

## CHAPTER 1

### *Dialogue and Human Existence*

Dialogue is important. I know this sounds trivial, and yet this whole chapter presents an attempt to establish the notion of dialogue as a central fact of human existence, as an ontological concept. The word *ontological* does not refer to just any kind of being, neither does it deal with the existence of dialogue; it refers specifically to human existence. This may not be the most conventional use of the term, but from my point of view, it is the most accurate one. The ontological concept of dialogue explores the place of dialogue in the human way of being. One of the reasons for using the adjective *ontological* is a need to distinguish between what I propose and a number of non-ontological concepts of dialogue. In the context of this book, the very existence of a human being in his or her human quality is a result of dialogue. In the non-ontological conception of dialogue, this relation between dialogue and human existence is reversed: dialogue is treated as secondary to human existence, mainly as a form of communication.<sup>1</sup>

Several thinkers of hermeneutics tradition, for example, Heidegger<sup>2</sup> and then Gadamer,<sup>3</sup> made similar ontological claims regarding the centrality of understanding for being. However, these are two different uses of the term *ontological*. Hermeneutics describes being of the world in light of language and understanding. This book is an attempt to give a particular answer to the question, What does it mean to be human?

I will draw on the works of Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin, who developed the two major ontological theories of dialogue. In particular, two works will receive most of my attention since they represent the thought of the two authors in the most concentrated form. These are *I and Thou* by Buber and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* by Bakhtin. However, this book cannot be positioned in the context of scholarship on Buber and Bakhtin. None of my claims are to establish new or better interpretations of these two philosophers' thought. I may as well put

“Buber” and “Bakhtin” in quotation marks, so that someone’s established opinions about authentic Buber and Bakhtin are not offended. As strange as it may sound, I am not really interested in finding what exactly Mikhail Bakhtin and Martin Buber meant and what their position was on this and that. It is so in part because this is a work of applied philosophy, and in part because in my opinion, meanings of all texts, including the texts of my favorite philosophers, are born when we read them, and not when the texts are written. I would happily accept charges that some quotations are taken out of context and some of their ideas are misunderstood by me, as long as the comments and conclusions made are worthy of discussion.

This free reading of the philosophical texts does not, I hope, mean that anything goes. The question is, indeed, where is the border drawn between a creative interpretation and a shoddy scholarship. I think the key is in how we treat an author we discuss. A more traditional scholar would show his respect to Buber, for example, by a solid attempt to discover the authentic meaning of Buber’s philosophy by analyzing the whole totality of his works along with the most important explications of Buber by other authors. I attempt to construct the strongest possible “Buberian” position in the context of the particular conversation of this book. It is essential for me to capture what Buber might have said to contribute to this particular conversation, even if he never actually said it. In other words, I value the strength of an argument above its authenticity. The disclaimer here is that these are rather a fictional Buber and a fictional Bakhtin, although I use real people to create the philosophical characters.

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The two philosophers presented their thought in forms that are worth mentioning. Buber wrote *I and Thou* in a manner that was quite unusual for traditional philosophy. In fact it is so idiosyncratic that some received the book as poetry rather than philosophy.<sup>4</sup> It is probably both, but I am only going to touch upon its philosophical aspect, if only because it is inaccessible to me in German. *I and Thou* is an extremely obscure book, which is difficult to analyze and critique, if one approaches it as a traditional

work of philosophical writing. But it also strikes as very clear and concise once you make it to resonate with what you know about life rather than what you know about philosophy. The basic structure of Buber's language is defined in his initial claim: "To man the world is twofold."<sup>5</sup> *I-Thou* and *I-It* are two pairs of primary words that distinguish two very different modes of existence. Hence, *I-Thou* or just *Thou* refers to the realm of the dialogical relation, while *I-It* or *It* to the realm of subject-object experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Bakhtin did not write poetry, but neither did he state his philosophical views directly. He conveys his philosophy mainly through a literary analysis of Dostoevsky and Rabelais. Following Clark and Holquist,<sup>7</sup> I will assume that Bakhtin invites Dostoevsky to be his interlocutor, and not an authoritative source. For instance, Bakhtin wrote about Dostoevsky's novel: "Not a single element of the work is structured from the point of view of a non-participating 'third person'."<sup>8</sup> For my purposes, this should be read as: "The position of the 'non-participating third' is inadequate." I defer until later discussion about whether such a claim is ontological or ethical in its nature. Yet there is no reason to confine Bakhtin's thought to literary criticism only. Dostoevsky's novel was for Bakhtin quite clearly a model of the human universe. He characterized his own work as *philosophical anthropology*,<sup>9</sup> and his works are best understood in this way.

