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Out of the In-Between: Moses Mendelssohn and Martin Buber’s German Jewish Philosophy of Encounter, Singularity, and Aesthetics

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Abstract

Out of the In-Between: Moses Mendelssohn and Martin Buber's German Jewish Philosophy of Encounter, Singularity, and Aesthetics

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This dissertation seeks to clarify and articulate a trajectory in Germanic Jewish thought, beginning with the work of Moses Mendelssohn and ending with Martin Buber; this trajectory maps two concepts: the in-between [zwischen] and singularity [die Singularität]. These ideas are developed in light of their philosophical context, and brought into dialogue with contemporary thought.

Singularities are individuals that cannot be seen as a particular instantiations of either a general or universal concept. This creates problems for thinking about them, in particular, it is difficult to see how singulars can relate to or affect each other. The in-between is the relational space that allows for an encounter between singularities. In this sense, the in-between is the chief conceptual support for the idea of singularity.

This dissertation takes the modest goal of formalizing and clarifying these concepts, preparing the ideas of the in-between and singularity such that they can be used in the study of religion. I suggest that these concepts are useful insofar as they allow us to take a middle path between theology and reductive analysis, viewing the transcendent claims of religions in a manner that is at once sympathetic and critical.
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Introduction

*A philosophy is never a house; it is a construction site.*

This dissertation seeks to clarify and articulate a trajectory in Germanic Jewish thought, beginning with the work of Moses Mendelssohn and ending with Martin Buber; the two chief concepts mapped of this trajectory are the in-between \([\text{zwischen}]\) and singularity \([\text{Singularität}]\). I begin with Moses Mendelssohn, not only because he is the first significant German Jewish philosopher, but because his work, in particular his aesthetic work, provides basic building blocks for a theory of singularity and the in-between. I end with Martin Buber because it is in his work that these ideas receive their most contemporary, and adequate, expression. It is my intention to develop the concepts of singularity and the in-between in light of their philosophical context, and to bring them into dialogue with contemporary thought. These ideas will develop as the trajectory proceeds, their implications and applications expanded in light of their employment. However, before beginning this trajectory, it might be helpful to establish a working definition of the two concepts.

I distinguish two types of individual: the *singular* and the *particular*. The term ‘individual’ has multiple meanings, but these two will be the focus of this dissertation. Particulars are instances of a universal or general kind. For example: the word ‘cat’ is a kind, a kind that contains all cats; I can define a particular cat through its inclusion in this kind. Singularities are individuals that are not particulars, meaning: not particular instantiations of either a general or universal concept. Singularities are single, unique, unique,
and autonomous individuals that cannot be grasped in terms of their differences and similarities to other things. Thus they are not defined by their participation in universals or generals; they are, if a part of anything at all, a member of a plurality, or community. This is why there is a historical tendency to link singularity with an individual’s proper name, which indexes a singular independent of its inclusion in a set or kind. Singulizers are what makes something what it is, independent of its predicates or containment in a universal. The difference between the terms particular and singular is well expressed by the English language, where the word ‘particular’ suggests something that is part of something, or an instance of it, while the ‘singular’ is unique, possible lonely, and not necessarily a part of some general type or kind.

The in-between is the relational space that allows for an encounter between singularities, but this is a transcendental space insofar as these relations, and the encounter they engender, constitutes the meeting singularities. In this sense, the in-between is the chief conceptual support of the idea of singularity—it allows us to coherently think about singularity—but conversely, singularity allows us to understand the in-between, as the in-between is between two singularities. Because singularities are autonomous and cannot be defined by their differences from other singularities, they cannot meet, or be thought, in a standard conceptual space (which is determined by the differences between its objects); the space where singularities encounter each other cannot be thought of as a container without transforming the singulars into particulars. The in-between is thus a strange relational space between two singularities present to each other, without which this presence would not be possible. It is not arrived at through phenomenology, but something closer to transcendental analysis: it must be presupposed if we are to explain
how encounters with singularities are possible, and how it is the case that these singularities are formed by these encounter. The in-between is emphatically not a mid-point between two existent things, nor is it a combination of two particulars. It refers not to the border-land between two zones (the liminal) nor is it an expression of mediation or combination. It is instead an phenomenological notion of a transitory space that allows two unlimited and autonomous beings to encounter each other in a manner such that this encounter, itself not a part of the world of things and descriptions, is able to transform and recontextualize the world of third-person descriptions.

Because these concepts are both abstruse and in danger of being too abstract this dissertation seeks to explicate both the historical trajectory that constructs them—in order to help clarify what they are—and, to show what set of problems they are responding to—to aid their employment by contemporary and future thinking. One advantage of this approach—mapping an intellectual trajectory—it that it allows us to view Buber’s work in terms of both his Germanic and Jewish intellectual heritage, rather than separating his thought and viewing him as either a German or a Jew. Buber and Mendelssohn drew heavily from both the resources of German philosophy and the traditions of Jewish thought, and both resources were brought to bear upon the problems of singularity and the in-between. These concepts exist at an intersection between philosophical and religious thought, where philosophy is engaged to do justice to religious phenomena. Of greater importance is the way the analysis of a trajectory explicates the abstruse concepts of the in-between and singularity in relation to concrete problems they were intend to deal with. This will ensure that such analysis resists becoming too dissociated, and allows for engagement with contemporary thought about religion and ontology.
A long term goal of this project is to employ the concepts of singularity and the in-between in the study of religion. This dissertation takes the more modest goal of formalizing and clarifying these concepts, preparing the concepts of the in-between and singularity such that they can one day be employed in the study of religion. I suggest that these concepts are useful insofar as they allow us to take a middle path between theology and reductive analysis, viewing the transcendent claims of religions in a manner that is at once sympathetic and critical.

If the study of religion is seen as a function of another discipline, such as history, then it is far from clear why we need religious studies. There must be something about its object—religion—that requires special modes of analysis. I would argue that religion, as an object, requires that we take seriously the idea of encounters which violate our standard descriptive world view (including the study of history, psychology, sociology, economics, et al). However, if the study of religion is to be a study, then it cannot simply accept theological claims about such encounters. This is a difficult situation, and I believe the ideas of the in-between and singularity can help us negotiate it. These two concepts provide us with conceptual tools for understanding the social, aesthetic and cultural aspects of religion, without dissolving the specifically mysterious or conceptually hidden elements of religious traditions. By giving us a way to think about real encounters that cannot be explicated from a third party perspective, Buber allows us to take seriously claims about religious encounter. Singular encounters, as real but transitory engagements that relativize third-person descriptive schemes, would be a conceptual building block for a study of religion that does not need to discard theological or naturalist perspectives; the
study of religion, viewed from this perspective, would be something like the study of
singularities, especially, but not only, singularities that people name ‘religious’.

As Remi Brague has shown, Buber’s philosophical thought is intended to “take into
account and do justice to religious experience.”² Here Buber’s work explicitly follows
that of Moses Mendelssohn. For both, to study religion is to study the ways communities
develop and protect specific images [Bild] of singularities, or, in other words, the way in
which practices can facilitate, transform, or block access to the in-between.³ I suggest
that this method is well positioned to theorize the seemingly conservative elements of
religious communities, without dismissing them as remnants of archaic and obsolete
worldviews, or reducing the study of religion to the mere collection of historical data.
One benefit of such a theory is that it would by no means require abandonment of studies
that treat religion from the perspective of one of the more traditional disciplines; instead,
such work would be re-contextualized in light of the singular religious object. For
instance, a sociology of religion could bring to light valuable information about the ways
specific communities organize around, and protect, an ‘image,’ or practice, for
encountering singularities. A history could show the ways and means by which religious
singularities are transmitted, or tamed, in a historical setting. A psychology could
explore the ways people respond to singularity.

The project of employing singularity and the encounter as a means of studying religion
does not mean a focus upon first person experience, experience supposedly lost when we

² Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, Martin Buber : A Contemporary Perspective, 1st ed. (Syracuse:
Syracuse University Press, 2002), 134.
³ For the most succinct treatment of the relationship between images and practices see the
recent, and excellent: Gideon Freudenthal, No Religion without Idolatry : Mendelssohn's
employ third person descriptive schemes. While there is truth to the idea that theories of
religion sometimes overlook first person experience—and attempts to recover this
experience are important—such a recovery is not the goal of this work. Instead,
singularity and the in-between are intended to make sense of the second person—the
events of encounter and address—and the ways that these affect both the first and third
person. Rather than attempting to synthesize the first and third person perspectives, Buber
presents a model for thinking that emphasizes second person analysis. Buber holds that
there are entities or encounters that can only be made sense of through the second person:
that there are beings—God is a chief example—which we can speak to, even if we cannot
speak about them. Kant holds that there are concepts—such as existence and orientation,
to which Buber adds singularity—that cannot be treated as predicates, which are seen
from a third-person perspective, or embedded in the first. Buber thus follows and
develops Kant’s thinking when he holds that there are fundamental concepts that can only
be accessed through an encounter; and encounter is theorized from the second person
perspective. This requires something of a gamble: a study that privileges second-person
analysis will need to give up on apodictic demonstrations and risk engagement with
claims that can neither be proven nor disproven. However, I suggest that such an
approach would allow us to treat religious claims as being more than mere fancy, or
products of other forces—such as the economic or historical—and view them as
documents or traces, no matter how problematic, of real encounters.

Such a grandiose scheme could likely never be brought off by one person, let alone one
dissertation. Thus, this work restricts itself to a formalization and clarification of the
trajectory of these two concepts in the hopes that they will one day be employed in the
study of religion. Even is the project of providing a method for the study of religion is
never realized, this work seeks to be of value as a contribution to Mendelssohn and Buber
studies.

I believe that Mendelssohn’s philosophy is productively viewed from the perspective of
his theory of singularity and the twofold space of his aesthetic theory. These ideas
represent a real, and overlooked, philosophical development, one that can helpfully
engage with contemporary aesthetic thought. Mendelssohn’s twofold space of encounter
provides a theory of representation where representations transform both their object and
subject, such that sensuality is given a space of autonomy distinct from ratiocination.
There are, he holds, entities and ways of thinking which we can only access through the
sensual. Intriguingly, this access is founded on human limitation: limited sensuality,
when brought to bear on the infinite, ‘manufactures’ beauty as a means of making up the
gap between our limited sensuality and its infinite object. This theory is relevant for
many contemporary psychoanalytic and Hegelian approaches to the aesthetic. More
generally, it allows us to think about the aesthetic and sensual as an autonomous field that
provide access to truth which escapes other modes of appropriation.

