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**“GENUINE EDUCATION” IN MARTIN BUBER’S PHILOSOPHY OF
DIALOGUE**

ABSTRACT. In the work *Ich und Du* (1923) the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber propounds and elaborates the theses of his ‘philosophy of dialogue’, focusing in particular on a perspective hinged on the themes of dialogue, relation, and encounter. Starting from his famous distinction between the ‘I-It’ relation and the ‘I-Thou’ relation, Buber highlights how in education the dynamics of the relationship between the educator, the pupil, and the world need to follow the dialogical principle in order to fully develop in a productive and genuine way. If this principle is performed by a continuous mutual action between the ‘genuine educator’ and the student, it can contribute to the creation of ‘genuine education’, which is characterised by a sound axiological, teleological, and maieutic-creative statute that allows for the understanding of the close link existing ‘between’ the goal of the ‘individual’ and the goal of the ‘community’ in the dynamic dimension of ‘us’.

Keywords: education, dialogue, relation, relationship, educator

1. The Education of Mankind is Founded on the Dialogical Principle

The Austrian and Jewish philosopher Martin Buber is known as the philosopher of dialogue. Buber can probably be considered the philosopher who propounded the largest number of theories regarding the importance of the genuine interpersonal relationship in the existence of human beings. The major work in which Buber propounds and discusses the main theses of his 'philosophy of dialogue' is *Ich und Du* (1923), translated into English with the title *I and Thou*. In this work, the author postulates a perspective hinged on the concepts of dialogue, relation, and encounter. Besides, *I and Thou* is also the work in which Buber draws the famous distinction between two different kinds of foundational relations that shape human existence: the 'I-It' relation and the 'I-Thou' relation. According to the Jewish philosopher, the distinguishing factor between these two different types of relationship is the type of relation existing between the two constituents of the 'single primary words', noticeable in the difference recorded between the 'realm of experience' and the 'realm of relation'. To be more specific, according to Buber, the 'It' of the realm of experience exists only as an object that might be recognised merely superficially in some of its parts. On the other hand, the 'Thou' of the realm of relation is a subject that actually stands in front of us. It is recognised in its essence, thus making it possible to engage in an authentic relationship with 'Thou' and creating thus a genuine relation, a 'genuine encounter' between 'I and Thou' and 'Thou and I'.

The Austrian philosopher identifies this ontological relation 'I-Thou' with the term 'dialogue', a concept that according to Buber is not linked to communication, i.e. a simple exchange of information. In fact, in the philosophy of Buber, dialogue at its finest form does not require a communicable content in order to actually 'exist'. Instead, it requires the

availability of the whole participant not only for ‘giving’ or ‘receiving’ contents, but also for ‘entering’” into them and ‘engaging’ in a relation with them. This relation takes place when two individuals trigger the main element of authentic dialogue: the ‘mutuality of the inner action’. This element is based essentially on the mutual and unconditional acceptance of ‘Thou’ by ‘I’ and of ‘I’ by ‘Thou’.

The dialogical approach described in the previous paragraphs explains the fundamental ontological potential of Buber’s anthropology: the concept of ‘responsibility’. According to Buber, assuming and accepting one’s own ‘dialogical responsibility’ means respecting and enacting the relationship. Finally, it means also getting concretely involved in the ‘building’ and ‘confirming’ process of one’s self and of ‘Thou’ as individuals. In this way, the thought of Buber opens up in general to a wider social dimension, specifically to the concept of ‘community’.

From this point of view, it is clear that education plays a paramount role in the philosophy of Buber, since it is a defining human experience for the society and it takes place in and via interpersonal relationships. As a matter of fact, the Austrian philosopher argues that «education means to let a selection of the world affect a person through the medium of another person» (Buber 1947: 118). Specifically in the education process, this collection of mutual relationships is based on three elements: the educator, the pupil and the world. The key concept in the philosophy of Buber is the assumption that, in order to have a genuine and effective relationship dynamics, it is necessary to fully recognise the other. This recognition is possible only if both components of the relation (teacher-student) are open to listening and mutual engagement.

