

Existential Philosophy of Education: A Buberian Response

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Abstract

In this paper, an attempt has been made to exposit how an understanding of Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue can help us to clarify and answer some of the questions that are being raised in the theorization about Education from the existential perspective. In this attempt, first of all, a discussion about the ways in which the relationship between existentialism and education has been understood. Subsequently, a discussion about the critique of an existential perspective in theorization about education will be attempted. An overview of the extent to which the discourse of Philosophy of Education has acknowledged or ignored Buber's contribution to Philosophy of Education will be presented. This will be followed by a discussion about how an understanding of Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue might help us to answer some of these critiques.

Keywords- *Buber, Philosophy, Dialogue*

In the recent writings about the existential perspective in education, as reflected in studies related to the increasing feeling of dehumanization (Tubbs, 2013), concerns about the education of the persons (Ekanem, 2012), authentic education (Mayes, 2010), special education & inclusion (Veck, 2012) (Shady & Larson, 2010), or in search of an educational theory in the uncertain times (Webster, 2002), it is also being seen as a way to live in the alienating and anxiety provoking era of uncertainty (Malik & Akhter, 2012). Thus it seems pertinent to relook at the critique of existential perspective in education focusing especially on the writings in the latter part of the twentieth century.

In this attempt, first of all, a discussion about the ways in which the relationship between existentialism and education has been understood. Subsequently, a discussion about the critique of an existential perspective in theorization about education will be attempted. This would be followed by an overview of the extent to which the discourse of Philosophy of Education has acknowledged or ignored Buber's contribution to Philosophy of Education will be presented. Then a discussion about how an understanding of Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue might help us to answer some of these critiques will follow.

Existentialist thought is concerned with human reality in its concreteness. This concern does bring into focus the solitariness, alienation and angst which was the ethos of the life and times in which existentialist thought emerged, however, it must be emphasized that even though Existentialism emerged in a gloomy context of World Wars, it is not just a pathological product of a certain historic situation but it goes beyond to an optimism that is a result of deep reflection and contemplation of human predicament. This movement from a sense of helplessness to the power of will and agency is what existentialism aims at. If philosophy wants to help in this human journey, then it needs to be nothing less than but a way of life. Philosophy, therefore, would need to be more than a body of propositions or an attempt to capture the essence of life through reason.

Existentialism can be seen as more of a way of philosophizing rather than a school of philosophy. Therefore, existentialists do not start with a common body of doctrines. Nevertheless, existentialists do have some common themes like, freedom, responsibility, authenticity, guilt, alienation, emotions, death and being etc. But all existentialists

conceptualize about these themes in their own unique ways and because of which they so tend to reject any label that is ascribed to them, whether it be that of being an 'existentialist'. Even though "the diversity among them (the existentialists) testifies to the fact that the so-called existentialist movement has no unity of aim or of doctrine" (Schneider, 1967, p. 469), it must be taken as the strength of the Existentialist Movement rather than a limitation. One of the most basic characteristics of existentialism is that "this style of philosophizing begins from man rather than from nature" (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 14). However, this starting from man is not being limited to a Cartesian thinking subject, for whom 'I think, therefore I am' (1984, p. 17; AT7:25) is the point of departure leading to a dualist and rationalist philosophy, rather "for the existentialists the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing" (Macquarrie, 1972, pp. 14-15), in the entirety of his lived reality. It is true that Existentialists "will be more interested in developing the affective side of man, his capacity to love, to appreciate, to respond emotionally to the world about him" (Morris, 1954, p. 255), but he will never suggest that this should be done at the cost of man's ability to reason. Nevertheless, the "existentialist is not an irrationalist in the sense of supporting his claims by appeal to mystical insight, 'gut' feeling, or other non-rational founts of knowledge" (Cooper, 1999, p. 14). The existentialists focus on the whole being rather than aspects or parts of it; they talk about the plight of man as well as his uniqueness; the focus is on the lived rather than on the conceptualized; the being is inseparable from the world rather than one adjusting to and being subordinate to the world or being the one who is appropriating the world to his desires; and the concern is with meaning or 'how to be' rather than with how or 'what to have'. However, "existentialism does see hope behind the desperation" (Ornstein, Levine, Gutek, & Vocke, 2010) and gives to man an 'agency', responsibility derived from freedom to 'choose' and a freedom to 'be'. "If existentialism must begin in agony, it is capable of issuing exhilarating sensations of human power" (Morris, 1966, p. 4).