With Buber, the ideas of singularity and the in-between not only allows me to formalize
his thinking such that it is able to adequately respond to problems raised by many of his
critics, they also foreground Buber’s darker and more rigorous aspects, in particular, his
notion of melancholy [*Schwermut*], mis-meeting [*Vergegnung*], and his employment of
the idea of nothing [*Nichts*] as a fundamental concept for explicating how encounters are
possible. Buber holds that there are real encounters with singulars that recontextualize
descriptive claims, but that these encounters are shot through with nothingness, hence
their transitory nature. My project reveals not only that the domesticated image of Buber as a grandfatherly Jewish existentialist is misleading, but also that this image obscures how crucial Buber’s concepts of the in-between and singularity are for philosophical analysis. Further, this explication of Buber’s allows us to look ‘behind’ the regnant French thought of the other to its Jewish philosophical roots in order to better understand the contemporary theoretical landscape. When seen from a Buberian perspective, the Lévinas-inflected theory that dominates debates about otherness is seen as over-determining encounters in order to ensure that they provides us with a secure ground for ethics. Buber convincingly argues that this should not be the case, and the assumption that encounter is always ethical damages our understanding of what encounter is. Finally, I believe Buber’s phenomenological analysis of the second person encounter with singularities are directly applicable to contemporary debates in phenomenology, in particular ideas of intentionality and relations without objects. Buber provides a way for thinking through a second person relation where the object is nothing, or not a thing, and this gives us an alternative to phenomenologies that—following Heidegger—use the first person relation to anxiety as the primary case of such relations to nothing. This in turn allows for a reading of the non-object relation within a social sphere.

Both Mendelssohn and Buber’s writings are deceptively simple, such that the subtlety of their metaphysical and ontological analysis is often unnoticed. A reconstruction and formalization of their philosophies of singularity and the in-between will allow an explication of their more sophisticated positions, positions often overlooked in favour of their more congenial tropes. It is for this reason that this dissertation’s primary method of analysis is philosophical. Neither Buber nor Mendelssohn were exclusively
philosophical thinkers. But it is in their specifically philosophical work that their analysis is at its most refined, and capable of participating in the academic study of religion. I would suggest that their philosophical contributions cannot be understood from cultural or historical perspectives. Such perspectives are extremely valuable, but insofar as the intention of this dissertation is the development of two concepts, philosophical explication and formalization is of the utmost importance. However, this philosophical analysis will not take the form of extensive abstract argumentation, nor will it try to argue for a specific position in a cultural vacuum. Rather than philosophical argument, the method here is one of philosophical reconstruction, seeking to develop singularity and the in-between in the midst of a historical context, mapping an intellectual trajectory that these ideas take. It will thus deal extensively with Buber and Mendelssohn’s intellectual antecedents and influences, the critiques they faced which forced them to reformulate their views, and responses to their thinking. It is to be hoped that such a trajectory will be capable of being extended into the present and beyond, and that this work will aid contemporary and future engagement with these concepts.

To this end, I will begin with an exploration of the way Mendelssohn takes up the rationalist philosophy of Leibniz and Spinoza in a manner that—while seemingly being only a synthesis and popular commentary upon their ideas—transforms their work such that it is capable of addressing the two primary concepts of this dissertation. Mendelssohn’s aesthetics are the primary arena for this transformation; his attempts to do justice to the claims of sensuality led him to qualify the scope of rationality, and, to develop a theory of encounter. One major claim of this dissertation is that singularities cannot be dealt with from the position of third-person metaphysics. A third-person
metaphysics—which is most metaphysics—cannot constitute or discover entities except in terms of their universality or participation in a set. More simply: I suggest that singularities—with which religion is very much concerned—cannot be thought through the third person, but requires engagement with the second person perspective. Any claims about singularity thus need to make explicit the way we can have access to them, and this can only occur through encounter. Thus, Mendelssohn’s ‘twofold’ space of representation will come into play as an early means of conceiving this sort of encounter.

In the second chapter the trajectory passes through the work of Immanuel Kant. This for two reasons. Firstly, Kant’s work presents something of a rupture in the history of German philosophical thought. After Kant, third person metaphysical claims become difficult, if not impossible to sustain. Mendelssohn, despite his theory of aesthetic encounter, was still very much a metaphysician of the Leibniz-Wolffian school (what Kant called dogmatic metaphysics). Thus, Kant’s work would seem to destabilize, if not destroy, Mendelssohn’s work (Mendelssohn himself famously referred to Kant as the ‘all destroyer’). However, at least insofar as the idea of singularity is concerned, Kant’s rupture has a productive effect: once it has been show that singularities cannot be grounded by a classical metaphysical system, it becomes necessary to think through singularity on its own terms. Cut loose from the metaphysical harmony that once sustained them, the radically autonomous nature of singulars become more explicit. The second reason for Kant’s inclusion concerns the extensive influence he had upon Martin Buber’s own work. Buber takes up two essential concepts from Kant: the idea that some things can only be known through direct relation; and the idea of the transcendental x, which Buber employs as a means of indexing, or pointing, at things that we cannot think-
about. Buber takes Kant’s destruction of dogmatic metaphysics seriously, and develops a
phenomenology that allows us to theorize singularity—indexing it through the x—in the
absence of a third person metaphysical system. Thus, Mendelssohn’s insights into
singularities are deepened, and his twofold space of encounter is reconstructed as the in-
between, seen as a space that is prior to most forms of representation.

Kant and Mendelssohn’s work is thus employed to clarify the two basic concepts—
singularity and the in-between—and to exhibit the metaphysical space which Buber
inherits and responds to. The third chapter treats the positive claims Buber makes about
the in-between from this position. By positive I mean phenomena that are concrete,
phenomenologically available, or present. This chapter treats Buber’s presentation of
speech directions, encounter, and presence, paying especial attention to Buber’s use of
phenomenological exercises. The notion of encounter is taken up from Kant, and is used
to establish a type of access to singularity. Following the work of Bloch, this chapter
formalizes two speech directions: talking-about and talking-to. These intentional
attitudes are used to exhibit one of Buber’s chief claims: that there are some things—
singularities—that cannot be spoken about but can be spoken-to. Here the examples are
drawn from daily life—in particular: conversation, and what it means to say ‘I know
someone’. It is hoped that the mundane nature of these examples will help bring the
seemingly abstract concept of singularity down to earth, and demonstrate its usefulness in
making sense of basic phenomena. From this position, the idea can be expanded upon
such that it is able to take account of other, less commonplace, encounters.

Buber’s idea of presence is an intentional state that undergirds the speech directions
(which require a linguistic apparatus). Presence is a basic type of encounter that allows
us to make sense of singularity, and to see how the idea of singularity can be employed to help us understand what goes on in face to face encounters—especially that which seems to exceed third-person ways of conceiving things. Presence can occur in the absence of language, and thus allows us to think about encounters with non-human singularities, something that is of interest to the study of religion, where, often, one of the members in an encounter is not human. It also allows us to extend Buber’s dialogicism beyond specifically inter-personal encounters, and avoids the traps laid by theories that over-privilege discourse as a means of encountering others.

These positive phenomena will give a rough outline of what Buber’s phenomenology of the in-between and singularity looks like. The fourth chapter will use these phenomena to explicate and formalize the thinking that undergirds Buber’s phenomenology, focusing upon the negative conceptual characteristics of the in-between and singularity. In particular, Buber’s employment of the concept of ‘nothing’ [Nichts] will be mobilized to explain the phenomenological grounding for the positive phenomena of the previous chapter. It will be shown that the dual nature of the human person’s intentional attitudes—speaking-to versus speaking-about, the I-It versus the I-You—are grounded in two different ways that the Nichts is employed. Further, it will be shown that the dual nature of the person is reflected in the duality of the human world (the world of particulars that can be described, and singulars that can be encounters). In the world of speaking-about, singulars appear as a Nichts (I can say nothing about it). In the world of speaking-to, encounters are shot through with the negative, they are constituted by it: the Nichts is the ground of a singular’s autonomy, the way it is able to relativize the world of things, and its transitory nature. Demonstrating this will both provide an argument for
why the in-between and singularity need to be taken seriously—there are things that cannot be explained without it—and, will explicate a formal mechanism that Buber’s uses to establish his phenomenological claims.

After dealing with the expansive category of the singularity, the final chapter will focus upon the specifically human singularity and the relation of the inter-human [Zwischenmenschlichen] to the in-between. Rather than engage in transcendental or formal analysis, this will take the form of a lengthy exploration of Buber’s genetic account of the human singular—genetic meant in its logical sense: a description of a manner of formation. As mentioned, it is often the case that in religious encounters one participant is non-human, it is even more often the case that at least one of the participants is human. Through exploring Buber’s—at points problematic—account of natality and childhood development, the theory of singularity and the in-between will be brought to bear upon human being. This will aid any employment of Buber’s work that touches upon human concerns. While Buber’s own genetic story is far from being empirical, it is hoped that an exploration of the specific ways the category of singularity and the structure of the in-between are used by him to explicate human development can be used to help recontextualize observational and experimental accounts of human development.

The properly philosophical aim of this chapter is to respond to a criticism that has been voiced in several forms by Buber’s interpreters: how is it possible that the encounter with singularities in the in-between constitute the human person? On first glance, it seems that a meeting is impossible without two pre-established persons to do the meeting. It will be shown that Buber’s critics confuse his transcendental account—in which concepts are
developed through structures of presupposition—with his genetic one. Buber’s in-between is not, as has been suggested by several interpreters, the fundamental concept of a general ontology, but it is—in an inchoate form—the beginning of the genetic process. To assume the in-between has transcendental priority leads to a misunderstanding of how the genetic process is possible: critics such as Theunissen argue that the concept of the in-between cannot by itself explain the emergence of the first person ‘I’. But it was never meant to do this. I will argue that—despite Buber’s incidental comments which suggest otherwise—it is a mistake to view the in-between as a concept for fundamental ontology. There are properly ontological concepts that precede the in-between—most notably, the idea of Urdistanz—and without them the in-between does not function. The genetic primacy of the in-between has nothing to do with transcendental or ontological priority. Instead, humans begin genetically in an undetermined in-between space that is articulated through the entry of the nothing [Nichts] in the process of development through the event of mis-meeting [Vergegnung] which is the genetic manifestation of primordial distance [Urdistanz]. It is through the Nichts of Vergegnung that the terms of the inarticulate in-between are distinguished and the I emerges out of the in-between.

It is hoped that the mapping of this trajectory will clarify what the ideas of the in-between and singularity refer to, the problems they were intended to solve, and possible future engagements for these concepts in the field of religious studies. The explication of these ideas will allow a more nuanced reading of Buber and Mendelssohn, exhibiting the complex and demonstrate their continued value for philosophical and religious thought.
Chapter One: Aesthetics, Singularity, and the Perfect Harmony

This chapter develops a set of concepts out of the work of Moses Mendelssohn, concepts that initiate a trajectory which leads into Martin Buber’s work. Of especial importance are Mendelssohn’s treatment of aesthetics and singularity. It is not clear that Mendelssohn himself recognized the extent to which these two ideas are intertwined. But they are intertwined in his actual work, even if he was not explicit about their entanglement. Singularity, the notion that there are objects that cannot be determined by their predicates, or position within a universal, is a powerful notion, and one that is essential to Buber’s project. Aesthetics provides a way, possibly the only way, that we can encounter and think singularities.