In order to deeply understand the dynamics of Buber's thought on education, it is necessary to clarify some of the core concepts of his dialogic anthropology. The conceptualisation of human existence in ontological terms is performed by using the opposite perspectives of 'I-Thou' and 'I-It'. This conceptualisation implies a series of indications about what is 'right' in human behaviour and 'how' it is possible to create also in the field of education something genuine that might be able to turn the existence of human beings into something genuine. In *I and Thou*, Buber argues that at the beginning of a relationship «man becomes an I through a Thou» (Buber 1970: 80). Hence, according to the author, human beings as 'relational beings' are initially configured to 'openness, encounter, dialogue' and they act therefore on their only freedom: indeed, the engagement in a relationship with the other allows human beings to become aware of their own selves, involving their whole beings. Obviously, the same is true also in the mutuality of the relationship of the education process, since 'I' gets educated and develops a genuine existence. Therefore, in the pedagogy of Buber, the mutual relation 'I-Thou' provides the possibility of developing positive values, values that are genuinely educational. Besides, it is only because of the relationship of mutuality that the same values may concretise: «I become through my relation to the Thou, as I become I, I say Thou» (Buber 1970: 11).

Referring in particular to the goals of education and the issue of its methodology, another important element to understand properly Buber's pedagogy is represented by the concept of 'orientation', since it affects Buber's pedagogical epistemology. Indeed, the concept of orientation is crucial to understand the creation of the dialogical relation 'I-Thou', because the 'I-Thou' polarity induces 'I' to profoundly open up to the other. Besides, this process takes place in an 'oriented' ontological context, as both 'I' and 'Thou' are naturally and

ontologically ready to make a 'foundational movement' that equals a 'direct' opening to the other. A voluntary opening, which is consciously sought, wanted, and conquered; it is not a mechanical act, but something obtained through the personal commitment of the parties involved in order to create mutuality (Buber 1983: 58). Therefore, the 'orientation' can be only 'one', not because there is only one single 'right orientation', which is the one pointing to 'Thou', but also because it is 'personal', as it involves each and every human being in a completely unique way. The only possible 'orientation', the one pointing to 'Thou', must therefore be lived and interpreted according to the instructions given by a personal original map that cannot be pre-planned, as it is unique and must be drawn daily. Being able to orient oneself and thus start in the right direction acquires a strict pedagogical meaning: «it means to take the orientation pointing to the place where the individual project of each and every human being is achieved. That final point is the realisation of one's uniqueness and it is, at the same time, a movement towards Thou» (Poma 1974: 33).

Considering the normative power of the dialogical principle that establishes that neither the educator, nor the student, nor their twofold relation may exist independently or autonomously; it is possible to analyse different aspects of the practice of education and the ways in which the different factors that come into play can interact in genuine and productive ways. Nevertheless, the three players involved in the dynamics of education (educator, pupil, world) manifest themselves in interaction with the others through modalities that are always new and dense of mutual influences. Yet, this fact does not mean that the process is completely free of obstacles that might lead them astray and far away from the characteristics and rules of 'genuine education'.

Education is indeed a difficult and sensitive experience, in which sometimes the educational relationship may decay and acquire unsuitable, inappropriate, and counterproductive forms. According to Buber, education is not simply the fruit of an accidental process that could be improvised on a daily basis, letting individuals get passively carried away by the flow of episodes and events. Instead, when framed into an existence that aspires to become 'genuine', education requires strong resolution; a will that affects interpersonal dynamics and involves each and every human being in their own responsibility and in the choices taken in front of themselves, the others, and the world (Buber 1983).

