

# ETHICAL AND SPIRITUAL ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM: BUBER, LEVINAS, AND KRISHNAMURTI

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**Abstract.** Ethical and spiritual matters today, like all cultural pursuits in late modernity, have a marked tendency towards self-referentiality. Given that neither tradition (whether religious or secular), nor science, nor for that matter that type of philosophical reasoning, can provide a generally acceptable moral guide, there have been several attempts to combat relativism without resorting to the more conventional, foundationalist ways of legitimizing ethical codes. This paper, after briefly summarizing the well-known attempts by M. Buber and E. Levinas to construct a post-conventional ethic, intends to show that the (among academics) rather less known work of the Indian sage-philosopher J. Krishnamurti can be seen as complementary in certain important ways to Buber's and Levinas' approaches.

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## I Martin Buber

As a student of Simmel, and having been influenced not only by philosophers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard but also by social thinkers like Tönnies and Weber, Buber had a strong sense of social interaction as central to an understanding of social life in general and of morality in particular. His views on ethics –after a mystical and individualistic existentialist phase– took their more or less permanent form with the development of his dialogical philosophy (Mendes-Flohr 1989.) In this, the distinction between the relationships “I-It” and “I-Thou” plays a fundamental role (Buber 1937). The I-It relation is based on what Weber has called instrumental rationality: the self responds to something extraneous to it (physical object, other person, God) in a manipulative, rationalizing or calculating manner. The ultimate aim is the attainment of control/domination.

By contrast the I-Thou relation, when applied to the “interhuman”<sup>1</sup> comes very close to what Habermas has called communicative rationality. Here the Other is neither reduced to an object, nor is s/he viewed as an extension of the self. There is a type of interpersonal mutuality<sup>2</sup> in which each individual retains full autonomy while opening up to, and deeply understanding the Other’s situation. It is from this in-between, interhuman space of open, “undistorted” communication that the ethical emerges.

In negatory terms, the ethical emanates from an interpersonal situation where the rationalizing, calculating, planning, utilitarian element (which transforms the Thou into It) is absent. In default of such elements the I is able, in an open-ended interactive situation, to confirm the worthiness of the Other, and to show trust by being fully present, i.e. by not withholding from the “meeting” or “dialogue” any part of itself. A genuine meeting, therefore, being based on an I-Thou relation, presupposes a non-instrumental/non-utilitarian confirmation of the Other, which is expressed through the Self being fully present to the interactive situation (Silbernstein 1989, 129 ff).

**Ethical anti-foundationalism.** In the light of the above, it is not surprising that Buber rejects categorically any foundationalist attempt to derive ethical rules of conduct from sacred texts, traditional religious practices,<sup>3</sup> or logico-deductive reasoning. For him, any attempt at codification, classification, typification –whether inspired by religious or secular theorizing– automatically precludes the genuine meeting or dialogue. By leading from the I-Thou to the I-It type of interaction, it eliminates the “in-between” space where the ethical is able to emerge.<sup>4</sup>

Another way of putting this is to say that ethical codes, however constructed, cannot provide moral guidance for any concrete encounter, because each encounter is unique, unrepeatable and, therefore, not subsumable to any general category or concept. This means that genuine ethical guidance can only spring from within the encounter itself, rather than be derived from something pre-existing or existing outside/beyond the actual meeting between two human beings (Buber 1947, 1952).

It is for the same reasons that the ethical cannot be found when the I turns into itself and tries to reach self-fulfillment, or the divine, via solitary, hermitical types of contemplation. Although such practices do have their legitimate place in human existence, when they become dominant, they lead away from the ethical–since the *interhuman*, (interactive), rather than the *intra-human* (intra-active), is the only way of meeting not only the Other (as Thou),<sup>5</sup> but also God, the eternal Thou (Friedman 1955, 70-76). In other words, neither sacred texts nor a rational belief in God or the “good”, nor any of the meditative practices developed by various mystical traditions (East or West) can be of any value if they turn one’s attention away from the in-between genuine dialogue.

**Moral relativism and human nature.** Given his radical anti-foundationalism, it is not surprising that Buber has been accused of moral relativism:

“Buber sees man as obligated to make a decision in a set of circumstances so unique that only he alone can decide what it is that he ought to do. This in turn leads to the type of moral anarchy where anything goes and where a Hitler type of conduct can be as ethical or unethical as any other” (Fox 1967, 160).

