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Encounter and Embodiment: Martin Buber's Philosophical Anthropology Reconsidered

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**ENCOUNTER AND EMBODIMENT: MARTIN BUBER'S PHILOSOPHICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY RECONSIDERED**

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**A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF
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Encounter and Embodiment: Martin Buber's Philosophical Anthropology Reconsidered

William M. Plevan

Abstract

In my dissertation, I argue that Buber's 1938 lectures on philosophical anthropology, *The Problem of the Human Being*, are a crucial resource for understanding the relationship between Buber's philosophy of dialogue and his writings on Judaism. I show that Buber's critique of collectivism and individualism in social and political theory and philosophy of culture is part of his broader project of arguing that Western thought, and in particular German philosophy, have ignored the spiritual teachings of Judaism to its detriment. I demonstrate the link between Buber's philosophical account of dialogue as a genuine relationship that grounds community and an embodied conception of holiness he found in classical Jewish texts. For Buber, the essentially Jewish idea that a genuine relationship with other involves their whole, embodied reality could serve as a spiritual counter to both social alienation and totalitarian politics in modern life. While I question both Buber's essentialist methodological approach to the history of Judaism and aspects of his philosophical account of dialogue, I find his project of fusing social and spiritual renewal to be instructive for contemporary religious thought, social and political theory.

Introduction

One of the persistent challenges in interpreting the thought of Martin Buber is understanding the relationship between his dialogical philosophy and his various scholarly and more polemical writings on Judaism. The challenge stems in part from the fact that Buber's most significant works on the idea of dialogue - *I and Thou*, the short book "Dialogue," his lectures "The Problem of the Human Being," and his later papers on philosophical anthropology (collected in English in the volume *The Knowledge of Man*) - contain only few and often oblique references to Jewish textual sources. Buber himself is not explicit or clear as to whether his philosophy of dialogue is a Jewish philosophy, and what it would mean for it to be so. Much of the scholarship on Buber's dialogical philosophy places it in the context of Buber's varied intellectual influences and, while not denying the significance of his Jewish commitments and intellectual interests, does not deal directly with the question of how the dialogical philosophy contributes to the arguments in Buber's Jewish writings or the other way around. In this dissertation, I address the relationship between Buber's philosophy of dialogue and his interpretation of Judaism by closely examining his lectures on philosophical anthropology, "The Problem of the Human Being,"¹ which he delivered in 1938 not long after fleeing Germany and arriving in Palestine to take a chair in sociology of culture at the Hebrew University. While these lectures have been discussed in the scholarly literature

¹ These lectures appear in English under the title "What is Man" in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). Here I refer to the lectures by the translation of their Hebrew and German title (*Ba'ayat Ha'adam* and *Das Problem Des Menschen*). I use quotation marks, rather than italics, though the lectures appear as a stand alone book in German, they do not in Hebrew.

on Buber's philosophy of dialogue, their unique relationship to Buber's writings on Judaism have been overlooked.

In my discussion of these lectures, I find the crucial link between Buber's philosophy of dialogue and his interpretation of Judaism in his claim that human realization occurs within the embodied realm of everyday existence, rather than in some form of mystical ascent or ascetic retreat from everyday existence. In some of his polemical writings on Judaism from 1918 onward, Buber claims that the idea of realization in the everyday, what I am calling "embodiment," is the distinctive teaching of Judaism, which he often presents as the "essence of Judaism." In these same writings, Buber contrasts this teaching of Judaism with two alternative ideas. The first is that human realization requires withdrawal from the everyday, which Buber usually associates with the ancient teachings of Gnosticism as he understood them. The second is the idea that the world as is holy just as it is and is in no need of transformation, an idea Buber usually equates with what Buber calls heathenism or other ancient religious ideas like magic and the apocalyptic as he understood them.

What I argue here is that this triadic contrast of Judaism with Gnosticism and heathenism also shapes the rhetorical presentation of his argument in "The Problem of the Human Being." In these lectures, Buber presents a critical overview of attempts within the history of Western thought and by his early 20th century contemporaries Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler to address the essence of the human being as a philosophical question, the area of philosophy usually called philosophical anthropology. Buber offers a brief version of his own answer to this question in the final lecture where he introduces the concept of "the between," or the "interhuman," that he would develop

at greater length in later writings, particularly in “Elements of the Interhuman.”² In “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber contrasts the dialogical sociality of the between as a philosophical concept with two opposing concepts that he calls “individualism” and “collectivism.” As I will argue in the dissertation, the concepts of individualism and collectivism as Buber presents them parallel the characterizations of Gnostic and heathen ideas that he discusses at greater length in his writings on Judaism. Likewise, Buber, both in these lectures and elsewhere, associates major thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition and his own time with either endorsement or opposition to the Gnostic or pagan conceptions of human realization. Dialogical philosophy is a Jewish philosophy in the sense that it presents the essential teachings of the Jewish tradition in a philosophical idiom.

By reading “The Problem of the Human Being” in light of Buber’s writings on Judaism I will clarify two important aspects of Buber’s thought. The first is the role of embodiment both in Buber’s interpretation of Judaism and his philosophy of dialogue. As we might expect, Buber’s conception of dialogue answers both the question, “what is the essence of Judaism” and the question, “what is the essence of humanity.” In the case of the latter, Buber’s later writings on philosophical anthropology present “the between” as the condition of all human realization. Likewise, Buber says in his writings on Judaism that dialogue is the defining characteristic of the divine-human relationship as depicted in Jewish sources.³ What I argue here is that scholarly interpretations have overlooked the

² Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), 62-78.

³ For example, “...the whole history of the world...is a dialogue between God and his creature...” Martin Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis*, (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997), 18.

role of embodiment in Buber's conception of dialogue, whether in interhuman dialogue or the dialogue between humanity and God. For Buber, it is crucial to his argument that dialogue is realized within embodied material existence, not outside of it. Although he himself did not emphasize this theme or note it as a main principle of his philosophy, it appears in his most of his crucial writings on dialogue. "The Problem of the Human Being" offers us the best window into understanding both the significance of embodiment in his thought because it contains the clearest link between his philosophy of dialogue and his contrast of Judaism and Gnosticism in which he discusses embodiment most explicitly.

The second important aspect of Buber's thought I clarify is the way his philosophical writings and his writings on Judaism, different as they be in method and rhetoric, share the common goal of presenting a humanistic conception of self-realization and social renewal that Buber believed is uniquely Jewish. From his earliest writings, Buber claimed that his interpretations of Jewish religious texts were directed at providing valuable insights into the nature of human self-realization. Moreover, Buber presented his own writings on Judaism as part of a broader Zionist project of enacting of humanistic revival of Jewish life that would serve as a model and vanguard for humanistic renewal for all peoples. In his essay "My Way To Hasidism," for example, Martin Buber recalls the point in his life at the age of 20 in which he was devoid of spiritual grounding or direction. He lived, as he described it, in "the '*Olam-ha-tohu*,' the 'World of Confusion,' the mythical dwelling place of lost souls. Here I lived – in versatile fullness of spirit, but

without Judaism, without humanity, and without the presence of the divine.”⁴ Buber goes on to say that he began to find a spiritual anchor by embracing the Zionist project of cultural renewal, settlement of the land of Israel and realization of community. He describes how his discovery of a passage by the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, drew him to the spiritual power of his teachings. “The primally Jewish opened to me, flowering to newly conscious expression in the darkness of exile: man’s being created in the image of God I grasped as deed, as becoming, as task. And this primally Jewish reality was a primal human reality, the content of human religiousness.” Connecting this text to his childhood encounter with Hasidism, Buber concludes that “The image out of my childhood, the memory of the zaddik and his community, rose upward and illuminated me: I recognized the idea of the perfected man.”⁵

This passage shows that Buber’s viewed his reclamation of Jewish religious texts as a humanistic endeavor deeply rooted in his Zionist conception of Jewish renewal. For Buber, Zionism, both in its literary and socio-political dimensions, is, or should be, an essentially humanistic endeavor Buber would later describe his interpretive approach as “Hebrew Humanism,” by which he meant the “reclamation” of the Jewish literary tradition for the “normative value of the human patterns demonstrated” in that tradition.⁶ Buber’s consistently argued that Judaism contained unique teachings about the nature of human realization and that it was Israel’s mission to enact these teachings as a practical task of realizing genuine community, ideally in its own land. My claim is that Buber understood his writings on dialogue and philosophical anthropology as one literary form

⁴ Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), 49.

⁵ Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 51.

⁶ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 244.

for expressing his humanistic Jewish teaching, even though they did not contain explicit references to Jewish textual sources. The more philosophical style of “The Problem of the Human Being” and his later philosophical anthropology allowed him to develop these ideas without the distinctive idioms of Jewish texts and to place them within contemporary conversations within disciplines of philosophy, psychology and social theory, thereby broadening the audience for distinctive Jewish ideas.

In each section of the dissertation I treat a different set of theme and thinkers that Buber discusses in “The Problem of the Human Being” that provide the structure of his argument about Judaism and the essence of humanity. In chapter one, I examine the way Buber developed the triadic schema of Jewish/Gnostic/heathen (although Buber does not always use the latter two terms consistently) that appears throughout Buber’s polemical lectures and writings on Judaism. These lectures represent Buber’s response to a constellation of views prevalent in German culture and society that Judaism as a religious tradition lacks any spiritual value and could not make any meaningful contribution to intellectual and cultural life. At times he is addressing non-Jews, but for the most part his arguments about Judaism are addressed to Jews whom he hoped to inspire to find Judaism spiritually compelling and participate in a renewal of Jewish life. Buber’s polemical argument is that Judaism has been distorted both by its Jewish and non-Jewish despisers because Western thinking typically separates the spiritual from the material, a way of thinking Buber sees in the most important philosophical and theological sources of that tradition, first in Plato and later in the apostle Paul. According to Buber, Judaism’s teaching of the realization of the spiritual within the material is not only the key to Jewish renewal but also critical for addressing the spiritual and social crisis prevalent in modern

Western life. This claim about the spiritual value of Judaism and the contrast of Judaism to Gnostic and heathen thinking shapes his arguments about the Western philosophical tradition that he develops in “The Problem of the Human Being,” as I will discuss in the remaining chapters.

In chapter two, I show that Buber’s critique of individualism and collectivism in “The Problem of the Human Being” is rooted in his broader critique of the Western philosophical tradition beginning with Plato. I examine two places in Buber’s writings where he contrasts the spiritual value of Judaism to the limitations of Platonic philosophy and social thought. Buber’s assessment, I take it, is that both Gnostic and heathen thinking arise from Plato’s abstract approach to philosophy because of its ontological separation of the spiritual from the material. For Buber, this Platonic separation of material and spiritual leaves a problematic legacy for Western social and religious thought that reemerges in modern forms of individualism and collectivism, both as social theories and political ideologies. Buber’s own concept of the between as the ontological realm in which genuine dialogue occurs serves as an alternative to these options that is rooted in Jewish ideas about community and spiritual realization as Buber interpreted them. The between, I argue, is not only the realm of inter-human dialogue, but also where the spiritual is realized within the material.

In chapter three, I discuss Buber’s philosophical debt to Immanuel Kant. Buber cites Kant as an important philosophical influence in several places in his writings, but he does not offer a systematic account of how Kantian insights figure into his own philosophical project. Paul Mendes-Flohr has already drawn attention to the neo-Kantian elements of Buber’s concept of the “between.” In this chapter, I explicate key passages in

“The Problem of the Human Being” and *I and Thou* where Buber relates his philosophy of dialogue to the Kant’s claim that the concepts of time and space are intuitions of the faculty of sensibility. I take Buber to claiming that Kant himself overlooked the philosophical significance of this claim for understanding the unique nature of the human being. The faculty of sensibility, in Buber’s interpretation, not only delivers direct contact with external objects but also gives human beings unmediated contact with the pain and suffering of other human beings. This direct contact is what forms the ontological realm of the between in which human beings encounter each other in genuine relation. Buber’s own philosophical anthropology, I argue, builds on the insight that the everyday realm of time and space, what he calls the I-It realm, is rooted in the realm of relation, or the I-You realm. Buber understands this neo-Kantian anthropology as a Jewish reworking of Kant because it provides a philosophical account of the realization of the holiness within the everyday material world. For Buber, genuine dialogical relationships are constituted by the concrete embodied contact of human beings with each other.

In chapter four, I place Buber’s discussion of Hegel in “The Problem of the Human Being” in the context of his Zionist project of recovering a uniquely Jewish philosophy of history. Buber’s reading of Hegel as a historical determinist, whatever it’s merits, is not unique. Buber’s discussion of Hegel is significant, I argue, as an example of how Buber’s interpretation of the Western philosophical tradition forms an extension of his polemical arguments about Judaism. To show this, I consider Buber’s arguments about the uniquely Jewish conception of history that contrasts with a conception of history rooted in the Western philosophical and theological tradition, of which Hegel is only the most important recent representative. In the prophetic writings of the Bible,

Buber argues, history is the ongoing dialogue between humanity and God. This unique view of history shapes an understanding of both the past and the future. The Jewish people are unique in being a people of memory, by which he means people whose understanding of the past is rooted in concrete dialogical relationship with past events and ancestors. Likewise, Jewish messianism is distinct from the determinism that he associates with both Hegel and ancient apocalyptic writers. Whereas apocalyptic thinking seeks reveal the secrets of a predetermined outcome of history, Jewish messianism places the future in the hands of human beings who have the choice to respond to the divine call of revelation or refuse that call. Part of Buber's Zionist project was a call for a renewed appreciation of this distinctly Jewish approach to history both within Jewish life and for all humanity. His critique of Hegel, then, is an effort to articulate his polemical arguments about Judaism in a philosophical idiom.

In chapter five, I continue to examine the relationship between Buber's Zionist project and his philosophical anthropology by looking his arguments about the nature of exile in both his Zionist writings and his critique of the philosophical anthropology of Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler in "The Problem of the Human Being." As with his philosophy of history, Buber delineates a uniquely Jewish conception of exile rooted in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. He argues that contemporary liberal Judaism and political Zionism have moved away from this genuinely Jewish conception of exile, the former for embracing Jewish exile and denying it's problematic nature and the latter for proclaiming that the founding of a Jewish state would end of exile. Buber categorizes these views according to the Gnostic/heathen/Jewish schema that shapes his Jewish polemics. Buber's treatment of Heidegger and Scheler, I argue, shares a formal similarity

to his critique of liberal Judaism in that they share the Gnostic resignation to the exilic conditions of humanity and the Jewish people respectively. The neo-Gnostic thinking of these two philosophers represents a capitulation to the alienated conditions of modern humanity just as totalitarianism, following heathen thinking, seeks to overcome exile through a political totality. Buber's philosophical writings, I conclude, cannot be understood apart from his project of Hebrew Humanism, retrieving Jewish ideas not only for the renewal of genuine Jewish community but for the spiritual and social renewal of all humanity.

Chapter 1: The Faith of Judaism and the Human Condition

Martin Buber's writings on philosophical anthropology are generally interpreted as an attempt to clarify the philosophical claims of his classic work *I and Thou*, in which he introduces the notion of dialogue as a spiritual orientation towards both human beings and all of existence. While this is clearly the case, I argue here that Buber's 1938 lectures on philosophical anthropology, "The Problem of the Human Being," cannot be fully understood apart from their relationship to his polemical arguments about Judaism and Zionism found in lectures and essays from 1918 and following. In these writings, Buber argues that Jews should return to authentic Jewish notions of spiritual realization and that these ideas provide a stronger basis for spiritual and social renewal than found in Western philosophy and theology. Buber's arguments about the essence of human realization and his arguments about the essence of Judaism go hand in hand, each contributing to his project of Hebrew Humanism.

In this chapter, I set the stage for my interpretation of Buber's 1938 lectures on philosophical anthropology by examining his arguments about the essence of Judaism in several lectures after 1918, the point at which Buber begins to develop his dialogical thought. In particular, I will point to the triadic schema that appears frequently in Buber's rhetoric about Judaism. Buber depicts Judaism as teaching the embodied realization of spirit within community and contrasts this teaching to ideas that either extract the spirit from embodied reality, typically Gnosticism, or ideas that glorify embodied reality as it is, typically what Buber calls "heathenism." In the first section, I will focus on Buber's 1918 lecture, "The Holy Way," which is recognized as a major shift from Buber's earlier

thought to his dialogical philosophy. In the second section I will focus on lectures and essays from after *I and Thou* in which Buber develops this triadic structure and presents an explicit critique of Gnosticism and its role in shaping modern Western thought. I will pay particular attention to how Buber's arguments about Judaism anticipate his philosophical arguments about the human condition and the nature of community in "The Problem of the Human Being."

I

To examine the connection between Buber's philosophical anthropology and his interpretation on Judaism, I will rely primarily on Buber's public lectures on Judaism and Zionism as a source for his account of Judaism. These public lectures on Judaism share ideas and themes with Buber's scholarly works on Judaism, but they have a more rhetorical and polemical style that make it possible to understand the relationship between his Jewish writings and his philosophy of dialogue.

Guy Stroumsa has suggested that Buber, like Nietzsche, could be best described as a "creative thinker" whose writings were aimed at "awakening sleeping souls (mainly Jewish ones, through his spiritual brand of Zionism) to appeal to a deeper reality."⁷ In *I and Thou*, Buber draws attention this to a deeper reality without reference to Jewish sources. In his public lectures on Judaism, however, Buber explains how attentiveness to a deeper reality is a part of the essence of Jewish teachings. Buber defends a particular

⁷ Guy Stroumsa, "Presence, Not Gnosis: Buber as a Historian of Religion," in *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2002), 25-26.

interpretation of Judaism in contrast to contemporary rival interpretations of Judaism that had become prevalent in the cultural discourse familiar to his audience, usually Jewish but sometimes Christian. Sometimes he seeks to counter views that explicitly or implicitly denigrate Judaism by arguing for Judaism's spiritual vitality. At other times, he challenges Jewish interpretations of Judaism and forms of Zionism that he believes do not adequately reflect the true essence of Judaism.

Buber's arguments for Judaism's spirituality vitality depend on his particular conception of Judaism's spiritual essence. In Buber's philosophy of culture, all peoples and civilizations have a spiritual essence that permeates the various historical manifestations of that people. This spiritual essence is rooted in that people's original founding moment, which gives that people its meaning and purpose. For the Jewish people, the key founding moment is the Sinai event, where the Israelites as a whole experience God's presence and commit to be God's covenanted people. By return, Buber makes clear, he does not mean going back to the way things were in the past, but rather that making the spiritual essence of Judaism present within contemporary historical reality.⁸ For Buber, a people's life and culture will never reflect a perfect instantiation of their spiritual essence, but the more a people's actual life becomes alienated from that spirit the more that people's spiritual life will deteriorate and atrophy.

Buber's interpretation of the essence of Judaism can be summarized in two key ideas found throughout his writings on Judaism. The first is that the people of Israel's task is to realize the kingship of God through a genuine community, one in which every individual can realize their uniqueness through communal participation. The second is the

⁸ Martin Buber, *Israel and the World*, 243-4.

notion that holiness is realized within everyday reality of work, family and communal existence. Buber develops the first idea in his Biblical commentaries and the second idea in his scholarly writings on Hasidism. A full analysis of how Buber develops these ideas in those writings is not my purpose here. Rather, I am interested in how Buber deployed these key ideas in his more polemical lectures about Judaism and Zionism and how they shed light on Buber's philosophical writings.

Unlike his scholarly writings, Buber's public lectures directly address the contemporary intellectual, cultural and political challenges for Jews and Judaism. Of particular interest to me here is Buber's argument that Judaism's essence cannot be adequately understood from the intellectual and aesthetic categories of Western philosophy, theology and culture. Indeed, Buber's rhetoric in these lectures displays a polemical directness not found in his writings on dialogue or his scholarly Jewish writings. Buber draws attention to the way Judaism has been denigrated and misunderstood by the leading thinkers of the Western tradition, whether ancient, modern or contemporary. In turn, Buber addresses contemporary European Jews, now educated in Western academies, whom he believes have internalized this cultural despising of Judaism to the point that they reject any meaningful connection to Judaism.

Buber himself attests to having faced this dilemma about the value of Judaism as a university student.⁹ When he resolved to embrace his Jewishness wholeheartedly and without reservations, he endeavored to find the spiritual vitality of Judaism and teach it to contemporary Jews who struggled as he did. This struggle against the denigration of Judaism from without and within was the driving force of Buber's Zionism as a project of

⁹ Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), 48-49.

Jewish renaissance. Buber's personal passion to defend the spiritual vitality of Jewish ideas and values clearly resonated with many well-educated German Jews and explains his historical importance as a lecturer, teacher and author for German Jews. He continued to deliver such lectures after the rise of the Nazis to power in 1933, which only added urgency to Buber's message of embracing Judaism in the face of its denigration. These public lectures on Judaism, then, provide the best account of how Buber viewed the challenge of interpreting and re-interpreting Judaism in a spiritually compelling idiom in the contemporary world.

Buber's polemical style can be found in his earliest public lectures on Judaism, but I will begin my analysis with Buber's 1918 lecture "The Holy Way" for two interrelated reasons. First, it is in this lecture that we begin to see clear examples of what I am calling a triadic structure in Buber's polemical contrast of Judaism to Western thought. Second, as Paul Mendes-Flohr has already noted, this lecture represents the earliest example of Buber's turn to dialogical thinking.¹⁰ Indeed, one of my goals in this dissertation is to explain the relationship between the triadic structure in Buber's polemical arguments about Judaism and his philosophical claims about dialogue. As I will show in what follows, these two aspects of Buber's rhetoric involve a claim he makes about the embodiment of spiritual realization.

In his earlier, pre-dialogical lectures, Buber often contrasted Judaism to Western thinking, most notably in his 1912 lecture "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," in which he places Judaism in the category of Eastern rather than Western thought and

¹⁰ Paul Mendes Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1989), 107-8. Mendes-Flohr points to Buber's dedication of the lecture to Gustav Landauer as evidence of the latter's influence of Buber's dialogical turn.

culture. Although Buber would later move away from sharp distinctions between East and West, he continued to argue that Judaism's conception of the human spirit differed from that found in Western philosophy and Christian theology. In "The Holy Way," delivered in 1918, Buber presents himself as countering "assimilation" of a spiritual and intellectual kind to what he calls "the Occidental dualism that sanctions the splitting man's being into two realms...the truth of the spirit and the reality of life..." According to Buber, Western thought sanctions and promotes a dualism between the realization of the human spirit and what he calls "reality." The term is somewhat vague here but Buber uses consistently to mean both everyday material existence and social relations such as community and family. When Buber says that Judaism teaches the realization of "the holy within the everyday," "holy community" or "the divine within community," he is presenting Judaism as the alternative to this Western separation of "spirit" and "reality." This separation was evident to Buber in Christian theology, which he believed has incorrectly interpreted Jesus' statement about "rendering unto Caesar," but he also saw analogous ideas throughout Western social philosophy beginning with Plato. In contrast to this tradition in Western thought, Buber argues, Judaism teaches that realization of the human spirit occurs *within* "the reality of life" and not outside it.

Buber would retain this basic rhetorical schema contrasting Western dualism to Judaism in his later polemical writings on Judaism religion and philosophy. In general, Buber contrasts Judaism to two types of thinking that grow out of this Western dualism. In these contrasts, Buber characterizes Judaism as teaching about the potential wholeness of spirit and reality and the two other types of thinking embrace one node of the duality of spirit and reality. Thus, one form of thinking, which Buber often characterizes as

“heathenism,” teaches fidelity to the demands of “reality” at the expense of the spirit. The other form of thinking, which he identifies as Gnosticism, teaches seeking the realization of the spirit outside of “reality.” Although these terms do not appear in “The Holy Way,” this triadic rhetorical schema appears in several places in the lecture.

Already in “The Holy Way,” before the publication of *I and Thou*, Buber uses the key terminology of his dialogical philosophy to explain what he means by the realization of the spirit within reality. This passage “The Holy Way” shows how these two aspects of his thought were intertwined:

The divine may come to life in individual man, may reveal itself from within individual man; but it attains its earthly fullness only where, having awakened to an awareness of their universal being, individual beings open themselves to one another, disclose themselves to one another, help one another; where immediacy is established between one human being and another; where the sublime stronghold of the individual is unbolted, and man breaks free to meet the other man. Where this takes place, where the eternal rises in the Between, the seemingly empty space: that true place of realization is community, and true community is that relationship in which the Divine comes to its realization between man and man.¹¹

In this passage, Buber uses terms like “open up,” “disclose,” “help” and “immediacy” to describe what he will call “dialogue” in *I and Thou* and later writings. Significantly, he also uses the term “the between” to refer to a space where God is realized within human community. Buber would go on to develop the concept of the between in the final lecture of “The Problem of the Human Being” in 1938, twenty years after “The Holy Way,” and further in “Elements of the Interhuman” from 1957. As I will explain in greater detail in the next chapter, when Buber contrasts the dialogical sociality of “the between” to both individualism and collectivism in social theory in “The Problem of the Human Being,” he is relying on the same triadic rhetorical structure that he uses when contrasting Judaism to

¹¹ Martin Buber, *On Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 109-110.

Gnosticism and heathenism. This passage suggests Buber developed much of his philosophical terminology in an effort to explain what he took to be authentically Jewish ideas about the nature of human self-realization.

Along this line, the passage above anticipates two claims that are central to Buber's philosophical anthropology. The first claim is that human self-realization is made possible by the realization of dialogical relationships in community. The second claim is that the realization of a genuine community constitutes the realization of the divine in its "earthly fullness." The first claim is the one Buber consistently emphasizes in his anthropological writings. The second claim is found in a variety of Buber's claims about embodiment, materiality, reality and the everyday in his Jewish and anthropological writings, but he does not explain the significance of these claims nor does he use consistent terminology to denote them. Buber's association of "community" and "earthly fullness" stands as an early example of using the language of embodiment to explain what he means by the realization of dialogical encounter and genuine community.

For Buber, these two ideas about human self-realization are rooted in Jewish ideas. On his interpretation, the genuine community as imagined by Biblical and later Jewish thought provides an earthly abode for the divine presence, the *shekhina* of classical Jewish lore. In another passage from "The Holy Way," Buber elaborates on the notion of divine realization on earth by drawing on Biblical imagery of the holy Tabernacle:

Judaism therefore is not concerned with a God who lives in the far beyond, for its God is content to reside in the realm between one earthly being and the other, as if they were cherubim on the Holy Ark; nor is it concerned with a God who dwells

in things, for it is not in the being of things that He abides but only in their perfection.¹² Like the Cherubim of the Holy Ark, a genuine dialogical relationship between two people becomes a place for the dwelling of the divine presence. It is crucial for Buber that these people be “*earthly*.” In other writings on dialogue he will describe dialogical encounter as being between “embodied” people, meaning that dialogical encounter involves their whole embodied reality including their failings and sufferings.

Buber further connects his idea of community to the classical rabbinic concept of the *shekhina* in exile. Buber explains that after becoming a community of exile in different parts of the world:

The (Jewish) people were forced to realize that in fact not only they alone but also the *shekhina*, the divine Presence dwelling within the human element, had gone into exile. For the *shekhina* is at home only where there dwells a potent will for a covenant with God and an equally potent striving for realization of such a covenant, only where man endeavors to live within the sight of the unconditional. When the covenant is relaxed, when the striving slackens and man loses sights of the unconditional, the *shekhina* is in exile.¹³

The notion of the *shekhina* in exile originated with the rabbis of the Talmud to make the comforting assertion that the divine presence once found in the holy Temple was still with the people when they were sent into exile.¹⁴ Buber at once adopts this classical rabbinic claim that the physical, political exile of the people is mirrored by the spiritual exile of the divine presence and also transforms this concept by giving it a distinctly humanistic interpretation. The *shekhina* is the divine aspect that dwells within humanity, not just Israel, and it would seem that any person who strives “to live within the sight of the unconditioned” can overcome the exilic condition experienced in different ways by

¹² Buber, *On Judaism*, 111.

¹³ Buber, *On Judaism*, 128-9.

¹⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 29a.

all human beings. I contend that Buber's notion of "the between" seems to function as a philosophical equivalent of the notion of the *shekhina* as the earthly presence of the divine that even joins the people Israel in their exile and suffering. In Buber's anthropology, people can only become fully realized when they become fully present, in a fully embodied way, to another person.

This passage about the Cherubim and the Ark also stands as an example of Buber's triadic rhetorical schema in which Judaism opposes Western dualism. On the one hand, Buber contrasts Judaism's dialogical sociality to the view that God dwells "in the far beyond," meaning outside the realm of material existence. This is the view that Buber associates elsewhere with Gnosticism, aspects of Plato's philosophy, Christian theology, Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah) and modern forms of political and spiritual individualism. On the other hand, Judaism rejects the notion of the God who "dwells in things." This is the view Buber primarily associates with "heathenism" which encompasses ancient forms of heathenism, magic, apocalyptic thinking as well as modern collectivism and totalitarianism. These sorts of views assert that the divine dwells within material and social reality in a fixed way that is independent of the human will. On this view, human beings can either glorify the divine within nature, as in heathenism, manipulate the divine, as in magic, or be resigned to divine will, as in the apocalyptic. For Buber, all versions of this view deny any essential role to human agency and insist that human beings must capitulate to reality as it is, as opposed to Judaism, which seeks the divine in "the perfection" of reality and requires human action to realize that perfection.

I will give greater attention to the political dimension of Buber's Jewish polemics and its relationship to his philosophical anthropology in the chapters that follow. For

now, I want to briefly point one brief passage in “The Holy Way” where we see the political dimension in Buber’s Jewish critique of Western dualism. Using the Biblical prophets as a source for authentic Jewish teaching, Buber argues that, “Compromise with the status-quo is inconceivable to them (the prophets); but escape from it into the realm of a contemplative life is equally inconceivable.”¹⁵ Here again we see Buber’s triadic schema of Judaism, heathenism and Gnosticism. “Compromise with the status-quo” involves a capitulation to the “powers that be” as we might say. Buber asserts that this requires or implies a belief in the inevitability of the prevailing power structure and the impossibility of transformative change, akin to ancient heathenism. At the same time, the prophets refused to retreat into a socially isolated spiritual existence because on their view the only meaningful spiritual engagement is with the fully embodied realm of both material and social existence.

Buber’s interpretation of Judaism in “The Holy Way” is part and parcel of his reflections on the Zionist program he already been committed to for nearly two decades at this point. While Buber always viewed settlement in Palestine as a focal point of Zionist activity, in this lecture he explains the meaning of settling and working the land in terms of spiritual realization within the material:

Ancient Judaism did not want to realize the Divine in a purely spiritual life but in a natural life. Just as its religion was an agrarian religion, so its legislation was agrarian legislation. The humaneness demanded by its prophets was a humaneness rooted in the soil...The establishment of a true community cannot come about unless the agrarian life, a life that draws its strength from the soil, is elevated to a service of God that spreads to the other social classes, binding them, as it were to God and to the soil. The laws of the spirit are the laws of the soil, correctly understood; they carry out the dictates of a nature that has become humanized and God-directed.¹⁶

¹⁵ Buber, *On Judaism*, 119.

¹⁶ Buber, *On Judaism*, 144.

Buber uses the phrase “a purely spiritual life” to refer to the type of view he associates with Gnostic thinking in many other lectures on Judaism and in “The Problem of the Human Being” when discussing Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Scheler, each of whom Buber viewed as having Gnostic elements in their thought. In those lectures, Buber criticizes these thinkers for failing to grasp the interhuman element of the spiritual realization. What I am showing here is that Buber’s account of dialogical relationship and genuine community consistently relies on language of embodiment throughout his writings. This embodiment language has two dimensions. First, the dialogical relation in which people realize the spirit is a relationship between two fully embodied people. Second, the realization of the human spirit involves a relationship with material reality, i.e., the earth and soil, in which a person elevates and hallows through their work with or on the earth.

In the passages I have cited from “The Holy Way,” Buber briefly touches on themes that he will explore in greater detail in other works: genuine dialogue and the nature of community in his writings on dialogue and his social theory, the role of the prophetic leader in pronouncing divine rule in his Biblical commentaries, and the hallowing of the everyday in his writings on Hasidism. The lecture’s value lies in showing how these aspects of Buber’s thought form an organic whole within an interpretation of what Buber thinks of “the essence of Judaism.” In the next section, I will look at Buber’s later public lectures to show how he develops the triadic schema comparing Judaism to Gnostic and heathen thinking. In particular, I will consider how these lectures anticipate the philosophical concerns that Buber explicitly takes up in “The Problem of the Human Being.”

II

Martin Buber's vast and varied corpus is peppered with several brief but often significant discussions of what he calls "Gnosticism," both as a historical phenomenon and as a philosophical legacy. He discusses the what he maintains is this ancient Christian heresy in several of his essays and lectures on Judaism, in studies of Hasidism and the Bible and in his several of his critiques of contemporary philosophical figures. Buber's only book-length study that could be said to contain a sustained treatment is Gnosticism is his book on the New Testament, *Two Types of Faith*, in which he concludes that Paul's writings and the Gospel of John are heavily influenced by Gnostic doctrine. But there his discussion is limited to the texts of the New Testament, as direct knowledge of Gnostic sources was practically unknown at that time.

While earlier scholarship had largely ignored it, several recent studies have discussed Buber's interest in Gnosticism in enlightening ways. Guy Stroumsa has suggested that Buber's various discussions of Gnosticism point to his serious engagement with the then burgeoning field of religious studies (*Religionwissenschaft*), an interest that has not been fully acknowledged in studies of Buber's work. Remi Brague takes up the philosophical implications of Buber's contrast of Gnosis and Jewish faith by subjecting Buber's use of the concept of "world" to rigorous philosophical analysis. Together these studies highlight the possibilities, the limitations, and even the frustrations, of making sense of Buber's critique of what he calls Gnostic teaching.

Buber discuss Gnosticism in three lectures from between 1928 and 1939 that show how his critique of Gnosticism clarifies the importance of embodiment for his philosophy of dialogue, a theme only alluded to in *I and Thou* but given more attention in “The Problem of the Human Being.” In these lectures, Buber contrasts Gnostic denial of the material world with Judaism’s affirmation of the embodied material world as a realm for creative, revelatory and redemptive divine action. The implication of this contrast is that the dialogical life with God and humanity taught in Jewish sources can only be realized within embodied existence. The danger of Gnosticism is not only that it rejects Jewish teachings, but that it concedes worldly existence to demonic forces, providing no intellectual resources to oppose injustice and evil, including and most importantly totalitarianism and fascism. For Buber, the affirmation of Judaism’s embodied dialogue over Gnosticism world-denying spirituality was an urgent social and political task.

Buber’s critique of Gnosticism was likely a reaction to the revival of Gnosticism among Christian theologians and other intellectuals in Germany in this period, most particularly in the wake of the publication of Adolph von Harnack’s book on Marcion in 1920.¹⁷ The book generated strong reactions from Jewish thinkers because it advocated for Christianity’s rejection of the Hebrew Bible and its God. In classical Gnostic

¹⁷ In *God Interrupted*, Benjamin Lazier has sketched the trajectory of interest in Gnostic and pantheistic “heresy” during the interwar period in Germany and how Jewish intellectuals responded. While pantheism is not exactly what Buber means by “heathenism” or “magic,” it is a similar rejection of the Biblical God in favor of deifying nature. In Lazier’s helpful schema, while figures like Jonas and Strauss are Jewish heretics who opposed anti-Jewish heresies (Jonas, Gnosis, in favor of Jewish worldliness; Strauss, Pantheism, in favor of divine transcendence) Buber, despite his rejection of Rabbinic Judaism, is a non-heretical, pious Jew who embraces both the worldliness that must reject Gnosis and the divine transcendence that must reject magic, paganism and pantheism. Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008).

teaching, the God of Israel is an evil demiurge who creates the material world of evil and suffering. According to Harnack, only the true God, whom Marcionites identify as God the father, can bring about redemption through escape from the material world. The very word Gnosis, meaning “knowledge” in Greek, refers to the secret knowledge of this true God and the redemption this God makes possible.

Buber’s most definitive statement about Gnosticism comes in a 1928 lecture entitled, “The Faith of Judaism,” a summary of the basic elements of Jewish faith. Buber’s critique of Gnosticism in “The Faith of Judaism” should be understood as a response to the neo-Marcionite claims of contemporary intellectuals that the Hebrew Bible does not offer anything of spiritual value for humanity. Buber argues to the contrary that the Hebrew Bible and Hasidism offer a unique teaching on the nature of faith and the human spirit that is instructive to all of humanity. According to Buber, the defining characteristic of Judaism is the dialogical situation, in which human beings find themselves called to be partners with God, who calls out to them to perfect creation and is near to them in their times of trouble. Dialogue with the divine is not uniquely available to the Jews, yet because Judaism explicitly teaches its possibility Buber claims to be “certain that no other community of human beings has entered with such strength and fervor into this experience as have the Jews.”¹⁸

In the last two sections of this lecture, Buber contrasts Judaism to what he calls the two “spiritual powers...masquerading under the cloak of religion,”¹⁹ gnosis and magic. Gnosticism, like magical practice, he argues, is not just a historically varied set of doctrines and communities, but it is also a recurring temptation in the history of human

¹⁸ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 16.

¹⁹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 21.

thought, the temptation to deny the spiritual significance of the everyday material world. As we would expect, Buber claims that Gnostic teaching conflicts with the faith of Judaism because it occludes the possibility of genuine dialogue with God. But Buber's engagement with Gnosticism also prompts him to develop the idea that dialogue must be realized within embodied material life, an aspect of his philosophy of dialogue that was not fully explicit in his previous writings on dialogue.

Buber explains how both Gnosis and magic occlude the possibility of a dialogical relationship with God: "He who imagines that he knows and holds the mystery fast {as with Gnosis – my note} can no longer face it as his 'Thou'; and he who thinks that he can conjure it and utilize it {as with magic – my note}, is unfit for the venture of true mutuality."²⁰ Buber's objection to magic is familiar and expected from his presentation of dialogue in *I and Thou*. Magic represents the attempt to manipulate and utilize divine power through rote formulations and practice – it is the paradigmatic example of turning God into an "It." Buber's objection to Gnosis, however, does not easily fit within the primary categories of *I and Thou*. To treat something as an "It" is to treat it as "merely body," but why then should treating something as a "You" not mean treating something as "only spirit?" There are plenty of passages in that book that suggest Buber cannot be endorsing a Gnostic spirituality, but he does not provide the clear and concise definitions or categories that make this easily discernable. Indeed, this may be a great weakness in the book, especially because Buber's rejection of his own earlier embrace of mysticism was motivated by the anti-worldliness of mystical practices and teachings. No matter how Buber wants to have a worldly, embodied conception of faith, the question is whether he

²⁰ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 22.

provides himself with the conceptual tools that would warrant such a faith and meaningfully distinguish it from Gnosis and mysticism.

