

DIALOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE THOUGHTS OF MARTIN BUBER AND JOHN DEWEY

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Abstract

Education is not just about learning to excel in examination and acquire a good source of livelihood. Education is more about character development and acquiring the right principles or dispositions that would permit one as individual to relate well with others in the society and contribute positively to the development of the society. The big question is: how can education be used to attain such lofty goals? Martin Buber and John Dewey propose dialogue as the right answer to the interrogative. Education founded on dialogue is the platform character formation and societal development, both argue. The article studies dialogue, a core value in the philosophies of John Dewey and Martin Buber. He recognizes that both philosophers agree in more areas than not in their philosophies of education. Beyond this, it finds that there are some manner of continuity between the propositions of both philosophers. It suggests that Buber's philosophy of education founded on the principle of I-Thou is a blueprint to resolving the problems which Dewey spots in the society arising from the poor system of education in vogue. Hence, while both scholars share a close affinity; Buber's ideas on education are more practical and may be projected as the definitive end to Dewey's.

Keywords: Dialogue, Education, Martin Buber, John Dewey

Introduction

The pragmatist, John Dewey, and German Existentialist, Martin Buber, wrote at almost the same period; yet they did not engage with each other's work. Buber's life experiences and education played a major role in shaping and defining his work. Born in Vienna in 1878, Buber lost both parents at the age of three. A close friend and associate of Buber, Ernst Simon (1973), has suggested that his ". . . search after his long lost mother became a strong motive for his dialogical thinking – his *I-Thou* philosophy."(Simon 1973:359) Following his loss, he was raised and educated by his grandparents. John Dewey was born (1859) earlier than Martin Buber, but they were contemporaries. He was one of the most influential American scholars in the first half of the 20th century. This paper will bring together their different schools of thought to discuss what Dewey considers the primary concern of the society. In particular, Dewey's critique of traditional against liberal conceptions of education for the individual and society will be discussed. Examining Dewey's thought regarding the interactions of the various groups which constitute the society will enable us to identify society's primary concern. Then, through the philosophy of Buber, this article will explore how public dialogue can be reinforced. Finally, Buber and Dewey's apprehensions concerning the increasing value given to expert knowledge will be accessed. As we will see, Buber's conception of the I-Thou relation offers a solution to the issues raised by Dewey.

Buber's I-Thou Philosophy

Buber's *I* and *Thou* is a philosophy of personal dialogue in that it describes how personal dialogue can define the nature of reality. Buber's major stance is that human existence may be defined by the way in which we engage in dialogue with each other, with the world and with God. He proposes two attitudinal relationships for the 'I': the *I-Thou* and the *I-it*. These form the basis for his anthropological dualism and authentic existence. The *I-Thou* relationship relates to a deep and mysterious personal engagement with the other, the other being the *Thou*. The *Thou* is not an object and has two dimensions. The first form of dialogical meeting as a *Thou*, is when two people encounter each other in a relationship characterized by "mutuality" and reciprocal love. Secondly, the most fundamental and mysterious form of dialogical meeting is with the eternal *Thou*. The "God . . . him who – whatever else He may be – enters into a direct relation with us men in creative, revealing and redeeming acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relation with him." (Buber 1937:75). Accordingly, Buber concludes that "the relation to a human-being is the proper metaphor for the relation to God." (Buber 1973: 81). Here we see the religious-existential character of Buber's work in that he views God, not in abstract ontological terms, but in the concreteness of man's encounter with his fellow man.

The *I-it* relationship is diametrically opposed to the *I-Thou*, and is based upon the axioms of logical empiricism/positivism: objectivity, determinism, abstractive contemplation, and a utilitarian approach to the other. In the *I-Thou* relationship, human beings do not perceive each other as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, but engage in a dialogue involving each other's whole being. In the *I-It* relationship on the other hand, human beings consider each other as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, and view themselves as part of a world which consists of things. *I-Thou* is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, while *I-It* is a relationship of separateness and detachment.

