Reflections on Martin Buber’s Approach to Upaniṣads and Vedānta

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ABSTRACT

Martin Buber engaged with the Upaniṣadic thought and found it essentially mystical and not conducive to man-God dialogue, where dialogue is understood as an I-Thou relation in which the I and the “other” do not become one. This paper presents a response to Buber’s critique of Upaniṣadic thought by arguing for the need to understand the differences between the Upaniṣads and Vedānta. In this attempt, the paper discusses Buber’s critique of Vedānta as monological in comparison to his dialogical thought. Further, it delineates the differences and similarities between Buber’s thought and Vedāntic thought concerning their understanding of man, man’s knowledge of the divine, and the relationships between man and divinity. Lastly, the paper situates Buber’s critique in comparison to the various Vedāntic philosophies.

1. Introduction

Buber understands Vedānta as “that central tradition of Hindu mysticism which in its austerest expressions in the Upaniṣads affirms that reality is non-dual and that the multiplicity of the world is actually māya, or the illusion of creation” (Friedman, Martin Buber’s Life and Work 78). Buber means, in general, by the “Upaniṣadic,” “Vedāntin,” and “Hindu” thought, a perspective that has at its roots the identity and unity of man, the world, and God. With this approach, Buber explains the unknowability of the dualism of I and the world in the moment of unity, by drawing on the Upaniṣads:

Whoever experiences the oneness of I and the world knows nothing of I and the world. For—as it says in the Upaniṣads—just as a man embraced by a woman he loves has no consciousness of what is outside or inside, so the mind embraced by the primal self, has no consciousness of what is outside or inside. (Buber, Ecstatic Confessions: The Heart of Mysticism 3)
Similar to an I-thou relation, where there is “no knowledge based on the distinction of subject and object because there is no self-consciousness or consciousness of any other being” (Huston 68), Buber highlights the inconsequentiality of propositions made about the true nature of the self. In this regard, he notes that

in the Upaniṣads, too, the significance of the teaching of the Atman does not lie in the fact that a statement is made thereby about the unity of being, but that what one calls being is nothing other than the unity of the self and that the unified one thereby encounters the world as being, as unity, as his self. (Buber, Pointing the Way: Collected Essays 37)

The theme of the relationship between man and his world is central to Buber’s thought and it can also be considered as a linchpin for his discussion of the various eastern and western traditions and their differences.

The next section discusses Buber’s contemplations on Jewish and Upaniṣadic traditions. This is followed by a discussion of various schools of Vedāntic thought to respond to Buber’s critique of Vedānta as monological in comparison to his dialogical thought. The subsequent section situates Buber’s perspective within the various Vedāntin philosophies by a comparative analysis of Buber’s thought and Vedāntic philosophies focusing on their understanding of man, man’s knowledge of the divine, and the relationships between man and divine.

The central argument of the paper is that Buber’s critique of the Upaniṣads is based on the assumption that they are necessarily Advaita (non-dualist). As a response to this position, the paper argues that Buber’s critique and his own idea of “I-Thou” relation can be placed within the Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita Vedānta philosophies. This paper highlights that blanket discussions of the Upaniṣadic or Vedāntic thought without a thorough grounding in the Indian philosophical traditions leads to over-generalizations and simplifications.

2. Buber’s contemplations on Jewish and Upaniṣadic traditions

Buber (On Judaism) distinguishes between the oriental and the occidental man as being motor and sensory respectively. Where central to the psychic processes of the oriental man, is “centrifugal – an impulse emanates from his soul and becomes motion”; whereas, the “basic psychic act of the sensory-type man is centripetal – an impression is made on his soul and becomes an image” (58). He acknowledges that this may be an oversimplification, but he finds it central since they perceive and act. The oriental man perceives in motion, experiences actions, and for him thinking means doing; whereas the occidental man acts in images, experiences shapes, and thinks about form. To the oriental motor-type man,

the world appears as limitless motion, flowing through him. Though he perceives individual things, he does not perceive them as separate entities, each reposing and complete in itself, but only as an aggregate of nodal points for an infinite motion, which flows through him as well. (Buber, On Judaism 59)

On the other hand, to the occidental sensory man, “guided by the most objective sense, sight, the world appears objectified, as a multiplicity of things which is spread before his eyes and to which he himself and his body belong” (Buber, On Judaism 59). Buber identifies Jews as “the Orient’s latecomers” (On Judaism 63) and Jewish thought “as
essentially Oriental and as the religion that brought the spirit of the Orient to the West” (Wood, The Beautiful, the True and the Good 393). Buber views the Jew as oriental, to whom doing is more important, and his experience of the world is not separate, diverse, or isolated, but, inward, essentially lived, and driven toward unity from the split and duality of the world: “The rediscovery of the oriental essence of Judaism was, according to Buber, accomplished by the Jews and therefore a result of their own agency” (Vogt 165). They were the media through which Europe encountered the spirit of the orient.

Buber finds the meeting point of all the Asiatic religions in the oriental quest for the conception and realization of a unified world: “It is not merely given to man, it is given to him as a task; he is charged with making the true world an actual world” (Buber, Pointing the Way: Collected Essays 60). The difference lies in the way one responds to this command following the Vedas, the Tao, or the Avesta. A Vedāntin attempts to tear “the web of appearance and recognizing his self as identical with the self of the world, he realizes the truth, the unified world in the all-encompassing solitude of his soul” (Buber, Pointing the Way: Collected Essays 61). It is the meaning of man’s existence in the world that he endeavors toward the unification or realization of the primal unity that is split and distorted to redeem the world.

