Original Papers

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Subject-subject relationship as a significant aspect of personal development in adulthood

The issue of the subject-subject relationship, also known as the relationship of encounter or the I-Thou relationship, which has a strong presence in the humanities and Christian mysticism, is rarely addressed by psychology. This type of relationship goes beyond the psychosocial approach to personal maturity and human development at the so-called higher stages, thus falling outside the predominant lines of psychological inquiry. Consequently, this paper concerns issues that are not popular in psychology, albeit they are close to the problem of the person's development as a subject. Drawing inspiration from cultural anthropology and intersubjective philosophy – especially Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue and Gabriel Marcel's concrete philosophy – the author presents from a psychological stance the phenomenon of the subject-subject relationship and its prerequisite conditions. Adopting the perspective of personalistic psychology in its existentialist-phenomenological strands, the author indicates the place of this relationship in human personal development and highlights its crucial significance to this process.

Keywords: subject-subject relation, encounter I – Thou, intersubjectivity, personal development, adult development

To live in the full sense of the word
is not to exist or subsist merely
but to make oneself over, to give oneself

Gabriel Marcel

Introduction

Gabriel Marcel (1987) wrote in his *Metaphysical Journal* that if I approach someone with the intention of asking him a question wondering whether he will be able to answer, whether he has the wherewithal for informing me, then he will not be *Thou* for me, but *He*, a collection of data. But this is one of our most frequent and natural behaviors. Our world is a world of precisely this kind of relationship – a subject-object one. The other person is somebody who can provide information or other desirable goods, somebody with whom we may have certain dealings. The digital culture and participation in virtual reality intensifies this process, whereby the subject-subject relationship is declining in favor of the subject-object one – we are witnessing the demise of *Thou* in favor of *It*. As Czesław

Walesa (2011) observes, the phenomena of virtual reality, despite developing in the person the ability to function in a world of possibilities, impair his contact with reality and shape negative experiences and behaviors, including an instrumental approach to other people and egoism.

The world of personal relationships between people, of encounter with the human being as a person, is crumbling in front of our eyes. On the other hand, from an existential perspective, an individual's development towards personal maturity and its higher stages – if it does occur – must necessarily go through deep transformations of interpersonal relationships towards their aspect of subjectness. According to the approach of personalistic psychology, human development in the latter part of one's life mostly depends on quantitative changes in terms of relationships he establishes with other people and with the world. One could even argue that this development essentially boils down to the deepening of these relationships and the enhancement of their subjectness. The issue of the *subject-subject relationship* – also known as the *relationship of encounter* or the *I-Thou relationship* with regard to the surrounding reality and especially to other people – has a substantial presence in the fields of philosophy, philosophical and

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cultural anthropology, religious studies, theology, and Christian mysticism. The nature of this relationship remains closely connected to an understanding of the human being as a *person* and to acknowledging his developmental possibilities at the subject and spiritual levels.

In present-day psychology, there are two major approaches to the notion of person. In nomothetic research into the specific properties of human mind, it is treated as a theoretical, or explanatory, category. The *person* is a term referring to a hypothetical factor commanding the specific forms of functioning of a human being as an abstract representative of the species. On the other hand, in idiographic research, the notion of person is an observational, descriptive, and interpretive category. It refers to the manner of being-in-the-world of a particular individual. In this case, the metatheoretical assumptions of psychologists are convergent with the general philosophical tenets in this respect (Straś-Romanowska, 2002). Let us follow this path.

Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (1989) assumes that the person, or the subject, is man as a conscious being, experiencing his own existence, and adopting certain positions with regard to the world and to himself in the world. Thus, the personalistic approach proposes that the essence of personal existence is related to the process of consciously, reasonably, and reflectively adopting certain positions on reality and to intentional search for the meaning of events at various, not only rational and material, levels. The personal existence of an individual determines his ability to self-transcend for the sake of moral and religious values (Frankl, 1984).

Any psychological reflection on the subject-subject relationship as a personal relationship requires making an assumption about the potentially possible *personal development* of the human being, which is in fact what humanistic psychology in its personalistic-existential strand assumes. It is in this context that psychology explores the issue of the subject-subject relationship as being potentially possible to arise in the process of personal development. This development is not synonymous with the development of personality or developing towards subjectness, although it is certainly closely related to those processes.

In Polish academic psychology, the issue of the person's developing towards subjectness has been analyzed primarily by Maria Jarymowicz (2008). In her concept of subjectness, she combines an experimental and an anthropological perspective, which is quite rare in psychology. However, her approach is based on a somewhat different vision of the human being as a person (from that recognized by personalism) and on a specific understanding of subjectness and its correlates. Therefore, in order to preserve the clarity of the perspective adopted in this paper, her approach remains outside the main focus of our interest.

