

Offprint:

New Perspectives on Martin Buber

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Dilthey and Simmel: A Reading From/Toward Buber's Philosophy of History

by Jules Simon

In *The Eclipse of God* Buber asserts that the crisis we are experiencing post-Holocaust is an eclipse of a trusting faithfulness in the absolute.¹ This assertion about the historical crisis associated with the Holocaust provides an occasion to reflect on Buber's philosophy of history. Buber's lifelong commitment to the possibility of revelatory encounter and of dialogical relations entails a corresponding commitment to a philosophy of history that challenges the assumption that an ethical life is somehow distinct from the particularity of historical existence. That Buber evaluated his historical situation in the middle of the twentieth century as a crisis had as much to do with his judgments about faith and the status of the social relationships of humans with one another as it did with his sense of his own work as contributing to an historical task. And while what Buber had to say about the Shoah as a particular historical event likely had much to do with the particularity of his Jewish upbringing, considering the positions of Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel as philosophers of history, and as Buber's teachers, helps us to better understand his judgment. Through studying with these two men, Buber continued on a path toward interpreting history as the product of expressing particular socio-cultural relations which themselves emerge through the historically and philosophically informed engagements of ordinary and extraordinary individual agents.²

¹ See Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God*, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1988), 127-129. The "eclipse of God" of which Buber writes in this section of his text has to do with the dominance of the I-It relation in modernity that has overtaken the relationship of the I-Thou, which is only available through the categories of human-with-human relations, and never through the categories of an individually existing, autonomously isolated human. See also Buber's *Between Man and Man*, (Great Britain: Collins, 1947) for a collection of Buber's essays that stress his proclivity for anthropological analyses.

² By extraordinary agents I mean such inspired and history-effecting individuals as Dilthey, Simmel, or Buber. In Buber's view, any "ordinary" individual can be inspired to become extra-ordinary.

Later in his life, Buber developed the notion that our history includes more than personal, individual encounters of presence, and if we strive for a social world of productive cooperation and non-violent resolutions of our differences, we must depend on our propensity for critical assessment of that process we call history and history making. That is an ethical task but also, by any other name, that is a philosophy of history, and reading Buber's works as they exemplify his ethically informed philosophy of history enables us to continue to turn to his works as sources for continued inspiration to improve our social relations.

1. Buber's Early Teachers

Nietzsche's philosophy had a profound influence on Buber's early development, but Buber may have been just as deeply influenced by studying with Simmel and Dilthey, especially in forming his lifelong concern for engaging with empirically given particulars of the cultural environments within which he found himself. Such engagements included determining what criteria should be used to formally assess how those environments were and should ethically be shaped, a determination that was not simply a matter of analytically categorizing this or that content of an experience according to some predetermined conceptual schemata.³ Rather, Buber never tired of insisting on prioritizing a personal relation as a phenomenon of unmediated presence and, a dialogical commitment as the *sine qua non* for determining any philosophy of history. Only subsequent to the encounter itself, prioritized as the initial source of response, would he attempt to formally assess the encounter according to the analytic categories then at his disposal. Given that dialectical tension, it is not surprising that most scholarly attention has been focused on Buber's debt to Nietzsche and Nietzsche's rejection of a progressive, linear development of the course of human history in favor of inciting a Dionysian aestheticization of life over submission to a dogmatically formulaic, historically progressive, hierarchical order. Conceptually, such attention makes sense. But Buber was very critical of Nietzsche, especially by focusing on the ethical in

³ For an argument that situates Buber in a Maimonidean-Kantian-Cohenian trajectory, see Kenneth Seeskin, *Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 137-138. Seeskin contends that Buber must return to Kant and Cohen, privileging content over source making ethical judgments, because, "In order to see through false absolutes, we need more than people who witness to the divine presence; we need people who subject false absolutes to rational critique." Of course, situating Buber's works in such a constellation makes his work vulnerable to the accusation of empty formalism with regard to effecting ethical intervention.