Buber tries to answer this kind of objection by developing a theory of what intrinsically constitutes our humanity. Human beings, unlike animals, are differentiated from the natural environment; they *distance* themselves from it by living in a social world they themselves have constructed. This separation from nature creates a fundamental insecurity which the individual can deal with *either* by establishing genuine I-Thou relations, or by resorting to I-It relations, i.e. to the manipulation of nature and other human beings in a sterile search for total control/domination. The first strategy results in self-actualization, where the Self, via genuine dialogue, actualizes the unique “design” inherent in each human being. When the second, the instrumental strategy is adopted, self actualization is thwarted and an objectifying, alienating I-It orientation to life acquires permanence and solidity (although never irreversibly).<sup>6</sup>

Basing himself on this kind of philosophical anthropology, Buber argues that what precludes moral relativism or moral anarchy in his system of thought is the notion of self-actualization as this is linked to his idea of “presentness” (Friedman 1955, 62 ff). In the genuine meeting there is no holding back of parts of ourselves. When we are present to the Other with our whole being, then we move towards self-realization, towards the realization of our uniqueness. From this perspective, “evil” consists of creating obstacles to genuine dialogue and so to self actualization. Evil results when –via suppression, pretence, manipulation– we hinder the unfolding of our unique being.

“One cannot do evil with the whole soul, i.e. one can do it through holding down forcibly the forces striving against it –they are not to be stifled” (Buber 1967, 720).

So if the good cannot be derived from outside (God, sacred texts, rational codes) or from within the Self (solitary meditation), it can be found in the in-between space of the genuine meeting. It springs up spontaneously when we make ourselves *present* to the Other in the right way, i.e. in non-manipulative, non-suppressing, not I-It manner (Silberstein 1989, 129).

From this perspective the move towards self-actualization is a precondition for true dialogue as well as the outcome of such dialogue. An individual develops his/her true and therefore “good” nature by constantly striving to move from I-It to I-Thou relations. In so far as relations are achieved by the process of self-actualization, in so far as I fully present myself to the Thou, ethical conduct comes into being without the intervention of concepts, categories, formulas or, for the matter, practices of contemplation. The genuine meeting or dialogue is therefore the essence of human interaction, and as such the only basis on which a non-foundationalist morality can be built.<sup>7</sup>

## II Emmanuel Levinas

The Jewish philosopher-theologian has been justly labeled the theorist *par excellence* of postmodern ethics (Baumann 1993). Like Buber, he categorically rejects any foundationalism, whether derived from sacred texts, venerated traditions, social-scientific analysis, or logico-deductive reasoning; but at the same time he tries to avoid the moral relativism that characterizes so much of postmodern thought.

Levinas argues that it is impossible to arrive at the “ethical” if we start from general values from which we hope to deduce more context-specific moral norms. He does not see the ethical as compatible with generalization or classification, since it has nothing in common with metaphysical speculations, utilitarian calculations, or logico-deductive reasoning. The ethical does not come from “above” or rather “outside”, it emerges from a special relationship between the Self

and the Other: the ethical is the non-rational, non instrumental (in Parsonian terms “expressive”) reaction of the Self to the Other asking for attention or help. It is the responsibility felt towards someone who is not like oneself, but different, a stranger, “other” (Levinas 1969, 212-15).

Just as we cannot link the ethical to broader categories, so we cannot classify or categorize the Other. This Other that turns to me asking for attention has neither a symmetrical relationship to myself nor is s/he part of some broader abstract category. The Other asking for help has something unique, unrepeatable, even mysterious, something that is not amenable to any generalization or typification. This precisely is the reason that my sense of responsibility and my spontaneous opening up to the Other can neither be explained deterministically, nor is it predictable.

