



From Acosmism to Dialogue: The Evolution of Buber's Philosophical View on Mysticism

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The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber has long been known as a critic of dualistic religious paradigms that contain the imperative of renouncing the world. He denoted such paradigms as *acosmic* thus highlighting their problematic relation to the *cosmos*. However, the accusation of acosmism has been leveled also against Buber himself and has been aimed at his pre-dialogical authorship. In the article I track the acosmic tendencies in Buber's pre-dialogical thought and since they are linked to his preoccupation with mysticism I follow the evolution of his philosophical view of the mystical tradition. I argue that although Buber's early study of mysticism indeed contributed to the acosmic orientation of his thought, his discovery of the specific character of Jewish mysticism inspired him to shift the emphasis of his thinking from subjectivity and interiority to intersubjectivity and community.

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1 Introduction

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber has long been known as a critic of dualistic religious paradigms that contain the imperative of renouncing the world. He denoted such paradigms as *acosmic* thus highlighting their problematic relation to the *cosmos*. Buber developed his criticism of acosmism most clearly in his work *The Question to the Single One* (1936) in which he paid close attention to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Buber's central claim was that Kierkegaard's dualistic interpretation of religion introduces a chasm between the individual's relation to God and his relations to fellow humans. While the individual is to relate to God in an essential way – i.e. with his whole being – he is called to renounce all essential relating to other humans in order to preserve the exclusiveness of his God-relationship (Buber 1947, 50–52). On the basis of this interpretation Buber accused Kierkegaard of acosmism and repeated this claim in his later discussions of Kierkegaard.

Interestingly, the accusation of acosmism has been leveled also against Buber himself. It has been aimed at Buber's pre-dialogical authorship that is characterized by different emphases and concerns than his well-known dialogical authorship. Buber's pre-dialogical work focuses primarily on the individual and critics have argued that it contains extremely problematic concepts of intersubjectivity and community. It is important to bear in mind that Buber's pre-dialogical authorship is extensive: it comprises more than 150 texts written in a period of circa 20 years (1897–1916).

In the present paper, which is primarily a historical investigation, I track the acosmic tendencies in Buber's pre-dialogical thought. Since these tendencies are often attributed to Buber's intensive preoccupation with mysticism, I am going to follow the evolution of Buber's philosophical view of the mystical tradition. I will argue that although Buber's early study of mysticism indeed contributed to the acosmic orientation of his thought, his discovery of the specific character of Jewish mysticism inspired him to shift the emphasis of his thinking from subjectivity and interiority to intersubjectivity and community [1]. In the first part of my paper I will explore the acosmic effect of the study of predominantly Christian mysticism on Buber's thought, while in the second part I will elaborate on Buber's discovery of the ethical imperative in the Jewish mystical tradition of Hasidism. In both parts I will be primarily concerned with Buber's thought prior to and around his dialogical turn in 1916. Since my topic is Buber's intellectual transition from acosmism to dialogicalism I will not devote closer attention to his mature dialogical thought. Thus, I will not discuss his treatments of mysticism



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in his well-known works, such as *I and Thou* or *The Question to the Single One*, which follow the dialogical line. The only later work that I will briefly discuss is *Gottesliebe und Nächstenliebe*, since it contains a Hasidism-inspired critique of acosmism that is of special interest for my analysis.

2 Mysticism and Acosmism in Buber's Pre-Dialogical Thought

As Paul Mendes-Flohr explained in his works on the early Buber, there was a large-scale revival of philosophical and literary interest in mysticism in the early 20th century in Germany. This revival was systematically promoted by the scholars associated with the Eugen Diederichs publishing house in Jena. Young Buber was well-acquainted with this revival and contributed to it with several publications (Mendes-Flohr 1979, 11–12).

Buber's interest in mysticism is visible already in his dissertation *Zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblems* (1904) in which he explores the intellectual legacy of the Christian mystical writers Nicolaus Cusanus and Jacob Böhme.

