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The Human Person as a Rational and Relational Being in the Philosophy of Martin Buber

Emmanuel Edeh

Department of Philosophy, Claretian University of Nigeria

Correspondence: emmanueledeh62@yahoo.comORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5360-5415>**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the human person as a rational and relational being through the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber. Philosophical anthropology has traditionally emphasized rationality, autonomy, freedom and self-consciousness as defining features of human personhood. While these characteristics remain significant, Buber challenges approaches that understand the human person primarily as an isolated and self-sufficient subject. His dialogical philosophy proposes that authentic human existence emerges through encounter and relationship. Central to Buber's thought is the distinction between the I–Thou and I–It relationships. The I–It relation represents an objective and instrumental mode of engaging reality, which is indispensable for practical knowledge and everyday activities. However, the I–Thou relation expresses a deeper form of encounter in which persons meet one another as unique subjects rather than as objects to be used or manipulated. This paper argues that rationality and relationality should not be treated as competing dimensions of human existence. Rather, they are complementary features of authentic personhood. Human rationality enables reflection, judgment, freedom, and responsible action, while relationality provides the interpersonal context within which these capacities acquire ethical and existential meaning. Through a philosophical analysis of Buber's dialogical anthropology, the paper demonstrates that the human person becomes fully human through genuine encounter, mutual recognition, dialogue, and responsibility. The study further highlights the contemporary relevance of Buber's thought for human dignity, interpersonal communication, education, peacebuilding, and social coexistence. It concludes that a comprehensive understanding of the human person requires a synthesis of rational autonomy and relational responsibility.

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1. Introduction

The question of the human person remains a central concern of philosophical anthropology. From classical antiquity to contemporary philosophy, thinkers have sought to determine what fundamentally constitutes human existence and what distinguishes the human being from other forms of life. Plato associates human fulfilment with the proper ordering of the soul and the rule of reason, while Aristotle understands the human being as a rational animal whose flourishing is realized through virtuous activity within the community (Aristotle, 1999). In the modern period, Descartes places the thinking subject at the centre of philosophical inquiry, presenting consciousness and rational reflection as fundamental to human self-understanding (Descartes, 1996). Kant subsequently

connects personhood with rational autonomy and the capacity for moral self-legislation (Kant, 1996). These approaches demonstrate the enduring philosophical importance of rationality, consciousness, freedom, and moral agency in accounts of the human person. Nevertheless, they also raise a fundamental question: whether the person can be adequately understood when the self is conceived primarily as an autonomous subject existing prior to and independently of its relationships with others.

Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy offers an important response by shifting philosophical attention from the isolated subject to the relation between persons. Buber's central insight is that human existence is fundamentally relational. The person does not achieve the fullness of human existence simply through self-consciousness or rational reflection but through genuine encounter with an Other. In *I and Thou*, Buber develops this argument through the distinction between the two basic attitudes expressed in the primary words I-It and I-Thou (Buber, 1970). The I-It relation characterizes the sphere in which persons encounter things, objects, events, and even other persons from the standpoint of experience, observation, analysis, or practical use. The I-Thou relation, by contrast, signifies a direct interpersonal encounter in which the Other is not reduced to an object but is encountered as a presence in his or her own right (Buber, 1970). Buber's argument should therefore not be interpreted as a rejection of rational knowledge or objective engagement. His concern is that the I-It mode becomes inadequate when treated as an exhaustive account of human existence. The human person requires a form of relation in which the Other is encountered as a Thou rather than merely understood as an It.

This distinction has important implications for philosophical anthropology because it challenges accounts of personhood that give priority to isolated individuality. Buber's famous assertion that "in the beginning is relation" argues that relation is not merely something added to an already constituted self but belongs to the very structure of human existence (Buber, 1970). The self is therefore disclosed through its manner of relating to others. In the I-Thou encounter, the person does not approach the Other merely as an object to be classified, measured, manipulated, or used. Instead, the encounter involves a direct relation in which the Other is acknowledged as a Thou (Buber, 1970). Consequently, Buber's anthropology shifts the discussion of personhood from what an individual possesses in isolation to how the individual exists in relation to others.