As the above shows, Levinas’ approach to the ethical is a theory against theory. It is an argument that emphasizes how utterly impossible it is for the mind to grasp in abstract, general terms the Self’s reaction to the Other’s specific demand for attention. The ethical is simply the unintended, unpredictable, non-universalizable, spontaneous outcome of an asymmetrical relationship between ego and alter.<sup>8</sup>

**The constitution of the Self.** The difficulty Levinas’ theory gives rise to is this: How can we be sure that the elimination of utilitarian calculations will result in a spontaneity that is truly ethical? How can we be sure that the non-instrumental, spontaneous, context-specific reaction of the Self to the Other’s plea for help and attention won’t be negative or downright destructive? Since Levinas’ definition of the ethical is to a considerable extent negatory, since it says what the ethical reaction to the Other is *not* (not instrumental, not symmetrical, not generalizable etc.), then what remains entails asymmetrical relationships which in common-sense terms are as likely to be supportive as detrimental to the Other. This is to say that neither the lack of instrumentalism nor of rationalization/classification leads

necessarily to a spontaneous reaction to the Other asking for attention that is beneficent or life-supporting.

If Levinas assumes that it does, it is because he more or less implicitly believes that human beings are basically ethical; or, to put it more cautiously, he subscribes to a view of human nature as tending to react in ethically positive terms to the Other's demand for help once certain negative factors are absent. The "good" as unconditional, "infinite" responsibility for the Other is constitutive of the Self, is prior to being, or to any notion of personal freedom or choice:

"This antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice. That is my pre-originary susceptiveness. It is a passivity prior to all receptivity, it is transcendent. It is an antecedence prior to all representable antecedence: immemorial. The Good is before being" (Levinas, quoted in Hand 1989, 112).

Levinas giving priority to the good over the ontic, to axiology over ontology takes various forms in his work. So he talks about the ethical being prior to the natural, about responsible being as coming before being, about the unique Me preceding individuality, or asserts that the prime importance of ethical over ontic individuality

"is due not to participation but to facing in which each individuality is a unique me facing and faced by a unique other beyond conceptuality" (quoted in Llewelyn 1995, 137).

Therefore if Buber tried to avoid moral relativism via his concepts of distance/relation and self-actualization, Levinas attempts to overcome the inherent indeterminacy of spontaneous reaction to the Other's demand for help by resorting to a theory (again) on what is the inherent constituent of being human. Trying to go beyond Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's ontology, Levinas argues that what fundamentally constitutes the Self is neither consciousness/intentionality

nor the state of being towards death (Levinas 1969, 33-48, 109 ff). What is specific about our humanity is that we are responsible beings, that we are capable of openness to the Other's plea for help, that concern for the Other comes before Self-concern (Levinas 1981, 138). It is this kind of asymmetrical relationship, rather than transcendental consciousness or any ontological quality, that is the core of our humanity.

This relational-asymmetrical dimension –which points to the unique, the unrepeatable, the mysterious– is logically prior to both the phenomenology of consciousness and the ontology of being. It is this that constitutes the moral human being, by stressing the concrete existent rather than existence in general, the “face” rather than the individual, the saying rather than the said, “fissure” rather than totality, discontinuity/disruption rather than continuity/harmony, alterity rather than sameness, asymmetry rather than symmetry, etc. It is this type of relational constitutive element that enables one to reject non-interactive or intra-active<sup>9</sup> sources of moral justification, without falling into moral relativism or the type of indeterminacy that is implied by a spontaneous opening-up to the Other.

**The Buber-Levinas debate.** The above shows that there are striking similarities between Buber's and Levinas' theories of the ethical. They both reject instrumental rationality and stress the fact that the ethical cannot be derived from either sacred texts, traditional codes etc., or from inward, contemplative practices. For both, the interhuman/interactive is the space where the ethical originates. Moreover, they both oppose moral relativism by stressing that a certain opening-up to the Other constitutes our humanity, and as such is “always, already” there. It can be suppressed, but it cannot be made to disappear. It is not something to be constructed, chosen, or invented (à la Sartre), but something to be discovered. Hence for both, attempts at intellectualization, codification, standardization hinder or suppress the emergence of the ethical; they lead to *thinking* rather than doing the good.



Of course, there are also fundamental differences between the two thinkers. The most pronounced is that from Levinas' point of view, Buber's dialogic in-between situation is too formal and symmetrical-*formal* in the sense that Buber fails to give even a minimal content to the ethical relation; and *symmetrical* in the sense that it refers more to the type of reciprocal *amitié spirituelle* of friends than to the fundamental imbalance that feeling responsible for "the hungry and naked of the world" necessarily entails. In other words, the ethical transcends mutuality, because it necessarily entails *responsibility* not towards a friend or an equal, but towards an unknown, mysterious Other who vis-à-vis the Self is in a position of both inferiority –the Other needs me– and superiority –“the other always rises ‘above’ my conception so as to face me ‘over’ it” (Smith 1983, 108).