Overview of Buber's Philosophy of Education

Some of Buber's most important texts in education include *Between Man and Man* (1947), *The Education of Character* (1939) and *The Address on Education* (1925). As the title of the first suggests, education is a relation between human beings and, as such, Buber's theory of inter-human relationships serves as the obvious foundation for his philosophy of education. Buber understands that both the I–Thou and the I–It relations play a role in one's education and he was very critical of both teacher-centered (top-down, or as Buber would say, '*funnelled in*') and student-centred (bottom-up, or as Buber would say, '*pumped out*') approaches to education, which were discussed in the early years of the twentieth century. Buber's lecture, *The Address on Education*, delivered at the 3rd International Educational Conference in Heidelberg in 1925, which focused on the development of the creative powers of the child, is a direct attack on such approaches to education. For Buber, a teacher-centered approach to education, the practice in Germany at the time of his lecture, places too much emphasis on the role of the

teacher. This makes it difficult for an I–Thou relation to arise, and therefore teacher and pupil become trapped in an I–It relation where the teacher provides students with facts and information, where the teacher *funnels* information *into* students, but does not encourage their creative minds. The student-centered approach to education emphasizes the role of the student, but also makes it difficult for an I–Thou relation to arise, for the student lacks the guidance from the teacher and, by and large, is left to his or her own devices, left to *pump* education *out* of subjective interests or needs within a given environment. Both these approaches to education remain within the realm of the I–It according to Buber and, as such, Buber rejects these in favour of an educational approach based on dialogue between teacher and student, which enables the I–Thou relation to arise. One of the reasons for Buber’s defense of an education based on dialogue is the fact that the teacher does not choose who is before him or her, and as such the teacher must accept whoever is present if he or she is to educate. This acceptance, this mutuality, this dialogical relation can only arise through the I–Thou relation. The educator can only educate if he or she is able to build a relation based on true mutuality, on true dialogue with students, and this mutuality, this dialogue can only come to the fore, if the student trusts the educator, if the student feels accepted, otherwise any attempt to educate will lead to rebellion and lack of interest. The question here is thus: What does Buber mean by an educational approach based on dialogue?

In *The Address on Education*, Buber articulates his basic definition of education, thus:

What we term education, conscious and willed, means to give decisive selection by man of the effective world; it means to give decisive effective power to a selection of the world, which is concentrated and manifested in the educator. The relation in education is lifted out of the purposelessly streaming education of all things, and is marked off as purpose. In this way, through the educator, the world for the first time becomes the true subject of its effect. (Buber 1961: 116)

Therefore, for Buber, education based on dialogue is one that places appropriate weight on both the teacher’s influence and on the student’s capacities, interests and needs. The role of the teacher is to set the curriculum and the framework, and in doing so, the teacher sets a sort of value platform for the student, but this does not mean that the student’s interests, creativity and needs are set aside, as the student develops these within the framework set by the teacher- this is now an aspect of educational theory and practice that is widespread among educators, which perhaps demonstrates Buber’s influence in the field of education. Cohen (1979: 89) rightly notes that for Buber, “what is important to education is not freedom lacking direction, but communion having both a direction and a purpose.” (Cohen 1961:81). It becomes clear that communion and dialogue are key terms within Buber’s philosophy of education.

Moreover, that which takes place between teacher and student is described by Buber as *inclusion* and must not be confused with *empathy*. In the case of *empathy*, one transposes over the other, one puts oneself into the other's position and in so doing nullifies the other's difference. In the case of *inclusion*, Buber notes, "there is a relation between two persons ... an event that is experienced by them *in common*, in which at least one of them actively participates and ...without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the stand point of the other." (Buber 1979: 124). Obviously, Buber's illustration is applicable to both teacher and pupil. The teacher experiences what the pupil experiences, the teacher perceives things through the pupil's eyes, without losing control of their perspective as teacher. The pupil is also encouraged to share in experiences, to accept the teacher's guidance, without losing spontaneity and creativity. It is only through *communion*, through *mutual respect*, through *encountering*, that this can happen: it is only through the I-Thou relation that teacher and pupil can truly enter upon *dialogue*.

