

A Comparative Study of Adler and Buber: From Contact to Cooperation

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Abstract

The relevance of Martin Buber's philosophy for modern psychology has been well established (Allport, 1961; Israel, 1998; May, 1986). The idea of human contact is important both for Adler (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*) and for Buber (*I-Thou*), but there are other elements common to both Adlerian and Buberian thought. To describe these, the author compares Individual Psychology and Buberian philosophy. Following some brief introductory comments on Buber, the author describes the Kantian backgrounds of Adler and Buber and then compares both theorists' conceptions of pragmatism. Next, the author applies Buber's concept of *I-Thou* to Individual Psychology. To conclude his discussion, the author describes the Adlerian and Buberian perspectives regarding concepts such as social interest, person as melody, empathy and understanding, dialogue, and meaning of life and mental health, with implications for therapy.

As early as 1956, Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1964) compared Alfred Adler with Martin Buber. They quoted Buber as saying, "People want to be accepted in their being by people and want to mean something to the being of the other person" (p. 16). Buber's philosophy has deeply affected modern thinking on the human predicament. For Buber, human beings are social beings, capable of empathy and enchantment, spirituality and culture. Of course, people live in a world of objects, in a world molded by science and technology. However, if they have nothing left for personal engagement, if they have no feelings for value and culture, then they hardly deserve to be called human beings. They would only be impersonal instruments, useful objects in the hands of those who possess the power. Human worth presupposes that people should use the freedom at their disposal. "And in all the seriousness of truth, listen: Without it a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human" (Buber, 1923/1996, p. 85).

Who Was Martin Buber?

Born in Vienna in 1878, Buber was educated by his grandparents in what was then Polish Galicia, in the town of Lvov (Lemberg). His grandfather was a successful businessman, but, more importantly, he was a remarkable scholar, with a thorough knowledge of Hebrew, and an editor of rabbinic works.

In 1904, Buber presented his thesis at the University of Vienna for his Ph.D. In the 1920s, he started a translation of the Hebrew Bible with Franz Rosenzweig; Buber continued to work with this project after the death of Rosenzweig in 1929. (He completed the translation of *Die Schrift* in 1961.) In 1938, Buber moved with his family to Jerusalem to accept the chair of social philosophy at the University. He died in 1965, world-famous and honored for his contributions. He was a philosopher, theologian, Hasidic scholar, Bible-translator, Zionist politician, and psychologist. During his career, his fame as a wise person, as a teacher of his fellow humans, steadily grew, and he was regularly consulted in political, ethical, and other problems of the human condition. In this respect, he was reminiscent of Adler who achieved a similar, albeit somewhat different fame as a wise person. Because Buber did not like to be very specific in his formulations and because he moved freely from one field of study to another, many students of Buber often feel frustrated by his sweeping formulations. However, there is poetic breadth in his thinking, and his style is charismatic and dramatic.

Compared with Buber, Adler was much more concrete and straightforward in his formulations. Very often, Buber made the impression that he was moving in a very thin air of the Pure Spirit. Adler was continuously searching for practical solutions to practical problems. However, even Buber was engaged in this search, in his own way.

Kantian Epistemologies

Kant was very important to Adler mainly through the ideas of Vaihinger. Vaihinger developed the radical philosophy of *as if*, which has strong Kantian undertones. Concepts were for Adler final fictions, and scientific theories were hypotheses. However, Adler and Vaihinger were not stating that there is no objective reality. In fact, Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1964) called Adler an "idealistic positivist." Adler spoke of "absolute truths," meaning social processes that produce concepts and orientations. Individuals who fail to appreciate these processes will fail in life; their constructions and expectations are not adequate. However, what matters in this context is Adler's Kantian epistemology. Human beings react to their interpretations of reality, not to reality itself. Concepts, expectations, and attitudes are cognitive constructions, which Adler referred to as final fictions. People are not reacting to realities as such; they react to their own interpretations and expectations concerning these realities. Adler's ideas concerning social consciousness can be seen as a development of Kant's idea of the categorical imperative. Like Socrates's *daimon*, the categorical imperative as well as Adler's *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* tells the individual what is right and what is wrong.

