I explore certain acute and timely tensions between contemporary, postmodern philosophy and the popular status of religious tradition. Such tensions appear to draw much of their strength from two prominent sources: Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of the transcendent God, and Heidegger’s rejection of absolutist metaphysics. The problem is that if the transcendent God has become superfluous to thought, and the treatment of the absolute metaphysical nature of things has become taboo, then the special status of religious claims as revealed, absolute truths of a transcendent Being, and of the natures of the world and humanity, has been seriously called into question. I will show that a consideration of two particular religious thinkers – Martin Buber and Ralph Waldo Emerson – will equip us with a sophisticated response in the current philosophical environment of postmodernity, and provide us with the resources to construct a nuanced religious narrative of creation, sin, and salvation within the broader contexts of metaphysical immanence, epistemological intertwining, and ethical instrumentalization that has followed in the de-absolutizing path laid by, among others, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Through an examination of the dialogical relations between persons described by Buber, and the relations of discipline between persons and the world described by Emerson, we will be able to resurrect a sense of immanent, non-absolute religious practice in the era of postmodernity, after the death of the transcendent God and the end of absolutist metaphysics.
THE IMMANENCE OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL:
BUBER, EMERSON, AND THE DIVINE IN A SECULAR WORLD

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by

Dylan Joseph Scott

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I. Religious practice in postmodernity

The relation between philosophy and religion\(^1\) is difficult to pin down. They have at times been bedfellows, and at other times, antagonists, and there are a variety of reasons to think of either characterization as the proper one. Our concern will be with certain acute and timely tensions between contemporary, postmodern philosophy and the popular status of religious tradition, tensions which seem to suggest the second characterization of their relation. Such tensions appear to draw much of their strength from two prominent sources: Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of the transcendent God, and Heidegger’s rejection of absolutist metaphysics.\(^2\) The problem is that if the transcendent God has become superfluous to thought, and the treatment of the absolute metaphysical nature of things has become taboo, then the special status of religious claims as revealed, absolute truths of a transcendent Being, and of the natures of the world and humanity, has been seriously called into question.

An initial reaction to these tensions could be simply accepting that the role these religious claims have played in our thinking has expired, and that nothing more needs to be said now that God – and the status of religion as metaphysically ultimate – has finally been put to bed. Yet within religious texts themselves, and within the history of thinking about those

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\(^1\) I have in mind Judeo-Christianity in general, but my claims about religion might apply to more than just the structure of thinking in light of canonical biblical texts.

texts, one continues to find reasons to revisit their message in the contemporary conversation about the relation between philosophy and religion, and to consider these religiously-motivated responses with due diligence. To this end, I will show that a consideration of two particular religious thinkers – Martin Buber and Ralph Waldo Emerson – will equip us with a sophisticated response in the current philosophical environment of postmodernity, and provide us with the resources to construct a nuanced religious narrative of creation, sin, and salvation within the broader contexts of metaphysical immanence, epistemological intertwining, and ethical instrumentalization that has followed in the de-absolutizing path laid by, among others, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Through an examination of the dialogical relations between persons described by Buber, and the relations of discipline between persons and the world described by Emerson, we will be able to resurrect a sense of immanent, non-absolute religious practice in the era of postmodernity, after the death of the transcendent God and the end of absolutist metaphysics.

II. Metaphysics of immanence and transcendence, and modern epistemologies of the transcendental

The general task of both philosophy and religion has, up to the end of modernity, been to solve the riddle of reality by appealing to absolute Ideas, forms, or principles, making the attempt to think of being qua being, or being as it is in itself. I find it helpful to think of this shared task in the context of the categories of transcendence, the transcendental, and immanence. In some cases, it seemed that philosophy and religion both inquired after the absolute, abstract, and transcendent natures of otherwise concrete, immanent, and worldly objects, invoking Plato’s dualism of mind and matter to construct, with Plotinus, Augustine, and Aquinas, a Christian metaphysics of transcendent omnipotence and immanent creation. As
the handmaiden of theology, philosophy followed in step by exploring the immanent world as the locus of revelations about an absolute, transcendent Good or God. However, as is the way of things, this initial metaphysical task of both philosophy and religion was challenged and problematized by that motley group of 17th – 19th century ‘modern’ philosophers, particularly the transcendental thinking of Kantian epistemology.

The shift to philosophical modernism – what we have been encouraged to call “the Enlightenment” – refers to the critical reorientation of thought in terms borrowing from Descartes’s *cogito*, or Kant’s transcendental apperception of phenomenal experience, or the promise of Reason to unlock the potential for knowledge in the individual. The ancient, metaphysical quest for certainty derived from transcendent, eternal, unchanging forms was replaced by modern, epistemological “questions of access or the conditions under which knowledge is possible.” 3 Neither rational principles (Descartes’s *cogito*) nor empirical sense data take priority, but rather transcendental categories of thought serve as the sieve of experience between subject and object, mind and world, and value and fact. 4 In the *Critique of Pure Reason* in particular, Kant describes the “transcendental” as “absolutely independent from all experience… [and] the *a priori* possibility of cognition,” or what can be assumed as the conditions for the possibility of sensible and intellectual experience and factual, objective knowledge of the world. 5 What is *a priori* for Kant is the absolute synthesis of subject and object that makes experience possible, 6 and the transcendental is a “field” of concepts where “the part of this field in which knowledge is possible for us is a territory;” experience of the world

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4 Malabou, Catherine (2014). “Can We Relinquish the Transcendental?” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28(3), 246
5 Quoted in Malabou, 243
6 Ibid, 246
becomes, after Kant, an endeavor in “possession, ownership, and mastery,” a unilateral acquisition of conceptual territory by the individual subject of knowledge. In modernity, the rational agent, not the divine, is the guarantor of knowledge, and enlightened philosophy after Kant takes its absolute cue from the transcendent, not the transcendent. But even in the midst of modernity no one had yet announced death of God – the transcendent absolute still persisted as beyond certain knowledge and comprehensive understanding by the experiencing subject, as the Romantic mysterium of faith in Novalis, the voice that speaks sola scriptura and not dogmatically to Schleiermacher, and who redeems the individual by grace. Room remained for immanent religious experience of the transcendent God.

III. Nietzsche and the death of God

It was Nietzsche who, in the 19th century, first declared a rupture from the modernist way of thinking by announcing the death of the transcendent, moral God of miraculous special revelation. He showed that we no longer need to speculate, as some of the Romantics did, about some noumenal reality beyond comprehension, neither must we inquire into the conditions of religious experience, because there is no longer religious experience – its object, God the absolute, has been killed, and we have “unchained this earth from its sun.” He accused believers themselves of killing their own God, claiming that those who heeded His commandment not to lie have themselves realized He was a lie. We no longer have a need for God, Nietzsche asserts, because his purpose as our moral and rational compass has become

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7 Ibid, 247
8 Vattimo, 81-82
10 Vattimo, 6
obsolete – in his place we have placed our own practices and our own capacity for Reason. It is not that Nietzsche was trying to articulate a growing preference for atheism, and neither was he making an absolute metaphysical claim to the effect that God does not, in fact, exist. He himself was aware that if he had made such an assertion, he would have been guilty of implicating himself in the very same modernist game of describing an objective and ultimate nature of reality, which just so happens to be devoid of God. Rather, Nietzsche’s announcement11 of the death of God was not the assertion or putting forward of a thesis about the order of things, but the taking notice of the gradual abolition of the divine as the absolute ground of Romantic religious thought. After the death of the transcendent divine, no such assertions could be put forward: there is no longer an absolute arbitration of the proper meaning and order of things, but only a perpetual state of play of these utterly worldly things.12 One therefore bites one’s own tongue during the announcement of God’s death, and indeed to appreciate the declaration requires a taste for irony: after Nietzsche, the a priori of one’s thought and action are only those maxims that work best for that individual. With the death of the moral, transcendent God has followed the end of a singular, discursive metanarrative and “right” way to think about the world, and it appears to leave a profligate perspectivalism in its wake. While this irony of claiming that no absolute claims can be made will not be lost during our considerations of Buber and Emerson, we will not find ourselves endorsing some unrestricted relativism.

IV. Heidegger and the end of absolute metaphysics

Carrying Nietzsche’s revelation into the 20th century was the task of Heidegger. It was he who announced a parallel rupture in our categories of thinking the absolute metaphysically

11 Ibid, 12
12 Ibid, 3
and objectively. His was not the death of the moral, transcendent God of believers who
 guaranteed truth – Nietzsche had already written this obituary – but the death of the God of the
 philosophers, the loss of metaphysical assurance that there even was a true, objective, and stable
 order of the world to be uncovered. As with Nietzsche, Heidegger is not asserting that reality
 is structured in some other way than has been previously thought; this would not mark the end
 of metaphysics, but simply a shift to a new paradigm still rooted in metaphysical thinking.
 Instead, Heidegger gradually withdraws from making any absolute claim or affirmation
 whatsoever about the structure of being qua being, but announces a reconception of ‘being’ and
 ‘truth’ in fundamentally different terms.

 The end of absolutist metaphysics means the end of thinking of being objectively, in
 loosely Platonic terms of universal, immutable, transcendent forms that are “indifferent to the
 fact of being thought.” For Heidegger, fundamental ontology proceeded phenomenologically:
 being was woven with human existence as free, open, and plurivocal being-in-the-world, a
 being that is said in many ways and that is incompatible with the manifestation, in modern,
 technologized society, of the absolute, objective thinking of metaphysics. In other words,
 Heidegger’s ontological principle of immanent being-in-the-world rejects a metaphysical
 invocation of the objective, transcendent absolute, an echo of the death of the transcendent God.
 What does remain in Heidegger, however, is a notion of the transcendental as a correlation or
 synthesis of person and the world which responds to the contingency, dynamism, freedom, and
 open-ended manifestations of being-in-the-world.

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13 Ibid, 13, 15
14 Ibid, 4
15 Vattimo, 13; Malabou 248
16 Vattimo, 14
17 Malabou, 244
If thinking the metaphysical absolute objectively has failed to conform to the reality of being-in-the-world, then our metaphysical thinking must deal with the non-absolute, radically immanent, contingent, historical, concrete unfolding of being: being must be continuously rethought in new contexts and cannot be definitively pinned down. It is unsurprising, therefore, that religion, in order to reclaim its relevance in the postmodernity influenced by Heidegger, must rethink its traditional role of offering claims about metaphysical, transcendent, objective, or moral absolutes.

V. The immanence of the transcendental

Assuming (as I will) that we have been convinced to abandon these ancient and modern ways of philosophizing absolutely and with certainty, we find ourselves in league with postmodernity, and the world no longer presents itself as having a solid structure or foundation against which we can craft our thinking. The lines have blurred, or have disintegrated altogether. We have lost our access to the transcendent Absolute because our access to the world has been called into question by modernity. Worse still, we can no longer rely on our epistemological foundations since the modern mission to obtain objectivity has failed, but must instead recognize the constant influence of culture and context on our now-perspectival thinking. Now, in the postmodern era, we receive paradigms historically, and risk tentative conjectures about their veracity, adhere to them in good faith, paying more heed to contingency and less to certainty. In general, our thinking has become instrumental, rather

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18 Vattimo, 22
20 Vattimo, 8
21 Ryder, 94
than descriptive, as philosophy turns from thought to action,\textsuperscript{22} from evaluating the world as a spectator to creating the world as a living, human person.

The devotee to Judeo-Christianity can respond to the announcement of God’s death with the simple denial of either (or both) the death of the objective, moral, transcendent God declared by Nietzsche, or the parallel rejection in Heidegger of absolutist metaphysics and the dismissal of the God of the philosophers. Even though it is beyond my present purposes to offer a fuller defense of Nietzsche’s or Heidegger’s rejection of the absolute, these two prominent voices in the history of philosophy present an acute challenge to any inheritor of religious tradition who wishes to remain philosophically relevant: to offer a response, a renewed narrative of creation, sin, and salvation, an apologetic eulogy in the wake of God’s death as the transcendent absolute of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. The goal of this essay will be, therefore, to give the sacredness of religiosity a voice in the secular philosophical era of postmodernity, and I will attempt to do this by highlighting what I think of as the immanence of the transcendental: a thinking of being \textit{qua} relation between persons and persons and the world that draws from the philosophies of Martin Buber and Ralph Waldo Emerson. We will follow Heidegger’s hesitation against making make any absolute metaphysical claims, rejecting the abstract objectivity of transcendence (so, the Platonic dualism between immanence and transcendence) in favor of the concrete contingency of the immanence. We minimize epistemological applications of the transcendental by focusing on the conditions of religious experience as irreducible, reciprocal, and non-absolute relations between persons and persons and the world – an \textit{a priori} of relation. Lastly, our ethics now demands flexible methodology and instrumentalization as philosophy has moved from a consideration of being to becoming

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
and made a turn toward creative or active thinking – the state of play brought about by Nietzsche. After a survey of the religious though of Buber and Emerson, we will return to these themes in the concluding chapter to evaluate the efficacy of these religious responses to postmodernity.
Chapter 2: Martin Buber and I and Thou

I. Buber’s project in I and Thou

When Martin Buber’s Ich und Du was translated into English in 1937, fourteen years after its initial publication, it became I and Thou.23 It was endorsed almost immediately by Protestant theologians of the time – theologians who, unsurprisingly, were enticed by the preliminary translation of Buber’s du into the English Thou. They naturally assumed that a book about the relation between I and Thou would serve as a new source of theological doctrine to add to their existing metaphysical orthodoxy.24 They were, however, misled, and Buber’s philosophy continues to be misread as yet another supplement to centuries of already contentious theology. Buber was, in fact, attempting “to get back to the roots”25 of religious tradition, not to declare this or that canonical truth as superior to the rest, but for the sake of saving religion from the misrepresentation and misconstrual of what was once the primitive,26 religious and relational attitude of humanity.

The German du that Buber actually uses is “is spontaneous and unpretentious, remote from formality, pomp, and dignity,”27 while the English Thou calls to mind “the God of the pulpits... [and] has no place whatever in the language of direct, nonliterary, spontaneous

24 From Kaufmann’s Prologue, 20
25 Prologue, 32
26 Buber, 73
27 Prologue, 14
human relationships.”28 These spontaneous human relationships were the intended focus of Buber’s philosophy; he was not proposing an objective philosophy of any essential subject, nor of any pure Being-in-itself, but rather a down-to-earth philosophy of “the actual human being, of you and me, of our life and our world,”29 of the human condition of communal existence. Neither was he simply continuing the explicit theological legacy that preceded him, but was launching “a sharp attack on all talk about God and all pretensions to knowledge about God”30 to which the traditional orthodoxy aspired. The divine relationship is, for Buber, much more closely related to the everyday social relationships between living, active human beings, those that unfold spontaneously between me and du.31 Buber had a unique “understanding [of] ‘theological’ as describing the experience of speaking to God rather than propositions about God,”32 or equivalently, a theological activity of speaking to du rather than about du, or of a concrete encounter between persons33 that is unlike any abstract thinking or theologizing.

Nevertheless, Buber—and the rest of us—must commandeer these abstractions and rational conceptualizations if the message about our concrete existence as relational human beings is to be legitimate. Abstraction, as I will be using it, involves a philosophical effort to rationalize the constitutive character of some phenomenon or other. If one presumes that Buber’s use of these abstractions indicates his taking of them as real and direct correspondences to their actual referents, one is easily deceived by his flowery, theological diction and the aesthetic presentation of his ideas into reading his larger philosophical message as an

28 Ibid, 14-15
29 Buber, 65
30 Prologue, 20-21
31 Buber, 171, Kaufmann’s chosen translation of the German du is the English you. Du is used in this essay to refer to textual usages of “you.” This is done in order to give du a clean set of connotations developed by this thesis which oppose it to thou, as well as emphasize its nature of spontaneous familiarity.
33 Buber, 112
endorsement of romanticism, or else as a promotion of some sort of otherworldly mysticism.\textsuperscript{34} Ich und Du, however, represents a strict abhorrence of any mysticism, romanticism, or some such teaching whose concepts transcend the concrete world; its terms concern only this world and this life, the immanent here and now.\textsuperscript{35} To succumb to this mystical interpretation of Buber’s philosophy is to avoid dealing directly with the concrete ethical challenge underlying the abstract language,\textsuperscript{36} and to miss Buber’s decidedly anti-romantic point that “the sacred is here and now.”\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, “we are not so rich that we can do without tradition,”\textsuperscript{38} but we must reflect on Buber’s traditional abstractions carefully and relearn their import. His is not strictly an unyielding, objective abstraction of the world into transcendent ideas, but a fluid and deliberate abstraction of our concrete existence as persons within the world. It is a philosophy whose truths ground us in reciprocal, present, and active engagement with the world and with other persons – it points to du and is not about du. Buber abstracts the encounter with du to show how the Sabbath exists for us at all times and in every day,\textsuperscript{39} and he abstracts from the immanent, concrete encounter with other people in order to recognize “infinity and eternity”\textsuperscript{40} in direct, spontaneous, and active human relationships.

