

Re-reading Buber's *I and Thou*

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I Excerpts from *I and Thou* (trans. Walter Kauffman)

1. The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.
The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak.
The basic words are not single words but word pairs.
One basic word is the word pair I-Thou.
The other basic word is the word pair I-It; but this basic word is not changed when He or She takes the place of It.
Thus the I of man is also twofold.
For the I of the basic word I-Thou is different from that of the basic word I-It. (p. 53)

NB Kauffman's translation of 'du' (German 2nd person singular/informal = 'tu' in French) has been altered throughout this document – I have used 'thou' rather than 'you'.

2. I contemplate a tree. [...] I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of flight, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground. [...] I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air [...] I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life. [...] Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.

But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me. [...] This does not require me to forego any of the modes of contemplation. There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget. (pp. 57-58)

3. When I confront a human being as my thou and speak the basic word I-thou to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. [...] He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is thou and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light. [...] Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines – one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity—so it is with the human being to whom I say thou. I can abstract from him the color of his hair or the color of his speech or the color of his graciousness; I have to do this again and again; but immediately he is no longer thou. [...] (p. 59)

4. “The Thou encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking.” (p. 62)

5. “The it is the chrysalis, the thou the butterfly”; every thou (except for the Eternal Thou) must again become an it (p. 69)

II Comparison of *I-It* and *I-Thou*

I- It	I – Thou
Subject-object	Subject-subject
Experience	Encounter/relation
Indirect Knowledge	Direct Knowledge
Purposeful	No goal or purpose
One-way	Mutual relation
Control	Grace
I= 'individual', limited 'I'	I = 'person', 'whole being'
	Affirmation of meaningfulness of human existence; emerge from the encounter somehow changed

III Buber on God and Religion

Quotations from *I and Thou*:

“Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal Thou.” (p. 123)

It is not as if God can be inferred from anything – say, from nature as its cause, or from history as its helmsman, or perhaps from the subject as the self that thinks itself through it. It is not as if something else were “given” and this were then deduced from it. This is what confronts us immediately and first and always, and legitimately it can only be addressed, not asserted. (p. 129)

- Buber defined God as “him that, whatever else he may be in addition, enters into direct relationship to us human beings through creative, revelatory, and redemptive acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relationship to him ('Afterword', 1st published 1957, *I and Thou*, Kaufman translation, pp. 180-182)
- Buber prefers the term “religiosity” to “religion” – the rituals of religion may preclude the immediacy of God’s presence
- Buber thought that a renewed emphasis on I-thou would help to cure the ‘sickness of the age’

IV Contemporary Psychology and Neuroanatomy

a) “Flow”

Term used by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1934-2021) to describe a state in which a person is completely engrossed in an activity, loses any sense of self-consciousness or emotion, and is unaware of the passing of time. Athletes, musicians, etc. describes this state in various ways. (See his *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*, and Martin Seligman’s discussion of flow and ‘gratifications’ in his *Authentic Happiness*.)

How to achieve flow: a) remove distractions; b) engage in a task that is pitched at just the right level of challenge – if it is too difficult, it will be frustrating, if it’s too easy, it will be boring. I-thou relations can be partially understood as experiencing flow when in relation with another person (or art, nature or God). But I-thou should not be *reduced* to flow per se.

Csikszentmihalyi also pointed out that most people, in the absence of an external stimulus or specific activity to focus on, will quickly fall into ‘**psychic entropy**’, ‘a state in which we cannot use attention effectively to deal with external tasks, because we need it to restore an inner subjective order.’ (*Finding Flow*, p. 22). **Chaos**, he taught, is the normal state of the mind. In the absence of a goal or external stimulus to focus on, the untrained mind soon becomes entangled in negative thoughts and emotions. (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, p. 119)

b) The “Four Characters” in your Brain

Dr Jill Bolte Taylor is a Harvard-trained neuroanatomist who suffered a stroke at the age of 37. Her TED talk, [“My Stroke of Insight”](#), has been viewed over 28 million times. She published a book of the same title and, more recently, [Whole Brain Living](#) (2021). In *Whole Brain Living*, a self-help book that draws on her background in neuroanatomy, she argues that we are not ‘thinking beings who also feel’ but ‘feeling beings who also think’. She presents a novel view of the self as composed of ‘four characters’, and her descriptions are similar to some of Buber’s ideas about the different ‘I’ of ‘I-thou’ and ‘I-it’ relations.

