

## Violence and Dialogue from the Perspective of Martin Buber

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### Abstract

Martin Buber's fundamental thesis is about the way we approach the world, which is according to our two-fold attitude as that of 'I-It' and 'I-Thou'. These are the two attitudes with which we address the 'other': one is a dialogic relation of 'I-thou' and the other is a non-dialogic relation of 'I-It'. In I-It relation the other is objectified and there is no reciprocity but the 'other' may also objectify the 'I'. In an 'I-It' relation the 'other' is perceived as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, and the world is thought of as consisting of things. I-It is a relation of person with thing, of a subject with an object, involving some form of utilization, domination, or control. However, in 'dialogue', we acknowledge the other as having a distinct otherness that neither be reduced to the realm of the sameness and nor can be negated. The present paper is an attempt to understand the origin of violence from the dialogical perspective of Martin Buber. Further, the paper attempts to explore how this understanding of violence places a lot of emphasis on a person's sense of responsibility and forms a basis of the determination of the 'ethical'.

**KEYWORDS:** Violence, Dialogue, Buber, Peace, Otherness

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### Introduction

An analysis of the conceptualization of violence becomes important in the times when the acts of violence are diverse and vary in their intensity and manifestations from personal to public spheres. Every violent act entails a negation of the 'other', and with modern emphasis on the individual and the self, the idea of the 'other' has also come into prominence. This is probably what Dipankar Gupta (2007, p. 8) meant when he wrote that "...true modernity is about how people relate to other people, and likewise, true ethics is all about a concern with "other" as equal citizens". However, citizen is still a narrower conception than the way a 'philosophical anthropologist' like Buber would conceptualize and study 'wo/man' in the entirety in his existence. Nevertheless, conflicts are common when we live with 'others' as they have opinions, views, perspectives, ideas and systems that are different from ours. However, any attempt to dissolve this difference into sameness misses the whole point. Therefore 'dialogue' can be posited as another way of conflict resolution in which only a synthesis of two opposing positions is not attempted, whereas, in dialogue the distance between the self and the 'other' is deemed irreducible. These are the considerations that are at the basis of the understanding of violence being presented in this paper. The central focus of this paper is to understand the ways in which the philosophy of dialogue of Martin Buber enables us to understand the nature of violence as well as a way away from violence towards peace comprised of multiplicity, plurality, and love. However, before an attempt is made to understand violence from Buber's perspective one needs to first understand his conception of a human being, as

only human being engage in violence by choice rather than out of any physical need or safety instinct alone.

### **The Human Being**

Thus even the understanding of the human being needs to be revised. Rather than understanding a human being as an individual, as economic being, social being, or a rational being, who is nothing but an aspect of the whole *being* who must be seen in the entirety of his existence. For Buber, “each child is born with a given disposition of ‘world-historical’ origin, that is, inherited from the riches of the whole human race, and that he is born into a given situation of “world-historical” origin, that is, produced from the riches of the world’s events” (2002, p. 98). For Buber “the self is ‘social’ by nature; its very ‘essence’ is interpersonal” (Herberg, 1956, p. 15). Thus Buber speaks of a person rather than an ‘individual’- who is separate from the world in his solipsistic existence. This person is in relation with others and is thereby influences them and gets influenced by them. Hence from Buber’s perspective mutuality in the human existence can be seen as “fundamental and must be regarded as the ontological basis of human life”(Rotenstreich, 2009, p. 21).

Buber discusses in ‘I and Thou’ (1958) about the two types of relations in which a ‘person’ can enter with the world: ‘I-It’ and ‘I-Thou’. These are primary words for him which define one’s existence within a relation. The Primary word I-It can never be spoken with the whole being. The ‘It’ is always bounded by other ‘It’s. ‘It’ is in a relational-experience in which the ‘other’ is experienced and thus objectified that is ‘it’ is perceived, sensed, thought-about and felt. There is no reciprocity from the being but the ‘other’ may also objectify the ‘I’. This leads the man to a division of an ‘inner’ and an ‘outer’ only to be realized that both of these are equally objectified. Human beings perceive each other as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, and the world is thought of as consisting of things. I-It is a relation of person with thing, of subject with object, involving some form of utilization, domination, or control. In the realm of I-It, “the noblest fiction is a fetish, the loftiest fictitious sentiment is depraved” (Buber, 1958, p. 13). Saying ‘It’ is violence to the existence of the other’s otherness.

