

KANDINSKY AND BUBER: AESTHETICS OF DIALOGUE

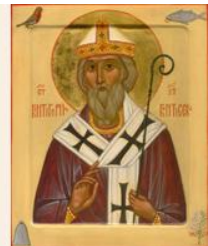
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ДИСЦИПЛАНА СЮБЪЕКТИВНОГО ПАТРИАРХАТА
ПРИХОД РУССКОЙ ПРАВОСЛАВНОЙ ЦЕРКВИ
ВО ИМЯ Свт. КЕНТИГЕРНА В ГЛАЗГО (ШОТЛАНДИЯ)
СУРОЖСКАЯ ЕПАРХИЯ, МОСКОВСКИЙ ПАТРИАРХАТ



Summary

The paper introduces dialogue as a mode of human being that had initially been presented by Buber and his followers from a very human perspective. People always exist personally, in a dialogical realm which was viewed by Buber through the prism of the word pair “I and Thou” and later rediscovered ethically by Levinas as “I for Thou”. The above human approach to dialogue is now complemented with a sort of aesthetical dimension, which, though not absent from the work of Buber and Levinas, had, strictly speaking, never been viewed from the perspective of “spiritual aesthetics”, presented by Wassily Kandinsky. This is the context in which the term “aesthetics of dialogue” has been developed in the current paper.

Our human nature tends to be dominated by selfishness and yet we are always conscious of the fact that we are living with others. Otherness is inevitably a real fact of existence. Once we have related to another person, we may recognize his life as reflecting a being that is even more real than our own concept of what we are ourselves. Personality is neither simply an individual matter nor simply a social product; it is a function of relationship. We are all born as ‘individuals’, in the sense of being different from each other; but it is still only potentially rather than in actuality that we are born as persons. Our personalities are called into being by those who enter into relation with us. This does not mean either that a person is merely a cell in a social organism. To become a person means to become someone who responds to what happens from a centre of inwardness.

Persons will differ among themselves in the extent of their willingness to enter into relations with each other. This is due to the very fact that the person must keep itself apart from being mixed with the common nature. While firmly believing that I know who I am according to

my own nature, I should nonetheless be aware that I cannot see my own value such as beauty as it is known to others. This unknown value of beauty which is unique to my personhood has to be taken into account in dialogue, since one's self is being penetrated by the other who is also interested in comprehension from a centre of his own inwardness.

Human interest in the world – personal or impersonal – and in its Creator, has been considerably redirected towards dialogical or communal issues by the impact of a personalist approach in philosophy and theology. While natural science and art consider human being not as a whole but in selective aspects and as part of the natural world, dialogical method turns us toward its wholeness and integrity. What was recognized as being an aesthetical method before Kandinsky's appearance is, precisely, a highly perfected development of the subject-object (or *I-It*) way of observing and knowing. But it is a process of abstraction away from the concrete actuality and largely ignores the differences there must inevitably be between the observers. It reduces the *I* as far as possible to an abstract knowing subject and the *It* as far as possible to a passive and abstract object of feeling and thought. However, even when we are dealing with the impersonal world, no observation can be made that is not affected by the observer. For these reasons alone, the scientific approach as applied in aesthetics is not qualified to find the wholeness either of human being or of nature. One might compare human beings or natural objects with each other, but all that can emerge from such a comparison and contrast will be an expanding and contracting scale of similarities and differences. This can be of aid in categorizing human beings and animals as differing objects in a world of objects but not in discovering the uniqueness and beauty of man as man or of nature as related to man.

A vivid example of the subject-object relation could be found within the Kandinsky's view of an art exhibition when people with booklets in their hands go from wall to wall, turning over pages, reading the names. Then they go away, neither richer nor poorer than when they came, and are absorbed at once in their business having nothing to do with art. However, "each picture is a whole lifetime imprisoned, a whole lifetime of fears, doubts, hopes, and joys", - said Kandinsky. Unfortunately, "those who could speak have said nothing, those who could hear have heard nothing. This condition of art is called 'art for art's sake.' This neglect of inner meanings, which is the life of colours, this vain squandering of artistic power is called 'art for art's sake.'"¹ The artist was disappointed with cold eyes and indifferent mind the spectators regarding the work. "Connoisseurs admire the 'skill' (as one admires a tightrope walker), enjoy the 'quality of painting' (as one enjoys a pasty). But hungry souls go hungry away."²

In place of objectification Kandinsky introduced harmonization the whole as the task of art. Raised an Orthodox Christian and grown in the atmosphere of the Jewish and Christian stories, Wassily Kandinsky believes that art belongs to the spiritual life. Art is one of the mightiest elements of the spiritual life, "a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience. It may take different forms, but it holds at bottom to the same inner thought and purpose."³ The artist never denounced his Russian-Orthodox faith and several of his paintings from the early 1910s deal with various religious subjects, saints, the Deluge, and the Resurrection.

