

# Buber's I and Thou: A Sine Qua Non for Knowledge Acquisition

## Abstract

This paper dwells on the concept of Buber's 'Ich and Du', popularly known as 'I and Thou', as it concerns knowledge production and acquisition. From Buberian parlance, 'I and Thou' can be seen in twofold, 'I-It' and 'I-Thou'. While the former emphasizes separation, the latter accentuates relation. In its original position, this paper raises questions as, what knowledge is, what lie is, what constitutes truth, how knowledge becomes different from belief, who is/are to be educated, amongst others. The paper further clarifies terms as, 'to know' and 'to learn', and critically examines the philosophical anthropology of man, essence of man and relevance of knowledge acquisition. With the realization of human advancement, this paper submits that an individual to/with individual must strive to realize one another's potentialities and intend each other as a particular person specifically reaching out in a bipolar situation not seeing one another as mere objects but rather same as oneself.

*Keywords:* Knowledge, I and Thou, I-it, I-thou, Martin Buber

## Introduction

Knowledge can be traced to its etymology, epistemology, which is a derivation from two Greek words episteme meaning knowledge, and logos, meaning study. Literally, epistemology as the study of knowledge, is not only an investigation into the nature of knowledge itself, but also an examination of the means of acquiring knowledge, the value of knowledge and how one can differentiate between truth and falsehood. Knowledge and knowledge acquisition as conceived in this study is delimited to the realm of epistemology, which emphasizes what knowledge entails and how one can acquire such knowledge.

In philosophy, when the concept of knowledge is employed, what comes to the fore are questions as what knowledge is, how knowledge is acquired, what it means to know, the possibility and certainty of acquiring sufficient knowledge, amongst others. For its emphasis, the concept of knowledge acquisition is a sine qua non to philosophy, as the latter is envisaged literally as the search for knowledge and wisdom. More so, central to any philosophical inquiry is the concern about what one claims to know and how one comes about such knowledge. Various epochs in philosophy have recorded the pursuit of knowledge acquisition, dated from the era of the Greek Sophists, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes till this contemporary era. For instance, in the pursuit of validation and revalidation, Rene Descartes emphasizes that a place of 'doubt', a place of skepticism leads to 'knowledge'. He further argued that the 'only thing one can be certain of, is the knowledge of oneself and ourselves', and his statement, 'cogito ergo sum', translated as 'I think, and therefore I am'<sup>1</sup>, comes to be. In the same vein, Martin Mordecai Buber, an existentialist thinker, a religious thinker, a philosophical anthropologist and educator, in his popular work titled, 'Ich and Du', known as 'I and

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes, R. 1641. Meditations on First Philosophy. Reprinted in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (3 volumes). Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, trans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

'Thou'<sup>2</sup>, emphasizes what learning is, what lie is, what constitutes truth, how knowledge becomes different from belief, who is/are to be educated, amongst others.

The emphasis of this paper is to examine Martin Buber's I and Thou and implications on knowledge acquisition for human advancement. This paper is compartmentalized into few divisions – philosophical anthropology of Martin Buber, the town and gown of knowledge, conceptual framework of a knowledge-society, Buber's I and Thou for knowledge acquisition and implications on human advancement. The paper further added that, human advancement must be seen as a foundational framework for sustainable development, which seems to be the global phenomenon in recent times.

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### Martin Buber's Philosophical Anthropology

Martin Mordecai Buber was a prolific author, scholar, literary translator and political activist whose writings, mostly in German and Hebrew ranged from Jewish mysticism to social philosophy, biblical studies, religious phenomenology, philosophical anthropology, education, politics, and art. Most famous among his philosophical writings is the short but powerful book I and Thou<sup>3</sup> where our relation to others is considered not as manifold but twofold. The I-it relation prevails between subjects and objects of thought and action; the I-Thou relation, on the other hand, obtains in encounters between subjects that exceed the range of the Cartesian subject-object relation. Though originally planned as a prolegomenon to a phenomenology of religion, I and Thou proved influential in other areas such as education, medicine, social sciences and so on.

Buber discussed his Philosophical Anthropology in the essay titled, 'What Is Man?'<sup>4</sup> According to Wheelwright, one of Buber's firmest answers to the question of what is man appeared in the second major division of that essay.<sup>5</sup> Buber began the essay by citing four questions raised by Immanuel Kant: 'What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? What is man? ...'. After a series of arguments, he asserted that; 'Fundamentally, all this could be reckoned as Anthropology since the first three questions are related to the last'. Buber felt that, the question, 'What is man' could be answered only through a legitimate philosophical anthropology<sup>6</sup>. Part of the process of obtaining philosophical-anthropological knowledge is self-reflection, i.e., wrestling with one's problematics.