In 1909 Buber published an intriguing volume of narratives by primarily Christian mystics entitled *Ekstatische Konfessionen*. This work contains an insightful preface, which reveals some important facts about Buber's philosophy of mysticism and his view of the religious individual. The preface makes clear that Buber aims to explore the intense inner life of the individual mystic, the private lived experience of the religious individual. Buber focuses primarily on the experience of ecstasy, in which the mystic experiences the union with God, as well as the unity of his own self. The attached mystical narratives are to illustrate how the religious individual experiences the very ground of his being in an immediate, private, and non-reflective way (Buber 1996a, 2):

[T]here is an experience, which grows in the soul out of the soul itself, without contact and without restraint, in naked oneness. It comes into being... free of the other, inaccessible to the other... [The soul] experiences itself as unity, no longer because it has surrendered itself wholly to a thing of the world... but because it has submerged itself entirely in itself, has plunged down to the very ground of itself... This most inward of all experiences is... ek-stasis.

It is obvious from the cited passage that Buber appreciates both the interiority of the mystical experience and the mystic's resoluteness to live out his subjectivity without regard for otherness. The dubious position of otherness comes to light even more clearly in another passage, where the world

and other human beings are depicted as inner abstract entities (Buber 1996a, 6):

[The mystic's] unity... is limitless, for it is the unity of I and world. One's unity is solitude, absolute solitude: the solitude of that which is without limits. One contains the other, the others in oneself, in one's unity: as world; but one no longer has others outside oneself, no longer has any communion with them or anything in common with them.

In 1910, in a debate at the First German Conference of Sociologists, Buber abandoned the poetic language of *Ekstatische Konfessionen* and declared quite prosaically (Verhandlungen 1911, 206–207) [2]:

I should like to pose the question whether mysticism can at all be considered a sociological category. I would contend that it is not: Mysticism is solely a psychological category... [it] may likewise be designated religious solipsism. It is, on the one hand, an absolute realization of [individual] religiosity... On the other hand... mysticism negates community, precisely because for it there is only one real relation, the relation to God.

According to Buber mysticism reveals the important fact that deep religious processes are utterly private, inaccessible to otherness. As he explains, in the moments of highest religious passion the soul plunges into its own ground uniting itself with God in absolute solitude.

Although Buber suggests that mysticism *negates community* in the sociological sense, he also claims that the mystic *contains others in himself*. This bond is, however, purely meta-physical. The religious individual experiences the communion with others as an inner process, since through his union with the Absolute he has also entered into a union with humanity. This humanity appears to be utterly abstract, as it is merely a moment of the Absolute. Importantly, the described communion with other humans does not require any determinate ethical action and does not involve any concrete social responsibility. The religious individual's only responsibility is that of an intense passion for the Absolute.

Although it is obvious that Buber finds various aspects of mystical experience inspirational it must be emphasized that his understanding of mysticism was based on an analytical study of mystical literature and *not* on his personal religious experience. Thus, it is appropriate to describe his conception of mystical ecstasy as a purely theoretical construction rather than an expression of his own spiritual life [3]. It must also be said, however, that Buber took the experiences described by the mystics very seriously and attempted to capture their common core in a philosophical way.

Buber's theory of the passionate religious individual experienced a critical test in the times of World War I. As Mendes-Flohr suggested, Buber's mystical interpretation of the war disclosed the untenability of his genuinely acosmic concept of a metaphysical (psychological) communion with others (Mendes-Flohr 1979, 131–140). The failure of Buber's theoretical model of a spiritual community was accompanied by an existential crisis, since he took a personal stance towards the war on the basis of this model. Thus, at this point we can speak of a practical application of Buber's previously purely theoretical considerations on mysticism.

In the face of the conflict between nations Buber initially welcomed the war believing that it would bring about a new quality of the individuals' relation to themselves and to the Absolute. He was enthusiastic about the intensification of inner life that the war provoked in those who joined the fight. As he claimed, the war prompted engaged individuals to overcome their atomization and provided them with an opportunity to strive for inner unity while focusing on a single goal. Each individual was confronted with a unique chance to embrace the intensive and unifying experience of passionate heroism (Buber 1915, 490; Buber 1916, 1). Through this experience a community of passionate individuals came into being.

It is quite obvious that the community Buber envisioned when speaking about the soldiers passionately fighting for their causes is as abstract and devoid of actual intersubjectivity as the mystic's communion with others described in *Ekstatische Konfessionen*. In his essays *Bewegung* (1915) and *Die Losung* (1916), Buber suggests that the true community brought about by the war consists of those, who through

their passionate service in the war realize the Absolute in this world. It is the intensity of their experience of committed service that connects them, regardless of which country they fight for. By fighting for "*the absolute value*" – that is embodied in the notion of the fatherland – these individuals are metaphysically united, as they fight with "*the same intensity, sincerity and directness*" (Buber 1915, 490, 491). They may never meet, and they struggle to achieve mutually opposed goals, yet, they all fight "*out of the sense of a paramount duty*" (Buber 1916, 1), which unites them and sets them apart even from their countrymen who do not share in this experience.