In my opinion, the relationship of encounter should be given considerable attention by psychology because, as aptly noted by Anna Gałdowa (1990), this relationship has not only an existential and moral dimension *sensu stricte*, but also a psychological one – it may arise in various situations in human life if certain basic psychological conditions are met. At the same time, this relationship constitutes one of the more important, but often underestimated, criteria of the quality of human life (Straś-Romanowska, 2005).

Drawing inspiration from the rich humanistic thought in this field, especially from cultural anthropology, Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue and Gabriel Marcel's concrete philosophy, I intend to present the significance of the subject-subject relationship in the personal development of the human being, discussing this issue from a psychological viewpoint.

The sources

According to cultural anthropology, the subject-subject relationship was characteristic of our ancient ancestors, members of tribal cultures, who maintained such a relationship in respect of all objects of reality. From the perspective of the history of culture or religion, it is clear that man initially developed mostly through subject-subject relationships (see e.g. Dajczer, 2009a). In the light of the two fundamental manners of referring to the surrounding world, traditionally defined as *mythos* and *logos*, he was a man of *mythos*.

One of the crucial differences between these modalities is the subject-subject vs subject-object nature of one's relationship with reality. *Logos*, as a mode of notional cognition, assumes a division between the subject and the object and leads to a subject-object relationship in respect of the surrounding world by adopting the position of an observer preserving a distance with regard to the object of cognition. On the other hand, *mythos* remains in the area of existential experience, arising from direct participation and eliminating the subject-object distance. It provides room for a subject-subject experience of the world and opens the human being to a metaphysical reality (see Labouvie-Vief, 1990 and 1996, Zagórska, 2004 and 2010).

Present-day developmental psychology assumes that in the course of one's life the coexistence of *logos* and *mythos* creates a mature mind and is necessary to achieve full personal integration. Development in adulthood is not only about an increased ability to understand the world in terms of analytical categories, but is primarily a process of transforming the manner man relates to his social and cultural environment with its conventions, norms and values (Zagórska, 2010).

In accordance to the dialogical understanding of the subject-object and subject-subject relationship by Buber

(1992 and 1993) and by Marcel's concrete philosophy (1984, 1986, 1987), the former is equivalent to the *I-It* relationship, and the latter to the *I-Thou* relationship. The difference between them is not a matter of distinguishing between relationships with things and relationships with persons, but rather a distinction between two manners in which man can relate to anything in the surrounding world. These are two basic ways of experiencing the world and of connecting to the surrounding reality (Dajczer, 2009a and 2009b). Either fulfills a different role. The problem of the present world is a lack of harmony between the two and the decline of the subject-subject relationship.

From I to Thou: an encounter

I-Thou

The subject-object manner of entering into relations with the world is reflected in an analytical approach, keeping one's distance from the surrounding reality, and not becoming personally involved. This implies a reserved approach to the object as a problem to be solved. Therefore, the object is to be manipulated and controlled as a fundamentally passive or inert thing, in contrast to the active subject. In this context, an instrumental and egocentric approach is predominant: the world is perceived as an object of experience and utility, with the goal being to fulfill one's current needs and desires.

In a relationship of this type, man becomes the owner of the world and uses it to facilitate and arrange his life. The world is perceived as a set of things that are supposed to serve him, providing emotions or entertainment. The ability to perceive the world in this way is usually developed through diminishing the relational powers of man, by moving him away from the *I-Thou* relationship.

The "world of It" is governed by the teleology and causality of physical processes perceived with one's senses. But also psychological processes are perceived in this world as possessing an origin, e.g. in the subconscious, and leading to certain effects. It is a world of simple, tangible, empirical dependences, in which even thought is treated as matter that can be shaped according to one's will.

Institutions constitute a natural domain of the *I-It* relationship. The everyday experience of the subject-object relationship in institutions results in the deterioration of the ability and willingness of man to contemplate the world and its forms abstracted from the social and spatiotemporal context. An individual immersed in *It* cannot afford deeper reflection on his own life, his own existence.

I-Thou

The other mode of relationship with the world, of the subject-subject nature, is connected with discovering *Thou* as a person. Buber writes: "Whoever says You does not have something for his object. For wherever there is something there is also another something; every It borders on other Its. (...) But where You is said there is no something. You has no borders. Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation." (1992, p. 40).Through *Thou* the human being becomes *I*. *I* needs *Thou* to become a person – without a relationship with *Thou* there is no *I-person*; especially that while saying *Thou*, *I* is automatically said also (Bukowski, 1987).