There have been two modern attempts to answer the question, both of which were rejected by Martin Buber. He offered his refutation of individualistic anthropology<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, Buber did not favor the collectivist attempt to answer the question. The subject proposed as the answer to the question 'What is man?' was: man with man.<sup>9</sup> Hence, only the man who realizes in his whole life with his whole being the relations possible to him helps us to know man truly. For Buber, since the depths of the question about man's being are revealed only to the man who has become solitary, the way to the answer lies through the man who overcomes his solitude without forfeiting its questioning power.

Buber then argued that the sphere which is established with the existence of man with man, but which is conceptually comprehended, is the sphere of 'between'<sup>10</sup>. It is here that the genuine

<sup>2</sup> The concept of Buber's can be seen in twofold; that of 'I-It' and 'I-Thou'. While 'I-It' emphasises separation, 'I-Thou' accentuates relation.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kaufmann. I and Thou, Martin Buber: A New Translation with a Prologue 'I and You' and Notes. 1978. Op.cit. p.15

<sup>4</sup> Diamond, M. L. Martin Buber: Jewish Existentialist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, Between Man and Man. trans. R. G. Smith (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1965), pp. 11B-20o.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Wheelwright, 'Buber's Philosophical Anthropology', Library of Living Philosophers, op. cit. p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> An anthropology which is substantially concerned with the relation of the human person to himself

<sup>9</sup> Buber, Between Man and Man. Op. Cit. p.203

<sup>10</sup> 'Between' is a primal category of human reality

third alternative to individualism and collectivism begins.<sup>11</sup> Buber attempted to explain the 'Between' thus: when two individuals come up 'against one another', 'the sum does not exactly divide, there is a remainder, somewhere, where the souls end and the world has not yet begun, and this remainder is what is essential'. Friedman argued that Buber's philosophical anthropology was an extension and development of his philosophy of dialogue.<sup>12</sup>

Buber's philosophical anthropology as discussed and examined is basically on man and his relations with other men (man with man), and that is why Friedman described Buber's philosophical anthropology as an extension of his major work on Ich and Du. However, to understand what a man is, one must look outside his or her solitary state, milieu and in turn, relate with the world of things, existence of things and fellow men. To corroborate this, man cannot live in isolation, thus, he or she must live to relate with things and fellow beings. Consequentially, man gets to know more of his existence and other things that circumscribes this existence by relation.

### What Knowledge Is and What It Is Not

The concept of knowledge has been conceptualized in various contexts to mean a belief, an opinion. However, it is imperative to note that the concept of knowledge is different from both belief and opinion. While the latter are characterized by uncertainty and instability, a claim to knowledge is grounded on the basis of conclusive evidence, which paves way for certainty. Similarly, there is a need for an analysis of 'knowing how' and 'knowing that', which are forms of knowledge acquisition. 'Knowing how' is simply a type of knowledge which consists of possessing certain skills and abilities; a practical knowledge – a case sample of knowing how to carry out a task, such as playing football or playing the piano, or basically what the pragmatists would regard as 'what works'. 'Knowing that' on the other hand is a statement with profundity, which a philosopher finds intriguing in his or her way to understanding how truth can be achieved. It could be seen as factual or propositional knowledge, because it deals with propositions, which are meaningful statements that assert something about the universe, and the assertion can either be true or false.

Plato, an ancient Greek, happened to be one among other philosophers who first attempted the definition of knowledge. He argues that for a factual claim to be knowledge, it has to be a belief. However, beliefs alone do not establish something as the truth. For instance, s/he may believe Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) exist, but his or her belief doesn't make it true. Hence, it has to be a belief that is true. For instance, 'the earth is spherical' and the test for the truth is the justification of the belief – it is spherical because the scientist, Galileo Galilee was able to prove beyond reasonable doubt that it is. For Plato, a knowledge is thus a Justified True Belief, popularly called JTB in Philosophy. For Ayer, knowledge can only come to the fore on three conditions: firstly, if what one said to know is true (P is true); secondly, that one is sure of it (S is sure that P is true), and lastly, that one should have the right to be sure (S has the right to be sure that P is true).<sup>13</sup>

However, the traditional account of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB) has been challenged by the American philosopher, Edmund Gettier in his 1963 three-page paper. He gave two counter-examples to illustrate that there are instances where a person may have a justified true belief about a knowledge claim and still fail to 'know it' because although justified, the reason(s) for the belief turned out to be false. This paper adopts one of the two counter-examples for the purpose of emphasis.