One more preliminary note regards the extent of the influence of Buber (1878–1965) on Bakhtin (1895–1975). I need to make this point in order to show that neither of the two philosophers derives from another, and that they complement rather than repeat each other. Remarkably little work has been done to compare the two thinkers, and I am not about to do it here. My aim is not a systematic comparison of the two philosophies, but a construction of a framework useful in my further analysis of education. K. Clark and M. Holquist briefly note that young Bakhtin was introduced to Buber's work by a German tutor sometime between 1910 and 1913. Bakhtin does not discuss Buber in his works, which may or may not demonstrate that Bakhtin was not familiar with the mature Buber's thought.<sup>10</sup> Nina Perlina attempts to demonstrate "an astonishing similarity of opinions and formulaic renditions between Mikhail Bakhtin and Martin Buber."<sup>11</sup> She attributes these similar-

ities not as much to direct influence, which is not quite proven yet—although Bakhtin mentioned Buber in his correspondence with Kagan—as to the fact that the two men were contemporaries, and developed as thinkers in similar intellectual milieus. In particular, he and his circle were interested in the work of the neo-Kantian Marburg school of Hermann Cohen, who also had influenced Buber's thought. In addition, Bakhtin ignores many issues central to Buber, as if he was not aware of all aspects of Buber's philosophy. For instance, he does not address Buber's idea of a whole being, his analysis of feelings in the *I-It* relations, and the like. And finally, Bakhtin wrote most of his Dostoevsky book in 1922,<sup>12</sup> while Buber's *I and Thou* first appeared in German in 1923.

Caryl Emerson offers an interesting discussion of the Buber-Bakhtin connection in the context of recent Russian studies of Bakhtin. Various attempts were recently made in Russia to draw parallels, to sharply contrast, and to trace connections between the two philosophers.<sup>13</sup> Until proven otherwise, I will assume the two ontological theories of the dialogue as two independent theories. In other words, I choose to treat the parallels between Buber and Bakhtin as an extra support, as if they corroborated each other's claims. And I need such support because strong argumentation is not to be found in the two philosophers' writings. Martin Buber never bothered to explain exactly why he thinks the world is twofold. He stated it as a self-evident truth, which is how much of philosophy, and especially that of an ontological kind, is conducted. As I have mentioned, Mikhail Bakhtin disguised philosophy as literary criticism. So, he credits Dostoevsky or Rabelais for much of his claims, which is hardly a true philosophical argument.

Having said there is not much of a traditional philosophic argument in the works of Bakhtin and Buber, I do not intend in any way diminish the extent of their contribution to philosophy. To the contrary, I consider the two to be among most important thinkers of this century. What they did was to see the difference among groups and individuals as not simply an important human condition, but as a central, defining condition of human existence. They placed the difference in the very center. They also took dialogue to be the way of being in the world of irreducible, fundamental difference.

THOU ART, THEREFORE, I AM:  
THE NATURE OF DISCOVERY

What exactly did Buber and Bakhtin contribute to the philosophy of dialogue? Bakhtin compared Dostoevsky's invention of the dialogical novel to the Copernican revolution.<sup>14</sup> This metaphor, which does not strike as a novelty, may easily be applied to Bakhtin himself, as well as to Buber. Indeed, Copernicus did not discover any new observable facts: the Sun and planets still seem to revolve around the Earth. However, the perception of the universe had completely changed after Copernicus (not right away, of course). A different object had become the center of this world. Similarly, neither Buber nor Bakhtin invented new practices. All they did was to describe the world of human relations differently. Bakhtin, for instance, emphasized, "We repeat: what is at issue here is not the discovery of new features or new types of man."<sup>15</sup> It is to discover a new and integral *aspect* of being human.

Buber and Bakhtin, like Copernicus, discovered the new center of the human universe, the *dialogical*. It is the center in a sense that the very fact of human existence is contingent upon engagement in dialogical relations. An individual may exist as an organism in a physical or a biological sense. But we are truly human only when we are in a dialogical relation with another. The most important things in human lives happen *between* human beings, rather than within or without them. Buber states unequivocally: "All real living is meeting."<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin's formulation is quite similar in its categorical overtones. He writes,

It is fully understandable that at the center of Dostoevsky's artistic world must lie dialogue, and dialogue not as means but as an end in itself. Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. It is not a means for revealing or bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is—and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end. . . .

