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## GOD'S SILENCE IN THE DIALOGUE ACCORDING TO MARTIN BUBER

In his essay, *Religion and Ethics*, incorporated in the small volume, *Eclipse of God*, Martin Buber discusses the main crises in the history of human thought, which have been responsible for the dissolution of "the absoluteness of the ethical co-ordinates" and have led to "disintegration" in antiquity as well as in our times. In both cases, the responsibility lies with the acceptance of the principle of Protagoras, according to which, "Man is the measure of all things." Today's philosophical movement to which the dissolution should be ascribed commenced with Hobbes and culminated by way of Feuerbach and Marx, in the concept of Nietzsche's Superman.<sup>1</sup> The result is a civilization of "relativized values," a next-door neighbor to the moral bankruptcy of nihilism. The need of the hour calls for a new validation of the absoluteness of the "ethical co-ordinates."

In an earlier essay in the same volume, Buber explains that Kant's intellectual restlessness, as revealed in the notes jotted down in his old age, has as its "spur" the search for such a validation of the absoluteness in the ethical obligation. Whereas Kant was inclined to believe that "God is not an external substance, but only a moral condition within us," this was not a concept that could satisfy the requirements of the "postulate of practical reason." If the categorical imperative was to be unconditional, the immanent justification of a God who was a moral condition within man was surely unsatisfactory. The ethical obligation does imply a quality of absoluteness. Man is

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aware of such absoluteness, but he cannot be its source.<sup>2</sup> The original source of the ethical Yes or No is the Absolute itself. "Only out of a personal relationship with the Absolute can the absoluteness of the ethical co-ordinates arise . . ."<sup>3</sup> Kant was unable to find a satisfactory solution to his problem because he refused to see God as Absolute Person, who is to be encountered by man. His concept of an immanent deity was leading man into the vicious circle of ever-repeated self-encounters. Ethical absoluteness, however, can only be validated in "personal essential relation to the Absolute."

Buber's proposals should not be mistaken for a form of heteronomy. He does not suggest moral laws which are imposed on man from on high or from without. But does he, then, stand for moral autonomy, for a form of self-imposed ethics? Whence would such an ethics derive its absoluteness? Where, then, is the way out of the dilemma? Buber states the meaning of his position in the following terms:

Where the Absolute speaks in the reciprocal relationship there are no longer such alternatives. The whole meaning of reciprocity, indeed, lies in just this, that it does not wish to impose itself but to be freely apprehended. It gives us something to apprehend, but it does not give us the apprehension. Our act must be entirely our own for that which must disclose each individual to himself. In theonomy the Divine law seeks for your own, and the revelation reveals to you yourself.<sup>4</sup>

The question that concerns us here is: Does the explanation of Buber, contained in this passage, offer the validation of the ethical absoluteness, which it wishes to establish? To answer this question, an analysis of the key concepts of the passage are necessary.

How does the Absolute speak in the reciprocal relationship and what does it say? It is basic to Buber's position that the Absolute communicates no explicit teaching or law. It is not a definite idea, capable of conceptual formulation, which is being *taught* by the Absolute. According to Buber, when God "addresses" man no word is really spoken. Nothing happens beside, and in addition to, the ordinary course of the events of one's personal life. Man hears himself "addressed" by such events.

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He finds himself in the "concrete situation" of his existence. This situation is not of his own making; he has been placed into it. Realizing the full significance of his situation, he meets the Giver of the situation. All the events of man's personal life are messages addressed to him by the Giver. Every situation in which a man has to make decisions and to act is a challenge from God that seeks man, as if saying to him: "What now? How are you going to deal with this?" The human decision, the deed, is man's response to the address of God. Thus the dialogical situation arises. The theme is repeated in innumerable versions in the entire work of Buber.

The events that occur to human beings are the great and small, untranslatable but unmistakable signs of their being addressed, what they do and fail to do can be an answer or a failure to answer . . .<sup>5</sup>

If, however, the dialogue is to be a genuine one both partners in it must be free and independent—God as well as man. The answer is not prescribed by God; man must find it by himself.