Buber emphasizes the worldliness of Jewish faith most often in his discussions of Hasidism, which he takes to be the most genuine expression of the prophetic faith in the history of Judaism. He not only contrasts magic and Gnosis with prophetic dialogue but with Hasidism's worldly spirituality. As he emphasizes elsewhere, the enduring teaching of the Hasidic movement is notion of hallowing everyday existence.²¹ To take one saying of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, which Buber published in 1928, the same year as "The Faith of Judaism": "In all that is in the world dwell holy sparks, no thing is empty of them. In the actions of men also, indeed even in the sins that a man does, dwell holy sparks of the glory of God."²² The divine presence is within the world, even within evil, awaiting the work of human beings to unravel the shells and make God's holiness present within the world. While Hasidism's use of spiritual utterances and special rituals in this work of holiness may appear magical, Buber interprets them as intentional actions that call out to God and hallow everyday existence, thus inviting God's presence, not conjuring it. God's free response is to be present within the world, unlike the Gnostic deity who cannot enter fallen earthly existence, remaining remote and inaccessible.

It is precisely here that Buber clarifies that dialogical encounter must be embodied in order for it to be truly dialogical. The Hasidic and prophetic insistence on the accessibility of God to the ordinary human being entails that the spiritual work of holiness must take place within the embodied existence within which human beings live,

²¹ Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 20-24.

²² Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 181.

not only the human being's body, but the entire world of bodily beings. The crucial theological differences between Gnosticism and Judaism, according to Buber, illustrate this crucial point. Judaism expresses this embodied faith in its commitment to what Buber calls the "triad of world time," "creation, revelation and redemption."²³ In Judaism, each of these elements of time has an independent reality within God's relationship with the world. The God of the Bible creates the world, is then present for humanity in history through revelation and then promises the possibility of eventual redemption within the world. Each of these elements of Biblical time remains independent from the other, thereby giving space for free divine action (creation), free human response (revelation) and eventual reconciliation (redemption). Buber contends that Marcion's Gnostic teaching separates creation and redemption by positing each as authored by different divinities, the former an evil being, the latter a worthy object of worship. Because the created world offers no hope for redemption, redemption necessitates escape from the material world of the body.

These theological differences between Judaism and Gnosticism entail anthropological differences. For Buber, as for Hermann Cohen, divine character and human character are correlated. God the creator addresses revelation and promises redemption to the whole human being, within the bodily world of creation:

Man stands created, a whole body, ensouled by his relation to the created, enspirited by his relation to the Creator. It is to the whole man, in this unity of body, soul and spirit, that the Lord of Revelation comes and upon whom he lays his message. So it is not only with this thought and his feelings, but with the sole of his foot and the tip of his finger as well, that

²³ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 25. Although Buber does not remark on his use of this terminology found prominently in the work of his collaborator Franz Rosenzweig, the phrasing strongly suggests the influence of the latter on the former.

he may receive the sign-language of the reality taking place. The redemption must take place within the whole corporeal life.²⁴

In *I and Thou*, Buber only hints at the notion that the dialogical situation is with the full embodied being of the other,²⁵ but he does not develop the idea. Here we at least have a full articulation of the idea even if expressed within the terms of Buber's philosophy of Judaism, and not the phenomenology of dialogue we find in *I and Thou* and his later philosophical works. If the entire human body is addressed by God in revelation and redemption, then the dialogue between human beings must also be between the whole body of my I and that of my You.

Buber's rhetorical attacks on Gnosticism are important for understanding his critique of Christianity as well. While the Church formally declared Marcionism heretical, embracing the God of Israel as the one God of creation and canonizing the Hebrew Bible, Buber believed that Christianity's rejection of Gnosticism was only partial. In *Two Types of Faith*, published in 1948, Buber would fully articulate the basis for this claim. There he argues that even as Paul rejects the full-blown dualism of Gnostic myth, he concedes a great deal of philosophical ground to Gnosticism. Paul may not reject the Hebrew Bible as divine revelation, but he denies any intrinsic spiritual value to the law. And while Paul may embrace the one God of creation, he divides the world into a quasi-Gnostic dualism of the law of the flesh and the law of spirit.²⁶

²⁴ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 27.

²⁵ "But the It-humanity that some imagine, postulate, and advertise has nothing in common with the bodily humanity to which a human being can truly say You." Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 65.

²⁶ Cf. Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2003). The broader argument of that book is that the teachings that can be genuinely attributed to Jesus are consistent with the teachings of the Biblical prophets, and that Paul's writings and the gospel of John reflect the deep influence of Gnostic myth.

I do not wish to weigh in on the merits of Buber's interpretation of the New Testament here. Rather, I am suggesting that Buber's discussions of Christianity and its relationship to Judaism cannot be fully understood without attention to his rhetorical attacks on Gnosticism in contrast to Judaism. Buber's 1934 lecture, "The Power of the Spirit," offers us an example as to why this is the case. In that lecture, delivered at the Lehrhaus in Frankfurt-am-Main, Buber contrasts Judaism to both Christianity and what he calls "heathenism," referring to the variety of late ancient polytheistic religious practices. While Gnosticism is not mentioned explicitly in Buber's account, he clearly alludes to its presence in late ancient intellectual life. Moreover Buber's contrast between Judaism, Christianity, and heathenism focuses on Judaism's embodied conception of the human spirit, which as we have seen was also central to his discussion of Gnosticism.

Buber's point of departure in "The Power of the Spirit" is the suggestion of Count Hermann Keyserling's that modern humanity's spiritual ills, and in particular the rise of fascism, are rooted in the failure of modern society to provide healthy relationship with what Keyserling calls "tellurian forces," and Buber prefers to call "elemental," namely earthly, bodily aspects of existence. As a result of this failure, modern civilization restricts the expression of certain creative capacities. When the desire to express these capacities is expressed in political projects like fascism, modern humanity is "intellectually passive" in the face of the revolt of the elemental against the higher faculties. On Buber's analysis, the revolt against the intellect originates in the failure to appreciate the power of the spirit in human life. Appreciation of the role of the spirit, and awareness of the very fact that it is a kind of power, has eroded in modernity because of

fundamental misunderstandings of what spirit means. What it has come to mean, Buber suggests, is a “severed intellect,” “the spirit turned into a homunculus.”

In “The Power of the Spirit,” Buber avers that Judaism’s conception of the spirit as a power that can transform and hallow all aspects of material existence has been overlooked and neglected by Western civilization, in the past and in the present day, to its detriment. He argues that Judaism’s conception of the spirit offers a more stable and healthy approach to our relationship with the elemental than either that of pagan antiquity or even Christianity. Buber’s contrasts between Judaism, Christianity and “heathenism” are highly schematic, and he acknowledges that it oversimplifies historical realities. The lecture is best understood as a rhetorical presentation, not a systematically argued philosophical or historical essay. Buber’s intention is to highlight how Judaism’s teaching on the relationship of the human to the elemental are superior to the other religious approaches, not to defend the contrast historically or philosophically.²⁷

Buber’s definition of spirit in this lecture is reminiscent of his discussion of revelation from “The Faith of Judaism”: “(Spirit) is man’s totality that has become consciousness, the totality which comprises and integrates all his capacities, powers, qualities and urges. When a man thinks, he thinks with his entire body; spiritual man thinks even with his fingertips.”²⁸ The spirit, like revelation in the other lecture, involves every part of the human body, down to the finger tips. This similarity suggests that Buber takes himself to be offering a unique Jewish understanding of spirit here, as he goes on to explain in the rest of the lecture. This conception of spirit is Jewish not in the sense that it

²⁷ I take it that this is what Buber does in fact do in his later works, *Two Types of Faith* and “The Problem of the Human Being.”

²⁸ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 175.

is drawn directly from Jewish sources, but in the sense that it coheres with the essence of Jewish teaching as Buber understands it.

In order to fully compare Judaism and Christianity's conception of spirit, Buber distinguishes what he calls "elemental forces" and "elemental urges." Elemental forces are "those powers of nature which, both in pre-history and in history, built the kind, the species and the destinies of man. The most frequently cited instances are the elemental forces of 'blood' and 'soil.'"²⁹ Elemental urges "are those factors in human existence which enable human existence to develop subjectively, though in accordance with a common core which shapes a man partly like all other creatures and partly as a man and an individual endowed with his own peculiar traits. We know these urges under the names of hunger, sex and the will to power."³⁰ Elemental forces are the building blocks of the objective, social facets of human civilization, whereas elemental urges structure the subjective life of the individual, even if in ways very similar to fellow human beings and animals. Together they provide the bodily substance of the world in which human beings live.

As mentioned above, Buber does not call Gnosticism by name in this essay but its presence is felt deeply in Buber's account of both heathenism and Christianity. On Buber's view, the instability of heathenism's account of the spirit leads to the rise of Gnosticism. Heathenism, according to Buber, glorifies the elemental (both urges and forces) and does not demand that they are in need of transformation. This glorification proves superficial, Buber contends, and Hellenistic culture represents attempts to come to terms with the failure of heathenism or the attempt to revive it. "In the end," Buber

²⁹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 178.

³⁰ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 178.

concludes alluding to Gnostic mythos, “heathenism necessarily breaks apart into spirit alien to the world and world alien to spirit.”³¹ Gnosticism is the product of the inherent spiritual tension within heathenism.

Christianity rises where heathenism fails by embracing the duality of world and spirit. Presaging his later argument in *Two Types of Faith*, Buber notes that by Christianity he does not mean “the teachings of Jesus,” but rather the doctrinal religion grounded in Pauline writings. In diametric opposition to heathenism, Christianity “desanctifies” the elemental. With respect to elemental forces, such as “blood”³² and “soil,” Christianity desanctifies them negatively by giving them no role in the story of the struggle for holiness. Christianity desanctifies the elemental urges, however, in a positive sense “by rendering them subservient” to the law of holiness.³³ This is how Buber interprets Paul’s contrast of “the law of sin which in my members” and “the law of my mind.” Paul’s Christianity stops short of full-blown Gnosticism in that it does not completely deny the possibility of spiritual realization in this world. The task of the human being is to engage in the struggle between spirit alien to the world and world alien to spirit, on the side of spirit of course. But Paul’s concession to Gnosis, in Buber’s view, is that there is no hope for resolution to the conflict within this world. The sacraments can make the elemental urges subservient to the holy spirit, but it cannot hallow these urges. The hallowing of both the elemental urges and forces is, according to Buber, a uniquely Jewish teaching.

³¹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 177.

³² By “blood” Buber presumably means familial relations.

³³ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 178.

As we saw in “The Faith of Judaism,” Buber views Judaism as locked in on-going intellectual confrontation with other religious philosophies, in that case Gnosis and magic. Here too, Buber sees the historical dominance of paganism³⁴ and Christianity as responsible for the distortion of the genuine Jewish view and the failure of Western civilization to appreciate its value. From the Christian perspective, Judaism’s embodied conception of the spirit looks like heathenism; and from the perspective of the heathen, Judaism emphasis on transformation and spirituality looks like Christianity. What these two perspectives miss, according to Buber, is what Judaism affirms, namely that the life of the spirit is realized within bodily, earthly life through human action. In Judaism, Buber explains, the realization of the spirit occurs through the hallowing of the elemental forces and urges, making them instruments of holy action in the service of God and in imitation of God’s loving and just ways. The Biblical account of God’s covenant with Abraham (cf. Gen 12, 17, 18) shows how elemental forces such as “earth” and “seed” and elemental urges such as sexual relations are hallowed by being subjects of the covenantal relationship through the promise of land and descendants and the rite of circumcision.³⁵

For Buber, the Jewish alternative to Gnosticism is vital to modern Western civilization. The notion of the “severed intellect” that had dominated modern conceptions of the spirit is a product a neo-Gnostic consciousness that does not value earthly existence. Buber’s conception of an embodied spiritual life offers both a diagnosis and corrective to what he maintains is the Gnostic influence that has provided an intellectual

³⁴ While the complex and historically varied phenomena often referred to as “pagan” religions largely disappeared in the West after the rise of Christianity and Islam, Buber associates the Platonic philosophical tradition and perhaps other forms of neo-classicism as an example of ongoing influence of paganism on Western literary culture.

³⁵ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 181.

and cultural milieu conducive to the rise of fascism and other forms of political violence. From Buber's Jewish perspective, bodily existence is not an embarrassment to the life of the spirit, that is, to cultural and intellectual achievement, but it is necessary to its realization. If the spirit can only be realized within the body, then the life of the spirit and the life of the body cannot be severed from each other, despite attempts to do so. Thus, when bodily life and existence are denigrated in the realm of the spirit, that is, in the realm of culture and ideas, bodily life can also be denigrated in the realm of the body, that is, in concrete social and political life. For Buber, the consequences of the cultural influence of Gnostic dualism are disastrous for Western civilization in general and the Jews in particular.

Buber briefly discusses the revival of Gnostic thinking in his own times in a 1939 speech entitled, "The Spirit of Israel and the World Today," when he had already settled in Palestine. While this reference to Gnosticism is brief, it represents Buber's clearest statement on the relationship between Gnosticism, fascism and anti-Semitism. Buber's aim in the essay is to articulate a conception of Israel's spirit as "the spirit of realization" that seeks the realization of all humanity rather than the mere power and success of the nation itself. In this context, Buber argues that Christian anti-Semitism originates in a general gentile ambivalence about the people Israel and its claim of revelation. On the one hand, the nations of the world are impressed by this God who reveals the divine will to humanity and demands justice and compassion. On the other hand, they want to avoid the actual demands put upon them. This ambivalence about Torah is expressed by Paul in his epistles, which honor the divine origin and even authority of the Torah but

nonetheless deny its value for the nations. Through Paul, the nations find a vehicle for accepting the Biblical God but rejecting that God's commandments.³⁶

As Buber sees it, Paul's references to the Hebrew Bible in the canon only serve the purpose of pointing to that which is rejected by Jesus' teaching, namely the commandments of the Torah. Christian hatred of Jews, he believes, stems in part from the fact that Jews continue to proclaim allegiance to the Torah that Jesus supposedly rejected. To be sure, the Jews were not always perfect in their obedience, and Buber seems to blame the victim when he claims that the Jews could have thwarted this hatred by succeeding in creating the ideal community that the Torah demands.³⁷ But as much as Jews fail to fulfill the Torah, Christians, in Buber's view, wished to reject it entirely. The fact that the Hebrew Bible would ultimately be a part of the Christian canon presented an obstacle to this desire, but it did not squelch it.

For Buber, the Gnostic heresy, a heresy for Christians, succumbs to the temptation to fully eradicate the Jewish witness from the Christian story of redemption. Buber sees in Marcion's separation of the Hebrew Bible from the New Testament the logical extension of Paul's ambivalence about the Torah. But Marcion did what even Paul dared not to do by completely separating the teachings of Jesus from his Israelite legacy and positing the God of Israel and the God of the Gospels as two opposing deities. The rejection of Hebrew thinking results in what Buber calls the "Gnostic transvaluation: there is no value to this material world, and no thought ought to be given to *its* correction."³⁸ The denigration of the material world and the denigration of Israel go hand

³⁶Buber, *Israel and The World*, 189.

³⁷Buber, *Israel and the World*, 190.

³⁸Buber, *Israel and the World*, 191.

in hand as they both involve the rejection of the God who created the first, revealed commandments to the second and promises to bring redemption to both in unison.

In his discussion of ancient Marcionism, Buber juxtaposes the physical destruction brought upon the Jewish people by Hadrian's brutal suppression the Bar Kokhba revolt and Marcion's "spiritual contribution to the destruction of Israel."³⁹ Historically, of course, there is no connection. Rather Buber argues that the logical implications of the Marcionite view are that "the world is in the hands of the worldly powers without any check or limitation."⁴⁰ Buber further explains: "In the teachings of Marcion the nations of the world are absolved of the demands of heaven by an extreme dualism: the life of the redeemed soul on the one hand, and that of existing society on the other."⁴¹ Note how Buber in one place characterizes Marcion's dualism as opposing spirituality to the "material world" and in the next paragraph to "existing society."

These passages reveal an important but largely unstated premise in Buber's discussions of Marcion and Gnosticism: that to denigrate the material world is to abandon the possibility of genuine social life that could realize justice and friendship. Bringing this premise to light is crucial for understanding Buber's view of the dangers of the resuscitation of Gnostic thinking in his own time. In this lecture, Buber briefly refers to Harnack's revival of Marcionism with its rejection of the value of Hebrew Scripture for Christian theology. Buber acknowledges that Harnack was not an anti-Semite, rather a liberal theologian, but his assessment of Harnack's influence is damning and chilling: "Three years after the death of Harnack in 1930, his idea, the idea of Marcion, was put

³⁹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 191.

⁴⁰ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 191.

⁴¹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 192.

into action; not however, by spiritual means but by means of violence and terror...The gift of Marcion had passed from Hadrian to other hands.”⁴² Buber does not explicitly claim that the revival of Marcionism had *caused*, or was even a contributing cause, to the rise of Nazism. But he is emphatic that Gnosticism and Nazism are logically connected in that they both aim to destroy Israel, one intellectually and spiritually, the other physically. And for Buber these amount to the same thing, for while assenting to Gnosticism does not require killing Jews, it does amount to destroying not only Judaism as a set of practices and beliefs, but the very peoplehood of the Jews as a vital collective reality, because for Buber what gives the Jewish people its vitality as a nation is the very set of teachings about creation, revelation and redemption that Gnosticism rejects.

Even if Gnostic thinking in his own time did not ignite anti-Semitic violence, the logical connection that Buber draws between the two suggests that Nazism’s marriage of political repression and anti-Semitism is a natural one because Judaism’s dialogical teaching represents the strongest intellectual opposition to such repression. Instead of dismissing the Nazis’ hatred of the Jewish people as a form of paranoia, Buber embraces the charge. Jews are indeed the greatest enemy of Nazism because they possess the idea and practice of embodied dialogue that affirms the holiness of the everyday world that the Nazis would instead subject to their blood-thirst. The Jewish opposition to the Gnosis would deny the Nazis and other brutal tyrants Marcion’s “gift” of world-denying spirituality.

To return to Stroumsa’s observation, Buber “intended to be a ‘creative’ thinker, awakening sleeping souls (mainly Jewish ones, through his spiritual brand of Zionism) to

⁴² Buber, *Israel and the World*, 192.

appeal to a deeper reality.” The deeper reality was not otherworldly, but this-worldly. It was the reality of dialogical mutuality, what Buber named “the between” or the “interhuman.” The reality of this “between” is too often overlooked in favor of the supposed concreteness of I-It relations. The other temptation is the Gnostic one: to escape the supposed concreteness of I-It *and* the genuine concreteness, the fully embodied concreteness, of I-You relations. Buber’s critique of Gnosticism clarifies that dialogue can never involve the evasion of concrete embodied existence, but a fulfillment of it. It also clarifies that dialogue is not an escape from suffering and terror, but a direct and bold response to it and against it.

Conclusion

Buber’s goal in the public lectures I have discussed here was primarily to inspire Jews to reclaim their spiritual heritage. In addition to arguing for Judaism’s spiritual vitality, he also claims that the ideas of Judaism are crucial for addressing the spiritual and social crisis of modern Western humanity, one that has taken shape over centuries but was felt, Buber believed, more acutely in the early 20th century. The Western tradition, rooted in both Greek philosophy and Christianity, is beholden to ways of understanding the relationship between the material and the spiritual that fail to address humanity’s spiritual needs. For Buber, the primary culprit is the ever-recurring presence of Gnostic thinking in Western thought. Western philosophy and social thought, since the time of Plato, has been, Buber believes, held captive to conceptions of the human being that imagine a divided soul. Buber’s 1938 lectures, “The Problem of the Human Being,”

represent Buber's attempt to address the problems in Western philosophy and contemporary philosophical anthropology. His arguments there, I claim, are rooted in the triadic structure of Jewish, Gnostic, heathen that I have discussed at length here. It is to these lectures that I now turn in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Images and Illusions: Individualism, Collectivism and the Limits of Philosophy

In the final lecture of “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber contrasts his concept of “the between” to both individualism and collectivism understood as comprehensive social philosophies. Each of these social philosophies, Buber argues, hypostatizes one aspect of human social life, either the group or the individual, and treats it as ontologically basic and normatively prior to the other. By distorting the true nature of the human spirit, Buber thought, individualism and collectivism as philosophical views and political programs reflect the depths of the spiritual crisis of the modern West and give rise to the political and humanitarian horrors transpiring in Europe at the time he delivered the lectures. Buber argues that recognizing the between as the basic ontological reality of social life avoids the philosophical errors at the root of this spiritual crisis.

My goal in this chapter is to explain the significance of this early presentation of concept of the between by linking it to Buber’s argument for the indispensability of Jewish ideas, as an alternative to Western philosophy, in addressing the spiritual crisis of modern humanity. Building on the observations of Mendes-Flohr and others,⁴³ I argue that Buber’s arguments about Judaism and his arguments about social philosophy are intertwined. Buber’s argument about Judaism, in effect, is that Jewish ideas, as Buber

⁴³ In addition to Mendes-Flohr, Laurence Silberstein has emphasized the role of sociology and social thought in shaping Buber’s dialogical and Jewish thought. Cf. Laurence J. Silberstein, *Martin Buber’s Social and Religious Thought: Alienation and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

understood them, provide a stronger basis for a critical social philosophy than those provided by the Western philosophical tradition. In my analysis, I bring together Buber's writings on social philosophy with his writing on Judaism and philosophy to show how these different arguments work together to form a whole.

In the first part of the chapter, I examine Buber's unpublished preface to "The Problem of the Human Being" in which he clarifies the relationship between his critique of philosophical anthropology in the lectures and his critique of the discipline of sociology. In the second half of the paper, I connect Buber's critiques of individualism and collectivism to his general arguments about the limits of the Western philosophical and the value of Judaism for social theory and spiritual realization. By pointing to the limitation of this philosophical legacy, Buber presents Judaism's conception of the human spirit as the alternative philosophical source that avoids the extremes of individualism and collectivism.

I

In the final lecture of "The Problem of the Human Being," Buber presents the concept of the between as an alternative to individualism and collectivism, in which he discuss these views as both philosophical orientations of the social sciences and political ideologies. For Buber, both the collectivist assumptions about human nature evident in much sociology, as well as conservative or fascist politics, and the individualist assumptions of current philosophical anthropology, as well as liberal politics, obscure the reciprocal, dialogical character of human life.

In the final paragraph of the final lecture, Buber argues that the between “provides the starting point for the philosophical science of man; and from this point an advance may be made on the one hand to a transformed understanding of the person and on the other to the transformed understanding of community.”⁴⁴ This statement alludes to the way Buber intended for this concept to serve as a “meta-sociology” to use Mendes-Flohr’s term. However, the significance of Buber’s statement about the implications of his philosophy for the social sciences is not fully clear without reference to his preface to his lectures that appears with the Hebrew manuscript but has not been published in the printed editions of the lecture in Hebrew, German or English translation. This preface clearly shows that contemporary philosophical anthropology is only half of Buber’s critical target, the other being the contemporary social sciences.

In the preface to *The Problem of the Human*, Buber offers a critique of individualism and collectivism as philosophical understandings of human nature that emerge from within different scientific approaches to the study of humanity, anthropology and sociology respectively. On Buber’s view, the collectivist assumptions about human nature evident in much sociology, as well as conservative politics, and the individualist assumptions of current philosophical anthropology, as well as liberal politics, had obscured the reciprocal, dialogical character of human life. What concerned Buber was how the various disciplines that study human beings had in his time generated modes of philosophical discourse that were limited by the perspectives of the disciplines from which they emerged. When the limitations of each discipline were carried into the philosophical realm, this amounted to more than just a disciplinary bias, but a near

⁴⁴ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 205.

complete obfuscation of the true calling of social and anthropological philosophy, that is to understand the whole reality of the human being.

Buber explains that his aim in “The Problem of the Human Being” is to show the “natural” and “organic,” connection between philosophical anthropology (*torat ha’adam b’tor limud filosofi* – literally, “anthropology as a philosophical discipline”) and social philosophy (*torat ha’chevra b’tor limud filosofi* – literally, “sociology as a philosophical discipline”), or what we might call social theory.⁴⁵ Both philosophical disciplines seek to understand the conditions of human realization and cultural creativity, but because the thinkers in each field disagree on fundamental issues, they are unable to see the potential for connection between the two fields. Buber views the impasse between individualism and collectivism as philosophical views as a result of the failure of philosophers in these two fields to find the common ground that they should be able to find.

Buber emphasizes that his discussion of these two fields of philosophy is not a methodological critique of sociology and anthropology as empirical sciences. Rather, his target is the philosophical approaches to understanding the nature of the human being that emerges from these two disciplines. The difference is crucial. For Buber, a scientific discipline and a philosophical discipline differ precisely on the extent to which their success depends on accounting for the conclusions of other disciplines. For a science to succeed, it must put blinders on and ignore the conclusions and methodological assumptions of other scientific disciplines. Philosophy, on the other hand, *cannot* succeed without doing precisely that, considering the conclusions of other fields of philosophical

⁴⁵ Buber Archives, Bet/12/folder 3. All quotations from what I call the “preface” are my original translation.

research, in order to consider the subject at hand from as many perspectives as possible.⁴⁶

Buber gives the example of physics, which as a science should examine physical processes by ignoring the existence of biological processes that may inhere in the subject at hand.⁴⁷ A complete philosophy of nature however, should consider the way the natural world is understood from several perspectives, including the conclusions of epistemology and aesthetics.

As scientific disciplines, anthropology and sociology contribute to human knowledge when they maintain the integrity of their boundaries from other fields of inquiry and limit the scope of their inquiry to their proper object of inquiry. For anthropology, its scope of inquiry is both humanity in general and the individual human being, who reflects the general characteristics of humanity. For sociology, its scope of inquiry is particular human collective units: societies, nations, families etc. Buber's critique is not aimed at the methodological assumptions of each science qua science, but at the type of philosophical reflections about the nature of their shared object of inquiry,

⁴⁶ This view is more nuanced than the one found in an essay by Buber from 1927, that sharply distinguishes between the "religious" and "philosophical" world views, in which the philosophical is identical with the scientific. Cf. "Philosophical and Religious World View" in *A Believing Humanism: My Testament, 1902-1965* (Amherst, NY, Humanity Books, 1999), 130-135. Buber does not jettison the basic dichotomy found in this essay of religious and scientific knowledge, but in his later writings he does seem to think of philosophy, or at least genuine philosophical anthropology, as capable of overcoming and challenging the boundary between science and religion, or "religiosity" in Buber's sense, in a way that science cannot.

⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, this way of constructing the distinction between science and philosophy roughly follows the I-You/I-It distinction as developed in *I and Thou*, in which the former relationship seeks to encounter the whole of the other while the latter deals with specific parts of the other in so far as they are useful for the task at hand. However, as we shall see below, philosophy to Buber still represents an achievement of the I-It relation. I surmise that Buber is identifying the potential for philosophy, when fully achieved, to realize the reality of the wholeness of relation found in the I-You, without fully touching it.

human existence as a whole. It is here that individualism and collectivism as philosophical approaches emerge: the appropriate methodological limitations of each science become inscribed as problematic philosophical assumptions. Thus, because anthropology as a science studies humanity as a species based on what is evident in every individual member of the species, philosophical anthropology has tended to be individualistic in that it locates the conditions for human realization and creativity in the individual human being. Likewise, because sociology studies and analyzes collective social phenomena such as social institutions and practices, social theory has tended to be collectivist in that it locates conditions for human realization and creativity in such collective enterprises and institutions.

In the preface, Buber briefly mentions the political dimension of the impasse between individualism and collectivism as ways of understanding the relationship between individual and state. His discussion is also attentive to the contemporary moment in which two forms of collectivism, fascism and communism were striving for political and ideological dominance. However, his primary interest is not in a political theory or program *per se*, but rather to extract humanity from the “thicket in the field of philosophy”⁴⁸ by finding a third category of human existence that is neither dependent on individualism or collectivism nor based on a mixture of them both. The concept of “the between,” which he only alludes to here but introduces in the final lecture, is thus an attempt to find a third way between individualism and collectivism as philosophical approaches to human realization and cultural creativity. Buber did not shy away from the

⁴⁸ Buber uses the same word for thicket - *svach* - as found in Genesis 22:13 that describes the ram Abraham sees caught in the thicket that he later offers as a sacrifice in place of Isaac.

concrete social and political implications of finding the third way, but his goal in these lectures is to repair the state of philosophy by bringing philosophical anthropology and social theory into closer conversation in order to realize the close and organic connection between the two fields of philosophical inquiry.

If Buber wished to bring philosophical anthropology and social theory into dialogue, why are his lectures devoted solely to philosophical anthropology? Buber explains that, as he sees it, social theory has developed far more than philosophical anthropology, meaning that one finds in the field of social theory a fixed array of opinions and positions that debate their points in predictable fashion. Buber's assessment is that philosophical anthropology was not as well developed, making it more vulnerable to going down the path away from its organic connection with social theory. I would add, that perhaps Buber sensed that this was a more fruitful direction for him to pursue given the relative state of the two fields. I doubt this assessment is merely the practical calculation of an academic careerist. Rather, his decision seems to be a frank recognition that the ground may be more fertile in philosophical anthropology because opinions are less hardened and thinkers taking part in the conversation more open to new ideas. In other words, there was a more realistic opportunity for genuine dialogue. Nonetheless, by turning to Buber's critique of modern sociology from that same year we can grasp the full scope of his project of developing an understanding of the nature of humanity that takes the role of both individual and community seriously. I will examine this critique of sociology in the following section.

II

Buber's inaugural lecture at the Hebrew University, earlier in 1938, was devoted to discussing the contemporary state of sociology and its philosophical underpinnings. This inaugural lecture cannot be understood apart from the complicated context of his arrival at the Hebrew University in 1938. Buber's appointment to the faculty of the Hebrew University was a matter of significant controversy. As Buber's preface to "The Problem of the Human Being" suggests, that lecture, entitled, "The Demand of the Spirit and Historical Reality," should be seen as a companion piece to his lectures on philosophical anthropology, as Buber intended for the two disciplines to be in conversation. My reading of the lecture will show that Buber's analysis of the philosophical situation in sociology also points to a need for a concept such as the between to avoid both individualism and collectivism.

The controversy over Buber's appointment to the faculty of the Hebrew University was not apparently over his qualifications, but over his appointment to an academic department. The original proposal for Buber's appointment was for a chair in Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*), which was the appointment Buber held at the University of Frankfurt.⁴⁹ This original proposal was rejected and Buber was eventually appointed to a chair in sociology of culture,⁵⁰ a chair he accepted, and which held until his retirement in 1951. But it is fair to say that Buber saw himself primarily as a scholar

⁴⁹ Guy Strousma argues that influential figures within the faculty of the Hebrew University were hostile to the study of religion and comparative religion - not necessarily to Buber - a hostility, he contends, that continues to this day. Cf. Guy Strousma, "Buber as Historian of Religion," in Paul Mendes-Flohr, (ed.), *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2002). 46-7.

⁵⁰ Several studies refer to Buber's chair as having been in "Social Philosophy." While this is certainly an apt description of what Buber did, the formal title of the chair as it appeared in the Hebrew University catalogue was Sociology of Culture.

of religious texts than as a social theorist or sociologist. Buber navigates this tension in “The Demand of the Spirit” by devoting the lecture to discussing what Jewish religious texts, represented by Isaiah, provide a better source of insight for understanding the task of sociology than the Greek philosophical tradition, represented by Plato. The lecture itself is marked by sudden and somewhat jarring transition from the first part in which Buber discusses modern sociology, to a contrast of Isaiah and Plato, which contains the heart of the lecture’s argument.⁵¹

As mentioned above, Buber is careful in the preface to *The Problem of Human Being* to distinguish between the empirical work of a scientific discipline and the critical work of a philosophical discipline. In the first part of “The Demand of the Spirit,” Buber notes that from its origins with Saint-Simon, Comte and Von-Stein, sociology fully integrated the descriptive elements and the philosophical and critical elements of the discipline. The founders of modern sociology were primarily concerned by the dissolution not only of social structures but also of the spiritual life of communities in light of the rising power of modern nation states. “Modern sociology originates,” Buber concludes, “in the meeting of the spirit with the crisis of human society, which the spirit accepts as its own crisis and which it undertakes to overcome through a spiritual turning and transformation. Modern sociology is just this insight into the nature of the crisis, its causes and the problems set by it, the beginning of this turning and transformation.”⁵² “Turning” is of course a significant term for Buber as it parallels the Hebrew term

⁵¹ The transition between the two parts of the lecture is quite sudden, and the second section has its own literary integrity so that it could be anthologized on its own, without Buber’s conclusion which reestablishes the link to sociology, in the collection *On The Bible*. Cf. Martin Buber, *On the Bible*, (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2000), 151-159.

⁵² Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 178.

teshuva, which is usually translated as repentance but literally means “turning” and indicates a re-orienting of oneself towards God.⁵³ Buber’s use of the term anticipates his use of Isaiah, one of the Biblical prophets who invoke the term *teshuva* in his prophetic critiques, as a model for sociology’s work of social transformation. The reconciliation with God advocated by the prophets is for Buber a model for inter-human reconciliation at the heart of social transformation.

Buber argues that in order for sociology to realize its philosophical and critical task, it must work with the correct understanding of the relationship between the human spirit and the prevailing power arrangements within a given society, what he calls “social reality,” or, as per the title of the lecture, “historical reality.” While the social theorist analyzes social institutions for the sake of transforming them, the work of changing social conditions must also involve, Buber believes, a transformation of the human spirit through the actual relations between people. Thus, the social theorist needs to recognize that the human spirit is what Buber calls a “partner with reality,” because the spirit contributes insights on the quality of human relationships to the understanding of how to transform social institutions. What must be avoided in social theory, and in the life of the spirit generally, is for the spirit to become the “mere voice of reality,”⁵⁴ where the spirit can only express the validity of the prevailing institutions and power arrangements, thereby capitulating to them. To be a partner with reality allows the spirit an independent voice that can speak to the demand to transform social institutions and power arrangements.

⁵³ Cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 164-5.

⁵⁴ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 179.

Buber sees his approach as a call to move away from the “values-free” methodology in the social sciences, in which the theorist examines social conditions without making any value judgments at all.⁵⁵ When this methodology becomes fully embraced, it results in viewing the spirit as being a mere voice of reality, because the values of the theorist cannot impact the evaluation of the social reality she studies. That is not to say that the social theorist should allow biases such as class or culture to impact their work. Granted, Buber contends, no social theorist will be genuinely motivated to engage in social theory without caring in a deeply personal way about the subject of her study. At the same time, the theorist must deny the influence of their personal motivations and concerns in order to achieve genuine knowledge. For this reason, Buber calls all genuine knowledge an “ascetic act.” While the fullness of a human being’s life involves participation in and caring for the destiny of a real human community, the social thinker must temporarily deny herself this participation in order for the spirit to “achieve the free vision,” which only then becomes the source for a critical evaluation of current social conditions and power arrangements.⁵⁶

Buber’s contrast of Plato and Isaiah in the second half of the lecture illustrates the difference between the spirit being a “partner with reality” as opposed to the “mere voice of reality.” Buber considers Plato and Isaiah not only as thinkers but also as “men of spirit” who became historical actors by bringing the demands of the spirit to bear on the use of political power. What unites their experience was their failure to bring about the

⁵⁵ Buber cites Max Weber as the originator of this approach, but does not discuss him at length. Buber’s comment appears to be a reaction to something he views as prevalent in sociology and attributed to Weber, not a thorough discussion of Weber’s methodology or approach to sociology.

⁵⁶ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 181.

success of the triumph of the message of the spirit in history. Plato's historical failure was his attempt to install an actual philosopher-king in a Greek polis, most notably with the assassination of prince Dion of Syracuse, to whom Plato served as a mentor. Isaiah's failure was the failure of his teaching to influence the people of the kingdom of Judea to accept God as their true King after the death of King Uzziah and at a time of nation crisis due to Assyrian invasion (Isaiah 6-7).

The fact that both Plato and Isaiah fail to transform historical reality allows Buber to contrast the way each one responds to and accounts for their historical failure. The crucial difference emerges from their differing account of the human spirit and its relationship to forms of social or political power. Plato views both the human spirit and power as something that human beings "possess," that they have as a given. According to this teaching the human being is born with a perfect spirit that contains within it a perfect universal truth of justice that it longs to see realized in a political community. The problem with this conception of the spirit is that by thinking of the spirit as perfect, and by thinking of the truth the spirit possesses as universal and timeless, any historical failure must be seen as a failure of reality, not the spirit. In this ways of thinking, the spirit may be a perfect entity, but it lacks the power to attach itself to reality.

Buber seems to fear two possible reactions of the philosopher to this kind state of affairs. On the one hand, the failure to the spirit's vision of truth in the world can lead to a world-weariness and rejection of the world. On the other hand, the philosopher may also want to attach their ideas to any form of power they can come to possess, even if it fails to live up to their ideals of justice, if only to have some element of their spirit take hold in reality. This choice might lead to an elitist totalitarianism that Buber claims Plato

himself outlines in the Republic, or simply in the capitulation of intellectuals to the powers that be. Note that the two Platonic reactions correlate with the Scylla and Charybdis of individualism and collectivism through which Buber seeks to find safe passage. The disappointed Platonic theorist might seek the solipsistic comfort of isolation or the ability to exercise total power over the masses. Buber's reading of Plato plants the seeds for the false choice between individualism and collectivism in the false choice between two ways of dealing with the historical failure of the spirit, world-weary resignation or totalitarian capitulation. And as with individualism and collectivism, the way around the false choice is to correct our conception of the human spirit.

Buber finds the alternative to Plato's conception of spirit in the prophet Isaiah. In Buber's reading of Isaiah, "The man of spirit – such is the tradition from time immemorial – is whom the spirit invades and seizes, whom the spirit uses as its garment, not one who contains the spirit. Spirit is an event, something happens to man. The storm of the spirit sweeps man where it will, then storms on into the world."⁵⁷ For Isaiah, the spirit is not yet perfected. When he goes before God, Isaiah fears that he has "unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5) and hence not appropriate for a divine mission. This is a conception of spirit that can partner with reality, because the spirit views itself in need of transformation as much as the reality around it. Likewise, the prophet does not believe, like Plato, that he possesses a perfect, eternal and universal truth. Rather, Buber explains, "The Hebrew prophet invariably receives only a message for a particular situation."⁵⁸ On this view, the spirit can respond to historical failure by waiting to understand what is demanded of it in the next historical situation, thereby avoiding the dilemma of

⁵⁷ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 187.