Case I

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Buber, *Knowledge of Man*. trans. M. Friedman and B. G. Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p.13.

<sup>13</sup> Ayer, A.J. (1955) *The Problem of Knowledge*. New York St. Martins Press Inc.

Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition: (d) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Smith's evidence for (d) might be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails: (e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), for which he has strong evidence. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (e) is true. But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true, though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false. In our example, then, all of the following are true: (i) (e) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (e) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (e) is true. But it is equally clear that Smith does not know that (e) is true; for (e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith's pocket, and bases his belief in (e) on a count of the coins in Jones's pocket, whom he falsely believes to be the man who will get the job.

To sum it up, Gettier claims the JTB account is inadequate; that it does not account for all of the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge<sup>14</sup>. In the same vein, an American philosopher, Roderich Chisholm also proposes this case:

Looking across the field, you see an object that looks like a sheep and you form the belief that there is a sheep in the field. It however turns out that the object seen in the field is actually a dog and not a sheep. Yet, in the same field, there is a sheep obscured from your vision by a small hill. Therefore, you have a justified true belief but the justification for your belief which is the object you saw is not a sheep. You merely stumbled into being right (there is indeed a sheep in the field) but that is not knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Having established the traditional definition of knowledge and the counter-examples of Gettier and that of Chisholm, it will be adequate to argue that knowledge is in continuum, thus, one can only strive to know what exists at one's disposal. In same manner, that a belief becomes true and justified, is the same stance that such knowledge can be faulted. There are many arguments today as regard the traditional definition of knowledge given by Plato, however, it is pertinent to bear in mind that knowledge is never certain, rather hypothetical and susceptible to correction.

There are various ways to knowledge acquisition and validation. One of such could be knowledge obtained through observation of things around us, through our senses and through personal experiences from actions in which we are involved – this is mostly valued in today's world of science and technology. Another is knowledge derived through reasoning by inferring new knowledge from what we already know. This type of knowledge cannot be established using physical evidence but by reasoning or logic. For example, given the fact that there is a teacher implies an apriorism<sup>16</sup>, that there exists a learner – this type of knowledge can be seen in Philosophy. Others are: knowledge an individual receives from a spiritual source – knowledge revealed to and by prophets in Christianity and Islam through the Bible and Quran by vision or trance; knowledge claim on a person of authority, such as parents, professionals or specialists; knowledge obtained through a partial contact with the object of knowledge, or its extension, knowledge obtained through a closer contact with the object of knowledge; and lastly, knowledge acquired through sudden insight. A case sample is that of Archimedes who was reported to have had a vision of the law of floatation in a flash while taking his bath, when he exclaimed 'eureka!' Remarkably, all these sources of knowledge are delimited to their strengths and limitations; and thus, it must be noted that they are not mutually exclusive, rather mutually complementary.

<sup>14</sup> Gettier, E. Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? Analysis, 23, 1963, pp. 121-123.

<sup>15</sup> Chisholm, R. The Logic of Knowing. The Journal of philosophy vol. 6. 1963

<sup>16</sup> (Philosophy) The idea that some knowledge of the physical world can be derived logically from general principles

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## On a Knowledge-Society

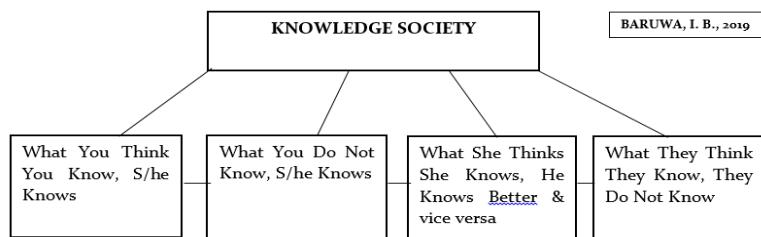


Figure 1. Knowledge Society by Baruwa (2020)

The adoption of the above figure is not on the epistemological arguments, as considered by Baruwa in the preface of his study, rather his contributions to knowledge. For Baruwa, the above diagram serves as a pictorial summary of a knowledge-society, where he asserted that, knowledge comes in different phases, and therefore, the users must accept it in its continuum<sup>17</sup>.

