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

jules simon, University of Texas at El Paso
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Michael Zank

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Contents

Preface..............................................................................................................V

Introduction.....................................................................................................1

1. Michael Zank: Martin Buber –
   A Visualization of His Life in the Cities of His Work.................................11

Part I: Taxonomic Perspectives

   Buber and the Zionist Anthology Discourse...............................................31

3. Michael Zank: Buber and Religionswissenschaft –
   The Case of His Studies on Biblical Faith....................................................61

Part II: Aesthetic Perspectives

4. Asher D. Biemann: Aesthetic Education in Martin Buber –
   Jewish Renaissance and the Artist.................................................................85

5. Zachary J. Braiterman:
   Martin Buber and the Art of Ritual..............................................................111

Part III: Philosophical Perspectives

6. Jules Simon:
   Buber’s Philosophy of History....................................................................127

7. Leora Batnitzky: Revelation and Neues Denken –
   Rethinking Buber and Rosenzweig on the Law..........................................149

8. Andrea Poma: Unity of the Heart and Scattered Self –
   A Postmodern Reading of Buber’s Doctrine of Evil....................................165
Chapter 6

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

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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. 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

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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.” 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.\(^4\)

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.” 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.4 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 connect-edness of the world of human spirit dawns in the subject and yet there is a

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progression of spirit that connects the particular logical processes whereby
the overall meaning of this world is determined." 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.” What this complex of prob-
lems entails is grappling with various bodies of knowledge, namely knowl-
dge 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 un-
specified whole (as a sort of universal concept) was most likely unsatisfac-
tory. Rather, Buber’s own original conceptualization of the historical pro-
cess 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 vari-
ous 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 ex-
perience’ (of an individual) as a set of predications that constitute a par-
ticular form of assertions about all of reality. For Dilthey, the most impor-
tant 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,
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
very "gathering unity of our consciousness." Given Buber's insistence on
the importance of the fullness of presence in the presently experienced en-
counter 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. Examining
Dilthey's conception of time more closely reveals remarkable resem-
lances 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, struc-
tures 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 de-
termines the content of our lives in all directions." One of the characteris-
tics 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." And what
destroyed the lived experience is the operation of observation (Beobachtung)
which, at its root, entails fixing something over against oneself by attend-
ing to it. Dilthey notes that when lived experience "... is arrested by atten-
tion, (...) [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 be-
cause it fixes things by means of attentiveness; it halts the flow and rigid-
ifies 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 experi-
ence the flux itself." 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-

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11 Ibid, 214.
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." 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." 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

\[\text{Ibid., 221.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
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-courses. 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

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23 Ibid, 222.
work of attending to and prioritizing, assignation of meaning is the most distinctive category of historical thought. Indeed, Dilthey maintains, history is memory and meaning belongs to memory. But all three judgments — meaning, value, and purpose — are not mere assignations; rather, they are structural forms of life which emerge from lived experience. They are not abstract concepts imposed on lived experience, but emerge from the temporal flow based on the “formal operations grounded in the unity of consciousness.”

And what is this “unity of consciousness” that occurs as the gathering within a human through attending to the remembered flow of lived experiences? “It is primarily the passage to a life that takes place in a human body and that, as a self, with its intentions and their being restrained by pressure from the external world, is distinguished from what is outside, impossible to experience, and strange.”

The human that forms through the acts of unifying its consciousness by telling stories about itself to others is as strange and impossible to experience as it is to objectify the I-Thou encounter that later courses through Buber’s work. Dilthey modifies this strangeness by commenting that, although the unity of consciousness is defined by judgments about the lived experience as it relates to the life course, expressed, at first, as predications about “this specific life course,” they nonetheless achieve commonality and generality by having the objective spirit as background and by maintaining insight into other persons as a constant correlate to one’s own life nexus.

Reflections of human beings about themselves can thus serve as bases for autobiographical sketches which then become historical portraits. But this is the work of intentional consciousness on a human substrate level. It is only through a guided comprehension and interpretation of one’s own life in its connections to these human substrates that historical relations are revealed. What further distinguishes Dilthey’s theory is his discussion of meaning as an historical, temporal occurrence: lived experience is that which is temporally conditioned. What makes that occurrence visible, however, is what constitutes meaning for Dilthey and is that which is the very nature of life. As the nature of life, meaning is not conceived as some kind of an a priori; rather, the meaning that is constituted becomes “something new that surpasses time.”

