

## **Affective Ontology and Dialogical Epistemology of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’**

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**ABSTRACT :** *Affective ontology and dialogical epistemology herald the homecoming of the exiled values of genuine humanism and universal brother/sisterhood. This is a mode of being and existence where 'the self' is because of the other. The self enveloped by the radiance of the other and the other illumined by the aura of the self initiates a living steered by an emancipating dependence and liberating togetherness. The dawn of a new humanism characterised by the values and virtues of an 'at home infinity' beckons the humankind to recognize and respond creatively to ensure peaceful living and meaningful existence on this minute planet of the marvellous universe.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The deliberations and the articulations on the formation, functions and the trajectories of the self constitute the foundation and the theoretical contours of the various systems of knowledge from the very inception of learning and scholarship. The tantalizing enigma is that any branch of knowledge, neither philosophical nor scientific, could unravel and comprehend the essence of the self in its totality. The claims of psychoanalysis and existentialism as the final word in understanding the dynamics and problematic of the self met with arch criticism during its heyday itself. Thus the self continues its elusive voyage gifting laborious task of intense research, both ideological and empirical, to the aspirants.

This study includes ‘the other’ in understanding ‘the self’, realizing that no study of the self is complete without the other. Because the self is not an insular reality, rather an avenue and opening genuinely reaching out and embracing the other. But some of the conceptions and the theories of the self vehemently opposed and evaded the other considering the other as the enemy of the self and a hindrance to its actualization. The emerging social and economic patterns solicit a new orientation and a shift of emphasis in understanding the self and its mode of operation. The flattening dynamics of globalization and the ever increasing fear syndrome precipitated by violence and terrorism call for an accommodative and affective theory of the self and the other. Any intellectual pursuit focused on the profound mystery of the self faces the extreme dangers of narcissism and solipsism. The former is the unconditional worship of the self and thus forgetting the existence of the other/s. In other words, it is a state of obsessive introversion of the entire being into oneself and keeping the outside reality in abeyance. Solipsism on the other hand places the self on the highest, pedestal and makes it ‘the ultimate’. This is an attempt to claim absolute autonomy of the self by negating the very existence of the other. This study carefully avoids both these poles and also the other extreme of the loss of self and provides congenial matrix for the self to achieve fulfillment and authenticity by accepting and accommodating the other as the intimate and inevitable companion towards the path of realization. Infinity becomes ‘at home’ in such a dispensation of mutuality and cordiality. Affective ontology and the dialogical epistemology herald the home coming of the exiled values of genuine humanism and brotherhood. This is a mode of being and existence where ‘the self is because of the other’. The self enveloped by the radiance of the other and the other illumined by the aura of the self. A living steered by the emancipating dependence and liberating togetherness. The epistemology of such an ontological order achieves ‘another pattern’ as it is a celebration of communion and empathetic affection. The epistemological discourses of the self can only be dialogical because of its existential labyrinths of relation. The very ‘dialogue’ is edifying and revelatory as it builds up and discloses each other. The dawn of a new humanism characterized by the values and virtues of ‘at home infinity’ beckons the humankind to recognize and to respond to it creatively to ensure peaceful living and meaningful existence on this minute planet of the marvelous universe.

### **II. An Outline of the Theories of the Self**

The genesis of the theories of the self reveals its centrality irrespective of time and place. The self surrounded by the halo of enigma generated curiosity in every thinking person. As a result the pure intellectual speculations gave way to philosophical theories, while the aesthetic attempts produced literary works teeming with the epiphanies of the self. This part of the study focuses only the areas of philosophy and literature to cull

out the history of the theories of the self. According to Donald E. Hall it is not only the theories of the self but also the very self awareness of humankind grew and developed with the growth of philosophy and literature.

