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WIRKLICHKEIT AND VERANTWORTUNG: THE FOUNDATIONS
OF MARTIN BUBER'S AUTHENTICITY

BY

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THESIS ABSTRACT

This study will investigate the foundations of Martin Buber's authenticity. The problem of the foundations of authenticity arises in Jean-Paul Sartre who makes contradictory claims when he says on the one hand there are no objective ethical values while on the other says "we ought to be authentic". The questions are: Can authenticity be separated from objective values and still impose an obligation? And what are the foundations for saying "we ought to be authentic"?

In the first section Buber's notion of Wirklichkeit (actuality) is examined and will be shown to provide some legitimate foundation for authenticity by implying an obligation in reference to what man "ought to be".

The second section reviews Buber's acceptance of objective values and discusses how this acceptance provides Buber with another foundation of authenticity. Buber's notion of Verantwortung (responsibility) is essential to understanding his views on objective ethical values and their ontological foundation in God.

The third section points out how Buber's philosophy overcomes the existential nothingness that confronts modern man.

In the Conclusion the value and importance of Buber's philosophy, as well as some of the problems connected with it, are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem and the Plan

It seems odd that in a study on authenticity in the philosophy of Martin Buber I begin with Sartre, for no two thinkers could be further apart. But there are valuable insights to be gained concerning authenticity in general by a short, critical account of Sartrean authenticity. Furthermore, Sartre's extreme, atheistic existentialism makes for some interesting contrasts with Buber's religious existentialism and throughout the study I will be making these contrasts evident.

The problem of the foundation of authenticity surfaces in Sartre. His existentialism is confounding. One wonders how he can, on the one hand, deny objective values, while on the other exhort us to be authentic. He seems to speak from two sides of his mouth. Alfred Stern remarks,

It is strange that a philosopher, who denies in this way all bases for value judgments that are objectively valid, would utter so frequently the most offensive value judgments, with the most apodictic certainty, on the moral behavior of other people, and claim

universal validity for such "philosophical categories" as "coward" and "salaud".¹

The questions that come to mind are: Is there an obligation to be authentic? and why ought I become authentic? These questions point to the axiological basis of authenticity and the answer to them involves Sartre in some difficulties.

Sartre has tried to steer clear of "obligation".

Fredrick Olafson, in his book Principles and Persons, traces the philosophic history of ethical voluntarism and is concerned with the problem of authenticity and obligation. He points out:

It is not difficult to locate the sources of the antipathy which the concept of obligation typically invokes in existentialist philosophers. The root notion in that concept is one of being bound in the sense of being subject to an effective restriction on the permissible range of human choice. Traditionally, this restriction itself has been thought of as independent of and unremovable by, human volition. Indeed, many moralists have argued that it must be independent of choice if we are to be able to talk--as we all do--of what we ought to do even when we do not do it.²

Sartrean authenticity has its seeds in freedom and

¹Alfred Stern, Sartre, (New York: Delta Books, 1967), p. 41.

²Fredrick Olafson, Principles and Persons, (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 192.

negation. William Barrett says "The essential freedom, the ultimate and final freedom that cannot be taken from a man, is to say No. This is the basic premise in Sartre's view of human freedom: freedom is in its very essence negative, though this negativity is also creative."³ Objective values and a human essence are denied because they interfere with man's freedom. Sartre says No to objective values because they impose an obligation: "what I ought to do". He says No to an essence because it too implies an obligation: "what I ought to be", and because an essence implies a creator or designer. Man is hence the maker of his own values, the inventor of his own essence. He must recognize his complete freedom and complete responsibility.⁴ But while Sartre revolts against the traditional sources of obligation he seems to want to say that one ought to be authentic, that one shouldn't be a coward or filthy stinker.

Hazel E. Barnes, in her An Existentialist Ethics

³William Barrett, Irrational Man, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1962), p. 241.

⁴Cf. Sartre's discussion of "existence precedes essence". Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism", in Essays in Existentialism, Wade Baskin editor, (New York: The Citadel Press, 1970), pp. 34-40.

attempts to bridge the gap between Sartrean authenticity and obligation. She claims that in recognizing one's freedom one also sees the responsibility involved and an obligation. "As process, not entity, man is free and responsible. Sin, guilt, or evil involves denying this fact, either in oneself or in another person."⁵ Barnes finds this concept of obligation to be compatible with Sartre's denial of objective value—I do not.

A deeper look at the foundation of Sartre's authenticity shows that Sartre has tacitly, and in contradiction to his denial of objective values, reintroduced them. If pressed, it seems that Sartre and Barnes would reply that authenticity is grounded in honestly facing and accepting what they take to be man's situation. Man really is free and responsible!⁶ Attempts to deny this are dishonest and in bad faith (mauvaise foi). Sartre distinguishes two types of bad faith:⁷ first, presenting to oneself as true

⁵Hazel E. Barnes, An Existentialist Ethics, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 94.

⁶Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, Hazel E. Barnes translator, (New York: The Citadel Press, 1956), pp. 529-532.

⁷Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Bad Faith", in Essays in Existentialism, pp. 147-186.

a pleasing untruth and second, presenting to oneself as untrue a displeasing truth. Both are flights from authentic existence, and note, both are flights from truthfulness.

For Sartre, the key to authentic existence rests in honestly accepting all the anguish and responsibility that travel with freedom. Inauthenticity or bad faith is a lie.

"Fundamentally it is a lie about one's freedom. Bad faith is a way of declaring that one is not responsible for what he has been or not free to choose what he will be. It seeks refuge in the idea that man may either cut himself off completely from his situation or that he is identical with his situation and determined by it. Good faith, as the existentialist sees it, lies in accepting the truth about man's being."⁸ To put it succinctly, the foundation of Sartrean authenticity lies in the imperative that we ought to be honest. More specifically, we ought to be honest about our freedom and responsibility. This is an imperative that effects all men and upon which authentic and inauthentic existence turns.

To be sure, Sartre and Barnes would deny this

⁸Barnes, An Existentialist Ethics, p. 34.

interpretation but unless there is a universal imperative then there is no foundation for saying we ought to be authentic.

A number of commentators have made similar observations on the unfoundedness of Sartre's authenticity and responsibility. Jean Wahl says, "From Nietzsche to Sartre, such is the road of modern philosophy. In one as in the other, values are posited without having any foundation."⁹

Olafson summarizes a powerful argument against Sartre like this,

If morality were, at bottom, a matter of will and choice as the existentialists believe, then all obligations would be self-imposed. An obligation I have created, however, is one from which I can release myself; and the latter, so the argument goes, is no obligation at all.¹⁰

Paul Roubiczek gives a devastating critique of Sartrean responsibility in his book Existentialism: For and Against:

Nevertheless, these existentialists (who deny objective values) want to preserve responsibility, to show that man is responsible for what he is and what he does. In this they fail. Man, according

⁹Jean Wahl, "Martin Buber and the Philosophers of Existence," in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, Maurice Friedman and Paul Schlipp editors, (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1967), p. 500.

¹⁰Paul Roubiczek, Existentialism: For and Against, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 88-89.

to them, is responsible for his actions to himself, but as there is no given morality, he can constantly change the principles on which he bases his actions. Though most existentialists deny it, this leads once more towards a concept of the absolute, for, to make sense, responsibility demands dependence on a transcendental which is absolute. To make sense, responsibility has to be, not only 'responsibility for' but also 'responsibility to', and man himself is insufficient to give meaning to the latter, unless he admits the presence of transcendental elements in his own nature. Morality cannot be arbitrarily created; it must have authority.¹¹

The upshot of this is clear. The Sartrean theory of authenticity and responsibility presents a problem: either Sartre has contradicted himself by reintroducing the objective value (honesty) that gives his authenticity obligation, or his authenticity is groundless and there is no reason to be authentic and no axiological difference between authenticity and inauthenticity. Authenticity must be grounded in objective values and it is the implications of this and the relationship between authenticity, values and essence that will be examined in the rest of this study. This will be done by analyzing Martin Buber's concept of authenticity, specifically his concepts of

¹¹Paul Roubiczek, Existentialism: For and Against, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 88-89.