Asakavičiūtė and Valatka (2020) support this interpretation by reading Buberian dialogue as an existential form of relating. Their analysis connects dialogue with human existence and argues that the movement from monological to dialogical existence is significant for the possibility of authentic human life. They further emphasize that Buberian dialogue cannot be reduced to a fixed communicative procedure because it concerns a lived relation through which human existence is continually formed and transformed (Asakavičiūtė & Valatka, 2020). This interpretation strengthens the present argument that Buber's contribution extends beyond a theory of communication. In his philosophical anthropology, dialogue concerns how persons become present to one another and thereby disclose dimensions of their own humanity. Stopa (2023) similarly emphasizes the relational character of Buber's anthropology by interpreting Buber's thought through the idea of creative dialogue. Her comparative analysis of Martin Luther and Martin Buber shows that Buber's anthropology places relation, language, and dialogue at the centre of an account of human existence. For Stopa (2023), Buber's conception of the person is therefore better understood through relation than through an account of the individual as an isolated substance. This observation is particularly significant for the present study because it reinforces the claim that relationality is not simply one characteristic among many possessed by the human person. Rather, it concerns how personhood itself is disclosed and sustained.

However, notwithstanding the considerable scholarship devoted to Buber's I-Thou/I-It distinction and his understanding of dialogue, an important question remains insufficiently developed: how can Buber's relational conception of personhood be integrated with the traditional philosophical understanding of the human being as a rational subject? Much of the discussion of Buber appropriately emphasizes dialogue, encounter, relation, and interpersonal existence, while classical and modern philosophical anthropology has often placed greater emphasis on rationality, autonomy, consciousness, and moral agency. The present study identifies this tension as a significant point of inquiry. It does not assume that rationality and relationality are competing definitions of the human person. Instead, it argues that they are complementary dimensions of personhood that require philosophical integration.

This study therefore argues that the human person is simultaneously a rational and relational being. Rationality enables the person to deliberate, evaluate, make judgments, and exercise responsible agency, but these capacities do not reach their fullest ethical significance in isolation. They acquire concrete meaning within relationships with other persons. Conversely, relationality should not be understood as requiring the abandonment of rational autonomy. Genuine dialogue presupposes persons capable of responding,

interpreting, judging, and assuming responsibility for their actions. Buber's dialogical philosophy consequently provides a productive framework for bringing these two dimensions together. His philosophy challenges an excessively individualistic understanding of the self without requiring the rejection of reason. Buber's contribution, therefore, broadens philosophical anthropology beyond the image of the self-sufficient individual. The person is not merely a thinking subject who subsequently enters into social relationships; the person is also a being whose identity and ethical significance are disclosed through relation. The I-Thou encounter demonstrates that human existence involves more than knowing and using the world. It involves the capacity to encounter another person without reducing that person to an object of possession or utility (Buber, 1970). In this respect, Buber's dialogical philosophy offers a significant philosophical basis for reconsidering human dignity and responsibility. The human person becomes more fully intelligible when rational agency is situated within the relational context in which persons encounter and respond to one another. Accordingly, this study moves beyond a merely descriptive presentation of Buber's dialogical philosophy and examines its implications for an integrated conception of human personhood. While existing studies illuminate Buber's understanding of dialogue, relational existence, and the I-Thou encounter (Asakavičiūtė & Valatka, 2020), this study specifically investigates how Buber's relational anthropology can be brought into constructive conversation with the philosophical tradition's emphasis on rationality. It argues that neither rationality without relation nor relation without rational agency provides an adequate account of human personhood. A more comprehensive philosophical anthropology must recognize the human person as a being whose rational capacities and relational existence mutually illuminate one another. From this perspective, Buber's dialogical philosophy offers a valuable foundation for understanding human dignity, responsibility, and authentic coexistence.

2. Conceptual Clarification

The Concept of the Human Person

The concept of the human person occupies a central position in philosophical anthropology because every account of ethics, society, freedom, responsibility, and human dignity ultimately depends on understanding who the human being is. The human person cannot be adequately reduced to biological existence, psychological consciousness, or social membership. Personhood involves the capacity for self-awareness, rational reflection, freedom, moral responsibility, and meaningful engagement with others. Contemporary scholarship on Buber's philosophical anthropology particularly stresses that the human being must be understood through relationality rather than through an exclusively objective description of human nature. Biemann (2025), for instance, explains that Buber's philosophical anthropology seeks to understand the "fact of man" through relational existence, self-reflection, and the human striving toward self-realization.

