

Martin Buber and Daoism on Interhuman Philosophy

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Abstract

For Martin Buber, a person participates in two kinds of relationship: the I-Thou and the I-It. In the case of the former, the wholeness of being is employed resulting in genuine dialogue, while the latter objectifies things and is thus devoid of anything genuine. Among the influences on Buber's thought, that of Daoism has not gone unnoticed by scholars of comparative philosophy. This paper will contribute to said discourse by examining Buber's concept of the interhuman and its employment of the following themes: oneness and the genuine person, non-deliberate action (*wuwei*) and the in-between, and genuine dialogue as a turning towards being. What our analysis will show is that Buber's interhuman philosophy bears witness to the transcendence of words by bringing to life the silence from which they arise and recede, attuning participants in genuine dialogue to the spiritual resonance between themselves and the primal Thou, while elevating their faith in human life in the process. The interhuman was seen by Buber as a viable solution for the societal ills of his time and it remains so half a century after his passing.

Keywords: Martin Buber, Daoism, genuine person, non-deliberate action (*wuwei*), dialogue, interhuman philosophy

Martin Buber in daoizem v medčloveški filozofiji

Izvleček

Po Martinu Buberju se oseba udeleži dveh oblik odnosov: jaz-ti in jaz-ono. V primeru prvega se celota bivanja uporabi tako, da rezultira v pristni dialog, medtem ko slednji popredmeti stvari in je tako izpraznjen česar koli pristnega. Med vplivi na Buberjevo misel je tisti, ki ga je nanj imel daoizem, ostal popolnoma neopažen s strani primerjalnih filozofov. Ta članek bo prispeval k omenjenemu diskurzu tako, da bo preučil Buberjevo pojmovanje medčloveškega in njegove uporabe v naslednjih temah: enost in pristna oseba, nenamerno delovanje (*wuwei*) in vmesnost ter pristni dialog kot obrat k bivanju. Naša analiza bo pokazala, da Buberjeva medčloveška filozofija priča o transcendentnosti besed, tako da pripelje v življenje tišino, iz katere vznikajo in kamor se umikajo, uglašujoč udeležence v pristnem dialogu v duhovno sozvočje med njimi samimi in

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prvinskim Teboj, medtem ko hkrati višajo tudi njihovo vero v človeško življenje. Buber je v medčloveškem videl izvedljivo rešitev za družbene težave svojega časa, kar drži tudi pol stoletja po njegovi smrti.

Ključne besede: Martin Buber, daoizem, pristna oseba, nenamerno delovanje (*wuwei*), dialog, medčloveška filozofija

Introduction

What does it mean to engage in dialogue with another person? Is it merely an exchange of words, or is something more profound occurring? We can interact with the utterances of others and integrate them into our own thinking, but given the subjective nature of language, its mutuality is not assured. For Martin Buber (1878–1965), genuine dialogue centres upon the I-Thou in that it is spoken with the wholeness of being, whereas the I-It is not, making the I-Thou the primal word of the in-between. Buber was long interested in the in-between of things and how it might be brought into being through a dialogical encounter. By engaging the being of another, as opposed to relying on words, it becomes possible to value their ability to convey what they find meaningful instead of how this meaningfulness is delivered, thereby giving rise to a genuine encounter wherein each thing's uniqueness is acknowledged and preserved.

Of the influences on Buber's philosophy of the interhuman, that of Daoism stands out.¹ This paper will contribute to the discourse on Buber's engagement with Daoism by examining his concept of the interhuman and its employment of the following themes: oneness and the genuine person, non-deliberate action (*wuwei*) and the in-between, and genuine dialogue as a turning towards being. What our analysis will show is that Buber's interhuman philosophy bears witness to the transcendence of words by bringing to life the silence from which they arise and recede, attuning participants in genuine dialogue to the spiritual resonance between themselves and the primal Thou,² while elevating their faith in human life

1 When it comes to influences on Buber's thought, Friedrich Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard are notable examples, however, as Maurice Friedman writes, "the mysticism of Meister Eckhart and the philosophy of Jakob Boehme were just as influential on Buber's early thought as was Daoism" (Buber 1964, 5).

2 Buber's descriptions of the primal Thou are uncannily Daoist sounding, as the following examples from *I and Thou* demonstrate: "In the relationships through which we live, the innate You [Thou] is realized in the You [Thou] we encounter: that this, comprehended as a being we confront and accepted as exclusive, can finally be addressed with the basic word, has its ground in the *a priori* of relation" (Buber 1970, 78–79); "Human life which is created only by a third element: the central presence of the You [Thou], or rather, to speak more truthfully, the central You [Thou] that is received in the present" (*ibid.*, 95); "The purpose of relation is the relation itself—touching the You

in the process. The interhuman was thus seen by Buber as a viable solution for the societal ills of his time and remains so half a century after his passing.