Meaning is the category by which life is apprehended and which designates “the relationship of parts of life to the whole as rooted in the nature of life.” But meaning can only be possessed

25 Dilthey, Formation, 225.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, 252.
29 Ibid, 253.
by the connectedness of memory which surveys an elapsed lifespan. A past lifespan is meaningful only insofar as it is connected to some external project to which we are committed in the future, and which is connected to or carries out some commitment by us to a certain path. Or, additionally, an historical lifespan is judged to be meaningful if as an individual life-span it connects us to communal life, thus enabling us to contribute towards shaping humanity.

But the distinctive nature of how the part as individual relates to the whole of humanity is that the relation is never consummated and, thus, the whole of life can never be complete. This is the case because of the temporal nature of life, that is, because our lived experience is ever in flux and that flux entails that our comprehension of the meaning of life is continuously changing as well. In other words, we "construe the connectedness of life from the determinate-indeterminate meaning of its parts." According to Dilthey, the task of the historian is that she designates the meaningfulness of a life as meaningful (bedeutend). This she does by establishing the works of an individual in how they function as turning-points to determine the destiny of humanity as a whole. Moreover, the meaning of life is connected to understanding the sense (Sinn) of life, as in the reciprocal connection of the intelligibility of the words of a sentence to the intelligibility of the sentence as a whole. But since the meaning is that understanding process as a gathering together within of something external, the sense of life has more than just verbal or grammatical signification. And so when we say that something is meaningful, we are saying something about a relationship that holds in understanding between a nexus of external events and the gathering together of those events in the inner nexus by which they are understood, that is, we are saying something that holds concretely for both the individual and the group.

In this way, Dilthey establishes a type of connectedness between the individual and the group that is proper to the experiencing of life itself, namely, "a connectedness rooted in particular life-events." He seeks such a connectedness in how it prevails in the relations of the categories of life disclosed by the relations themselves, and which provides the very methods to grasp them, a process similar to a Kantian "universal schematism in concepts" used by the natural sciences to explicate causality in the natural world. Such a "universal schematism" is an abstract system whose logical structures are completely transparent and by which we can understand the connectedness of life, although its connectedness as a whole is never entirely accessible to conceptual cognition. It is never entirely accessible because we understand life only in constant approximation to the highest

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid, 255.
good or ideal life realized through the shaping process at work in life itself — through the moments of purpose, idealization, and giving shape. What this means is that we understand individual works by apprehending different aspects at different moments in the temporal flow of life, but that each concept of a particular work or experience includes within it a perspective on the whole of life; “each discloses the whole of life from a different perspective.” In fact, not only are different perspectives disclosed, but those perspectives are ultimately irreconcilable:

Our experience of the present discloses a plurality of distinctive values that cannot be united and are at best comparable. From this value-perspective, life appears as an infinite source of existential value, both negative and positive, and of distinctive values. Life is a chaos, full of harmonies and dissonances — but the dissonances cannot be resolved into harmonies.33

Buber may have learned something about this irreconcilability of perspectives from Dilthey, namely, that differences of perspective — the dissonances — cannot be resolved. That would correspond to the logic that Buber constructs in saying that the Thou can never be transformed into an It, that is, that we cannot reduce our unique experience of the other into categories of objectification. Besides dissonance, Buber may also have been impressed with Dilthey’s assertions about what we can positively resolve from our experiences, namely, that all of life is an interconnected whole. According to Dilthey, “(h)is connectedness is, consequently, the peculiar mode of relation or category inherent in the nature of everything that can be experienced.”34

In contrast to the atomistic psychology of the natural sciences, which results in reified abstractions and dogmatic formalisms such as Bertrand Russell’s modern atomism or even the early Husserl’s concerns with establishing a pure phenomenology as a rigorous science, reading Buber’s works we sense a resonance of Dilthey’s emphasis on the structural connectedness of the whole enlivened by real relations of concern for the particulars of the ‘external’ world. And if we stress Dilthey’s turn from psychologism to hermeneutics in the last part of his life, then constructing a possible Diltheyan impact on Buber’s development can be suggested from their parallel stress on the production of meaning as a function of communal immuence. Because I am connected to a community, I am only able to make sense of my individually lived experience within the interconnected relations of my given, traditional world. We are able to produce meaningful articulations because of how things are related in history which is coupled with negative and positive value judgments; that there is something

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32 Ibid. 256.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid. 257.
negative about current historical conditions forcefully impels us toward a positive ideal, an ideal that also serves as a compelling force. But then there is the matter of contradictory dissonances. If all is immanence and relational connectedness, how can we have real dissonance? For that Buber would have to turn to Simmel, because an immanentist philosophy of history does not leave enough room, or any room at all, for dissonance, transcendence, the absolute, or the *a priori*.

