Phenomenology Religion in the “I and Thou” of Martine Buber

1. Clarification of Terms

1. ‘I-It’

Buber considers the whole life as an encounter, an encounter with each other. He brings out two kinds of relationships in this encounter with one another. They are ‘I- it’ and ‘I-thou’.

‘I-it’ relationship is characterised by a monologue. In monologue the other person is not considered as a person but only the personal achievements are given importance. It is a means for some purpose and the ethics and values have no place, only personal motives are important in this relationship. However when a child is born it does not distinguishes anything, for a child everything is same, and identifies everything as same thing. But once the child comes to the awareness, it starts separating itself from everything. It separates the reality as subject and object. Buber says that every ‘thou’ in this world is doomed to become ‘it’. Yet, before becoming ‘it’ they were ‘thou’, but due to the limitedness of our language which tends to catch the only thinghood of the ‘thou’, every ‘thou’ is condemned to become an ‘it’. However in the beginning even without our knowledge there existed only ‘I-thou’ relationship. The moment when human being recognized itself from others as separate was the beginning of ‘I- it’ relationship.

2. ‘I-thou’

The ‘I-thou’ relationship is characterised by dialogue. In dialogue the other is considered as a person, there is reciprocal respect for the person and his views; the ethics and values are respected too. However, Buber identifies the ‘I-consciousness’ as the static point of reference in every subject. Once can attain this only through the ‘I-thou’ relationship. The subject becomes a ‘thou’, when an individual is able to see himself or herself as a ‘thou’. He or she will be able to enter into the relationship in full consciousness at this stage. One becomes an ‘I’ through a ‘thou’, that is when he confronts a thing as ‘thou’ then he or she

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2 Martin Buber, I and Thou, 77-79.
3 Martin Buber, I and Thou, 69.
4 Martin Buber, I and Thou, 75.
becomes aware of his or her own self; this is the ‘I-consciousness’. Here the dialogue takes place.\(^5\)

### 3. ‘I’ in ‘i-it’ and i-thou

Buber makes it clear that, though the word ‘I’ finds its meaning in relation to the other the ‘I’ in ‘I-it’ and ‘I-thou’ have a different meaning. The ‘I’ of the ‘I-it’ word means ego, for it becomes conscious of itself as subject apart from the other which is considered as a mere object. This ego sets itself apart from other egos. This one is the spiritual form of differentiation. The mere purpose for setting oneself apart from others is to experience and use the other. But the ‘I’ of the ‘I-thou’ world is totally different, the ‘I’ is a person and it is conscious of its own self as subjectivity. Here the ‘I’ is person because it enters into relation to other persons and it is the natural association. The mere purpose of this relation is not manipulation. Buber believes that when an individual touches a ‘thou’ through relation he or she is touched by a breath of eternal life.\(^6\)

However he affirms that this separation does not mean that there are two kinds of human beings. He says, “There are not two kinds of human beings, but there are two poles of humanity.” Buber is also makes clear that there are no pure egos and pure persons. All the human beings live in a twofold way, that is to say that we have both the qualities of person in ‘I-thou’ relationship as well as the qualities of ego in the ‘I-it’ relationship. It is between these two the history takes place.\(^7\)

### 4. Three Spheres of Relationships

The relationship in the world can be of three spheres, namely: life with the nature, life with fellow beings and the life with Spiritual beings.\(^8\) The invitation of Buber is to have an ‘I-thou’ relationship, in all these sphere of relationships. In this world of relation every ‘I’ encounters the ‘thou’, and in this ‘thou’ the ‘I’ has relation with the ‘Eternal Thou’.\(^9\) In these three spheres the first and the third does not have much connection to language, where as in the second sphere the language has a very significant place. In this sphere the

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\(^6\) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 111-114.

\(^7\) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 114-115.

\(^8\) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 56.