Relationality and Human Personhood

Relationality refers to the fundamental orientation of the human person toward other persons. It implies that human existence is not self-contained but develops through interaction, communication, recognition, and mutual responsibility. For Buber (1970), this is not simply a sociological observation but an ontological claim about what it means to be human. The human person discovers and actualizes the self through encounter with the other. The I-Thou relationship represents the highest expression of this relational dimension. In genuine encounter, the other is not reduced to a collection of characteristics, functions, or uses. Rather, the other is approached as a unique and irreducible presence. Recent scholarship describes Buber's I-Thou encounter as a form of relational openness in which the person turns toward the other with a willingness to establish a living mutual relationship. Thus, rationality and relationality should not be regarded as mutually exclusive characteristics. Rationality explains the person's capacity to understand, deliberate, and choose, while relationality explains the person's capacity to encounter, recognize, and respond to others. In Buber's philosophical anthropology, authentic personhood emerges when these dimensions are integrated within a life of dialogue, responsibility, and mutual recognition.

3. Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue

Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue constitutes the central framework for understanding his conception of the human person. He developed his dialogical philosophy primarily in *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*), originally published in 1923. For Buber, dialogue is not simply the exchange of information or words between two individuals; it represents a fundamental mode of human existence. Recent scholarship continues to interpret Buber's dialogical thought as a philosophical anthropology in which relationship is fundamental to understanding what it means to be human (Horikawa, 2024). For Buber, dialogue is not

merely the exchange of words between two people. It is an existential encounter in which persons become genuinely present to one another. The relationship is therefore not simply between two already-complete individuals; rather, the encounter itself contributes to the realization of personhood. This explains why Buber's philosophy is particularly relevant to the present study. If the human person is rational, the person possesses the capacity for reflection, judgment, and responsible decision-making. Yet if the person is also relational, these capacities cannot be understood adequately outside concrete relationships with others. Buber's philosophy brings these two dimensions together by showing that human existence is fulfilled through meaningful encounter.

The I–Thou Relationship

The I–Thou relationship is the most distinctive concept in Buber's philosophy. It describes an encounter in which one person approaches another as a unique and irreducible being rather than as an object to be analyzed, classified, or used. In this encounter, the person does not stand before the other merely as an observer but enters into a relationship of presence and mutual recognition. Buber's I–Thou therefore represents a direct and genuine encounter between subjects. The other person is not reduced to social status, physical characteristics, economic usefulness, intellectual ability, or any other measurable quality. Rather, the other is encountered as a whole person. This makes the I–Thou relationship particularly important for understanding human dignity and interpersonal responsibility.

Mendes-Flohr (2025) explains that Buber's concept of dialogue goes beyond ordinary communication because dialogue reveals something essential about human existence and our orientation toward one another. The concept of “the between” (*das Zwischen*) is particularly important because genuine intersubjectivity emerges through mutual recognition in the I–Thou relationship. The I–Thou relationship also demonstrates that the human person is fundamentally relational. The self does not achieve its fullest meaning in isolation but through authentic encounter with another. Consequently, Buber's famous insight that the I exists in relation to a Thou challenges individualistic conceptions of personhood.

An important background to Buber's philosophy is his concern with the isolation of the modern individual. Modernity often encouraged the understanding of the human being as an autonomous subject who stands apart from others and understands the world primarily through objective knowledge. Buber considered this inadequate because it fails to capture the depth of human encounter. His philosophy therefore seeks to move beyond a purely monological conception of existence. The human person does not exist simply as an isolated I; the I becomes intelligible through its relation to a Thou or an It.