In his submissions, Baruwa noted that an ideal learner or individual must be willing and overly interested in seeking knowledge (inquisitiveness); must be capable of being receptive (receptiveness); must learn to be accommodating in matters of other's attitude, cultures, opinions, behaviors, environments, experiences and the like, and one's qualities (openness); and lastly, if the three points become viable in an ideal individual, hitherto, it becomes easy to directly collaborate with others for newness (novelty)<sup>18</sup>. The truism of this to this paper is the nature of knowledge, mode of enquiry, and the sustainability of knowledge for human advancement, or its extension; for the purpose of discovery or creating possible solutions in the society.

## Buber's I and Thou and Knowledge Acquisition

Martin Buber in his philosophical parlance does not explicitly define knowledge, rather discusses terms as 'truth', 'reality of relation', 'values', 'dialogue' 'learning', amongst others, and makes distinctions between 'to learn' and 'to know'.

Learning, for Buber, is first and foremost a synthesis of both exploration of the relational world and rediscovery of traditions and values by experiencing the changing world as it is. Learning is indeed a 'search for meaning' or as stated in Buber's definition of education, the selection of the effective world by a person.<sup>19</sup> In addition, for Buber, learning means to acquire certain value-judgments.<sup>20</sup> In this meaning-making journey, the child learns as he or she encounters the world,

<sup>17</sup> Ikeoluwapo, B. B. Martin Buber's Existentialism and Implications on Nigerian Educational System. Unpublished Master's Thesis, 2019

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Buber, Between man and man, Op. Cit. 129.

<sup>20</sup> F. H. Hilliard, "A re-examination of Buber's address on education" British Journal of Educational Studies, 21(1), 1973, 47.

attempts to deal critically with its reality, and through the act of selection, figures out what is significant in all realities he or she encounters for him or herself.<sup>21</sup> This is why, in addition to the influential role of the teacher in the teaching-learning process, Buber demands a great deal of freedom for the learner in his ‘selection of the effective world’. As Murphy puts it, a free choosing of its reality, a free venturing into the unknown and the undisclosed and full responsibility for his own knowing.<sup>22</sup>

Buber considers ‘learning’ to be the becoming character of the act of knowing.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, he divides knowledge into two kinds: that of self and that of reality. He further added that, a person needs to explore and experience both knowledge of self and knowledge of reality to step ‘down’ into the relational world characterized by the pure dialogue. In situ, Buber’s theory of knowledge is solely based on ‘the primary reality of relation’.<sup>24</sup> ‘Truths’, according to Buber, ‘were disclosed through knowing, loving, believing and other relationships of everyday life, i.e. truths that were disclosed through relational rather than objectivist criteria’.<sup>25</sup>

Despite a religious nature, Buber sees a great difference between objective knowledge and belief. In the process of discovering reality, he requires a ‘pure dialogue’, which demanded freedom and liberation of personality; he also asserts that humans should not forget the rule of logic, which was considered to be ‘a true regard for the depth of life’.<sup>26</sup> For Buber, a mistake occurs when any forms of coercion, indoctrination, propaganda, or preaching are used in the classroom. The idea of introducing ‘values whose claim is absolute’ into character education is a mistake as well.

Buber sees ‘change’ as a key goal of education. By change, he sees the learner moving along ‘toward the right and desirable direction. Similar to this, he maintains that education is genuine only when it is education of character, which begins with the true essence of the private self, personally re-experiencing the absolute and rediscovering our human nature.<sup>27</sup>

For Buber, the health and growth of a community relies primarily on that of individuals. The contribution of each and every member to their community is reflected in their social consciousness and interactions with one another. Through education, one may become a healthy cell in the organic society. Thus, everyone needs to be educated. Exploring oneself and perceiving the ‘other’ in its singularity are a two-fold task for every person, asserts Buber. Educators must responsibly help learners develop this ability since this leads a person to ‘know’ one’s fellow human being both physically and spiritually.<sup>28</sup>

## Knowledge for Human Advancement

Agreeably, if not unarguably, the previous section **seem** philosophical, however, this section **emphasizes** the relevance of the shared thoughts and ideas to the advancement of humanity in this contemporary age.

