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Martin Buber's Theory of Knowledge and its Feminist Elements Cornelia Muth, Germany

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ABSTRACT

This contribution relates my feminist standpoint to Karen Barad's agential realism. She calls her theory of knowledge an "ethico-onto-epistemology" as she states an "interconnectedness of ethics, ontology and epistemology" (Barad 2014, 100–101). Using this approach, she wants to overcome the history of excluding others by western sciences which is Buber's perception, too: For him, dialogue is an ethical performance which is indivisible from knowledge, science, religion, or any other areas of existence. Buber's thinking, according to Hans Kohn, elucidates a dialogical life that is ontological in nature and not just defined by a logical saying that brings order to life and does not address the errors of thinking in non-relational ways.

KEYWORDS

Dialogue; Buber; Barad;
Epistemology

In what follows, I relate my feminist standpoint to Karen Barad's "agential realism." She calls her theory of knowledge an "ethico-onto-epistemology" as she states an "interconnectedness of ethics, ontology and epistemology" (Barad 2014, 100–101). Using this approach, she wants to overcome the history of excluding others by western sciences, which is also Buber's perception. For Buber, dialogue is an ethical performance that is indivisible from knowledge, science, religion, or any other areas of existence. Buber's thinking, according to his biographer Hans Kohn, elucidates a dialogical life that is ontological and not just defined by logical sayings that bring order to life and do not address the errors of thinking in non-relational ways

Furthermore, both thinkers are aware of the power of binary categories with which the "I" can discriminate or overlook the "Thou" in seeing the other as an object. This is what Buber calls the monological attitude, the "I-It," for example, when the scientist only observes other human beings but does not consider that there is an alternative way of encountering another being as a person. What this means for Buber is that the I of the scientist stands in relation and says you: "When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his [or her] object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds" (Buber 1950, 4). As Buber points out, the word for the object is not the object itself. Apart from that he differentiates the subject of the I-Thou from the subject of the I-It. The I of the I-Thou is always in a moving process or rather a becoming otherness, a non-determinable Thou. In comparison to Barad, she also declares that subject and object are not fixed, neither the I nor the other are entities. These insights refer to her reading of Bohr's quantum physics that "things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, and words do not have inherently meanings" (Webb, 6). For Buber every human is a unique otherness; Barad considers that there are unlimited differences among creatures. Besides, both philosophers include animals within their concepts.

The I-Thou can be seen as what Barad describes as "diffraction": "Diffraction is a matter of differential entanglements, where entanglement is not the intertwining of separate entities, but the very inseparability." and "What is on the 'other side' of the cut is not separate from us" (Barad 2014, 221–241, 234). She calls this kind of human performance "intra-action," which is very similar to what Buber considers as the in-between (Barad 2013, 27–68). Barad gives the following description:

The notion of intra-action is a key element of my agential realist framework. The neologism "intra-action" signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction" which assumes

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that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the “distinct” agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements.* (Webb 2021, 10; italics in original)

Buber speaks about connectedness when he describes the space between I and Thou. He calls it the in-between or the intermediate: “Thus all reality is fulfilled connectedness; nothing individual is real in itself, everything individual is only a precondition” (Buber 1962c, 28).

But how does the believing philosopher understand the intermediate? What does he want to show us when he says that he has no philosophical system, but wants to enter conversation with us? Buber feels compelled—he himself speaks of dictation—to point to a “neglected, obscured primordial reality” (Buber 1962d, 1111–1122). This reality is the “human double relation to being” (Buber 1962d 1111–1122). However, what is often overlooked in the intellectual penetration of this dialogical principle—and Buber already criticizes this in his philosophical account about five years before his death in 1965—is the “elementary *prerequisite of all human relationships*”: primal distance (Buber 1962d 1114; italics in the original). This term is meant to describe an attitude, often confused with a reflexive attitude, that we all know when our environment is distant or “moved away” from us, when we perceive it as no longer belonging to us, as it were. Buber calls such a mode of perception primal distance. It is important not to understand it as a “reflexive > position of a spectator<” (Buber 1962d 1115), but as an element of human being. Only with and due to primordial distancing can we engage in a dialogue with our environment and thus encounter primordial reality. This primal reality is then the in-between, which “is no longer founded in the sphere of subjectivity, but in that between beings” (Buber 1963, 30). It reveals itself when I and you, we, become mutually aware of each other and encounter each other sincerely. By this Buber means an actual event in which unique I's “realize” themselves uniquely and let go of the “orienting” attitude, for example, images about the other. In this respect, the orienting act is the primordial distancing or I-It, when the I makes the You an object of its own categorizations. I-Thou, in turn, is an act that is realized only in the present.