Everything in Dostoevsky's novel tends toward dialogue, toward a dialogic opposition, as if tending toward its center. All

else is the means; dialogue is the end. A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is minimum for life, the minimum for existence.<sup>17</sup>

Both writers shift the weight of significance to the realm of the dialogical. Dialogue is not simply a conversation, a way of communication, and a means toward some other goals. Dialogue becomes the goal in itself, the central purpose of human life. This is quite a radical proposition, which I nevertheless intend to take seriously. The formula of human existence in this approach is following: "Thou art, therefore I am." The assertion of another's being is essential for my own being; the process of this assertion *is* my being. Self-awareness is secondary to the dialogical relation with the other. If I do not accept and make sense of your existence, there is not a way for me to exist or make sense of my own being. A failure to affirm the being of the other brings myself into non-being.

Buber expressed the idea about dialogue as a fundamental ontological notion by the inclusion of the *eternal Thou* notion in his framework. One should take into consideration the theological foundations of Buber's philosophy. Buber thought of dialogue as meeting God through meeting another human being: "In each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*."<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin, who probably had Christian beliefs, expressed the same or similar idea in a more secular form, although he did not elaborate on the subject. Let us remember that it was a profoundly atheist political regime that made decisions whether Bakhtin would publish his work. Bakhtin saw a role for a pure "man in man," a representative of "all others" for the self. "[The culminating points of Dostoevsky's dialogues] rise above the plot in the abstract sphere of pure relationship, one person to another."<sup>19</sup> The "man in man" is a concept not unlike that of eternal *Thou*. In dialogue we transcend our immediate situatedness, and get in touch with what is essential about us as humans.

Why does dialogue become the foundation of being? While both thinkers do recognize the importance and omnipresence of the subject-object, or *I-It*, relation, this relation is on the periphery of being; it is something inevitable, but not essential for human existence. "And in all seriousness of truth, hear this: with-

out *It* man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Bakhtin noted that the discovery of the polyphonic novel does not in any way cancel other, monological genres of literature.<sup>21</sup> And yet he writes: "Only purely mechanical relationships are not dialogic, and Dostoevsky categorically denied their importance for understanding and interpreting life and the acts of man."<sup>22</sup>

The above claim about dialogue as the only truly human sphere of being is quite strong. Those who never know dialogue are described as only partially existing, as not fully human. One may even suspect an attempt to separate human beings into an "enlightened" caste of those able to enter the dialogical, and another caste of those who are not. Such a charge would not be fair for two reasons. First, the fuller existence in dialogue is defined not by separateness, but by connectedness with others. "Thou art" includes the other in the very core of one's own being; it is a radically inclusive formula. Second, the dialogical is a universal phenomenon, accessible to everyone equally, and readily available in foundations of every culture and every language. Bakhtin writes that *every* meaning is co-authored; *every* word uttered by an individual belongs in part to somebody else. "[Dialogic relationships]—are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all the relationships and manifestations of human life—in general, everything that has meaning and significance."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Buber argues that *I-Thou* is a natural way of life, represented both in the history of primitive men, and in the individual history of a child.<sup>24</sup> "There are not two kinds of man, but two poles of humanity. . . . Every man lives in the twofold *I*."<sup>25</sup> "All men have somewhere been aware of the *Thou*."<sup>26</sup>

It seems that Buber and Bakhtin are saying this: for full existence as a human being, one not only has to enter the dialogical relation, but also to know and value the fact of such an entry. Here we find a line that separates human existence from existence of material world. One may always argue that the material world exists without and independently of human understanding of it, although even such a claim was persistently challenged as long as there is philosophy. However, human existence depends on one's own awareness of the human existence. One of Buber's central

claims is just this: primary words bring about existence. That is why there is no clear distinction between Buber's and Bakhtin's ontological and normative claims; moreover, there is a tension here: one is fully existent only in dialogue, therefore one *must* enter the dialogical to exist fully.

Placing the dialogical at the center of human existence has its consequences for educational theory. Before talking about my own understanding of these consequences, I would like to demarcate what I call non-ontological concepts of dialogue in education. The approach that seems to be erroneous to me is to promote dialogue in education as an excellent tool of learning. Using the same Copernicus metaphor, such an approach amounts to suggesting: "Look, the Sun is really an interesting planet, revolving around the Earth. It is much bigger than we thought before, and it has amazing features we did not know existed. Let us pay more attention to the Sun." One can study the Sun a lot, and even benefit from the study, without ever realizing that it is Earth that revolves around the Sun, not the other way around. In this same way, many educators embrace the notion of dialogue without attempting the paradigm shifting associated with this notion. No matter how much one values dialogue, if it remains a means toward some other end, one does not really understand what dialogue is.