However, Mendelssohn, because of his commitment to a Leibnizian rationalist metaphysics, was unable to see that singularity must be dealt with via aesthetics. Mendelssohn’s pre-Kantian doctrine of harmony and perfection enabled him to treat singularity from the perspective of a third-person, or ‘dogmatic,’ metaphysics. If only to explain this ‘oversight’, it will be important to treat Mendelssohn’s idea of perfection. The perfect harmony is the tissue that allows Mendelssohn to think singularity via metaphysics. This is no longer possible after Kant takes his surgeon’s knife to transcendent reason. Perfection and harmony will, however, resurface in Buber’s thought, transformed from claims into ideals.

Thus, Mendelssohn’s aesthetics, and not his third-party metaphysics, provides a means of encountering and thinking through singularities, whereas Buber will eventually

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4 Gumbrecht defines what I mean by such a metaphysics: as such “an attitude, both an everyday attitude and an academic perspective, that gives a higher value to the meaning
provide the metaphysical structure—the in-between—that does justice to these singularities. Buber’s concerns, and the general shape of his thought (especially the space of representation) are analogous, if not directly indebted, to Mendelssohn’s. Mendelssohn’s ‘twofold’ space of aesthetic encounter is of particular importance, as is his extensive and sympathetic treatment of ugliness. A system’s ability to account for ugliness is deeply related to its ability to think singularity: ugliness, an intensity that exists outside the ‘universal’ strictures of beauty, is a test case for singularity. If an ugly object is seen only in its deviation from the beautiful, then it is clear we are not thinking this object on its own terms. Conversely, if an ugly object is seen to have perfection—harmful or not—in its own right, this provides evidence that we are on the road towards thinking singularity.

Mendelssohn’s thought admirably fulfills these conditions, and his aesthetics of singularity is the first step I will take towards Buber’s idea of the in-between.

**background**

Mendelssohn gives us a body of thinking that seeks to maintain the rigour of rationalism while attempting to give full justice to the liberal and sensual claims of modernity. He built bridges between the old intellectual order and the new aesthetic and political world, even though those bridges, as is well known (perhaps too well known) were quickly burnt of phenomena than to their material presence; the word thus points to a worldview that always wants to go ‘beyond’ (or ‘below’) phenomena or the physical. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), xiv. (emphasis added)
by Kant the ‘all destroyer’. Mendelssohn is not however, of mere antiquarian interest, nor can he be dismissed as pre-modern.  

Mendelssohn is perhaps best known for his role in the 18th century pantheism controversy. A series of published letters, private conversations, and hastily written essays were the vehicle for a European intellectual trauma. The public exposure of German cultural hero Gottfried Lessing’s pantheist beliefs provided the impetus for re-examining religious Enlightenment. The controversy began when Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi published a private conversation wherein Lessing declared himself a Spinozist, which Jacobi took to be an admission of atheism. As one of Lessing’s best friends, and the explicit target of Jacobi’s publishing, Mendelssohn was implicated in the controversy from its beginning. This dispute was engaged in by almost every significant intellectual in Germany.

The effects of this controversy have not really subsided. In particular, the work of Leo Strauss continues this dispute, with his positioning of Jerusalem and Athens as antipodes and Western Civilization as the tension established between the two. Strauss wrote his

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5 To fully argue this would take a book of its own, but it suffices to note that Mendelssohn’s politics, with the effort to find the universal in the actions of a singular community, or Mendelssohn’s notion of imperfect rights, both have far more in common with contemporary political theory than the generic liberalism and the universalist rights one finds in Lessing or Kant.


7 “Western man became what he is, and is what he is, through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought.” "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory
dissertation on Jacobi, and very shortly thereafter assembled the *Jubiläumsausgabe* of Mendelssohn’s work.\(^8\) Unsurprisingly, Strauss uses Jacobi and Mendelssohn to articulate the Jerusalem and Athens debate. What is surprising is the way that Strauss positions these thinkers in a triangle where Jacobi stands for Jerusalem, Mendelssohn, the Jew, stands in for Athens, and Lessing is an unresolved third who has freed himself from the Enlightenment trust in reason: privately Athenian and publically a supporter of Jerusalem.\(^9\) Mendelssohn, on this model, is an effete ‘universal’ figure who falsely privileges an abstract reason that cannot do justice to an undecidable life.\(^10\)

I suggest a different reading: Mendelssohn is a rationalist, but he seeks the rational, or universal, *through the singular*: the image of him as a thinker floating above the world in

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9 Of course, Mendelssohn’s Athenian traits are viewed as a self-satisfied bourgeois compromise, and Jacobi’s Jerusalem is a little too irrational, if not crazy, for Strauss. As Gottlieb notes: “These conclusions led Strauss to seek a third alternative, which he found in Lessing”. As reported by Jacobi, Lessing was an atheist, but he concealed this fact even from his close friend Mendelssohn. Rather, Lessing presented himself as a defender of traditional Christianity…. Strauss accepted Jacobi’s understanding of Lessing. For Strauss, while as a philosopher Lessing could not believe in God, he recognized the political utility of religious belief for the masses.” Michah Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn’s Theological-Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Here we can see a prefiguration of Strauss’ esoteric reading technique in the figure of Lessing, who ‘knows the secret’ but keeps quiet about it. Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 71. I do not deny the merits of Strauss’ hermeneutics, but suggest that his approach is not radical enough: for him, the ‘secret’ is something that could, in theory, be made public. Strauss does not develop a thoroughly dialectical model of the secret, which is secret in its revelation. For an account of this model see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of MenaḥEm Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

10 Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 140.
a land of empty ideas is mistaken. For Mendelssohn, a universal not grounded in singularity is not really universal. For instance, the basic thesis of *Jerusalem* is that the universal state must tolerate dissonance not for pragmatic reasons, but rather that a state should be composed *out of* the dissonances between different faiths and beliefs, in order to achieve a harmonious perfection. A harmonious perfection is the only real universal—an imposed universal, a ‘box’ that contains differences, is false. As Mendelssohn pithily exclaims: “Brothers, if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence.”

Ultimately Strauss was unable to see Mendelssohn’s intellectual finesse; he was too taken by Jacobi’s reading of his adversary.

**texts**

In Mendelssohn’s aesthetic writings, particularly the modifications to the second edition of his *Philosophical Writings*, we find a discussion of ‘twofold’ representation that presages Mendelssohn’s concept of diversity and Buber’s aesthetics. It is in the twofold process, or space, of aesthetics that we find a way of accessing singularities.

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11 Mendelssohn’s cosmopolitanism is not an attempt to abstractly string together a series of particular claims by a pragmatic leader or bureaucracy. Rather, through engaging singular traditions and their problems one arrives at the universal. See: Willi Goetschel, "Mendelssohn and the State," *MLN*, no. 122 (2007): 472.
14 Strauss rather hyperbolically claims that “in *Morning Hours* is also found the definitive formulation of the results at which his aesthetic investigations aimed.” This is an excessive claim, but, insofar as *Morning Thoughts* certainly does contain restatements of the aesthetic investigations, restatements that are sometimes more refined, this text will be consulted as a means of developing the ramifications of Mendelssohn’s aesthetic philosophy. Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 108.
These works are considered by many historians of philosophy as of minor interest, except insofar as they presage Kant’s three faculty theory. More recently, Fredrick Beiser has convincingly argued against this, showing that faculty theory is a rather late accretion to Mendelssohn’s thought, and that his anthropology is more integrated.

However, despite the flaws in the faculty argument, it is precisely Mendelssohn’s attempts to extend the domain of reason to the realm of aesthetic desire and taste (protecting the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition) that, even if accidentally, begins the process of undermining dogmatic metaphysics. Mendelssohn’s sensitivity to aesthetic and sensual matters, in particular, to the fact that we can aesthetically enjoy representations of ugly and tragic objects, erodes key elements of Rationalist monism.

Mendelssohn’s aesthetics are expressed in his early philosophical dialogues (the Philosophical Writings). These dialogues are an encounter between Leibniz-Wolffian

\[\text{\footnotesize 15 Where the soul has three semi-independent faculties: desire, knowledge, and taste. This view, perhaps most famously espoused in the English world by Beck, holds that Mendelssohn adds a “faculty of approval as the psychological basis for judgments of taste,” which provides art, and judgments about art, with a degree of autonomy from the mechanics of reason. Lewis White Beck, Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 329.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 16 This discrepancy between their two readings occurs because Beck understands reason in a post-Kantian sense, limited to regulating sensual representations, while Beiser operates with a Leibnizian notion of reason, one tied to the perfection of the world. For Beck, reason is mechanical, for Beiser (and Mendelssohn) it is beautiful. Beiser’s argument suggests Mendelssohn’s aesthetics cannot be viewed apart from his metaphysics. This is why we are able to see elements of Mendelssohn’s politics and metaphysics within his aesthetic works: they are cut from the same cloth. Frederick C. Beiser, Diotima’s Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 200, 40, 416.}\]


\[\text{\footnotesize 18 Mendelssohn’s treatments of the sublime, the ugly, and the tragic are owed to his sympathy for the English and Scottish Enlightenments, especially the work of Burke and the Earl of Shaftesbury.}\]
ideas and the popular thought of the French and German enlightenments, and are explicitly in the style of Shaftesbury.\textsuperscript{19} This encounter transforms both set of ideas, broadening the scope of the Leibnizian project to include themes that were previously consigned to the English Enlightenment, while tempering the mechanical nature of English thought.\textsuperscript{20}

**mobilizing Mendelssohn**

For the purposes of this work, Mendelssohn’s aesthetics will provide four key insights. *Firstly*, in Mendelssohn we find a preliminary idea of singularity. *Secondly*, sensual representation always operates as an intensity against a background of perfection; perfection becomes a radical means of both destabilizing all representations (as inadequate when measured against perfection) and grounding all representations. *Thirdly*, Mendelssohn elucidates an anthropo-mechanics for encountering singularity: a to and fro movement that moves from the singular to the harmony in which it is contained. *Fourthly*, Mendelssohn’s the process, or space, of representation is ‘twofold’: representations point in two directions—towards the subject and towards the object—


\textsuperscript{20} To summarize Altmann’s biographical description of Mendelssohn’s philosophical education: Mendelssohn knew Rambam and the Medieval Jewish philosophers before he studies properly ‘western’ philosophy; his first western encounter was with Locke, in Latin; he was then introduced to Leibniz, who he revered for the rest of his life, and Spinoza, for whom he had great respect, but considered as a kind of incomplete Leibniz; the French he detested as superficial, albeit good psychologists; to the British he begrudgingly allowed three philosophers: Locke, Samuel Clarke, and Shaftesbury. Intriguingly, he did not consider Hume a philosopher, and disliked Bayle, primarily because of his unsympathetic reading of Spinoza. *Moses Mendelssohn*, 12, 26, 31.
while themselves occupying a third space that is *neither* subjective nor objective. All four of these themes resurface in Buber. Buber’s understanding of presence is a phenomenological description of a relation to a singularity. Perfection is be resurrected by Buber as the only non-limiting ethical and aesthetic *ideal*. The ‘to and fro’ is a way of integrating the two types of being (singular and particular, You and It).