The *I-Thou* relationship is characterized by a non-utilitarian approach to reality. The object becomes a subject – it is treated in a personal manner as an unconditional value, with respect and with dignity. At the culminating point, a person enters into a relationship with a subject, participating in an encounter with its characteristic features:

- exclusiveness: the world becomes binary through *I* and *Thou*;
- presence and openness: relinquishing the desire to classify and define;
- bilateralness;
- directness: the lack of any intermediation (Buber, 1992, 1993; see also Kępiński 1972, 1977; Bukowski, 1987; Baran, 1991).

In its primary aspect, a relationship of encounter may arise between a person and a person, a person and an animal, a person and a plant, and especially between a person and God. It constitutes an *I-Thou* dialogue. In a relationship with a human being, this dialogue implies a manner of relating to another that is reflected in the statement "I indeed give myself" and "am accepted" by the other (Gadacz, 2003). This bond, based on unconditional mutual acceptance and authentic openness to another, free from rational analysis or judgment.

This dialogue is a kind of experience that is common to all people, although contemporary man has largely lost his ability to understand and experience it. People tend to live the subject-object relationship ever more intensively (see Dajczer, 2009a).

Drawing on Buber's work (1992, 1993), one may attempt to create a certain approximate psychological picture of encounter with another person as a high point of the *I-Thou* relationship. I do not really experience the person whom I encounter, but stand in a relationship with him. Only after stepping out of this relationship can I experience him again. Experiencing implies moving away from *Thou*. The *I-Thou* relationship is direct. There is no notional apparatus, knowledge or fantasy between *I* and *Thou*; there is no objective or desire. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have been overcome, an encounter actually occurs. "The moment of encounter is not 'a living experience' (...) Something happens to man" (Buber, 1992, p. 108). There arises "something more," certain growth that the man did not know before and whose origin he is not able to indicate.

An encounter occurs *now*, within its time-course, and outside of that moment it has no continuation. It represents the quality of interpersonal relationship that a person longs for and which he returns to.

Similarly to Max Scheler, Buber believes that humanity is becoming degraded by departing from *I-Thou* dialogue and moving towards the *I-It* relationship. Thus, people deprive themselves of the most fundamental human qualities and lose the dialogical nature of the mind, becoming psychologically impoverished.

Development one's humanity and the subject-subject relationship

Exploring the relational dimension of the human being, Gabriel Marcel (1984-1986), who remains close to the philosophy of dialogue, importantly observes that if a man does not fully exploit his developmental potential, he is not fully a man. It is necessary to develop towards humanity throughout one's life. Therefore, everything that a person experiences is important.

Developing one's humanity makes it necessary to step out of trivial existence and choose authentic existence. The authentic mode of living is characterized by reflective, relational and axiological dimensions. By making certain choices – especially in terms of making himself available – a man designs his life in a unique way, making his existence authentic or inauthentic.

Of central importance for Marcel is the difference between a *problem* which we solve and a *mystery* in which we participate. Everyone is called to "create himself" – discover himself and another as a *mystery* rather than a *problem*, to transcend himself by opening himself to the other and making himself available. A mystery exists where the border between the subject and the object becomes vague, where man cannot attain the distance characteristic of a *problem* relationship. In the latter, one's connection to the object is limited to those dimensions of the object that are exposed to manipulation and control. The greatest difficulty for contemporary man is the fact that reality has become problematized, and thus cut off from the depth of existence. In such reality, man becomes a "degraded mystery," reduced to the function he fulfills in society.

The human being is not and should never be a problem to be solved. He is not "the sum total of issues" to be analyzed in detail. One should not perceive somebody who absolutely transcends material reality in terms of a *problem*. It is necessary to open oneself to another as a *mystery* through internal transformation leading to a value-based existence, through becoming a full human being, even though the world we live in does not make it easy.

Thus, it is necessary to perceive the human being as a subject, which is explicitly revealed in an encounter between *I* and *Thou*. The orientation toward this encounter lies in one's intentional striving to become a full human being, to live in a value-driven manner. And this means transcending the trivial, including one's curiosity related to the sphere of the *problem*, or self-complacency leading to an ostensibly peaceful conscience. "Metaphysical anxiety," which arises in the sphere of *mystery*, does not let one be indifferent in the face of the truth of one's conscience, which moves the person from within and awakens him from moral slumber.