⁵⁸ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 190.

responding to the fact that something universally valid has failed. The inherent humility of this conception of the spirit allows the spirit to bring its vision for better human relations to the task of actually transforming social arrangement without losing hope when such a task may fail.

Buber links the humility of Isaiah's spirit to the prophet's teaching that both the human spirit and historical power are gifts granted by God. Buber notes that Isaiah 6 is the earliest text in the Hebrew Bible that names God as "king" (*melekh*).⁵⁹ For Buber, the notion of divine kingship is the central teaching of the Biblical prophets, and he summarizes this teaching and its significance for social theory in this lecture as follows:

A people which seriously calls God Himself King must become a true people, a community where all members are ruled by honesty without compulsion, kindness without hypocrisy, and the brotherliness of those who are passionately devoted to their divine leader. When social inequality, distinction between the free and the unfree, splits the community and creates chasms between its members, there can be no true people, there can be no 'God's people.' So criticism and demand are directed towards every individual whom other individuals depend upon, towards everyone who has a hand in shaping the destinies of others; that means directed towards every one of us. When Isaiah speaks of justice, he is not thinking of institutions but of you and me, because without you and me the most glorious institution becomes a lie.⁶⁰

In Isaiah's vision, both actual human beings and the institutions in which they live are subject to the rigorous criticism of the God who demands justice. To achieve this demand, the people must create not only justice in the formal rules of institutions, but in the reality of their concrete social relations. Isaiah's message, while failing in its own time, carries the seeds of future success because, unlike Plato's, it does not speak merely

⁵⁹ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 186.

⁶⁰ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 188-9.

of justice within the mechanisms of power but as a concrete living reality in the communal life of a people.

Isaiah's vision thus fulfills Buber's criterion of an account of spirit and reality in which the spirit is independent of reality and can partner with it in the task of transformation. The spirit's own reality is realized concretely in these social relations of "you and me" and is not dependent on social institutions. This is the reality that Buber names as "the between" in "The Problem of the Human Being." The concept of the between, the ontological realm of dialogical relation, provides the social theorist with an idea of the human spirit as a living reality that inhabits social institutions, is affected by them and can demand that they become more just and compassionate. This spirit is realized in a genuine community.⁶¹ It is not perfect, but it is real, and it is a spirit that can partner with social institutions to transform them without being reduced to their functioning.

The contrast between Plato and Isaiah strongly suggests that Buber's efforts to explicate his ideas in philosophical language are an extension of his more rhetorical efforts to vindicate Biblical and Jewish ideas about the nature of the human spirit and human community. At the end of the inaugural lecture, Buber addresses his largely Jewish audience in Jerusalem when he speaks of the prophetic call to be a people of God, not only for itself but for the sake of the world: "Nations can be led to peace only by a only by a people which has made peace a reality within itself."⁶² In his view, the task of

⁶¹ Buber here is indebted to Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) and the latter's argument that community is condition without which society cannot endure. Cf. Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, 77-8, and Silberstein, *Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought*, 33-35.

⁶² Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 189.

arguing for these Jewish teachings is not only for the sake of vindicating them for Jews but a fulfillment of Israel's prophetic mission to teach about the possibility of social transformation to the world. Seeing his argument this way explains both why Buber sought to find his academic home in Religious Studies and why sociology presented a suitable alternative. Buber saw his scholarly studies of Judaism as studies in ancient ideas about the nature of the human spirit and the creation of genuine community. And these ideas, he claimed, were relevant and urgent in his own time.

Buber's general argument for the value of Judaism for addressing the crisis of humanity relies on a contrast of Hebrew and Greek thinking found in his inaugural lecture. This contrast is both a historical and cultural contrast between two kinds of thinking, one Greek and the other Hebrew, and a contrast between two modes of discourse not particularly limited by cultural boundaries, one philosophical, the other religious and prophetic. Buber posits two complementary ways of viewing this contrast. One is that the unique Greek cultural legacy is the abstract philosophical thinking exemplified in Plato, and that the unique Hebrew/Jewish cultural legacy is the direct dialogical encounter with God and the world exemplified in Biblical prophets and Hasidic masters. At the same time, Buber does not reject philosophy as a mode of discourse, as if engaging in abstract philosophical thinking would be a betrayal of one's essential Jewishness. Likewise, he does not view the direct encounter with the divine to be the sole property of the Jewish people. To the contrary, he believes that it is the obligation of the Jewish people to teach this unique way of engaging God and the world to the nations as a whole.

For Buber, the Greek and Jewish cultural legacies are both gifts to the world that may be absorbed by all. The issue then becomes how much of each gift to absorb and in what measure compared to the other. Buber addresses this issue in a lecture, “Religion and Philosophy,”⁶³ in which he develops a typology of these two modes of engaging with the world. Philosophy, for Buber the quintessentially Greek cultural legacy, excels at abstract thinking that can generate new knowledge technology, but also loses sight of concrete reality at the potential expense of human spiritual and social well-being. Religion, for Buber the quintessentially Jewish cultural legacy, attests to concrete embodied reality both as the sphere of human realization and the realm of divine concern and action. While philosophy can conceptualize human realization and God as the Absolute, only religion, by teaching the enactment of dialogical relations with *both* humanity and God, can realize these ideas in life.

Buber’s argument, I take it, is that philosophy cannot fully realize its role in the life of the human spirit without recognizing the role of religion in realizing dialogical encounter with the Absolute in real life. At the same time, Buber does think that philosophy’s abstract mode of thinking can contribute to the task of religion, particularly in the eradication of false images of God and in having a conceptual apparatus for discussing the nature of the human spirit. In this way, philosophy can support the genuine realization of the human spirit. After discussing Buber’s account of the relationship between religion and philosophy in the lecture with that title, I will turn to showing how Buber’s discussion of collectivism and individualism is an example of the kind of philosophy he images to be possible when taking both the limitations of philosophy and

⁶³ The lecture as it appears in *Eclipse of God* dates to 1951 but Buber delivered parts of this talk in 1929.

the role of religion into account. Buber's critique of individualism and collectivism is that both distort humanity as the image of God, and his development of the between as an alternative is an attempt to provide a philosophical concept for understand the nature of the human spirit.

In "Religion and Philosophy," Buber contrasts religion and philosophy in terms of a polarity between "reality" and "abstraction." Buber characterizes religion as that which expresses concrete reality and philosophy as that which abstracts from that reality. In his view, the exemplary forms of religion and philosophy were produced by the cultural achievements of Jewish and Greek civilization respectively. Religion in its exemplary form is thus achieved in a dialogical relation with God in which one enters into direct encounter with absolute being in the fullness of one's concrete reality. Philosophy is exemplified by the abstract thinking of Greek philosophy, reaching its height with Plato and Aristotle. Buber calls the form of abstraction found in Greek philosophy primary abstraction: "By primary abstraction we mean the inner action in which man lifts himself above the concrete situation into the sphere of precise conceptualization. In this sphere the concepts no longer serve as a means of apprehending reality, but instead represent as the object of thought being freed from the limitations of the actual."⁶⁴ Buber interprets the essence of philosophical abstraction as the attempt of the thinking being to free itself of the limitations of concrete reality.

Religion too, it might be said, attempts to set itself apart from concrete reality in mythic interpretations of existence and the routine of ritual behavior. But for Buber, *genuine* religion is dialogical and seeks to overcome its own forms and be constantly

⁶⁴ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), 39.

renewed by direct encounter with being, to the point that religion “wills to cease to be the special domain ‘Religion’ and wills to become life.”⁶⁵ In order to accomplish this, religion must struggle against ideas and spheres of life that claim to offer the same relationship with the absolute as religion but without the lived concreteness of genuine religion. Buber mentions by name “metaphysics, gnosis, magic and politics” as the “medley that seeks to take the place of the flowing life of faith which is renewed in the flux.”⁶⁶ What these have in common is that they all seek to provide a relationship with the absolute that occludes genuine encounter, the relationship of I to You. In Buber’s view, “the religious element must combat the tendency of this conglomerate to become autonomous and to make itself independent of the religious life of the person.”⁶⁷ These elements are ways of thinking about life that may have their origin in religious life, but if they seek to become autonomous of genuine religion, namely, dialogical encounter, they will obscure the reality of dialogical situation.

Buber’s argument about the relationship between religion and philosophy essentially repeats his depiction of the dynamic, symbiotic relationship between the I-You relation and the I-It relation in *I and Thou*. In “Religion and Philosophy,” Buber explains that religion and philosophy respectively are the highest expression of I-You and I-It relations. “I-(Y)ou finds its highest intensity and transfiguration in religious reality, in which unlimited Being becomes, an absolute person, my partner. I-It finds its highest

⁶⁵ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 34.

⁶⁶ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 34. I discuss Buber’s use of terms like “gnosis” and “magic” are their relationship to metaphysics in chapter 1. Cf. Martin Buber, *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997), 22-24.

⁶⁷ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 34.

concentration and illumination in philosophical knowledge.”⁶⁸ This statement is helpful for understanding how Buber views the relationship between religion and philosophy. In his account in *I and Thou*, the I-It realm of knowable objects is both an abstraction from and dependent on the I-You realm of encounter. Likewise, a theory in the natural or social sciences is constructed by dealing with some real embodied entity in abstract terms. At the same time, the reality of the objects that are subject of the theory cannot be fully captured by the abstract terms used to express the theory because the object has a concrete reality beyond the terms I use to describe it.

What is true about the relationship between forms of knowledge and concrete reality holds for the relationship between philosophy and religion. As we have seen, for Buber, philosophy is the discipline that considers the conclusions of a variety of forms of knowledge in relationship to each other and is able to draw broad conclusions about the state and nature of human knowledge from these considerations. This effort requires, however, that the philosopher view all of reality in abstractions in order to develop philosophical theories. Here, Buber is more explicit that the risk of philosophical theorizing is that the philosopher who seeks to articulate the conditions of all of reality in abstract terms may forget or lose sight of the fact that this embodied concrete reality from which her abstractions are drawn are not themselves given by their concepts. Buber finds a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon in Descartes who ignores or at least forgets this fact in his presentation of the thinking subject as the starting point of philosophical thinking: “The ‘I’ in the Cartesian *ego cogito* is not the living, body-soul person whose corporeality had just been disregarded by Descartes as being a matter of

⁶⁸ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 45.

doubt.”⁶⁹ Buber sees Descartes as trying to arrive at a secure foundation for knowledge of concrete corporeal reality by beginning with the abstract consciousness. This attempt fails on its own terms, Buber thinks, because “only through genuine intercourse with a Thou can the I of the living person be experienced as existing.”⁷⁰ Moreover, the philosophical abstractions that characterize Descartes’ thought actually occlude encounter with concrete reality. Once one conceives of reality from an abstract standpoint, there is no way to philosophically account for the concrete reality that I actually encounter in reality.

The value of the abstract thinking realized in philosophy is that it allows human beings to experience the world as an objective world of consistent regularities. Again, however, such abstraction poses a potential risk of running amok and ignoring the concrete reality on which it depends. Buber describes this risk as a dulling of the senses, literally losing the ability to feel. Buber describes the distinctive contribution of the Greek philosophical tradition as drawing the human mind away from concrete reality to the abstract realm of universal ideas by privileging the sense of sight over the other senses:

The Greeks established the hegemony of the sense of sight over the other senses, thus making the optical world into *the* world, into which the data of the other senses are now to be entered...The history of Greek philosophy is that of an opticizing of thought, fully clarified in Plato and perfected in Plotinus. The object of this visual thought is the universal existence or as a reality higher than existence.⁷¹

Allowing the sense of sight to take over the other senses allows abstract thinking to focus on the universals of existence. Buber describes the logical conclusion of this process as the “totalization” that takes place in philosophical thinking, in which “thinking overruns

⁶⁹ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 39.

⁷⁰ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 40. Buber does not defend this philosophical claim in this essay, but this could be said to be his signature philosophical claim.

⁷¹ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 40-1.

and overwhelms all the faculties and provinces of the person. In a great act of philosophizing even the finger-tips think – but they no longer feel.”⁷² At the height of philosophical activity, Buber claims, the philosopher literally loses her senses, loses sensual contact with concrete embodied reality.

Buber’s contrast of religion and philosophy does not serve to reject the second in favor of the first. Rather, Buber claims that philosophy needs religion, the dialogical encounter with the Absolute, in order to maintain its legitimacy, because without religion, philosophy would lose sight of the concrete reality on which philosophical abstractions are based. Whereas philosophical abstraction obscures concrete reality, religion deals with it directly and forcefully, seeing the concrete embodied reality of human social life as the realm of human realization and the realization of the divine within the human. Religion invites the human being into the fullness of concrete reality beyond the abstract comprehension of philosophy. Without religion to reconnect human beings to concrete reality, philosophy itself would remain abstraction for its own sake, untethered from the actual world and unable to truly comprehend reality.

Buber himself devoted much of his literary career to clarifying the teachings of “true religion,” by which he meant the essential teachings of Judaism. The style of *I and Thou* seems aimed at capturing the poetic sensibility Buber associates with religion in opposition to philosophy. At times, however, Buber used the more abstract idiom of philosophy to articulate ideas about both religion, in the sense of the relationship between God and humanity, and human nature. Buber’s discussion in “Religion and Philosophy” points to two specific ways in which he saw philosophical thinking addressing the

⁷² Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 44.

concerns of religious thinking. I believe these two ways indicate to how Buber saw himself as a philosopher and are reflected in his philosophical work in “The Problem of the Human Being,” as I shall explain below. First, philosophy offers a way to interrogate and correct the false images of God that inevitably become a part of religious thought. At the end of the lecture, Buber considers Rosenzweig’s comment that “divine truth” is assured to those who approach it with the “double prayer of the believer and the unbeliever.”⁷³ Buber offers an interpretation of the “prayer of the unbeliever” different than Rosenzweig’s to illustrate the contribution that philosophy can offer to religious faith. Religious encounters with God must always be put into words and images, which for Buber are “necessarily untrue” and only serve as “signs and pointers” to renewed encounter with the real living God.⁷⁴ These images however “always quickly desire to be more than they are” and “swell themselves up and obstruct the way to Him (sic) and He removes Himself from them.”⁷⁵ Philosophers may view this situation and reject both the images and the actual God the images purport to represent. However, what Buber calls the “critical atheism” of the philosopher can become a “prayer of the unbeliever” because it draws attention to the images that “no longer do justice to God.” For the believer, the work of the philosopher can contribute to eradicating these images and renew efforts to imagine God appropriately.

Secondly, philosophical reflection can generate a correct understanding of the nature of the human spirit who seeks out God in religious encounter. In “Religion and Philosophy,” Buber says that the human spirit “would not genuinely exist for us as an

⁷³ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 45. Here, Buber is quoting Franz Rosenzweig.

⁷⁴ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 45.

⁷⁵ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 45.

objective connection if thought did not objectify it, if spirit itself as philosophy did not objectify and unite itself.”⁷⁶ For Buber, of course, the human spirit is dialogical, it occurs between people. In *I and Thou*, Buber points to the dialogical character of the human spirit, but these passages do not offer the kind of “objective” understanding of the human spirit that philosophy uniquely provides. Recall also that in the preface to “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber argues that philosophy must consider all aspects of its object of inquiry. In the case of the human spirit, then, philosophy can at least develop a concept of the human spirit that tries to express its wholeness. A correct philosophical account of the human spirit cannot replace or even create the actual lived life of the human spirit, and Buber’s work interpreting and translating Jewish sources was aimed at offering inspiring accounts of those who lived the life of the spirit to its fullest to teach modern educated Jews and Gentiles how to achieve the same. But a correct philosophical account of the human spirit can also play a role in promoting its realization, and if philosophical accounts of the human spirit were wrong and potentially dangerous, as he believed individualism and collectivism to be, then philosophical reflection and argumentation were the best way to address them.

These two ways in which philosophy can contribute to religious faith - by battling false images of God and by offering a correct understanding of the nature of the human spirit, the realization of which is part and parcel of living a religious life – may be linked to the Biblical notion that human beings are created in the divine image.⁷⁷ Buber himself does not say this, but it is implicit in his general approach to images of God. The true

⁷⁶ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 43.

⁷⁷ Genesis 1:27. Buber interprets the notion of humanity created in the divine image as demanding that humanity aspire to become like unto God. Buber, *Israel and the World*, 73-4.

reality of God cannot be articulated in human language, but we may use appropriate images to speak of God and point to God. But what constitutes an appropriate image? In Buber's discussion of God, the most prevalent images are those of a personal being who is present for others in their time of need and suffering. In other words, the appropriate images of God are those that model for human beings the conditions for the realization of the human spirit, the life of dialogue.⁷⁸ The task of subjecting images of God to criticism and developing a conception of the human spirit are two intertwined tasks. While they can never be fully complete, one can have better images of God and a better understanding of the conditions for the realization of the human spirit.

Buber's contrast of religion and philosophy clarifies Buber's philosophical objectives in "The Problem of the Human Being" and how these lectures are part of his larger project of turning to Jewish sources for addressing the modern spiritual crisis of humanity, even though these lectures does not systematically address Judaism. "The Problem of the Human Being" is a critical analysis of approaches to the nature of humanity in Western philosophy. His discussion of individualism and collectivism at the end of "The Problem of the Human Being" represents a culmination represents the culmination of his critical philosophical objective. Buber characterizes individualism and collectivism respectively as imaginary and illusory ways of understanding the human being because of the way they have distorted our understanding of the realization of the human spirit.

Buber's critique of individualism and collectivism at the end "The Problem of the Human Being" also builds on his depiction of Plato's philosophy as giving hegemony to

⁷⁸ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 75-6.

the sense of vision in the life of the spirit that appears in “Religion and Philosophy.” Buber’s only briefly mentions this reading of Plato in the second lecture, but I will show how that mention of Plato relates to his broader argument about individualism and collectivism. Buber viewed both individualism and collectivism as responses to the same underlying problem: an existential sense of loneliness, or what he called homelessness (*choser-bayit, Hauslosigkeit*). In the beginning of the second lecture of “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber develops the notion that in the history of human thought there are epochs of homelessness and epochs of habitation (*achuzat- bayit, Behaustheit*) as a guiding framework for his analysis of pre-20th century thought, what he calls the “*pre-history* of philosophical anthropology,”⁷⁹ that is, how philosophers answered the question “what is humanity” before philosophical anthropology became a recognized realm of philosophical inquiry.

In Buber’s account, classical Greek philosophy, culminating with Plato and Aristotle, as created an epoch of habitation by raising the visual sense over the others:

The tendency of the Greeks to understand the world as a self-contained space, in which man too has his fixed place, was perfected in Aristotle’s geocentric spherical system. The hegemony of the visual sense over the other senses, which appears among the Greeks for the first time, as a tremendous new factor in the history of the human spirit, the very hegemony which enabled them to live a life derived from *images* and to base a culture on the forming of images, holds good in their philosophy as well. A visual image of the universe (*Weltbild*) arises which is formed from visual sense-impressions and objectified as only the visual sense is able to objectify, and the experiences of the other senses are as it were retrospectively recorded in this picture.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 126. I will examine these ideas in greater depth in the next chapter.

⁸⁰ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 127.

As in “Religion and Philosophy,” Buber associates the imagistic tendency of Greek culture with objectification of the world. A world formed through images of Greek culture and philosophy gives humanity a home within the world, a sense of humanity’s place within the cosmos. The sense of habitation built on images is not stable however, because the images are merely images, and not any real sense of security. The sense of habitation breaks down into the loneliness and solitude of what Buber calls “homelessness,” which can be found in the spiritual condition of an individual or a society as whole.

Buber views both individualism and collectivism as distinctively modern attempts to respond to existential human loneliness. They are distinctively modern responses for two reasons. First, individualism and collectivism are distinctively modern and post-Kantian because they come after the collapse of medieval Western cosmology and metaphysics, a collapse that Buber views as both permanent and beneficial. Secondly, both individualism and collectivism speak to the social dimension of loneliness characteristic of modernity. In addition to the sense of existential loneliness that has been possible for certain thinkers throughout history, modernity presents humanity with a new kind of loneliness, the very real and concrete sense of social loneliness that comes from the social, economic and political upheaval of modern life. The erosion of traditional communities characteristic of modern life severs people from organic social bonds that create the kind of meaningful human connections and relationships that Buber believed were a precondition for human flourishing.

Buber views individualism as an attempt to embrace both existential and social loneliness and raise it to the essential quality of human existence. “To save himself from

the despair with which his solitary state threatens him, man resorts to the expedient of glorifying it.”⁸¹ Buber’s diagnosis could apply to various modern philosophical traditions. In liberal political philosophy, some versions of social contract theory and theories of individual rights are taken to depict the individual as entering into social arrangements in a voluntary manner, as if social or political relationships were not inherently essential to human well-being, but only a pragmatic arrangement. In a very different vein, Buber elsewhere criticizes Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy for lionizing the individual who is able to develop her genuine personality by distinguishing herself from “the crowd.”⁸²

Taking such disparate examples such as these together, Buber concludes, “Modern individualism has essentially an imaginary basis. It founders on this character, for imagination is not capable of actually conquering the given situation.”⁸³ We can look to Buber’s later essay, “Elements of the Interhuman,” to gain a better idea of what Buber has in mind by this claim. In that essay, Buber discusses what happens when we forgo genuine interhuman relationships for dealing with the mere appearance of another human being. Take two people, Peter and Paul. They each have the image they wish to project to the other, the image each actually has of the other, and furthermore an image that each has of himself. None of these images are the real, embodied Peter and Paul. Buber summarizes the tally: “Two living beings and six ghostly appearances, which mingle in many ways in the conversation between the two.”⁸⁴ Buber’s use of “appearance” I suggest correlates to his use of imaginary in discussing individualism. The image is not the real thing, it is a fleeting attempt to capture the reality that ultimately fails. It may be

⁸¹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 200.

⁸² Cf. “The Problem of the Single One” in Buber, *Between Man and Man*.

⁸³ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 200-201.

⁸⁴ Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 67.

characteristic of everyday human life to use images to speak about objects in our midst, but we should not confuse these images with appreciating the whole being we are discussing. To claim that individuality is the condition of human realization is the reification of an image and claiming it is the wholeness of the human being when it is not. The notion of a self-sufficient individual whose essence is realized in separation from others is for Buber an imaginary understanding of the true human being, “a mere ghostly appearance” of the real dialogical human being.

Buber sees collectivism as a response to the failures of individualism. When self-assertion in the face of loneliness fails to provide a meaningful sense of human connection, people are liable to follow the diametrically opposite path of subsuming their will to the collective will of a national, political or religious group. The insecurity and dread of being alone in the universe and in society is overcome by submission of the individual to the “whole.” Whereas Buber calls individualism imaginary, he calls collectivism an illusion because in a collective entity “a dense reality rules.”⁸⁵ The difference in terminology is highly suggestive. The notion of a self-sufficient individual is ghostly, and ultimately has no reality in life. The power of the collective over the individual, however, is very real in that the collective can actually impose itself on people in a way that destroys genuine communal life: “That tender surface of personal life which longs for contact with other life is progressively deadened or desensitized.”⁸⁶ In another lecture, Buber refers to “the collective Moloch” referring to a Biblical term for an

⁸⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 201.

⁸⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 201.

idolatrous cult.⁸⁷ Collectivism becomes idolatry when the collective becomes obeyed to the point of completely occluding any genuine connection between God and humanity and between human beings themselves.

Buber should not be taken as claiming that the individual and collective are not real entities. Rather, he is arguing that individualism and collectivism are false in that they fail to account for the relationship between human individuals and collective social groups in a way that satisfyingly accounts for the nature of human self-realization. Buber does not provide an argument in this lecture for why the concept of the between serves better to explain individuality and collectivity, but he offers a clear explanation of his claim. The penultimate sentence of “The Problem of the Human Being” reads: “Now you can turn to the individual and you recognize him as man according to the possibility of relation which he shows; you can turn to the aggregate and you recognize it as man according to the fullness of relation which he shows.”⁸⁸ Individualism and collectivism fail because they insist that the individual and the collective respectively are the self-sufficient entities of human realization. For individualism, all of human life flows from the individual; for collectivism all human life flows from the collective. The concept of the between, Buber believes can account for how both an individuals achieves the fullness of their creative potential in the dynamic of dialogical relationships with others, forming a genuine community. In this dynamic of dialogue, individuals achieve genuine individuality and the collective becomes a genuine community, each fulfilling fullest potential meaning of that concept.

⁸⁷ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 115. The term Moloch appears in Leviticus 18:21 and 20:1-6.

⁸⁸ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 205.

III

I have argued that Buber views individualism and collectivism as legacies of the primacy of Greek philosophical models, particularly Plato's, in the Western philosophical tradition. Buber thinks that Plato's conception of the spirit can break down into either individualistic world-weary retreat or collectivist enthusiasm for totalitarianism. Buber also saw individualism and collectivism as theoretical products of the philosophical tendency, also rooted in Plato, to lose sight of concrete reality as a result of valorizing abstract thinking in the life of the spirit. Nonetheless, the traditions are not irrevocably at odds with each other. Buber sees the aims of Hebrew religious thinking as encompassing the aims of Greek philosophical thinking. The quest for human realization and self-knowledge that characterizes the Socratic enterprise can only be realized with the uniquely Hebrew conception of the human spirit. The value of abstract thinking found in Plato, and then Aristotle and their successors, can only be realized with an awareness of the concrete awareness of reality that can only be delivered in religion, by which of course Buber means dialogical encounter.

Buber's own writings about dialogue could be divided according to the typology of religion and philosophy. As I suggested in the last chapter, the between as a philosophical concept grows out of Buber's interpretation of the classic Jewish concept of the *shekhina* as the indwelling presence of the divine. In this sense, the between is the space for the realization of the divine within a genuine community, achieving what Buber understands by the Biblical prophetic concept of "the kingship of God" and the Hasidic

concept of “realization of the holy in the everyday.” For Buber, these Jewish concepts express the aspiration for human self-realization and community renewal that inform his later development of the concept of the between in “Elements of the Interhuman.” When using the term “the between” in writing on Judaism or in the more poetic *I and Thou*, Buber is engaging in a religion oriented form of writing. He evokes the reality of the between without defining it clearly and avoiding the pitfalls of presenting a dynamic concrete reality in abstract terms.

Buber’s last lecture of “The Problem of the Human Being” represents a move from a religious to a philosophical form of writing, to use the terms in his sense, in his account of the between. Buber’s language still aims to capture the sense that naming and elaborating this philosophical concept is not the same as actually experiencing the reality of a dialogical relation. At the same time, Buber is moving towards a more precise characterization of this reality that can be used to compare it to its important philosophical rivals as he saw them, individualism and collectivism. Buber understood the emergence of individualism and collectivism as resulting from the tendency of philosophical thinkers to lose sight of concrete reality while engaging in abstract thinking. The individual and the collective are necessary and appropriate abstractions used for the sake of social scientific research, but when they become the starting point of philosophical theories, they are imaginary or illusory. while it may be appropriate for anthropologists to study what is common to all individual human beings *qua* human beings, and for sociologists to study collective social entities, philosophers err when they attempt to draw conclusions about the realization of the human spirit based on the partial views of either methodology. The philosophical conclusions that can be drawn from

seeing the human being merely as an individual or merely as part of a collective are at best partial and at worse gross distortions of the actual dialogical reality of human life.

Conclusion

Buber, I take it, saw his own work as philosophical in the sense that he used the between as an abstract concept. Recall that for Buber, the abstracting tendency of philosophy is not inherently problematic and only becomes so when disconnected to the concrete reality of the everyday. The use of an abstract concept requires the recognition that the philosophical abstraction itself cannot provide an orientation to reality on its own. In writing philosophy, Buber wished to maintain some awareness of the concrete reality that lies beyond the concepts that can only partially grasp that reality. Buber's exhortation to philosophical anthropologists is that they should examine human nature from the point of view of many areas of knowledge in order that they may approach the wholeness of the object in question. Sociology, anthropology and other social sciences can all contribute to this knowledge, but the philosopher must avoid confusing the part for the whole or the abstract for the concrete.

I view Buber's philosophical anthropology as a self-conscious effort to use abstract philosophical terms to express Jewish ideas but on Judaism's terms. Buber's central anthropological claim is that the human spirit is realized in community, and he sees this idea as originating in classical Jewish sources, particularly the teachings of the Biblical prophets. *I and Thou* was Buber's attempt to express this idea in language expressing an I-You orientation, evocative and poetic rather than precise, abstract or

explanatory. In his later philosophical works, Buber embraces the mode of Greek thinking, relating to the nature of humanity in an I-It orientation, providing more precise terminology and comparing his philosophical claim to his rivals. At the same time, Buber's use of abstract philosophical language retains a respect for the philosophical limits and spiritual pitfalls of abstract thinking. Likewise, Buber frames his principle rivals, individualism and collectivism, as themselves by-products of the embrace of abstract thinking at the expense of Judaism's concrete religiosity. Buber placed his own philosophical writing in the modern philosophical tradition linked to Kant that begins philosophical reflection with a delimitation of philosophy's metaphysical ambitions. Buber believed that Kant's insights about the limits of philosophy, properly interpreted and applied, could open the Western mind to the teachings of Judaism. In the next chapter, I consider Buber's debt to Kant's philosophy and its significance for Buber's claims about Judaism.

Chapter 3: Religion of Realization out of the Sources of Judaism

In his 1957 lecture, “Elements of the Interhuman,” Buber explains that his contrast between I-You and I-It relations draws significantly on concepts from the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Referring to Kant’s idea that human dignity consists in not treating a fellow human being as a means to one’s end, but rather as ends in themselves, he states: “My point of view, which is near to Kant’s in its essential features, has another source and goal. It is concerned with the presuppositions of the interhuman. Man exists anthropologically not in isolation, but in the completeness of the relation between man and man; what humanity is can be properly grasped only in vital reciprocity.”⁸⁹ Here, Buber acknowledges drawing on a key philosophical concept in Kant, that of human dignity, but at the same time using that concept for a different philosophical purpose. Whereas Kant uses the conception of human dignity to fashion a rule for testing moral maxims, one version of the categorical imperative, Buber uses this concept to develop his central anthropological insight, namely that full human existence can only be realized in the “vital reciprocity” of dialogical relation.

Buber’s comment about Kant nicely captures the way Buber draws on Kant’s philosophy in “The Problem of the Human Being.” In these lectures, Buber frames his project of philosophical anthropology as a revision of Kantian philosophy. Indeed, Buber credits Kant’s influence, mediated by neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen and Edmund Husserl, for allowing philosophical anthropology to become a serious topic of philosophical conversation in the early 20th century. Buber does not offer a

⁸⁹ Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 74.

comprehensive picture of his intellectual debt to Kant in “The Problem of the Human Being” or elsewhere, but only alludes to this debt in brief passages such as the one above. However, as the above passage suggests, Kant’s influence hovers over much of Buber’s philosophical writing and Buber’s occasional but significant comments about Kant offer important insights into Buber’s own philosophical commitments.

In this chapter, I will elaborate on Buber’s debt to Kant by focusing on Buber’s remarks in “The Problem of the Human Being” about the importance of Kant’s claim that time and space are intuitions of the human faculty of sensibility. In particular, I will examine an important passage in *I and Thou* in which Buber asserts that our perception of time and space is made possible by dialogical encounter. Read in light of Buber’s professed debt to Kant’s conception of time and space, I argue that Buber took his own explorations of dialogical encounter to be the result of renewed attention of the faculty of sensibility. We will see that appreciating Buber’s attention to sensibility allows us to better understand his conceptions “the between” and as well as the role of Jewish religious ideas in his philosophical anthropology. The spontaneous intuition of time in sense perception that Kant described is rooted, I take Buber to be claiming, in the more significant feature of human existence that Kant overlooks. The essence of the faculty of sensibility is that it allows human beings to be affected by external objects, potentially in a pleasurable or painful way. Buber’s call to fully appreciate the faculty of sensibility also fulfills his project of finding a way based the impasse of individualism and collectivism. For Buber, it is through the faculty of sensibility that human beings can become aware of human interdependence characteristic of the realm of the between in which genuine dialogue occurs.

I

In “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber shares a personal anecdote about how reading Kant helped to resolve a youthful philosophical perplexity reminiscent of Pascal’s sense of existential terror. At about age fourteen, Buber recounts, he had become perplexed by trying to imagine what it would mean for time and space to be either finite or infinite. Contemplating either one was vexing for him: how could space have an edge, how could time have a beginning, what would it mean for either to go on forever? In his “Autobiographical Fragments,” Buber explains his problem in these terms: “what was at stake was the reality of the world in which one had to live and which had taken on the face of the absurd and the uncanny.”⁹⁰ Buber reports that reading Kant’s *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* only a year later saved him from this philosophical perplexity by suggesting to him that time and space are intuitions of human sense experience, thus “liberating” him from the question of the infinity of space and time.

We will return to this anecdote below, but to begin to unpack these claims, let us start with what Buber has to say about Kant’s importance for philosophical anthropology. In Buber’s view, Kant’s critical philosophy allows philosophical anthropology to be its own question separate from metaphysics while also pointing to the relationship between the eternal and the everyday. In “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber presents the very concept of philosophical anthropology as a legacy of Kant’s early effort to describe the essential structure of philosophical inquiry. In his *Handbook* to his lectures on logic,

⁹⁰ Paul Schlipp and Maurice Friedman (eds.) *Philosophy of Martin Buber* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1967) 12.

Kant articulated four questions that define what he views as the four areas of philosophy: 1) What can I know? which deals with metaphysics; 2) What ought I do? which deals with ethics; 3) What am I permitted to hope? which deals with religion and 4) What is the human being? which deals with anthropology.⁹¹ Buber argues that when Kant addressed the subject of anthropology in his later lectures on the subject, he did not live up to the promise of the question as posed in the *Handbook*. Kant's myriad observations about human behavior, psychology and physiology do not add up, Buber believes, to an adequate philosophical inquiry into the essence of human existence.⁹² And as Buber notes, Kant drops the fourth question for his formulation of the questions of philosophy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, a fact that no doubt suggested to Buber the depth of Kant's evasion of the question.⁹³

The fact that Kant avoids actually addressing the anthropological question does not, for Buber, detract from his legacy. To the contrary, one of the recurring themes of Buber's thought is that the failure of a great teacher leaves a legacy.⁹⁴ We saw an example of this theme in the prior chapter in Buber's interpretation of the prophet Isaiah, whose prophetic mission failed but who nonetheless left his teaching as a legacy for future generations. Buber begins the first lecture of the printed version of "The Problem

⁹¹ As cited by Martin Buber *Between Man and Man*, 119.

⁹² For a helpful study of the role of anthropology in Kant's ethics, Cf. Allen Wood, "Unsocial Sociability: The Anthropological Basis of Kantian Ethics," *Philosophical Topics* 19 (Spring 1991), 325-351. Buber may have overlooked these aspects of Kant's ethics, but they are unlikely to have altered his conclusion that Kant did not engage in a serious *philosophical*, i.e. ontological, inquiry into the human being.

⁹³ Kant's new formulation could also suggest simply that he had changed his mind about the significance of a separate inquiry into the essence of the human being.

⁹⁴ Dan Avnon discusses Buber's idea that great teachers are marked by failure in their own time and yet leave a legacy of their teaching in his paper, "*Limmud and Limmudim*, Guiding Words of Buber's Prophetic Teaching," in Paul Mendes-Flohr (ed.), *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2002), 101-119.

of the Human Being” with another example of this phenomenon from the Jewish tradition. He tells the story of R. Simkha Bunam of Przysucha, a Hasidic master, who reportedly told his students that he had wanted to write a book entitled *Adam* – in this context meaning “human” - but then decided not to.⁹⁵ Rabbi Simkha Bunam may have abandoned his effort at understanding the human being, but by telling the story of his failure, he teaches his students of both its importance and its difficulty. For Buber, the statement of Rabbi Simkha Bunam encapsulates the fate of the anthropological question in the history of Western thought:

From time immemorial man has known that he is the subject most deserving of study, but has also fought shy of treating this subject as a whole, that is, in accordance with its total character. Sometimes he takes a run at it, but the difficulty of this concern with his own being soon overpowers and exhausts him, and in silent resignation he withdraws – either to consider all things in heaven and earth save man, or to divide man into departments which can be treated singly, in a less problematic, less powerful and less binding way.⁹⁶

Kant stands in Buber’s mind as the philosopher who came closest to dealing with humanity and was most forceful in turning away from that subject by devoting a great deal of philosophical energy to both “all things in heaven and earth save man” and “(dividing) man into departments which can be treated singly.” But as with Rabbi Simkha Bunam, Kant’s abandonment of the anthropological project leaves a “legacy,” a task left to others to complete,⁹⁷ meaning that Kant’s formulation of the question still defines the task of philosophical anthropology.

Buber reads Kant’s formulation of the anthropological question in terms of Kant’s “Copernican Revolution,” namely his insight that the human structures of perception

⁹⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 118.

⁹⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 118.

⁹⁷ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 121.

shape human knowledge.⁹⁸ Instead of taking the world as given and asking how it is possible for human beings to know what is in the world, Kant began with an internal consideration of the structures of human perception and charts the limits of human knowledge.⁹⁹ Kant's formulation of the anthropological question mirrors Kant's more general philosophical framework, because it places the human subject at the center of *all* philosophical inquiry. In formulating the questions of philosophy in the *Handbook*, Buber explains, Kant argues that all the questions of philosophy are actually included in the anthropological question, because the answers to the first three questions are directed at answering the fourth, namely the anthropological question. Buber takes Kant to be suggesting that all human inquiry into different existing beings in the world not only tell us something about those beings but about the human being who studies them. Buber summarizes the importance of Kant's questions this way: "...in Kant the meaning of the fourth question, to which the first three can be reduced is, what kind of being is it which is able to know, and ought to do, and may hope?"¹⁰⁰ The anthropological question cannot be addressed separately from the others, but in concert with them, because all areas of human inquiry tell us something about the inquiring subject.

As we will see in greater detail below, Buber believes that Kant's revolution suggests, even if Kant himself did not see this, that the human being is the being in whom the unconditioned or the eternal is realized. In "The Problem of the Human Being," Buber contrasts his understanding of the anthropological question to that of Heidegger, who in his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, takes the four questions of philosophy

⁹⁸ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), Bxvi-xviii, 21-23.

⁹⁹ Roger Scruton, *Kant* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982), 28.