3. Risking Adventure with Georg Simmel

Simmel was not especially concerned with the topical events of his day until WWI when he became super-patriotic, setting aside his carefully maintained and socially distanced rational life of the uninvolved stranger for a passionate display of communion and nearness. Indeed, Simmel’s young friend, Ernst Bloch, chided him: “You avoided decision throughout your life — *Tertium datur* — now you find the absolute in the trenches.”

According to Paul Mendes-Flohr, Buber was similarly committed to a passionate form of nationalism early in the war, influenced in his case by his appropriation of Dilthey’s concept of *Erlebnis* — understood as intuitively and emotionally lived experience — as opposed to *Erfahrung* — cognitive experience grounded in sense data. Indeed, his passion extended even to the point that he thought that the crisis of modernity conditioned by the science of industrialism was only answerable by a renewed commitment to the absolute — to the point of justifying the violence of war. However, he only turned away from his patriotic obsession with the war upon the intervention of his friend Gustav Landauer in 1916, who urged him to turn away from such a perverse militarism. What makes Buber’s pre- and


36 See Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber’s Transformation of German Social Thought*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 16-19. “The a-social character of Buber’s *Kulturphilosophie* became particularly manifest when he tried to extend its purview to the events of war. The heroic mood engendered by the First World War seemed to Buber to have initiated an epoch of unconditioned action in which one realizes one’s *Erlebnisse* in their fullness and thereby gains “a connectedness with the Absolute.” “Precisely,” because now so many are driven to unconditioned action,” is this period — an age which seems to have been abandoned by God — one of the Unconditioned’s revelation.” He also exulted *Gemeinschaft*, the organic, genuinely human community eclipsed by the *Gesellschaft*, the "society" created by bourgeois civilization. Through their mutual relation to the Unconditioned, “the men of heroic or unconditioned action are – regardless of their views or locality, indeed they may be adversaries on the battlefield – transcendentally united in *Gemeinschaft*. Thus, the injustice and tragedy of war are of marginal import compared to the war’s metaphysical significance. The
post-1 and Thou judgments about crisis and the need for a commitment to "the absolute" different from one another? Paradoxically, Simmel's diagnosis of the flux of modernity and his corresponding presentation of the phenomenon of social fragmentation may have contributed to Buber's revised notions of social relations and what constituted crisis and a call for renewed commitment, and to a particular(ist) sort of philosophy of history post-Shoah.

Early in his career, Simmel developed a psychological theory of individualism that stayed with him during his later analyses of social interaction, emphasizing the concept of interaction as reciprocal effect, with the concept of "society as a totality" acting as an a priori of the interaction between individuals. In The Problems of the Philosophy of History (1892) Simmel claims that the totality of history is ungraspable, but that we can get at the meaning or sense (Sinn) of history because that is not a matter of proof. Problematizing the possibility of grasping, or conceptually comprehending history as a totality, places Simmel on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum of Dilthey who argued for the universalizability of historical comprehension. For example, in the Philosophy of Money (1900), Simmel presents an alternative to a Marxist theory of value in terms of what he calls the flux of modernity. What he means by such a flux is that all social relationships can be understood as exchange relationships, that is, that money can be used for every purpose, generically substituting everywhere for the substantive value between individuals. Correlatively, by the time Buber started writing I and Thou he had developed — perhaps with insights gained from Simmel — an antipathy to the impersonalism of reducing all relations to money relations, that is, reducing human relations to mere quantifiable calculations. In this respect, given that any philosophy of history entails a unified theory that is applied to order and account for phenomena that appear disparate and contingent, Simmel, as a philosopher

war is preeminently a "Sinnbild," a symbol of profound inner events. Yes, the war is, despite its manifest horror, "a fearful grace, the grace of a new birth."

