

I and Thou

■ Martin Buber

To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude.

The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks.

The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words.

The one primary word is the combination *I—Thou*,

The other primary word is the combination *I—It*, wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words *He* and *She* can replace *It*.

Hence the *I* of man is also twofold.

For the *I* of the primary word *I—Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I—It*.

* * *

Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations.

Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence.

Primary words are spoken from the being.

If *Thou* is said, the *I* of the combination *I—Thou* is said along with it.

If *It* is said, the *I* of the combination *I—It* is said along with it.

The primary word *I—Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word *I—It* can never be spoken with the whole being.

There is no *I* taken in itself, but only the *I* of the primary word *I—Thou* and the *I* of the primary word *I—It*.

When a man says *I* he refers to one or other of these. The *I* to which he refers is present when he says *I*. Further, when he says *Thou* or *It*, the *I* of one of the two primary words is present.

The existence of *I* and the speaking of *I* are one and the same thing.

When a primary word is spoken the speaker enters the word and takes his stand in it.

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some *thing* for their object.

I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something. The life of human beings does not consist of all this and the like alone.

This and the like together establish the realm of *It*.

But the realm of *Thou* has a different basis.

When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. *Every It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds.

When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no *thing*; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation.

It is said that man experiences his world. What does that mean?

Man travels over the surface of things and experiences them. He extracts knowledge about their constitution from them: he wins an experience from them. He experiences what belongs to the things.

But the world is not presented to man by experiences alone. These present him only with a world composed of *It* and *He* and *She* and *It* again.

I experience something.—If we add 'inner' to 'outer' experiences, nothing in the situation is changed. We are merely following the uneternal division that springs from the lust of the human race to whittle away the secret of death. Inner things or outer things, what are they but things and things!

I experience something.—If we add 'secret' to 'open' experiences, nothing in the situation is changed. How self-confident is that wisdom which perceives a closed compartment in things, reserved for the initiate and manipulated only with the key. O secrecy without a secret! O accumulation of information! It, always It!

The man who experiences has no part in the world. For it is 'in him' and not between him and the world that the experience arises.

The world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced, but has no concern in the matter. For it does nothing to the experience, and the experience does nothing to it.

As experience, the world belongs to the primary word *I–It*. The primary word *I–Thou* establishes the world of relation.

The spheres in which the world of relation arises are three.

First, our life with nature. There the relation sways in gloom, beneath the level of speech. Creatures live and move over against us, but cannot come to us, and when we address them as *Thou*, our words ding to the threshold of speech.

Second, our life with men. There the relation is open and in the form of *speech*. *We can* give and accept the *Thou*.

Third, our life with spiritual beings. There the relation is clouded, yet it discloses itself; it does not use speech, yet begets it. *We* perceive no *Thou*, but none the less we feel *we* are addressed and we answer—forming, thinking, acting. *We* speak the primary word with our being, though we cannot utter *Thou* with our lips.

But with what right do we draw what lies outside speech into relation with the world of the primary word?

In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out toward the fringe of the eternal *Thou*; in each we are aware of a breath from the

eternal *Thou*; in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*.

I consider a tree.

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air—and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.

I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law—of the laws in accordance with which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the component substances mingle and separate.

I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.

In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colors and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way.

Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual.

The tree will have a consciousness, then, similar to our own? Of that I no experience. But do you wish, through seeming to succeed in it with yourself, once again to disintegrate that which cannot be disintegrated? I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree, but the tree itself.

If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I–Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things.

Thus human being is not *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* and *She*, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbor, and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and as the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in *his* light.

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words nor to statue of lines, but they must be tugged and dragged till their unity has been scattered into these many pieces, so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I can take out from him the color of his hair, or of his

speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time I do it he ceases to be *Thou*.

And just as prayer is not in time but time in prayer, sacrifice not in space but space in sacrifice, and to reverse the relation is to abolish the reality, so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I do not meet with him at some time and place or other. I can set him in a particular time and place; I must continually do it: but I set only a *He* or *She*, that is an *It*, no longer *my Thou*.

So long as the heaven of *Thou* is spread out over me the winds of causality cower at my heels, and the whirlpool of fate stays its course.