Literature, art, science, and philosophy flourished as old definitions and social institutions were questioned and altered. One consequence of all these developments and many more was a palpably increasing awareness of the self as something that was not divinely formed and statically placed, but rather changeable and possibly cultivatable through one's own concerted activity.(17)

The theories and definitions of the self achieve metaphysical splendour due to its complexity. The processual nature of the self in its formation and coming into being is much emphasized by the scholars. It means self is not a congenitally finished product; instead it is to grow from its nascent stage to maturity and fullness through the vicissitudes of everyday life. Adapting Sartre's conception of the self Oglivy writes, "The self may be a kind of process rather than a complete and underlying continuous thing" (105). Another illusion which is dismantled with regard to the hermeneutics of the self is its discovery. The scholars argue with clarity that the self is to be constituted than to be discovered. The celebrated French intellectual Michel Foucault minces no words in stating that, "...the self is not something that has to be discovered or deciphered or as a very obscure text.... The self has, on the contrary, not to be discovered but to be constituted, to be constituted through the force of truth." (168)

The concept of the self is always associated with the idea of reflexivity. But this reflexivity is an ongoing activity involving the other/s. It means the reflexivity of the self is not akin to mirror reflection, rather is an 'other' reflection. The self concept of the person achieves clarity and refinement as far as the self reaches out and allows itself to reflect on others. Reflexivity is thus the theoretically eluding self's enduring presence and availability to the other. Viktor Gecas intelligibly articulates saying, "the self is a reflexive phenomenon that develops in social interaction and is based on the social character of human language. The self concept...is a product of this reflexive activity (3). This article in the ensuing part deals with those concepts and ideologies which promote and facilitate the relation between the self and the other in a pattern of mutuality and cordiality. The assaults of fundamentalisms and the prevalence of other intolerant ideologies solicit the humanity to shun the dogmas of hatred and animosity and to embrace the ever new maxim of togetherness and communion.

### III. "IN THE BEGINNING IS THE RELATION"

This part of the study focuses only on those theories which propose accommodative ontology and dialogical epistemology of the self and the other. The splendour and grandeur that emanates from the theories of two eminent writers are invoked in this part. They are the existential philosopher Martin Buber and the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. Buber's *I and Thou* and Fromm's *To Have or To Be* contain a spirituality and humanism which transcends the limits of the systems and theories. Walter Kaufmann writes in the introduction of his translation of *I and Thou*, "it appeals to that religiousness which finds no home in organized religion" (38). The self and the other, in such theories, shed the insular and provincial attitudes and embrace an affective way of living. This affectivity is the outcome of the realization of mutual inevitability. This ontological premises ushers in an epistemology of abiding and enduring dialogue. The various aspects of this affective ontology and dialogical epistemology are discussed here.

**Being and Having :** According to Buber "the world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude" (82). One of the dominant attitudes is that of being and having. Being refers to genuine humanism while having denotes consumerist and commercial disposition of man. Fromm's vision is lucid and enlightening.

By being and having...I refer to two fundamental modes of existence, to two different kinds of orientation toward self and the world, to two different kinds of character structure, the respective predominance of which determines the totality of a person's thinking, feeling, and acting. (23)

Fromm amply develops this idea in his book *To Have or To Be* and his articulations in this book manifest his optimistic existential vision. He relates this two attitudes to human experience and writes, "...having and being are two fundamental modes of experience, the respective strengths of which determine the differences between the characters of individuals and various types of social character" (16). For him these attitudes do not confine in the human level alone, rather it permeates the whole universe. Having mode is marked by objectification of the other by the self. Everything in the world is for possession and consumption. We read, "in the having mode of existence my relationship to the world is one of possessing and owning, one in which I want to make everybody and everything, including myself, my property" (23). So naturally the self and

its identity are determined by the property it owns. Such a malady is precipitated by capitalist economy and its emphasis on private property. The other and the rights of the other are ignored, instead the self and its unlimited powers receive prominence. That is “in this mode of existence all that matters is my acquisition of property and my unlimited right to keep what I have required” (76). Fromm laments over the impersonal relationship that exists in this mode of and calls it dead. He writes, “in the having mode, there is no alive relationship between me and what I have... The relationship is one of deadness, not aliveness” (78). To stem the tide of having mode Fromm proposes being mode.