However, Buber places a caveat on teacher-pupil relations which appears contradictory. He maintains that the I-Thou relation with respect to a teacher-pupil relation can only be one-sided; that is, teacher towards pupil but not pupil towards teacher. Buber understands that dialogical inclusion cannot be fully mutual in this case because if it were to become fully mutual it would either tear apart the educative relation or the educative relation would develop into friendship. Therefore, the relation is only fully accomplished on the teacher side but not on the pupil side, and thus the relation between teacher-pupil is some how asymmetrical. How can Buber talk about a dialogical relation that is 'one-sided inclusive'? This seems to argue against his definition of the I-Thou relation as something ineffable, as something encompassing an infinite number of meaningful and dynamic situations, as an encounter expressing the mutual and holistic existence of two beings. In fact, it makes complete sense to talk about a dialogical relation that is one-sided inclusive within the educational realm. It is a fact that in education the relation is under the guidance of the educator; this is something that is not open to challenge. And the life of dialogue is ineffable; it has an infinite number of meaningful and dynamic situations because it arises from the many realities of life's experiences, not least educational experiences, and as such the I-Thou relation allows for various levels, shades and hues of inclusion. Stevenson buttresses this point with the following practical instance:

For instance, the *Thou* that I say to my lover is much more intense than the *Thou* I say to a friend, and the *Thou* that I say to a close relation is more inclusive than the *Thou* I say to a pupil. This is an aspect that is not often recognized by Buber's commentators but it is imperative for an accurate understanding of Buber's philosophy as a whole. And if I-Thou relation is so ineffable that it allows for difference shades and levels of inclusion, then it becomes less puzzling to talk about it being, in some cases, 'one-sided inclusive.' (Stevenson 1963: 193-209).

Thus, given that the educator is in control of his or her relation with pupils, it is the task and the obligation of the educator to step in and say *Thou* at his or her will and whenever he or she sees fit. That is to say, it is the obligation of the educator to experience education both as a teacher and as a student. But there is also a conscious decision by the educator and students to prevent the relation from becoming fully mutual, because if it were to become so it would either destroy the educative relation, for the teacher's role as a guide is undermined, or it would develop into friendship. All this talk about asymmetrical relations between teacher and pupil applies only to the education of the child. Buber regarded adult education differently. He understood that in the case of adult education which includes: undergraduate and postgraduate students, should be seen as being on the bridge between formal school and fully independent adulthood as it were: the relation between teacher and student is different. Yalom rightly observes that, for Buber, adult education allows for a higher level of mutuality and is established on the basis of 'real questions', 'rather than on Socratic challenges or on preparation for examinations'. (Yalom 1994: 144). As such within the context of adult education the relation between teacher and student is based on a higher level of *communion* and this makes it easier for the I-Thou relation to arise. The one-sidedness of the I-Thou relation between teacher and student in child education is replaced with an I-Thou relation that is more symmetrically reciprocal and more empowering for the adult student. This empowerment of adult students via an I-Thou relation based largely on *mutuality* is the core value of adult education. This is because it allows education to become the source of personal and community transformation. That is, every I-Thou encounter in adult education has the potential for the I to be transformed and this affects the I's outlook of I-It relations and of future I-Thou encounters.

And this applies to adult education based on dialogue in its various modes- formal, informal and non-formal. Such transformations, whether personal or communal, are directly connected to an individual and community's wellbeing and capacity to relate to and interact with other individuals and communities, and this greatly impinges on issues such as adult basic education, active citizenship and conflict resolution. It is important to emphasize that Buber understood that education is always the education of character. The core task of education is to enable people to live humanely and in social peace and harmony. In his *Education of Character*, Buber avers that education is "a step beyond all the dividedness of individualism and collectivism ... genuine education of character is genuine education for community ... he who knows inner unity, the inner most life of which is mystery, learns to honour the mystery in all its forms." (Buber 1939: 146). It is obvious in this passage that Buber understood the implications of his thought for social and political advancement, as well as for spiritual wellbeing. (Smith: accessed 2021) When the educator establishes a value platform and invites the student to experience this platform, the student does not experience this passively; rather, the student analyses, scrutinizes, criticizes this platform actively and, in turn, this prompts the educator to re-evaluate and/or re-assert the value platform. That is,

there is a constant dialogue between educator and student. This interaction between educator and student, this constant evaluation and re-evaluation of value platforms, is the cornerstone of what Buber calls a *dialogical community*. Such a community is for Buber *a third way* between absolute individualism ('I' without 'Thous') and collectivism ('Thous' without an 'I') and this, Buber believes, improves the quality of life for the members of the community as it increases social cohesion and sustains cultural creativity.