I do not experience the man to whom I say *Thou*. But I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word. Only when I step out of it do I experience him once more. In the act of experience *Thou* is far away.

Even if the man to whom I say *Thou* is not aware of it in the midst of his experience, yet relation may exist. For *Thou* is more that *It* realizes. No deception penetrates here; here is the cradle of the Real Life.

This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises.

The act includes a sacrifice and a risk. This is the sacrifice: the endless possibility that is offered up on the altar of the form. For everything which just this moment in play ran through the perspective must be obliterated; nothing of that may penetrate the work. The exclusiveness of what is facing it demands that it be so. This is the risk: the primary word can only be spoken with the whole being. He who gives himself to it may withhold nothing of himself. The work does not suffer me, as do the tree and the man, to turn aside and relax in the world of *It*; but it commands. If I do not serve it aright it is broken, or it breaks me.

I can neither experience nor describe the form which meets me, but only body it forth. And yet I behold it, splendid in the radiance of what confronts me, clearer than all the dearness of the world which is experienced. I do not behold it as a thing among the 'inner' things nor as an image of my 'fancy,' but as that which exists in the present. If test is made of its objectivity the form is certainly not 'there.' Yet what is actually so much present as it is? And the relation in which I stand to it is real, for it affects me, as I affect it.

To produce is to draw forth, to invent is to find, to shape is to discover. In bodying forth I disclose. I lead the form across—into the world of *It*. The work produced is a thing among things, able to be experienced and described as a sum of qualities. But from time to time it can face the receptive beholder in its whole embodied form.

—What, then, do we experience of *Thou*?

—Just nothing. For we do not experience it.

—What, then, do we know of *Thou*?

—Just everything. For we know nothing isolated about it any more.

The *Thou* meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed *the* act of my being.

The *Thou* meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one; just as any action of the whole being, which means the suspension of all partial actions and consequently of all sensations of actions grounded only in their particular limitation, is bound to resemble suffering.

The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*.

All real living is meeting.

The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*. The memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole. No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*. Desire itself is transformed as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about.

In face of the directness of the relation everything indirect becomes irrelevant. It is also irrelevant if my *Thou* is already the *It* for other *Is* (Can object of general experience'), or can become so through the very accomplishment of this act of my being. For the real, though certainly swaying and swinging, boundary runs neither between experience and non-experience, nor between what is given and what is not given, nor yet between the world of being and the world of value; but cutting indifferently across all these provinces it lies between *Thou* and *It*, between the present and the object.

* * *

The present, and by that is meant not the point which indicates from time to time in our thought merely the conclusion of 'finished' time, the mere appearance of a termination which is fixed and held, but the real, filled present, exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting, and relation exist. The present arises only in virtue of the fact that the *Thou* becomes present.

The *I* of the primary word *I-It*, that is, the *I* faced by no *Thou*, but surrounded by a multitude of 'contents,' has no present, only the past. Put in another way, in so far as man rests satisfied with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no present content. He has nothing but objects. But objects subsist in time that has been.

The present is not fugitive and transient, but continually present and enduring. The object is not duration, but cessation, suspension, a breaking off and cutting dear and hardening, absence of relation and of present being.

True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past.

* * *

Appeal to a 'world of ideas' as a third factor above this opposition will not do away with its essential twofold nature. For I speak of nothing else but the real man, of you and of me, of our life and of our world—not of an *I*, or a state of being, in itself alone. The real boundary for the actual man cuts right across the world of ideas as well.

To be sure, many a man who is satisfied with the experience and use of the world of things has raised over or about himself a structure of ideas, in • which he finds refuge and repose from the oncome of nothingness. On the threshold he lays aside his inauspicious everyday dress, wraps himself to pure linen, and regales himself with the spectacle of primal being, or of necessary being; but his life has no part in it. To proclaim his ways may even him with well-being.

But the mankind of mere *It* that is imagined, postulated, and propagated by such a man has nothing in common with a living mankind where *Thou* may truly be spoken. The noblest fiction is a fetish, the loftiest fictitious sentiment is depraved. Ideas are no more enthroned above our heads than resident in them; they wander amongst us and accost us. The man who leaves the primary word unspoken is to be pitied; but the man who addresses instead these ideas with an abstraction or a password, as if it were their name, is contemptible.