One example of a non-ontological treatment of dialogue is an interesting book by Nicholas Burbules, who seems to be right on the verge of accepting dialogue as an end, but never actually crosses the line. He says, following general Buber's line of thought: "Dialogue is not something we *do* or *use*; it is a relation that we *enter into*,"<sup>27</sup> and then writes a whole book about how to *use* dialogue in teaching. Burbules does not take the ontological aspect of dialogue seriously enough. For instance, Burbules further defines: "Dialogue is an activity directed toward discovery and new understanding, which stands to improve the knowledge, insight, or sensitivity of its participants."<sup>28</sup> But dialogue is not an activity in a sense that it is not directed toward anything. Dialogue is an end in itself, the very essence of human existence.

My approach would be not to study dialogue in teaching, but teaching in dialogue. Burbules and others<sup>29</sup> convincingly show how using dialogical methods can improve teaching and learning. These findings are indeed valuable, but they contain the seeds of



self-destruction. Dialogue that is being *used* for something ceases to be dialogue. This is only a shell of dialogue, a conversation entirely within the *I-It* realm. No rules can guarantee that dialogue really happens, and dialogue may occur despite gravely monological forms of communication. Once dialogue begins, no one can channel it, or manage it, or transform it, even for the noble aims of education. I want to contrast the ontological vision of dialogue to a non-ontological one, which sees dialogue as a form of communication, as a means toward some other goal.

What I reject is the idea that certain forms of dialogical teaching should simply be included in educational practice, along with other useful tools. Instead, education in its entirety should be realigned to create those brief “relational events” of direct, immediate meetings among individuals. This does not mean that the rest of time spent in school does not count or is not important. Quite to the contrary, as it will be evident from my further argument, the dialogical approach to education entails restructuring all aspects of everyday school life. And yet it is crucially important to understand the priorities in school life: the occurrences of dialogue, even if brief, should be the end, and the rest of the time should be the means. What kind of learning technique to use, and what kind of schedule to offer, all these questions are important, but do not stand independent of the larger purpose. The criterion here is whether they promote or obstruct dialogue. Nothing in school is significant or insignificant *as such*, without taking into consideration the larger purpose of dialogical relation.

I want to make education revolve around the dialogical. For this purpose, the life of an entire school should be treated as a whole. Paradoxically, describing schooling from the dialogical point of view brings us to talking more about classroom discourse and organizational structures, than about dialogue itself. I deal mainly with the world of *I-It*, for this world is not indifferent to the dialogical. Donald Berry, a scholar of Buber’s thought, accepts Maurice Friedman’s point that Buber did not propose to choose between I-Thou and I-It relationships, rather, he advocated the healthy alteration between the two. Berry develops this point further:

The relationships [in the situations of helping, including teaching] are defined by the assertion of need and the arrangement to

respond to that need: structure. But the choice is not between structure and spontaneity, but between regarding structure as closure and as enabling, as an opening. Nor is the choice between the constancy of need (and its response) and the fleeting moments of mutuality. . . . The world of things and beings, even of tasks and purposes, is not the same after one has been in relation.<sup>30</sup>

My goal is to show how school can be changed in a way that it “is not the same,” in a way that forms the school structure into an opening to the life of dialogue. The life of any school is inevitably monological, but it nonetheless can be more or less accommodating, more or less movable, and more or less *breakable* for dialogue to occur. The secret of dialogue rests not where almost everyone may be looking for it. The secret of dialogue is not in the dialogue itself. It is in the surrounding realities of everyday school life. The dialogical is a direct relation, but the road to it may only be indirect.

### LAWS OF THE DIALOGICAL

The following description of dialogue will not include many direct references to educational issues, but its implication for educational theory should become evident later in this work. The purpose of this description is both to distinguish dialogue from other spheres of existence and show its place in human life.

Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin remind me of two sailors. They traveled for many years to tell us about a new land they discovered. Both of them tell amazing stories about the new land, filled with a promise of new freedom and happiness; stories that are almost too good to be true. They really try to lure us into going there, and even insist that we must go. But they also have trouble pointing to where this new land is. The dialogical is an unseen aspect of human life, in part because it does not have a material location. It is neither within, nor without an individual. The great *between* has its own strange laws.