Overview of Dewey's Thought on Education

Dewey discusses traditional and progressive education as opposites in his philosophy of education. He affirms that for traditional education, learning is the "acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the instructors." (Dewey 1963: 19). He observes that "old" (traditional) education focuses too heavily on the subject matter rather than learning. In such an education model he claims, "The child is simply the immature being who is to be matured; he is the superficial being who is to be deepened; his is narrow experience which is to be widened. It is his to receive, to accept. His part is fulfilled when he is ductile and docile." (Dewey 1902: 8). Traditional education, Dewey maintains, is "fixed and rigid" (Dewey 1961: 110), which brings about the "attitude of listening." (Dewey 1902: 8). Since listening is the act of receiving, Dewey believes that this translates into passive learning. Dewey views education as a social function. (Dewey 1902: 8) Hence, for him "a being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account." (Dewey 1902: 12). Dewey implies this to be critical failing of the traditional system of education. The "old" education fails, Dewey alleges, because "it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life." (Dewey 1966: 49) Traditional education, then, focuses mostly on the ideals of competition, not cooperation, which does not align with democracy. Dewey argues that since education "is a process of living and not a preparation for future living," (Dewey 1966: 48) education needs to promote cooperation- a key component of his education for democracy.

Dewey's discussion of the traditional and progressive educational systems highlights "the organic connection between education and personal experience." (Dewey 1963: 25). He avers that traditional education does not contribute to student's growth because it sees the teacher as the 'Jack of all trade' and the student as the 'master of none'. The system, thus, creates room for the teacher to impose her experiences on the students. This entails that traditional schools operate based on the philosophy of "rejection and sheer opposition" (Dewey 1963: 21), which denies the link between experience and education. Dewey, however, posits: "to the growth of the child all studies are subservient." (Dewey 1902: 9). In fact, he insists that "the child [is] the sun about which the appliances of education revolve." (Dewey 1943: 34). By implication, Dewey advocates for a curriculum which considers the needs and interests of the child ahead of everyone else's. In addition, Dewey quips that "the aim of education is to enable individuals to

continue to promote democratic society.” (Dewey 1961:100). For Dewey, then, education does not end when students graduate from schools or universities; it is a life long commitment. Only through such an education can students continue to be productive.

Dialogue in the Educational Philosophy of Buber and Dewey

The above summarizations of the thoughts of Buber and Dewey on education reveal their emphasis on the need for education to be both experiential and dialogical. Education needs to be experiential according to both because it surely involves an intercourse between two or more persons- teacher and student(s). It is the meeting and digestion, fusion and infusion of the experiences of both the teacher and students that actually result to learning. Dewey and Buber also emphasize that beyond being experiential, education must be dialogical else the experience gotten via education becomes one-sided. Without a balanced dialogue between the teacher and students, education becomes an unhealthy accumulation or imposition of the experiences of the teacher on the students. This automatically leads back to the traditional pedagogy, a system both Dewey and Buber criticized strongly. Beyond the realm of education, both Dewey and Buber views dialogue as critical to the development of the society at large. Buber exemplified this extensively in his philosophy of I-Thou, citing the I-Thou (contrary to I-It) as the ideal pattern of dialogue that brings about stability and development to the society because it preaches equality of all before all. Buber’s sees this as the most important object of education- to make all persons relate to one another in a balanced I-Thou (subject-subject) relationship. Dewey also queues into this viewpoint.