Wirklichkeit (Actuality) and Verantwortung (Responsibility).

The plan of the study is to have three sections examining the following questions: I. Wirklichkeit; What is the relation between essence and authenticity?, II. Verantwortung; What is the relation between objective values and authenticity?, III. The Overcoming of Nothingness--The Life of Dialogue; How can modern man overcome the separation and alienation facing his life?

I. WIRKLICHKEIT

Unwirklich bleibt, wer nicht verwirklicht.¹

Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung.²

Buber seldom uses the words authenticity or authentic. The key terms that have led commentators like Maurice Friedman to speak about authenticity are Wirklichkeit or one of its derivatives, for example wirklich. Wirklichkeit is one of the most important notions in Buber's thought and this is one of the reasons I leave it untranslated. Another reason to leave it in German is that the two translators of I and Thou render it differently. Walter Kaufman translates Wirklichkeit as "actuality" and Ronald Gregor Smith as "reality". But perhaps the best reason to leave the term in its original language is one that both translators would agree on. Some of the associations due to the richness of the German Wirklichkeit are lost by rendering it

¹Martin Buber, Daniel in Werke: Erster Band Schriften Zur Philosophie, (Munich: Lambert Schneider, 1962), p. 24.

²Martin Buber, Ich und Du, Ibid., p. 85

either "actuality" or reality". For example, there is the connection between Wirklichkeit, Werk, and wirken.

Kaufman's use of "actuality" has its merits over Smith's "reality". Kaufman says, "Buber's persistent association of Wirklichkeit with wirken can be carried over into English to some extent by using "actuality" for the former (saving "reality" for the rare instances when he uses Realität) and "act" in a variety of ways for the verb."³

What I hope to do in the rest of this section is: first, to clarify Buber's use of Wirklichkeit; second to show its connection to his distinction between person and ego and to reciprocity (Gegenseitigkeit), that is, to the influence that the different ways of relating to being have on the I; and finally point to how Wirklichkeit provides a foundation for authenticity by implying that I ought to exist in a certain way.

The concept of Wirklichkeit has its roots in Buber's claim in I and Thou that "The I of the basic word I-Thou is different from that in the basic word I-It. Basic words...

³Walter Kaufman. Preface in Martin Buber, I and Thou, Walter Kaufman translator, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), pp. 45-46. Cf. also p. 61, footnote 4.

establish modes of existence."⁴ Man's twofold I is one of the most important points of I and Thou, but also one of the most difficult to explain. Perhaps the best way to do so is to focus on the last sentence of the above quote: "Basic words establish modes of existence." The basic words are how one addresses being in one of its three realms: nature, other men and God. In the I-Thou one meets the other for the "other's sake". In the I-It one appropriates the other for the "I's sake". The I-Thou asks nothing of the other, he says Thou. "No purpose intervenes between I and Thou, no greed and no anticipation... Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur."⁵ The I of the I-It asks "what's in it for me"; "what can I get"; "I experience"; "I have". The modes of existence that the I-Thou and I-It establish refer to the existence of the I, and the modes are wirklich (actual) for the I of the I-Thou and unwirklich (inactual) for the I of the I-It. Buber says,

⁴Buber, I and Thou, pp. 53-54. Throughout this study I have used Kaufman's translation but changed his rendering of Ich-Du as I-You back to the traditional I-Thou.

⁵Ibid., pp. 62-63.

Whoever stands in (the I-Thou) relation, participates in actuality;...where there is no participation there is no actuality. Where there is self-appropriation, there is no actuality. The more directly the Thou is touched, the more perfect the participation.⁶

The main point is this: a man's relationships reveal and determine the quality of his life. "The real self appears only when it enters into (the I-Thou) relation with the other. Where this relation is rejected, the real self withers away."⁷ Wirklichkeit is a qualitative notion, that is, it refers to the quality of man's life.

It is important to remember that Buber stresses the "torturously dual"⁸ character of man's relationships and of his I. Man is an entangled series of the actual and in-actual I. The I-It in itself is not evil, in fact, the It-world is necessary for human survival. The danger comes when I-It is man's dominant approach to being. "In all seriousness of truth listen: without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with It is not human."⁹

⁶Ibid., p. 113.

⁷Martin Buber, The Eclipse of God, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), p. 30.

⁸Buber, I and Thou, p. 69.

⁹Ibid., p. 85.

Buber helps to clarify Wirklichkeit and its connection to man's twofold I by distinguishing between a person and an ego (Eigenwesen).¹⁰ The person represents the actual I of the I-Thou while the ego represents the inactual I of the I-It.

There are not two kinds of human beings, but there are two poles of humanity. No human being is pure person, and none is pure ego; none is entirely actual, none entirely lacking in actuality. Each lives in a twofold I. But some men are so person-oriented that one may call them persons, while others are so ego-oriented that one may call them egos. The more a human being, the more humanity is dominated by the ego, the more does the I fall prey to inactuality.¹¹

In 1957, many years after the above was written, Buber made further comments on this distinction in a taped conversation with the psychologist Carl Rogers. He said,

A person, I would say, is an individual living really with the world. With the world, I don't mean in the world--just in real contact, in real reciprocity with the world in all the points in which the world can meet man.¹²

Characteristic of the person is engagement. Characteristic

¹⁰ Kaufman translates Eigenwesen with "ego" while Smith uses "individuality". In a footnote to I and Thou, (p. 111, footnote 7) Kaufman comments on Buber's dislike of the Smith version.

¹¹ Buber, I and Thou, pp. 114-115.

¹² Martin Buber, "Dialogue between Martin Buber and Carl Rogers" in The Knowledge of Man, Maurice Friedman Editor, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 184.

of the ego is detachment. The person engages in order to meet. The ego detaches in order to experience and use.

The ego does not participate in actuality, nor does he gain any. He sets himself apart from everything else and tries to possess as much as possible by means of experience and use. That is his dynamics: setting himself apart and taking possession--and the object is always It, that which is not actual.¹³

So in Buber's philosophy person and ego are terms that have a precisely defined meaning. The former is given to the man whose life is centered around the I-Thou relation and who is wirklich (actual). The latter refers to the man whose life revolves around the I-It relation and who is unwirklich (unactual).

How much of a person a man is depends on how strong the I of the basic word I-Thou is in the human duality of his I. The way he says I--what he means when he says I--decides where a man belongs and where he goes. The word "I" is the true shibboleth of humanity. (That is the password that distinguishes one group of men from another.) Listen to it! How dissonant the I of the ego sounds!¹⁴

Let us now examine Buber's notion of reciprocity and its connection to Wirklichkeit.

Buber claims that "Relation is reciprocity".¹⁵ What

¹³Buber, I and Thou, p. 114.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 58 and 67.

he means by this is: how I relate to others affects my I, that is, if I relate to another in the I-Thou, I am wirklich (actual) while if I relate in the I-It, I am unwirklich (inactual). This statement of Buber's has often been misunderstood. Some have taken it to mean that the other partner of relation also must respond in the I-Thou manner. However, this is an erroneous interpretation since Buber claims that it is possible to have an I-Thou relation with a tree,¹⁶ which obviously cannot respond in the I-Thou manner. Malcolm Diamond helps to clarify this by saying:

Since the term I-Thou so strongly suggests the personal, critics often seem to believe that Buber imagines that the tree is aware of him in the same sense that he is aware of it. They do so, however, in the face of his denial of any such notion.¹⁷

But another problem arises. Many take Buber's saying that "Relation is reciprocity" to mean that, at least in interhuman relationships, an I-Thou relation occurs only when both partners relate to each other in the I-Thou.

¹⁶Cf. Buber's beautiful description of the tree and the ways of relating to it. Ibid., pp. 57-59.

¹⁷Malcolm Diamond. Martin Buber: Jewish Existentialist. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), p. 30.