According to Katz (1984), a close reading of Buber's work "will reveal a significant dependence of Buber on the Kantian tradition" (p. 90). Katz separated three important structural aspects in Buber's thinking that reveal Kantian influences:

1. What we know is determined by how we know.
2. The general specifications provided by Kant of what constitutes phenomenal knowledge is nearly exactly duplicated by Buber in his description of the It.
3. Kant's understanding of the noumena is the basis for Buber's Thou.

Buber (1967a) himself told how the ideas of space and time confused his mind when he was a young boy and how he learned from Kant's *Prolegomena* that space and time "are not real properties that adhere to the things themselves" but "mere forms of our sensory perception" (p. 12).

Thus, an individual's understanding is merely his or her ability to organize the chaotic information provided by his or her environment. Truth remains dependent on his or her capacity to create some cognitive order in the stream of the informational chaos surrounding him or her. Communication is neither self-evident nor straightforward; the individual must comprehend the cognitive constructions employed by another before he or she can truly understand what that other is trying to communicate.

Pragmatism

Another trait common to Adler and Buber is their relationships to pragmatism. According to Pfuetze (1967), existential thinking for Buber meant "that participation is the essence of truth . . . that truth must be discovered and confirmed by the whole being and with one's very life in pledge" (p. 515). Pfuetze compared Buber with George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), a disciple of John Dewey (1859-1952) and William James (1842-1910). Adler was in contact with Dewey, and he was familiar with the work of James (Ansbacher, 1968a). Adler's formulations concerning social interest were very similar to Mead's ideas. Pfuetze asserted that

both Buber and Mead establish a philosophical anthropology which conceives of man as a self-other system, comprising a duality of an alter in the ego in which the self in the dialectic is both subject and object. . . . It must and does regard itself with the eyes of an other. (p. 529)

Both Mead and Buber emphasized ego-alter dialogue. For Mead (and pragmatists in general), human beings are deeply social in their innermost essence. According to Mead (as cited in Morris, 1934/1967),

The principle which I have suggested as basic to human social organization is that of communication involving participation in the other. This requires the appearance of the other in the self, the identification of the other with the self, the reaching of self-consciousness through the other. (p. 253)

This way of defining human interaction is one trait that unites pragmatism with Buberian and Adlerian thought. One of the central themes in Mead's psychology is the social interrelatedness of human personalities (Israel, 1998). Mead spoke of the generalized other, containing the social and cultural attitudes and expectations an individual has internalized. This concept is very close to Adler's idea of community feeling or Buber's *I-Thou* interaction.

Both [Adler and Mead] see the human personality as built upon an interaction of an organism with other organisms in a social matrix. And both maintain that the self which emerges in this process of interaction nevertheless is a creative agent which plays a part in the direction of its own growth. (Morris as cited in Winetrou, 1968, p. 11)

Adler shared with Mead his social commitment and his belief that human beings are deeply affected by social interactions with others. Adler's Individual Psychology is not about individualism; rather, Adlerian and Buberian thinking are examples of what Dewey called "transactionalism."

I and Thou

For Adler, human individuals are social beings. Their basic orientation is largely determined on the basis of social interactions, interactions between I and Thou. "Thus we arrive at the conclusion that the I-Thou relationship, the productivity of the community, and the relationships of the sexes are never private matters but problems of the community . . ." (Adler, 1930/1970, p. 37). Buber would not totally have agreed that the I-Thou relationship is "never a private matter," but otherwise this statement would have been quite reasonable from Buber's point of view. For Buber, the I-Thou relationship means personal engagement. Thou is not an object; the I-Thou relationship means a gestalt, a higher-order totality, not merely a sum of two persons discussing with each other.