Buber differentiates the Jew from other oriental perspectives, especially the Upaniṣadic thought, based on how the Jew would respond to this duality of the world. A Jew experiences this duality in his innermost self, as the duality of his I. Buber believes that “the united world yet to be built exists within man himself, intended and projected as the ‘will of God’; but, also within man himself, it is opposed by a resistant, reluctant element” (Buber, Pointing the Way: Collected Essays 65). The Upaniṣadic man “brings the world to unity by his insight,” whereas “the Jew brings the world to unity by his decision” (Buber, On Judaism 65), in which he perceives his own duality in terms of good and evil. He continually struggles to bring about a unity to become whole, for “just as the idea of an inner duality is Jewish, so is the idea of redemption from it” (Buber, Pointing the Way: Collected Essays 27). It is in himself that a Jew experiences “the fate of the world which has fallen from freedom into bondage, from unity into duality” (Buber, Pointing the Way: Collected Essays 65). Buber not only tried to surpass the narrow conception of the human being as a cognitive self, but also attempted to show that Jewish mysticism is not a reaction against rational order, but an attempt to bring together both the rational and the truly religious (Schmidt 98). In contrast to the Upaniṣads, where the unity of the world is brought about by an intuition, Buber believes that a Jew brings the world to unity by his decision, but the unity of insight and decision leads to the unity of the being.

For both Buber and the Upaniṣads, the significance is of that “what one calls being is nothing other than the unity of the self and that the unified one thereby encounters the world as being, as unity, as his self” (Buber, Pointing the Way: Collected Essays 37). The attempt of Buber is to understand the self by avoiding the “two opposing errors of mysticism and egoism” (Wheelwright 75). In egoism, the possibility of a genuine relationship with others is meek, while in mysticism, the self and the other merge into a unity. Buber’s idea of “the between” and essentially interpersonal nature of the self, provided him with the space to place his understanding amidst these two poles of egoism and mysticism. He finds Kierkegaard’s idea of “the one” egoistic and the Upaniṣadic idea of the union of the self and the Brahman mystical. Buber’s emphasis in Jewish thought was on viewing “all things as utterances of God and all events as manifestations of the
absolute” (Buber, On Judaism 59). This enables him to establish Jewish religion as a way of life and the Jewish corporeal reality as “a revelation of the divine spirit and will” (Buber, On Judaism 59).

In contrast to the Jewish position, Buber highlights that the corporeal reality in the Upaniṣads is an illusion, which one must shed to realize the truth. He finds this idea of illusion central to Vedānta:

The command may be answered by a wholly inward act; this is what the Indian of the Vedānta means when, tearing the web of appearance and recognizing his self as identical with the self of the world, he realizes the truth, the unified world in the all-encompassing solitude of his soul. (Buber, On Judaism 61)

This web of appearance is known as “Māya,” which designates “the uncanny game of hide-and-seek in the obscurity of the soul, in which it, the single human soul, evades itself, avoids itself, hides from itself” (Buber, Good and Evil 111). As a way to overcome maya, Buber discusses the coronation formula for the Self of the Upaniṣads, “This is the real, the Self, and Thou art the Self” (Buber, I and Thou 66). In his discussion of these references, Buber identifies the Upaniṣadic thought as mystical, in the sense that the self is ultimately lost in the Brahman in the case of the Upaniṣads: “The distinguishing mark of mysticism is the notion that man reaches his highest fulfillment through losing his own individuality by becoming merged in a higher reality (Wheelwright 75). From Buber’s perspective, “the unity is a unitary relation, the wholeness of the between, and not a fusion of the two who meet in it” (Kohanski 114). In this unity, Buber sees the Upaniṣadic and other eastern perspectives as a way to counter the empty alienated self of the I–It relation similar to his own experience of the I-thou relation of unity and declares the Upaniṣadic thought to be mystical.

For Buber, “the logic of mysticism thus runs: We should seek union with the World-Ground (by whatever name it is called) because we are already really one with it” (Wheelwright 75). From this perspective, Buber places the Upaniṣadic identity of man with Brahman. He disagrees with the Upaniṣadic way of de-alienating man as it ultimately leads to the loss of one’s self in the unity with the eternal Brahman. From his perspective, the “mystic mistakes this psychological unawareness of exclusiveness as an actual absorption of one partner (the self) into the other (the Absolute)” (Kohanski 114). In this perspective, “the ancient Hindu ‘That art thou’ becomes the postulate of the annihilation of the human person, one’s own person as well as the other” (Friedman, Martin Buber’s Life and Work 215). The person is uniquely capable of being in a relationship with everything, but it ultimately loses itself in the quest for the ultimate Truth.

As it seems in the Ecstatic Confessions (1996), “Buber may have agreed intellectually with the Vedānta at this point, but the prime fact of his experience was the division between the “I” and the world . . .” (Friedman, Martin Buber’s Life and Work 78). His disagreement has an anthropological basis of the reality of man and his world. For Buber, to deny the anthropological reality is to deny the being of man. However, probably, “no non-dualist Vedāntist would be troubled by Buber’s criticism since, for him, true “personal” existence and the true ‘We’ are found precisely on the road that Buber holds annihilates them” (Friedman, “The Bases of Buber’s Ethics” 185). The assertion is that “the empirical world is not to be downgraded to an illusion or mere appearance, as in the ascetic pathos of the Vedānta as well as in the Western
philosophical tradition” (Urban 89), as opposed to the Upaniṣadic formulation “tat tvam asi,” – that art thou, in which, “the otherness of the other is proclaimed as deception. Each and everything is, in fact, absorbed into the self. (Wood, The Beautiful, the True and the Good 397). The difference, as Murphy (133) summarizes, is that “In the Jewish tradition matter is seen as an immanent manifestation of divine reality (manifested in the act of divine creation) whereas in the latter it is merely an illusory reality.” For Buber, no matter how encompassing and embracing is the I-Thou encounter; it could not be considered unification.