The themes guiding our discussion first appeared in “The Teaching of the Tao”, an early and now famous essay that Buber included as an afterward to his translation of the *Zhuangzi*.³ Regarding this early essay, a great deal has been said of remarks Buber made in the foreword to a collection of his essays assembled by Maurice Friedman:⁴

In this selection of my essays from the years 1909 to 1954, I have, with one exception, included only those that, in the main, I can also stand behind today. The one exception is “The Teaching of the Tao”, the treatise which introduced my 1909 translation of selected *Talks and Parables of Chuang-tzu*. I have included this essay because, in connection with the development of my thought, it seems to me too important to be withheld from the reader in this collection. But I ask him while reading it to bear in mind that this small work belongs to a stage that I had to pass through before I could enter into an independent relationship with being. One may call it the “mystical” phase if one understands as mystic the belief in a unification of the self with the all-self, attainable by man in levels or intervals of his earthly life. (Buber 1957, ix)

Six years prior to these comments, however, Buber declared in a prefatory note to his *Zhuangzi* translation that

[Thou]. For as soon as we touch a You [Thou], we are touched by a breath of eternal life” (ibid., 113); “Through every single You [Thou] the basic word addresses the eternal You [Thou]” (ibid., 123); and, “in every sphere, in every relational act, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze toward the train of the eternal You [Thou]; in each we perceive a breath of it; in every You [Thou] we address the eternal You [Thou], in every sphere according to its manner” (ibid., 150). This does not imply, as Jason Wirth points out, that Buber’s engagement with Daoism “is a kind of Chinese mirror in which he gazes upon his own thinking or unduly appropriates Chinese thought for his own purposes” (Wirth 2020, 123). Nevertheless, Buber will use the above statements as fodder in developing his philosophy of the interhuman.

- 3 Buber’s *Chinese Tales – Zhuangzi: Sayings and Parables and Chinese Ghost and Love Stories* was first published in 1910, followed by a second edition in 1918, and a third in 1951. For more, see the introduction by Irene Eber to Buber’s *Chinese Tales* (1991). Buber also spoke at length about the *Daodejing* when he visited Ascona, Switzerland, in 1924. These previously unpublished notes now form part of volume 2.3 (2013)—*Schriften zur chinesischen Philosophie und Literatur*—of his *Werkausgabe*, which totals 21 volumes and took nearly 20 years to complete (i.e., 2001–2019). For more on Buber’s connection to Daoism, see: Friedman (1976); Eber (1994); Herman (1996); Allinson (2016); Johnson (2020, 116–45); Nelson (2017; 2020), and Wirth (2020).
- 4 The work in question is *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays* (1957).

the afterward was originally a separate essay in which I intended to provide a summary of Daoistic teachings, to which I owe a great deal ... the afterward has remained virtually unchanged since its first publication; I did not believe it should be modified, even though my ideas of many of the topics treated have undergone substantial change. (Buber 1991, 3)

What is more, in his introduction to the 1963 edition of *Pointing the Way*, Maurice Friedman notes that for Buber “Daoist *wuwei*—the action of the whole being that appears to be non-action—still informs the second part of *I and Thou*” (Johnson 2020, 121–22). In other words, “Buber intended the piece to be read for the sake of understanding the background, the early ‘mystical’ phase of his development that led to his mature thought, but not as an expression of that mature thought in itself” (ibid., 118). In 1952, one year after the third edition of his *Zhuangzi* translation was released, Buber published *Eclipse of God*, a series of lectures given at various American universities in late 1951. It is in “Religion and Philosophy” that he makes a clear distinction between philosophy and religion which helps explain why he distanced himself from the mysticism associated with “The Teaching of the Tao” in order to embrace the oneness of authentic dialogue:

Philosophy understands faith as an affirmation of truth lying somewhere between clear knowledge and confused opinion. Religion, on the other hand, insofar as it speaks of knowledge at all, does not understand it as a noetic relation of a thinking subject to a neutral object of thought, but rather as mutual contact, as the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between one active existence and another. Similarly, it understands faith as the entrance into this reciprocity, as binding oneself in relationship with an undemonstrable and unprovable, yet even so, in relationship, knowable Being, from whom all meaning comes. (Buber [1952] 2016, 25–26)

Tying this knowable being from which all meaning comes to the Dao, Buber says “the Chinese Dao, the ‘path’ in which the world moves, is the cosmic primal meaning. But because man conforms his life to it and practices ‘imitation of the Dao’, it is at the same time the perfection of the soul” (ibid., 26). These words also echo what he wrote in “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism”, one of eight addresses given from 1909–1918 and found in his *On Judaism*:

[...] the Daoist Chinese, in whose ancient world-image the world’s happenings flow from the counteraction of two principles, the light and the dark, but who perceives Dao, the way, as the single, primal principle in

which both are grounded. This Dao which the wise man realizes on earth through his life, not by interfering with but by actualizing in this world the cosmic intent of oneness through the significance of both his action and his non-action. (Buber 1967, 61)

What is more, Buber interpreted the authentic life of the Orient to be “the fundamental metaphysical principle, not derived from nor reducible to anything else” (ibid., 69) and owing to this, “the Orient perceives that the full manifestation and disclosure of the world’s inner substance is thwarted; that the primally intended unity is split and distorted; that the world needs human spirit in order to become redeemed and unified; and that this alone constitutes the meaning and power of man’s existence in the world” (ibid., 62). Not long after making these comments, Buber in his 1929 essay “Dialogue” again broached the subject of mystical experience, writing:

Since then I have given up the “religious” which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. (Buber 2002, 16)

Although Buber admitted to being disillusioned with the mysticism informing “The Teaching of the Tao”, the principles of Daoism were never in doubt for him, as the above examples so aptly illustrate. To these, we can add one more from the essay “Judaism and Civilization”:

Whether we take the Chinese principle of Dao, the “Way” in whose eternal rhythm all opposites contend with each other and are reconciled ... everywhere transcendent Being has a side facing toward man which represents a shall-be; everywhere man, if he wants to exist as man, must strive after a suprahuman model; everywhere the outline of a true human society is traced in heaven. (Buber 1967, 192)

As interesting as these glimpses of Buber’s relationship with Daoism are, they do little to help us understand how Daoism aids his interhuman philosophy. The task before us, therefore, is to analyse the pillars supporting the notion of the interhuman, foremost of which is genuine dialogue. Given genuine dialogue is grounded in the oneness of the I-Thou, we shall begin with the individual who exemplifies such unity: the genuine person.