The *I-It* relationship is everything *I-Thou* is not. It implies detachment, objectivity, observation. It is the relationship between observer and observed; it is the relationship of a philosopher who represents the school of logical empiricism, who thinks everything is reducible to propositions, those logical atoms which are objects, neatly divided to true or untrue, to meaningful or meaningless. Buber agreed that we all live in a world of facts and objects. For each individual, there are realities to contend with, there are deadlines, there

are bills to pay, there are practical matters to take care of. In short, there are *I-It* relationships. But they are not everything.

The primal paradigm of the *I-Thou* relationship is, according to Buber, love. Love is not a feeling, it is not an emotion. It is not romantic longing, neither is it romantic fulfillment.

Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love. This is not metaphor but actuality: Love does not cling to an I, as if the You were merely its "content" or object; it is between I and You. (Buber, 1923/1996, p. 66)

Love means recognition and confirmation of the Other. It is responsibility, it is a task, it is a challenge: "Love is responsibility of an I for a You" (p. 66).

Adler (1936/1971) characterized love as a human dyad, a task for two. Love does not mature, "it does not deserve the name of love, without labor and discipline, sacrifice and co-operation" (p. 148). Adler emphasized that love is "equal partnership between a man and a woman—where two are merged into one, a human dyad . . ." (p. 148). For Adler, the *I-Thou* relationship is embedded in something which is a universal truth:

We can never find anyone who could say truly, "I am not interested in others." He may act in this way—he may act as if he were not interested in the world—but he cannot justify himself. Rather does he claim to be interested in others, in order to hide his lack of social adjustment. (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 140)

Adler is more down to earth than Buber, but the inherent ideas are very much the same.

Social Interest

Adler's term *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* has been translated as "social interest" or "community feeling." In this context, both translations are useful. "Interest" is a neutral term that denotes a special kind of transcendence, which actually means much more than feeling. The Latin *transcendere* means not only going over, surpassing, but also reaching out for (something outside oneself). In this context, the word "feeling" does not mean anything like a transitory emotional state. Rather, it means a deeper structure of socially and individually anchored attitudes, values, and emotional systems.

According to Buber, human beings possess an inborn drive for social contact. Humans strive after mutuality and communication and, thus, a dialogue finally emerges. The development of the mind of a child is closely connected with this contact message. The child has a natural direction of movement toward the other, toward Thou, and connection, contact, love,

and affection are the basic ingredients which make the emergence of *I-Thou* possible. According to Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964),

social interest remains throughout life. It becomes differentiated, limited, or expanded and, in favorable cases, extends not only to family members but to the larger group, to the nation, to all of mankind. It can even go further, extending itself to animals, plants, and inanimate objects and finally even to the cosmos. (p. 138)

Buber was, like Adler, an essentially social thinker. Historically, both took advantage of the well-known distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Rotenstreich (1984) argued that Buber absorbed this distinction mainly from Tönnies.

Gemeinschaft was germane to Buber's own direction of thought according to which he tried to present modes of human coexistence which are primarily imbued with a non-organized ambience. (p. 475)

Buber gave preference to this mode of existence, and he was skeptical about institutional, political, and organized ways of human dialogue in general.

At the turn of the century, many German sociologists were discussing the concepts of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. One of these sociologists, Folkert Wilken, was active in a circle of Individual Psychologists in those days (Ansbacher, 1978). It is probable that Adler was affected by the contemporary discussions on *Gemeinschaft* in the days immediately after World War I when he adopted the concept *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. According to Ansbacher (1968b), John Stuart Mill had already used a similar concept which he called fellow-feeling, or social feeling of mankind. Ansbacher connected Adler's concept of social interest with Buber's idea of the *I-Thou* relationship: "True social interest, i.e., being interested in the interests of the other would be included in Buber's *I-Thou* concept" (p. 140).