By understanding the “I” as an independent reality, Buber calls “in question every self-sufficient principle of existence in that it posits in ontological unconditionally the essential presence of the other as other” (Buber and Friedman 23). The “other” is never merged with the “I,” but can be entered into a deeply inter-subjective relation, which makes the in-between central to experiencing the “thou.” Buber’s emphasis on the concrete “I” seems to be inspired by Hasidic thought, which “does not regard corporeal reality – the non-artistic natural human life – as an obstacle to oneness” (Urban 89). The empirical world is not to be downgraded to an illusion or mere appearance, as Buber and other scholars in his tone, such as (Urban 89) believe. Not believing in the genuineness of an ecstatic state or personal realization in a contemplative absorption, Buber “came to place ‘genuine dialogue’ – direct, honest, open, spontaneous, mutual, address-response communication in the midst of the everyday – at the center of the soul’s search for God” (Kramer 226). Here, the “I” and the “Thou” do come together to form a unity, but not an absorptive state where self and other are merged: “Man’s striving in his encounter with the Absolute is thus not for unification or identity with Him, but to be in His presence” (Kohanski 114). Thus, it is this meeting that becomes the sacred ground for the encounter with god – an encounter that cannot be spoken of. This encounter, though similar to the one articulated by the mystics, does not lead to unification. If man’s self and God become one, then, for Buber the lived reality, the relation, and others would become obsolete. His “critique of ‘oriental mysticism’ in its Vedāntic sense is that it amounts to the negation of ‘you-saying’ because the ‘I’ cannot say ‘you’ to itself” (Chatterjee 60). However, there is more to Vedāntic thought than what one finds in Buber’s allusions and interpretation. In the next section is a response to Buber’s approach to interchangeably using the concepts Upaniṣadic, Vedāntic, and Hindu.

3. A response to Buber’s position

In his engagement with the perspectives from the Indian subcontinent, Buber refers to Vedānta, Upaniṣads, and some other ideas from Hindu traditions. In the discussions of Buber’s understanding of the Upaniṣadic and Vedāntic thought, as presented in the previous section, one finds the following:

- In Buber, the Vedāntic thought is discussed as essentially non-dualistic
- The Vedāntic thought is understood to be mystical in nature; therefore, it is not able to consider fully the aspects or dimensions of interpersonal relationships
- The Vedāntic thought, in its emphasis on the Brahman being the real, negates the world by considering it nothing more than an illusion
- In its union with the Brahman, the existential self of the Upaniṣadic man is annihilated
These understandings about the Upaniṣads and the Vedāntic thought leads to the question of the relationship between man (jīva) and Brahman, the possibility of jīva’s knowledge of Brahman, and the idea of moksha as the realization of Brahman, which needs to be discussed in order to respond to the way in which Buber and his scholars have approached the Upaniṣads and the Vedāntic thought. To engage with these questions, it is essential to clarify the demarcation between the Upaniṣads and the Vedāntic treatises that will enable one to understand that Upaniṣadic thought is not synonymous with the non-dualistic Vedāntic thought, as is implied in the discussions of various scholars mentioned in the previous section. Furthermore, it would also clarify the way in which the possibility of knowledge of Brahman changes with the changing assumptions about Brahman and the varying ideas of moksha.

Instead of going into the popular etymology and positioning of the Upaniṣads in the Vedic corpus, it suffices to say that the Upaniṣads are said to be the śruti or revealed literature because they are considered to be the utterances of sages rooted in their personal illumined experience: “Out of the wealth of suggestions and speculations contained in the Upaniṣads, various later thinkers chose elements for the construction of their own systems, not infrequently by straining the texts” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 37). Some scholars, such as C. Sharma (A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy 18) believe that there is an inherent unity amongst the Upaniṣads in their emphasis on the doctrine of idealistic monism, whereas other scholars highlight, in the Upaniṣads, the justifications or manifest signs for polytheism, monotheism, and monism (Sinha 18), which is, probably, how the later scholars claim to root their formulations of Vedāntic thought.

The Vedānta, on the other hand, constitutes the third period of philosophical development from the early centuries of the Christian era. Vedānta is only one of the six systems of Hindu philosophy presented in the sūtras (aphorisms), namely, Nyaya, Vaiśeṣika, Samkhya, Yoga, “Purva Mimāṃsā or earlier interpretative investigations of the Vedas, relating to conduct; and the Uttara Mimāṃsā or later investigations of the Vedas, relating to knowledge, also called Vedānta, the ’end of the Vedas’” (Radhakrishnan and Moore xviii). This interpretation of Vedānta as the end of the Vedas is challenged by many with an alternative interpretation of Vedānta as the essence of the Vedas: “Vedānta is often, but less correctly, called ‘Hinduism’; a foreign word. The inhabitants of India were described by the Persians as Hindus because they lived on the other side of the River Sindhu (the Indus). The Persians, apparently, could not manage the sound of the letter S” (Taber 148) so the word Sindhu was pronounced as Hindu.

As a philosophy, Vedānta “refers to the doctrines set forth in the part of the Vedic corpus known as the Upaniṣads, one of the three bases of the Vedānta school” (Gupta 30), others being Vedāntasutra and the Bhagavad-Gīta. These three are together referred to as the three points of departure or the three institutions – prasthānatrayi – of which the Upaniṣads are the original texts or the mula-prasthāna (C. Sharma, The Advaita Tradition in Indian Philosophy: A Study of Advaita in Buddhism, Vedānta and Kāshmira Shaivism 119). The Upaniṣads are “the institute of revealed knowledge (Śruti-prasthānam), the Bhagavadgīta, that of traditional knowledge (Smriti-prasthānam) and the Brahmasūtras, that of philosophical knowledge (Nyayaprasthānam)” (Kapoor 14). Vedāntasutras were the very first attempt to systemize the Upaniṣadic thought made by Badarayana sometime between 500 and 200 BC (Swami Prabhavananda and Manchester 268). Based on at least these three sources, a number of schools of Vedānta
emerged and elaborate commentaries are available on at least ten of them (R. Chaudhuri). These interpretations have, on one hand, the non-dualist school of Shankara, and on the other, the dualist school of Madhava: “While some Upaniṣads have been deemed ‘monistic,’ others, including the Katha Upaniṣad, are dualistic” (Glucklich 70). Other schools can be placed somewhere in between these two schools.