In one of the three examples it is obvious that the direct relation includes an effect on what confronts me. In art the act of the being determines the situation in which the form becomes the work. Through the meeting that which confronts me is fulfilled, and enters the world of things, there to be endlessly active, endlessly to become *It*, but also endlessly to become *Thou* again, inspiring and blessing. It is 'embodied'; its body emerges from the flow of the spaceless, timeless present on the shore of existence.

The significance of the effect is not so obvious in the relation with the *Thou* spoken to men. The act of the being which provides directness in this case is usually understood wrongly as being one of feeling. Feelings accompany the metaphysical and metapsychical fact of love, but they do not constitute it. The accompanying feelings can be of greatly differing kinds. The feeling of Jesus for the demoniac differs from his feeling for the beloved disciple; but the love is the one love. Feelings are 'entertained'; love comes to pass. Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its 'content,' its object; but love *is between I and Thou*. The man who does not know this, with his very being know this. does not know love; even though he ascribes to it the feelings he lives through, experiences, enjoys, and expresses. Love ranges in its effect through the whole world. In the eyes of him who takes his stand in love, and gazes out of it, men are cut free from their entanglement in bustling activity. Good people and evil, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real to him; that is, set free they step forth in their singleness, and confront him as *Thou*. In a wonderful way, from time to time, exclusiveness arises—and so he can be effective, helping, healing, educating, raising up, saving. Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*. In this lies the likeness—impossible in any feeling whatsoever—of all who love, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blessedly protected man, whose life is rounded in that of a loved being, to him who is all his life nailed to the cross of the world, and who ventures to bring himself to the dreadful point—to love *all men*.

Let the significance of the effect in the third example, that of the creature and our contemplation of it, remain sunk in mystery. Believe in the simple magic of life, in service in the universe, and the meaning of that waiting, that alertness, that 'craning of the neck' in creatures will dawn upon you. Every word would falsify; but look! round about you beings live their life, and to whatever point you turn you come upon being.

* * *

Relation is mutual. My *Thou* affects me, as I affect it. We are molded by our pupils and built up by our works. The 'bad' man, lightly touched by the holy primary word, becomes one who reveals. How we are educated by children and by animals! We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe.

* * *

—You speak of love as though it were the only relation between men. But properly speaking, can you take it even only as an example, since there is such a thing as hate?

—So long as love is 'blind,' that is, so long as it does not see a *whole* being, it is not truly under the sway of the primary word of relation. Hate is by nature blind. Only a part of a being can be hated. He who sees a whole being and is compelled to reject it is no longer in the kingdom of hate, but is in that of human restriction of the power to say *Thou*. He finds himself unable to say the primary word to the other human being confronting him. This word consistently involves an affirmation of the being addressed. He is therefore compelled to reject either the other or himself. At this barrier the entering on a relation recognizes its relativity, and only simultaneously with this will the barrier be raised.

Yet the man who straightforwardly hates is nearer to relation than the man without hate and love.

* * *

But this is the exalted melancholy of our fate, that every *Thou* in our world must become an *It*. It does not matter how exclusively present the *Thou* was in the direct relation. As soon as the relation has been worked out or has been permeated with a means, the *Thou* becomes an object among objects—perhaps the chief, but still one of them, fixed in its size and its limits. In the work of art realization in one sense means loss of reality in another. Genuine contemplation is over in a short time; now the life in nature, that first unlocked itself to me in the mystery of mutual action, can again be described, taken to pieces, and classified—the meeting-point of manifold systems of laws. And love itself cannot persist in direct relation. It endures, but in interchange of actual and potential being. The human being who was even now single and unconditioned, not something lying to hand, only present, not able to be experienced, only able to be fulfilled, has now become again a *He* or a *She*, a sum of qualities, a given quantity with a certain shape. Now I may take out from him again the color of his hair or of his speech or of his goodness. But so long as I can do this he is no more my *Thou* and cannot yet be my *Thou* again.

Every *Thou* in the world is by its nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things. In objective speech it would be said that every thing in the world, either before or after becoming a thing, is able to appear to an I as its *Thou*. But objective speech snatches only at a fringe of real life.

The It is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly—except that situations do not always follow one another in clear succession, but often there is a happening profoundly twofold, confusedly entangled.

