

# Martin Buber and the Life of Dialogue



**INSTRUCTOR:**  
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*ICJS Jewish Scholar*

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[www.icjs.org/buber](http://www.icjs.org/buber)

**ICJS**  
COURSE

FEB 28-APR 4, 2022  
MONDAYS  
7:00-9:00 PM EST  
VIA ZOOM

MAR 1-APR 5, 2022  
TUESDAYS  
10:00 AM-NOON  
@ ICJS LIBRARY

# Course Schedule



"Circles in a Circle," by Wassily Kandinsky,  
1923.

**Class 1:** Intro to Buber and Dialogue

**Class 2:** Hasidism, Mysticism, and God

**Class 3:** Revelation and Law: Martin Buber's Relationship with Franz Rosenzweig

**Class 4:** *I and Thou*

**Class 5:** Buber's Theo-Politics: Mahatma Gandhi and the Israel/Palestine Question

**Class 6:** Biblical Humanism and the Dialogical Community



# Today's Agenda



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- 7:00 p.m. Welcome
- 7:05 p.m. Review of Last Class: Revelation in Everyday Life
- 7:10 p.m. Three Stories: One Message?
- 7:20 p.m. Breakout Room #1
- 7:40 p.m. Transition
- 7:45 p.m. Buber's *I and Thou*: An Introduction
- 8:00 p.m. Some Textual Analysis
- 8:20 p.m. Breakout Room Discussion #2
- 8:40 p.m. Plenary/Questions
- 8:55 p.m. Parting Thoughts
- 9:00 p.m. Adjourn



# A Few Guiding Questions for Today's Class

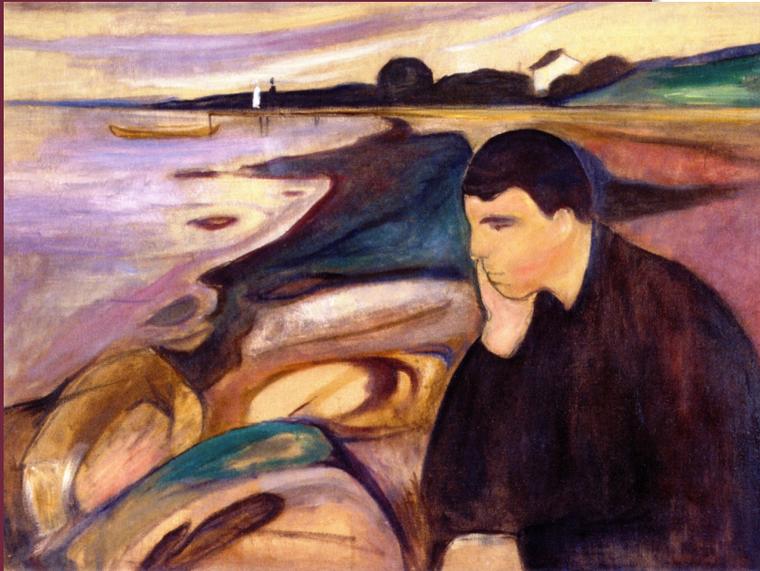


Vincent Van Gogh, The Starry Night, 1899

1. How do I change my relationships to nature, things and human beings so that I can open myself up to glimpses of the eternal?
2. How is it possible for God to need humans as much as humans need God?
3. How can atheists and agnostics be closer to God, as Buber argues in *I and Thou*, than practicing religionists?
4. Is God and/or Godliness found in treating people equally or as equals?



## A Few Take-Aways from Today's Class



Edvard Munch, Melancholy, 1894

1. Genuine dialogue entails risk and danger: it draws out aspects of ourselves which can be transformational experiences.
2. Although we more often tend to treat others (people or other living beings) and nature like objects, we all have the ability to relate to others as unique and sacred creatures.
3. We always return to the world of **I-It** after an **I-Thou** encounter (Buber calls this “sublime melancholy”).
4. Buber’s critique of organized religion does not imply a denial of it.
5. Buber wants to change the way we think, live, and the way we talk and relate to one another.



# *I and Thou: A Dialogical Theology*



“That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart.