This too is a mistaken interpretation. "Mutual speech and answer are not the essential criteria of the I-Thou relation."¹⁸ To be sure, the ideal situation is when both parties relate, in the I-Thou, but it is not necessary.

I think this error can be traced to Smith's translation of I and Thou. He translates two German words (Gegenseitigkeit and Mutualität) by one English word (mutuality).¹⁹ This leads to confusions because Buber means two different things by the two different words. Gegenseitigkeit, which Kaufman translates as reciprocity, refers as stated above, to the fact that when I say Thou my I becomes actual. Gegenseitigkeit can be predicated of all I-Thou relations. Mutualität, which Kaufman renders mutuality, refers to the situation where both partners of a relation address the other as Thou. Mutuality is the ideal in human relationships, but cannot be predicated of all I-Thou relations. In the postscript added to I and

¹⁸Grete Schaeder, The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber, Noah J. Jacobs translator, (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1973), p. 448.

¹⁹On pages 82 and 88 of Ich und Du in Buber's Werke he wrote "Beziehung ist Gegenseitigkeit." Which Smith translates as "Relation is mutual", pages 8, and 15. On page 166 Buber wrote "...die volle Mutualität nicht dem Miteinanderleben der Menschen inhärent." which Smith translates as "...full mutuality is not inherent in men's life together." p. 131.

Thou in 1957 Buber wrote:

Everything tells you that complete mutuality does not inhere in men's life with one another. It is a form of grace for which one must always be prepared but on which one can never count. Yet there are also many I-Thou relationships that by their very nature may never unfold into complete mutuality.²⁰

The last task of this section is to discuss the connection between Wirklichkeit and essence and to show in what way an essence can help provide a foundation for authenticity.

Implicit in Buber's concept of Wirklichkeit is an essence, an essence that defines how man "ought to be." In order to avoid confusions it must be pointed out here that the term 'essence' does not have the same connotation as it does in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. In Aristotelian-Thomistic terminology the term essence refers to the "essential" determination of a being as opposed to the accidental. For example, the human essence is something I, as a human being, cannot be other than I am. An essence in this traditional sense is precisely that which defines me as being human rather than something else. It

²⁰Buber, I and Thou, p. 178.

is something I cannot alter or change. It is the factual nature that I am, and not a matter of choice or achievement. Essence in the Aristotelelian-Thomistic tradition is an ontological notion.

Since one of Buber's primary concerns is the ethical we can turn there to illustrate a different use of the term 'essence'. Analogous to the ontological sphere one can also speak of the "essential" determination of an individual's character. Thus Buber can say that a man is essentially a person (or virtuous) or essentially an ego (or not virtuous). Here we are speaking of the essential determination of character and for Buber this essential determination of a man's character is the manner with which he relates to being. To put it succinctly, when Buber makes a statement like a man ought to actualize his essence he means that a man ought to become virtuous. For Buber, man's essence, or real self is a possibility that is actualized in the I-Thou relation. Really existing as a person, in Buber's technical meaning of the word, is not simply a birthright.

Since Buber sees man's essence as an axiological rather than an ontological principle, it is an achievement,

a possibility to which man is called and therefore reconcilable with man's freedom. Man's essence, in the axiological sense, makes a claim, it imposes an obligation on man--"he ought to exist a certain way", that is achieve his essence. In contrast, it would be meaningless or absurd to say "one ought to be one's essence" if the term essence is used the ontological or Aristotelian-Thomistic sense since one cannot help being what he is by nature. Essence, in Buber's sense is reconcilable with freedom because it makes an inescapable claim, but one that man is not forced to answer. Man may be inauthentic if he so chooses. But because man is free to decide to be authentic or inauthentic, to answer or not answer the call to be a person in Buber's sense of the word, does not mean there is no obligation, only that the obligation can be shirked.

One of the reasons Sartre denies God is that he thinks if God exists then man has a blueprint he must follow and is not free. For Buber, God's design of man is "what we ought to be", but there is no necessity compelling us. God, indeed, has designed man for a certain goal but man chooses whether to meet the demands of becoming what he ought to become. The existence of God provides Buber with the final

source of man's axiological essence and his authenticity.

God is the sanctioning power behind the obligation of

striving for the goal of authenticity. Ultimately man

is accountable to and responsible to God for his character,

or the kind of individual he ought to be.

II. VERANTWORTUNG

In the Introduction I intimated that for authenticity to be meaningful it must be based on obligation. In the preceding section Buber's notion of Wirklichkeit was discussed and shown to provide some foundation for authenticity by implying what man ought to become. In this section Buber's acceptance of the objectivity of ethical values will be discussed in connection with his notion of Verantwortung (responsibility).

There are two main points: first, Buber's emphasis on the independence and absoluteness of ethical values which is reflected in his notion of Verantwortung (responsibility); and second, Buber's analysis of Sartre's denial of objective ethical values.

Buber has argued throughout his writings that ethical values must be independent, that is, the value of an act cannot ultimately rest on the will of men nor on the act's mere usefulness to men. He says,

We mean by the ethical...the yes and no which man gives to the conduct and actions possible to him, the radical

distinction between them which affirms or denies them not according to their usefulness or harmfulness for individuals and society, but according to their intrinsic value and disvalue.¹

Buber claims that values are intrinsic properties of real things, not merely projections of individuals or societies. Further, he holds that values can have the authority necessary to impose an obligation only if they are independent and absolute.

One can believe in and accept a meaning or a value...if one has discovered it, not if one has invented it. It can become for me an illuminating meeting, a direction giving value, only if it has been revealed to me in my meeting with being, not if I have freely chosen it for myself among other existing possibilities and perhaps have in addition decided with a few fellow creatures: This shall be valid from now on.²

To say that values must be discovered rather than invented implies the independence of value. Discovery points to something overagainst me that I find out. It intimates a relation that I enter into with the thing I discover. In discovery I unveil and recognize something that exists

¹Buber, The Eclipse of God, p. 92.

²Ibid.

independently of me. This distinction between the discovery and invention of value is one of the major disagreements between Sartre and Buber. Buber holds that the origin of value is outside of man while Sartre, with his doctrine of the free creation of values, holds that man is the origin of values.

Defenders of the independent and non-relative character of ethical values are few in our time. "To deny the presence of universal values and norms--that is the conspicuous tendency of our age."³ Recent theories of value are characterized by the reduction of value to some form of relativism. For example, A. J. Ayer sees values as "emotive expressions" and R. B. Perry defines values as "objects of any interest". But it is really no wonder that much of contemporary philosophy denies the independence and absoluteness of value since man is seen as the originator of value. Our age denies God and the absolute in all of its forms and attempts to place in man's hands what has traditionally been placed in God's. Sartre, in "The Humanism of Existentialism"⁴ quotes Dostoyevsky who said,

³Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 108.

⁴Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism", in Essays in Existentialism, p. 41.

"If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." The death of God is also the death of objective ethical values which have their ontological foundation in him. When God died so did the ultimate source of obligation. It is important to note that Dostoyevsky's statement is hypothetical and Sartre seems to take it as a statement of fact. Buber would agree that ethics to be meaningful must be grounded in God, but the death of God is not a statement about the existence of God but rather about our relationship to a God that really exists. Marvin Fox gives a nice summary of the importance of God in Buber's ethics when he says,

Buber believes that moral values must be absolute and must be related to an absolute else they cannot be binding at all. When man is concerned to know what it is that he really ought to do there is no possible answer except in terms of an absolute demand...If a man wants to know what is right and what is wrong, if he seeks to discover the intrinsically valuable, then, Buber believes he must appeal to the absolute. In this commitment to absolute values we see one side of Buber's moral philosophy, namely the conviction that the absolute (i.e. God) exists, that he is the source of values and of moral obligation, and that all men are accountable to him.⁵

I have quoted Fox at length because he stresses an important

⁵Marvin Fox, "Some Problems in Buber's Moral Philosophy", in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 153.

side of Buber's axiology. Values cannot be absolute unless they are grounded in the absolute. Buber says, "Only an absolute can give the quality of absoluteness to an obligation."⁶ The obligation of objective values places demands on all men. "Over and above all the countless and varied peoples there is an authority, named or unnamed, to which communities as well as individuals must inwardly render an account of themselves."⁷ Buber's philosophy finds a place for objective values because he keeps their ontological foundation. He can uphold objective values because he believes man is ultimately responsible, whether he knows it or not, to a being superior to his own will and the decrees of society.

