

## Dialectical Faith Versus Dialogical Trust

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STANLEY Hopper's "Eclipse of God and Existential Mistrust" is truly breathtaking in its brilliance of analysis and breadth of scope. I shall not undertake to do justice to it as a whole. Nor will I attempt to present a balanced valuation of it, such as is done by Thomas J. J. Altizer. I see my own special contribution, rather, as focussing on his interpretation of the thought of Martin Buber—a task for which Professor Hopper will grant my competence even where he differs with my stance.

Hopper recognizes that Buber would dispute his speaking of the "I-Thou relation" as a metaphor (page 47). Yet Hopper clearly does not understand from what standpoint Buber claims in *I and Thou* that "Thou" is not a metaphor. For Buber "Thou" is not a pronoun that stands for some noun, a linguistic symbol of some transcendent reality. It is the word of address that is spoken from within the relationship and that gives no information whatsoever concerning the nature and essence of one's partner in dialogue. When Hopper suggests that "Thou" is Buber's name for Tillich's God beyond "God" or for the "Transcendent," he reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of Buber's thought that necessarily impairs everything else he has to say on this subject. For Buber, religious symbols are symbols of the I-Thou relationship, not of God as he is in himself. Therefore the "Thou" is not, in fact, separable from the saying of "Thou" within an actual I-Thou relationship. It cannot refer to any designation of God, however transcendent and ineffable. Buber's "eternal Thou" is not a symbol of "God." "God," for Buber, is a symbol of the "eternal Thou," and the eternal Thou is the eternally renewed Thou of the concrete, particular I-Thou relationship.

Hopper seemingly reverses this position and takes seriously—as "another side" of Buber's teaching a "certain literalism" which "invades this sense of the Mystery and coerces it towards the traditional dualistic models."

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His language continues to assert the terminological screen of "transcendence" and the "Absolute," of that which is "over against me," of "holding fast to the living God," of betweenness and encounter and of Pascal's "God of Abraham," phrases held not metaphorically or archetypally, but as he says, in a "real," "existential" and "actual" sense of which language as metaphor would somehow seem to deprive it (page 49).

Actually, Hopper is making the same error as before, namely, imagining that the "Thou" of the I-Thou relationship refers by itself, apart from the relationship, to something outside of it. The only question for Hopper is whether that reference is properly couched in terms of metaphor so that it does not limit the ineffable reality of the Absolute, grounded in the depths of Jung's collective unconscious so that it may have "archetypal" significance without literal meaning, or whether it is taken as a literal, hence dualistic referent. Buber rejects all three of these possibilities in favor of the concreteness of the unique happening and event. If he does indeed espouse "betweenness" and "meeting" ("Encounter" is a translation for *Begegnung* that Buber did not like or use.), that is not because of any "literalness" of reference but the exact and true opposite—a meaning that cannot be divorced from the mutual knowing of dialogue.

While Hopper makes no secret of his preference for Heidegger over Buber, one is nonetheless astonished by the distortion that this preference introduces into his mere reporting of Buber's position. Accepting as his own Heidegger's goal of recovering for Western consciousness a "fundamental ontology," Hopper transmutes Buber's critique of Heidegger's concept of being into a concession. It gives evidence, Hopper claims, that "in the zones of ontological reflection Martin Buber's thinking remains enmeshed in the traditional rhetoric." Against all the evidence of everything that Buber has written, Hopper proceeds to conclude that Buber's "summation symbol, 'God,' often sounds like that which Wallace Stevens referred to as 'that Gold Self aloft, Alone . . . looking down,' and hence untouched by what is most radical in the metaphors of 'death,' 'absence,' 'loss,' 'disappearance,' and even 'eclipse,' which terms . . . prevent our wishful return into that hermetic Eden of intellectualistically oriented thinking which has comprised the tradition of Western metaphysics from Aristotle down . . ." (page 50). I wish Buber were still alive to enjoy, as he truly would have, the

spectacle of his thought being subsumed under the tradition of Western metaphysics!