Tönnies (1962) described *Gemeinschaft* as follows:

Reciprocal, binding sentiment as a peculiar will of a *Gemeinschaft* we shall call understanding (consensus). It represents the special social force and sympathy which keeps human beings together as members of totality. . . . Understanding is based upon intimate knowledge of each other in so far as this is conditioned and advanced by direct interest of one being in the life of the other, and readiness to take part in his joy and sorrow. (p. 196)

This kind of thinking must have been very attractive to Buber and Adler alike. Tönnies gave expression to a belief that human beings can relate naturally and organically with each other, that artificial, institutionally and politically conditioned, *Gesellschaft*-type social ties are secondary. For people in general, the primary social ties of *Gemeinschaft* are what really matter. Modern industrialized society fosters *Gesellschaft*-type relationships, but social life is possible only because there are *Gemeinschaft*-relationships. It is the

Gemeinschaft which makes life worthwhile and valuable. Without *Gemeinschaft*, people would, according to Tönnies (1962), only stand “opposite each other as free agents of their wills and abilities” (p. 196).

Person as Melody

Buber (1923/1996) compared the *I-Thou* with melody. Melody does not consist of individual sounds; it is a totality as such, a gestalt *sui generis*. Of course, you can discuss a melody from the *I-It* point of view, but then it ceases to be a melody *sui generis*. According to Bloch (1984),

“the presence of the Thou” encompasses different modes of reality, ranging from our being caught up in contemplation in all its plasticity, its Gestalt, to that mystic Nothingness of the unity of Being . . . (p. 49)

There is, as Bloch stated, much “factual fluctuation” in Buber’s text, which does produce insecurity as to what he really meant. But it seems safe to state that the *I-Thou* relationship meant a kind of gestalt for Buber. It is unique; it cannot be reduced to its constituents. Buber emphasized that in spite of his somewhat mystical and literary language, this whole, this gestalt of the person, is not mystical creation. It is something to be met in life, every day, every moment. It is not something reserved for an elite class of mystical intellectuals; rather, it is a privilege of all human beings, provided they are willing to use their freedom of being. If we let ourselves be bounded by it, we shall stay prisoners of causality, prisoners of the world of objects, the world of consuming and competition. The free self that can meet the other in a dialogue creates its own pattern, its own lifestyle.

According to Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964),

Very early in my work, I found man to be a (self-consistent) unity. The foremost task of Individual Psychology is to prove this unity in each individual—in his thinking, feeling, acting, in his so-called conscious and unconscious, in every expression of his personality. This (self-consistent) unity we call the style of life of the individual. (p. 175)

Adler also suggested that the gestalt, “once all the notes are brought into reference with the melody,” is not enough (p. 175). What is needed is the individual recognition of the author *along with* his or her attitudes.

Empathy and Understanding

According to Katz (1984), the

I-Thou encounter is an intersubjective relation between equals. . . . This

relation is characterized by its mutuality. This is an especially important feature of I-Thou meeting. The symmetry of the relation is a basic premise of the whole dialogical life. (p. 94)

Other properties of *I-Thou* encounters are, according to Katz, awareness of the other as a subject, awareness of the other as a free being like the knowing self, and awareness that the freedom of *I-Thou* entails the total autonomy of both partners.

Thus, empathy, "the realization and understanding of another person's feelings, needs, and suffering" (Chaplin, 1985, p. 154), plays an important role in Buber's philosophy, at least from a psychological point of view. Empathy is not necessarily a mutual or intersubjective or dialogical relation. However, it is unlikely that the empathy will last long if you try to communicate with a person who does not in any way respond to your empathy. In such circumstance, your empathy will probably fade away.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), one of Buber's teachers, was engaged in defining the differences between natural sciences and humanities. But Buber was also influenced by Dilthey's studies on religion, especially on the religious conceptions of Hegel (Kaufmann, 1984). It was Dilthey who presented the logic of understanding (*Verstehen*) as a methodology in humanities. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) defined social interest as an evaluative attitude toward life: "To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another" (p. 135). Adler also discussed the idea of empathy and explicitly mentioned Dilthey in this connection. "Empathy and understanding are facts of social feeling, of harmony with universe" (p. 136). Adler added that empathy is "absolutely essential to the achievement of social living." Clearly, the German tradition of humanistic idealism was a living reality in the thought of Adler and Buber.