* * *

In the beginning is relation.

Consider the speech of 'primitive' peoples, that is, of those that have a meager stock of objects, and whose life is built up within a narrow circle of acts highly charged with presentness. The nuclei of this speech, words in the form of sentences and original pre-grammatical structures (which later, splitting asunder, give rise to the many various kinds of words), mostly indicate the wholeness of a relation. We say 'far away'; the Zulu has for that a word which means, in our sentence form, 'There where someone cries out: "O mother, I am lost." The Fuegian soars above our analytic wisdom with a seven-syllabled word whose precise meaning is, 'They stare at one another, each waiting for the other to volunteer to do what both wish, but are not able to do.' In this total situation the persons, as expressed both in nouns and pronouns, are embedded, still only in relief and without finished independence. The chief concern is not with these products of analysis and reflection but with the true original unity, the lived relation.

We greet the man we meet, wishing him well or assuring him of our devotion or commending him to God. But how indirect these worn-out formulas are! What do we discern even dimly in 'Hail!' of the original conferring of power? Compare these with the ever fresh Kaffir greeting, with its direct bodily relation, 'I see you!' or with its ridiculous and sublime American variant, 'Smell me!'

It may be supposed that characterizations and ideas, but also representations of persons and things, have been taken out from representations of incidents and situations that are specifically relational. The elementary impressions and emotional stirrings that waken the spirit of the 'natural man' proceed from incidents—experience of a being confronting him—and from situations—life with a being confronting him—that are relational in character. He is not disquieted by the moon that he sees every night, till it comes bodily to him, sleeping or waking, draws near and charms him with silent movements, or fascinates him with the evil or sweetness of its touch. He does not retain from this the visual representation, say, of the wandering orb of light, or of a demonic being that somehow belongs to it, but at first he has in him only the dynamic, stirring image of the moon's effect, streaming through his body. Out of this the image of the moon personally achieving the effect only gradually emerges. Only now that is to say, does the memory of the unknown that is nightly taken into his being begin to kindle and take shape as the doer and bringer of the effect. Thus it makes possible the transformation of the unknown into an object, *He* or a *She* out of a *Thou* that could not originally be experienced, but simply suffered.

This initial and long-continuing relational character of every essential phenomenon makes it also easier to understand a certain spiritual element of primitive life that is much discussed and observed, but not yet properly grasped, in present-day study. I mean that mysterious power the idea of which has been traced, through many variations, in the form of the beliefs or in the knowledge (both being still one) of many nature peoples. Known as Mana or Orenda, it opens a way to the Brahman in its primal meaning, and further to the Dynamis and Chants of the Magical Papyri and of the Apostolic Epistles. It has been characterized as a super-sensuous or supernatural power—descriptions which depend on our categories and do not correspond to those of the primitive man. The limits of this world are set by his bodily experience, to which visits from the dead, say, quite 'naturally' belong. To accept what has no sensuous qualities at all as actually existing must strike him as absurd. The appearances to which he ascribes the 'mystical power' are all elementary incidents that are relational in character, that is, all incidents that disturb him by stirring his body and leaving behind in him a stirring image. The moon and the dead, visiting him by night with pain or pleasure, have that power. But so, too, have the burning sun and the howling beast and the chief whose glance constrains him and the sorcerer whose singing loads him with power for the hunt.

Mana is simply the effective force, that which has made the person of the moon, up there in the heavens, into a blood-stirring *Thou*. The memory of it left its track when the image of the object was separated out from the total stirring image; although it itself, indeed, never appears other than in the doer and bringer of an effect. It is that with which man himself, if he possesses it—perhaps in a wonderful stone—can be effective in this way. The 'world-image' of primitive man is magical not because human magical power is set in the midst of it but because this human power is only a particular variety of the general magic power from which all effective action is derived. Causality in his world-image is no unbroken sequence but an ever new flashing forth of power and moving out towards its production; it is a volcanic movement without continuity. Mana is a primitive abstraction, probably more primitive than, say, number, but not any more supernatural than it. The memory as it is being trained ranges the grand relational events, the elemental emotional shocks. The most important for the instinct of preservation and the most noteworthy for the instinct to understand—that is, 'that which effects,' stands out most forcibly of all, and becomes independent. The less important, the non-communal, the changing *Thou* of experiences, retires and remains isolated in the memory, and is gradually transformed into an object and very slowly drawn into groups and classes. As third in the arrangement, terrible when thus separated, at times more ghostly than the dead and the moon, but always more and more irrefutably clear, there arises up the other, 'unchanging' partner, 'I.'