Oneness and the Genuine Person

For Buber, uttering I-Thou will not only prove impossible without oneness, but the in-between facilitating authentic dialogue will fail to emerge too. When *I and Thou* first appeared in 1923 it immediately eclipsed “The Teaching of the Tao” and yet, as Maurice Friedman notes, “if we look at part two of *I and Thou*, we discover that everything that Buber says about the free man who wills without arbitrariness is, in fact, the direct application in almost the same words of what he wrote in ‘The Teaching of the Tao’ about the perfected man of the Dao” (Friedman 1976, 419). Without digressing too far, let us examine this “perfected man”⁵ and see how their teaching awakens people to the oneness of ultimacy (i.e., the primal Thou or the Dao).

Buber’s story of a piece of mica beautifully conveys the unity symbolized by the I-Thou dyad:

On a gloomy morning I walked upon the highway, saw a piece of mica lying, lifted it up and looked at it for a long time; the day was no longer gloomy, so much light was caught in the stone. And suddenly as I raised my eyes from it, I realized that while I looked I had not been conscious of “object” and “subject”; in my looking the mica and “I” had been one; in my looking I had tasted unity. I looked at it again, the unity did not return. But there it burned in me as though to create. I closed my eyes, I gathered in my strength, I bound myself with my object, I raised the mica into the kingdom of the existing. And there, Lukas, I first felt: *I*; there I first was I. (Buber 1964, 140)⁶

From the perspective of Daoism, the oneness Buber experiences replicates the stories of cook Ding and the butterfly dream in the *Zhuangzi*.⁷ The two figures in these stories—cook Ding and Zhuangzi—have mastered the art of conjoining with things and no longer distinguish themselves from the objects of their attention. The need to do so comes from the idea that one thing can know another according to its own perspective without realizing said point of view is confined by its own momentariness. If we are to acquire the unity spoken of by

5 The perfected person is one of several names used by Daoism to describe the sage. Others include: spiritual person, ultimate person, and paradigmatic person. In this paper, I will use the designation of genuine person.

6 Italics in original. Buber’s *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization* was first published in German in 1913 and according to Maurice Friedman, “this book is obviously a book of transition to a new kind of thinking and must be characterized as such” (Buber 1964, ix).

7 The story of cook Ding appears in chapter 3 while that of the butterfly dream is from chapter 2.

Buber, there must be a cessation in thinking of things as an “It” whose existence is located outside the realm of “I” and instead view all “Its” as equal to the “I” of realized oneness with the primal Thou. This account differs from that of Elliot Wolfson for whom “a careful reading of this text [the mica story] lends support to our previous claim, namely, unification is complete when the I withdraws into itself, when what is over against the I is shut out, when, in short, the I closes its eyes” (Wolfson 1989, 431).

Wolfson’s description is also a response to Buber’s claim that the genuine person “bring[s] forth the totality of his being in order to withstand a single thing or event” (Buber 1964, 69). Wolfson might be correct with regard to Buber, but in Daoism the I-ness of the genuine person does not withdraw into itself but conjoins with the nothingness of the Dao. To withdraw into oneself indicates there is an identifiable self whose existence is independent of the objectified self as seen by the world. The *Zhuangzi* contains a single instance of an I-Me duality but instead of withdrawing the I-self, it is the Me-self that is discarded.⁸ Put differently, the genuine person in Daoism is selfless, mindless,⁹ and without knowledge, in that having these will corrupt his genuineness and spontaneity thereby breaking his oneness with things and the Dao. To have, as Wolfson writes, the I close its eyes does not change the fact that it is still an I; it would be better, in the view of Daoism, to transform the I into a boundless non-I.

The selfless non-I of Daoism symbolizes a freedom unhindered by the trials and tribulations humanity artificially applies to being. Oneness, therefore, is not the exclusive domain of being, nor does it signify uniformity amongst beings; on the contrary, to be one with the world is to be one with the collectivity of both being and nothingness. Nothingness is a vital component of Daoism, acting as a counter-balance to being and its associated properties.¹⁰ Buber knew this but hardly spoke of it. The one noteworthy passage on nothingness, what Buber calls counterbeing, occurs in dialogue 4 of *Daniel*:

8 See the story of Ziqi and Ziyou in chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*.

9 This term does not mean the genuine person is without self-awareness, thoughts, and the like, but that his heart-mind remains empty of any thoughts, schemes, feelings, etc., that would corrupt his harmony with the Dao. Buber, in his Ascona notes on chapter 7 of the *Daodejing*, expressed it thusly: “The existing selfhood, the individuation, also comes from Dao. Dao manifests itself in multiplicity, by virtue of an infinity of participations. Participation of things in Dao, Dao’s in things. This relationship established by Dao is violated as soon as a thing wants to go out into a self-determined, independent ‘spatial environment’. Once it sets a goal, it aims away from Dao, from the relation of Dao manifestation and participation to Dao. This affects its duration. The rest follows from this. Participation does not result in deprivation of self, but in completion of the self” (Buber 2013, 235).