Buber’s philosophy therefore lends itself to the project of orienting the divine in immanence by sanctifying the secular\textsuperscript{41} and by focusing on the tangible “sense of intimacy”\textsuperscript{42} that manifests itself in the real social relationships between human beings.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{34} Prologue, 23, 25
\textsuperscript{35} Buber, 159
\textsuperscript{36} Prologue, 19
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 26
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 31
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 30
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 23
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 37
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 38
relationship with \textit{du} is sustained by “genuine dialogue”; it encourages one “to listen and communicate”\textsuperscript{44} in a more profound and practicable way, and promotes a sense of familial community that has been – and seems continually to be – lacking. For these reasons, what follows will not be concerned with the traditional theological relation between an individual who knows something about Thou, but instead with the \textit{a priori} of lived, reciprocal relationships between one individual and another, between I and \textit{du}. This will be an invitation to preserve what is desirable in the religious life while shedding what has come to contaminate the genuine spiritual relationship of dialogue and the sense of communal affirmation between persons.

In this chapter, I will (in section II) offer Buber’s implicit cautioning against taking his philosophy to be an objective abstraction of transcendent or immutable ideas that miss the intended target of concrete existence. The rationalization of God as \textit{Thou} in traditional theology deliberately overlooks the immanence of the divine in this way, and likewise the conceptualization of the individual as a subject fails to recognize the concreteness of personal relation. To abstract in this objective manner – in which the subject of experience is itself an object – is to adopt the attitude Buber calls “I-It.” After detailing the one philosophical attitude, I will (in section III) attend to the other, the mode of comportment of engaging the world in a personal manner, wholly and presently in confrontation of subjectivity, as an active person-in-relation and not as an experiencing subject – that is, the attitude of “I-\textit{du}.” Although presented through traditional abstractions, the relation described by I-\textit{du} can only be fully and actually comprehended as it is actively brought to bear on the concrete world. The immediate relationship between persons, from I to \textit{du}, are those that happen in the present, concrete encounter. It is in this sense of personal, present encounter that Buber’s is crafting a theological

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 22
activity that happens in immanence, and not another explicit, strictly and objectively abstract theology of transcendence. I will therefore (in section IV) conclude by detailing how Buber takes the personal I-\textit{du} relationship to be indicative of an immanent, theological relationship with the divine, that is, by carving out room for God in our concrete existence.

II. Objective abstraction, causality, the experiencing subject as an object, and I-It

According to Buber, there are two basic words, or word-pairs, one can speak: I-\textit{du} and I-It. By “speaking” one or the other word, one relates to the world according to one or the other manner. One’s “being” is situated in a unique “mode of existence,” and one establishes a particular “state of relationship” with the world. From these two basic modes of comportment or philosophical attitudes can be drawn several parallel and interrelated distinctions: between subjectivity and objectivity, between person and subject, between active participation and reflective experience, and “between presence and object.” Put differently, I-It and I-\textit{du} are distinguished as, on the one hand, the objective abstraction of oneself as an impersonal subject whose reflection and experiences are about It, the causal world of objects, and on the other hand, the personal abstraction (that is, the making abstract of subjectivity) of

\begin{itemize}
\item Buber, 53
\item Ibid, 54
\item Kohanski, Alexander S. \textit{An Analytical Interpretation of Martin Buber’s I and Thou} (New York: Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 1975), 45.
\item Buber, 54
\item Ibid, 53
\item Kohanski, 46
\item Buber, 113, certain passages in \textit{I and Thou} establish this contrast between subjectivity and objectivity. What is important is to keep in mind that \textit{persons} relate to the world in \textit{subjectivity} following Buber, and that \textit{subjects} relate to the world in \textit{objectivity} following the modern division of subject and object.
\item Ibid, 63
\end{itemize}
oneself as a devoted, whole person who actively participates in the spontaneous, present confrontation\(^{53}\) and reciprocal relation to \(du\).

The I-It attitude involves reckoning with the world of objects as an “experiencing subject,”\(^{54}\) that is to say, one honors the subject-object dichotomy, marking a rift between the mediated experiences of the reflective subject from the objective, concrete world.\(^{55}\) The picture, therefore, is of a “functional one-dimensionality of a subject that experiences and uses objects”\(^{56}\) and “directs itself toward to It-for-itself, [and] takes possession of it.”\(^{57}\) I-It is an attitude that spawns only “activities that have something for their object.”\(^{58}\) That is, of acting on and perceiving the world as a collection of individual objects that must be isolated, made use of, and given over to conceptual rigidification and universalization in the style of modernity.

Buber’s subject experiences properties, processes, and objects in space and time; in general, reflective experience is of a world of reliability and measurability\(^{59}\) whose objects are meticulously conceptualized and assimilated into knowledge.\(^{60}\) Such objective abstraction proceeds largely on the presumption of the “unlimited sway” of causality\(^{61}\) in the world, and that “man is yoked into an inescapable process that he cannot resist.”\(^{62}\) This is the experience of the world as a physical system whose objects are strung together by causal laws of various

\(^{53}\) Ibid, 81, “confrontation” is used equivalently with “encounter”  
\(^{54}\) Ibid, 73, experience comes from the German, erfährt. Buber uses this, and the etymologically related befährt, which means “to drive over the surface of something,” to describe a superficial experience of the world  
\(^{55}\) Kohanski, 94  
\(^{56}\) Buber, 80  
\(^{57}\) Kohanski, 66  
\(^{58}\) Buber, 54-55  
\(^{59}\) Ibid, 82  
\(^{60}\) Ibid, 90  
\(^{61}\) Ibid, 100, assuming we are not Humeans about causality, who might suppose that causal laws obtain only contingently and that the necessity of causality is not fundamental to any metaphysical, scientific, and physical understanding of the world  
\(^{62}\) Ibid, 105
levels of complexity. Objects exist along a spatiotemporal continuum, bounded and differentiated by one another, with each necessarily related as the effect of some earlier interaction of objects, and each part of the cause of some effect to follow. Experience becomes the project of retroactively making sense of the given course of objective phenomena, proceeding largely as a structuring of the causal processes and interactions between “objects [which] consist in having been… [in] standing still, ceasing, breaking off, becoming rigid, standing out.”

Importantly, “there is no I as such” – one cannot specify the “I” that speaks one or the other basic word separately from the “I”‘s intimate involvement with the other member of the word-pair. The experiencing subject of I-It, then, becomes itself another It in the world, determined to be “this way and not that… [or else as] being-that-way” for this or that purpose, relative to the rest. The experiencing subject shares with objects the nature of being divided from and bordered by the rest, itself a mere sum of properties, isolated and distinct from what lies outside of it, and is privileged only in its one-dimensional locus of experiencing the rest of the world. The experiencing subject remains itself “ordered into a system of cause and effect,” essentially another object abstracted from the world, and no different than the rest of It.

Experience is therefore, according to Buber, an objective reflection about the world, conducted by a one-dimensional subject that understands the causal phenomena. This experiential, objective attitude of I-It focuses on the amalgamated presentation of causally-related phenomena, mediates this experience through the use of empirical evidence, figures,

63 Ibid, 100
64 Ibid, 63-64
65 Ibid, 54
66 Ibid, 113
67 Kohanski, 67
68 Ibid, 67
and forms, and finally deduces and constructs probabilistic frameworks that afford some predictive grasp of the structure of the world – if not actually getting at the “real” world order as it is “in-itself.” The continuum of causality is necessary to explain the operation of the objective world, but Buber makes us “aware of the fact that in real living experience the connection is of an immediate relation between beings neither of which causes the other.”

The history of the human race is painted with the enculturation of the I-It attitude; humanity has more and more acquired knowledge of a deterministic natural world, means and maps of social differentiation, and increased technical capacity, but in all of this, Buber warns, something has been lost.

Something lost? Where else is there true progress if not in the systematic induction of the way the world is from the causal evidence brought forth from the past? How can one move forward through life without first reevaluating where he has come from and constructing a life only from those solidly confirmed facts? Buber wonders, quite justifiably, that because after all fantasizing and idealizing “one must after all return into ‘the world’ [of objects], why not stay in it in the first place?”

What about the human condition is lacking in objective abstraction, in the attitude of I-It, which is not exhausted by experience and use of objects according to causal laws?

Far from dismissing as unnecessary or immoral the scientific or empirical knowledge of things as objects, Buber’s philosophical message is to implore that the I-It attitude “should do its work faithfully and immerse itself and disappear in that truth of the relation which surpasses

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69 Ibid, 83. What Kohanski is referring to by “living experience” I take to be “confrontation” and “encounter.”
70 Buber, 87-89
71 Ibid, 85
understanding and embraces what is understandable.”

The I-It attitude of objective experience that depends on causality only fails to recognize a crucial element of human existence: devotion, that is, the active giving of one’s whole being for the sake of participating with and affirming another being to whom one relates and encounters. The experiential and causal models of the world condemn as intolerable the actuality of present participation and immediate relation, and deny freedom and liberation, neglecting thereby the relation to spontaneous presence circumscribing reflective experience and objective abstraction. Instead, the mode of I-It renders existence absurd because one “does not participate in any actuality, nor does he gain any... the object is always It, that which is not actual.” I-It sets up shop within a “demonic absurdity” of ubiquitous causality, determining that an individual is only ever a reflective subject, comported towards the world as it is mediated through the partiality and impersonality of experience and use. The experiential attitude of I-It is not the same as devoted participation with the world; objective abstraction occurs only within the individual, one-dimensionally, after the fact and in light of the objective phenomena, and not, as with reciprocal participation, presently between the individual and the world. Neither, moreover, does the objective world, taken as such, reciprocally participate or involve itself in experience, but merely “allows itself to be experienced” by the impersonal subject, neither helping nor hindering the mediation, and contributing nothing of itself to the experience. The emphatic prioritization of experience and use leaves no room for concrete actualization through present,

72 Ibid, 91
73 Prologue, 12
74 Ibid, 11
75 Buber, 105
76 Ibid, 114
77 Ibid, 102-103
78 Ibid, 56
79 Ibid, 56
80 Kohanski, 47
reciprocal participation, and any promise of salvation or actualization sounds empty and hollow, as any sort of existence or understanding that is not presumptively conditioned by the experience of objects is rendered insignificant.

Objective abstraction in I-It is therefore an attitude into which one enters only partially, as an experiencing subject and never as a wholly spontaneous and devotionally participating person-in-relation.\footnote{Buber, 54} Reflection about the world is a “remoteness from du,” an impersonal relation that brings order to one’s mode of existence, but fails to recognize that “an ordered world is not the world order.”\footnote{Ibid, 82} The dynamic world order of reciprocal spontaneity and participatory activity only comes to the fore in the attitude of I-du.

III. Personal abstraction, presence, the whole person as spontaneity and active participation, and I-du

One immediately confronts the world in the fullness of possibility through the reciprocal relation of the basic word I-du. This personal philosophical attitude has been overlooked as philosophy has objectively abstracted the subject as the locus of one-dimensional and impersonal reflection. I-du therefore demands rejuvenation for the sake of substantiating personal dialogue and community through its recognition of the immediate, spontaneous, and devotional aspects of the relations between persons.

Whereas I-It is the mode of a subject experiencing objects of reflection, I-du is the mode of existence of the person who immediately and presently confronts another. Presence, “in the sense of relation, is not a point marking off time from the future,” but instead is the “actual, full present that arises only as [du] becomes present, is there opposite me, and that takes place in the
meeting, in the relation.”83 The relation to du is not the same as the experience of some object, but of meeting another; the “a priori of relation… is not what is evanescent and passes but what confronts us, waiting and enduring.”84 Presence is the here-and-now moment of immediate relation to the entirety of another existing being, a confrontation separate from the continuum of space and time, and at once “always new”85 as the other “is there.”

Presence is neither the condition for experience, nor is it conditioned by experience; one is either presently in confrontation with du, or else is reflecting on some experience. Experience, recall, is the one-dimensional and unilateral appreciation by a subject of an It in space and time, and is of nothing between subject and world, while the present relation to du is an immediate and devotionally reciprocal engagement between beings. As soon as we presume to have a hold on what is presently confronting us, we have abandoned the movement and reciprocity of the relation; we cannot “get at” du one-dimensionally because du is in the same moment “getting at” us in the reciprocal encounter. The relation to du “is confirmed in and of itself,” and we can recognize its actuality even as we have “no knowledge of it whereby to diminish or alleviate its mysteriousness.”86 The reality of presence, therefore, “cannot be transferred or expressed as a universally valid and generally accepted piece[s] of knowledge,”87 and Buber’s abstractions of these phenomena of subjectivity are not intended to fix or pin down the reality of the encounter. Rather the encounter can be hinted at and be substantiated enough to at least be recognized.

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83 Kohanski, 52-53
84 Buber, 64, 78
85 Ibid, 83
86 Kohanski, 138-139
87 Buber, 159
It is for the sake of restoring the natural, primitive, and personal relation to what is present – the relation between I and du – that Buber is abstracting subjectivity, challenging one to recognize also the inexpressible, present, and immediate encounter with another, as opposed to only abstracting the world of objects for the sake of experience and use. Instead of speaking as a subject who experiences the causal world of objects, participating as a person-in-relation invites the spontaneity of reciprocal subjectivity without encumbering the relation with the one-dimensionality the experiencing subject. The person who confronts du seizes at once “everything possible… [and all] potentialities,” and one is nothing other than this whole, spontaneous collectivity of possible decisions and choices. The person is immediately an “active whole” – one’s whole being, the capacity to act and all available decisive possibilities, are brought to the fore in the encounter with du, and the responsibility of choice “fills the firmament.” The one who speaks I-du is no longer “the abstracted self but the whole, undiminished” person, an unconditioned unity of active possibility ready to actualize the other, du, in present confrontation. The encounter with du does not mean that one neglects “any of the modes of contemplation” involved with experience, but rather all of the modes of contemplation are “included and inseparably fused” into the active, spontaneous whole. Should one “pull and tear,” both parties in the relation can become a multiplicity of conditioned particulars of experience, and the relation of the I “is no longer [with] du.” The relation, by its spontaneity and immediacy, involves no application of concepts, nor knowledge, nor

88 Ibid, 69-70
89 Ibid, 101
90 Ibid, 125
91 Ibid, 54
92 Ibid, 59
93 Ibid, 137
94 Ibid, 58
95 Ibid, 59
imagination, nor purpose, each of which pull and tear at the world and make it disjointed. It is instead a plunging “from particularity into wholeness” of action as a member of the relation, such that “every [isolated] means is an obstacle” to the relation, means which suffer from the one-dimensionality of mediate, objective experience as opposed to the reciprocal spontaneity of the encounter. Buber’s personal abstraction of subjectivity – that capacity to bring all possibilities to the fore in the present moment and to relate spontaneously as an active whole – affirms our actuality and that devotional aspect of ourselves as persons which cannot be derived from our reflective and objective understanding of the world.

As you confront du, this partner in the relation “does not stand outside you, [but] touches your ground,” at which point, ground-to-ground, the boundary between I and du blurs. The person as an active whole stands ready to relate; the totality of possibilities is called at once to an actualization through devoted participation with the other. In so doing, there is in the relation to du that confronts you and touches your ground an invitation to and initiation of exclusive reciprocity – the person at once fully recognizes, and is recognized by, another. The relation to du offers “the whole abundance of actual reciprocity, of being admitted, [and] of being associated,” which is ultimately foundational to any sort of genuine dialogue or community between persons. I-du is, therefore, that unreflective and spontaneous mode of being a person, standing before the present confrontation by another, and willing to communicate and relate reciprocally with the partner-in-relation in the devotion of dialogue and community.

96 Ibid, 62-63
97 Ibid, 84
98 Ibid, 58
99 Ibid, 62
100 Ibid, 158
One thus surpasses the mere experience of things and reaches the horizon that borders the understandable and ordered world of objects,\textsuperscript{101} that is, the world ordering relation to \textit{du}. By uttering the basic word \textit{I-du}, one is neither reflecting upon nor experiencing this or that particular thing at the expense of the rest, but rather “has nothing. But he stands in relation.”\textsuperscript{102}

One has nothing in the sense of having no object at hand, but instead “participate[s] without being able to appropriate,”\textsuperscript{103} is directed beyond oneself in the fullness of possible action without pinning the other down, and preserves the sheer “will to communicate”\textsuperscript{104} and reciprocally participate with another. To “have” something in this sense is to have something to experience or use. To stand in a relation in which one has nothing, in contrast, is to be related in a way that forbids the experience and use of something, and endorses only the endless multiplicity in the moment of reciprocal participation and communication. \textit{I-du} is the posture of being directed \textit{toward} and participating \textit{with} the world, and not the reflective laying claim to some objective abstraction \textit{about} the world.

One might here object that all relations are conditional and mediated, or that the person in relation to \textit{du}, even with all the possibilities of being at once unified in spontaneous relation to the present confrontation, is nonetheless still somehow conditioned by the relation; there must be mediation “all the way down.” However, it seems to me that one uses conditionality only in those considerations when the members of the relation can be considered by themselves, as isolated or disjointed from one another. The partners are antecedently conditioned by what they are not, the possibilities have already been limited and delineated, and the relation is necessarily mediated by having the members opposed to, bounded by, standing apart from, or

\begin{footnotes}
\item[101] Ibid, 81
\item[102] Ibid, 55
\item[103] Ibid, 113
\item[104] Kohanski, 3
\end{footnotes}
in contrast to something else. In other words, the advocate for this pervasive conditionality has already presupposed the attitude of I-It, and has begged the question on objectivity. A conditional relation is not the relation between active, whole persons because the former relation necessarily invokes means, partiality, and disjointedness, and thus prevents the exclusive reciprocity of the latter; one is conditioned by and set against another, and wholeness and reciprocity are severed. The relation to du, however, can be thought to be unconditional because it necessarily involves exclusive reciprocity within interdependent active wholes; there is no conditioning of one partner by the other because the collective possibilities of one are presently and entirely wrapped up in the actualizing confrontation by the other. The decisive moments of devoted, active participation reinforce and thrive in reciprocal subjectivity; I-du is a mode of presently “being-with,”¹⁰⁵ of participating in an actuality through “living intercourse.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, there is no mediation of the partners-in-relation because, in fact, there is only the present relation. Inasmuch as a conditioned relation between beings sets the partners against or contrasted with one another, the immediate relation to du is unconditioned because, in that present moment, neither partner can be thought of as isolated or disjointed from the other.

