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“ENCOUNTERS... A DIVERSITY OF ENCOUNTERS...”

“...The mystery of encounters. Almost each life has undergone changes in connection with some encounter. Are we all not convinced that his or her fate would be different were it not for the crossing of certain strands on the path of our lives? One can suppose that everything has its beginning in those knots which were tied when nothing foretold their appearance....Each and every one of us without exception is to a lesser of greater extent an explosive, and we make our way through life looking for the one who will ignite the fuse; we are inert gunpowder the discharge of which must be brought about by someone else. One must wait. Who knows? Will anyone ever know? Has the encounter that can open new horizons before me already taken place?”

Jean Guitton, *Diary*

At least three sources are the inspiration of the reflections presented in this essay – firstly, the vibrancy, the lasting relevance, and the spiritual fertility of the philosophy of dialogue. On the other hand, it is interesting how the philosophy of dialogue “clashes”, even to some extent contradicts the existentialism of the 20th century. An analysis of this comparison brings to light an extremely intriguing analogy to the domain of the natural sciences and chemistry, with which I feel such close affinity. In this article, I will try to highlight the grounds for drawing such an analogy.

One of the most outstanding representatives of the philosophy of dialogue is Martin Buber. Interestingly, this scholar, who was born in Vienna, but since his early childhood, after his parents divorced, was brought up in Lvov, where he attended a Polish school. He wrote his first articles in Polish, and after settling down at Jerusalem, used to deliver some of his lectures at the Hebrew University in Polish. However, he was mainly drawn to the German culture. He studied at Vienna, Berlin, Zurich, Munich, and Leipzig. At that time, he came into contact with the Zionist movement and for a short period engaged in its activity. However, as he did not find there any deeper connections with the spiritual tradition of Judaism, he withdrew and turned to Hasidism. Martin Buber characterized Hasidism in the following terse and highly poetical words, "*The Hasidim teaching is nothing but an indication that one should live in delight, in happiness filled with delight*" [Introduction, in the Polish translation, p. 16, *The Tales of the Hasidim*].

"Since my youth I have been intrigued by the possibility of a dialogical relation between man and God, which means man's actual partnership in the dialogue between Heaven and earth, whose language both in the inquiry and in the response is the going on itself, the going on that proceeds downwards and upwards. And from the moment the Hasidim tradition became the foundation of my thinking, that is since around 1905, this has been to me the most important question" [Buber, 1963, p.13].

In 1923, Martin Buber published his principal philosophical work, *I and Thou*. The essay *Between Person and Person*, which is the basic point of reference for the reflections in this article, is a sort of commentary to the ideas expounded in *I and Thou*. The entire philosophy of dialogue stems from the belief that man becomes an I, a person, only in encounter with a Thou. Martin Buber contrasts the I – Thou relation with the I – It connection relation. The I – It is connected with experiencing and creating, and entails the separation of constitutive elements and properties. The I – Thou relation, on the other hand, assumes reciprocity, because it pertains to encounter and to an all-inclusive "take". According to Buber, it involves the following "planes": the "doorstep" is linked with the inanimate world ("*The vast sphere that stretches from stones to stars might be called the doorstep, i.e. a step before the threshold*", [Buber, Afterword to: *Ich und Du*, 1957, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p.118]), the "threshold" is associated with the animal world and important relations with other people, and finally the essential encounter: one's relation to God – "*The extended lines of relations intersect in the eternal Thou*" [Buber, 1923, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p.85]. For Martin Buber, like for most philosophers of dialogue, the most important Thou is God, but another man is never an obstacle on one's way to God.

"God (...), entering into relation with man, always includes in it his absoluteness. That is why a man who turns to God need not turn away from other I – Thou relations, but brings them all to Him, and lets them beam with joy in the face of God. In general, however, one should be careful not to understand talking to God (...) as something that only takes place besides or above everyday life. GOD'S SPEECH TO MEN PERMEATES EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS IN THE LIFE OF EACH ONE OF US, AND EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS IN THE WORLD AROUND US, ALL THE BIOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL GOINGS

ON, AND MAKES THEM A HINT AND A DEMAND FOR YOU AND FOR ME. (Event after event, situation after situation is made possible and warranted by a person’s speech, demanding endurance and decision from the human person)” [Buber, Afterword to: *Ich und Du*, 1957, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p.124, my emphasis stressing: E. Zielonacka-Lis].

