What It Means to be Truly Human in Organizations: Martin Buber's Concept of I-Thou Relations

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Abstract

This chapter invites us to think differently of organizations. The theory of the firm and related theories depict human relations in terms of their objects and instrumentalities. This conception, however, precludes any metaphysical account of human relating. In this chapter, we look to an historical figure, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, for special insight into the nature of human relations that has largely escaped notice in contemporary organization studies. We begin by unpacking Buber's distinction between two modes of relating: I-It and I-Thou; first, to recognize that it involves profound distinctions in how we come to relationships, and particularly how we understand their ontology, epistemology, and causality; and second, to recognize that it invites us to think differently about business. Upon this foundation, we draw also from allied ideas of the social teaching of the Catholic Church to point the way toward a new language of business rooted in the being of I-Thou relations.

Keywords: Martin Buber, I-Thou relations, ontology/epistemology of relating, positive relationships at work

What It Means to be Truly Human in Organizations: Martin Buber's Concept of I-Thou Relations

Theories in social science make assumptions about human nature. These assumptions matter because they inform our research and the methods we use to study organizations. They also influence the options we propose to design organizations. One of the most influential theories in organizational scholarship is the theory of the firm, also referred to as agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). This theory assumes that people behave rationally according to a utility function of stable preferences in order to maximize personal gains. Similar assumptions have been made in other dominant theories in organizational research. For example, social exchange theory builds on the premise that human relationships develop based on people's intention to gain profits and avoid punishment (Emerson, 1976). Similarly, social network theory builds on the notion of self-interested behavior, positing that people use their social networks to capitalize on personal gains, such as increases in influence, power, or pay (Ghoshal, 2005). Furthermore, social network theory reduces persons and their human relations to structural properties of a network consisting of "nodes" and "ties" (Burt, Kilduff, & Tasselli, 2013).

These conceptions of human relationships are not wrong or morally condemnable; however, they offer a limited view on the world of human relationships. One problem of such accounts is that they model human behavior upon a narrow premise of self-interested behavior. Another, yet related, problem is that such accounts rely upon a limited few axioms which reduce the reality of human relations to an abstract level, casting out much of the richness of human relations in organizational life. A third and more profound problem is that such accounts preclude the metaphysical dimensions of human relations. These accounts offer words for the many and various objects of human relations (e.g. individuals, groups, tasks, jobs, leaders, followers, owners, employees, products, services, buyers, sellers, etc.), but no

words for the spirit or "being" of human relations, no words for such things as their living possibilities, or their joy, solidarity, and common good.

These conceptions of human relationships are of decisive practical significance because they shape how social relationships are experienced and conducted. Traditional views of the firm promote a depersonalized social structure that puts economic concerns for efficiency and the division of labor over concerns for personal connection and community. These views define relationships by the purposes they serve and organize them according to the objective roles they define. In this rationalist view, the genuine concerns of persons for one another succumb to the artificiality of economic contingency.[1] Thus, by depicting human relations in terms of their objects and instrumentalities, these conceptions define *what* we are (declaring in effect that we are self-seeking objects). However, by conceding nothing of spirit or being to human relations (not to mention their living possibilities, joy, solidarity, or common good), these conceptions say nothing about *who* we are.

It could be no surprise then that when social scientists first observed the advent of the modern business corporation, they were concerned that the depersonalization and deliberate prevention of emotional connection in organizations would be alienating (Weber, 1904/1958, 1920/1984). Durkheim (1933) warned that seeing each other as means to economic ends, not unlike material objects, would create an "anomic division of labor," leading to a lack of sensitivity and moral regard for each other's needs. Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/1957, p. 36) contrasted the mechanical relations in organizations (Gesellschaft) with the more organic relations in community (Gemeinschaft). *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by interpersonal

[1] This emphasis on the pursuit of instrumental goals can be traced back to early views that relational concerns are inappropriate in work settings, referred to as the Protestant Relational Ideology (e.g., Sanchez-Burks, 2002). The Protestant Relational Ideology holds that "No intimacy, affection, brotherhood, or rootedness is supposed to sully the world of work" (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993, p. 133). This belief resulted in a culturally unique relational work style in America (Lenski, 1961), and over time these beliefs about maintaining impersonal and emotionally detached work settings were secularized and incorporated into contemporary corporate culture (Fischer, 1989).

connections based on emotional depth, personal intimacy, and involving the whole person, whereas *Gesellschaft* is characterized as 'mechanical' because it is seen as artificial fictions operating under logic and rationality that dehumanizes interpersonal connections. Unifying human themes such as trust become corroded and mutated into something mechanical and external such as rigid contracts. In the Gesellschaft, people are reduced to mere commodities.[2]

This depiction from decades ago of work relationships as mechanical, transactional, and impersonal seems to be only growing in relevance in recent years. Americans are reportedly forming fewer non-transactional relationships at work (Cappelli, 1998; Pfeffer, 2006), and the number of Americans who see work as a place to make friends is declining (Grant, 2015; Kacperczyk, Sanchez-Burks, & Baker, 2013). This corresponds with a broader trend of increasing social isolation, demonstrated in Putnam's (2000) landmark book, Bowling Alone, but as Pfeffer (2006, p. 5) states, "We are not only 'bowling alone,' we are increasingly 'working alone'." We all need human connection, but its significance seems to be drowned out when viewing relationships as functional and instrumental (e.g., Sayer, 2007). David Korten (2019, p. 1) invites us to challenge this outlook of organizations, suggesting that the "proper purpose of any human institution is to improve the lives of the people who depend on it"

In this chapter, we aim to broaden our understanding of the nature of human relationships at work by looking back to the work of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, a key historical figure in the philosophy of human relations.[3] In his landmark book, *I and Thou* (1923/1958), Buber suggests that we encounter others in two different existential modes: the

[2] Wrote Tönnies: "[I]n the Gesellschaft they [humans] are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors… [E]verybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others. Their spheres of activity and power are sharply separated, so that everybody refuses to everyone else contact with and admittance to his sphere; i.e., intrusions are regarded as hostile acts" (p. 65).