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<sup>21</sup><sup>21</sup> Daniel Murphy, Martin Buber's philosophy of education (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1988), Op. Cit., p. 188.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Murphy, Martin Buber's philosophy of education (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1988), Op. Cit., p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Murphy, Martin Buber's philosophy of education pg. 104

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Murphy, Martin Buber's philosophy of education Op. Cit. p. 95

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Heinz Politzer, Martin Buber : humanist and teacher (The Adolf D. Klarmann Memorial Collection, 1956), Op. Cit. p. 16

<sup>27</sup> Adir Cohen, The question of values and value education in the philosophy of Martin Buber. Teacher college record, 80(4), 1979, p. 760.

<sup>28</sup> Kalman Yaron, Martin Buber. Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education, 2000), p. 138.

- The act of knowing or learning must be on the basis of discovery, rediscovery and exploration of relations with the world. In doing this, there exists human advancement for all and sundry. Hence, this will pave way for development, or its extension, sustainable development.
- The acquisition of knowledge at one end must be solely based on search for meaning, and at the other end, contributions to the advancement of humanity.
- Each and every one must endeavor to explore and experience both knowledge of self and knowledge of reality to step ‘down’ into the relational world characterized by pure dialogue. The emphasis here can be retraced to that of a knowledge-society where there is utmost recognition for collaboration or communion for newness.
- Knowledge as considered in this paper is said to be a continuous process. Therefore, individuals or thinkers must acculturate ‘doubt’ and ‘logic’ as complementary, not exclusive, for the purpose of knowing and for a true regard for the depth of life.
- In the pursuit of knowledge, Buber sees ‘change’ as a key goal of education. By change, he regards an individual moving along toward the right and desirable direction. Hence, change remains a key goal for any human advancement or developmental change.
- For Buber, the health and growth of any community seeking change relies primarily on its members, or people living therein. Therefore, the contribution, social consciousness and interaction of each and every member of the community remain an important tool for human advancement.
- Humans are seen as gregarious beings, who cannot live in isolation. It is therefore important to live and relate with things and fellow beings. Consequentially, man gets to know more of his existence and other things
- Knowledge has been described as a continuous process, in which one only strives to know what exists at his or her disposal. In same manner, that a belief becomes true and justified, is the same stance that such knowledge can be faulted. Therefore, knowledge is never certain, rather hypothetical and susceptible to correction.
- An educated or learned being in the society must consider these four attributes. Inquisitiveness – willing and overly interested in seeking knowledge; receptiveness – capable of being receptive; openness – accommodating in matters of other’s attitude, cultures, opinions, behaviors, environments, experiences and one’s qualities; and lastly, novelty – collaborating with others for newness (novelty).
- The I-thou concept, if accepted and imbibed, can invigorate the link between the town and gown, that is, between the ivory towers and the larger society, and make the world a better home for development and its sustainability.

## Conclusion

In the pursuit of knowledge, human advancement remains a viable tool for any development, or for sustainable development in any milieu; therefore in promoting the advancement of humanity, there is need to consider Buber’s I and Thou as argued from the inception to this fore. Buber submits that an individual to/with individual must strive to realize one another’s potentialities and intend each other as a particular person, specifically reaching out in a bipolar situation, not seeing one another as mere objects, rather same as oneself. For the emphasis, the teacher who wants to help the learner to realize his or her best potentialities must intend him or her as this particular person, both in his or her potentiality and actuality. The teacher or educator must know him or her not as a mere sum of qualities, aspirations and inhibitions; s/he must apprehend him or her, and affirm him or her as a whole. In the

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same vein, Buber emphasized that, a psychotherapist can be satisfied to analyze his patient by bringing to light unconscious factors from his microcosm and applying to a conscious project, the energies that have been transformed by this emergence, or at best, may help a diffuse soul that is poor in structure to achieve at least some concentration and order. But with all these, he cannot absolve his true task of regenerating a stunted personal center, except only if, s/he enters as a partner into a person-to-person relationship, but never through the observation and investigation of an object.

The point of contention is that humans must come into realization of seeing one another in an I-thou form of relation, as rightly argued by Buber. To consolidate this, if one is poor and the other is rich; let the rich assist the poor, and also, if one lacks knowledge; let him who has share with the poor in mind and soul. For the purpose of further studies, this paper has only adopted few of Buber's realities toward knowledge acquisition, knowledge production and a life worth living. This paper examined Martin Buber's I and Thou and implications on knowledge acquisition for human advancement and later submitted that human advancement must be seen as a foundational framework for sustainable development.

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