In the essay *Between Person and Person*, the author juxtaposes the interpersonal and the social, specifying the conditions of an authentic contact and authentic dialogue between people. Those are: a necessity to live from approach the essence as opposed to living from approaching the image, reaching out to the whole person, appreciation of our partner’s individuality and uniqueness, “opening” not imposition. For Buber, what is crucial is in between, “*The sphere of the interpersonal is a sphere of being opposite each other*” [Buber, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p. 141]. Buber’s insights, formulated decades ago, still sound surprisingly up to date, “*Undoubtedly, a vast majority of what is called conversation between people today, should more adequately be called jabber, in the literal sense of the word. In general, people do not really talk to each other; each one, though facing the other, in fact talks to an imaginary instance, whose existence exhausts in listening to him*” [Buber, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p. 145].

The accuracy of Buber’s observations, the current significance of his analyses, the possibility of “building” authentic contacts between people after satisfying the conditions named by the author, are all reasons for taking a closer look at his approach. What is particularly worth noting is the fact that such an approach seems to be in total disagreement with the standpoint of the 20th century existentialists, who so often emphasized human loneliness, and identified man’s necessity to live in this world as the source of fear experienced by him or her. Thus, we are given contradictory assessments of the basic “clash”: I – another man. “*To him (Sartre – my addition: E. Zielonacka-Lis), that we deal only with ourselves and our own problems is man’s irrevocable fate. The intrinsic existence of the other is his own problem, not mine; there is no, and cannot be a direct relation to the other*” [Buber, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p. 145].

My additional motive in taking up this topic is what I see as an intriguing analogy with the “world of chemistry”. At the onset of a chemical investigation, we identify the chemical individuals, i.e. chemical substances – and chemical compounds. However, what I think is the most interesting to every chemist is the question of what will happen when one chemical substance “mixes” with another one. Here too, the IN-BETWEEN is extremely important, understood as a continuity of changes that take place in the course of a CHEMICAL TRANSFORMATION. Here too, whatever is “dormant” in a given chemical compound manifests itself in contact with others. As a result of the contact with other chemical substances, an “opening” takes place, and whatever was “deposited“, or “concealed” in the “individuality” of the chemical substance is now revealed and made visible.

“If we want to take watchful care of “today”, and at the same time prepare “tomorrow” with foresight, we must develop in ourselves and in the generations to come after us the gift which lives in the depth of man (...). Some call it intuition, but this term is not fully univocal. Personally, I should prefer to call it real phantasy, because in its true essence, it is no longer a SEEING, but a bold,

imaginative STEPPING INTO THE DIFFERENT, which demands a most intense MOTION of my being, and this is a feature of all real phantasies. However, here the AREA OF MY ACT IS NOT ALMIGHTINESS, BUT A REAL PERSON MEETING ME HALF WAY, whom I can try to present to myself as this, and no other, in its entirety, unity and uniqueness, and in its dynamic core, which makes all this real over and over again" [Buber, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, pp. 147-148, my emphasis stressing: E.Zielonacka-Lis].

"What must only be done is to open the potentiality of the other, not by instruction, but by encounter, by an existential COMMUNICATION BETWEEN WHAT IS AND WHAT IS CAPABLE OF BEING" [Buber, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p. 148, my emphasis stressing: E. Zielonacka-Lis].

Buber carried out a criticism of the dominant analytical, reductive, and derivative view of interpersonal contacts. His observations, written down decades ago, are still up to date and surprisingly enough, relevant to currently undertaken chemical cognition. In contemporary chemistry, especially bioorganic chemistry, due to technical limitations, we often begin with the analysis of monomers, and throughout the undertaken study, we must be aware of the complex relations that occur between the element and the whole.