10 For more, see Chai (2019).

Being and counterbeing; but they were not set in opposition to each other as the two in the drama who now appeared to be enclosed in a unity; they did not carry out their polarity as those did. Each persevered in its calling, the one in happening, the other in perceiving. And this perceiving seemed to me no less notable than that happening. For it did not behave with that well-meaning neutrality that the observer commonly brings to the observed. Rather it bore its oppositeness in itself, in some way expressed, confirmed it; and not just one part of that which had been divided in two but the whole reality over against it. (Buber 1964, 108)

When Buber speaks of being and nothingness as “bearing its oppositeness in itself”, he has in mind comments he made in his “The Teaching of the Tao” about

the unity of the masculine and the feminine elements that do not exist for themselves but only for each other, the unity of the opposites that do not exist for themselves but only through each other, the unity of the things that do not exist for themselves but only with one another. This unity is the Dao in the world. (Buber 1957, 47)

Laozi’s *Daodejing* refers to the union of feminine and masculine in just three chapters, while the *Zhuangzi* speaks of them in only four. Buber is not pointing to these designations of gender but to one of many possible English translations for Yin and Yang. Since Yin and Yang do not appear in the *Daodejing*, Buber must be referring to Yin and Yang as found in the *Zhuangzi*. Here are a few pertinent examples:

In stillness, he [the genuine person] and the Yin share a single virtue; in motion, he and the Yang share a single flow. (Watson 2013, 120)

At that time the Yin and Yang were harmonious and still; ghosts and spirits worked no mischief; the four seasons kept to their proper order; the ten thousand things knew no injury; and living creatures were free from premature death. (Watson 2013, 123)

In the same way, heaven and earth are forms that are large, the Yin and Yang are breaths that are large, and the Dao is the generality that embraces them. (Watson 2013, 224)

The genuine person abides by the regulatory laws of nature and does not question the results they bring. A few pages after the above-quoted passage from “The Teaching of the Tao”, Buber rephrases what he says about the perfected person as follows:

“[He] reconciles and brings into accord the two primal elements of nature, the positive and the negative, Yang and Yin, which the primal unity of being tore asunder” (Buber 1957, 49). Not only this but “the perfected man is self-enclosed, secure, united out of Dao, unifying the world, a creator, ‘God’s companion’: the companion of all creating eternity” (ibid., 50). It is language such as this that has caused non-specialists of Chinese philosophy to misconstrue Daoism. Phil Huston is a case in point: “Since the unity of the world only exists for the perfected person, it is he or she who brings to life the Dao that is latent in them” (Huston 2007, 85). The oneness of the cosmos exists regardless of whether or not the genuine person exists in the world. Indeed, the genuine person in Daoism tries their utmost to remove any trace of their presence which could be taken by others as signifying “the path” to harmonizing with the Dao. Additionally, it is not accurate for Huston to describe the genuine person as one who “brings to life the Dao that is latent in them” because the Dao is innate to all things, events, transformations, and so forth. There is, therefore, nothing to “bring to life”, since the Dao lacks life and so cannot die; it exists without having a surplus or deficit and is immeasurable in time and space. The Dao is simply the source of all possibilities regardless of whether or not they are actualized.

It is this cosmological unity that the genuine person embraces and teaches the world. This teaching, however, does not take the form of linear discourse wherein others are instructed how and when to act; instead, the genuine person employs the teaching of no-words¹¹ such that it “goes forth as the shadow from the substance, as the echo responds to the sound”.¹² Put differently, the genuine person in Daoism teaches others by letting them teach themselves, by letting them discover what it means to be a living being whose fate is not self-determined but is intertwined with all other things as bestowed to them by the Dao. Given this, any discourse that espouses the pedagogical power of reason or ritual abandons the Dao and instils in humanity an erroneous scepticism of the Dao and its operative ways. Unity of knowledge thus lies with the unknowable just as the oneness of being traces its roots to nothingness. To speak of the primal Thou, one must overcome the space separating each “I” from all others so as to stand in the space of the in-between and gaze upon the eternal Thou. For Buber (and Daoism), the easiest way to accomplish this is to teach others *via* the parable.

The parable, Buber argues, is what brings genuine dialogue into the world:

The central man brings to the teaching no new element, rather he fulfils it; he raises it out of the unrecognized into the recognized and out of the

11 See *Daodejing*, chapter 43.

12 See *Zhuangzi*, chapter 11.

conditioned into the unconditioned ... As soon as the unity becomes teaching out of the ground and goal of a separated man, submerged in wordless wonder, as soon as the word stirs in this man in the hour of stillness, before the break of day, where there is yet no Thou other than the I, and the lonely talk in the dark traverses the abyss across and back the unity is already touched by parable ... That he [Zhuangzi] composed its parable is not to be understood as if he had “explained” it through things or “applied” it to things. Rather, the parable bears the unity of the teaching into all the world so that, as it before enclosed it in itself, the All now appears full of it, and no thing is so insignificant that the teaching refuses to fill it. (Buber 1957, 39–43)

We will have more to say about the parable in section four below. In the meantime, let us conclude our examination of the genuine person by turning to his knowledge. Having described the Dao and quoted extensively from the *Daodejing*, it is only in the five pages comprising section 7 of “The Teaching of the Tao” that Buber addresses the unknowable. A few pages earlier, in section 6, he states

the unknowableness of the Dao cannot be understood as one speaks of the unknowableness of some principle of a religious or philosophical explanation of the world, in order to say nevertheless something further about it. Even what the word “Dao” expresses does not express the unknowable. (Buber 1957, 46)¹³

Bearing this in mind, Buber connects the unknowable to the parable through the unity of the genuine person as it is “not in the dialectic of subject and object, but only in the unity with the all is knowledge possible” (ibid., 52). The basis for this claim is Zhuangzi’s statement that “there must first be a true man before there can be true knowledge” (Watson 2013, 42).

