

# I AND YOU AND THE DIVIDED I

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## Résumé de l'article

Cet article réexamine l'idée de Martin Buber sur les relations Je-Vous à la lumière de ce que la science, la biologie et la sociologie plus contemporaines nous apprennent sur le cerveau humain et son développement. Parce que ces compréhensions nouvelles des êtres humains, nos relations les uns avec les autres et le monde dans lequel nous vivons, rendent plus difficile de nous identifier et de nous étiqueter, nous et nos relations, à travers des catégories claires (« je » et « vous », ou « cela »), cet essai vise à trouver un moyen de les réconcilier avec la pensée de Buber. Il montre comment les découvertes scientifiques concernant le cerveau et les modèles psychologiques de l'esprit (à la fois ceux de Platon, tels qu'on les trouve dans la *République*, et ceux que décrivent des ouvrages contemporains de psychologie) élargissent la gamme des êtres ou des entités aptes à s'intégrer dans des relations qui se chevauchent.

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## I AND YOU AND THE DIVIDED I

MATTHEW ALLEN NEWLAND

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the idea at the heart of Martin Buber's philosophy, the idea that the most authentic expression of human existence arises between two individual persons, sharing a mutual moment of relationship in the experience of one another *as persons*. However, such a relationship, and/or experience of such a relationship, is only possible if the two participating in the moment are sentient individuals, aware of one another's presence before the other (one's relationship with a fellow human being very different from one's relationship with a collective group, team, committee, etc.).

While this might seem intuitively obvious, my thesis research has led me to a conclusion that goes against our everyday perception of both ourselves and our experiences; as Walt Whitman put it, we are large; we contain multitudes<sup>1</sup> (and are comprised of many distinct components and systems). If we are not really individuals at all, but each of us is instead a society of distinct cells and systems functioning as a kind of biological community, then the idea of individuality becomes problematic. If this is the case, then the relationship between any two individuals is not really what it appears to be at all, but a relationship between *many* and *many more*; our interpersonal interactions are society-to-society, rather than one-to-one.

Therefore, this paper was written to expressly discuss the effect of a more contemporary understanding of the brain, mind, and person, in relation to Martin Buber's understanding of interpersonal relationships. The question being considered is whether or not Buber's idea translates to this new understanding of human existence (as a kind of "all of us-all of you" relationship, in place of the I-You relationship he describes). Plato's *Republic* will be used as a helpful means of illustrating the idea of the human mind (interestingly, this ancient book appears to offer a very accurate idea of how the human person and human experience are put together).<sup>2</sup>

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1. Paraphrasing the famous line from "The Song of Myself": Walt WHITMAN, *Song of Myself*, Mineola, NY, Dover Publications. 2001. Originally published in *Leaves of Grass*, Brooklyn NY, W. Whitman, 1855, p. 53.

2. Elizabeth A. LAIDLAW-JOHNSON, *Plato's Neurobiology: A Call for a Psychotherapist King?* Paper presented at *Science, Technology, and the Humanities: A New Synthesis*. Hoboken NJ, Stephens Institute of Technology, April 24, 2009.

## I and You

Martin Buber's *I and Thou* offers an enlightening perspective on the individual's place in the world. The book describes two perspectives, two worlds, which Buber understands each of us to inhabit. First, there is the *I-It world*, in which the individual human being experiences the world as a set of objects with which to interact (a world of things which may be used as tools, or otherwise avoided or ignored). This may even include other people, if indeed we see those around us merely as the means to some personal end, to be manipulated and made to serve our purposes. The alternate world Buber describes sees a great series of relations between personal experiences; this is the *I-You world* of the book's title, where everything is experienced personally. Here there are no objects; in the I-You world, one has nothing, but "stands in relation" to "Yous" (our fellow human beings). It is also here that one experiences art, a personal encounter conveyed in an object imbued with personality by the artist. It is also the world where a person encounters God, who is seen by Buber as the "eternal You"; one can ignore God, and see the world only as a collection of objects scattering the landscape, or one can find God everywhere, behind every corner, always watching and always waiting to be found.

The two worlds Buber describes coexist, necessarily overlapping, as we human beings must exist in the I-It world first, in order to experience the I-You world. While God waits eternally, food, water, and shelter each possess a utilitarian character that remains vital to life (though even these can have analogs in the I-You world of relations; contrast a simple shelter with a home, or mere sustenance with a family meal or communal gathering, where food is lovingly prepared and shared, thus becoming a personal experience).