Starting from the private and continuous relationship that each and every individual has with himself or herself, human beings are asked to build and work at best on their own educational paths. It is an imperative that requires everyone:

“to fight to reach his or her own self; to try and try again after learning important lessons from every temporary failure, because on the way to the successful completion of personal existential and educational projects people fight with different rates of success, but the fight is always worth the effort, even when you believe you are bound to fail” (Poma 1974: p. 33).

This individual educational task that involves everyone from their first to their last breath requires every person to love himself or herself, something that does not limit the love for 'Thou', but rather promotes it. In the majority of his works, Buber calls upon all children, grown-ups, young, and old to commit themselves in becoming 'new human beings' and have a 'genuine existence', following all the stages of a challenging 'way' on which finish-lines can never be considered truly final.

In every historical moment or stage, the pedagogical challenge must therefore receive the attention and creative commitment of all individuals and communities. Education indeed cannot be simplistically considered a habit, the practice of something given for granted or

considered repetitive. Education is constantly new, because it persistently renovates itself, while at the same time it redefines the life of each and every human being living in the world.

In his essay *Education*, Buber states that «in every hour the human race begins. In this hour, across the whole extent of this planet, new human beings are born who are characterised already and yet have still to be characterised» (Buber 1999: 229).

On the other hand, the ‘unique reality’ of mankind is affected by a continuous renewal process that creates myriads^{s?} of different realities with the peculiarities that make it unique and special and mysteriously big in the creation process. It is also true, though, that in some moments and in the peculiarity of a specific situation framed in the macroscopic dimension of mankind, the ‘unique reality’ of a child, an individual child, strongly emerges from the living space. Of course, no child comes from nowhere. Every child is the product of a complex series of biological, historical, and cultural influences that, at least in part, affect and define it. The fact is that, in the end, the present offers mankind the possibility of starting again, but in order to fully seize this opportunity human beings must avoid to settle passively for ‘what they’ve already seen’, the ‘general’ schemes, and ‘what they are born into’. Rather, they must notice and enhance the original added value that every reality of the world or of human life has to offer. Realities that can be fully expressed with the contribution of ‘genuine education’.

Indeed, education has the never-ending task to bring reality one step closer to utopia. Regardless of their material conditions, no human being should feel or be excluded from the challenging duty of building the future and playing a role in the renewal. To reach this goal, in his essay *Education*, Buber (1999: 248) argues that «the part to be played in this by everyone alive to-day, by every grown-up and child, is immeasurable, and immeasurable is our part if we are educators». In other words, if there is a crucial role that must be played, it is

the role of ‘genuine educators’. In general, human decisions and deeds are not always genuinely creative and useful to the humanising way: according to how they are implemented, they can bring about different and alternative results, «they can illumine the grey face of the human world or plunge it in darkness» (Buber 1999: 248). Even education, in its widest sense, is subject to the same faith. Therefore, it is necessary that educators, with their resolution and will, make education become concretely ‘genuine education’, ‘authentic education’, because only in this way education will be able to strengthen the light-spreading force in the hearts of the doers (Buber 1999: 248).

At this point, it becomes clear the importance of analysing and understanding the distinguishing aspects of this kind of education and of the role of educators.

2. The ‘Genuine Educator’ and the Goals of Education

Undoubtedly, education is a complex experience in which the educator, the pupil, and the world are necessary poles involved in creating a dynamic relation. Nevertheless, Buber discusses the educational situation focusing on the contribution of each individual, highlighting all the ethical and interpersonal aspects involved. In this way, the duty of the educator is assessed in its whole complexity, difficulty, and significance. Indeed, because of the specific responsibility and strong influence in the interpersonal relationship that educators have, they are the individuals who play the main role in education, thus determining the authenticity and efficiency of the education process. As a matter of fact, also because of some influences due to the cultural context surrounding the educator, the actions of the teacher might be biased by a ‘lust of power’, ‘propaganda’, ‘eros’, superficiality, attitudes that could tilt the balance of a relation that since the beginning was already asymmetrical. This fact

could undermine the quality of the dynamics of education and make the whole process 'unauthentic'. Yet, on the other hand, the educator might also be able to truly help the subject of the educational process in becoming a human being with a 'genuine existence' in the relation 'I-Thou'. The ability to create new human beings who are open to dialogue highlights the fact that educators have the possibility of becoming the main architects of communities.