31 See Georg Simmel, Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie Eine erkenntnistheoretische Studie, (Leipzig: Duncker & Humbolt, 1892). Drittes Kapitel: Vom Sinn der Geschichte, P.3: "Es bleibe noch immer eine offene Frage, ob die Geschichte das Werk eines göttlichen lenkenden Geistes sei oder die Kräfte ihrer Entwicklung aus sich allein gewöhn; welches der Zweck sei, den dieser Geist oder ihr immanenten Lauf, der nicht über sich hinauswies, verfolgte, und ob es überhaupt einen solchen Zweck gebe oder nicht; ob diese ganze Bewegung als ein Fortschritt zu fassen sei; wo denn der Wert all dieses Ringens und der seiner Erkenntnis stecke; ob die Summe der historischen Bewegungen eine in sich geschlossene, für sich befriedigende Einheit darstelle, oder ob einerseits jedes Stadium und jedes kleinste Element derselben Sinn und Bedeutung für sich habe oder andererseits ihre Gesamtheit nur im Zusammenschluß mit den kosmischen Bewegungen überhaupt ein sinnvolles Ganze ergebe."
of history, may have been working against himself. Hence, his most effective contribution to Buber's thought and to thought in general may have been in his critique of structural generalists like August Comte and Leopold von Ranke who claimed that by applying positive, scientific principles they would be telling history like it really was. So, while Buber could have relied on Dilthey's critique of historical reason for better understanding of how individuals fit into groups, he may have learned from Simmel that individuals cannot be subsumed in groups but remain strange sorts of fragments.

While Simmel's systematic text on the philosophy of history would seem to be the logical choice to listen for the echoes of Simmel's constructions in Buber's formulations, I contend that that body of work is better understood as a background for the more direct influences that Simmel may have had on Buber during the time Buber was his student. This seems plausible because The Philosophy of History was completed several years before Buber arrived in Berlin and during Buber's studies there Simmel was developing the consequences of his philosophy of history for his philosophy of culture that became his Sociology. That later philosophy depends upon a theory of history that focuses on a diagnosis of the impact of structural conditions of modernity on individual identity formation as determined by movements in and out of dominant social groupings. In other words, the degeneration or fragmentation of the wholeness of an individual becomes a consequence of the possibilities of experiencing a reconstructed wholeness in the contemporary cultural milieu. For Buber, such teachings may have provided seeds for the a priori social structures he uses to build the logic of the I-Thou/I-It phenomenon as an historical process.38

Buber's proximity to Simmel is also apparent from the fact that both belong among the pioneers of sociology in early 20th-century Germany.39 But

38 For an account of how Buber's I Thou can be understood as an historical process, see Norbert Samuelson, An Introduction to Modern Jewish Philosophy, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 201: "At this stage a revolt takes place against the I-It. A person steps outside of the relationship and regains spontaneity, and the process starts all over again. A nearly pure I-Thou moves increasingly to an I-It. When a nearly pure I-It is attained, there is a revolt in which a new, nearly pure I-Thou is attained. The new I-Thou again progressively deteriorates in an I-It direction. The movement of all history is from I-Thou to I-Thou/I-It, to I-It, and then again into a new I-Thou, which marks the recapturing of freedom at the price of security. Buber uses this progression to describe everything. In Book II, the progression is applied to the history of human beings in relationship to friends, institutions, societies, and nations. Finally, in book III, the progression is applied to the history of God and human beings in religions."

39 Buber was among the founding members of the Soziologische Gesellschaft, established in 1909. His professional career as a sociologist began with the publication of the forty volume series Die Gesellschaft which was the flagship of the Literarische Verlagsanstalt Rütten & Loening in Frankfurt, for which he worked as an acquisitions editor.
unlike the more influential and famous Weber, Simmel's work has been characterized as unsystematic, fragmentary, and lacking historical inheritability. In fact, not many scholars count themselves as Simmel's disciples, perhaps not even Buber. But perhaps Buber should have done so because, like Simmel, he did not find a school to train later disciples. Indeed, Simmel's anti-systematicity, like Nietzsche's anti-historicizing philosophy of history, may have provided Buber with the inspiration to focus on the fragments of the temporally transitory and spatially fleeting character of accounting for our human relations as a way of diagnosing contemporary modern society, particularly German and European society in turmoil at the beginning of the twentieth century but then, also, an Israeli/Palestinian society in the violent throes of national aspirations and disappointments. Unlike Nietzsche, however, both Simmel and Buber stayed with institutional culture, specifically continuing in their roles as (admittedly attenuated and ambivalent) academics and exerting influence through their teaching and not just their writing. But it is to writing that I turn.