Yet, as necessary as the I-It world may be for our basic survival, it is the I-You world of relations that holds the most importance, in Buber's view. While we might say that the I-It world provides a foundation upon which we may reach up to experience something higher, the I-It world also poses a threat, obstructing our experience of the I-You relations they make possible. That is, they can distract us from our experience of other Yous, both human, eternal, and those found in works of art. By the 1920s, as scientific and industrial progress continued to advance civilization, Buber had begun to fear the threat of alienation from both our world and one another: "When man lets it have its way, the relentless growing It-world grows over him like weeds."<sup>3</sup> The world was already in danger of becoming a utilitarian world, of resources to be used and exploited, and reduced to elements and chemical compounds. Science and industry were reducing the world to raw materials, stripped of their life, beauty, and personality.

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3. Martin BUBER, *I and Thou*, New York NY, Touchstone Books, 1970, p. 96.

### A New Understanding of the Subjective Self

But there is another way in which both scientific progress and material analysis have affected our understanding of human beings and their nature: our knowledge of the brain and the mental activity arising from it has made great advances since the 1800s, when Pierre Paul Broca first identified the language center of the brain's left hemisphere. Since then, the brain has been revealed to be a number of overlapping, interacting systems, each one performing a particular operation, and giving rise to a specific mental process. It is these processes, all together, which bring about the experience of the individual, thus suggesting that the subjective I of our individual experience is not really a single thing, but a unity of many parts. And if the I is really a product of processes, many "Its," what does this mean for the I-You conception of reality? Are Yous reducible to objects, and if so, are I-You relations really possible?

It is important to consider Buber's distinction between I-it relations and I-You relations, given that every child must live, learn, and grow in a social environment. The I-You relation described by Buber exemplifies this idea by describing I-You relations as humankind's salvation: it is through others (both our fellow human beings, and God) that we are delivered from the nightmare of alienation. The brain itself needs I-You relations even more than it relies on I-It relations; while objects (plural Its, or things like food, water, and clothing) are necessary for the survival of the body, human existence requires more.

There are individuals who *do* treat other people as objects, and use them as a means of survival, getting ahead, or satisfying some desire, but such use (treating people as the means to some other end) is unhealthy and can lead to problems. Discussing such behavior and treatment of others as objects, psychologist Louis Cozolino (who specializes in working with adults who have suffered abusive or troubled childhoods) says that without the necessary relationships at the beginning of their lives, children's brains will not grow the neurons they need in order to relate to the world.<sup>4</sup> The lives resulting from brains that have failed to fully develop, in light of childhood circumstances, lead to a vicious circle of violence. According to Cozolino, an abusive childhood often results in an adult life dominated by violent impulses. When these adults become parents themselves, the cycle continues.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Louis COZOLINO, "It's a Jungle in There: We're Not as Evolved as We Think," *Psychotherapy Networker*, 32 (2008), p. 22.

5. Louis COZOLINO, "It's a Jungle," pp. 22-23.

## The Individual as a Society

My doctoral thesis, *City of Cities* (2017)<sup>6</sup>, discussed the composite nature of the human mind, and the idea that the experienced unity of one's individual consciousness is not so much a real thing itself, as it is a means of interpreting our own shared experiences. When an interpreter module in the left brain is compromised, for example, by a stroke, a condition called *anosognosia* can result. Anosognosia is a deficit of self-awareness resulting from physiological damage to the brain, and can leave a person unaware of the existence of her disability, or convinced that a part of her body actually belongs to someone else in a kind of disassociation from the self.<sup>7</sup>

Even though we may not be aware of it, every human being possesses a "composite brain" that sees, thinks, divided into two halves (the left and right hemispheres) which understand the world in two very different ways.<sup>8</sup> If the rational and emotional parts of that composite brain fail to cooperate, for example, due to stroke or brain injury, problems can arise.<sup>9</sup> Yet in a healthy brain, both parts are also capable of prioritizing goods and cooperating, thus ensuring the successful survival of the entire person (the whole). The many parts are all united in a common purpose: survival as a whole, which will ensure their survival as individual components. And yet Martin Buber's understanding of human experience, and its place in the world (whichever world he describes), appears to be at odds with this reductionist, composite view.

While my thesis deconstructed the mind in order to offer a contemporary take on Plato's city-soul analogy from the *Republic* (and the idea that the soul is not one thing, but the harmonious working of several components all together), Buber's idea of a whole being who experiences the Yous and Its beyond its limits does not exactly fit with this understanding. For one thing, the unity of the individual arises from the many, but the many can be separated, and their unity compromised. When an epileptic patient has the *corpus collosum* cut (that is, the bundle of nerves connecting the left and right hemispheres of the brain), the apparent result is two functioning minds, each with

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6. *City of Cities: Understanding Human Nature by Pushing Plato's City-Soul Analogy to Its Limits*, Ottawa, Dominican University College (Faculty of Philosophy), December 9 2017.