I say "whether he knows it or not" because while Buber stresses the ontological dependence of values on God he also holds that one can recognize and acknowledge values without recognizing and acknowledging God's existence. Buber tried to clarify this in his "Replies to My Critics".

⁶Buber, The Eclipse of God, p. 18.

⁷Martin Buber, Israel and the World, (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), p. 220.

Fox accused Buber of making values epistemologically dependent on God, that is, in order to know values I must know God first.⁸ Buber responds, "Where do I teach that? If I taught that, I would, indeed, have to be of the opinion that a man who does not believe in God could not act morally. But I am by no means of that opinion."⁹ Buber's position could be put this way: In the order of being (ordo essendi) God is necessarily prior to values since they ontologically depend on him. But in the order of knowing (ordo cognoscendi) values can be known prior to knowledge or belief in God.

Buber's concept of Verantwortung (responsibility) reflects his emphasis on the independent and absolute character of ethical values. Once again it is the richness of the German that prompts me to leave the term untranslated. The significance of responsibility in the ethical sense is brought out more clearly in the German than in the English. There is, as in English, an intimate connection between antworten (to respond), Antwort (response),

⁸Fox, "Some Problems in Buber's Moral Philosophy", in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 159.

⁹Buber, "Replies to My Critics", Ibid., p. 700.

verantwortlich (responsible), and Verantwortung (responsibility). But the English does not convey what the root of the German word does. Wort is the word, call, or claim that demands a response. Smith says, "If the reader will remember that 'responsibility' carries in itself the root sense of being 'answerable', then the significance of the 'word' (Wort) in actual life will not be lost."¹⁰ The word (Wort) or claim of objective values demands a response (Antwort).

For Buber, man is responsible (verantwortlich) because he has an obligation in the face of the claim ethical values make. Responsibility for Buber means that man has the ability and duty to respond to being in an appropriate way, that is in a way that takes being seriously on its own account. Nathan Rotenstreich says that "Buber stresses the phenomenon of responsibility in its two senses--the one sense is that of responding to a call and the other is that of being supposed to respond, that is to say, responsibility qua accountability."¹¹

¹⁰ Ronald Gregor Smith, Translator's Notes, in Between Man and Man, p. 206, note 2.

¹¹ Rotenstreich, "The Right and Limitations of Buber's Dialogical Thought", in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 99.

Buber says that "Genuine responsibility exists only when there is real responding."¹² This means that one fulfills his responsibility when he "really responds", that is, responds in the I-Thou manner. In the ethical realm responsibility means recognizing and complying to the claim of objective ethical values.

The connection between Wirklichkeit and Verantwortung can now be brought out. Buber's philosophy claims that man's essence is actualized when man becomes aware of and responds appropriately to the importance of what is over-against him. Objective ethical values represent one sphere of being overagainst man and part of authentic existence lies in the compliance to objective ethical values.

In contrast to Buber's emphasis on compliance Sartre's view of man is based on the rejection of any relation that implies compliance or obedience. And as we would expect Buber's final analysis of Sartre is quite severe. He pointedly suggests that "Sartre has started from the 'silence' of God without asking himself what part our not hearing and our not having heard has played in that silence."¹³ He further criticizes Sartre by saying,

¹²Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 16.

¹³Buber, The Eclipse of God, p. 69.

Does existence really mean, as Sartre thinks, existing "for oneself", encapsulated in one's own subjectivity? Or does it not essentially mean standing over-against the x--not an x, but the x itself. "God," says Sartre, "is the quintessence of the Other." But the Other for Sartre is he who "looks at" me, who makes me into an object, as I make him...But what if God is not the quintessence of the Other, but rather its absoluteness? And what if it is not primarily the reciprocal relation of subject and object which exists between me and the other, but rather the reciprocal relation of I and Thou?¹⁴

Sartre, to be sure, has failed to see the importance of the I-Thou relation. In fact, he has failed to see the I-Thou at all. Sartre, because he sees man's relation to being only in terms of the subject-object relation has relegated all relationships to that of conflict, possession, and a threat to the individual's freedom.

Sartre limits human relationships a priori to my knowing the other as subject only when he knows me as object, or, at best, to my recognizing his freedom only as a freedom I wish to possess and dominate by my own freedom...Buber sees the I-Thou relation as the existential and ontological reality in which the self comes into being and through which it fulfills and authenticates itself.¹⁵

In Good and Evil Buber describes what he considers to be

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 67-68.

¹⁵Maurice Friedman, Introduction to Between Man and Man, pp. xvi-xvii.

the most radical stage of evil and it sounds remarkably like a critique of the fate that Sartre dooms his authentic man to. "By glorifying and blessing himself as his own creator, he commits the lie against being, yea, he wants to raise it, the lie, to rule over being, for truth shall no longer be what he experiences as such but what he ordains as such."¹⁶ Sartre's radical freedom destroys all notion of value, but he wants us to be honest and face our situation. He says, "We want a doctrine based on truth and not a lot of fine theories."¹⁷ Sartre has burned every bridge that leads to an "ought" but still seems to say "we ought to be honest." Sartre's existentialism leads "where no primary address and claim can touch me, for everything is "my property"; responsibility has become a phantom."¹⁸

Throughout his philosophy Buber argues that obligations to be absolute must ultimately be rooted in God. In the first section we noted how God was seen as the source of what man ought to be. In this section it was pointed out

¹⁶Buber, Good and Evil, Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 138.

¹⁷Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism", in Essays in Existentialism, p. 50.

¹⁸Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 45.

that Buber sees God as the ontological basis of objective ethical values. His reason is that "Responsibility presupposes one who addresses me primarily, that is from a realm independent of myself, and to whom I am answerable. He addresses me about something that he has entrusted to me and that I am bound to take care of loyally."¹⁹

¹⁹Ibid.

III. THE OVERCOMING OF NOTHINGNESS

We have seen Zarathustra
bone weary
atop his mountain
wondering,
pondering
if he has really overcome
his nihilism--
the master's ressentiment.
Said Yes?

Remember Orestes,
leaving Argos
self-triumphant
pursued by the Fury-Flies
after reaching his
nothingness?

Wasn't it the Knight of Faith
who leapt past--
across the abyss
of his despair
and found
God?

In keeping with the existentialist tradition, Buber too, graphically speaks of nothingness or the abyss facing modern man. In this section I hope to show what the problem of nothingness is in Buber's philosophy and how his "life of dialogue" attempts to resolve this problem.

To say that nothingness is a problem to be resolved hints that Buber has another disagreement with Sartre. Nothingness for Buber is not, as it is for Sartre, the ontological foundation of man's existence.¹ Nothingness in Buber is a metaphorical description of the tragic condition of modern man. It is a metaphor of man's separation (Versonderung) and alienation (Verfremdung)² from nature, other men and God. Sartre's ontological use of nothingness implies that it is to be sought because it is where authenticity lies. Nothingness for Sartre is man's misery and his greatness. It is his misery because it involves life's absurdity, man's complete loneliness, and man's alienation from others and even himself, and

¹Cf. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, Chapter One and Barnes, An Existentialist Ethics, p. 79 "From this nothingness stems man's freedom."

²Buber, I and Thou, p. 107.

his greatness because by being nothing man is absolutely free.³ Buber, to the contrary, sees nothingness as a condition that can and ought to be overcome. That nothingness in its various forms can and should be overcome is a position that Buber, Nietzsche⁴ and Kierkegaard agree on.