As both sides move towards each other, the in-between as primordial ground recedes into the background and primordial reality shows itself in the foreground for the human being: “I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become I, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting” (Buber 1950 11). The in-between is thus a condition for the realization of my being-with. In Buber's words, “Yes, this means realizing relating the experience to nothing but itself. And here is the place where the power of the human spirit awakens and gathers and works creatively. For where orientation rules, that clever economy is at home whose cleverness stinks to high heaven because it only saves and does not renew” (1962c, 25).

Thus, the in-between as (primordial) reality is not “simply the totality of what is perceived and what is perceptually possible” (Buber 1962c, 24). Rather, the in-between, dialogically speaking, is an intangible realization space that is directly connected to being. Orienting could be the between in the dissecting or perceiving. Both perspectives together then result in people's double relationship to life: human beings need both sides to live; both are necessary for life. I-Thou and I-It belong together like life and death. Even though Buber gives more attention to the dialogue, he does not devalue the I-It. He does, however, point out that genuine renewal for human beings and the community can only flourish from the in-between for “He or she who lives his or her life in true, realizing knowledge must eternally begin anew, eternally dare everything anew; and so, his or her truth is not a having, but a becoming” (Buber 1962c, 39). Becoming is development without concept and yet it is not directionless since it relates to immediate contact and exclusive events. On the other hand, orientation towards a “solid general truth” and security for once and for all are elements of a preservation attitude, which in their exclusivity condition rigidity and authoritarian subjugations. But concerning directional events, what does Buber mean when he speaks of the in-between as development and becoming?

Buber shows three paths with Daniel: For Daniel, there is the path of settlement, of embrace, and of transformation. Settlement here means fighting fairly with a view to reaching an honest agreement. Embrace is sincere love for my fellow human beings. Transformation is true realization. In all variations, the path runs through conscious duality: the distancing attitude is realized in devotion to the thing and the person. Stress, loss of orientation and fear are all part of the process. Only those who dare to choose between “freedom and bondage” and “permanence and transformation” open the door to the in-between.

Those who pass through, according to Daniel, are those who, despite their conditionality, that I have absolutely decided to let them pass through and enter the in-between. What we realize in the process is “written indelibly in the heart of the world” (Buber 1962b, 76).

But where the foot of realization stands, there the power is drawn from the depths and brought together and moved to action and renewed at work. As the ballplayer . . . is called by the task to draw from his body all force and to pour it into action, so does the experience in the person who is ready to realize it. (Buber 1962c, 26)

Here it is to be noted that the in-between is more than we can mentally determine. With Buber, we can now also say that it is not a mystical phenomenon. For it is not a matter of the I and the Thou dissolving into a unity, but of the I and Thou transcending each other.

We “transcend” our categories and projections by letting go of them and at the same time acknowledging that even our sensual experiences only give limited insights into the respective other.

For Buber, the “in-between or being-in-between” is “that kind of being” or “the way of being that stands between the persons communicating with each other, which we are unable to assign to either the psyche or the physis. . . Leaping fire is the right image for the dynamic between the persons in the We” (Buber 1962c, 68).

And as Buber further elaborates this point,

The concept of the in-between is gained by no longer locating a relationship between human persons, as one is accustomed to doing, either in the inwardness of the individuals or in a general world that encompasses and determines them, but in fact between them. The in-between is not an auxiliary construction, but the real place and bearer of interpersonal events; it has not received specific attention because, unlike the individual soul and the environment, it has no simple continuity, but is constituted anew in each case in accordance with human encounters; therefore, by its very nature, what belongs to it has been connected to the continuous elements, soul and world. (Buber 1962e 405)

He makes it clear that it is not only the spoken word that is important, but that it “rather takes place in the oscillating sphere between the persons, the sphere which I call the in-between and which we can never allow to merge into the two participants. . . The word that is spoken is uttered here and heard there, but its being spoken has the in-between as its place” (Buber 1962c, 10). Nevertheless, Barad and Buber agree that the subject takes responsibility of her or his action and towards the world.

Therefore, for Barad, scientists, researchers, or philosophers always live an engagement with the world. For Buber the philosopher is always part of the crisis or situation of the world he or she describes:

The philosophical cognition of man is by nature a self-contemplation of man, and man can only contemplate himself in such a way that the cognizing person . . . first contemplates himself as a person. . . He can only recognize the wholeness of the person and through it the wholeness of man if he does not leave his subjectivity outside and does not remain an untouched observer. (Buber 1962a,e, 316)

In Barad’s words, “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (Webb 2021, 4).

