice of assuming the existence of super-text derives from the great narratives of modernity, that assumed all texts ever written to be either erroneous, or parts of the Truth. Yet the same assumption could be held on a much smaller scale. Buber's work, for instance, could be assumed to contain a core truth, from which all the smaller truths of his writings emanate. In my view, one must allow for heterogeneity of discourses to exist within each writer's work, just like we now allow such heterogeneity to exist among writers.

The quoted man argument, in fact, questions the newness of each subsequent text. The neglect of the intentional disconnection between the texts implies that the new texts conveyed essentially the same ideas in another disguise. Just to be fair, some people do write like that, but we tend to look down on self-repetitions. The quoted man argument is a method that emphasizes sameness of ideas across texts, as if they were coming from an inner core of a philosopher's views or from a philosopher's essential self. This robs the philosopher of originality with respect to himself, reducing his thought to a few identifiable core ideas. Great for encyclopedias, this is not so good if you are trying to enjoy and engage with a specific text.

Is it possible then to interpret Buber or any other thinker? Of course. Interpretation, as we all know, does not always look for the author's intent. Literary criticism, for example, abounds in interpretations that are designed to make the interpreted authors turn in their graves. In philosophy, such readings are not the norm, but there is no rational reason for this. The meaning of every text is born at the moment of interaction between the reader and the text, so each interpretation is by definition also a misinterpretation. There is no "meaning" in ink markings on paper. Blenkinsop believes Buber's ideas about educational relations come from "Buber's" ideas about God. Someone else might suggest that his understanding of education comes from the Oedipus complex, or from the Marburg philosophical school of Hermann Cohen. These are all valid ways of added-value reading, which is interpretation. Importantly, one may also ignore the sources of these ideas, and add

meaning from one's own practice or theorizing.

Any text can be compared to food that is too dry to swallow. One has to pour something in to make it edible. One can pour a solution from the same author's previous text, or juices from other authors, or waters of one's own making. These are all creative choices available to an interpreter, and suitable for different recipes. Is the quoted man argument more productive than, say, searching for a secret code in Buber's writings? No one can know for sure, but I doubt it. The productivity of interpretation depends on how much added value the interpreter brings into the text. This does not directly depend on where the added meaning comes from — from the interpreter's own theorizing, her errors, or her knowledge of the author's previous work.

The most important objection against the quoted man argument has to do with its efficiency. Let me first mention that I find Blenkinsop's conclusion interesting and deserving much attention. Indeed, focus on developing relationships in education may bring much-needed alternatives to behavioral analysis of educational practices that dominate educational theory. The view of "asymmetrical" relationships as unchanging is not helpful. It is not clear though that Blenkinsop could not have arrived at these conclusions without referring to Buber's theological writings. Subsequently, I wonder if he has chosen the most efficient way of theorizing. The "complete reading of Buber's work" which B is indeed a commendable, although not necessarily gainful undertaking. Of course, it is a lot of fun, but exactly the same result could have been achieved by numerous of other ways: for example, straightforward critique of *Education* with or without help of other theorists.

I suggest that philosophy of education should treat philosophers' texts differently. We do not aim at clarifying the meaning of Buber's thought. Even when we do it, the final purpose is to seek ways of enriching educational practice with new ideas. We cannot really justify an interest in a philosopher's thought as such, without thinking of implications for education. Let us assume for a moment, that it is possible to understand Buber's educational writings *better* through connecting them to his theology. One must ask then, better for what? Since philosophy of education must ultimately improve educational practice, the richer in practical implications an interpretation is, the better it is.

Let us list again the main educational implications of the new reading of Buber by Blenkinsop:

1. Educators need to search for the good within all their students.
2. Educators must be conscious and thoughtful.
3. Educators must help students to open themselves and develop awareness.
4. The teacher must be available even to uninterested students, so students can go through a conversion (active engagement with God).
5. Education is a process: it begins with asymmetrical relationships that later give ways to true dialogue.

These are gross simplifications, and I ask the reader to read the original essay for fuller justifications of these suggestions. The last two implications seem especially promising, for two reasons: (1) educational philosophers defer to psychologists on most questions about human development, and the latter get it all wrong; and, (2) no

one really knows how relationships between students and teachers grow and develop, not even the psychologists, who would have gotten it all wrong if they did. Indeed, educators will benefit greatly if they examine spiritual maturation and development of relationship. Unfortunately, Blenkinsop spends all his effort on the quoted man argument, and has no space left for spelling out these two important lessons. Of course, he will probably continue this work in the future and arrive at specifically educational interpretations of Buber applicable to practice. However, in educational philosophy, we see a great deal of provocative ideas and suggestions that could potentially advance educational theory, and very few of them actually make it that far. As a profession, we are in the business of producing these ideas, but unfortunately, there is nobody out there to pick them up. One of the reasons for such a state of affairs is our over reliance on methods such as the quoted man argument. We tend to lose sight of education in our fascination with philosophy.

In the end, my appeal is to all philosophers of education: let us cut to the necessary minimum the wasteful work of interpreting other philosophers, and do more original work instead. Dewey has done so, but we have interpreted him to death. In the end, it is a matter of allocation of labor. Every time we feel an urge to make generalizations about so-an-so's true ideas, let us remember Buber's words: "I am not a quoted man."

1. Ron Anderson and Kenneth N. Cissna, *The Martin Buber-Carl Rogers Dialogue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 43-44.