In the Upaniṣads, one finds references and arguments for both unity as absolute monism – the belief that there is only one fundamental reality – and dualism – that there are two irreducible realities: “The Shvetasvatara Upaniṣad speaks of a dualism consisting of physical nature, prakṛti, and soul or spirit, Atman. In contrast, the Chandogya Upaniṣad emphasizes the unity of human and Brahman. The most common name for ultimate reality used in the Upaniṣads is Brahman” (Matthews 79). Such a range of interpretations has been possible because the Upaniṣads “contain both the negative and the positive descriptions of the Brahman” (Gupta 226), because of which “all schools of Vedānta claim to be based upon the Upaniṣads” (Hiriyanna 336), which suggests that the Upaniṣads “do not contain a systematic and logical development of ideas” (Gupta 30); and thus, it also seems improbable that Upaniṣads are composed by the same author (Dasgupta 5).

Commonly, both the Upaniṣadic dialogues and the Vedānta thought are considered to be Non-dualistic (Advaita) in nature. In this version of Vedānta, unity is essential for the realization of Brahman within oneself. Thus, they highlight those verses from the Upaniṣads that justify or inspire toward such unity. For example,

> Upaniṣads like Isha, focus on ‘the winning of the state of Immortality, the relations of the divine, all-ruling, all-possessing Brahman to the world and to the human consciousness, the means of passing out of our present state of divided self, ignorance and suffering into the unity, the truth, the divine beatitude.’ (Sri Aurobindo 15)

Similarly, in the Chandogya Upaniṣad we find “the basic doctrine of the identity of the Atman, the psychical principle within, and the Brahman, the universal principle of nature. This doctrine is expressed in the very famous saying, “tat tvam asī (that art thou)” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 64). Furthermore, in the Brhadaranyak the notion of the transcendental Atman as universal and undifferentiated consciousness is portrayed with the “famous doctrine of ‘Neti, Neti’ (‘not this, not this’), the mystical doctrine of the indescribability of the Absolute” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 77). This negation is reflected in the term Advaita, which, being a negative term, denies that there are multiple realities: “Brought to its sharpest, it denies an absolute ontological distinction or difference between the subject and object, or between perceiver and perceived, or between Creator and created” (Milne 166). Only when attempts are made to translate this term into a western vocabulary does it become known as monism where it results in the confusion of being understood as an expression of oneness.

This Absolute Brahman is “beyond ’difference’ (bheda) – parts, divisions, or attributes – and change. Hence, it is strictly ineffable and indescribable; one may characterize it only by saying that it is in its essence Being, Consciousness, and Bliss (saccidānanda)” (Taber 148). This conception of the Absolute Nirguna (attribute-less) Brahman, along with the identity of Jiva and Brahman and negation of the material reality, leads an Advaitin to believe in a conception of mokṣa as the realization of the ultimate unity of the jiva with the Brahman. The word jiva is derived from the root jīv, which means “to
continue breathing.” The jīva is also considered as bhokta (experient), karta (agent), gyata (knower) (Grimes 149). Advaita advocates complete renunciation with the belief that jñāna alone is the means of attaining moksha (Hiriyanna 339). The liberation in Advaita that is brought about by the removal of ignorance arises from “the destruction of the tendency in us to superimpose our egos on Brahman’s Pure Consciousness” (Betty 216). The path toward this realization is the path of knowledge and deep, persistent meditation on Brahman and his true nature. This realization is in no way incompatible with the continuance of the physical body if one realizes that the physical body is only an illusory appearance (Grimes 149–50). Jñāna or knowledge in Advaita Vedānta may be either mediated or immediate. Advaita recognizes two kinds of knowledge, viz. Svarupajñāna and Vrittijñāna. The former is of the nature of the self, whereas the latter is concerned with modifications by the impressions of the world; thus, the former is considered to be real and the latter to be not real. The former is called cit and it is described as partless (akhanda) and attributeless (nirvishesh). Mediate knowledge is about “knowing that” of an object, whereas the immediate knowledge is about the revelation of the “what” of an object (Grimes 150).

The Advaita tradition has been the most influential amongst at least ten schools of Vedānta, which have their well-articulated positions (R. Chaudhuri). The reasons for these are many, such as the vigor with which Shankara promoted his understanding of Vedānta by engaging in debates during his travel in India; the appeal to the mystical that Advaita has; its implicit response to the concerns of the Buddhists, especially the critique of the rituals (Menon); space, however provisional and patronizing, provided to other theologies in the system of Advaita by Sankara (Swami Tapasyananda xiv); and the internal logical consistency of the Shankara’s formulations.

The fact that there are various other traditions in the Vedāntic thought that propose other interpretations of the Upaniṣads while critiquing Shankara proves that Buber’s critique of Vedānta or Upaniṣads, as has been discussed in the previous section, is narrow and is valid only as a critique of the monistic aspect of the Advaita Vedānta. This is the central point of departure from “the non-dualist Upaniṣadic thought, with which Buber entered into dialogue along with other eastern philosophies very early in his career till the end of his life” (Wood, The Beautiful, the True and the Good 393). While Buber understood unity as “non-dual but multivariate” (Blenkinsop 305), he viewed an Advaitin’s quest as a search for unity in which the universe ultimately dissolves into Brahman.