Nietzsche's contestation of what he may have considered to be mere formalism, that is, a formalism fraught with the danger of reducing human encounters to moral equivalents in a Darwinian logic of a survival of the fittest.

Indeed, in *Between Man & Man*, in his critique of Spengler's biologism, Buber says of Nietzsche, that "Nietzsche's thesis speaks the language of history, Spengler's language of biology," which he considers a trivialization and poor simplification. By contrast, for Buber, animals do not have a history in the sense of a "world history" which means that, "Man has acquired history by entering fundamentally on something that would be bound to appear to the beasts of prey as senseless and grotesque – namely, on responsibility, and thus on becoming a person with a relation to truth." Moreover, "History is not the sequence of conquests of power and actions of power but the context of responsibilities of power in time."⁴ His discussion aims at exploring how being human crystallizes in the possibility of doing good or evil in the context of the historically current crisis and its concomitant loss of faith in political action, particularly in light of the Shoah. Buber concludes:

That man may not be lost there is need of the person's responsibility to truth in his historical situation. There is need of the Single One who stands over against all being which is present to him – and thus also over against the body politic – and guarantees all being which is present to him – and thus also the body politic.⁵

In passages such as these, it is evident that Buber works with a clearly established philosophical sense of historical analysis, informed, however, by his ethical commitments. The fusion of the two shaped Buber's peculiarly Jewish-influenced philosophy of history and for that, he not only had Jewish teachers and read Jewish texts, but was informed by his reading of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Kant and Cohen. But perhaps more to the point, he was able to create his own style of philosophizing in contrast to those philosophers by turning to and drawing from Simmel and Dilthey.

Consider what Buber had to say about Simmel and Dilthey in the short Introduction he wrote in 1957, near the end of his life, to Nathan Rotenstreich's book on the philosophy of history, *Between Past and Present*. In that introduction, Buber refers to Simmel and Dilthey as two thinkers who, at the turn of the century, raised the fundamental questions about the nature of historical knowledge and its workings on humans in its form as a self-reflective activity. Referring to Simmel, Buber claimed that "such important presuppositions as 'the distinctive traits of the *a priori* through which we interpret and organize the historical facts' (Simmel, 1892) [be-

⁴ *Between Man and Man*, 97.

⁵ *Ibid*, 108.

came] the subject matter of analysis." And, referring to Dilthey, he said that "a 'Critique of Historical Reason' which Dilthey in 1908 considered one of the main tasks of the thought of our generation is still unwritten." For Buber, intellectual productions such as philosophies of history must grow out of certain working conditions, that is, they must be spiritual products of humans thinking together in a common effort, and they must grow out of particular places and times such as, in the case of Rotenstreich, from the Jerusalem of the 1940s and '50s. Significantly, though, he also noted that, as a philosophical endeavor, that effort can not be characterized by any particular attachment to a definitive school of thought. Only in fulfilling such criteria of production – formalization of social structures, critique of the causality operative in history, cooperative research, and indefinite historical origin – can an essay such as Rotenstreich's qualify as a philosophy of history that merges "the open-minded experience of living history with a reflective perspective on past history."⁶ At age 79, with a full life of accomplished production behind him, Buber neglected to even mention Nietzsche's name but did refer to his two teachers with whom he had contact when studying in Berlin, two German philosophers of history.

2. Dilthey's Universalization of Autobiography

The set of ideas which best characterize Dilthey's original, interpretive approach in reflecting on history, and those which likely influenced Buber's appropriation and transformation of that approach, are those of time, value, meaning, purpose, and productive force. These are issues on which Dilthey was working toward the end of his life and which are effectively condensed and interrelated in his *Draft for a Critique of Historical Reason*, unpublished in his lifetime.⁷ Dilthey entitled the first part of the *Draft* "Lived Experience and Autobiography," and began the section called "The Task of a Critique of Historical Reason" by claiming that "(t)he connectedness of the world of human spirit dawns in the subject and yet there is a

⁶ See Nathan Rotenstreich, *Between Past and Present* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1958), vi.

