



# I and Thou

*Martin Buber*

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## **I and Thou** Martin Buber

I AND THOU BY MARTIN BUBER TRANSLATORS INTRODUCTION HIS work in its original, German form has already, since its publication fourteen years ago, exercised on the Continent an influence, quite out of proportion to its slender size. In view of this influence alone it may be affirmed that I and Thou will rank as one of the epochmaking books of our generation. It has hitherto been comparatively unknown among Englishspeaking students of philosophy and theology. I and Thou is to be understood in the context of Bubers previous intensive study, chiefly of Jewish mystical writings. It is not an isolated phenomenon among his works, but represents the culmination of the intensely religious interest that characterises them all. It is, indeed, philosophical but it is not an academic work of discursive philosophy. It is mystical, but it belongs to what PringlePattison has termed the higher Mysticism of real communion with God, as distinguished from the debasedI mysticism that sub stitutes for the real present world a world of illusory delights, where absorption in the Diym is experi enced. The decrying of mysticism as a whole, fashion able today among Protestant writers, has a weighty retort in the present work. For an indubitably real mystical experience is here set forth, not with contempt for the means of human expression but with finished and delicate power. For this reason, though we might call and Thou a philosophicalreligious poem, it belongs essentially to no single specialised class of learned work. It has a direct appeal to all those who are interested in living religious experience rather than in theological debates and the rise and fall of philosophical schools. It has first and foremostto be judged on its intrinsic meritsby the impact, that is to say, which it makes on our actual, responsible life, as persons and as groups, in the modern world. This immediate value of Bubers work becomes clear if we consider its main thesis. There is, Buber shows, a radical difference between a mans attitude to other men and his attitude to things. The attitude to other men is a relation between persons, to things it is a connexion with objects. In the personal relation one subject I confronts another subjectThou, in the connexion with things the subject contemplates and experiences an object. These two attitudes represent the basic twofold situation of human life, the former constituting the. world of Thou, and the latter the world of It The content and relation of these two worlds is the theme of and Thou. The other person, the Thou, is shown to be a realitythat is, it is given to me, but it is not bounded by me: Thou has no bounds the 1 Though the second person singular pronoun has almost dis appeared from modern English usage, it remains in one important spherein prayer. By its retention in the English text, therefore, far from suggesting an obscure situation, it keeps the whole thought iii the personal and responsible sphere in which alone it is truly to be understood. TJiou cannot be appropriated, but I am brought up short against it.

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