7. Jean-Pierre CHANGEUX & Paul RICOEUR, *What Makes Us Think?: A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue about Ethics, Human Nature, and the Brain*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press. 2000, p. 48.

8. Livingstone Smith describes it as such: "We are like elaborate buildings made out of many millions of tiny bricks and can be analyzed into our essential ingredients." (David LIVINGSTONE SMITH, *The Most Dangerous Animal: Human Nature and the Origins of War*, New York NY, St. Martin's Press, 2009, p. 96).

9. The rational part may seek to rationalize its experiences to a point of absurdity, as was the case with Mrs. Dodds, a stroke patient unaware that half of her body was paralyzed. Mrs. Dodds rationalized her paralysis with explanations. See Vilayanur S. RAMACHANDRAN & Sandra BLAKESLEE, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*, New York NY, William Morrow, 1998, pp. 127-128.

different capabilities and intentions.<sup>10</sup> And as mentioned already, there are people who suffer strokes, who fail to recognize their own body parts as their own (while their body parts, such as their hands, might seemingly take on lives of their own, following the direction of brain impulses which are no longer connected to the rest of the individual).<sup>11</sup> If all of this is true, then how are we to understand Buber's individual-based understanding of human life? Can the experience of the individual be salvaged, in light of what we know about the composite nature of the soul?

### ***Republic, Reconciliation and Reconnection***

In response to these questions, we can consider a number of thoughts. One is that the mind, as a unity of processes and components, offers not only an understanding of how minds work, but also therapeutic tools for helping people who suffer developmental trauma. People who have suffered traumatic experiences, and/or neglect early in life may have, as a result of their experiences, a difficult time functioning in, and interacting with, other people in society. Elizabeth Laidlaw-Johnson, in a discussion on Plato's *Republic*, the divided systems of the brain, and the distinct mental processes associated with each, offers further support to the idea that childhood trauma and neglect have a damaging effect on the sufferer's ability to develop and cultivate relationships later in life:

The emotional and logical parts of the brain require development along these neural highways for brain development. This development comes from interacting with other brains—other people. So, at this very basic level, we need each other. More specifically, the interaction is most needed when we are quite Young, as our brains develop. Neuro-psychologists argue that continuous and positive interaction during the first year and a half of life is critical to moral development.<sup>12</sup>

By seeing the component systems of the brain as processes, and the brain as a set of separable, independently-functioning systems, efforts can be made to foster connections within the individual, which allow for personal relationships with other people beyond the individual.

2500 years ago Plato argued that these components together make up a person, who in turn helps to make up a community, together with other people. Interestingly, then, we may briefly consider the components of the mind as Its, in order to better relate to one another as people (Yous in the

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10. Thomas NAGEL, "Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness," *Synthese*, 22 (1971). pp. 397-399.

11. Iftah BIRAN & Anjan CHATTERJEE, "Alien Hand Syndrome," *Archives of Neurology*, 61 (2004), pp. 292-294.

12. Elizabeth A. LAIDLAW-JOHNSON, *Plato's Neurobiology*, p. 4.

*Imago Dei*, the “image of God”). Of our three brain systems, the rational forebrain matures long after the survival and limbic (emotional) systems of the brain. In order to mature, neural links must be built between the developing brain systems, and this task is fostered by our interactions with other people. Victims of childhood abuse and neglect develop brains shaped to survive, but *not* equipped to communicate (Laidlaw describes these brains as primed for “fight-or-flight” responses to the environment, and are more likely to respond with impulsive reactions. In a state of arrested development, neither listening nor considering consequences come easily for people whose brains have not properly connected in childhood.

In observing that this development comes from our interactions with other people (and is hindered by abuse and neglect at the hands of others), Laidlaw-Johnson concludes that we need one other, in order to relate to one another.<sup>13</sup> This is a fascinating idea, in light of our preceding discussion, and opens a new dimension into our consideration of Martin Buber’s ideas. Buber, who aims his focus on, and places so much value in, the I-You world, sees the relations between ourselves and one another as our means of salvation; it is the relationships we share with one another that free us from the emptiness and alienation of the I-It world. This means that, in order to become capable of I-You relationships, we must ourselves be Yous to others. The child who has a parent or teacher who experiences her as a You will be able, in the fullness of time, to treat others as You as well. The I is only able to do this in a pre-existing web of I-You relations. And as we are all You to one another, it means all Yous coalesce, gradually winding together as neural connections are fostered in each individual brain, connecting together in an environment of love.