Buber's mystical interpretation of the war was severely attacked by his friend Gustav Landauer. Landauer criticized both Buber's mystical description of the experience of war-time heroism and the notion of an abstract transnational and transfrontal community of committed fighters. In his letter from May 12, 1916, Landauer argued that such an interpretation not only devalued the horrors and sufferings of the war but implicitly negated the legitimacy of other kinds of war experience. He dismissed the idea of a metaphysical community as "*a lifeless construct*" and suggested that Buber had no right to speak about the war in these terms (Buber 1996b, 190).

Both Mendes-Flohr and Buber's biographer Maurice Friedman agree that Landauer's letter must have caused Buber deep distress and eventually prompted him to substantially reorient his thinking (Mendes-Flohr 1979, 139–140; Friedman 1991, 89). As Mendes-Flohr explains, Buber's subsequent writings show an evident change of mind, as the focus of his philosophical inquiry shifts from consciousness and the inner life of the individual to the realm of interpersonal relationships. Following his philosophical metamorphosis in 1916, communion with other humans is no longer rooted in the individual's private inner experience, but rather in concrete interpersonal relationships arising from irreducible historical encounters with other persons. For this reason, Mendes-Flohr speaks of a relocation of Buber's philosophical emphasis from *pathos* to *ethos* (Mendes-Flohr 1979, 14, 142). This shift of emphasis is accompanied by Buber's turning away from inward oriented mysticism and a critical stance toward such mysticism in all religious and philosophical traditions.

3 Buber's Discovery of Ethos in the Mystical Tradition of Hasidism

Following the conflict with Gustav Landauer Buber's thinking underwent a substantial transformation and it is appropriate to speak of a significant self-correction on Buber's part. This self-correction, however, does not mean a total discontinuity between Buber's pre-dialogical and dialogical thought.

Buber's interest in mysticism is among those elements of his pre-dialogical thought that survived his turn to dialogical philosophy. Importantly, already in his pre-dialogical writings Buber manages to identify an ethical imperative in a certain type of mysticism – namely Hasidism – which he subsequently integrates into his philosophy of dialogue. What is more, the ethical imperative inherent in Hasidism seems to have constituted a contributing factor to Buber's turn to dialogicalism. Thus, although Buber's early philosophy of mysticism obviously reinforced the acosmic orientation of his pre-dialogical thought, it also created an opening to the overcoming of acosmism.

Let me shed more light on this issue by means of an analysis of Buber's early essay *Die jüdische Mystik*, which appeared in 1906, i.e. ten years before the decisive confrontation with Gustav Landauer. This essay was written as a preface to Buber's collection of Hasidic narratives entitled *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*. It contains intriguing passages that anticipate Buber's later reorientation towards intersubjectivity and ethics.

The opening paragraphs of the essay introduce the reader to the relations of Jewish mysticism to Persian, Greek and Christian spiritual traditions. However, after these preliminary remarks Buber turns to the analysis of what he refers to as “the soul of the Jew” [“die Seele des Juden”] (Buber 1906, 6). He suggests that it contains a peculiar innate element that constitutes its core and provides it with a substance. He calls this element *pathos*. Although *pathos* is hard to define, Buber describes it as “the desire for the impossible.” He suggests that this desire is the driving force behind Jewish mysticism (Buber 1906, 7).

In the subsequent passages Buber presents a chronological overview of the history of Jewish mysticism, which he interprets in a progressive way. In his view Jewish mysticism gradually loses its acosmic features until it completely breaks with the tradition of mystical acosmism. He suggests that the first epoch of Jewish mysticism is to be located between the publication of two major works: the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Zo-*

har, i.e. circa between the 7th–13th century. This is the time of the development of the Kabbalah, which in many aspects draws on Greek philosophical traditions, especially Pythagoreanism and Neoplatonism. Buber notes that in this period the study of the Kabbalah is limited to a narrow circle of scholars and remains out of touch with everyday life (Buber 1988, 5–6). It is practiced along the lines of the Neoplatonic *theoria*, which focuses on contemplation and does not contain any specific ethical doctrine.