Like Buber, he opines in his *Democracy and Education* that pragmatic education aims at setting up a democratic form of society where each individual is completely independent and willing to cooperate with others. Every individual must be given freedom to develop his own desires and achieve his ambitions. Every individual must be equal to every other members of the society. Hence education must create cooperation and harmony among individuals of a democratic society in which the child undergoes various forms of development, of which moral education is most important. Dewey argues that the system of education in vogue in any society is deficient if it does not sow the seed of dialogue among the various individuals and groups in the society. According to him, this brings about problems in the society such as discord and the various forms of marginalization experienced today. Dialogue is therefore of critical importance to both Buber and Dewey. This having been said, it is necessary to note that this article sees a unique connection and continuity between Dewey’s philosophy of education and Buber’s. Dewey’s thought concerning the imbalanced interaction of various groups in the society gives us an insight into the problem of the society arising from the failure in the poor system of education in place. This article is of the opinion that Buber’s educational idea anchored on the I-Thou offers a solution to the concerns raised by Dewey. In the following section, therefore, attempt is made to tackle the discord in

societies arising from the poor system of education in vogue which is not founded on the principles of dialogue- a fact Dewey lamented, using Buber's I-Thou.

The Ideal Society Founded on Dialogue: The I-Thou

The progressives argue that the individual should operate freely and self contained and must exist prior to society.(Smith accessed 2021) This is because the individuals create societies and formulate rules and norms to protect collective interests and freedom of the members. (Avnon 1998: 22) Tension often emanates within a society when there is tendency to apply limit and control to pre-social individuals who seek absolute freedom. (Avnon 1998:33) Thus Dewey criticizes traditional liberal education as being too utopic and unrealistic because it was unable to actually represent the relationship between the individual and the society. For Dewey, to conceive individuals as pre-social and self-contained is untenable. He argues that individual does not act in isolation, but instead, he acts alongside others whose actions influence and shape the individual. (Murphy 1998: 11) A society is created when a group of individuals come together to direct their efforts toward pursuing a shared interest.(Politzer 1956:24) Dewey insists that social institutions must not hold themselves over individuals; but must rely on the different perspectives and abilities of its constituting individuals to progress. (Avnon 1998:20). Nonetheless, individuals are regulated by the responsibilities and limitations imparted by society and its institutions. (Avnon 1998: 43) Dewey maintains that the individual cannot oppose the society or group of which he is an integral part nor can the group be set against its individual members.” (Yaron 2000: 140). Therefore, he rejected and criticised the restriction of individual in the Traditional system, which still exist in some places.

As individual begins to feel isolated from and restricted by the major group, an imagined dissociated individual arises and becomes the basis for the opposition between individual and society. (Cohen, 1979: 98) According to Dewey, what actually takes place here is that a smaller group is unable to realize their full potentialities and fully participate in the creation of society when one dominant group dictates all possible forms of association. (Yaron 2000, 45) These illusory tensions between the individual and society are particularly exacerbated during periods of technological and social change. (Yaron 2000:45) Political institutions become outdated, unable to address the needs of the newly emerging groups, and debates on vague conception of the individual and society abound, yet the real issues remain unaddressed. (Cohen 1979: 764) As the pre-social individual is born from a misunderstanding, the problem is not one of individual freedom from society, but how individuals are to inquire the consequences of a society operating a certain way. (Yaron 2000:41) To be truly democratic, they must exist alongside the broader public, their work actively participated in and directly shaped by them, and their knowledge distributed amongst all. (Cohen 1979: 760) The public is not a herd to be led, but rather comprised of active participants in democratic discussions and decisions. (Murphy 1998: 104) For Dewey, a public dialogue is

the only truly democratic means to comprehensively and positively reform society's operations.

The philosophy of Martin Buber offers insight into how this public dialogue can be realized. While Dewey identifies that face to face communities must move away from prejudice and rhetoric toward more genuine forms of dialogue, he does not outline how this could be achieved. (Murphy 1998: 104) In the "I and Thou," Buber identifies two modes of existence for human beings- the I-It and I-Thou. Like Dewey, Buber's 'I', the individual is always situated among others. Through the I-It, we experience the world. In this mode, we accrue empirical knowledge of our surroundings, sort them out into categories and analyse their function. The I stands in a pure subject-object relation with the world. Through the I-Thou mode, the I stands in relation to a Thou- the Thou steps forward and the I turns to it, and acknowledges the fullness of the Thou itself. (Politzer 1956: 16-17) The Thou is not reduced to empirical attributes or potential function but remains unique, and enters into a dialogue with the I. This ensures the mutuality is sustained in the relationship, though at different levels of inclusion. On the contrary, in the I-It mode, one acts upon the other as an object. Conversely, through the I-Thou mode different actors in the society (for instance student – teacher) enter into a mutual dialogue each other. Hence, Buber situates the importance of dialogue within the individual experience.