Buber deems the exemplar of this relation to du to be the child.¹⁰⁷ He observes that before a child is born, he rests in a “pure natural association...[and] a bodily reciprocity” to the mother.¹⁰⁸ The pregnant mother’s life always regards her child’s, and so also the child’s existence is utterly wrapped up in the mother’s: the mother’s womb is the child’s, too.¹⁰⁹ Buber

¹⁰⁵ Buber, 113
¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 92
¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 76
¹⁰⁸ Ibid.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
describes that in pregnancy, one discovers unconditional reciprocity between child and mother, such that neither partner in the maternal relation subsists or can be thought of as apart from the other: a mother ceases to be exactly that without her child, and the child cannot be at all without the mother. Neither is the mother conditioned by the child, nor vice-versa; each is unconditionally itself only in the total confrontation with the other, and in every moment, the mother participates by giving the child life, and the child relates by drawing life from her.

Further, once born, the child begins to reconcile his existence with his larger world, and as before birth, comes to know the world and to give it meaning and substance through bodily reciprocity. Children know first and only relation, or else “the longing for relation is primary... as the category of being, as readiness... [as] the a priori of relation; the innate du.”110 The child reaches towards the world and invites its response, not as a subject and for the sake of assimilating the world into objectivity, but rather to call to it as another living being, as a mutual partner with whom one lives and engages. Buber writes that “it is in encounter that the creation reveals its formhood; it does not pour itself into the senses that are waiting but deigns to meet those that are reaching out,” a revelation which happens “through the reciprocal force of confrontation,”111 and a meeting which will be “the primal condition of salvation.”112

To be sure, talk of salvation packs some weight, and Buber risks carrying with it heavy connotations to the effect of the survival of the soul after death, or the total elimination of sin and evil which plagues the existence of every human person. Such terminal uses of salvation are not what was intended by the term. The I-du relation is, for Buber, the condition for salvation because it offers “the inexpressible confirmation of meaning... [such that] nothing can

110 Ibid, 78
111 Ibid, 77
112 Ibid, 138
henceforth be meaningless,” and, moreover, not because we have gained “meaning of ‘another life’ but that of this our life, not that of a ‘beyond’ but of this our world.” The basic word I-*du* lends itself to salvation because the relation to *du* invites solidarity between man and the world, and encourages one “to uplift and sanctify everything material” through the engagement and giving of oneself in participation. It is not that the person gains meaning by becoming better equipped to reckon with the world of objects, or by having acquired epistemological knowledge of things. Nor is it a self-imposed or individually crafted meaning in the typical existentialist sense. Rather, salvation is “an illuminating meaning, a direction-giving value, only if it has been revealed to me in my meeting with being.” The meaning gained in the encounter is a trusting and faithfulness in the other who provides a sense of direction, affirmation, and purpose, substantiated only within the relation between the person and *du*. The basic word I-*du* has the world to opening itself up and calling to the individual, inviting his participation and only thereby becoming meaningful as a sharing in trust and faith.

Importantly, the significance of the confrontation with *du*, and with it the meaning and salvation of this life, are necessarily contentless – content follows from experience, and meaning in such a strictly epistemic sense fails to capture the spontaneity and exclusively reciprocity of the encounter. A meaningful life is here lived in a way that almost “resemble[s] passivity… [and] has been called not-doing,” because the response to *du* involves only “silence… [and] the taciturn waiting in the unformed, undifferentiated, prelinguistic word” – meaning follows

113 Ibid, 158
114 Ibid, 159
115 Friedman, Maurice S. *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 76, 142
116 Ibid, 199
117 Ibid, 119, 281
118 Buber, 159
119 Ibid, 125
120 Ibid, 89
from a listening to the other “only when all speech has ceased within.”\textsuperscript{121} This means, therefore, that the meaning given by the I-\textit{du} relation is without constancy,\textsuperscript{122} and that, of all relations, “none are more evanescent. They leave no content that could be preserved”\textsuperscript{123} because “measure and comparison have fled.”\textsuperscript{124} From this we come to notice that the ineffability of “infinity and eternity” subsist in the present encounter with \textit{du}, and that only objective content, only the objects of experience and quantities and qualities and boundaries within the objective world, substantiate any sense of finite constancy. Something is constant only so long as it is consistently contextualized by what it is not, yet the indeterminate unconditionality of the relation to \textit{du} involves simultaneously and reciprocally both what is and what is not, as between persons wholly overwhelmed by the presence of another.

Lacking explicit content, the meaning and salvation afforded by the I-\textit{du} relation “does not wish to be interpreted by us – for that we lack the ability,” and it therefore “cannot be handed on as a valid ought.”\textsuperscript{125} Salvation consists only of “putting it to the proof in action… by each person in the uniqueness of his being and in the uniqueness of his life.”\textsuperscript{126} The contentless meaning is manifest at once, only in the sheer “capacity for decision,”\textsuperscript{127} in the reality of reciprocal, devoted participation, and the unconditionality of the present encounter. And yet, the reciprocal and “direct relationships [with \textit{du}] involve some action on what confronts us,”\textsuperscript{128} however here one must be mindful of Buber’s nuance.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 153
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, 80
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, 82
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, 83
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 159
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, 100
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 65
\end{flushright}
The unique person-in-relation-to-*du* becomes “the whole human being,” a concentration of possibility into an active whole that determines its salvation in “the decisive moment” faced many times every day. In the decisive moment, one straddles the line between actualization and possibility, and affirms at once “all the force of the other into the doing of the one, absorbing into actualization of what was chosen the undiminished passion of what was not chosen,” the fullness of genuine, free, and immediate decision. To maintain trust and faithfulness to *du*, one only relates as an active whole that is immediately together with another, as one inviting unconditional fellowship, owning up to the capacity for decision, and embracing the willingness to respond to the call of the other. The tangible proof of salvation is justified only in hindsight; conditional, explicit sense is made of the confrontation only once the reciprocity of the relation has lapsed and one is able to reflect on the resulting activity from without the relation.

Moreover, one cannot act in response to *du* by using means to achieve some end, even in the sense of acting according to moral imperatives; to do so is to act out of partiality, and not out of the wholeness of possibility. This responding according to some imperative involves either the arbitrariness of self-will, or else risks the objective one-dimensionality of experience and use which terminates of the reciprocity of the relation, and brings one out of the unconditioned wholeness of free decision and into the conditionality of forced, intentional activity. In responding to *du*, one is devoted exclusively to the other, giving oneself over in trust and in devoted participation, and therein finds salvation without having to seek it out.

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129 Ibid, 137
130 Ibid, 132
131 Ibid, 101
132 Friedman, 51
133 Buber, 109
134 Friedman, 63, 67
is to act out of passivity, a product of listening and heeding, not of one’s own will or understanding but of ineffable faithfulness to and responsibility for another. The person who freely decides in the present moment “no longer interferes, nor does he merely allow things to happen. He listens to that which grows, to the way of Being in the world, not in order to be carried along by it but rather to actualize it in the manner in which it, needing him, wants to be actualized by him – with human spirit and human deed, with human life and human death.”

One listens to du in the direct relation, silently heeds without experiencing, and receives the confrontation without utilizing it. Any more than this breaks the person out of the unconditionality and exclusiveness of the relation and catapults the subject into partiality and limited possibility, turning du into an It and severing the reciprocity of the relationship. If we take Buber seriously, we find no clear-cut or definite answers to the questions of the meaning of human existence or the method of the moral life, because no single answer to either can be given; these must be answered repeatedly, through the devoted participation of the person in each unique, present encounter, and through the actualization of possibilities collected in the moment of decision.

IV. The eternal du, God, and the ineffable here and now of immanent and personal spirit

There is a risk that the preceding discussion might suggest that one only ever speaks one or the other basic word, I-It or I-du, once and for all time. However, Buber observes that it “is the sublime melancholy of our lot that every du must become an It in our world…as soon as the relationship…is permeated by means.” Once the moment of exclusive confrontation has

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135 Buber, 109
136 Ibid, 90
137 Ibid, 89
138 Ibid, 69
lapsed, and the infinitude of possibilities have been condensed to a single actuality, the relation to du is conceptualized and made abstract, committed to knowledge and memory, and assigned a role or purpose that is without the faithfulness and trust that first brought it into being – du inevitably “becomes an object among objects… [and is] assigned its measure and boundary.”\(^{139}\)

Existence in and communication with the world “is an intricately entangled series of events that is tortuously dual,”\(^{140}\) and the immediate encounter with du inevitably and by its very nature “never lasts long.”\(^{141}\) The present moments of relation may come and go, or may not come at all; one might always stand in the constant relation to the world as an experiencing subject who “pulls and tears” at the world of objects, or one may, from time to time, find oneself relating to the world through the spontaneity, brevity, and immediacy of confrontation. It is therefore ever an aspiration, and not a continuous, lived reality, for one to always speak the basic word I-du.

Salvation, the contentless meaning brought to bear on life through devoted participation, has been shown to not be a “what” because it offers no explicit guidance for our actions; it is rather a “how” – that is, how persons come to relate to one another, with devotion and active participation, in the openness and reciprocity that is the potential for dialogue and community, or “that power which alone can enable man to live in the spirit.”\(^{142}\) “Spirit,” for Buber, is the capacity to relate between persons; spirit “is word,” the essence of reciprocal communication and genuine dialogue, and involves simultaneously the present confrontation of du and “man’s response to his du.”\(^{143}\) It is the meaningful “word” that carries with it neither description nor reference, but is “word” as it is presently spoken, “word” as the responsive

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\(^{139}\) Ibid, 68
\(^{140}\) Ibid, 69
\(^{141}\) Ibid, 68
\(^{142}\) Ibid, 89
\(^{143}\) Ibid
communication by the whole person-in-relation to the world. Buber does not mean by this that spirit corresponds to the literal spoken word or language of an individual, but more than this, that spirituality is the underlying capacity for dialogue and shared community itself, an acknowledgment of the realm of unconditional, infinite possibility between persons, the realm of reciprocity that is “between I and du.”¹⁴⁴ Just as the relation to du “confronts us, waiting and enduring,” so, too, spirit “has not yet entered the world but is ready to do so and now becomes present.”¹⁴⁵ Spirit is that which is “not at hand,”¹⁴⁶ but that is “the genesis of word and form,”¹⁴⁷ and from which manifests “the spiritual forms that are ‘at hand’… the indivisible wholeness of something spoken.”¹⁴⁸ Spirituality, or the attitude of one who decides to participate without appropriating, is to speak “the word [that] cannot be spoken except to another; it is ‘man’s will to communicate.’ Speech is identical to revelation.”¹⁴⁹

Spirit, here taken to mean the unconditional, reciprocal responsiveness of the whole person presently encountering another, offers us a glimpse of “the eternal du,”¹⁵⁰ and captures Buber’s invocation of the return to God.¹⁵¹ “God” is “the most burdened of human words,”¹⁵² the name that has been so laden with theological misunderstanding and false metaphysical connotations that it is has become fashionable to reject. God has been drawn into the context of experience, has been turned into “the logical and dialectical God of the theologians” by having been “put into a system, enclosed in an idea, [and] thought about philosophically as… the ‘once

¹⁴⁴ Ibid
¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 174
¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 175
¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 176
¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 174
¹⁴⁹ Kohanski, 3
¹⁵⁰ Buber, 123
¹⁵¹ Prologue, 35-36, Umkehr, Buber’s German translation of the Hebrew t’shuvah, which means “the return to God.”
¹⁵² Buber, 123
for all’ of dogma.” However, “precisely for this reason,” writes Buber, “[God] is the most imperishable and unavoidable” word. Spirituality, and God with it, has been corrupted by the attitude of I-It, the one-dimensional movement of experience from object to subject, at the expense of the more immediate relation to du that, for Buber, is the mark of the divine.

In the relation to the eternal du, a “mutuality” is present “of the kind that can obtain only between persons.” This is not to treat God definitely and strictly as a person, but as “also a person,” by the fact that God, the eternal du of the world, “enters into a direct relationship to us human beings through creative, revelatory, and redemptive acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relationship to him.” Buber’s God is the cosmic other of whom we have no experience, but who calls to us and to whom we respond by speaking the basic word I-du, and “if you say ‘soul of my soul’ you have not said too much.” The present and active wholeness of persons, and the unconditional reciprocity, spontaneity, and contentless meaning affirmed by the infinitude of possibilities in the relation to another, are applicable to the relation to God as well. God is the “absolute person” that cannot be relativized or fully condensed to a single abstraction, as God is “the wholly other; but he is also the wholly same...he is the mysterium tremendum that appears and overwhelms; but he is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I.”

Importantly, the relation to the eternal du involves “unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness” at once. It remains the exclusive, participatory, and

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153 Friedman, 113
154 Buber, 123
155 Ibid, 181
156 Ibid, 180-181
157 Ibid, 84
158 Ibid, 181
159 Ibid, 127
160 Ibid
unconditional relationship between I and du, while also including all other personal relationships and standing as that to which all other relationships point. Nothing is experienced of this peculiar relationship to God, but rather we “grasp everything in him,”161 and indeed, all “isolated moments of relationships join for a world life of association.”162 One cannot even seek God, as “there is no God-seeking because there is nothing where one could not find him.”163 This being the case, then in all personal relations “if [one] commits himself he also cannot remain godless,”164 as Buber has it that whenever one “addresses with his whole devoted being the du of his life that cannot be restricted by any other, he addresses God.”165 Buber’s God is not the transcendent God of the philosophers, but the eternal du who confronts us in every present moment of encounter with the world.

The return inherent in Buber’s spirituality “involves a change not only of the goal [of spirituality] but also of the kind of movement.”166 The return is more than the assuming of a responsive state of mind, but is the decisive “act of return”167 embodied by the whole, concrete person. In the return, one abandons oneself to the real “problematic of life,” denies oneself the “once for all” absolute of tradition, and rejects the hopeful notion of a paradisiacal life after death that makes death itself “unreal or unserious, [and] hinder[s] our recognition of the limits of finitude as the threshold of eternity.”168 The decision to return to God, that is, to comport oneself in devoted, reciprocal participation with du, is an ongoing and lifelong mission, an aspiration to communicate with the world that comes from “the depths of spontaneity unto

161 Ibid
162 Ibid, 149
163 Ibid, 128
164 Ibid, 143
165 Ibid, 124
166 Ibid, 154
167 Prologue, 36
168 Friedman, 115
death...but this action no longer imposes itself upon the world, it grows upon it as if it were non-action,“\textsuperscript{169} and involves the free, unconditional decision to affirm the actuality of du. It is the stage of spirituality beyond the ethical, wherein one’s decision “has soared way beyond duty and obligation – but not because he has moved away from the world; but rather because he has come truly close to it.”\textsuperscript{170} Talk of God and spirituality is unavoidable, and demands resuscitation by the expulsion of objective and experiential content, because the devotion and commitment of one’s whole being are supremely necessary for genuine dialogue and community between persons.

This means that the relation to the eternal du need not, and in fact must not, imply a movement beyond the concrete world, because, as with all relations between I and du, the confrontation unfolds in the present moment – here and now – and not in some otherworldly, transcendent beyond. Indeed, “we try to lift more than we can if we speak of [the relation to God] as something beyond the encounter.”\textsuperscript{171} Neither, moreover, should grasping everything in the relation to the eternal du mean that we conceive of God as an absolute Idea or Principle, as in this we still revere God as some “‘particular something’… [and this leaves us] always directed toward the experience and use of an It, a thing, an object of enjoyment.”\textsuperscript{172} There is neither experience nor knowledge of God, as this makes God an object, and turns the eternal du into an It. To go beyond the concrete encounter, or to invoke transcendence, absoluteness, or idealism, is idolatry. By rescuing God from the theologians, Buber does not intend that we should merely substitute one idol for another, more palatable one, or that by the destructive act of “‘smashing’ the idol… the diverted religious act would all by itself return to its proper

\textsuperscript{169} Buber, 157
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid, 156-157
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 124
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid, 154
object.”173 This substitution of one idol for another relies on the blasphemous174 presupposition that “man’s relation to the finite goods that he ‘idolizes’ is essentially the same as his relationship to God, as if only the object were different,” and that a “mere substitution” of intended objects is all that is needed.175 The only sense in which the theological doctrine of God is resurrected and re-sanctified is by making the flat assertion that God’s nature determines he cannot become an It,176 and is not at all an object about which we theologize.