Curiosity is an attitude characteristic of a person who is not involved in the object of his interest. It only signifies the desire to attain a better understanding of the object, which takes place in the sphere of notions and abstracts and is not connected to one's own existence. The object of curiosity is totally "in front of me." I enter into an *I-It* relationship with it. On the other hand, anxiety is inseparably connected to the object that engages me to such an extent that it changes my relation to it. It ceases to be external and belongs to me in an integral way. Involvement in the object reaches such a degree that the object becomes part of myself and the mystery of my existence. Thus, a subject-subject relationship arises, resulting in a desire for communion, which is characteristic of authentic existence.

Psychological preconditions for a subject-subject relationship

Entering into a subject-subject relationship is of holistic nature – it encompasses cognition, attitudes, and will. In contrast to instrumental, emotional or partner relationships, it is open to values that can make a person undertake actions for the sake of another. Such actions may be in conflict with the current personal need or interest of the person. The subject-subject relationship, being a personal relationship, is an expression of self-transcendence and self-determination, to use Frankl's words (1984). Thus, the boundaries of the self become transcended or transformed. Here, a person's own effort is necessary, as well as his embeddedness in the higher values.

A subject-subject relationship is demanding: the person should abandon himself: reduce the needs of the self, divert attention from it, and decrease the belief in its importance (de-egocentrization). Such relationship also requires some form of reduction of the self in the process of development (Gałdowa, 1990). At the time of encounter, the other person should be for me "everything." Hence, the urgent need to abandon oneself for the sake of another, to listen carefully, and to be empathic. One needs to be ready to offer another one's time, because a subject-subject relationship, in contrast to a subject-object one, is time-consuming. It seems entirely incompatible with the "fast and efficient" principle which is predominant in contemporary social life.

An effort of this kind is characteristic of the higher developmental stages, where courage and determination is necessary to seek the deeper levels of truth (also of oneself) and to act in accordance with moral principles. This also implies that one needs to relinquish the safety ensuing from the fixed rules of collectivity as he goes beyond what is common and acts, in a way, against the natural tendency of the mind, whose particular feature is to accept the truths shared by the majority of the members of his culture (Fromm, 1996).

However, by relinquishing the existing source of security, the process of individuation may proceed in a more fruitful manner. This process is characteristic of the person's development in the latter half of his life, when he begins to consciously follow values which are higher than those underlying the norms and principles of social life. Moreover, the courage of those people who undertake this kind of challenge brings benefits for the future generations. The efforts of those who are intent on continuous, intensive development lead to changes in cultural systems, which in turn provide a regulatory context for the activity of the subsequent generations (Labouvie-Vief, 1990).

The effort of discovering the deeper levels of truth about oneself is related to the necessity to take note of and recognize the subject-object nature of the relationships one enters into – their superficiality. Therefore, one needs to question one's patterns of behavior and habits connected to interpersonal contacts, and be ready to change oneself.

Gałdowa (1990) observes that what makes it difficult, or even impossible, to encounter or experience the other person with his entire wealth of uniqueness, intimacy and spiritual depth, is the area of "what is mine" – my own needs and desires determining the selectiveness of perception – and the mechanism of personality projection. Self-image and projections are two basic anti-developmental factors, and overcoming them is a prerequisite for maintaining relations with others based on truth.

Due to the fact that an encounter requires attention and a focus on the other person at a given time, another prerequisite is a conscious effort to free oneself of the burden of the past and of orientation towards the future. This effort is one of the forms of self-transcendence because people do not appreciate the importance of the present moment and tend to concentrate on what is absent. For an encounter of two *presences* to take place, the person needs to be "here and now," oriented towards the other, and free of his own attitudes and projections to the greatest possible degree. Aspects of one's personal life are connected to the present – even if in the context of the past and the future.

We feed on the past and the future because the present is not sufficient for us. Thus, it is necessary to discover the importance of the present moment. However, such a discovery is impossible without reference to the higher values which call for the person to be "here and now." The person may respond to them only in the present moment.

One's inner work in this field must follow the right intention, a certain superior reason, or the supreme value. One's actions must be fully motivated. However, they do not have to be necessarily conscious or goal-oriented, as, according to Dajczer, "We enter a relationship of encounter when we give up our goal. Then, the goal is the encountered 'Thou', which engulfs and fills us" (2009a, p. 67).

Efforts made for the sake of the Highest Value or the most important values, non-instrumental and non-adaptive from the point of view of one's adjustment, lie at the core of the human being's development as a person. Therefore, it seems vital to orient the capacity of entering into subject-subject relationships within the potentially possible and boundless process of personal development.