What Buber actually writes is radically different from what Hopper reads through the lenses of his Heideggerian approach. In the context of a concise but thoroughgoing critique of Heidegger's teaching of the rebirth of divine images through man's concept-clarifying thought, Buber states:

This is not the place for a critical discussion of Heidegger's theory of being. I shall only confess that for me a concept of being that means anything other than the inherent fact of all existing being, namely, that it exists, remains insurmountably empty. That is, unless I have recourse to religion and see in it a philosophical characterization of the Godhead similar to that of some Christian scholastics and mystics who contemplate, or think that they contemplate, the Godhead as it is in itself, thus as prior to creation. It should also be noted, however, that one of them, and the greatest of them all, Meister Eckhart, follows in Plato's footsteps by placing above the *esse est Deus*, as the higher truth, the sentence, "*Est enim (Deus) super esse et ens.*" Compare this with Heidegger's statement (*Platons Lehre*, 76): "'Being'—that is not God and it is not a ground of the world. Being is more than all that exists and is, nonetheless, nearer than any existing thing, be it . . . an angel or God. Being is the nearest thing." If by the last sentence, however, something other is meant than that I myself am, and not indeed as the subject of a *cogito*, but as my total person, then the concept of being loses for me the character of conceivability that obviously it eminently possesses for Heidegger.<sup>1</sup>

So also with Jung. Hopper's failure to notice Buber's critique of the psychologizing of reality makes him so misunderstand Buber's thesis that Jung has contributed to the "eclipse of God" as to convert this into the judgment that Jung fits into the "God is dead" category. Neither did Buber ever suggest, as Hopper claims, that the unconscious is "an irrational function of my rational ego." Nor does Buber's carefully documented critique of Jung's relegating transcendence

<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God. Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), "Religion and Modern Thinking," trans. by Maurice Friedman, p. 73 f.

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to a symbol of the psychologically immanent justify Hopper's characterization of Buber's aim as that of preserving the I-Thou relationship "in its externality," whatever that could possibly mean. What Buber has said is that those who confine God to the transcendent make him less than he is, but those who reduce him to the immanent mean something other than God. If this latter contributes, in Buber's opinion, to the "eclipse of God," it is not because he is attached to any dualistic transcendence, but because he is suspicious of a God reached by the removal of the otherness and uniqueness met in the "lived concrete."

From misunderstanding and misinterpretation Hopper proceeds to amateur psychoanalysis: "Buber's defensiveness arises from the sense of threat that he feels at the point where Jung's theory of the Unconscious subverts the classical model of a person, and thus, by extension threatens the adequacy of the 'I-Thou relation' model" (page 50). Although Hopper later discusses Buber's concept of "unmasking" from "Hope for This Hour" (*Pointing the Way*), he misses Buber's central point, namely, that the game of unmasking the motives of others quickly becomes mutual and leads to an existential mistrust that makes it impossible to attend to *what* the other says because one is so busy figuring out *why* he says it! Since Buber has made his critique of both Heidegger and Jung in great detail, with careful documentation, and with a full philosophical explanation of its significance, one might more easily ask what makes Hopper so defensive about Buber's criticism of his two intellectual heroes that he cannot grasp its plain intention. No one who has read *I and Thou* with any openness, much less Buber's other works, could imagine that Buber is concerned with "the primacy of the rationalist ego," or "the person . . . deprived of its depth dimension," or "a mind in the body over against God and the world," or a "cerebral and assertive" dialogue as opposed to one that is "watchful and attentive" of "the creative *élan* that comes out of silence" (page 50). Such gross misreading betrays a dogmatism based on a very un-Zen-like dualism between "good" nondualistic terms and "bad" classical, dualistic, absolutistic, or intellectualist terms. From these dichotomies arises Hopper's evident inability to imagine that paradoxical combination of transcendence and immanence that lies at the heart of Buber's philosophy and, in different form, of Zen Buddhism.

Hopper mistrusts Buber's view of mistrust as not sufficiently radical. But when he deals with that unmasking of which Buber speaks in connection with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, he entirely misses the distortion that existential

mistrust inevitably brings in its wake—the belief that one has ideas and ideals while the other has only rationalizations and ideologies, to be seen through and reinterpreted but never to be taken as a valid expression of a really other point of view. On the contrary, Hopper sees “unmasking” only as a positive phenomenon which strips off pretensions and presumptions and confronts “us with the primary mysteries of being and self-identity,” releasing us “into a fresh understanding of the nature and ‘meaning’ of things.”