Buber replied to Levinas that the I-Thou relation is by no means limited to the mutual understanding and respect that friendship implies, for it refers to a kind reciprocity between human beings who might have no shared characteristics or interests apart from their common humanity. Moreover, for Buber the idea of the ethical comprises far more than that unconditional, asymmetrical help, in the sense that

“if all were well clothed and well nourished, then the real ethical problem would become wholly visible for the first time” (Buber 1967, 72).

What needs stressing from the point of view of this paper is that for both of them the ethical relationship (whether symmetrical or not, whether referring to mutual confirmation or unconditional responsibility towards the needy) is achieved in an apophatic, negatory manner. Given that a certain type of openness to the Other is inherent in our humanity, in order to find or rather *do* what is ethical, we must remove whatever distorts or hinders our “true” nature. Any attempt to construct or derive the good deliberately (via texts, traditions, reasoning) automatically leads away from the ethical.

The other fundamental similarity between the two philosophers is

that they both try to avoid moral relativism by developing a philosophical anthropology in which a kind of openness to the Other is constitutive of the Self. This openness takes the form of mutual confirmation and trust in Buber's case, and of unconditional responsibility for the other in the case of Levinas.

This attitude does indeed avoid moral relativism or indeterminacy, but at the price of reintroducing, by the back door so to speak, a quasi-foundationalist assumption based on a general, universal theory of what constitutes our "true" humanity. This assumption is, of course, as problematic as its opposite, which stresses the inherent wickedness of human beings and the need, not for discovering the good, but for controlling and regulating the "bad". This being so, I would rather agree with Zigmunt Bauman that

"humans are normally ambivalent: ambivalence resides at the heart of the 'primary scene' of human face to face. All subsequent social arrangements –the power-assisted institutions as well as the rationally articulated and pondered rules and duties– deploy that ambivalence as their building material while doing their best to cleanse it from its original sin of being an ambivalence. ... what follows is that moral conduct cannot be guaranteed; nor by better formed motives of human action. We need to learn how to live without such guarantees ... and with the awareness that guarantees will never be offered..." (Bauman 1993, 18).

In the light of the above both Levinas' notion of unconditional responsibility for the Other and Buber's confirmation of the Other as constitutive elements of the human self are problematical –if not for any other reason than that they reintroduce in their analyses a *monistic* element that their anti-foundationalist pluralism had already endeavoured to transcend.<sup>10</sup>

I think the basic reason for this turn to monism is that both of them underemphasize the intra-active dimension that ethics necessarily entails. Focusing primarily on Self-Other relationships, they both consider any concentration on Self-Self relations as unavoidably lead-

ing to closure, narcissism, egoism in one form or another. Therefore Levinas and Buber tell us what is ethical vis-à-vis the Other, but not what is ethical vis-à-vis the Self, since for both of them Self-Other relations (symmetrical or asymmetrical) displace from centre-stage the problem of Self-Self relations. To put this differently: the ethical problems of confirmation and of responsibility for the Other peripheralize the ethical/spiritual problem of what the ancients called “care of the self” (Foucault 1986), confirmation/responsibility for the Self.

It is at this point that Krishnamurti’s writings and teachings – which, as I am going to argue, are anti-foundationalist in a more radical way than that of the two Jewish philosophers– can be seen as complementing and/or resolving some of the difficulties engendered by Levinas’ and Buber’s theories of ethics.

### III Krishnamurti

Although some of the points to be developed in this section can also be found in the mystical traditions of the major world religions, I have chosen to deal with the teachings and writings of J. Krishnamurti because his rejection of “extrinsic or extraneous” legitimation of the ethical or the spiritual (in terms of divine revelation, sacred texts, logically derived codes of conduct etc.) is even more radical than that of Levinas and Buber. In that sense the Indian sage is as “post-modern” or as anti-foundationalist in the sphere of the spiritual as Levinas is in the sphere of the ethical.<sup>11</sup>

At the age of 14, J. Krishnamurti was “discovered” in India by the clairvoyant C. W. Leadbeater, and brought up as a messiah by Dr. Annie Besant of the London Theosophical Society. As is usual in such cases, Krishnamurti’s early teachings and “divine revelations” led to the founding of a religious sect with followers, rituals, funds etc. But unlike most gurus coming from the East he, after a profound existential and spiritual crisis in 1927, rejected his messianic status

and all the elaborate organizational/institutional arrangements that went with it.

