ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A DIALOGUE:

SYMMETRICAL *or* ASYMMETRICAL

[Diyaloğun Olabilirliği Üzerine: Simetrik mi Asimetrik mi?]

Songül Köse (Research Assistant)

Akdeniz Üniversity, Department of Philosophy
songulkose@akdeniz.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

In this paper, in general, I will present Martin Buber's and Emmanuel Levinas' perspectives on interpersonal relations within the main cotext of dialogue and then give my own standpoint about the issue in question: "Is asymmetry really needed for a genuine dialogue?" In the meantime, I will also propound some fundamental notions of their philosophies with the intent of displaying their viewpoints in a clearer way.

Keywords: Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, dialogue, relation, encountering.

ÖZET

Bu makalede, genel olarak Martin Buber ve Emmanuel Levinas'ın diyalog kavramının ana teması üzerinden kişilerarası ilişkiler üzerine bakış açıları sunulacak ve "Gerçek bir diyalog için asimetri gerçekten de gerekli midir?" sorusuna yönelik yazarın görüşü belirtilecektir. Bunların yanı sıra, ayrıca, Buber ve Levinas'ın felsefelerindeki kimi temel kavramlar da onların konu hakkındaki düşüncelerini daha anlaşılır kılmak amacıyla açımlanacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, diyalog, ilişki, karşılaşma.

According to Martin Buber, man is "the being who faces an 'other' and constructs a world from the dual acts of distancing and relating." ("Buber, Martin", 2016). Although even this short quote says a lot about Buber's dialogical philosophy, in the next few pharagraphs I will shortly mention about his remarks on communication and especially on dialogue.

To Buber, there are two modes of existence in the world. These modes are composed of two word pairs: I-Thou and I-It. The I-It word pair is used for the experiential mode of existence, *id est* the essence of the I-It mode is 'experience' or 'knowledge'. In this kind of existence, the It exists as detached from I and I am indifferent to It. For Buber, scientists' attitude towards the objects of their study fields falls under this kind of existence. Or, one's observation of objects, people, actions and so on without getting involved dialogically is an I-It existence model. In I-It existential mode, the object of I's experience or knowledge is not affected because it stays passive. Therefore, relation is not a matter of I-It mode of existence because of the fact that "relationship is dialogical."(Bergman, 1991, s. 227).

On the other hand, the I-Thou mode of existence is based on 'relation'. Buber divides this kind of I-Thou relation into three, namely, relation with nature (with tree for instance), relation with spirituals (for example, with God) and relation with people. Furthermore, dialogue emerges from the relation with people because as Gordon states "[D]ialogue occurs in the intersubjective realm that exists between persons; it cannot be reduced to something that happens within an individual's psyche or the dynamics of a group." (Gordon, 2011, s. 211).

Moreover Buber asserts that dialogue is a tripartite category, i.e. dialogue exists in three forms as genuine dialogue, technical dialogue and monologue (Buber, 2004, s. 22). Dan Avnon explicates succinctly, in his book *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue,* these three forms of dialogue as follows:

> [Dialogue] is *genuine* when each of the participants 'has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.' Dialogue is *technical* when 'prompted solely by the need of objective understanding,' that is, by the need to understand the object that

is present as the focal point of the meeting. *Monologue*, a distortion of dialogue, is the characteristic of most speech. (Avnon, 1998, s. 138)

Annette Holba defines technical dialogue as "a direct response to a functional need" (2008, s. 491) and I think her expression is easier to understand than both Avnon's and Buber's. Monologue, if you do not mind, can be defined as "inner chatter". Explaining these two forms will be waste of time and wandering away from the main topic, since as stated in the opening pharagraph the focal point of this paper is 'genuine dialogue'. That's why, in the hope of explaining them in detail in another paper, let me get back to our primary concern.

As Buber indicates, genuine dialogue can be spoken and/or silent (Buber, 2004, s. 22). In genuine dialogue, it is important for the parties to be (presence), to be aware of the other (awareness) and to be seen as a whole particular being (affirmation). For the relation between the parties to occur there first must be a distance, i.e. relation presupposes distance (encountering/ confronting). Then, I waits for to be acknowledged by Thou and for a response to his/her invitation from Thou. Once Thou responds to I's call, "betweenness" is obtained and so a basis for dialogue is provided. According to Buber, dialogue must be unmediated and mutual. Both I and Thou must attend the dialogue in an equal and active reciprocity. Buber's I within a dialogue with Thou, does not consider Thou as a means to an end or as just an object. In dialogue, when embracing (inclusion) is actualised, neither I nor Thou leaves from their own wholenesses or spheres. Besides, for Gordon, "the sphere that exists between two persons transcends the individual spheres of each of the speakers and is always more than the sum total of their individual worlds." (Gordon, 2011, s. 214). Because, embracing is, unlike empathy, experiences the other's world without losing your own viewpoint. Therefore, in my opinion, the reciprocal act in a dialogue does not constitute a symmetry between I and Thou which can cause the loss of subjectiveness of them (1).