Being mode is juxtaposed to the having mode and it is operative only in an atmosphere of independence, freedom and critical reason. The true joy in the being mode “lies in loving, sharing and giving” (81). Fromm defines the being mode as follows. “By being I refer to the mode of existence in which one neither has anything nor craves to have something, but is joyous, employs one’s faculties productively, is owned to the world” (19). Such a style of living demands unconditional freedom from egocentricity and selfishness. For this, one has to empty his self and ascend to the dynamics of genuine love. To explain the being mode of existence Fromm speaks about two forms of being.

In the being mode of existence, we must identify two forms of being. One is contrast to having and means aliveness and authentic relatedness to the world. The other form of being is in contrast to appearing and refers to the true nature, the true reality, of a person on a thing in contrast to deceptive appearances as exemplified in the etymology of being. (24)

Fromm conceives both the modes as potencies of each person and urges humanity to embrace the being mode. He warns the humanity about the mighty currents of having mode potent enough to submerge the world, and invites every individual to the genuine freedom and joy of the being mode of existence.

**Being and Becoming :** The self, according to the optimistic theories, is not stagnant and changeless, rather dynamic and transforming principle. To denote this mobility of the self towards growth and maturity the scholars use the term becoming. Matthew Arnold in his conception of culture as perfection comments, “not a having and resting, but a growing and becoming, is the character of perfection as culture conceives it (52). The processual nature of ‘becoming’ is an ascent to higher degrees of perfection and change as Fromm conceives, “change and growth are inherent qualities of the life process” (25). The process of becoming is inevitable and it is the guarantee of greater perfection and authenticity. Olney’s observation is worth mentioning.

The individual in-becoming circles around his own core of selfhood, drawn in toward that central point which becomes indistinguishable in the end from the divine, order-and meaning-giving “still point of the turning world”. The point of reference and direction in the process of individuation is as much human as divine, but as much divine as human. (147)

Buber, as he presents the ideal relationship as I-Thou relation, emphasizes the possibility of transcending from the I-I domain to the I-Thou domain. He visualizes.

That which confronts me is fulfilled through the encounter through which it enters into the world of things in order to remain incessantly effective, incessantly It – but also infinitely able to become again a you,<sup>1</sup> enchanting and inspiring. It becomes “incarnate”. Out of the flood of space less and timeless presence it rises to the shore of continued existence (66)

Thus the self should undergo, or in other words, should submit itself to this becoming process to achieve ontological dignity and epistemological depth.

## **Here and Now**

The phrase here and now (*hic et nunc*) expresses the spatial and temporal dimension of the self and other in the ‘being – becoming’ mode. Buber and Fromm speaks about this ‘tangible infinity’ and ‘at home eternity’ at length. Fromm situates ‘here and now’ in the context of being mode. For him “the mode of being exists only in the here and now” in Fromm’s conception “inscapes” and “infolds” eternity. “The experience of loving, of joy, of grasping truth does not occur in time, but in the here and now. The have and

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Kaufmann in his translation of Buber’s *I and Thou* uses the term ‘Thou’ only in the title of the book. Throughout the book he uses ‘you’ instead of ‘thou’ and gives his justifications in the introduction. See pages 14-16.

how is eternity, that is, timelessness. But eternity is not, as popularity misunderstood, indefinitely prolonged time .(128)

Buber places the domain of relations between I and Thou in the elevated space of here and now. Kaufmann comments on Buber's idea of here and now like this. "The sacred is here and now. The only God worth keeping is a God that cannot be kept" ( 25). The I and Thou coexist and have their being here and now. Everything between there happens only in here and now and anything that misses this target is outside the region of authenticity. There and now, for Buber, is a point of intersection between I and thou and this is the moment and place of genuine relation. He writes, "the moments of relation are joined here, and only here, through the element of language in which they are immersed. Here that which confronts us has developed the full actuality of the you. Here alone be holding and being beheld, recognizing and being recognized, loving and being loved exist as an actuality that cannot be lost" (151). Thus 'here and now' becomes the expression for the intense and concentrated moments and space of I-Thou way of living, which in turn disseminates and diffuses the fragrance of sacrality and the fragments of eternity to all and everywhere. Kaufmann's language attains grace and truth as he writes, "the place of the sacred is not a house of God, no church, synagogue, or seminary, nor one day in seven, and the span of the sacred is much shorter than twenty four hours. The Sabbath is everyday, several times a day" ( 30).