Finally, Buber’s in-between will formulate a space that is very much like the autonomous space of Mendelssohn’s idea of representation.

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21 This twofold direction is, however, not dyadic (in Peirce’s sense) because the representation is itself a term in the relation. It is thus a triad that points in two directions. Note that this ‘third’ is a semiotic, and *not* theological or transcendental, third: it is nothing but the relating, although, as such, it has an independence of the two terms. “Each individual representation stands in a twofold relation. It is related, at once, to the matter before it as its object (of which it is a picture or copy) and then to the soul or the thinking subject (of which it constitutes a determination). As a determination of the soul, many a representation can have something pleasant about it although, as a picture of the object, it is accompanied by disapproval and a feeling of repugnance. Thus, we must indeed take care not to mix or confuse these two relations, the objective and the subjective, with one another.” Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 132.

22 In addition to the ‘standard’ two types of the sublime “the monistic sublime (the Beautiful) and the dualistic sublime (the philosophical sublime). [Buber] singled out Moses Mendelssohn, Kant’s contemporary and counterpart, who “discussed another side of this very same subject, the Infinite.” According to Buber, Mendelssohn thought that “the Infinite which we consider a whole, but *cannot encompass*, causes a mixed feeling of pleasure and of discomfort. The magnitude of the subject creates pleasure, but our inability to grasp its [the Infinite’s] limits mixes pleasure with some bitterness which enhances it. The Beautiful, represented in Moses Mendelssohn’s concept of harmony and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s idea of the beautiful soul, *overflows.*” In Gilya Gerda Schmidt, *Martin Buber's Formative Years: From German Culture to Jewish Renewal, 1897–1909* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 34. (emphasis added)

23 See his 1917 letter to Werner Kraft: “It is not true that health is the aim of humanity, of the people, of the artist. Health can never be anything but a prerequisite, not an aim. The aim can only be perfection; any other word taken from the human realm is *too constricting.*” Martin Buber, *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 215. (emphasis added)
aesthetics

Aesthetics, a field opened by Baumgarten in early 18th century Berlin, was intended to deal with the philosophy of sensation and sensual representation, be it through the bodily organs, or, in later thinkers, the imagination. Our contemporary use of the term ‘aesthetics,’ exclusively referring to art, is a more recent development. Aesthetics was intended to explain sensation’s cognitive value, and to understand desire and taste—pronouncements on specific art works was a secondary function. For Rationalist aesthetics, art objects are the highest instance of sensation, a paradigmatic instance for philosophical analysis, but not the sole focus. This position assumes that art objects are objects created solely for the benefit of sensation, and thus in art we can isolate sensation for-us. Both sensations and art works are grounded in a Leibnizian metaphysic, but Mendelssohn adjusts this metaphysics to make room for human perception as something more than a ‘confused idea’. Leibniz was something of a philosophical saint for German rationalists, but was viewed by Mendelssohn as having given short shrift to the power of sensation. What differentiates Mendelssohn’s aesthetics from his predecessors is that, for him (unlike conventional readings of Aristotle and the Empiricists) sensuality is not the base line, or first point of access to thought, from which we progress upward through abstraction. Nor, however, does he subscribe to the ‘Platonic’ or rationalist line, for which sensation is merely a confused form of thought that ought to be superseded. Aesthetics, the sensual, is a means of representing that operates in parallel to apodictic cognitions; its specialty is the necessarily indistinct—rather than confused thought, it is

24 Beiser, *Diotima's Children : German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing*, 118.
the thought of the confused—and in this regard, it is a ‘faculty’ as much as reason is. Rather than operate subservient to reason, sensuality operates in harmony with it.

Baumgarten takes the Aristotelian line, holding that human rationality deals with the universal, while particularity is accessible through the sensual. From the sensual particular, the mind moves to the universal. For Mendelssohn, positing an absolute dichotomy between sensuality and rationality is just plain wrong: there is a rationality to sensuality, and a sensuality of rationality; both are united in the striving for perfection. Bodies want pleasure, and pleasure leads to perfection: there is no need for pleasure to be pleasure in the beautiful, so representations that increase perfection do not (as with Baumgarten) need to be representations of perfection. Mendelssohn’s position is compelling because it does not require that sensual objects re-present perfection, as with the tone-deaf aesthetics of philosophers who want art to simply mirror the perfection of the cosmos.

**Leibniz and harmony**

As Loemker has noted, Leibniz employs harmony as a Baroque means of harmonizing seemingly isolated objects, objects split apart by Enlightenment mechanist thought: “the old Platonic conception of a microcosm-macrocosm relationship was restored but developed into a pluralistic system of individuals, each with power and each acting in a way as to include others in its unique perspective in a community of interacting events and correspondingly passive internal states.”\(^{25}\) Mendelssohn takes up this plurality, but

\(^{25}\) Leroy E. Loemker, *Struggle for Synthesis; the Seventeenth Century Background of Leibniz's Synthesis of Order and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 149, 81. This is likely the impetus for Martin Buber’s placing Leibniz as the endpoint in the
changes the relationships between the individuals, reducing, if not eliminating, their passivity. His interest lies in developing a harmony of singulors, rather than a network of causal forces.

Thus, the ideas of harmony and perfection are of especial importance for the network of individuals, and are the centre of both Baumgarten and Mendelssohn’s aesthetics. For both, perfection is a type of power, much like Spinoza’s. Power is action undetermined by something else: more perfection means more autonomous action, and vice versa. For Leibniz, the harmony is system of diverse entities that maintain a mutually affirmative connection amidst their diversity, a “similitude in dissimilar things”. These concepts mutually limit each other: to be harmonious is to be more perfect (or powerful), but the perfection of created things is limited by their ability to exist in harmony with all


26 For an analytic discussion of harmony in Leibniz, see Laurence Carlin, "On the Very Concept of Harmony in Leibniz," The Review of Metaphysics 54, no. 1 (2000). For a discussion of the debate surrounding the idea of perfection, see Gregory Brown, "Compossibility, Harmony, and Perfection in Leibniz," The Philosophical Review 96, no. 2 (1987). Note that the harmony I am dealing with here is connected to, but not the same thing as, the doctrine of pre-established harmony.

27 “God is absolutely perfect… Because a thing’s perfection is simply the total amount of positive reality it contains… so that where there are no boundaries at all, namely in God, perfection must be absolutely infinite…A created thing is said to act on something else in so far as it has perfection, and to be acted on by something else in so far as it is imperfect. Thus, activity is attributed to a monad in so far as it has distinct perceptions, and passivity is attributed to the monad in so far as it has confused perceptions.” Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), Monadology 41,42,49

28 Leibniz cited in Carlin, "On the Very Concept of Harmony in Leibniz."
other existing things.\textsuperscript{29} Singularity complicates things somewhat: as far as autonomy is concerned, they have a great deal of power, but, as they do not exist in a causal network, they do not have the ability to cause changes: they have an affective, not effective, power.

In Leibniz’s aesthetics, because senses are limited in their reach, harmony acts as a \textit{limit} upon sensation. Harmony cannot be clearly sensually represented. This is because our bodies are connected to all other bodies, and we “receive impressions” from all of them at once, which overwhelms the senses. So, “our senses are \textit{related to everything},” but, for that very reason, “it is impossible for our soul \textit{to attend} to everything.” We cannot pay attention to all the particulars simultaneously. The assumption is that we can really only perceive clearly a few things at a time. The lack of clarity in a representation comes not from a lack of sensation, but rather too much. These sensations combine into one aesthetic, but confused, representation.

This is almost like the confused murmur coming from the innumerable set of breaking waves heard by those who approach the seashore. Now, if from several perceptions (which do not come together to make one), there is none which stands out before the others and if they make impressions that are almost equally strong or equally capable of gaining the attention of the soul, the soul can only perceive them confusedly.\textsuperscript{30} [1686]

\textsuperscript{29} Minds are a privileged part of this network: “Now, minds are the most perfect of all things, occupying the least space and thus providing the least hindrance to one another … and their perfections are virtues. That is why we should be sure that the happiness of minds is God’s principal aim, which he carries out as far as the general harmony will permit.” Leibniz’s famous employment of the idea of compossibility—multiple entities whose possibilities do not contradict each other—is arguably merely the logical employment of the idea of harmony. Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, DoM S. 5. (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Philosophical Essays}, DoM S. 33. (emphasis added). I follow Bennet in reading \textit{‘clear’} as \textit{‘vivid’}, and (in this case) reading sympathy as harmony. “The French word \textit{clair} primarily means \textit{‘vivid’}, \textit{‘bright’}, \textit{‘strongly present to consciousness’}, so that Descartes can say that one’s awareness of an intense pain is \textit{clair}, and bright light is
When there is no *dominant* impression, we have a confused perception. It seems fair to assume that distinct representations have a single impression that ‘stands out before the others’. The sea shore is returned to in Leibniz’s *New Essays* (a book favoured by Mendelssohn). Here, the confusion of the waves is described as the “*je ne sais quoi*” \(^{31}\) of the sound

> Those flavours, those images of sensible qualities, *vivid in the aggregate but confused as to the parts*; those impressions which are made on us by the bodies around us and which involve the infinite; that connection that each being has with all the rest of the universe. It can even be said that all things harmonize...and that *eyes as piercing as God’s could read in the lowliest substance the universe’s whole sequence of events.* \(^{32}\) [1704]

If we had senses as keen as God’s, the whole universe would be available in every sound. This because the universe is, for Leibniz, a *plenum*: there are no gaps in the world, no vacuum, and so everything is connected to everything else. Everything is pushing and pulling everything else, with each thing leaving an impression, or trace, on every other thing. Regrettably, we do not have eyes as piercing as God’s. Harmony is the stuff aesthetics is composed of, because impressions are received from the whole (harmonious) universe. But aesthetics, at least human aesthetics, cannot actually perceive the harmony out of this mass of impressions.

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\(^{31}\) Many of Leibniz’s followers used this *je ne sais quoi* to articulate the mysterious and irreducible element of art works. For Leibniz, this mysterious element is not an artistic property, but the confused sensory representation of the absolute.

Another instance of the seashore occurs ten years later, very close to the end of Leibniz’s life, in his *Principles of Nature and Grace Based on Reason* [1714]. Here sensation’s power is placed alongside of its limitation. It is restated that every perception, no matter how distinct, contains an infinite number of confused perceptions. The soul is perfect, powerful, to the exact extent it has distinct perceptions. Distinct perceptions *are* perfections. The rest “are the result of impressions that the whole universe makes upon us,” and are confused. Because confused perceptions are made *upon* us, they do not come from our own power, and are imperfect. Sensation gives us the infinite, but we can’t see it clearly: “*Each soul knows the infinite—knows all—but confusedly.*” The soul must elevate *elements* of this totality to the point of clarity (rational cognition) for them to be perfections. We are stuck looking at one thing at a time.