One must approach the writings of the existentialists with an attitude of encountering existence in its wholeness, and with all its complexities and paradoxes. Since existentialists conceptualize differently, one must refrain from making sweeping generalizations like "the existentialist method is an individualistic method" (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 17); that "according to existentialist point of view, people have two choices: they can either define themselves or they can choose to be defined by others" (Martin & Loomis, 2006, p. 52); that "they have advocated extreme subjectivism in philosophizing" (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 17); that "Existentialists view society only as a new mode of tyranny over the minds of men" (Morris, 1954, p. 258), or that "With the possible exception of Jean Paul Sartre, existentialist writers tend to be either a-historical or anti-historical" (Sutherland, 1967, p. 167). These generalizations will be discussed in detail later in the paper when a Buberian response to the critique of an existential philosophy of education will be presented.

Existentialism and Education

The possibility of an existential philosophy of education has been questioned by many scholars through their critiques like, "As for pedagogy, it seem inevitable that the existential school will become more individual-centered. In a way, it will have to be, since its prime consideration is the individual living unattached in a friendless world" (Morris, 1954, p. 256). Similarly, there are various other questions are raised for an educational theory based on existential thought, like

"What would a curriculum based on existentialism consist of? In what ways would the behavior of an 'existentialist teacher' differ from any other teacher? Would an 'existentialist administrator' operate in ways different from any other? Is the very existence of the school as an institution of

society consistent with existentialism's general lack of concern with and for institutions?" (Denton, 1968, p. 101).

A similar critique is presented by Null (2011, pp. 85-86) saying that

"The primary weakness of existentialism is its neglect of the subject matter commonplace. Its extreme emphasis on the individual needs of learners leaves little room for organized bodies of knowledge to be taught in a coherent way. This rejection of subject matter leads to a curriculum that disconnects learners from their cultural heritage... Traditional forms of subject matter are repositories of our cultural past. Failing to connect students with this knowledge does them a disservice, one that ultimately traps them in a life spent satisfying their own desires as opposed to one spent seeking to comprehend the world around them. Liberation becomes impossible if learners are taught to pursue only what their emotions tell them to learn".

As has been discussed, existentialists conceptualize differently about the human situation, but "there is an underlying tendency to identify Existentialism with the ideas of Sartre and attempt to relate his philosophy to education" (Baker, 1966, p. 216). "Though, Sartre is certainly a significant representative of atheistic existentialism, but any study of existentialism must include thinkers (existentialists) whose conclusions are radically opposed to his" (Diamond, 1960, p. 16) like those of Marcel, Jaspers and Buber. However, the various scholars of Educational Theory tend to generalize about the Existential thought and sometimes write so sweepingly that it gives an impression that either the existentialists are a group of rebels who are idiosyncratic, self-centered, anti-social, or anti-institutions or that the existential thought had concluded with Sartre.

Even with this seemingly incomplete reading there are, but only a few, writings which can be called as balanced and conscious by taking into consideration the differences between different thinkers of existentialism, both theist and atheist, like that of Bowers (1965), Baker (1966), Macquarrie (1972), Cooper (1999), and Ornstein, Levine, Gutek, & Vocke (2010),.

