



## Commentary on *From the Absolute of Either-Or To the Uncertainty of And*<sup>\*</sup>

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### Buber's Interpersonal Ethics

In his essay *From the Absolute of Either-Or To the Uncertainty of And*, Taswell (1976) presents a provokingly interesting interpretation of Buber's *I and Thou* (Buber 1923) in terms of interpersonal ethics. According to Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, there is a dichotomy between the word pair "I-You" and the word pair "I-It". Taswell illustrates this dichotomy in terms of two different attitudes or personalities, namely of "behaviorists" and "humanists", in the following way:

A scientist is one who conducts a search for an explanation of life so that life can be lived. A humanist is one who conducts a search for an understanding of life so that life may be worth living. The humanist must therefore oppose those scientists who are behaviorists because if man is nothing but an animal without free-will, then his life is not worth living. Life can have meaning only if man is more than an animal, only if man possesses free-will. And so the humanist says that man is more than an animal because his actions transcend those of mere animalistic survival and that man does possess free-will because he chooses to act in this way, a way which is not determined by the driving force of survival. (Taswell 1976, pp. 1-2)

Hence, the "humanist asserts that free-will exists. The behaviorist asserts that free-will does not exist. A raging controversy ensues; it is known as Free-will versus Determinism" (Taswell 1976, p. 2). Interpreting Buber now,

The behaviorist with his belief in determinism is an ego who belongs to the It-world. The humanist with his belief in free-will is a person who belongs to the You-world. An ego is nothing but an animal who survives. A person is a man who lives a life of meaning, one of dialogue. (Taswell 1976, p. 5)

Following Taswell, the "behaviorists" live a life of "war", while the "humanists" live a life of "peace", to the extent that

Some but not all behaviorists of the It-world of war will continue to exist; all humanists of the You-world of peace will continue to exist. Individual humanists make zero-risk bets; individual behaviorists make high-risk bets. Certainly, a zero-risk bet is less of a gamble than a high-risk bet. (Taswell 1976, p. 6)

Therefore, Taswell concludes that Martin Buber could be appropriately called "an insurance agent" (Taswell 1976, p. 6) for the "sole authentic truth of life" with his philosophy of dialogue (Taswell 1976, p. 7). In my commentary to Taswell's essay, I would like to pinpoint some conceptual issues from general moral philosophy. Yet, my main aim will be a brief discussion of the *Free-will versus Determinism* paradox in terms of cognitive neuroscience and scientific methodology.

### Some Conceptual Remarks

Buber wrote *I and Thou* in 1923 when psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung were active in psychiatry. Taswell wrote his essay on Buber's concepts of connection, relation, and dialogue half a century later in 1976 at Harvard when the behaviorist Burrhus Frederic Skinner was still an influential psychologist on campus at the university. My remarks, written now another half century later in 2025, recognize the truism that writings in the past by Buber in 1923 and Taswell in 1976 must be considered in historical context.

With respect for this history, but now considered in the context of the contemporary philosophy of science, my first remark concerns the dichotomy between "behaviorists" and "humanists". Usage of the term *humanist* has been continued by modern scholars. However, the term *behaviorist* has been replaced by the term *naturalist*<sup>1</sup> or even by the term *physicalist*<sup>2</sup> in philosophic discourse by many authors.

Secondly, I have to emphasize that the transcendental notion of a "person" plays a crucial role in general moral philosophy. According to Kant, a "person" is a "rational being" that is able to take its "own point of view", i.e. a reflected perspective, as indicated by Buber's "I-You" or "I-It" dichotomies.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, Buber's philosophy of dialogue was later resumed by Habermas' *discourse ethics* within the framework of his *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984; Habermas 1990).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Martin Buber's ideas about a life in "authentic truth" are also reflected in Immanuel Kant's "culture of sincerity",<sup>5</sup> in my own attempt toward a "lattice gauge society",<sup>6</sup> and, most notably, in Václav Havel's *Living in Truth*, defeating (post-)totalitarianism.<sup>7</sup>

### The Free-will versus Determinism Paradox

Yet, my main comment on Taswell's essay relates Buber's "I-You" and "I-It" dichotomies with first person ("I"), second person ("You"), and third person perspectives ("It"), as investigated in cognitive neuroscience (Selman 1971; Habermas 1990; Brier 2006; Velmans 2002; Velmans 2009). Specifically, Max Velmans aligns the *Free-will versus Determinism* paradox with the apparent *complementarity* between first

<sup>\*</sup> Document created 2025-08-11, updated 2025-08-28, published 2025-08-29.

