

When Does a Person Become a You?

Martin Buber on Encounter

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Introduction

Much of our ordinary life requires us to encounter the world as something to be understood or acted upon. We learn things about other people. We form impressions of their personalities. We remember what they have done, anticipate what they might do, and decide how we should respond to them.

Martin Buber does not think there is anything inherently wrong with this. But in *I and You*, first published in German in 1923, he argues that it represents only one fundamental way of relating to reality.

Buber calls this the relation of **I–It**. Against it he places another basic relation: **I–You**. Here, another being is no longer primarily something we observe or experience, nor even a collection of qualities we know particularly well. Something else happens: we *encounter* them.

The distinction can initially seem elusive. What would it mean to encounter someone without turning them into an object of experience? Can we recognize moments in our own lives when another person—or perhaps even something nonhuman—ceased to be an “It” and became a “You”? And what could Buber possibly mean when he claims that **“all actual life is encounter”**?

As you read, don't worry about deciding immediately whether Buber is right. Try first to notice what kind of experience he is attempting to describe. See whether you can recognize it.

I and You

Martin Buber

Part One¹

The world is twofold for the human being, in accordance with our twofold attitude toward it.

Our attitude is twofold because there are two basic words we can speak.

The basic words are not single words, but pairs of words.

One basic word is the pair **I–You**.

The other basic word is the pair **I–It**; without changing the basic word, *He* or *She* may also take the place of *It*.

Thus the human “I” is also twofold.

For the I of the basic word **I–You** is different from the I of the basic word **I–It**.

Basic words do not describe something that exists independently of them. When spoken, they establish a mode of existence. Basic words are spoken with one’s whole being.

When **You** is spoken, the I of the word-pair I–You is spoken along with it.

When **It** is spoken, the I of the word-pair I–It is spoken along with it.

The basic word I–You can be spoken only with one’s whole being.

The basic word I–It can never be spoken with one’s whole being.

There is no I in itself, but only the I of the basic word I–You and the I of the basic word I–It.

When a human being says “I,” one of these two is meant. The I that is meant is present whenever “I” is spoken. And whenever we say “You” or “It,” the I belonging to one or the other basic word is present as well.

To be an I and to say I are one. To say I and to speak one of the basic words are one.

Whoever speaks a basic word enters into that word and takes their stand within it.

Human life does not consist only of activities directed toward something.

It does not consist only of acts that take something as their object.

I perceive something. I sense something. I imagine something. I want something. I feel something. I think something.

1 Excerpted from Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Insel-Verlag, 1923). English translation prepared for the Seattle Applied Wisdom Lab. Section headings added for readability; an intervening passage on artistic creation has been omitted.

Human life does not consist of these things and others like them alone.

Taken together, all such acts establish the realm of It.

But the realm of You has another ground.

Whoever says **You** does not have some *thing* as an object.

For wherever there is a thing, there is another thing beside it. Every It borders on other Its; it exists as an It by being bounded by them.

But where You is spoken, there is no thing.

You has no boundary.

Whoever says You has no thing, possesses nothing.

But they stand in relation.

We say that a human being experiences the world. What does this mean?

A person moves across the surface of things and experiences them. From them, the person acquires knowledge of their qualities—experience of what belongs to things.

But experience alone does not bring the world to the human being.

For experience brings only a world made up of It and It and It—of He and He, She and She, and It.

I experience something.

Nothing changes if we add “inner” experiences to “outer” ones, following that temporary distinction born of humanity’s desire to blunt the mystery of death.

Inner things like outer things: things among things!

I experience something.

And nothing changes if we add “hidden” experiences to “obvious” ones—as though there were some sealed compartment within things reserved for the initiated, and we possessed its key. Mystery without mystery! An accumulation of information! It, It, It!

The one who experiences does not participate in the world.

For experience is “in” the person, and not between the person and the world.

The world does not participate in experience. It allows itself to be experienced, but this does not concern it: it contributes nothing to the experience, and nothing happens to it through being experienced.

The world as experience belongs to the basic word **I–It**.

The basic word **I–You** establishes the world of relation.

The Three Spheres of Relation

There are three spheres in which the world of relation arises.

The first is **life with nature**. Here relation stirs in darkness, beneath the level of speech. Living creatures stir toward us, but they cannot come to us, and when we say You to them, our address remains at the threshold of language.

The second is **life with human beings**. Here relation is manifest and takes the form of language. We can give and receive the You.