4. Situating Buber’s criticism

Buber’s critique of Vedāntic or Upaniṣadic thought is, to be precise, a critique of the Advaita Vedānta of Sankara, since neither the Upaniṣads nor Vedānta are non-dualist in themselves. It seems that Buber’s previous engagement with Hegel’s idealistic thought led him to think of Brahman only “through the filter of the Hegelian Absolute” (Chatterjee 61). He had already rejected the Hegelian thought as one that negates the otherness of the other. The second, probably, most-discussed reason for Buber’s rejection of absorption or immersion in any experience that negates the concrete reality of this world was his experience with a young man who died after he tried to have a word with Buber. Buber felt responsible for the young man’s death because he believed that if he had assured him of meaning in life, then the young man might have been alive: “Although the episode, as
recounted by Buber, might seem to suggest that the visitor committed suicide, he was in fact killed at the front in World War I” (Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber* 80). Buber’s guilt arose because he withheld himself; instead of being fully present he was absent in spirit – “he failed to make real, insofar as it was up to him, the possibility of genuine dialogue that that hour offered” (Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber* 81). Buber abandoned the idea of unity between man and God in favor of the concrete existence but one wonders, as does Wright (2007) about why Buber’s lesson from this experience “was not a general obligation to be fully present to others whenever they seek us out, but a specific lesson about the dangers of mystical ‘religious’ experience” (Wright 105–06). This experience took him from the religious to the concrete reality; however, the description of the experience itself “might say something about its ethical implications but it cannot, it would appear, be used to impugn the ontological status of the experience, as Buber mistakenly seems to conclude” (A. Sharma). Moreover, to an outsider who has not experienced the events as Buber himself did, it is quite impossible to discern if this emotionally moving experience compromised his judgment regarding the introvertive mystical experiences as discussed in the Advaitic thought (A. Sharma).

In *Advaita* unity is the property of the universe, but for Buber “Unity is not a property of the world but its task. To form unity out of the world is our never-ending work” (Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, 30). In the *Advaita* philosophy, “the individual does not have any true uniqueness: the *jiva* becomes an individual manifestation of the universal, whereas to Buber the person is through and through uniqueness” (Malik and Boni 34), whereas the “other” in Buber’s thought cannot be and should not be merged with the “I.” Buber’s existential understanding of dialogue necessitates an “I” or the “self.” Furthermore, Buber also renounced the monism of a mystic for the sake of the concreteness and uniqueness of the “self” and the “other” in his later writings (See Buber *Ecstatic Confessions: The Heart of Mysticism*). “Buber regarded the cognitive approach to the Absolute as a point of no relational return and asserted that beyond its static nature lay a higher revealed truth apodictically asserting itself as a compelling Presence” (Birnbaum 390). Thus, the generalized critique by Buber and his scholars of the Vedântic thought is that it is monistic and it denies the otherness of both man and God from the self. Different from a non-dualistic standpoint of the Vedânta, existentialist perspectives such as Buber’s, “minimizes the importance of essences on account of its preoccupation with the principle of existence. This creates a false dualism” (H. Chaudhuri 11). Consciousness in Advaita Vedânta, on the other hand, transcends the “dualism of subject and object, I and Thou, or I and This. It is therefore egoless and impersonal” (H. Chaudhuri 16).

The separation of the *jiva* from the Brahman is not just a philosophical or metaphysical notion but is also an experiential fact, which may lead to “a subjective experience of separateness, incompleteness, and relativity of being” (Milne 166). De-alienation, understood from the perspective of Advaita, may be linked to the realization of mâyâ being the cause of separation between the self and the *Brahman*, because of which man “sets himself up as a separate, self-enclosed entity, a sort of spiritual atom, separate from Being, separate from the external world, and separate from the rest of humanity” (H. Chaudhuri 9). On the other hand, understanding de-alienation from Buber’s existential framework, one can say that it is a shift toward realizing “being” as opposed to “having.”
However, as discussed above, Buber’s critique of Upaniṣadic thought is true only in the case of Advaita Vedānta: “Ever since western scholars began to study Indian Philosophy there has been a persistent tendency to identify it with Advaita Vedānta, with the result that other Vedānta schools have been left neglected” (Wadia v). It would be incorrect to say that Hindu, Vedāntic, or Upaniṣadic thought is in itself monistic. Of the various views that Westerners hold about Indian Philosophy, the idea that “in Indian metaphysics, there is no place for a plurality of individuals. The plurality of individuals is ultimately an illusion: the ultimate reality is one ineffable Absolute (called Brahman)” (Bhattacharyya 131) is only partially correct insofar as one speaks of Advaita Vedānta. One finds such an idea of Brahman in schools of Vedānta other than Advaita, such as Viṣiṣṭādvaita, Bhedabheda, and Dvaita. R. Chaudhari discusses ten sampradaya or schools of Vedānta and observes that Sankara’s Advaita-vada is “the only one amongst all the ten schools to uphold the Doctrine of Absolute or Strict Monism. Rāmānuja and others all subscribe to the Doctrine of Monotheism” (R. Chaudhuri 19). However, for the sake of brevity and the limitations of a singular study to address the interface of all the ten schools with Buber’s thought, further discussion will be focused on, apart from Advaita, two most prominent and oft-discussed Vedāntic philosophies, namely Viṣiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita.

In Viṣiṣṭādvaita, the Brahman is Sāguna (with attributes), which enables a personal relationship with the Brahman: “Brahman is not an attributeless homogeneous stuff of consciousness. He is a supra-personality (purusottama). He is endowed with an infinite number of auspicious attributes. He is all-pervading, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-merciful” (P. N. Rao 73). These attributes (viṣeṣanās) are different from Brahman but also dependent on and inseparable from Him. The attributes as viṣeṣanās and the predominant one is viṣeṣ: “Because the viṣeṣan cannot by hypothesis exist by themselves or separately, the complex whole (viṣeṣ) in which they are included is described as a unity. Hence the name “Viṣiṣṭādvaita”” (Hiriyanna 399). There are three kinds of distinctions, i.e. heterogeneous vijātiya bheda, homogeneous sajātiya bheda, and internal svagata-bheda. Brahman is considered to be devoid of the first two distinctions, but it has the third distinction, which is also the reason for the material and immaterial reality to be dependent on it.

The inanimate (acit) and the animate (cit) entities are the body of the third Brahman. They are part-of-the-whole, distinct yet inseparable: “The first is incapable of any kind of awareness, the second capable of limited awareness, the third all-aware; but none is any less, or more, real than the other two” (Betty 217). The non-duality is realized in the relation between the dualities. The world is not māya as described in Advaita, which makes the denial of the world and human reality untenable. Thus, the Viṣiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja “opposes the Advaita contention that the I is reducible to the status of not-self, or is external to consciousness. He maintains that the ‘I’ is never experienced to be so i.e. as an external entity (bahya padartha)” (Balslev 63). It counters Advaita’s assertion of the unreality of the universe with the real world and jīvās. Thus, in Viṣiṣṭādvaita, a concrete world, a personified worshipped, and a real worshipper comes into being (Kumar and D’Souza 345).