Buber, like Dewey, is concerned with the growing status of expert knowledge. While Buber acknowledges the I-It mode as an essential aspect of our lives, he claims that those who exist solely within it, and do not enter the I-Thou, are not human. (Buber 1937/2003: 69) This is simply because the real essence as humans is removed by the I –It mode. Buber claims that modern society is preoccupied with unraveling existence, experiencing all the world has to offer, only to categorize and utilize it. (Buber 1937/2003: 22) It has also mistakenly dismissed the value of the I-Thou mode, claiming it is sentimental; that it has no utility outside of itself. (Buber 1937/2003: 22) Groups too are considered only in terms of their goals and actions, reduced to an It; their members can no longer form a community if they have no interest in one another outside of function. (W. Fisher 1992:) Drawing from Dewey, communities steeped in the It-world rely on empirical conceptions of society which fail to truly unpick pressing social issues; solutions are blindly chosen by experts and their success is reliant on luck, not serious enquiry. (Dewey, 1977:188). This work strongly assumes that I-Thou relations offer a way out. It avers that to embrace the I-Thou mode is to turn away from theories and concepts driven world toward concrete relationships and dialogues.(Moran 1974: 32) By turning to the I-Thou, individuals enter the present and experience each other as limitless beings. Thus, conditions are created to foster more honest forms of debate, discussion and persuasion to transform the scientific and modern society and education in to I- Thou mode of existence.

In summary, Dewey criticised the traditional conception of individual as purely isolated because it failed to recognize the individual as being both situated within and integral to society. His advocacy to create positive reform by improving the

society's ability to engage in healthy public dialogue finds accomplishment in Buber's work "I and Thou", which shows the value of dialogue to the individual experience and ultimately promotes dialogical education at different levels of inclusion. Though I-Thou dialogue has its possible limitations, however, it offers enabling condition that enhances dialogical education to create a community in which individuals can enter a positive public dialogue, the individual experience coordinated into achieving general goal as well as the goals of the individual. This simply implies that Buber's I-Thou offer enabling conditions that allows individuals to confront the problems faced by the society in the subject ways as identified by Dewey.

Conclusion

Dialogue is a fundamental recipe for balanced education, stability and development of the society. Any society that runs an educational system that is not founded on the principles of dialogical education is exposed to the risk of producing individuals whose attitude or approach to life would be detriment to peaceful coexistence and the overall development of their immediate society. This is the emphasis of the educational philosophy of both Dewey and Buber. Buber developed his educational ideal following the blueprint of his I-Thou philosophy. Dewey did same in his work *Democracy and Education* where out the importance on dialogical education to grooming individuals with the required acumen to function effectively in a democratic society. Dewey pointed with keen astuteness the problems a system of education based on traditional principles (non-experiential) could cause to the society. He emphasized that such systems of education may be best described as indoctrination (*funneled-in* in the language of Buber) because they are teacher-centered. Such is the reason for the poor character or moral development of the growing population. This, according to Dewey, creates room for the growth of social vices such as inequality, tribalism, and other undemocratic tendencies that are divisive and denigrative in the society. Dewey agrees that dialogue is the way forward to curb these crises and postulates an education system based on dialogue to help in that regard. He, however, failed to illustrate practically and existentially how this dialogue may be effected in human relationship. Buber's I-Thou provides the guideline.

The article demonstrated the uncanny but very handy relations and continuity that exists between Dewey and Buber's philosophy of education anchored on dialogue. Beyond Dewey's dialogical education, Buber provided an existential insight into how dialogue may be effected in man's daily life through what he conceptualized as the I-Thou (Subject-subject relation). As Buber would customarily say, "Every living is meeting." Of course, a balanced and well functioning society is built on the principle of egalitarianism- every citizen having equal opportunities and relating with each other as equals. It is only in this circumstance that dialogue is possible. It is only when education is embraced in this mode that character is

trained and transformed into a light to dispel the darkness of inequality in the society. `

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