[3] Here we follow the Historical Figures Research Approach of Werhane, Freeman & Dmytriyev (2017) to illuminate important aspects of human relating ignored by contemporary organizational scholarship.

I-It and the I-Thou. In the I-It mode, one sees the other person as a discrete object in space and time. He/she is a composition of objective and measurable properties to be judged by his/her potential value or usefulness. In contrast, in the I-Thou mode, one beholds the other person in the fullness of his/her being and with regard for his/her inalienable human dignity. In the light of Buber's thinking, it is apparent that, by the assumptions they make about human relationships, the theory of the firm and related theories are strictly predicated on the I-It mode of relations and focus entirely upon the objective, instrumental, and impersonal. By precluding the I-Thou mode of relations, these theories keep people from their full humanity at work. And while being fixed on I-It relating orients organizations towards instrumental and individualistic ends, it closes organizations off to the profound purpose and moral solidarity of I-Thou relating.

In this chapter, we offer an expanded conception of human relating at work, beginning with Buber's concept of I-Thou relations and drawing upon allied ideas of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. We begin by unpacking Buber's distinction between I-It and I-Thou; first, to recognize that it involves profound distinctions in how we come to relationships, and particularly how we understand their ontology, epistemology, and causality; and second, to recognize that it invites us to think differently about business. Upon this foundation, we then point the way toward a new language of business rooted in the being of I-Thou relations. In particular, we call attention to ideas of the human person, human communion, and the logic of gift. In so doing, we follow Korten's (2019) call to offer a piece of theoretical spadework to help develop an emerging Theory of Community in organizations. With this chapter, we hope to lead the reader and the field of organizational studies beyond the existing and dominant account of human relationships in business predicated upon self-interested behavior, to a more humane account of these relationships predicated upon their real being, illuminating their beauty, truth, and goodness.

Between the I-It and the I-Thou

Martin Buber was a Jewish philosopher and one of the pioneers of the dialogue philosophy in the early 20th century. Considering himself a philosophical anthropologist, Buber sought to explore and understand the wholeness of human being from the particularity of lived experience. While studying in Vienna, Buber was inspired by the world of theatre and the give-and-take format of university seminars to develop a philosophy of dialogic intersubjectivity, contending that humans only fully come into being in relations of mutual confirmation with other humans. Many of his essays and lectures have been compiled and published in two volumes: *Between Man and Man* (1947; essays from the 1920s and 30s) and *The Knowledge of Man* (1965; essays from the 1950s). In these essays, he offers a dialogic answer to Kant's question "What is man?"—that is to be in relation. Or as Buber writes, "In the beginning is the relation" (1923/1958, p. 18). Buber's writings inspired philosophers Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Levinas and others in a philosophical movement criticizing the obsession with empiricism and objectivity brought in during the Enlightenment as the dominant way to understand and relate to the world. Buber and his followers recognize empiricism and objectivity as an abstraction of realty, and a contrived way of relating to the world.

Buber's most influential work was his book, *I and Thou* (1923/1958), in which he develops a distinction between two fundamental modes of relating, I-It and I-Thou. I-It is the mode of relating in which we most frequently engage with others, experiencing the other as an object with certain characteristics and capabilities, with some functional motivation driving the exchange. For example, in a recruitment process, an HR manager might scan the profile of a job candidate based on an evaluation of the candidate's personality and abilities according to predefined criteria. Managers might see their subordinates as impersonal human resources.

Coworkers might see each other by their roles rather than the persons inside the roles. Such knowledge, by its very nature, is impersonal, making no distinction between persons and things. I-It is monologic and produces one-way relationships with objects and object-like persons.

For Buber, however, the primary mode of relating is the dialogic I-Thou relation. I-Thou is not merely a thing among others (Lent, 2013). Rather, I-Thou relating "points to the quality of genuine relationship in which partners are mutually unique and whole" (Kramer, 2003, p. 15). This mode of being in relation is characterized by "mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability (Friedman, 2002, p. 65)," affirming the other not as an object, but as another subject that cannot be objectified or labeled. In a recruitment process, for example, an HR manager might engage in a genuine dialogue with the job candidate, allowing to be truly moved by the presence of the other person without objectifying her or him. Managers and coworkers might take in and wonder at the beauty and magnificence of each other in their uniqueness and wholeness, realizing at the same time a sense of oneness in their shared humanity.

