

# ON THE BUBERIAN EXISTENTIALIST TEACHER

## (A PERSPECTIVE ESSAY)

Elvis Omondi Kauka

Department of Educational Foundations

University of Kabianga

---

**Abstract:** The purpose of this Perspective Essay was to illuminate the implications of Martin Buber's conception of Subject-Subject and Subject-Object relationships on the understanding of an existentially ideal teacher. The essay examines the definitions and the social roles of a teacher, Buber's elucidation of Subject-Subject(I-Thou) and Subject-Object(I-It) relationships and the Buberian teacher is an *I-Thou* teacher. As a Philosophical Essay, the paper employs purely conceptual analysis and synthesis as its crucial tool of communication. Three critical points are stipulated in the end: That a Buberian teacher is a Heutagogue or self-determined learner, a Democrat because he respects subjective Thou of the learner and Philosopher Teacher by being a Heutagogue and a Democrat.

**Keywords:** Buber, *I-Thou*, *I-It*, Heutagogue, Democrat, Philosopher-Teacher.

---

### I. INTRODUCTION

The concept 'Teacher' can either refer to an adult representative of a society in the school organisation or a 'Socialiser' of others-not- so-socialised. A teacher is recognised as one who has undergone the socialisation process longer than the learner and is more aware of his or her society's culture by having lived longer in its social settings, has acquired more basic education as well as professional training. *Ipsa facto*, the roles of a teacher are social in nature include being an *Evaluator* of the academic performance of the learners, a *Disciplinarian* who ensures that there are adherence and obedience to rules and regulations, a *Group leader* responsible for managing and organizing learning activities and for motivating, inspiring, urging, and encouraging his or her learners to keep working hard in their academics or otherwise. A teacher is also a *Mediator/conciliator*. As a mediator he or she is a consensus agent whenever the learners disagree, tries to reconcile the differences, bring them to an agreement through dialogue, making reasonable decisions and judgments. To the extent that a teacher is entrusted with taking care of learner's welfare in the absence of the biological parents, a teacher, acting in *loco parentis* is a *Surrogate parent*. Lastly, every teacher is an *Administrator*; This is because he/she manages the learning process. *In toto*, a teacher is the *prima facie* socialising agent outside the family. Being a *prima facie* socialising agent, the teacher needs multiple skills and competencies ranging from cognitive skills, practical skills and creative skills. However, most importantly an ideal teacher must have a high level of social and Emotional Intelligence, otherwise known as E.Q. Alongside having high E.Q, a teacher must have a deliberate Philosophy of Teaching rooted in Philosophical Anthropology to act as a socialising guide and a reminder during his teaching enterprise. One such Philosophy is Buberian Existentialism. The Philosopher Martin Buber(February 8, 1878 – June 13, 1965) was an Austrian Jewish Existential Philosopher and a copious author of over seventy Philosophical, literary pieces. This article subsumes and assumes Buber's Philosophical anthropology as elucidated in his Philosophical Masterpiece, *Ich und Du(I and Thou)* first published in 1923.

**II. I -THOU AND I- IT RELATIONSHIPS: THE DUAL PREMISES OF BUBERIAN EXISTENTIALISM**

According to Buber, human beings interpret the world based on the attitude they acquire from what he calls the two **Primary words** *I-Thou* and *I-It* (and the variants he/she/them). Whenever these Primary words are spoken they bring into existence relationships because they are spoken from being and although they are necessarily combined, the two primary words are different in that while *I -Thou* is spoken from the whole being, *I-It* is not. From a linguistic perspective, Buber's point can be explained by appealing to the structure of Personal Pronouns. Consider the table below:

Personal Pronouns		
Singular	Plural	Class
I	We	First Person
You(Thou)	You	Second Person
He/She/ It	They	Third Person

