

## True Dialogue in an Era of Synthetic Conversation: Rethinking Spiritual Knowledge and Artificial Intelligence

"From time to time, I seem to hear a question echoing out of the depth of stillness. But he who asks it does not know that he is asking it and he to whom the question is addressed is not aware that he is being questioned. It is the question that the world of today, in utter unawareness, puts to religion. This is the question: "are you, perhaps, the power that can help me? Can you teach me to believe?"

(Martin Buber, "The Silent Question", On Judaism, p. 202)

In this paper I would like to re-evaluate the question of ethics and humanity through Buber's "the essence of human being". My aim is to think about the humanity of human being in the time of Artificial Intelligence, and the possibility of truthful conversation - true dialogue - at this time, that I call here: an Era of Synthetic Conversation.

In more than one aspect, this kind of questions and this ethical context, may rephrase the role of Religion in general, and Judaism in particular, facing the problems of technology of our time. Let me say, that for Buber, facing the problem of humanity in modernity, was his main task in all of his philosophy: to establish the way of "believing humanism". And as a Zionist and Jewish thinker he pointed and wrote the programmatic task of Zionism: constructing a way of "Jewish humanism" – of "Hebrew humanism".

I would like to draw your attention to three domains of discussions - crucial and important, each of which requires us to think deeply - religiously and ethically.

The first discussion is "the human crisis" or "the crisis of human being". and that means that we have to ask ourselves about the meaning of humanity in the time of crisis. What will happen to man in the age of artificial intelligence? Is there a way to remain human – an authentic human being – in an era that most of our life is surrounded by a synthetic environment.

The second discussion is the question and the option to make a true dialogue in our time. Is it possible to having a direct and sincere conversation between people in our time – the era of screens, cellular phones, and electronic surroundings and algorithm that can guess what we are going to say.

And the third discussion is the ethical question of "the moral subject". Whether and how we should relate to the new intelligence beings - artificial beings – as an ethical subject ? For example, do we have to think about robots as moral subjects? Of course, there is a legal question concerning these new developments, but I want to focus on the basis: the ethical mode of thinking.

Of course, these discussions are not separate questions, but related one to the other. But, still I would like to distinguish between these three topics.

### In the Midst of Crisis

"For the past three decades, we have felt that we were living in the initial phases of the greatest crisis of humanity has ever known. It grows increasingly clear to us that the tremendous happenings of recent years, too, can be understood only as symptoms of this crisis. It is not merely a crisis brought about by one economic and social system being superseded by another, more or less ready to take its place; rather are all systems, old and new, equally involved in the crisis, what is the question, therefore, is nothing less than man's whole existence in the world"

(In the midst of Crisis, The Writings of Martin Buber, Will Herberg (ed.), p. 123)

Martin Buber, The Israeli and Austrian philosopher, proclaimed the most precise wording and difficult mode of saying about the meaning of this crisis. The crisis of human being following the twentieth century – with the World Wars, the period of Atomic bombs,

Genocides and the Shoah – the holocaust. But this was not the first time that Buber wrote about human crisis. The basis of Buberian thinking was based on what he called "the desire for the one" – the passion for unifying existence. And the search for "what is common to all".

Buber well articulates his worry from the humanity of human being - from the beginning of the twentieth century. He analyzes the problems of humanity, and his deep understanding of this crisis, because the alienation between people – between one and the other - between man to man, between human being and nature, and between human being and divine entities.

According to Buber, the greatest difficulty of modern age, is the crisis of humanity and the alienation of human being – one in the face of the other person – but also there is an alienation of one to himself. In the age of alienation – there is a distance between people – there is forgery – a false – in the most intimate relations between people. In the age of alienation, human being cannot be sure and safe in his life, and as a result of that feeling, he could lose his possibility to live in the deep sense of the word.

So, while Buber wrote his magnum opus – *Ich und du*, he phrases clearly that there is a change of the meaning of subjectivity – the subjectivity of the subject - when man relates to an object and when he relates to a subject. For Buber, the fundamental differentiation is the differentiation between 'relation' and 'distance'. There are two modes of relations : "I – thou" and "I – It" - *ich und du* – *ich und es*.