¹⁰⁰ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 121.

to be expressions of Kant's emphasis on the limits of human knowledge, action and hope, with the fourth question being an expression of the radically finite nature of humanity itself.¹⁰¹ While acknowledging that Kant does indeed impose limits on human knowledge, Buber insists that Kant's intention in formulating the questions of philosophy was to indicate *both* the limitations *and* the possibilities of actual philosophical and scientific inquiry, and not merely, as he takes Heidegger to be suggesting, to express the limits of such inquiry. Moreover, Buber thinks Heidegger's interpretation renders the anthropological question inert. If there is nothing more to say about the human being in general other than that human beings are finite, limited beings, then philosophical anthropology is at a dead-end. As much as Buber acknowledges that he seeks to draw out of Kant's question conclusions to which Kant himself might not assent, he claims that Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's question is simply distorts Kant's ideas. Buber sees himself as adding something to Kant, whereas he sees Heidegger as subtracting something, namely the very idea that the human being can have genuine knowledge.

I do not wish to resolve the issues between Buber and Heidegger on the interpretation of Kant. For the purposes of this dissertation, Buber's discussion of Heidegger is significant for what it tells us about Buber's understanding of his own project. Buber presents Heidegger's interpretation as being diametrically opposed to his own: By interpreting the question, "what is the human being" to be a question about human limitation, Buber avers, Heidegger denies human beings the possibility of three kinds of relationships that parallel Kant's three questions: genuine knowledge of beings

¹⁰¹ Buber's criticisms of Heidegger's reading of Kant's questions anticipate his broader criticisms of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, which I will discuss in chapter five.

in the world, genuine relations with fellow human beings and a genuine relationship with something beyond ourselves, something eternal and unconditioned, namely God.

For Buber, the relationship with God is not one relationship among others but a relationship that is found through all other relationships. To affirm *any* genuine relation is implicitly to affirm a relationship with something eternal. Likewise, to deny *any* relation with something outside the self, as Buber takes Heidegger to be doing, is to deny any possibility of a relationship with something eternal. This is what is at stake in Buber's interpretation of Kant's formulation of the questions of philosophy in contrast to Heidegger's. Buber takes Kant's anthropological question as not only affirming the possibility of genuine knowledge, goodness and hope, but as also indicating how the eternal is realized in all human relations, even if Kant himself never realized this dimension of the question. For Buber, genuine anthropological inquiry examines how all aspects of human existence contain the potential for the realization of the eternal and unconditioned within the everyday and conditioned.

Buber builds on Kant's claim that time and space are intuitions of the faculty of sensibility to develop his own understanding of how the eternal is realized in the everyday through the actions of human beings. For Buber, Kant's revolutionary claims about time and space put to rest ways of understanding humanity's relationship with the world and God that were inimical to Jewish teaching. Whereas classical Western metaphysics, i.e. scholasticism, had maintained that humanity's relationship with God was mediated through coming to know the world as it really is independent of humanity, Kant's revolution opens up the possibility of seeing the relationship between God and the world as mediated by humanity. Buber tells a story of the history of Western thought that

explains how before Kant, Western thought, under the influence of Greek, particularly Gnostic, and Christian categories, could not, except in rare circumstances, appreciate the significance of the anthropological question. It is to this discussion I will now turn.

II

In the second lecture of “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber presents a brief account of the spiritual and intellectual obstacles to serious confrontation with the anthropological question in pre-Kantian Western thought. In what he calls a “spiritual history” of anthropological thought, Buber focuses not on the social, historical or intellectual conditions that produced the work of various thinkers, but on their spiritual condition, and how that spiritual condition was conducive or not to serious engagement with the anthropological question. In Buber’s account, philosophy since the time of Aristotle has for the most part not been conducive to a serious philosophical confrontation of the question, what is the human being? This question can only be taken seriously, Buber believes, by a thinker who is “solitary,” meaning one “who by nature or destiny or both is alone with himself and his problematic, and who succeeds, in this blank solitude, in meeting himself and in discovering man in his own self, and the human problematic in his own...In the ice of solitude man becomes most inexorably a question to himself, and just because the question pitilessly summons and draws into play his most secret life he becomes an experience to himself.”¹⁰² As I noted in the previous chapter, for Buber, the distinctive approach of anthropology is to consider the individual human

¹⁰² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 126.

being as indicative of the species as a whole. In the moments of solitude characteristic of a genuine anthropological thinker, an individual human being confronts her own problematic nature thereby opening up confrontations with the problematic nature of humanity as a whole.

Buber calls the moments of solitude in the spiritual history of humanity “epochs of homelessness,” meaning that humanity does not have a stable sense of security in the cosmos. In this kind of solitude, a person looks at herself as somehow not belonging in the world, which confronts her as something alien and other. When a human thinker can no longer take for granted that she is a part of the world around her, then the problematic nature of humanity as a whole comes to the fore. For Buber, the story of the anthropological story is largely the story of the influence of Gnostic categories, carried into Christian sources, on Western philosophy. Just as was the case with Buber’s interpretation of Heidegger, my concern in this chapter is not whether Buber’s understanding of “Gnosticism” is adequate but rather with how this category sheds light on Buber’s thought.

For Buber, Gnosis and Judaism depart ways precisely in how they respond to suffering and exile. The solitude of the thinker is a kind of exile from the world, and this exile involves a kind of suffering, even if not a conventional form of physical suffering such as injury or disease.¹⁰³ In Judaism, God responds to exile and suffering and seeks to bring about redemption in this worlds. Gnosticism posits that exile and suffering are the creation of an evil demiurge, whereas the real God of light and redemption can only be encountered by leaving the world of the body. Judaism, as opposed to Gnosticism, Buber

¹⁰³ I suspect Buber would say that such suffering is felt in the body even if it does not originate in direct bodily harm.

contends, can respond to the problem of human alienation, loneliness and exile in a way that affirms the embodied character of genuine human existence.

Buber calls those moments in spiritual history that are not characterized by the solitude of homelessness in the world “epochs of habitation.” In epochs of habitation, “man lives in the world as in a house, as in a home,” and “anthropological thought exists only as a part of cosmological thought.”¹⁰⁴ In the thought characteristic of these more prevalent epochs, the human being is understood in terms of the more general categories used for understanding the cosmos, the realm of time and space, but not as a unique being. From the point of view of such thought-systems, humanity is at home in the world because humanity is not categorically different than any other element in the cosmos. Humanity is made up of the same elements and building blocks as all other creatures, and while it exhibits distinct characteristics compared to other species, it is still one species among other species, and “a thing among these other things.”¹⁰⁵ Life in the world of time and space may be physically challenging, dangerous or threatening, but it is not spiritually alienating as it would be were the humanity to be considered, as it is in epochs of homelessness, a different category of being from other creatures.

It might seem at first glance that Buber is speaking of epochs of homelessness and epochs of habitation as universal features of human spiritual history that occur with relatively equal frequency. On closer analysis, however, this is not the case. In Buber’s account, epochs of homelessness are quite rare in pre-Kantian Western thought. Indeed, Buber only identifies two pre-Kantian thinkers who exemplify the solitude of homelessness, Augustine and Pascal. Significantly, Buber emphasizes that both these

¹⁰⁴ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 126.

¹⁰⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 127.

thinkers draw on the non-dualistic God of the Hebrew Bible to confront the problem of the human being. This is additionally significant due to another feature of Buber's account, namely that the very concept of the epoch of habitation names a uniquely Greek way of seeing the relationship between humanity and the cosmos. As we saw in the previous chapter, Buber considers Greek culture and philosophy to have raised the visual image above all other products of the senses. Buber repeats this claim in his account of pre-Kantian philosophy in "The Problem of the Human Being." Epochs of habitation are built, Buber says, on a "visual image of the universe."¹⁰⁶ This visual world-image, sometimes a literal picture of the boundaries of time and space, provides clarity for humanity about what the world is like and how they fit into it. At work in Buber's depiction of these two epochs, at least implicitly in his account, is a contrast between characteristically Greek and characteristically Hebrew ways of thinking about the human spirit.

The two epochs of habitation that achieve long term stability in Buber's account are a legacy of Greek culture and philosophy. The first one is the original Greek-Hellenistic picture of the world developed by Aristotle. With the Greeks in general and Aristotle in particular, humanity is given fixed place in the fixed order of the universe. In keeping with Buber's assessment of pre-Kantian thought, for the Greeks, "Man is comprehended only in the world, the world is not comprehended in him."¹⁰⁷ Likewise, post-Augustinian Christianity, culminating in the systematic theology of Aquinas, provides a secure image of the human being's place in the world. Buber depicts the human being as existing at the meeting of the two axes that form a cross. On the vertical

¹⁰⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 127.

¹⁰⁷ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 127.

axis, representing space, the human being resides between heaven and hell, and the horizontal axis representing time, the human being resides between the creation of the world and its final redemption. The actual human being, the sinner, exists at the meeting point of these two axes with the crucified Jesus, between heaven and hell, between the fall and final redemption.

In “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber does not depict this Christian world-image as a Greek legacy, nor does he associate the theology of Aquinas with neo-Aristotelian philosophy. However, Buber does take the view in his later work, *Two Types of Faith*, that Christian theology’s emphasis on systematic belief is a Greek legacy born of the apostle Paul’s response to Gnosticism.¹⁰⁸ If Christian faith is understood as the “evidence of things unseen,”¹⁰⁹ then Buber understands this to mean that faith provides an image of the realm of time and space that we might not otherwise conjure. As in all his discussions in “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber does not emphasize the explicitly religious themes of his topic, but they form a crucial background for understanding Buber’s broader project of comprehending humanity as the being in whom the eternal enters the everyday. Thus, to expand on my comment from above, in Buber’s view of Christian scholastic theology, humanity’s relationship with God is mediated by the notion of an objective realm of time and space that God creates and through which humanity can reach God.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 79-90. A full exploration of this claim is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I think it is reasonable to assume that Buber held this view about Christian theology ten years before he wrote this study. My argument is that even if Buber himself did not think the matter through, he is implicitly committed to the notion that his concept of “world-images” as the basis for a “epoch of habitation” originate in what he considers to be Greek thinking.

¹⁰⁹ Hebrews 11:1.

As we saw in the last chapter, Buber claims that people can misleadingly take an image to capture the whole of the reality. Similarly, epochs of habitation provide human beings with a sense of security in the world, but it is a false sense of security that ultimately breaks down. All epochs of habitation occlude the deeper penetration into the reality of life possible in an I-You encounter with God, humanity and all of reality. In Buber's account, the ancient Aristotelianism that made humanity merely one part of the cosmos is supplanted by the dualistic images of Gnostic myth: "In place of the sphere which had collapsed there now arose two autonomous and mutually hostile kingdoms, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. We meet them again and again in almost every system of that widespread and manifold spiritual movement of gnosis, which at that time seized the embarrassed heirs of the great oriental and antique cultures, split the godhead and emptied value from creation..."¹¹⁰ Elsewhere, Buber describes this process as "heathenism necessarily break(ing) apart into spirit alien to the world and world alien to spirit."¹¹¹ Whereas Aristotelian humanity was indistinct from the world, Gnostic humanity is radically alien to the world. In Gnostic myth, humanity does not belong to the world at all. I take Buber to be explaining the rise of Gnosis as a reaction to the cosmological anthropology of Aristotle. When humanity's distinctiveness is obscured by the world image, then the pendulum swings too far in the other direction towards Gnosis or something like it.

As wrongheaded as Buber thinks it is, the rise of the Gnostic myth nevertheless makes possible a direct confrontation with the problem of the human being. This is the response that Buber finds in Augustine. While Augustine of course rejects Manicheanism

¹¹⁰ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 127-8.

¹¹¹ Buber, Martin, *Israel and the World*, 177.

and the dualism of Gnostic myth to become a Christian, Buber concludes that he is “thoroughly conditioned by gnosticism,”¹¹² suggesting that his thought has not fully overcome the fundamental notion that the human being is the site of a struggle between two rival principles, good and evil. Yet in confronting the full power of the anthropological question, Buber depicts Augustine as drawing on the Psalmist’s version of the question: “*What is man that thou are mindful of him?*”¹¹³ Buber claims that the Church, and here Augustine would represent this direction, recognized that it must reject Gnosticism in order to maintain a bodily connection to the created world.¹¹⁴ Note that the Christian world-image that Buber summarizes in the image of the Cross takes over the basic elements of Gnostic myth. The space of the world is divided into upper and lower, and the time of the world is divided into redeemed and unredeemed.

The situation Pascal faced is one where the stability of the Christian image of the world was also under pressure. Pascal did not reject Christian faith, but instead famously embraced “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” over the “God of the Philosophers.” At the same time, Pascal was an accomplished scientist and mathematician who fully confronted the problem of humanity’s place in the cosmos in light of the new Copernican science. As Buber sees the problem, Copernican science presents a universe that is infinite in time and space. Once the universe is infinite, it can no longer be given the boundaries, walls or fences that can make it a home for human being. With this

¹¹² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 179.

¹¹³ Psalm 8:5, as cited in Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 128. The italics are in Smith’s translation, although no such emphasis is found in either the German or Hebrew originals.

¹¹⁴ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 192.

conception of the universe, it is impossible to create an image of the universe as a closed metaphysical system and to have a stable epoch of habitation.

Pascal's virtue as a thinker is that he confronts both of what Buber calls the "twin infinities," namely the "great" infinity of the Copernican universe and also the "small" infinity of the individual human being who lives in this universe.¹¹⁵ On the one hand, Pascal sees humanity's smallness, and seeming insignificance, in the universe. On the other hand, he recognizes how significant humanity can indeed be through its own acknowledgement of its situation. Pascal differs from other early modern thinkers, Buber suggests, because he understands humanity as a being that can confront its own place in this infinity. The human being for Pascal is more than an intellectual animal who can know things about the world. Rather, the human being stands at a distance from the world and senses the uncanniness of the world's infinity and then wonders what place it has in this infinite universe.

For Buber, Pascal's honest confrontation with the twin infinities of the universe and humanity represents a rejection of Gnostic teachings. Buber remarks that Pascal "has nothing to do" with Gnosticism,¹¹⁶ a comment that relates to both Pascal's Biblical theism and his embrace of science. In Buber's view, Gnosticism is actually opposed to science because it offers a secret teaching that allows a person to find spiritual redemption outside the material world. Science as it should be practiced confronts the material world and the way it works with complete seriousness.¹¹⁷ In Buber's view, the

¹¹⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 131.

¹¹⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 179.

¹¹⁷ Buber's concerns about the spiritual pitfalls of scientific thinking should not be mistaken for a outright rejection of the value of scientific thinking. To the contrary,

deeper spiritual problem comes from Gnosis, which turns humanity away from actual human life by claiming to offer answers to the secrets of existence that are in actuality beyond human capacity to understand. Pascal's commitments both to the scientific method and to faith in the Biblical God lead him to completely eschew the false promises of Gnostic teachings.

Buber's discussion of Pascal in "The Problem of the Human Being" sets the stage for his discussion of Kant in that work. Kant does not provide Buber with a clear answer as to how humanity can find its home in the universe. Rather, Kant's claim that time and space are intuitions of sensibility point Buber in the direction of thinking about humanity's place in the universe in terms of how the eternal can be realized within human existence. Buber deals with this question in his writings on religion and Judaism, but as I suggested above, the purpose of his philosophical anthropology is to articulate a conception of the human being who is capable of being in relation to the eternal. Kant's claim that time and space are intuitions of sensibility provides Buber with a philosophical framework for addressing this philosophical question.

We can now begin to understand Buber's claim, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that Kant "liberated" him from the question of the infinity of space and time. While Buber does not explicitly discuss the faculty of sensibility in this brief discussion of Kant's influence, it is crucial for appreciating the extent to which Buber's appropriation and critique of Kant is at the heart of his philosophical anthropology. As is well known, in the "First Part of the Main Transcendental Question" of the

Buber's critique of science aims to ground the abstract thinking of scientific discourse in a genuine connection to the concrete reality that science implicitly acknowledges.

Prolegomena,¹¹⁸ Kant briefly presents his argument that space and time are “forms of sensible intuition.” The argument addresses the question of how it is possible to have knowledge in mathematics, in geometry for example that is at once synthetic¹¹⁹ (and thereby adds to our knowledge of sensible objects) and also *a priori* (and thereby knowable prior to any particular experience). Kant’s answer that we cannot perceive objects without our intuitions of space and time, that is, without extension and duration: “Geometry is based upon the pure intuition of space. Arithmetic attains its concepts of numbers by the successive addition of units in time, and pure mechanics especially can attain its concepts of motion only by employing the representation of time.”¹²⁰ This answer solves the problem of how there could be pure mathematics, but it could also be said to *dissolve* the question that perplexed Buber himself, and that Kant believes is the source of much philosophical error: in what way is time and space part of reality independent of our sense experience? In short, Kant’s answer is that they are not. Existence in space and time is not an aspect of beings as they exist *in themselves*, or noumena, but only *as they appear to the senses*, or phenomena.

In “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber explains that he learned from Kant’s critical philosophy

¹¹⁸ Although Buber of course eventually read Kant’s more elaborate arguments in the *Critique of Pure Reason* at some point in his life, I will draw mainly from the *Prolegomena* both for its own simplicity and because this is the text that Buber himself sights as the source of his philosophical insight. It should be noted that Buber (*Between Man and Man*, 136) acknowledges Kant’s warning that the *Prolegomena* is not meant for those who have not read the *Critique*, and that he, like most teachers of undergraduate philosophy courses, ignored this warning.

¹¹⁹ Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. James W. Ellington (Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1977), 13-14.

¹²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 27.

that being itself was beyond the reach alike of the finitude and the infinity of space and time, since it only appeared in space and time but did not itself enter into this appearance. At that time I began to gain an inkling of the existence of eternity as something quite different from the infinite, just as it is something quite different from the finite, and of the possibility of a connexion between me, a man, and the eternal.¹²¹

Buber's self-described attempt to imagine the edge or beginnings of time and space, or their infinitude, begins with taking the dimensions of time and space as in themselves measurable, much like the objects that we measure within time and space. If time and space themselves are like ordinary objects in this sense, then they have a beginning and an end that can be measured; or one can apply to them the mathematical concept of infinity to say that they have no definite point of measurement and they extend forever. Kant's philosophical insight allows a person, Buber believes, to abandon the hopeless enterprise of deciding which is correct.

The more significant impact of Kant's insight for Buber is that it allowed him to consider the connection between the human and the eternal freed from engaging in philosophical speculation into the nature of finitude and infinity. In his later "Autobiographical Fragments," Buber explains that Kant's solution to the problem of infinity left him with a remaining problem: "But if time is only a form in which we perceive, where *are* 'we'? Are we not in the timeless? Are we not in eternity?"¹²² This alternative formulation of the anthropological question, "*where* are we," as opposed to Kant's "what is the human being," has a strong Biblical resonance with Genesis 3:9 where God asks the first human beings, "where are you?"¹²³ That question, as a

¹²¹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, pp. 136-7.

¹²² Buber, in *Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 13.

¹²³ I believe Buber's formulation of this question is an allusion to God's question to Adam (*Ha-adam* the human being) "where are you" in Genesis 3:9.

straightforward reading of Genesis would suggest, is not about location in the realm of time and space, but about where the first human beings stand in their relationship to God after having eaten the fruit and become aware of good and evil.

In his recollections of his youthful encounter with Kant's *Prolegomenon*, Buber does not suggest that Kant influenced his later conception of dialogue, which he would only develop at the end of World War I, more than 20 years after his first reading of Kant. Rather, it seems that Buber credits that encounter with helping him frame the question that would characterize both his early literary career and his later dialogical thinking, namely, searching for ways of understanding how the eternal, or God, can be realized within the human being.¹²⁴ That intellectual and spiritual quest led Buber to study a variety of religious textual traditions, but he made a claim for the value of Jewish sources over others as early as this stage of his career.¹²⁵ Buber's later transition to dialogical thinking preserved the centrality of the question, "how can the eternal be realized within the human," and preserved the use of Jewish sources as the origin of the best answers to this question. But in Buber's dialogical thought, the eternal is realized in the realm of reciprocal relations that he called the between, or the interhuman, whereas before he believed that the eternal is realized within an individual human being.

As Paul Mendes Flohr has argued convincingly, Buber developed his dialogical thinking by engaging with neo-Kantian social thinkers such as Georg Simmel and in particular Gustav Landauer. I suggest that Buber's dialogical thought stimulated a fresh engagement with the basic Kantian claim that initially influenced him, namely that time and space are intuitions of sensibility. In *I and Thou*, the realm of I-It relations is the

¹²⁴Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, 59.

¹²⁵See Buber's early addresses on Judaism collected in Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, 11-55.

realm of time and space, the everyday cosmos of human existence. In delineating the I-You relation, Buber points to a reality in human existence that Kant overlooks but that can be explained by appropriating Kant's own philosophical terminology. Recall Buber's depiction of Kant as articulating but then ignoring the demands of the philosophical question, what is the human being. Buber's interpretation of Kant's claim about time and space builds on this idea. I take Buber to be claiming that Kant provided the philosophical framework for explaining the two-fold nature of human existence, I-You and I-It, but did not actually pursue the discovery of the dialogical side of life.

Buber's appropriation and critique of Kant involves a further exploration of the way human sensibility produces awareness of time and space. Although he does not explain this clearly in *I and Thou*, it is central to Buber's dialogical thought that I-You relations are concrete and embodied and that I-It relations are abstract and disembodied. This distinction between the embodied and the abstract is drawn out of Kant's own account of the distinction between things in themselves and mere appearances. In the *Prolegomenon*, Kant responds to the possibility that he has presented an unpalatable form of idealism in which only thinking beings exist and external objects do not. In explaining his position and distinguishing between appearances and things in themselves, Kant states that we have no knowledge at all of things in themselves and that "*all the properties which constitute the intuition of a body belong merely to its appearance.*"¹²⁶ Buber's account of I-It relations in *I and Thou* follows this claim. There, the I-It relation is one in which I think of the other in terms of the properties they possess. In his later work, Buber

¹²⁶ Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, p. 33/sec. 289.

describes the I-You relation in contrast as an encounter with the “real person,” and not their “mere appearance”¹²⁷

I take Buber to be claiming is that Kant simply overlooked the way in which we come to be genuinely aware of things in themselves, of the real genuine other, and other persons in particular. As Paul Mendes-Flohr has noted, Buber claims that beyond our everyday sense perception of objects we are capable of a kind of experience (*Erlebnis*) that gives us an awareness of the concrete or essential existence of other beings.¹²⁸ The contrast between I-It and I-You relations is a contrast between how we encounter other beings as *embodied* beings. In an I-It relation, we know other embodied beings, as Kant thought was possible, through their properties. Kant’s great philosophical virtue, for Buber, was that he recognized that the properties of a being were not its essence, but its mere appearance, and that this way of knowing was abstract, distant and disembodied. What Kant did not realize, however, was that in addition to producing the intuition of objects as occupying time and space, sensibility allows human beings to encounter the embodied reality of other beings that makes this intuition possible and conditions it, namely the real essential person, not a mere appearance. The I-It realm of time and space is the spontaneous abstraction and objectification of the real embodied beings we encounter in the original I-You relation. And it is through this real dialogical encounter with other beings that the eternal is realized within the everyday world of human existence.

¹²⁷ Cf. Buber’s discussion of “being” and “seeming” in *The Knowledge of Man*, 65-68.

¹²⁸ Cf. Paul Mendes Flohr, “Buber’s Rhetoric,” in Paul Mendes-Flohr (ed.), *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, 16ff.

Indeed, the question of how the eternal is realized in the everyday is central to his concerns in *I and Thou*. More to the point, the argument of that book is that the spatio-temporal realm of I-It relations is rooted in the dialogical realm of I-You relations. The process of recovering and rediscovering the I-You form of a relation is an act of return to origins. I will now turn to one passage in that book in which Buber makes this claim explicitly and discuss its relationship to Kant's claim that time and space are intuitions of sensibility. The passage appears in a discussion of how human beings can provide their living relationship with the Eternal You "spatio-temporal continuity," that is, some concrete everyday existence. In this context, Buber makes the following claim:

The anchoring of time in a relation-oriented life of salvation and the anchoring of space in a community unified by a common center: only when both of these come to be and only as long as both continue to be, a human cosmos comes to be and continues to be around the invisible altar, grasped in the spirit out of the world stuff of the eon.¹²⁹

This passage extends the basic argument of *I and Thou*, namely that the realm of I-You relations is prior to, or "anchors"¹³⁰ the realm of I-It relations. Buber specifies this argument further by pointing to two axes of the realm of relation, a "relation-oriented life of salvation" which anchors temporality and "a community unified by a common center" which anchors spatiality.

It is true that Buber never mentions the Kantian term "sensibility" in either *I and Thou* or his brief discussion of Kant's conception of time and space in "The Problem of the Human Being." But if we take Buber at his word that he embraced Kant's solution to the problem of time and space, then this passage from *I and Thou* could plausibly be read

¹²⁹Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 163.

¹³⁰This is how Walter Kaufmann renders "*die Bindung*" in his translation, which is literally "binding" and he says indicates "cohesion or obligation." Cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 163, n.8.

as Buber's account of how sensibility produces "a human cosmos" in the human being's spontaneous construction of time and space. Buber's claim, as I take it, is that the intuition of sensibility to perceive the world as bound by time and space is rooted in a more primordial human realm of existence that Buber identifies as a primordial realm of relation. This primordial realm of relation is constructed along two axes, the "relation-oriented life of salvation" and the "community unified by a common center," both of which generate a cosmos "around an invisible altar."

How are the "relation oriented life of salvation" and the "community around a common center" rooted in the faculty of sensibility, and how does that generate the intuitions of time and space? Buber does not say, but I believe we can reasonably reconstruct his claim from his other statements and those of Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defines sensibility as "the capacity (receptivity) for receiving representations through the mode in which we are affected by objects."¹³¹ The faculty of sensibility is the way human beings receive all sense perceptions of external objects, or, to put it in the terms that I discussed above, external bodies, animate or inanimate. Kant's claim that time and space are the pure forms of all our perceptions of objects means that our very notion that objects exist in a realm of time and space is a spontaneous intuition of our sensible awareness of those objects. As I suggested above, Buber should be taken to be claiming that our sensible awareness of other bodies actually allows us to encounter their essential being and to have their essential being affect our essential being. But how does this meeting of essences happen through the faculty of sensibility, and why should this meeting be characterized in terms of salvation and community as Buber does?

¹³¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A19, 65.

The connection might be best be understood if we note that in so far as sensibility is the capacity to be affected by outside objects, then it is also the faculty that gives the human being the capacity to suffer. The possibility of suffering is a distinctly human event for Buber because, like existential loneliness, a human being can be aware of itself as suffering. The uniqueness of human suffering may explain how sensibility generates the “relation-oriented life of salvation” and “community around a common center.” Actual suffering, the experience of pain, produces a striving to overcome that suffering, the realization of which is salvation. The human striving for salvation, I take Buber to claim, anchors time because this striving requires a notion of duration, of one event following another, which allows a person to remember the suffering of the past and also hope for the relief from such suffering at a future time. It is through the faculty of sensibility that the human being also develops a spontaneous desire to overcome suffering and live a meaningful life, which is salvation.

Consider Buber’s claim about the grounding of time in the life of salvation in light of Kant’s famous moral arguments for the existence of God, the immortality of the soul and the freedom of the human will. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues that these three beliefs were “postulates of pure practical reason.” The very idea of a categorical moral obligation, Kant claims, warrants belief in an infinite duration of time to achieve human perfection, a God who can align virtue with happiness (by rewarding and punishing human beings) and the freedom of the will to fulfill such obligations. Buber undoubtedly rejected the notion that practical reason could give warrant for beliefs in God or human freedom (he does not discuss the immortality of the human soul at any length), or that “rational warrant” for these beliefs was at all possible, or even spiritually

desirable. But if Buber rejects Kant's arguments, his account of time preserves the underlying relationship between the work of human realization and "the postulates." The striving for salvation spurs human beings to reach beyond themselves to seek a relationship with the eternal You, God, whose primary characteristic for Buber is being ever-present to the one who suffers.¹³² God's presence affirms both human freedom and the hopefulness that human salvation is possible in some future time. The human desire for these ends, I take Buber to be claiming, is what gives reality to time itself, because time measures the progress the individual makes towards these goals.

Seeing Buber's account of the striving for perfection in light of Kant's account of time can shed light on a perplexing feature of Buber's thought. For Buber, striving for perfection requires both seeing the task of perfection as something that can be realized and as something that can never be fully realized, so that we would never be deluded that perfection has been realized in our time. This tension in Buber's thought is drawn from Kant's antinomy about the nature of time. On the one hand, we can imagine completing the task of perfection, which would be the end of time since the striving will have ceased. On the other hand, time goes on forever because the task of perfection is something that cannot be completed. Buber carries Kant's antinomies into his account of how we should look at the striving for perfection in human life. We must imagine that the quest for salvation is both something that can be realized and something that can never be realized.

We might see Buber as carrying over the postulates of pure practical reason into his philosophical anthropology. What Kant considered metaphysical topics, - God, freedom of the will and immortality of the soul - Buber treated as essential elements of

¹³² Buber, *Israel and the World*, 23.

the human condition. Buber would not claim, for example, that freedom of the will could be proven in the way Kant did, with reference to the morality of the will. But for Buber, the very possibility of human perfection places the future in the hands of human being in their deciding to do good or evil. Likewise, Buber could be taken as claiming that the very idea of human perfection makes us aware of (but does not rationally entail belief in) a perfect being who not only commands me to strive for perfection and also is present to us to relieve human suffering. But my focus here is on how Buber draws on Kant's notion that time is an intuition of human sensibility. Buber's claim, as I understand it, is that the very idea of duration is given to us only because the desire for salvation emerges spontaneously from the faculty of sensibility.

Buber's account of sensibility explains the spatiality of human perception in terms of a primordial human awareness of community. In the passage from *I and Thou* above, Buber describes the community as emerging around an "invisible altar," the shared communal center in which the community seeks salvation in its relationship with a divine being. As Buber emphasizes in his later philosophical paper "Distance and Relation," prior to relation there is a setting at a distance of the individual that makes relationality possible.¹³³ Once others are set at a distance, I can conceive of being in relation with them while remaining separate and being at a distance. I take it that Buber's claim in *I and Thou* is that a genuine community with a common center is a primordial realization of this state of being in dialogical relation while maintaining the separation that maintains genuine individuality. The very notion of space, is produced in this primordial realization

¹³³ Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 50.

of genuine community around a common center,¹³⁴ because it generates the conditions of coordinating any object in relation to myself in terms of proximity and distance. As with the salvation-oriented life, this primordial sense of community is produced by sensibility because it is the faculty of sensibility that makes me aware of the suffering of others and they of my suffering. The awareness of suffering of the other and my very presence for the other in their suffering is the essence of the dialogical relation and the genuine bonds of human community.

As much as I am interpreting this passage from *I and Thou* to be making a philosophical claim, I take it that Buber's primary interest in these passages is to generate interest not in his interpretation of Kant but in the ways in which ancient religious literary sources could reconnect us to the original dialogical relation. In this one passage, Buber makes the claim that our very concept of time and space are rooted in a deeper relational reality than we are ordinarily aware of. In the section of *I and Thou* in which this passage appears, Buber deals primarily with the problem of how a living relationship with the Eternal You can be realized in everyday life. In particular, Buber is concerned with the routinization of this relationship in the form of religious cults and law. The phenomenon of routinization, which Buber takes to be universal in the history of human religion and culture, not only fails to capture the power of the original moment of relation but misleads human beings as to how they should respond to that moment. In cult religion, human beings draw away from the world of everyday existence to "attend to God," as opposed to "attending to the world." Buber argues that "...the pure relation can be built

¹³⁴ Cf. Dan Avnon's discussion of Buber's conception of the common center and central persons in *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue*, (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 1998), particularly 155-58.

up into spatial-temporal continuity only by becoming embodied in the whole stuff of life.” Cults and religious law cannot genuinely preserve the divine-human encounter, which can only be realized in direct human action.

Although not primarily interested in tracking the Kantian origins of his own terminology, Buber’s uses the concepts of temporality and spatiality in order to explain the idea of that the everyday world of existence, time and space, is rooted in the primordial realm of direct relations where salvation and community are humanity’s “ultimate concerns.”¹³⁵ The task of *I and Thou* is not only to delineate the two kinds realms of relation, but to explain how these two realms interact in dynamic fashion. Far from remaining isolated from each other, the goal of a genuinely religious life is to bring the I-You into the spatio-temporal realm of I-It relations, the holy to be embodied in the everyday.

Thus far, I have tried to account for Kant’s influence of Buber’s philosophical anthropology by suggesting that Buber’s general account of the relationship between the I-You and I-It realms, the eternal and temporal, are rooted in Kant’s claim that time and space are intuitions of sensibility and Buber’s subsequent expansion of this claim. The primordial realm of dialogical relation is formed through human awareness of their own suffering, which in turn produces a stable cosmos of time and space in which human beings pursue their physical and material security. The risk of living in this stable cosmos is that they will forget their spiritual origins in the realm of relation and find themselves too disconnected from it to return. The way back to this original relation with being, Buber argues, is through recapturing our attunement to the faculty of sensibility.

¹³⁵ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, (Harper and Row: New York, 1957), 1-4.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the work of attunement to the faculty of sensibility is essentially the work of religion. Religion's proper orientation is towards the concrete embodied life of everyday human existence. The faith of the Hebrew Bible (and Hasidism) is that God addresses us in our concrete embodied existence, not, as in Gnosticism, that we must overcome that existence to reach the divine. This conception of God seems quite remote from Kant's, but as in the case of the anthropological question, Buber identified unfinished business on the margins of Kant thought that provided him with a fruitful way of articulating a philosophical framework for his Buber's ideas. Buber's analysis of Kant's difficulty in embracing the Biblical God, I shall argue, as with Buber's discussion of the anthropological question, revolves around Kant's refusal to acknowledge the role of sensibility in human life. It is to Buber's discussion of Kant's conception of God that I now turn.

III

Buber discusses Kant's conception of God in his 1943 essay, "The Love of God and the Idea of Deity." Buber's primary purpose in this essay is to discuss the limitations of Hermann Cohen's rationalist conception of the God-human relationship. In discussing his differences with Cohen, Buber also reveals an important affinity between himself and his teacher. Both Buber and Cohen draw seek to offer what might be called a Jewish correction and appropriation of Kant's philosophical legacy. This essay represents Buber's understanding of how he and Cohen differed in the way they draw on Kant. Hence the essay also provides another important example of how Buber expressed his

own philosophical insights by drawing on one aspect Kant's philosophical framework and taking that insight in a philosophical direction that Kant did not take.

Buber's discussion of Kant in this essay has three features similar to his discussion of Kant in "The Problem of the Human Being." The first two similarities are literary observations. First, Buber draws attention to a text in which Kant considers an idea that he himself rejects but that Buber thinks he should not have. In "The Love of God and the Idea of Deity," Buber argues that Kant's late reflections on the nature of God reveal the philosopher caught between an idealist, almost projectionist, conception of God as an idea and a conception of God as a living personality, the latter of which he rejects and Buber embraces. Second, as in "The Problem of the Human Being," Buber uses Pascal to set the stage for his discussion of Kant.

The third similarity is a matter of philosophical substance, but again, Buber is not explicit on this point. I argued above that Buber's discussion of Kant's conception of time and space puts Kant's conception of sensibility and Buber's implicit use of that concept in *I and Thou* at the center of Buber's philosophical anthropology. In this lecture also, Buber's critique of Kant points to the centrality of the concept of sensibility. Buber reads Cohen's conception of God as an attempt to resolve the tension Buber finds in Kant in favor of the idealist conception of God. The problem with this conception of God, Buber argues, is that it is incompatible with the Biblical conception of a personal God who enters into relation with embodied beings. Buber also claims that Kant was well aware of the problem, which to repeat, makes Kant's failure interesting and instructive.

In "The Love of God and the Idea of Deity," Buber frames his differences with Kant and Cohen by drawing on Pascal's sharp distinction between the God of the

philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Looking to Kant's notes in his unfinished works from his old age, Buber concludes that these notes "reveal a scene of incomparable existential tragedy."¹³⁶ On the one hand, Kant embraces the God of the philosophers by insisting that God is an idea and that thinking the idea of God and believing God, that is, having God as an object of faith, is one and the same act. On the other hand, Kant acknowledges that for this faith to be genuinely faith, it must be directed at a living personality such as the God of the Hebrew Bible. Buber concludes that Kant did not allow the possibility of faith in a living God to overrun his rationalistic theology. Instead, Kant remained satisfied with saying that conceiving of God as a living personality is "the inescapable fate of man."¹³⁷ Buber takes Kant to mean that thinking of God as a living personality way is the way human beings will inevitably think about God, even though believing in that God is this way is not sanctioned by reason as Kant understands it.

Buber presents Cohen's contribution to Jewish thought as a confident embrace and intensification of the tension that plagued Kant's thinking about God. According to Buber, Cohen strengthens Kant's conception of an ideal God and he is also a philosopher "overwhelmed by faith." Because of his attention to Jewish concerns and sources, Buber surmises, Cohen confronted the fact that genuine faith involved not merely thinking or believing but *loving* God, and moreover that genuine love of humanity flows from my love of God, because in loving God, I also come to love what God loves, namely other human beings. But Cohen's extension of Kantian rationalism leads him to comprehend this love as love of an idea. Here, Buber cites Cohen's lectures on Judaism from 1914-15:

¹³⁶ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 51.

¹³⁷ Buber quoting Kant in *Eclipse of God*, 52.

“‘Why should I not be able,’ (Cohen) replies, ‘to love ideas. What is man after all but a social idea, and yet I can love him as an individual only through and in virtue of that fact. Therefore, strictly considered, I can only love the social idea of man.’”¹³⁸ Cohen offers a complete resolution of the tension by making love of an idea the highest form of love and the precondition to love of a concrete living being.

Buber’s response to Cohen on this point is important for understanding his view of Kant, although he does not conflate their two positions. Buber concedes that there may be an element of idealization in our love of either human beings or God, that we do in fact love the idea of a person or God. But he counters that love of such an idea or ideal is made possible by our love of the other’s concrete personality. Thus, about human beings, Buber contends: “Only if and because I love this or that specific man can I elevate my relation to the social idea of man into that emotional relationship involving my whole being which I am entitled to call by the name of love.”¹³⁹ And about God, Buber says that God can be said to be a personality in the sense that “God loves as a personality and that He wishes to be loved like a personality. And if he was not a person in Himself, He, so to speak, became one in creating Man, in order to love man and be loved by him – in order to love me and be loved by me. For even supposing that ideas can also be loved, the fact remains that persons are the only ones who love.”¹⁴⁰ Even if persons can be idealized and that these ideas can become objects of our love, the reciprocity we associate with love is grounded in love of a concrete personality because only a personality can *love us back*.