Consciousness of the 'I' is not connected with the primitive sway of the instinct for self-preservation any more than with that of the other instincts. It is not the 'I' that wishes to propagate itself, but the body, that knows as yet of no 'I.' It is not the 'I' but the body that wishes to make things, a tool or a toy, that wishes to be a 'creator.' Further, *a cognosco ergo sum*, in however naive a form and however childlike a conception of an experiencing subject, cannot be found in the primitive function of knowledge. The 'I' emerges as a single element out of the primal experiences, out of the vital primal words *I-affecting-Thou* and *Thou-affecting-I*, only after they have been split asunder and the participle has been given eminence as an object.

* * *

The fundamental difference between the two primary words comes to light in the spiritual history of primitive man. Already in the original relational event he speaks the primary word *I-Thou* in a natural way that precedes what may be termed visualization of forms—that is, before he has recognized himself as *I*. The primary word *I-It*, on the other hand, is made possible at all only by means of this recognition—by means, that is, of the separation of the *I*. The first primary word can be resolved, certainly, into *I* and *Thou*, but it did not arise from their being set together; by its nature it precedes *I*. The second word arose from the setting together of *I* and *It* by nature it comes after *I*.

In the primitive relational event, in virtue of its exclusiveness, the *I* is included. While, that is to say, there are in it, in accordance with its being, only the two partners, the man and that which confronts him, in their full actuality, and while the world becomes in it a dual system, the man, without yet perceiving the *I* itself, is already aware of that cosmic path of the *I*.

On the other hand the *I* is not yet included in the natural, actual event which is to pass over into the primary word *I-It*, into the experience with its relation to *I*. This actual event is the separation of the human body, as the bearer of its perceptions, from the world round about it. The body comes to know and to differentiate itself in its peculiarities; the differentiation,

however, remains one of pure juxtaposition, and hence cannot have the character of the state in which *I* is implied.

But when the *I* of the relation has stepped forth and taken on separate existence, it also moves, strangely tenuous and reduced to merely functional activity, into the natural, actual event of the separation of the body from the world round about it, and awakens there the state in which *I* is properly active. Only now can the conscious act of the *I* take place. This act is the first form of the primary word *I-It*, of the experience in its relation to *I*. The *I* which stepped forth declares itself to be the bearer, and the world round about to be the object, of the perceptions. Of course, this happens in a 'primitive' form and not in the form of a 'theory of knowledge.' But whenever the sentence 'I see the tree' is so uttered that it so longer tells of a relation between the man —*I*—and the *tree—Thou—*, but establishes the perception of the tree as object by the human consciousness, the barrier between subject and object has been set up. The primary word *I-It*, the word of separation, has been spoken.

* * *

—The melancholy of our fate; then, arose in earliest history?

—indeed, yes—in so far as the conscious life of man arose in earliest history. But conscious life means the return of cosmic being as human becoming. Spirit appears in time as a product—even as a by-product of nature, yet it is in spirit that nature is timelessly enveloped.

The opposition of the two primary words has many names at different arcs and in different worlds; but in its nameless truth it is inherent in creation.

* * *

But you believe then in the existence of a paradise in the earliest days of mankind?

I AND THOU

—Even if it was a hell—and certainly that time to which I can go back in historical thought was full of fury and anguish and torment and cruelty—at any rate it was not unreal.

The relational experiences of man in earliest days were certainly not tame and pleasant. But rather force exercised on being that is really lived than shadowy solicitude for faceless numbers! From the former a way leads to God, from the latter only one to nothingness.

* * *

Only brief glimpses into the context in time of the two primary words are given us by primitive man, whose life, even if it could be made fully accessible, can represent only as it were allegorically that of the real early man. We receive fuller knowledge from the child. Here it becomes crystal dear to us that the spiritual reality of the primary words arises out of a natural reality, that of the primary word *I-Thou* out of natural combination, and that of the primary word *I-It* out of natural separation.