It seems that, to Rāmānuja, to declare that Brahman and the world, or Brahman and jīvās, are literally identical is inconceivable: “Identity statements like ‘I am Brahman’ or ‘You are That’ must be taken non-literally. They mean that Brahman is the jiva’s or the
world’s inner controller (antaryamin), a position shared by Rāmānuja” (Betty 218). However, there are parallels in the way Brahman and the world relate with each other and the way souls relate with the body, for “just as the human soul is the animator and controller of its body, so Brahman is the animator and controller of the universe. Brahman penetrates every atom of it; He is inseparable from it; but He is also distinct from it” (Betty 217). For Rāmānuja the jīvās are real and eternal, thus, justifying the human-Brahman difference, “Viṣṇu is the controller and knowledge jñāna as a way for jīvās, who are bound (baddhas), toward being liberated (muktas) and the eternally free (nitya) (P. N. Rao 78).

Unlike Advaita Vedānta, where there is an absolute identity in attaining Moksha by liberated souls, in Viṣṇu’s view, the freed soul has a “direct intuition of His [God’s] own true nature” (Ramanuja, 1966, 770). This intuition is a result of Bhakti (loving devotion) and Prapatti (whole-hearted self-surrender). In the Upaniṣads, “the way of devotion as the love of God (bhakti) and the way of knowing (jnāna) as two equally justified and equivalent ways to God” (Bergman 306–07). Since the nature of jīva is essentially that of the Brahman, therefore the Jīva may be said to know the Brahman, but when it is bound it gains knowledge of the world as well. The jīva’s knowledge “is eternal and in the state of liberation is all-knowing, but on account of empirical limitations, this knowledge is diminished” (Grimes 147) in the embodied form.

Viṣṇu’s view also “appeals to the mass of men and fills the heart of men with hope and gives the aspirant the solace and the grace of a personal God” (P. N. Rao 81), which is similar to the possibility of a personal relationship with God, similar to Buber’s idea of God as an Absolute Personal. This understanding of Brahman and human-Brahman relation partially addresses Buber’s critique of the Upaniṣads and Vedānta being monistic in nature and a denial of the uniqueness of man and Brahman. However, the question of the radical otherness of the “other” as well as God, with possibilities of encounters and moments of dialogue, does not get addressed by Viṣṇu’s view, because the primary idea is still of non-difference.

In order to search for a finite Brahman, where there is a space of a radical difference between entities, humans, and God, one needs to refer to another school of Vedānta, i.e. Dvaita, which seems to come closest to the difference between man-man and man-God that Buber asserts. It has been of lesser importance to the modern scholars who generally get introduced to the Advaita philosophy and seldom try to find much beyond it. Dvaita originated in southwestern India in the 13th century: “Using a formidable logic as its main weapon against Advaita, it grew into a major religious movement, primarily in southern India and, after AD 1500, also in the northeast of the country” (Zydenbos 249). In addition to the Upaniṣads, these scholars have also referred to the Puranas and Itihasas to substantiate their claims.

Dvaita Vedānta is a “pluralistic, theistic and realistic system” (P. N. Rao 82). Within the three kinds of entities that exist in the universe, namely, Jada (matter), Jiva (human beings), and Ishvara (Brahman), a scheme of five-fold difference panchabhedas is set forth by Madhava, which are: “(1) The difference between Jīva and Isvara, (2) between jīva and jīva, (3) jada (matter) and jada, (4) jada and jīva and (5) Isvara and jada” (P. N. Rao 88). The jīva are “eternal and no two are alike. They are similar to God (Brahman) in kind, but not in degree. They are active agents dependent upon God’s will” (Grimes 148). Dvaita has the following contentions against the Advaitin:
(a) The Advaitin’s Brahman is non-different from the sūnya of the Buddhist, (b) the world of matter and souls is ultimately real, (c) the individual soul is absolutely and eternally different from and dependent on Brahman, (d) the Brahman of the śrutis is not attributeless (nirguṇa) but is the abode of the auspicious attributes, and (e) the import of śruti is not in tune with Advaita” (N. Rao 385).

With this position, the nature of Jiva and Brahman, as well as the Jiva-Brahman relationship, changed significantly. In the concrete reality of the world, knowledge for Mādhava is “a relation between a knower and a known object. There is no cognition of a non-existent thing” (N. Rao 380–81). Similar to the correspondence theory of knowledge, for Mādhava, the “jnāna, which cognizes the attributes of an object as it is, is truth. That cognition, which cognizes the object other than as it is, is error” (P. N. Rao 84). Thus, for Mādhava, both the material universe (samsara) and the bondage of the jiva in samsara are real.

Mādhava rejects the Advaitin claim of the world as māya and the ultimate monistic unity of the Jiva and Brahman as Moksha. Similar to Viṣṇu-Brahman, moksha or “the liberation from samsara is possible only through bhakti and the grace of God, who in this monotheistic system is thought of as Vishnu” (Zydenbos 249). The many ways of Bhakti (loving devotion) are:

Hearing about God’s majesty (shravana), singing His praise collectively (Kirtana), silent remembrance of Him through the repetition of His names (Smarana), service of His aspect as society (Padasevanam), worship of His holy images (archanam), salutation of His presence in all beings, cultivating the attitude of His servantship (dasyam), entertaining intimacy with Him (sakhyam), and making a whole-hearted and unreserved offering of oneself to Him (atmanivedanam). (Swami Tapasyananda 187)