Buber (1923/1958) acknowledges both the necessity and value of objective knowledge or I-It relations for living in the world (Lent, 2013), as we tend to organize our everyday around the I-It to reduce our existential anxieties, which is not necessarily wrong nor evil. We objectify the world in a self-indulgent way to possess it, to master it, and to create order. We employ quantifiable measures to capture images of "reality" for science. We see employees as human resources as a way to maximize efficiency. Many great scientific and organizational achievements can be credited to the I-It. But I-It comes with a price, as the profound limitations of I-It leave us alienated from each other, and even from ourselves. Buber contends that I-It only has meaning in the service of I-Thou: "It is not as though scientific and aesthetic understanding were not necessary; but they are necessary to man that he may do his

work with precision and plunge it in the truth of relation, which is above the understanding and gathers it up in itself" (1923/1958, p. 41-42).

Both modes of being are exclusive: we are either in the mode of I-It or I-Thou. Although Buber acknowledges that we spend most of our lives in the I-It mode of being and only occasionally enter the I-Thou, he emphasizes that the I-Thou is essential for becoming fully alive as person, as "without 'It,' a man cannot live; but he who lives with 'It' alone is not a man" (1923/1958, p. 52). Thus, business that is disconnected from the relational underpinnings that give it meaning is a hollow pursuit with potential to alienate or corrupt; I-Thou gives meaning to business and makes it a fully human enterprise.

Buber stresses that there should be an appropriate rhythm of alternation between the I-It and I-Thou modes of being. This alternating between I-It and I-Thou allows for a dynamic turning to the other as an act of inclusion without giving up the "ground of one's consciousness" or the ability to "see through one's own eyes" (Friedman, 2002, p. 357). Kramer (2003, p. 159) describes the experience of switching from I-It to I-Thou as "turning toward the other with unreserved spontaneity by opening to an indwelling presence between persons… turning away from a self-reflexive monologue consumed in self-enjoyment and towards the wordless depths of genuine I-Thou." One turns away, therefore, from a preoccupation with self, while turning towards the other as Thou in an invitation to genuine dialogue. As I meets Thou, the connection is defined "in between" both, as self and other are reciprocal partners engaged in a "dynamic of elemental togetherness" (Kramer, 2003, p. 24).

But our culture has increasingly become absorbed into the world of It. Many have contested that the rise in technologically-mediated interaction has increased the perceived artificiality of social connection (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Mallaby, 2006; Marche, 2012; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Olds & Schwartz, 2009; Sigman, 2009; Stoll, 1999; Turkle, 2015). Technology permits a more careful and deliberate presentation of the self. But for Buber, genuine dialogue requires each respondent to bring what is really in his or

her head to the dialogue, "without artifice, seeming, or pretense" (Cooper, 2003, p. 138). Related to the I-It versus I-Thou distinction, Buber draws a distinction between being and seeming. Reitz (2015, p. 109) describes seeming as "attempting to 'read' the group and sensing how to respond to our perceptions in the right way." Friedman (2002, p. 99) explains, "The origin of the tendency toward seeming is found in the human need for confirmation. It is no easy thing to be confirmed by the other in one's being; therefore, one looks to appearance for aid." But this deep-seated concern about being accepted by others and our felt need for protection leads us to be "encased in an armour" (Buber, 1965, p. 10), which inhibits I-Thou relation both by masking the I and shielding against the Thou.

Buber emphasizes the importance of embracing and revealing one's personhood to enable entering an I-Thou relation. An I -Thou relation is "a relation of person to person, of subject to subject, a relation of reciprocity involving 'meeting' or 'encounter'...." (Herberg, 1956, p. 14). Indeed, the "I" of a person differs between I-It and I-Thou. In I-Thou a person becomes whole through a relation to another self. The formation of the "I" of the I-Thou relation takes place in a dialogical relationship in which each partner is affirmed as a whole being. Only in I-Thou relation can the "I" truly develop as a whole being, as participants move toward a union with each other that affirms the distinctiveness and authenticity of each other.

As much time as Buber spent thinking and writing about the I-Thou relation, he offers no clear steps to cultivating I-Thou encounters. In a speech at the 1930 Convention of Jewish Youth Organizations in Munich, Buber stated, "But if you asked me, 'What is to be done' I would have to tell you that I do not have a prescription in my pocket, and I have nothing that resembles a prescription. For this call of the moment that all of you ought to hear cannot be translated into a formula" (Biemann, 2002, p. 254). This reflects his commitment to the ineffability of I-Thou relations. For Buber, "The Thou encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking" (1923/1958, p. 62). In fact, deliberately attempting to construct an I-Thou

encounter is already succumbing to an I-It mode. Relatedly, Buber acknowledges that every Thou by its nature fates to become a thing, or continually re-enter into the condition of things (Lent, 2013), making I-Thou encounters "perilous" and "unreliable" (1923/1958, p. 77). No person can permanently stay in an I-Thou relation, and, as a matter of principle, no I-Thou encounter lasts forever. These moments fade away and become sediments of objective manifestation and artefacts. Hence, we must find ways to nurture and renew those moments of direct, genuine, and spontaneous encounters if we are to cultivate generative relationship with other persons.

*** Add Table 1 about here ***

Applying Buber's Framework to Social Life in Organizations

In the following, we will offer a review of important differences between the I-It and the I-Thou regarding their mode of understanding, ontology, epistemology, and causality. First, we suggest that there are two alternative modes of understanding corresponding to the I-It and I Thou: *seeing objects* and *beholding being* (see Table 1) (Sandelands, 2017). In the I-It, a thing is seen as an object. In this perspective, seeing is to regard things with certain ideas in mind — in particular, that they are material entities in the dimensions of space and time, that they therefore have parts and that they have certain perceptible properties, and that they stand in relations of cause and effect to other objects. In the I-Thou, by contrast, being is beheld by taking it into ourselves and allowing ourselves to be conformed to it. In this perspective, beholding is to receive and integrate the other being into our own according to our capacities of body and mind. These different modes of understanding of I-It and I-Thou are mutually exclusive; we cannot see objects and behold being at the same time.