⁷ Dilthey died in 1911. *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (*Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*) was published in an abbreviated and unfinished form in the Proceedings of the Prussian Academy of the Sciences in Berlin as a continuation of *Studies Toward the Foundation of the Human Sciences*, read by Dilthey to the Academy from 1904 to 1909 and then published by that group. For presentations of Dilthey's influence on Buber, see: Maurice F. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 34, 40, 48. Also see H.P. Rickman, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Pioneer of the Human Studies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1979), 41.

progression of spirit that connects the particular logical processes whereby the overall meaning of this world is determined."⁸ Dilthey set up the task of critiquing 'historical reason' by spelling out what must be done in order to understand how the "formation of the world of spirit in the subject makes possible the knowledge of spiritual reality," a problem, he claims, which can only be addressed by sorting out the particular functions of those entities that cooperate in the formation of that course of the world of spirit. The ultimate goal, then, is to understand at the level of functionality the formation of what he calls the "historical course in the world of spirit and in the discovery of its systematic nature."⁹ What this complex of problems entails is grappling with various bodies of knowledge, namely knowledge of the apprehending subjective and objective knowledge of this world, that is, this spiritual world. Again, to repeat, the only way to come to such an understanding is to grasp the *particular* functions of the entities involved in the formation of the historical course of the world of spirit.

For Buber, Dilthey's attempt to conceptualize the connectedness of these as-yet vague entities and the production of the whole, as a whole, may have appeared to be a fascinating intellectual undertaking. However, it is safe to say that as merely a "fascinating intellectual undertaking" working out the connectedness of such entities with a projected and unspecified whole (as a sort of universal concept) was most likely unsatisfactory. Rather, Buber's own original conceptualization of the historical process of sorting out the connectedness of the functions of entities by using the word pairs I-Thou and I-It, was most likely more affected by Dilthey's further claim, that

Understanding is a rediscovery of the I in the Thou; spirit rediscovers itself at ever higher levels of connectedness; this selfsameness of spirit in the I and the Thou, in each subject of a community, in each cultural system, and finally, in the totality of spirit and universal history, makes possible the cooperation of the various functions of the human sciences.¹⁰

But in just what ways might such a rediscovery of "selfsameness of spirit in the I and the Thou" have been important for Buber?

Dilthey defines the terms for those particulars as categories – the various human sciences – against the background of the concepts of life and lived experience which he had earlier defined. The determinations of those categories emerge from how each is applied out of the 'nexus of lived experience' (of an individual) as a set of predications that constitute a particular form of assertions about all of reality. For Dilthey, the most important of these categories is temporality and it is that which constitutes the

⁸ Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 213.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

very "gathering unity of our consciousness."¹¹ Given Buber's insistence on the importance of the fullness of presence in the presently experienced encounter with another, Dilthey's teaching about the connection between temporality and the "gathering unity of consciousness" most likely had a seminal effect on Buber's own conception of temporality.¹² Examining Dilthey's conception of time more closely reveals remarkable resemblances to Buber's logic of temporality. For example, for Dilthey, although we are determined by our past, in our attitude towards the future we are free, thus ethically and for utopian reasons we can, as it were, change our given conditions.