However, when we have an attitude of mutuality and wholeness we address the other as ‘Thou’. ‘I-Thou’ is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, while ‘I-It’ is a relationship of separateness and detachment having no present but only past as things can be experienced only after there has been an effect. The ‘I-It’ relation is never spontaneous since it has a past only. The ‘I-Thou’ lives in the present because it is an encounter, an engagement. A meeting of the living in which ‘I’ is seized by the power of exclusiveness and entering a relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one as an act of whole being. The meeting is not in man but between man and the world personified. With inanimate objects we can be in an ‘I-Thou’ relation as well as in an ‘I-It’ relation. One cannot make oneself understood with others through ‘I-Thou’ relation; on the other hand one cannot have mutuality in ‘I-It’, but ‘understanding’ is achieved through ‘I-It’ only. Only an ‘I-Thou’ relation can lead up to dialogue in which persons turn toward each other in their being. They accept each other as partner in dialogue no matter what their respective positions are. For Buber the relation is established prior to the ‘I’ and the ‘I’ differs with our addressing of the other as ‘It’ or ‘Thou’. When we address the other as ‘thou’ we are defining the ‘I’ in as whole and mutually in relationship but when we define the other as ‘it’ we define the ‘I’ as solitary. These are

the two attitudes in which we address the other: one is a dialogic relation of 'I-thou' and the other is a non-dialogic relation of 'I-it'. The subject and object relationship that gets established with an individualistic attitude is a relation of a self with a thing, of separateness and detachment that is based on some form of utilization, domination, or control.

However, with an attitude of mutuality, reciprocity and wholeness can one address the other as a 'Thou'. Only an 'I-Thou' relation can lead up to dialogue in which persons turn toward each other in their being. They accept each other as partner in dialogue no matter what their respective positions are. In an 'I-Thou' relation every act of objectification of the other is violence to the other's otherness. For Buber the 'I-Thou' relation is at the base of all genuine meetings and when we have an attitude of openness and wholeness we address the other as 'Thou'. 'I-Thou' is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, while 'I-It' is a relationship of separateness and detachment having no present but only past as things can be experienced only after there has been an effect. The 'I-It' relation is therefore never spontaneous. The 'I-Thou' lives in the present because it is an encounter, an engagement. A meeting of the living in which 'I' is seized by the power of exclusiveness and entering a relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one as an act of whole being. The meeting is not in man but between man and the world personified. With inanimate objects we can be in an 'I-Thou' relation as well as in an 'I-It' relation. One cannot make oneself understood with others through 'I-Thou' relation; on the other hand one cannot have mutuality in 'I-It', but 'understanding' is achieved through 'I-It' only. Only an 'I-Thou' relation can lead up to dialogue in which persons turn toward each other in their being. They accept each other as partner in dialogue no matter what their respective positions are. For Buber the relation is established prior to the 'I' and the 'I' differs with our addressing of the other as 'It' or 'Thou'. When we address the other as 'thou' we are defining the 'I' in as whole and mutually in relationship but when we define the other as 'it' we define the 'I' as solitary. 'I-Thou' is an encounter with the other in which the other is not objectified and neither is experienced as a phenomenon whereas the 'I-It' relation is characterised by such an experience and objectification. However the question arises that how is this related to violence?