Dialogue

In a dialogue, human beings have a responsibility to respond to a call. However, the *I-Thou* dialogue is something more than just two people talking to each other. Buber (1967b) wrote:

As to the sphere of the interhuman I do not designate the relationship of the human person to his fellowmen in general, but the actualization of this relationship. The interhuman is something that takes place from time to time between two people; but in order that it may take place again and again, in order that genuine meetings may occur and ever again occur, the Thou in relation to his or her fellowpeople must be inherent in humans. (p. 711)

Adler's Individual Psychology is essentially a psychology of interpersonal

relationships. According to Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964), Individual Psychology is a value psychology, meaning that

only the individual who is socially prepared for cooperation can solve the social problems which life imposes. By this we mean that there should exist a certain degree of contact feeling, . . . of striving for cooperation . . . in the "law-of-movement" of the individual. Where it is lacking we meet with "failures." (p. 356)

Adler preferred the more concrete term "cooperation" for "dialogue," but what he meant is essentially the same thing. For Adler, Individual Psychology is not a positivistic, mechanistic science: It is a psychology based on values.

Human beings are not simply psychophysiological objects who are behaving, acting, speaking, doing, listening, perceiving, and reacting. Psychology cannot be only a science of *I-It* relationships; it must comprise *I-Thou* dialogues. Human beings are your travelling-fellows; you share something with them, and the most important instances of sharing are cooperation and contact. Psychology means establishing a cooperative contact; it is a dialogue-based relationship between two equal human beings.

The very concept of "human being" includes our entire understanding of social feeling. . . . The entire development of the child demands his or her embeddedness in a situation in which social feeling is present. (Adler as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1982, p. 107)

Maslow (1966) suggested that there is a difference between experiential knowledge and spectator knowledge. Spectator knowledge is based on the Buberian *I-It* relationship, while experiential knowledge is based on the *I-Thou* dialogue between two human personalities. "If we wish to learn more about persons, then this is the way we'd better go about it" (p. 52).

The Meaning of Life and Mental Health

What Buber said about belief is important from the viewpoint of the meaning of life. An *I-Thou* relationship leads to meaningfulness in life. This meaning provides trust, but this trust is completely different from trust in objects. Many advertisements emphasize the trustworthiness of objects such as cars and banking services. However, what Buber meant by trust is a conception of a deeply felt meaningfulness which is unshakable. Whatever will happen in the world, one will have the feeling that there is something more valuable than anything else. In the face of everything perishable, this knowledge is deeply satisfying. I am at home in the world, not alone, not a piece of stone at the mercy of causality, not left for the cold winds of dark cosmic solitude.

For in truth there is a cosmos for humans only when the universe becomes a home for them with a holy hearth where they sacrifice; and there is eros for them only when beings become for them images of the eternal, and community with them becomes revelation; and there is logos for them only when they address the mystery with works and services of the spirit. (Buber, 1923/1996, p. 150)

According to Adler (1929), social interest is the cornerstone of mental health.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the value of an increase in social interest. The mind improves, . . . the feeling of worth and value is heightened, giving courage and an optimistic view, and there is a sense of acquiescence in the common advantages and drawbacks of our lot. The individual feels at home in life and feels his or her existence worthwhile just so far as he or she is useful to others and is overcoming common, instead of private feelings of inferiority. (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 135)

Mental health and meaning in life for Adler are expressions of social interest, and this perspective corresponds to Buber's *I-Thou* relation. Additionally, Adler described worth, value, courage, and optimism, concepts similar to Buber's idea of basic trust. Finally, Adler defined "meaningfulness" with the help of the metaphor of feeling at home in life. Buber thought that it was important to understand that philosophy is basically something that expresses itself in life, not in isolation, outside life. And, of course, this mental health in the Adlerian sense can be connected with Buber's idea of basic trust.

In Adler's thinking, social interest transcends the narrow borderlines of pure individuality. Social interest is essentially a relationship that leads to feeling with the whole, *sub specie aeternitatis*. This idea of transcendence is close to Buber's thinking, although Adler's words here as elsewhere are more mundane than Buber's.

