

## Martin Buber's inborn Thou: A phenomenological account

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates Martin Buber's concept of the inborn Thou in relation to the concept of trust. Drawing mostly on phenomenological and psychological resources, I want to argue that the inborn Thou is a form of proto-trust, or more exactly, the first manifestation of what could be called trust towards the other, and towards the world. Trust will also be considered in its relation to familiarity, and I am going to suggest, using different conceptions from several authors, that the connection between familiarity and trust could be better highlighted using once again Buber's main concept from the book *I and Thou*. I will investigate the phenomenon of cooperation and companionship in infancy, drawing mostly on the phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity and the one of interaction. My starting point will be Martin Buber's few pages on the development of the dialogical life on the infant. The phenomenological side of our inquiry will consist mainly in the tradition of the dialogical side of this broad discipline, and here I could recall the contributions of Beata Stawarska and Stephan Strasser. Concerning the psychological side of our thesis, Daniel Stern, Colwyn Trevarthen and Stein Bråten are going to be fundamental sources for our argument that there is an innate sociality of the human being, which manifests itself in the desire for establishing genuine relations between I and Thou. Moreover, trust will again be addressed when we are going to analyze the early interactions between the infant and her primary caregiver. Familiarity and trust will prove themselves in the end to be directly proportional to each other. My main claim would be that one does not speak about an acquisition of trust and familiarity, but rather about the development of both of them from the very beginning of the infant's life.

**Keywords:** Martin Buber, inborn Thou, trust, familiarity, contact

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## **Introduction**

Even though Martin Buber spoke many times of his main concepts pertaining to the philosophy of dialogue, he never quite linked them together into a unitary whole. This is unfortunately the situation with the notions of the inborn Thou and the concept of trust. This paper attempts to connect these two concepts of Buber's dialogic theory, in order to show that there is a strong interrelation between them. Anticipating, we can already state that the inborn Thou is the presupposition of trust, whereas trust is already present in the context of the inborn Thou, because of the issue of familiarity, which will be present during our argumentation. This statement might seem puzzling at first, but as our analysis will hopefully show, the "missing link" between what Buber has named the inborn Thou and the problem of trust, is exactly the phenomenon of contact. Nevertheless, I will argue that in the case of the philosophy of Martin Buber we do not speak of a sort of acquisition of trust, but rather of a development of it.

Our inquiry will be a phenomenological one, yet it will also draw on resources coming from the fields of child psychology, development, and psychoanalysis. The first part of this study will tackle Martin Buber's few and scattered remarks about the development of the dialogic life in the case of the very young infant. Secondly, we will draw on certain phenomenological authors who themselves have drawn on the tradition of dialogical philosophy, in order to show that attempts were made in order to solve the problem of the relation between the inborn Thou and trust. Third, we will evoke certain concepts and notions pertaining to child development, so that we can show that much of what today is discussed under the broad title of "companionship" was already present in the philosophy of Martin Buber.

### **"The basic package"**

"The basic package" was the notion employed by Italian phenomenological psychiatrist Giovanni Stanghellini, in order to show how the notions of current child psychology and development were already present in the theory of Martin Buber. The basic package might be synonymous with Buber's inborn Thou, which will be given a definition in the following lines. Nevertheless, we are not going to start from the beginning of Buber's *I and Thou*, but rather we are going to jump ahead into the chapter dedicated to the problem of the dialogical life of the infant.

After the analysis of the life of the primitive man<sup>1</sup>, Buber turns towards the life of the infant, in order to gather more arguments for what he has designed under the title of “the primacy of relation”. Therefore, this short chapter could be the argument from child development.

The primary words of I and Thou arise from a natural combination, whereas the word-pair I-It arises through separation. We will soon notice why this happens so. The life of the infant inside the mother's womb is one of bodily reciprocity, thus we can argue already for a form of reciprocity even in the case of the intrauterine life of the infant. (Buber 2013, 17) The life horizon of the child is inscribed in the mother's body, and this is the origin of what Buber called the desire<sup>2</sup>. This desire is not the nostalgia of coming back to this sort of bodily reciprocity, rather it is the desire to meet the first Thou as such. Buber then speaks of the *Urwelt*, the primal world that precedes form. From there, by virtue of the birth, there takes place a separation, which means the entering into a personal life of the human being. As phenomenologist and psychoanalysts agree, this birth is not something that happens in an instant, rather it is a process that takes time. This means that the biological birth does not correspond to the spiritual one, in Buber's words. (Fazakas & Gozé 2020, 183)

The primal nature of the effort to establish relation is already to be seen in the earliest and most confined stage. When there exists no need for nourishment, it seems that the hand of the infant tries to grasp something. If we wish to call this action a reflex, then we would not explain that much, because the infant is actually seeking human contact from the very beginning. (Buber 2013, 19)

Buber even anticipates British psychoanalysis Donald Winnicott's theory of child development when he states that the infant will soon meet a teddy bear, which he is going to love and never forget. This phenomenon is called by Buber the “instinct for relation”. I consider that we can better call this phenomenon, in a philosophical manner, the infinite aspiration of imagination, which turns everything that it encounters into a Thou, a genuine partner of dialogue, and why not, of play even. (Buber 2013, 19)

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<sup>1</sup> As Martin Buber attempted to prove before the chapter dedicated to the life of the infant, the inborn Thou also manifests in the life of the primitive man.