Switching to the other extreme, so to speak, he developed a teaching which, in the spiritual and ethical sphere, is profoundly anti-foundationalist. For the post-1927 Krishnamurti, spirituality has nothing to do with beliefs, whether religious or secular. Beliefs as well as divine revelation, sacred texts etc. are more than irrelevant to those searching for genuine spirituality: they constitute the most serious obstacles to such a search. So for instance his writings, more systematically than Buber's or Levinas', avoid any reference to God, to whether or not there is life after death, as well as to all other eschatological questions. He equally rejects any attempt to elevate his own teachings into an organized system of belief and practices. His constant advice is that one should accept nothing, whether it comes from him or others, without first "testing" it, without exploring what the teaching entails in terms of one's own experience.

Given this Pyrrhonian attitude, Krishnamurti sees himself as merely someone who helps his fellow human beings to look at themselves in a particular manner. For him, looking inwards becomes fruitful only when one eliminates to the utmost of one's ability not only all beliefs and preconceived ideas, but also all linguistic categories, all the concepts and conceptualizations that are acquired through a variety of socialization processes. This purgative, negatory, apophatic, internal work, which is a necessary precondition for the emergence of the spiritual, appears to be not so very different from what psychoanalysts do when they try to clear the ground of defensive preconceptions and misconceptions, so that the hidden or repressed parts of the self can emerge. But Krishnamurti is opposed to psychoanalysis, on the grounds that the psychoanalytic process is based on verbal exchanges –and verbal exchanges, just like beliefs or any other mental process, prevent the emergence of the spiritual.

Krishnamurti regards thinking and being as antithetical –as do most mystical traditions East and West. The more the spiritual is sought via conceptual categories, reasoning, self-analysis etc., the

more it remains elusive. He even rejects all internal disciplines (such as for instance meditating with the repeated use of a mantra) that aim at the cessation of thinking. Any spiritual system or method or technique leads to a mechanized, routinized relationship with the self, and so is fundamentally anti-spiritual. It is not possible to acquire spirituality as one acquires knowledge of a language –that is to say, gradually, and by the use of various meditative techniques or methods.

Spirituality for Krishnamutri entails a “pathless way”. It entails seeing what goes on inside the self in a wordless, conceptless and totally detached manner –detachment here meaning not simply setting aside all beliefs and preconceived ideas, but also, as much as possible, cleansing the mind of all concepts, thoughts, labels, words (Krishnamurti 1969). When this quietening of the mind is achieved, a fusion occurs between the observing and the observed parts of the self. For G. H. Mead, the I is always transcending the Me (in the sense that when the I looks at itself it becomes Me and a new I, a new observer always appears); for Krishnamutri, on the other hand, when the mind becomes silent, when thinking of any kind is stilled, the I/Me or observer/observed dualism disappears (Krishnamutri 1985).

So while Krishnamutri’s (non-)method shares with psychoanalysis the urge to explore what *is* rather than *ought to be*, his exploration dispenses with verbal/conceptual exchanges. Any verbal interaction between analyst and analysand, or any attempt by the former to use analytical tools in order to describe or explain latent or manifest aspects of the ongoing interaction, automatically sabotages the detached exploration of what *is*. It is through silent, continuous gazing inward, rather than through talking, analyzing, expressing feelings verbally, or thinking, that the genuine exploration of the self proceeds.

**Silent observation and compassion.** Assuming that internal silence or silent observation has been achieved, what happens next? Krishnamutri’s instant reaction to such a question is to refuse a definite answer, urging the questioner to find out him/herself what

emerges out of inner observation or contemplation. At other times (breaking his own rule) he has suggested that what does emerge is invariably a sense of unlimited compassion towards the Self, the Other, and all creatures (Krishnamurti 1978).