Leibniz’s aesthetics takes off from this notion that human sensation is vivid and expansive, but confused. Beauty, in turn, is vivid, but confused. Mendelssohn transforms this limitation by suggesting that confused sensation is not merely an incomplete concept, but also a property of beautiful things. In his hands, aesthetics becomes a means of explaining how the senses are able to directly appropriate the infinite in a meaningful manner. To do this, he transforms the power of the sensual: rather than a confused representation of particulars, it is capable of providing an encounter with a singularity, which is itself confused (if we try to view it as a particular)

33 Here God’s vision is explained as coming from its creative power “God alone has distinct knowledge of the whole, for he is its source” *Philosophical Essays*, Principles Sec. 13. (emphasis added)
Spinoza and perfection

*The doctrine of Spinoza is obviously much closer to Judaism than it is to the orthodox teaching of Christians.*

Despite his role in the pantheism debate with Jacobi, Mendelssohn was one of the first German thinker of import to present Spinoza in a favourable light. This, even though Mendelssohn felt Spinoza had not gone ‘far enough,’ meaning, had not arrived Leibniz’s insights:

> Spinoza, has participated immensely in the work of bettering philosophy. Before the transition from the Cartesian to the Leibnizian philosophy could occur, it was necessary for someone to take the plunge into the monstrous abyss lying between them. This unhappy lot fell to Spinoza. How his fate is to be pitied! He was a sacrifice for the human intellect, but one that deserves to be decorated with flowers. Without him, philosophy would never have been able to extend its borders so far.

However, the aesthetic philosophy of the *Dialogues* demonstrate that Mendelssohn did not regard Spinoza as superseded by Leibniz, as he had made contributions which needed to be recovered without sacrificing the advances of Leibniz and Wolff. Mendelssohn

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35 Julius Guttmann, "Mendelsohn's Jerusalem and Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise," in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship.* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 361,62. It should be noted, of course, that Wolff was the first to present Spinoza *fairly*. Mendelssohn was the first to publish a favourable impression.
36 "Spinoza, has participated immensely in the work of bettering philosophy. Before the transition from the Cartesian to the Leibnizian philosophy could occur, it was necessary for someone to take the plunge into the monstrous abyss lying between them. This unhappy lot fell to Spinoza. How his fate is to be pitied! He was a sacrifice for the human intellect, but one that deserves to be decorated with flowers. Without him, philosophy would never have been able to extend its borders so far.” Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 106.
wanted to reinvigorate Spinoza’s insights without losing hold of Leibniz’s notion of harmony.

Crudely put, for Spinoza, ‘what is, is perfect, because it is’. Leibniz inverts this formula: ‘What is, is because it is perfect.’ It exists because God has chosen it, and God chose it because it is the best. This choice—of the best possible world—is made in accordance with the principle of harmony: the possible world that can actualize the most perfections (in harmony) is chosen by God: this world, the real world, allows the greatest number of perfections to develop without contradictions.

What the world is, is quite different for these two early Rationalists. Spinoza’s world is a single substance, while Leibniz’s world is a balancing act between countless substances (monads). Spinoza’s ‘individual’ is a temporary assemblage of parts, one that disappears when the parts cease to operate in tandem: everything particular is a result of deeper processes. Leibniz employs a great deal of theoretical finesse to avoid this conclusion. His considered solution is the monad: a simple substance, created by God, is the centre of who we are. The monad is employed to resist the reduction of an individual to a mere alteration of substance; in more contemporary language: the monad is the ‘self’ that cannot be reduced to a set of physical causes. The universe is harmoniously ordered so that these simple substances are each able to achieve maximal perfection, without stepping on the toes of other simple substances. 37

37 For an explicit statement of Leibniz’s preserving the individual from being subsumed into substance, see Morning Thoughts “This series of contingent things, we say, have their own substantiality outside of God, even if they can only be on hand as effects of his omnipotence…No doubt, that finite beings subsist for themselves depends upon the infinite and they are not thinkable without the infinite, but they are nonetheless not
So, Leibniz’s notion of *harmony* provides Mendelssohn with a way to establish the independence of singularities. But Leibniz’s notion of perfection is too cognitive for Mendelssohn. In order to develop a notion of perfection that is not merely cognitive he needs Spinoza, for whom *reality* and *perfection* are the *same* thing. While vivid and distinct ideas are more perfect than pale and confused ones, perfection has other avenues. For instance, an increase in bodily perfection increases that of the mind, and vice-versa.

This is the model Mendelssohn uses to give sensuality a greater place than it had been given in Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics (including Baumgarten’s aesthetics). In Spinoza, both thought and body are implicated in perfection, which gives sensuality a part to play alongside of the supposedly pure intellect. Of course, for Mendelssohn, this must be done while avoiding reduction of the individual to a mere part of a greater substance—which Spinoza saw as a necessary consequence of his thinking.

Thus Mendelssohn takes the harmonized individual from Leibniz, and combines this with Spinoza’s model of the passions, limiting sensuality and autonomy by each other. Insofar as he avoids the pitfalls of the two thinkers he combines, this leaves him with a world of individuals that are both independent and sensuous. For Mendelssohn, modern metaphysics is superior to Platonic metaphysics, because it is able to deal with the body unified with the infinite with respect to substance.” Entities are effects of God, but not ‘in’ God; there is more than one substance. To show the difference between these two types of existence, Mendelssohn differentiates between that which exists as self-sufficient (Spinoza’s substance) and things that exist for-themselves (entities)—the word substance is used differently in each case. Spinoza’s proof of the unity of substance is thus taken as refuted, applying only to the self-sufficient. *Morning Hours : Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck (New York: Springer, 2011), ch. 13, 105.


in an non-otherworldly manner, as a “divine creation”.\textsuperscript{40} Spinoza, in combination with Shaftesbury, allowed Mendelssohn to develop a metaphysics that took account of the material conditions for thought and sensibility.

Mendelssohn’s ‘materialist’ aesthetics allows a place for the body and its pleasures because it does not privilege rational perfection over physical perfection: both are rooted in the same source, the person.\textsuperscript{41} It is thus not unfair to consider Mendelssohn as a ‘perfectionist’ more than a ‘rationalist’: that the world is rational follows from the fact that it is perfect. The person, the whole person, is part of this perfection: the person is not a disembodied mind. Sensuality is thus not mere receptivity, but also the bodily ‘improvement’—what we might now call training—that accompanies an affect.\textsuperscript{42}

This recovery of the importance of sensuality was needed to develop an adequate aesthetics. But it was also necessary because the complicated rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff, dependent on long chains of reasoning, had, for Mendelssohn, lost some of its argumentative force. While he himself subscribed to many tenants of rationalist philosophy, he recognized that, in the face of the Scottish enlightenment, many basic principles of the Wolffian system had lost their status as self-evident claims. As Strauss notes:

\textsuperscript{40} Strauss, \textit{Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn}, 110. Mendelssohn, Phädon 8.26–27 [Nob 42].

\textsuperscript{41} Mendelssohn, \textit{Philosophical Writings}, 44. Of course, physical perfection here does not mean ‘strongest’ in the mundane sense, but rather sensual affectability and discernment.

\textsuperscript{42} The temptation to ascribe pleasure to the body and perfection to the mind must be firmly rejected: as Altmann notes “harmony between the higher and lower faculties of the soul constitutes the core of Mendelssohn’s philosophy,” and for this reason Mendelssohn equates sensuous gratification with improved conditions of the body. Alexander Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn on Education and the Image of Man," in \textit{Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship}. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 401.
In that the *force of conviction* of metaphysics becomes doubtful for Mendelssohn, he must attribute a much higher significance than Wolff does to the indistinct [sensual]... meaning: metaphysics now receives the function of the defense of the knowledge that is available and reliable for human beings independently of metaphysics.”

Mendelssohn by no means disregards metaphysics, but its function changes. Instead of being demonstrative, for him, metaphysics is pragmatic, or defensive, serving to support phenomena available through other means (including the sensuous). For instance, freedom, is not something metaphysically demonstrable. Instead, one is acquainted with freedom by other means, and experience of freedom is *supported* by metaphysical argument. In order for metaphysics to take this protective role, sensuality, the means of acquaintance with truths by non-apodictic means, the vehicle for true but indistinct ideas, had to be given its due. So too singularity: singularity cannot be metaphysically demonstrated, but must be encountered aesthetically, and protected by metaphysics.

**singularity**

*Since God possesses all these perfections without limits, he is infinite and, consequently, singular [so ist er unendlich und folglich einig].*  

In employing the word singularity as a technical philosophical term, I am intentionally departing from the colloquial style of Mendelssohn’s *Philosophical Writings*. The terms ‘singular’ and ‘particular’ are often used interchangeably. Not here: I will be using these two terms to bring out a basic differentiation that is enacted in Mendelssohn’s work. My intent is to distinguish the ‘singular’ from the ‘particular’ as two types of *individuals*.

The term ‘individual’ has multiple meanings, but these two will be the focus of much of

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43 Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 27. (emphasis added)
44 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 280. Note that Mendelssohn is using the idea of singularity here, but not the technical term Singulär.
this dissertation. I believe the term ‘singular’ best describes the nature of certain entities (especially persons) that Mendelssohn develops.\textsuperscript{45} Employing singularity as a technical term allows for continuity from his thinking, through Buber, to contemporary thought. More importantly, it allows us to distinguish entities that are defined by their containment in a universal (particulars) from those that ‘contain their own container’ (singulars). At issue is nothing less than the attempt to think (certain) individuals without predicates. How this is possible will be explicated throughout this work. For now a working definition is in order.

