

**GESTALT THERAPY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAM 2023**  
**For: Blagica Rizoska Vanikj**  
**Second Year Assignment**

**I-THOU BY MARTIN BUBER**

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**December 2023**

Martin Buber is a theologian and a philosopher. He is born in Vienna and lived between 1878 and 1965. His views are named as Theistic Existentialism and Dialogical Existentialism. Not a Christian but a Jew and his yearning for looking ways of connection to world and to God is his primary concern. He also says many things about our earthly connections. For him existence is defined as:

“Being-in-the-world in terms of addressing or speaking to the world”

*I and Thou* (1923) originally written in German but it has two English translations.

- Buber, Martin (1937). [\*I and Thou\*](#). Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
- Buber, Martin (1970). [\*I and Thou\*](#). Translated by [Walter Kaufmann](#). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

In these translations I-Thou is sometimes expressed as I-You. However, for Buber I-Thou is something different from I-You, because these primary words (as Buber names them) are hyphenated words that always involve one another. Hyphenated I-Thou and I-It are two primary words, two different ways that we use in addressing the world.

“...“I” always involves an “It” or a “Thou”  
Without an “It” or a “Thou”, there is no “I”...”

This is how he writes also in his book, a poetic and philosophical way of talking about things. When he writes about I-Thou and I-It, an ongoing mutual interplay of identity or alterity (otherness) is at the heart of his existential vision. Meaning in our encounters with the world we either feel a form of identifying or a form of otherness.

That's how his book starts:

(From Smith's translation, pg.

“...To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude.  
The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words  
which he speaks.

The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words.

The one primary word is the combination ***I-Thou***.

The other primary word is the combination ***I-It***; wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words ***He*** and ***She*** can replace ***It***.

Hence the *I* of man is also twofold.

For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a **different *I*** from that of the primary word *I-It*.”

In our words, Buber's main proposition is that we may address existence in two ways:

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

The attitude of the I towards an It always involves an object and that object is used for own purposes. For Buber also the objects are experienced. The verb of experiencing has a different meaning for Buber than other existentialists. For him experiencing the world is always internal to the experiencer only and it is not in between the person and the world. An example may be experiencing the nature. We can make use of natural resources for our civilized lives or we can be in nature, just to be feel our presence there, in an here and now manner.

Another important difference between I-Thou and I-It attitudes is the presence of the whole being in the relationship.

From Smith's translation, pg.3

"The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the **whole being**.  
The primary word *I-It* can never be spoken with the whole being. "

Whether the person engages with the world with his whole being or partial being is major in differentiating I-Thou attitude from I-It attitude towards the world.

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. 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.

## I-It

I-It attitude is an objectifying stance towards the world. It is about having objects and objectifying other people. It is pragmatic, purposeful instrumentality; it is like using means towards some ends. It helps sustain ourselves in concrete and practical ways. It is an attitude that we most of the time in our daily living use, experience or practice. It is essential for survival.

**I-It is also the world of *experience* for Buber** (confusing! different from other existentialists). For Buber, word *experience* refers to **internal subjectivity**, NOT to genuine encounter with the other. In order to understand Buber's definition of I-It attitude and his different definition for the verb experiencing, let's look at his own words:

From Smith's translation, pg.4

"The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of **transitive verbs** alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone, which have some *thing* for their object.  
I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something.  
The life of human beings does not consist of all this and the like alone.  
This and the like together establish **the realm of *It***."

Experience (pg.5)

"It is said that man experiences his world. What does that mean!  
Man travels over the surface of things and experiences them. He extracts knowledge about their constitution from them: he wins an experience from them. **He experiences what belongs to the things.**  
But the world is not presented to man by experiences alone. These present him only with a **world composed of It and He and She and It again.**"

"I experience something. -If we add "**inner**" to "outer" experiences, nothing in the situation is changed.  
We are merely following the **uneternal division** that springs from the lust of the human race to whittle away the secret of death.  
Inner things or outer things; what are they but things and things!"

"The man who experiences has no part in the world. For **it is "in him" and not between him and the world that the experience arises.**  
The world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced, but has no concern in the matter. For it does nothing to the experience, and the experience does nothing to it."

Buber describes the realm of it (the thing-the object) so elaborately and even includes the realm of experiencing as a function of I-It attitude. "The world permits itself to be experienced but has no concern in the matter" he says, emphasizing the mutual concern in actual I-Thou relations. I-Thou requires mutuality, reciprocity and engagement on both sides, with their whole beings that meet each other "in between".

# I-Thou

I-Thou (pg.4)

“But the realm of Thou has a different basis.

**When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object.**

For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every It is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others.

But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds.

When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing.

But he **takes his stand in relation.**”

Buber saw the meeting between I and Thou as the most important aspect of human experience because it is in relationship that we become fully human. When one meets another as Thou, the uniqueness and separateness of the other is acknowledged without obscuring the relatedness or common humanness that is shared. Buber contrasted this I–Thou relationship with an I–It relationship, in which the other person is experienced as an object to be influenced or used — a means to an end.