Following is a brief discussion of these critique, however, Wheeler (1967, p. 7) rightly points that "perhaps the discussion of existentialism and education has been somewhat compromised by the tendency to try to determine the supposed 'implications' of existentialism for education. It would be regrettable if this approach stifled an interest in existentialist writing and comment on education" and therefore the following discussion of Buber's views on the educational process would be not with an intent to find implications and do away with all the questions, but with an effort to be in dialogue with Buber's writings and to think in the direction pointed by him.

One of the important Jewish Existentialist (Diamond, 1960), whom I am focusing upon in this paper, is Martin Buber. However, studies about existentialism and education either write in a generalized way about existentialism and existentialists (Kaplan & Owings, 2010) (Fallico, 1954), or like that of (Kneller, 1958), (Morris, 1954), (Koirala, 2011), (Emery, 1971), and (Copleston, 1948) either just mentions Buber or completely ignore his contribution to the theory of Education. The following discussion is limited to the above mentioned general critique of an existentialist theory of education and is in no way a comprehensive account of Buber's thought regarding theory of education.

Martin Buber as an Existentialist

Martin Buber, one of the leading existentialists, philosophized at length about Dialogue. He is described as a theistic existentialist, theologian, philosophical anthropologist, a scholar and a translator. His writings span across the fields of Jewish folklore and fiction,

Christian and Hasidic studies, Zionism and Judaism, philosophical anthropology and theology, education and psychotherapy, psychology and art.

Buber presented his conceptualization of dialogue in 1923, in his highly influential magnum opus 'I and Thou', which has been a landmark work for the disciplines of Philosophical Anthropology, Communication, Education and Philosophy. Buber is an important thinker in the legacy of the philosophical thought of Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Kant, Sociological thought of Simmel and dialogical thought of Scheler, Marcel, Jaspers, Rosenzweig, and Boheme.

Buber's stature among the existentialists is clear from the following words of Brunner (1967, p. 309) that "existentialism as it has developed since Kierkegaard does not by any means reach the depth of Buber's simple but profoundly revolutionary fundamental insight". His dialogical philosophy is perceived as "one of the decisive discoveries of our time - the Copernican revolution of modern thought" by German theologian Karl Heim as early as 1930 (Friedman, 1955, p. 164). Buber "more than any other Existentialist, has, in the spirit of Dewey, treated education as a serious topic for philosophical inquiry, one which is an integral part of his I-Thou philosophy" (Baker, 1966, p. 222). Buber, among all existentialists, probably has written most clearly and extensively about education.

The Person and the Community

"One of the misconceptions to clarify about existentialism is the claim that it is too individualistic" (DuBose, 2010, p. 309) and does not give importance to the community or social institutions. Though, it can be accepted to an extent that some existentialists are against collectivism like Kierkegaard who posits 'the single one' against 'the crowd', but Heidegger and Sartre do try to move towards others through their conceptualization of 'being-for-others' and 'being-with-others'. Nevertheless, there is a profound conceptualization of *community* in some existentialists like Buber and Marcel. Many existential thinkers advocate the interpersonal approach "but the best known of all is the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber" (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 58). Buber's ontology of the 'realm of the between' or the 'interhuman' and conceptualization of 'dialogue' are totally immune to this critique. Buber's affinity to the community through the Jewish thought of Hasidism is so much that it is appropriate to say that "Buber filtered Kierkegaard's existentialism through the teachings of Hasidism" (Diamond, 1960, p. 11).

Buber proposes the 'interhuman' as "a separate category of our existence" (Buber, 1965, p. 72). The interhuman is the realm between men rather than a social realm. Any realm can be the realm of the interhuman if for a person "the other happens as the particular other" (Buber, 1965, p. 74). It is when one becomes aware of the other in such a way that a relation is established and they regard each other as partners rather than using each other as objects that the realm of the interhuman appears. It is the sphere in which a person is confronted by the other in a mutual relation. Buber (1965, p. 75) called the unfolding of the sphere of the interhuman as 'the dialogical'. Buber makes it clear at the outset that "it is basically erroneous to try to understand the interhuman phenomena as psychological" (Buber, 1965, p. 75). The meaning of the conversation cannot be found neither in one or the other partner nor in both together but in their dialogue, but in the 'between'.

