

MARTIN BUBER'S THEORY OF EDUCATION*

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Introduction

It was from my father that I realized the value of education. I remember how he inculcated to us his children the value of education. I remember him telling us his own story about how he finished his studies as a working student. From his story I realized how important education is and how people work hard to get an education. His story inspired me so much and it sparked deep within me, a burning desire to educate myself. When I got into philosophy, I became so interested with the philosophy of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, who is easily one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. From his philosophy, I absorbed the kind of theory of education, which I believe, spells out what education ought to be.

Martin Buber was born on February 8, 1878 in Vienna, and was brought up in the Jewish tradition. He was influenced by the philosophy of Nietzsche, by Kant and by the existentialist thought in the early years of his life, particularly Kierkegaard and apparently by Husserl's phenomenology. He was also influenced by Zionism and Hasidism. The Hasidism tradition was the chief formative influence in his life and his theory of education have a marked influence of the Hasidist tradition with its emphasis on joy, love, meeting and relation with God and fellow man, the present hour, and true self. Buber is best remembered for his books *I and Thou* and *Between Man and Man*, two of his numerous writings.

Buber was a philosopher and a teacher who lived his philosophy and teachings. His philosophy is reflected in his personality and his contribution to philosophy was not only his own teachings but his very being. True to his philosophy, Buber has always stressed the importance of dialogue and interhuman relations especially in education.

This paper is divided into four parts: first, Buber's critique of the traditional approaches to education, second, his idea of education as dialogical, and third, the education of character. The last part is reflection on the implications of Buber's theory of education to the

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teaching profession and to the present state of education in our country.

The Old and New Traditions of Education

In one of his essays on education,¹ Buber discussed what he considered the two major traditions in educational thought. These traditions have their own notions of the task of the educator and their respective approaches in order to accomplish such task.

The first tradition which Buber simply identified as the old theory, or the compulsory school, regards education as a process of shaping the child into a form which the educator must first visualize, so that it may serve as a directive for his work. The educator does not rely on the child's natural endowment but sets up a pattern which determines how much endowment is to be handled. The educator in this theory or approach may be compared to a sculptor, who sees the shape hidden in the crude marble or wood, and guided by the image which he formed in his mind carves the material at his own disposal.

The second tradition which Buber simply identified as the modern theory or the free school, regards education as the process of drawing out of the child that which is in him. This entails overcoming the disturbing influences and setting aside the obstacles that hinder his free development. In other words, to educate is to allow the child to "become himself." The educator according to this approach may be compared to that of a gardener who fertilizes and waters the soil, prunes and props up the young plant, removes the weeds around it and, after he has done all these, and if the weather is fine, he trusts that the plant will develop naturally all by itself.

In the first case, education means influencing a soul to develop in accordance with what the educator considers to be right. In this approach, man is regarded as a creature with diverse potentialities and it is the duty of the educator to shape his personality based on such potentialities.

In the second case, education indicates the care that should be given to a "soul in the making" in order that the natural process of growth may reach its culmination. This approach believes that fundamentally man is good and at the same time is predetermined by his innate endowment.

The old theory of education is characterized by "habit of authority." The modern theory is characterized by tendencies to freedom.² Some writers regard them as the classical and progressive traditions.³ Buber illustrates the methods of these theories through the funnel/pump analogy.⁴ The teacher of the compulsory school sees learning as a

passive assimilation by the child of ideas that are poured through the funnel of his consciousness. From time to time the teacher checks if the student is able to absorb the ideas poured into his mind. Learning is thus measured by the amount of ideas the student has assimilated or absorbed into his consciousness. The teacher of the free school sees learning as a drawing forth or "pumping out" of powers that are latent in the child's consciousness. Learning is measured by the amount of ideas that have been drawn out from his mind.

Thus the teacher in the compulsory school works prescriptively from models and rules, while the teacher of the free school encourages a spontaneous expression of individual tendencies and interests. Buber illustrates the distinction between the two in the case of a drawing class. He said, the teacher of the compulsory school of thought began with rules and current patterns. Now you knew what beauty was and you had to copy it either in apathy or despair. The teacher of the "free" school places on the table the material and makes the pupil draw it.⁵

The teacher in the old school either instills values to the child or he draws the child into the values.⁶ The teacher in the modern school respects the freedom and inclinations of the child.