Genesis tells us that God formed Adam from the mud of the earth. And indeed, our bodies are comprised of the very elements of our planet, the same carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and calcium atoms found in the ground beneath our feet. And yet the human being, though a physical composite of any elements of systems, etc., is a breathing, living soul, and emerges from the confluence of all these things, together. The I is comprised out of many Its. So too can we see a convergence of Its forming the I and You elements of the I-You relationship. Earlier, a puzzling question was raised: how can we regard the individual as an I, when I (and You) are comprised of many Its? A possible response has been found in Laidlaw-Johnson’s observations, in her comparison of the triune brain and the tripartite soul found in Plato’s *Republic*.

Just as a healthy person emerges from the harmonious cooperation of the three souls (and brain systems), so too can we say that the I (and You) both emerge from their component parts. The I and You are an emergent reality,

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13. Ibid.

both coming together in a pre-existing relationship. The love of other Yous makes me an I, and I in turn am able to share who I am with other Yous.

### Community First

The traditional view was the product of Trinitarian and Christological problems as these were conceived within the systematic differentiation of consciousness as originated by Aristotle and transposed to Christian soil by Thomas Aquinas. The contemporary view comes out of genetic biology and psychology. From the 'we' of the parents comes the symbiosis of mother and child. From the 'we' of the parents and the symbiosis of mother and child comes the 'we' of the family. Within the 'we' of the family emerges the 'I' of the child. In other words the person is not the primordial fact. What is primordial is community. It is within the community, and through the intersubjective relations that are the life of community, that there arises the differentiation of the individual person.<sup>14</sup>

In the above passage, the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan explains, from a theological perspective, how community, not the person, is the primordial fact, an idea that fits together well with Cozolino's and Laidlaw's observations, discussed already. The community exists first, and from within its life and inter-subjective relations arise the individual, differentiated and supported by the others around her. She is differentiated and molded within that context, but will only become an I capable of I-You relationships if she is first treated as a You (and not an It) before she knows herself to be an I.

One last idea that is relevant and worth considering is the idea of God arising from such a system. Buber's idea of God as an eternal You can only be encountered by the I, and for this reason Buber's God is neither omnipotent, nor all-powerful; rather, the God described by Buber *needs* human beings, in order to relate to another. A supremely relational being with no one to relate to would no longer be relational. And given that the human I emerges from a web of connected Its, brain components and mental processes converging together to give rise to an individual I, it could be suggested that the Eternal You of God arises from a similar accumulation of universal processes. Like the God described by another Jewish philosopher, the Australian Samuel Alexander in *Space, Time, and Deity* (1920),<sup>15</sup> this is a God that does not exist separately from Creation, but is emergent from it, and who is the result of the whole cosmic process.

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14. Bernard LONERGAN, *Philosophy of God and Theology*, Philadelphia PA, Westminster, 1973, pp. 210-211.

15. Samuel ALEXANDER, *Space, Time and Deity: The Gifford Lectures at Glasgow, 1916-1918*. Charleston SC, Nabu Press, 2012. Originally published 1920.



Note: Buber's discussion of I-You relations also incorporates God, the eternal You, as a necessary means of salvation from the alienation of the world of objects, arising from our inter-subjective relations. However, it is not necessary to include God (or prove God's existence) while holding or defending Buber's understanding of an authentic human existence. As psychotherapist Sheldon Kopp (1976) puts it in the following aphorism, "We have only ourselves, and one another. That may not be much, but that's all there is. How strange, that so often, it all seems worth it."<sup>16</sup>

To apply this idea to our present discussion, authentic relationships with loved ones may be sufficient to (at least) ensure the growth and development of the brain, as suggested by Cozolino, earlier in this paper. As long as we are treated with value, love, and respect by our fellow human beings, the citizens of our local communities, families, etc. will develop and grow in a healthy way, and we will be capable of dealing with conflict, building relationships, and caring for one another as they learn to care for us.