Historicity of the self

Since the emphasis is on the person in the world, for existentialists and especially for Buber, the situation of every person in a historical context is important. According to him, "each child is born with a given disposition of "world-historical" origin, that is, inherited from the riches of the whole human race, and that he is born into a given situation of "world-historical" origin, that is, produced from the riches of the world's events" (2002, p. 98). Thus the subject of Buber is not an 'individual', separate from the world and other human beings

but a 'person' who is affected by the world and in turn affects the world. This person is in relation with others and is thereby defined by the others. For Buber "the self is "social" by nature; its very "essence" is interpersonal" (Herberg, 1956, p. 15). Hence the mutuality in the human existence can be seen as "fundamental and must be regarded as the ontological basis of human life" (Rotenstreich, 2009, p. 21). Nevertheless, this person is not determined by the historical situation, but is influenced and in turn influences it.

Relationship with the 'other'

It may be said that some of the existentialists do stress upon the individual but "probably all the leading existentialists pay at least lip-service to the truth that man exists as a person only in a community of persons" (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 17). However, in Buber's thought the 'other' is, at the least as important as the 'self' is.

When the 'other' is approached with an attitude of use or manipulation, a relationship between a subject and object is established, which is the relationship of an 'I' with an 'It'. It is a relation of a person with a thing, of separateness and detachment involving some form of utilization, domination, or control. A relation in which the 'other' is experienced and thus objectified, that is, 'it' is perceived, imagined, sensed, thought-about and felt. The 'I-It' relation is never spontaneous since it has a past only as things can be experienced after there has been an effect. Buber's explication of the 'I-It' relation questions the dependence of positivists, empiricists and pragmatists on the distinction between the subject and the object in method of knowing, for in the realm of 'I-It' only that one can perceive an ordered, detached, reliable, predictable world, which can be verified by the senses alone.

However, when the attitude of mutuality, reciprocity and wholeness are there while addressing the other, the other becomes a 'Thou'. Only an 'I-Thou' relation can lead up to dialogue in which persons turn toward each other in their being. They accept each other as partner in dialogue no matter what their respective positions are. In an 'I-Thou' relation every act of objectification of the other is violence to the other's otherness. The 'other' is essentially irreducible to the self-same.

Dialogue

When an 'I-Thou' relationship is established with the 'other' then we can say that dialogue has been established. According to Buber (2002, p. 22) there are three kinds of dialogue: There is 'genuine dialogue'- no matter whether spoken or silent- each of the participants faces the other in their whole being. They turn to each other with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation. Then, there is 'technical dialogue'- which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding. And third is 'monologue disguised as dialogue', in which two or more men meeting in a space speaks with themselves in intricate and circular ways and yet imagine they have been able to have a dialogue with the other.

The nature of dialogue may also change with the nature of relationship in which the dialogue is happening. The two aspects, which differentiate between the various kinds of 'dialogic relations', are 'mutuality' and 'inclusion'. Mutuality is there when partners turn to each other in wholeness. The act of 'inclusion' is that which makes it possible to meet and know the other in his concrete uniqueness and not just as a content of one's experience. For example, when two persons are debating over a point they may realise the shortcomings of their own perspective spontaneously, this kind of dialogical relation is 'disputation'. Disputation is abstract because it leaves the wholeness outside the relationship, but it may have a mutual experience of inclusion. Secondly, like in education where 'mutuality' is there but there is one sided experience of inclusion which is the inclusion of the child by the educator. The third kind of dialogue is friendship which has mutuality as well as inclusion by both the partners.

An understanding about knowledge built upon Buber's conceptualization of dialogue does not disparage the objective or the introspective ways of knowing, but definitely acknowledges them and attempts to establish dialogue as a complementary way of knowing at the least, and as a way of being at its best.