**Relation** : Buber's theory of the self and the other can be summed up in the celebrated phrase 'I and Thou'. For him "the basic word I-You establishes the world of relation" (56). The famous scholar in Buberian philosophy Maurice Friedman explains the qualities of I-Thou and I-it relationship like this. "The I-Thou is a relationship of openness, directness, mutuality, and presence. The I-It in contrast, is the typical subject – object relation knowing, using, putting things in categories" (15). The I-Thou relationship takes place in three realms, namely, with nature, with fellowmen and with spiritual beings. But the relationship is elevated and remains in the I-Thou domain, only when the beholder is capable of such sublimity. For Buber the I-Thou relationship with the nature is "reciprocity" and that is the integral encounter with the nature. The Korean poet Ko Un in his poem "Uncle Maeng Sik" depicts the possibility of such a relation with the nature.

Ah, the void ! Ah ! the dread  
of days when snow is billowing down,  
days when snow is filling every corner of the world  
Yet uncle simply throws open the front gate and exclaims:  
"Ah – ha, it's really snowing!  
I wonder: how will all the wild animals survive ?".  
(Ko Un, Ten thousand lives 79)

The relation with fellowmen in Buber's thought become parallel to the reality. He categorically writes, "whoever reverses the relation annuls the reality" (59). Nothing, even to say I experience my fellow being will be a fallacy in the illumined world of relation. Classification and categorization of human beings according to various qualities and credentials also is an anomaly. I- thou relation achieves a sacramental sanctity as he writes:

The you encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my essential deed...The basic word I – you can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become, becoming I, I say you. All actual life is encounter. (62)

This essential deed of encounter can never be partial or involuntary rather it is a total and deliberate deed. So I - You relation is a world of absolute mutuality spiced with grace and plenitude. The Somalian novelist Nuruddin Farah in his novel *Maps* narrates such a profound relation visible even in a child.

There is a photograph taken when you were very, very small; there is a hand, most definitely yours, stretched outwards, away from your own body. Searching for another hand – most probably hers, to help and give assurances. (Farah 9)

Buber conceived relation not only as the rhythm of life but also as the true prayer, and cult. Relation exists in a pure and prime order as it is coexistent with the external logos. Imitating the Logos hymn of St. John the evangelist he writes, "in the beginning is the relation – as the category of being, as

readiness, as a form that reaches out to be filled, as a model of the soul, the a priori of relation; the innate you” (78).

**Reciprocity :** Affective ontology of relation is characterized by reciprocity in Buber’s thought. Reciprocity involves an aspect of mystery as it eliminates the parameters of qualities and abstractions. He writes:

Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us. The “wicked” become a revelation when they are touched by the sacred basic word. How are we educated by children, by animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity. ( 67)

Buber’s idea of reciprocity influenced even the contemporary ethical domains. This is the reason why the discourses on identity and difference include reciprocity. Reciprocity acts as a norm that tempers and modulates the human structures from the dangers of absolutism and fundamentalism. Seyla Benhabib observes, “the norm of ‘reciprocity’ is embedded in the very structures of communicative action into which we are all socialized, for reciprocity entails that we are treated by others equally insofar as we are a member of a particular human group” ( 31). The absence of reciprocity introduces hatred and alienation in human relation and thus nullifies it.