According to Buber, education is always goal-oriented. The goal of education must be the individual in his or her entirety, involving both his or her current state and his or her future possibilities. The goal of education must be the education of 'character', as the Austrian philosopher argues many times in his works.

The concept of 'character' is in strict correlation with the concept of 'orientation' described in the previous paragraphs. According to Buber, the main quality of mankind is its faithfulness to its dialogical nature, which requires an individual to be available to the other, to be 'Thou-oriented' (Buber 1958). The 'character' provides another definition of the dialogic individual: a human being who is able to live a genuine existence and who is committed to the difficult task of concretising the 'I-Thou' dimension in different spheres of life. Thus, education allows individuals to step towards this goal shared by the entire mankind with strong resolution and great hope, allowing them to become gradually more aware and more autonomous (Buber 1958).

In other words, the final goals of education are autonomy and individual responsibility, concepts that are identified and manifested in the 'character'. Buber's pedagogical proposal is an axiom that states that the higher the 'individual autonomy' is, the higher the 'interpersonal relation' is. Autonomy and relation go therefore hand in hand and it is not possible to divide them in a teleological perspective of education. Nevertheless, the 'character' is not a self-

sufficient and originally isolated individual that postulates the statement of I as individual (Friedman 1972: 430). Rather, the 'character' is an opening to 'Thou' that allows the individual to build and develop, as it is a form of 'encounter'.

In a wonderful passage of his *The Way of Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism*, Buber puts forward a 'rule', which is presented also as a hasidic 'advice':

"Why should I embrace my personal way, why should I reunite with my whole being? Here is the answer: not for myself. Start from thyself, but don't end with thyself. Take thyself as starting point, but not as destination. Know thyself, but without caring only for thyself" (Buber 1990: 50).

This means that Buber considers the realisation of the individual in a much more complex network of relationships and as the expression of it. The creativity of these relationships is essential to let the individual emerge as an independent human being. This creation of human existence can take place only in the 'sphere of between'.

"Only when two human beings mutually understand each other at the point that everyone wants the highest level of success for the life of the other, without imposing on the other aspects of his personal life, only in this relationship can be found the wonderful lively dynamics of mankind" (Buber 1958: 222).

Considering the goals of education, the clear and continuous reference to the dialogical principle draws a link 'between' the goal of the 'individual', seen in its particular existential situation, and the goal of the 'community'. According to Buber, genuine education must induce a transformation and become a continuous promoter of coexistence among human beings in the dynamic dimension of 'us'. In these terms, education acquires a social, cultural, and political goal that «restores the natural unity of mankind» (Simon 1976: 552). Only in this way, it is possible to build on sound foundations a human coexistence that could aspire to

fulfil the highest expectations. «Only human beings educated through a genuine practice of education will become the architects of the new unity of mankind» (Simon 1976: 551).

Thus, education must face the challenging and endless duty of promoting in human beings the realisation of their whole essence and the wholesomeness of the human dimension that makes them unique. Starting from this, every human being can then express the action that is best suited to the specificity of every situation. Obviously, the success in performing this challenging duty depends on the educator, who has the task of discovering and enabling the flourishing of the gifts and original talents of every human being. At the same time, though, the educator must also understand what the possibilities and duties of every one are, not only considering a possible personal growth and enrichment, but also thinking about the genuine enrichment of humankind.