Both singulars and particulars are individuals, but they are different types of individuals, or, at least, different ways of identifying individuals. Particulars are instances of a \textit{universal}. For example: the word ‘cat’ is a universal kind, a kind that contains all cats. My cat can be viewed as a particular instantiation, or an example, of ‘cat’. So far, so good—it is certainly true that my cat is a cat: she is part of the set of cats. The problem with this way of looking at things is that any particular entity is defined by its membership in this set, and is thus reducible to it. This means that the individual brings nothing to the claim, except its membership in various sets. This is fine when we are talking about an individual, but difficulties arise when we talk to, or with, an individual. The reasons for this will be developed in chapter three, but for now it suffices to note that

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{45} I am deliberately discounting Peirce’s claim that they mean the same thing (‘‘Singular’ and ‘individual’ are equivocal terms’’). Instead I am following Peirce’s subdivision of this ‘equivocal term’: his singular is divided into “\textit{individuum signatum} and \textit{individuum vagum}”. Put inexactly, what I call the singular is the “\textit{individuum signatum},” whereas the individual is the “\textit{individuum vagum}” “Julius Caesar” is an example of the former; ‘a certain man,’ of the latter. I do not want to get bogged down in the problems of reference and proper names, I just want to note that the singular refers to \textit{one} thing, not subsumed by a universal (Julius is not defined by its inclusion in a universal) whereas a ‘certain man’ refers to \textit{a} thing by subsuming it under a universal Charles S. Peirce, \textit{Collected Papers} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 5.299, 3.94.
\end{quote}
what makes my cat herself, and not just an instantiation of ‘cat’, will never be captured by universal terms, and therefore, never by particular terms.\textsuperscript{46}

This is where singularity enters. Singulards are not defined by their participation in universals or generals; they are, if a part of anything at all, a member of a plurality, or community. This is why there is a historical tendency to link singularity with an individual’s proper name: my cat, Gimmel, is singular insofar as I do not relate to her as a particular cat, but as a presence, encountered individual. Singulards are individuals, not necessarily captured by any universal, or general kinds—it is what makes something what it is, independent of its predicates or containment in a universal; this type of being is normally accessible to us only through its being present, and not being thought-about.\textsuperscript{47}

The difference between the terms particular and singular is well expressed by the English language, where the word ‘particular’ suggests something that is part of something, or an instance of it, while the ‘singular’ is unique, possible lonely, and not necessarily a part of

\textsuperscript{46} On this reading, the particular is the universal expressed in a distinct location in space and time

\textsuperscript{47} Again, one could also say that singulards are particulars that contain their own universal. This is at least implied in Kant’s “Table of Judgments,” where judgments of Quantity are listed in the order: Universal; Particular; Singular. More interestingly, Kant employs singularity to explain the non-conceptual aspect of intuition: singularity (\textit{Einzeln}, not \textit{Singulär}) refers to the aspect of an intuition that cannot be expressed by “mere concepts”: an intuition is immediately related to the object and is singular; the [concept] is mediate, by means of a mark, which can be common to several things.” This provides a very interesting counter-point to the scholarly dogma that, for Kant, all unity is on the side of the judging subject. Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 206 A70 B95, 398 A20 B77.
some general type or kind. ⁴⁸ A particular cat is replaceable by any other cat. A singular cat is not. ⁴⁹

Mendelssohn’s theories of persons, of religions, and political entities are all marked by a turn from the rationalist concept of individuals as particulars to the phenomenological concept of individuals as singulars. And this, in turn, is the difference between Mendelssohn’s theory of harmony and the older variants: a real harmony is not a harmony among particulars, but between singulars. ⁵⁰ This seemingly subtle difference (between Mendelssohn’s harmony of singulars rather than of individuals) marks a radical transformation. This transformation is rooted in Mendelssohn’s notion of aesthetics as a sensual opening up onto a bi-directional space. As Goetschel elegantly writes:

> Not only would the boundaries and the hold of metaphysics be renegotiated to create space for aesthetics as a discourse in its own right but, more importantly, aesthetics provided the entry point to address a whole sleight of

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⁴⁸ In the OED, “Individual” is defined as “Belonging to or affecting only a part of something; partial; not universal… Applied to a proposition in which something is predicated of some, not all, of a class of things.” Singular is defined as “One only; one and no more; single…That idea which represents one particular determinate thing to me, is called a singular idea.”

⁴⁹ In too much contemporary thought, singularity is a function of ethics: Kant’s requires that we treat all other persons as particulars subsumed under maxims. This is a good way of explicating why we should treat people ethically in general, but inadequate for explicating ethical encounters. Hermann Cohen’s notion of the ‘Thou’ was meant to deal with this inadequacy, and provide a point of access to ethics through singularity. Many have since assumed that singularity is only visible through the ethical, which reduces singularity to an ethical function. Mendelssohn and Buber’s aesthetics and politics provide a much needed counter-point to this.

⁵⁰ Beck notes Leibniz was a nominalist about universals, a realist about particulars, and in this respect presents an inversion of Plato: “the locus of the universal has been shifted from the predicate to the subject [of a sentence].” Beck, Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors, 210. Mendelssohn develops this line of reasoning further: universals are not mere nominal entities that encompass particulars, they are (insofar as we accept them at all) themselves particulars in disguise. The state, or religion, that presents itself as a universal that ‘contains’ particulars is lying: it is a particular entity that uses the illusion of universality to enforce its power.
problems as philosophically relevant that had been viewed for too long as irrelevant to philosophical attention. Central to this was the notion that the specificity and singularity of the individual would provide its own rules rather than be defined by normative models.51

Aesthetic encounter is a way of thinking about singularity without relying upon universality. Arguably, Leibniz’s (very real) progress towards this type of thinking stops at the point where he turns individuals (monads) into mechanical entities that unfold in a windowless space according to a plan inserted into at creation.52 This is Mendelssohn’s greatest departure from Leibniz: his notion of harmony is not of individuals representing each other, but singulars opening up to each other. Mendelssohn, for all his love of Leibniz, never refers to windowlessness when discussing individuals.53 For Mendelssohn, Leibniz’s contribution to a theory of singularity is the notion of harmony, not the monads that are harmonized; hence his claim that Leibniz’s harmony did not require the acceptance of monads for its validity.54

There are two obvious sources for this move to singularity: the aesthetically encountered singular individual, and the singular individual (or, ‘I’) doing the encountering. Leo Strauss, in his introduction to Mendelssohn’s Morning Thoughts, notes that Mendelssohn quietly departs from Spinoza and Leibniz in his transformation of the self, or ‘I’. Strauss

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52 I would suggest that the windowless aspect of the Monad is a late element of Leibniz’s thought, used to solve a variety of metaphysical problems (in particular, the problem of evil and freedom) that had accumulated over the course of his career.
53 Mendelssohn does refer to the closely related theory of pre-established harmony, but only as a means to make Spinoza respectable (by claiming that Spinoza was the true originator of pre-established harmony).
54 Mendelssohn, Philosophical Writings, 96-101.
does not fully recognize the degree of this transformation, but his observation is nonetheless worth repeating:

Mendelssohn’s critique of ‘purified’ Spinozism comes down not so much to the actuality of things outside God, as to the actuality of man *qua* I outside God…Mendelssohn asserts not merely the I’s being *outside* God, its substantiality, but also the I’s being archetypal…because for him it is a self-evident presupposition…in the sense that even God’s thoughts of the finite I are simply images of this archetype…[W]hat motivates him definitively is no routine theological interest, but interest in the substantiality, the discreteness, the autonomy, the individual right of the I.55

Strauss is referring to a long section of *Morning Thoughts* where Mendelssohn counters the accusation that Lessing is an atheist Spinozist by claiming Lessing is a purified Spinozist, meaning, not a determinist. But, Mendelssohn goes on to critique even this type of purified Spinozism for its claim that everything is ‘in’ God. Mendelssohn employs a series of arguments about limitation to demonstrate that human beings must have an existence *independent* of God. The gist of it is that, because our thinking is limited, and God’s is unlimited, the limitation (or limited person) exists outside of God, even if God created these limitations. Strauss is correct to claim that Mendelssohn’s argument for the independence of the world from God is founded by his desire to protect the limited ‘I’; the end result of this independence is that the ‘I’ is an independent

55 Strauss ends this sentence as such: “that is why the undemanding benevolence of God is privileged, since only it is compatible with the demands of the autonomous I”; This last clause does not follow, and is indicative of the limitations of Strauss’ reading. Strauss is so concerned with presenting Mendelssohn as a liberal who did not have the courage to follow a line of reasoning through to the end, that he does not see the power of his philosophical innovations. In this he follows Jacobi. Instead of seeing the singular as obedient to a benevolent God, it is perhaps better viewed as analogous to God, at least as regards autonomy. Hence the need to place the ‘I’ outside of God, so that it might have its own autonomy. Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, 123,25. (emphasis added)
archetype—archetype being a singularity abstractly construed (the archetype is its own type, its own universal, but is not necessarily accessible to sensation).  

Then Mendelssohn, in a very famous passage, suggests that his argument with Spinozists, both refined and unrefined, is primarily an argument over wording, and the positions are really not so far apart:

As a human being, the divinity’s thought [this is what he takes the Spinozist position to entail], I will never cease to remain the divinity’s thought and will be happy or miserable in this infinite sequence of times, depending upon whether I more or less know, more or less love him, the thinker of me, depending upon whether I strive (for Spinoza must also allow that a striving inheres in this thought that God has), depending upon whether I more or less strive to become similar to this source of my existence and to love the rest of his thoughts as myself. If, my friend, the defender of purified pantheism concedes all this as he would certainly have to, by virtue of his basic principles, then morality and religion are secured.

It is the last sentence in this section that is renowned, as it bears directly upon the pantheism controversy and Mendelssohn’s attempt to save Lessing’s reputation. But I would like to draw attention to the italicized sentence just before it. It is a tricky claim because Spinoza—as Mendelssohn well knew—did allow, or rather, insisted, that a being strive for greater perfection and power. But this striving is ‘automatic’: it is precisely not as an autonomous or singular ‘I’ that a being strives for greater perfection; perfection is not a choice to imitate the ‘source of my existence’—‘choice’ is not available under

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56 Strauss seems to miss the fact that the human ‘I’ is its own genus precisely because the human is strives towards its own perfection. Because of “[t]his independent, unceasing progress toward their own ideal… each individual rational being constitutes “his own small world”… As a result, each individual is of infinite worth in and of itself, such that it would contradict God’s own perfection for God to sacrifice rational beings for the greater good of the whole, as each rational being represents an irreplaceable whole in and of itself.” Robert Erlewine, Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 51.

57 Mendelssohn, Morning Hours: Lectures on God’s Existence, 123.
Spinoza’s determinism, especially as Jacobi presents it. For Spinoza, *all* things strive to preserve and increase their existence: there is no ‘I’ and there is no choice in the matter. So, the point Mendelssohn suggests as the congruence between him and the pantheists is exactly the point they cannot agree upon.\(^\text{58}\) For Mendelssohn each ‘I’ is in itself ‘godlike’ in that it is singular.\(^\text{59}\)

Thus the inclusion, or intrusion, of the singular ‘I’ is where Mendelssohn departs from Spinoza, in order that he might establish the singular’s autonomy: this is the first source of singularity. But Mendelssohn must also depart from Leibniz, in order that the encountered other also be singular: Leibniz seeks to save the ‘I,’ but as a windowless monad, an ‘I’ that is autonomous, but never encounters anything. This is unacceptable to Mendelssohn, if only on the grounds of his understanding of sensuality and aesthetics. Here Strauss’ argument does not go far enough:

> The purpose of creation for Leibniz is chiefly the beauty and order of the *cosmos*; for Mendelssohn, on the contrary, it is chiefly the happiness of man, of each man. The result of this is that for Leibniz all suffering is in principle justified in the upward glance at the universe—indeed, all suffering is grounded, and thereby justified, in the universal order—whereas for Mendelssohn the suffering of any one human being remains a decisive objection against the perfection of the universe insofar as this suffering does not redound to the benefit of that same individual.\(^\text{60}\)

Strauss reads Leibniz correctly: for Leibniz it is the beauty of the cosmic beauty that redeems individual suffering. Unfortunately, he contrasts cosmic beauty to Mendelssohn’s idea of happiness, rather than Mendelssohn’s own understanding of beauty and aesthetics. For Mendelssohn, it is not the beauty of the harmony that redeems

\(^{\text{58}}\) Whether or not Lessing, or even Spinoza, understood this is debatable.

