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The Nature of the “In-Between” in D.W. Winnicott’s Concept of Transitional Space and in Martin Buber’s *das Zwischenmenschliche*

Laura Praglin

Introduction

Martin Buber (1878-1965), German Jewish social philosopher and theologian, and D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971), British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, portray in vibrant detail the reality of the “in-between”. Although contemporaries, they were separated by country and profession, and did not know each other. Yet both set forth in their writings remarkably complementary views concerning “in-between space”—the transitional area, to Winnicott, or *das Zwischenmenschliche* to Buber. This is a meeting-ground of potentiality and authenticity, located neither within the self nor in the world of political and economic affairs. In this space, one finds the most authentic and creative aspects of our personal and communal existence, including artistic, scientific, and religious expression.

The creative and moral implications of the “in-between” continue to resonate deeply, and to claim the attention of recent scholars. Decades after their original contributions, we witness an ongoing engagement of Buber and Winnicott within a variety of interdisciplinary contexts. Fields as varied as philosophy, theology, politics, health care, communication, gender studies, and psychology continue to employ the work of these two thinkers when grappling with the themes of intersubjectivity, dialogue, and moral responsibility.¹ On the relevance of Buber’s relational concept of the self, for instance, Fishbane writes the following:

His vision, though formulated decades ago, is remarkably resonant with current voices in family therapy and other fields, which are reformulating fundamental assumptions about personhood and therapy. Within family therapy, psychoanalysis, human development, and gender studies, traditional notions of the self are being challenged. In multiple contexts of research and theory, older ideas about independence and separation-individuation are giving way to a view of the person in more relational, interdependent terms.²

¹ See, for instance, C. Fred Alford, “Levinas and Winnicott: Motherhood and Responsibility,” *American Imago* 57, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 235-259; Gal Gerson, “Individuality, Deliberation and Welfare in Donald Winnicott,” *History of the Human Sciences* 18, no. 1 (2005): 107-126; P. Wilkin, In Search of the True Self: A Clinical journey Through the Vale of Soul-Making,” *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 13, 1 (2006): 12-18; Richard Blackwell, “Holding, Containing and Bearing Witness,” *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 11, no. 2 (1997): 81-89; Mona D. Fishbane, “I, Thou, and We: A Dialogical Approach to Couples Therapy,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 24, no. 1 (Jan. 1998) 41-58; Paul Genova, “[There are only Three Kinds of Psychotherapy](http://www.psychiatric-times.com/p011140.html),” *Psychiatric Times* 18, issue 11 (November 2001), Retrieved 5/15/06 at <http://www.psychiatric-times.com/p011140.html>.

² Fishbane, 41.

Such dialogical aspects of Buber's and Winnicott's thought have particular significance for psychotherapy, and most past writings about these thinkers focus upon this area. Yet other pivotal aspects of their thought have been rarely explored outside the psychological realm, especially how this "in-between" space harbors culture and imagination; provides for art and symbol; and helps in the ethical and spiritual regeneration of the wider world.

Buber and Winnicott communicate in clear, poetic styles remarkable for either of their professions. Their prose is purposely open-ended, "with a clear wish to have the reader fill in his [or her] own experiences."³ Both are also noted for their unusual respect for individual autonomy; for unconditional acceptance of others; and for the search for mutuality in personal relationships.

As a result of their varied disciplines and training, Buber remains more vague and skeptical about the psychological element, whereas Winnicott is less specific about the social and cultural realities. Although Buber shows more wariness of the inner and psychological dimensions of human existence, he does not dismiss the insights of the psychological sciences--provided they do not purport to define the essence of the person. Yet Buber finds psychology as a whole too quick to classify the world and the person into subject/object dichotomies, and thus its ability to engage the dialogical realm remains inadequate. Buber concludes that although human nature is a social product, persons still possess a great degree of freedom and responsibility. As a result, Buber asserts that behavioristic psychologies must be rejected, since they leave little room for genuine freedom. He denounces those psychologies, for instance, which insist that therapeutic change succeeds because the person adapts new habits to better fit cultural realities.⁴

