

Martin Buber's Dialogical Method to Marriage Partners' Psychotherapy

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Abstract: This paper shall endeavor to discover the relational perspective of the individual using Martin Buber's concept of an I-Thou relation applied to marriage partners i.e. between husband and wife. A dialogical method to marriage partners shall be unveiled, which motivates these partners to move toward a more collective connection, which is emphasized in the aforementioned philosopher's I-Thou concept. Furthermore, this paper shall be divided into three major parts. Primarily, the writer shall discuss Buber's philosophy of dialogue, which would be the foundation of this paper. Secondly, the writer shall present the connection between Buber's philosophy to marriage partners' psychotherapy. This part shall be divided into three segments: (1) towards a collective partnership, (2) towards a mysterious partnership, and (3) towards an empathic partnership. Finally, the third part of this paper shall conclude all the aforementioned arguments.

Keywords: Buber, dialogical method, I-Thou relation, marriage partners

A profound departure from the psychoanalytic perspective of the individual was established by Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue during his time.¹ By underscoring the relational possibility of individuals in his concept of an I-Thou relation, he rivaled this with the I-It relation, which is governed by the ego and self-interest.² According to him:

The I of the basic word I-You is different from that of the basic word I-It. The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego. The I of the basic word I-You appears as a person. Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos. Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons.³

In the conference entitled, "Martin Buber's Contribution to the Humanities," Jacobs discusses that therapists who are involved in a dialogical method must modify their presence to

the progressive inclination of their patient, which would be of great help in the start of the actual psychotherapy. He begins his paper by stating that:

In the practice of psychotherapy, philosophy and psychotherapy are intimately intertwined. Therapeutic interventions are guided as much by a therapist's philosophy as they are by an understanding of psychology and psychotherapeutic principles. Both philosophy and psychology attempt to address the question of what it means to be a human being.⁴

Through the lens of Buber's philosophy, the I-It relation involves perceiving the other through one's own needs. Hence, this relation could manifest through various relationships such as international organizations, cooperatives, and functional relationships. However, this relation could also manifest itself through oppressive relationships such as domestic violence and child

exploitation. In oppressive relationships, the other is perceived with the foundation of needs, which neglects the destruction inflicted to the other.

The aforementioned perspective understood that there is a time and place for the I-It relation. If not, then it would be burdensome if every individual operation were encumbered with the ceaseless demands of the said relation, which interacts with others in terms of the fullness of their respective egos.⁵ However, the threatening consequences of disregarding the I-Thou and interacting with others only through the I-It relation, is also emphasized in this perspective. The threat is that one can eradicate the humanity of the other.

The I-Thou relation is a relation to another individual and also to God, while I-It is a relation to a thing, to the world, and to everything that is not human.⁶ The individual is conscious of the complete otherness of the partner in dialogue in the I-Thou relation. According to Buber, the term “relational” in the I-Thou relation indicates a common attribute. He writes: “The “meaning is to be found neither in one of the two partners nor in both together, but only in their dialogue itself, in this ‘between’ which they live together.”⁷ Fishbane further vindicated this by writing: “Buber defines “between” as the intersubjective or “interhuman” sphere, the space where two individuals meet. He differentiates the interhuman from the psychological, which is more concerned with the experience of the individual self. He also differentiates the interhuman from the social, which is broader and includes casual affiliation between people.”⁸

Buber conveyed his philosophy of dialogue when a moment of mismeting⁹ between him and a student occurred. It was stated that when he and his student were talking, he was not completely focused on what his student was saying to him. Therefore, when this student was slaughtered in the war, he experienced a sense of remorse on his part, bearing in mind that he lacked ample

“presentness” throughout their final meeting. Because of this, he considers the magnitudes for each relationship (e.g. domestic partnership) when there are moments of mismeting and absence of understanding and/or connection.¹⁰

The Application of Buber’s Dialogical Method to Marriage Partners’ Psychotherapy

A dialogical method is mainly significant to relations, particularly to married couples. According to Jacobs:

One of the arts of therapy is the attempt to bring your presence forward in a way that addresses the patients current particular relational need. A developmental perspective on dialogue would assert that there is a natural developmental thrust towards dialogue. If the therapist can provide the ground by being available for various kinds of ‘meeting’ as new developmental sequences emerge, then the full-bodied turning-toward-the-other will emerge.¹¹

The above-mentioned statement would be evident in the latter division of this paper, particularly on *Towards a Mysterious Partnership*. The foremost challenge of psychotherapy is to facilitate a dialogue between the husband and wife throughout the actual therapy. Buber writes: “The therapist must feel the other side, the patient's side of the relationship, as a bodily touch to know how the patient feels it.”¹² Even though these couples commence psychotherapy with an unconditional detachment from one another, another significant challenge in the aforementioned treatment is the permission of each partner to be their genuine self. Buber argues that to have a genuine relation of dialogue, both partners should acknowledge the *Thou* of his or her partner.

a. Towards a Collective Partnership

The existence of a competition, which is evidently prevalent in our society, also invades a

couple's relationship. Because of this, couples tend to let their pride get in the way with their argument, which leads them to doing and saying anything they could to prove that they are right, even though they are essentially wrong. Some therapists of couples feel caught between the conflicting plans and assertions of each partner. Possibly the primary challenge of psychotherapy is to help the marriage partners move from a competitive type to a more collective type, in which either both partners win or they both lose.