Hopper sees his thought as new and more radical than Buber’s, whereas I see Hopper’s position as an up-to-date essentialism of a traditional Western or Hindu metaphysical nature, without a trace of existential anguish. This may account in part for his total failure to grasp the fundamental issues of ontology between Heidegger and Buber. He equates “Buber’s existential relations” with Heidegger’s “entities” as elements for which we lack the grammar that would enable us to grasp them in their Being (page 54). He thus reduces Buber’s sphere of the between to the “ontic,” the merely existential, and accords to Heidegger’s hypostasized non-relational Being the sole conceivable ontological reality. But Buber has said repeatedly and in all clarity that to him it is the “between” itself that is the “ontological,” and he has denied the possibility of reaching any “Being” through plumbing the depths of the self or even as the ground of self and world.

When Hopper deals with Buber’s interpretation of the Heraclitean “logos” in “What Is Common to All” (*The Knowledge of Man*), he again ignores the real issue between Buber and Heidegger—whether “man” may bring about the “unconcealment of Being” directly or only through the “between,” i.e., in that common “speech-with-meaning” (*logos*) through which he builds a common cosmos. Instead Hopper claims that Buber’s use of the term *logos* “tends to function rationalistically, losing its ratios of physical depth and losing its thrust as one metaphor in a cluster of vitalistic metaphors which, taken together, convey something of Heraclitus’ vision of things.” But Buber *has* used Heraclitus’ *logos* in the context of an interpretation of his “vitalistic metaphors and figurations of the unity of opposites.” The very term “unity of opposites” figures centrally in Buber’s own thought from his 1901 essay on Jacob Boehme, his 1904 dissertation on Nicolas of Cusa, his 1911 essay on “The Teaching of the Tao,” his 1913 chapter on “Polarity” in *Daniel* to and through the whole of his mature thought. “The unity of the contraries is the mystery at the innermost core of the dialogue,”

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Buber himself wrote. Not only has Hopper merely put Heidegger forward in place of Buber without facing the issue between them, he has missed the heart of Buber's philosophy—the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Hopper finds the figural terms of Buber's metaphor of "eclipse" "not radical enough to embrace the paradoxical sense of desolation and release which we today experience." But has Hopper really experienced the desolation that arises, not out of some Socratic, Kierkegaardian, or Nietzschean dialectic, but out of the "hiding of God" in the time of Auschwitz? Does he understand Buber's refusal in the name of "the Job of Auschwitz" to put up with early being, his insistence on struggling for its redemption, and his readiness to meet, in whatever form he comes, "our cruel and kind Lord who is again and still a hiding one"? Has Hopper even asked himself what commentary Heidegger's Naziism throws on his attempt to unconceal Being minus genuine dialogue with real otherness? Hopper locates "the *place* where the seeming contradictions of theophany and reversal are occurring" as "contemporary literature" which "*embodies* the enigma that it seeks to solve." In so doing he is in danger of elevating literature to a sphere above life. If there is a "new myth that is forming at the heart of the world," then we cannot look for its first signs in literature and art alone, as Hopper suggests, but in the full historical reality, including that Dialogue with the Absurd (to use my own terminology) that is the only stance that does not evade those historical contradictions that we cannot make meaningful either within a rational world-view or a mystic insight into the heart of things.

When Hopper himself comes to discussing the "death of God," we are confirmed in what we already suspected: the provincial framework of his system of denials. He equates "God's failure" with that "recession of Christendom's symbolic system, along with the classical world-view," which "renders everything uncertain." No wonder that he cannot understand the non-Christian and non-Greek nature of Buber's thought. What Hopper is really talking about is a chapter in the intellectual history of the Western world rather than those holocausts and abysses of modern history that have put man himself in question.