Teacher-student Relationship

The relationship of education is made possible by mutuality, because it makes the pupil trusting and accessible. Inclusion in education is one sided as "the educator stands at both ends of the common situation, the pupil only at one end" (Buber, 2002, p. 119). However, this one-sidedness is important since it sustains the educative relation, because it preserves the distance between participants otherwise "In the moment when the pupil is able to throw himself across and experience from over there, the educative relation would be burst asunder, or change into friendship" (Buber, 2002, p. 119). Similarly, in other 'I-Thou' helping relationships—those of educator and pupil, parent and child, doctor and patient—this experiencing of the other side cannot be expected to be mutual without destroying the relationship or converting it into friendship.

Buber places a lot of emphasis on the role of educator as an educative force. Buber contrasts "the principle of the "new" education as "Eros" with that of the "old" education as the "will to power" (2002, p. 110). On one hand, where earlier the educator was considered as the bearer of assured values who was expected to fill the student's head as through a funnel in a disciplinarian fashion; on the other hand, the new educator with desires to enjoy child because "Eros is choice made from an inclination" (Buber, 2002, p. 112). However, both the situations stifle the growth of the child. Buber asserts that the educator, like the doctor for his client, must be free from the desire to dominate or to enjoy the child. The educator must only point out or give subtle hint about the various values and this encounter would be effective only when has first imbibed them in his being. Therefore, Buber presents the educator as an ascetic who rejoices in the world for the sake of the responsibility for child who is entrusted to the educator's influence but not his interference. For him the most inward achievement of the relation in education is trust of the child in the world. This trust is achieved by the real presence of the educator for the child and a true education is the education of the character which can happen only in dialogue.

The educator must not interfere in the child's wholeness lest he divides the soul into an obedient and a rebellious part, but the educator must integrate the child via the integrity of his own being. The educator must be spontaneous and wholly alive to be able to communicate directly with other beings. Buber also distinguishes between propaganda and education where propaganda is only about influencing the other person for exploitation; education, in contrast, recognizes each child as a unique person and prepares him to fulfil a special task he is destined to. Education helps the child to develop his own unique relationship with truth and god enabling him to face the other.

The educator's role is even more important when the release of the various creative instincts inherent in the child takes place. These creative instincts upon their release meets the educative forces personified in the educator and it is dependent on "their purity and fervour, their power of love and their discretion, into what connexions the freed element enters and what becomes of it" (Buber, 2002, pp. 102-103). Sidorkin (1999, p. 2) observes a shift of focus in pedagogy from behaviour to relation, which is visible in the writings of many thinkers, such as Nel Noddings, Gilligan, Jane Martin, Gert Biesta, and Frank Morgonis, and because of this shift "educational theory experiences certain paradigm crisis – we are no longer able to give educational practitioners an advice, because we think in term of doing. However, "it is the lack of language for describing what works in schools that among other things prevents educators from turning every school into a good place to spend one's childhood" (1999, p. 2). Thus, the need is to start thinking about 'being in relation' rather

than 'having a relation'; about becoming responsible rather than making others responsible. Here is an existentialist cry to "let education be the discovery of responsibility! Let learning be the sharp and vivid awakening of the learner to the sense of being personally answerable for his own life" (Morris, 1966, p. 117).

The Child

Buber considers the birth of a child as the ultimate creative act of nature. Every child has certain instincts which shine forth during his lifetime. Among the many creative instincts, Buber mentions two important instincts namely, the 'originator instinct' and the 'instinct for communion'. The 'originator instinct' is an autonomous instinct in which what the child desires is its own share in this becoming of things: it wants to be the subject of this event of production" (Buber, 2002, p. 100). Buber criticises those theories of knowledge which has as its basis the assumption that the child learns because he has an instinct to busy himself or a need to indulge in some sort of activity or enjoyment. He clarifies that this instinct is not a derivative of any other instinct like instinct to 'busyness' or 'activity'; the 'libido'; the 'will to power' or 'having'. The originator instinct "no matter to what power it is raised, never becomes greed; ... which alone among the instincts can grow only to passion, not to lust; which alone among the instincts cannot lead its subject away to invade the realm of other lives. Here is pure gesture which does not snatch the world to itself, but expresses itself to the world" (Buber, 2002, p. 102).