"The outlook is reductive, because it wants to reduce the diversity of the person nourished by a microcosmic fullness of possibilities, to schematic and everywhere repeatable structures" [Buber, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p. 147]. We can notice here an extremely interesting analogy with the chemical structure. In discussions of chemists who work at the laboratory table, as well as the philosophers of chemistry, attention is drawn to the dependence between the chemical structure and the conditions – that it is always necessary to determine the conditions in the context of structural studies, and to formulate the results relatively to the conditions. This shows the significance of a dynamic approach.

What is particularly appealing in Buber's approach is his emphasis on man's "relational character". *"In the beginning there is a relation"* [Buber, 1923, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p. 49]. *"In the beginning there is a relation: as the categories of essence, readiness, an encompassing form, model of the soul; the a priori of relation; the innate Thou"* [Buber, 1923, in the Polish translation: Ja i Ty, 1992, p. 56].

On the other hand, some philosophers of chemistry write in the following way:

"Chemistry is a science of dynamic relations. Therefore, any successful theoretical account of chemistry has to systematize chemical relations by mapping the chemical network" [Schummer, 1997, p. 323]. "(...) Two types of chemical predicates can be derived for chemical substances describing either the *potential to produce or the potential to be produced*" [Schummer, 1997, p. 321].

"Unlike physical interest in a few intrinsic quantities and fundamental theories, chemistry is interested in the variety of context-dependent dynamic properties with special reference to substantial changeabilities in order to improve the classification of its manifold objects. Unlike biological or geological classifications which work with phenomenal similarities or original relationships, chemical classification is based on dynamic relations performed by experiment" [Schummer, 1997, p. 329].

The stance represented by Joachim Schummer is not the only way of “seeing” chemistry. Also in connection with this discipline of science there is a discussion concerning a shift of emphasis, and arguments are weighed as to which factors should be recognized as basic: chemical compounds, or the processes of chemical transformation to which they are subjected [van Brakel, Vermeeren, 1981]. Some philosophers of chemistry who stress the importance of the macroscopic level draw attention to the fact that the possibility of defining chemical compounds exclusively in terms of macroscopic properties takes us back to the standpoint of Lavoisier’s, that chemistry is a quantitative science concerned with the macroproperties of substances and their transformations [van Brakel, 1991]. As it has rightly been pointed out, “*Energy – range considerations do define operationally the classes of experiments reaching the various levels of complexity;*” [Del Re, Villani, Severino, 1986, p. 266] – chemical analysis is a decomposition of materials accomplished by applying to them energy not greater than a few eV – “*but the ontological dimension must be added to it to provide an assessment of the programmes and types of explanations characteristic of different sciences.*” [Del Re, Villani, Severino, 1986, p. 266].

This interesting discussion on the nature of chemistry resembles to some extent the difference of perspectives in which we can view man, represented by the 20th century existentialists and the philosophers of dialogue.

At this point, I would like to share with the readers a personal reflection. When I first noticed some analogy between the view of interpersonal relations proposed by Martin Buber, and the “world of chemistry”, it came to me as a great surprise. However, emphasis on what is “in-between”, “stepping into the different”, “opening” what is potential, the relational character, the frequent inability to plan a conversation or a chemical reaction in all details “to the end” is – with due respect to all the differences – crucial both to the chemical and the human reality. I was moved by this perceived “unity” to such an extent that at a certain moment I felt an imperative to share my observations. On the other hand, in an age of, unfortunately, a widespread objective or even instrumental approach to man, of all-pervasive manipulation and sociotechnics, it is by all means desirable to propagate the way of seeing relations between people proposed by Martin Buber nearly a hundred years ago. Authenticity, reciprocity, an attempt to reach the irreplaceable individuality of our partners in a variety of events in our lives, are the basic and prerequisite conditions of true relations between persons. They enable coming into contact with each other, make “meeting” and dialogue possible, and at the same time promote an authentic development of each of the partners. The way of looking at reality presented by Martin Buber facilitates life in harmony with nature, one’s own self, and other people, a life, which finds its ultimate point of reference in the One God. Propagation of such an attitude appears to be a great chance for contemporary man and the world.

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