The I–It Relationship

The second fundamental relational mode in Buber's philosophy is the I–It relationship. Here, the world is approached through experience, observation, analysis, classification, and practical use. Objects, events, and even aspects of human life can be approached in this manner. It is important, however, not to interpret Buber as arguing that the I–It relationship is inherently evil or unnecessary. Human beings need objective knowledge for science, technology, education, economics, medicine, and everyday practical activities. The problem arises when the I–It mode becomes the exclusive way of relating to reality, particularly when persons are treated merely as objects. The I–It relation therefore represents the world of experience and utility, whereas I–Thou represents the world of encounter and relationship. Buber maintains that human existence requires both, but authentic personhood cannot be reduced to the I–It mode. Zank and Braiterman note that Buber regarded the distinction between I–Thou and I–It as an ontological reality rather than merely an abstract conceptual distinction. Thus, a teacher may legitimately regard a student as a learner whose academic performance needs evaluation that is an I–It dimension. Yet if the teacher sees the student only as a grade, statistic, or academic result, the student's personhood is reduced. A genuine I–Thou encounter recognizes the student as a unique person deserving respect, attention, and responsible engagement.

The I–Thou–It Relationship and the Constitution of the Self

A central implication of Buber's dialogical philosophy is that the I cannot be understood independently of the relationship in which it exists. Buber does not describe the I as a fixed and self-sufficient entity that subsequently enters into relationships. Rather, the character of the I changes according to the basic relation in which it participates. As Buber states in *I and Thou*, “there is no I as such,” because the I exists only in relation to a Thou or an It (Buber, 1970). The distinction is therefore not simply between two different ways of treating an external object; it concerns two different modes of human existence. The I of the I–It relation is

the I that experiences, observes, analyses, classifies, and uses. The I of the I–Thou relation is the I that encounters, responds, and participates in a living relation with another. Buber's point is consequently more radical than the claim that people sometimes behave objectively and at other times personally. His argument is that different forms of relating disclose different possibilities of selfhood.

The I–It relation is indispensable to human existence. Human beings must experience the world, acquire knowledge, distinguish things from one another, organize experience, and employ objects for legitimate purposes. Buber therefore does not condemn the It-world or suggest that it should disappear. His concern is that the I–It relation becomes problematic when it is treated as the complete form of human existence. The world of It is characterized by experience and use, whereas the world of Thou is constituted through relation (Buber, 1970). The difficulty arises when the categories appropriate to things are applied without qualification to persons. When another human being is reduced entirely to a function, category, characteristic, or means to an end, the possibility of genuine encounter is diminished. The I–Thou relation interrupts this reduction by enabling the Other to be encountered as a person rather than merely as an object.

The relationship between I, Thou, and It is therefore constitutive of Buber's anthropology. The I does not first exist in isolation and then choose between relating to a Thou or an It. Instead, the two basic relations disclose different forms of the I itself. In the I–It relation, the I stands over against what it experiences and seeks to understand or employ it. In the I–Thou relation, the I enters into a direct relationship with another presence. Buber thus connects the structure of the self with the structure of its relationships. The distinction between I–Thou and I–It is consequently not merely a distinction between interpersonal kindness and impersonal behaviour; it is a distinction between fundamental modes of existence (Buber, 1970).

This interpretation has been developed by later scholars of Buber. Biemann's discussion of Buber's philosophical anthropology places the relational constitution of human existence at the centre of Buber's understanding of the human person (Biemann, 2025). Asakavičiūtė and Valatka (2020) likewise interpret Buberian dialogue as an existential form of relating, emphasizing that dialogue concerns the manner in which human beings exist with and toward one another. Stopa (2023), in her examination of the relational anthropologies of Martin Luther and Martin Buber, also treats relation and dialogue as central to Buber's conception of the human person. These interpretations support the argument that Buber's philosophy should not be confined to a theory of communication. His distinction between I–Thou and I–It concerns how the self becomes situated in the world and encounters other persons.

The recent scholarship collected in *A Companion to Martin Buber* develops this relational interpretation in several directions. Biemann's chapter addresses Buber's philosophical anthropology, while Welz's chapter specifically examines Buber's relational ontology and dialogical listening (Welz, 2025). Welz argues that genuine dialogue involves a form of openness in which preconceived assumptions and instrumental purposes are suspended sufficiently for the other's voice to be genuinely heard (Welz, 2025). Her analysis is particularly relevant to the present discussion because it demonstrates that the I–Thou relationship is not simply a conceptual distinction but a mode of being present to another person. The distinction between I–Thou and I–It therefore has direct implications for the understanding of human personhood: the quality of one's relation to the Other affects the way the self exists and understands itself.