I want to postpone deepening Buber's I-Thou relation with the aim of elucidating Emmanuel Levinas' stance on interpersonal relation. After presenting Levinas' approach to the mentioned issue and showing his objections to Buber's dialogical theory, I will try to answer the question of this paper.

According to Emmanuel Levinas, like to Buber, intersubjective relation is a basic requisite of human life. However, unlike Buber, Levinas used this idea as the basis of his ethics because he considered ethics as "first philosophy" ("Emmanuel Levinas", 2011). In Levinas' principal work *Totality and Infinity*, he continuously talks about the transition from I to the Other whom I have an infinite responsibility. For Levinas, ethics is prior to ontology. The very existence of the Other has an important and inevitable effect on who I am and who I am not. For this reason, I must be grateful to the Other, feel the *hierarchy* all the time and act responsibly. I have used "hierarchy" on purpose even though I have not met such a usage for the I-Other relation in none of the texts I read, but I understand this relation in this way because of the reasons that Other is pre-existent, his face is above me and he demands an infinite *responsibility to* him. Put it differently, the Other is prior to I in both ontological and ethical sense. Yet, sticking to Levinas' vocabulary and using "asymmetry" instead of "hierarchy" is maybe what I should do.

In Buber's theory of dialogue (I-Thou relation), Thou does not seem as a vague concept; at least, reader can understand that Thou is a person. However, Levinas does not assign an explicit definition on whatness of the Other. Furthermore, I believe that, to know who or what the Other is very crucial in order to understand Levinas' view on communication. But when one examines the book *Totality and Infinity*, s/he cannot grasp the Other clearly. One reason for this is that, as Levinas announced, he is against the conventional attitude toward ontological categorizations, i.e. he does not want to give a distinct definition of the Other. Because, such categories define subject and object for sure (ontological or metaphysical closure): This is like nailing down something and this is contrary to both the infinity and alterity of the Other: "So, knowing is a reduction of the foreign to the familiar, of what is other to the self." (Beavers, 1996, s. 2).

The other reason for the elusiveness of the Other is that, as asserted in various articles, even Levinas does not have a clear idea about it. Levinas verbalises this state of the Other as "epiphany as a face" (Levinas, 1979, s. 187). Levinas, in the book *Basic Philosophical Writings*, explains this as: "The Other comes to us not only out of context but also without mediation; he signifies by himself" (Levinas, 1996, s. 53).

Balanuye (2006), in his dissertation entitled "Ethico-Political Acts of Desire", construes the elusiveness of the Other as a necessity: "[the Other] must stay outside the realm of the ontology and of the language this ontology implies as a necessary feature of 'ethical transcendence'." (Balanuye, 2006, s. 47). As far as I am concerned, Levinas' attempt in escaping from ontological categorizations turned into a struggle and, in a sense, obliged him to evade the important question regarding the whatness of the Other.

In the present case, "Then, in what way can we know the Other?" seems as a reasonable question to ask. Levinas' answer would be "the face" because according to him "the Other presents itself (interrupts the same) as a face, not a theme." (Levinas, 1996, s. 17). Starting from this point of view, Levinas makes his claim about the priority of ethics: a relation between two persons starts from the encounter and "face" is the focal point of encountering and from here the idea of ethical responsibility emerges. This ethical responsibility is infinite and therefore the Other's face is like a window that opens out onto the infinity because " In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God." (Levinas, 1982, s. 92). Moreover, the Other, for Levinas, "comes from a dimension of height" and, because of his transcendence which comes from exteriority, he "presents himself as a stranger" (Levinas, 1979, s. 215).

Furthermore, in a relation between I and the Other, because of the singularity (or subjectivity) of I and the alterity of the Other, they never intertwine each others and hence their relation occurs in an *asymmetrical* place: "Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalization but takes form as fraternity and discourse, is situated in a 'space' essentially asymmetrical." (Levinas, 1979, s. 216).

As Levinas indicates, the Other is the exteriority in virtue of which I reaches himself/herself. His exteriority comes from his being transcendent and infinite. Therefore, he is necessarily elusive and unknowable to I. His epiphany occurs as a face and his face lays an ethical responsibility on I. Besides, because of the reasons given above, the I-Other relation takes place in an asymmetric plane.

Then, in Levinas' perspective, how is dialogue possible between I and the Other? As stated in a co-authored article:

> For Levinas, generally speaking, *I witness the face of the other in and through language*,..., since language constitutes the relation to the other (there can be no relation to another person without language, in other words). As such, this immediate moment of coming into contact with the face is a moment of transcendence, a kind of deliverance, if you will, from the ordinary structures of being. (Diedrich, W. W. & Burggraeve, R. & Gastmans, C., 2006, s. 43, emphasis added)
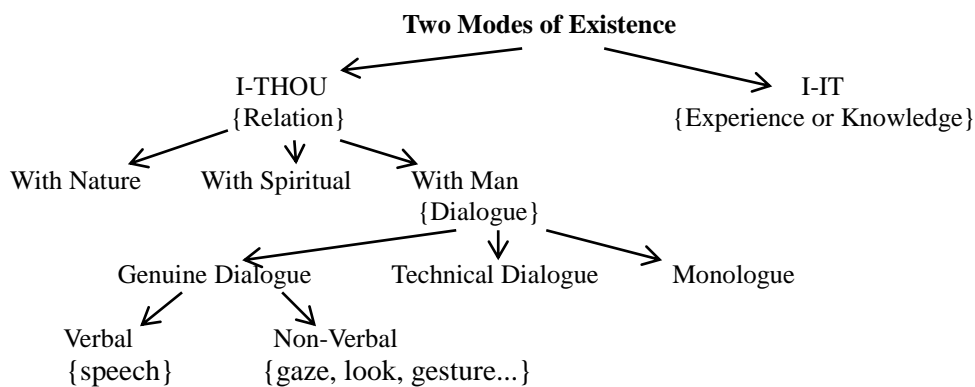
In other words, the linkage between I and the Other is language. In addition to that, as mentioned above, the dialogue between I and the Other is asymmetrical because of the reason that the relation between them is itself asymmetrical. Additionally, for Levinas, in a dialogical communication, I is in a genuine relation with the Other: "Discourse is not simply a modification of intuition (or of thought), but an original relation with exterior being." (Levinas, 1979, s. 66).

After presenting Buber's and Levinas' perspectives on dialogical relations articulately, now it is time to answer the question "Is asymmetry really needed for a genuine dialogue?". The first thing I am going to say is that Buber uses the term dialogue in a much narrower sense than Levinas. Buber, unlike Levinas, does not attribute a transcendent quality to dialogue. Therefore, while Levinas' dialogical encounter has a "heteronomous" character, Buber's dialogical encounter, if you will, has an "autonomous" character, and hence reciprocity (or mutuality) comes into question against which Levinas argues. Levinas criticizes Buber for being reductionist because Levinas interprets the notions of reciprocity (or mutuality) and inclusion (embracing) in I-Thou relation as the loss of subjectiveness of both I and Thou. Yet, as explained above, even if the relation between I and Thou is designated as symmetric by Levinas, albeit the inclusion neither I nor Thou loses their individual spheres. In other words, the difference between them does not disappear. On the contrary, in my point of view, sacrifices that I has to make in the infinite responsibility to the Other in Levinas' dialogical relation put I in danger of not preserving his wholeness.

Last but not least, I find Buber's dialogical theory much more well-structured than Levinas'. That is what I think because Buber's Thou is not elusive, tacit or ungraspable and there is no hierarchy between the parties of the dialogue because Buber does not consider asymmetry necessary. Besides, Levinas' arguments against Buber's I-Thou relation do not seem sound or valid to me because Levinas evaluates Buber's theory based on the rules of his own relational theory ignoring the fact that they designate different starting points as a basis. Moreover, I do not understand the possibility of any kind of ethical relation between immanent and transcendent. Hereby, if there is any possibility for a genuine dialogue, it should take place in a symmetric plane.

Endnotes

(1) The chart below is what I made from my Buber readings and shows the way I understand him:

Two Modes of Existence

I-THOU
{Relation}

I-IT
{Experience or Knowledge}

With Nature   With Spiritual   With Man
{Dialogue}

Genuine Dialogue   Technical Dialogue   Monologue

Verbal
{speech}

Non-Verbal
{gaze, look, gesture...}

REFERENCES

Avnon, D. (1998) *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Balanuye, Ç. (2006) *Ethico-Political Acts of Desire*. Phd Thesis, METU, Ankara.

Beavers, A. F. (1996) *Emmanuel Levinas and the Prophetic Voice of Postmodernity* (with addings to the 1993 original text) Retrieved February 1, 2016 from http://faculty.evansville.edu/tb2/PDFs/PropheticVoice.pdf

Bergman, S. H. (1991) Trans. from Hebrew by Arnold A. Gerstein, *Dialogical Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber,* Albany, US: State University of New York Press.

Buber, M. (2004) *Between Man and Man,* NY: Taylor & Francis e-Library.

Buber, Martin. In *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved Januay 28, 2016 from http://www.iep.utm.edu/buber/

Diedrich, W. W. & Burggraeve, R. & Gastmans, C. (2006) Towards a Levinasian Care Ethic, In *Ethical Perspectives: Journal of the European Ethics*, Vol. 13, No. 1 s. 33-61.

Gordon, M. (2011) Listening as Embracing The Other: Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue, In *Educational Theory*, Vol. 61, No. 2 s. 207-219.

Holba, A. (2008) Revisiting Martin Buber's I-It: A Rhetorical Strategy, In *Human Communication*, Vol. 11, No. 4, s. 489-503.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1979) *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* USA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and Duquesne University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1982) *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo,* trans. by R. A. Cohen, Pitsburg: Duguesne University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1996) *Basic Philosophical Writings,* USA: Indiana University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Retrieved January 25, 2016 from http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/