

*“To share some of the content of my mind with another within intimacy is surely a defining human experience.”*

### Y is for You and I: the philosophy of Martin Buber

Logically I have no way of proving that the universe contains any mind other than my own: I have no access to your mind. Each of us is in solitary confinement within our own consciousness. When I look at you I can only see and hear a body moving and sounding in a certain way. But, if we are functioning in a normal human way, we will experience the other as a person — a person like us — not just as a body with actions and speech. We interpret our perception via the concept of other persons. I cannot directly perceive the other's consciousness and I cannot deduce it. I can only infer it, which as science shows us, is generally a most unreliable epistemological move.

But it would be silly not to believe that everyone else did not have a mind. We can't share our consciousness itself, but to be able indirectly to share some of the content of our own consciousness with another is an essential part of our humanity, even though most human communication is only marginally more effective than semaphore. Pascal recognised the profound difference between a person and an object. He said:

*‘Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature; but he is a thinking reed ... But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies ... the universe knows nothing of this.’* (Pascal B. *Pensées, éditions de 1670*, 347.)

Martin Buber (1878–1965) is remembered for his reflective and enigmatic book *I and Thou*. It is a cross between Kierkegaard and Sartre, but shorter. Buber asserts that:

*‘I become through my relation to the Thou ... All real living is meeting. [...] We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe.’*

To share some of the content of my mind with another within intimacy is surely a defining human experience. Kant was very clear about our duty to respect the personhood of others:

*‘Always respect humanity, whether in others or in yourself, ... by treating humanity always as an end and never merely as a means ...’*

[Kant I. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. 4: 421, 1785.]

Buber goes further. He sees our relations with others not only as an issue of our duty to respect persons, but as an issue of our own transformation as we recognise the humanity in the other. In relating to others we ourselves are made truly human. The ‘I’ of ‘I — Thou’ is different from the ‘I’ of ‘I — It’. *‘A person makes his appearance by entering into relation with other persons.’*

To treat another as merely a means to an end is to treat them as an It, not a Thou. In doing so we wrong not only them but ourselves. So the most profound and authentic human experience, encountering the other as a person and thereby transforming oneself, is based not on science but on a commitment to the humanity that one sees in the other, thus transforming oneself. As doctors let's stick up for humanity — for all our sakes.

#### CPD further study and reflective notes

These notes will help you to read and reflect further on any of the brief articles in this series. If this learning relates to your professional development then you should put it in your annual PDP and claim self-certified CPD points within the RCGP guidelines set out at <http://bit.ly/UT5Z3V>.

If your reading and reflection is occasional and opportunistic, claims in this one area should not exceed 10 CPD credits per year. However, if you decide to use this material to develop your understanding of medical philosophy and ethics as a significant part of a PDP, say over 2 years, then a larger number of credits can be claimed so long as there is evidence of balance over a 5-year cycle. These credits should demonstrate the impact of your reflection on your practice (for example, by way of case studies or other evidence), and must be validated by your appraiser.

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DOI: 10.3399/bjgp15X683221

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#### Box 1. Reflective notes

- Industrialised medicine tends to turn persons into objects. How can we counter this?
- Can we move beyond duties to our patients to encounters with our patients?

#### Box 2. Further reading

**Primary source:** First published in Germany 1923. Buber M. *I and Thou*. Smith RG, trans. New York, NY: Scribner, 1937, 2000.

**Further study:** Nagel T. *Mind and Cosmos: why the materialist neo-darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.