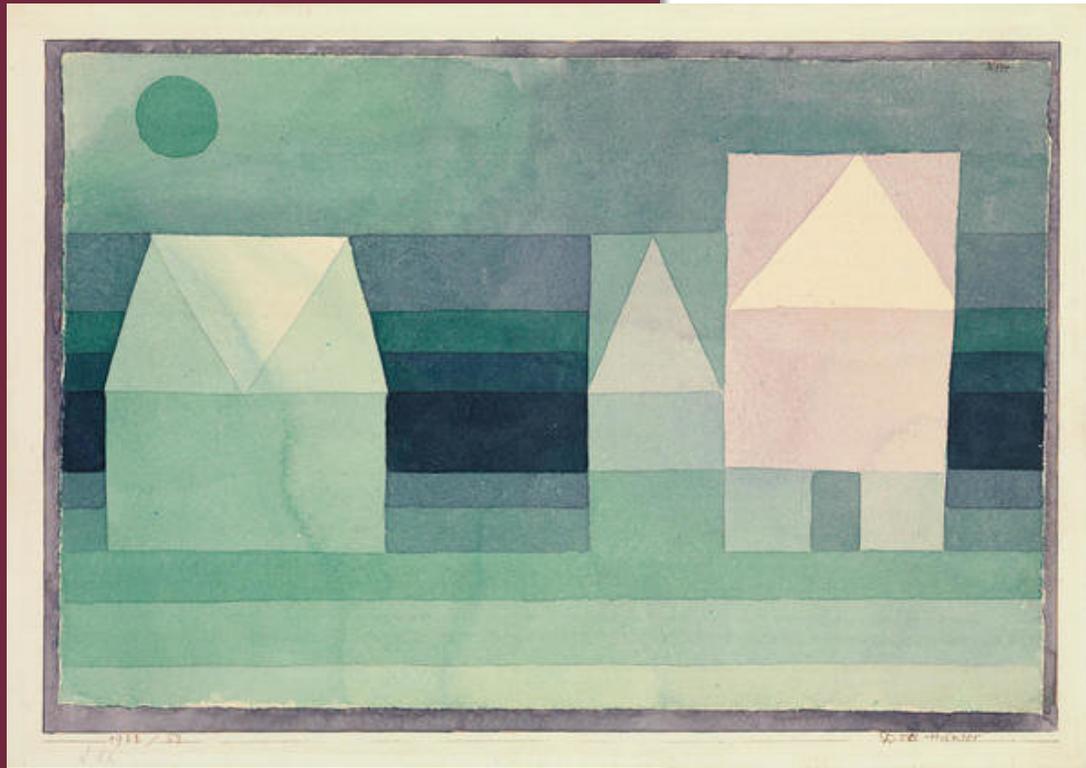
But don't you know also that God needs you—in fullness of his eternity, you?

How would man exist if God did not need him, and how would you exist?

You need God in order to be, and God needs you—for that which is the meaning of your life.” (*I and Thou*, 130)



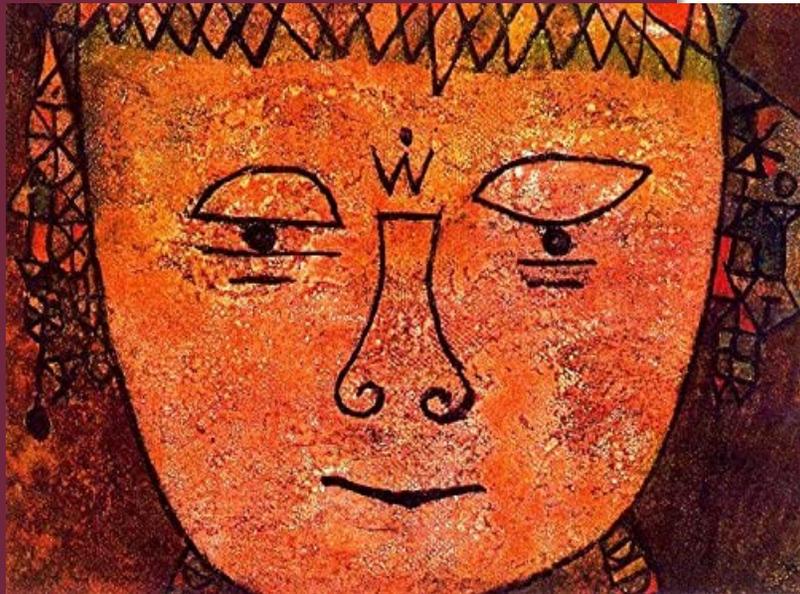
## Three Stories



Paul Klee, Three Houses, 1922.