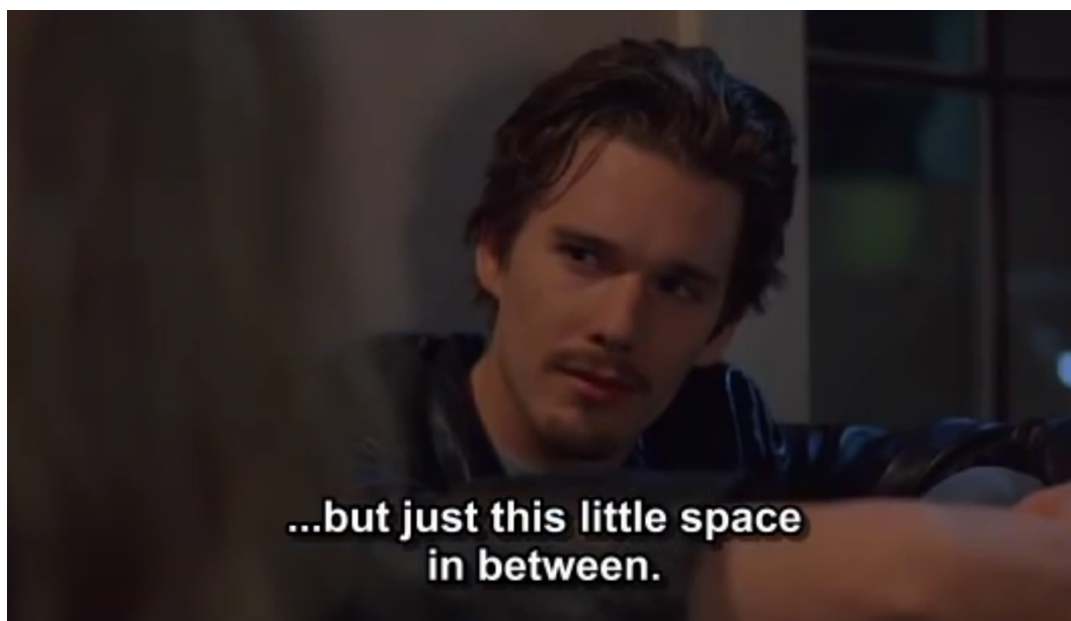
A conversation based film series by Linklater comes to mind as an example from fictional world. In the film *Before Sunrise* (Linklater, 1995), the two actors’ (Julie Delphi and Ethan Hawke) 2-minute dialogue brings the insight of an I-Thou attitude towards close relationships.

I-Thou (from *Before Sunrise*, Linklater, 1995)

JD: I’m talking seriously here. I always have this strong pressure of being a strong and independent icon of womanhood and not making it look like my whole life is revolving around some guy. But loving someone and being loved means so much to me. I always make fun of it instead. Isn’t everything we do in life is for being loved.

EH: I don’t know. Sometimes I dream of being a good father, good husband to someone I feel really close. But then other times it seems silly. Like it would have ruined all my life. It’s not just a fear of commitment or that I’m not capable of loving or caring, because, I can. It’s just, if I’m totally honest with myself, I think I’d rather die if not knowing that I’m good at something, I’ve excelled in some way rather than I’m in a nice caring relationship

JD: Yeah. But, I had worked for this older man and once he told me he has spent all his life thinking about his career and his work. He was 52 and it suddenly struck him that he had never really given anything off himself. His life was for no one and nothing. He was almost crying saying that. .... You know I believe if there’s any kind of God, it won’t be in any of us. Not you, or me, but just this little space in between. If there’s any kind of magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone sharing something. I know it’s almost impossible to succeed but who cares really, the answer must be in the attempt.



According to Buber, an interpersonal encounter contains wonderful potential that far exceeds two separate people in conversation. This potential becomes apparent when two people actively and authentically engage each other in the here and now and truly “show up” to one another. In this encounter, a new relational dimension that Buber termed “the between” becomes manifest. When this between dimension exists, the relationship becomes greater than the individual contributions of those involved. This type of meeting is what Buber described as an I–Thou relationship.

I–Thou is being in mutual relation to someone or something; and affirming him/her/it with one’s entire being. Takes the form of participation, encountering, meeting and reciprocal

relation (instead of residing in using or experiencing). The I–Thou relationship is also characterized by mutuality, directness, being present, intensity and ineffability. Buber described the between as a bold leap into the experience of the other while simultaneously being transparent, present and accessible. He used the term “inclusion” to describe this heightened form of empathy.

### The world of relations



According to Buber, the sphere of relations is explained as (pg.6):

“The spheres in which **the world of relation arises** are three.

First, **our life with nature**. There the relation sways in gloom, beneath the level of speech. Creatures live and move over against us, but cannot come to us, and when we address them as Thou, our words cling to the threshold of speech.”

“Second, **our life with men**. There the relation is open and in the form of speech. We can give and accept the Thou.