The possibility for changing the given, rigidified-as-objective, structures of our existence occurs primarily in the 'gathering' experience of the subject, which Dilthey connects with an experience of temporal 'flux.' That experience is fundamental, since "the lived experience of time determines the content of our lives in all directions."¹³ One of the characteristics of a "lived experience" is that it is "a temporal sequence in which every state is in flux before it can become a distinct object."¹⁴ And what destroys lived experience is the operation of observation (*Beobachtung*) which, at its root, entails fixing something over against oneself by attending to it. Dilthey notes that when lived experience "... is arrested by attention, (...) [it] fixes what is essentially fluid." The flux and fluidity of lived experience is only something that we can refer to after the fact, because, "(w)hen we want to observe time, the act of observation destroys it because it fixes things by means of attentiveness; it halts the flow and rigidifies what is in the process of becoming. We experience both the changes in what-just-was and that such changes are occurring. But we do not experience the flux itself."¹⁵ So, in what way can we accomplish the 'gathering' activity if, in attending to the factors that constitute our experience, we fix them and thus destroy their vitality?

Dilthey addressed this problem by working through the issue of the structural relationship of the individual to the group, which he elaborated in terms of a structural nexus of life, inherent in all aspects of reality. "It is only because life itself is a structural nexus in which lived experiences stand in experienceable relations that the connectedness of life is given to us. This connectedness is apprehended in terms of a more comprehensive category that is a form of predication applicable to all of reality – the rela-

¹¹ Ibid, 214.

¹² Ibid, 215.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 216.

¹⁵ Ibid, 217.

tion of whole and parts."¹⁶ Such a discussion likely had an impact on Buber, since we know from his early studies that he was very interested in just this issue of the relationship of individual to group, especially in the context of his views on how an individual Jew should be connected to the nascent political movement of Zionism.¹⁷

For Dilthey, however, what constitutes the life of spirit is this aforementioned gathering activity that occurs as the correlate of the nexus of life as the lived experience of such a connectedness. He distinguishes one realm of development from another, but as inherently connected, similar to distinctions that constitute Buber's logic of the evolution of relations from I-It to I-Thou. For Dilthey: "The life of spirit manifests itself on the base of what is physical and represents the highest evolutionary stage on earth (...). With lived experience we move from the world of physical phenomena into the realm of spiritual reality, which is the subject matter of the human sciences and of reflection on them (...)." ¹⁸ We move from physical phenomena, the 'It' realm, to that of 'spiritual reality,' the realm of encounter and dialogue, of I-Thou.

It seems to me, however, that Buber may have adopted even more from his teacher in this respect, namely, how Dilthey combines the experienced *intensity* of the flux of lived experience with our 'gathering' reflections upon that occurrence. Such an experience has a twofold characteristic of spontaneity and of leading to the intellectual intimation of apprehending an interconnected wholeness. Per Dilthey, "(l)ived experience encompasses elementary operations of thought. I have designated this as its intellectuality. These operations occur when consciousness is intensified."¹⁹ However, Dilthey notes that these intellectual categorizations are not just abstract classifications, i.e., acts that are expressive of a higher degree of discernment. Rather, Dilthey maintains that while the intellectual activity is one that ascertains this or that state of affairs, "no *a priori* construction is involved" in this activity.²⁰ In other words, Dilthey aligns his 'theory' against what he calls the spiritualizing of the natural sciences in such philosophies of nature as Schelling's and Hegel's. But his move in developing a hermeneutic method and away from the rigid abstractions of his earlier preference for organizing analytic reflection into fixed psychological categories becomes even clearer in how he grapples with approaches to histori-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Gilya G. Schmidt, *Martin Buber's Formative Years: From German Culture to Jewish Renewal, 1897-1909* (Judaic Studies Series), (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Dilthey. *Formation*. 217.

¹⁹ Ibid, 218.

²⁰ Ibid.

cal accounts. Indeed, historical assertions must be conceptualized differently, with a special kind of nexus where the individual parts of a life are interconnected into a whole. We can relate this dimension of Dilthey's philosophy of history, the move away from spiritualizing to an interpretive hermeneutics, to Buber's concern for establishing a basis for encounters by claiming that any encounter, in order to count as an encounter, has to be an experience of wholeness, of one whole individual to another with a special nexus.