Buber is right to ask, “What is it that is eternal…present in the here and now, of what we call revelation?”177 He answers with the fact that even from the wordless encounter “we receive what we did not have before… [and] it has been given to us,”178 that is, we receive the saving grace, meaning, and affirmation that comes from genuine participation with another human being. Life has been endowed with meaning, and the present relation to du and to other persons reveals the infinitude and eternality of devotion: it is a reciprocity between collections of possibilities that resists “the measure of the immeasurable and the limit of the unlimited;” defies understanding even “as an infinite sum of qualities that have been raised to transcendence; because it is not to be found either in or outside the world; because it cannot be experienced; because it cannot be thought.”179 Limited only to the infinitude of the living encounter, and without the delineation of experiential or conceptual knowledge of du, one is helpless if he attempts to prescribe a method for inviting the encounter – it defies conceptual comprehension. This is to say, in other words, that one must accept that the encounter it is the

173 Ibid, 153
174 Ibid, 154
175 Ibid, 153-154
176 Ibid, 123
177 Ibid, 157
178 Ibid, 158
179 Ibid, 161
“primally simple fact,” that it cannot be justified or rationalized because it is embraces infinitely and eternally all that lends itself to justification or rationalization. “The only genuine guarantee of continuity,” of salvation and actuality, is through bringing the relation to bear on life, through the return to the attitude of I-du and by “actualizing God in the world.” Indeed, “going forth is unteachable in the sense of prescriptions. It can only be indicated… [as] the total acceptance of the present.” God is never inferred from anything, nor is he rationalized or deduced as the source of something “given,” but rather in the encounter one finds God without seeking, and finds infinity and eternity in the here and now of confrontation with du.

180 Ibid, 126
181 Ibid, 163
182 Ibid, 126
183 Ibid, 128
Chapter 3: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalism

I. Emerson and Transcendentalism

Ralph Waldo Emerson is arguably the most renowned American philosopher, at least of those 19th century Transcendentalist authors of whom he was a contemporary. His writing is delicately crafted, invigorating and awe-inspiring, and speaks to the soul as would one’s favorite poetry. The continued intellectual relevance of Emersonian Transcendentalism rests in its emphatic recognition of the “original relation” between the world and humanity – or, more accurately, between Nature and the individual – a multifaceted and harmonious relation that implores our inquiry and invites our cultivation. This emphasis on relation should remind us of the earlier discussion of Martin Buber. Whereas that first chapter was particularly concerned with the direct relation between one individual person and another, our concern with Emerson is the direct relation between an individual person and the world at large. This two-pronged sense of personal relation – between persons and between persons and the world – and the associated notions of the divine incorporated by each of our considered philosophers, will be tied together in the last chapter, where we will consider the immanent transcendental and the divine in the concrete world.

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184 The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings, edited by Lawrence Buell (New York: Random House, Inc, 2006), 107-108. Although he is often taken as a representative of the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson took great pains to establish a critical, although sympathetic, distance between himself and his contemporaries.

185 Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1836). “Nature.” In The American Transcendentalists, 33
In this chapter, I will begin by exploring Emerson’s particular version of Idealism, and move on to show how it lends itself to his views on Nature, spirituality, and the individual person. Therefore, (II) to the extent that we can indulge this sort of Idealism, we can retain, at least, (III) his inspired naturalism, (IV) his particular notions of God and spirituality, and (V) the sorts of individual practices he identifies as appropriate to this original relation between Nature, God, and humanity. Through a careful elucidation of his philosophy, it will be shown that although Emerson makes liberal use of traditional religious language, in the context of this particular reading of his Transcendentalism such terms have the potential to take on new and intriguing meanings, and reinforce the relevance of Emerson’s thought to contemporary considerations of the relation between philosophy and religion.

II. Idealism and materialism

In order to appreciate Emerson’s Transcendentalism, and his views on the relation between God, Nature, and humanity, one must first have in mind his fundamental philosophical framework of Idealism. While it draws from the German Idealism which was its predecessor, Emersonian Idealism is cast as “more basic and universal” than the earlier Idealism of Kant.186 Whereas Kant was interested in establishing an epistemological Idealism appropriate to discerning the relation between Reason and objectivity, Emerson’s Idealism is more pragmatic and appropriate to his Transcendentalist philosophy of human existence. This is to say that Emerson was less concerned with questioning of the capacity and extent of human knowledge, and more concerned with the general interplay and overlap of self and world. Emerson follows Kant by taking the notion of “transcendental” to mean “whatever belongs to

186 Buell, L. in The American Transcendentalists, from the introduction to “The Transcendentalist,” 107
the class of intuitive thought,” and so he also adheres to “the tendency to respect the intuitions, and to give them... all authority over our experience.”187 These are the intuitions of time and space, as well as the “intuitions of the mind”188 – those that are “transcendental” in virtue of being discerned by “a retirement from the senses”189 and intellection of the world. Importantly, for Emerson, the intuitions of the mind are the source of an even greater unity between self and world, carrying Kant’s insights beyond description of conditions of experience right up to the edge of religious discourse. To see what it means to respect intuitions over sense experience, we should have a picture in mind of Emerson’s specific contrast between Idealism and Materialism.

Idealism is presumed to be of a “higher nature” than Materialism.190 Materialism is empirical in the common philosophical sense, constructing its axioms based on measured, sensible perceptions of the external world. Idealism, in contrast, is “higher” because it sees through the “facts’ of ordinary experience... to their meanings, their possibilities, their connection with the whole of life,”191 not stopping at the superficiality of sensation but heeding the intuitions of enduring Ideas.192 It is worth observing that the “higher reality” and significance of the Ideas need not establish a metaphysical dualism between the spheres of the exclusively rational intuitions of the mind and of the concrete material world. To the contrary, the proposal at hand is that the general consequence of Emersonian Idealism is to bring the

187 Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1841a). “The Transcendentalist.” In The American Transcendentalists, 113
188 Ibid, 113
189 Ibid, 108
190 Ibid, 108
192 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 109
whole of the actual world into clearer focus. Let us examine Materialism further before addressing Idealism.

As mentioned, Materialism is an espousal of empiricism, and rests “secure in the certainty of sensation” of the external world. From the facts gathered from observation and sense data, recorded in the replicable history of the laws of cause and effect, the materialist forms an educated prediction of the future from present circumstances, and directs this predictive lens over Nature. The external world – Nature – refers to everything outside of oneself, the “Not Me,” the Other, or the world as it is confronted by an individual. ‘Nature’ is taken to refer to the totality of all that there is, but risks being mistaken as the general name of only the world of discrete objects, should one presuppose a rigorous Materialism.

Such an empirical reliance on sensation is, as with anything, susceptible to doubt. To insist that the uniformity of experience today might be different tomorrow, or that what attracts now might later repel, or that the laws of nature could have been and may elsewhere be otherwise, suggests to the Materialist the possibility that “his mental fabric is built up on just as strange and quaking foundations as his proud edifice of stone.” More to Emerson’s point, it may be supposed that we gather only “representations of things” from sensation, and that of “the things themselves” we yet receive only veiled intimations. Indeed, Emerson points out the irony that an intellect that draws only from sensation renders itself blind, and it remains

194 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 109
195 Emerson, “Nature,” 34
196 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 109
198 Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1841b). “The Over-soul.” In The Best of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays, Poems, Addresses (New York: Walter J. Black, 1941), 208
undecided whether “all that there is” includes only the material objects of time and space, or whether an additional, immaterial something is present.\textsuperscript{199}

Emerson has it that there is more to the perceived natural world than our sensations can account for. There is, we will see, an additional presence, some aspect of the Not Me experienced by the self, that is lost in an exclusively material dependence on sensation – a sort of “inassimilable presence”\textsuperscript{200} only witnessed by intuition. To the extent that one is doubtful of philosophical Materialism and empiricism, and the guarantees of the intellect to reach “the things themselves,” one ought to entertain Emerson’s sort of Idealism. To be sure, this bold assertion against direct perception of the world, and the insistence of a distance between material sensation and the intuitions of the things themselves, demands sufficient motivation, and this will be offered in section (III). Before we submit ourselves to this climb to Idealism, however, let us better orient ourselves to our destination.

Idealism is a denial of the Materialist axiom that only what is sensed is real, asserting, on the contrary, that we cannot through sensation alone discover the true nature of reality after which we seek. Note, however, that the lessons of Materialism are not altogether rejected; Idealism validates the legitimate – though superficial – impression and apparent coherency of sensation, but still lacks assurance of its philosophical completeness.\textsuperscript{201} Idealism maintains that what is sensed is nothing more than a mere representation of what is real, and that “mind is the only reality,” of which all else is a lesser approximation.\textsuperscript{202} The facts of sense are therefore supplemented by facts which are “not liable to doubt; facts which…assume a native superiority

\textsuperscript{199} Atchley (2006), 256  
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid  
\textsuperscript{201} Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 108  
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid, 110
to material facts.”203 These are the “metaphysical facts” of consciousness, the “rank which things themselves take...[and] not at all, the size or appearance.”204 The “metaphysical facts” and “things themselves of consciousness” are, in a sense, nearer to what is real, and their rank is a measure of this proximity, as though we “find ourselves on a stair” between truth and appearance, and are evaluating on which step we find ourselves standing.205 The size or appearance of things as they are sensed, then, are lower representations of the higher reality of things – a reality in which, “as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom...[and that which] we call Reason”206 are intuited. So it is that, according to Emerson, speculative and practical reason – philosophy and virtue – are each clarified and augmented by Idealism, as each defers to Reason and intuitions of the mind, and renders the purely material world a superficial expression of these.207

What is to the intellect called ‘Reason’ is, in relation to Nature, called ‘Spirit,’208 and so, inasmuch as an individual is practiced in the use of Reason, an analog in the Spirit of the Not Me will be recognized. In brief, the faculty of Reason reflects the Spirit of Nature. Spirit is a concentration209 of everything natural into “the eternal ONE,”210 and is therefore “that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other.”211 Indeed, the Over-Soul brings together even “the act of seeing and the thing seen, the see and the spectacle, the subject and the object,”212 and mind and matter; the natural world

203 Ibid, 108  
204 Ibid, 110, Emerson’s italics.  
205 Quoted in Atchley (2006), 259  
206 Emerson, “Nature,” 43  
207 Ibid, 59  
208 Emerson, “Nature,” 43; Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 108  
209 Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1841c). “Self-Reliance.” In The American Transcendentalists, 222  
210 Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 207, Emerson’s capitalization.  
211 Ibid  
212 Ibid
and humanity collectively flow “perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded…Unknown center.”213 Spirit pervades and contains Nature,214 and is not deduced as the primary cause of Nature but is witnessed through the cultivation of practiced perception and disciplined reception, that is, the intuitive faculty of Reason. So it is that we sense and understand the world in a fragmented fashion, but bearing witness to the whole, that is, the Over-Soul, involves some other measure.215 So it is, also, that every materialist can be uplifted to Idealism, but an idealist cannot be lowered back down into Materialism216 – the Idealist has become aware of the intimate unity between self and Other, between Reason and Spirit, which has always been the goal of philosophy, and would (presumably) be unwilling to sever that connection. Again, we should be cautious here, and remember not to take Emersonian Idealism as establishing a metaphysical dualism between mind and matter, but instead as showing how the two are interrelated, and that the distinction is not as hard and fast as is customarily assumed. By coming to terms with this reconciliation, we will see that, although Emerson uses religious language typically reserved for mysticism and otherworldliness, his particular use of such terms entail a philosophical framework that is radically of this world. But we are getting ahead of ourselves – this uplifting to Idealism cannot be accomplished on a whim, but must be cultivated through a series of progressively demanding, disciplined, and devotional relationships with Nature.

III. Nature, more than material, discipline and Reason

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213 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 110
214 Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 208
215 Ibid, 209
216 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 108
Emerson identifies five classes of Nature, or ways of conceptualizing the external world: as a commodity, as a source of beauty, as a source of language, as an instructor in discipline, and as a source of spirituality. The progression through each level highlights what is apparently absent in the former, and marks the anticipated movement from Materialism to Idealism, from the appearance of things to things as they are in themselves. This is not, to repeat, a hierarchy from empiricism to rationalism, and neither is it a bridge constructed between the distinct metaphysical realms of the immanent and transcendent. Rather, this progression involves a movement between “modes of consciousness or ways of being in the world.”

On the one hand, there is the standard view of a subject that makes frivolous use of commoditized objects. There is, on the other hand, a subject who establishes, through discipline, a progressive embeddedness in the Not Me of Nature, and reaches a “unitive mode of awareness [in which] the being of the whole and my being are indistinguishable.” The parallel in all of this to Buber – that he also espoused a similar divided consciousness, describing a mode of speculation and separation against a mode of unity between self and Other – will become clearer in section (IV). Each stage will be discussed in turn, and as the last will be covered in section (IV), it will receive only a brief introduction.

The first, most basic and commonplace relation to Nature is taking her as a commodity. It is, according to Emerson, the universal relation to the natural world “which all men apprehend.” Taking Nature as a commodity means that we use Nature as a means of acquiring those desirable advantages we take for ourselves and for our own profit – we understand Nature only as a mass of objects to be used. Whatsoever we endeavor to provide

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217 Smith (2009), 193
218 Ibid
219 Emerson, “Nature,” 36
for ourselves and for our own advantage, Nature has already provided in raw form; we reproduce and recombine the natural goods already available to us. It seems clear that relating to Nature as a commodity coheres with the framework of Materialism. We identify the structure and function of material objects, determine which objects’ acquisition would be advantageous to us, and devise methods and means of favorably altering our circumstances by seizing these material commodities. However, one may discover (as it seems Buber had in his discussion of I-It) that such a relation is cheap, exploitative, and “mean and squalid,”220 and to engage the natural world only as a resource for our selfish gain prevents the profound unity of humanity and the natural world of which we are apparently capable,221 and so with an undeveloped appreciation of the Ideal and the intuitions of Reason. Thus, before we exhaust all commercial use of Nature, we should first come to terms with her higher values.

The second relation humanity has with Nature is to see the world as a source of beauty. The Transcendentalists – of whom Emerson is often taken as a representative – were “lovers and worshippers of Beauty,” and who, when considering “the eternal trinity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty…prefer[red] to make Beauty the sign and head”222 of their philosophy – that is, to orient their thinking around the beauty of Nature. Epistemic truth is here reckoned heartless, and the goodness of morality, dowdy; we can derive some resource from these first two Ideas – material facts and virtue, among others – but can draw much more of life from beauty.223 It is unsurprising that the Transcendentalist philosophy has the character of poetic discourse, and that these writers impressed the natural world with “grace and expression”

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220 Ibid, 50
221 Ibid, 36
222 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 120
223 Ibid
through the use of “the imagination and affection.” 224 By playing with the natural forms in this personifying way, Transcendentalism “assert[s] the predominance of the soul” 225 over the raw, material commodities of the natural world. Through the relation to the beauty of Nature, we have taken our first steps beyond Materialism, commodity, and selfish apprehension, and have crossed the threshold of Idealism, relation, and immateriality, and approach Nature, the Not Me, for its own sake and as like ourselves. Nature expresses herself as beautiful in a threefold manner.

First, one witnesses that those fundamental aspects of nature – it’s “forms and actions” – provide even more invigoration than do her commodities, as Emerson observes that “we are never tired, so long as we can see far enough” into some natural scenery. 226 The multitude of forms and activities expressing the “perfectness and harmony” 227 of Nature is enough to “give us a delight in and for themselves,” 228 beyond whatever selfish interest we may have in them. However, to become so excessively preoccupied with the disinterested aesthetic delight of the natural forms causes them to “become shows merely, and [to] mock us with their unreality.” 229 This is to say that there is more to the beauty of Nature than the sheer aesthetic pleasure she evokes, which is unsurprising given the push toward Idealism.

This “more” is the beauty of Nature in the second, moral sense: the beauty of the natural tendency of things as expressed through the human will, or “the mark God sets upon virtue” and the gracefulness of every natural action. 230 Art, as Emerson has it, is nothing other

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224 Emerson, “Nature,” 54-55
225 Ibid, 57
226 Ibid, 38
227 Ibid, 41-42
228 Ibid, 38, Emerson’s italics.
229 Ibid, 40
230 Ibid
than the expression of Nature through the will of man. Virtuous actions are beautiful because the virtuous act is the one “in unison with her [Nature’s] works.”

Nature is beautiful, thirdly, “as it becomes an object of the intellect.” Intrigued by the first appearance of the beauty of the natural forms, we discover that they are reconstituted in the order of the mind, “not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.” Natural beauty, when it becomes the focus of our Reason, simultaneously motivates and reaffirms virtuous and moral action through the grace of beauty: beauty, the intellect, and virtuous activity become “eternally reproductive.” As might be expected, we limit ourselves if we stop at beauty as the ultimate or “final cause of Nature.” Beauty is therefore another milestone along the path to that unity of the human, Nature, and the divine.

We proceed to see that Nature may also, according to Emerson, be conceived as the source of language. There is, as with Beauty, a three-tiered scaffolding of ways in which Nature lends itself to language, with each tier building on its predecessor.

First, words themselves are conceived as “signs of natural facts.” Emerson means by this that tracing the etymology of a particular word will show that it borrows from some or other “material appearance. Right originally means straight; wrong means twisted. Spirit primarily means wind; transgression, the crossing of a line,” etc. These particular example suggest that, just as the beauty of Nature was tied to virtue, so also is the language of Nature moral: natural facts underlie the use of the moral terms right, wrong, transgression, and the

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231 Ibid, 42
232 Ibid, 41
233 Ibid
234 Ibid
235 Ibid
236 Ibid, 42
237 Ibid
238 Ibid, 42-43
expressions of natural facts are thick with moral connotations. Indeed, Emerson has it that, just as all natural actions are moral, so also “all [natural] things are moral.”\textsuperscript{239}

The morality of linguistic expression means, secondly, that words are “symbols of particular spiritual facts,”\textsuperscript{240} that is, every natural state of affairs has a corresponding state or intuition of the mind. This, we have seen earlier, follows from Emerson’s Idealism, so that every material fact pertains to a higher fact in consciousness. Nature is therefore “an interpreter,”\textsuperscript{241} giving to humanity a means of communication, a way of expressing conscious thoughts through the avenue of natural symbolism. Speech therefore becomes allegorical because “man is an analogist,”\textsuperscript{242} and derives recognizable patterns of thought from recognizable patterns of Nature, and vice-versa, notices these patterns of Nature as replicas of his own patterns of thought.