Second, we propose that there are different ontologies underlying these alternative modes of relating: The I-It corresponds with seeing relationships as constellations of objects,

whereas the I-Thou corresponds with understanding relationships as processes of eventful encounters (see Table 1) (Mohr, 1982). From the I-It perspective, relationships are made of stable material objects that change according to their positioning in space and time only. Relationships develop and adapt in association with properties of other objects in the world, but they do not change in their substance (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). Social network analysis is a good example of this kind of perspective. According to this view, persons and their relationships can be reduced to the structural properties of nodes and ties, assuming that these nodes and ties only change in response to some external property of other things, but not in their own substance.

By contrast, the ontology underlying I-Thou acknowledges the processual nature of relating. Such ontology embraces being as a verb rather than a noun, focusing on 'relating' as a process rather than 'relation' as a thing (Mohr, 1982; Tsoukas, 2005). The essence of process philosophy is nicely captured by Heraclitus' statement: "Process is fundamental: The river is not an object but an ever-changing flow; the sun is not a thing, but a flaming fire. Everything in nature is a matter of process, of activity, of change" (Rescher, 1996, p. 10). The different ontologies underlying I-It and I-Thou reflect two different versions of the world: the one related to I-It that sees the world as made of objects in which processes represent change in objects; and one related to I-Thou that understands the world as made of processes in which objects are reifications of processes (Tsoukas, 2005).

The ontology of I-Thou has been much less readily embraced by philosophers in the 19th and 20th century's than that of I-It (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). Notable exceptions include the American pragmatic and processual approaches of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and Alfred North Whitehead (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005) and the European life philosophy and phenomenology of Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Buber was most familiar with those continental traditions of life philosophy and phenomenology, because he attended

lectures of Dilthey and was invited to Simmel's private tutorial when studying at the University of Berlin (Wood, 1969). Nevertheless, Buber never systematically laid out an explicit ontology of the I-Thou in his own writings (Wood, 1969).

Third, there are two distinct epistemologies emanating from these alternative ontologies underlying I-It and I-Thou: variance theory and process theory (see Table 1). The I-It corresponds with variance theory; the I-Thou corresponds with process theory. In the business sciences, variance theory has been the dominant idea of what constitutes knowledge of business. An important characteristic of a variance theory is that it can be formulated in mathematical terms. The theory of the firm is a good example of this kind of theory, as the original statement of this theory was laid out as a mathematical function (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). In variance-theory terms, explanations take the form of causal statements or models incorporating variables (e.g. X causes Y, which causes Z) (Van de Ven & Poole, 2000). An implicit goal of such deterministic explanations is to establish the conditions necessary and sufficient to bring about an outcome (Mohr, 1982; Van de Ven & Poole, 2000). Variance theory primarily uses research designs such as experiments and surveys, applying quantitative statistical methods built on the general linear model, such as ANOVA, regression, factor analysis, and structural equation modeling (Van de Ven & Poole, 2000). Poole, Van de Ven, Dooley, and Holmes (2000, p. 29) attribute the predominance of variance theory to organizational scientists' one-sided graduate school training, pleading for a more balanced use of variance and process theory: "Give a child a hammer, and everything seems made to be hit; give a social scientist variables and the general linear model and everything seems made to be factored, regressed, and fit."

The I-Thou, in turn, corresponds with the epistemology of process theory. Whereas variance theory draws on variables, process theory builds on events, providing narrative explanations of how a process enfolds as a sequence of events (Mohr, 1982; Drazin & Sandelands, 1992; Pentland, 1999). Process theory can, for example, include critical events,

turning points, rites of passage, interaction rituals, formative patterns, or contextual influence, that give direction to how a process enfolds (Collins, 2004; Poole et al., 2000; Turner, 1969).[4] In process theory, the order of events matters, which is different from the epistemology of variance theory (Abbott, 1988). Even the meaning of concepts and events can change over time, as the involved actors' interpretations of those concepts and events change as the process enfolds (Abbot, 1988). As such, process theory tends to be more complex than variance theory due to the potential non-linearity of the underlying events (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Different than variance theory, process theory can only establish necessary conditions to bring out a particular outcome but not sufficient conditions (Mohr, 1982). In its purest form, process research uses qualitative research designs, such as case studies or ethnographies, and builds on qualitative methods, such as interviews or participatory observation (Poole et al., 2000). The subjectivity inherent in the interpretative process– be it the subjectivity of the involved actors being studied or the subjectivity of the researcher– is not seen as "error variance" to be explained away, but understood as a valid source of information that helps gain insights into the very nature of a phenomenon.