\(^9\) The word Eternal Thou referring to God.
language is perfected as sequence and becomes speech and reply. It is only in this sphere there is encounter and reply, the word is formed into a language, the answer and the question are present in the same tongue and here alone the beholding and being beheld, recognizing and being recognized, loving and being loved are existing. He also goes further in saying that the relationship with men is the perfect metaphor for relation with God.\textsuperscript{10} But in God all answer is found God reveals himself to us as language.\textsuperscript{11} He also makes clear that is human beings are part of nature yet the sphere of relationship is different.

b. Some Concepts

1. Nature of ‘I-it’

The ‘I-It’ relationship is not a relationship rather it is only an experience.\textsuperscript{12} When I contemplate on a tree I get to know about the tree but it remains as an object of experience.\textsuperscript{13} Buber says that there is an inner longing to relate with is present at all the stages of life.\textsuperscript{14} In ‘I-It’ relationship the other person is characterised by the particulars like colour, physical structure and things alike hence the other person no more remains to be ‘thou’. The other individual is looked at only as an object.\textsuperscript{15} Ethics finds no values in this relationship, the individual motives are important. Individual goals and benefits are given prime important in this kind of relationship. In this, there is no possibility of genuine dialogue.

2. Nature of ‘I-thou’

Buber says that when we confront a person as our own ‘thou’, he or she no longer remains as ‘it’, that individual ceases to be ‘it’ and becomes a person same like us. Here even though that individual is having particulars (colour, size and etc.), we will begin to see everything in the light of that individual. So the person is seen as a whole being not as

\textsuperscript{10} Here he is meaning to say that the relation with God is as same as we relating with the other as Thou, in relation with God also we must never tend to look at Him as a mere thing which gives us something when we are in need of some thing.
\textsuperscript{11} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 149-151.
\textsuperscript{12} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 53-56.
\textsuperscript{13} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 57-58.
\textsuperscript{14} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 77.
\textsuperscript{15} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 59-60.
means to achieve some hidden motives. Buber also makes a very clear point that this relationship leads us to God. When we consider the other as ‘thou’ we ourselves become whole person. In this relationship we are able to enter into a supreme encounter, here we are not rejecting ourselves rather we involve ourselves. We give up the false drive for self-affirmation and satisfaction and begin to see other as ‘thou’.

3. Relationship and Community

Buber affirms that in every individual there is a basic division of two forces (two districts), the ‘I district’ and the ‘it district’ which in other words expressed as feeling and institution. Institutions are external, like the place of work, the persons whom we meet but the feelings are internal. Feeling is an area through which an individual comes out of the impact caused by the institutions, which is the outer world. Buber considers the feeling for each other as not the prime reason for community life rather for him; it is the single reciprocal relationship to a single living center and the living reciprocal relationship to one another become the prime reasons for community life.

Buber goes on to say that there are two forms of association; one is of personal life and the other is of the public life. However, feelings are an essential part of this life. On further reflection he says, human life is not only made of these two forms of associations rather it requires a third element that is the central presence of ‘thou’. Buber wants to emphasises that life is not only made up of an individual and his or her relation to other more over it is about considering the other as well as him or herself as ‘thou’ in this relation. Hence, the ultimate meaning of life rests upon considering the other and ourselves as ‘thou’; this is the single living center of reciprocal relationship.

4. Freedom and ‘I-thou’

Buber stress the significance of freedom in every ‘I-thou’ relationship. In ‘I-thou’ relationship the ‘I’ is not limited by the ‘thou’ and vice versa. Both ‘I’ and ‘thou’ enjoy

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17 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 75.
Buber explains this idea of freedom further by explaining the causality that is present in the ‘It-world’. In the ‘It-world’ every event is considered to be of necessity, that is caused and a cause. This unlimited sway of causality in the ‘It-world’ is of fundamental importance for the scientific offering of nature. Yet the man is not confined to this’ It-world’ but free to step out of it again and again into the world of relation. It is only here ‘I and thou’ confront each other freely in a reciprocity that is not tainted by any causality. In this relationship we find guaranteed for only the people who know relation and who know of the presence of the ‘thou’ have the capacity to make a free decision. When we are able to make decisions we are free. A human being in this relationship, to whom the freedom is guaranteed, does not feel that he or she is oppressed by the causality. This individual being is very much aware that the very nature of his or her mortal life is a circle between ‘thou’ and ‘it’.  