The ante-natal life of the child is one of purely natural combination. bodily interaction and flowing from the one to the other. Its life's horizon. as it comes into being, seems in a unique way to be, and yet again not to be, traced in that of the life that bears it. For it does not rest only in the womb of the human mother. Yet this connexion has such a cosmic quality that the mythical saying of the Jews, 'In the mother's body man knows the universe, in birth he forgets it,' reads like the imperfect decipherment of an inscription from earliest times. And it remains indeed in man as a secret image of desire. Not as though his yearning meant a longing to return, as those suppose who see in the spirit—confusing it with their intellect— a parasite of nature, when it is rather (though exposed to diverse illnesses) nature's best flower. But the yearning is for the cosmic connexion, with its true *Thou*, of this life that has burst forth into

spirit.

Every child that is coming into being rests, like all life that is coming in being, in the womb of the great mother, the undivided primal world that precedes form. From her, too, we are separated, and enter into personal life, slipping free only in the dark hours to be close to her again; night by night this happens to the healthy man. But this separation does not occur suddenly and catastrophically like the separation from the

26

I AND THOU

mother; time is granted to the child to exchange a spiritual connexion, that is, *relation*, for the natural connexion with the world that he gradually loses. He has stepped out of the glowing darkness of chaos into the cool light of creation. But he does not possess it yet; he must first draw it truly and he must make it into a reality for himself, he must find for himself his own world by seeing and hearing and touching and shaping it. Creation anneals, in meeting, its essential nature as form. It does not spill itself into expectant senses, but rises up to meet the grasping senses. That which will eventually play as an accustomed object around the man who is fully developed, must be wooed and won by the developing man in strenuous effort. For no *thing* is a ready-made part of an experience: only in the process of acting and being acted upon, of what is over against men, is anything made accessible. Like primitive man the child lives between sleep and waking (a great part of his waking hours is also sleep) in the flash and counter-flash of meeting.

The primal nature of the effort to establish relation is already to be seen in the earliest and most confined stage. Before anything isolated can be perceived, timid glances move out into indistinct space, towards something indefinite; and in times when there seems to be no desire for fulfillment, hands sketch delicately and dimly in the empty air, at apparently aimlessly seeking and reaching out to meet something indistinct. You may, if you wish, call this an animal action, but it is not so comprehended. For these very glances will after protracted time settle on the red carpet-pattern and not be moved till the soul of the object has opened itself to them; and this very movement of the hands from a woolly Teddy-bear its precise form, apparent to the senses, is lovingly and unforgettably aware of a complete body. Neither the act is experience of an object, but is the correspondence of the hand to be sure only 'fanciful'—with what is alive and effective over against it. (This 'fancy' does not in the least involve, however, a 'giving of the universe': it is the instinct to make everything into *Thou*, to relate to the universe, the instinct which completes out of its own living effective action when a mere copy or symbol of it is over against him.) Little, disjointed, meaningless sounds persistently into the void. But one day, unforeseen, they will enter into conversation—does it matter that it is perhaps with the kettle? It is conversation. Many a movement termed reflex is simply in the building up of the person in the world. It is simply the fact that the child first perceives an object, then, as it were, puts

27

I AND THOU

himself in relation with it. But the effort to establish relation comes first—the hand of the child arched out so that what is over against him may nestle under it; second is the actual relation, a saying of *Thou* without words, in the state preceding the word-form; the thing, like

the *I*, is produced late, arising after the original experiences have been split asunder and the connected partners separated. In the beginning is relation—as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul; it is the *a priori* of relation, the *inborn Thou*.

The *inborn Thou* is realised in the lived relations with that which meets it. The fact that this *Thou* can be known as what is over against the child, can be taken up in exclusiveness, and finally can be addressed with the primary word, is based on the *a priori* of relation.