Finally, I-It and I-Thou differ in their underlying mode of causality: the I-It corresponds with efficient causes; the I-Thou corresponds with final causes (see Table 1). According to Aristotle (1999), an efficient cause is what brings an entity into being. As such, an efficient cause can be thought of as a *push-type* causality (Mohr, 1982). In the more technical terms of variance-theory, an efficient cause is a force that links an attribute X of an entity with an attribute Y of the same or another entity, such that attribute X is conceived as *acting on* the attribute Y (Van de Ven & Poole, 2000). For example, the quality of a work relationship X (i.e., an attribute of an entity) could be thought of as changing the work

[4] For examples of process research in the organizational sciences see Gersick (1988), Lee, Mazmanian, and Perlow (in press), and Metiu and Rothbard (2013)

satisfaction of an employee Y (i.e., an attribute of another entity). To qualify as an efficient cause, the precursor X (in our example, the quality of a work relationship), must be necessary and sufficient to cause the outcome Y (the work satisfaction of the employee). Efficient causation is the predominant mode of explanation in modern social sciences today (Van de Ven & Poole, 2000). In variance theory, efficient causation is even thought of as the only legitimate type of causal reasoning (Mohr, 1982).[5]

Final causation, by contrast, is what determines the purpose of an entity (Aristotle, 1999). Aristotle envisaged this type of causality only for living beings (Mohr, 1982). A final cause can be thought of as a *pull-type* causality (Mohr, 1982). For example, one could think of a final causation much like the development of a seed toward becoming a plant: The means of becoming a plant is already inscribed in the seed as a potential, becoming actualized when the seed grows toward being a plant; the purpose, however, of being a plant is already inherent in the seed right from the beginning of its being. Modern social science has abandoned Aristotle's metaphysical understanding of final causes altogether, not least because it requires assuming a natural purpose inherent in living beings or supposing a supernatural entity determining the purpose of all beings (McKelvey, 2004). Social science today refers to final causes only in a metaphorical sense (Mohr, 1982). In process-theory terms, a final cause is understood as "an endpoint to whose existence connotes the occurrence of certain prior events" (Mohr, 1982, p. 59). In this view, a final cause is understood merely as a probabilistic process but not as a purposeful development inscribed in the being itself or imposed by a supernatural entity. As such, contemporary social scientists do not permit themselves to think of final causation in broader Aristotelian terms. However, when reading Buber, particularly

[5] It should be noted that while the scientific causality of variance theory resembles that of Aristotle's efficient causality, it is the brainchild of Scottish philosopher David Hume and is actually quite different. Whereas efficient causality for Aristotle was the ''how'' by which a potency of form is actualized, scientific causality for Hume was a conjunction of events that we experience and call cause and effect but that we cannot rationally justify.

his earlier mystic writings (Buber, 1908, 1908/1931, 1909), we cannot help but think that Buber holds that it is essentially through final causation in the broader Aristotelian sense that I-Thou encounters support a divine higher purpose coming into being.

Toward a Language of Being in Business

After this review of characteristic differences between I-It and I-Thou, we now turn our attention to what the notion of I-Thou portends for our thinking about relationships in business. Heretofore, management scholars and business ethicists have rarely referred to the concept of the I-Thou directly. One of the few exceptions is Peter Drucker (1980) who met Buber when Drucker was a student at the University of Frankfurt. From this early life experience, Drucker was familiar with Buber's work. In Drucker's classic writings on management, he particularly emphasized the importance of receptiveness in managerial communication which was influenced by Buber's notion of I-Thou relations. However, Drucker does not mention Buber's concept of I-Thou relations directly (Schwartz, 2004). Similarly, the business ethics literature has also seldomly referred directly to Buber's concept of I-Thou relations (Schwartz, 2008). One of the few exceptions is Robinson (2015) who compared Islamic notions of dialogue with more Western conceptions, such as Buber's I-Thou relations. Besides these few exceptions, management and business ethics scholars have stayed silent about Buber's ideas. Buber's work, however, resonates with concepts from the humanistic management perspective, such as human dignity and flourishing (Pirson, 2017; Pirson, & Lawrence, 2010).

There is also some literature in business ethics, most notably from the social teaching of the Catholic Church, that draws upon ideas of the fundamentally relational nature of being that resonate with Buber's concept of I-Thou. This resonance can be traced perhaps to the common root of Catholic Christianity and Buber's Jewish philosophy in the monotheism of

Abrahamic religion—both begin in the article of faith that all being begins and ends with God. In any case, this ancient Abrahamic perspective is lost upon the modern political philosophy underlying most of the organization sciences that is loath to embrace metaphysical assumptions about human nature that cannot be scientifically verified. Catholic social teaching augments this ancient perspective with the metaphysics of Aristotle and Aquinas (Sison & Fontrodona, 2012, 2013) to develop ideas about person (e.g., Acevdeo, 2012; Mele, 2009; Sandelands, 2009), community (e.g., Melé, 2012; Sison & Fontrodona, 2013), and the logic of gift (e.g., Baviera, English, & Guillén, 2016; Frémeaux & Michelson, 2011).

We believe that these ideas might help situate the concept of I-Thou in the business ethics literature and enrich our understanding of I-Thou relations in organizations. Figure 1 depicts a summarizing model of I-Thou and the related concepts of being a person, participating in a community of persons, and the logic of gift.