However, even after being a devotee Bhakta, liberation is not for all souls and also not in the same manner. This is because the souls are quantitatively as well as qualitatively different from each other and this difference has implications for the possibility, experience, or attainment of moksa as well. In Madhava’s thought, all souls are dependent on the Lord for salvation, but all souls do not get liberated sarvamukti or are not destined to attain moksa (Zydenbos 249). Apart from Vishnu himself and his consort Sri or Lakshmi being the nityamuktas eternally liberated, all other souls are shrśtiyuj (associated with the creation), of which some are liberated mukta and some not-liberated amukta. The not-liberated or amukta souls are again of three kinds: muktiyogya (salvable), nityavarta (world-bound) and tamoyogya (damnable) (Swami Tapasyananda 199) (Hodgkinson 176). For a Dvaitin, souls have a definite nature or svarupa of their own and any “moral effort and education can never alter the svarupa of the soul” (P. N. Rao 90). Additionally, even after the attainment of Moksha, the human and Brahman do not become one but remain as many in various forms, which are, “Śālokya residence in the same region, Samipya being near him, Sarupya having a form similar to Him in many respects, and Sayujya togetherness with him” (Swami Tapasyananda 195) in the order of increasing level of bliss. Thus, in Mādhava’s thought, the Jiva has full awareness of the state of liberation or moksha.

The discussion presented above enables one to move away from the generally understood notion that the Upaniṣads themselves are purely monistic, toward the view that the Advaita understanding of the Upaniṣads as one of many formulations rather than as the
authentic and ultimate timeless philosophy. This also enables one to appreciate the fact that “textual evidence suggests that it was a relatively recent development in the long-term intellectual history of India” (Nicholson 25) and that there are at least ten other interpretations of the Prasthānatrayi, which includes the Upaniṣads, the Brahmasūtras, and the Bhagavad-Gītā. Actually, the teachings of Śāṅkara, “were in part a reaction against earlier Bhedābheda interpretations of the Brahmasūtras and the Upaniṣads.” (Nicholson 25). The differences between these schools are about the nature of man and Brahman, the possibility of jīva-Brahman relationship, the path and the idea of liberation or Moksha, and the epistemological implications of the metaphysical assumptions.

For example, “in Dvaita or Dualistic Vedānta, Brahman, again conceived as Viśṇu, is quite separate from His creation, which nevertheless owes its existence to His Will or Grace” (Taber 148), which implies that knowledge via perception is real and that there is no content-less cognition that does have value in the Advaita Vedānta, especially in the state of Moksha when the soul is united with the Brahman. Furthermore, multiple articulations of having attained the state of Moksha will be ridiculed in the Advaita tradition because there would not be any separate self to enjoy it, whereas in the Dvaita tradition such explications may be valued since the experience and enjoyment of bliss by one soul would be different from the other.

Buber sees good as that which results when the world of “It” is permeated by I-Thou because of a continual return to the eternal Thou. This is similar to Dvaita Vedānta in which the realm of the jīva and his relationship is infused with the relation that he has with the Brahman as a devotee. The relation with one’s God interplays with going out to the meeting with other men and the world. In Buber, there is the interplay between the relationship with the eternal Thou which results in a revelation and a turning in which man turns from the restricting and codified forms of religion to a personal, direct confrontation and meeting with the eternal Thou, whereas in the Dvaita Vedānta, there is an interplay in experiencing Moksha while remaining in this body and engaging with one’s world and other jīvās. Kumar (290) finds both Buber and Mādhava to be “realists, pluralists, theists, metaphysicians, and staunch believers in God, world, souls and Human Relationship.” Thus, the path toward one’s God in both Mādhava’s and Buber’s thought is Bhakti: “Buber ‘refuses to recognize a God ‘believed in’; he acknowledges, instead, a God ‘lived with’” (Guilherme 369). To enter into a relationship with God one must first become whole in his existential anthropological reality: “Prayer, dialogical prayer, is a tool to achieve all this” (Guilherme 369). This is similar to the God of the Bhaktas who is their Sakha (friend), Priye (lover), or in any other personal relationship.

Thus, the Upaniṣads offer us multiple understandings, ranging from one in which the supreme Self pervades everything; therefore, there is no genuine “other” and thus there is no space for establishing a personal relationship with anything or anyone to the one, exemplified by Dvaita, in which the supreme self is necessarily different from the individual self and there are various ways in which they relate. A position in between could be that since the Supreme is in all these existences, one “should acquire the right relation to the world. Perfect fulfilment of our individuality means the perfect fulfilment of our relations with the world and the other individuals” (Radhakrishnan 130). This is the calling of the transcendent to which one must answer, i.e. to manifest one’s true self in every relationship with every being.
If personhood is understood to be relational, as Buber does, then, “without a Thou, there is no personal I. But this once again would imply that Brahman is not infinite, ‘one without a second.’ Relation to another ‘I’ would render Brahman finite” (Bracken 40) or at least both finite and infinite as has been understood in many schools of Vedānta, such as Visistadwaita and Bhedabheda, which intends to bring together difference and non-difference. Similar to Buber’s personal God, the Dvaitin and Vishishtadvaitin notion of Brahman manifest on one level as a personal God but at a deeper level as the impersonal absolute.

These formulations of the Vedāntic thought do not keep one and the many as binary opposites as is done in the western tradition. The difference central to the idea of “one” and “non-dual” could also be that the idea of “becoming one” would entail non-oneness that becomes oneness, whereas the idea of non-dualism would mean that there have never been two or more and all plurality is considered as non-existent. Probably, this is how the Upaniṣadic non-dualist position is essentially different in the Hegelian dialectic where two become one, which is also the reference point for Buber while approaching the Upaniṣadic thought and finding it the same as the western idealistic position. However, here one must differentiate between monism and non-dualism, where inherent in the idea of monism is “oneness,” the underlying idea in non-dualism is “non-two.” The idea of non-dual has been articulated in many spiritual and religious traditions around the world, such as Sufism, Taosim, Buddhism, and Christianity. Philosophers such as “Plotinus, Eckhart, and Hegel have also embraced forms of non-dualism as being representative of ultimate reality” (Webb 626–27), but their conceptualizations are multifarious.