The Transitional Space: Between Subject and Object

Like his mentor, Georg Simmel, Buber attempts to combine philosophy with social and psychological theory. In a preface to *die Gesellschaft* in 1906, Buber first calls forth the concept of *das Zwischenmenschliche*⁵, which he later refines to mean the dialogical realm, the world of relatedness between persons. He contrasts this to the impersonal domain of social collectivity characteristic of mass society. Buber's focus on meaningful relatedness is pursued foremost in his seminal 1923 study, *I and Thou*,⁶ where he outlines two ways of being in the world: the modes of I-It and I-Thou. In the realm of the I-It, persons treat each other as objects. In the realm of I-Thou, persons seek to relate meaningfully to others. We must live in both worlds, Buber insists, yet only in the world of the I-Thou do persons relate with their whole being, and only here is true dialogue and relationship possible.⁷ The true hallmark of maturity and health becomes the successful negotiation of this twofold nature of existence.

Influenced by psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, Winnicott proposes original ideas regarding the role of transitional phenomena within early development and in later life. Contrary to both the behaviorists and the neo-Freudians, moreover, Winnicott similarly contends that the pivotal issue in psychology is the specific relations of the individual with others

³ Ernst Ticho, "Donald Winnicott, Martin Buber and the Theory of Interpersonal Relationships," *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes* 37, no. 3 (Aug. 1974): 240.

⁴ Buber, Martin. *The Knowledge of Man*. Ed. M. Friedman (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 166-184.

⁵ Martin Buber, *Die Gesellschaft, Sammlung sozial-psychologischer Monographien* [Society. A Collection of Social-Psychological Monographs] (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1906-1912, 40 volumes. The first volume (Werner Sombart, *Das Proletariat*) includes the introduction to the series, and proposes the term "das Zwischenmenschliche."

⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1958).

⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 3-5.

in the world, and not the satisfaction of instinctual drives. Although Winnicott finds that “objects”—a term that includes persons—with which the infant relates are crucial in gratifying instincts, the child’s engagement with objects remains primarily a relational one from the start of life.

In a speech to the British Psycho-Analytical Society in 1966, Winnicott describes the evolution of his thought. At first he worshipped Freud unquestioningly, viewing play and symbolism as expressions of the structure of the mind, universally projected onto the wider world. However, he gradually realized that “Freud did not have a place in his topography of the mind for the experience of things cultural.” He also began to realize that the infant, for instance in play, had its own point of view, different from that of its parents or observers:

For a long time my mind remained in a state of not-knowing. . . I played about with the concept of ‘mental representations’ . . . in terms of objects and phenomena located in the personal psychic reality, felt to be inside. . . also, I followed the effects of the operation of the mental mechanisms of projection and introjection. I realized, however, that play is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality.⁸

Infancy: The Beginning of the In-Between

Winnicott focuses upon how an infant moves from a sense of illusory merged omnipotence with the mother and gains psychic structure, or a relatively firm sense of self. He also asks how a child copes with object loss or an unresponsive social environment. Central to these concerns is his idea of transitional phenomena, which arise in the context of “good-enough mothering,” within a facilitating environment. Transitional objects, the infant’s first “not-me” possession(s), are universal and of infinite variety. They come into play from about four to twelve months, given the normal provisions of good parental care and an adequate holding environment. Although they are actual objects (e.g. a blanket or thumb), these transitional objects are not yet perceived by the infant as having a fully external reality. They are symbolic of a third reality, a resting place that exists “in between” subject and object—between that which is merged with the mother, and that which is outside and separate. The transitional objects preserve the illusion of symbiosis with the mother, “thus allowing the infant the illusion that what the infant creates really exists.” It mediates the inevitable disillusionment process inherent in the gradual establishment of ego boundaries as the child begins to “distinguish between fantasy and fact, inner and outer, similarity and difference.”

While Winnicott, as a pediatrician and psychoanalyst, focuses upon critical early experiences and realities of human development, including serious emotional loss leading to life-long psychic trauma, Buber, the social philosopher, assumes that most adults have the capacity to relate meaningfully, rarely referring to deficits in emotional development. Buber also differs from many psychologists in positing an inherent relationality of child from the start of life: “In the beginning is relation—as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul; it is the *a priori* of relation, *the inborn Thou*” This distinguished Buber from many psychological theorists, who contend that an infant first regards his/her mother “as a part-object, an It, and only gradually relates to her as a whole person, a Thou.” Rather, the infant-mother relationship is, from the start, a mutual I-Thou relationship. Eventually, however, Buber writes, the child must “fall” into a state of differentiation and in

⁸ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971), 112.

⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 27.

dividuation. Yet it is an “exalted” fall, because this inevitable move from I-Thou to I-It is an accomplishment which made the *essential* I--Thou encounter possible. Buber thus formulates a significant distinction between the mature or “essential Thou on the level of self-being” and the immature or “primitive Thou [which] precedes the consciousness of individual separateness.”¹⁰ Yet, how may a small child, who is not yet fully conscious of his/her separateness, achieve the “distance” necessary for I-Thou relation? This question remains problematic to several Buber critics. Buber depicts the primitive I-Thou as a “category of being, a readiness. . .the *a priori* of relation,” which “does not rely on a distinction between oneness and separateness, but on a more fundamental distinction between a newborn’s concrete experience, on the one hand, and the existential conditions which make him human, on the other:

The primitive I-Thou [is] a description of the fundamental characteristics which make an infant a human being, while the ‘essential’ I-Thou is a description of the kind of relations that are possible in mature mutual relationships. Thus, the primitive I-Thou signifies that an essential constituent of being human is to be always in-relation-to-someone.”¹¹

Despite its ability to provide refuge and renewal, however, Winnicott and Buber insist that this “in-between” world can never displace or supplant the inner and outer worlds. Whether in childhood or adulthood, we cannot stay in this realm of creative possibility and transformation forever, even if it is the most real and authentic part of our existence. Buber and Winnicott therefore refuse to become neo-romantic worshippers of feeling and subjectivity. They avoid such dualism, and discourage, in Buber’s terms, the rejection of the world of I-It, suggesting instead the interpenetration of the I-It realm by that of I-Thou.

Like the child, we must return always to the “exalted melancholy of our fate” in the I-It world: Yet Buber insists that even in this mundane sphere, we can claim a sense of meaning, for “these Thou’s which have been changed into It’s have it in their nature to change back again into presentness.”¹²

Winnicott’s transitional object, an illusion in itself, remains paradoxically for all persons “the basis of initiation of experience.” This intermediate area of experience, in which the transitional object shares, is retained throughout life, “in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.”¹³ Winnicott’s “in-between” world does not possess the vacillating It/Thou qualities to the same degree that Buber’s does, and remains a more stable and enduring concept, available to draw upon for the rest of our lives.

Reflections Upon the Imagination

The key to the “in-between” realm in infancy involves fantasy, but the capacity to call upon fantasy first requires the sensitive response of adults around the child. “[W]e agree never to make the challenge to the baby: did you create this object, or did you find it conveniently lying around?” Winnicott suggests. “That is to say, an essential feature of transitional phenomena and objects is

¹⁰ Charles Brice, “Pathological Modes of Human Relating and Therapeutic Mutuality: A Dialogue Between Buber’s Existential: Theory and Object-Relations Theory.” *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes* 47, no. 2 (May, 1984): 116.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹² Buber, *I and Thou*, 16, 23

¹³ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 16.

a quality in our attitude when we observe them.”¹⁴ As a result, through transitional objects, the earliest “not-me” possession, the child both uses symbol and experiences play for the first time.

Although more hesitant about the imaginal or “fanciful” realm than Winnicott, Buber describes a child’s interaction with a teddy bear in *I and Thou* in terms similar to those of Winnicott. The child’s experience is not a relation to an object, but is “the correspondence of the child—to be sure only ‘fanciful’—with what is alive and effective over against him.”¹⁵ This “is the instinct to make everything into Thou, to give relation to the universe,” notes Buber. “Little, disjointed, meaningless sounds still go out into the void, but one day, unforeseen, they will have become conversation.”¹⁶

Buber’s comment regarding the critical importance of conversation evokes Winnicott’s story of a boy and his string. Winnicott is asked to evaluate a young boy, whose primary means of communication is with a length of string he always carries with him. His obsession with string begins at the time of separation from his depressive mother, and becomes stronger whenever subsequent bouts of depression and detachment separated mother and child. “String can be looked upon as an extension of all other techniques of communication,” Winnicott suggests. “String joins, just as it also helps in the wrapping up of objects and in the holding of unintegrated material. In this respect string has a symbolic meaning.”¹⁷ Winnicott posits that if the string remained attached to “lived concreteness” (in Buber’s words)—i.e., the original wish to maintain contact with the mother—it is more likely that the boy can be helped. If the string is only symbolic, without retaining its original meaning, cure becomes much more difficult. The predicament Winnicott observes is that “the function of the string is changing from communication into a denial of separation”:

As a denial of separation, string becomes a thing in itself. . . . When hope is absent and string represents a denial of separation, then a much more complex state of affairs has arisen—one that becomes difficult to cure, because of the secondary gains that arise out of the skill that develops wherever an object has to be handled in order to be mastered.¹⁸

Art and the Creative Process

For Winnicott, life itself is always expressed in symbol, for it plays an integral part in the formulation and realization of transitional space. Yet, paradoxically, not even an artist creates entirely new symbols and forms, only, like the child, discovers them. As a result, Winnicott remarks, “creative living involves, in every detail of its experience, a philosophical dilemma—because, in fact, in our sanity we only create what we find.”¹⁹

Such creativity, declares Winnicott—whether artistic, religious, or scientific—is “the doing that arises out of being.”²⁰ Using Winnicott’s terms, we may say that the artist, for example, expresses his/her being by constructing a framed, transitional area in which creativity finds expression. The artist creates and recreates unconscious processes, and presents these in a manner which resonate with our shared sense of symbols. By articulating these shared symbols, the artist invites us into this intermediate area of experiencing. The poet, for example, chooses symbols and images of a common language, and finds comfort not available in herself. S/he invites others

¹⁴ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 113.

¹⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26, 27.

¹⁷ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

into this in-between space, beyond the merely private, subjective, or psychological, which serves as a resting place between inner and outer reality, between psyche and culture. Through art, therefore, one can move from the private to the social world. Readers find meaning as well, because they now share in the capacity to articulate experience. Creative expression—through art, philosophy, religion or mathematics—may thus resolve situations, and allow for new possibilities. In this way, it is like the child's experience in imaginative play.²¹

Buber seems to agree that creativity and the discovery of form also occur in the realm of the “in-between”. Maurice Friedman suggests that Buber views “a work of art is not the impression of natural objectivity nor the expression of spiritual subjectivity. It is the witness of the relation between the human substance and the substance of thing. Art is “the realm of ‘between’ which has become a form”:²² In the creative process, the artist discovers the potentialities of form, as s/he encounters that which is over against the self. But form itself crystallizes into structure, and thus non-immediacy:

[The artist] banishes it to be a ‘structure’. The nature of this ‘structure’ is to be freed for a timeless moment” by meeting the work of art again, lifting the ban of distance or crystallization, and clasps the form.²³

Reflections Upon Culture

In his essay, “The Concept of the Healthy Individual,” Winnicott suggests that people live in three worlds: the inner, the outer, and the transitional—“the area of cultural experience.” Cultural experience, Winnicott writes, begins as play, and subsequently “leads on to the whole area of man's inheritance, including the arts, the myths of history, the slow march of philosophical thought and the mysteries of mathematics, and of group management and of religion.”²⁴ Of the three worlds, the area of cultural experience is the most variable, Winnicott states. It is also the most healthy, for it is the area not only of play and humor, “but also all the accumulated culture of the past five to ten thousand years.” It is here that a good mind can best operate, and the sense of trust can be offered and confirmed.

The dialogical realm, *das Zwischenmenschliche*, is similarly critical to the preservation of culture, believes Buber. Buber, however, transcends his earlier expressions of romantic folk psychology and mysticism, and insists that culture must incorporate ethical and social dimensions. Buber thus uses the realm of *das Zwischenmenschliche* as a potential space for the reconstruction of human relations within a morally accountable community.²⁵

In his social philosophy, Buber searches for the elements of genuine community, where real meeting is possible. Often he mentions *das Gemeinschaft* as a location for *das Zwischenmenschliche*, embracing the “matrix of warm and trusting relations that had been eclipsed by the competitive, calculating relations of bourgeois urban life.”²⁶ Moreover, it was Buber's view that *Gemeinschaft* was not simply an irretrievable memory, and could, therefore, be reconstructed. True *Gemeinschaft*, writes Buber, permits “the Thou to come into being.” Yet in group life as in individual existence, it is not the It-world itself, but rather its *domination* over all of life that is evil.

²¹ D.W. Winnicott, “The Concept of the Healthy Individual,” in *Home is Where We Start From* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 36.

²² Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 3d ed. rev. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 81.

²³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 40.

²⁴ Winnicott, “Healthy Individual,” 35.

²⁵ Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber and the Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 13-15.

Buber cites the category of “the essential We” to correspond on the community level to the “essential Thou on the level of self being.” Similarly, he posits a primitive We on the group level, analogous to that of the primitive Thou on the individual level: “the primitive We precedes true individuality and independence, whereas the essential We only comes about when independent people have come together in essential relation and directness.”²⁷ Through this essential We, humans can transcend the impersonality of mass culture. As Buber writes in *Between Man and Man*, one “is truly saved from the ‘one’ not by separation but only by being bound up in genuine communion.”²⁸

Buber calls for restructuring of society “into a community of communities,” which would strive to transform mass society into the essential We of *Gemeinschaft*. True community, however, can only occur if people take personal responsibility, and can sacrifice for the group. Buber’s social philosophy is far from utopian, realizing how difficult it is in an age of impersonal mass society to redirect human nature towards responsibility for the integrity of the total community. He embraces no one political ideology, but points to varied communities where non-exploitative relations predominate.

Although Winnicott does not speak in similar detail about the dynamics of culture, he does view cultural forms as inherently more enabling and creative. Due to his social location in Great Britain, Winnicott also seems more pragmatic and positive towards both monarchy and large-scale democratic government. In his essay, “Some Thoughts on the Meaning of Democracy,” Winnicott considers democracy a more mature form of culture, for instance, in its respect of privacy through the secret ballot.²⁹ The main threat to democracy, however, Winnicott writes, is that its people may not be mature enough to maintain and nurture it. In this case, totalitarian systems can threaten a people through their appeal to demonic certainty, stirring in some individuals a desire to persecute others.

Winnicott finds that such a desire to persecute, or wish to be persecuted, results from a failure of successful transitional objects, often as a result of early impingement by others. In adult group life, this developmental deficit can lead one particular group to force its illusions upon another. Illusion, “which in adult life is inherent in art and religion,” notes Winnicott, “becomes the hallmark of madness when an adult puts too powerful a claim on the credulity of others, forcing them to acknowledge a sharing of illusion that is not their own.”³⁰ Winnicott’s insight here may offer some rationale for emergence of National Socialism, which Buber’s social psychology was hard-pressed to comprehend.

Winnicott observes that the healthy person maintains his self-esteem as well as his doubts, and is able to discern the difference between inner and external conflict. “When healthy persons come together they each contribute a whole world, because each brings a whole person,” he writes. They are capable of becoming depressed, rather than automatically joining group manias and seeking domination of others.³¹

A rich, nurturing sense of culture can be found in Winnicott’s analogy of the holding environment of mother and infant to the wider world, which “provides a refuge or fellow feeling and the fact that we are all human.” Similar echoes of this “holding environment” can be found

²⁷ Buber, Martin. *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 202.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁹ D.W. Winnicott, “Some Thoughts on the Meaning of the Word Democracy,” in *Home Is Where We Start From* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936), 241.

³⁰ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 3.

³¹ Winnicott, “The Value of Depression,” in *Home Is Where We Start From* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 71-79.

in Buber's *Gemeinschaft*, which affirms fellowship and community while countering coercion and domination.

Illness, writes Buber, represents distortion, both because the individual closes himself off from the world and because society rejects the person, refusing to offer confirmation. It is critical that a healthy culture, therefore, offer treatment that not merely aims to "integrate" or "adjust" an individual to the prevailing society, but that seeks to restore the person's interrupted dialogical relations.

Finally, both Buber and Winnicott find that healthy communal life requires its members to assume ongoing responsibility for the well being of others in the group. "It is human beings who are likely to destroy the world," concludes Winnicott. "If so, we can perhaps die . . . knowing that this is not health but fear; it is part of the failure of healthy people and healthy society to carry its ill members."³² To care for others means that, for both Winnicott and Buber, persons move outside themselves with a newfound sense of courage. Assuming such responsibility for others encourages and restores genuine relations between persons, and in so doing enables the ethical and spiritual regeneration of the wider world. The transitional space, or *das Zwischenmenschliche*, therefore remains critical for the preservation of a morally accountable world community, where the ability to relate meaningfully to others continues as an ever-present—and perduring—reality.

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³² Winnicott, "Healthy Individual," 37.

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