<sup>2</sup> A comparison between Buber's notion of desire, and for example, Levinas' one, will not be the aim of this paper.

The infant does not first of all perceive an object, rather he makes an effort to establish a relation to it. The experience of the object comes second, and the first experience which we have to notice is the infant's relation to his mother. Therefore, the experience of objects would come after the separation of the primary words I-Thou. Jan Patočka is very attentive in correcting Buber, when he states that there exists even an I-Thou-It relation (Patočka 1998, 76), which corresponds to what Colwyn Trevarthen has called secondary intersubjectivity, hence a relation between I and Thou, in which an object is the subject of joint attention. (Smidt 2018, 43)

We finally receive a definition of the inborn Thou, which is poetic in its very nature. Buber tells us that in the beginning there is the relation, as a category of being, readiness, grasping form, mold for the soul, it is the a priori of relation, the inborn Thou. The inborn Thou is realized in the lived relations with that which meets it. (Buber 2013, 19) This metaphoric definition demands further explanations, which we are going to offer. The readiness of which Buber speaks about is the readiness to give and to receive, in the sense of human contact, even as tenderness. The form implied in the definition might correspond to the phenomenological intention, which awaits being met by fulfillment. This fulfillment comes in the person of the other's bodily presence. When the father of the philosophy of dialogue states that the inborn Thou is the a priori of relation, he has in mind Immanuel Kant's framework of transcendental philosophy. Thus, we could as well guess that this short chapter of Buber's concerning the dialogical life of the infant could be seen as an echo to Immanuel Kant's transcendental aesthetic. This statement of ours will be strengthened by our further analysis, in which we are going to see how Buber uses Kant's notions of "analysis" and "synthesis".

Buber then speaks of the instinct to make contact, first by touch and then by visual touch. The inborn Thou is soon brought to its full powers. This inborn Thou transforms into a mutual relation, which could be designed by the term tenderness. Summing up, we have so far in our equation the infant's inborn Thou and the mother's one, which come in contact by virtue of tenderness. This phenomenon could be called under the title of "moments of meeting", as in Daniel Stern's thematization (Stern 2004, 55). I want to insist a little bit more on the mother's behavior towards her infant. The mother's inborn Thou towards her infant could be reinforced by what Donald Winnicott has called the primary maternal preoccupation, namely the mother's

capacity to meet the infant's desire and needs at the right moment. (Winnicott 1958, 301-302)

Buber even speaks of an instinct of creation or of the originator instinct (Buber 2002, 100), which means the desire of the child to create, either by synthesis, by setting things up in a definite form, or by analysis, by pulling pieces apart and tearing up stuff, which could be called a sort of destruction, but nonetheless not a blind one. We will see exactly why this happens. By virtue of the inborn Thou, a personification of that object takes place, and a conversation is established. The development of the soul in the child is inextricably related to the longing for the Thou. Through the Thou, the human being becomes I. (Buber 2013, 19-20)

### **Phenomenological interpretations**

In her book on dialogical phenomenology, Beata Stawarska advances several arguments from different fields of inquiry, in order to prove the existence of the "I-You connectedness". Thus, she draws on the tradition of dialogic philosophy, phenomenology, child development, and even sociolinguistics, so that she can reinforce her thesis. From her book, I want to especially dwell further on her reading of Martin Buber's "primacy of relation". Stawarska is very attentive about the phenomenon which Buber calls the *Urwelt*, namely the world that precedes form, and also, that precedes the infant's personal being. Therefore, she analyzes very carefully the passages from Buber's *I and Thou*, and arrives at very interesting considerations for our thesis even.

Beata Stawarska considers that the child who was just born, still retain some sensations from his previous environment. As she states, the infant lies on the mother's belly, and they are not strangers at all. They were long time intimates. The mother is familiar with the infant's movements, his patterns of rest and activity, whereas the infant is familiar with the mother's heartbeat, unique style of speaking and with her touch. (Stawarska 2009, 158) Her argumentation can even be reinforced by certain passages from Winnicott's late work. Here, I am especially referring to what Winnicott has called the experience of birth. Therefore, we find out in Winnicott's that just after birth, the infant and the mother attune to each other, by virtue of bodily rhythms, such as the respiratory one. (Winnicott 1988, 146)

Moreover, another author who wrote a dialogical phenomenology, starting from the texts of Buber and Husserl is the Dutch philosopher, Stephan Strasser. In his lectures, he begins with

Husserl's notion of the world, in order to arrive at the issue of basic trust (what he calls faith).