*** Add Figure 1 about here ***

Being a Person

We begin our walk through ethical concepts allied to the I-Thou with the human person (see summarizing model in Figure 1). The notion of a person shares close intimacy with the concept of I-Thou, because Buber (1923/1958) understands being aware of one's personhood as an important prerequisite to engage in I-Thou relations. According to Catholic social teaching, a person is a unique, absolute being, possessing self-conscience and self-determination (Melé, 2009). As a result of those faculties, man can act morally and reflect his own actions (Melé, 2012). In this view, human beings are a reflection of God's absoluteness, which implies that we partially mirror God's perfection. As such, a person has absolute dignity, but at the same time the natural ability to feel guilt, shame, and remorse when disregarding his or her dignity and acting dishonest (Acevedo, 2012). As such, a person can transcend itself in the very act of making free decisions (Melé, 2012). Virtue ethics can be

thought of as a way to cultivate acting in accordance with one's dignity (Melé, 2009). Most notably, a person is characterized by being "someone" and not "something" (Spaemann, 2006) , which also resonates with how humanistic management conceptualized human dignity (Pirson, Goodpaster, & Dierksmeier; 2014).

Similar to Buber (1923/1958), Catholic social teaching understands a person as a process or event rather than as a state or object. According to this doctrine, man is an image of God; though an imperfect one (Acevedo, 2012). As such, personhood is the latent structure of our being. By our very existence, we have an unqualified inherent dignity as a person (Sison, Ferrero, & Guitián, 2016). But it is a dignity that we must live up to by our conduct. As a person, we can only develop fully when we exercise our reason and free choice toward the end of perfecting ourselves in the image of God. To this end the Catholic Church and other spiritual movements offer practices by which we can become the person we are created to be, often by detaching us from the trials and tribulations of the world of I-It relations in acts of silence, meditation, reflection, and prayer to reclaim the peace and solace of the I-Thou relation. Buber (1923/1958), however, emphasizes too that I-Thou encounters are not restricted to such quiet solitary moments but can be experienced while engaging in the world with any living being (humans, animals, even plants) so long as we open ourselves to their being in acts of real relating.

Human work can serve an important function in nurturing one's personhood, as labor allows developing one's dignity by engaging in the world (John Paul II, 1981; Sison et al., 2016). Organizations are important contexts that can serve or hinder this aim to develop as a person. Catholic social teaching values the subjective dimension of work more highly than the objective one (John Paul II, 1981), in another parallel to Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It relations. The "human significance" of work is more important than its objective "professional significance." As Pope John Paul II puts it: "The proper subject of work is Man" (p. 14). This is obviously counter to traditional accounts of business, such as the theory

of the firm, that priorities profit maximization over other potential aims and purposes of organizations (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The preeminence of the subjective dimension of work over the objective dimension has also important implications for how to design organizations: If one values the subjective dimension of work more than its economic outcome, one could design organizations in ways that help employees reflect on the morality of their decisions, also offering them the discretion to make value-based decisions on their own.

Finally, the concept of a person is inherently relational (Clarke, 1993; Sison et al., 2016). A solitary person without this dual striving for substantiality on the one hand, and relationality on the other is not conceivable (Clarke, 1993). This belief stands in sharp contrast to the conceptualization of man according to the modern political philosophy (Melé, 2009), which describes man as an "individual," a rational actor with self-interested behavior maximizing its own utility (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). According to Catholic social teaching, a person is not an isolated thing, but a social being with a natural inclination to build human connections with others and develop shared communities (Melé, 2009).

Being a Community

The word "community" stems from the Latin word *communitatem* meaning "common" or "shared by all or many" (Melé, 2012). We believe that a community of persons needs moments of I-Thou encounters to really come alive (see summarizing model in Figure 1). However, we suggest that a community of persons cannot build on I-Thou encounters alone and needs some shared higher purpose, around which community members can gravitate. This higher purpose cannot be generated simplistically by the top management such as by issuing a vision statement. A vision statement might help remind community members of a higher purpose, but a true vision needs to be tied back to human being—to what is

required to live truly as persons in communion. Such a vision must be a final cause in the broad Aristotelian sense of a purpose that inheres in and informs our living being.

Drawing upon Aristotle, a higher purpose may include any "cultivation and improvement (by whatever standards) of its members as well as its own perpetuation'' (Solomon, 1994, p. 275), serving the flourishing and dignity of members in a community (Acevedo, 2012). According to Catholic social teaching (and Buber's view), and contrary to the theory of the firm, business is not to put its private good of profit before the public common good of community (Acevedo, 2012; Mele, 2009). This idea is also well in line with the humanistic management perspective (Pirson & Lawrence, 2010). Thus, business leaders are not to lord over customers or employees under their control but are to submit to them as their servants (Acevedo, 2012; Sandelands, 2014). Leadership, in this view, has but one supreme good: to affirm the dignity and to support the flourishing of each and every person (Whetstone, 2002). Such leadership is perhaps hard to imagine in many industries to today, such as investment banking, in which the defining ethos is to maximize private self-interest. And such leadership is hard to hope for from those business managers who, because they are preoccupied with financial outcomes, are loathe to spend any resources on "people issues" (van Dierendonck, 2010; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). And so, it is to regret that modern accounts of business say very little about how leaders can affirm their followers' human dignity and generate a transforming vision that can become known in I-Thou encounters and materialize as a higher purpose for members of an organization.

According to Catholic social teaching, the one higher purpose that can truly serve as the final cause of business is the *principle of the common good.* The common good is "the good human life of the multitude, of a multitude of persons; it is their communion in good living" (Acevedo, 2012, p. 207). It does not sacrifice the good of the person to the good of the community but is at once the good of both (Melé, 2009). The common good encourages cooperation to promote human flourishing for all members of a community (Acevedo, 2012).