That it is given that all words are signs of natural facts, and that these natural facts are themselves signs of spiritual facts, Emerson concludes, thirdly, that “Nature is the symbol of spirit,”\textsuperscript{243} and that the natural world bespeaks its transparency to humanity as spirit “manifest[s] itself in material forms.”\textsuperscript{244} Nature herself becomes “a metaphor of the human mind,”\textsuperscript{245} and we discover once again the assertion of an intimate connection between mind and matter, between Nature and humanity, that is the focus of Emerson’s spirituality as will be described in section (IV). We are not, however, at the end of the journey to Idealism, as what is spiritual in Nature surpasses even all that can be captured by language.

\textsuperscript{239} Ibid, 50
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid, 42
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid, 44
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid, 43
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid, 42
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid, 47
\textsuperscript{245} Ibid, 46
In addition to the relations of Nature as a commodity, and as a source of beauty and of language, Emerson identifies a fourth relation: Nature as an instructor of discipline. Both the sensible Understanding and intuited Reason receive their due instruction from Nature, but it is the discipline of exercising the two faculties in tandem that holds the promise of reflecting the Over-Soul and Spirit of Nature. The discipline offered by Nature involves developing an acute appreciation of each of the preceding classes of Nature; one is disciplined by responsibly using commodities, by receiving and creating natural beauty, and by learning the language which both he and Nature speaks. Moving through and above the more superficial relations with Nature in this way, we will see how it is that Emersonian Transcendentalism is initiating a projection into the firmament of Ideas, and articulating the precise sense in which God is an Over-soul, without going so far as to entangle us in the web of transcendence.

It is the Understanding which categorizes and classifies the natural objects of sense, and which “...adds, divides, combines, measures” Nature according to measures “of difference, of likeness, or order...of ascent from particular to general, [and] of combination.” Space and time exist as the sensibilities of the Understanding, and fragment the whole of Nature into “sundered and individual” objects classified by the subject. This tendency of the Understanding toward classification manifests itself in the motive on the part of the material sciences to identify “a ground unconditioned and absolute” to serve as the “law [which] determines all phenomena.” Scientists even today, to use a common phrase, are after a ‘theory of everything,’ seeking a comprehensive and predictive representation of the

246 Ibid, 48
247 Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1837). “The American Scholar.” In The American Transcendentalists, 85
248 Emerson, “Nature,” 48
249 Ibid
250 Ibid, 49
251 Ibid, 57
fundamental nature of objective reality. Our prolonged development of the proper experience of sensible objects, and the discipline of the Understanding acquired thereby, teaches “the exercise of the Will or the lesson of power,”\textsuperscript{252} that one can selfishly and unilaterally “reduce under his will…the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character,” making Nature a servant to “sure and useful results…until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will – the double of man.”\textsuperscript{253} These results, we should recall, constitute the quaking foundation upon which the Materialist constructs his own notions of Nature and reality. More than this, it is misguided to attempt only to conform Nature to one’s own character; one must likewise conform his character to the natural order of things. To this end, Emerson has us turn our attention to the disciplined development of the intuitive faculty of Reason.

Just as Emerson’s Idealism advocated a seeing past the superficial facts of Materialism into the enduring things themselves, so also does Reason parallel this movement through the Understanding; Reason transfers the material facts of the Understanding into the “world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind.”\textsuperscript{254} Reason is, in brief, the faculty of acknowledging a more inclusive interrelationship between Nature and humanity, but a faculty developed only through a prolonged education in the earlier classes of Nature. Emerson describes instruction in going “beyond theory via experience”\textsuperscript{255}: of taking the time to reconsider the “wisdom of separation”\textsuperscript{256} that makes Nature a mass of commodities, and to recognize that all that the beauty and material facts of the Not Me will find a concordant Idea in one’s own mind and that the world offers up a wholeness, significance, and meaning beyond its

\textsuperscript{252} Ibid, 49
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid, 49-50
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid, 48
\textsuperscript{255} Laugier, Sandra (2009). “Transcendentalism and the Ordinary.” \textit{European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy} 1, 8
\textsuperscript{256} Emerson, “Nature,” 49
mere appearance. It is through Reason that “the ancient concept, “Know thyself,” and the modern precept, “Study nature,” become at last one maxim.”

Crucially, and unlike the disciplined Understanding, a disciplined Reason reveals that one’s activity is properly “something the world is doing” and that Nature acts through the individual; the practice of disciplined Reason is simultaneously an active and passive practice of acting naturally, so that the individual and the world become at once mutually defining.

Emerson describes a relation to the natural world that promotes “endless exercise” of the human faculties, a practice necessary because Nature “is a perpetual effect” and “nothing in nature is exhausted in its first use.” There is no shortage of expressions of this one idea: the least “particle is a microcosm” of the whole, “the drop is a small ocean,” the common is the house of the miraculous and all facts are poetry, and the world consists of endless multiplicity. Nature’s truths are now seen to be “innumerable,” her façade is a mixture of modifications of the same whole, and she is, at root, a collection of “irreducible...[and] interrelated polarities.” The discipline of Reason is therefore an adventure, an education in thinking without a secure point of reference – a philosophical practice of “migration” and not, as is usually the case, of “dwelling” upon established ground. It is in this sense that

257 Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 86
258 Smith (2009), 192
259 Laugier (2009), 10
260 Smith (2009), 206
261 Emerson, “Nature,” 60
262 Ibid, 51
263 Ibid, 51
264 Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 97-98
265 Emerson, “Nature,” 66
266 Ibid, 50
267 Ibid, 52
268 Smith (2009), 196-197
269 Laugier (2009), 10
270 Laugier (2009), 7; Smith (2009), 198-199
Emersonian Idealism is definitively anti-dualistic: a dualistic Idealism (such as one between phenomenal and noumenal realms) decides that the ground of our thinking is rational, and treats the Ideas of the mind as substantial, absolute reference points.\textsuperscript{271} In Emerson’s case, however, one heeds the lessons of Nature that he may continually return to the world and put these endless lessons of Reason into practice, growing and developing his rational capacity according to new and ever-developing demands of life. The reasonable man thus becomes himself a “method” and a “selecting principle,”\textsuperscript{272} able to preserve a proper harmony within the “ebb and flow” of the relation to Nature and to respond well to its “inevitable changes.”\textsuperscript{273} Emerson’s teaches us succinctly that “we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them.”\textsuperscript{274}

What we should learn from all of this is a lesson in “the Unity of Nature – the Unity in Variety.”\textsuperscript{275} As we have seen, the innumerable variety of the natural world is achieved only through discipline, that is, through an adventurous apprenticeship in the uses of commodity, beauty, language, Understanding and Reason, under the auspices of the universal Spirit of Nature, the Over-Soul of God. The discipline provided by Nature is, in sum, a reflection that “all things...have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature,”\textsuperscript{276} as it “circumscribes all things...[and yet] contradicts all experience.”\textsuperscript{277} Contradicting experience, Spirit is thus a confusion and a transparency,\textsuperscript{278} an “uncanniness of the ordinary,”\textsuperscript{279} and a divine transience

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\item \textsuperscript{271} Smith (2009), 200
\item \textsuperscript{272} Quoted in Smith (2009), 205
\item \textsuperscript{273} Smith (2009), 204
\item \textsuperscript{274} Quoted in Atchley (2006), 258
\item \textsuperscript{275} Emerson, “Nature,” 51
\item \textsuperscript{276} Ibid, 50
\item \textsuperscript{277} Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 209
\item \textsuperscript{278} Atchley (2006), 258
\item \textsuperscript{279} Quoted in Laugier (2009), 1
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and “intimate elsewhere”\textsuperscript{280} that eludes capture by the Understanding and Reason, while serving as their inexhaustible source.\textsuperscript{281} Spirit thus “animates and exercises” the world, and operates through Nature without itself being reduced to a function; it is “the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being...[and is] an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed.”\textsuperscript{282} The individual at this highest stage of the relation to Nature, that which is original, redeeming, and devout,\textsuperscript{283} witnesses the “inexplicable continuity of this web of God...[which] resembles his own spirit.”\textsuperscript{284} Through practice and discipline, one “become[s] a transparent eyeball,” nothing and all at once, “part or particle of God.”\textsuperscript{285} So it is that the discipline of Reason involves using commodity, beauty, and language in a supportive moral effort, and culminates in a cumulative relation to Nature that respects that “the aspect of nature is devout,” and promotes education in “the lesson of worship.”\textsuperscript{286} Moving forward, we will see that Idealism and the affirmation of Reason “cannot be denied without impiety and atheism.”\textsuperscript{287} It is, therefore, against the background of Idealism that Emerson sets his notions of religiosity – “the introduction of ideas into life,”\textsuperscript{288} – and of God.

IV. The Over-soul of God and spirit

Before proceeding, we should take stock of Emerson’s Idealism and the affiliated relation between humanity and Nature as these have been described so far. We have seen that the Idealism offered by Emerson is not entirely Kantian: it is not primarily focused on any

\textsuperscript{280} Atchley (2006), 261
\textsuperscript{281} Emerson, “Nature,” 52
\textsuperscript{282} Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 208
\textsuperscript{283} Emerson, “Nature,” 66
\textsuperscript{284} Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 85
\textsuperscript{285} Emerson, “Nature,” 35-36
\textsuperscript{286} Ibid, 60
\textsuperscript{287} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 219
\textsuperscript{288} Emerson, “Nature,” 58
epistemological claims, and asserts no distinction between phenomenal experience and noumenal reality. Rather, Emersonian Idealism represents a speculation on the character of human existence; it is an approach to the world unconcerned with determining the formal conditions of objectivity, but is instead an indication that, through a disciplined faculty of Reason, one can intuit a kindred spirit in Nature that mirrors one’s own self. There exists, for Emerson, a “consanguinity” between Nature and humanity, so that man “finds something of himself in every great and small thing.” Idealism so understood detracts from Materialism through its recognition of the immaterial lessons of Nature not given credence by the materialist, and through its witness to the ongoing development and accomplishment of a relation to that endlessly embracing aspect of Nature that mirrors one’s own state of existence and becoming. This is the Over-Soul, the Spirit of Nature and the Not Me, and the partner of humanity’s relation to the world.

Frustratingly, because it brings philosophy to the horizon of its concepts, and creates tension at the limits of observation and analysis, a legitimate depiction of the Over-Soul and of God appears elusive. The source of life and our being that is Spirit is therefore hidden from both our Reason and Understanding, and our best philosophy fails to reach it, as “there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve.” Indeed, of Spirit, “he that thinks most, will say least.” To ask the question of what Spirit is a trick of the understanding. One expects a propositional statement for an answer, but this would be a delusion. One is able to receive only a passing of Spirit itself, “alone, original, and pure,” as

289 Ibid, 53
290 Ibid, 61
291 Ibid, 63
292 Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 206
293 Emerson, “Nature,” 60
294 Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 222-23

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“that man whom it enlightens [or] takes him to itself.” In this way, Spirit is acted in life, or, perhaps better, humanity lives within Spirit, and does so properly without any attempt to apprehend it as absolute truth. Spirit is therefore left “undefinable, [and] unmeasurable” because it is not an object of thought, but an active manifestation, and its essence becomes ineffable and immutable so that “its presence or its absence is all we can affirm.”

Philosophically considered, then, Emerson’s God is neither the God of tradition nor rhetoric, but is nonetheless a divinity whose infinitude is present to humanity insofar as we move beyond commodity, and embrace the beauty, communicative relation, and disciplinary instruction of Nature. Humanity, a part of Nature yet simultaneously at a speculative and subjective distance from Nature, shares the “life by which things exist,” and only “afterwards see[s] them as appearances.”

One can be forgiven, however, for making the profane attempt to elucidate this conception of God for the sake of philosophical contemplation. Spirit, we have already seen, is the eternal aspect of the ephemeral world of Nature, and so strikes us as unmeasurable and ineffable. We encounter the Over-Soul in fleeting moments of disclosure following disciplined relation; Spirit thus continually eludes Understanding and Reason even while it breaks through to us through the development of these faculties. So, even while the material facts are not identical to the Ideas of intuition, and even while the natural world is not identical to Spirit, humanity finds itself straddling the line between these “modes of being;” we are caught up in

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295 Ibid, 214
296 Emerson, “Nature,” 33
297 Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 208
298 Ibid, 215, 220
299 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 219-20
300 Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 221
301 Ibid, 214
302 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 219
all of the realities of Nature. The natural world is without value if it is considered in itself and
unmarried to human history;\textsuperscript{303} one must recognize that “Nature is so pervaded with human
life, that there is something of humanity in all, and in every particular.”\textsuperscript{304} The German
Idealism from which Emerson draws only serves “as a useful introductory hypothesis, serving
to apprise us of the eternal distinction between the soul and the world.”\textsuperscript{305} It rightly emphasizes
the distinction between the Ideas of Reason and the phenomenal materiality of the world, and
reaffirms that the epistemological problem of the external world remains undetermined.
However, this is no real problem for Emerson’s Transcendentalist project: the natural world
and humanity are kindred spirits, irrespective of what is understood or comprehended, with
each enveloped and circumscribed by the Over-Soul of God and differing only in that humanity
cannot control Nature as we do ourselves, or that our activity is distinct from the activity of the
world merely “because of the way in which we talk.”\textsuperscript{306}

The intimations of the whole, the Over-Soul, that we are granted are confined to
surprising and brief moments of revelation,\textsuperscript{307} “flash-of-lightning”\textsuperscript{308} disclosures of the soul of
the world and humanity through sublime announcements and manifestations of its ideal
nature. So it is that, at every moment, we may find ourselves shifting between these two
diverging and contrasting states, existing with a “double consciousness…of the understanding
and of the soul”\textsuperscript{309} that drifts between the presence or absence of Spirit. “Yet,” writes Emerson,
“there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them

\textsuperscript{303} Emerson, “Nature,” 44
\textsuperscript{304} Ibid, 61
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid, 61
\textsuperscript{306} Quoted in Smith (2009), 195
\textsuperscript{307} Emerson, “Nature,” 33; Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 119
\textsuperscript{308} Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 119
\textsuperscript{309} Ibid

56
than to all other experiences.”310 These episodes of revelation inspire an “infallible trust” in our intuitions, and not any specific convictions about the nature of Spirit beyond its ineffability.311 Therefore we cannot so easily write off this Transcendentalist religiosity by appealing to the customary arguments against religion, as such arguments are rendered “invalid and vain” by the very nature of this extravagant philosophy which apparently surpasses the intellectual understanding. A developed faculty of Reason is earned, not argued for. Neither, moreover, can we appeal to any authority, or to the large number of believers who would consider themselves allies of the orthodox interpretations of God and spirituality – Transcendentalism is a projection of the particular lessons learned in use, beauty, language, and discipline, through which the individual witnesses the presence of God opposing and relating to himself. Emerson’s religiosity plausibly becomes more credible than the orthodoxy from which he detracted, because it is more tangible than theoretical, is earned rather than passively received, and manifested in the most subtle moments of activity rather than the solemnity of sacrament.312

We ought to be able, at this point, to make a preliminary connection to our preceding chapter on Buber. We recall how Buber established two modes of relating to the world: I-It and I-du. As an individual relating to It, one engages the world as though it were an amalgamation of material objects to be used, or to be unilaterally appropriated by the subject. It is not far-fetched to perceive an analogous situation described by Emerson’s Materialism and relation to Nature as a commodity, where Nature becomes a means to our own ends of empirical understanding and material objectification. Both philosophers likewise describe a way of

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310 Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 206
311 Ibid, 221
relating to the world that offers more than material or objective gain. Through dialogue, we saw in Buber, we relate to the world as a figure of ourselves, and in reciprocal communication and confrontation with another. Emerson’s disciplined Reason – his figure of the “transparent eyeball” – announces this same message of unity and unconditional recognition between self and Nature. Just as Reason is practiced and developed in discipline, so also is Buber’s sense of dialogue an ongoing project, a method of communication with the world beyond conceptualization and categorization. For this very reason, and for both thinkers, Spirit and du so conceived are inhospitable to the Understanding; they defy rational measure and so are left as ineffable and intimated aspects of the world which we confront and live alongside and within. Finally, at no point in either discussion have we left the actual world in which we live, neither have we attempted to establish a metaphysical dualism, but have only come closer to the world as it confronts us. In Buber, we encounter the other, du, in unconditional reciprocity through dialogue with the partner-in-relation, and in Emerson, we intuit that we are part of the whole of the Over-Soul of Nature when we exercise the faculty of Reason.