Buber did not set out to resolve the conflict between these two approaches. And although, these theories seemed to be reasonable, Buber rejected these two theories on the basis of their "ideological constrictions." The old and compulsory school is represented by the "will to power" while the new and free school is represented by "eros," or inclination.

Although the old educator Buber declared is the "bearer of assured values," and the "ambassador of history to this intruder - the child," he believes that such situation is easily used or misused by the individual's will to power and "when authority becomes convulsive and passes into fury it begins to decay."⁷ "Then the moment comes near when the teacher no longer faces the pupils as an ambassador, but only as an individual."⁸ Buber condemns the old educator for his denial of personal freedom, for obstructing the possibilities of reciprocal encounter and for the proper nurturing of the student's capacities.

Just as the old situation deteriorates, eros comes in and offers a kind of freedom from the old school. But this is not education according to Buber. Thus while he recognizes the fact that such "progressive theory" liberates the classroom from the repressive authoritarianism of the old school, he denounces the free school theory for its misconception of potentiality and freedom and their diminished sense of teachers' status and authority. As a result of this mis-

conception of freedom education loses its direction.

Buber rejected the notion that freedom is for self-development and fulfillment; rather freedom is affording the possibility for personal i.e. relational fulfillment. Freedom then becomes a means towards a higher end: fulfillment through communion and love.

Freedom in education is the possibility of communion; it cannot be dispensed with and it cannot be used in itself. Without it nothing succeeds, but neither anything succeeds by means of it; it is the run before the jump...the confirmation of that primal and mighty potentiality, but which it cannot actualize.⁹ Hence Buber criticized both the impersonal and formalistic strategies of the old educators and the aimless individualism of the progressive educators.

Education as Dialogue.

Buber emphasized the redefinition of the essential realities of the educational process, particularly of the relation of the educator and learner and the aim of the educational process. Buber stressed that education entails responsibility, the responsibility towards a realm of life which the educator must influence but not interfere either by power or inclination. He wrote:

In education then, there is a lofty asceticism: an asceticism which rejoices in the world, for the sake of the responsibility for a realm of life which is entrusted to us for our influence but not our interference - either by the will to power or Eros.¹⁰

The real educator is guided by the principles of inclination and freedom and recognition of values.¹¹ These principles must not be understood as separated, they are joined together in the "dialogical relation" between the educator and the learner.

Education is relation. Buber distinguished two types of relation, the I-It and I-Thou.¹² The first is characterized by manipulation, control, and domination; Buber called it the I-It relation. The second is characterized by directness, mutuality, respect and genuine concern; this is the I-Thou relation. In the I-It relation man considers the other as an object to be manipulated, to be used, to be controlled. In the I-Thou, man considers the other as a fellow human being, as a person to be accepted and respected. The I-Thou is a relation of genuine dialogue and Buber stressed that "the relation in education is one of pure dialogue."¹³ Education is one realm of life where the dialogical relation

must be established.

In education therefore, the educator must see the learner as a "Thou", as a living partner in this human event. The educator or teacher must see the learner as a person for the sake of whom he stands by his vocation as a teacher. He must consider his student as a Thou, a concrete existing and feeling subject, not an object to be shaped according to what he would want him to be. Education then, is not a mere process; it is human relation and as such must be "dialogical." Only in the dialogical relation between the teacher and student can education be considered as a living human event. Genuine dialogue in education entails true concern for the students, an honest intention of helping them to actualize their potentialities, to help them unfold their talents and good qualities.

The essence of teaching then for Buber, is centered on the teacher-learner relation, a relation which is rooted in the framework of Buber's dialogical philosophy. Here we can identify certain characteristic elements which constitute this dialogical relation between the teacher and the student.

The first essential element of this dialogical relation is the trusting reciprocity between the student and the teacher although such reciprocity may be limited by the reciprocating capacities of these partners in the relation. This trusting and spontaneous reciprocity is illustrated by Buber through the metaphor of birth-giving which he first expounds in the *I and Thou*.¹⁴ Such reciprocity is compared to the involuntary bodily reciprocity between the mother and the fetus in the womb of the mother. Just as trust is essential to the relation between the mother and the child so is the trust between the teacher and the student. "Trust in the world because this human being exists - that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education."¹⁵ The presence between the teacher and the learner of a trusting and mutually affirming reciprocity is therefore an indispensable element of the dialogical relation in education.