For instance, it is beyond regular time and space:

And just as prayer is not in time but time in prayer, sacrifice not in space, but space in sacrifice, . . . so with the man to whom I

say *Thou*. I do meet with him at some time and place or other. I can set him in a particular time and place; I must constantly do it: but I set only a *He* or a *She*, that is an *It*, no longer my *Thou*.<sup>31</sup>

The *Thou* appears, to be sure, in space, but in the exclusive situation of what is over against it, where everything else can be only the background out of which it emerges, not its boundary and measured limit. It appears, too, in time, but in that of the event which is fulfilled in itself: it is not lived as part of a continuous and organized sequence, but is lived in a “duration” whose purely intensive dimension is definable only in terms of itself.<sup>32</sup>

And from Bakhtin:

Dostoevsky ‘leaps over’ all that is comfortably habitable, well-arranged and stable, all that is far from the threshold, because the life that he portrays does not take place in that sort of space. . . . In comfortably habitable interior space, far from the threshold, people live a biographical time: they are born, they pass through childhood and youth, they marry, give birth to children, die. This “biographical” time Dostoevsky also “leaps over.” On the threshold and on the square the only time possible is *crisis time*, in which a *moment* is equal to years, decades, even to a “billion years.”<sup>33</sup>

What does this all mean? Does it mean that people who enter the dialogical do not experience time and space as we all do in everyday life? Yes, it means this, and also that dialogue is not defined and determined by spatial and temporal location. Dialogue is what Virginia Woolf calls moving from entanglement in the “cotton wool of daily life” to “moments of being.”<sup>34</sup> Much of my work is about creating such rips in the fabric of the everyday time and space in order to create possibilities for “moments of being.” In chapter 4, I will try to show how time and space in school life may be transformed to make room for dialogical encounters.

Of course, not every time we feel or experience something unusual, like “falling out” of the conventional spatiotemporal relations, do we find our way into the dialogical. One may use drugs, or excite oneself with violence to break through the “cotton wool of daily life.” But the dialogue is when you suddenly relate

to another human being directly and fully. Dialogue is when such a relation takes you completely out of your regular life.

Another important feature of the dialogue is this—it knows neither genesis nor causality. Dostoevsky, writes Bakhtin, did not use such a fundamental German classical philosophy category as *becoming* or evolution. For him, the central philosophical categories were such notions as coexistence and interaction.<sup>35</sup> Drawing from Dostoevsky, Bakhtin questioned the relevance of dialectics when it comes to a finalizing synthesis of contradictions and differences. This was not a particularly safe thing to do in a thoroughly Marxist and therefore “dialectic” country. For Bakhtin, differences never fully merge, instead, they coexist in an engaged interaction. Dostoevsky, an embodiment of dialogical thinking for Bakhtin, saw everything as coexisting in one single moment. He could only understand the world as coexistence of different things. This does not mean that Bakhtin denied the importance of change. What he rejected was the ideas of genesis, where the past determines the present. He also rejected the reduction of difference (synthesis) as the end of development. Dialogue does not reduce plurality of human worlds and yet it connects various parts of this plurality.

Buber also writes on causality:

Here [in the world of the dialogical relation] *I* and *Thou* freely confront one another in mutual effect that is neither connected with nor colored by any causality. Here man is assured of the freedom both of his being and of Being.<sup>36</sup>

Freedom here is first and foremost the freedom from determination, from the burden of history. Dostoevsky, writes Bakhtin, never appeals to history as such, and treats every social and political issue in light of the present day.<sup>37</sup> This does not mean that the past is forgotten in dialogue. Rather, the past comes into the present, not as a cause, and not as an earlier stage of the present, but as a still existing, burning memory of the past. The memory is as real as the present is, the memory that is an equally important voice in the polyphony of a dialogical moment. This is how Buber puts it:

No systems of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*. The memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole.<sup>38</sup>

Along the same lines comes another of Buber's statements: "True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past."<sup>39</sup> What he means here is that the past does not cause the present, does not precondition dialogue. The *I* and *Thou* of dialogue simply are, with no explanations attached: "We are two *beings* and we have come together *in infinity* . . . for the *last time in the world*. Drop your tone, and speak like a *human being*! Speak, if only for once in your life, with the voice of a man."<sup>40</sup> Dialogue is not explainable by history or by any other cause.