**Presence and Participation :** Buber plays with the words present (temporal category) and presence (idiom of relation) to evoke the true meaning of presence. Buber’s magical language enravels us as he writes, “only as the You becomes present does presence come into being” (63). Presence thus is not just proximity but a dissemination of the I and you. Fleeting impressions and momentary appearances are not presence. “Presence is not what is evanescent and passes but what confronts us, waiting and enduring” (64). Presence permeates in and through the being and also from being to being as a procession of agility and gaiety. Ko Un inscribes such a presence in his poem “Our Great Aunt at Taegi”.

“When a woman like her enters a house of mourning  
the wine and food in the offerings find their proper flavour,  
don’t they ?”  
(Ko un. Ten Thousand Lives 52)

For Buber relation is an end in itself, and it being so, the intensity of relation is marked by the degree of participation. In relation “participation remains as a living potentiality” (113). Participation denotes genuine relation in which the Thou or the You remains in its integral actuality. Buber affirms:

Whoever stands in relation, participates in an actuality, that is, in a being that is neither merely a part of him nor merely outside him. All actuality is an activity in which I participate without being able to appropriate it. Where there is no participation, there is no actuality. Where there is self – appropriation, there is no actuality. The more directly the you is touched, the more perfect is the participation. (113)

Thus participation becomes the guarantee for the absence of appropriation in an affective and accommodative ontology.

**Love and Identity :** Buber’s theory of the self and the other abides in the congenial matrix of love. Any violation of love will mar the I and thou from its delicate trajectory. He conceived love as a “cosmic force” and as the “responsibility of an I for a You” and for him “man dwells in his love” (66). For him love is not a metaphysical ideal devoid of the touch of reality. He applies love in concrete human situations. Love is the surety of genuine relationship between I and Thou. He writes, “when a man loves a woman so that her life is present in his own, the you of her eyes allows him to gaze into a ray of the eternal you” (154). Such a love beholds each other in reverence and presence. Luce Irigaray’s vision is very close to this idea of love. She writes about love as she speaks about the transformation of discourse. “I love to you” is more unusual than “I love you”, but respects the two more: I love to who you are, to what you do, without reducing you to an object of my love” (60). At the same time this love is rational so the individuality of the persons is kept intact. James Oglivy comments, “Rational love is love which relates a person intimately to another, at the same time preserving his independence and integrity” (37). This argument leads us to think about the identity in the context of an affective ontology.

Affective ontology is not the termination of identity, rather a deeper affirmation and acceptance of the identity. It means such an ontology neither obliterates the selfhood of the self nor abandons the self to an amorphous realm. In a dispensation of affective ontology the self attains authentic identity in the abiding presence of the other. Buber in his *The Way of Man* affirms this truth by saying, “every man’s foremost task is the actualization of his unique, unprecedented and never recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, and be it even the greatest, has already achieved” (16). That is, ontology of accommodation respects the uniqueness of the self and at the same time checks the self from slipping into the danger of absolutism.

**Dialogue :** The affective ontology prepares the way for a new epistemology which is dialogic in its content and spirit. Buber develops this dialogical epistemology in *I and Thou* and in *Pointing the Way*. To enter into this amazing world of empathetic and edifying theory of knowledge Stuart Charme’s comment will help.

I – thou relation refers to an intimate, caring relation which accepts another person for what he is. In contrast, I – it relation refers mainly to the inevitable use of objects and persons for private, selfish purposes. As it will become clear, an I – Thou relation on the ethical level does not preclude all knowledge about another person. (162)

The epistema constituted by the I – Thou relationship is dialogical. Dialogue in this sense transcends to the realm of a sacrament in which unseen grace become palpable and concrete. This dialogue begins at the “threshold of mutuality” and continues in an atmosphere of openness and freedom and ultimately builds up each other in mutual knowledge. John Macquarrie writes, “A genuine relation to another person cannot be one-sided, dominating, or possessive, it must consist in openness and willingness to listen and receive as well as to speak and to give” (109). Dialogue thus constitutes the favourable space for the self to disclose itself and to receive the other. Dialogue does not happen in an experiential level rather in an interhuman level. Friedman explains this idea by saying, “in dialogue I allow the other person to be in his or her uniqueness...So dialogue is not a question of how many people one has to do with but whether one really has to do with the people with whom one has to do” (Friedman 9). In such sublimity love is the medium and even silence can be language of communication Nuruddin Farah narrates such an awesome dialogue as he describes the relation between Armadio and Karin.