The goal of Hopper's paper, as he states it, is "to accomplish the negative and to focus our uncertainty infinitely in order that the Deity, the positive, that which is already given, might be glimpsed through his creative Presence." This Kierkegaardian type of dialectic is full of intellectual paradoxes, but it misses the genuinely existential and historical ones. Put in another way, it is the difference

between "dialectic" and "dialogue." Dialectic, whether it is seen as individual reasoning or the sweep of world-historical consciousness à la Hegel, is essentially monological. In its perspective existential mistrust and the failure of dialogue does not really threaten contact with reality but in the end serves to promote it. Hence even in its progression of opposites and its radical negations and affirmations, it is still an essentialist approach. For the life of dialogue, in contrast, the existential mistrust that results from and exacerbates the failure of dialogue cannot be overcome intellectually or dialectically but only through an event of new meeting—through a renewal of trust that comes, if at all, only out of an honest facing of existential contradictions. Nothing expresses so clearly this radical contrast between Hopper's essentially optimistic and essentialist dialectic and Buber's "eclipse of God" as the statement that Martin Buber wrote on my book *Problematic Rebel*:

The theme is the revolt of man against an existence emptied of meaning, the existence after the so-called "death of God." This emptying of meaning is not to be overcome through the illusionary program of a free "creation of values," as we know it in Nietzsche and Satre. One must withstand this meaninglessness, must suffer it to the end, must do battle with it undauntedly, until out of the contradiction experienced in conflict and suffering, meaning shines forth anew.<sup>2</sup>

In his last explicit statement on the "eclipse of God," Buber pointed out that its divine side is what the Hebrew Bible speaks of as "the hiding of God." This is an event *between* God and man rather than something that in any way breaks off the divine revelation, but it is a real event that no dialectic can conjure away:

One may also call what is meant here a silence of God's or rather, since I cannot conceive of any interruption of the divine revelation, a condition that works on us as a silence of God. One is right to see here a "most troubling question." These last years in a great searching and questioning, seized ever anew by the shudder of the now, I have arrived

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Friedman, *Problematic Rebel: Melville, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus*, 2nd revised & radically reorganized edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books (paperback), 1970).

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no further than that I now distinguish a revelation through the hiding of the face, a speaking through the silence. The eclipse of God can be seen with one's eyes, it will be seen.

He, however, who today knows nothing other to say than, "See there, it grows lighter!" he leads into error.<sup>3</sup>

Dialectic, for all its dynamism, is still bound to the subject-object way of knowing—the very dimension that Hopper imagines he has transcended. After his progress through Heidegger, Jung, Wallace Stevens, Zen, and so much else, Hopper ends with Rilke, or more exactly with Rilke interpreted in a subjective-objective duality that Rilke himself overcame in his *Duino Elegies*:

Rilke proposed that perhaps we have made a mistake in trying to look *at* God, thus making an object of him, standing over against us; perhaps we ought, as he said, to see as God sees—in which case, God would be behind us, so to speak, like the enigma *a priori*, and we would be looking in the same direction as he is looking, seeing as he sees, participating, that is, in his creative life, even as the poet today strives to be one with his poem, participating thereby in the ontology of utterance, provided of course that the utterance comes from a psychical source deeper than the cavern beneath his inmost cave. (p. 69)

In *The Knowledge of Man*, both in "What Is Common to All" and in "The Word That Is Spoken," Buber put forward an "ontology of utterance" based squarely on the reality of the life *between* man and man. But Hopper totally misses this, even as a theoretical possibility, just as he misses Buber's distinction between existence as *Gegenüber* or *Gegenstand* ("vis-à-vis" or "object") when he speaks of God as "an object . . . standing over against us." Hopper only knows God as object or as subject.

The third alternative, of a God who is met in the "between," i.e. in "the meeting with the nameless Meeter," but not in any knowledge of some "object" that is met, is simply left out. When Hopper wants to go beyond the merely

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Arthur Schilpp and Maurice Friedman, editors, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* volume of *The Library of Living Philosophers* (LaSalle, Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1967), Martin Buber, "Replies to My Critics," trans. by Maurice Friedman, p. 716.



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personal, he falls into that archetypal psychologizing of God and existence evident in his referring the "ontology of utterance" to a "psychological source" more profound than the individual himself. What troubles me most of all in Hopper's stance is not the religious dimension *per se* but the human. In turning away from the meeting with what transcends the self to the Self alone, he does not do justice to the lived reality of existence itself, which does not take place within the psyche, no matter how profoundly conceived. Against Hopper I repeat what I wrote at the end of my Introductory Essay to *The Knowledge of Man*: "Martin Buber's philosophical anthropology refers us with a profundity unequalled in our time to man's still unfathomed relation to being and meaning."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, edited with an Introductory Essay (Chapter I) by Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), p. 58.