V. The infinitude of humanity, solitary self-reliant speculation, and action

Having at last reached the stage of the highest truth, the relation to Nature wherein Nature, God, and humanity become indiscernible from each other, one can appreciate the doctrine that is most prized and crucial for Emersonian Transcendentalism: “the infinitude of the private man.” The mind of the person who relates to the Spirit of Nature is an “unbounded, unboundable empire;” one realizes that he is animated by the same Over-Soul

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313 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 221
314 Ibid, 208
which resides in the minds of all of humanity.\textsuperscript{315} Through the Reason that belongs to each of us, we discover that each human being alone resides at “the center of beings,”\textsuperscript{316} that the mind of God and man is the same, and that the individual “is himself the creator in the finite.”\textsuperscript{317} What was before routinely assumed to be “the common” is now imbued with “the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause;”\textsuperscript{318} the human soul is made “plain and true” and yet also divine.\textsuperscript{319} Moreover, through humanity’s relation to the Spirit of Nature – that is, God – humanity resides fully “in the present, above time.”\textsuperscript{320} Through this uniquely Emersonian practice of disciplined Reason, humanity is brought also to this eternal presence, outside of time.\textsuperscript{321}

Imbued with the infinitude of God and present to that which is outside of time, we should not be surprised at Emerson’s teaching that the disciplined and self-reliant individual is shot through with inconsistency, contradiction, and is the constant victim of being misunderstood. Misunderstanding follows necessarily once we stand above the Understanding and in view of the Ideas of Reason. The individual behaves as though in accordance with “whim,” though of course “it is somewhat better than whim at last.”\textsuperscript{322} The individual practiced in Reason defers to these intuitions of the mind as he returns to the world to act within it, but is aware of the fact that these intuitions are inexact and fleeting. Such a person accepts the lessons of Nature without relying on them as an absolute, definitive, and fixed

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{315} Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 96
  \item \textsuperscript{316} Emerson, “Nature,” 43-44
  \item \textsuperscript{317} Ibid, 61
  \item \textsuperscript{318} Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 97
  \item \textsuperscript{319} Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 219; Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 211
  \item \textsuperscript{320} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 220-221
  \item \textsuperscript{321} Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 216. This infinitude of man, importantly, is not equivalent to the assertion that man has acquired immortality; Emerson’s focus on the infinite present is not meant to imply a focus on an unending existence of the individual after death, which still remains in the scope of finitude in virtue of its temporality.
  \item \textsuperscript{322} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 213
\end{itemize}
Thus, one is invited to speak and act according to that particular role he has so far established for himself in the world, and retains the liberty to change this role and defend his new position as vigorously as the former, even if this means he contradicts himself. So, even though the forthcoming description of the divine individual will advocate seemingly contradictory practices, we ought to remember that “the force of character is cumulative,” and that the actions of one “honest and natural” character will be in harmony because “one tendency unites them all;” the practice of the self-reliant individual is a product of both “the secrets of his own mind…[as well as] the secrets of all minds.” That the Spirit of Nature and God is common to all of humanity will round out the discrepancies of individual characters, as the sharp distance between the peaks and valleys of mountain ranges are unnoticeable when one considers the curvature of the earth upon which they rise and fall. Somewhat paradoxically, the Spirit of the Over-soul common to all of humanity remains the discovery of the self-reliant individual, who alone becomes the “transparent eyeball” and sees within himself the unity of the whole of Nature, and not the residue of society’s predeterminations and predilections.

So we observe firsthand Emerson’s polarizing insistence that the divine individual fulfilled by Reason and Spirit ought to shun society and insist on faithful nonconformity, solitude, and self-reliance. Society, Emerson informs us, conspires against the “liberty and culture” of the individual and “scatters [the] force” of his will for the sake of the group, and so defies Emerson’s breed of individualism as it advocates conformity to custom and disavows

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323 Smith (2009), 206
324 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 216
325 Ibid, 217
326 Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 93
327 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 216
The better judgment of society is, in fact, the worse, and those who would “defer to the popular cry...are bugs, are spawn, and are called ‘the mass’ and ‘the herd.’” Indeed, the herd is fed by the “portable and convenient cakes” society makes of its institutions and causes, and which are eagerly consumed by its constituents. Following the path prescribed by society achieves nothing great nor noble, and serves only to reinforce “a spirit of cowardly compromise...a frightful skepticism, a life without love, and an activity without an aim.” There is nothing divine in this effort to stifle the individual will and secure the benefit of society, and neither a single individual benefits, nor, in spite of its efforts, does society, as “for every thing that is given, something is taken.”

The divine individual, then, is lonely, having shed and shunned the influence of society under the conviction that “it is better to be alone than in bad company,” or with a preference to “perish of ennui” rather than degrade themselves to the politics of society. These solitary individuals distance themselves from society because they find their expectations for humanity unmet by the mass of people: “they are the most exacting and extortionate critics.” The fault of the masses is that they individually lack degree, substance, or that magnitude of character that is the potential for every human being. These same solitary individuals likewise withdraw themselves from the work and labors of society. It is not that they prefer inactivity, but rather that they cannot willingly participate in the affairs of the popular world. So they wait “until the Universe rises up and calls [them] to work...[or] until [they] have the highest command.”

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328 Ibid, 212-14
329 Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 93-95
330 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 117
331 Ibid
332 Ibid, 119
333 Ibid, 115
334 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 229
335 Ibid, 116, 113
336 Ibid, 118
What has genuine integrity, therefore, is not the customs and norms of society, but the sacredness of one’s own thinking.\textsuperscript{337}

For Emerson, then, it is only the solitary individual who can thrive, only the man who freely and bravely relies on his own silent, steady, and severe abstraction\textsuperscript{338} and the power of his own inner divinity, and who is at peace with his own principles and the residence of the whole of Nature within himself. Self-reliance is nothing other than a “respect for the divinity in man,”\textsuperscript{339} and the ethics of Reason, the grasping of the Ideas of God in one’s own mind, is that “it is simpler to be self-dependent”\textsuperscript{340} and to trust the sacred law of one’s own nature first and foremost.\textsuperscript{341} The self-reliant soul is not the child of his circumstances, but the maker of his circumstances.\textsuperscript{342} Envy towards those in society “is ignorance,” and disrespects Reason and the divinity of oneself: “imitation is suicide.”\textsuperscript{343} “Insist on yourself,” Emerson implores, “never imitate…[as] every great man is an unique.”\textsuperscript{344} Operating according to the apparent whims of one’s own constitution, and forcefully enforcing today that which was denied yesterday, leads one “in the presence of all opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he.”\textsuperscript{345} Such an individual risks “the charge of antinomianism” and of lawlessness, because, inspired as he is by the Lawgiver, he assumes the liberty of neglecting and contravening whatever moral and political laws society has in place.\textsuperscript{346} The solitary life is therefore chosen as a matter of critical temperament and as a matter of committed principle, but it is not an easy choice; the

\textsuperscript{337} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 213
\textsuperscript{338} Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 93-94
\textsuperscript{339} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 225; Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 110
\textsuperscript{340} Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 110
\textsuperscript{341} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 211, 213
\textsuperscript{342} Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 110
\textsuperscript{343} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 211
\textsuperscript{344} Ibid, 228
\textsuperscript{345} Ibid, 213
\textsuperscript{346} Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 111
divine individuals withdraw and isolate themselves "as a choice of the less of two evils,"\textsuperscript{347} They are neither blind to nor lacking misgivings about their own self-alienation; in solitude there "is no time for gayety and grace."\textsuperscript{348}

There is, fortunately, a reciprocal consequence of solitary, self-reliant speculation. We know that the divine individuals do not prefer inactivity, but only find nothing worthwhile in the activities of society. They rightly condemn inactivity as cowardice,\textsuperscript{349} and recognize that genuine spiritual fulfillment follows when one commits "[to] work and live,"\textsuperscript{350} and that one becomes truly acquainted with oneself through acting in and on the world around them. Activity, then, is the complement and counterpart to thought,\textsuperscript{351} is a resource without which "thought can never ripen into truth," and one knows only so much as one has lived.\textsuperscript{352} Living is the completion and the total act of which thinking is only the partial act.\textsuperscript{353} Emerson expresses this point with wonderful simplicity: "Life is our dictionary."\textsuperscript{354} The divine soul is therefore a becoming and a migration, and is not static; it is more proper to "speak rather of that which relies, because it works and is," instead of that which is statically self-reliant.\textsuperscript{355}

So it remains true that it is what one does for and by himself that matters, and not whether it accords with "what the people think."\textsuperscript{356} By acting according to the infinitude of one’s own divine nature, one reinforces himself, and advances his own "rude truth...not

\textsuperscript{347} Ibid, 114
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid, 120-121
\textsuperscript{349} Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 89-90
\textsuperscript{350} Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 216
\textsuperscript{351} Emerson, “Nature,” 41, 52; Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 91
\textsuperscript{352} Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 89-90
\textsuperscript{353} Ibid, 92
\textsuperscript{354} Ibid, 91
\textsuperscript{355} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 222
\textsuperscript{356} Ibid, 214
wish[ing] to expiate, but to live”\textsuperscript{357} according to necessity, adequacy, and novelty.\textsuperscript{358} One thus acts naturally when he acts for himself, and we recall the third measure of the beauty of Nature, the beauty of a liberal and aesthetic spirit. Such acting naturally is beautiful because one acts according to their own divine spirit, and whatever there is that is beautiful in the natural world is reflected in the natural action of the solitary individual who lives by his own spirit.

However, by living in and acting upon the world, the divine individual is brought back from his solitary escape in his own mind and into the social sphere. One realizes that at least a few of the persons with whom he shares company “are supplementary to the primary teaching of the soul,” and who answer also to the thoughts of Reason and Spirit as “separate selves…of a common nature.”\textsuperscript{359} The sovereignty now recognized of each individual “tends to true union…because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.”\textsuperscript{360} The individual inspired by Reason, who recognizes the soul of God in all men and in all things and who discovers beauty in all of humanity if not in the structures and institutions of society, still yet invites the desire for “just and even fellowship,” and is compelled to respond to that self-assuring love which “seems to [be] the last and highest gift of nature.”\textsuperscript{361} So it is that the divine individual learns to “carry salvation to the combatants and demagogues in the dusty arena below,”\textsuperscript{362} and the advocate of solitude wrestles with the contradictory inclination that the soul of God he discovers in himself is in all of humanity.

The inconsistency and contradiction of whim now has the individual turning from inward speculation to outward activity. So we see the truth in Emerson’s summarization: “It is

\begin{footnotes}
\item[357] Ibid, 213-214
\item[358] Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 117
\item[359] Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 211
\item[360] Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 98-99; Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 214
\item[361] Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 114-115
\item[362] Ibid, 117
\end{footnotes}
easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but
the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the
independence of solitude.”363 The great man is he who relies on himself to impart his sympathy
to all of those who are kindred spirits of Reason and God. It is such an individual that can serve
as the measure of our character against his “heavenly spark,” and against which we can
“compare the points of our spiritual compass.”364 Greatness, however, is a difficult title to
achieve, and while all of humanity possesses the capacity for self-reliance and acting in unison
with Nature, few attain the level of merit and discipline inherent in such an accomplishment.
Society stifles self-reliance, but isolation and an autonomous will are not by themselves
sufficient to invoke intimations of the unity man and world.

Now we may rightly ask, what all has been offered in this study of Emerson? We have
seen the intuitive appeal of Idealism as contrasted with Materialism, and the promise of
gleaning a glimpse of the “things themselves” through the disciplined exercise of Reason. We
have seen that it is through Nature, the Other and the Not Me, that we learn the valuable
lessons of commoditization, beauty, language, and discipline, and approximate the immanent
sphere of spirituality at the horizon of the world and humanity. Crucially, at this horizon we
have turned back toward the world, and have seen that the “things themselves” of Nature
resonate with the inner nature of humanity; we are parts of the whole of the Over-soul, and
reflect the mind of God only as we issue into practice a self-reliance on our own individual
principles of Reason. All of this is a variation on a common theme: there is a significant
relation to be had between the natural world and humanity, and appreciating this relation at the
very least resembles what we might consider a religious attitude. This religious attitude,

363 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 214
364 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 121
importantly, is intriguing because it grounds the religious relation in contact with the world, and resists a deference to metaphysical transcendence. This is remarkable like the religious attitude of Buber, and the shared perspective of each of these thinkers and its consequences for philosophy deserve to be fully articulated and considered.
Chapter 4: The Immanence of the Transcendental

At the head of this last chapter, we should make a return to our initial project as presented in our introductory chapter, namely, the place of what is sacred to religion in the secular philosophical atmosphere of postmodernity, after the death of the transcendent God and the end of absolutist metaphysics. We saw that, since the time of Plato, philosophy was occupied with determining absolutely the eternal, transcendent natures of truth, goodness, and beauty, and how early Christian tradition was modeled against this separation between immanence and transcendence. Gradually, the Kantian and post-Kant era replaced transcendence with the transcendental, and epistemology became first philosophy, so that philosophy prioritized questions of our human access to the true, objective reality of things. Christianity, again, remained in step with this philosophical shift to modernity, softening the veracity of general revelation while remaining unshakable in its convictions of special revelation. In the 19th century, Nietzsche’s hammer smashed the idol of God, the absolute arbiter of truth and meaning, and a century later Heidegger did the same thing to the ambitions of metaphysicians. Together, Nietzsche and Heidegger laid the groundwork for the 21st century’s postmodern thematic, a notion of access to truth as relational, hermeneutic, and perspectival which watered down metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical absolutes. Yet, it is undeniable that religious tradition persists, and we ought to evaluate the role of this persistence in contemporary postmodernity.
Specifically, we should see if there are philosophical resources from the religious tradition to address the three features of postmodernity I identified in that earlier chapter: I) a rejection of the abstract objectivity of transcendence in favor of concrete, non-absolute immanence; II) a recasting of religious experience as the a priori of irreducible, reciprocal relations between persons and between persons and the world; and III) the instrumentalization of philosophy and thought’s turn towards multiplicity, creative activity, and becoming. God’s death and the end of absolute metaphysics means, for Buber at least, “that man has become incapable of apprehending a reality absolutely independent of himself and of having a relation with it,”365 a relation Buber undertook to resurrect in his thinking about subjectivity and the relations between persons. For Emerson, the transcendental truths of the relation between Nature and humanity were not deducible by intellection alone, but were, rather, matters of practice and disciplined cultivation. Drawing from these two thinkers, we have a collective picture of human relations as between persons and between persons and the world that offers a productive religious response to each of those postmodern revisions to metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

I. Rejecting the metaphysical absolute of transcendence in favor of non-absolute, contingent, concrete immanence

We can now turn to the first feature of postmodernity that follows Heidegger’s rejection of metaphysical absolutes, of thinking of being qua being, and the demand to direct thought to the contingent, actual, concrete sphere of immanence. Here, as elsewhere, we risk being ironic: the entire project of postmodernity was to relinquish a claim on the absolute, yet the present

365 Quoted in Friedman, 131
discourse continues to emphasize actual conditions of immanence over those of transcendence.

Is immanence not just another way to think about the metaphysical absolute?

It seems to me that the metaphysical absolute involves a notion of necessity, that precisely because this is thinking being *qua* being, it is thinking being as it necessarily *is*. But if this is the case, when we talk about a reduction to immanence, we are not thereby making the same sort of absolute claims as were made in pre-modernity regarding the invocation of transcendence. For philosophy before postmodernity, the sphere of immanence was imagined to be circumscribed either by an other-worldly, eternal, and stable transcendent realm, or else boxed in and bracketed by transcendental conditions of the possibility for experience, and it was on either of these necessity-ensuring, non-immanent spheres that our notion of the absolute depended. However, once the primary claim of postmodernity – to abandon the metaphysical absolute and quarantine the transcendental a priori to the epistemological – is made, then an equivalent abandonment of the necessary forms and conditions imposed by transcendence and the transcendental must follow; philosophy must turn its attention to what remains of an immanent sphere of contingent actuality. Put differently, it isn’t that we now ascribe to absolute immanence, as though the actual were absolute, but rather that we relinquish our absolute claims altogether, and are now left only with the sphere of non-absolute, non-necessary, or contingent immanence. We are not yet to the point of abandoning philosophy altogether, and so it continues contemporarily with a qualification: all discourse concerning immanence is discourse about what is contingent, about actuality and not at all about some absolute, transcendent necessity. In other words, the subsequent claims about immanent religiosity from Buber and Emerson are not claims about any absolute necessity of religiosity in postmodernity, but rather the suggestion that such religious talk about immanent divinity is still appropriate even as its claims are not taken to be absolute. One can take these contingent
religious claims – even when clothed in the language of universal generality and necessity – with a grain of salt and continue to find them savory.

To begin with the immanence of the relation between persons, we see that Buber’s project of sanctifying the secular and the immanent “here and now”\textsuperscript{366} was not to add to orthodox theology – that is, not to make absolute claims about the necessary features of a transcendent Thou – but to emphasize the fleeting divinity associated with our concrete, spontaneous human relationships, those that obtain in moments of speaking to, and not about, \textit{du} in actual, “genuine dialogue.”\textsuperscript{367} To think of this relation as immanent means rejecting the attitude of I-It, the alternative attitude that retains the pre-modern distinction between immanence and transcendence. To reflect and experience the world as the impersonal subject of I-It is to do nothing other than to make absolute claims about the transcendent nature of the objects of the world or the transcendental conditions for the possibility of experiencing them. In contrast, as one adopts the attitude of I-\textit{du}, one replaces absolutizing, objective experience with spontaneous, actual participation. As a person-in-relation-to-\textit{du}, one is in immediate confrontation with the world, directed toward the other which is present, which “\textit{is there},”\textsuperscript{368} and not at all preoccupied with any transcendent, absolute elsewhere. There is no otherworldly referent here; when one relates to \textit{du}, one does so presently, reciprocally, and immanently. Inasmuch as one is engaged in the attitude of I-\textit{du}, one is as well practicing immanent religiosity.