However, the importance of ethics and intersubjectivity in mysticism begins to increase following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, when a renaissance of the Kabbalah takes place. In this second phase, which is connected especially to Isaac Luria, a much greater emphasis is placed on the action of the individual and on his responsibility for others. As Buber argues, Isaac Luria initiates a paradigm that focuses on “the ethical-ecstatic act of the individual as a co-working with God to achieve redemption” (Buber 1988, 6) [4].

Buber maintains that the preoccupation with human will and the individual's responsibility for the fate of the people receives even more attention in the Jewish ascetic movements of the 17th and 18th centuries. The progressive discovery of the importance of ethics and intersubjectivity reaches its peak in the middle of the 18th century with the rise of the movement of Hasidism. Buber presents a rather paradoxical description of Hasidism: on the one hand, it represents the highest form of Jewish mysticism; on the other hand, it is a refutation of mysticism. Buber captures the controversial character of the Hasidic movement in a decisive dictum, which constitutes the very core of his essay. He declares that “Hasidism is the Kabbalah become ethos” (Buber 1988, 10).

In contrast to the earlier forms of Jewish mysticism, the Hasidic tradition shifts the emphasis away from contemplation, transcendence, asceticism and subjectivist ecstasy. Instead, it emphasizes ethical action, the concern for this world and everyday human community. Contrary to other kinds of mysticism that call for the detachment and separation of the soul, Hasidism teaches the unfolding of the soul in the midst of a community (Buber 1988, 10–15). Although Hasidism stands in a tradition rooted in the force of *pathos*, it manages to uncover the prime importance of *ethos*, which had been gaining increasing ground in the movements that preceded it.

Thus, the *dialogical shift* of Buber's philosophical project from *pathos* to *ethos* is explicitly thematized already in Buber's 1906 exposition of Jewish mysticism. To be sure, the issue is not elaborated at length, but the line of thought presented in the essay is continued and receives substantial attention in Buber's dialogical *oeuvre*. For Buber classical Hasidism becomes over time an emblem of a balanced spiritual doctrine that teaches the intrinsic unity of religion and ethics. The essay *Die jüdische Mystik* clearly indicates this trend that persists and is further elaborated in Buber's later works.

In the essay *Mein Weg zum Chassidismus* Buber confirms the Hasidic principle of the unity of love of God and love of humans and suggests that it implies the integration of the domains of religion, ethics and politics (Buber 1918, 9–10). In the treatise *Der heilige Weg* he insists that in Hasidism the connection with the Absolute is attained by means of fraternal service and selfless help in a community which has little in common with the abstract *pathic* community depicted in *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (Buber 1920, 56–57). Buber examines at length the imperative of ethical commitment and love for one's community in the Foreword to *Der große Maggid und seine Nachfolge* and places it at the heart of the Hasidic doctrine of the zaddik's interaction with different segments of the Jewish community (Buber 1922, XLV–L, LII–LIII). Although Buber's later philosophical works contain explicit critiques of mysticism, Hasidism is always singled out as a tradition that points in a dialogical direction. Not only does Hasidism contain a doctrine of a dialogical relationship with the eternal divine Thou, it also contains a doctrine of a dialogical relationship with the temporary human Thou.

Buber's later dialogical writings often present Hasidism as an example of ethical religiosity, which stands in contrast to religious doctrines that insufficiently reflect the importance of intersubjectivity. In this way Buber counterposes Hasidism to Kierkegaard's interpretation of religion in the essay *Gottesliebe und Nächstenliebe*. In order to demonstrate the acosmic nature of Kierkegaard's religious thought Buber refers to a statement from Kierkegaard's work *The Single Individual*, which he had already criticized in *The Question to the Single One*. In his essay Kierkegaard famously claims that "[e]veryone should be careful about becoming involved with 'the others,' essentially should speak only with God and with himself" (Kierkegaard 1998, 106; Buber 1947, 50). Buber reacts to this by highlighting the difference between Kierkegaard's imper-

ative and the Hasidic insistence on the unity of religion and ethics: "One must have essential intercourse only with God, says Kierkegaard. It is impossible, says Hasidism, to have truly essential intercourse with God when there is no essential intercourse with men" (Buber 1948, 165). In the subsequent passages Buber advocates the Hasidic approach, in which the ethical and the religious are seen as interdependent and co-extensive. By emphasizing the unity of love of God and love of the neighbor Hasidism precludes any form of religiousness that would downplay the importance of concrete ethical action. Moreover, by insisting that "the pedagogically decisive way is from 'below' 'upward'" (Buber 1948, 170). Hasidism teaches that ethically relating to humans constitutes the first step in the individual's learning process of how to relate meaningfully to any alterity, including God.