Unity with the all is another way of saying harmony with the Dao. That the genuine person can do so is not on account of his taking elixirs or being put into a trance by a shaman; rather, it is as the *Zhuangzi* states: “Understanding that rests in what it does not understand is the finest” (ibid., 14). That the genuine person is able to do this is because he follows the teachings of the masters of antiquity:

The men of ancient times who practiced the Dao employed tranquility to cultivate knowledge. Knowledge lived in them, yet they did nothing for its sake. So they may be said to have employed knowledge to cultivate

13 Buber’s second sentence is referring to chapter 1 of the *Daodejing*.

tranquility. Knowledge and tranquility took turns cultivating each other, and harmony and order emerged from the inborn nature ... Although men had knowledge, they did not use it. This was called the perfect unity. (ibid., 122–23)

Guarding their oneness with the Dao against sources of disturbance, the genuine person does not disturb their knowledge or grow weary of its presence within. To have knowledge but not employ it when encountering things is to let things stand in the clearing of their own being, a being they neither question nor try to alter. Buber found this idea particularly attractive, writing:

This knowledge is not knowing but being. Because it possesses things in its unity, it never stands over against them; and when it regards them, it regards them from the inside out, each thing from itself outward; but not from its appearance, rather from the essence of this thing, from the unity of this thing that it possesses in its own unity. This knowledge is each thing that it regards, and thus it lifts each thing that it regards out of appearance into being. (Buber 1957, 52)

The Daoist belief in cosmic holism and its unknowable source not only extends to its views of language, hence its adoption of the parable, but to the actions of things as well. To act according to what is unknowable is to act without preconceptions or schemes; it is an acting that is both natural to one's being and that of others. When describing the genuine person, Daoism calls their behaviour non-deliberate action (*wuwei*). For Buber, “as the true knowledge, seen from the standpoint of human speech, is called by Laozi ‘not-knowing’ ... the action of the perfected man, is called by him ‘non-action’” (Buber 1957, 53–54). When it comes to the interhuman, Daoist *wuwei* is recast in the language of the I-Thou as the “in-between”. Just as *wuwei* allows things to come together in a climate of authentic being—the in-between—we shall now analyse how it serves as a sphere within which people authentically encounter one another.

Wuwei and the In-Between

In “The Teaching of the Tao”, Buber describes *wuwei* as having these traits: it is an effecting of the whole being, it is an effecting out of gathered unity, and it stands in harmony with the nature and destiny of all things (Buber 1957, 54). During his 1928 lecture “China and Us”, delivered at the China Institute in Frankfurt, Germany, Buber had this to say about *wuwei*: “It is, I believe, in the commencing

knowledge of this action without doing, action through non-action, of this powerfulness of existence, that we can have contact with the great wisdom of China” (ibid., 125). Clearly, *wuwei* is seen by Buber as something that amounts to more than the specialized conduct of the genuine person. Indeed, according to Irene Eber, Buber does not “relate non-acting to either cognition or a special person; anyone can practice it, he implied, as long as the person realizes that short term success in the historic here and now is illusory” (Eber 1994, 456). Eric Nelson argues that *wuwei* for Buber “could reorient the West ... by indicating an alternative vision to the restless activism and consumption of modern technological civilization” (Nelson 2017, 202). Regardless, any perceived success during a *wuwei* encounter is wholly illusory because the dynamics between both parties are themselves inconstant and fleeting. The genuine person in Daoism, however, avoids the dangers of the relationship between himself and his conversational partner by dwelling in the nothingness sustaining the Dao.

Buber, as we saw above, renders Daoist nothingness as counterbeing but its function is different from his concept of the in-between. In part two of *I and Thou*, Buber argues that communal life needs to integrate the “It” into the I-Thou otherwise its isolation will lead to the demise of the collective. Without the in-between to facilitate interhuman dialogue, a genuine encounter such as what stems from two people coming together in *wuwei* will lack the means to see being and nothingness mutually nourish one another. If, as Buber says, “I require a You [Thou] to become; becoming I, I say You [Thou]. All actual life is encounter” (Buber 1970, 62), then the man of I-It is really the anti-*wuwei* man; he is the self-willed man who has no trust but wants to make things happen (Friedman 1976, 419). Maurice Friedman, who coined the phrase “anti-*wuwei* man”, goes on to say:

The anti-*wuwei* man has no grand will, only a self-will which passes off as a real will. The unbelieving core in the self-willed man can perceive nothing but unbelief and self-will, establishing a purpose, and devising means, the means here and the end there. When in thought he turns to himself, he knows this. So he spends most of his time turning his thoughts away from himself. (Friedman 1976, 419–20)

Buber does not speak of the anti-*wuwei* man; rather, it is the “capricious man [who] does not believe and encounter. He does not know association; he only knows the feverish world out there and his feverish desire to use it” (Buber 1970, 110). Regardless of what we call him, such an individual is the complete opposite to the genuine person:

The sage embraces all heaven and earth, and his bounty extends to the whole world, yet no one knows who he is or what family he belongs to. For this reason, in life he holds no titles, in death he receives no posthumous names. Realities do not gather about him, names do not stick to him—this is what is called the great man. (Watson 2013, 208)