\(^{\text{59}}\) Here a comparison with the biblical notion of each human being created ‘in God’s image’ invites itself.

suffering; in fact, the beauty of the harmony is explicitly impossible. It is in the beauty of engaging with and representing another singular, where we bring it into harmony, that we find the redemptive note. This means the increase of happiness comes from the individual engagement in a twofold space (of which representation is a primary example) not acquiescence to a universal harmony.61

**Mendelssohn: making a space**

The standard reading of Mendelssohn is that he is the thinker who won an autonomous place for aesthetics, especially where emotions are concerned. Kai Hammermeister’s work precisely articulates this position:

> While Baumgarten laboured to gain acceptance for the cognitive aspects of beauty and art, Mendelssohn did the same for art’s emotional elements. And whereas Baumgarten’s theory led to a strengthening of the *Regelpoetik* (poetics of rules), Mendelssohn emphasized pleasure over regulations. With this, he contributed significantly to the paradigmatic shift from an aesthetics of production to an aesthetics of reception and a general psychological aesthetics.62

Hammermeister’s praise is coupled with the reproach that Mendelssohn’s aesthetic theory is ultimately insufficient because he does not “attribute any unique cognitive function to art”.63 I would argue that the strength of Mendelssohn’s aesthetics lies in precisely this ‘weakness: Hammermeister takes the early Schelling (and later Heidegger’s) aesthetics of ontological disclosure—where art discloses truths inaccessible to philosophy and science—as ideal. Aesthetics that do not allow for this special

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61 This is the reason for the many dualities that occur throughout Mendelssohn’s work, including his ‘dualism,’ which is not a mind-body dualism, but a duality between perceiver and perceived; his dualism is really only anti-idealism. Mendelssohn’s dualism amounts to the claim that perceived objects have an independent existence of the perceiver. See: Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, 39.
63 *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, 21.
disclosure of being through art are found lacking. Mendelssohn’s aesthetics do reveal a type of being: singularity. But this disclosure is not limited to art, but is, rather, an intrinsic possibility of the sensual/aesthetic encounter as such.

Mendelssohn’s interest in art is directed towards understanding sensation and representation. This is part of his cognitive pluralism: there are multiple ways of approaching the truth, none necessarily privileged above the others. In line with this, painting has no magical powers that separate its truths from those of, say, philosophy (and vice versa). Only its manner of disclosure is completely different. This is precisely the power of his aesthetic theory: art is neither subjugated, nor elevated, to a different domain. The miraculous, or revelatory, power of art found in Baumgarten (and Schelling, and Heidegger) is absent; instead, it adheres to the entire world of sensuality. This allows for a representational space with great reach and power, if only because assumes a greater inter-penetration of cognition and sensibility, rather than limiting disclosure to a particular type of sensation or sensory object. This is not to say that sensation has unlimited power: autonomy—the chief power of the singular—does not require supremacy. Human sensation (like human reason) has strict limits. But the limits of sensuality—like its disclosures—pervade the whole aesthetic field, and, again, are not limited to the world of art; although, it is in art that these limits are most obvious.
the beauty of limits

*If the knowledge of perfection is sensual, it is called beauty.*

The limited power of sensuality is the foundation of Mendelssohn’s aesthetics. These limits are productive limits, inextricably linked to the very things the aesthetic gives us. When our limited sensibility tries to deal with perfection, the result is beauty. Beauty is perfection seen vividly, but not distinctly. As a strange consequence, this means there is no beauty for God: because God’s perception is vivid and distinct—as compared to ours, which is merely vivid—beauty exists only for us.

As a consequence, God is beautiful to us, but we are not beautiful to God; the relationship is absolutely asymmetrical. As with Leibniz, our sensuality is limited by its inability to express the plenum while paying attention to each element simultaneously.

What is intriguing about this position is that the limit on distinctness is generative, if only because it produces beauty, itself a positive power. This seems counter-intuitive, and is best illustrated by an example, one dear to Mendelssohn. The mathematician, while working through a complicated problem, views each element in the problem distinctly, but only one at a time. When she views the entire series as a whole, she sees it indistinctly. But it is only in this confused intuition of the whole that the equation is an object of beauty. In a strange way, the beauty of the equation is discovered and produced

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64 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 172.
only when seen in this way. This holds for all aesthetic experience, no single distinct element is beautiful, only the indistinct intuition of the whole has this quality.\textsuperscript{66}

The limit on the number of terms we can sense clearly and simultaneously engenders beauty when it encounters perfection or harmony. Beauty is not a direct effect of the perfect, it is the meeting place of indistinct sensuality and perfection. The perfect harmony is not beautiful in-itself, it is beautiful for us autonomous singularities as we attempt to sensually appropriate it. To directly intuit harmony-in-itself would require we see all elements distinctly and simultaneously. But diversity does not appear to us as such, and so we are confronted with harmony’s effect, or beauty as seeing an indistinct unity. Beauty is something of a compensation prize for our lack of God-like perception.

The complicated interplay between perfection, harmony, limit, and unity means that we enjoy perfection through a limited, or unified, intuition.

\textit{Beauty presupposes unity} in a multiplicity. The pleasure that arises from this rests upon the limitation of the powers of our soul. Such does not take place in God. \textit{Perfection demands not unity but rather harmony} of the multiplicity. The pleasure that arises from this is grounded in the \textit{positive} power of our soul.\textsuperscript{67}

To understand this we need to keep clear the distinction between unity and harmony: in beauty we see unity where there is harmony: when our ability to grasp perfection \textit{qua} harmony comes to an end (when we can no longer keep all the individual elements in a series distinct) harmony \textit{appears} to us as unity. This indistinct unity is very close to a singularity.

\textsuperscript{66} Any intuition of a beautiful individual element is beautiful because of its connection to an unseen whole.
\textsuperscript{67} Mendelssohn, \textit{Philosophical Writings}, 22. (emphasis added)
The limit that produces this interplay of terms is not static: it can be moved. As in the above example of the mathematician, extensive training allows her to grasp more distinct particulars, and deepens her intuition of the indistinct whole (a singular), or opens up entire new vistas of perception (new singulars). If she knows only basic algebra, she might be entranced by the power of an infinite set of integers. Calculus opens her perception up to complicated functions, and so on. Degrees of perfection are essential to the Leibnizian-Mendelssohnian world view, and nowhere is this clearer than the aesthetic:

[T]he pleasure afforded by sensuous beauty, the unity in a multiplicity, is to be ascribed merely to our inability. We tire when our senses are supposed to unpack an all-too-complicated order. Entities endowed with acuter senses necessarily find in our beauties a disgusting uniformity, and what tires us can secure them gratification. 68

This aesthetics may seem limited to contemporary tastes, in that ‘acuteness’ develops in a specific direction, towards a greater grasp of the multiplicity in a unity. But this development of taste is not limited to any given field. In most, if not all, areas, there is the possibility of greater and lesser degrees of discernment. Mendelssohn cannot be viewed (as he sometimes is) as a person who stresses the emotional impact of a work above all else: aesthetics also requires a training of our sensible apparatus to discern particulars, in an obvious analogue to the education of reason.

For, even though Beauty rests on our inability to grasp the sensual with absolute distinction., without any distinction, beauty disappears. Aesthetics thus requires a balancing act between distinct particulars and an obscure harmony: more distinct

68 Philosophical Writings, 23. The fact that Mendelssohn uses the term ‘tiring’ is not trivial. There is a physiological aspect to this limitation.
particulars increase the ‘depth’ of the sensual, but too many tire it. This balancing takes place on the tightrope of focus:

It is a well-established truth that no distinct concept is compatible with the feeling of beauty. The reason for this is our limited soul's inability to grasp a multiplicity distinctly all at once. *If the soul wants to think distinctly, it must withdraw its attention from the whole and reflect upon one part of the object after another.* But it is also a well-established truth that *no completely obscure concept is compatible with the feeling of beauty* since, in its obscurity, the multiplicity of the object is as it were concealed. …*[T]he expansively clearer the representation of a beautiful object, the more ardent the pleasure that springs from it. An expansively clearer representation contains a richer multiplicity, more relations opposite one another.*

So, to refine the earlier observations, the process of ‘tiring’ is linked to the fact that when we wish to view a particular distinctly, we must separate it from its context, and view it independent of its position in a harmony. This abstraction is itself both a limitation, and a power. It is a power, insofar as abstraction allows us to view a thing distinctly, to see how it ‘works’. It is a limitation in that this abstracted particular is severed from its position in a harmony. The perception of beauty is a re-entry of the abstracted objects back into the harmony. It thus has its own temporal structure: distinct perception occurs ‘one part of the object after another,’ while beauty concerns the object as a singular. One is tempted to say that beauty concerns the set of distinct objects all at once, but this is not the case: there is something ‘extra’ in the perception of the entire object that is not captured in the set (or series) of its abstracted parts. The beauty of the singular transcends the features that make it up, much as Spinoza’s substance is not composed of

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69 *Philosophical Writings*, 14. (emphasis added) note the similarity between “expansively clearer” and Baumgarten’s extensive vividness: but here vividness requires a patterned distinction

70 *Philosophical Writings*, 90-1.
its attributes added together. The beautiful is neither a universal nor a particular, but a singular. The singularity of a beautiful object is its ‘extra’ thing that appears independently of its components.

**mechanism: back and forth, to and fro**

What separates us from God is the way we view this ‘extra’: God sees both the individual elements and their harmonious relation at the same time. Mendelssohn notes that we need to switch back and forth between the distinct particulars and their participation in a singular. Buber will develop this back and forth in a philosophical-anthropological vein, holding that the vacillation between the two worlds (of particulars and singularity) is an essential aspect of human being. Mendelssohn, who is more invested in physiology and epistemology, is interested in the way the ‘back and forth’ movement tires us when it goes beyond the limits of our discernment and training.

This back and forth is the mechanism that drives our perception of beauty: particulars in the absence of unification are too abstract to be beautiful, pure unity without particulars is boring; but as humans, we cannot see both at the same time—we see beauty, as it were, out of time, outside the time of sequential particulars and the simultaneous whole; instead, we see it as a singular appropriation of perfection. Going back and forth between the particulars and their unification generates a ‘third thing’ that is not really a thing. This singular is the sensual representation of harmony, seen under the aspect of beauty.