Being convinced that an artist must have something to say, Kandinsky did not accept merely aesthetic approach to art. Apart from the *I-It* relation the subject matter of abstract painting must be inner nature, the hidden reality 'veiled in darkness'. He argued that non-

¹ Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*. Trans. by M. T. H. Sadler. NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977, p. 3.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 4.

figurative painting is as being produced by “inner necessity, which springs from the soul” and he believed that abstract painting, like an Orthodox icon, conveys a spiritual message. Kandinsky was less concerned about the motif of the painting than the use of color and line as means of representing “spiritual” states of mind. He might be called an artist who always seeking for *true dialogue* with his spectator.

Among the most significant writings of the best-known dialogical thinkers of the beginning of the last century – Buber, Rozenzweig and Ebner – pride of place must be given to Martin Buber’s “I and Thou”. In this brilliant book, now recognized as a classic, the author makes use of both poetry and philosophy to reveal the significance and the depth of our human inter-relations. There can be no existence other than in relation to other existences, so, once they enter into dialogue, all the participants become, insofar as they are open to it, participants in a common existence. Buber stressed the importance of this dialogical common existence, arguing for the fundamental value of the *I-Thou* relationship and its distinction from the *I-It* relation. The *I-It* relations are objectifying and monological as opposed to those between *I* and *Thou*, which are communal and dialogical. So one can say that the pair of words *I-It* indicates degrees of separation from others, whereas the twofold term *I-Thou* indicates a togetherness, a close bonding.⁴

According to Buber, *I-Thou* is the primary word of relation. It is characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability. Although it is only within this relation that personality and the personal really exist, the *Thou* of *I-Thou* is not limited to men but may include animals, trees, objects of nature, and God. *I-It* is the primary word of experiencing and using. It takes place within a man and not between him and the world. Hence it is entirely subjective and lacking in mutuality. Whether in knowing, feeling, or acting it is the typical subject-object relationship. It is always mediate and indirect and hence is comprehensible and orderable, significant only in connection and not itself. The *It* of *I-It* may equally well be a he, a she, an animal, a thing, a spirit, or even God, without a change in the primary word. Thus *I-Thou* and *I-It* cut across the lines of our ordinary distinctions to focus our attention not upon individual objects and their causal connections but upon the relations between things, the *dazwischen* (‘there in-between’).⁵

“The first encounter with any new phenomenon exercises immediately an impression on the soul. This is the experience of the child discovering the world, to whom every object is new”.⁶ It is, then, on the basis of his relationship with others, that the child comes to a knowledge of the external world. Later, it is through his social relationships that he receives those categories that gradually enable him to see the world as “an ordered continuum of knowable and passive objects”. Kandinsky wrote,

He sees a light, wishes to take hold of it, burns his finger and feels henceforward a proper respect for flame. But later he learns that light has a friendly as well as an unfriendly side, that it drives away the darkness, makes the day longer, is essential to warmth, cooking, play-acting. From the mass of these discoveries is composed a knowledge of light, which is indelibly fixed in his mind. The strong, intensive interest disappears and the various properties of flame are balanced against each other. In this way the whole world becomes gradually disenchanted. It is realized that trees give shade, that horses run fast and motor-cars still

⁴ Kraemer, Kenneth. *Martin Buber's I and Thou: practicing living dialogue*. Kenneth Paul Kramer with Mechthild Gawlick. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003, p. 16.

⁵ Friedman, Maurice S. *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960, p. 57.

⁶ Kandinsky. *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*, p. 23.

faster, that dogs bite, that the figure seen in a mirror is not a real human being.⁷

Buber has described this process as the movement of the child from the *I-Thou* to an *I-It* relation with people and things. Through constantly comparing his perceptions with those of others the child establishes what is for him 'objective' reality. On the contrary, avoiding such an objectification, Kandinsky involves completely new and even unreal object – the red horse. This puts us in another atmosphere. An unreal world is now demanded because of the impossibility of a red horse. This is an impossible combination of colour and form. And he said: "To set this red horse in a careful naturalistic landscape would create such a discord as to produce no appeal and no coherence". He keeps looking for coherence which he believes is the essential of harmony demanding that the inner value of a picture should remain unified whatever the variations or contrasts of outward form or colour. The artist considers his view by means of a human dialogue.