In the instinct to make contact (first by touch and then by visual 'touch' of another being) the *inborn Thou* is very soon brought to its full powers, so that the instinct ever more dearly turns out to mean mutual relation. 'tenderness.' But the instinct to 'creation,' which is established later (that is, the instinct to set up things in a synthetic, or, if that is impossible, in an analytic way—through puffing to pieces or tearing up), is also determined by this *inborn Thou*, so that a 'personification' of what is made, and a 'conversation,' take place. The development of the soul in the child is inextricably bound up with that of the longing for the *Thou*, with the satisfaction and the disappointment of this longing, with the game of his experiments and the tragic seriousness of his perplexity. Genuine understanding of this phenomenon, which is injured by every attempt to lead it back into more confined spheres, can only be promoted if, during its observation and discussion, its cosmic and metacosmic origin is kept in mind. For it reaches out from the undivided primal world which precedes form, out of which the bodily individual who is born into the world, but not yet the personal, actualised being, has fully emerged. For only gradually, by entering into relations, is the latter to develop out of his primal world.

Through the *Thou* a man becomes *I*. That which confronts him comes and disappears, relational events condense, then are scattered, and in the change consciousness of the unchanging partner, of the *I*, grows dear, and each time stronger. To be sure, it is still seen caught in the web of the

28

I AND THOU

~rl, on with the *Thou*, as the increasingly distinguishable feature of that march reaches out to and yet is not the *Thou*. But it continually breaks through with more power, till a time comes when it bursts its bonds, and *I* confronts itself for a moment, separated as though it were a *Thou*; as ~ctty to take possession of itself and from then on to enter into relations • consciousness of itself.

only now can the other primary word be assembled. Hitherto the *Thou* relation was continually fading away, but it did not thereby become & for some *I*, an object of perception and experience without real motion—as it will henceforth become. It became rather an *It*, so to speak for itself, an *It* disregarded at first, yet waiting to rise up in a new personal event. Further, the body maturing into a person was hitherto wished, as bearer of its perceptions and executor of its impulses, to be the world round about. But this distinction was simply a juxtaposition brought about by its seeing its way in the situation, and not an effective severance of *I* and its object. But now the separated *I* emerges, formed. Shrunken from substance and fullness to a functional point, to a subject which experiences and uses. *I* approaches and takes possession of the *Thou* existing 'in and for itself,' and forms in conjunction with it another primary word. The man who has become conscious of *I*, that is, of himself, who says *I-It*, stands before things, but not over against them in the manner of a subject of mutual action. Now with the magnifying glass of peering

doom-ation he bends over particulars and objectifies them, or with the
feeling of remoteness of remote inspection he objectifies them and arranges them as
a series. he isolates them in observation without any feeling of their
essentialness, or he knits them into a scheme of observation without any
feeling of universality. The feeling of exclusiveness he would be able to
find only in relation, the feeling of universality only through it. Now for
the first time he experiences things as sums of qualities. From each
common experience qualities belonging to the remembered *Thou* had
previously remained sunk in his memory; but now for the first time things
appear for him actually composed of their qualities. From the simple memory
of the relation the man, dreaming or fashioning or thinking, according
to his nature, enlarges the nucleus, the substance that showed itself in
relation to *Thou* with power and gathered up in itself all qualities. But now also
for the first time he sets things in space and time, in causal connexion,
and with its own place and appointed course, its measurability and
indivisible nature.

The *Thou* appears, to be sure, in space, but in the exclusive situation of

29

I AND THOU

what is over against it, where everything else can be only the background out of which it
emerges, not its boundary and measured limit. It appears, too, in time, but in that of the event
which is fulfilled in itself: it is **not** lived as part of a continuous and organised sequence, but is
lived in a 'duration' whose purely intensive dimension is definable only in terms of itself. It
appears, lastly, simultaneously as acting and as being acted upon—not, however, linked to a
chain of causes, but, in its relation of mutual action with the *I*, as the beginning and the end of
the event. This is part of the basic truth of the human world, that only *It* can be arranged in
order. Only when things, from being our *Thou*, become our *It*, can they be co-ordinated. The
Thou knows no system of co-ordination.

But now that we have come so far, it is necessary to set down the other part of the basic truth,
without which this would be a useless fragment—namely, a world that is ordered is not the
world-order. There are moments of silent depth in which you look on the world-order fully
present. Then in its very flight the note will be heard; but the ordered world is its
indistinguishable score. These moments are immortal, and most transitory of all; no content
may be secured from them, but their power invades creation and the knowledge of man,
beams of their power stream into the ordered world and dissolve it again and again. This
happens in the history both of the individual and of the race.