She washed him, as she washed him everyday of all the years that he had lain on his back. Alone, but not lonely, her hands white with soapy foam, her eyes tearlessly dry, her throat not at all teased with the convulsive wishes of mournfulness, she moved back and forth and her hands washed and touched and felt a body she had known for years, the body of a man who had ‘possessed’ her, a man who had given her love and children – and who at times made her hate herself. (71) Here the possession is not a burden, but the warmth of owning. In a predicament of alienation and disowning relations, dialogue reveals its power of cementing the gaps and establishing a new world order. Buber suggests dialogue as the antidote for establishing peace and curbing war. He writes in *Pointing the Way* in a genuine dialogue each of the partners, even when he stands in opposition to the other, heeds, affirms, and confirms his opponent as an existing other. Only so can conflict certainly not be eliminated from the world, but be humanly arbitrated and led towards its overcoming” (238). Thus dialogical epistemology is not a new discipline or theory in place, but an immediate necessity to ensure meaningful existence. As Whitman writes in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”:

“yes my brother I know  
The rest might not, but I have treasured every note....”  
(Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*.204)

Dialogue is the ability to treasure even the heartthrobs of the fellowmen. This knowing is not a cerebral activity but a “transport of cordiality” happening in a natural and spontaneous manner. Again this is not a knowledge based on the ‘Carte d’identité’ or ‘Curriculum Vitae’, rather built upon the premise beyond the identifications and formal education. Speech and silence equally communicate to the self and the other in an atmosphere of inevitable mutuality. In such an epistemology “in the beginning is the relation” becomes a befitting hermeneutics of the “in the beginning was the word” (St. John’s Gospel 1:1) and their unity heralds a genuine hermeneutics of the self and the other here and now.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To understand the voyage of the self and the other under the new ontological and epistemological dispensation a few lines from Whitman’s “Passage to India” will suffice.

“Sail forth – steer for the deep waters only,  
Reckless O soul, exploring I with thee, and thou with me,  
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,  
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all”  
(Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*. 329)

The metaphor of navigation is attached to the journeys of the self in world literatures. If we consider the ‘I’ in Whitman’s poem as self and the ‘soul’ as the other, the poem provides great insights into the ontology and epistemology proposed in this paper. The end of this voyage is not a spatial or temporal destination, rather this is aimed at the epiphanies of the self and exploration of the other. The ‘risk’ factor is constituted not by the precariousness of the journey, but by its length and depth, in other words by the profound enigma. The theories of the self and the other evolved into this mature vision through the effort of many thinkers and scholars in various disciplines. This does not mean this theory is a “theory par excellence” or beyond ambiguity. The sole guarantee to perpetuate this theory for the well being of all is a deliberate and conscious living of the same. Publishing books and articles, organizing conferences and seminars are not the remedy, rather an activism of brotherhood and peace is the need of the time. Even this activism, if not propelled by an elemental spontaneity, will face a pathetic failure. Because anything imposed is not owned by man, rather he reacts and repels to it. So, as the very theory proposes transcendence from the defamiliarization of the other to a familial configuration between the self and the other, its implementation demands an oblation of the self and a libation of the other on the altar of mutuality. And such a living makes “grace at home” “Kingdom of God among us” “infinity in the palm” and “eternity in a moment”. This is a living in “another pattern” in which “all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well”. This is the economy of I and Thou, and here and now in which:

“Look if you sweep the yard well,  
The yard will laugh.  
if the yard laughs  
the fence will laugh.  
Even the morning – glories  
blossoming on the fence will laugh”  
(Ko Un. “Maternal Grand Father”. 173)

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