To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks.

The primary words are not isolated worlds, but combined words.

The one primary word is the combination *I – Thou*. The other primary word is the combination *I-It*; wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words *He* or *She* can replace *It*.

Hence the *I* of man is also twofold,

For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*.  
(Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 45)

And I would like to read this section carefully - and hear the nuances - the meaning of the *I* changed when one is facing the other as a subject and when one is facing the other as an object. So, here is the question: what is going to be with our relation to the other person – or maybe we have to ask ourselves what is the meaning of 'subjectivity' – of 'I and Thou' relations - facing AI - an artificial subject – unreal creature. According to Buber, the all meaning of subjectivity completely changed. What is the meaning of the *I* – of the self – in the time of Artificial Intelligence. According to this fundamental differentiation, there is no option for true dialogue with AI. And we have to ask ourselves if there could be an option for a true dialogue between people at all, because what happened to subject in this age of technology.

Is there an option of real dialogue?

So, if the meaning of dialogue of *I* has already changed, and we prefer the conversation of the "I and It", what is the meaning of dialogue in our age? As you already know, rhetoric – manipulation – professional talking – these are different ways to describe false conversation. We cannot relate to the relation of "I and It" – "Ich und es" – as a real dialogue at all. So, facing the new technology, in the age of AI - when you make a chat with virtual assistant and you don't know - if there is a human assistant behind the chat, or just a virtual assistant – that you talk with.

And again, I would like to come back to the same question: Can we continue to talk about a true dialogue in our age? For me, this is a urgent question that we have to deal with.

Perhaps, the meaning of the absence of true dialogue between people, is concealing human values – and as a result of that : the absence of humanity - of the historical human being as we know him. Is there an option of be make a real conversation – to be in a face to face meeting. Buber calls it "conversation as a being in dialogue" – the conversation as a real and true conversation. According to Buber we have to differentiate between real dialogue and

unreal dialogue. He describes and defines a wide range of different conversations that are false – that are not a true dialogue. For Buber, that is, conversations that are technically conducted, conversations that act as if they are direct conversations, but they are still false conversation. The great rhetoric is one of the way to make a dialogue that is false dialogue. Usually, people are busy with the task of keeping themselves from the view of the other person. One get into a conversation, and while he is presented in the situation of conversation, he continues to ask himself: how am I viewed by the other's eyes ? and perhaps it is more complicated, when this man responses to the other question, while taking into account the way that his answer will accepted by the other. In a real dialogue, in a true dialogue – one has to open himself before the other person, staying in a mode of being exposed before the other, and in the option of being in reciprocity between I and the other.

Can we still continue to talk about a true dialogue ? about sincerity ?

That peoples can no longer carry on authentic dialogue with one another is not only the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time, it is also that which most urgently makes a demand of us. I believe, despite all, that the peoples in this hour can enter into dialogue, into a genuine dialogue with one another. In a genuine dialogue each of the partners, even when he stands in opposition to the other, heeds, affirms, and confirms his opponent as an existing other. Only so can conflict certainly not be eliminated from the world, but be humanly arbitrated and led towards its overcoming. (“Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace”, Pointing the Way)

### The Third discussion

The very important and perhaps the most crucial question, which I can only point about today, concerns the moral status of creatures with artificial intelligence. The ethical imperative and the moral obligation according to Kantian philosophy relates to any creature

with reason. Hence the meticulous question, what is the relation in which we are committed to for a new kind of creatures ? what is the ethical obligation in a world where there are intelligent beings that are not with the status and the definition of being human? We usually think of artificial intelligence as a continuation of human will and deed. What Heidegger analyzed in his phenomenology of *Techné* – the hammer as extension of the hand. So, the AI is just an extension of human being, and the responsibility is and remain just upon the subject – just for human beings.

Then, the moral question pertains to the level of responsibility that a person has for the action through artificial intelligence. But here, I would like to take another step and ask, what will be the ethical status of those creatures - perhaps robots - who have intelligence.