¹³⁸ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 58. Cf. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, GA, 1995), 160.

¹³⁹ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 58.

¹⁴⁰ Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 60.

Buber explicitly relates his critique of Cohen to his interpretation of the Jewish view of creation: “And if (God) was not a person in Himself, He, so to speak, became one in creating Man, in order to love man and be loved by him – in order to love me and be loved by me.”¹⁴¹ One of Buber’s main aims in the lectures collected in *The Eclipse of God* is to refute the idea that God is merely a projection of human characteristics onto an absolute reality. In this passage, Buber seems close to endorsing this very view, but in fact he is showing how such a view can emerge from a misunderstanding of the intent of the Biblical view of creation. In Buber’s understanding of the Biblical view, God’s love of humanity is so powerful, God’s intimacy with the divine creation so intense, that God is able to take on, as it were, the characteristics of earthly creatures in relating to them, whether in nature or in history.

From Buber’s perspective, he and Cohen do not disagree necessarily on the notion that God’s true reality is ultimately mysterious. Their disagreement stems rather from the way they understand God’s relationship with God’s creatures. Buber takes Cohen to be an astute reader of Jewish sources who knows that in Judaism there must a reciprocal relation, and what Cohen calls a “correlation” between humanity and God.¹⁴² Buber takes over Cohen’s idea of correlation and transposes it into his own ethic of embodied self-realization. Buber parts with Cohen on the question of what is involved for us in loving human creations - what about another human being do we love? Their understanding of how we love God and how God loves us turns on that question. Buber argues that Cohen

¹⁴¹Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 60.

¹⁴²Cohen explains the use of this term to mean “reciprocal relation” in *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, 86.

cannot account for the way in which God would love us, because while we may love ideas, ideas do not love, and if God is *only* an idea, how could God love humanity?

My interest in this chapter is not in Buber's disagreement with Cohen in itself, but rather in how Buber's critique of Cohen exemplifies their differing paths away from Kant. What is relevant here is that Buber and Cohen take diametrically opposite views of Kant's legacy, which at the same time unites them in giving Kant a place of unique significance in the Western philosophical tradition. Cohen argued that Kant placed too much emphasis on sensibility at the expense of what Cohen called "pure thought." Buber, in contrast, contends that Kant overlooked the full contours of sensibility, evading any sustained consideration, philosophical or otherwise, of the concrete embodied nature of both interhuman and divine-human relationships.

Conclusion

I suggested above that Buber's brief reading of Kant's religious philosophy has similar features to his discussion of Kant's anthropology. By way of conclusion, I will now briefly expand on this idea. One might read Buber as following Kant's famous dictum that in order to reign in the speculative metaphysics he had to "deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."¹⁴³ But Buber explains faith differently than Kant did. Buber clearly viewed Kant's limitation of speculative metaphysical knowledge positively and saw it as an important achievement that set the stage for his own dialogical thought. Buber treats metaphysical speculation as characteristic feature of the Gnostic spirit and

¹⁴³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, BXXX, p. 29.

completely opposed to Hebrew thought.¹⁴⁴ The fact that Kant realized the genuine power of the personal God of the Bible in his late life serves as evidence for Buber how much Kant's philosophy had eschewed Gnostic thinking. This is what I take to be Buber's view of Kant's philosophical legacy. Because his philosophical program dissolved the temptation of speculative metaphysics on matters of space, time and God, he points the way towards serious philosophical consideration of the ideas of the Hebrew Bible.

As Paul Mendes-Flohr has shown, Buber's concept of the between, or interhuman, is not only the social space of human dialogical encounter but also the space in which God is realized within human beings. Buber's philosophical anthropology is aimed at articulating a conception of the human as that being who can realize the eternal with its everyday existence in time and space and delineating the conditions in which that can occur, which in Buber's dialogical thinking is the between. Thus, the between is not only the answer to the question "what is the human being," but also "how can the eternal be realized within the human being?" Buber drew both of these questions from Kant.

To a degree, Buber also drew his answers from Kant. In the passage from *Elements of the Interhuman* with which I began this chapter, Buber states that the concept of the interhuman is drawn from Kant's idea that human beings are end in themselves. I take Buber to mean that he has taken over Kant's idea that what matters about the human beings is the whole human being whose dignity is not dependent on its usefulness, its role in some system or its instrumental value as a tool. Buber does not, as Kant did, develop this insight into a system of ethics. In fact, Buber would view Kant's systematic ethics as actually undermining the real philosophical significance of Kant's own insight, because

¹⁴⁴ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 22.

when human dignity is expressed as a system of duty the wholeness of the human being is obscured. Buber's aim in his philosophical writings was to develop an anthropology that would retain what he took to be Kant's fundamental insight and not have this disadvantage.¹⁴⁵

Instead of honoring human dignity through a rational system of duties, Buber proposed the dialogical life, which involves being present with one's whole being for the whole being of another person. The wholeness of a person is the embodied realization of their spirit. In drawing on Kant's philosophy for different philosophical ends, Buber drew largely on Kant's conception of sensibility and his claim that time and space are intuitions of sensibility. Kant's claim points to the fact that the everyday world of human existence is conditioned by our embodied nature as human beings. Buber sought to draw out the implications of this idea for human self-realization and religion that Kant, as a rationalist, could not see. Human self-realization occurs within in our being present in a fully embodied way for the fully embodied life of others, in imitation of the God of the Hebrew Bible, who created and loves our embodied existence and teaches humanity how to realize the divine plan for creation within that embodied created existence.

¹⁴⁵ Buber did not oppose the concept of moral duty per se, but he did not think that Kant's systematic ethics could not fully capture the nature of moral decision-making. Cf. Kenneth Seeskin's discussion of Buber in chapter 7 of *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, (Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 2001), for a helpful discussion of Buber's critique of Kant. I do not endorse Seeskin's conclusion that Buber's position is indistinguishable from Satre's. Moreover, as Buber makes clear, his own interest in ethics lies not in saying what rules are the best but in defining what it means to have good character, a point that Seeskin does not address.

Chapter 4: Origin and Goal: The Historical Dimension of Buber's Philosophical Anthropology

In several places in his writings, Buber singles out the philosophy of Hegel as the origin as a way of thinking about power and history that has had a particularly pernicious influence in both the way modern people understand Judaism and on modern social and political life. One of his clearest assessments of Hegel appears in his inaugural lecture at the Hebrew University from 1938, where Buber contrasts the Biblical prophets with the Western philosophical tradition:

Since Hegel, power has learned to offer a grandiose justification of its resistance to the spirit: true spirit, so we are told, manifests itself in history, in its struggles for power and its power-decisions. He who serves power, therefore, is proclaimed as the true representative of the spirit, and he who opposes it with criticism and demand has obviously fallen into the impudent madness of believing there is something superior to history.¹⁴⁶

Here, Buber claims that the Hegelian notion that the spirit manifests itself in history undergirds totalitarian ideologies because it insists that the only path to spiritual realization is to serve power and whatever persons, institutions or entities that possess power. From such a philosophical perspective, the Biblical prophetic vocation of resisting prevailing structures of power through inspired speech appears to be a form of madness.

My purpose here is not to defend or evaluate Buber's reading of Hegel, an issue I will leave to the side in the discussion that follows. Rather, my goal in this chapter is to place Buber's various comments about Hegel within the broader context of Buber's project to develop a philosophy of history rooted in Jewish and Biblical prophetic teachings about the struggle for justice and human self-realization. I emphasize that for

¹⁴⁶ Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 182.

Buber, Hegel's philosophy represents a modern version of ancient ideas about history that not only fail to promote these humanistic end but also result in a distortion of the spiritual power of Jewish ideas.

In this first part of the chapter, I will look at Buber's discussion of Hegel in "The Problem of the Human Being." Here I discuss Buber's identification of Hegel's view of history with ancient forms of apocalyptic thinking as Buber understands it and with the heathen and Gnostic thinking I have discussed in previous chapters. In the second part of the chapter, I will examine Buber's contrast of what he takes to be a Biblical and Jewish conception of history with one characteristic of "the nations," a term referring to what Buber sees as characteristically Western approaches to thinking about history. I will explain this distinction with attention to the ways in which it bears upon Buber's criticisms of some forms of Zionism and liberal Judaism. Buber views both liberal Judaism and classical political Zionism as examples of modern Jews who have problematically reinterpreted Judaism by giving primacy to Western categories of social and spiritual thought. In the third part of the chapter, I will discuss Buber's more comprehensive understanding of the Jewish conception of history as rooted in memory. Jewish memory, Buber claims, embodies contemporary Jews' relationship to the past by grounding it in a concrete relationship to ancestors who lived and told events of the past. Memory also has an anthropological dimension for Buber, because it is through memory that we can retrieve awareness of dialogical encounter. Buber's arguments against Hegel, then, should be seen as part of his effort to use Jewish ideas of spiritual realization to inform philosophical responses to the spiritual crisis of humanity.

I

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Buber believed that Western philosophy and theology had historically evaded confronting the problematic and unique nature of the human being by providing a “secure home” for humanity in the spatial realm of the cosmos by categorizing the human being as one being among others in a philosophical or theological system. In Buber’s estimation, the ascendance of Kant’s transcendental philosophy made such metaphysical systems untenable, leaving philosophy without its traditional answers to the question of nature of humanity. In “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber suggests that Hegel’s philosophy of history represents the most significant modern attempt to find a secure home for humanity in a philosophical system, the difference being that this home is found in time rather than in space as in the pre-modern philosophical or theological systems. On Buber’s reading, Hegel’s notion of the world spirit unfolding in history is an attempt, albeit a failed one, to eliminate the distinctiveness and agency of individual human existence by reducing it to a function of historical determination.

In one sense, Buber sees Hegel’s philosophy of history as a uniquely modern development because it does not rely on the spatially rooted metaphysical images of ancient and medieval Western philosophy. At the same time, Buber’s takes Hegel to be a representative of the underlying essence of what Buber calls “Occidental thinking,” in contrast the thought patterns characteristic of Judaism and its ancient teachings.¹⁴⁷ When he discusses or mentions Hegel in passing in his writings, Buber mostly associates him

¹⁴⁷ Martin Buber, *On Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 108-9.

with apocalyptic messianism, that emerged out of Persian religious traditions and can be found in both later Jewish and Christian sources, but which Buber argued was inimical to genuine Biblical faith. Buber's critique of Hegel then does not depend on a comprehensive interpretation of Hegel's ideas, but rather on the association of Hegel's philosophy of history with these ancient ideas. In identifying the failure of Hegel's philosophy of history, Buber is identifying the problems with what he takes to be a distinctively Western philosophy of history and presenting the Jewish conception of history as an alternative that can better address humanity present spiritual crisis.

Buber reads Hegel, as he reads Plato, as encapsulating the tensions between what Buber calls heathenism on the one hand and Gnosticism on the other. As I discussed in chapter one, Buber views these two forms of thinking as polarities in tension with each other, forming the unstable essence of Western thought. The greatness of Plato and Hegel as thinkers, however, is that they encapsulate both the Gnostic and heathen pole within the structure of their thought. Buber's discussion of Hegel is important for understanding his claim that the ideas of Judaism provide an alternative to that very polarity.

In "The Problem of the Human Being," Buber calls Hegel's philosophy of history "the third great attempt at security within Western thought" following the attempts of Aristotle and Aquinas, both rooted in Plato's original metaphysical ambition. In Buber's account, the existential security provided by these paradigms was destabilized by the Copernican conception of infinite space. Hegel tries to replicate the stability of these older systems by building a secure home for humanity in time as opposed to space. Hegel's idea that universal reason becomes realized in history is what Buber means by Hegel's home for humanity "in time." History is the structure that gives human beings

meaning and purpose, relieving the existential loneliness that comes with a lack of meaning or purpose. Indeed, because Hegel's systematic philosophy gives pride of place to "universal reason" over the concrete human being, Buber believes that the system actually obliterates the possibility of a genuine individual meaning.¹⁴⁸

Buber's discussion in "The Problem of the Human Being" draws on the idea that Hegel's philosophy of history is a kind of "secularized messianism,"¹⁴⁹ that is, the secularization of the idea that the future outcome of history is guaranteed by divine power. To clarify this idea, Buber contrasts two ancient messianic traditions, the Persian and the Israelite. In Persian messianism, "the future final and complete victory of light over darkness is guaranteed to the precise hour," whereas Israelite messianism "rejects such precision because it understands man himself, frail, contradictory, questionable man himself as an element that can both contribute to salvation and hinder it."¹⁵⁰ As Buber discusses in a later essay, this Persian messianism became integrated into Jewish and then Christian literature after the Babylonian exile in writings that form the apocalyptic tradition. While found in some late Hebrew prophetic writings, Buber takes the

¹⁴⁸ Recent interpretations of Hegel have given greater emphasis to anthropology in Hegel's philosophy, which might challenge Buber's reading of Hegel in several ways. In particular see Buber acknowledges that early in his career, Hegel showed a great deal of interest in anthropology, but contends that he moved away from this interest by the time of the *Encyclopedia*. In other respects, however, Buber's interpretation seems to be conventional for its time. Thomas A. Lewis notes the long tradition of seeing Hegel as a thinker who gives primacy to theory over practice and gives no critical role to philosophical theory. Cf. Thomas A. Lewis, *Freedom and Tradition in Hegel: Reconsidering Anthropology, Ethics and Religion* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 6-8.

¹⁴⁹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 142. Buber also assesses Marx's view of history as a secularized messianism, Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 143.

¹⁵⁰ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 142.

apocalyptic message to be counter to the genuine tradition of Israelite prophecy, precisely because of its view of the future and human decision.

Although Buber's discussion in "The Problem of the Human Being" is vague on this point, he clearly associates this apocalyptic form of messianic thinking with the historical determinism he finds in Hegel.¹⁵¹ In a later treatment of apocalyptic thinking, Buber argues that in apocalyptic writing, everything "is predetermined, all human decisions are only sham struggles. The future does not come to pass; the future is already present in heaven, as it were, present from the beginning."¹⁵² In this way of thinking, since the future is already set, the future is not future but an already present reality, but only in some ethereal world, either in heaven or human thought. The apocalyptic tendency to see the future as already determined generates a view of humanity's downfall as having been programmed in from humanity's beginning. Buber claims that the Christian doctrine of original sin also has its origins in this apocalyptic tradition. For the apocalyptic mind, history is over before it has begun. This is what Buber means in saying that the apocalyptic does not offer genuine history, but only "sham struggles." Human struggles against evil and violence are not genuine struggles if in the end the outcome is predetermined. That view, Buber believes, negates our deepest held intuitions about the meaningful nature of human struggle self-perfection and against the evils of violence and oppression.

¹⁵¹ For example, in *Two Types of Faith*, his study of the Gospels and Paul's epistles, Buber makes the claim that Hegel's philosophy of history is a secularized version of Paul's philosophy of history in which history is perfected through the unfolding of reason, a secularized God, independent of human action. Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 90. Buber also calls Marx, whom he argues shares Hegel's determinism, an example of "optimistic modern apocalyptic," Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 203. Also see Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 143.

¹⁵² Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 201.

Buber contrasts this apocalyptic view of history and sin to what he takes to be the genuinely Biblical and later Jewish conception of sin as developed by the early Talmudic sages. In these teachings, the evil urge is depicted as a “still neutral passion” that animates human creativity. According to this Talmudic teaching “It depends on man whether this passion takes the direction towards God or falls into directionless chaos. The intention of creation, from the perspective of this Jewish teaching, was that the world should become an independent seat of free decision out of which a genuine answer of the creature to his Creator could issue.”¹⁵³ In the Jewish view, the created world can be redeemed through the human decision to channel the evil urge towards a holy purpose of the divine will. As I will discuss in greater detail below, Buber views the Jewish conception of history in terms of revelation and divine-human dialogue. The struggles of human history are genuine struggles in that they have real stakes because what human beings do matters to God.

Having established this contrast between two ancient understandings of history, Buber introduces the terms “cosmological time” and “anthropological time” to identify Hegel’s position and his own, corresponding to the apocalyptic and Jewish understandings of history respectively. The critical difference between these two conceptions of time lies in the way they give us a sense of the future. When I look to the past, through the mechanism of memory, anthropological time and cosmological time converge; the past that I remember is also the objective past of the universe.¹⁵⁴ From the anthropological perspective, however, the future cannot be known in advance because it

¹⁵³ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 202.

¹⁵⁴ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 141. Buber does not seem to take the issue of “false memory” seriously. As we saw above, memory gives subjective meaning to objective events, but does not nor could not contradict the factuality of past events.

depends on my decision, my individual will, and on the willing decisions of other human beings. In the cosmological conception of time that Buber associates with Hegel, the future of the universe is knowable if one has knowledge of the workings of the universe. Even though the future is not present, the future becomes present by understanding the future in terms of the events of the past, whether natural or historical events.

In Buber's understanding, the process of reason's realization in history that Hegel depicts fails to provide a genuine form of existential security. For Hegel, Buber argues, the security of the future comes through thought alone. The realization of reason in history only gives a sense of the future in cosmological time, hence it is only an intellectual achievement realized by the thinking individual, the scientist or philosopher. Buber argues this cannot account for any actuality in lived life: "But thought does not have the power to build up man's real life, and the strictest philosophical certainty cannot endow the soul with that intimate certitude that the world which is so imperfect will be brought to its perfection."¹⁵⁵ If the work of human realization requires confidence that the work is at least possible, a system built on cosmological time does not provide that confidence because it does not account for the concrete decision of the human being to change herself or her world. Indeed, the historical determinism that is implicit in Hegel's philosophy of history gives no room for the individual to realize their perfection within historical circumstances.

On Buber's view of Hegel, individual self-realization consists only in internal knowledge and thought which has no impact on history. Such knowledge may be perfected, but it cannot perfect the world outside the individual. Meanwhile, the world

¹⁵⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 142.

outside the individual follows its historical course in a determined fashion. The individual may be able to know what course the world will take, but she cannot do anything about it. In Hegel's actual world, according to Buber, historical processes culminate in the power of the state, which has the ability to manage the conflicts of different sectors of society. In two later lectures on political and social thought, Buber criticizes Hegel's political theory for negating the value of social groups independent of the state. In Buber's estimation, Hegel fails to recognize the "social consciousness, solidarity, mutual aid, loyal comradeship, spirited enthusiasms for a common enterprise" that are the hallmark of social groups in modern society.¹⁵⁶ More importantly, however, Hegel's state absorbs all individuality in its absolute power and becomes, as Hegel himself suggests, a kind of God.¹⁵⁷ Thus, while Hegel's philosophical system reflects a Gnostic sensibility in which the individual finds salvation remote from the world, his political philosophy reflects what Buber might call a heathen sensibility, where power itself, the absolute power of the state, is considered divine.¹⁵⁸ I will return to Buber's association of Hegel with Gnostic and heathen thinking below.

Buber maintains that the dialogical faith of the Hebrew prophets can provide a sense of confidence in the future and energize action against the prevailing systems of injustice and evil that Hegel's thought cannot. Buber argues that "...the power of faith alone can experience perfection as something assured, because it is guaranteed to us by someone we trust – whom we trust as the guarantor also what has not yet come to be in

¹⁵⁶ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 171.

¹⁵⁷ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 171, 213.

¹⁵⁸ Consider again Buber's 1938 inaugural lecture at the Hebrew University, where Buber identifies Hegel's view of history as the inspiration for a modern ideology that venerates power as manifested in historical events. Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 182.

our world.”¹⁵⁹ This conclusion about Biblical faith might seem paradoxical because in the prophetic tradition the results of history appear to be contingent on human action, not predetermined. Buber’s view here seems to be that in the prophetic tradition, God is the master of history and will determine its end, but that this mastery is responsive to the role that human beings choose to play. In apocalyptic thinking, the divine may control history but humanity is alone in the face of the unresponsive totality of being or history. One can either submit to the predetermined course of history in heathen worship or find a Gnostic spiritual refuge. In prophetic thinking, God calls to humanity in revelation, and humanity can respond to God through action, but whether they do or not, God will prevail. This form of faith in the future is more philosophically compelling, Buber believes, because it is rooted in personal trust that takes shape in embodied existence, not in the impersonal forces of history or in the distant, abstract and disembodied Gnostic paradise of the individual intellect. This interplay of divine revelation and human response is what Buber calls the dialogical structure of history, which I will discuss in the remainder of the chapter.

Buber’s contrast of Hegel’s cosmological time to anthropological time is intended to present the differences between Jewish and Western thinking in the idiom of contemporary philosophy, rather than in the framework of religious history that Buber uses in his lectures and essays on Judaism from 1918 onward. Buber’s substantive philosophical argument in “The Problem of the Human Being” is that Hegel’s historical determinism cannot offer actual confidence in the future because humanity actually stands outside its reality in a Gnostic standpoint of alienation from reality. Again,

¹⁵⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 141.

Buber's argument about Hegel's philosophy of history parallels his argument about Plato's metaphysics that I discussed in chapter 2. Both Hegel and Plato valorize "reality" – which for Buber includes prevailing systems of power - as it is: Plato by giving pride of place to the sense of vision and Hegel through historical determinism. Both Hegel and Plato also give the philosopher a privileged standpoint to cognize this reality, through the tool of abstract philosophical thought. These two moves provide the framework for the polarity of heathen glorification of reality and the Gnostic resignation to reality. The first provides the spiritual energy for totalitarianism, the second provides a refuge for the spiritual person, consoles them that they are powerless to act against historical forces and absolves of any obligation to do so.

What I am showing here is that Buber's contrast of apocalyptic and prophetic messianism works in tandem with his contrast of Judaism to Gnostic and heathen thinking that appears frequently in his writings, as I have discussed. This connection comes through clearly when Buber discusses the affinities between Hegel and Heidegger as modern versions of apocalyptic thinking in contrast with the prophetic tradition:

For Hegel, world history is the absolute process in which the spirit attains to consciousness of itself; so for Heidegger historical existence is the illumination of being itself; in neither is there room for a historical reality that sees history and judges it...Time is not embraced by the timeless, and the ages do not shudder before One who does not dwell in time but only appears in it.

Buber goes on:

If historical time and history are absolutized, it can easily occur that in the midst of present historical events the time-bound thinker ascribes to the state's current drive to power the character of an absolute and in this sense the determination of the future. After that, the goblin called success, convulsively grinning, may occupy for a while the divine seat of authority.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 215.

Here again Buber associates Hegel's view of history and the state with a modern form of what he called heathenism, the collapsing of spirit and power. The state that exists, regardless of its perfection, is proclaimed divine. It certain seems that Buber meant for this association of Hegel and Heidegger to connect the former's philosophical justification of the state to the latter's initial enthusiasm for National Socialism.

In the next chapter, I will discuss Buber's categorization of Heidegger's fundamental ontology as a form of contemporary Gnostic thinking.¹⁶¹ For now, I wish to show only that for Buber, Hegel's determinism represents a philosophy of history that works in tandem with the spiritual teachings of both Gnostic and heathen thinking. The celebration of mere power reigning in history creates either an uncritical acceptance and celebration of that power or a world-weariness that engenders the Gnostic flight to find true individual salvation from outside the corrupt and violent world of creation. Buber's critique of Hegel is a call to return to a Jewish philosophy of history, which is the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

II

In his writings on the Bible and Judaism, Buber often contrasts what he takes to be a characteristically Biblical or Jewish way of understanding history and a way of understanding history characteristic of "the nations," a term I seek to explain in what follows. These categories serve as typologies for Buber, and his not making a claim about the way Jews and non-Jews always think by virtue of national or racial identity. Indeed,

¹⁶¹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 179.

Buber draws attention to ways in which Jews have failed to incorporate Biblical thinking into their Jewish self-understanding and calls upon them to reorient their thinking accordingly. Likewise, Buber's contrast of Biblical thinking and gentile thinking is also directed at Christians, who claim allegiance to the Bible, to reconfigure their own thinking along the lines of Biblical thinking and eliminate gentile thinking from Christianity. As we saw in chapter 1, Buber's rhetorical critique of Gnosticism was meant to draw attention to the implicit and explicit anti-Judaism of neo-Gnostic thinking among Christian theologians and non-Christian philosophers. Buber wanted Christians and all non-Jews to incorporate what he took to be the authentic Biblical and later Jewish teachings on the dialogical life into their understanding of religion and the human spirit.

It is also important to note that while Buber's primary contrast is between two types of history, one Biblical and the other gentile, Buber also occasionally operates with a triadic structure in his analysis. Buber's more prevalent dichotomies, including "Israel" and "the nations," follow the pattern of the I-You/I-It dichotomy, but, as I have been arguing, there is also a consistent triadic dichotomy that is an outgrowth of the I-You/I-It dichotomy. In this dissertation, I am drawing attention to the triadic contrasts of individualism/ collectivism/ the between, and Gnostic/heathen/Jewish. Buber's treatment of different understandings of history provides a good entry point for seeing how the more well-known dyadic structure generates the less well-known triadic structure. As I have been arguing, Buber posits Gnostic and heathen thinking as being two sides of the same coin because they both emerge from the tendency to theorize about reality from the standpoint of the I-It world. When the concrete world of relation is ignored, *both* Gnostic

and heathen ways of thinking, as well as individualism and collectivism, emerge. Buber's discussions of history provide examples of both his use of dyadic and triadic structures.

As we saw in the last chapter, in *I and Thou*, Buber asserts that human awareness of time is anchored in "the relation-oriented life of salvation." I understood this to mean that the human concept of time is rooted in my sensible awareness of the suffering of human beings, which generates a yearning to realize perfection. Buber presents a more concrete and textually rooted version of this idea in his essay "Humanity Today and the Jewish Bible." There, Buber articulates a uniquely Biblical view of time as anchored in a structure of salvation history. The Bible, Buber argues, always makes a claim on humanity "that it must be recognized as a document of true history of the world, that is to say, of the history according to which the world has an origin and goal...Creation is the origin, redemption the goal."¹⁶² In the Biblical view, history has a definite beginning in God's creation and a definite goal in the culmination of God's rule over creation through the redemption of the world. Revelation is the ongoing middle point between origin and goal. In this sense, revelation is not restricted to the moment of the Sinai event, but an ever-present possibility of divine-human dialogue that not only occurs within history but also, as we shall below, actually constitutes history.

In this essay, Buber contrasts the Biblical view of history to two modern views. The first is that of the "freethinker" who views history as a random series of events with no coherent meaning. The second views history "dogmatically," deriving laws and regularities from the study of the past that allow one to predict or anticipate how future events will unfold. The second view clearly corresponds to modern historical

¹⁶² Martin Buber, *Israel and the World*, 94.

determinism, which Buber finds in Hegel and Marx's philosophy of history, as I discussed above. But here we have an example of how Buber's dyadic contrast of I-You/I-It thinking generates the triadic structure in Buber's contrast of Judaism to Gnostic and heathen thinking. The freethinking and dogmatic views of history are two sides of the same coin. Both, Buber contends, leave humanity in a "meaningless drift" of time. This claim can be understood in terms of Buber's claim in *I and Thou* that time is anchored in a "relation-oriented life of salvation." The freethinker denies the possibility of a movement towards salvation and the dogmatist denies the significance of relation for the achievement of historical ends. Thus, both fail to recognize the primacy of dialogical relation in an effort realize salvation within the concrete material world of creation.

The denial of the primacy of relation takes two paths, hence generating the triadic structure of Buber's thinking. In denying the possibility of finding any meaning in human events, the freethinking view aligns itself with the Gnostic denial that humanity can find salvation in the concrete embodied realm of existence. The dogmatic view, on the other hand, implicitly puts its faith in the unfolding patterns of history. The dogmatist glorifies history just as it is in the same way that the heathen glorifies earthly existence just as it is. The Biblical notion of history as revelation offers, in Buber's view, an alternative that affirms the dignity of earthly existence while acknowledging the imperfections of the current circumstances of human social life. Through revelation, humanity is given an opportunity to work with God to turn God's created world into God's redeemed world. In the view of history as revelation, human events have meaning by virtue of humanity's effort to seek the truth that would realize a redeemed world.

Buber's other discussions of history largely focus on the difference between the Biblical view of history as revelation and the dogmatic view of history, because it is this view of history that Buber associates with modern historicism and totalitarianism. In one lecture, Buber calls the Bible's view "history as seen from below," which is "peculiar to Israel" as opposed to "history seen from above," which "has always been widespread among nations"¹⁶³ and corresponds to the dogmatic view. In the view "from above," "History is a series of seizures of power by the empowered (by God) and of their exploitations of victory...Victory indicates a decision on the part of God, indicates the presence of God. Successes are revelations."¹⁶⁴ In the Biblical view of history "from below," "history is an action which takes place between man and God, a dialogue of action...Whatever happens between God and the participant in the dialogue whom he himself has appointed and made independent, is history. Whether a man is powerful or powerless makes no difference in the role he plays in the dialogue of history."¹⁶⁵ From above, God merely dictates the outcome of events and the powerful are beneficiaries of divine dispensation; from below, humanity responds to God's words and actions and that ongoing dialogue constitutes history.

Buber's conception of history from below emphasizes the freedom of human beings in their relationship to God. From above, God grants humanity power and success and the human response to power is meaningless. From below, humanity is free to respond either with or against God and human power is not interpreted to indicate that God favors a specific person or group. Buber's contrast of these two approaches to

¹⁶³ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 78.

¹⁶⁴ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 79.

¹⁶⁵ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 78-9

history parallels his contrast of Plato and Isaiah as two different kinds of “men of the spirit” that I examined in chapter 2. As I noted there, and as Dan Avnon has shown, Isaiah serves for Buber as a paradigm of prophetic leadership.¹⁶⁶ In the worldview represented by Plato, the spirit serves the prevailing arrangements of power, meaning the forces that “history,” in the sense of history from above, has deemed to be those worthy of power. In contrast, Isaiah represents the Biblical view that the spirit’s role is to guide the prevailing forms power in order to realize the rule of God in the form of a just and compassionate society. The view of history from below, Buber says, views power as “authorized by God only to the extent to which man uses it in full awareness of his responsibility.”¹⁶⁷ In history seen from above, a divine granting of power is seen as irrevocable. In history seen from below, a divine grant of power depends on the exercising of human responsibility on behalf of justice and compassion.

The two conceptions of history also differ in the way they think about human suffering from the unfolding of human events. In history seen from above, those who make history are the “winners,” those who win battles and build cities. If they impose suffering on others in order to realize their success, then that suffering is also a part of God’s plan as it were. Seen from below, history is the struggle of humanity to realize God’s rule on earth, a struggle that repeatedly fails and results in the suffering of those who testify to God’s rule even in the face of danger, such as the prophets Elijah and Isaiah. Buber writes: “These experiences of suffering which thus come upon the prophet join together to form that image of the servant of the Lord, of his suffering and dying for

¹⁶⁶ Dan Avnon, *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 88-102.

¹⁶⁷ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 80.

the sake of God's purpose."¹⁶⁸ Suffering becomes the hallmark of the prophetic leader who testifies to God's rule but does not see it realized in the present time. Historical greatness is defined from below by the willingness to accept suffering for justice and compassion and not, as from above, by the ability to impose suffering on others.

Because the prophetic leaders and those who follow in this model do not achieve worldly power and success, their work is often accomplished "in the shadow,"¹⁶⁹ obscured by the "gentile" standards of what is considered important. Thus, Buber says, "historic destiny is the secret correlation inhering in the current moment."¹⁷⁰ Whereas the achievements of the so-called great historic actors are known in the moment, the truly meaningful human events remain unknown. Elsewhere, Buber describes the Biblical notion of history as "hidden": "...the whole history of the world, the hidden, real world history, is a dialogue between God and his creature; a dialogue in which man is a true, legitimate partner, who is entitled to and empowered to speak his own independent word out of his own being."¹⁷¹ Buber calls this history "hidden" because the dialogue between humanity and God is not visible when the everyday world is taken at face value and judged by the criteria of worldly power and success. This Biblical conception of history can be said to be "hidden" in another respect as well, namely that it is hidden from the view of the predominant ways that history is understood by the "the nations," whose view is usually manifested in cultural elites such as philosophers and historians and by political elites who invoke this conception of history as a guidepost to national success. As Avnon

¹⁶⁸ Martin Buber, *On the Bible* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 148.

¹⁶⁹ Buber, *On the Bible*, 150. Cf. Avnon, *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue*, 88-102 for a further discussion of Buber's use of Isaiah as a model for Biblical leadership in which the realization of the dialogue with God is accomplished in secret.

¹⁷⁰ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 95.

¹⁷¹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 16.

has shown, Buber's Biblical studies draw attention to the disciples of prophets as group of hidden teachers who maintain the alternative conception of history.¹⁷² These teachers preserve and transmit the authentic Biblical teaching of the dialogical life, the teaching that makes them the seeds for the genuine realization of the mission of "Israel" to teach this mission to the world.

Whether Buber saw himself as a genuine disciple of the prophets in this mode or more modestly as an interpreter and teacher of their ideas is a matter of speculation.¹⁷³ But Buber did clearly see himself as trying to re-orient both Jewish and human self-understanding in light of the teachings of Hebrew prophets. Buber's contrast of the Biblical/Jewish conception of history to that of the nations is an attempt to redefine the terms of what counts as "historical success." Buber's of these two conceptions of history is thus not grounded in theory but in the concrete experience of peoples. The problem with the conception of history common to the nations is that it immediately disqualifies the Jewish people's actual historical success: continuing the dialogue with God in ongoing messianic striving and patience. Buber, I take it, has adopted a common Jewish rhetorical trope. He is pointing to the fact that the nations who strive for power and empire, especially those who seek to oppress the Jewish people, ultimately collapse, while the Jewish people continue to survive. That this fact has not encouraged the nations, both ancient and contemporary, to rethink their conception of historical success shows, Buber might say, that they are held captive to their own false conception of

¹⁷² Dan Avnon, "*Limud* and *Limmudim*: The Guiding Words of Buber's Prophetic Faith" in *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 110ff.

¹⁷³ Dan Avnon, "*Limud* and *Limmudim*," 117. Buber briefly discusses the "social thinker" who is "not a prophet but a philosopher" and has a "teaching," in "The Demand of the Spirit and Historical Reality" in *Pointing the Way*. See my discussion in chapter 2.

historical success. Buber's project, however, both in his writings on the Bible and philosophy, are premised on the hope that his contemporaries among "the nations" – i.e. non-Jews, would be open to accepting the Biblical/Jewish view of history. Thus, his writings address both his Jewish and non-Jewish contemporaries to show how they may overcome the problematic view of history common to "the nations."

Buber posited that Jewish existence was misunderstood by gentiles, and also often by Jews themselves, because they thought about peoplehood in the terms of "the nations," i.e. the typical categories of Western thought, and not in Biblical terms. In a 1934 lecture, "The Jew in the World," Buber argues that the Jewish people cannot be categorized as either a "creed" or a "nation," despites attempts of both Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers in the West to define Jewish existence in one of those two categories.¹⁷⁴ The problem with the nation/creed schema, as Buber presents it, is that it places a wedge between so-called "history" on the one hand and "revelation" on the other. By history, Buber here means history as normally understood, from above, and refers only to the experience of a collective national group. Revelation, in the nation/creed schema, refers only to a sublime form of individual experience, but one that is completely outside the realm of social or communal action. Buber does not name names, but he is clearly targeting the stark choice between Zionism and liberal Judaism as forms of Jewish self-understanding. Zionism in its common articulations defines Israel a nation in which the collective identity and power of the people is essential to the continuity and flourishing of the people. Zionism embraces the idea that the Jews have been outside of "real" history and that they need to return to history through the development of a nation-state. In

¹⁷⁴ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 169

liberal Judaism, by contrast, most notably in classical articulations of Reform Judaism, which renounced any national identity for Judaism, Judaism is defined as a form of individual religious consciousness that while shared in community has no national or “historical” existence. This version of Reform Judaism embraces the freethinking that disconnects spiritual life from the fullness of concrete social life as a nation.

Buber argues that the nation/creed schema does not capture the reality of the Jewish people because “The community of Israel experiences history and revelation as one phenomenon, history as revelation and revelation as history.”¹⁷⁵ The separation of history and revelation reflects, in Buber’s view, thinking characteristic of the nations and not Biblical thinking. In Biblical thinking, revelation may be experienced by the individual but is addressed to the entire life of the nation. History, meaning “real” history as we saw above, is the ongoing dialogue between God and the people. Jewish attempts to understand Jewish life in terms of either nation or creed, such as Zionism or Liberal Judaism, fail to stay true, Buber believes, to the Biblical conception of peoplehood. It is the nations that should re-orient their thinking to Biblical categories, and not the Jews who should internalize gentile thinking.

Buber’s critique of the nation/creed schema serves as another example of how Buber’s dyadic contrast generates the triadic one. The nation/creed schema is at root one perspective that separates history from the spirit and nationality from religion and revelation. From within this structure, one can find human being in one or the other, but not both. Thus, the schema offers the false choice of heathen glorification of the material-historical or Gnostic resignation from it. The nation/creed schema thus parallels two other

¹⁷⁵ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 169.

false alternatives that play an important role in Buber's philosophical and religious writings. First, the nation/creed schema parallels the false alternative of collectivism and individualism that Buber says he seeks to overcome in "The Problem of the Human Being." For Buber, categories such as individual and collective are legitimate tools for analyzing human social life. The problem is that philosophers claim that one category or the other is the essence of human existence while ignoring the origins of both the individual and collective in dynamic and reciprocal relations. The case of the nation/creed schema is similar. Buber does not deny the possibility of individual religious experience of revelation, nor does he deny the collective experience of nations. What he rejects is the notion that revelation is individualistic *in its essence*, or that nationality is collectivist *in its essence*. To the contrary, Buber argues, revelation is fully realized within a national group whose existence is centered not on the nation's collective power, but on the creation of a genuine community. A genuine community is realized through the realization of each individual and each individual is realized through its participation in a community.