Dialogue and Mutual Presence

Buber's philosophy of dialogue provides a strong foundation for understanding the human person as both rational and relational. Rationality enables the person to deliberate, evaluate, and make responsible judgments, while relationality places these capacities within encounters with other persons. Buber therefore does not reduce the human being to either an isolated rational subject or a social individual whose identity is completely absorbed into the community. His account presents human existence through the interplay of the I–It and I–Thou relations, each of which represents a genuine dimension of human life (Buber, 1970). The I–It relation makes possible experience, knowledge, organization, and practical engagement with the world; the I–Thou relation opens the possibility of direct interpersonal encounter. The problem is not that the I–It relation exists, but that it becomes destructive when it is allowed to replace the possibility of I–Thou encounter altogether. For Buber, therefore, authentic human existence requires the capacity to move beyond an exclusively objectifying orientation toward the world. The person necessarily lives in the It-world and cannot permanently remain in an I–Thou encounter. Buber explicitly recognizes that every Thou eventually becomes an It when the immediate encounter passes (Buber, 1970). This point is important because it prevents his philosophy from being interpreted as a simple rejection of objectivity. The I–Thou and I–It relations are not two worlds between which human beings permanently choose. Rather, they are two

fundamental dimensions of human existence. The ethical and anthropological challenge is to prevent the I–It relation from becoming so dominant that persons are treated merely as objects, functions, or instruments.

Genuine dialogue requires presence because dialogue involves more than the exchange of information. To be present to another person is to attend to the Other as someone who speaks and demands a response. In *I and Thou*, Buber describes the I–Thou encounter as unmediated by conceptual schemes, predetermined purposes, or instrumental calculations (Buber, 1970). This does not mean that a person can literally approach another without any prior knowledge or assumptions. Rather, it indicates an attitude of openness in which one's assumptions do not prevent the Other from appearing as a Thou.

Welz (2025) develops precisely this dimension of Buber's thought in her discussion of "dialogical listening." She explains that Buberian dialogue involves openness to the other and the suspension of prejudices and preconceived notions sufficiently to allow the other's voice to be genuinely heard. Dialogical listening therefore complements speaking: genuine dialogue requires not merely expressing oneself but allowing the Other to address the self. Such listening can also transform the person who listens because openness to another may lead one to revise one's assumptions and acquire a new understanding of both the Other and oneself (Welz, 2025).

Dialogue consequently involves mutual presence rather than unilateral observation. The I does not merely look at the Other from a distance; it turns toward the Other and becomes responsive. The Thou, likewise, is not simply an object waiting to be known but a presence capable of addressing the I. This reciprocal structure distinguishes dialogue from an exclusively subject-object relationship. Buber's anthropology therefore gives interpersonal encounter a significance that cannot be captured by a purely cognitive account of human relations. To encounter another person dialogically is to acknowledge that the Other cannot be exhausted by one's descriptions of that person.

The significance of dialogue for human personhood is consequently both ethical and ontological. Ethically, dialogue requires the recognition of the Other as a person rather than an instrument. Ontologically, it reveals that the self itself is relational because the I becomes a particular kind of I through the relation it establishes with a Thou or an It (Buber, 1970). The I–Thou relation thus contributes to the realization of a form of human existence characterized by presence and responsiveness, while the I–It relation provides the necessary framework for experience and practical engagement with the world. A sound philosophical anthropology must therefore account for both without allowing one to eliminate the other. Buber's contribution can consequently be understood as an attempt to overcome the false choice between isolated individuality and complete social absorption. The human person is neither an entirely self-contained individual nor merely a product of social relationships. The person is a relational self who possesses rational capacities and exercises them within a world shared with others. Buber's distinction between I–Thou and I–It makes this position philosophically intelligible by showing that the self is constituted and disclosed through different modes of relating. The task of authentic human existence is not to abolish the It-world but to ensure that the objectifying mode appropriate to things does not become the only mode through which human beings approach one another (Buber, 1970). This understanding provides an important foundation for the present study's conception of the human person. If rationality describes the person's capacity to think and deliberate, relationality explains the context in which that rational capacity becomes ethically significant. The person who reasons is also a person who encounters others, responds to them, and assumes responsibility within relationships. Buber's dialogical anthropology therefore makes it possible to integrate rationality and relationality without reducing either dimension. The human person is a rational self, but the self becomes fully intelligible through its relations with others.