One of the most obvious ways that Simmel provides a source for understanding a Buberian philosophy of history is the way Simmel combined his own personal standing within the scientific and academic community with both the form that his theorizing took and the content of that theorizing. Like Buber, much of what he wrote about had to do with working through the relationship of the individual to the group. This holds for the whole spectrum of his work, from The Philosophy of History to The Philosophy of Money and his Sociology. For Simmel, "group members relate to each other on the basis of what is commonly intelligible. What is not commonly intelligible, yet what may constitute an element of an individual's personality, must be withheld or denied by him during his participation within the group." This entails that a member's identity becomes distinct from an individual's personality as a result of the sacrificial price that someone must pay for belonging to a group. But Simmel insists that this does not mean that a member would participate halfheartedly in the group; rather, in order to become an active member he has to participate with the full absorption of his identity. What Simmel points out is that regardless of the level of absorption, which is a kind of intensity, the fact is that "only a fragment of his whole self participates." The point Simmel makes is that

and author, a position he held from 1904 until about 1914. He returned to sociology toward the end of his life when he taught social philosophy at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, influencing the likes of Ami Etzioni and Shmuel Eisenstadt.


41 Ibid, 41.
group membership is possible only if an individual is able to split his personality into fragments. The problem is that although belonging to a group, such as a scientific community, enables a member to perfect a certain fragment of his personality, the consequence is that he becomes restricted from expressing the rest of his personality. He is ultimately damaged as a whole person.

On the one hand, the issue at stake for Simmel was the question of determining the standards by which to judge scientific activity, namely, whether the highest ideal is systematic unity and coherence or whether other fragments are worth prioritizing. Another, postmodern, way of stating the problem is to ask whether there is one grand narrative at stake or many, and in what sense can we talk about pluralities of narratives? On the other hand, the issue for us is what to make of such fragmentation in light of Buber's insistence on how an encounter entails an engagement of the whole person. The issue can be partly resolved by considering some political consequences of group association. Simmel makes the observation that those elements that are prioritized by a collectivity, such as a coherent scientific community, are those which are most communally intelligible, and thus are the most diffuse and intellectually inferior. Most humans share those traits which can be said to belong to the least common denominator and suppress those that are higher. In fact, the collective calls out to the inferior and simplistic, such as state-sponsored patriotism, pledges of allegiance to the flag and the motto of "In god we trust" imprinted on its currency. Buber's work, like Simmel's, provides a corrective to the simple-mindedness of instilling normative obedience to the political order, any political order – including German, Israeli, and American. This shows up in Buber's unceasing efforts at engaging in community organization that resists the dominant political hierarchy, whether organizing intellectual and cultural forms of resistance in totalitarian Nazi Germany in the 1930s or by supporting an unpopular political position working to improve Jewish-Arab/Israeli-Palestinian relations in the 1940s and 1950s.

To explore this in more detail, the notion of the most diffuse, least-common-denominator dimension of social organization is what Simmel develops in The Philosophy of Money with his theory that the money culture is a dominant characteristic of modernity. For Simmel, money is the flow or flux of modernity and what becomes the problem of modernity is in what way anything can stand out from the relentless diffusion of the money culture. What appears problematic in Simmel's diagnosis, however, is the source of that culture, that is, the problem-complex of capital production exhaustively dealt with by Marx in terms of its social consequences of alienation and exploitation. Simmel, however, solves that problem by turning to an analysis of cultural productions of fragments and the
phenomenon of adventure. Simmel dealt with the problem of the diffusion of experience that has come to lead to alienation in the money culture of modernity by understanding the experience of isolation and alienation differently, from both psychological and object perspectives, as it were. These threads that seem to connect Buber’s thought with Simmel’s, can be traced to two of Simmel’s signature topics, “The Adventurer” and his extended treatment of modernity as a money culture in The Philosophy of Money.