### **Violence as Negating of the Radical Otherness of the 'Other'**

"The problem posed by the appearance of the other has been an issue that has exercised a powerful hold over philosophical discussions of the twentieth century" (Kakkattuthadathil, 2001, p. xix). This other has been negated completely in the Cartesian understanding of 'I think, Therefore I am'. Further, though Hegel addresses the themes of 'the other' and the 'intersubjectivity' in 'Phenomenology of Spirit' (1977) but he starts with an individual self-consciousness which by a gradual process similar to thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis becomes the absolute. Hegel describes that, when two self-consciousnesses encounter each other they enter into a 'life and death' struggle, because they desire to be recognized by the other. However, they also want to negate the other as 'other' since any such recognition would mean the supremacy of the other to the self-consciousness. After the struggle the winner becomes the Lord and the one who gave into the fear of death becomes the bondsman. Though in Hegel's thought mutual recognition is achieved in the end yet it is preceded by the desire to use, have or control the 'other'. In Hegel's theory, we find that the primacy of ethics towards the other in this relation that

we have in Buber is absent. Secondly, Hegel begins with the self-consciousness and then encounters the other.

Similarly, in Husserl's (Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology, 1982, p. 89) attempt to answer the question that, "When I, the meditating I, reduce myself to my absolute transcendental ego by phenomenological epoche' do I not become *solus ipse*; and do I not remain that, as long as I carry on a consistent self-explication under the name of phenomenology?", we find that his idea of intentionality of consciousness as consciousness-of-something falls short of addressing the 'other' in his uniqueness. This is because consciousness-of-something makes the 'other' and object of my consciousness.

In both these ways the other is being negated, however, in Buber's thought, the otherness of the other is something that must not be consumed or subsumed by the sameness of the 'I'. However, when the 'I' meets another 'I', it has the capability to predict it, objectify it and to make an 'It' out of the sameness of this 'I'. However, when we face the otherness which the 'I' cannot reduce to the 'same', the result is a relationship between the 'I' and the other as 'thou' which cannot be reduced to sameness. Therefore, any force or compulsion to reduce the other to the same will result into an act of violence. Though in itself "nowhere does Buber suggest that I-It is evil; we couldn't live without it" (Malik & Boni, 1995, p. 8), but probably only here we find the origin of violence, the moment we try to reduce the other to the same, a 'thou' to an 'it'. A dialogue is a relation between persons in which the 'self' and the 'other' are related yet free. This freedom is freedom to respond and address the other. Here "the idea of responsibility is to be brought out back from the province of specialized ethics, of an 'ought' that swings free in the air, into that of lived life" (Buber, 2002, p. 18).

The relational understanding of freedom is different from other existentialists like Sartre who insist on the absolute nature of freedom and choice by conceptualizing human beings as individuals. Buber also rejects the idea put forth by Kierkegaard that God may be encountered in solitude, apart from one's relations and commitments to other human beings. Buber, unlike Nietzsche, is also positive about the dynamic realization of culture and value in the life of a 'person'.

This understanding of addressing the 'other' is also different from Kant's conception of categorical imperative dictum to do with others that which one can agree to be done with oneself. However, "the moral force of the categorical imperative arises from reason's appropriation of a principle governing all humanity. By contrast the moral force of my concern for a Thou arises out of the immediacy of our encounter" (Seeskin, 2001, p. 184).

Similarly, the pragmatic attempt to use the other for some purpose is questioned by Buber's emphasis on the primacy of the ethical responsibility towards the other. It also demands that we must not consider the child as 'resource' or as an 'individual' but as a person or being irreducible to any category of 'rational', 'economic', 'spiritual', or 'social' alone. Buber hints at Dewey's conception of character as 'a system of interpenetrating habits' and proposes that a great character responds from the whole being recognizing the uniqueness of every situation.