4. The Human Person as a Rational Being in Buber's Philosophy

The human person has traditionally been understood as a rational being, particularly in the philosophical traditions of Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant. Rationality involves the capacity to think, reflect, deliberate, judge, communicate reasons, and make purposeful choices. Buber does not reject these capacities, but he questions whether rationality alone can adequately define human existence. In *I and Thou*, Buber (1970) places rational activity within a broader conception of the person as a being who exists in relation to others. His philosophy therefore challenges the idea of the isolated thinking subject without denying the importance of thought and reflection.

Rationality is evident in the human capacity for self-reflection. Persons can examine their experiences, evaluate their actions, recognize alternatives, and make conscious decisions. Buber's dialogical anthropology, however, indicates that self-awareness does not establish a completely independent self. The I exists through

its relation to an It or a Thou, and these relations disclose different modes of selfhood (Buber, 1970). The I–It relation involves experience, observation, classification, and practical engagement, all of which require rational capacities. The I–Thou relation, by contrast, involves direct encounter with another person who cannot be reduced to an object of knowledge or use. Rationality is therefore important to human existence, but it becomes inadequate when it treats objective knowledge as the complete measure of human understanding.

Buber's understanding of freedom further demonstrates the place of rationality within his anthropology. Human beings are capable of considering alternatives and consciously responding to situations. Yet, for Buber, freedom is not merely unrestricted individual choice; it becomes meaningful through relation and responsibility. In *Between Man and Man*, Buber (1965) connects genuine dialogue with the person's capacity to turn toward another and respond. The person is therefore not simply a calculating subject but a being capable of recognizing another and assuming responsibility for the response given. Rational judgment consequently contributes to responsible action, while dialogue gives that responsibility an interpersonal context.

Biemann (2025) interprets Buber's philosophical anthropology as emphasizing self-reflection and relational existence, thereby showing that Buber's understanding of the person cannot be reduced either to isolated consciousness or to social existence alone. Similarly, Asakavičiūtė and Valatka (2020) understand Buberian dialogue as an existential mode of relating, while Stopa (2023) emphasizes the relational character of Buber's anthropology. These interpretations support the view that Buber's philosophy integrates rather than simply opposes rationality and relationality. Buber's contribution to the concept of rational personhood therefore lies in placing rationality within a dialogical framework. The human person can think, judge, choose, and reflect, but also encounters and responds to other persons. The I–It relation demonstrates the importance of knowledge and practical reason, while the I–Thou relation reveals that human existence cannot be exhausted by objectifying cognition (Buber, 1970). Rationality is consequently a genuine dimension of personhood, but it acquires its fuller ethical significance within relationships characterized by dialogue and responsibility. Buber's philosophy thus supports an understanding of the human person as both a rational and relational being.

5. The Human Person as a Relational Being

The understanding of the human person as a relational being constitutes one of the central contributions of Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy. Against conceptions that portray the individual as an autonomous and self-sufficient subject, Buber maintains that human existence is fundamentally characterized by encounter. The person does not achieve authentic selfhood in complete isolation but discovers and develops the meaning of the self through relationships with others. Contemporary scholarship continues to regard dialogue as foundational to Buber's understanding of human existence, emphasizing that the I–Thou relationship establishes genuine human connection and mutual recognition (Mendes-Flohr, 2025).

For Buber, relationship is not something added to human existence after the person has already become fully constituted. Rather, relationship is fundamental to the emergence and realization of personhood. The I becomes an I through its relation to a Thou or an It. This means that human identity is partly relational: who a person becomes is influenced by the quality and nature of the person's encounters with others. Buber's famous I–Thou relationship illustrates this position. When one encounters another as Thou, the other is not treated simply as an object possessing certain qualities. Instead, the other is encountered as a whole and unique presence. Mendes-Flohr (2025) describes mutual recognition in the I–Thou relationship as central to Buber's account of genuine intersubjectivity.