It is precisely this overwhelming feeling of compassion (or love) that becomes a spontaneous motivation or (non-)guide to practical action. When in a state of compassion, one does not have to consult ethical precepts or ponder alternative courses of action—neither does one have to weigh the pros and cons of alternative strategies; in short, one does not have to make conscious decisions at all. The decision emerges automatically, and one knows exactly what to do both vis-à-vis the self and vis-à-vis the Other. In this sense compassion—the result of silent detached, internal observation—operates like the grace of God does in certain Christian traditions. In the same way that the believer, by means of a corrective, expiatory purification, i.e. by means of apophatic, negatory, cleansing, renders him/herself an “empty vessel” ready to receive divine grace, so Krishnamurti tells us that silent observation of what *is* prepares one for the emergence of compassion which results naturally in the right kind of inter- and intra-action. The difference between the more traditional Christian apophatic method<sup>12</sup> and Krishnamurti’s teaching is that for the latter the source of energy and guidance is not external, but is found inside each one of us.

Let me add one last point about Krishnamurti’s philosophy. He does not elevate his negatory attitude to thinking into a general principle of action. He fully admits that in everyday life there are numerous situations where one has to think, plan ahead, budget time etc. However, such calculating, rationalizing, instrumental aspects of action (what Buber would call I-It relations) not only should be mobilized solely when it is strictly necessary, but must be suspended completely in the sphere of intimate, interpersonal relations. In the same way that the “care of the self” requires silent, inward contemplation, the relationship of the Self with the Other should not be based on the preconceived images or typifications that thinking more

or less automatically gives rise to. That relationship should not be mediated through images accumulated in the past, which images or mental representations numb the senses and allow the deadweight of the past to intrude into the living here and now. It is only when we become aware of this continuous image building, this ceaseless classification, that it is possible to go beyond it and relate to those close to us in a fresh, spontaneous, ever new and open manner.

The principle holds true not only for the relation between self and Other, but also for that between Self and Nature.<sup>13</sup> In so far as I look at the tree outside my window through the filter of past images I have of it or of trees in general, I do not really see the actual tree. My vision is clouded by the haze of mental representations constructed in the past. My casual, absent-minded, imaged look at the tree misses what is vibrant, alive, everchanging in the actual tree. My ability to look at myself, at my spouse, or the tree outside my window in a manner that is always new and fresh depends on my ability to set aside thought processes in general, and not to build up typifications –of myself, my spouse, the tree– in particular (Krishnamurti 1975, 107 ff).

#### IV

### Buber-Levinas-Krishnamurti: A comparison

Despite the very different preoccupations and backgrounds of these three thinkers, there are certain very striking similarities between them.

As already mentioned, all three are radically anti-foundationalist,<sup>14</sup> in that they reject tradition (religious or secular) as well as reasoning means for exploring and finding the way to a life of virtue. All of them refuse to spell out systematically ethical or spiritual rules of conduct. Their approach is more procedural than substantive: they tell us not what to do, but rather what not to do (not to think, ratiocinate, calculate, classify) so that the ethical/spiritual can emerge from within. For all three, the ethical/spiritual can not be imported

from the outside, so to speak (via revelation, sacred texts, a master's teachings) nor can it be acquired by a person's will or reasoning. The will or reasoning are useful only in a negatory sense, as means for clearing the ground, creating an empty space, removing the obstacles that block the blossoming of the ethical/spiritual.

The differences between the three thinkers are, of course, as significant as the similarities. Levinas and Buber focus on interaction, on the ego-alter relationship which we may call ethical; Krishnamurti puts the emphasis on intra-action, on the Self-to-Self relationship that generates spirituality. In Levinas and Buber there is no systematic attempt to link intra- with interaction. The focus on the Self-Other relations is so strong that Self-Self relations are peripheralized or dismissed as leading to narcissistic closure. For Krishnamurti, by contrast, the emphasis on Self-Self relations does not preclude a systematic consideration of Self-Other relations. In fact, it is when one quietens the mind, when one watches the inward self in silence, detachment, and acceptance, that compassion emerges towards the Self *and* the Other. It is inner peace and compassion that more or less automatically lead to harmonious, loving relationships. The internal is primary, in the sense that the absence of internal compassion precludes genuine Self-Other compassion, and eventually results in the jungle-like, moral, divisive and fragmented existence that has become dominant in modern society (Krishnamurti 1975, 180-88). For Krishnamurti internal freedom (achieved via silent observation) is a precondition for a free, non-compulsive, non-routinized relationship with the Other. This contrasts sharply with Levinas' position, which asserts that responsibility for the Other's freedom is anterior to freedom in myself (Llewelyn 1995, 145).