Thus, among the four ways of responding to the other as posited by Cain (1996, p. 138) dialogue seems to be the most preferred way. Here the other historical three ways have been of "complete disregard, polemical attack or defence (apologetics), and syncretism." As the first response we shut ourselves off to even an acknowledgement of the 'other'

and we "act as if they don't exist." The second response is more active and aggressive in which we reject the 'other', for example, "the other religions as "untruth" or "unfaith," in comparison with our own religion, which we proclaim contains the whole and only truth" (Cain, 1996, p. 138). Any study and knowledge of the 'other' is aimed at denigrating the 'other' and to establish the superiority of the self. The third way is called as 'syncretism', 'syntheses, or 'eclecticism', which "has a great appeal to liberal humanists in religious communities". Though this approach seeks to open-up to whatever is considered good in the 'other' and tries to incorporate it in the 'self', "it risks a certain shallowness, inauthenticity, or irresponsibility when it tries to put things together that don't belong together or are clearly contradictory" (Cain, 1996, p. 138). Yet this approach provides us spaces for meetings, mutual influences and attitude change.

Thus there are many situations which may be called as violent, for example, speaking of homogenization in any particular community or society that is presently heterogeneous would amount to violence (See Sen(2007) for more discussion on this issue); the negation of equal opportunities, or promotion of inequality for personal profits would also be a violence to the poor or the marginalized (See Sen and Dreze(2013)); attempts to 'mainstream' the 'forest-dwellers' against their will would then also be considered violent (See Roy(2011)); use of any kind of state apparatus for control and domination is violent; and any attempt of indoctrination in an educational setting must also be considered violence. Each of these situation presents to us a different context with its own concerns and questions that require much greater efforts but Buber's ideas can enable one to problematize the nature of ethics and responsibility in the social context.

### **Conclusions**

The way away from violence is towards relation, which according to Buber is towards dialogue. Dialogue is like an encounter between the 'I' and the 'thou' in which something is revealed of the other but the otherness of the other is still irreducible to the 'I' or by the 'I' into any formulae or any synthesis or into a unitary structures of thought or reason. However, dialogue is focussed on the 'between' what happens in between the 'I' and the 'thou'. This in-between is the realm of the relation and not of objectification. "Although our capacity to enter into dialogue may be grounded in our relational development, our actual engagement with the Other is not a given. A compassionate engagement with the Other must be cultivated through compassion and dialogue and underlines the role of the person as a 'situated agent' of change"(Frie, 2010, p. 464).

Dialogue is an acknowledgement of the others' otherness and the limitations of the sameness of the 'I'. Here we have an ethical obligation towards the other, however, through his 'dialogical philosophy', Buber avoids not only the objectivism of moral absolutes but also the subjectivism of cultural relativists because he makes the moral values absolute by relating them to an absolute 'thou' for "only an absolute can give the quality of absoluteness to an obligation" (Buber, 1952, p. 27). However, Buber gives to moral values a relative nature too by making the person responsible to the other. In an 'I-Thou' relation, the person is responsible for the 'thou'. This responsibility is not imposed on the person and neither is the person free to choose this responsibility but it is ingrained in the nature of an 'I-Thou' relation "arises in my relation to the absolute" (Seeskin, 2001, p. 185). The 'person' is not forced to respond but neither can he choose not to respond, but he is free in how to respond. Were the ways in which one must respond be fixed or determined by someone else will be a state of moral heteronomy, however, had

the 'I' being left free to respond or not, it will lead to moral autonomy. "Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding" (2002, p. 12).

Here, an ethical a violent act does not necessarily entail altruism or self-denial, nor is it being impartial; neither is it a predefined response to a purely objective condition, nor is it a subjective reaction to a situation. Every new situation calls for a genuine response which is peculiar to that situation. This response may or may not be called violent according to the social norms but they are justified as long as they are of a responsible being for the 'thou'.

Moreover, and one of the important distinctions Galtung (1968, p. 169) makes is whether "there is an actor that commits the violence as personal or direct, and to violence where there is no such actor as structural or indirect". This indirect violence which he calls 'Structural Violence' also needs to be understood from Buber's perspective but there seems that one has to be content with this much in a paper.

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