In Buber's terms, this good entails that organizational members relate to their fellow organizational members as I-Thou, which awakens a sense of oneness in being and purpose. But the common good should be pursued even in circumstances and practices that pertain to the realm of the I-It, as for example in designing organizational rewards in a way that they are perceived appropriate and fair by the people affected by them.

This view has interesting implications for stakeholder theory. Stakeholder theory is a movement toward recognizing the claims of all actors with real interests in a firm and not just those of its shareholding owners (Freeman, 1984; Laplume, Sonpar, & Litz, 2008). Traditionally, the theory of the firm and related theories think of human relations within a firm as being based on contracts (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Those relations outside of the organization with customers are thought of as market transactions; competitors are characterized as enemies (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Applying Buber's idea of I-Thou relations, competitors might be seen as fellow sportsman rather than enemies, entailing a notion of solidarity and comradeship (de Peyrelongue, Masclef, & Guillard, 2017). The concept of a community of persons would also entail that a firm is embedded in a larger community, such as a region or a country (Melé, 2012). According to the social teaching of the Catholic Church, the solidarity of organizational members is not an exclusive solidarity but should also generalize to the greater good of those bigger communities.

The principle of the common good, however, does not prescribe a quantitative logic, exact algorithm, or a definite metric of how the flourishing of different stakeholders can be prioritized. As such, the common good principle does not explain how to solve dilemmas or tradeoffs in dividing resources between stakeholders, such as employees, customers, or shareholders (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Drawing from Buber's work on dialogue, a meeting might be set up in a way that may foster I-Thou relations between different stakeholders and genuine understanding. This approach might also help toward accepting hardships in favor of a greater good of the organization, as the common good principle entails.

Such stakeholder dialogues would require really opening up to beholding the needs of other stakeholders and becoming present to each other as fellow persons. At the same time, Buber would hold that people in an I-Thou encounter cannot quantify their interests. Hence, those non-quantifying and non-objectifying elements beyond stakeholders' interests should also be included in a stakeholder dialogue.

Finally, a community of persons can provide recognition for its members and people outside of the community. As such, individual flourishing necessarily entails a communal aspect: individual flourishing can be achieved only together with the flourishing of others (Sison et al., 2016). The social teaching of the Catholic Church is aware that members of a community have a demand for mutual recognition and acknowledgement (Sison et al., 2016). According to this view, communication does not only serve instrumental aims, but can provide a sense of belonging. Thus, the communication among members of a community ought to be based on trustworthiness (Melé, 2012). Different than theoretical lenses that base their argument on social contracts, like the theory of the firm (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), the social teaching of the Catholic Church acknowledges a deep bond of humanity between persons (Sison et al., 2016). The resulting solidarity of this bond is thought to be not limited to the members of the own community, but in principle encompasses *any* person, because any person has an uncompromised human dignity (Sison et al., 2016). As such, this perspective offers a broad idea of solidarity going beyond simply distressing over the misfortune of others. Rather it proposes to act with benevolence, goodwill, and compassion toward people who need help, and guiding them to change their situation (Sison et al., 2016). Acting with such benevolence does not mean disregarding to provide services and goods in an efficient, profitable, and competitive manner (Melé, 2012). However, this stance requires a delicate balance between acting with care and compassion and generating profits for the community without violating the human dignity of its members or the people affected by the community (Melé, 2012).

Person, Community, and the Logic of Gift

Finally, we end our stroll through concepts allied to the I-Thou with the logic of gift (see our summarizing model in Figure 1). The logic of gift is defined by free and unconditional giving (Baviera et al., 2016; Frémeaux & Michelson, 2011). In Figure 1, we depict this logic by arrows linking the other concepts (i.e., being a person, encountering I-Thou relations, and participating in a community of persons) because we think of this logic as a generative principle tying together these other parts of our summarizing model.

Catholic social teaching describes the logic of gift as consisting of acts of loving and knowing (Faldetta, 2011): "The only proper and adequate way to relate is love," writes Wojtyla (1993, p. 41). Loving, according to Catholic social teaching, is defined as taking care of others in the spirit of benevolence. Such loving is directed toward others' well-being and helping them flourish. Obviously, this notion of loving is broader than physical attraction or personal liking (Melé, 2009). According to this idea of loving, no human should be treated only as a means to an end (Acevedo, 2012). Notice, furthermore, that according to this view, loving comes *before* knowing (Melé, 2009; Sandelands, 2017). Knowing in this perspective involves the whole person, including body and soul, not just merely cognitive faculties, as theories stemming from modern political philosophy, building on Cartesian dualism between mind and body, would suggest. As such, knowing includes aspects of intuition, perception, reason, and conscience in interacting with the world (Acevedo, 2012).

A paradigmatic case for the logic of gift is friendship (Baviera et al., 2016). Aristotle (1925) differentiates between three types of friendship: Utilitarian, hedonistic, and virtuous friendship. First, utilitarian friendship is characterized by a common interest (Melé, 2012). For example, in an organization people may work together because the results of the group's work benefit their careers. This type of friendship is based on material gains (i.e., I-It). Second, hedonistic friendship is characterized by pleasure and enjoyment (Melé, 2012). For example, in an organization people may engage in a project because it is fun to work with the

other persons on a team (i.e., still I-It). Finally, virtuous friendship is characterized by goodwill toward the others and taking care of them. This type of friendship is the exemplary and most intensive form of benevolence (Spaemann, 2000) and is based on its inner beauty, truthfulness, and nobility (i.e., I-Thou) (Melé, 2012).