The table is crucial in interpreting Buber for two reasons: That relationship is ultimately singular and that It is not just an interpersonal relationship between the first person (the 'me', the 'I') and the second person (you, thou). It is also the relationship between the *I* and the *I*. These two relations affect the general relationship between the I and the third person singular (It/He/She) and with all the plurals(We, You, They). How the *I* relates with the *I* extrapolates into how the *I* relates with the *Thou* and finally how he relates to the We, You and Thou. Sociologist and Psychologists would possibly state that social relations are an extension of Intrapersonal relationships. The Axis of relations is thus the individual, collective being, the *I*. However, Buber asserts that the *I* cannot be taken by itself because the very time it is uttered it implicitly means either *I-Thou* or *I-It*. Further, The *existence of I* and the *speaking of I* are one and the same thing" and that "When a primary word(I-Thou or I-it) is spoken the speaker enters the world and takes his stance of relationship in it. In usual Parlance, the *I -It* refers to a Subject acting on a limited object or a thing while in *I-thou*, there is no Thing and therefore no bounds. 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. As 'an experience', the world belongs to the Primary word *I-It*. The primary word *I-Thou* establishes the world of relation. In short, we have two types of relationships, Subject-Subject and Subject -Object(Subject-Thing). Human Being as subject: Buber postulates that unlike trees, human beings are subjects, not things. As such they cannot be treated in a separation of the totality of their being. In addition, a human being is not to be treated in separation from other subjects. Buber observes, "If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things" in other words Human beings cannot be experienced as objects because subjects relate.

Lastly, Buber posits threefold Spheres of Relation: First, The relationship of Humans with nature which is characterised by gloom, lack of speech and simple movement of creatures over against humans without coming to them. In this case, creatures cannot be addressed as *Thou*. Secondly, the relation of humans with humans. There the relation is open and in the form of *speech*. It gives and accepts the *Thou*. Thirdly, our life with spiritual beings. Here the relation is clouded, but discloses itself; it does not use speech, yet begets it. No *Thou is perceived* 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...in all these humans address the eternal thou.

**III. THE BUBERIAN TEACHER IS AN I-THOU TEACHER**

In Buberian Perspective teaching is necessarily a relational Profession. This observation is not exclusive to Martin Buber though, in fact, it is plausible to infer that of all the oldest professions, teaching is probably the most socially oriented profession. As such, the goal of teaching has been and still is to transform society through socialising its members. This case is evidenced among the Masters and Teachers of different generations; From the ancient Kemetic Education to Eastern teachers like Confucius, Jesus Christ of Nazareth and Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. From Hindu Gurus like Mahatma Gandhi to South American teachers like Paulo Freire and to the Greek Educators like Pythagoras, Socrates,

Plato, Aristotle. Having this in mind, then a Buberian teacher is First an *I-Thou* teacher, one whose life and educational activities embody the most profound and intimate of all relationships. He is a Heutagogue, a Democrat and a Philosopher.

**Heutagogue:** Heutagogy is Self-determined and life-long learning which is built-up from pedagogy (directed learning) and Andragogy (Self-Directed learning). The process of fashioning oneself into a substantive *I*, an *I* that needs to relate with the *Thou* of the learner as a subject, the Buberian Teacher has the responsibility of first of all teaching himself/herself how to be an authentic being. Such a teacher knows that an authentic being is never created by any other teacher other than the self. This implies that the teacher cannot transform the society or a nation without transforming the Self or the *I*. The transformation of the individual requires an intensive, holistic and lifelong process of self-formation and self Reformation. This kind of teacher emanates from the inward of his being, an abyss that is rarely fathomed except by a few. The Buberian teacher is thus introspective, meditative and contemplative in nature. He is in touch with his emotions, prejudices, biases and cognitive ability. He calls them by name and knows when they are likely to influence his teaching enterprise. This kind of teacher knows all his weaknesses and strengths, likes and dislikes. But most importantly he is not only able to manipulate the elements that constitute his being towards beneficial ends but also recognises that he/she is an unfinished project yearning for further furnishing. It is because of this, that in the process of seeking for his ever elusive *I* that he self-directs and self-determines his learning having known that he is a lifelong learner.