Implications for Therapy

If the relationship *I-Thou* is of such primordial importance in human interaction as Buber (and Adler) suggested, there are profound implications for psychotherapy. According to Friedman (1991),

"In the last ten years or so," said Buber in the course of one of the 1957 seminars, "I have the impression of a certain change in psychotherapeutic practice in which more and more therapists are not so confident that this or that theory is right and have a more musical, floating relationship to their patients. The deciding reality is the therapist, not the methods." (p. 27)

Theories and techniques are for Buber less important than genuine *I-Thou* interaction. However, for Buber, the client and the therapist are not wholly

equal; the therapist is someone who must be more on the giving side. More important than interpretations and techniques is that a genuinely human interaction take place between the two partners.

Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) agreed with this perspective: "Psychotherapy is an exercise in cooperation and a test of cooperation. . . . For the psychologist the first rule is to win the patient" (pp. 340-341). Discussing the role of technique in Adlerian psychotherapy, Mozdierz and Greenblatt (1994) asked, "Does not the term 'practitioner' itself suggest 'technique,' whereas Buber's (1998) term 'I-Thou' suggests a reciprocal effort?" In response, they asserted that therapy is a task for two that requires committed collaboration and that winning the patient over does not require techniques or mechanical maneuvers, but a philosophy of thinking about human beings.

The idea of the therapeutic value of human contact is important for Adler and Buber alike. When a proper contact has been established, the next step is the cooperation between therapist and client. Greenson (1967) used the term "working alliance" to emphasize the rational and purposeful part of the feelings the client has for the therapist: The term focuses on the client's capacity to work purposefully in the therapeutic situation. Buber's *I-Thou* relationship describes the establishment of human contact between two persons, and Adler's idea of social feeling denotes the prevailing attitudes in a community. As early as 1932, Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979) wrote:

It is advisable to point clearly toward cooperation. The fact of cooperation is easily understood, although in most cases it turns out to be inadequate. If a person cooperates, he or she will never become a neurotic. This you must inculcate in the person during treatment. (p. 193)

Summary and Conclusions

In this article, I've analyzed and compared a number of ideas shared by Adler and Buber. Both theorists interpreted human cognition with the help of Kantian and pragmatist concepts. On the one hand, I and Thou, a central idea in Buber's thought, can be found in the substance and content of Individual Psychology. On the other hand, the Adlerian idea of social interest is evident in Buberian philosophy. Both Adler and Buber saw person as melody, as a gestalt or form that is unique and individual. Empathy and understanding were central ideas for Buber and Adler alike, and the idea of dialogue played a central role for both authors. Meaning of life and mental health meant for Adler and Buber that one feels at home in the universe, that the individual has in his or her possession an unshakable trust in the meaningfulness of life

as whole. For psychotherapy, these ideas imply that philosophy of life and cooperation are more important than technical interpretations. The basis of Individual Psychology is to be found in *I-Thou* relationships, that is, in deeply felt social interest.

Of course, there are differences between the psychological and philosophical outlooks of Adler and Buber. In the first place, Buber emphasized more the *I-Thou* relationship, but Adler viewed human interaction as a cornerstone for human community. Whereas ethics, according to Adler, was based on the social relationships, the starting point of Buberian ethical theory was the personal existence. Thirdly, Adler's view on the meaning of life and human history was based on the idea of a social and cosmic evolution, but Buber emphasized the relationship between the individual and God.

Finally, Buber admitted that he avoided giving concrete advice; instead, he tried to point the way for others. Adler was keenly interested in the concrete problems of living individuals. In his own way, however, Buber was very true to life. His philosophy was based on human experience of life, and, for him, there was no contradiction between life and philosophy. Similarly, Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979) suggested

Everyone subordinates all experiences and problems to his own conception. This conception is usually a tacit assumption and as such unknown to the person. Yet he lives and dies for the inferences he draws from such a conception." (p. 24)

Note

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