Likewise, the categories of nation and creed parallel the categories of "religion" and the "secular," a false alternative that Buber sought to overcome in his religious thought. This parallel is particularly relevant assuming Buber was targeting secular Zionism and religious liberal Judaism as paradigms of Jewish usage of the categories of nation and creed, respectively. Both secular Zionism and liberal Judaism based their conception of nationality and religion on the secular/religion divide, in which the public realm is secular and the private realm is religious. One possible problem with this association is that, as we saw above, Buber depicted history from above as having a

religious element in it, in that it views historical success as a form of revelation. But Buber also saw that history seen from above was the common view of “historians whose outlook is completely secular.”¹⁷⁶

As I suggested in chapter 2, Buber’s contrast of genuine community to individualism and collectivism is structured along the same lines as his contrast of heathen glorification¹⁷⁷ and Gnostic resignation. Buber’s use of this contrast helps to explain the common element shared by the more theological “history seen from above” and the more secular form of history that Buber associates with the nation/creed schema. Whether religious or secular, the heathen view of humanity and history glorifies power, success and reality as it is, and rejects a role for the spirit to transform current reality. Buber seems to have viewed “history from above” as an ancient and more theologically inflected ancestor of modern secular nationalism. Both glorify power and view history as the realization of power by kings, war-lords or the modern state, whatever the case may be. The Gnostic response is mere resignation to these forces and a search for spirituality outside the concrete embodied realm of created existence.

Buber’s rejection of the nation/creed schema is an extension of his interpretation of Judaism’s conception human self-realization as the spirit’s transformation of concrete embodied existence, exemplified by the Hasidic concept of the hallowing of the everyday. For Buber, the realization of the spirit in concrete reality inherently includes the social; it cannot, by definition, by an individualistic process. In Buber’s view, Judaism’s unique mission is to be a full “reality system,” meaning “that basic unity of a great community which relates all the fields of social, family, and personal life, of

¹⁷⁶ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 78.

¹⁷⁷ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 177.

politics, economics, and culture, to a single underlying principle which cannot be derived from any one of these fields, but which permeates it and gives meaning to them all.”¹⁷⁸ The dichotomy of nation and creed is one version of the Gnostic heresy that divorces revelation from real social life and hence from history. On the Biblical view, by contrast, divine revelation speaks to all these aspects of reality and permeates them, and seeks to transform them by bringing them into the service of God.

Buber’s claim that this conception of the nation is unique to the Jewish people must be further clarified. His claim seems to be that while other nations or groups may be able to maintain some kind of existence as nations or creeds, for the Jewish people to do so would be to reject their mission to attest to the deeper truth that real history is a dialogue between God and the human community. To be clear, Buber does not claim that the other (gentile) nations *cannot* overcome the categories of nation and creed, or individual and collective. Indeed, his interpretation of Jewish messianic hope is that all the nations of the world will form genuine communities patterned along the Biblical vision. Buber’s claim, rather, is that for the Jewish people to accept either category is to reject its fundamental mission and cease to lay claim to its historic covenant. Unlike the other nations, Buber believes, Israel cannot really exist without aligning itself to its mission. If it did otherwise, it would cease to be Israel.

For this reason, Buber’s claim of Israel’s uniqueness is not a conventional claim of superiority but a claim about the unique task Israel has been given by virtue of its mission. The notion that Israel’s election as a people gives it worldly power is to fall into the trap of thinking of history as “from above.” Elsewhere, Buber explains that

¹⁷⁸ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 180.

“Historically, Israel enjoys no precedence over the other (nations); superhistorically, it has precedence over them in this covenant...”¹⁷⁹ “Historically” here should be taken to mean history as seen “from above.” Israel’s covenant with God gives it no advantage in power or worldly success, only in that it encounters God more intimately, and has available a clear understanding of the task of bringing the kingship of God. But the nations of the world are not excluded from the ultimate completion of this task. Indeed, Israel’s mission according to Buber is to teach this idea to the nations so that they may all be united in a family of nations. Following prophetic ideas found in Amos and Isaiah, Buber believes that God deals with every nation, and that even the “false gods” of the nations are imperfect reflections of the one true God. When the nations of the world unite, “They ‘flow’ to the ‘mountain of the Lord’s house,’ but not away from what they are.”¹⁸⁰ In Buber’s adaptation of this Biblical vision, each nation takes part in real history by coming to know God as directly as Israel does without eradicating their unique identity.

This vision of the nations joining under Israel’s leadership is messianic, but this idea too requires clarification. As Buber repeatedly emphasizes, messianic visions in Jewish sources are meant to inspire action towards their realization, but they come with the implicit injunction not to proclaim their realization in current circumstances. A Jew is characterized, Buber says, by “the basic consciousness that God’s redeeming power is at

¹⁷⁹ Buber, *On the Bible*, 81. The term “superhistorically” raises the possibility that Buber is somewhat in tension with himself with his view of revelation of history, but his use of the term elsewhere suggests that what he means by superhistorical is not “outside of history” but “what is not merely historical that completes history, much as the spirit is “that which is not merely the body but completes the body. In this sense, revelation is “superhistorical;” God’s presence is not limited by everyday reality, but enters it to complete it. Cf. Buber, *On Judaism*, 199.

¹⁸⁰ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 208.

work everywhere and at all times, but that a state of redemption exists nowhere and never.¹⁸¹ This Jewish messianic patience is central to the Biblical understanding of history and its resistance to both gnostic resignation and heathen glorification. Biblical and Jewish teachings insist that God will redeem the world of creation,¹⁸² but at the same time, any proclamations of the perfection of the world or the realization of history *in the present* are tantamount to glorification of the present circumstances in some form, i.e., the arrival of the messiah, the realization of a perfect society, state or power arrangement.

Such premature declarations of messianic perfections can take several forms. They may be motivated by a well-meaning hope for spiritual perfection, as might be the case with some false messiahs. But proclamations of historical realization may serve more vicious intentions to secure power by asserting the divine sanction of tyranny or to commit mass slaughter in the name of social perfection. Either way, these examples are characteristic of “the nations” in understanding history as viewed from above in that they view history as the successes realized by these leaders in history. In contrast, the Bible sees real history as a string of failures of leaders, even leaders like Moses and David, to fully consummate the divine-human dialogue. The Jewish messianic consciousness is thus characterized, according to Buber, by striving for divine-human dialogue coupled with resistance to declaring its perfection in the present. Belief in the messiah serves to spur hope that the dialogue may be perfected: “This is what the Messianic belief means, the belief in the real leader, in the setting right the dialogue, in God’s disappointment being at an end.”¹⁸³ A Jew, according to Buber, strives to realize the dialogue while

¹⁸¹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 34.

¹⁸² Buber, *Israel and the World*, 27.

¹⁸³ Buber, *On the Bible*, 148.

continuing to affirm that God's disappointment has still not ended. For this reason, Buber thought it was essential to maintain the centrality of exile in Jewish thinking, as liberal Judaism and political Zionism both failed to appreciate. Zionism declared that the task of overcoming exile would be overcome at a specific historical moment, the founding of a state, whereas liberal Judaism denied the need for the task. For Buber, maintaining a sense of exile meant that the task of realizing the dialogue with the divine was not fully consummated.

So far, I have discussed Buber's arguments as he presents them to someone whose tendency is to hold the view of history as seen from above. For such a person, whether a Jew or a non-Jew, Buber, as we have seen, draws the contrast between two conceptions of history to allow them to see the Jewish people's uniqueness. When viewing history as from below, from the perspective of the Biblical/Jewish view, Buber argues, one can comprehend the standard of success set for the Jewish people by its covenantal relationship with God in the concrete embodied reality of its life as a people. Buber also offers an explanation for how the Jewish people actually deals with the past within its own spiritual life that undergirds the conception of history as seen from below. Buber's claim is that for the Jewish people, in its own dealings with the past, history is conditioned by memory. It is to this claim that I now turn.

III

As I have suggested before, one of the challenges of reading Buber is that he himself does not draw attention to the significance of his claims nor does draw attention to the relationship between claims he makes in different writings. It is left to interpreters

to draw connections between claims found in different writings and to explain their relationship. This is the case for Buber's claim that in the Bible and Judaism history is conditioned by memory. This is a claim that Buber makes briefly but clearly in two places, but he did not develop the claim further nor point us to two other brief but significant passages that discuss the role of memory in human consciousness. Taken together, these passages offer a consistent picture of Buber's claim that real history, in the sense of history as revelation, is conditioned memory. What these passages also indicate is how Buber's anthropological arguments tie together with his arguments about the spiritual teachings of the Bible and Judaism. My discussion of Buber's claims about memory and history will serve as another example of what I have been arguing in this dissertation, namely that Buber's philosophical arguments are an extension of his defense of ideas that he claims to be uniquely Biblical or Jewish.

My analysis focuses on two aspects of Buber's claim about memory. The first is that memory is embodied, and that history conditioned by memory is embodied, whereas history as it is commonly understood by the nations is abstract. When viewed through the faculty of memory, Buber claims, the past takes on an embodied and dialogical character, where the person in the present is involved in events of the past and shapes their understanding. Buber's second claim about memory is that memory is the exemplified characteristic of great writers, where Buber specifies Biblical writers and philosophical anthropologists. What these writers share is their capacity to use memory to engage the past as an embodied and dialogical reality. What Biblical writers do for Israel, good philosophers do for humanity: they link these respective groups to their origin in a dialogical encounter with the other, either human or divine.

In order to elucidate Buber's claim that real history is conditioned by memory, I will draw on Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's well-known discussion of history and memory in his book *Zakhor*.¹⁸⁴ Yerushalmi's central claim is that from post-Biblical times until modernity, Jewish civilization did not place much value on historical writing, but instead maintained a sense of the past through collective memory. As an academic historian, Yerushalmi seeks to show that the historical approach to the past is a distinctly modern one for Jews. Prior to modern era, Yerushalmi argues, Jews memorialized the past but did not seek to offer the kind comprehensive accounts of human events that are characteristic of historical studies. In a brief essay he wrote as part of a school syllabus from 1932 entitled "Why We Should Study Jewish Sources." Buber makes the similar claim that Jews have their "own characteristic history" for which "Jewish collective memory" is the "very origin,"¹⁸⁵ as opposed to the "universal awareness of history common to all nations," by which Buber, like Yerushalmi, means the national group's exercise of power to shape political, social, economic and military institutions. Both in Buber's analysis and Yerushalmi's account, the capacity to use power to make war is central to the conception of what Buber calls "universal history."¹⁸⁶

The contrasts that Buber and Yerushalmi draw are motivated by very different concerns, but recognizing this divergence helps point to the common elements in their

¹⁸⁴ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Memory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996).

¹⁸⁵ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 147

¹⁸⁶ Yerushalmi notes that throughout the Middle Ages, Jewish authors referred to gentile historical chronicles as "*sifrei milkhamot*," or "war books," which were banned by some religious authorities. The implication of this view is that the preoccupation with history is deeply un-Jewish. Cf. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 69. Yerushalmi also notes the extent to which Jewish historians of the 16th century offer apologies for their works which many Jews would view as frivolous because of this bias.

analysis. Buber's concern is that capitulating to gentile forms of historical thinking will erode the forms of Jewish memory that he believed were essential to the uniquely Jewish conception of history. Yerushalmi, interestingly enough, implicitly casts doubt on Buber's fear and expresses a concern that is almost the mirror image of Buber's. He contends that no matter how much progress historical study has made, perceptions of the Jewish past in the modern world are still shaped by collective memory. His advice to the professional historian is to recognize this reality and acknowledge the limitations historical research can have in shaping popular images of the past. At the same time, Yerushalmi's analysis both confirms Buber's underlying claim, namely that memory is characteristic of the way Jewish sources understand the way we look to the past, and provides an extensive analysis of both Jewish historical sources and classical Jewish sources that elucidate the difference and tension between history and memory.

In the essay, "Why We Should Study Jewish Sources," Buber's contrast of gentile history and Jewish history rooted in memory revolves around the question of how a people's looks to its past as a source for inspiration and guidance to its future. National survival, he maintains, does not require a nation to maintain constant awareness of events from their past. In times of peace and stability, the political, social and cultural life of the nation can flourish without consideration of the past. In this way of looking at the past, the events of the past remain "objective" in the sense that they are viewed as completed and distant from contemporary concerns. Indeed, in times of "security" a nation may look at its history as quaint or "out of tune with the times."¹⁸⁷ It is only when a nation is beset with uncertainty about its future or its survival – and here Buber seems to mean

¹⁸⁷ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 147.

catastrophic events and war - that it looks to its history in order to strengthen national resolve. Thus, the potency of history is itself dependent on historical circumstances and highly instrumental. Nations recall their past with passion only as the historical moment requires.

Buber contends that while the Jewish people often view history this way, in the fashion of “the nations,” they have the resources in their religious sources and practices for viewing the past in terms of memory. For Buber, the distinguishing feature of memory is that it can give meaning to past events. As Yerushalmi suggests that “If Herodotus is the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.”¹⁸⁸ Buber argues that while universal national history sees events as a “sequence of objective events,” Jewish memory consists of “a sequence of essential attitudes towards such events.”¹⁸⁹ Unlike the history of the nations, the Jewish national spirit is defined by a shared memory that is passed down from parent to child, from generation to generation. Buber says that this does not mean that the Jewish people’s memory consists of “any one particular past,” but rather “it means that one generation passed on to the next a memory which gained in scope – for new destiny and emotional life were constantly accruing to it...”¹⁹⁰ Jewish memory is not a fixed set of essential attitudes about past events but consists of an continually evolving sense of common past and common destiny that defines the Jewish nation. From the point of view of the nations, Jewish memory might look like an unhealthy obsession with the glory of a distant past, because for them the past is only invoked in times of crisis. But, Buber contends, the Jewish people’s entire

¹⁸⁸ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 8.

¹⁸⁹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 147

¹⁹⁰ Buber, *Israel and The World*, 146.

relationship with the past follows a different pattern. In Jewish memory, every generation contributes to their understanding of the past as the memory is passed down, which keeps the memory spiritually vital for the people.

The quintessential vehicle for the transmission of Jewish shared memory, Buber argues, is the Passover *Seder*, at which every Jewish parent passes on the memory of divine redemption to their children. The crucial element of the telling of the Passover story is that the people telling the story not only recount events of the past but actually participate in the story. Buber alludes to the statement found in the Passover *Haggadah*: “In every generation a person should see themselves as if he had left Egypt.”¹⁹¹ In this case, seeing oneself as if having left Egypt, does not mean that one imagines oneself as having been in the past but that the divine redemption of the past becomes palpable as a present experience.¹⁹² For Buber, Jewish collective consciousness is maintained not by recounting historical events as events of a finished past, but by sharing a memory that makes the meaning of the past, the “essential attitudes,” vital for the current generation. And this memory is preserved primarily in Jewish texts, such as the Passover *Haggadah*, and ritual enactments, such as the Passover *seder* itself.

I believe we should understand “How to Study Jewish Sources” as Buber’s statement as to how “real history” or “history seen from below” is concretely realized. This kind of history is conditioned by memory, meaning that its historical reality is rooted in its connection with memory. “History from above” is the official history of national powers, “history from below” is history that is passed down concretely from

¹⁹¹ *Passover Haggadah*.

¹⁹² As I will discuss shortly, Buber insists that the act of memory is not an act of the imagination. Buber, *On the Bible*, 138

generation to generation, in which each generation participates in shaping the community's understanding of the past. What makes history actual for Buber is its connection to the concrete historical memory passed down from one generation to the next.

Without being rooted in memory, history is abstract and does not have a genuine hold on concrete reality. The contrast between these two kinds of history thus follows Buber's contrast between the concrete and embodied and the abstract and disembodied I discussed in chapter 2. Intergenerational memory gives history an embodied quality, as opposed to the abstract disembodied quality of objective history. Memory is passed from parents to children, not just orally but "in their bones." Buber explains that memory was realized in an "organic" way: "This expanding memory was more than a spiritual motif; it was a power which sustained, fed and quickened Jewish existence itself. I might even say that these memories realized themselves biologically, for in their strength the Jewish substance was renewed."¹⁹³ Just as a person is connected in a biological way to their ancestors, they can be connected in a bodily way to events of the past through memory. Recalled as objective history, past events have a merely instrumental power. In memory, past events have a meaning given by the fullness of my connection to that past, mediated by the direct interpersonal connection between generations.

Buber makes a similar claim about memory being an embodied faculty in a passage in *I and Thou* in which. This passage appears in a section of *I and Thou* in which he is responding to the contemporary sociological and anthropological theories of how so-called primitive cultures develop concepts for a spiritual force that pervades nature,

¹⁹³ Buber, *Israel and the World*, p. 146.

Durkheim's discussion of *mana* being one prominent example.¹⁹⁴ Buber contends that the standard theories do not do justice the experience of early humanity by interpreting concepts such as *mana* as naming "a supra-sensible or supernatural force." On the contrary, Buber argues, the early human experiences all being as sensible: "The appearances to which he attributes a 'mystical potency' are all the elemental relational processes – that is, all the processes about which he thinks at all because they stimulate his body and leave an impression of such stimulation in him."¹⁹⁵ Early human beings, prior to the development of advanced technological culture, experience the world almost exclusively in sensible terms without the use of concepts that would divide the world into "sensible" and "supersensible."¹⁹⁶ A human being's bodily, sensible encounters with other beings are all treated in similar fashion, which is why even the dead are treated as present and inanimate objects are treated as a personal presence.

In Buber's account, the development of technology and concepts in early human culture involves a distancing from the sensible potency of bodily encounter. In the original encounters, other beings are treated as unique and *sui generis*, but as human

¹⁹⁴ See Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 190-206.

¹⁹⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 71.

¹⁹⁶ I do not take Buber to be claiming that early human beings experience the world unmediated by concepts. While he does understand the original encounter with the You as unmediated, he also views the development of human concepts, technology and civilization as a continuum away from the original I-You relation, with modern humanity more dangerously far than at any time in human history. Immediately prior to the passage I am discussing, Buber discusses the concrete nature "primitive" language showing how early language retains the relational character of human experience, but even this suggests that already experience is mediated by concepts. That is why I think he thinks of the child as "better evidence" of the original I-You relation, namely because early human civilization have developed some concepts and technology and we do not have evidence of pre-cultural humanity that would allow us to see the development of concepts and the fall away from the original encounter with being, a development, Buber believes, visible in the child.

beings develop tools, driven by the impulse for survival, they begin to look for the repeatable aspects of experience. Buber suggests that the faculty of memory plays a significant role in the transition from an original understanding of relationality to the technological conception of causality:

The causality of (the primitive person's) world is not a continuum; it is a force that flashes, strikes, and is effective ever again like lightning, a volcanic motion without continuity....Memory, educating itself, constructs a series of the major relational events and the elementary upheavals. What is most important for the drive for knowledge, namely, that which is active and effective, stands out most clearly and gains independence, while the less important, that which is not shared, the changeful You of the experiences, recedes, remains isolated in man's memory, gradually becomes an object and even more gradually gets arranged in groups and species.¹⁹⁷

Human memory, according to Buber, organizes the original dynamic encounter between a person and other beings into relational events. From these memories, a person can focus on those repeatable, replicable aspects of the events that are essential for human survival and ignore those parts of the elementary experience that are unique to the event, "the changeful You," that do not enhance survival. From the original flux of events, the memory creates regularities from events and objects from beings. Yet, even as human beings focus their minds on that which they can use and produce, the memory retains the trace of the original encounter with other beings prior to their objectification.

¹⁹⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 72.

The movement from encounter to objects also creates what we understand as a human subject, the “I” of both I-You and I-It relations. Buber continues: “But the third element, gruesomely detached and at times spookier than the dead and the moon, becomes more and more inexorably clear until finally the other partner that always remains the same emerges: ‘I’.”¹⁹⁸ The original movement of the human being to manipulate and use beings as objects is a not a movement of a “subject,” but of the human body: “What wants to propagate itself is not the I but the body that does not know any I. Not the I but the body want to make things, tools, toys, wants to be ‘inventive’.”¹⁹⁹ In an original encounter, Buber explains, the body does not know itself as an I, but the body does contain the drive for self-preservation that generates the consciousness of self that constitutes subjectivity. After passing from the primal flux of original encounter, the human being becomes an I who can be aware of relating to others as either and It or a You.

In Buber’s account of the so-called primitive human being, the faculty of memory is what preserves the original sensible relational encounter with all external objects. These original relations can of course be forgotten, as Buber explains is the “sublime melancholy of our lot” to forget, or lose sight, of the dialogical encounter.²⁰⁰ But by enhancing our attentiveness to the faculty of memory would allow human beings to recapture the original dialogical relation with being. As I will show in greater detail below, Buber’s aspiration for philosophical anthropology is to guide humanity in this recovery of dialogue. But for now, I only want to note the important parallel between

¹⁹⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 72-3.

¹⁹⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 73.

²⁰⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 68.

Buber's claims about Jewish memory in "Why We Should Study Jewish Sources" and his claims about anthropological memory in *I and Thou*. In both discussions, Buber claims that memory is the repository of the embodied, dialogical and meaningful origin, in one case of Israel and in the other case human existence. The importance of memory is that it keeps us rooted in our (Jewish or human) genuine reality but also allows us to shape that reality ourselves and contribute to its meaning. Just as Jews contribute to the meaning of the Exodus through their own understanding of the experience, so a human being contributes to the meaning of a relationship in a genuine encounter. To lose touch with memory is to view reality through the lens of the abstractions that are the product of I-It relations, primarily the abstractions of utility and power that are the hallmark of human tool making and also the conception of history common to the nations.

What we see by comparing these passages is that while Buber views the preservation of memory as a uniquely Jewish task, he also views it as a task that has value for all humanity. Again, Buber's claims about what is uniquely Jewish do not exclude the rest of humanity. Jewish sources and culture are unique bearers of clearly articulated teachings and practices in which history is conditioned by memory. But the messianic hope intertwined with these teachings is that all human beings would one day experience the direct encounter with God that Israel experienced. The path to this encounter, of course, runs through dialogical encounter with all being. Using memory to recover this original dialogical encounter and to experience God through that encounter is a possibility for all human beings at all times without the benefit of Jewish texts and practices. Buber's goal in *I and Thou* seems to have been to articulate what it would take

for any person to recover this original encounter. Buber's philosophical anthropology, as I will explain below, is a different approach to that same goal.

Whether Jewish or anthropological, the preservation of memory can be enacted by anyone, but it is significantly aided, in Buber's view, by great writers who are endowed with the capacity to bring connect with memory and bring its fruits to life for others. In the case of Jewish memory, both Buber and Yerushalmi point to the Bible as the source for the distinctive Jewish approach to the past. It is significant that despite his reliance on a somewhat sharp dichotomy between history and memory, Yerushalmi views the Bible as being the source of distinctively Jewish memory but also as being historical in a way post-Biblical literature is not because the Bible's concerns reflect the whole of social and political life, including international politics. Why was post-Biblical literature memorial and not historical? In Yerushalmi's assessment, because the destruction of Jewish sovereignty was interpreted as a punishment for Israel's sins, the classical rabbinic sages were not interested in chronicling historical events of their time because they "already knew of history what they needed to know,"²⁰¹ namely that God is its author and planner. With Israel in exile, contemporary historical events were of little significance to this Jewish mind-set because the template of Jewish history was already established by the Biblical framework. Thus, according to Yerushalmi, modern Jews who embraced secular history to understand the past represent a radical departure from pre-modern forms of Jewish memory.

Buber sees in Jewish memory practices not as a departure from Biblical history but a continuation of Biblical history's being conditioned by memory. Here again, Buber

²⁰¹ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 21

and Yerushalmi agree on what they identify as the memorial aspects of Biblical literature, namely connecting Israel with God's redemptive power. Yerushalmi writes: "...ancient Israel knows what God is from what he has done in history. And if that is so, then memory has become crucial to its faith and, ultimately, to its very existence."²⁰² Memory, according to Yerushalmi, assures that future generations will look at history as series of events in which God acts on behalf of the people Israel, as opposed to human events that unfold independently of divine providence. In Buber's language, God's redemption is an expression of God's presence to Israel and hence part of the ongoing dialogue between God and Israel. Israel's self-conscious acts of memory form a communal response to past acts of divine love and redemption.

Here, the differences between Yerushalmi and Buber's analysis help to clarify Buber's argument. Buber's call for Jews to embrace Jewish memory is not a call to return to the ahistorical form of memory of the post-Biblical period that Yerushalmi discusses but a call to the Biblical form of history grounded in memory that seems to fall outside of Yerushalmi's structure. Recall Buber's dual critique of liberal Judaism and Zionism. Buber's call to embrace memory is another example of resisting *both* the radical de-historicization of Judaism *and* the Zionist tendency to reject the significance of the textual and oral sources of Jewish memory and Jewish religious consciousness in favor of Jewish political power. Buber shared with other Zionists the idea that the Jewish people should "return to history," but the history that Buber wished to return to was the Biblical conception of history as a dialogue between God and humanity. "Why cling to a community based on memory when it is possible to live as a nation among other

²⁰² Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 9.

nations!” Buber imagines his Zionist contemporaries saying.²⁰³ In other words, why not construct Jewish history the way all nations do, as a record of struggles for national greatness and power, as in “history from above.” If Buber looked to the *seder*, these Zionists were the ones who looked to the Maccabees, heroes who fought for national sovereignty, faithful to national sovereignty as much as to God, if not more so. Buber thought this understanding of history would only lead Zionism to failure. Instead, the project of reclaiming the land must recognize, Buber believed, that Jewish history is grounded in memory, whether in the land and in exile.

The Zionism Buber opposed, the one characterized by the idea of being like the other nations, also offered a version of a return to the Bible, largely predicated on the return of the people to living in a sovereign state in its land under Jewish rule with Jewish leaders and heroes. Again, this is what Buber would call history from above, or what “the nations” commonly call history. For Buber, the return to the Bible means the return to history conditioned by memory. He explains how this claim related to Biblical narrative in his essay “Biblical Leadership.” There, Buber claims that the person-to-person transmission of memory characteristic of the Passover Seder is also characteristic of the way Biblical narrative came to be formed. The “historicity” of Biblical events, he argues, does not mean “that the Bible depicts men and women and events as they were in actual history; rather...its descriptions and narratives are the organic, legitimate ways of giving an account of what existed and what happened. I have nothing against calling these narratives myths and sagas, so long as we remember that myths and sagas are essentially

²⁰³ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 147.

memories which are actually conveyed from person to person.”²⁰⁴ For Buber, the historical truth of Biblical narrative comes from its being derived not from human imagination, which would suggest the fabrication of events or characters, but from the process he describes in “Why We Should Study Jewish Sources,” namely that memory of past events is shaped by “essential attitudes” of each generation that remembers. Biblical narrative reflects the meaning attached to events by successive generations from the time of the events themselves before being recorded in the text.

Buber explains this understanding of Biblical authorship by using the example of the Exodus:

It is not that people to whom something like the exodus from Egypt has happened subsequently improvise events, allowing their fancy to add elements they do not remember and to embroider on what happened; what happened continues to function, the event itself is still active and at work in their souls, but these souls, this community soul, is so made that its memory is formative, myth-creating, and the task before the Biblical writers is then to work on the product of this memory.²⁰⁵

In Buber’s account, memory is the organic product of people responding to real situations but expressing their understanding of events in terms of essential attitudes and the deeper meaning. These products of memory may not be historically accurate by the standards of modern historical science, but they are genuine recollections as opposed to pious falsehoods or products of the imagination. Buber is emphatic that by memory he does not mean products of the imagination or fantasy.²⁰⁶ The products of memory have historical facticity in being genuine responses to actual events. Moreover, as we have seen from Buber’s other writing, the memory core preserves the concrete dialogical origin of the

²⁰⁴ Buber, *On the Bible*, 137.

²⁰⁵ Buber, *On the Bible*, 138.

²⁰⁶ Buber, *On the Bible*, 138.

moment, in which the human being is open to genuine dialogue with God and with other beings.

The role of memory in returning us to the original dialogical situation is the place where Buber's Jewish thought meets his philosophical anthropology. Buber associates memory with the distinctive work of both the Biblical writers and of a philosophical anthropologist. In two passages, Buber compares both to great writers in the way they convey the products of their memory. In discussing Biblical writers, Buber writes that

The great narrator allows the events to drop into him as they happen, careless, trusting, with faith. And memory does its part: what has thus been dropped into it, it molds organically, unarbitrarily, unfancifully into a valid account and narrative; a whole on which admittedly a great deal of conscious work has then to be done, but the distinguishing mark was put upon it by the unarbitrarily shaping memory.²⁰⁷

Here, the Biblical writer spontaneously responds to the memory of events in the memory with out excessive artifice. The writer's artistic power is a tribute to the extent to which s/he finds meaning in the events that unfold, but not due, Buber would claim, to the power of their imagination.

Significantly for my argument, Buber also compares philosophical anthropologists to great writers in their use of memory. The task of philosophical anthropology is to recover the "wholeness of the human being" for humanity by pointing to dialogical relationality as the underlying ontological reality of all human life.²⁰⁸ In

²⁰⁷ Buber, *On the Bible*, 138.

²⁰⁸ Leora Batnitzky, "Renewing the Jewish Past: Buber on History and Truth," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 10 no. 4 (2003), 342-4.

“The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber suggests that the philosophical anthropologist can recover the wholeness of the human being by examining human phenomenon from within the human memory. Just as he claimed in the passage from *I and Thou* I explored above, Buber argues that memory preserves the wholeness of human events that is lost when they become analyzed as part of a scientific study. Instead of categorizing human phenomena as analyzable units of experience or information in the way other researchers would, the philosophical anthropologist deals with human events, Buber says, “like great writers,” who deal with human events “in a natural and uninhibited way, and leave the harvest to the hour of harvest.”²⁰⁹ For Buber, the philosophical anthropologist considers human phenomena as they are preserved in human memory, because in memory events retain their wholeness as concrete occurrences that take place in the complex web of the entirety of a human life, either my own or that of another.

Buber’s description of both Biblical poetic/narrative writers and philosophical anthropologists as “great writers” point to the underlying connection between the aim of his Jewish writings and his critique of Western Philosophy in “The Problem of the Human Being.” Buber’s claim that “real history” is conditioned by memory parallels Buber’s critique of the social sciences for their emphasis on the collective side of human existence at the expense of the individual and ultimately the inter-personal and dialogical. The flaw of social scientists, as I discussed in chapter 2, is the same as view history “as from above” - looking at the structure of society from the standpoint of prevailing power arrangements and institutional structures. It may not be the intention of the historian or social scientist to support the maintenance of such structures, but their approach can “fall

²⁰⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 125.

into other hands” as Buber saw the rise of Gnostic thinking in Weimar Germany giving some form of support to Nazi anti-Semitism. The task of the philosophical anthropologist, like that of the great writer of Biblical and Jewish religious narrative, is to constantly remind humanity of the essential role of the memory in shaping human community by passing on communal experience of God, or the Eternal or the Absolute, from generation to generation, person to person in embodied encounter. This is what Buber means by saying that philosophical anthropology can provide the social sciences with a secure foundation; philosophical anthropology can not only point to the limits of the social sciences but point to its true calling in guiding human spiritual renewal.

Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I argued that Buber builds his philosophical anthropology on Kant’s claim that the intuitions of time and space are rooted in human sensibility. Philosophical anthropology represents Buber’s philosophical realization of this insight. The realm of time and space not only includes natural and fabricated objects, but the structures of societies and the historical past of each human group and humanity as a whole. Philosophical anthropology, like Biblical writing, calls humanity to its original embodied dialogical encounter with all of existence and to the memory underlying all human communities, what Buber calls the “between” or the “interhuman.” The historical and social sciences may overlook the between and the role of human memory, but the between is in actuality, Buber contends, the condition for the existence of the entities

known as “history” and “society.” History and society are actually abstractions of the concrete embodied dialogical reality of the between.

To recover the wholeness of the human being, humanity, lead by writers such as poets and philosophers alike, must recover the original, direct, sensible and embodied encounter with being that Buber believed produces the everyday social human experience in “society” and “history,” the reality that is within by time and space. In this task, Buber explains, the philosophical anthropologist must adopt a mode of inquiry that differs from typical scientific disciplines. The philosopher herself engages in the inquiry in a way that scientific researchers do not.²¹⁰ It is worth recalling in this context that in Buber’s understanding of I-It and I-You relationships, the meaning of being an “I” is different in each relationship. The I of the I-It relation is concerned only with things as objects for use, whereas the I of the I-You relation remains open to the full possibility of each being it encounters. Likewise, the philosophical anthropologist adopts a different orientation than the practitioners of scientific disciplines in order to appreciate the relational character of human life.

Just as the subject of an I-You relationship must be fully engaged with their entire selfhood in the relationship, so too must the philosophical anthropologist make herself part of the philosophical inquiry.²¹¹ The philosophical anthropologist, says Buber,

can know the *wholeness* of the person and through it the wholeness of *humanity* only when he does not leave his *subjectivity* out and does not

²¹⁰ Buber defers to a strong idea of scientific objectivity, perhaps for the sake of argument. I think that Buber ultimately does not think that scientists should maintain personal distance but rather should do so in a kind of temporary way that allows them to remember their own humanity and, in the case of social scientists, the humanity of those they study.

²¹¹ Cf. Buber, *I and Thou*, 60-61.

remain an untouched observer. He must enter, completely and in reality, into the act of self-reflection, in order to become aware of human wholeness. In other words, he must carry out this act of entry into that unique dimension as an act of his *life*, without any prepared philosophical security; that is, he must expose himself to all that can meet you when you are really living.²¹²

Students of humanity in the other disciplines rely on their ability to separate themselves from the phenomena they examine, even when they engage in self-observation. This distancing allows the social scientist to maintain her objectivity, but also precludes the possibility of a direct and open relationship with the whole concrete embodied life of humanity. Just as the other disciplines involve stripping the human being of its humanity, the researcher herself is stripped of her embodied humanity by disconnecting herself from the humanity she studies. The loss of humanity for the researcher involved in this form of inquiry may be temporary and reparable, but it is a real loss of one's full and embodied humanity. The philosophical anthropologist, however, does not herself from the human phenomena that is the subject of her inquiry. Like the Biblical writer, her account is rooted in an embodied encounter within human life and other human beings who narrate their recollection of significant moments of their existence.

The unique task of philosophical anthropology, as Buber explains, is to bring human beings back to recognize how their world of differentiated objects, the I-It, originates in the primal relational encounter through by writing in a way in which she is fully engaged in the concrete embodied reality of existence. This is what Buber means

²¹² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 124.

when he says that the philosophical anthropologist “has nothing else in his mind but just to live what is to be lived, he is there with his whole being, undivided, and for that reason there grows in his thought and recollection the knowledge of human wholeness.”²¹³ By use of the memory, the philosophical anthropologist recalls the flux of human events and human life without the systematic imposition of scientific categories that divide human experience into isolated realms (biological, historical, psychological etc.). The use of these categories in the sciences, Buber believes, that strips human beings of their humanity. The philosopher can restore humanity in its wholeness by offering an account of human life that recalls the original bodily encounters with being. In philosophical anthropology, the philosopher preserves the truth of experience not through the objectifying and abstracting methods of science but through the embodied recollection of memory.

It is worth recalling again, that Buber’s lectures on philosophical anthropology take place both at the time of his arrival in Palestine and his taking a chair in a university. Buber’s lectures, on one level, address the legacy of Judaism’s teachings for the disciplinary structure of the modern university. Like his critique of Plato, as I discussed in chapter 2, Buber’s critique of Western philosophy is aimed at delineating an essential role for Hebrew ideas within the Hebrew University. Buber’s particular targets are the disciplines of the social sciences and history, which he likely assumed would play a role in addressing the social, political and economic challenges of the emerging society, both Jewish and Arab, in Palestine. For the Zionist enterprise to be realized, Buber believed, it must not rely on a conception of history as according to the nations, but attend to the role

²¹³ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 126.

of memory in the formation of a genuine community that is realized in just and compassionate social relations. Buber's lectures may be taken as an effort to see that this insight would be internalized within the cultural sphere of the university that was a product of the Zionist vision that Buber endorsed.

In addressing the legacy of Western philosophical conceptions of humanity in the social sciences, Buber is arguing in these lectures that both the Zionist project and humanists in general should a conception of history he finds in the Bible. History in the Hebrew Bible is self-consciously rooted in memory, and in fact commands practices of memory to maintain an organic connection to the embodied roots of past events, both through relationships with ancestors and God's acts of redemption which take place within the realm of concrete bodily life. In looking to the past through memory, the contemporary generation seeks to realize the holy and eternal within the mundane and everyday through the realization of a genuine community. In attempting to realize this prophetic vision of this community, the Biblical conception of history not only looks to the past but also to the future when its vision of a genuine community is realized. The hope for an (as yet) unrealized future redemption of humanity is what Buber considers to be a genuine Jewish messianism.

Chapter 5: Exile and Embodiment²¹⁴

As I have been arguing in this dissertation, Buber's philosophical arguments and his interpretation of the Western philosophical tradition are shaped by his Jewish polemics, particularly his contrast of Judaism with what he called Gnostic and heathen thinking. In the last chapter, I showed how Buber's philosophy of history and his critique of Hegel were part of his Zionist project of recovering a distinctly Jewish way of understanding the past and its relationship to the future. In this chapter, I continue to draw the connection between Buber's Zionism and his philosophical anthropology by discussing the concept of exile both in his Jewish polemical writings and his critique of the philosophical anthropology of Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler in the second section of "The Problem of the Human Being." Buber views these thinkers as representative of the Gnostic tendency in Western thought in their capitulation to modern conditions of alienation.²¹⁵

In the first section of this essay, I discuss Buber's criticisms of the concept of exile found in both modern liberal Judaism and political Zionism. I show how Buber

²¹⁴ Portions of this chapter were presented as "Embodied Dialogue in Buber's Philosophical Anthropology" (conference paper presented at Dialogue in the 21st Century: A Martin Buber Memorial Conference, Manhattan College, New York, April 2015).

²¹⁵ In my reading of Buber I associate the issue of alienation in his reading of Heidegger and Scheler with the theme of exile in his Jewish writings. Laurence Silberstein has suggested reading Buber's philosophy of dialogue as a response to the problem of alienation in modern society: "A careful reading of Buber reveals his ongoing concern for the meaningless, fragmented quality of life in the modern world. His books and lectures reflect his concern for the modern person's estrangement from nature, from other persons, from God, and from his or her own essential being." Laurence J. Silberstein, *Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought: Alienation and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 18.

associates these two modern Jewish ideologies with Gnostic and heathen thinking respectively as part of his argument that they represent Jewish adaptations of characteristically Western categories of thought. For Buber, the genuinely Jewish conception of exile retains hope for the realization of perfection within the material world of community while at the same time resisting premature claims to the overcoming of exile. In the second section, I will show that Buber's critique of Heidegger and Scheler as neo-Gnostic thinkers in "The Problem of the Human Being" shares the same structure as his criticism of liberal Judaism because they share Gnostic thinking's resignation to the exilic condition of humanity within material social conditions. This analysis shows how Buber's philosophical anthropology part of his project of Hebrew Humanism, which marshals Jewish ideas to inspire Jewish renewal for the sake of humanity. Buber's writings on Judaism argue that Zionism should be a movement for universal human renewal. His philosophical writings, I conclude, cannot be fully understood apart from this aspect of his Zionist aspirations. Both sets of writings serve his larger aim of presenting a humanistic social philosophy rooted in the teachings of the Jewish tradition as he interpreted them.