In the short but very dense pedagogical work entitled *The Way of Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism* (1948), Buber offers a useful collection of ‘advice’ to educators, calling on them to be in their own individuality and in their relations with themselves and others the architects of the ‘way’ represented by education in its deepest meaning. By analysing this series of ‘advice’, it is possible to understand what **are** the main requirements of the ‘genuine educator’ **are**. More than anyone, the educator must be aware that human existence is an original way that everyone must individually follow. As a matter of fact, the educator has the duty of following with resolution his or her own itinerary of growth. In doing so, the educator must establish a constant dialogue with his or her own past and destiny, keeping a constant responsibility-building relationship with the different voices that, as ‘Thou’, interact with the educator on a daily basis (Buber 1990). In other words, to reach this goal that will allow the

educator to build genuine educational relationships, the teacher must go back to his or her own self, walking in search for the heart (Vermes 1990).

According to Buber, the highest expression of the genuine educator's pedagogy is to be 'a thinker who teaches', who can efficiently combine thoughts and actions. The 'courage' that allows the educator to go beyond and combine the dichotomy of thought and action, words and deeds, teaching and being, is similar to 'honesty', a paramount attitude that is necessary in order to develop genuine interpersonal relationships. Buber argues also that the absence of honesty undermines the encounter with 'Thou', fostering misunderstanding and conflict. Therefore, according to the Austrian philosopher, only when educators venture with resolution on this interior way, they can legitimately take part to the personal journey of the subject of education, engaging in an interpersonal relationship that might be actually educational. Furthermore, to make this interpersonal relationship a success, the educator must have the skills and the will to put into practice a series of important and productive attitudes in its engagement with the individual and the entire group.

One of the main requirements to build a genuine interpersonal relationship is indeed to accept the other, recognising and respecting the 'distance' that divides and creates a relation between 'I' and 'Thou'. The acceptance of the other is therefore the main tool that actually opens up the communication with the other, overcoming defensive attitudes and simplistic escape instincts that might emerge when facing the often unsettling diversity of 'Thou' (obviously, the same is true also in the opposite scenario featuring a dominant 'I'). In the encounter with the other, Buber argues that it is possible to 'accept that individual' when he or she is welcomed with full availability, because it is an individual worthy of being our 'Thou', even if doing so might result difficult or challenging because it is the 'other'.

According to Buber, this availability to ‘Thou’ by an ‘I’ who is completely fearless is actually the attitude that allows the other to feel the intimacy of the relationship. It allows the other to see himself or herself in his or her uniqueness, recognise himself or herself and become ‘present’ in mutuality. Therefore, the Austrian philosopher contends that the ‘genuine educator’ is ready to perform an action characterised by the widest and most unconditional acceptance of those individuals that are placed under his or her care. Nevertheless, the individuals that Buber labels as ‘genuine educators’ must perform their duties with the moral commitment that forces them to control their ‘passions’ and face every pupil in the most appropriate way. Therefore, the most important skill of ‘genuine educators’ is to fully respect the diversity that characterise their pupils since their first encounter. A diversity that must be understood and enhanced as the most visible expression of God’s creation, recognisable at every birth in the history of mankind. Educators must thus perform their duty ‘without making any choice’, without selecting their pupils, otherwise education risks to lose its meaning as open, dialogical, creative experience.

To avoid all this, Buber argues that it is necessary to capitalise on the virtue that allows educators to accept and discuss the limits of their duty and, simultaneously, to fully accept the pupils: humility. This virtue represents a vital requisite to perform the endless research that forces educators to review step after step the complex relationship in which they play the main role. In other words, humility can protect the educator from the assumption of omnipotence that often develops in those that think that they can and must educate the pupils *ab imis* and *in toto*.