Although the most explicit elaborations on the doctrine of intersubjectivity and community contained in Hasidism can be found in Buber's dialogical writings, his early essay *Die jüdische Mystik* clearly anticipates these reflections. Moreover, by claiming that the Hasidic thinkers accomplished the essential shift from *pathos* to *ethos*, Buber anticipates his own shift in this direction. As Mendes-Flohr argued in his analyses, Buber's dialogical turn is in its essence a shift from *pathos* to *ethos*, from subjectivity and interiority to intersubjectivity and community.

4 Final Remarks

It is obvious from the presented analysis that Buber's pre-dialogical thought is characterized by strong acosmic tendencies that are incompatible with his later philosophy of dialogue. These acosmic tendencies are manifestly present in Buber's early philosophy of mysticism, in which he explores the theory of the religious individual without regard for the individual's rootedness in relationships with concrete historical humans. Although Buber thematizes the individual's communion with others, this communion is fully ahistorical and devoid of any ethical content. It is completely absorbed into the sphere of subjectivity and integrated into the process of unification with the Absolute. Moreover, Buber's notion of the mystic's abstract communion with others, which is disconnected from actual intersubjectivity, is later translated into political terms, when during the World War I Buber devises the concept of a *pathic* community of passionate fighters. These depictions confirm Mendes-Flohr's claim that

“[b]efore his proclamation of the doctrine of dialogue Buber showed hardly more than a superficial interest in ethical, or any other, relationships between individuals” (Mendes-Flohr 1979, 8). As we have seen, Buber’s practical application of the acosmic conception of a spiritual community failed, which caused him substantial existential distress. The dialogical conception of community, which he subsequently developed, avoided excessive abstraction and proved to be existentially much more plausible.

In contrast to Mendes-Flohr’s suggestion that Buber accomplished the shift from *pathos* to *ethos* only after his philosophical conversion in 1916, I have argued that Buber anticipated this shift already in his early reflections on Jewish mysticism. By identifying such a shift in the mystical teachings of the Hasidic religious thinkers Buber seems to begin his struggle with acosmism already in his pre-dialogical thought. It certainly took Buber some time to integrate his early findings into the overall structure of his thought, but it seems that Buber’s rejection of acosmism cannot be entirely attributed to Gustav Landauer’s influence. Instead it seems to be, at least in part, an outcome of a long-time inner struggle on Buber’s part.

Perhaps, it was this lengthy struggle and its painful climax that later made Buber sensitive to religious doctrines with acosmic tendencies. This might have contributed to Buber’s decision to confront Kierkegaard publicly, especially in the times of political turmoil in Europe. In the face of the rising power of Nazism and Germany’s looming aggression against its neighbors, which led to World War II, Buber may have felt a duty to act differently than he did twenty years earlier.

In more general terms we can say that Buber’s struggle with different interpretations of mysticism highlights the important issue of ethical, social and political consequences of intense religious experience. In his early oeuvre Buber largely avoided this issue by limiting intense religiosity to the sphere of inwardness and defining it in purely metaphysical and psychological terms. This initial disconnection of religiosity from ethical, social and political challenges prompted him to formulate overly abstract conceptions which proved dysfunctional in real-life confrontations. As we have shown, however, even the early Buber was not completely blind to the fruitfulness of ethical action that stems from intense religious experience. In fact, the ethical, social and political aspect of religiosity was gaining ground in his thought as time went by. After his breakthrough to dialogicalism in 1916 Buber embraced this aspect fully and began to develop it systematically.

Notes

- [1] I am developing here ideas that I have already presented in (Šajda 2012) and (Šajda 2013).
- [2] This description of mysticism by Buber was pointed out by Mendes-Flohr (Mendes-Flohr 1996, XVII–XVIII).
- [3] I thank the anonymous referee for highlighting this fact.
- [4] Translation modified.

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