For Stephan Strasser, faith is always menaced by non-faith. This is a statement with which Merleau-Ponty's later work would resonate (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 28). In a dialogical framework, we could hold that the Thou can become an "other", even "another", and finally, one among many. For Strasser, faith should not be considered solely as a religious attitude, thus we may equate it with trust, even with the basic form of it. Hence, even an atheist could have faith or trust in the other, even in the world. (Strasser 1969, 123)

Recalling Buber's discussion from his book on faith, Strasser reminds us of Buber's statement in which the father of the philosophy of dialogue suggested that I have trust in someone without having the sufficient reasons for explaining why I trust him. (Buber 1951, 8) This statement echoes Wittgenstein's observations of trust from the book entitled *On Certainty*. (Wittgenstein 1969, 162) Moreover, Buber argued that this trust is established via the initial contact with the other, which helps us very much in establishing the functions of the inborn Thou. Therefore, contact becomes for Buber the "missing link" between the inborn Thou and the trust in the world.

For Strasser, trust is phenomenologically basic. Here I could introduce Fazakas and Gozé's text on the transcendental history of trust, in which the authors argued that trust in the world is gained through the repeated interactions of mother and infant. These interactions represent the mother's holding which is later on introjected in the guise of the transcendental earth or soil. (Fazakas & Gozé 2020, 175) For Strasser too, the Thou is first believed. As Wittgenstein would put it, the infant learns by trusting his parents.

Strasser even goes further when he states that because I trust the Thou, I even trust the objects which he or she presents me. Therefore, the objects are conceived as real. This statement resonates with Winnicott's presentation of the world in small doses. (Winnicott 1987, 69)

Later, Strasser sketches a sort of dialogical poetry of the first encounter with the Thou. As he puts it, the first Thou is with me before I am with myself. This echoes Nietzsche's observation that the Thou is older than the I. (Patočka 1998, 36) Continuing with Strasser, he argues that we do not choose that Thou in any way. It is Mother. Mother is gentle, she gives her completely to me. With her I know that I am securely sheltered. I cannot avoid believing that Mother is the

Thou for me. She gives me everything I need to live, grow and change. (Strasser 1969, 131)

The last phenomenological author who will be evoked to strengthen our thesis, is the Italian psychiatrist Giovanni Stanghellini, who in his wonderful book on dialogue, recalls how much modern psychology is in debt to Buber's legacy. Moreover, he even argues that Buber was the starting point for virtually many contemporary theories coming from the part of developmental psychology. Here we could remember Colwyn Trevarthen's notion of "companionship", Daniel Stern's concept of the intersubjective matrix, and Stein Bråten's virtual other, which directly echoes Buber's inborn Thou. These theories will be presented in the last part of our inquiry.

Giovanni Stanghellini begins with the fact that there is an intrinsic relational nature of the human being. The design of our being allows us to detect the fact that the other is a special kind of an object, namely a person like ourselves. The Italian psychiatrist then introduces and recalls Daniel Stern's notion of the intersubjective matrix. Intersubjectivity is an innate and primary system of motivation that organizes human behavior. One of the greatest needs of the human being is that of being seen by the other. Thus, the other's regard is constitutive of our selfhood and personhood. (Stanghellini 2017, 19) This statement of Stanghellini's echoes directly Winnicott's theory of the mirror role of the mother's face (Winnicott 2009, 149) and Richir's exchange of gazes. (Richir, 2008, 88) Both Winnicott and Richir considered that in order to become a subject and a person, the infant needs to be seen and mirrored by the mother. There is a long tradition of the issue of mirroring the self in the other, which began with Hegel's fifth chapter from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 2004, 111), and continuing with numerous phenomenological authors, including for example Jan Patočka. (Patočka 1998, 36)

Returning to the arguments presented by Stanghellini, he argues that we need a Thou who looks at us to form and maintain our basic self and personal identity. We thus need the recognition of a Thou in order to remain an I. For example, mother and infant create a pre-verbal communication context that forges a dynamic system based on an affective lexicon. Self and other, and intertwined by virtue of the intercorporeity linking them. (Stangellini 2017, 20) We can now remember the issue of incorporation and the *Urwelt* of the infant.