Drawing from the five ways of understanding non-duality as proposed by Loy, it may be discerned that non-duality as “the negation of dualistic thinking,” “the non-plurality of the world,” and “the non-difference of subject and object” are operative in Buber and Dvaita Vedānta. The other two understandings, viz., non-duality as “the identity of phenomena and Absolute” and “the possibility of a mystical unity between God and man” are only possible in Advaita Vedānta.

5. Conclusion

The central concern of this paper was that if Buber rejects non-duality as oneness as monological on the basis of the argument that in it one finds no possibility of a real “other” even in the form of an opinion or a perspective. Are Upaniṣadic dialogues monological? If not, then how do they provide spaces for plurality and multiplicity of voices that Buber considers as the hallmark of dialogue?. Articulated differently, the question is “Is the Absolute Identity a kind of Relation at all?” (R. Chaudhuri 77). Understood from the perspective of the Advaita Vedāntins, the category of “Relation” implies duality and must be placed in the Vyavaharika (empirical) domain in which the Absolute is with attributes (saguna), one individual differs from another, and the entire pluralistic universe exists” (Grimes 356); the other two being the Pratibhasik (apparent or illusory) domain and the Paramārthika (transcendental) domain. The second argument is that if Brahman and Brahmanda are absolutely different, then there is no question of relations at all. For, “if two things be so very different from one another,
essentially and eternally, how can there ever be any relation between them?” (R. Chaudhuri 77–78). Vishistadvaitins and Dvaitins resolve this by making the Brahman an independent reality and the Brahmanda (universe) as the dependent reality. Which brings us to the third position, unity-in-difference of the Vishistadvaitins, where “Brahman and Brahmanda, are essentially related from the point of view of “Svarupa” or nature – yet remain different from the point of view of “Guna-saktis” (R. Chaudhuri 78), which enables the conception of a real relationship and not just an empirical one.

However, there are few claims of Buber that need further clarification, e.g. Buber’s discussion of māya as an illusion is, at best, only partially accurate for the idea of māya will be interpreted differently by the different schools of Vedāntic thought. Without going into much detail, it might be sufficient to present the six meanings of māya that Radhakrishnan articulates, namely, “maya\(^1\) as inexplicable mystery, maya\(^2\) as the power of self-becoming, maya\(^3\) as the duality of consciousness and matter, maya\(^4\) as primal matter, maya\(^5\) as concealment, and maya\(^6\) as one-sided dependence” (Braue 102). With such a range of interpretations, which are coherent with the discussions of Brahman, jīva, and knowledge in the various Vedāntic schools, it is not easy to agree with Buber’s understanding of māya.

Buber interprets the idea of māya as sin, which Buber inserts in his discussion of the Upaniṣads from the Jewish thought. Buber interprets sin, as opposed to the Hasidic spirit of the hallowing of the everyday, as “self-assertion, not seeing God’s immanence in all things” (Friedman, Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue 20). There is no idea of sin in the Upaniṣadic thought. At the most, “Indian philosophy interprets the theory of sin as nothing but an error or mistake which arises from ignorance that veils the true nature of our soul as well as the harmony that exists between God and the universe” (Prajñānānanda 16). Buber’s idea of sin will be viewed as the illusory nature of māya, i.e. to hide the truth of the world.

Buber further differentiates between the Jewish idea of redemption and mistakenly interprets the Upaniṣadic idea of realization as akin to it. He presents the Jewish idea of redemption as higher than the Upaniṣadic idea of redemption (he mistakes the Upaniṣadic thought as Indian thought ignoring the rich diversity of philosophies of India) in saying that

when, in Jewish mysticism, the original character of the God-idea changed, when the dualistic view was carried over into the very concept of God, the Jewish idea of redemption attained the high plane of the Indian [Upaniṣads]: it grew into the idea of the redemption of God, the idea of the reunion of God’s being (which is separated from things) with God’s indwelling, which wandering, erring about, dispersed — abides with things. It became the idea of God’s redemption through the creature: through every soul’s progress from duality to unity, through every soul’s becoming one within itself, God becomes One within Himself (Buber, Pointing the Way: Collected Essays 28).

It must be clarified here that in the Advaita philosophy, Brahman is transcendent, supreme, and non-dual. The duality is, at the most, in his forms but he is beyond any duality; thus, the idea of redemption would not make sense in the Advaitin or even Vishishtadvaitin framework. However, in Madhava’s thought, one does find a discussion of jīva who do not realize Brahman or Vishnu.
Nevertheless, Buber rightly finds the Indian idea of liberation, realization, or moksha (if this is what he means by redemption) to be purer and unconditional, but his following comment seems plausible only for the Advaita Vedānta and not for the Upaniṣads themselves,

Indian redemption means an awakening; Jewish redemption, a transformation. Indian redemption means a divesting of all appearances; Jewish redemption, a grasping of truth. Indian redemption means negation; Jewish redemption, affirmation. Indian redemption progresses into timelessness; Jewish redemption means the way of mankind. Like all historical views, it has less substance but more mobility. (Buber, On Judaism 27–28)

However, it is when one does not encounter any “thou” and lives only in the “It,” that there is evil. This evil can never become absolute because Buber does not conceptualize the word as dualistic but as a continuum of I–It and I-thou relationship where there is always a possibility to hallow the most insignificant of moments. Thus, evil may also be considered to be the predominance of “I–It” relationships because of the alienation of man from God. There is nothing purely evil in the world, but it is the absence of a “thou.” However, this evil can be overcome if one is open to an encounter with the “Thou” and through real encounters evil is overcome.

Buber’s dialogical thought presents an ontological duality between man and God, with some moments of meeting the two in which the I is not the individualistic narrow I but the I in relation with the thou. The Upaniṣads on the other hand, have become a basis for various philosophical schools of Vedānta, out of which the Advaita of Sankara, Viṣṇūdviṣṭa of Rāmānuja, and Dvaita of Mādhava. A discussion of these schools helps us to place Buber’s understanding of the human-God relationship, man’s knowledge of God and the various critiques that Buber raises against the Upaniṣadic thought.

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