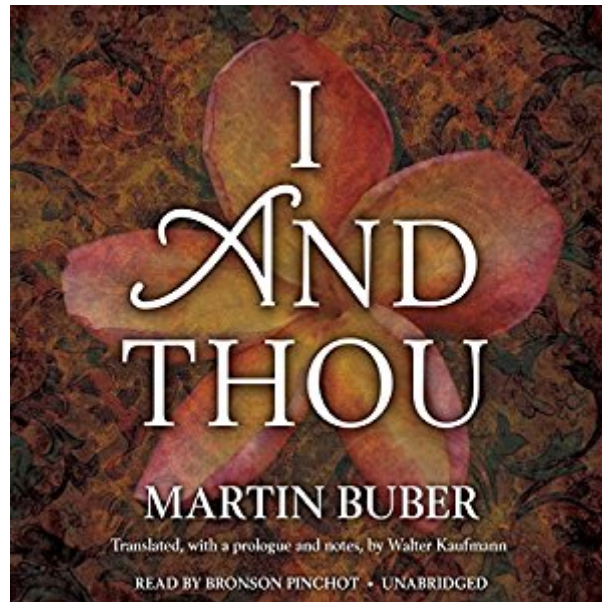


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I And Thou



Synopsis

Martin Buber's *I and Thou* has long been acclaimed as a classic. Many prominent writers have acknowledged its influence on their work; students of intellectual history consider it a landmark; and the generation born after World War II considers Buber one of its prophets. Buber's main proposition is that we may address existence in two ways: (1) that of the "I" toward an "It," toward an object that is separate in itself, which we either use or experience; (2) that of the "I" toward "Thou," in which we move into existence in a relationship without bounds. One of the major themes of the book is that human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. All of our relationships, Buber contends, bring us ultimately into relationship with God, who is the Eternal Thou. The need for a new English translation had been felt for many years. The old version was marred by many inaccuracies and misunderstandings, and its recurrent use of the archaic "thou" was seriously misleading. Professor Walter Kaufmann, a distinguished writer and philosopher in his own right who was close to Buber, retranslated the work at the request of Buber's family. He added a wealth of informative footnotes to clarify obscurities and bring the reader closer to the original and wrote an extensive prologue that opened up new perspectives on the book and on Buber's thought. This volume provided a new basis for all subsequent discussions of Buber. Martin Buber (1878-1965) was a Jewish philosopher, theologian, Bible translator, and editor of Hasidic tradition. He was also known as one of the paramount spiritual leaders of the twentieth century and is best known as the author of *I and Thou* - the basic formulation of his philosophy of dialogue - and for his appreciation of Hasidism, which made a deep impact on Christian as well as Jewish thinkers. Fleeing Nazi Germany in 1938, he immigrated to Israel, where he taught social philosophy at the Hebrew University.

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Customer Reviews

I love Martin Buber's language in describing relationships as either "I-Thou" or "I-It". I find this very helpful when working with groups to help them understand how subtle differences can quickly change the relationship and damage communications. While the concept is simple, the nuances and subtle issues in practice are certainly not and like all good human relations, requires a great deal of study, practice and more practice. With that in mind, this translation of the poetic original I-Thou by Buber needed more for me to understand and embrace it more fully. To that end, I found Kenneth Paul Kramer's "Martin Buber's I and Thou; Practicing Living Dialogue" to be a very good companion resource.

My daughter, a teacher, has her degree in Philosophy, and I picked this up at her urging. I think that I understand more now, about why people teach. The subject of learning is just the "It" in Buber's notation. What is important is the "Ich / Du" moment, which is not the "It", and which must be experienced. Buber connects the Ich/Du with a primordial drawing together of personality. Extrapolating from Buber, in my own "nachgedanken", that foundation of personality forms some basis for our crude understanding of The Eternal, of Love and of Nature. I approach the subject of Philosophy most humbly, confessing my ignorance. But Buber defines his terms from the outset and builds from there. Reading, I felt myself in the presence of a thoughtful, universally kind instructor. Perhaps he was hedged in a bit by the Judeo-Christian pre-war culture, but he was fighting to understand the "other", and I don't think he was talking down with respect Asian or African cultures, but was constrained by mere "book learning" of cultures which were both spacially and temporally displaced from his own. My daughter thinks this isn't the best translation. If you know a little German, I recommend also getting a copy of "Ich und Du", which I am using to shed additional light on some passages. If you are new to Philosophy, as I am, take a look at Buber as a great first read.

I and Thou is not meant to be listened to. Every chapter, every paragraph, even every word resonates with meaning from other parts of the work. To listen to this while driving to the office and think you're going to appreciate it is about as likely as the ability to grasp the meaning of The Wasteland while gardening.

Best book I've read. The best course of knowing oneself is to know one's own life and to know that the greatest service is to love one's fellow man and realize that the root of happiness is to pursue a cause that is greater than oneself.

As a professor of "Existential Ethics", I haven't a brief evaluation of Buber's I and Thou except to say that there isn't a deeper, more poetic, more trenchant -profound- analysis / treatment of human relationship and its metaphysical foundation. Suffice it to say that in this one book is all the ethics you'll ever need - given that you live by it's wisdom.

I am reviewing Kaufman's translation of Buber's I and Thou (or, as the translator has it, I and You). Deservedly so, I and Thou is a classic in western theological and social thought. A warning, however: the book is not easily accessible. I.e., the writing can be quite obtuse and requires a willingness to read and re-read portions as one works through it (a consequence of its German origins and the writing style of the author). Kaufman at one point footnotes a very long sentence with the observation that (paraphrase)"this is one of the most baffling sentences in the book." Buber himself in the postscript notes that he was constantly asked to explain and clarify various points in the original text, thus choosing to update the book in his postscript (which is minimally better). Nevertheless, one is encouraged to take the plunge and enter into a relationship (his key theme in I/Thou relations)with the author by forging ahead even if one does not always understand some things at the moment; it will become more clear as one reads on. Buber distinguishes between I-It and I-Thou relations. I-It is normal and to be expected; it is a natural component of human reality. However, the fundamental problem of I-It relations, especially between human beings,is that the other is reduced to just another object in a world of objects and treated as a means to one's ends. I-It is a symbol of the "sickness of our age." I-Thou/I-You, however, results from relationships/associations whereby the "other" becomes essential to the development of and realization of the self (I). I-It functions within the terms of monologue; the attempt by the self to manipulate and control the other. I-Thou is founded upon dialogue: the sharing of self with another self with the goal of maximizing the humanity of those party to the conversation. I-Thou relations are reciprocal and spirit (both human and otherworldly) comes to exist and mediates the "between" (rather than located only in the I, described as "ghostly solitude"). Thus, the book is a contribution to examining and critiquing what became known in the 20th century as mass society theory and has links to that genre in numerous ways (Marcuse, One Dimensional Man et al). Implicit throughout is his deep spirituality/religiosity; in Section 3 he is explicit about this as he explores I-Thou in terms of

I-and-the-Eternal Thou" (God; every You/Thou is a glimpse of the Eternal You/Thou. Non-religious readers (or potential readers) should not avoid the book for this reason; indeed, this portion of the discussion helps to clarify the "regular" I-Thou relations. I and Thou was published the same year as Freud's Ego and the Id. Buber's take is an interesting subtle critique of Freud's formulation: according to Buber, the ego is not equivalent to the I; egos are created by setting one ego apart from other egos. The I, on the other hand, is rooted in the person and his/her reciprocal relations with other persons (e.g., Jacques Maritain's thesis). Ich und Id is about controlling and suppressing; Ich und Du is about liberation.

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