If, following Krishnamurti, one views a certain type of Self-Self relationship as not leading to closure but to openness vis-à-vis the Other, then most of Buber's and Levinas' insights on Self-Other relations can be applied equally to those of Self-Self. For instance, I can deal with my self in an instrumental, rationalizing, manipulative, sadistic manner, or in a manner that is open-ended, self-affirming,



self-trusting, self-helping. To put it differently: Krishnamurti's work argues that not all Self-Self relations lead to closure and egotism. It also argues that Self-Self relations are so inextricably linked with those of Self-Other that any attempt to examine them in isolation leads to serious impasses.

G. H. Mead, to whose work neither Buber nor Levinas refer, has persuasively shown the fruitfulness of looking at social processes simultaneously from an interactive and an intra-active (I-Me) perspective (Mead 1927). Krishnamurti, without knowing Mead's work, argues something similar for the ethical and spiritual sphere. For Krishnamurti it is not enough to see the intersubjective, interhuman "in-between" as the space where the ethical originates. For him it is rather that the space relevant for the emergence of the ethical is both intra- and inter- subjective; in Buber's terms it is both intra- and interhuman, entailing relations not of dialogic (I-Thou) but of "trilogic" character (I-I-Thou).<sup>15</sup> To use Levinas' terminology, the moral self portrays a sense of strong responsibility not only vis-à-vis the Other but also vis-à-vis the "inner Other" (those parts of the Self which cry for help, nurturing, acceptance etc.).

To say it again: in contrast to Buber and Levinas, for Krishnamurti the ethical entails not merely Self-Other but Self-Self-Other relationships. This position enables him to avoid moral relativism without being obliged (as are Buber and Levinas) to resort to theories of human nature that lead back to monistic, foundationalist notions of the good. In other words, although Krishnamurti's teaching too entails, at least implicitly, a theory of human nature (i.e. when obstacles are overcome, *compassion* emerges), this theory is constructed neither via philosophical anthropology nor via a critique of ontology or phenomenology. It is based on *experiencing* (rather than reasoning) what emerges once silent observation of the self is practiced successfully. In that sense Krishnamurti's stance is more consistently anti-foundationalist than that of either Buber or Levinas.

This does not mean that Krishnamurti's position is totally without problems. How can one be sure that quietening the mind will lead

to compassion? Why should silent observation dissolve inner difficulties and bring about inner peace and kindness vis-à-vis the self and others? Could it not be that inner silence and the quietening of the mind might, in certain circumstances, bring not compassion but egoistic aggression? In other words, is there a valid link between the cessation of thought and compassion on the other? Could it be valid in certain cultures and not in others?

A partial answer to this rather empirical question is that in the mystical traditions of all world religions –whether one looks at Christian saints, Buddhist monks or Hindu holy men– one consistently tends to find:

- (a) a certain anti-foundationalism stressing that, even when sacred texts and traditional beliefs are respected, the genuine search for the spiritual and/or divine takes an apophatic, negatory forms;
- (b) that this leads to overcoming, to mastering selfish and/or illusionist views of the Self and the Other;
- (c) that once (by means of the *via negativa*) such aspects of the self have subsided, an altruistic, compassionate, enlightened part emerges from within.

All the great mystical traditions view the self as entailing both altruistic and egoistic tendencies, and teach that it is necessary to master, to overcome, dissolve the latter to allow the former to surface. There is, finally, the view that this emergent altruism (which can take a variety of forms) is not entirely socially constructed, but is there like a more or less hidden substratum, a hidden “divine spark” which, as a potentiality, exists within every human being (this is of course a position that social constructionists would consider as essentialist).

What should be stressed in closing this essay is that the type of inner work Krishnamurti advocates presupposes high levels of individuation. This would mean that the link between inner silence and compassion, if not culture-specific, refers to an *evolutionary* universal:<sup>16</sup> it makes its appearance once social differentiation and

individuation have reached a stage when members of a social whole can conceive of themselves as “individuals” distinct from primordial groupings, and as capable of systematic internal dialogue.