## Final Reflection

What can we learn from all of this? By answering the question of how the I can be an I, if it is a composite of many Its, we have noted that the dualistic division between Buber's two worlds is something of an oversimplification. While there may be a real distinction between the worlds of I-You and I-It, there is also a strong connection and overlap, as one gives way to the other. The I-It world precedes the world of I-You, both physically and temporally: our bodies require the subsistence of the planet: its fruits, produce, meat, water, and shelter, in order to survive, be healthy, and be capable of I-You relations. And yet, long before that, before our bodies were mature or capable of I-You relations, other Yous close to us treated *us* as Yous to their "Is" (the plural "I"). Our parents, teachers, and caregivers began the process of connection and interaction, which made our brains capable of forming I-You relations later in life. Without their example and without their care and attention, our brains would remain fragmented, and our souls incapable of bringing that relational aspect to others. Therefore, there are clear connections between the worlds of I-You and I-It that make any dualistic division between the two somewhat inaccurate. There has certainly been a tendency to emphasize the difference between the two in the past; for example, as Walter Kaufmann says in the introduction to *I and Thou*, "The straight philosophers tend to celebrate one of the two worlds and deprecate the other."<sup>17</sup> Among these "straight philosophers" would be Buber himself, who, while not disparaging the I-It world,

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16. Sheldon KOPP, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him: The Pilgrimage of Psychotherapy*, New York NY, Bantam, 1976. p. 224.

17. Walter KAUFMANN, "Introduction", in Martin BUBER, *I and Thou*, p. 18.

nonetheless saves his praises for the relational experience of the I-You world: "Even if I-it is not disparaged, nobody can fail to notice that I-You is celebrated."<sup>18</sup> And yet, as we have seen, the relation between the two worlds is less Manichean than it might at first appear, with the two worlds occupying two places on a continuum, rather than being separate. One gives rise to the other, which in turn gives rise again to the one before.

Finally, It should also be noted that depreciating the one-on-one understanding of interpersonal relationships does not itself show Buber's dualistic vision of relations to be inaccurate, but it does complicate the question of how they might work (if indeed we are not really the individuals we appear to be, even to ourselves). For this reason, it needs to be stressed that neither Buber's understanding of an I-You relationship, nor his understanding of relationships in general, is being criticized or invalidated, following this discussion. Rather, the nature of I-You relationships is being re-examined in light of what science, biology, and sociology teach us about the human brain and its development. This has helped us to understand that our relationships with one another, and the world we live in, cannot be so easily labeled, or divided into clear categories ("I" and "You," or any other individual). Rather, scientific discoveries regarding the brain and psychological models of the mind (both Plato's, as found in the *Republic*, and those being described in present-day psychology) expand the ranges of beings/entities capable of entering into overlapping relationships.

We might understand the question at hand as an iteration of the old question regarding "the one and the many"; the paradox discussed in Plato's *Parmenides* is here expressed in the question of the nature of personhood: are we, each of us, one, or many? (137c-159b) Is the nature of the relationships between persons between one another, or is it better understood as being between *many* and *many others*? (Is GOD a similarly comprised person?). Which came first, the world of interpersonal relations, or the I-It world of objects? While we cannot hope to resolve the *Parmenides* dilemma here, or any of these other questions, perhaps by considering it through the question of the nature of personhood, we can gain a better understanding of the question.

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18. Ibid.

## SUMMARY

This paper re-examines Martin Buber's idea of I-You relationships in light of what more contemporary science, biology, and sociology teach us about the human brain and its development. Because these new understandings of human beings, our relationships with one another, and the world we live in, make it more difficult to identify/label us and our relations into clear categories ("I" and "You," or "It"), this essay aims to find a way to reconcile them with Buber's thought. This paper shows how scientific discoveries regarding the brain and psychological models of the mind (both Plato's, as found in the *Republic*, and those being described in present-day psychology) expand the ranges of beings/entities capable of entering into overlapping relationships.

## SOMMAIRE

Cet article réexamine l'idée de Martin Buber sur les relations Je-Vous à la lumière de ce que la science, la biologie et la sociologie plus contemporaines nous apprennent sur le cerveau humain et son développement. Parce que ces compréhensions nouvelles des êtres humains, nos relations les uns avec les autres et le monde dans lequel nous vivons, rendent plus difficile de nous identifier et de nous étiqueter, nous et nos relations, à travers des catégories claires (« je » et « vous », ou « cela »), cet essai vise à trouver un moyen de les réconcilier avec la pensée de Buber. Il montre comment les découvertes scientifiques concernant le cerveau et les modèles psychologiques de l'esprit (à la fois ceux de Platon, tels qu'on les trouve dans la *République*, et ceux que décrivent des ouvrages contemporains de psychologie) élargissent la gamme des êtres ou des entités aptes à s'intégrer dans des relations qui se chevauchent.