Third, **our life with intelligible forms**. There the relation is clouded, yet it discloses itself; it does not use speech, yet begets it. We perceive no Thou, but none the less we feel we are addressed and we answer forming, thinking, acting. We speak the primary word with our being, though we cannot utter Thou with our lips. “

**I-Thou attitude is being present to the other in his/her/its wholeness with one’s own wholeness.**

Buber describes this relation in terms of “relation” and “distance”

- Relation: mutual contact and affirmation
- Distance: implies both “I” and “Thou” poles remain intact (rather than dissolving into a homogeneous mass)
- I-Thou involves both relation and distance simultaneously (and paradoxically)

Becoming is also a function of I-Thou (every instance of becoming requires a You)  
How we enter I-Thou relations are explained in terms of “Grace” (givenness) and “Will” (election). A particular kind of givenness of the moment that one steps into by willful choice.  
As Buber says:

“You encounters me. But I enter into direct relation to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once”

From Smith’s translation, pg.11

“The Thou meets me through grace - it is **not found by seeking**. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being.  
The Thou meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means **being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one**; just as any **action of the whole being**, which means the suspension of all partial actions and consequently of all sensations of actions grounded only in their particular limitation is bound to resemble suffering.  
The primary word I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being. **Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me.**

I become, through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou:  
**All real living is meeting.”**

I-Thou attitude has many other characteristics.

- I-Thou is the locus of **creativity and art** (immersion in the present with one’s wholeness-Maslow’s primary creativeness)

Art work (pg.9)

“This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work.

This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power.

The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, **if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises.”**



- The relation to the Thou is **direct**.

Direct relation (pg.11-12)

“The relation to the Thou is direct.

**No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou.**

The **memory itself is transformed**, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole.

**No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between I and Thou.**

**Desire itself is transformed** as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance.

Every means is an obstacle. **Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about.”**

- I-Thou is based in **the present** (temporal modality)

Present (pg.12)

“The present arises only in virtue of the fact that the Thou becomes present.

The I of the primary word I-It, that is, the I faced by no Thou, but surrounded by a multitude of “contents” has no present, only the past.

Put in another way, in so far as man rests satisfied with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no present content. He has nothing but objects. But objects subsist in time that has been.

**... True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past.”**



## The Eternal You – God

Eventually, as a theologian, Buber also defines God as the Eternal You, a final form of I-Thou relations. According to Buber, every particular instance of I-Thou makes an indirect reference to the Eternal You. He terms God in various ways: The Eternal You – God – The Center – The Countenance. Even atheists who enter into I-Thou relation make at least an implicit affirmative reference to God. All spiritual life for Buber, inheres in the I-Thou. Spirituality inheres in the between, in some reciprocal encounter. He also uses the metaphor of parallel lines in physics: although they don't meet in material world, they meet when I-Thou relations happen.

“The parallel lines of relation meet”



## I – It / I – Thou in the Developmental Process

Every particular You is bound to become an It; but, every It may or may not become a You. In terms of **developmental processes**, I – Thou is the more original condition and the I – It is a derivative of it. As Buber describes, development proceeds from

- an unspoken I-You,
- to identification of oneself as an I,
- to the ultimate emergence of I-It

This is also true in the case of primitive societies (I-You holds a much greater sway) where people have more direct contact with the nature and the spiritual life.

## Knowledge, Art, Training



The world of I–It can be coherent and ordered — even efficient — but it lacks the essential elements of human connection and wholeness that characterize the I–Thou encounter. The I–It attitude is increasingly depersonalizing and alienating as it becomes structuralized in human institutions like knowledge, art and training. When an extreme I–It attitude becomes embedded in cultural patterns and human interactions, the result is greater objectification of others, exploitation of people and resources, and forms of prejudice that obscure the common humanity that unites us.

## **Final Words: I-Thou and Gestalt Therapy**

Buber’s dialogical understanding is one of the major pillars of Gestalt Therapy. Thus the main themes of Buber’s I-Thou conceptualization summarized so far overlaps with Gestalt concepts.

- Positioning in between-in the relation as the core of I-Thou relations is expressed as “Everything happens at the contact boundary” in Gestalt approach. The units have intact boundaries that engage with each other when the authentic contact happens.
- Wholeness in I-Thou is crucial for the person to be in his entire being when in relation corresponds to the emphasis on authentic contact in Gestalt where the alignment of 4 dimensions of being is realized and experienced.
- Partial engagement in I-It relations can be explained by contact boundary interruptions in Gestalt.
- Dialogue is the core of Relational Gestalt approach.
- Grace and Will, being elected and electing at the same time for I-Thou relations to occur is related to Existentialist roots of Gestalt and refers to “acting by choice”, making active preferences in life.
- Present time modality of I-Thou relations directly focus on the importance of being “Here and Now” in Gestalt theory and practice.
- Experience as a form of I-It relations as describe by Buber, on the other hand deepens the Phenomenological definition of experience in Existentialist philosophy in general and Gestalt approach in particular. When the experience confined to the internal subjectivity of the person and has no direct way of connecting to the world, then for Buber it’s an instance of I-It relations and objectification of the world.