Before I want to start answering these questions, it is important for me to add a more wide perspective of the discussion. It is up to us to ask what tools - and ideas - we need to measure these questions. What is the place of religious conception within this context? Perhaps, I need to articulate this question about the differences and the connections between three domains: ethics, religion and technology. As I opened my paper: "the question that the world of today, in utter unawareness, puts to religion". Has the religion have the power to assist humanity?" "could the religious thinking teach us to believe in human being in the age of artificial intelligence ?"

Please let me go back to the Buberian dialogue. In our age, the most crucial task, is to think about humanity facing the crisis of human being. The most of our efforts should be directed to redefining humanity and human being. We have to rebuild our lexicon of "what is the meaning of being human". And the way will lead to diversity discourses of humanism, of religions and of philosophies.

At the end of his life he gave a lecture and said:

"For if I should characterize my own basic view by a concept, it can only be... the concept of a believing humanism". It is with these words that Buber described himself in 1963, some two years prior to his death, upon receiving the Erasmus Prize in Amsterdam. By his own

profession, the one concept capable of describing his worldview articulates a profound and inner connection between humanism and faith." "A Believing Humanism" was for Buber a single concept that in essence combines two principles – one oriented to the human and one oriented to the divine. In this speech, Buber brings full circle a course of creative endeavor lasting more than sixty years, since he first named it "Biblical humanism", a concept that became elucidated gradually, until "A Believing Humanism" came to signify Buber's self-declared spiritual identity.

The ethical and religious task: 'Biblical Humanism'.

And here I would like to arrive to conclusion – or maybe instead of conclusion.

The history of "Humanism" is the history of all the attempts to define "what is the meaning of being human" - "what is the ethical meaning of being human". These are attempts that can be achieved by literary activity, which determines these types of literature that constitute the humanist conception of being human. These humanist culture and art reshaping the concept of humanism and established the educational system in the light of the concept of "Humanism".

"Humanism", says Buber, is the faith in human being, 'if he becomes human'. The thought that man is the object of faith is a rhetorically seductive one, but it requires some reflections. Buber sees the potential of problematic implications of this idea, and uses the citation "if he were a man" - 'if he becomes human', to emphasize this point.

In other words, faith in man is not faith in the human biological species, simply because it is human, but it is faith in man's potential to be human. The moral significance of this attitude is that man is required to recognize - and take into account - that the achievement of humanism is not guaranteed, and that he might discover himself sliding into the zone of inhumanity .

And when, at certain times, the danger looms that humanity will slide into the zone of the 'inhuman', then must we turn for assistance to an earlier age, in which the human element of humanity was clearer and purer, in order to find the driving force towards a new, freer

humanity. The renewal of the concept of humanity is undertaken in the shadow of the threat of losing it. Talking about humanism is not merely innocent and pretty speech, as we might be tempted to think. It stands rather in the looming shadow of the loss and the absence of humanism, and even emerges out of a struggle with its actual absence. The goal of humanism, the goal of returning to history, is not only the search for a better humanity and humane-ness but also a search for another type of literature, an ideal literature:

“According to the true humanistic understanding, the literary tradition is not mainly a matter of aesthetic admiration or historical teaching, or even of patriotic prides, although it contains some of those things as well as others; according to the true understanding it is first and foremost authoritative and normative, because it teaches the distinction between the human and the inhuman, it testifies in regard to the human and demonstrates it.”

Therefore, come back to the linguistic tradition is not only a return to the past; its role is to generate an image of the normative value of the human qua human.

The foregoing discussion allows us to understand the meaning of the project that Buber points to: a return to the Bible. This is not a romantic experiment of a return to the glorious past of the Jewish people. Nor is it an attempt to study the Bible per se – either from a literary, national, or historical perspective. The goal of returning to the Bible has an ethical, cultural goal – to identify the normative value presented in the Bible.

And maybe in those words, I will ask to end my talk, today. The risk of losing the humanity in the age of artificial intelligence is real. If the risk was great enough in the age of technology, then it became much more risky, in the age of thought algorithms, and the ability of artificial intelligence.

And what in Buber's eyes can preserve humanism - and humanity in a non-human era - is the Bible's special status, which allows and calls us to human ethical being. and the meaning of biblical and Hebrew humanism is to be in dialogue - in life of dialogue.