In his selflessness, the genuine person in Daoism instantiates openness in others by redirecting the focus of their thinking away from the particularity of their being towards the oneness of the world. To take the world as a multiplicity of beings conjoined in cosmological unity is to regard the space of betweenness dividing them not as a chasm of the unknown, but as the fertile territory of becoming. Partaking in the becoming of another's being has its ontological value, but in the context of interhuman philosophy, the freeing of the word is more valuable in that one who is free in thought will concurrently enjoy a freedom of being. *Wuwei* does not produce said freedom, but instead signifies it. Given the natural world is inherently in a state of *wuwei*, anyone who mirrors its equanimous harmony will reap the benefits of oneness with the Dao: spiritual freedom. Thus, the receptive nature of *wuwei* clarifies the mind and spirit alike while strengthening the body and its essence and breath. Laozi notes how “the teaching that is not expressed in words, the advantage that is had by acting without conscious purpose, rare is it that anyone under heaven ever reaches them” (Lynn 1999, 137), while Zhuangzi argues “if the gentleman finds he has no other choice than to direct and look after the world, then the best course for him is inaction [*wuwei*]. As long as there is inaction, he may rest in the true form of his nature and fate” (Watson 2013, 75). In a similar fashion, Buber notes in “The Teaching of the Tao” that “[*wuwei*] is an effecting of the whole being. To interfere with the life of things means to harm both them and oneself. But to rest means to effect, to purify one's own soul means to purify the world, to collect oneself means to be helpful, to surrender oneself to Dao means to renew creation” (Buber 1957, 54).

Although Buber's “surrender oneself to Dao” in order to “renew creation” belongs more to the religious aspect of Daoism than the philosophical views put forward by Laozi and Zhuangzi, Buber is correct to highlight the bidirectionality of *wuwei*. We see the influence of this understanding on his concept of the in-between, which the 1951 essay “Distance and Relation” describes thusly:

Genuine conversation, and therefore every actual fulfillment of relation between men, means acceptance of otherness. When two men inform one another of the basically different views about an object, each aiming to convince the other of the rightness of his own way of looking at the

matter ... the desire to influence the other then does not mean the effort to change the other, to inject one's own "rightness" into him; but it means the effort to let that which is recognized as right, as just, as true ... take seed and grow in the form suited to individuation. (Buber 1965, 69)

Suspending words in the in-between reconnects them with their root in the unsayable by forcing them to shrug-off their human conferred ornamentation. In the realm of the in-between, classifying things via attributes belonging to the I-It is no longer possible since the in-between nullifies all designations outside of its own betweenness. Said differently, "the interhuman opens out what otherwise remains unopened" (ibid., 86). Should the genuine person leave the unopened as such, its presence in the world will go unnoticed by all who are not attuned to it. This is not to say the closedness of the in-between vanishes whenever it is overlooked by humanity; rather, humanity's attunement to the in-between weakens to such an extent that it is not even thought of. We thus lose the ability to think of the primal Thou whose oneness unites us in its togetherness of being and nothingness. Knowing increasingly less about what we are unable to utter, we take the words of the I-It as the extant of the knowable; however, we run into a problem which the *Zhuangzi* poetically expresses as:

We can use words to talk about the coarseness of things, and we can use our minds to visualize the fineness of things. But what words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing—this has nothing to do with coarseness or fineness. (Watson 2013, 129)

Elliot Wolfson characterizes the in-between as "double-faced" since it is ontologically prior to all relations while also being posterior to the particular events of relation (Wolfson 1989, 433), and he derives this idea from Buber's essay "Distance and Relation" which states:

For the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men, that is, pre-eminently in the mutuality of the making present—in the making present of another self and in the knowledge that one is made present in his own self by the other—together with the mutuality of acceptance, of affirmation and confirmation. (Buber 1965, 71)

Referring to Buber's 1957 essay "Elements of the Interhuman", Martin Freidman explains "making present" as "to imagine quite concretely what another person is

wishing, feeling, perceiving, and thinking ... [it is] a bold swinging into the other which demands the intensest action of one's being to imagine the particular real person in all her wholeness, unity, and uniqueness" (Friedman 1999, 408). Recalling our earlier remarks on Buber's renunciation of mysticism, it must be said that he continued to write about it in the 1929 essay "Dialogue" and in "What is Man?" from 1938. In the latter essay, Buber lays the groundwork for his concept of "making present" by connecting it to the mystery of being:

In an essential relation, on the other hand, the barriers of individual being are in fact breached and a new phenomenon appears which can appear only in this way: one life open to another—not steadily, but so to speak attaining its extreme reality only from point to point, yet also able to acquire a form in the continuity of life; the other becomes present not merely in the imagination or feeling, but in the depths of one's substance, so that one experiences the mystery of the other being in the mystery of one's own. (Buber 2002, 201–02)

An essential relation is thus one whereby genuine dialogue rises to the fore and each party turns towards the being of the other as if it were their own. Turning to the being of the other is to become open to oneself, to rediscover oneself as the Thou or non-self of Daoism. Relatability between non-selves is hence the crux of interhuman philosophy, as it is the realm of becoming whose possibilities can only blossom in the state of passive receptivity that is *wuwei*. If *wuwei* is the milieu wherein genuine dialogue occurs, the question we must ask is not what *wuwei* entails but why genuine dialogue is a turning to the (non-) being of Thou? Before answering this question, a few final observations on Buber's use of *wuwei* are in order.