Authentic relationship requires genuine encounter. Encounter occurs when persons become present to one another rather than merely observing or using one another. It therefore involves openness, attentiveness, recognition, and reciprocity. Mutual recognition is important because it protects the dignity of the other. A person who recognizes another as Thou does not reduce that individual to social position, economic usefulness, academic achievement, or any other measurable characteristic. The other is respected as a person whose existence has intrinsic significance. This understanding remains relevant in contemporary discussions of relationality. Recent scholarship connecting Buber's philosophy with relational-interpersonal approaches emphasizes mutual recognition, responsiveness, and openness even when relationships experience disagreement or breakdown (Zhang et al., 2026).

Relationality necessarily involves communication, but Buber's understanding of dialogue is deeper than ordinary conversation. Dialogue requires more than speaking; it requires listening and responding. The

person must be willing to hear the other and allow the encounter to challenge preconceived assumptions. Mendes-Flohr (2025) identifies dialogical listening as an important aspect of Buber's relational ontology. Genuine listening means truly attending to another person rather than simply waiting for an opportunity to respond. Jons (2024) similarly develops Buber's thought through the idea of "calling and responding," presenting human interaction as a process in which one attends to the summons of the Other and responds responsibly. Thus, dialogue transforms communication into a moral and existential encounter. To listen genuinely is already to acknowledge the significance of the other.

6. Rationality and Relationality: A Complementary Understanding of the Human Person

The philosophy of Martin Buber provides a significant basis for understanding rationality and relationality as complementary dimensions of human personhood. Rather than treating the human being simply as an autonomous rational subject, Buber's dialogical philosophy emphasizes that human existence is realized through relationships. Recent scholarship particularly identifies Buber's I-Thou relationship as a contribution to philosophical anthropology, emphasizing relationship as fundamental to the constitution of the human person (Horikawa, 2024).

Rationality and relationality are sometimes presented as different or even competing accounts of human existence. Rationality emphasizes the individual's capacity for thought, judgment, autonomy, and deliberate choice, whereas relationality stresses interpersonal connection, dialogue, mutual recognition, and responsibility. Buber's philosophy suggests that these dimensions should not be separated. The human person is capable of rational reflection, but this rationality operates within a world inhabited by other persons. Similarly, relationships require rational capacities such as understanding, communication, interpretation, and responsible decision-making. Consequently, rationality provides important capacities for human agency, while relationality gives those capacities an interpersonal and ethical context.

Buber's critique of the I-It relationship helps to illuminate the danger of rationality detached from genuine human encounter. Through the I-It mode, reality can be classified, measured, analyzed, and utilized. Such rational objectification is necessary for scientific and practical knowledge, but it becomes problematic when human beings are treated exclusively according to the same logic. If a person is regarded only according to usefulness, social status, economic value, academic achievement, or institutional function, the person risks being reduced to an object. Buber's dialogical philosophy challenges this reduction by insisting upon the possibility of encountering the other as Thou. Zank and Braiterman note that Buber's philosophy resists reducing human relationships to merely rational or objectifying forms of interaction.

Although Buber strongly emphasizes relationality, his philosophy should not be interpreted as advocating the abandonment of rational individuality. Authentic relationship does not require the destruction of the self. Rather, the I remains an active participant in the encounter. A healthy relationality therefore requires freedom, reflection, judgment, and responsibility. The individual must be capable of distinguishing authentic dialogue from manipulation, coercion, conformity, or unhealthy dependence. Relationality becomes genuinely human when persons freely recognize one another and assume responsibility for the relationship.

Dialogue provides the practical meeting point between rationality and relationality. Genuine dialogue requires persons to articulate their thoughts clearly, listen to opposing perspectives, interpret meaning, and respond appropriately. At the same time, it requires openness to the other and recognition that the other cannot be reduced to one's preconceived categories. Mendes-Flohr (2025) identifies dialogical listening as a central feature of Buber's relational ontology. Genuine listening requires suspending preconceived assumptions sufficiently to encounter the other with openness and understanding. Thus, dialogue is neither purely rational debate nor mere emotional interaction. It is an encounter in which rational consciousness and relational openness work together.