Of those three types of friendship discussed above, virtuous friendship is the only type that qualifies as sharing the logic of gift. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle (1925) distinguishes secondary goods and primary goods. Secondary goods are desired because they are instrumentally useful for obtaining other goods; primary goods are desired because they are good in themselves. Utilitarian and hedonistic friendship refer to secondary goods because both include a calculated exchange (for material benefits or pleasure). Virtuous friendship, in turn, is a primary good because it is enacted for its own good (Baviera et al., 2016).

Sharing the logic of gift can help persons be more fully present to each other, engage in I-Thou encounters, and participate in a community of persons. First, the logic of gift helps people to acknowledge their personhood (Argandoña, 2011); it does so by opening possibilities that other kinds of instrumental exchange or duty cannot. For example, it can support forgiveness and the repair of trust after a conflict has damaged a relationship, or it can make space for people to give back the same way they have had the experience of receiving unconditionally from other (Baviera et al., 2016). Moreover, the logic of gift can open the possibility to be grateful (Baviera et al., 2016). Second, the logic of gift helps people to encounter I-Thou relations. It does so by making people recognize the unqualified dignity and worth of others. Moreover, the logic of a gift's non-instrumental nature is also conducive to entering I-Thou encounters. Finally, the logic of gift helps a community of persons flourish (Baviera et al., 2016): "Civic love or friendship is the very soul or animating form of every political society," writes Maritain (1951, p. 209). Such unconditional giving can help inspire efforts to contribute to a greater good in ways that defy any calculated strategy of personal benefit (Baviera et al., 2016). At the same time, the relationship between the logic of gift and

a community also works in the other direction: An organizational community of persons can help generate a logic of unconditional giving that helps cultivate I-Thou relations and, grounded in practices of care and compassion, can make its organizational members become fully alive.

Conclusion

This chapter invites us to re-examine the theory of the firm and to think in a profoundly different way about what it is to be human in business. With Martin Buber and with Catholic Social Teaching we are invited to begin our thinking, not with the autonomous and economically rational individual, whose primary motivation is self-interest (i.e., to *have more* for self), but with the human person in communion, whose primary motivation is to will the good of others as one's own (i.e., to *be more* with others). In a word, we are invited to not think in economic terms of efficiency, but in human terms of real being.

Do we limit ourselves to accepting the I-It as the only possible or practical mode of relating in organizations, or do we allow ourselves to think of organizations as places where the I-Thou can and should emerge? In this chapter, we first criticized the theory of the firm and related theories for conceptualizing human relationships based upon a narrow premise of self-interested behavior, relying upon a limited few axioms, and precluding the metaphysical dimensions of human relations. Based on this critique, we offered an extended ontology and epistemology of human relating at work, beginning with Martin Buber's concept of I-Thou relating, and drawing upon allied ideas of religious faith. We follow Buber's lead in inviting a re-humanization of social life in organizations, and a resistance to the oppression of rationalization that so often inhibits human being at work, and constrains the study and conceptualization of organizations. In doing so, we suggest that I-Thou makes businesses truly human enterprises and us as humans come alive, because as Buber writes, "without 'It,' a man cannot live; but he who lives with 'It' alone is not a man."

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Figure 1. A Summarizing Model of I-Thou Relations and Related Concepts

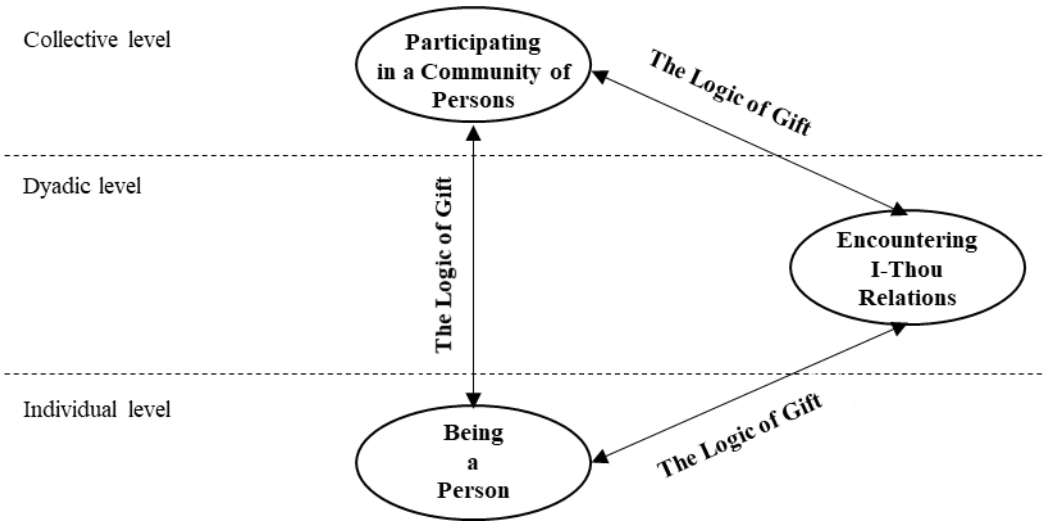


Table 1. Characterization of I-It versus I-Thou

	I-It	I-Thou
Mode of understanding	Seeing	Beholding
Ontology	Constellation of things	Enfolding process
Epistemology	Variance theory	Process theory
Causality	Efficient causes	Final causes