In his essay on “The Adventurer” we find Simmel presenting the adventurer as the sort of person “tied to our lives with fewer threads” than our ordinary experiences, providing the exemplar for the possibility of separation from the perceived necessity and continuity of our life. What constitutes the normal, expected flow of our ordinary and regulated life is the recognizable sequence of events, which can be ordered narratively into a before, during, and after. The adventure breaks up that continuity, providing us with an altered experience of temporality, since its beginning and end are characteristics of the contents of its own structure and not of ordinary experience. Also, it is the nature of an adventure to take form as an isolated fragment, which, given its isolation, results in a weakened connection with the rest of life, disrupting the stability and orientation that characterize the regulation and predictability of ordinary experience. Similar to Walter Benjamin’s preoccupation with the social roles played by the stranger-as-outsider, the flaneur and the gambler in his writing, Simmel notes that the adventure provides us with the possibility to experience risk and chance, an experience that occurs for its own sake.\(^{43}\) Thus the excitement of the adventure, the risk that is taken to commit ourselves to such an undertaking and loosen the ties that bind us to the status quo, provides both danger and possible reward. The danger comes in that the adventure may go wrong and the security and safety upon which we depend for the continuity of our lives may be lost. The reward comes in that the adventure takes on its own character of wholeness and individuality. If successful in our risk-taking, the regular order of the intentionality structures of our everyday life are temporarily suspended in favor of the fabrication of those structures from within the integral content of the adventure experience itself – given the whole-hearted commitment to the integrity of the experi-

\(^{43}\) Simmel exerted a direct influence on Benjamin as well as a host of other seminal intellectuals in the early 20th century, such as Georg Lukács, Ernst Cassirer, and Siegfried Kracauer. Benjamin was influenced by both Simmel’s Philosophie des Geldes and his Soziologie, citing Simmel’s work in several of his later essays. He refers to both works in “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4. 1938-1940, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 19-20.
ence. While a fragment of experience such as an adventure can fail to produce the kind of embedded experience of systemic wholeness that results from Dilthey’s hermeneutic approach, the result of Simmel’s concentration on such fragmented wholes of individual experiences provided a way to understand how even the most neglected or isolated individual could be apprehended as meaningful.

But another way to characterize Simmel’s thought is that he moved from systematic concerns and a systematic way of writing to a more essayistic and focused form. In exercising that focused kind of writing, Simmel also saw other kinds of crystallizations, such as those social structures as family, which is the crystallization of a relationship between individuals. In presenting various crystallizations, however, what Simmel consistently stressed was a formalism in relationship that could be applied across different situations, a formalism that held between individuals as well as groups. In this respect, Simmel also worked with social types, especially the stranger, which he argued could be found in different social situations at different times. And this concentration on the ‘whole’ of individual experiences that moves over social situations is what Buber readily adapts and transforms, at first in his enlivening the Tales of the Hasidim, then in outlining the I-Thou relation itself, and finally in relating his own autobiographical adventures.

Another way to characterize Simmel’s method is as a search for the “invisible threads” of social reality such as “monetary images” collected as “snapshots” (Momentbilder) viewed formally sub specie aeternitatis. In his signature work, The Philosophy of Money, Simmel observes that “the unity of these investigations lies (...) in the possibility (...) of finding in each of life’s details the totality of its meaning.” Simmel’s idea about modernity was that the transitory nature of modern experience, of modern capitalist society, necessarily leads to fragmentation and alienation and must be redeemed culturally, historically – through Simmel’s “eternal present” transformed into the eternal Thou of the I-Thou relation. This is done by redeeming the smallest fragments and not producing a comprehensive, abstract social theory, and by attending to the different modes of experiencing modernity in everyday life. By attending to these specific modes, such as the phenomenon of money exchange and the fleeting transitoriness of styles, we translate the world of homogenous, superficial experience into an inner, unique world. These modes are forms of interaction which Simmel refers to as threads of relation spun between people in their daily interchanges and habits. As he notes in his essay “Sociology of the Senses”:

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We can no longer take to be unimportant consideration of the delicate, invisible threads that are woven between one person and another if we wish to grasp the web of society according to its productive, form-giving forces; hitherto, sociology has largely been concerned to describe this web only with regard to the finally created pattern of its highest manifest levels.\(^4\)

So while Simmel focused on particular details of our social world—those "delicate invisible threads" that constitute predominantly urban experiences—to develop his social theory, he did so not so much to form an all-encompassing theoretical vision. Rather, his intent, like Buber's seems to have been an ethical one.