The psychotherapist requests the husband and wife to think of their marriage as a team effort, which recommends that they are accountable for the "We" of their relationship.¹³ These couples shall be encouraged to view one another as their own lifetime partner, which would mean that they would be there for each other in every challenge they would potentially encounter. These couples are also encouraged to think of the consequences for their relationship of whichever assumed attitude, conduct, and language they could involve in with each other. Hence, this presents a new level of attention as marriage partners, considering what impression their discourse or act will have on their relationship, not just how it will disturb the other or their own plan. Therefore, their challenge is to understand and care for the *between* of their married life.

The couple is invited to think about what kind of relationship they would want to have and how to improve it from then on. If they would want to have a long-lasting marriage, then they should realize that nothing would progress in their relationship if they would continue to view one another as a rivalry. They are encouraged to be the pioneers of their own relationship, to be mindful of the *between*. To be the pioneers of their own relationship is to enable liberation in their lives, which would also enable them to begin anew.¹⁴ They would also have the audacity to choose where their relationship would lead to, which would either make or break themselves and their relationship.

Therefore, if they were successful enough to move to a more collective partnership as husband and wife, they would then be perceived as an encouraged pair with the space to cultivate themselves independently and then together.

b. Towards a Mysterious Partnership

Another challenge in psychotherapy is to encourage the couple to move from their feeling of dissatisfaction towards each other.¹⁵ This primarily means to accept that change is inevitable in their relationship. Hence, the role of the therapist, which is to encourage the couple to overlook the *honeymoon stag*¹⁶ of their relationship, is quite crucial.

Furthermore, the therapist could encourage them to become conscious of the mystery of their partner, to get to know their partner as a total individual.¹⁷ This would be evident if the partner would frequently go alone together to *reconnect*. This view that allows the couple to move toward a sense of mystery suggests the demonstration of an I-Thou relation. Buber writes:

As long as love is "blind" – that is, as long as it does not see a whole being – it does not yet truly stand under the basic word of relation. Hatred remains blind by its very nature; one can only hate part of a being. Whoever sees a whole being and must reject it, is no longer in the dominion of hatred but in the human limitation of the capacity to say You.¹⁸

Moreover, Buber explains what happens when a couple confronts one another in the I-Thou relation:

In each of them the will is stirred and strengthened to be confirmed in their being as what they are really are and nothing else. We see the forces of real life at work as they drive out the ghosts, till the semblance vanishes and the depths of personal life call to one another.¹⁹

Understanding the desire to be established in a relationship is essential for Buber.²⁰ This understanding is valuable when working with couples undergoing psychotherapy. The magic of early relationships lies in the sense that one is understood and established to the very core of an individual. Buber explains:

For the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men, that is, preeminently in the mutuality of the making present—in the making present of another self and in the knowledge that one is made present in his own self by the other—together with the mutuality of acceptance, of affirmation and confirmation.²¹

If the other feels otherwise, this would immediately trigger an argument between the two. For example, in the earlier parts of their relationship, the husband would frequently surprise his wife with things such as dinner dates, new clothes, or flowers. But when their relationship starts to lengthen, the husband would often forget to surprise his wife, even forgetting their special occasions such as their wedding anniversary. An individual would want to feel the consistency of his or her partner and to feel disregarded is to cause resentment in their being. This is most likely to be the wife's problem because women tend to be more sentimental and emotional over the little things. They would want to feel that nothing has changed and that the love of the husband is always concretely manifested through material things. But then again, this does not generalize women. This could most probably be applicable to materialistic types of women. Going back, the angst over establishment could completely disregard the couple's capability to relate to one another dialogically, in mystery.²² Buber writes:

The basis of one's life with [another] is twofold, and it is one—the wish of every [person] to be confirmed as what [s/he] is, even as what [s/he] can become, by

[another]; and the innate capacity in [persons] to confirm others in this way... On the other hand, of course, an empty claim for confirmation, without devotion for being and becoming, again and again mars the truth of the life between persons.²³

An authentic dialogue demands for both partners' enthusiasm to be genuinely oneself in their relationship and to likewise see their partner's genuineness. Justifying this, Buber writes: "Genuine conversation, and therefore every actual fulfillment of relation between [persons], means acceptance of otherness. The strictness and depth of human individuation, the elemental otherness of the other... is affirmed from the one being to the other."²⁴ Furthermore, accepting the other's *independent otherness* is the foundation of a relation.²⁵ Hence, Buber recognizes the independence that allows for dialogue and genuine relation.²⁶ Well-defined restrictions between the self and the other are absolutely fundamental for understanding and communal respect in a relationship.²⁷

c. Towards an Emphatic Partnership

The beginning when the couple is stuck in disenchantment and blame is the effort contained from moving to magic to mystery. Several procedures could help the couple to move from blame to empathy. Buber defines empathy as: "The exclusion of one's own concreteness, the extinguishing of the actual situation in life, the absorption in the pure aestheticism of the reality in which one participates."²⁸ Friedman explained this further by expressing that:

To be fully real the I-Thou relation must be mutual. This mutuality does not mean simple unity or identity, nor is it any form of empathy. Though I-Thou is the word of relation and togetherness, each of the members of the relation really remains himself, and that means really different from the other.²⁹

This move shall support them to see one another more genuinely and to relate themselves in a dialogical method. In the beginning of their session, couples are in the state where they blame one another. For instance, the materialistic wife would often blame her partner for the inability to provide her requests, which is what her partner promised her in the beginning of their marriage. Because of this, her partner would often experience the feeling of guilt for his inability to provide the requests of his wife. The feeling of guilt experienced by the husband is one of the reasons why empathy is non-existent in their relationship. They see the other as accountable for the continuous desolation they are facing in their relationship. In this perspective, it is expected that couples in this state could not deal with one another in the I-It relation.

Three lessons may arise from this instance: (1) To take more accountability so that they would not feel like a casualty towards their partner, (2) to help the husband and wife to move past the state of blaming themselves for demanding too much from their partner and their relationship in general, (3) and to carve in themselves that their partner is less responsible for their personal contentment in life. However, as this transpires, respective sides become more and more responsible to themselves and to their relationship. Hence, blame is becoming ambiguous in their relationship.

In order to develop empathy towards their partner, they must engage themselves in the thought that they have concern for one another, which Fishbane elaborates that: “underneath the fighting and weariness, care deeply for each other are quite protective of each other.”³⁰

Conclusion

As established in the beginning, the goal of this paper is discover the relational perspective of the individual using the existentialist philosopher Martin Buber’s concept of an I-Thou relation between marriage partners i.e. between husband and wife. The aforementioned philosopher’s thoughts on the subject instituted a profound departure from the distinctive perception of the person. Perceiving couples’ problems in relational terms and helping them to work toward a more collaborative, mysterious and collaborative partnership are at the heart of the therapeutic method exhibited. I have endeavored to acknowledge the various fields of development and psychotherapy that share a social perspective of the individual.

To finally conclude this paper, according to Friedman:

Step forth out of his protected professional superiority into the elementary situation between one who asks and one who is asked. The abyss in the patient calls to the abyss, the real, unprotected self, in the doctor and not to his confidently functioning security of action. The analyst returns from this paradox as one for whom the necessity has opened of a genuine personal meeting between the one in need of help and the helper.³¹

Ultimately, the relational approach that is used by the therapists with a couple also reduce their numerous assumptions and roles that make this work hypothetically unsatisfying, and tolerates for a respectful relationship between the problematic couple and their therapist.³²

¹ Mona DeKoven Fishbane, "I, Thou, and We: A Dialogical Approach to Couples Therapy," in *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 24, no. 1 (1998): 41.

² *Ibid.*, 41.

³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 111-112.

⁴ Lyanne Jacobs, *The Therapist as 'Other: The Patient's Search for Relatedness*, Paper presented to Conference, 'Martin Buber's Contribution to the Humanities', October 1991, 1.

⁵ Fishbane, 1998, 42.

⁶ Sylwia Górzna, "Martin Buber: Father of the Philosophy of Dialogue," in *European Journal of Science and Theology* 10, no. 5 (2014): 46.

⁷ Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 75.

⁸ Fishbane, 1998, 42.

⁹ Martin Buber, *Meetings* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1973), 18.

¹⁰ "The life of dialogue is not one in which you have much to do with men, but one in which you really have to do with those with whom you have to do. It is not the solitary man who lives the life of monologue, but he who is incapable of making real in the context of being the community in which, in the context of his destiny, he moves. Being, lived in dialogue, receives even in extreme dereliction a harsh and strengthening sense of reciprocity; being, lived in monologue, will not, even in the tenderest intimacy, grope out over the outlines of the self." Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 23-24.

¹¹ Jacobs, 1991, 8.

¹² Martin Buber, *A Believing Humanism: Gleanings by Martin Buber* (New York: NY: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 173.

¹³ Fishbane, 1998, 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁶ "Honeymoon Phase – where one feels happy about a new environment and often overlooks emerging disappointment and flaps in the new environment." Annette Holba, "Revisiting Martin Buber's I-It: A Rhetorical Strategy," in *Human Communication: A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association* 11, no. 4 (2008): 494.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ Buber, 1970, 67-68.

¹⁹ Buber, 1965, 78.

²⁰ Fishbane, 1998, 46.

²¹ Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 71.

²² Fishbane, 1998, 46.

²³ Buber, 1965, 67-68.

²⁴ Buber, 1965, 69.

²⁵ Fishbane, 1998, 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Buber, 2006, 115.

²⁹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 70.

³⁰ Fishbane, 1998, 51.

³¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 190.

³² Fishbane, 1998, 55.

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