In a conversation with an interesting person, we endeavour to get at his fundamental ideas and feelings. We do not bother about the words he uses, nor the spelling of those words, nor the breath necessary for speaking them, nor the movements of his tongue and lips, nor the psychological working on our brain, nor the physical sound in our ear, nor the physiological effect on our nerves. We realize that these things, though interesting and important, are not the main things of the moment, but that the meaning and idea is what concerns us.⁸

Turning to the aesthetics of dialogue, one should mention a phenomenon common among men – a certain kind of speech through which a human being enters into a common existence with other human beings, speech-with-meaning. This speech-with-meaning reaches out for a personal reciprocation, which may or may not occur. Dialogue, then, can be viewed as a form or mode of personal being aesthetically recognized within being-with-the-other, that is, within the relationship, which exercises a continual influence on the personal inward being. It is, in fact, only the knowing of the *I-Thou* relation which makes possible the conception of the wholeness and the beauty of man. Only *I-Thou* sees these beauty and wholeness as the whole person in unreserved relation with what is over against him rather than as a sum of parts. Some of those parts are usually labelled objective and hence oriented around the thing known and some subjective and hence oriented around the knower.⁹ Aesthetics of dialogue, on the contrary, must be viewed within the perspective of a unified beauty common to all participants of dialogue since it becomes true. Thus, within the *I-Thou* relationship the inner beauty becomes aesthetically recognized as means of mutuality and perception.

The word "beauty" defines not an objective concept but a personal relation. By encouraging a relationship rather than understanding a concept we know what the beauty really is. The relation constitutes the very existence of beauty which does not suggest separation and distance but reconciliation and dialogue. It is by being wholly transformed into relation that our life is transformed into beautiful life. We participate in existence consciously and rationally, because the erotic drive of our nature is transformed into a personal relation when there arises in the space of the other the first signifier of desire: the maternal presence. The subject is born with love's first leap of joy.¹⁰ Further human relations are inevitably marked by the notion of beauty,

⁷ Ibid., p. 23-24.

⁸ Ibid., p. 49.

⁹ Friedman. *Martin Buber*, p. 173.

¹⁰ Yannaras, Christos. *Variations on the Song of Songs*. Trans. by Norman Russell. Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005.

which gradually leads man to create and recognize the work of art. While seeing the external form and colour subjected to the artist's need, Kandinsky introduces aesthetical perception of art in an inner and personal way similarly presented by Buber as *true dialogue*.

The work of art is born of the artist in a mysterious and secret way. From him it gains life and being. Nor is its existence casual and inconsequent, but it has a definite and purposeful strength, alike in its material and spiritual life. It exists and has power to create spiritual atmosphere; and from this inner standpoint one judges whether it is a good work of art or a bad one. If its "form" is bad it means that the form is too feeble in meaning to call forth corresponding vibrations of the soul. <...> "Good drawing" is drawing that cannot be altered without destruction of this inner value, quite irrespective of its correctness as anatomy, botany, or any other science. There is no question of a violation of natural form, but only of the need of the artist for such form. Similarly colours are used not because they are true to nature, but because they are necessary to the particular picture. In fact, the artist is not only justified in using, but it is his duty to use only those forms which fulfil his own need. Absolute freedom, whether from anatomy or anything of the kind, must be given the artist in his choice of material. Such spiritual freedom is as necessary in art as it is in life.¹¹

In conclusion, one should say that there are two different *I's* within the pairs *I-Thou* and *I-It*. However, the beauty itself is not twofold but is to be considered rather in two different and related modes.¹² It is difficult in practice to distinguish them and, in the case of those who are attempting to live in dialogue, the distinction may be expected to vanish altogether. The dialogical modus of being provides the person with a "two-dimensional" perspective in contrast to the *I-It* relation, which is a sort of mutual soliloquy. The one-sided *I* is to be transformed into the *I* reciprocally reflected in *Thou*. Nevertheless, the two aesthetical modes are related to each other and co-exist in the same reality of being; however inseparable in practice they must be distinguished in principle if we wish to grasp the beauty of the being in its wholeness and immediacy.

¹¹ Kandinsky. *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*, p. 53.

¹² Although the Buber scholar Kramer used the term "twofold world": one may find that Buber himself mentioned "twofold attitude" towards the world instead of "twofold world" – Kraemer. *Martin Buber's I and Thou*, p. 42. And he was only trying to link or subordinate word pairs in their twofold relation to *I*.