5. The ‘I-thou’ in three spheres of Relationship 

5.1 Nature 

The first sphere of relationship is a relationship with the things that are present in the nature. The invitation of Buber is to have an ‘I-thou’ relationship with nature. Buber says that when we contemplate on the nature we get to know the things of the nature but here the nature remains as a mere object. For example when we look at a tree we get to know things of the tree. But when I enter into the ‘I-thou’ relationship ‘I’ begin to see the nature as it is. The tree remains a tree for me nothing else comes to my mind. In this ‘I-thou’ relationship we confront the nature and the nature also confronts us. The moment we begin to look at a thing in the nature as ‘thou’ or soul we enter inside a world dialogue with the whole environment around.

5.2 Fellow Beings 

The second sphere of relationship is a relationship with our fellow beings. Buber proposes the ‘I-thou’ as a model relationship among our fellow human beings. However the ‘I-thou’ cannot remain isolated the ‘I-thou’ is an all-embracing relationship. Buber

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21 Martin Buber, I and Thou, 130.
22 Martin Buber, I and Thou, 100-101.
23 Martin Buber, I and Thou, 57-58.
says that the ‘I-thou’ relationship is inclusive of all relationships. We cannot remain isolated in our relationships. We cannot say that since I am in relationship with one particular individual or a group I need not to relate with other individuals or groups. The relationship that Buber is speaking about is all-embracing relationship.\textsuperscript{24} In speaking about the relationship that exists between a man and woman, Buber says that when a man loves a woman and looks at her as ‘thou’ her eyes make him to have the taste of the ‘Eternal Thou’. But when he begins to see her with lust as an object that satisfies his sexual hunger then that is not a genuine relationship.\textsuperscript{25}

5.3 God

Buber says that there is an inner longing in every human being to relate and dialogue with God. Our need for God means more than anything to us. But he says that God also needs us. If God does not need man then why do we exist in this mere world? We human beings need God for our own existence. In the similar manner God needs us to add meaning to our own life. If we do not exist then there cannot be any meaning. So in relationship to God also there is a mutual dialogue or relationship that is happening.\textsuperscript{26}

He explains further saying that the relationship that a human being has towards the world and God are the same, we cannot say that we love God in truth and use the world. We have to love God in the world and therefore look at the nature also as ‘thou’ in view of the ‘Eternal Thou’.\textsuperscript{27} He also says that when the self becomes transparent and united with the absolute that is the ‘Eternal Thou’ we attain self-responsibility.

Three spheres of relationship, about which Buber speaks of, are all interlinked with one another. We cannot love one or have relationship with one and avoid the other. Buber demands from us a dialogical relationship with the nature, the self, the other and the ‘Eternal Thou’.

c. Phenomenology of Religion in ‘I and Thou’ of Martine Buber

We are introduced to the ideas of Buber in the paper already, and then what is the phenomenology of religion present in the ‘I and thou’

\textsuperscript{24} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 129.
\textsuperscript{25} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 154.
\textsuperscript{26} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 130-131.
\textsuperscript{27} Martin Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 156.
Buber stresses three levels of relationship in this world. They are relationship with nature, relationship with fellow human beings and relationship with God. Then he says that every ‘I’ is called to recognize the ‘thou’ in each level of relationship and in this ‘thou’ ‘I’ has the relation with the ‘Eternal Thou’. Here we can see a gradual development of the idea of religion (more clearly the idea of God) from the realm of experience to the real of faith. In encountering the nature and the fellow men as ‘thou’ the ‘I’ called to encounter the ‘Eternal Thou’. And this happens all the time we are in an ‘I-thou’ relationship with the nature, and the fellow beings.

Bibliography