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person and third person accounts in the following way:

One simple way is to accept that for each individual there is one “mental life” but two ways of knowing it: first-person knowledge and third-person knowledge. From a first-person perspective conscious experiences appear causally effective. From a third-person perspective the same causal sequences can be explained in neural terms. [...] These perspectives are complementary. The differences between how things appear from a first- versus a third-person perspective has to do with differences in the observational arrangements. (Velmans 2002, pp. 10)

Here, the term “complementarity” refers to the well-known complementarity between different experimental “arrangements”, known in quantum physics. There, the famous *wave-particle dualism* of an electron results from the complementarity of, e.g., a Wilson cloud chamber, where an electron appears as a particle, and an electron microscope, utilizing its wave aspect. The idea that first person and third person perspectives, and hence freedom and determinism, are eventually complementary to each other has already been expressed by the founder of quantum theory, Max Planck:

What do we then mean when we say that the human will is free? That we are always given the chance of choosing between two alternatives when it comes to a question of making a decision. And this statement is not in contradiction with what I have already said. It would be in contradiction only if a man could perfectly see through himself as the eye of God sees through him; for then, on the basis of the law of causality, he would foresee every action of his own will and thus his will would no longer be free. But that case is logically excluded; for the most penetrative eye cannot see itself, no more than a working instrument can work upon itself. The object and subject of an act of knowing can never be identical; for we can speak of the act of knowing only when the object to be known is not influenced by the action of the subject who initiates and performs the act of knowing. (Planck 1932, p. 104)

Following Planck, his methodological thought experiment of applying the third person perspective upon one's own first person perspective recalls the crucial situation of quantum physics, where objects and instruments of observation consist of essentially the very same constituents, namely electrons, protons, and neutrons, that superimpose upon measurement into completely entangled states. Thus, Taswell's Buber interpretation gains further support by the methodology of natural science.<sup>8</sup>

## Citation

Brainiacs 2025 Volume 6 Issue 2 Edoc SE696E956

Title: “Commentary on *From the Absolute of Either-Or To the Uncertainty of And*”

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Dates: created 2025-08-11, updated 2025-08-28, published 2025-08-29

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NPDS: [LINKS/Brainiacs/BeimGraben2025CFAEOTUA](https://links.brainiacs.beimgraben2025cfaeotua)

DOI: [10.48085/SE696E956](https://doi.org/10.48085/SE696E956)

## Acknowledgments

I thank Kiersten Xianqi Zhu for valuable suggestions upon an earlier version of this manuscript.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Kant (1783/2004, AA 4:363): "Similarly, the cosmological ideas, through the manifest inadequacy of all possible cognition of nature to satisfy reason in its rightful demands, serve to deter us from naturalism, which would have it that nature is sufficient unto itself." Note that "AA" refers to the German *Akademie Ausgabe*, published by the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Science as the standard reference of Kant's works.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Primas (2009, p. 173): "Physicalism as a doctrine about the empirical world, claiming that 'mental entities, properties, relations and facts are all really physical' [...] 'Physics can, in principle, predict the probability with which a human body will follow any given trajectory.'"

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Kant (2002, AA 4:438): "Now it incontestably follows from this that every rational being, as an end in itself, would have to be able to regard itself at the same time as universally legislative in regard to all laws to which it may be subject, because precisely this suitability of its maxims for the universal legislation designates it as an end in itself, just as the fact that this dignity (prerogative) before all mere beings of nature brings with it to have to take its maxims always from its own point of view but also at the same time from that of every other rational being as a universally legislative being (which is why they are also called 'persons')."

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Bordum (2005, p. 851): "It has often been said that discourse ethics as developed by Jürgen Habermas can be understood as a dialogical continuation of the monological ethics developed by Immanuel Kant [...]. Like Kant's categorical imperative, Habermas' principle of universalization specifies a rule for impartial testing of norms for their moral worthiness."

<sup>5</sup>Kant (1842, p. 258, AA 6:190): "Notwithstanding, *sincerity* is what we are entitled to expect and to exact from all (viz. that whatever is said, be honestly declared); and were there no substratum in our inner man tending to this virtue, whereof the culture only lies neglected, then would the human species become in their own eyes an object of the deepest disgust and disdain."

<sup>6</sup>beim Graben (2016, p. 3): "The most stable *lattice gauge society* would be a network where every individual can reasonably communicate with every other one — which is the 'open society'. Moreover, individuals should be susceptible to local gauge transformations, i.e. they have the freedom to 'gauge' their particular belief states by means of perspective-taking for comparison with those of their communication partners. Therefore, people should be open-minded. Fanaticism, by contrast, breaks the local gauge invariance when 'frozen thoughts' and dogmatism (Arendt 1971) prevent successful and respectful communication between enlightened persons (Stangneth 2016)."

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Havel (1990, p. 56): "Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. The principle must embrace and permeate everything. There are no terms whatsoever on which it can coexist with living within the truth, and therefore everyone who steps out of line *denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety*."

<sup>8</sup>Planck (1932, pp. 109): "The protagonists are mainly divided into two schools. One school is interested in the question chiefly from the viewpoint of the advancement of knowledge, holding that the principle of strict causation is an indispensable postulate in scientific research, even including the sphere of mental activity. As a logical consequence of this attitude, they declare that we cannot except human activity in any shape or form from the universal law of causation. The other school is more concerned with the behavior of human beings and with the sense of human dignity, which feels that it would be an unwarrantable degradation if human beings, including even the mentally and ethically highest specimens of the race, were to be considered as inanimate automata in the hands of an iron law of causation. For this school of thinkers the freedom of the will is the highest attribute of man. Therefore we must hold, they say, that the law of causation is excluded from the higher life of the soul, or at least that it does not apply to the conscious mental acts of the higher specimens of humanity."