We live out life from the beginning with the other, we literally inhabit the body of the other at the beginning, of the mother. Infants

are born as social and sociable beings, who wish to establish contact with their mothers. Therefore, the structure of the first encounter is one designed by the concept of protoconversational turn-taking. In other words, mother and infant attune affectively. This entire paradigm, Stanghellini concludes is built on Buber's ideas. (Stanghellini 2017, 21)

Summing up the observations which were developed throughout this chapter, we could already consider that the inborn Thou functions from the very beginning. It functions as the desire to establish contact with the other, and by virtue of this contact, the infant develops trust in the mother, and later, in the world. As Henri Maldiney argued, when talking about infants, we have first and foremost to remember the role played by the maternal space, which resonated with Winnicott's holding environment. We must remember that the mother is the first Thou, whereas the holding environment expands throughout the person's life, and finally includes even the idea of society and humanity. (Abram 2007, 193)

### **The perspective coming from child development**

We have already briefly indicated the perspectives of Daniel Stern and Giovanni Stanghellini, hence we should now focus more on the ideas of two other researchers in the field of child psychology, namely Colwyn Trevarthen and Stein Bråten. Whereas for the first, Martin Buber's work is mentioned rarely, for the second, the work of the father of dialogic philosophy is a direct source of inspiration.

Colwyn Trevarthen, the psychobiologist is known for suggesting a cooperative model for the mother-infant relation. Therefore, he retraces Buber's steps when he concludes that by virtue of the infant's "distance"<sup>3</sup>, which he or she has from the beginning, he or she is able to engage in a form of intersubjective relatedness with the mother. Familiarity is directly proportional with trust, as Giovanna Colombetti and Joel Krueger point out (Colombetti & Krueger 2015, 1166), therefore there exists familiarity with the mother from the beginning. Moreover, there is also a form of trust, or proto-trust, which is exactly the inborn Thou, which awaits the meeting with the actual Thou, establishing the contact. We can recall Buber's comparison of the inborn Thou with a form ready to be filled by the actual presence of

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<sup>3</sup> Distance here means that the infant acknowledges the other a separate being, as an independent and autonomous one.



the other. This contact may be explained by the help of Frances Tustin's concept of the rhythm of safety (Tustin 1986, 268), which comes close to the basic trust. Therefore, the rhythm of the interactions between mother and infant, and implicitly, the contact established, builds up the basic trust.

Another interesting observation, coming from the part of ontological philosophy, is that the infant is always and already into the world. Thus, as Henri Maldiney would suggest, in the case of the infant, there is not an inner world onto which there is added an external one, rather, the infant, lives from the beginning in the world, with other, objects, and more generally, beings. This philosophical observation resonates with the current research made in infant development.

Moreover, in favor of this last observation comes the work of social psychologist Stein Bråten. Bråten draws on Buber, Wittgenstein and George Herbert Mead, in suggesting that the infant has "distance" from the beginning vis-à-vis the other. Therefore, Bråten offers numerous examples of early empathic relatedness between infant and mother, or even between infant and sister/brother. From these empirical studies, Bråten draws the conclusion that the infant is born with a virtual other (in mind), and with the ability of alter-centric participation. We have already indicated that the virtual other is the direct successor of Buber's inborn Thou, whereas the alter-centric participation (Bråten 2009, 260) would be the direct successor of what Buber has called "imagining the real". "Imagining the real" designates that state in which the self "imagines" what the other feels, desires and needs in a concrete fashion. This concrete fashion pertains to what Buber explained as the phenomenon of feeling what the other's needs in our own bodies. (Buber 1965, 81) Therefore, "imagining the real" is not mere inference or a sort of simulation, but rather, a "bold swinging into otherness". The implications of the interrelation between the inborn Thou and "imagining the real" will be left aside for further studies.

### **By way of conclusion**

The present paper attempted to give a phenomenological account of Buber's inborn Thou via a threefold approach to this phenomenon. First, we ventured in the philosophy of dialogue, in order to unfold the basic package, as Stanghellini put it. Secondly, the phenomenological authors who have drawn on Buber and the philosophical tradition which has its basis in the work of Edmund Husserl strengthened our

argumentation, by developing the lines proposed by the conjunction between the philosophy of dialogue and phenomenology concerning the phenomenon of the inborn Thou. Finally, we arrived at certain perspectives pertaining to child development, in which companionship was closely related to the issues of trust, familiarity, and even contact.

We could end our entire discussion with a paraphrase of a quote coming again from Buber's dialogical theory towards education. Therefore, in his lectures on education he suggests that trust in the world is the utmost achievement of education, whereas we can add that this could also be the utmost achievement of child-rearing, and even of psychotherapy. (Buber 2002, 116)

Trust is seen as something phenomenological basic, as Strasser pointed out. Without this sort of basic trust, the world would seem inhospitable, and this loss of trust would represent the impossibility of human encounters. (Fazakas & Gozé 2020, 171) Finally, paraphrasing Wittgenstein once again, and bearing in mind Buber's discussion of the inborn Thou, we could suggest that the limits of my world are the limits of my trust in the world. (Wittgenstein 2002, 68)

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