The third is **life with spiritual beings**. Here relation is veiled in cloud, yet reveals itself; it is without speech, yet gives rise to speech. We hear no You, and yet we feel ourselves addressed. We respond—creating, thinking, acting. With our whole being we speak the basic word, though with our lips we cannot say You.

But how can we include what lies beyond speech within the world of the basic word?

In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us, we glimpse the edge of the eternal You. From each we sense a breath of it; in every You we address the eternal You, in each sphere according to its own way.

The Tree

I contemplate a tree.

I can take it in as an image: a rigid pillar struck by light, or a burst of green shot through with the gentleness of the blue and silver background.

I can perceive it as movement: the flowing veins around its clinging, striving core; the roots drawing nourishment, the leaves breathing, the endless exchange with earth and air—and the dark growth itself.

I can assign it to a species and observe it as a specimen, studying its structure and way of life.

I can overcome its particularity and form so completely that I recognize it only as an expression of law—the laws according to which forces continually oppose and balance one another, or the laws according to which substances combine and separate.

I can dissolve it into number, into pure numerical relations, and in this way make it timeless.

Through all of this, the tree remains my object. It has its place and its duration, its kind and its characteristics.

But it can also happen, through will and grace at once, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into relation with it, and now the tree is no longer an It. The power of exclusivity has seized me.

I do not need to give up any of the ways in which I have contemplated it. There is nothing I must stop seeing in order to see, and no knowledge I must forget. Rather, everything is there together—image and movement, species and specimen, law and number—indistinguishably united.

Everything belonging to the tree is there: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its exchange with the elements and its exchange with the stars—all of it in a single whole.

The tree is not an impression, not a play of my imagination, not a value created by my mood. It stands bodily before me and has to do with me, as I have to do with it—only differently.

Do not try to weaken the meaning of relation: **relation is reciprocity.**

Does the tree, then, have a consciousness like our own?

I do not experience that.

But because you think you have succeeded in analyzing your own consciousness, must you now dissect what cannot be divided?

What encounters me is not a soul of the tree, nor a dryad, but the tree itself.

Encounter with Another Person

When I stand before another human being as my You and speak the basic word I–You to them, they are no longer a thing among things, nor something composed of things.

They are no longer a He or a She, bounded by other Hes and Shes, a point entered into the network of space and time; nor are they a collection of qualities that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named characteristics.

Rather, without neighbor and without seam, they are You and fill the whole horizon.

Not as though nothing else existed but this person. But everything else lives in their light.

A melody is not composed of notes, nor a poem of words, nor a statue of lines. We have to pull and tear at them before their unity can be broken down into multiplicity.

So it is with the human being to whom I say You.

I can extract from them the color of their hair, the character of their speech, the quality of their goodness. I must do this again and again.

But when I do, they are already no longer You.

And just as prayer is not in time, but time is in prayer; just as sacrifice is not in space, but space is in sacrifice—and whoever reverses the relation abolishes its reality—so I do not encounter the human being to whom I say You at some particular point in space and time.

I can locate them there. I must do so again and again.

But then they are only a He or a She, an It—not my You.

As long as the heaven of You is spread out above me, the winds of causality crouch at my heels, and the whirlpool of fate grows still.

I do not experience the human being to whom I say You.

But I stand in relation to them, in the sacred basic word.

Only when I step out of that relation do I experience them again.

Experience is distance from You.

Relation can exist even when the person to whom I say You does not perceive it in their own experience.

For You is more than It knows. You does more, and more happens to You, than It knows.

No deception reaches this far.

Here is the cradle of actual life.

What Do We Know of the You?

What, then, does one experience of the You?

Nothing at all. For one does not experience it.

What, then, does one know of the You?

Only everything. For one no longer knows anything particular about it.

The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is an act of my being, my essential act.

The You encounters me. But I enter into immediate relation with it. Thus relation is both **being chosen and choosing, passivity and activity at once**. For an action of the whole being, precisely because it suspends all partial actions and therefore all the feelings of action that arise from their limitations, must itself come to resemble passivity.

The basic word I–You can be spoken only with one’s whole being.

The gathering and merging into the whole being can never happen through me alone, yet it can never happen without me.

I become through the You; becoming I, I say You.

All actual life is encounter.

The relation to the You is immediate.

Between I and You there stands no concept, no prior knowledge, no fantasy. Memory itself is transformed as it plunges from separateness into wholeness.

Between I and You there stands no purpose, no desire, no anticipation. Longing itself is transformed as it plunges from dream into manifestation.

Every means is an obstacle. Only where every means has fallen away does encounter occur.