In *I and Thou* Buber asserts that *wuwei* is the action of a person who is whole because "nothing particular, nothing partial is at work in [the *wuwei*] man and thus nothing of him intrudes into the world" (Buber 1970, 125). Both Laozi and Zhuangzi describe the genuine person as one who leaves no trace in the world, reflects the world without retaining anything, speaks without talking, and so forth. What does this mean? The best way to explain it is via the analogy of the tree. In the *Zhuangzi*, the tree appears in twenty-one of its chapters,¹⁴ two instances of which are the following:

Carpenter Shi went to Qi and when he got to Crooked Shaft, he saw a serrate oak standing by the village shrine. It was broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around, towering

14 The tree also appears in two chapters of the *Daodejing*.

above the hills ... When Mr. Shi was returning, the altar-oak appeared to him in a dream, and said, "What other tree will you compare with me? ... How is it that you a useless man know all this about me a useless tree?" (Watson 2013, 30)

Zhuangzi was walking in the mountains when he saw a huge tree, its branches and leaves thick and lush. A woodcutter paused by its side but made no move to cut it down. When Zhuangzi asked the reason, he replied, "There's nothing it could be used for!" Zhuangzi said, "Because of its worthlessness, this tree is able to live out the years heaven gave it." (ibid., 156)

Not intruding into the world as the tree stands free in its selflessness, the person of *wuwei* relinquishes their calculating mind to blend in natural harmony with the Dao. In this state of "mindlessness" the genuine person has nothing with which to intrude upon others, hence things are encountered as if they were but one branch of the Dao intertwining with another. Thus, in their selfless and traceless existence, the genuine person appears as a mirage-like figure, neither downplaying nor embellishing the state of things but reflecting them as they are. This being the case, humanity turns to the genuine person when words and actions disrupt the equilibrium of the world. For Buber, this person signifies the branchness of the branch, the treeness of the tree, and does so due to their mastery of *wuwei*.

In dialogue 4 of *Daniel*, Buber offers the following insight: "Look at the ground, at the shadows of the trees as they stretch themselves over our path. Have you ever seen in the upper world of the trees a branch so outlined, so clear, so abstract as here? Is that not the branchness of the branch?" (Buber 1964, 10). In section 1 of *I and Thou* we read: "The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently ... what I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself" (Buber 1970, 57–59). Finally, in discussing chapter 1 of the *Daodejing* during his stay in Ascona, Buber says: "Is the tree a complex of vibrations? No, this tree is something in itself. But only insofar as it is something for me. Both are created for each other" (Buber 2013, 228). Interhuman philosophy resembles these portrayals of the tree; standing before it as we do, the tree in its being teaches humanity about our own standing in the world. This being to being standing translates into a mutual becoming, whereby the I-ness of the human self and that of the tree coalesce into primal oneness. In this way, the ontic differences between human and tree give way to the ontological unity of existence wherein being and nothingness stand alongside one another and are realized in the form of authentic experience.

Genuine Dialogue as Turning to Being

As the connection between Buber's interhuman philosophy and Daoism comes into focus, the remaining pages of this paper will be devoted to elucidating the nature of genuine dialogue and how it aids our turning to being. In his exegetical study of Buber's translation of the *Zhuangzi*, Jonathan Herman observes the following traits of Buber's language of the parable: first, Laozi's words are concealed in silent images but *Zhuangzi*'s belong to the existential multiplicities of oneness; second, unlike the elemental oneness of Laozi, *Zhuangzi*'s is attainable, belonging to the life of things as well as their fulfillment in the world; third, *Zhuangzi*'s use of parable allows those who grasp it to realize their actuality and most profound state of being human.¹⁵ If we broaden the context of Herman's remarks to include all of Buber's writings, their relevancy to the latter's dialogical thought of unity through affinity of difference remains undiminished. In his "Elements of the Interhuman" Buber proclaims:

I affirm the person I struggle with: I struggle with him as his partner, I confirm him as creature and as creation, I confirm him who is opposed to me as him who is over against me. It is true that it now depends on the other whether genuine dialogue, mutuality in speech arises between us. But if I thus give to the other who confronts me his legitimate standing as a man with whom I am ready to enter into dialogue, then I may trust him and suppose him to be also ready to deal with me as his partner. (Buber 1965, 79–80)

In the introduction to Buber's *Between Man and Man*, Maurice Friedman says something to the same effect:

Dialogue is not merely the interchange of words—genuine dialogue can take place in silence, whereas much conversation is really monologue. It is, rather, the response of one's whole being to the otherness of the other, that otherness that is comprehended only when I open myself to him in the present and in the concrete situation and respond to his need even when he himself is not aware that he is addressing me. (Buber 2002, xvi)

What is interesting about this turning to being is that it can occur in either dialogue or silence. The wordless teaching of Daoism finds equivalency in Buber's notion that whenever another person makes themselves knowable, their openness of being is accepted in its particularness while simultaneously acknowledging its

¹⁵ See Herman (1996, 114, 115, 116).

inclusion in the unity of the primal Thou. As long as both participants in genuine dialogue do not think in terms of outer and inner, the realm of the interhuman is preserved; as long as both participants in genuine dialogue turn towards the (non-)being of the primal Thou, the oneness of their existence remains authentic. In other words, turning to the being of the other involves nothing less than confirming said being as a mutual partner. Buber writes:

The chief presupposition for the rise of genuine dialogue is that each should regard his partner as the very one he is. I become aware of him ... I accept whom I thus see, so that in full earnestness I can direct what I say to him as the person he is. (Buber 1965, 79)

In Daoism, recognition of this kind assumes an onto-cosmological air when Zhuangzi claims that “heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me” (Watson 2013, 13).