Nothingness is found in Nietzsche's "On the Three Metamorphoses".⁵ With stirring images he tells of the advancement of nihilism and its eventual overcoming. The first stage is the camel--the beast of burden who bears the herd's values that are thrust on its back. In the second stage the camel becomes a lion who revolts and fights the dragon "Thou Shalt" with the roarous NO of nihilism. But

³Sartre uses nothingness in both the ontological and metaphorical senses. Ontological nothingness provides the basis for man's absolute freedom. Metaphorical nothingness refers to man's anxiety about being absolutely free, i.e., his anxiety about his total responsibility for himself.

⁴In saying that Nietzsche saw nihilism as something to be overcome I am taking a stand in something of a controversy. Arthur Danto in Nietzsche as Philosopher, (New York: MacMillan Company, 1970), p. 33, argues that Nietzsche is a "complete nihilist". Richard Schacht in "Nietzsche and Nihilism", Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays, Robert Solomon editor, (Garden City, New York, 1973), pp. 58-82, sees Nietzsche's nihilism as a transitional stage of his philosophy.

⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra in The Portable Nietzsche, Walter Kaufman translator and editor, (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), pp. 137-140.

nihilism is overcome when the lion transforms into the "yes-saying" child. Kierkegaard, in the Sickness Unto Death⁶ describes the abyss of despair that confronts all men and is overcome by believing in and loving God. But there is a significant difference between nothingness in Buber and nothingness in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard: Nietzsche and Kierkegaard see their respective forms of nothingness (nihilism and despair) as necessary steps to their respective goals (the Übermensch and the faith in and love of God); Buber sees nothingness as that which takes away from and prohibits real living (Wirklichkeit). Nothingness in any form is not the path that leads nor the emptiness that drives man to authentic existence.

In light of his philosophy of dialogue we can expect Buber to analyze man's separation and alienation in terms of the rift between modern man and his relations to nature, other men, and God. We can also expect to find Buber's resolution of the problem of nothingness to lie in man's entering into appropriate relationships in these three spheres. According to Buber it is in the realm of the

⁶Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, Walter Lowrie translator, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 155 and 194.

"Between" that the problem of nothingness arises and so it is there it must be remedied. Rotenstreich says,

He sees the remedy of the human predicament implied in the sickness of our time in the fulfillment of the relationship between I and Thou. Because of the stresses laid on the remedy of the sickness of time, he reaches a point where ontology is a matter of fact replaced by imperatives.⁷

The Experience of Nothingness

In his novel Daniel Buber artistically describes the chaos facing modern man. Reinhold tells Daniel about his experience of nothingness; "I no longer know any calm. Rather restlessness and wandering and the worst anxiety--these have become my comrades."⁸ Reinhold feels separate and out of place in the world, a world he used to know as "my sister".⁹ Reinhold relates how one evening attracted by the ocean's stillness and beauty, and beckoned by a new moon, he went out in a small boat. As quickly as a summer storm arises the sea's splendor changed and became a stormy

⁷Rotenstreich, "The Right and the Limitations of Buber's Dialogical Thought" in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 132.

⁸Buber, Daniel, p. 82.

⁹Ibid., p. 84.

gulf that fenced Reinhold from shore. This separation became an image of the abyss in Reinhold's life. "The abyss was between piece and piece of the world, between thing and thing, between image and being, between the world and me."¹⁰ After finally reaching the shore this feeling of separation and estrangement did not leave.

There my last security shattered; broken I
set foot on the shore, and when I set foot
on the shore, it was to me a discordant,
disjointed life. Behind me the storm rose
over the sea, before me lay the calm land;
but it was to me as though I now left the
last, fearful hiding place of calm and
entered into the harsh storm that would
never end.

Since then the abyss is before me at all
times.¹¹

Reinhold's experience depicts a situation that Buber describes as "homelessness" and which he has analyzed at length throughout his works. Buber says,

In the history of the human spirit I
distinguish between epochs of habitation
and epochs of homelessness. In the former
man lives in the world as in a house, as
in a home. In the latter, man lives in the
world as in an open field and at times does
not even have four pegs with which to set
up a tent.¹²

¹⁰Ibid., p. 84.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 86-87.

¹²Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 126.

He further divides homelessness into social and cosmic homelessness. Social homelessness refers to man's separation and alienation from other men, cosmic homelessness to man's feelings of being "marooned in the universe,"¹³ and being forgotten by or completely cut-off from God.

Social Homelessness

Man's separation and alienation from his fellow men has its roots in an over-development of the I-It relation, of man's preoccupation with use and experience. The characterization of our age is the progressive increase of man's ability to use and experience and a decrease in his powers to relate.¹⁴ In looking at Buber's concept of Wirklichkeit we saw that authenticity lies in the I-Thou relationship and that "when man lets It have its way, the relentless growing It-world grows over him like weeds, his own I loses actuality."¹⁵ Man indeed is twofold and the I-It is necessary for survival, but for modern man, the It-world has

¹³Schaeder, The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber, p. 29.

¹⁴Buber, I and Thou, cf. pp. 87 and 89.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 96.

become cancerous, infecting man with inauthenticity and silently gnawing at the actual I. Perhaps Buber's main message is that this separation and alienation from others is accompanied by a separation and alienation of self.

The abyss between man and man causes, but also reflects the abyss within man himself. Robert Wood says, "The threat of nothingness stands over the I who dwells exclusively in the world of it."¹⁶ Man, in turning from others, turns from himself. "The problematic situation of modern man or the sickness of time, as Buber puts it, is an indication of a melancholic development inherent in the fact of our alienation from the basic and normative human situation."¹⁷

Modern man has let his life-giving potentiality to relate be usurped by his powers to use, to experience, to profit, to produce, to possess, to have. Our "alienation from the basic and normative human situation" is an alienation from ourselves, from the actual I of the I-Thou. While man has increased his ways and means of "having" he has lost touch

¹⁶Robert Wood, Martin Buber's Ontology, (Evanston, Indiana: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 71.

¹⁷Nathan Rotenstreich, "The Right and Limitations of Buber's Dialogical Thought", in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 122.

with how to authentically "be". Our age is sick and "in sick ages it happens that the It-world, no longer irrigated and fertilized by the living currents of the Thou-world, severed and stagnant, becomes a gigantic swamp phantom and overpowers man."¹⁸

In I and Thou and Between Man and Man Buber has analyzed at length two extremes of modern man: individualism and collectivism. In the modern situation "we have the massive and chaotic swinging of the pendulum from individualism to collectivism, from one extreme of inauthentic humanity to another."¹⁹ Buber rejects individualism and collectivism because they are views of man that make the I-Thou relation impossible. In individualism there is no Thou, only I. In collectivism there is no I, only We or Us. One cannot tolerate the Thou, the other cannot tolerate the I.

Individualism understands only a part of man, collectivism understands man only as a part: neither advances to the wholeness of man, to man as a whole. Individualism sees man only in relation to himself, but collectivism does not see man at all, it sees only society. With the former man's face is distorted, with the latter it is masked.²⁰

¹⁸Buber, I and Thou, p. 102.

¹⁹Wood, Martin Buber's Ontology, p. 77.

²⁰Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 200.

Collectivism has long been abhorred by existentialists. Seeing man only as a cog in some machine is what much of existentialism is a reaction to. Nietzsche detests the herd. Kierkegaard's crowd induces a false security that prohibits believing. In Sartre's *Argos* the people are inauthentic pawns of Zeus and Aegisthus. Buber too rejects collectivism.

Here the human being tries to escape his destiny of solitude by becoming completely embedded in one of the massive modern group formations. The more massive, unbroken and powerful in its achievements this is, the more the man is able to feel that he is saved, from both forms of homelessness, the social and the cosmic.²¹

Collectivism promises man the security which he craves, but in reality it only hides his loneliness and separation. It is not the remedy of homelessness. Gabriel Marcel comments,

It is true that the human personality first attempts to escape its isolation by adding itself to the mass. Yet therein lies an illusion that reflection suffices to dispel. In the midst of a collectivity, man is not with man or alongside man. The isolation is not surmounted, it is smothered as a sound may be drowned out by noise.²²

But while collectivism is recognized by most existentialists

²¹Ibid., p. 201.