Simmel goes on to say that, although we cannot grasp the totality of the work of history, we can grasp a certain mechanical, causal structure of history, such as an organic Darwinian mechanistic process, which allows us to talk about the practical effects of knowledge as results that can be psychologically referred to as values (\textit{Werke}). Whether there are formal laws that lie behind the empirical appearances is, for Simmel, not as important as articulating that whatever discourse in historical research we have used to refer to these processes, the essential function of historical discourse is to refer to purposes (\textit{Zwecke}) in relation to causal processes. Hence, whether or not there is a transcendent goal, what is significant is that there are moments along the way where we have the perception (\textit{Empfindung}) of a purpose that takes on value for us subjectively. Thus, the transcendent teleological function of historical discourse was understood for its possible causal determinations for this or that actual, practical subjective identity formation.

What Buber may have found helpful in formalizing his word pairs, I-Thou and I-It, was Simmel's peculiar understanding of \textit{a priori} categorization as a distillation of the empirical matter of particular events. On the one hand, such a process of distillation retains an empirical plurality as the object of historical reflection while, on the other hand, Simmel claimed to be able to also condense those objects into the commonality of forms. Thus, sociology and sociologists continue to be dependent on the particularities referred to by the creations of historians to develop their theories about the formal relations of the common elements in various situations and experiences of absolutely different, that is, absolutely other humans. For both Simmel and Buber, this would have meant that we need to continue to focus on understanding the works of art or culture as sparks or crystallizations of the autonomous productions of humans who resist the attempts by the dominant cultural group to reduce their individual distinctiveness to the

least common denominator, to mere placeholders in the economic flux of a market modernity.

4. Revisiting Buber through Dilthey and Simmel

The phrase, the “eclipse of our trusting faithfulness in the absolute,” can be fruitfully understood by revisiting Buber’s writing through the prism of a philosophy of history, a prism that leads us to consider the extent to which he was influenced by his teachers Dilthey and Simmel. From Dilthey, Buber assumed the task of a critique of historical reason, of the ways we understand and express the meaningfulness of historical occurrences, of our immanent, relational connectedness, but also of what constitutes those events that we validate with systematic and institutional vehicles, such as books and teaching institutions. How we give shape to things and assess their value in terms of productive force continued to be an essential part of Buber’s thought, from his work on narrative production in *The Tales of the Hasidim* to the phenomenology of *I and Thou*, from his critical socialism in *Paths in Utopia* to his translation of the Bible. But what Buber may have taken from Dilthey’s teachings about autobiography should be connected with what he may have taken from Simmel’s teaching about the stranger and the adventurer as fragments in an impersonal money-exchange modernity. Many of Buber’s essays, such as those collected in *A Believing Humanism* and in *Begegnung*, reveal to what extent Buber adopted that peculiar applied form of philosophy of history that we call autobiography. Loving the wisdom of history is formed through engaging in intensely felt encounters with the actors who produce history which, for someone directly or indirectly influenced by reading Buber’s works, takes the particular form of ethical encounters of ultimately unknowable others. Such biographical and historical encounters nonetheless crystallize in the kinds of artifacts with which we remember, and which we continue to hope will contribute to, the possibility of trusting faithfully and absolutely in the other.

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Part IV: Biblical Perspectives

9. Ilaria Bertone: The Possibility of a Verdietschung of Scripture.........................177

10. Gesine Palmer: Some Thoughts on Surrender – Buber and the Book of Job.................................185

Part V: Political Perspectives

11. Yossef Schwartz: The Politicization of the Mystical In Buber and His Contemporaries.................................205

12. Paul Mendes-Flohr: The Desert Within and Social Renewal – Martin Buber’s Vision of Utopia.................................219

13. Judith Buber Agassi: Buber’s Critique of Marx..................................................231

Part VI: Critical Retrospectives

14. Joseph Agassi: The Legacy of Buber For an Israeli Society After Zionism........237

15. Micha Brumlik: Adorno’s Critique of Buber..................................................247

16. Steven T. Katz: Martin Buber in Retrospect.................................................255

About the Authors.................................................................................267

Index of Names.................................................................................273

Index of Subjects.................................................................................279