Another essential element in this dialogical relation is the exemplary integrity of the teacher. Essential to education is the personal exemplification by the teacher of the values and the integrity of the potentialities he seeks to call forth in the student. Buber compared the image of the teacher to the image of the "zaddik," the legendary religious leader of Hasidic tradition. The zaddik is the historical embodiment of all the qualities Buber valued most highly in the teacher. His life exemplifies the truth and his active and living concern for his followers and his wholehearted communion with them. While learning is important to him, the teacher must place more importance on the

personal integrity he exemplified. His influence is not ascribed to his superior learning but to the way he lives his life. Hence, in education, the educator must be truthful as he teaches the truth, honest as he instills honesty to his student, just as he teaches justice, loving as he teaches love.

Another essential element is the teacher's active promotion of a healing concern for the personal well-being of the student. The healing concern of the teacher-zaddik indicates the role of the teacher in restoring faith and self-meaning to those who are in doubt, those whose beliefs and hopes have been shattered by misfortunes. The teacher must show genuine concern for his students, his sole intention is the well being of his students. They may sometimes disagree, but what is important is that both respect each other as persons.

The last essential element is the teacher's confirmation of the student's potentiality for self-fulfillment and personhood. The teacher realizes that the student has his own potentialities, he need not impose his will or ideas on the student, what the student needs is a confirmation of his talents. In the dialogical relation, the teacher realizes that his role is to help in the actualization process of the child towards personhood. He must not interfere, rather he must assist the child unfold his possibilities. Buber described clearly how the genuine educator may influence the persons committed to his care. Buber wrote:

"He sees each of these individuals as in a position to become a unique single person, and thus the bearer of a special task of existence which can be fulfilled through him alone. He sees every personal life as an engage in such a process of actualization... and the forces of actualization are involved in a struggle against the counterforces. He has come to see himself as the helper of the actualizing forces. . . . He cannot wish to impose himself, for he believes in the effect of the actualizing forces."¹⁶

Education, then, to be true to its meaning of "leading out" must be a channel, a way by which persons, students, unfold and actualize their talents and potentialities. But it does not mean letting the student develop by himself and merely watching over his development. Teachers are partners in his unfolding not through interfering and imposing but through their responding.

his Education of Character

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Education is essentially moral education and character refers to the ethical character. Ethical values have religious orientation.

The education of character or moral education Buber stressed aims to develop certain propensities in the student, it aims particularly to promote a responsible exercise of freedom and the continuing authentication of all intentions and deeds in the moment of their unique occurrence.¹⁸ At the same time, the education of character should be oriented towards the deepening of individual capacities for interpersonal relation. He insisted that the imperatives for moral action emanate primarily from the urging of the person's own conscience, or "conscience courage," the kind of conscience that is informed through self-illumination.

The genuine educator, then, does not only consider the individual functions and abilities of the learner; his concern is not only to teach this learner specific functions. His concern is always "the person as a whole, both in the actuality in which he lives and his possibilities, what he can become."¹⁹

It is the responsibility of the educator or teacher to assist the student towards the achievement of the highest possible degree of self-awareness and personal illumination, to assist then, in the molding of his character would be his greatest task.

But what is the ethical character for Buber? He followed the distinction made by Kerschensteiner between the character in the general sense which simply meant the consistency between man's action and his attitude to his human surrounding, and the real ethical character which involves the adoption of absolute but abstractly formulated values and norms.²⁰ Buber, however, rejected such definition of ethical character for it fails to be the basis of the education of character. Buber stressed that while the education of character is significantly oriented towards absolute values, these values have to be discovered and authenticated at the level of self-awareness and in terms of the existential situation of everyday life.