Nevertheless, the originator instinct makes us solitary because it cannot lead us to "sharing in an undertaking and to entering into mutuality" (Buber, 2002, p. 193) with others. The instinct which is important for a man to say 'thou' to an 'other' and have humility is not the instinct for origination but the 'Instinct for communion'. Education thus "breaks down the independent autonomy of the separated kingdoms of the self and works toward constructing the world we hold in common" (Hederman, 1980, p. 254). Communion "means being opened-up and drawn-in" and the choice to be so is freedom. Freedom for Buber is therefore a possibility to be in communion with others, a choice to act spontaneously in new and unique ways, a springboard to be used to reach up to the level of communion rather than an aim in itself. This freedom is in relation with and having responsibility towards the 'other'. In opposition to communion is compulsion where stands an 'unfree' person who is defined by public opinion, social status or his own problems that he cannot be spontaneous and mutual with others, he reacts to others instead of responding from his whole being.

Conceptualizing Knowledge

Buber like many other existentialists rejected the Cartesian 'Cogito' as a sufficient starting point of knowledge. For Buber knowing the 'other' as an object is only one aspect of knowing which is a form of the 'I-It' relation. Buber also points to a knowledge that is relational and in-between 'I' and 'Thou'. This knowledge can be understood as 'to know' where the word 'know' has its roots in Old Norse *knā-* to know how, be able to; which is akin to Greek *gnōstikós* (singular)- pertaining to knowledge, equivalent to *gnōst (ós)* known + *-ikos -ic*. This knowledge may not be symbolically represented in its entirety i.e. articulated completely in any form of symbol but, nevertheless it is a part of the 'being'. Similarly the primary meaning of the word for 'knowledge' in Hebrew is *yeda*, which is related to contact and relation. From this perspective, knowledge is gained in a relation or intimate contact with the 'other'. This knowledge comes from the encounter with the 'other' as 'thou'.

This realm of relationship with 'thou' is one where the primal origin of knowledge is. Where the eternal form of art confronts man and asks him to manifest it in a form, and then when it is expressed in some form by human hands, it is in front of the world to be enjoyed and cherished. The form becomes an 'It'. But rarely it does happen that for someone this

form becomes a 'thou' which again, through a creative transformation, manifests itself in some new form.

"It would, however, be a mistake to assume that Buber underrated the importance of rigorous scholarship or that he rejected the ways of science. He merely refused to regard these as the ultimate values and exclusive tools of learning" (Cohen, 1983, p. 12). Buber never says that knowledge in the 'I-thou' relation is better than the 'I-It' relation but he does stress upon the necessity of both in the life of humans.

Conclusion

However, since "the child is a reality; education must become a reality" (Buber, 2002, p. 99). Education becomes reality only when it has directly or indirectly some bearing on the reality experienced by the child. The selection of the world being presented to the child is what Buber calls the effective world. He proposes that the educator has to make the selection of the 'effective world' which is concentrated and manifested in him. "In this way, through the educator, the world for the first time becomes the true subject of its effect" (Buber, 2002, p. 106). All the educational content, which helps the pupil to make sense of the world, roots him in his socio-cultural milieu and helps him to live authentically with others, is important enough to be a part of the school curriculum, but even here it is not a rigid structured curriculum that an existentialist is looking for.

Nevertheless, for Cohen (1983, p. 13), Buber's educational philosophy "points our way to the kind of education we should hope to see established: education no longer dedicated only to the transmission of information and the development of intellectual faculties but intent on fostering true dialogue". Dialogue cannot be *made* possible but one can only be open to have a dialogic encounter for which one must be opened-up and drawn-in.

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