²²Gabriel Marcel, "I and Thou" in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 42.

as inauthentic, many over-react by dooming man to an egoistic individualism. This is the path of Sartre.

Authenticity for Buber, as it should be clear by now, lies in relating to the other. In Sartre it consists of opposing the other.²³ Buber makes some pointed criticisms of Sartre's individualism.

It is Sartre who has raised to a principle of existence the deficiency of a person who is shut up in himself. Sartre regards the walls between the partners in a conversation as simply impassable. For him it is inevitable human destiny that a man has directly to do only with himself and his own affairs. The inner existence of the other is his own concern, not mine; there is no direct relation with the other, nor can there be.²⁴

It is ironic that Buber criticizes Sartre, the upholder of freedom, for dooming man to fatalism. "This is perhaps the clearest expression of the wretched fatalism of modern man, which regards degeneration as the unchangeable nature of Homo Sapiens and the misfortune of having run into a blind alley as his primal fate, and which brands every thought of a breakthrough as reactionary romanticism."²⁵ Individualism is not where authenticity lies--"to save himself from the

²³Cf. Sartre's No Exit and "The Look" in Being and Nothingness.

²⁴Buber, The Knowledge of Man, p. 79.

²⁵Ibid.

despair with which his solitary state threatens him, man resorts to the expedient of glorifying it."²⁶

Authenticity and the overcoming of nothingness rest in the "Between" not in the extremes of individualism and collectivism. The I-Thou relation is the third possibility that smashes the false alternatives of individualism and collectivism that face modern man, and overcomes social homelessness. The man who lives only in the It-world gradually falls away from being truly man. He may dwell in an individualism alienated from others or in a collectivism of mutually alienated individuals bound only by their alienation and needs. Only if man returns to meeting will he overcome the abyss and come to authenticity." By virtue of it (the I-Thou relation) we are not abandoned to the alienation of the world and the deactualization of the I."²⁷

Cosmic Homelessness

Social homelessness is the covering over of the actual

²⁶Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 200.

²⁷Buber, I and Thou, p. 149.

"I" caused by the over development of the I-It relation in the sphere of the interhuman. Cosmic homelessness has its roots in man's mis-relation to and disconnection from the Absolute. Man's connection to the Absolute is twofold: first in his relationship to God, the Eternal Thou, and second in his recognition of and compliance to the absolute claim that objective values make. In the rest of this section I want to discuss how Buber links man's feelings of nothingness to the disintegration of his relations to both God and objective values.

In I and Thou Buber claims that "from the former (the I-Thou relation) a path leads to God, from the latter (the I-It relation) only to nothingness."²⁸ In Buber's thought, the I-Thou relation is bound to God in several ways. First, Buber defines God as the Eternal Thou. That is, as the one who never relates to being in any way but the I-Thou manner. The main point can be put this way: God is characterized as being essentially onefold in his relations and this is in contrast to man's twofold ways of relating. God is only an actual "I" and addresses being solely as "Thou". Man

²⁸Ibid., p. 75. Cf. also p. 150.

fluctuates between actuality and inactuality, and addresses being as "Thou" and "It". Perhaps the greatest demonstration of man's twofoldness is his relation to God. Man takes the Eternal Thou and relates to him as an It. "The Eternal Thou is Thou by its very nature; only our nature forces us to draw him into the It-world and It-speech."²⁹ Man has many ways of reducing God to an It. We can see God as only something we are to profit by. For example, gaining eternal happiness or forgiveness. We can "study" God and speak about him rather than speak to him. In his "Autobiographical Fragments" Buber tells of an incident with a friend that occurred in 1914. His friend asked, "Do you believe in God?" and Buber answered a quick "Yes." But the question stayed with him long after his friend had left him. Later that same day Buber thought, "If to believe in God means to be able to talk about him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in him means to be able to talk to him, then I believe in God."³⁰ Buber made a similar point when he said, "It is not

²⁹Ibid., p. 148.

³⁰Martin Buber, "Autobiographical Fragments", in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 24.

necessary to know something about God in order to really believe in him: many true believers know how to talk to God but not about him."³¹

The second way I-Thou relations are bound to God can be seen in Buber's claim that, "Extended, the lines of relation intersect in the Eternal Thou. Every single Thou is a glimpse of that. Through every single Thou the basic word addresses the Eternal Thou."³² This is at best a doctrine that is difficult to prove and one that had troubled Buber's translator and commentator Ronald Gregor Smith. Smith wrote,

This point (that every Thou is connected to the Eternal Thou) is undoubtedly the crux of Buber's view. It is in the last analysis a matter of faith. I recall that I once asked him a question about this. I said something to the effect that it was not clear to me how the Eternal Thou was to be understood as implicated in each relational event. How could this be proved? 'Proved?' he replied. 'You know that it is so!' Now, long afterward, I understand that this knowing of which he spoke was a trustful, believing knowing. And trust of this kind must be affirmed, it may even be confirmed as bearing ultimate meaning; but it cannot be demonstrated.³³

³¹Buber, The Eclipse of God, p. 28.

³²Buber, I and Thou, p. 123.

³³Ronald Gregor Smith, Martin Buber, (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1967), pp. 21-22.

I have neither the time nor desire in this study to get involved in this problematic claim of Buber's. What is important and relevant to this study is the significance of this claim since it points to an important thread that runs throughout Buber's thought. Much of Buber's philosophy is an attempt to make the spiritual livable. Walter Kaufman says that the point of I and Thou "was partly to break down the division between the everyday world and religion. Eventually God is found in the everyday world, in the Du."³⁴ Buber's point in saying that every I-Thou gives a glimpse of the Eternal Thou is that the religious and the secular are intimately related. A man's relationship to God is linked to his relationship to other men and to the world. "Above and below are bound to one another. The word of him who wishes to speak with men without speaking to God is not fulfilled; but the word of him who wishes to speak with God without speaking with men goes astray."³⁵ In I and Thou Buber expresses a similar view when he says, "He who knows the world as something by which he can profit, knows

³⁴Walter Kaufman, "Buber's Religious Significance", The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 682.

³⁵Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 15.

God in the same way."³⁶

For Buber the way to God is to be found in the Hasidic notion of the "hallowing of the everyday". Hasidism was the nineteenth century east European Jewish mysticism that Buber studied and was greatly influenced by. Maurice Friedman traces the etymological roots of "Hasidism". He says, "The Hebrew word hasid means 'pious'. It is derived from the noun hesed meaning loving kindness."³⁷ Hasidism attempted to synthesize the spiritual and the secular by making man's everyday living his synagogue. "Hasidism's message, according to Buber, resides above all in its relation to concrete reality...The essential message of Hasidism can be summed up in a single sentence: God can be seen in everything and reached by every pure deed."³⁸ Man meets God by approaching his fellow men and the world with "loving kindness".

Cosmic homelessness is man turning his back on God, either directly by relating to God as an It or not relating

³⁶Buber, I and Thou, p. 107.

³⁷Maurice Friedman, Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p. 16.

³⁸Schaeder, The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber, p. 292.

to him at all, or indirectly by letting the I-It relation dominate his life with others and the world. Buber characterizes man's turning away from God as the "Eclipse of God".

In our age the I-It relation, gigantically swollen, has usurped, practically uncontested, the mastery and the rule. The I of this relation, an I that possesses all, makes all, succeeds with all, this I that is unable to say Thou, unable to meet being essentially, is the lord of the hour. This selfhood that has become omnipotent, with all the It around it, can naturally acknowledge neither God nor any genuine absolute (such as objective values) which manifests itself to man as of non-human origin. It steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven.³⁹

Just as an eclipse of the sun is "something that occurs between our eyes and the sun and not a change in the sun itself"⁴⁰ so in our relationship to God it is not God who changes and hides himself but something that has stepped between God and us. The overwhelming development of the I-It is the obstacle that hides God from our eyes. Modern man's possessive and solipsistic attitudes have made him blind to the absolute. But "its light seems darkened only because the eye suffers from a cataract."⁴¹

³⁹Buber, The Eclipse of God, p. 129.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 23.