The genuine educators that ‘humbly’ engage with the pupils by respecting their uniqueness and originality have at their disposal three main methods to know their pupils. The validity of

these methods increases from the first to the third. The first one is the ‘observer’ method, through which educators ‘are fully focused in visualising in their mind the pupil in order to take some notes about him or her’. In other words, educators try to collect as much information as possible on the main features of the subject. According to Buber, the knowledge inferred from this process cannot be considered appropriate nor genuine, since it is originated in the objective dimension of ‘I-It’. The second method instead is the one of the ‘spectator’, which allows educators to ‘generalise some features’ in order to gain a general and summarised knowledge of the pupil. This method considers the ‘other’ as simple ‘existence’. Also in this case, educators stay anchored in the ‘I-It’ dimension, still far away from the possibility of creating a genuine interpersonal relationship with the pupil (Buber 1958). Only when educators resort to the third method, a genuine relationship is established. The third method delivers only when educators ‘perceive’ the subject of education and therefore don’t stop at noticing external or superficial features, but perceive the synthesis of something more substantial (using a terminology based on the philosophy of Kant, Buber labels this experience as a form of ‘synthesising apperception’). This is the only situation in which it is possible to develop a genuine dialogue between ‘I’ and ‘Thou’. As stated previously, this third method allows educators to actually become ‘aware of the other’. In this way, educators go beyond the mere knowledge of data or experimentation of communication techniques and they rather engage in a ‘genuine encounter’, in which something profound and important takes place because of a true awareness and acceptance of the otherness. Buber calls this operation ‘individuation’, because educators establish a true engagement and a positive interaction with the pupil. They ‘individuate’ the student, who pops out from the numerous multiplicity.

Finally, it is possible to claim that Buber sees in the genuine relation ‘I-Thou’ the right tool to reach the most intimate core of the individual standing in front of us. Besides, only the educator (who is aware of the existence of this ‘most intimate core’) can understand and respect the innermost depths of the reality of the subject of education. Recognising the ‘most intimate core’ of pupils means grasping the true meaning of their freedom, originality, and dignity. It is indeed in the innermost depths of this dimension of each individual where it is possible to find the fundamental root of the individual, the basic ‘I-Thou’ which serves as basis for a genuine existence, becoming in this way the most intimate secret of the internal unification and the dynamic unity that must be established in the different relationships with the others and the world. Therefore, to avoid betraying the most genuine reality of pupils, educators must teach students to shoulder their responsibility. Educators must help students to learn how to become subjects of positive relationships with the others, realising themselves in ‘I-Thou’ relations. Nevertheless, to meet this goal, educators must commit to a series of attitudes that undoubtedly go beyond the unconditional acceptance of pupils and at the same time combine with it. In other words, it is paramount that in every stage of the educational relationship, pupils are fully accepted, genuinely listened to, and their world truly understood. Only in this way, it will be possible to stretch the bridge of total availability to an encounter between educator and pupil. About this topic, the hasidic teachings aid in understanding the necessity of this constructive encounter that implies the building of ‘I-Thou’ in every kind of relationship. «No encounter, with person or thing, is without secret meaning. The human beings that live with us or that we meet every day, the animals that help us in our work: everything has a spiritual secret essence that needs us to reach its perfect shape, its full realisation» (Buber 1990: 61). Therefore, it is crucial that every human being opens up to the

search for and the encounter with the ‘secret’ that (of?, a meno che *treasures non sia verbo*) the other treasures. A ‘secret’ that is far from being **inaccessible** and that represents a real treasure that must be brought to light. A treasure that, in any way, makes richer also the person who is able to find it and enhance its value. Therefore, the ‘genuine educator’ has the duty of grasping the depths of the implicit aspects of reality, besides perceiving the often hidden and cryptic potentialities of students. Educators have the far from easy task of anticipating the reality of tomorrow, without forcing or betraying the reality of today. They have the duty of inspiring pupils to reach distant goals and show them the most efficient ways that will bring them to their final destination. Nevertheless, because of all these reasons, it is crucial that the availability, intelligence, and spirit of observation of educators exceed the common trends of a practice that is still anchored in rigid teaching models or in cold and fruitless interpersonal relationships, with the aim of bringing to the dialogue of education the creativity that characterises every maieutic action.

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