Daoism’s cosmological outlook bears upon the style of its teaching which is itself informed by its views on the nature of language. We saw an example of this in section 3 above when quoting from chapter 17 of the *Zhuangzi*. In terms of genuine dialogue and the turning to being, there is an often overlooked yet significant component in the form of silence. Buber writes: “It is not necessary for all who are joined in a genuine dialogue actually to speak; those who keep silent can on occasion be especially important” (Buber 1965, 87). The *Zhuangzi* assigns silence a more profound role, declaring it to be “the absence of words which shares the same principle with things themselves” (Watson 2013, 226). An absence of words is not indicative of ignorance, quite the opposite—silence is the genuine way of the Dao, the praxis of the genuine person, and the sphere in which an authentic turning to being occurs. Silence abrogates the artificial differences imposed on things by letting them stand free in the in-between of I and Thou (self and non-self in Daoism). The absence of words, therefore, is the generative emptiness of the Dao in which words take shelter from challenges to their meaning that inevitably arises once they are attached to things.

What is needed for the preservation of genuine dialogue is the receptivity of *wuwei*. As genuine dialogue is rooted in the openness of truthfulness and not in words that are selfish or false, said truth, according to Buber in “Elements of the Interhuman”, necessitates people “communicate themselves to one another as what they are ... [and depends] on his letting no seeming creep in between himself and the other ... granting to the man to whom he communicates himself a share in his being” (Buber 1965, 77). In other words, genuine dialogue is akin to an “abiding of difference” (Wolfson 1989, 442). Abiding in the betweenness of things

is, therefore, to regard their otherness as an opportunity to further one's awareness to the reality of the interhuman as a "partnership in a living event".¹⁶ However, we must be weary of arbitrarily acknowledging differences in times where none exist. This is more challenging than it sounds when the medium of delimitation is language. Zhuangzi thus offers the following advice: "Be broad and expansive like the endlessness of the four directions ... Embrace the ten thousand things universally ... When the ten thousand things are unified and equal, then which is short and which is long?" (Watson 2013, 132) Rather than turning inwardly or outwardly to things, it would be better to let them flourish in the unity of the primal Thou or the Dao.

An added benefit of turning to things via oneness instead of said things directly is that it protects us from spiritual harm should our encounter fail to transcend the level of physical experience. To "communicate oneself as one is" is not a fancy way for Buber to implore people to be more sincere with their words in that words can, paradoxically, arise from an insincere heart. The genuine conversational encounter involves putting the subjective I-self into temporary stasis to create a path for the primal Thou-self (the non-self of the Dao) to shine forth. Speaking with one's spirit instead of the mind is thus an open declaration of one's participation in the collective being of the world. In Daoism, to be open to being is to inoculate oneself against the intoxicating power of words and seek solace in the creative potentiality of the Dao.

Taking *wuwei* as his model, the genuine person clings to the ungrounded word and observes the world in all its spontaneous unfolding. Any ensuing dialogue will employ words in a wholly different manner from those of common conversation. Such being the case, turning to the being of one's conversational partner whilst in a state of *wuwei* is to look beyond the physicality of the It-self as a thing whose differences are cast by others as a challenge to one's own humanity. Genuine dialogue thus transcends the limitations of words by bringing to life the silence from which they arise and recede. Being informed by the abiding nature of the Dao or primal Thou is not a solitary path however. People become spiritually attenuated in genuine dialogue, both to themselves and their conversational partner, as well as to the ultimacy of the eternally ungrounded. Buber sums it up perfectly in comments he made on chapter 29 of the *Daodejing*: "Community is not the sum of individual individuals who complement each other, but something self-acting, spiritual, like everything really living that cannot be created. If it exists, it cannot be usurped by anyone, it resists, it is unassailable as long as it is community" (Buber 2013, 259).

16 This expression is from Buber (1965, 74).

Conclusion

With people who genuinely stand before being, expressing themselves without the semblance of selfish motives or false pretences, the resultant dialogue “brings out an aspect of the human person which would otherwise remain dormant” (Moore 1996, 102). In his 1953 essay “Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace”, Buber explains why, in his view, modern society has been unable to bring such dormancy to life:

[T]he crisis of speech is bound up with this loss of trust in the closest possible fashion, for I can only speak to someone in the true sense of the term if I expect him to accept my word as genuine ... This incapacity for unreserved intercourse with the other points to an innermost sickness of the sense of existence. One symptom of this sickness, and the most acute of all, is the one from which I have begun, that a genuine word cannot arise between the camps. (Buber 1957, 234–38)

Seven decades later, this sickness has not only failed to abate, it has mutated into something far more dangerous. What Buber saw in Daoism was not a means to escape the ills of the world but a toolkit of ideas that could be used to reconfigure modern society’s approach to thinking about being, the importance of drawing ourselves together in unity, and relearning the joy to be had in silent conversation. To continue down the road of radical individualism, mechanical thinking without addressing the flourishing of spirit, to be driven by the desires of being, all the while ignoring the presence of nothingness (counterbeing), unless humanity can reverse these actions genuine dialogue will amount to nothing more than a phantom. Without genuine dialogue to illuminate us, the wonderment of the world will remain a mystery. Buber’s turn to Daoism is precisely the kind of edification modern society needs to lead us out of the fog of disillusionment we find ourselves in, and into the clearing of mutual nourishment that is authentic life.

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