⁴¹Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 117.

Another source of man's cosmic homelessness is man's deafness to the direction giving claims of objective values. "Often enough we think there is nothing to hear, but long before we have ourselves put wax in our ears."⁴² Modern man's cosmic homelessness is exhibited in his feelings of directionlessness. He seemingly has no foundation whatsoever for his actions.

That man has no basis for action but his own will is the view of Sartre.⁴³ Sartre's philosophy emphasizes man's nothingness as the ontological basis of his being. Sartre arrives at man's nothingness via the category of possibility, which he sees as an important basis of man's radical freedom. But while for Sartre possibility is the source of man's freedom, for Buber it is one of the sources of man's cosmic homelessness. Because man is free he is always confronted with possibilities he can choose between. Even in the face of objective values man, because he is free, has the possibility of accepting or rejecting what he "ought to do".

⁴²Buber, I and Thou, p. 137.

⁴³Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism" is Essays in Existentialism, pp. 41-48 where he discusses the forlornness and anguish that accompany man's freedom.

For Buber possibility becomes the gateway to nothingness when man faces ethical choices in the darkness of the eclipse of objective values. Possibility, without the direction of objective values, swallows man in its nothingness.

The human person inevitably becomes aware of the category of possibility which of all living creatures is represented just in man...The evolving human person I am speaking of is bowled over by possibility as an infinitude. The plentitude of possibility floods over his small reality and overwhelms it.⁴⁴

The category of possibility, separated from objective values, dooms man to nothingness and an overglorification of freedom, which is a failure to submit to what is over and above the individual. It is the freedom that is no longer concerned with truth, but solely with the I. By approaching being in the I-Thou man meets and discovers meaning and values. "With the change of heart there is a change of eye, and to his new view there is meaning in what was for long meaningless."⁴⁵

Cosmic homelessness, like social homelessness is

⁴⁴Buber, Good and Evil, p. 125.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 5.

overcome by a return to the life of dialogue. When man addresses being as Thou he recognizes the absolute in its forms of God and objective values. "I can know neither God nor moral values as transcendent realities knowable in themselves apart from the dialogue in which I meet God and discover values."⁴⁶

The overcoming of nothingness by the life of dialogue further reflects Buber's attempt to join the religious and the secular. When social homelessness is overcome by the life of dialogue man is no longer doomed to the alienation and conflict that Sartre depicts in No Exit. When cosmic homelessness is overcome by the life of dialogue man is no longer a directionless and unfounded being in a world that is de trop.

Buber sees the inner connection between what he calls cosmic and social homelessness. He seems to think that the overcoming through dialogue of the social homelessness, that is to say, of what is the nearest homelessness to the concrete human being, leads, ipso facto, to the overcoming of the cosmic homelessness or vice versa, the overcoming of the cosmic homelessness in the dialogical situation between man and God leads to the overcoming

⁴⁶Maurice Friedman, Introduction to Between Man and Man, p. xviii.

of the social homelessness in the dialogical situation between man and man.⁴⁷

Perhaps Buber's point could be put this way: When man recognizes the value of being in any of its spheres he opens the door to seeing more. Seeing things in light of only what "I can get" makes one blind to the importance of the other. Homelessness in its two forms is due to man's preoccupation with only himself, and the danger is that this preoccupation can become so addictive that the life of dialogue disappears.

Buber's main message is for man to step out of the solipsistic, all pervasive ego and become a person who meets being and thus discovers the meaning that has been eclipsed.

YOU YOURSELF MUST BEGIN. EXISTENCE WILL REMAIN MEANINGLESS FOR YOU IF YOU YOURSELF DO NOT PENETRATE INTO IT WITH ACTIVE LOVE AND IF YOU DO NOT IN THIS WAY DISCOVER ITS MEANING FOR YOURSELF. EVERYTHING IS WAITING TO BE HALLOWED BY YOU, IT IS WAITING TO BE DISCLOSED IN ITS MEANING AND TO BE REALIZED IN IT BY YOU. FOR THE SAKE OF THIS YOUR BEGINNING, GOD CREATED THE WORLD. HE HAS DRAWN IT OUT OF HIMSELF SO THAT YOU MAY BRING IT CLOSER TO HIM. MEET THE WORLD WITH THE FULLNESS OF YOUR BEING AND YOU SHALL MEET HIM...IF YOU WISH TO BELIEVE, LOVE!⁴⁸

⁴⁷Rotenstreich, "The Right and Limitations of Buber's Dialogical Thought", in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 121.

⁴⁸Buber, On Judaism, p. 202.

IV. CONCLUSION

Some Problems

A primary philosophical problem in Buber's thought is his unfounded metaphysical claims. Buber holds that God and objective ethical values exist and that these values ontologically depend on God without giving philosophical justifications for these metaphysical principles. Buber is prone to making oracular statements about these matters rather than giving philosophical proofs.

Buber does defend his not offering philosophical justifications for God's existence. He holds that such justifications are at best ineffective. Buber's distinction between talking about God and talking to God points in this direction. Buber, like Pascal and Kierkegaard, stresses man's direct relationship to God rather than rational justifications for his existence. All three want the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob rather than the God of the philosophers. They believe a man becomes convinced that God exists by personally meeting and communicating with him, not by philosophical arguments. Even if one is rationally

convinced God existed he has yet to become religious.

Talking about God, as rational theology has traditionally done, does not change one's life. But talking to God in direct relation does.

Buber is personally convinced that God and objective ethical values exist. Indeed much of his philosophy can be seen as a polemic against those who deny God and objective ethical values. Buber attempts to explain why other men are blind and deaf to the God and the objective ethical values he so clearly sees and hears in his own life. For Buber the very nature of God and objective ethical values is such that they must be met and known personally. Demonstration is insufficient. Man's inability to see God and hear the claim of objective ethical values is not a result of either's non-existence, but a result of the blinding and deafening growth of the I-It attitude. Buber does not prove the existence of God and objective ethical values. Nor does he attempt to. They are, from the view of the objective method, his philosophical presuppositions. But from the view of the subjective method they are entities Buber has really encountered in his life. What Buber does is offer an alternative explanation about why God and objective

ethical values have become eclipsed to the vision of some men. Buber describes the purpose of his philosophy when he says:

I only point to something. I point to reality, I only point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside.¹

The view that the existence of God and objective ethical values is not subject to demonstration, but rather known by a personal seeing or encountering, is a reasonable position and one that Buber tries to defend. But his claim that ethical values ontologically depend on God cries out for justification. One immediately wonders why and wants an explanation. The closest Buber comes to giving such justification lies in his analysis of Verantwortung. He says that "responsibility only exists when the court is there to which I am responsible."² Since Buber connects responsibility to someone calling for a response, or someone I am responsible to, he grounds values in God who is the court to

¹Buber, "Replies to My Critics," in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 693.

²Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 17.

which one is responsible. The logic of the argument seems to be this: If there are absolute imperatives (values) then there must be first, someone making the demands of the imperatives and second, the demander himself must be above individual men and societies in order to bestow the quality of absoluteness on the demands; since there are absolute imperatives they are founded in a demander who is absolute. There are a number of problems here. First, it may be grammatically true that imperatives imply a demander, but this is a far cry from a philosophical justification that shows absolute values rest in God. That imperatives imply a demander could say more about our language than about metaphysics. Second, Buber does not make it at all clear what the connection between the absolute being and the absoluteness of ethical values is. Once again, it is an obvious grammatical fact that the term absoluteness is derived from the term absolute but this is no metaphysical justification for the ontological derivation of the absoluteness of values from the absolute, that is, God. It may indeed be the case that God is the ontological foundation of ethical values. All I am saying here is that Buber does not show this to be the case. He only says it and thus is open to criticism.