Absence of causality is easier to understand if connected with the fact that there are no objects in the dialogical. Buber consistently contrasted *I-Thou* as a relation to *I-It* as an experience. "When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing."<sup>41</sup> Maurice Friedman, a scholar of Buber's thought, offers the following description of the *I-Thou* relation: this relation is characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability.<sup>42</sup> Dialogue is not about objects; it is fully within subject-subject realm. Buber expressed this point rather poetically:

Thus human being is not *He* or *She*. . . . But with no neighbor, and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in *his* light.<sup>43</sup>

Bakhtin also notes the "disappearance" of objects from the dialogical. Although the world *is* still there, it is seen through relation with the other:

Not only the reality of the hero himself, but even the external world and the everyday life surrounding him are drawn into a process of self-awareness, are transferred from the author's to that of the hero's field of vision. They no longer lie in the single plane with the hero, alongside him and external to him in the unified world of the author—and for this reason they cannot serve as causal or genetic factors determining the hero, they cannot fulfill in the work any explanatory function. Alongside and on the same plane with the self-consciousness of the hero, which has absorbed into itself the entire world of objects, there can be only another consciousness; alongside its field of vision, another field of vision; alongside its point of view on the world, another point of view on

the world. *To the all-devouring consciousness of the hero the author can juxtapose only a single objective world [Bakhtin means “one kind” of an objective world—A.S.]—a world of other consciousnesses with rights equal to those of the hero.*<sup>45</sup>

This absence of an object in dialogue is not an exclusively negative characteristic. This means, among other things, that ideas, like objects, are thoroughly embedded into the context of a thinking human consciousness. There is no abstract truth, or even an abstract idea, without a living human being who expresses it. Every thought needs a living human voice to be expressed. Bakhtin paid particular attention to this aspect. Truth, he wrote, cannot be neutral in relation to who pronounces it. “In the mouth of another person, a word or a definition identical in content would take on another meaning and tone, and would no longer be the truth.”<sup>46</sup> The mouth is not neutral to what it says.

This notion of an idea embedded in an event needs some elaboration.

Thought, drawn into an event, becomes itself part of the event [or, rather, “event-like”—A.S.] and takes on that special quality of ‘idea-feeling’ or ‘idea-force,’ which is responsible for the unique peculiarity of the ‘idea’ in Dostoevsky’s creative world.<sup>47</sup>

What he means here is this: an idea as such does not exist on its own. An idea is a function of a human being. Therefore, an idea cannot really be a party in a dialogue. Dialogue involves whole individuals. The sentiment “their ideas are bad, not they as people” is a very misleading one indeed. Genuine response to an idea is impossible without knowing who came up with the idea and how and why they came up with it.

I described earlier how dialogue is not determined by a pre-existing set of factors and causes. One may say that now I am arguing that dialogue is embedded in a particular context, or is determined by this context. How is embeddedness in an event different from determinism? It is worth noting that the Russian word *sobytie*, which means “event,” can also be understood as co-being. No idea, no meaning resides fully within one individual:

The idea—as it is *seen* by Dostoevsky the artist—is not a subjective, individual-psychological formation with “permanent resi-

dent rights” in a person’s head; no, the idea is inter-individual and inter-subjective—the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion between consciousnesses. The idea is a *live event*, played out at the point of a dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses. In this sense the idea is similar to the word [he means *discourse* here—A.S.], with which it is dialogically [dialectically in the Russian text—A.S.] united. Like the word, the idea wants to be heard, understood, and “answered” by other voices from other positions.<sup>48</sup>

Extending Bakhtin’s metaphor, one can say that not only a mouth but also an ear is constitutive to an idea. It really needs both mouth and ear to exist and to have any meaning.

Again, time, space, and causality exist in dialogue, but they are transformed by it. Dialogue determines other things, such as objects and ideas, but it is not determined by them. Dialogue is a delicate thing; it does not tolerate any supremacy from anything else. But it is also a powerful force that draws everything into its orbit.

Dialogue is about subjects only. More than that, there is no medium between the subjects; it is a direct relation. Yet even the most sophisticated social or psychological account of human being actually puts something between us and makes our relations indirect. This point will become important later in this chapter in the context of the Bakhtin-Gadamer comparison, but for now I just want to make the point that a psychological description involves a set of objectifying characteristics, applied to a human being without his or her direct involvement. Many people believe that this is normal, that there are no relations without some kind of medium or a middle link that is largely responsible for what is happening between us.

Buber addressed the point about directness of dialogue when he wrote about two essentially different areas or dimensions of human life: the social and the interhuman. This dyad is based on his *I-Thou-I-It* distinction, and I will treat the interhuman here as synonymous with the dialogical. Social phenomena exist, in Buber’s words, “whenever the life of a number of men, lived with one another, bound up together, brings in its train shared experiences and reactions.”<sup>49</sup> But it does not mean that between one member and another there exists any kind of personal or existential relation. In the interhuman,

[The] only thing that matters is that for each of the two men the other happens as the particular other, that each becomes aware of the other and is thus related to him in such a way that he doesn't regard him and use him as his object, but as his partner in a living event.<sup>50</sup>

Another important characteristic of the interhuman is that it does not include psychological and social structures, or, as Buber calls them, "lasting dispositions." By the sphere of the interhuman he means "solely actual happenings between men, whether wholly mutual or tending to grow into mutual relations."<sup>51</sup> The interhuman consists of elements of everyday life that may lead to a genuine dialogue, or, as Buber describes it, an "*I-Thou*" relation.