So again, both thinkers agree that researchers are part of the reality they analyze, and that reality is not perceived by science as the pure intellect fails to meet the world nor is life as the experience of truth is not the truth of the experience. This brings Barad to her conclusion of the mentioned ethico-onto-epistemology: The “I” of a scientist is always in the modus to respond and therefore must overtake responsibility of his or her practices and of her or his used meaning: “Ethics is not about the right response to the other but responsible and accountability in lively relationships. ‘We’ are a part of these relationships; we do not stand apart” (Barad 2014, 221). By using the modus “diffraction,” we think with and through differences because “I am neither in the ideas nor are they in me. These ideas are not in my head, rather they are specific ongoing reconfiguring of the world in its interactive intra-activity. These ideas are not outside or inside me; they are threaded through ‘me’ and ‘me’ through them, or rather we are threaded through one another” (Juelstejaer and Schwennesen 2012, 23).

Using Buber’s, Barad’s, and my own feminist thinking (Muth 2017, 111–130), my last feminist research project on students’ gender (Muth 2009, 201–213) included written testimonies that contained some of the following representative statements (Dahlke 2023):¹

¹This research was conducted at my Department of Social Work at the University of Sciences and Arts at Bielefeld University. See Appendix.

What I become aware of in dialogue in an intense form is being seen without expecting it. I become aware of myself in the intersubjective with qserve me in understanding personal and social phenomena. At the same time, I have a need to attach less importance to them to be able to detach myself from them. I notice that I have insufficient language to express this. In my thesis I use the term “gender” instead of “gender constructions.” For me, the former term encompasses both biological and social gender and both are never clearly fixed in it for me. Perhaps this is not clear to others in my use of the term, but rather with “gender.” I choose to use both. . . Today, I have a new awareness of accepting and rejecting gender categories and can deal with them more decisively.” (Harstick 2023, 71–102)

The self-awareness of gender constructions and the awareness of related structural phenomena are an essential part of my self-image, which contributes to the experience of plurality. I cannot position myself outside the binary and dualistic system that prevails in society. I am part of it. But I can try to transform my thinking shaped by it. I can listen to myself to find out when voices are raised within me that express discomfort. I can perceive voices that tell me about violations of my boundaries and take them seriously. And likewise, I can also lend my ear to those who have no voice or whose voice is quiet, to let myself be irritated instead of just settling within the structures. Admittedly, this challenges me when the influences and perspectives are very different from mine. But I become aware that I can determine the extent to which it is possible for me to take in these other voices. In doing so, I make myself vulnerable. But this vulnerability is part of life. Repressing what I have experienced, not noticing the hurts, leads conversely to my repressing parts of myself. Acting hurtfully towards myself. And I no longer open to others out of fear of further hurt.

This protection is certainly necessary at times, but it also leads to me not being able to have other experiences through which I can find a way to deal with hurts. But I see this as a necessity because hurts are also part of the human condition.” (Löwe 2023, 103–127)

To summarize Buber’s and Barad’s (2018) thoughts and the new insights of our research project, I come back again to the conclusion of what Schilpp and Friedman stated about the epistemology of the philosophy of dialogue. In their opinion, Buber succeeds in “exploding the categories that have frozen to infertility” (Schlipp 1963, 1–9). Both Buber and Barad are thinkers aware of the open space of I and Thou where one can find out who you realize to be by using I-It categories as fixed gender-constructions.

For me, feminist thought is to remind us of those presented words that are only fixed in a dialogical reality that is open and becoming.

Notes on contributor

Cornelia Muth is a phenomenologist carrying out phenomenological research in theory and practice within the fields of adult education, sports, politics, business, and social work. She holds a tenure chair for in the anthropology of education at the University of Applied Sciences in Bielefeld, Germany in the Department of Social Sciences. She has created her own methodology concerning dialogical-phenomenological research.

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Appendix

Rules for intersubjective dialogue:

1. A group meets regularly, and individuals attend of their own free will.
2. There are no pre-decided topics.
3. The aim is to find a way of thinking together.
4. Participation in this process happens seriously and without pressure.
5. To arrive at a process of common thinking, attempts at convincing and persuading the other(s) are given up.
6. Everybody can say what they feel about how the process affects them. Communication is not about changing someone.
7. The main concern is letting the other(s) go.
8. One is guided by the paradox that there is no absolute truth, however universally believed, but that every attitude is relative.
9. Everyone agrees to the above rules for the time being, and when someone cannot stay with them, they will be changed. The task is to read and to understand these rules, and to ask how everybody else understands them. Thus, the participants make them their own and sense any obstacles to dialogue.
(Cornelia Muth 2009)