Of course, to all the above difficult issues Krishnamurti would have given a very pragmatic, non-intellectualized answer: the only way to find out whether inner, silent observation is linked to compassion is to try it out and see what happens. To turn the problem into an issue of philosophical anthropology or philosophy is to miss the point; it is, to use Buber’s terminology, to move from an I-Thou to an I-It attitude vis-à-vis the Self.

## NOTES

1. According to Buber, the I-Thou relation, as a non-instrumental orientation to something outside the self, applies not only to the interpersonal, interhuman space, but also to the relationship between the Self and Nature, as well as the Self and God. For some of the difficulties entailed in this broad definition see Levinas (1967).

2. Buber developed the concept of mutuality in his late work. It distinguishes I-Thou relations entailing mutuality in (i.e. those between persons) from I-Thou relations that are on the “threshold of mutuality”, i.e. those between the self and the Nature, or Self and God. See Silbernstein (1989).

3. In this later work, Buber turned more decidedly towards a secularized, anti-foundationalist position, as he found it less and less necessary to support his ideas by theology. See Silbernstein (1989, 146ff).

4. “Between the I and the Thou there is no conceptual structure, no prediction, fantasy, purpose, desire or anticipation. All intermediaries are obstacles. It is only when these vanish that the meeting occurs” (Bubber, quoted in Levinas 1967, 144).

5. “Man can become a whole not by virtue of a relation to himself but only by virtue of a relation to another” (Buber 1947, 181).

6. When the subject fails to enter into an I-Thou relation, the “distance thickens and solidifies, so that instead of being that which makes room for relation it becomes that which obstructs” (Friedman 1955, 83).

7. For a *sociological* discussion of Buber’s distance/relation concepts see Eisenstadt (1992).

8. For an introduction to Levinas’ thought see Hand (1989), Bauman (1993), Llewelyn (1995).

9. Like Buber, Levinas stresses the derivative nature of Self-Self relations. Any exaggerated emphasis on internal dialogue or inner communication leads to “monadization”, closure, to a pseudo-security that eliminates the genuine, life-giving risk that feeling responsible for the Other entails. See Hand (1989, 108ff).

10. The pluralism-monism contradiction is more obvious in Levinas’ work. In his *Totality and Infinity* (1969) his radical pluralism leads him to attack any philosophy of the same, of totality, harmony, balance, symmetry etc. At this stage the Self-Other ethical relation is mainly defined apophatically, by means of the *via negativa* (i.e. by pointing out what hinders or prevents its

emergence). In *Otherwise than Being* (1981), however, ontological pluralism tends to be combined with ethical monism as the Self's responsibility for the Other is elevated to a first principle, and the philosophy of responsibility becomes "first" philosophy.

"It is as through the idea of the Infinite (the in-the-finite) overflowed the mainly negative, critical analysis of Otherness or anti-ontology of the earlier work and served as the spring-board for a positive Saying of transcendence in the later. The absolute difference becomes absolute 'non-indifference'" (Smith 1983, 204).

11. For an introduction to Krishnamurti's life and work see Lutyens (1988, 1990).

12. The term *apophatic* plays a central role in the theology of the eastern orthodox church. It entails the notion of negativity –negativity in its non pejorative sense. It connotes a relation to the divine and to the self which is neither activist, nor related to cognitively oriented means- ends schemata. Apophatic theology, which has common features with Western negative theology, is closely but not entirely linked with *hesychasm* (*hesychia* in Greek meaning quietness), a spiritual movement that was important in the late Byzantine period. Its major representative in that period was St. George Palamas (Meyendorff 1974). Apophatism entails two types of negativity. The first connotes the impossibility of knowing the essence of the divine via rational means. The second related one entails on inward turning into the self in order to remove cognitive obstacles, achieving thus a void which sets the ground for the experience of the divine energies.

13. Here there is an obvious comparison with Buber, whose I-Thou relation applies not only to Self-Other but also to Self-Nature relations (Levinas 1967).

14. For the different type of issues that postmodern anti-foundationalism is raising in the social sciences see Mouzelis (1995, 41-44).

15. By an I-I relationship I mean a non-instrumental relation to the Self.

16. On the concept of evolutionary universals see Parsons (1966).

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