7. Ethical Implications of Buber's Conception of the Human Person

Martin Buber's conception of the human person as a rational and relational being has significant ethical implications because human existence is realized through meaningful encounter with others. In *I and Thou*, Buber (1970) distinguishes the I-It relation, in which persons or things may be approached through experience and use, from the I-Thou relation, in which another person is encountered in openness, presence and reciprocity. The ethical importance of this distinction lies in Buber's insistence that the other must not be reduced to an object, category or instrument. Human beings become more fully themselves through relationships in which others are recognized as persons. Biemann (2025) similarly argues that Buber's

philosophical anthropology cannot be adequately understood through an exclusively objective description of human nature because human existence is fundamentally relational.

Dialogue therefore constitutes an important foundation of Buber's ethics. Ethical responsibility emerges concretely when one person turns toward another and becomes responsive to the other's presence. Buber (1965) understands genuine dialogue as involving openness and responsiveness rather than merely the exchange of information. Asakavičiūtė and Valatka (2020) likewise emphasize that Buber's dialogical communication involves genuine human encounter and openness to the other. Responsibility, therefore, is not simply obedience to abstract moral rules; it arises from the encounter itself. The person must recognize the situation, deliberate about an appropriate response and freely accept responsibility for his or her actions. Rationality consequently acquires ethical significance when it is exercised within responsible relationships.

Recognition of the other also provides an important basis for human dignity. To encounter another as *Thou* is to acknowledge that the person cannot be exhausted by a social role, economic value, institutional status or personal usefulness. Buber's thought therefore challenges discrimination, exclusion, humiliation and other forms of objectification. His emphasis on encounter also has implications for empathy and care. Genuine dialogue requires attentive openness to the other, and Welz (2025) identifies dialogical listening as an important dimension of Buber's relational ontology. Listening enables persons to understand experiences different from their own and to respond more responsibly, particularly in situations involving marginalized or excluded persons.

Buber's dialogical ethics further has implications for peace and social coexistence. Conflict is intensified when individuals or groups cease to encounter one another as persons and instead regard one another as enemies, stereotypes or threats. Dialogue creates the possibility of listening, recognition and mutual understanding, thereby transforming relationships characterized by objectification and mistrust (Asakavičiūtė & Valatka, 2020). Buber's ethical anthropology thus connects rationality with relational responsibility: reason enables reflection and judgment, while relationship directs these capacities toward recognition, dialogue and responsible action. Authentic personhood is consequently realized not in isolation but through responsible encounters in which the dignity and humanity of the other are affirmed (Buber, 1970).

8. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion examined the human person as a rational and relational being through Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy. The study has established that a satisfactory understanding of human personhood requires more than an emphasis on rationality, autonomy, or individual self-consciousness. Although rationality remains an essential dimension of human existence because it enables reflection, judgment, freedom, and responsible choice, it does not exhaust the meaning of personhood. Human beings also exist fundamentally in relation to others.

Buber's dialogical philosophy provides a significant framework for integrating these two dimensions. His distinction between the I-It and I-Thou relationships demonstrates that human beings can encounter reality either objectively and instrumentally or through genuine personal encounter. The I-It relationship remains necessary for knowledge, science, practical activity, and everyday existence. However, when human beings are approached exclusively as objects, they risk being reduced to functions, categories, numbers, or instruments. The I-Thou relationship offers an alternative in which persons encounter one another through presence, mutual recognition, openness, and responsibility. Recent scholarship continues to interpret this encounter as central to Buber's understanding of authentic human existence.

The ethical implications of this position are considerable. To encounter another person as *Thou* is to recognize that person as possessing intrinsic worth and deserving respect. Such recognition creates the basis for responsibility, dialogue, empathy, peaceful coexistence, and human dignity. In an age increasingly characterized by social fragmentation, technological mediation, polarization, and the objectification of persons, Buber's insistence on genuine encounter remains philosophically significant. From a Buberian perspective, the human person should be understood as a rational, free, relational, dialogical, and responsible being. Personhood is neither purely an achievement of isolated reason nor merely a product of social relationships. It emerges dynamically through the interaction between self and other. The authentic human person is therefore one who can think and reason, but also listen, encounter, recognize, respond, and assume responsibility. Buber's philosophy consequently offers a compelling foundation for a more holistic understanding of human dignity and authentic human existence in contemporary society.

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