The place of the subject-subject relationship in personal development

Personal life is understood from the phenomenological perspective to be goal-oriented and to be undertaking efforts in the spiritual sphere. It is the adoption of "a certain position in respect of objects in the surrounding world and their properties" (Husserl, 1993, p. 67). This position undergoes gradual qualitative transformation in the process of development.

Personal development is closely related to the subjectivity of the person, his inner experience and the phenomenological world of his experiences. It is a non-instrumental and non-adaptive category that does not belong to the sphere of the person's functioning or behaving in a given situation (Straś-Romanowska, 1999).

This development is not synonymous with the development of personality, because it does not concern the regulatory dimension (adaptive or instrumental). It is founded on such attributes of the person as reason, will and conscience, which are related to the phenomenon of *existence*, in opposition to the regulatory mechanisms of psychological functioning. While the regulatory dimension is governed by the principle of determinism, the personal dimension is governed by the law of meaning – seeking and discovering meaning in the facts of reality through their interpretation and understanding in the context of the entirety of experience and through creative synthesis (Bouveresse, Parret, 1981, quoted in: ibidem).

Personal development consists of the transformation of the subject's attitudes and, by the same token, of the manner of the person's being in the world. The content of those attitudes consists of meanings discovered by the subject in the image of the world. Thus, as Gałdowa (1990) aptly observes (1990), personal development is a process of liberation from and relinquishing the old meanings for the sake of new meanings that express a deeper and

subjectively more accurate understanding of the order of the world and the fabric of one's life.

Within the three stages of personal transformation distinguished by the personalists – socialization, individuation and transcendentalization (see Straś-Romanowska, ibidem) – efforts aimed at a subject-subject relationship with others are characteristic, in my opinion, of the third stage, which corresponds to personal development proper. In contrast to the previous stages, with a predominance of inter- and intrapsychic processes, the third stage is driven by transpsychic (supra-subject) processes, which enable a transcendent objectivization of the self, and a redefinition of the existing engagements of the subject. Thus, the two preceding stages – known as pre-preliminary and preliminary – may illustrate the process of transition from an instrumental, object-like attitude towards people to a subject-subject attitude.

At the first stage, these attitudes are of instrumental nature, dominated by the external, social perspective. Interpersonal relationships are here perceived as asymmetrical and heteronomous. They are subjected to the principles of hierarchy, subordination and imbalance. The meaning of events and of the subject's actions is then a meaning imposed by others. Under such circumstances, a subject-object relationship seems to be the most natural.

At the second stage, the perspective changes from external to internal, subject-oriented. The need for autonomy and self-determination are pursued by the person by referring in all of his attitudes to criteria inherent in himself. This also concerns the process of assessment of other people. The person starts to be able to perceive the distinctness of another and is ready to tolerate it. Acceptance of the individuality of others emerges. Interpersonal relationships become symmetrical. The meaning of events and of the person's actions is here imparted by the person himself. Thus, the characteristics of this stage show that the person is becoming increasingly capable of entering a subject-subject relationship.

However, it is the third stage that provides adequate room for deep relationships, motivated by the higher values, with other people. A supra-subject perspective emerges in the perception of the world and oneself. Events are interpreted from the point of view of extra-model and timeless values. Self-understanding leads to another transformation of one's attitude to the surrounding world. The other human being is now treated as a person, as a subject of unconditional value, and interpersonal relationships become of dialogic nature – they are now governed by the principles of assistance, selflessness, dedication, consensus and concord.

According to the personalists, this stage may only emerge after the mid-life crisis. However, it seems that people with deep religious, inner life may be exceptions here.

Final remarks

William James wrote about human nature that "One great splitting of the whole universe into two halves is made by each of us . . . '*me*' and '*not me*'". And then, "No mind can take the same interest in his neighbor's *me* as in his own" (James, 1892/2002, s. 118). But is that really true?

This natural pattern of existence may be transcended, or at least one may try to transcend it. Man is an "undetermined" being – he can open himself to the transcendent. Describing the seventh (the highest) stage of moral development, Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) formulated a principle that goes beyond the norms of justice and equality "To give as much as possible over what is commonly offered to the other person". In Kohlberg's understanding, this is a religious stage.

Similarly, the *I-Thou* relationship belongs to the world of gratuitousness and selflessness. One cannot appreciate its depth without finding it essentially religious or spiritual. Then, it turns out that psychological reflection does not, indeed, reach those deepest layers.

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