To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude.

He perceives what exists round about him—simply things, and beings as things; and what
happens round about him—simply events, and actions as events; things consisting of
qualities, events of moments; things entered in the graph of place, events in that of time;
things and events bounded by other things and events, measured by them, comparable with
them: he perceives an ordered and detached world. It is to some extent a reliable world,
having density and duration. Its organisation can be surveyed and brought out again and
again; gone over with closed eyes, and verified with open eyes. It is always there, next to your
skin, if you look on it that way, cowering in your soul, if you prefer it so. It is your object,
remains it as long as you wish, and remains a total stranger, within you and without. You
perceive it, take it to yourself as the 'truth,' and it lets itself be taken; but it does not give itself
to you. Only concerning it

round Mom, you make yourself 'understood' with others; it is ready, though
 peals, maid to everyone in a different way, to be an object common to you
 is not in You cannot meet others in it. You cannot hold on to life without it,
 d in a t-1 ▶ w6ability sustains you; but should you die in it, your grave would be in
 ar un the other hand, man meets what exists and becomes as what is re! against him, always
 simply *a single* being and each thing simply as mg What exists is opened to him in
 happenings, and what happens him him as what is. Nothing is present for him except this one
 being, It a mplcates the whole world. Measure and comparison have disWeaaed: it lies with
 yourself how much of the immeasurable becomes iitr for you. These meetings are not
 organised to make the world, but r! a a sign of the world-order. They are not linked up with
 one another, ·ea& assures you of your solidarity with the world. The world which ~r~rrs to
 you in this way is unreliable, for it takes on a continually new Venance; you cannot hold it to
 its word. It has no density, for everyng u it penetrates everything else; no duration, for it
 comes even when ·mot summoned, and vanishes even when it is tightly held. It cannot r wed,
 and if you wish to make it capable of survey you lose it. It ves, and comes to bring *you* out; if it
 does not reach you, meet you, m e vanishes; but it comes back in another form. It is not
 outside you, it e+ a the depth of you; if you say 'Soul of my soul' you have not said too i* ..
 But guard against wishing to remove it into your soul—for then • annihilate it. It is your
 present; only while you have it do you have it present. You can make it into an object for
 yourself, to experience and ar you must continually do this—and as you do it you have no
 more ems_ Between you and it there is mutual giving: you say *Thou* to it and rr ,ourself to it,
 it says *Thou* to you and gives itself to you. You cannot ,dt.e yourself understood with others
 concerning it, you are alone with 3w it teaches you to meet others, and to hold your ground
 when ~n .wet them. Through the graciousness of its comings and the solemn •mess of its goings
 it leads you away to the *Thou* in which the parallel rem of relations meet. It does not help to
 sustain you in life, it only helps
 to glimpse eternity.

The world of *It* is set in the context of space and time.

The world of *Thou* is not set in the context of either of these.

The particular *Thou*, after the relational event has run its course, *is bound* to become an *It*.

The particular *It*, by entering the relational event, *may* become a *Thou*.

These are the two basic privileges of the world of *It*. They move man to look on the world of
It as the world in which he has to live, and in which it is comfortable to live, as the world,
 indeed, which offers him all manner of incitements and excitements, activity and knowledge.

In this chronicle of solid benefits the moments of the *Thou* appear as strange lyric and
 dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes,
 loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them,
 shattering security—in short, uncanny moments we can well dispense with. For since we are
 bound to leave them and go back into the 'world,' why not remain in it? Why not call to order
 what is over against us, and send it packing into the realm of objects? Why, if we find
 ourselves on occasion with no choice but to say *Thou* to father, wife, or comrade, not say
Thou and mean *It*? To utter the sound *Thou* with the vocal organs is by no means the same as
 saying the uncanny primary word; more, it is harmless to whisper with the soul an amorous
Thou, so long as nothing else in a serious way is meant but *experience* and *make use of*.

It is not possible to live in the bare present. Life would be quite consumed if precautions were

not taken to subdue the present speedily and thoroughly. But it is possible to live in the bare past, indeed only in it may a life be organised. We only need to fill each moment with experiencing and using, and it ceases to burn.

And in all the seriousness of truth, hear this: without *It* man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man.