1. The Mother
2. The Horse
3. The Soldier

# An Abandoned Child



Paul Klee, Wehgeweihtes Kind,  
1935.

1. “Whatever I learned in the course of my life about the meaning and meeting and dialogue between people springs from that moment when I was four.” (*Meetings*, 18)
2. Coined the word *Vergegnung* (“mismeeting”)
3. “Children experience what happens and keep silent, but in the night they groan in their dreams, awaken, and stare into the darkness. The world has become unreliable... it is up to us to make the world reliable again for children. It depends on us whether we say to them and to ourselves, ‘don’t worry, mother is here.’” (“Die Kinder,” 1933)
4. He realized that this lost feeling “was something that concerned not only [him], but all human beings.” (*Meetings*, 22)

# Unmoored and Adrift

Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893



“The human person feels himself exposed by nature—as an unwanted child is exposed—and at the same time a person isolated in the midst of the tumultuous human world.” (*Between Man and Man*, 237)

## A Horse



Franz Marc, Horse, 1911

“...I must say that what I experienced in touch with the animal was the Other, the immense otherness of the Other, which, however did not remain strange like the otherness of the ox and the ram, but rather let me draw near and touch it. When I stroked the mighty mane...it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of *Thou* and *Thou* with me...it struck me about the stroking, what fun it gave me, and suddenly I became conscious of my hand.” (*Fragments*, 10.)

# A Soldier



Hans Larwin, *Soldat und Tod*, 1917

# Breakout Room #1



Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939.

1. For Buber, the life of dialogue has a painful truth: It recognizes how difficult it is to achieve. Most people know how often life's journey is filled with "mism meetings" and of the failures of *I—Thou* encounters to take place. How do we open ourselves up to dialogue without also falling into despair?
2. What do you think was Buber's responsibility to the soldier? How might have "unmediated listening" changed the situation?
3. "Mism meetings" in life seem inevitable. How do we avoid them?
4. Have you or anyone you know had a similar experience that Buber described with the horse? What does being capable of such moments or experiences teach us about life?



## Part 2

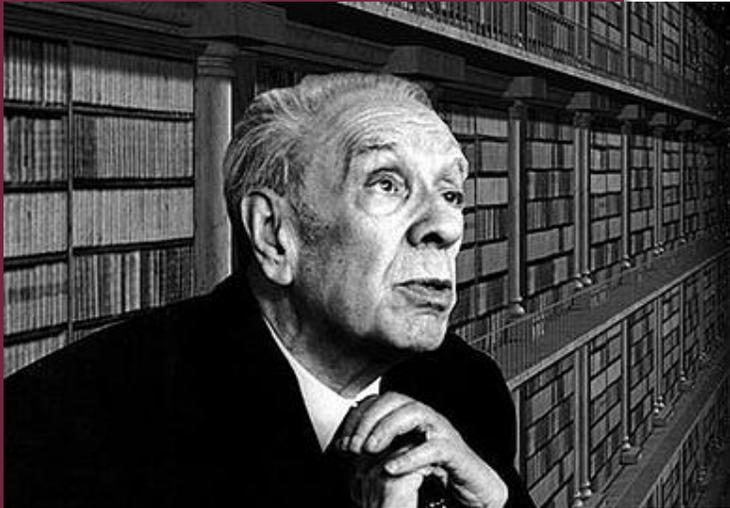


Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Totentanz der Mary Wigman*, 1926

1. A Three-part Brief Introduction to *I and Thou* (5mn.)
2. A very brief summary of each section of the book (5mn.)
3. Buberian assertions (5mn.)
4. Text study: Examining several sections of Part 3 of *I and Thou* (15mn.)
5. Breakout Room #2 (20mn)
6. Questions



## Jorges Luis Borges (1899-1986)



“When something is merely said or—better still—hinted at, there is a kind of hospitality in our imagination. We are ready to accept it. I remember reading... the works of Martin Buber—I thought of them as being wonderful poems. Then, when I went to Buenos Aires, I read a book by a friend of mine, and found in its pages, to my astonishment, that Martin Buber was a philosopher and that all his philosophy lay in the books I read as poetry. Perhaps I accepted these books because they came to me through poetry, through suggestion, through the music of poetry, and not as arguments.” Borges, *This Craft of Verse*, 31.