But how do we express the whole? How do we come to terms with what constitutes a whole in the first place, and what is the connection of whole-to-parts, or group-as-a-whole to individual-as-a-whole, that occurs in a philosophy of history? Dilthey says that we do so through recounting autobiographical narratives. Through the narrative of autobiographies we see that the lived experiences of life stories are set in an interconnected nexus, three variations of which Dilthey exemplifies by analyzing the autobiographies of St. Augustine, Rousseau, and Goethe. In St. Augustine's case, the whole is indicated by relating the parts to an absolute value, namely, the individual parts of St. Augustine's life only having relevance with respect to the highest good. In Rousseau's case, value and purpose – which constitute a 'whole' life – are only justified in having the legitimacy of his individual life publicly recognized. Dilthey considered Goethe a special case, because with Goethe we are given "an individual human being [who] looks at his own existence from the standpoint of universal history." In all three cases, however, autobiography can be said to be about presenting an individual life as a process of formation (*Ausbildung*) and of meaning endowment. "The sense of life is in giving shape to things and in development; on its basis the meaning of the moments of life is determined in a distinctive way; it is both the experienced, intrinsic, value of the moment and its productive force."²¹ Dilthey's point is that through autobiographies we learn that each life has a meaning context, "in which every remembered present possesses an intrinsic value and yet, through the nexus of memory, it is also related to the sense of the whole. This sense of individual human existence is unique and cannot be fathomed by conceptual cognition; yet, in its way, like a Leibnizian monad, it represents the historical sense." Moreover, "(i)n autobiography we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life."²² This is so because of the attempt to understand everything that happens in a life course as a kind of external phenomenon, where understanding attempts to understand what produced it from within a particular environment. An autobiographer can be said to be one who attempts to seek an overall coherence through determining

²¹ Ibid, 221.

²² Ibid.

how one has felt the values in one's own life, how one has worked out a plan, how one has produced a life-nexus that is now articulated as a life-history.

For Dilthey, memory acts by highlighting, and thereby attending to, what is significant in the life-moments that were experienced. Through concentrating on this or that moment, it allows others to sink into forgetfulness, gathering together through reconstructed reflection those momentary images, from both past happenings and future idealization, as constituents held together by a common meaning. For Dilthey, this holding together in an act of self-reflection is the root of all historical comprehension.

Autobiography is merely the literary expression of the self-reflection of human beings on their life-course. Such self-reflection renews itself to some extent in every individual (...). It alone makes historical insight possible. The power and scope of our own lives and the energy with which we reflect on them provide the basis of historical vision. Self-reflection alone enables us to give a second life to the bloodless shadows of the past. In combination with a boundless need to surrender to, and lose oneself in, the existence of others, it makes the great historian.²³

But self-reflection on one's life course entails that she who does the reflecting is able to hold together the reflections in meaningful coherence. Whether or not the parts of disparate reflections are linked together depends on whether or not we can provide value, purpose, and meaning to our life-nexus.

Dilthey claims that what unifies our consciousness are internal judgments that we make about the lived experiences that refer to our external, objective environment, judgments that can be analyzed in the forms of meaning, value, and purpose, each of which has its own temporal coordinate. Meaning refers to the past in how we 'look back' and assess past moments for their meaning for our particular life-nexus. Buber does just this kind of looking back in his autobiographical vignettes in his *Begegnung* collection of essays on the role that significant others played in his personal, historical development.²⁴ Value is assigned as negative or positive as a judgment about present occurrences according to feeling. Purpose arises with respect to the future as a projective attitude, and is that which subordinates all others. However, strictly speaking, none of the three are subordinated to the others since, because of their correlation with specific temporal modes, they are incommensurable.

Instead, the work of assigning meaning through attending to this or that memory, overcomes mere juxtapositions through the way one memory is prioritized over another and thus related to a life course. Because of this

²³ Ibid, 222.

²⁴ See Martin Buber. *Begegnung*. (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1978).