Buber insists that the interhuman phenomena may not be understood as a psychological one. Haim Gordon, who uses Buberian ideas in an attempt to promote trust and understanding between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, illustrates this point well:

HAIM. [D]ialogue, as Buber taught it, is not identifying with the Other, but rather accepting him as Other while often rejecting his feeling or thoughts. I attempted to relate dialogically to Muhammed.

MUHAMMED. I didn't feel that you related to me dialogically.

HAIM (FORCEFULLY). Muhammed, please stop listening to your feelings and try to listen to me, to Haim who is sitting here facing you. Please, listen carefully and try to believe me. I *am* interested in your feelings, but only as part of your entire way of life and not as a main topic for discussion.<sup>52</sup>

This "listen to me, and not to your feelings" concept is not that easy to grasp. We often assume that our feelings are an indispensable medium of communication. Paying attention to one's feelings is a popular belief of contemporary discourse. Psychologists have convinced us that what we feel is what we are, and what the other says s/he feels, is what s/he is. We try to relate to each other through our feelings, as an alternative to relating through social roles. This is a weak alternative indeed. We only substitute one indirect relation for another. Our feeling might get in the way of the direct relations as easily as objectified social roles. Neither feelings nor social roles are dialogical.



Directness of dialogical relation entails another property of dialogue: it cannot be described in the language of monologue. This last feature of the dialogical is important for my argument. The dialogue fundamentally escapes understanding within the language of monologue. This is so, in part, because the dialogical is *created* by language, although it eventually transcends the language. As Buber states, "Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence."<sup>53</sup> This evokes images of incantation: say the magical word, and find yourself in a strange and wonderful place. Of course, Buber did not have in mind physical acts of saying certain words. And yet he chose the metaphor of primary words for a reason. One has to really abandon the language of conventional subject-object relations in order to penetrate the dialogical.

Similarly, Bakhtin wrote about the dialogical sphere of thinking human consciousness, which is inaccessible for understanding with a monological approach.<sup>54</sup> Bakhtin examined a number of literary criticism works about Dostoevsky, and found that Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is impossible to understand from a traditional monological point of view. From a consistently monological point of view, the world of Dostoevsky appears as chaos, and his novel composition looks like a conglomerate of mutually alien elements and incompatible structural principles.<sup>55</sup> Arguing with V. Ivanov's reading of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin finds that a simple understanding of Dostoevsky's principles is not enough without seeing how these principles appear in his artistic method.<sup>56</sup> Translating this into the world of social relations, I would argue that dialogue looks like chaos from the point of view of the social sciences. If described in terms of social science, dialogue appears meaningless and inconsequential. This means that the dialogical not only needs to be described in a different language, but the dialogical also *is* that different language.

This description of the dialogical includes a good portion of negative statements: dialogue does not exist in regular time and space; it does not know causality and genesis; it does not include objects; there is no medium between its subjects; and so on. One of the reasons for this is that both Buber and Bakhtin wanted to emphasize a certain discontinuity between the conventional world

of everyday life and the moments of the dialogical. At first this might seem counterintuitive: if we are fully human only in dialogue, how can it be that dialogue is so distinctive and so short-lived compared to our common experiences? Are we humans only when we are not quite ourselves? This brings me back to the discussion about whether Buber and Bakhtin make normative or ontological claims. As I have mentioned, the notion of dialogue takes the role of an ethical ideal for them. From such a point of view, the ideal must be something other than regular everyday practice. Thus, the discontinuity and distinctness of dialogue is not something out of place there. However, dialogue is not *quite* an ethical ideal. Bakhtin and Buber do not want us to move completely into the realm of the dialogical. Dialogue is unachievable as a way of life, but it is readily accessible to anyone for short time periods and in some special circumstances. In other words, both Buber and Bakhtin make a remarkable ethical claim. They want us not so much to change our lives, as to pay more attention to what we already have, at least potentially have, and what we previously ignored. They do not argue for making our lives a continuous dialogue. Rather, they ask us to live our lives with these moments of full being in mind. The question is one of subordination. We need to live our lives in such a way that dialogue, no matter how brief and elusive, takes precedence over the instrumental relations of *I-It*.