## I-Thou: A Brief Introduction (a)



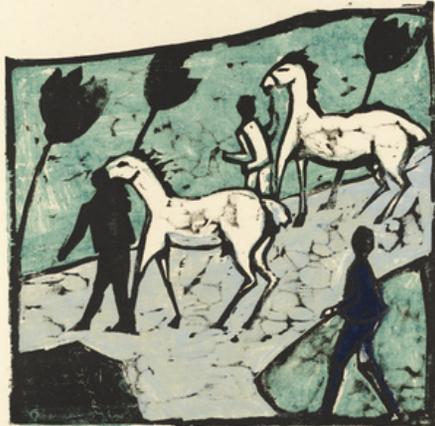
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,  
*Wintermondnacht*, 1918.

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1. *I and Thou* is written as a series of long and shorter aphorisms, divided into three sections (we read the 3<sup>rd</sup> section for today).
2. We need to resist the temptation to reduce human relations to the simple either/or of Apollonian or Dionysian (rational or romantic) ways of relating to others.
3. We are beings who can come into dialogue with humans, animals, nature, as ways of encountering the divine “thou.”



## I-Thou: A Brief Introduction (b)



Erich Heckel, *Weisse Pferde*, 1912.

1. The aim of *I and Thou* is **not** to disseminate knowledge **about** God, but rather to diagnose certain tendencies in modern society.
2. *I and Thou* directs readers to a religiousness or religiosity, which does not find a home in organized religion.
3. *I and Thou* speaks to readers whose primary concern is with social change: it is not interested in saving or defending any institution.
4. This book speaks to those who no longer “believe,” but who also wonder whether life without religion is bound to lack something too.

## I-Thou: A Brief Introduction (c)



Marc Chagall, *La Vie*, 1965

In *I and Thou*, Buber was trying to answer some of the most ineffable questions of human life and existence:

1. What is the meaning of existence?
2. How do we achieve a feeling of wholeness and meaning that most of us painfully lack?
3. How do we find our way to God now that religious belief has become so challenging for modern, educated people?

## Part One



Henry Matisse, Dance (II), 1910.

1. Buber examines the human condition by exploring basic elements in human psychology.
2. He offers his first premise: humans have two ways of engaging the world, yet the modern experience/world neglects one of those ways.
3. These two ways are described as **I-It** and **I-Thou** (or you).

## Part Two



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Woman in a Green Jacket*, 1913.

1. Buber examines humanity in society: both society and how people operate within it.
2. Buber argues that contemporary society alienates individuals because it only functions out of one of the two ways into human experience (**I-It**).
3. Societies have been built on **I-It** relations: politics, economics, public institutions, and even much of private life.
4. Existential angst, worries of meaninglessness or of impending doom result because of our dependence on **I-It** relationships.

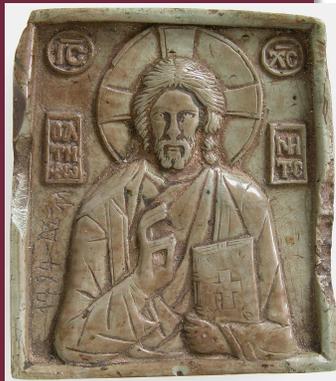
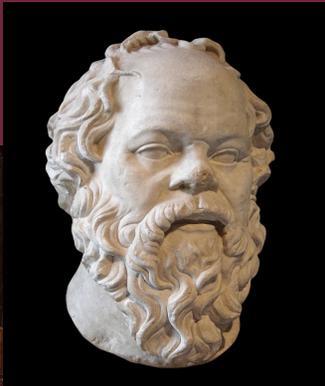
## Part Three



Henry Matisse, Plate VIII from the Illustrated Jazz Book, 1947

1. Buber interprets the role of religion in contemporary life.
2. Recognizing the arguments of the first two sections, Buber offers a way into building a meaningful society (a true community) by properly employing the second way of being in the world (**I-Thou**).
3. He uses **I-Thou** relations as a way to relate to God.
4. “The **I-It** word coheres in space and time. The **You-world** does not cohere in either. It coheres in the center in which the extended lines of relationships intersect: in the eternal **You**.”

## Historical Examples:



Buber considered Socrates, Jesus, and Goethe to have realized the I-Thou relation most fully:

1. Socrates with humanity
2. Jesus with God
3. Goethe with nature

## Buberian Assertions



Marc Chagall, *Aleko and Zemphira by Moonlight*, 1942.