**Democrat:** The Buberian Heutagogue teacher, usually humble, open, self-corrigible and contemplative is not a teacher unto himself. He is an *I*-thirsty, for the *Thou*. Having formed himself into an authentic *I* and being fearful that his authentic *I* may not be the best at a particular time, emerges from his inner recess to test the validity of his *I* through a substantive relationship with the *Thou*. This kind of a teacher teaches solely for two reasons (of course without ignoring other accidental aims), namely: To form the learner (the *thou*) into an authentic self and To evaluate his *I*. **He is thus a Formateur** or someone spearheading a transformation process, not because he is perfectly formed but because he needs to be reformed. The transformation of the *Thou* cannot be effected without the existence of a substantive interpersonal relationship between the *Formateur* (Buberian teacher) and the *Formé* (Learner). According to Buber this relationship is only possible if the teacher understands the two Primary words that shape relationships, that is the *Ich-Du* and *Ich-Es* (*I-thou* and *I-it*). As elucidated earlier, a Buberian teacher is one who knows that an *I-It* relationship deforms both the *I* of the teacher whose role is reduced to *experience* the learner as an object or a thing (or an *It*). The relationship in *I-It* context is not democratic because after all it is not a relationship between Subjects, but between a subject (*I* of the *Formateur*) and a thing (the *It* of the *Formé*). A real Buberian teacher is otherwise one who adopts an *I-Thou* disposition, which is democratic and respectful. Further, in this relationship the teacher knows that his her *I* is that of a subjective consciousness, a consciousness that is not limited by the already circumscribed options. He extends his entire being and everything that he is towards the self of hi/ her learners, who are also or should be Subjects, in an *I thou* relationship ambience. The *I* of the Teacher and the *Thou* of the learner insinuate conscious and transcendent subjects trying to merge into each other.

Although the teacher could be having chronological and expertise authority, he is nevertheless as a matter of fact and substantiality equal to the learner because he/she shares **Being** with the learner and that accidental differences like age and expertise do lead to substantial differentiation. While teaching therefore, the Buberian teacher comes to know that the world is not presented to humans by experiences alone as in the case with *I-It* relationship. Being Democratic and at the same time Holistic, the *Formateur* balances the three spheres of relations by ascending from natural Methodology of instruction dealing with humans' relationship with nature to whatever content related to human-human relations or *I-Thou* level. Finally, it should find its peak in the relationship between human beings and the spiritual being. As a matter of fact, key to Democracy of Buber's teacher is Democratic Speech.

**Philosopher-Teacher:** There are two key traits to Philosophical life, namely: Independent thinking and Openness. The Philosopher is rarely hold up with dogmas, neither is he/she narrow-minded not to admit what is reasonable. In this regard, the Philosopher is often non-committal, especially if commitment means intellectual blindness. Besides, a philosopher's job is to question answers rather than to answer questions, and although sometimes they admit some answers, it is only tentative, and only as a tool for further questioning with the aim of arriving at truth. Given that independent thinking is co-relational to Heutagogy, and openness is co-relational to Democracy, it can be deduced that a Buberian Teacher is Philosophical to the extent that he is Heutagogical and Democratic.

**International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning**

Vol. 5, Issue 6, pp: (27-30), Month: November - December 2018, Available at: [www.noveltyjournals.com](http://www.noveltyjournals.com)

**IV. CONCLUSION**

Martin Buber's contribution to Social Philosophy and Philosophical anthropology is rooted in the harmony of Metaphysics. It presupposes interconnection between subjects. As applied to Teaching, it asserts the intersubjectivity of the Teacher and the learner. The teacher is what he is by virtue of his conception of the dialogical relationships he develops during his work. He is thus both a teacher and a learner.

**REFERENCE**

- [1] Buber, M. (1923). *I and Thou*. (W. Kaufmann, Trans.) Touchstone.