Buber however, realizes the difficulty of such task. It is relatively easy to teach the child ideas, but the education of character is problematic. There is a great disparity between teaching certain disciplines or subjects, for example mathematics and teaching moral education. If the teacher explains that it is wicked to bully the weak, at ones he sees a suppressed smile on the lips of the strong. If the teacher explains that it is wicked to bully the weak, at once he sees a

suppressed smile on the lips of the story. If the teacher explains that envy is despicable, he feels at once the resistance of those who are poor.

In teaching other subjects, the teacher can openly announce his intentions and it does not interfere with the result; in fact the results are evaluated by such goals. But then when students notice that the teacher's intention is to mould their character, there is at once a feeling of resistance.

How could the education of character be possible? Buber carefully analyzed how character is formed. He observed that character is formed by the interrelations of opposing elements and factors - nature, society, history, language, culture, customs, news, music, technology and science, etc. - all exerting influence on the person. Among these diverse form-giving factors the educator is just one of these elements. But the educator is distinct from them, he is distinguished by the fact that it is by his will that he takes part in shaping the character and by his consciousness that he represents in the eyes of the person or learner a certain selection of what is, the selection of what is right and what ought to be done. It is in this will and consciousness that his vocation as an educator finds its fundamental expression.

From this experience, the genuine educator gains two things: humility and self-awareness. Humility from the feeling of being only one element amidst the fullness of life and reality in the student, and self-awareness from the feeling that he is only one who really want to take part in the life of the person, and this entails responsibility. He then realizes that the only way to his student is through his confidence on the teacher.

The only access then to the learner is through his confidence on the teacher, it is only when trust has been established that the student begins to open himself to the teacher. The teacher for his part must also open himself and must show genuine concern for the welfare of the student.

In educating character, we do not need a moral genius; what is needed is a real person who can communicate directly to his fellow man, a person on whom the student can put his trust, somebody who will accept him as a person and somebody whom he too will accept as a person. Buber wrote:

"When the pupil's confidence has been won his resistance against being educated gives way to a singular happening: he accepts the educator as a person. He feels he

may trust this man, that this man is not making a business out of him, but is taking part in his life, accepting him before desiring to influence him."²¹

Indeed as Buber said, it is only with his whole being, in all his spontaneity can the teacher truly affect the whole being of his students. "His aliveness streams out to them and affects them most strongly when he has no thought of affecting them."²²

Once this mutual trust has been established he can now introduce discipline and order, instill values and norms. He can now hope that discipline and order will become more and more inward and autonomous and that values and norm will be written in the heart of his student. And in the uniqueness of every situation he can expect his students to respond and act as concerned persons and apply the appropriate value or norm in such particular situation.

Buber aptly put it this way:

"What counts is not the extent of spiritual possessions, not the thoroughness of knowledge, not the keenness of thought, but to know what one knows, to believe what one believes so directly that it can be translated into the life one lives."²³

Conclusion and Implications of Buber's Educational Theory

The theory of education of Buber puts emphasis on the value of the person, on the dialogical character of education and the education of character. The student is a person and must be respected. He is a unique subject with his own potentialities. He is the bearer of a unique existence. The educator must understand that Education is relational. The alternative towards a genuine education is through dialogue or person to person relation. Buber viewed education as intrinsically relating, loving and reciprocating, rather than self-fulfilling and individually creative.

Individual growth, Buber insisted, is enlivened, deepened and fulfilled by the various relationships (interpersonal and social) which constitute human existence. The main function then of education is the nurturing of relational capacities rather than the provision of opportunities for self-expression and growth. Human development in education conceived independently of its relational contexts would lead ultimately to solitariness and to a man all for himself.

Education is not a process of manipulation neither is it a process of aimless self-expression. The student has the potentialities and talents; the role of the educator is to help in actualizing these potentialities and talents. The educator would be effective in this role when there is mutual trust and confidence between the teacher and the student.

Education is basically the education of character. The aim of education is the character of the student but the education of character should be oriented towards nurturing interpersonal relations. The great character is one who realizes the value of the person and interpersonal relation. The great character is always a character-for-others.

It is in this respect, that of forming character-for-others among the youth, that our present educational system sometimes fails. We often fall into the error of conceiving proper education as simply educating the mind, the intellect, disregarding the importance of the affective and moral aspect of the person, the character of the student. Thus putting a lot of information into the minds of students, without putting values into their hearts. Students simply become wise or bright, but devoid of values like honesty, love, generosity, respect, understanding, and others. They simply become persons-for-themselves, instead of being persons-for-others. The role of education, then, is not simply to create great minds but to form great ethical characters.