I

To begin my discussion of exile in Buber's thought, I return to a passage from his 1918 lecture "The Holy Way," that I discussed in chapter one. Here, Buber argues that after going into exile:

The (Jewish) people were forced to realize that in fact not only they alone but also the *shekhina*, the divine Presence dwelling within the human element, had gone

into exile. For the *shekhina* is at home only where there dwells a potent will for a covenant with God and an equally potent striving for realization of such a covenant, only where man endeavors to live within the sight of the unconditional. When the covenant is relaxed, when the striving slackens and man loses sight of the unconditional, the *shekhina* is in exile.²¹⁶

In this passage, Buber offers a distinctly universalistic interpretation of Jewish exile. The *shekhina* is what dwells “within the human element” and Israel’s exile is a paradigm for the possibility of exile and return that inheres in all divine-human relationships. Buber’s transformation of the concept of exile is characteristic of his Hebrew Humanism, his project of bringing the classic teachings of the Jewish tradition to bear on the contemporary spiritual condition of the Jewish people and of humanity. As Arnold Eisen has noted, Buber, like other spiritual Zionists sought to “universalize” the concept of exile because the Zionist aspiration of a Jewish return to the homeland could not be spiritually or morally justified if it did not serve humanity.²¹⁷ In Buber’s case, the task of Zionism is for the Jewish people to renew the Biblical aspiration to realize the “kingship of God” through a in the form of genuine community in which every individual can realize their whole personhood. This community, while situated, ideally at least, in the land, is to serve as a model of such a community for all of humanity. And just as Jewish homecoming models a universal human aspiration, so too Jewish exile, or more precisely for Buber, the Jewish understanding of exile, serves as a model for all people as to how to contend with exile and alienation as a spiritual and social condition.

²¹⁶ Martin Buber, *On Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 128-9.

²¹⁷ Arnold Eisen, *Galut*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 88.

Buber's writings on dialogue represent his attempt to articulate these Jewish teachings in a philosophical idiom²¹⁸ rather than through an interpretation of classical Jewish sources. I-You relationships are the kind of the relationships that create and enact a genuine community, as opposed to I-It relationships in which people are merely measured and categorized for their usefulness for social, economic or political purposes. As Paul Mendes-Flohr has argued, Buber develops the philosophical concept of "the interhuman," which he also called "the between," to identify the *a priori* conditions for genuine community.²¹⁹ The creation of such a community overcomes alienation and exile as a spiritual and social condition that can be experienced by all human beings. Buber alludes to the Jewish provenance of this idea in the "Holy Way":

Judaism therefore is not concerned with a God who lives in the far beyond, for its God is content to reside in the realm between one earthly being and the other, as if they were cherubim on the Holy Ark; nor is it concerned with a God who dwells in things, for it is not in the being of things that He abides but only in their perfection.²²⁰

As discussed in chapter one, this passage suggests that Buber's later development of this idea of "between" or "interhuman" his philosophical anthropology grows out of his interpretation of classical Jewish teachings on the *shekhina*, the dwelling presence of God. Buber's central philosophical claim is that even when we do not see it or realize it, the between is *already there*, waiting for human beings to make its reality apparent through action. Buber's rendering of Jewish teachings about the divine presence is the same, as is illustrated in the Hasidic teaching of the Kotzker to which he attached great

²¹⁸ While the style of *I and Thou* is certainly more evocative and poetic than a typical work of philosophy, it is nonetheless a book that makes philosophical claims about the nature of humanity and the divine.

²¹⁹ Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 40.

²²⁰ Buber, *On Judaism*, 111

importance: ““Where is the dwelling of God?...God dwells wherever man lets (God) in.””²²¹ On Buber’s interpretation, the divine presence is available to those whose actions within the world make it possible for the divine to dwell “between one earthly being and the other.”

To be clear, there is more to Buber’s humanistic interpretation of exile than the Jewish people serving as a model for non-Jews. More significantly, Buber’s humanism defines the standards for success of the Zionist project from within. For Buber, as Eisen notes, the collective Jewish return to the land of Israel does not in and of itself end all aspects of exile.²²² Entering the land is essential in allowing the Jewish people to reconnect to concrete material work, but the complete fulfillment of this physical return comes in realizing a genuine community as defined by his dialogical philosophy. Thus, while Buber’s discussions of exile in his Jewish writings are directed at rival versions of Judaism or Zionism, they share the same analysis of the problem of human spiritual realization as his writings on philosophical anthropology. This is an methodological important point for this essay, as I aim to show that his writings on Judaism can inform our understanding of his philosophical project and vice versa.

To understand the connection between Buber’s Jewish writings and his philosophical writings, I draw attention to the way he contrasts Judaism to other ancient ideas within Western thought. Buber presents these contrasts in a triadic form, where Judaism stands against Gnosticism on the one hand and heathen religion on the other. What is at stake for Buber in this contrast is the way these different religious ideas deal

²²¹ Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), 167-8.

²²² Eisen, *Galut*, 86.

with the relationship between the spiritual and the material. Buber introduces this tripartite structure in “The Holy Way,” where he argues that Judaism’s conception of community stands in contrast to an “Occidental dualism” that posits an irreparable breach between matter and spirit. In contrast, Judaism, on Buber’s reading, teaches that the spirit can transform concrete material existence. In later lectures, Buber associates Gnostic thinking with the idea that spiritual realization requires a denial of material life and “heathen” thinking with the idea that material things have already achieved perfection and can be objects of worship. Whereas Judaism seeks to hallow the material through transformative action, Gnosticism denies the spiritual value of the material and heathenism glorifies the material.

As in “The Holy Way,” Buber sometimes used this tripartite structure of Jewish/Gnostic/heathen without referring to it as such. This is the case in “The Jew in the World,” a lecture from 1934 where Buber discusses his view of exile. Buber’s main objective in this lecture is to argue that two modern Jewish ways of rethinking Jewish experience of exile, that of liberal or Reform Judaism and that of mainstream political Zionism, are actually a problematic departure from what he takes to be the genuinely Jewish understanding of exile. As I will explain, Buber’s analysis of the two Jewish views he opposes correspond to the schema he used to contrast Gnostic and heathen ways of thinking to Judaism.

The version of Zionism Buber attacks in “The Jew in World” is what we may call “secular political Zionism”²²³ that follows in the tradition of Theodor Herzl. Although

²²³ This term is meant to distinguish Herzl and his ideological successors from cultural or spiritual Zionists in the tradition of Ahad Ha’am and religious Zionists, who embraced aims of the Zionist program within an orthodox religious framework.

Buber worked closely with Herzl and was active in promoting Jewish settlement in Palestine, he came to distinguish his Zionism from that represented by Herzl and his successors. In some of its more vehement articulations, secular political Zionists promoted the view that accepting the condition of exile was inherently degrading and that a return to national sovereignty in their homeland was the sine qua non of a viable Jewish existence in modern conditions.²²⁴ To a large degree, this aspect of Zionism was tied to a rejection of Jewish religious orthodoxy, which, according to this view, promoted acceptance of exile as a punishment from God. While mainstream Zionism sought to provide physical security to Jews through political activity, Buber drew on what he took to be the prophetic view that for Israel, genuine security could only come through its spiritual realization of the kingship of God in genuine community.

In “The Jew in the World,” Buber argues that both secular political Zionism and religious liberalism, exemplified by Reform Judaism, represent a set of false choice modern Jews face between identifying themselves as either a “nation” or as a “religion,” as if the two are mutually exclusive. The temptation facing modern Jews, as Buber sees it, is that in order to “fit in” in modern social and political life they must abandon Judaism’s unique understanding of community. The reason these categories are so appealing to the Jewish people is a by-product of the people’s exilic condition. What modern Jews are seeking, Buber claims, in defining themselves as either nation or religion is a sense of “security,” both spiritual and physical. The Jews who define Judaism as a religion seek the security of national citizenship in the Western nation-states

²²⁴ Jacob Klatzkin offers perhaps the clearest presentation of this view. See Arthur Hertzberg ed., *The Zionist Idea* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 322-325.

in which they reside. Jews who define Judaism as a nation like all other nations hope to build a nation state that will provide for the people's collective security. In both cases, these forms of security are mirrored by the clarity of identity that Jews achieve in the eyes of the nations and in their own eyes. Recall Buber's claim from *The Problem of the Human Being* that all people seek to create a "world-image" for themselves that explains their place both in society and in the cosmos. In "The Jew in the World," Buber indicates that the desire for security is not only dealt with on an individual human level but on collective level as well. Collective human entities, national or religious communities, seek to define themselves and their place in the world through some cosmic image of the world.²²⁵ By accepting the categories of either religion or nation, modern Jews define their place both in the cosmos and in society.

Buber's argument in "The Jew in the World" is that the choice between religion and nation is a false choice rooted in the rejection of Judaism's distinctive teachings of human social life. In the Bible and later Jewish sources, he claims, there is no distinction between religion on the one hand and nation on the other. Rather, the world is divided into peoples, meaning national groups that are governed together and share all aspects of spiritual life, including common values, language and religious rites. The modern categories of "religion" as primarily a matter of individual conscience and "nation" as identifying a collective entity based on common language, culture and territory are both abstractions from what Buber claims is the more basic reality of peoplehood. The peoplehood framework does not assume the problematic distinction between religion and

²²⁵ Martin Buber, *Israel and the World*, 215.

nationality that in Buber's estimation divides the soul of modern Western humanity, the Jewish people in particular.

The issue of self-definition is crucial to modern Jews, Buber acknowledges, because each answer, nation and religion, offers a way for Jews to overcome the indignities of exile by adopting one of these categories and the organizational program each one suggests. In the case of liberal Judaism, being a religion allows Jews to be full citizens of their home nation-states. In the case of Zionism, Israel's existence as a nation entitles them to build a state in their historic homeland. Buber's aim in "The Jew in the World" is, in part, to explain how Jews have misunderstood their own exilic condition by adopting the standpoint of "the nations" rather than that of the Jewish tradition. From the standpoint of the nations, Israel's exilic condition of powerlessness and dispersion looks unnatural or unhealthy. Buber states the problem as follows:

Ever since (the Bar Kochba revolt, after which Jews were exiled from Jerusalem completely), (the Jew) has represented to the world the insecure man. Within that general insecurity which marks human existence as a whole, there has since that time lived a species of man to whom destiny has denied even the small share of dubious security other beings possess....It is this inescapable state of insecurity which we have in mind when we designate the Jewish Diaspora as *galut*, i.e. as exile.²²⁶

According to Buber, Israel's exilic state is deemed essentially problematic from the standpoint of the nations. To the nations, Israel appears as a specter, a ghost-like reality, because it does not fit into the standard categories of national life, neither having collective national power nor a common area of land on which they live. Buber remarks that, "This state of affairs provides a basis of truth for the observation that anti-Semitism

²²⁶ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 167.

is a kind of fear of ghosts.”²²⁷ What provokes hatred of Jews, according to this line of thinking, is that the Jewish people appear frightening because they are something that should not exist: they appear to be a living people, with a meaningful communal existence, a sense of shared past and destiny, but their lack of land and collective power suggests, again from the standpoint of the nations, that they should not be living people. The “ghostly appearance” of the Jews comes from the paradox of their continued existence and even their spiritual vibrancy despite their exilic condition.²²⁸

Buber contends that viewing the Jewish people as ghostly fails to account for the Jewish tradition’s own teachings, as he interprets them, of what gives life to a national and cultural group, namely, its realization of dialogical relations in its communal life. Buber’s philosophical anthropology is directed precisely at this question, which, as I am arguing, he draws from his interpretation of Jewish sources. Here, Buber calls the “ghostly” view of Judaism a mere “appearance,” and not the true reality of Jewish existence.²²⁹ In order to understand the essence of Jewish existence, he claims, one must adopt what he calls “the way of faith.” By this, Buber means Israel embracing its true calling to realize the kingship²³⁰ of God in realizing a genuine, dialogical community. Ultimately, these categories will not fully suit the nations either, but because of their unique task, the Jewish people will lose their capacity to realize their historical task if

²²⁷ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 168. He is presumably referring to the observation of the early Zionist ideologue Leo Pinsker. See Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, 184-186.

²²⁸ Buber takes the view that in exile the Jewish people still have had a spiritual vibrancy, while still believing that the fullest realization of Jewish spiritual can only take place on the land.

²²⁹ Here, Buber anticipates his own distinction between being and seeming as he elaborates in “Elements of the Interhuman,” in Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 65-68.

²³⁰ The Hebrew *malkhut* could also be translated with the word “rule.”

they allow themselves to be categorized as a religion or as a nation, whereas other nations would simply be as they have typically been and not be spiritually damaged as a result.

The fact that the Jewish people had been able to continue to exist in exile is attributable, Buber contends, to their commitment to being a people of God who take no security in anything other than God's commandment and protection. The full realization of this mission should, ultimately result in the transformation of all of humanity:

When the prophets say that there is no security for Israel save that in God, they are not referring to something unearthly, to something "religious" in the common sense of the word; they are referring to the realization of the true communal living to which Israel was summoned by the covenant with God, and which it is called upon to sustain in history, in the way it alone is capable of. The prophets call upon a people which represents the *first real attempt at "community"* to enter world history as a prototype of that attempt. Israel's function is to encourage the nations to change their inner structure and their relations to one another. By maintaining such relations with the nations and being involved in the development of humanity, Israel may attain its unimpaired existence, its true security.²³¹

Here, Buber inverts the assumptions of the nations as to what constitutes security and insecurity. What the nations view as security, particularly in the form of collective national power, is a sham. Likewise, the prophetic call is not to merely be a religion but to be a people of God. Israel, despite its exilic condition, has more security than the nations even under its adverse social conditions because it strives to realize its mission to be a community under God's rule. To be sure, being in exile diminishes Israel's capacity to realize this mission, but at the same time Buber argues that the genuine cause for the degrading character of their exilic existence is not the same cause given by "the nations" and modern Jews who subscribe to their thinking.

Buber's version of Zionist aspiration stands in direct opposition to Herzl's notion that the Jewish people should become a "normal" nation-state. Rather than strive for the

²³¹ Buber, *Israel and the World*, 170.

so-called normalcy of the nations, the Jewish people should settle the land and build it up as an outgrowth of their mission to create a true community under divine rule as a model for the nations of the world. As Buber interpreted Jewish teachings, the nations would eventually turn to Israel and look to its “way of faith.” But in the interim, the nations would go on living according to their usual way. Israel, according to Buber, cannot afford this choice. Being Israel is predicated on self-consciously striving to complete this mission, and falling away from that mission into the comfort of being merely a “nation” or merely a “religion” would essentially mean an abandonment of the Jewish people’s existence in any meaningful sense. Again, the importance and urgency of Zionism for Buber was that it provided a modern framework for renewing the ancient Jewish commitment to Israel’s mission in a time when the disintegration of prior autonomous forms of diaspora Jewish life left Jews without the live options for realizing the kind of communal life that at least acknowledged and approached the prophetic ideal he espouses.

For Buber, the Zionist aspiration to return to the land was not, as many secular Zionists viewed it, as a radical departure from the spiritual legacy of exilic Judaism. Buber’s central argument of his 1944 lectures, entitled *On Zion*, is that Jewish spiritual leaders throughout the nineteen centuries of exile have viewed living in the land of Israel as representing the highest potential for spiritual fulfillment. I will now look at Buber’s treatment of one these figures, Rabbi Liva ben Betzalel or Judah Loew, known as the Maharal of Prague and best known perhaps as the rabbi associated with the tales of the Golem, to show how Buber sought to frame the concept of exile differently than the predominant Western view.

Buber discusses Loew alongside his contemporaries Calvin, Grotius and Machiavelli arguing that the great Rabbi presented a sophisticated philosophy of history and nationalism that rivals the more well-known gentile figures. Those three thinkers, Buber notes, all link the essence of national existence to the achievement of statehood on contiguous land. Without one or both, they aver, a cultural group fails to be a historical nation. Buber finds an alternative to this view in Loew's thought:

As against all these conceptions R. Liva affirms the nation as such, to which it is true that, so long as the world is order is not disturbed, its own territory and independence appertain, but which, if it has lost both, may be regarded merely as having fallen ill, as handicapped in its functioning, not as having been robbed of its essence and made incapable of fulfilling its specific tasks.²³²

The difference between “merely having fallen ill” and being “robbed of its essence” is a crucial distinction for Buber. The strain of modern political thought embraced by mainstream Zionism concludes, Buber thinks, that the Jews, by virtue of being denied sovereignty and territory, have not been a nation at all since the first century CE. Buber sees the Jewish people as having been a genuine nation, albeit one that has not been able to fulfill its potential and has been ill. The “specific tasks” Buber refers to is Israel's mission to live under the divine rule. Exile has served as an impediment to fulfillment of this task in its fullness, particularly because of Israel's alienation from its land and the ability to work it and hallow it. Nonetheless, exile does not completely rob the Jewish people of the ability to fulfill this mission in its life as a community.

According to Buber, Loew's philosophy of history is based on the idea that Israel has both the characteristics that make it a nation like all the other nations and is unique for its covenantal relationship with God. In so far as it has a common history, language

²³² Martin Buber, *On Zion: The History of an Idea* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 79.

and culture, the Jewish people are entitled to their historic homeland as would any other nation. At the same time, the people's relationship to that land is determined by the terms of the covenant with God that stands outside the natural rights of nations. Israel's success or failure as a nation and its ability to hold on to its land depend on its fidelity to the covenant and thus to God's providence. If Israel fails in its covenantal relationship, it will lose possession of its land as a consequence. However, this unique relationship to God does not negate Israel's status as a nation like other nations. Buber summarizes Loew's position as follows: "The reason why God withholds (its right to its land) from Israel is not because it is less but because it is more than a nation: for in addition to being a nation it is also Israel."²³³ Israel retains the characteristics and aspirations of any nation to achieve self-rule in its own territory but its realization of these aspirations is determined by its covenantal fidelity.

Buber does not endorse the classical formulation of this covenantal theology, as he does not believe that Israel's exile is the result direct divine intervention in historical events. However, he does embrace the idea that Israel's success as a nation depends on its fulfillment of its mission to be a people of God. He looks to Loew's philosophy of history as model for how the Jewish people should see itself as a unique people with a mission articulated by the Biblical prophets while also possessing some characteristics of the other nations, such as a common language and attachment to a particular land. The problem with secular Zionism as Buber sees it is that it follows the dominant strands of the Western political tradition in holding that Jewish exile had effectively ended Jewish nationhood. From this perspective, exile is an unnatural condition and Jewish peoplehood

²³³ Buber, *On Zion*, 89.

in exilic conditions has no validity or genuine reality. To use Buber's phrase from "The Jew in the World," Jewish existence in exile is ghost-like.

In Loew's covenantal philosophy of history, however, exile does not represent the antithesis of nationhood, but a moment in the life cycle of a nation in its relationship with God. Loew follows a Jewish tradition that the punishment of exile is a purification of the people for their return to the land.²³⁴ In Buber's rendering of Loew's metaphors, "the sufferings of exile smelt the ore and separate the precious metal from the dross, they crush the olives and separate the water from the waste."²³⁵ Exile is a place of darkness, but it is a necessary darkness that serves as a prelude to the light of redemption. In exile, the Jewish people must work to maintain their unity and become stronger as a nation, preparing them to return to the land to serve God in the fullness of national life. Should they fail in the next opportunity, the cycle would repeat itself. But exile does not negate Israel's existence as a nation but rather affirms the covenantal character of their realization of national life.

Buber's differences with secular political Zionism on the Jewish experience of exile also extend to the way they view the return of the people to the land. Here, we must take note of Buber's understanding of messianism as ever-approaching but never fully realized aspiration for perfection.²³⁶ For Buber, exile can be fully overcome only when the people achieve genuine perfection in their service of God, but claiming that such perfection has been achieved automatically undermines the credibility of the claim, and hence should be discredited. Here, Buber fits in a Jewish tradition of what might be

²³⁴ Buber does not cite the source of this tradition.

²³⁵ Buber, *On Zion*, 84.

²³⁶ Buber discusses this view in "Two Foci of the Jewish Soul" in Buber, *Israel and the World*, 34-5.

called anti-messianic messianism. Messianic aspiration serves as an ideal that is kept out of reach out of skepticism that the ideal can be achieved within human history. Nonetheless, the ideal serves as an orienting goal for the community. This is the way Buber views overcoming exile. Secular political Zionists, following Herzl, might claim that moving all the Jews to Palestine would “overcome exile.” For Buber this would be a false secular messianic claim tantamount to saying that the people had no need for continued moral or spiritual growth. At worst, Buber believed, claiming that the exile had been overcome completely could vouchsafe a self-righteous and potentially totalitarian Jewish nationalism.

For Buber, as we saw above, the real meaning of exile is that one is in exile from God and from the service to God through building genuine community. Since no one can claim, Buber believes, that one has perfected their service to God, then one cannot claim to fully overcome exile. It would seem that Buber has transformed the classical covenantal theology and its claim that exile stands as an eternal possibility as a punishment for Israel’s sins without fully rejecting it. For Buber, exile is not a ongoing divine punishment but rather a condition inherent in the constant striving for perfection and realization. The extent to which we fail in the service to God we are still in exile. Thus, while Jewish settlement in the land is a necessary aspiration for the Jewish people to regain their strength as a people, simply moving people into the land does not, in Buber’s view, fully overcome the reality of exile with finality.

This view of exile fits with Buber’s notion of Judaism as the striving to realize holiness within the everyday, by which I understand Buber to mean embodied material existence. For the Jewish people as a nation to participate fully in striving for holiness,

they must do so in their particular land, the land that originally shaped their unique character as a people. Buber's *On Zion* lectures devote a great deal of attention to Jewish thought since the Bible of the way in which the land has shaped the people of Israel as a people of God. I will not review Buber's claims about the significance of the land here. My emphasis is on the fact that for Buber, the Zionist project of settling the land is only a precondition for the effort of spiritual realization within the physical. The land is the "everyday" within which the Jewish people strive to realize holiness, but merely living in the land does not suffice for achieving this reality.

My treatment of Buber's view of exile has emphasized his differences with secular political Zionism, which to him represented the "heathen" node of the heathen/Gnostic/Jewish triad found throughout his writings. The "Gnostic" side was represented within the Jewish thought of his day by liberal Jewish thinkers who argued that Jews should embrace their dispersion and view themselves as a religion of individual conscience and not a national group. The connection between this view and Gnosticism for Buber is that both ideas involve a withdrawal into individual salvation and a resignation to the exilic condition. In classical Gnostic myth, as Buber understood it, a person can only find individual spiritual salvation by looking outside material existence and human community. It is this idea that drives Buber's interpretation of Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler's philosophical anthropology, to which we now turn.

II

For Buber, the salient feature and principle weakness of Heidegger and Scheler's anthropological thought is their recapitulation of an ancient Gnostic conception of human realization. While Buber does not say so explicitly, his critique of Heidegger and Scheler is meant to contrast the weakness of this Gnostic thinking to the Biblically rooted dialogical thinking of his own philosophical anthropology. In what follows, I will show how Buber's own arguments against Heidegger and Scheler parallel his arguments about Gnosticism that we find in his writings on Judaism with particular attention to Buber's interpretation of the Jewish experience of exile.

As I discussed above, Buber advocates an interpretation of Jewish exile that avoids both the Zionist spiritual negation of the diaspora and Reform Judaism's embrace of exile and concomitant renunciation of a Jewish return to the land. Buber's critique of Heidegger and Scheler's approach to alienation in the human condition, I am arguing, parallels his critique of Reform Judaism in so far as they both accept alienation and exile without seeking to transform or overcome it. In Reform Judaism's case, this acceptance of exile is expressed in this movement's rejection of any claims to national status and embracing the status of religion, which Buber understands to be an individualistic category. In eschewing any aspiration to the land, Reform Judaism, in Buber's view, limits the potential for the Jewish people to realize a genuine community. Likewise, Heidegger and Scheler, in Buber's view, understand the alienated condition of modern humanity as an essential feature of the human condition that cannot be overcome. In viewing the human condition this way, Heidegger and Scheler reject the possibility for a genuine human connection to overcome the existential loneliness and create meaningful communal life.

While Buber does explicitly associate Heidegger and Scheler's philosophy with Gnosticism in *The Problem of the Human Being*, he does not discuss the implications of this association for the status of Judaism in their thought. Whatever Buber wanted to communicate to his audience in 1938, his association of these two thinkers with Gnosticism was itself a clear statement that he viewed their philosophies as inherently opposed to and incompatible with Judaism's notion of embodied spirituality. Given the timing of the lecture and especially given Heidegger's membership in the Nazi Party (footnote), Buber's association of these two thinkers with Gnosticism suggest Buber is at least suggesting that the rise of neo-Gnostic thinking in the Weimar period created fertile ground for more explicit forms of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

Buber did not think it was inevitable that German or Western culture and intellectual life would denigrate Jewish ideas. Buber's brief discussions of Edmund Husserl and Soren Kierkegaard prior to his fuller discussions of Heidegger and Scheler suggest that he was still in 1938 hopeful about the possibilities for a fruitful dialogue between Judaism and German culture and philosophy. In these passages, Buber frames the failures of Heidegger and Scheler's individualistic anthropology by drawing attention to the aspects of Husserl and Kierkegaard's thought they adopted and those they set aside. Doing so, Buber points to a way of adopting aspects of Husserl and Kierkegaard that would result in a different philosophical direction, a "road not taken" as it were, one to which Buber himself lays claim. Part of this "road not taken," is not only a particular philosophical approach but also a road for the integration and appreciation of Judaism and Jewish ideas in German philosophy and culture. Buber only hints at the Jewish concerns in his discussion of Husserl and Kierkegaard, but these hints are consistent with

his broader treatment of Judaism's potential contribution to Western thought in other places.

Buber draws on Husserl as a resource for philosophical anthropology in very much the same way he does with Kant. As with Kant, Buber finds a few statements in Husserl that Buber takes to be a significant contribution to philosophical anthropology even though Husserl did not intend them to be taken in such a way, thereby drawing on the authority of a great philosopher while also plotting a different philosophical course from their characteristic work. Buber cites two passages in Husserl that deal with humanity's struggle for self-understanding and the issue of human beings becoming a "philosophical problem." In a third passage, Husserl suggests that human life is essentially lived out in social groups. This observation aligns with Buber's anthropological claim that humanity in its essence is a social and dialogical being.

In the context of his discussion of Heidegger and Scheler, Buber's brief discussion of Husserl is meant to draw attention to the way in which these two thinkers, Buber believes, have actually deviated from Husserl's genuine philosophical legacy. Of course, Heidegger and Scheler do not claim to be faithful adherents to Husserl's philosophy, and Buber does not assert that they make this claim. Rather, Buber is asserting that should one wish to build on his phenomenological method to conduct an anthropological philosophical inquiry, then Buber's own approach is more faithful to Husserl's actual anthropological commitments. As Buber says, Husserl's insights into the sociality of human existence "fundamentally contradict the whole anthropological work of the phenomenological school" including Scheler and Heidegger.²³⁷

²³⁷ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 160.

As with his discussions of several other philosophers, Buber draws attention to a particular biographical feature of Husserl's life to help explain the aspect of their thought that Buber wishes to explain. In the case of Husserl, Buber credits his anthropological insights to being both German and Jewish. By being both German and Jewish, Buber avers, Husserl had experienced with greatest intensity the two aspects of modernity that are responsible, Buber believes, for the increasing urgency of anthropological reflection. As a Jew, Husserl was "the son of a people which experienced more grievously and fatefully than any other...the increasing decay of the old organic forms of man's common life," and as German he was "the pupil and adopted son, as he thought, of a people which experienced more grievously and fatefully than any other...man lagging behind his works."²³⁸ Buber does not go so far as to label Husserl's anthropological observations as Jewish, but he does suggest that the appreciation for organic community may have been more likely among Jewish intellectuals in Germany than non-Jews.

Buber undoubtedly meant for this description of Jewish intellectuals to apply to himself as well and cites the example of Husserl to identify the qualities that explain his, that is Buber's, own unique talent for articulating compelling anthropological observations in his writings on dialogue that speak to the spiritual condition of both Jews and Germans. But Buber has also pointed to a broader implication of Heidegger and Scheler's move away from Husserl's appreciation of human sociality, namely that it effectively resulted in a failure to appreciate the unique experiences and intellectual contributions of Jews. This aspect of Heidegger and Scheler's thought does not in and of itself make it philosophically problematic, but for Buber it is part of the way in which the

²³⁸ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 159.

neo-Gnostic turn in German philosophy and theology results in a denigration of Jewish ideas. If Jewish intellectuals, whether they lay claim to Judaism or not, are more likely to arrive at an appreciation of the organic communal life that has eroded in modern conditions, then the ascendancy of Gnostic thinking will inevitably come at the expense of Jewish intellectual and cultural influence.

Buber's appreciation of Husserl relates to the interhuman, horizontal plane of dialogical life, whereas his appreciation for Kierkegaard relates to the divine-human, vertical plane of dialogical life, between humanity and God. In his fuller treatment of Kierkegaard, "The Question to the Single One" from 1936, Buber criticizes the theologian for the withdrawal from community and society that Buber believes comes from lionizing the individual dimension of faith. Buber's view is that a fuller faith comes from embracing real relationships and finding a connection to God through those relationships, not by withdrawing from them. In Buber's estimation, Kierkegaard's God is indebted to Gnostic myth and Buber sees the roots of Heidegger's Gnostic anthropology in Kierkegaard's theology.²³⁹

At the same time, Buber's critical evaluation of Heidegger's appropriation of Kierkegaard indicates what elements of Kierkegaard's work Buber thinks could contribute to or are consistent with a Biblical understanding of the divine-human relationship. Kierkegaard's individualistic theological anthropology, Buber claims, forms a crucial background to Heidegger's philosophical anthropology. Heidegger and to a lesser extent Scheler have removed the divine from Kierkegaard's account of human life, leaving a picture of a human being who is alone *both* in the face of fellow humanity *and*

²³⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 179.

in the face of the divine, which is absent and negated in Heidegger's thought, at least as Buber reads it. Buber believes that such an account will fail to provide of satisfactory account of human self-realization because it denies the presence of *any* another person in the process. Kierkegaard at least understood the power of what Buber calls "the essential relationship," even as he relegated that relationship to the individual person's relationship to God. Removing God from Kierkegaard's theological anthropology leaves one with a Gnostic anthropology that asserts that human beings live in a state of alienation that cannot be overcome in any meaningful way.

It is possible to understand Buber's appreciation of Kierkegaard as an acknowledgement that as much as Kierkegaard's God may be rooted in Gnostic myth, it is also rooted in the Hebrew Bible's account of God who enters into relationship with humanity. The New Testament's portrayal of Jesus, however much that account may be attributable to Gnostic influence, does focus on the individual's you're getting into a complicated issue here with regard to Jesus' divinity; best just to leave this out relationship to God, but it is rooted in the model of divine-human relationship found in the Hebrew prophets. Kierkegaard's theology is not purely Gnostic, but a hybrid of Gnostic and Hebrew ideas, and for this reason Buber himself was able to draw on Kierkegaard's conception of essential relation precisely because of the Biblical lineage of Kierkegaard's thought.²⁴⁰

Husserl and Kierkegaard each speak to one dimension of Buber's Biblical conception of self-realization, Husserl to the irreducibly social nature of human life and

²⁴⁰ Buber's appreciation for both Kierkegaard's theology and Husserl's emphasis for the social dimension of knowledge and life recalls **H. Richard Niebuhr's suggestion of "Social Existentialism" in *Christ and Culture*.**

Kierkegaard to the essential nature of the divine-human relationship. For Buber, it is the Bible and Judaism that most powerfully articulate the role of both the interhuman and the divine-human axes in self-realization. Buber's account of Heidegger and Scheler, as we will now see, is largely directed at showing how their philosophy contrasts with his own Biblically-rooted philosophical anthropology.

Buber's critique of both Heidegger and Scheler is meant to show how their understandings of human realization are rooted in Gnostic notions that human beings live in alienation from other human beings and in exile from the divine. Buber, as we have seen, does not deny the spiritual value of solitude, but as with the Jewish experience of exile, solitude and alienation serves as starting points for spiritual growth and purification that can set a person on a path to genuine relationship. On Buber's reading, for both Heidegger and Scheler, the human spirit attains its height of realization in alienation from others and in opposition to relationships. Such accounts, Buber believes, do not offer a satisfactory account of human self-realization as experienced in known forms of human spiritual expression such as artistic or religious expression. Buber's focus on the issue of embodiment is a response to the abstract and empty Gnostic images of human realization contrast to the images found in Jewish sources that shape his own dialogical thought.

I begin my discussion of Buber's account of Heidegger by drawing attention to two potential problems with Buber's reading that stem from his categorization of Heidegger, along with Scheler, as an individualistic philosophical anthropologist. This categorization is significant for Buber, as the central goal of *The Problem of the Human Being* is to offer of critique of such anthropology using Heidegger and Scheler as two prominent examples. The two potential problems, in short, are that Heidegger does not

seem to be an individualist and does not see himself as a philosophical anthropologist. Buber does acknowledge these issues but it is worth discussing each briefly so as to understand how Buber is approaching Heidegger. My interest is not to defend Buber's reading of Heidegger against other potential readings, but rather to explain what Buber means by this claim and what is at stake for Buber in categorizing Heidegger the way he does.

First, Buber acknowledges that Heidegger does not see himself as engaging in philosophical anthropology, but rather in what Heidegger calls "fundamental ontology." Moreover, Heidegger explicitly rejects the project of philosophical anthropology in *Being and Time*.²⁴¹ For Buber, the problem with Heidegger's philosophy begins with this methodological choice for fundamental ontology over philosophical anthropology. As I discussed in chapter 3, Buber criticizes Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's questions of philosophy because Heidegger emphasizes human finitude rather than human participation in the world.²⁴² What is at stake is not only the legacy of Kant's transcendental philosophy, but the legacy of the whole Western philosophical tradition. Both Buber and Heidegger see themselves as taking on the whole of the Western philosophical tradition, but do so in very different ways. In chapter 2, I discussed how Buber's principle criticism of the Western philosophical tradition is that it attains knowledge through abstraction from concrete reality, as opposed to the Hebrew thinking found in the Bible, which looks to affirm the spiritual potential of concrete reality. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims to offer fundamental ontology as a method that will

²⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 11-12, 42-47.

²⁴² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 120-1.

actually achieve the metaphysical aspirations of the Western tradition, superseding its most important representatives such as Plato and Aristotle.²⁴³ From Buber's perspective, though, Heidegger's aspiration to succeed in metaphysics where other had failed is misguided and problematic because it only intensifies the tendency towards abstraction and makes the problem worse. Hence, while Buber acknowledges Heidegger's aims to distance philosophy from the legacy of Plato, he nonetheless categorizes Heidegger as a successor to that legacy.

Even if Heidegger rejects the project of philosophical anthropology, it is difficult to argue with Buber's assumption that Heidegger's fundamental ontology makes claims about the nature of the human being that can be fruitfully compared with other philosophical anthropological claims. In categorizing Heidegger's philosophy as a form of "individualism," Buber is placing Heidegger's claims about human beings within the framework of questions of philosophical anthropology. Buber acknowledges the important role that relationships with others, both everyday things and people, play in Heidegger's phenomenological observations, but he argues that in Heidegger's own system, these relationships do not constitute what Buber calls "essential relationships."²⁴⁴ Heidegger of course, does not claim that his philosophy offers an account of such relationships, but Buber's goal is to assess the implications of understanding the human being the way Heidegger does and to explain why Heidegger takes the view he does. As I will now discuss, Buber's claim is that Heidegger's human being is essentially alone and alienated even when surrounded by others in everyday life. This is what Buber means in

²⁴³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1-3.

²⁴⁴ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 169.

calling Heidegger individualistic and categorizing him as an individualistic philosophical anthropologist.

Buber finds Heidegger's individualism in the latter's characterization of the human being as a being-toward-death in *Being and Time*.²⁴⁵ Buber's claim is that in characterizing human existence through the lens of its end, Heidegger has abstracted the finality and finitude of human life from the fullness of human existence.²⁴⁶ Buber describes this abstraction in Heidegger's thought as a "curious partial sphere of life, not a piece of the whole real life as it is actually lived, but a partial sphere which receives its independence, its independent character and laws as it were through having the circulation of the blood in the organism arrested at some point and the isolated part examined."²⁴⁷ Buber's graphic characterization should be understood in light of his argument about the relationship between philosophical anthropology and the social sciences. The social sciences, Buber argues, can legitimately describe and analyze what he here calls "a piece of the whole real life as it is actually lived." The aspiration of philosophical anthropology is to provide a philosophical account of the real whole human being.

On Buber's reading, Heidegger's goal in *Being and Time* is to provide an account of how human beings can develop an understanding of what is essential about that existence as such. To accomplish that, a person must bracket out other aspects of human existence, namely relations with others, which form the environment of an individual human being's life. That move, Buber argues, results in a merely abstract conception of

²⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 219ff.

²⁴⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 164.

²⁴⁷ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 165.

humanity: “Heidegger isolates from the wholeness of life the realm in which man is related to himself, since he absolutizes the temporally conditioned situation of the radically solitary man, and wants to derive the essence of human existence from the experience of a nightmare.”²⁴⁸ The nightmare to which Buber refers is the radical isolation of a person extracted from the world of multiple relationships. By claiming that our relations with others are inauthentic or ontic relations, Heidegger, Buber argues, denies the possibility of the dialogical relation that is the essential teaching of Judaism.

Buber bases his reading on Heidegger notion that the human being as *Da-sein* only has a relation to itself. Buber places Heidegger’s account of the human being as essentially alone in the line of thinkers he had reviewed in the previous lectures of *The Problem of the Human Being* who confront human solitude and alienation. Augustine, Pascal and Kierkegaard. In Buber’s estimation, Heidegger has gone even further than these thinkers, over the brink as it were, by following Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God and placing the human being in an existential situation in which there can be no reaching out to a transcendent other, whether God or another human being. Buber concludes that “Heidegger’s ‘existence’ is monological,”²⁴⁹ meaning that he does not offer an account of how human beings can encounter something unconditional through a relationship with another being.