Buber's acceptance of God as the ontological foundation of value may have been prompted to some degree by the influence that Nietzsche had on him in his youth.³ In his attack on the traditional view of good and evil Nietzsche stressed that since God had died there was no longer any basis for objective ethical values. In The Gay Science Nietzsche says:

The greatest recent event--that "God is dead," that the belief in the Christian God has ceased to be believable--is even now beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe...In the main, however, this may be said: the event itself is much too great, too distant, too far from the comprehension of the many even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having arrived yet, not to speak of the notion that many people might know what has really happened here, and what must collapse now that this belief has been undermined--all that was built upon it, leaned on it, grew into it; for example, our whole European morality.⁴

In his philosophy Buber naively accepts that God is the foundation of value and argues against Nietzsche's and Sartre's position that there is no God and hence no objective values.

³Cf. Schaeder, The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber, pp. 13, 31 and 385.

⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, in The Portable Nietzsche, Translated and Edited by Walter Kaufman, (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 447.

Another important weakness in Buber's thought is his unclearness about the self. In the first section on Wirklichkeit I tried to clarify Buber's implied use of the term essence by distinguishing between the ontological and axiological uses of the term. When Buber says that man must achieve his essence what he means is that man is responsible for his ethical character or axiological self or essence. Buber's concern with the ethical has lead him to his doctrine of man actualizing himself in the I-Thou relation and his emphasis on the axiological self. But this concern overshadows and leaves unclear the status of the ontological essence or self in his philosophy. The ontological self becomes even more problematic when one finds statements like: "There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-Thou and the I of the basic word I-It."⁵ Buber seems here to be saying that there is only the axiological self--that there is no such entity as the ontological self. If Buber does mean this he has insurmountable difficulties, insurmountable because implied in his philosophy of relation is the ontological self. The I-Thou is a

⁵Buber, I and Thou, p. 54.

relation and for there to be a relation there must be entities that are related. The I, in the ontological sense, is not a result of relation as is the I in the axiological sense. The ontological I is the necessary presupposition of relation. The axiological self is a qualitative notion and as such requires the ontological self just as qualities require substances. I think Buber, despite the above quote, realizes the necessity of the ontological self. He says, "The I is indispensable for any relationship."⁶ His weakness is that he does not properly distinguish the ontological from the axiological self even though he intimates the difference. Buber himself seems confused about how he uses the terms I and self and the result of this confusion is often contradictory statements like: There is no self apart from relation on the one hand and relation presupposes the self on the other. The distinction between the ontological and axiological self remedies this contradiction since the former can be rendered there is no axiological self apart from relation and the latter can be rendered relation presupposes the ontological self. Clarifying the distinction

⁶Ibid., p. 126.

between the ontological and axiological self provides a key to unlocking the mystery to many puzzling statements of Buber's. For example, when Buber says "man becomes I through a Thou,"⁷ he is referring to the axiological I that is actualized in the I-Thou. When he says, "whoever lives only with that (the I-It relation) is not human,"⁸ he is referring again to the axiological human essence which is achieved, not the ontological human essence which a human being cannot lose or gain since it is what he is. Buber's accentuation of the category of relation has left unclear the role and importance of the category of substance.

Buber's Significance

The significance of Buber's philosophy lies in its rehabilitative character. Not only has Buber not succumbed to the Zeitgeist that has relativized ethical values and made man "the measure of all things", but he has actively tried to correct modern man's crippling preoccupation with only himself and his own purposes.

The key to understanding Buber, and in fact his main

⁷Ibid., p. 80.

⁸Ibid., p. 85.

contribution to philosophy lies in his distinction between I-Thou and I-It relations. It should be clear by now that in the I-Thou relation the I realizes that what is over-against him should be taken seriously on its own account and he is not merely concerned with using and/or dominating the other as is the I of the I-It relation. But Buber's terminology is somewhat misleading. In calling the basic attitude that takes being seriously on its own account I-Thou Buber leads us to believe that what is overagainst us which is to be taken seriously is of a personal nature. To be sure, man's relationships to persons, both other men and a personal God, is an important and even the highest dimension of the I-Thou relation, but Thou in Buber's philosophy is not restricted to personal beings. The interpersonal is the highest dimension of the I-Thou because it is where the ideal of reciprocal I-Thou relating can take place. With other men and God Thou can be addressed by as well as to the I. But one can also address nonpersonal beings as Thou as Buber explains with his example of an I-Thou relation to a tree. This is exactly the problem with Buber's terminology: it seems odd to say we can address or relate to a nonpersonal being as Thou which is a term usually reserved for personal

beings.

Perhaps I can help straighten out this problem in Buber's terminology by stressing that the Thou refers not so much to what is addressed or related to, but rather to how I address or relate. It is clear that for Buber what is addressed or related to in the I-Thou manner can be a personal or nonpersonal being. The terms I-Thou and I-It reflect a man's basic attitude toward being in one of its three spheres. The I of the I-Thou, or the person in Buber's technical sense, meets being essentially,⁹ and can be characterized by an attitude of reverence that sees and appreciates the intrinsic importance of the world, other men and God. In short, a person recognizes the value of being in general and the value of each sphere of being. In contrast, the I of the overdeveloped I-It relation, or the ego in Buber's technical sense, can be characterized by an attitude of pride that can see everything only in light of itself. It is important to remember that Buber sees the I-It as necessary but when the I-It becomes the dominant relation man is bordering on inauthenticity. Buber says, "Note well, not the I-It relationship itself, without which

⁹Cf. Buber, The Eclipse of God, p. 129.

no earthly persistence of human existence is conceivable but its hybris overstriding all measure is meant."¹⁰

A person recognizes and willingly accepts the claim that objective values make. An ego, because he is solely concerned with himself is either blind to this claim or even worse, sees the claim but openly rebels against it. In his Good and Evil Buber distinguishes between what he calls two stages of evil. In the first stage one is blinded due to his self preoccupation and cannot see "what offers itself". In the second stage one is bent on destroying "what offers itself".¹¹ Malcolm Diamond says:

He (Buber) has called the first stage of evil the way of the sinners who again and again miss God's way through their failure to direct themselves toward the good. The stage of radical evil is that of the wicked who oppose God's way with the basic attitude of their being.¹²

Paul Pfuete comments that Buber "considers the radical stages of evil (as) resulting from absolute self affirmation and man's presumptuous usurpation of the moral and creative

¹⁰ Buber, "Replies to My Critics," in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 716.

¹¹ Buber, Good and Evil, p. 30.

¹² Diamond, Martin Buber: Jewish Existentialist, p. 144.

role of God.¹³ The two stages of evil represent two forms of inauthentic existence. In both man fails to achieve the axiological essence Buber underscores throughout his thought. In both stages the I is the I of the ego. And as Buber says:

How dissonant the I of the ego sounds!
 When it issues from tragic lips, tense
 with some self contradiction that they
 try to hold back, it can move us to
 great pity. When it issues from chaotic
 lips that savagely, heedlessly, uncon-
 consciously represent contradiction it can
 make us shudder. When the lips are vain
 and smooth it sounds embarrassing or
 disgusting.¹⁴

The heart of Buber's philosophy is his recognition of man's capacity to transcend himself, that is, man's ability to be concerned with beings other than himself and enter into appropriate relations with that which he encounters. Recovering his transcendence is what rescues man from the all encompassing ego that threatens authenticity and like a cancer dominates our age. Buber's thought tries to restore the primacy of man's capacity to transcend himself by making it the basic principle of virtuous living. Buber's recognition of man's transcendence is what makes his and Sartre's

¹³Paul Pfuete, "Martin Buber and American Pragmatism," in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 537.

¹⁴Buber, I and Thou, p. 115.

existentialism remote. Sartre has closed his eyes to the I-Thou relation and then wonders why he cannot see the other except in terms of domination and conflict. Sartre's freedom becomes a declaration of war between an individual and the rest of being. For Buber, "It is a question of using this freedom properly, that is, in a manner worthy of the fact that it is a freedom which is given to us."¹⁵ Buber stresses the fact that man must recognize and freely accept the values intrinsic to being. The reverence that characterizes the person who lives the I-Thou relation is the basic attitude that makes the ethical and virtuous life possible.

¹⁵Buber, The Eclipse of God, p. 69.

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