Buber's theory of education offers us an ideal to follow. It promises a bright light in a seemingly dark situation where education finds itself in. However, such theory is effective only in a small group, because the kind of dialogue and personal relation between the teacher and students which Buber envisioned will not be effective in a large group or in a large number of students.

Such theory poses certain difficulties on the part of the teacher. It would be difficult on the part of the teacher to maintain a personal relation with his students if he has to handle a large class. It would be difficult and very exacting on the part of the teacher if he assumes the role of the teacher-zaddik because this would mean sacrificing even his private or family life. Besides, the teacher has other needs, particularly financial and material needs.

In our society, teachers are teachers only in the school, at home they assume different tasks, in the community they assume different roles. As persons they are not only concerned with teaching, they have other concerns.

But this is not to discredit Buber; I think it is our task to make the teaching profession more relevant and more meaningful. We have to

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and ways to make the role of a teacher or of an educator truly a significant one, a role that is not only personally satisfying but also financially beneficial. Being an educator entails a lot of sacrifices, but the benefits are not even enough to sustain a decent living.

One problem that our educational system is encountering now is the great disparity between the number of teachers and students. The lack and unavailability of teachers is a perennial problem. Every year our education officials complain of the lack of teachers. But why the lack of teachers? The problem can be traced to the number of students who are willing to take teaching as a profession. In college very few ever go into education courses. There are more scholarships granted in other technical courses but not in education. Students are encouraged to take technical courses but the encouragement to take education courses is not strong enough.

But this is not the root of the problem, the real problem is in the value we attach to the teaching profession. Students are not inclined to be teachers or educators because they perceive that such profession will not give them an advantage in life. Hence we give value to education but not to the teaching profession. We fail to realize that education and the educator go hand in hand.

Buber's theory on education implies that for education to be effective in shaping the character of young people, teachers should not be burdened with handling a large number of students. And this could only happen if we encourage young people to be teachers and at the same time train more teachers, teachers who will be concerned about the welfare of their students.

If we really consider education to be important in life, then, we have to answer a present need - the need to encourage people to be educators and the need for more dedicated teachers, to minimize the disparity between more teachers and students. If there are more students, there should also be more teachers. Education cannot fulfill its role, whether to shape the mind or the character, unless there are dedicated teachers.

Endnotes

- 1 Martin Buber, *On National Education. Israel and the World. Essays in a Time of Crisis*. New York: Schocken Books, 1963, pp. 149-50.
- 2 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1965, pp. 88-89. Hereafter cited as BMM.
- 3 Daniel Murphy, *Martin Buber's Philosophy of Education* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1988), p. 91.
- 4 BMM, p. 89.
- 5 Ibid., p. 88.
- 6 Ibid., p. 93.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., p. 91.
- 10 Ibid., p. 95.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Maurice Friedman, New York: Charles Scribners, 1958, pp. 3-34.
- 13 BMM, p. 98.
- 14 See Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 25-28.
- 15 BMM, p. 98.
- 16 Martin Buber, *Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*, ed., Maurice Friedman, trans., Maurice Friedman & Ronald Gregor Smith, New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p. 83.
- 17 BMM, p. 104.
- 18 Murphy, *Martin Buber's Philosophy of Education*, p. 146.
- 19 BMM, p. 104.
- 20 Ibid., p. 108.
- 21 Ibid., p. 106.
- 22 Ibid., p. 105.
- 23 Buber, *Israel and the World*, p. 142.

THREE KINDS OF LIBERTY IN POST-MODERNISM

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I. Freedom of independence

The first kind of liberty I want to discuss with you is one of the most widespread nowadays. The first meaning of liberty for the sixties was to be freed from any constraint or authority: "Neither God nor master" and "It is forbidden to forbid" were the mottoes of the French youth revolt in 1968. I saw it painted high on the walls of the University of La Sorbonne in Paris. The students were stimulated by the well-known philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Though we cannot reduce Sartre's

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