Buber acknowledges that Heidegger’s account in *Being and Time* addresses the myriad ways that human existence is constituted by *Da-sein*’s relationship with other beings, including everyday things, people and social groups. On Buber’s reading, the human being depicted in Heidegger’s account is one who is surrounded by other beings

²⁴⁸ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 168.

²⁴⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 168.

but who is essentially alone and alienated. Buber argues that Heidegger's notion of "solicitude" (*Fürsorge*)²⁵⁰ is not actually an essential relation with the other. Buber concludes that "the relation of solicitude...cannot *as such* be an essential relation, since it does not set a man's life in direct relation with the life of another, but only one man's solicitous help in relation with another man's lack and need of it."²⁵¹ The type of relation of human beings to each other described by Heidegger is not, Buber claims, the kind of essential relation that is, Buber believes, the ground of human social life and self-realization.

As I noted above, Buber understands Heidegger to be taking over Kierkegaard's conception of the "Single One" as an individual who refrains from becoming too deeply entangled in social relations. Buber's interpretation of Heidegger's notion of "solicitude" draws relies on the association of the two thinkers. For Buber, the important distinction between the two is that while Kierkegaard's remains open to an essential relation with another, though only with God on Buber's view, Heidegger's individual remains closed to an essential relation with another.²⁵² For Kierkegaard, on Buber's read, the isolation and loneliness of the individual from "the crowd" is for the sake of a relationship with God. For Heidegger, the individual does not reach beyond itself in relation. Buber draws out this distinction in the way he interprets the concept of dread or anxiety (*Angst*) in the two thinkers. "In his anxiety and dread, Kierkegaard's man stands 'alone before God,' Heidegger's man stands before himself and nothing else, and – since in the last resort one

²⁵⁰ Ronald Gregor Smith, the translator of *Between Man and Man*, consistently uses the term "solicitude" to render the German "*Fürsorge*" in Buber's *Das Problem Des Menschen*. Cf. Joan Stambauch's note on this and related terms, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, xv.

²⁵¹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 169.

²⁵² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 171.

cannot stand before oneself – he stands in dread and anxiety before nothing.”²⁵³ Buber’s comment that one cannot stand before oneself seems to be the heart of his claim about the difference between Heidegger and Kierkegaard and where Heidegger fails on his own terms. Kierkegaard claims that meaning is found in relation to God, whereas Heidegger claims that meaning is found in relation to one’s self. Whereas Buber takes issue with Kierkegaard’s account because it excludes the possibility of finding meaning, and God, in relations with other beings, with Heidegger Buber claims that the possibility of meaning and self-realization has been eliminated completely because the self is closed before the other.

Buber’s contrast of Kierkegaard and Heidegger is shaped by his emphasis of the Gnostic elements in each thinker. Buber cites Heidegger as suggesting that the individual life “fetch itself back” to attain full realization of the self. In a parenthetical comment, Buber notes that this concept “is, incidentally, a gnostic concept by which the gnostics meant the concentration and salvation of the soul which is lost in the world.” What I want to note here is that the lost soul of Gnostic thinking is lost, in Buber’s interpretation, because it is in exile from God, and the process of “fetching itself back” is one of overcoming exile and returning to the fullness of human life. Thus, although Buber does not say so explicitly, his comment here suggests that he sees the challenge of the alienated individual in modern society as a particular version of the problem of exile both as a universal human spiritual phenomenon and as a particular social and historical condition endured by Jews.

²⁵³ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 172.

Buber's criticism of Heidegger follows his general criticism of Gnosticism, namely that it does not actually succeed in what it seeks to accomplish because it does not contend with the real embodied world of creation. As I noted above, Buber argues that a relationship with one's own existence, a relationship to Da-sein, is not really a relationship at all. A relationship of a person to their own existence "cannot be regarded as one that is real as such, since the necessary presupposition of real duality is lacking."²⁵⁴ By abstracting the individual, Heidegger has stripped human existence of any concrete bodily reality:

Consideration of existence or self-being as such yields only the concept and outline of an almost ghostly spiritual being, that possesses, indeed, bodily contents of its basic sensations, its dread of the universe, its anxiety about existence, its feeling of primal guilt, yet possesses even these in a way that has nothing to do with the body.²⁵⁵

Here Buber distinguishes between merely having a body as a biological structure and being engaged with bodily life with other human beings. Heidegger's use of the term anxiety is in the end an abstraction of what Buber takes to be the real, embodied anxiety that human beings feel when confronted by others. For Buber, real anxiety in the face of others points to the significance of those others as my possible other in dialogue; thus, anxiety turns us towards the world and away from the self. For Heidegger, anxiety in the face of others turns us inwards and, following the Gnostic spirit, away from the embodied world.

Buber sees his own philosophy as addressing the same underlying concern as Kierkegaard and Heidegger, namely the challenge of achieving self-realization within the context of modern mass society. Mass society tends to flatten differences and

²⁵⁴ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 180.

²⁵⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 180.

individuality and individuals are constrained by the limits placed by mass society. In these conditions, people do not enjoy genuine freedom and they cannot exercise genuine responsibility. In the context of his critique of Heidegger, Buber introduces the notion of the “essential we” as an alternative approach to achieving spiritual realization in modern conditions. The concept of the “essential we” serves to clarify a point in Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. In *I and Thou*, Buber lays out the categories of I-You and I-It as the two primary relations. The first impression of many readers is that these categories apply primarily to relationships between two individuals. Buber addresses the communal and social dimension of his dialogical thinking in the third book of *I and Thou*, and it is apparent in his writings on Judaism beginning with “Holy Way” in 1918 and the following twenty-five years. But by the time Buber delivered *The Problem of the Human Being* lectures, he may have realized that it was necessary to introduce a particular concept to parallel the I-You that expresses how dialogical relations emerge in a group of many people.

Buber uses the concept of the essential we to contrast to the faceless, flattening reality of mass society that Heideggers call “the one,” or in Kierkegaard’s term “the crowd, in the same way that he contrasts the I-You relationship of mutual care and respect to the instrumental I-It relationship in his account in *I and Thou*. Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s assessment, in Buber’s view, is that the only possible form of social life with human beings is a set of relationships of solicitude within the structure of this faceless mass society. The only way to achieve individual spiritual realization, freedom and responsibility in this way of thinking is to retreat from social relationships as much as possible and find.

In contrast to the social alienation of Gnostic self-realization, Buber describes the essential we as “a community of several independent persons, who have reached a self and self-responsibility, the community based on this self and self-responsibility, and being made possible by them.”²⁵⁶ Buber also gives two sociological examples to explain what he means: “in revolutionary groups we find a *We* most readily among those whose members make it their labor among the people to waken and teach quietly and slowly; in religious groups we find it among those who strive for an unemphatic and sacrificial realization of faith in life.”²⁵⁷ Like the I-You relationship, the sense of “we” may be transient and occasional, applying to events and not institutionalized and routinized systems. For that reason, Buber avers that the “we,” like the “You” has been overlooked or forgotten both in human culture and in social thought, theology and philosophy.

It is hard to ignore the parallel between this idea of the essential we and the aspirations for genuine community as the realization of divine rule (or “kingship”) Buber describes in his writings on prophetic Judaism and Zionism. The lack of references to Jewish sources is typical in Buber’s writings on dialogue and anthropology, as in these places he is not arguing for the validity of his dialogical philosophy on the *authority* of Jewish sources. His dialogical writings, such as *I and Thou* and *The Problem of the Human Being* appeal to people’s everyday experience of life to point to the reality of dialogical encounter. For Buber, the Bible was not a source of authority for the spiritual validity of his philosophy, but it did serve as a source of authority for his claims that Judaism serves as a cultural conduit for dialogical thinking. The polemical force of his Jewish writings is their claim that Judaism contains a superior conception of spiritual

²⁵⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 175.

²⁵⁷ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 176.

self-realization to that of Gnosticism and heathenism, and that the Hebrew Bible and Hasidic teachings are an invaluable literary treasure for reflection on the realization of the spirit within community. But Buber does not think of his Jewish writings as providing a philosophical argument in favor of his dialogical thought. Again, Buber looks to his philosophical writings after *I and Thou* to elaborate his conception of dialogue and appeal to everyday human experience to prove, in a sense unique to Buber's own standards of proof, the validity of his claims. That Judaism serves as the source for these ideas does not, for Buber, make them true in and of themselves. The proof for their validity is not in the text but in life.

Buber does use Biblical imagery in discussing Heidegger's conception of guilt (*Schuld*) in a way that the Jewish origins of his ideas was just as much present in his thinking as were the Gnostic roots of Heidegger's. Buber states that Heidegger views original guilt as being rooted in the guilt of existence itself. Buber himself argues that there is a kind of "primal guilt" but that it consists in the failure to respond to the call of the other. Here Buber clearly contrasts what he views as Heidegger's secularized Kierkegardian Christianity²⁵⁸ with own reformulation of Biblical anthropology. Buber's use of Biblical language is unmistakable:

If I am not really there I am guilty. When I answer the call of present being – 'Where art Thou?' - with 'here I am,' but am not really there, that is, not with the truth of my whole life, then I am guilty. Original guilt consists in remaining with oneself. If a form and appearance of present being move past me, and I was not really there, then out of the distance, out of its disappearance, comes a second cry, as soft and secret as though it came from myself: 'Where were you?' *That* is the

²⁵⁸ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 179.

cry of conscience. It is not my existence which calls to me, but the being which is not I.²⁵⁹

Here Buber alludes to two key Biblical passages. The first passage is God's call to the first human beings in the Garden of Eden, "Where are you?" with the response, "Here I am."²⁶⁰ The second passage is the revelation of the divine name to Moses, which Buber has interpreted, following a traditional Jewish interpretation, as meaning "I will be with you," i.e., that God's name means that God will be present to humanity in times of suffering and distress. Following the rabbinic notion that divine characteristics in the Bible provide models of paradigmatic behavior for human beings, Buber connects the two passages about God's question to the first human beings by saying in essence that "where are you" is the question that human beings must time and again answer in their relationship to others. If they can imitate the divine character of being present they can fulfill the promise of their creation.

The use of this particular interpretation of the divine name in tandem with the rabbinic conception of imitation of God's ways licenses Buber's appropriation of the Biblical question "where are you" and its recontextualization to a situation in which we are called to respond to a human other, rather than restricting it to the divine. The difference is at the heart of Buber's criticism of Kierkegaard. In Genesis 3, it is God who calls to humanity. Buber's criticism of Kierkegaard is that he restricts the call of God to God alone, whereas Buber believes that the authentic Biblical view is that humanity is called to hear the voice of God's command in everyday life. For Buber, to be a religious

²⁵⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 166.

²⁶⁰ The response "Here I am" (*Hineini*) appears at several important junctures in the Bible when characters respond to God or another human characters in significant situations.

person is not to withdraw God from human life but to bring God's caring presence into human life.

The citation of this text from Genesis also connects Buber's critique of Heidegger with his interpretation of rival conceptions of exile that I discussed above. In Genesis 3, the first human beings are on the verge of first experiencing exile, as they are about to be expelled from the garden. The story points to humanity's primordial capacity for self-imposed exile. For Buber, humanity is born in the warmth and nurturing of the maternal relationship²⁶¹ which, much like the garden itself, provides sustenance without work. Like the first human beings, all human beings are in exile from this original garden. But, as I suggested above, the hope provided by Biblical anthropology, on Buber's view, is that this exile can be instructive and purifying. Exile can be overcome through our own understanding of the conditions of our existence as rooted in I-You relationships. For Heidegger, on Buber's reading, a human being cannot overcome their alienated condition, they can only confront and contend with it.

In concluding my treatment of Buber's critique of Heidegger, I return to Buber's claim that Heidegger's starting point for reflection is a distorted and abstract conception of human life. As I discussed in chapter 2, Buber views Gnostic resignation to embodied existence as rooted in the philosophizing abstractions of Greek philosophy as represented by Plato. The philosopher who views reality as if they themselves are outside of either already is or easily becomes the Gnostic who believes that spiritual realization must occur outside of embodied existence. By seeking to realize the same philosophical

²⁶¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 76.

aspirations as Plato, even in viewing Plato as having failed, Heidegger intensifies the spiritual isolation of the human being from concrete reality.

In contrast, Buber's notion of the "essential we" represents the religious orientation, grounded in the spirit of the Hebrew Bible, in contrast to the philosophical one. In the religious orientation, the human being participates in embodied reality in a direct, personal way, much like Buber's ideal for the philosophical anthropologist.²⁶² In this approach to social relations, one's spiritual realization actually depends on their ability to participate in the lives of others, both of us as whole, undivided embodied human beings. In Heidegger's neo-Gnostic approach, the self is permanently divided between the true spiritual self and the self that one presents to others. In Buber's model, the self's struggle for realization is an attempt to achieve harmony of the spiritual and material in the wholeness of one's own personality and in one's relationship with others. To accomplish this, I must involve my whole self, body and spirit, in essential relationships with others, also in body and spirit.

Buber's critique of the anthropology of Max Scheler in the penultimate lecture of *The Problem of the Human Being* revolves around an interplay between the two key dichotomies in Buber's thought I just discussed, one between spirit and body and the other between philosophy and religious thinking. Buber's central argument is that Scheler's philosophical account of the human spirit takes the modern state of alienation as a permanent reality and not something that can be overcome. For Buber, Scheler's metaphysics is "a consequence of the divorce between man and man"²⁶³ because it for granted takes the sociological reality of social disconnection as a permanent feature of

²⁶² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 125-6.

²⁶³ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 197.

reality. Scheler exemplifies the tendency of the Western philosophical tradition to engage in abstract thinking when they claim that the spirit can only be realized in a state of detachment. In Scheler's case, he draws attention to detachment from the body.

Buber's critique of Scheler focuses on the latter's claim that the ground of being consists of two primary attributes, spirit and impulse.²⁶⁴ In Scheler's metaphysics, spirit is a powerless godhead (*deitas*) that is the source of values and ideas and the impulse is the unbridled energy of the flux of life. Impulse contains all images and imagination, but is not guided by any purpose or meaning. Scheler's philosophical anthropology depicts the human being as the place in all of existence where these two attributes of the ground of being interact with each other and have the potential to cooperate. Indeed, for the spirit's values and ideas to have any impact in the world, they must find some way to work through the impulse and its life energy. Humanity's significance for Scheler, then, is that it provides a meeting point for the spirit to attach itself to the power of impulse. Human self-realization is the culmination of this meeting of spirit and impulse in the distinctly human creation of culture.

Buber sees the dualism of Scheler's metaphysics as a recapitulation of the Gnostic myth of the deity separated from the embodied world of material existence. Buber notes a difference between the two, namely that in classical Gnostic thinking, there are two distinct metaphysical entities, the genuine deity and the world of matter. In Scheler's metaphysics, these two aspects of reality are two attributes within the ground of being itself. But Buber understands this difference to be of minimal significance in its

²⁶⁴ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 185. Buber notes the similarity of Scheler's view to Spinoza's doctrine of attributes of being but also that for Spinoza these attributes are merely two among the infinite attributes, whereas Scheler's metaphysics assumes only these two.

implications for the anthropology that emerges. As Buber reads him, Scheler's concept of the spirit is thoroughly Gnostic in that it is alien to the material world and powerless to master it in any consistent way. The most the spirit can do is offer its guidance to the material impulse, the attribute with genuine power.

Buber also rejects Scheler's claim that the latter has refuted the Biblical account of creation *ex nihilo* by positing a powerless spirit. To begin with, Buber does not see the Biblical account of creation as entailing creation out of nothing, which is a term that comes from later medieval theology. Rather, Buber associates the conjuring of something from nothing with the magic trick performed by the Babylonian god Marduk in ancient creation myths.²⁶⁵ The genuinely Biblical teaching, Buber says, is that the process the world moves from being "unformed and void" to an ordered cosmos remains shrouded in mystery. According to Buber, the Bible and post-Biblical Jewish tradition teaches that God can only be known through God's actions of kindness towards humanity, but that God's essence cannot be known.²⁶⁶ Buber concludes that Scheler's notion of the "'world's ground'...is only one of the countless gnostic attempts to strip the mystery from the Biblical God."²⁶⁷ What Buber means here is that Scheler's notion of a powerless spirit seems to offer metaphysical knowledge of God by positing two aspects of reality, the spiritual and the material. The problem with this picture is felt most deeply in the anthropological picture that emerges from this division in reality that, according to Buber, becomes depicted by Gnostic teachings like Scheler's as a division within the human condition.

²⁶⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 188.

²⁶⁶ Buber discusses this view in his essay "Imitation Dei" in Buber, *Israel and the World*, 72-76.

²⁶⁷ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 189.

Buber understands Scheler's conception of the spirit to mean that the spirit cannot attain any influence in the world without giving itself over to material impulses or instincts. Buber's characterization of Scheler is similar to his characterization of Plato and Hegel as thinkers who present a conception of the spirit where the spirit capitulates to the prevailing power structures of "historical reality."²⁶⁸ In Scheler the capitulation of spirit to power becomes both a metaphysical dynamic in the ground of being and an anthropological condition for human self-realization. On Scheler's view, for a human being to achieve spiritual realization the spirit must resign itself to embodied impulses and take strength from them, as the spirit itself lacks any of its own power. Buber does not think this account captures the essence of humanity but rather, like Gnostic lore, depicts

a certain kind of man, namely that in which the sphere of the spirit and the sphere of the instincts have been made so separate and independent from one another that the spirit from its height can bring before the instincts the fascinating magnificence of ideas, as in gnostic lore the daughters of light appear to the mighty princes of the planets in order to make them burn in love and lose the force of their light.²⁶⁹

The human being of Scheler's anthropology, Buber suggests, is already so alienated from their own instincts that they cannot imagine maintaining their strength of spirit ("force of their light") without giving in to the power of the embodied instinct ("the daughters of light").

Buber's use of Gnostic myth to explain Scheler's view should not be taken as a claim about the sources of Scheler's ideas. Rather, Buber's critique is aimed at showing why Gnostic ideas have become attractive to philosophers living in the time of crisis of

²⁶⁸ "The Demand of the Spirit and Historical Reality" in Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 182-185.

²⁶⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 189.

humanity that Buber has described. Buber's critique of Scheler, like his critique of Heidegger, is perhaps best understood as a diagnosis: he reads their philosophical anthropologies as an extension of the sickness that already pervades humanity in the modern West, a sickness due to the factors of social disintegration and alienation from technology and work. Buber concludes that, "The powerlessness of the spirit which Scheler considers to be original is always an accompanying feature of the disintegration of community."²⁷⁰ The modern period is just another moment, like the waning days of the Roman Empire, when Gnostic myth becomes attractive again because of social disintegration and spiritual alienation.

Buber's diagnosis of the sociological background to Scheler's Gnostic dualism parallels his own claims about the social dimension of spiritual realization. Buber contends that, "The divorce between spirit and instincts is here (in Scheler's work), as often, the consequence of the divorce between man and man."²⁷¹ For Buber, spiritual realization occurs through genuine relationships with others. The separation of these two aspirations, the social and spiritual, originates in the tendency of human beings, and philosophers in particular, to view the dichotomies of individual/community and spirit/body as distinct metaphysical entities. In the hands of philosophers, the abstraction of these entities from genuine reality results in theories of how these entities interact that sever these theories and the people who follow them from genuine reality. Buber's claim, however, is that both community and individuality, and body and spirit are rooted in the original interhuman relational realm that Buber believes genuinely characterizes human existence. The spiritual aspect of life is not alienated from embodied life but exists in a

²⁷⁰ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 198.

²⁷¹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 197.

dynamic tension with it. The spirit, as Buber understands it, can guide embodied life and both spirit and body are realized together in their fulfillment of the whole human being.

As Buber understands it, Scheler's account of the relationship between spirit and instinct is rooted in the idea that spiritual realization, especially as expressed in humanistic achievement such as art or philosophy, occurs as the result of an ascetic act whereby the body denies itself to make room for the spirit. Scheler's account also views the instincts almost demonically, as a source of temptation that would lead a person away from the spirit. In this depiction, Buber sees an element of Gnostic and Christian dualism. The problem with this account, Buber argues, is that it misinterprets the multiplicity of dynamics between spirit and instincts that takes place within the life of the artist. While some philosophical or artistic work requires acts of asceticism, these acts are not, Buber suggests, complete denials of the body, but rather a "two-sided carrying out of an original contract which assures to the spirit unassailable mastery and which the instincts now fulfill – in individual instances grudgingly but in most actually with pleasure."²⁷² Indeed, artists may face temptations that they may need to overcome, and this process of overcoming may require acts of asceticism, but Buber believes it oversimplifies things to view these temptations as the essence of the instincts, as if the spirit and instincts are always at war with one another as one might find in Gnostic lore or some Christian theology. The instincts and spirit, Buber, believes, seek their fulfillment in relationship with each other, making spiritual realization compatible with bodily pleasure.

Buber also views the separation of body and spirit in Scheler's anthropology as characteristic of the philosophical mind. Elsewhere, Buber characterizes philosophy as

²⁷² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 190.

thinking that abstracts from concrete reality.²⁷³ Philosophers can generate new forms of knowledge by set themselves at a distance from concrete reality and seeing that reality as if they do not participate in it. The spiritual danger of philosophical thinking is for philosophers to lose a sense of contact with the concrete reality from which they abstract knowledge or concepts. In philosophical anthropology, the pitfall of this abstract distancing is particularly intense, as the philosophers, in distancing themselves from the object of study, are distancing themselves from their own personalities.

Buber sees this phenomenon at work in Scheler's account of pain. For Buber, the weakness of his account is that Scheler asks what pain is in abstraction of my own actual pain. Scheler distinguishes between the human faculty of intelligence which asks how the pain "has arisen and how it can be removed."²⁷⁴ In contrast, the spirit looks at this particular pain as indicative of an aspect of reality as a whole, namely that pain and suffering is a feature of being itself, and asks how and why this could be the case. As Buber describes Scheler's account, "man's spirit abolishes the character of reality of the empirical pain which the man has felt."²⁷⁵ Buber concludes that this mode of reflection on pain may generate "all sorts of brilliant thoughts about pain" but not "the nature of pain."²⁷⁶ The "brilliant thoughts" of philosophers may seem like impressive products of the intellect but they do not, Buber believes, penetrate the essence of pain as an aspect of human existence.

In a genuine consideration of pain, Buber continues, "the spirit does not remain outside and strip off reality, it casts itself into the depth of this real pain, takes up its

²⁷³ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 38-41.

²⁷⁴ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 191.

²⁷⁵ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 191.

²⁷⁶ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 192.

abode in the pain, gives itself over to the pain, permeates it with spirit, and the pain itself in such nearness as it were discloses itself...”²⁷⁷ Here Buber is applying the method of philosophical anthropology that I discussed in chapter 2. To give a genuine account of human existence, the philosopher must account for their own experience of human existence and not strip humanity of its concrete reality. As Buber puts it in his discussion of Scheler, “Pain – and every real happening of the soul – is to be compared not with a drama but with those early mysteries whose meaning no one learns who does not himself join in the dance.”²⁷⁸ The philosopher who treats reality at a distance cannot provide an adequate account either of that reality or of the source of their comprehension of that reality.

In Buber’s rhetoric, the opposite of the philosophical tendency to abstract from concrete reality is the religious tendency to participate in and penetrate concrete reality. For Buber genuine human religiosity confronts reality in its embodied material existence. Indeed, Buber characterizes genuine religiosity as a form of direct confrontation with suffering: “Man does not begin where God is sought, but where God’s farness means suffering without the knowledge of what is causing it.”²⁷⁹ I take it that Buber means that a religious person views all human suffering as an instance of God’s distance. But where God may be distant, the religious person does not distance themselves from their suffering but confronts it and gives voice to their pain as *their* pain and not as “pain in general,” i.e. pain separate from this particular instance of pain. A religious person wants to be relieved of pain as any person would be, but in addition to this desire they

²⁷⁷ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 192. The use of the word depths is likely an allusion to Psalm 130:2, “Out of the depths I call to You, Lord.”

²⁷⁸ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 192.

²⁷⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 195.

experience pain as an absence of meaning. Thus, the religious person also desires to be relieved of the perplexing distance from meaning and fulfillment experienced in solitude and despair.

Scheler himself, Buber notes, was once a religious person who gave up Christian theism for his metaphysics of the becoming God. In the process, Scheler elevated the philosopher as the spiritual type *par excellence* producing what Buber takes to be this mischaracterization of the spirit as a separation from embodied, material, “organic” life. For Scheler, humanity’s superiority in practical and theoretical intelligence over other animals is merely a difference in degree, not in kind. What differentiates humanity from animals for Scheler is this distancing from life that Buber describes as characteristic of the philosopher and leads us to create metaphysical accounts of existence.

In contrast to Scheler, Buber argues that the spirit is a “happening” or event that occurs without expectation.²⁸⁰ What makes an event spiritual is that it emerges from an uninhibited *participation* in concrete embodied reality, not a calculated, premeditated withdrawal from that reality. The spirit emerges in humanity in an instinct to language evident in children who describe the world in mythic terms.²⁸¹ This is not the place to discuss Buber’s remarks on language in general, but it is sufficient to note here that he regards the human instinct to speak as an indication of the priority of dialogical relations in human existence, as he describes in *I and Thou*.²⁸² Language in its most “primitive” form, as Buber would put it, reflects human beings’ essential tendency to participate in the world rather than distance themselves from it as the philosopher tends to do.

²⁸⁰ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 193.

²⁸¹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 193.

²⁸² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 69-73.

In Buber's schematic contrast of religion and philosophy, choosing to embrace this philosophical tendency to the exclusion of the religious tendency involves severing the connection between the human spirit and concrete embodied reality. In Scheler, the alienation from embodied material existence reflects the alienation experienced in social life. At the heart of Scheler's philosophy is the same problem that Buber argued faced modern Jews: a lack of security from not having a sense of home. If I understand the meaning of Buber's critique, Reform Judaism denies the problem of exile by asserting that the Jews are at home in their native land, but in doing so they assert that the life of the spirit, meaning religion, is inherently exilic. In other words, for Reform Judaism, the Jews as a body are merely citizens of wherever they are; and as a spirit their religion is not tied to any concrete embodied reality, namely a land. In this articulation, classical Reform Judaism is a Judaism of no particular place. Likewise, Scheler denies the meaningfulness of the quest for home that Buber sees as the pervasive question in the history of anthropological thinking. Scheler takes for granted the lack of security from social bonds he sees in modernity and posits that the spirit does not belong to any concrete aspect of reality, including an individual person's concrete existence. In Buber's analysis, to be spiritual for Scheler is to see oneself as not a concrete person but as an example of a generalized metaphysical reality. In Buber's view, Scheler's philosophy of existence fails on this point because it cannot deliver any genuine possibility of self-realization because an individual has no personal connection or stake in his vision of spiritual realization.

Conclusion

In my presentation of Buber's critique of Heidegger and Scheler, I have been emphasizing the similarity between Buber's critique of their anthropology and his critique of Reform Judaism embrace of exile in his essay "The Jew in the World." Buber views both sets of teachings, I argue, as contemporary versions of ancient Gnostic teachings that seek spiritual realization outside of community and embodied material existence. This similarity between the two positions reveals two aspects of Buber's philosophical anthropology. The first is that Buber's interpretation of the limits of Western philosophy was primarily shaped by his interpretation of ancient religious forms of life that he generally divided into three types, Gnosticism, Judaism and heathenism. The second aspect is that Buber saw Judaism itself – by which he meant the authentic teachings of the Hebrew prophets and their later versions – as providing vital resources to address the social and spiritual crisis of humanity.

In my reading of *The Problem of the Human Being*, I view Buber's assessment of philosophical anthropology as not only the starting point for his later philosophical anthropology but also as a philosophical contextualization of his writings on Judaism and Zionism. The first aspect of these lectures is explicit. Buber's critique of Heidegger and Scheler provide him with the starting point for introducing the notion of the between as the aspect of reality in which dialogue takes place. In both philosophers, humanity separates themselves from reality, either social or organic, in order to achieve spiritual realization. For Buber, in contrast, spiritual realization takes place through *participation*

both in the lives of others and in the embodied life of concrete material existence. Such participation in life together is the basis for genuine community.

In *The Problem of the Human Being*, Buber's discussion of community addresses the condition of modern Western humanity and not the Jewish people in particular. Likewise, Buber's introduction of the conception of the between is situated in contrast to individualism and collectivism as rival theoretical frameworks for understanding both human realization and social regeneration, not for the alleviating the spiritual or physical condition of Jews. But Buber's writings on Judaism and Zionism tell us a great deal about what this vision of ideal community looks like. His Zionist writings make it clear that the ideal of genuine community involves living and the land together, which we may understand as the fullest participation in concrete embodied reality. As in his Hasidic writings, Buber discusses the notion that work done in the spirit of holiness elevates the work to a holy act that draws humanity closer to God. In this sense, to fully comprehend the vision of community Buber alludes to in *The Problem of the Human Being*, one must attend to Buber's writings on Judaism as well as his later philosophical anthropology and social thought.

This conclusion should not surprise given what Buber says about Judaism's mission to the nations and his vision of Zionism as an attempt to fulfill that mission. If the Jewish mission is to teach the nations about the ideal of true community, then Buber's philosophical reflections on these ideals can be seen as an effort to make these ideals, rooted in the Hebrew prophets, accessible to a general Western audience whose own intellectual framework was shaped by the inheritance of Greek philosophy and Christianity. Thus, Buber's efforts to counter the effects of heathenism and Gnosticism in

philosophical reflections on spiritual life open the door to Jewish ways of thinking about spiritual realizations without explicit reference to Jewish sources, as he does in many places, most famously of course, *I and Thou*. No matter the language or the context, Buber's humanism is always *Hebrew* humanism.

Conclusion

One of the most compelling aspects of Martin Buber's writings is the way he integrates his own spiritual strivings to the task of philosophy and Jewish thought. Buber states that the task of a philosophical anthropology is to give an account of the wholeness of the human being, meaning that such a philosophy should comprehend a human as a being who strives for and can realize wholeness in their concrete life. For Buber, the task of realization demands that a person bring all of their disparate desires and tendencies into a coherent whole, a task that may be achieved in fleeting moments of spiritual elevation but is never brought to static completion.

In reading Buber's philosophical work and his writings on Judaism in light of each other, I have drawn attention to the way these writings work together not just as a set of philosophical positions but as a part of his personal quest for wholeness. Buber's youthful choice to devote time and energy to the study and transmission of Jewish religious texts was a decision of deep personal significance and I contend a personal effort to realize wholeness. He began this endeavor with the firm belief that the sources of the Jewish tradition would provide both inspiration for a Jewish national renaissance and humanistic wisdom of universal value. Moreover, to paraphrase a favorite Hasidic statement of Buber's, these two aims are one.²⁸³ For Buber, the essence of Judaism is its teaching on the humanistic task of realization, both for Jews and for all humanity.

Though Buber wrote in a variety of literary genres and on various topics, I have drawn attention to the underlying unity of these works by delineating how his polemical

²⁸³ Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Humanities Press International, 1988), 29.

arguments about Judaism motivated both his writings on Judaism and his writings on dialogue and philosophical anthropology. Even when not writing about Judaism explicitly, Buber saw himself as articulating and defending what he viewed as essentially Jewish ideas. My analysis focused on his lectures, “The Problem of the Human Being,” because I believe they offer the best entry point for seeing the unity of his Jewish and philosophical writings.

By way of conclusion, I suggest here that what makes Buber’s project enduring for modern Jewish self-understanding is the way it confronts the recurring tension in modern Jewish life between the particularly Jewish and the universally human. Buber felt this tension in a deeply personal way at a young age and his interpretation of Jewish texts represent his effort to resolve this tension by developing a humanistic interpretation of Judaism he would call Hebrew Humanism. On Buber’s reading, the task of Jewish particularity, as a concrete community, is to generate vanguard model for genuine community that would inspire the nations of the world to follow. Buber’s writings on dialogue and philosophical anthropology serve to present the essential ideas of the Jewish tradition as a set of philosophical observations and not as an interpretation of Jewish texts. Even though Buber believed that the study of Jewish sources was vital to the transmission of Jewish ideas, he also believed that these ideas could be transmitted in a philosophical idiom without the benefit of the particular language of Jewish sources. I am suggesting that even when Buber wrote without direct discussion of Jewish sources he thought of himself as teaching Jewish ideas.

My analysis of Buber’s “The Problem of the Human Being” draws attention to the way Buber’s philosophical arguments are shaped by the polemical structure of his Jewish

writings. For Buber, the philosophical alternatives to his dialogical philosophy are essentially latter day versions of ancient ideas that recur within the history of Western thought, such as Gnostic, heathen and apocalyptic. It has not been my purpose to defend Buber's general way reading of Western philosophy or theology, but rather to clarify the significance of this reading for understanding both his interpretation of Judaism and his dialogical philosophy. In particular, I have drawn greater attention to the role of embodiment both in Buber's interpretation of Jewish ideas and in his philosophical anthropology. For Buber, the human realization can only take place within the embodied world of material existence, by which Buber meant the materiality of things with which we work to survive and also the people with whom we interact in our world. Gnostic resignation, in his view, not only seeks realization outside of material existence, it does so in solitary alienation that cannot be overcome through human relationships.

As I suggested in both chapter one and chapter five, I view Buber's concept of the *shekhina* as a philosophical interpretation of the classical rabbinic concept of the *shekhina*, the earthly dwelling presence of God that according to rabbinic sources dwells within community. The *shekhina* enters into exile with Israel and continues to keep it company on its ongoing journey towards redemption. Drawing on the Hasidic concepts of realization of holiness in the every day and the Biblical concept of the kingship of God, Buber translated the classical concept of the *shekhina* into a socialist Zionist program that sought to create small communities that engage in common work on the soil. In this vision, the kingship of God means that God seeks to be realized within the material world and within human community, the two elements that constitute what he calls concrete reality. In his philosophical anthropology and social thought, Buber makes

the same claim about the nature of human realization. In “The Problem of the Human Being,” Buber does not use the theological terminology of Jewish sources, using instead the “the Absolute” in referring to the divine, but the centrality of the divine remains a part of his philosophical anthropology. In Buber’s Hebrew Humanism, human realization is the realization of the divine presence, the *Shekhina*, within the material world and human community.

Buber does set aside theological language in his later anthropological writings, such as “Elements of the Interhuman,” but this should not lead readers to the conclusion that his religious language can be separated from his philosophical anthropology or social thought. By drawing attention to the importance of embodiment in Buber’s philosophical anthropology, I have also clarified that the religious element of his thought cannot be separated from his anthropology. In Buber’s thought, there are two axes of dialogue, the interhuman and the divine-human, and both are part of the work of realization of the spiritual within the material. Buber’s concept of the between names the ontological realm of both interhuman dialogue and also divine-human dialogue. Divine-human dialogue may be between an individual and God in moments, just as interhuman dialogue may be between two people. But these moments of more discrete dialogue point towards the realization of the divine within genuine community, as with the classical Jewish aspiration for the return of both the people and *shekhina* from exile.

In Buber’s Hebrew Humanism, the classical Jewish concepts of exile and messianic redemption serve two roles. First, Buber draws on these teachings as a resource for imagining the task of building the genuine Jewish community in the land of Israel that he thought would enact the renewal of Jewish life. Second, these teachings are a model

for the universal human aspiration for realization of the divine within community. These two roles are inextricable from each other, and indeed one is essential for the other. In Buber's understanding of Jewish mission, the Jewish people must aspire to be an embodied model of genuine community for all the nations. The uniqueness of the Jewish people, in Buber's view, is that they have internalized the teaching of the dialogue with being into their national self-understanding to the extent that their success as a nation depends on whether or not they realize the ideal of the kingship of God. But this teaching is only fully realized in the culmination in a universal human redemption. At the same time, this universal human scope serves as a source of internal critique for the Jewish project. If the Jewish people fail to build a humanistic community, defined by its capacity to realize dialogical relations, then it fails to live up to its own Jewish ideals.

I am suggesting that Buber's writings in philosophical anthropology and social theory should be read as a part of his Jewish philosophy in two senses. In the first sense, these philosophical writings represent a way of teaching Jewish ideas in their most universal scope. In the second sense they present a humanistic standard by which to guide and judge the Jewish task of realizing the kingship of God within genuine community. In Buber's work as a scholar teacher and activist, he brought the principles of his philosophy to life in both these senses. In Germany, his Jewish polemics were aimed at defending the spiritual value of Judaism and inspire Jews to embrace the teachings of the Jewish tradition. As he moved to Palestine in 1938, he reframed these polemical concerns in the context of his role as a teacher of social thought in at the Hebrew University. "The Problem of the Human Being" represents a transitional moment where Buber both takes stock of the legacy of key figures in German social thought while at the same time

pointing to the pitfalls of the tradition of Western thought for the emerging Jewish intellectual political community in Palestine.

I do not suggest that we follow Buber's view that the Western tradition and Judaism each have a single overarching essence. The relationship between intellectual traditions and the development of philosophical positions is more complex and varied than his typologies of Jewish/Gnostic/heathen allow. Buber of course does not discount the value of any philosophical idea outside Judaism. I showed in particular the centrality of Kant's philosophical influence in his own work. Buber himself would acknowledge that he developed his own philosophy of dialogue in conversation with philosophers who were not Jewish and/or not interpreting Judaism outside of Judaism. Yet, I take him to be claiming that his reading of thinkers outside of Judaism helped him to clarify the humanistic ideas he found within the Jewish tradition. In its Jewish dimension, Buber's philosophical anthropology was a Zionist project in that he sought to give the texts of the Jewish tradition a voice that could be heard within the context of contemporary intellectual and cultural life on their own terms, without being denigrated by the standards of the predominant culture. Rather than let the predominant culture define the meaning of humanism, he suggested that Judaism's own teachings were humanistic, albeit in a different and unique way.

The notion of a Jewish mission to the nations of the world has remained a part of Jewish imagination and self-understanding in a variety of Jewish groups both in Israel and the diaspora. That idea, along with the idea that the Jews are a chosen people, is not without its problems. In a more modest form, however, Buber's use of this idea represents a compelling model for Jewish philosophy. Even if Judaism does not have a

single trans-historical essence, it is valuable for Jewish thinkers to identify key teachings in the tradition as guideposts for reflection on the ideals and norms of the Jewish people. Buber's suggestion that the essential teachings of the Jewish tradition are humanistic in nature remains a valuable starting point for such reflection, as does his insistence that the Jewish tradition contains social and spiritual ideals of value for non-Jews. Indeed, many contemporary Jewish philosophers develop their thought with just such assumptions. Considering Buber as an example of this approach to Jewish philosophy should benefit those who find inspiration and guidance in this task.

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