Further to this point of treating I-\textit{du} as the present and immediate confrontation with the immanent other, we remember that Buber described this relation between persons as the

\textsuperscript{366} Prologue, 26
\textsuperscript{367} Buber, 22
\textsuperscript{368} Kohanski, 52-53
condition for salvation, but an atypical salvation unconcerned with the (theologically-laden) notions of life after death or the forgiveness of sins. Buber’s notion of salvation pertained instead to the confirmation of meaning not “of ‘another life’ but that of this our life, not that of a ‘beyond’ but of this our world.”369 The meaning given to this world – a meaning which is non-absolute, without content and strict validity because it unfolds reciprocally and spontaneously between persons – sanctifies immanent actuality by inviting the individual to relate in trust and faith to this world and the persons in it, without placing this trust or faith in a transcendent Thou. The salvation of the I-du relation is determined in the decision to faithfully offer oneself to and participate with the other with whom one relates here and now. Nothing about this decision, this momentary leap, ensures a transcendent salvation, but a radically immanent, sanctifying engagement between persons. For a moment, meaning is immanently present in interactivity.

This brings us to the spoken spirituality of dialogue and what is, for Buber, the personhood of the divine in the world. We remember that, for Buber, spirit is word and a person’s capacity to communicate reciprocally with another, “between I and du.”370 Where there is language, Buber will say there is also spirit. Now admittedly, one could perhaps argue that human words and language serve as an influx of transcendent, univocal meanings into the immanent world, as though words existed as definitional forms and manifested themselves in tokens of speech. Likewise, one might argue for inherent, fixed language structures of the mind as transcendental conditions for thought and communication. If these views of language are correct, then language (and spirit with it) becomes something absolutely necessary. I lack the fortitude to argue against these particular views of language, but can only instead offer an

369 Buber, 159  
370 Ibid, 89
alternative that suggests a view of language amenable to Buber’s talk of spirit in the context of immanence.

Rather than referring to the dictionary for the formal, univocal meaning of words and parts of speech, and rather than diagramming sentences into their basic subject-predicate parts in an fMRI machine, we can witness the concrete development of speech and language through its contingent, historical manifestations – something like a genealogy of words. But that words might even have a historical genealogy encourages a thinking of them as immanent; as contingent manifestations of shared symbolism, words cannot serve as fixed categories of thought which antecedently delineated the ways we talk, and neither can they have essential, unchanging meanings. From this we gather that spirit, as the developing word and capacity to communicate between persons, is not absolutely transcendent, but is non-absolute, immanent to the unfolding of spontaneous dialogue. Moreover, just as spirit is the concrete revelation between persons, so also is the divine immanently present between persons inasmuch as they are in direct, spontaneous, and reciprocal dialogue with one another. If spirit is word, and word is immanent, then the reclamation of religiosity in postmodernity is not a reframed adherence to God as the absolute, transcendent Idea or Principle, because the divine is no It and is no Thou, but is that unnameable and ungraspable du to which we relate in moments of dialogue with one another. Granting all of this, we see that Buber’s religious attitude of I-du is faithful to the postmodern commitment to immanence. Can we say the same about Emerson’s Transcendentalist project?

I think the case can be made – or even invites being made – that Emerson was also a thinker of immanence. Let’s first address a minor obstacle to this immanent reading of his

371 Kohanski, 3
Transcendentalism: Emerson’s talk of the “higher nature”\textsuperscript{372} of Idealism and “intuitions of the mind,”\textsuperscript{373} the enduring and absolute Ideas of Reason, “metaphysical facts” beyond doubt and the reality of all things in mind.\textsuperscript{374} This is, beyond doubt, the language of absolute, transcendent Ideas and transcendental conditions. But crucially, Emerson seems to invite being read as an ironist, and although he makes free use of “metaphysical facts,” his doing so might just be a matter of philosophical etiquette, a tentative conjecture about the absolute, a paying of dues and not a literal intention to be read as playing that same old game of questioning absolute, necessary forms and conditions. Indeed, Emerson brushes off altogether the question about the veracity of Idealism, or the question of the mental or material substance of Nature: “Be it what it may, it is ideal to me,”\textsuperscript{375} arguably because its profundity still remains largely undisclosed. A rigid metaphysics of objective reality is not his primary concern: he gives a warm endorsement to self-contradiction\textsuperscript{376} and divided consciousness\textsuperscript{377}; he generalizes a characterization of the relation between an individual and the world which properly demands individual participation; the “higher nature” of Idealism is treated as such, not because it elevates one beyond the sphere of immanence, but because it is more valuable by bringing one closer to the world. He does not investigate ubiquitous Reason’s role in reclaiming objectivity, but an individual person’s role in cultivating a relation to the world, a metaphysics of existence in the world that brings the “consanguinity”\textsuperscript{378} between Nature and humanity into sharper focus. Emerson described this as the development of discipline in the tandem use of the conceptual Understanding – which has Nature subdued under a person’s will and interests – and the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{372} Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 108
\item \textsuperscript{373} Ibid, 113
\item \textsuperscript{374} Ibid, 108-110
\item \textsuperscript{375} Emerson, “Nature,” 53
\item \textsuperscript{376} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 216
\item \textsuperscript{377} Smith, 193
\item \textsuperscript{378} Emerson, “Nature,” 61
\end{itemize}
corresponding Reason and intuitions of the mind – which motivates a person to respond and act as courier to the world’s will.

Emerson, like Buber, as well depicts a movement between “modes of consciousness or ways of being in the world,” a mode of frivolous disunity and a mode of indistinguishable unity. It is the mode of disunity that treats Nature as a lump of commodities to be bent under our will, and that emphasizes raw Understanding without Reason; it is the same mode of objectivity and use as was I-It. So, for the same reason that I-It implied a deference to either transcendent eternal natures or necessary transcendental conditions of experience, so also does the material mode of disunity and commoditization fail to ground one in immanence. Conversely, as one becomes disciplined in the lessons Nature has to teach, one approximates the unitive mode of awareness and becomes more and more the “transparent eyeball” that melds together the Understanding and Reason, and the person to the sphere of immanence.

We saw this at each level of the progression of discipline. Commodities, those strictly material objects of Nature for our Understanding and will, are most at a distance from immanence: as treating Nature as objects of means rather than ends, commoditization ensures of disunity of person and world, thinking of the world as necessarily formed thus and so for this or that purpose. If these objects are at all immanent, it is only in the sense of being relatable to us as concrete things. Beauty manifests itself in the actual “forms and actions” of the natural world, and concrete expressions of virtue and creative thinking. Words borrow from material appearances, and each appearance corresponds to some intuition of the mind such that, over time, language serves as the link between material and immaterial Nature and as an

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379 Smith, 193
380 Emerson, “Nature,” 36
381 Ibid, 38
immanent manifestation of Spirit. Notice another parallel between Buber and Emerson: Emerson’s promotion of language as a resource for Spirit strikes a similar tone to Buber’s “spirit is word.” If we are correct in our understanding of language as an immanent, historical phenomena that developments through the concrete contingencies of human speech, then equally is Emerson’s spirituality an immanent spirituality. Lastly, the cultivation of discipline involves the skillful use of each of the previous natural resources, and so inasmuch as commodities, beauty, and language are immanent, so also is discipline. A disciplined unity with Nature is the culmination of our human existence in the world, and is arguably the same sort of immanent confrontation with another actual being as was I–du. Nature – the world that molds and disciplines our person so that we become like Nature and Nature becomes like ourselves – is not exhausted by transcendent forms or transcendental conditions for possibility, because the unifying relation to the world does not mean one must abandon the actual world, but return to it and become closer to it. Inasmuch as du can pass as the immanent partner-in-relation, so also can Nature. Granting the above, we get a sense for the immanence of the divine relationship between persons and between persons and the world that carries the religious attitude into postmodernity.

II. Rethinking the epistemological transcendental, objectivity, and religious experience after the a priori of irreducible, immediate, reciprocal relations between persons and between persons and the world

Some have claimed that all continental philosophers after Kant have, to some extent, incorporated “quasi-transcendental” views into their thinking of experience and the

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382 Ibid, 43
epistemological relation between an individual and the world. The transcendental, the a priori correlation or synthesis of subject and object, continues to set the tone for all our discussions about any experience – religious or otherwise – of the world. Nietzsche’s a priori was perspectivalism; Heidegger’s was being-in-the-world. The point at hand is that, after God has died, religious experience has dispelled its object of faith and special revelation, the transcendent God. No longer can we talk about such things as divine grace and personal conviction as necessary conditions for the redemption of sin and separation from the divine. So, also, has our thinking absolutely or “objectively” about the world been undone: the Kantian sense of experience as the unilateral taking possession of knowledge described in the introduction, the a priori “desubstantialization of subjectivity” into ownership, invites a reorientation. To think religious experience in postmodernity, and offer a renewed sense of transcendental, requires a movement away from the acquisition and appropriation inherent in absolute, objective, certain knowledge, and toward non-absolute, irreducible reciprocity, and intertwining of subject and object, and being-in-relation.

The transcendental that Kant introduced lingers on in postmodernity as the “transcategorical… the vomit of the system” which now lacks the former assurance of its absolute necessity. After we abandon the strict, reductive dichotomy between raw, empirical materialism on the one extreme, and formal, rational method on the other, our deference to the transcendental as the mediator of this dichotomy can be renegotiated. Instead, we now observe an a priori of relation, of an irreducible, reciprocal religious experience between persons

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383 Malabou, 245
384 Ibid, 247
386 Malabou, 245
and between persons and the world that does not conform to absolute objectivity. This feature of postmodern religiosity recognizes immanent moments of being-in-the-world, direct encounters that anticipate unilateral reflection, and immediate confrontations that fail to conform to the underlying, objective epistemic connection prompted by modernity.

The claim that objectivity is insufficient by itself to fully account for the possible unifying experience of the world and other persons was the task of the earlier chapters. Buber described I-It as the objective relation to the world which failed to account for the profound sense of unity involved in the relation between persons. For Emerson, a superficially-disciplined individual relied on a superficial relation to Nature as commodity, likewise failing to capture the sense of a developing, progressively-immediate relation of discipline between the person and Nature. As such, we must take “immediacy” between subject and object literally, as any measure of conformation without mediation, and not as being limited strictly to instantaneous moments of encounter or confrontation. Neither subject nor object is prioritized in the immediate relation, but only the present reciprocity of the relation obtains between the interpenetrating boundaries of subject and object. We get a picture of such immediate reciprocity between subject and object from Buber’s dialogical philosophy speaking to du.

Buber’s a priori was the relation between persons, subjectivity, and “genuine dialogue.” We know that he took great pains to establish the attitude of I-It as the attitude of a subject experiencing objects, of a subject who relies on the objective categories of causality, time, and space, and of a subject with beliefs about, desires for, and intentions regarding the use of objects. Objects, he taught us, are those entities that are isolated, differentiated, quantified, and categorized by rigid concepts and universal properties. But as mentioned earlier, this one-

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387 Ibid, 246
dimensional attitude of experience of It by the subject fails to recognize that reciprocal element of devotion in human existence, the active participation with another person that comes through dialogue. It was this reciprocal element of the exclusive relation between persons, between I and du, that was the primal fact of Buber’s philosophy, of the non-discursive, irreducible immediacy which blurs the distinction between subject and object. Subject and object fall into the same mode of reciprocal engagement, of speaking and listening exclusively to one another, and for a moment are indistinguishable from one another during the relation, before it is inevitably permeated by means.

Buber was restoring an a priori of relation by “resubstantializing” subjectivity, by pointing to a non-absolute a priori: not a condition of unilateral, possessive, objective knowledge of something, but a condition of reciprocal, subjective, actualizing experience between I and du. The a priori relation between persons is obviously not indifferent its crucially human element, and the religious experience of other persons is not objectively about the world, and so does not conform to the notion of the absolute as being qua being. The purely subjective relation between persons was “resubstantialized” as unconditional, as a being qua relation-to-du: one is unable to delineate the boundaries between members, or a specific vector of the relation, because each person is mutually present to the other, at once both recognizes and is recognized by the other, so that there is nothing at play other than the reciprocal relation between persons. Just as the womb was conceived as belonging to and melding together both the child and the mother, so also does the encounter belong to and unify both subject and his object, or rather, I and du. Accordingly, the members of the relation are considered interdependent, inseparable in the moment of being actualized by the other and actualizing the other in mutual dialogue and interactivity. There is no independent “being” that relates to
another, but only an occurrence of mutual “being-with”\(^{388}\) and unconditional, present, and immediate “intercourse.”\(^ {389}\)

It may be objected that Buber’s use of the concept of presence forces his involvement in dealing with an objective, transcendental a priori: hasn’t presence always aligned itself with necessary conditions for the possibility of experience? However, to think of presence as the necessary condition for the possibility of experience fails to recognize the overarching distinction between I-It and I-\(du\). To think of presence as a necessary condition for the possibility of experience is to think of it as something anterior to the unilateral apprehension of the given phenomena by the experiencing subject, or that to which experience can be reduced, the phenomenological presence of the given; presence is the condition for the possibility of experience only in the objective mode of I-It. Conversely, presence in Buber’s use of the term is \textit{not} the objective condition for the possibility of experience if unilateral experience and use is ruled out altogether in the mode of I-\(du\); we do not possess a present experience of relating to another person. As stated in that earlier chapter, as soon as we presume to have a hold on what is presently confronting us – that is, to think that we possess some experience of that which is presently given – we have abandoned the movement and reciprocity of the relation; we cannot only “get at” the presence of \(du\) one-dimensionally because \(du\) is at the same moment “getting at” us in the reciprocal encounter. For this reason, again as stated earlier, the reality of presence “cannot be transferred or expressed as a universally valid and generally accepted piece of knowledge,”\(^ {390}\) that is, presence cannot stand as a necessary transcendental condition for the

\(^{388}\) Buber, 113
\(^{389}\) Ibid, 92
\(^{390}\) Ibid, 159
possibility of experience if it is not something that is objectively experienced. Presence, for Buber, is an irreducible, reciprocal *a priori* of a person-in-relation.

For the same reasons, in I-*du* there is no sense of a discursive judgment or evaluation of the objective world by the experiencing subject, but only a reciprocal, unconditional, and intersubjective communication between one person and another. This isn’t to say that some judgment or evaluation of the I-*du* relation itself is impossible (though perhaps it is if the relation itself is not subject to experience), but that as soon as such judgment or evaluation is initiated, the reciprocal interdependence has been cut and subject and object emerge without betweenness as distinct, independent entities. In this sense, I-*du* is a non-discursive immediacy which is (contestably) not beyond the scope of discursive thought, but only cannot be reduced to or exhausted by its discourse.

I-*du* is explicitly a non-discursive, *a priori* relation inasmuch as Buber considers spirituality — the divine nature of dialogue between I and *du* — to be the capacity to communicate, and not the act or realization of communication or discourse itself. Spirit, recall, is that which is “not at hand,” but is the “genesis of word and form” and the sheer “will to communicate.” To be sure, such a notion of spirituality as an underlying capacity or genesis of communication may strike one as an assertion of a necessary, preexisting transcendental condition for communication. However, the point is not to say that one can communicate only if one does so out of an underlying disposition for spirituality; certainly there is some measure communication even from within the attitude of I-It. Rather, as soon as one achieves genuine,
reciprocal dialogue with another person, then spirit has made itself immanently manifest – immanent spirituality is identical to genuine dialogue, not an ancestor of it. We can think of genuine dialogue as a non-absolute, reciprocal a priori of subjectivity because Buber’s dialogue is not the literal act of speech, but the act of connection, participation, and becoming unconditional. Dialogue is the moment of present participation between persons, not just talking to each other.

The a priori of relation, for Emerson, was the relation between person and the world and the cultivation of discipline: the mutual conformation of Nature to one’s own will by the Understanding, and the conformation of one’s own character to the world through Reason. Discipline promises a developing, shared actuality between the person and the world, not the dreaded, unilateral apprehension of objective knowledge of the world by the experiencing subject. Characterized this way, Emerson’s a priori of the relation between persons and the world is likewise not indifferent to the personal element of the relation, and the reciprocal practice of discipline is irreducible merely to objective knowledge about the world, and so Emerson as well does not conform to the notion of the absolute as objectivity and thinking being qua being.

In the preceding chapter, the point was belabored that Emerson’s entire project was to identify the unity, the “original relation,” between an individual and Nature, or between subject and object, available to one who submits himself to the lessons of discipline. Nothing other than this progressive unity of subject and object was meant by the cumulative imagery of the self-reliant, “transparent eyeball” one becomes following the cultivation of discipline. One sees the world, but it is as though something other than – or over – the individual is seeing

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395 Emerson, “Nature,” 33
396 Ibid, 36
through the individual; his ‘me’ at once acts on the ‘Not Me’ even as the individual responds to the lessons of Nature. It was, after all, the Over-soul which brought together “the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object,”\textsuperscript{397} and this notion indicates that the disciplined, self-reliant individual becomes caught up in all of the realities of Nature, and the privileged distinction of subject and object is usurped by integrated and intertwined mutuality and transparency.