Characteristics		Characters
<i>Thinking Brain</i>		<i>JBT's nicknames for her characters</i>
Character 1: Left Thinking	Character 4: Right Thinking	
• Thinks in language • Verbal • Linear • Past/future • Detail • Analytical • Focus on differences • Judgmental • Punctual • Individual • Concise/precise • Fixed • Focus on ME • Busy	• Thinks in pictures • Nonverbal • Thinks experientially • Present moment • Kinesthetic/body • Holistic/big picture • Seeks out similarities • Compassionate • Lost in flow of time • Collective • Flexible/resilient • Open to possibilities • Focus on WE • Available	Character 1 Nickname: Helen "I call my Character 1 <i>Helen</i>—short for 'Hell on wheels, she gets it done!'—and I hope you will pick a name that rings true for your methodical self." Character 4 Nickname: Queen Toad 'I call my Character 4 <i>Queen Toad</i>—<i>Queen</i> because she is as big as the universe (yours is too), and <i>Toad</i> because she is a bit of a goofball and I live on my lily pad boat named "BrainWaves" six months of the year. I encourage you to name this part of your brain, too, so you can gain easy access to this most holy part of your soul.'

Emotional Brain		
Character 2: Left Emotional	Character 3: Right Emotional	
• Constricted • Rigid • Cautious • Fear based • Stern • Loves conditionally • Doubts • Bullies • Righteous • Manipulates • Tried and true • Independent • Selfish • Critical • Superior/inferior • Right/wrong, good/bad	• Expansive • Open • Risk taking • Fearless • Friendly • Loves unconditionally • Trusts • Supports • Grateful • Goes with the flow • Creative/innovative • Collective • Sharing • Kind • Equality • Contextual	Character 2: Abby ‘My Character 2 is Abby—which is short for abandoned. There is a long story behind that one, of course, but I encourage you to give a name to this part of your brain—one that sums up your deepest fear or emotional wound. Knowing this part of ourselves and learning how we can self-soothe our own little Character 2 by using our other characters, is key to feeling okay again after we have been emotionally triggered.’ Character 3: ‘Pigpen’ ‘My Pigpen is curious and consistently making a mess, so chaos follows this part of me wherever I go. Life is composed of consecutive moments of disarray, so this part of me sings at the top of her lungs, creates art with abandon, and explores nature without a schedule. She is friendly, joyful and potentially explosive when she comes face to face with fear.’

Brain Huddle:

Jill Bolte Taylor suggests that we can be more effective by inviting all four characters to communicate in a ‘huddle’, acknowledging each other’s concerns and looking for consensus on a way forward when we face challenges.

Questions to consider:

1. Which ‘characters’ enable I-thou encounters?
2. Which ‘characters’ present obstacles to I-thou?

V The Four Characters and *I and Thou*

Regardless of the scientific accuracy of this model, the characterisations of the four ways of thinking/feeling can potentially be seen as a helpful elaboration, in less poetic language, of some of the ideas Buber sought to convey. Characters 1 and 2 will tend to keep us in the mode of I-it; Characters 3 and 4 seem to have aspects of the 'I' of I-thou: focused on the present, open, available, 'lost in the flow of time' etc.

Buber sees the I of the I-thou as the 'whole person'. Importantly, in a departure from his earlier, mystically inflected work *Daniel*, the I does not seek to merge with the other.

Bolte Taylor's spirituality, by contrast, seems inclined towards merging with 'all that is'. She concluded her Ted Talk:

Right here, right now I can step into the consciousness of my right hemisphere, where we are — I am — the life force power of the universe. I'm the life force power of the fifty trillion beautiful molecular genes that make up my form — *at one with all that is*. [...] Or I can choose to step into the consciousness of my left hemisphere, where I become a single individual...separate from the flow, separate from you. I am Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, intellectual, neuroanatomist. These are the 'we' inside of me. Which would you choose? Which do you choose? And when? I believe that the more time we spend choosing to run the deep inner peace circuitry of our right hemispheres, the more peace we will project into the world and the more peaceful our planet will be.

Buber, by contrast, aims to encourage his readers to enter into more frequent I-thou relations with other people, nature, and sources of inspiration, and to recognize that the 'Eternal Thou' is at the centre of all of the finite I-thou encounters. When we achieve that on a societal level, glimpses of the Eternal Thou will cease to be like 'mere flashes of lightning in the dark' and become more 'like a rising moon in a clear starry night'. (p. 163)

IV Further Reading

a) *Martin Buber (1878-1965)*

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*: tr. Walter Kauffman, 1970; tr. R. G. Smith, 1958.

Buber, Martin. *Daniel*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1964.

b) *Discussions of Jill Bolte Taylor*

Her original Ted talk has been critiqued, on the basis that the differences in function between the left and right hemispheres of the brain are less pronounced than previously thought. For a brief and accessible overview, see: <https://biomedicalodyssey.blogs.hopkinsmedicine.org/2019/05/left-vs-right-brained-why-the-brain-laterality-myth-persists/>

For a general critique of the Ted Talk, see: <https://chaunceybell.com/2008/04/02/comment-on-jill-bolte-taylors-impressive-ted-talk/>

For an introduction to Jill Bolte Taylor's work, including her description of the four characters, see her website: <https://www.drjilltaylor.com/about-dr-jill/>