

A note on rethinking Martin Buber's 'I consider a tree'

DISCUSSION

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.119952>

In the original English version of *I and Thou* (1937) and in a postscript to the second English edition (1958), Martin Buber assured his readers that an *I–Thou* relationship is possible between a person and a tree. Considering the importance of dialogue in that form of relationship, commentators have often looked for ways to bypass the tree's inability to speak in reconceptualising the *I–Thou* relationship. This article looks instead at the importance of the person's ability to hear what trees may be telling us as a way of understanding Buber's point. A story found in Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946) is used as an illustration.

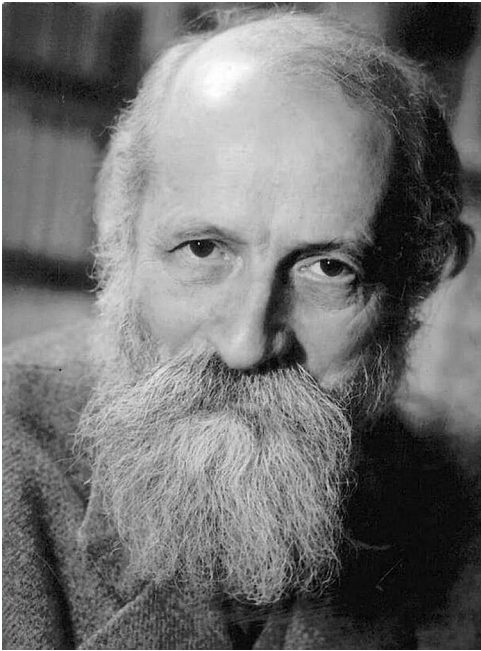
One section of Martin Buber's *I and Thou* that has understandably received considerable attention is called 'I consider a tree'; it fills only a page and a half (Buber 1958: 7–8). Here, Buber suggests that one can relate to a tree as to an object, an *It*, but also as a *Thou*. And since dialogic reciprocity is at the heart of an *I–Thou* relationship, Buber adds as if to preclude a possible misunderstanding, that he has no experience of a tree having consciousness. Originally published in German in 1923 and in English translation in 1937, when Buber's book appeared in a second English edition in 1958, it included a

postscript clearly intended to help shed light on the prospect of an *I–Thou* relationship between a person and a tree. Here is a key passage of that postscript:

It is part of our concept of a plant that it cannot react to our action towards it: it cannot 'respond'. Yet this does not mean that we are given simply no reciprocity at all. The deed or attitude of an individual being is certainly not to be found here, but there is a reciprocity of the being itself, a reciprocity which is nothing but being in its course (*seiend*). That living wholeness of the tree, which denies itself to the sharpest glances of the mere investigator and discloses itself to the glance of one who says *Thou*, is there when he, the sayer of *Thou*, is there: it is he who vouchsafes to the tree that it manifest this unity and wholeness; and now the tree which is in being manifests them. (Buber 1958: 126)

Needless to say, the postscript did little to settle the issue, though it did contain a useful hint, to which we will soon return.

There have been many attempts to reconcile having an *I–Thou* relationship to a tree with a tree's inability to speak. One solution was to suggest that relating to a tree really means relating to the 'eternal You' through



Martin Buber in Palestine/Israel between 1940 and 1950.

the tree (Coleman 1989: 143); another strategy was inspired by Buber's evocation of a 'reciprocity of the being itself' in the post-script and meant seeing the living wholeness of the tree as the basis for an *I-Thou* relationship with it (Margulies 2017: 333); and yet another approach was to posit a third type of relationship – the *I-Ens* – defined as an *I-Thou* relationship minus the faculty of speech, thereby providing an option tailored to the properties of the tree (Santmire 2018). And this is just a sampling of proposed strategies for preventing the tree's inability to speak from precluding its participation in an *I-Thou* relationship.

But what if the real issue lies elsewhere, in the ability or inability of the human partner to hear the tree's voice? In an essay on dialogue Buber wrote in 1929, a man who withholds himself, who is not really *there*, is described as subjected to a childhood's spell which can be lifted in a moment of grace, thereby 'bursting asunder the seven iron bands about our heart'

(Buber 1961: 3–4). If I may take that liberation entirely out of context and apply it to the issue of *I-Thou* relationships with trees, perhaps we could conclude that an ability to hear what a tree might be telling us depends on the breaking of a spell that binds our heart.

Let me give an example, drawn from Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, first published in German in 1946 under the title *Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager* and in English as *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*. While imprisoned at Auschwitz and other death camps, Frankl was a keen observer of human behaviour under the worst possible circumstances. He noted that 'the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision', and not of camp influences alone. He observed that 'the last inner freedom cannot be lost' and that the freedom with which some prisoners bore their suffering 'was a genuine inner achievement'. He found, however, that only a few of the prisoners 'kept their full inner liberty', one of whom was a woman whose death he witnessed.

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful despite this knowledge. 'In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously.' Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, 'This tree here is the only friend I have in my loneliness'. Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. 'I often talk to this tree,' she said to me. I was startled and didn't quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? I asked her if the tree replied. 'Yes.' What did it say to her? She answered, 'It said to me, "I am here – I am here – I am life, eternal life".' (Frankl 2004: 77–8)

Her dialogue with the tree was an accomplishment made possible by the inner freedom she had fought to preserve, and even Frankl – here in the role of ‘a mere investigator’ – had been unable to imagine her dialogue with the tree before she explained it to him. Perhaps this is precisely the sort of thing Buber had in mind when he wrote in the postscript to the second edition of *I and Thou* these words, which may now have more resonance than they did the first time they were cited:

That living wholeness of the tree, which denies itself to the sharpest glances of the mere investigator and discloses itself to the glance of one who says *Thou*, is there when [she], the sayer of *Thou*, is there. (Buber 1958: 126) ■

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