We can better appreciate this developing immediacy if we place it in the context of the progression of discipline to Idealism. At the earlier stages of the development, the mediated relationship between subject and object became more and more immediate and mutually effecting: commodities were related to as means, effecting the violent, possessive relation of purely objective experience; beauty was had in a mode of relating to Nature “not for barren contemplation, but for new creation,”\textsuperscript{398} of being impressed at once by the material “forms and actions” of the world by and for themselves, and to have awakened in the mind an intuitive, responsive impulse for creative activity in the world; language initially tries to capture some “material appearance” of the world and Nature serves as the “metaphor of the human mind.”\textsuperscript{399} The cultivation of the taste for beauty and language are both, therefore, somewhat subject to the Understanding and to the epistemic restraints of discourse, but contain elements of creativity and intuitions of mutuality between persons and the world that defy objective conceptualization. The presence of aesthetic delight and material analogies to thought suggest an immediacy between the person and the world, that the division between subject and object is not absolute, and that through creative action, or the continued re-imagination of traditional

\textsuperscript{397} Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 207. My italics.
\textsuperscript{398} Emerson, “Nature,” 41
\textsuperscript{399} Ibid, 46
discourse, one can discern the shared heritage of humanity and Nature. One’s relation to the
world has matured to the point of reciprocity, of having, at the same time, a disciplined
Understanding’s firm grasp on the truth and value of Nature, and a cultured Reason’s unitive and creative responsiveness to the endless variety of Nature.

The disciplined person is the self-reliant person, the one whose soul has been turned over to the unique revelations of the Over-soul, the individual whose intuitions remain flexible enough to be been molded by the various, material impressions of Nature, and the person with the discernment to engage, act, and participate with the world in response to its spontaneous invitations of beauty and speech. The self-reliant person does not prioritize his own, autonomous insight, and makes no claims of necessity regarding the veracity of his intuitions. Instead, the self-reliant person directs his will to the instruction of Nature upon his Reason. Here, subject and object merge into the mutual, shared actualization of one’s Reason by Nature and an individual’s intuitive, actualizing response to Nature: the creative activity, in work and life, of trusting the spontaneous lessons of the immanent, actual world. The self-reliant individual reveals the spark of the immanent divine because of he lives as a testament to the original relation of all souls to the Over-soul, of the spiritual kinship between persons and Nature, and the versatility of Reason to accommodate the variety and multiplicity of immanent actuality.

Furthermore, just as du was present in the confrontation, so also is Nature the “inassimilable presence”400 of the Not Me to which we find ourselves relating and having to respond. Given this shared emphasis on the same questionable word, I wonder if we can understand ‘presence’ as used in Transcendentalism in the same way as Buber had used the

400 Atchley, 256
term, as immanent reciprocity. What is present is not strictly an object of sense experience or of the Understanding, but the realization that some aspects of Nature are inassimilable to the Understanding precisely because they contradict, or at least exceed the narrow constraints of, objective experience. Accordingly, because Nature is to an extent inassimilable and irreducible, our relation to the world cannot be completely one-dimensional or objective. Therefore, some aspect of our relation to the world endures as a reciprocal, never-ceasing “perpetual effect” and “endless exercise” that denies any grounding in transcendent universals or a static, transcendental, a priori condition of objective experience. The effect and exercise of the “intuitions of the mind” are the lessons in method actualized and put to practice, promoting a deeper unity and relation to the world and not a speculative subjugation of it.

III. The instrumentalization of philosophy and thought’s turn towards multiplicity, creative activity, and becoming.

What can be said regarding that third feature of postmodernity: the instrumentalization of philosophy and the movement toward creative thought, of thinking multiplicities and becoming actualities rather than necessary, objective absolutes? Contemporary, postmodern philosophy deals with a reality made up of assemblages, bodies with heterogeneous elements, things as processes, and a dynamic, flexible philosophical response that plays along after this shift from being to becoming. The very nature of the paradigm requires that we adhere to the sphere of immanence in our philosophical deliberations. An emphasis on the contingency of

401 Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 209
402 Emerson, “Nature,” 60
403 Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 113
404 Smith, 205
actuality has ruled out all grounding in absolute necessities: the events in the sphere of
immanence occur as ruptures of the new, not exhaustible by analysis of the conditions for the
possibility of their occurring. Further, a hesitation against asserting truth-conditional, realist,
objective propositions about the world has meant that the task of thinking has changed to a
perpetual re-thinking, of treating the relation to the world as instrument and method rather
than as dogmatic structure and analyticity, a hermeneutic and pragmatic response to the change
and becoming of the world. In this sense, after the metaphysical shift to immanence from
transcendence, and the epistemological emphasis on an irreducible, immediate reciprocity
between subject and object, the ethical force of religiosity lingers as a reverence for an immanent
divinity, as direct and devoted participation with a partner-in-relation, and as creative concern,
acting without means, and being-acted-through.

Recall that Buber describes two basic words one can speak, I-It or I-

du. By framing his
entire philosophy in the context of spoken words, what equates with modes of existence as a
person, Buber seems to desire an understanding of his theological message as an invitation to do
something, to speak a different word, or engage the world and other persons in a new way. As
such, I and Thou encourages an instrumentalization of the message written on its pages, and
both basic words, I-It and I-

du, constitute activities. The attitude which concerns our revived
religiosity, I-

du, better accommodates the demands of postmodernity to heed the variety and
multiplicity of contingent, immanent actuality; it is the attitude which denies modern objective
experience and the determinable possession of the world of objects by a subject, in favor of
reciprocal participation, a movement of mutual recognition and dynamic, responsive
actualization between partners-in-relation. Experience in the mode of I-It is one-dimensional
possession, reflection, and appropriation in the understanding, whereas participation in the
mode of I-

du is bi-directional, always oscillating between the partners-in-relation, a mutual
participation without appropriation. Without appropriation, certainly, but definitively not without activity; recall Buber’s insistence that the relation to du “involve[s] some action on what confronts us.”\textsuperscript{405} Surely it is difficult to conceive of reciprocal participation, encounter or confrontation, and “living intercourse”\textsuperscript{406} as anything other than ongoing processes; nothing about the relation to du is static or fixed, but it is an unfolding and unpredictable development of mutual interaction and communication.

So we are not presently concerned with the default conception of a subject acting on and within the world of objects, but a person participating with another, in an occasion of reciprocity and mutuality. One does not gather knowledge or experience from the encounter, and neither does one participate in order to effect some end in accordance with one’s will or desire. It is not that one acts out of a particular mental disposition, but that one actively gives over one’s entire being in an attempt to affirm and be affirmed by another with whom one relates; the attitude is not a “what” that is possessed, but a “how,” a mode of comportment, or a readiness to relate. To talk of a readiness of one’s entire being to relate to another means treating oneself as a collection and seizure of “everything possible… [and all] possibilities”\textsuperscript{407} at once, as an “active whole”\textsuperscript{408} at the cusp of the moment of a decision to act. One decides in the face of uncertainty, confronted by the contingency of the future and making it actual. It was in this sense that the activity of relating to du is simultaneously passive and active, a responsiveness toward and heeding of all available possibilities in order to instigate some actualization. Such devotion to the partner-in-relation presents itself as though it were non-

\textsuperscript{405} Buber, 65
\textsuperscript{406} Ibid, 92
\textsuperscript{407} Ibid, 101
\textsuperscript{408} Ibid, 125
action, without the use of the other only as a means to an end, a selfless affirmation of the other
in response to its claim on the person.

Such broad strokes to paint such a specific occurrence! – a moment of interdependence
and mutual affirmation between persons. The child affirms the role of the mother as caregiver,
responding with vitality to her nurturing; the mother affirms the role of the child as dependent,
responding with direction and a cultivation of resourcefulness. Pedagogically, a moment of
participation occurs when a teacher speaks directly to the heart of a student by tying together
the threads of a difficult lesson so that the student can get a handle on the issue: the teacher
affirms the role of the student through her instruction, and the student affirms the role of the
teacher through his desire to learn from her. Buber finds something divine in such moments of
reciprocal, mutual affirmations between persons, and calls for a decisive return to this practice
and readiness to relate to another. It is a contentless salvation, evidenced only in the evanescent
acts of participation between persons, a religious ethic beyond normative prescription, an
imploration to return to God. To return to God as the immanent divinity in postmodernity is
the ever-ongoing aspiration to achieve genuine, reciprocal dialogue with another person in the
world, speaking the word I-du and fulfilling “the central commandment [of I and Thou] to make
the secular sacred.”⁴⁰⁹ There is scarcely any mutuality in relating to God as the idol of
theological discourse, and so to return to God is to recognize the kindred, spiritual aspect of the
mutual affirmation that obtains in relations between persons.

From Emerson we have learned that the cultivation of discipline is a process and
development of character; one progresses through the uses of Nature as a matter of reciprocal
engagement with the natural world. His philosophy of Transcendentalism, the a priori of the

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⁴⁰⁹ Prologue, 23
relation between persons and the world, is more accurately an instrument of effectively relating to Nature. The progression through discipline was a growing reduction in the appropriation and willfulness of the Understanding, and at the same time a cultivation of responsive, creative method of Reason, so that Emerson had detailed the maturing process of recognizing activity as the counterpart to thought\textsuperscript{410} in the relation between the person and the world. Importantly, Reason revealed that the unity between person and the world is a “unity in variety,”\textsuperscript{411} so that it is hardly an exaggeration to observe, even if figuratively, that the disciplined, self-reliant individual is he who works\textsuperscript{412} and migrates, never dwelling and always unsettled by the unforeseeable future of existing in the world, and he who skates on the surfaces of life without resting on one or the other.\textsuperscript{413} This means that the cumulative activity spawned by the disciplined Reason, as noted previously, makes of Nature an adventure\textsuperscript{414} and forces the individual into perpetual practice and “endless exercise” of his faculty of Reason,\textsuperscript{415} the cultivation of a self-reliant method of living in the world of contingent actuality and becoming multiplicities.

As with Buber, there is a movement in Emerson as well between “modes of consciousness or ways of being in the world.”\textsuperscript{416} The movement led by the Understanding is the movement of appropriation and use, which classifies and quantifies the objects of the world in order to make them available to the power of an individual will. The movement led by the Reason is the movement of response, creative action, and methodological discipline. The Understanding proceeds as though adhering to the necessary structure of the external world,

\textsuperscript{410} Emerson, “Nature,” 41, 52; Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 91
\textsuperscript{411} Emerson, “Nature,” 51
\textsuperscript{412} Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 222
\textsuperscript{413} Laugier, 7; Smith, 198-199; Atchley, 258
\textsuperscript{414} Laugier, 10
\textsuperscript{415} Emerson, “Nature,” 60
\textsuperscript{416} Smith, 193
while Reason proceeds as though the only necessity was contingency, as though the world itself was creative, containing not essences but assemblages and multiplicities, not possibilities but new actualities. In either case, there is some activity: the Understanding actively appropriates the world to the human mind in promotion of the exercise of the human will, and the Reason opens the intuitions to the impression by the forms and actions of Nature so that she can operate through the activity of the person who becomes “something the world is doing.”\textsuperscript{417} The passive activity of the individual’s Reason strikes an uncanny harmony with Buber’s person relating to \textit{du}: in response to \textit{du} or to Nature, the person is responsible for an actualization that affirms the presence of the other, but does so in a way that in not the exercise of self-will, but for the sake of \textit{du} or the spirit of Nature.

From this we can gather that Emerson’s religiosity is cultivated, developed, and earned through an active dealing with the lessons of Nature, of having one’s soul rely on the lessons of the Over-soul. Fulfillment and salvation come only when one commits “to work and live”\textsuperscript{418} in the world, to return to Nature who has taught us by making manifest her immaterial lessons. Emerson as well preaches an ethics of dynamic response to contingencies and difference, an ethics beyond normative prescription because its lessons are unique to each person in a unique relationship to the world, with different material needs, aesthetic taste, manner of speech, and acquired self-reliance than others. Transcendentalism is a philosophy of doing, of response and interactivity in relation to the world.

IV. Concluding remarks

\textsuperscript{417} Smith, 192  
\textsuperscript{418} Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 216
How, then, do we think of the relationship between philosophy and religion in the secularized atmosphere of postmodernity? To the extent the preceding explications of Buber and Emerson according to the three characterizations of postmodernity points to a renewed interpretation of religious tradition, we have reason enough for talk of something like divinity in postmodernity: each philosopher’s recognizes an encounter with the divine that unfolds in the sphere of immanence, within creation, without promoting and in fact prohibiting a deference to some other-worldly transcendence or some absolute, objective a priori; each describes a profound unity of subject and object that occurs in the moment of immediate, reciprocal relation to another person or in relation to the world, a revelation that the other is like myself and bespeaks of divinity; each recognizes that such a unifying relation and sense of redemption with the divine is an activity, a state of doing rather than a state of being. From these similarities, we get a sense for how we can respond to postmodernity, the death of God, and the end of metaphysics as persons committed to the immanence of the transcendental, an a priori of relation and a religiosity that obtains in the relations between persons, or between persons and the world.

It is striking that both Buber and Emerson describe a movement between two modes of comporting oneself to the world, a mode of disunity (I-It and Materialism) opposed to one of unity (I-du and Idealism), one of determinate appropriation and one of active interpretation. The mode of disunity is not discounted outright – the philosophy of absolutes still offers productive answers to many of its persistent questions – but was augmented by each thinker with the devotional mode of unity: the I-It attitude was to immerse itself in the surpassing and embracing truth of the reciprocity between I and du, just as the sensational and materialistic Understanding was instructed to grow into the intuited, idealistic Reason.
From this mutual duality of perspectives, we can notice that each of our thinkers describes a notion of God or Spirit as the ineffable, the transcategorical outside the system of thinking in terms of necessity, the “residuum [analysis] could not resolve”\(^{419}\) that promises only new revelations and persistent speculation, while at the same time subsisting proximally close to and intimately with our own being as human persons – some unnameable aspect of the world and ourselves testifies to divinity. Neither was conducting theology or philosophy of religion by inquiring into the absolute Nature of God and creation, the content of salvation, or the cost of sin. This standard approach to religion has become misguided because it reaffirms the idolatry of the absolute that has been put to bed by Nietzsche and Heidegger. What we have instead is a religiosiity unconcerned with the justification of its propositions, a contentless salvation, a seeking after truth not in some explicit revelation, but through activity, reciprocal dialogue, and human politics. The message of rejecting the absolute is, as has been noticed, shrouded with an ironic twist: a description has been offered about an \textit{a priori} of relation where one speaks \textit{to} \textit{du} and not \textit{about} \textit{du}; the intuitions of the mind and of Reason harbor the disciplining lessons of multiplicity, “endless exercise,” and “perpetual effect”\(^{420}\) of Nature. ‘God’ becomes the name of the unnameable aspect of Nature which continues to defy the understanding but who nonetheless participates with the person and calls for his response: the gravity of relating directly to another person with whom one communicates, and the inexhaustible instruction of the world with whom one engages. When one returns to God in postmodernity, one returns to the world and to the reality of being-with other persons; God is actualized in the world\(^{421}\) in moments of reciprocal affirmation between beings.

\(^{419}\) Emerson, “The Over-soul,” 206  
\(^{420}\) Emerson, “Nature,” 60  
\(^{421}\) Buber, 163
What can be said – if it is even safe to say anything – regarding the claims of the divinity of the human person and the world? What is divine for Buber is the mutuality that obtains in human relations, “between man and man,” and the responsibility to return the affirmation of the partner-in-relation, the solidarity with the other who is the “soul of my soul.” To return to God in postmodernity is, at least partly, to restore community and genuine dialogue between persons. For Emerson, Nature sanctifies herself and ourselves by her disciplined instruction of our intuitions. The person achieves his own inner divinity, cultivates his internal character to the cusp of infinitude, and grows to rely on the divine within his own mind. By so doing, he achieves the original and unifying relation to that Over-soul, initiates a return to that divine tendency that envelops and develops the world and those in it. Each of these relations, between persons and between persons and the world, ensures a mutual, developing actualization that brings the person beyond themselves into a tangible engagement with the immanent other, opens the space for the devoted and faithful giving of one’s whole being for the sake of another, and heeds the invitation of Nature and community calling us to work and to live.

To conclude, while the postmodern religiosity we have sought to describe resists an appeal to the understanding or to the rationalization of its concepts, and while the salvation and meaning so depicted follows only from a movement beyond objectivity, it is nonetheless not a blind faith. Rather, one believes in belief, not treating religious convictions as claims of absolute necessity, but rather as trust in the face of contingent actuality, a willingness to nurture a unity with the world rather than stand at a speculative distance from it. Religious discourse – the language of spirit, intuition, presence, divinity, salvation, and devotion – is properly

422 Ibid, 84
423 Emerson, “Self-reliance,” 208
424 Emerson, “Self-reliance,” 225; Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 110
425 Vattimo, 1.
hermeneutic and is the paradigm case for thinking of the real as contradictory and paradoxical, as lived, inviting reinterpretation and constant subversion, and as making direct demands for our interactivity. It is the narrative about creation, our relation to the divine, and the restoration of this relation that invites a continuous grappling with, a constant return and reinterpretation, and trust and devotion to a unfolding reinvigoration of truth. Once trimmed of its outmoded modern and pre-modern baggage of objectivity and transcendence, much of the discourse of religion remains as a historical artifact which can be recycled and reapplied in contemporary talk about the world and persons in it; we can draw from practices informed by the historical religious texts without incorporating the dogmatism of tradition associated with those texts. In the present case at hand, we are drawing from the practices described by a Jew and a Christian who take their cue from Judeo-Christian Scripture; a narrative offering a story of divine expectations, fulfilled in a figure of God who dies, and how those who retain that expectation ought to continue in the world after the fact of the death of God. Such a narrative asks again to be applied today, by religious thinkers meeting the death of the God in the secular philosophy of postmodernity.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