In a passage in *I and Thou*, Buber speaks of the innumerable possibilities for action with which a person may be confronted in a given situation. Among them, there is one single deed, which is the right one, the deed that alone constitutes the right answer to the Divine address, the deed that "waits" for this doer by whom it "desires" to be done.<sup>6</sup> However, man is not given direction that would lead him to the deed. In the dialogical situation, man is a "partner" of God. He must render his own life in freedom and independence. To Buber "the meaning of reciprocity" does not impose itself but wishes to be freely apprehended. Because the response is man's very own, what is to be disclosed to man is the disclosure of the individual to himself. This is the essence of revelation according to Buber. Revelation, too, is dialectical. It begins with God's address; it is completed with man's free response.<sup>7</sup> And thus Buber is able to affirm again and again that "true revelation" reveals man to himself.

What is that "something" that the "meaning of reciprocity" gives us "to apprehend" but not its "apprehension?" From numerous passages in Buber's writings one may derive clearly that

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the "something" is not a definite content but the realization that there is something to apprehend, that it desires to be apprehended and that it is decisive that man apprehend it. Beyond that, however, nothing is granted. The apprehension of contents is not granted. Man must discover it all by himself and thus he embraces the meaning of his life. Describing the characteristic marks of revelation, Buber states:

. . . one gains assurance of meaningfulness. From now on, nothing can be meaningless. The meaning, however, cannot be formulated conceptually. We learn that there is a meaning for us, that the Presence wants something of us, and we have to choose and decide in the spontaneity of every new moment and go and do it. What we then do is what He desires of us . . .<sup>8</sup>

It is only now that we can pose our question in all its significance: Is Buber's dialogical "personal essential relation to the Absolute" a convincing enough source for the ethical absolute? Does it, indeed, yield the absoluteness of the ethical co-ordinates which Buber is seeking? Since no contents of any kind is revealed to man either in revelation or in any other form of the encounter with the Eternal Thou, how does a man know the meaning intended for him? However certain a person may be that what he does, in response to the address, is the deed God desires of him, since God is forever silent as to the contents of His desire, the certainty will always be of a purely subjective nature. An explicit acceptance of man's response by God would be a new revelation with Divine "contents," which is inadmissible on the basis of Buber's thought. In the dialogical situation, certainty of the human response, so deeply involved in human freedom and independence, is inseparable from subjectivity. It is inconceivable how, certainty, so gained, could be called a validation of the ethical absolute. Buber's I-Thou relation with the Absolute will not fulfill the task he would want it to serve in this respect.

At times, one has the feeling that Buber would wish to establish the validity of the human response on firmer grounds. Occasionally, he speaks of the law of God that is deeply implanted within the human heart. When the call reaches man he has only

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to uncover the Divine law within himself. The word from Sinai is identical with the word that is "in thy mouth and in thy heart." The word from on high is identical with the word that man may uncover within himself. "Again and again, man tries to evade the two notes that are one chord; he denies his heart and rejects the call."<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the law in the human heart cannot grant us absoluteness as long as the word from Sinai thunders down dialogically, as it does with Buber. It is still man who makes the decision and thus discovers what the word from Sinai desires to reveal. It is man's decision, it is man's discovery. It is also his affirmation that he has discovered the Divine meaning, as well as the law within his heart that is identical with the law of God. On all these matters, God, notwithstanding the I-Thou situation, is forever silent.

The silence of God, as conceived by Nietzsche and other existentialist thinkers, is one of the main themes of *Eclipse of God*. Buber takes issue with Sartre. Since Sartre has done away with God he needs someone "to invent values." For the atheist, life has no *a priori* established meaning. It is up to man to give meaning to his life. The meaning that he chooses is the value for man, the value that he creates. As against this Buber maintains:

One can believe in and accept a meaning or value, one can set it as a guiding light over one's life if one has discovered it, not if one has invented it. It can be for me an illuminating meaning, a direction-giving value only if it has been revealed to me in my meeting with Being, not if I have freely chosen it for myself from among the existing possibilities . . . This shall be valid from now on.<sup>10</sup>