1. The sacred is found in time, in the here and now.
2. The only God worth keeping is a God that cannot be kept.
3. The only God worth talking about is a God that cannot be talked about.
4. God is not an object of discourse, knowledge or experience.
5. God cannot be *spoken of*, but God can be *listened to*.
6. The only possible relationship with God is to address God and to be addressed by God, here and now, in the present moment.
7. Buber interprets the Hebrew name of God—the tetragrammaton—as *God is present* (based on an interpretation of Exodus 3:14)

## The Dialogical God in the Hebrew Bible

*Pesikta de-rab Kahana*  
interprets this  
passage by stating:

“If you testify to me,  
then I’m God, and  
not otherwise.”

אֲנֹכִי הִגַּדְתִּי וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי וְהִשְׁמַעְתִּי וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר  
וְאַתֶּם יְעִדֵי נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְאֲנִי־אֵל

“I alone foretold the triumph  
And I brought it to pass;  
I announced it,  
And no strange god was among you.  
So you are My witnesses  
—declares the LORD—  
And I am God.”

Isaiah 43:12



# God



Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Worship of the Golden Calf*, 1594.

“Some would deny any legitimate use of the word God because it has been misused so much. Certainly it is the most burdened of all human words. Precisely for that reason it is the most imperishable and unavoidable. And how much weight has all erroneous talk about God’s nature and works (although there never has been nor can be any such talk that is not erroneous) compared with the one truth that all men who have addressed God really meant him? For whoever pronounces the word God and really means **You**, addresses, no matter what he delusion, the true **You** of his life that cannot be restricted by any other and to whom he stands in a relationship that includes all others. But whoever abhors the name and fancies that he is godless—when he addresses with his while devoted being the **You** of life that cannot be restricted by any other, he addresses God.” (p.124)



# The Uniqueness of Experience, the Uniqueness of God.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Street, 1908.

“Every actual relationship to another being in the world is exclusive. Its **You** is freed and steps forth to confront us in its uniqueness...As long as the presence of the relationship endures, this world-wideness cannot be infringed. But as soon as a **You** becomes an **It**, the world-wideness of the relationship appears as an injustice against the world, and its exclusiveness as an exclusion of the universe. In the relation to God, unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness are one. For those who enter into the absolute relationship, nothing particular retains any importance—neither things nor beings, neither earth nor heaven—but everything is included in the relationship. Looking away from the world is no help toward God; staring at the world is no help either; but whoever beholds the world in him stands in his presence.” (126-127)



## Prayer and Presence



Amanda Saint Claire, Fisherman's prayer, 2018.

“Although **we** on earth never behold God without world but only the world in God, by beholding **we** eternally form God’s form. Form is a mixture of **You** and **It**, too. In faith and cult it can freeze into an object; but from the gist of the relation that survives in it, it turns ever again into **presence**. God is near his forms as long as man does not remove them from him. In true prayer, cult and faith are unified and purified into living relation. That true prayer lives in religion, testifies to their true life; as long as it lives in them, they live.”  
(167)



# Summary



Chava Silverman, *Echoes of Eternity*, 2018.

1. We tend to treat the people and the world around us as things to be used for our benefit. Without this mind-set (the “**I-It**”), there would be no science, economics, or politics.
2. The more we engage in such thinking, the farther we drift from **I-You**—his term for addressing others directly as partners in dialogue and relationship.
3. Only when we say “**You**” to the world do we perceive its miraculous strangeness and, at the same time, its potential for intimacy.
4. The God Buber described here is neither a lawgiver nor a merciful redeemer, but a close presence to whom we can always turn to intimacy. Remember the quote: “That you need God more than anything, you at all times know in your heart. But don’t you know that God needs you—in the fullness of his eternity, you?” (130)



## Breakout Room Questions #2



Helen Frankenthaler, Flirt, Gagosian  
Series, undated.

God's presence, in *I and Thou*, is essential for addressing the many problems associated with contemporary society.

1. What are the existential or emotional risks involved in Buber's understanding of dialogue?
2. How might we use Buber's understanding of God interreligiously? Can this view be helpful toward advancing interreligious dialogue?
3. How might Buber be helpful to addressing the salient political-economic issues of our day, such as climate change, economic inequality, discrimination and persecution, among others?
4. Is God and/or Godliness found in treating people equally or as equals? What does Buber say? What do you say?