### BAKHTIN AND GADAMER

Before taking up the critique of monologism, I would like to differentiate the ontological concept of dialogue as represented by Buber and Bakhtin from one approach that may seem quite similar to it, that is, the hermeneutics. A systematic comparison of both Bakhtin and Buber on one side and various philosophers of hermeneutics tradition on the other, is a fascinating and extensive task, which I hope to undertake some day. In this book, I had to settle for an unavoidably sketchy attempt to set up some possible lines of comparison, mainly focusing on Bakhtin and Gadamer.

Hermeneutics' claim that understanding is interpretation largely overlaps with Bakhtin's idea that all meanings are shared. Some passages of Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

look remarkably hermeneutic, although there is no evidence that Bakhtin studied Dilthey or Schleiermacher, or had addressed hermeneutics in his writings. However, there is one subtle difference. Gadamer believes that the original meaning of a text is both unnecessary and impossible to recover, and that understanding involves creation of a new meaning. This implies, among other things, that the original meaning may have existed in the first place. Gadamer still allows for the singularity of meaning at the moment when the text is created. Bakhtin denied the very possibility of any such true singular meanings in text. He conceived writing and speaking as essentially dialogical activities, where meaning is born not because something is uttered but because it is addressed to someone else and is heard by someone else. Therefore, interpretation is not only the way of understanding, it is also the way of existence for any meaning in any text. There are no “uninterpreted” texts, because an author always writes it, so to speak, in partnership with the reader, and because any text is in a way an interpretation of a previously existing text. It is impossible to fully recover the original meaning, says Gadamer. Yes, because it never existed, continues Bakhtin.

Gadamer treated the dependence on our prejudices as an essential and unavoidable feature of understanding, which must be acknowledged and, to a certain degree, corrected. Understanding, according to Gadamer, is achieved through the “fusion of horizons.” The “fusion of horizons” idea is reminiscent of the old dialectical concept of synthesis in one important regard: it reduces the difference. Gadamer’s concept of truth is complex, and certainly not a rationalistic one like the truth of modernity. “Fusion of horizons” certainly is not a rational consensus of Habermas. Yet it still instinctively gravitates toward some sort of unity. Gadamer does not know polyphony in Bakhtin’s sense. Bakhtin’s truth does require a multiplicity of bearers; it consists of several interacting but contradicting voices. Most importantly, these voices never merge; Bakhtin’s horizons never fuse. To the contrary, Gadamer’s horizons tend to fuse, even if their full merger is impossible.

Gadamer does not believe in finalized truth, but allows for *singular* truths, even if existing for brief moments, even if validated by the historical distance. A comprehensive horizon may

not be achievable practically, but for Gadamer it still plays the role of an ideal end. His view of dialogue remains teleological, meaning that dialogue is viewed as a means of understanding, which still implies singularity of truth. This is different for Bakhtin, who wanted to maintain and cherish polyphony. A comprehensive horizon would mean the victory of falsehood for him, for a comprehensive horizon lacks polyphony.

Another important difference between philosophy of dialogue and hermeneutics is in conceptualizing the role of language. For Gadamer, language is the universal medium of understanding:

in the language the world itself presents itself. The experience of the world in language is 'absolute.' It transcends all the relativities of the position of being, because it embraces all being-in-itself, in whatever relationships (relativities) it appears. The linguistic quality of our experience of the world is prior, as contrasted with everything that recognized and addressed as being.<sup>57</sup>

To the contrary, both Buber and Bakhtin believe that dialogue transcends the language. Dialogue is a meeting beyond discourse, beyond time and space. We very well may experience the world of *It* only through language, but we meet *Thou* directly. Dialogue in this sense is a direct relation, while Gadamer makes a point that direct relation not mediated by language is impossible. To be sure, the issue here is not whether language is *used* at all in dialogue. After all, the primary word *I-Thou* is a word, that is a linguistic phenomena. Gadamer's point is not that language is simply present in any form of our experience of the world. Many things, like air, or food, or bodily senses have to be present for us to experience the world, and yet we do not ascribe much of ontological significance to them. Gadamer's claim is different: language is very *significant* in our relations with the world; language predetermines the character of such relations. Both Buber and Bakhtin would disagree with such a position. Language may have this sort of significance in our regular *I-It* relations with the world, but in the dialogical relations, it takes the back seat, just like the air and the food do.

A critique of Gadamer's claim about the ontological status of language from dialogical point of view will be different from that