In regard to values, the positions of Buber and Sartre are not very much apart from each other. The freedom of choice from among existing possibilities is basic for Buber, too. It is true that for Buber there does exist an *a priori* meaning established by the Absolute Person. Among the many possibilities of action, there is that one deed that is waiting to be done by me. However, the deed, the value, the meaning, is not revealed. What is revealed is that there is a meaning for me but not what it is. The contents of the meaning, the deed that is waiting for me, I have

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to find myself; and I have to affirm it to myself as the right value. On this point, Buber's God is no less silent than Sartre's. Whether we call it inventing values or discovering them may be paying tribute to the niceties of semantic distinction; essentially, we have landed in the domain of relativistic ethics, from which Buber was so sure to have broken out.

How little different the silence of Buber's God is in this respect from Sartre's altogether silent God, one may appreciate as one realizes that not only absolute obligation becomes problematic in the dialogical situation but the very thought of obligation in general. With Buber, the address of God that reaches a person from the midst of every experience is, as we have seen, essentially a challenge. Beyond that, it contains no guidance, no teaching; it offers no direction. Thus, this question is inescapable: Assuming that man is so addressed, what is the source of the obligation to answer? Why does he *have* to answer? Is there contained in the Divine address the obligation to respond to it? Such a heteronomous command would be the end of human freedom and partnership in the dialogue? Such an obligation to answer, to enter into the dialogue, would establish at one point a relationship between God and man completely outside the dialogical. There is no room for such a relation within the framework of Buber's teachings. Furthermore, such an obligation to dialogue would be contents in revelation, an idea vehemently rejected by Buber. Once one admitted any possibility of contents in revelation, one has left the grounds of Buber's thoughts. Once the obligation to respond is allowed as a form of positive contents in the Divine address, how can all other forms of revealed contents be excluded? Many may, of course, have the ability to respond. However, the ability to enter into the dialogical situation should not be confused with the obligation to do so. Since such obligation does not reach him from God, whose address contains no command or guidance, it can have its source in man's obligating himself to respond. But how far removed is such obligation from any absoluteness of status! In vain all the declarations of Buber that only by entering into the dialogical situation may man find and fulfill himself, that without the "dialogical life" man is lacking reality.<sup>11</sup> All this may be true, only it yields no obligation to

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answer the call. Man may indeed be unreal, if he does not enter into the dialogue with his whole being. But supposing, he—very foolishly, perhaps, and rather unrealistically—prefers being a mere ghost, an unreal person, how can it be shown that he is ethically wrong?

Everywhere Buber treats man's ability to lead the dialogical life as an *Erzgebot*,<sup>12</sup> a fundamental commandment. On the basis of his understanding of the I-Thou relation with God, there is no justification for such a concept. We are aware only of one passage in his writings that Buber, almost inadvertently, draws the only admissible conclusion from his own position. In *Zwiesprache*, Buber says to his "dear opponent":

. . . I beg you to notice that I do not demand. I have no call to that and no authority for it. I try only to say that there is something and to indicate how it is made: I simply record. And how could the life of dialogue be demanded? There is no ordering of dialogue. It is not that you *are* to answer, but you are able.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, this is so. And this is the decisive point. It is of the essence of the dialogical situation that man cannot be obligated to enter into it. Buber may well say: Woe unto man, if he refuses to live dialogically. He will fail to realize himself. He will "carry away a wound that is not to be forgotten." It may, indeed, be excellent mental hygiene to follow the advice of the doctor; but such advice will never yield ethical obligation.

### NOTES

1. Buber, Martin, *Eclipse of God*, p. 142.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-28.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
5. Buber, Martin, *Israel and the World*, p. 16.
6. Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*.
7. *Israel and the World*, p. 22; p. 27.
8. *I and Thou*, p. 109.
9. *Israel and the World*, p. 142.

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10. *Eclipse of God*, p. 93.
11. Cf. the ideas expressed in *Das Problem des Menschen, Urdistanz und Beziehung. Elemente des Zwischenmenschlichen*.
12. *Dialogisches Leben*, p. 229.
13. Buber, Martin, *Between Man and Man*, p. 16.