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71 *Philosophical Writings*, 108. Bayle’s incorrect reading of Spinoza, which, unfortunately, Mendelssohn somewhat follows, assumes that, for Spinoza, the infinite perfection is comprised of an infinite set of finite perfections. Here Mendelssohn takes a more Spinozist line than the one he attributes to Spinoza.
Mendelssohn, by insisting that aesthetic/extensive vividness expresses (but does not show) intensive particulars, ensures that the feeling of beauty bound up in the object.\textsuperscript{72} His understanding of beauty provides us with a way of seeing an object without reducing it to its distinct elements, or reducing it to a unity. Unlike Baumgarten, Mendelssohn’s ‘third thing’ (beauty) provides no access to a realm absolutely independent of the object. The theophanic, or revelatory, component of the aesthetic reveals the encountered singular, and does not transport us into an otherworldly realm. The aesthetically revealed singular is a non-transcendent third; it is emphatically not a point of theological mediation, a voice or image that can provide a point of orientation.\textsuperscript{73} Viewed from the outside, it has the look of a mere incapacity, or limitation (tiredness). From the inside, it is a singularity bound to a multiplicity. There is nothing ‘miraculous’ in this, if by miraculous one means the entry of a transcendent content into the immanent sphere. It is only miraculous in that the immanent content of the world is available to us, as finite being, through a transcendent vision (in the sense that beauty transcends its context by creating its own context).

The primary thing that differentiates Mendelssohn from Baumgarten, is that for Mendelssohn beauty does not give us access to perfection, it is created by our inability to grasp perfection. Perfection is thus positioned as a radical concept: it is not a regulative

\textsuperscript{72} Expression is used here in a technical sense, while showing is not; by expression I mean “X expresses Y according to R if and only if Rx is a function which maps X into Y” albeit I interpret R far more loosely than Kulstad. By showing I mean ‘pointing towards,’ an indexical relation to something outside the relation itself. The aesthetic representation expresses the object, in that it maps the object (albeit in a sensual manner), but does not necessarily point towards the object. Mark Kulstad, "Leibniz's Concept of Expression," \textit{Studia Leibnitiana}, no. 9 (1977).

\textsuperscript{73} I would hazard that this that lack of a definite theological orientation lies behind the conservative opposition to Mendelssohn.
ideal, but produces and deconstructs in the same breath. It produces beauty, but
demolishes out ability to discern it directly. It is not clear that even Mendelssohn
understood the full effect of his thinking here. On the one hand, perfection destabilizes
other concepts (including that of beauty) because no other concept can quite reach
perfection; on the other hand it engenders beauty through its inaccessibility. Beauty thus
points to perfection, not by being its analogue, its icon, or its conceptual shorthand, but
by illuminating the gap between sensibility and perfection.74

**the limits of beauty:**

While the first edition of the *Writings* uncritically assumes that beauty is the goal of
aesthetics, the *Rhapsody*, added to the second edition, recognizes the limitations of this
stance.75 This shift owes everything to Mendelssohn’s deepening appreciation for the
radical nature of perfection: perfection, rather than being merely the form of beauty (as it
is with Baumgarten) becomes a force that destabilizes beauty itself. This for two reasons.
*Firstly*, beauty is only one possible route towards perfection: beauty, as a product of the
(necessarily) failed attempt to grasp perfection, is just one means of so failing. *Secondly*,
as we will see, perceptions, including ugly or ‘illusory’ perceptions, participate in
perfection. There is thus no obvious reason to restrict art to representation of beauty, and

74 While Mendelssohn does not take the next step—that perfection itself is this very
gap—he provides the tools for taking the step (as Buber will). This because each
instance of incompleteness is in fact itself a (human) perfection, a perfection (or power)
of our sensibility.
75 Mendelssohn takes it as a rule, and a rule that differentiates him from his benighted
English counterparts, that an intuition of perfection results in pleasure and perfection.
But two things must be noted: it is from an intuition of perfection, and not necessarily
perfection as beauty, that this results; further, while intuitions of perfection increase
perfection, they are not the only intuitions that have this effect. All this is possible
because intuitions, even of the imperfect, are themselves perfect as intuitions, and
therefore as an exercise of our power. Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 146.
there is no obvious reason to choose the failure of beauty over, say, the beautiful failure of ugliness. Simply put: all sensations—not just those of beauty—are perfect in their own right.\(^7\) To understand this, we turn to the discussion of misperception in *Morning Hours*, a late work.

If I see a reflection of my friend in a lake, and mistake the reflection for my friend, it is tempting claim that the perception of my friend is in error, and therefore, imperfect. Mendelssohn rejects this:

-[Mendelssohn] I maintain that the sense of sight is not responsible for the illusion and rather in both cases *asserts the pure truth as much as it can*. As an appearance involving this sense, the image that you see here in the water has no less truth than that [actual sight of your friend]. Both are effects of the positive power of the senses and can, in keeping with my conception of the matter, *neither deceive nor delude*.

–[his son] “Who else then, however, should be responsible for the bewitchment?… If both images of sight assert the truth, how does it happen that that image shows me my friend there, where he is not while this informs me of him here, where he is actually on hand?”

–[Mendelssohn] ‘Is on hand’, I answered. Here, then, lies the knot. What do you understand by ‘to be actual,’ ‘to be on hand’?\(^7\)

The error, or imperfection, is found in the faulty inference that *follows* sensation. It is not the reflection that is imperfect, but the implications I draw from it. The pleasure we take in the arts shows this: we enjoy a movie, even though there is nothing ‘real’ in it; we would be hard pressed to call this lack of reality an ‘error’ or ‘imperfection’.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) All immediate sensory knowledge or, as others call it, all intuitive knowledge, be it sensation of the outer sense or perception of the inner sense, brings with it the highest degree of conviction. Neither error nor illusion takes place in them, considered as representations in the soul. If I hear and see and feel, then it is beyond any doubt that I actually hear and see and feel.” *Morning Hours: Lectures on God’s Existence*, 39.

\(^7\) *Morning Hours: Lectures on God’s Existence*, 37. (emphasis added)

\(^7\) *Morning Hours: Lectures on God’s Existence*, 33.
sensation and its representation are real (and therefore perfect), and the pleasure we take in them is an increase of our perfection.

However, while all sensations are perfect, the appearances, or representations, of perfection are strictly hierarchical. In descending order of power, perfection can be:

1) seen in harmony (seeing perfection in itself)
2) seen in unity (seeing perfection as beauty)
3) seen in sameness (seeing perfection as substance)\(^79\)

The first is how God sees the world, the second is how we see perfection, the third is how we see things when we are thinking instrumentally.\(^80\) This is a radical departure from theories for which beauty is our point of access to the divine, or harmonious.

Mendelssohn uses the example of the human body to illuminate this hierarchy, and the limits of beauty: we do not find human bodies beautiful \textit{per se}, but, in general, only their outside, or surface. Many people find internal organs and blood to be ugly. If beauty was our only point of access to the perfection and harmony of the human body, then the viscera would need to be abjected for their ‘imperfection’. Mendelssohn, of course, rejects this: God sees the external, “earthly Venus” of the skin, at the same time, and in harmony with, the “heavenly Venus” of the blood and organs. Below the skin there is not

\(^79\) See his description of the three types of pleasure in the Discourses: “We have uncovered sameness in multiplicity or beauty, harmony in multiplicity or intellectual perfection, and finally the improved condition of the state of our body or sensuous gratification.” \textit{Philosophical Writings}, 48.

\(^80\) That the first is only available to God because for him all singulares, particulars, universals, etc. are available immediately; we need to approach harmony in a more round-about manner. The tight dialectical circle between perfection and harmony, where each limits and fills out the other term, is a function of this. God sees perfection as harmony, harmony as perfection. Harmony, in this sense, is the aesthetic representation of power.
beauty, but perfection, a perfection that seems to actively resist being made beautiful.\textsuperscript{81}

It is a perfection of ugliness.

Perfection trumps beauty, not just because beauty is borne of the incapacity to reach perfection (as above), but also because there are types of perfection that seemingly cannot be made beautiful. Mendelssohn thus develops his later aesthetics to longer be so dependent upon beauty, and make a place for more ‘types’ of representations of perfection.

In the \textit{Rhapsody}, Mendelssohn claims that this move—seeing perfection as prior to beauty and pleasure, rather than their source—represents a forward movement on the part of philosophy. It is part of the superiority of the Moderns over the Ancients.

Mendelssohn sketches this historical development as such:

1) Epicureans, for whom pleasure is the highest principle
2) Stoics, for whom harmony with nature is the highest principle
3) Moderns, for whom “the original drive for perfection [\textit{Triebe zur Vollkommenheit}]” determines all principles\textsuperscript{82}

Perfection and harmony together represent a difference in kind from the preceding principle. Whereas the Epicurean seek to separate themselves off from the world, to better enjoy beauty and pleasure, the Stoics and Moderns look to integrate themselves with the harmony, seeking connection with, not protection from, the world. This is important because Mendelssohn holds that perfection, not pleasure, is the \textit{a priori} good

\textsuperscript{81}Mendelssohn, \textit{Philosophical Writings}, 23. Note that, although Mendelssohn does not explicitly recognize this possibility, we could train our sense of beauty to involve the internal organs and their functioning (see the erotic letters between James Joyce and his wife). This training is the expansion of our limitations, to become more like God; however, eventually, we will reach a point that we cannot incorporate into our vision of beauty. For God there is no such point, and thus, no beauty.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Philosophical Writings}, 150.
that should determine our actions, “[s]ince perfection is the only thing that accords with
the nature of an entity that is free,” in that we are only free when we choose the best, in
other words, increase perfection. 83 Pleasure indicates an increase in perfection, but the
Epicureans, under this model, confuse the index with the thing itself. 84 The difference
between the Stoics and the Moderns is primarily a matter of emphasis. The Stoic ‘being
in accord with nature’ is likely to lead to confusion, and devolve into mimicry, whereas
the Moderns understand that perfection is the principle that underlies nature. 85 The
Modern philosopher (or rather, Mendelssohn) sees perfection as something that
encompasses nature, but is not limited to it. In any case, the second two philosophies
consider pleasure as a by-product of a more fundamental harmonious perfection, even if
they disagree as to what the ground of this perfection is.

Given that aesthetics is the study of sensation, and pleasure is the principle that
Mendelssohn uses to drive his earlier understanding of art, this seems to leave us in a
sorry state. Neither beauty, nor pleasure, are the highest principle. However,
Mendelssohn has here very cleverly avoided switching from a (neo) Classical aesthetics
of perfection to a ‘Modern’ aesthetic of pleasure (indeed, he suggests that his
contemporaries who have chosen this route are in fact regressing to a previous,
Epicurean, ‘stage’ of philosophical development). Instead, he retains the idea of

83 Mendelsohn somewhat hyperbolically states that: “The essence of God consists in
perfection; it is the plan of creation, the source of all natural and supernatural events, the
goal of all our desires and wishes, the guiding principle of our actions and omissions; it is
the supreme principle in ethics, in politics, and in the arts and sciences of pleasure. It is
the sun in the system of sciences, and without it everything falls back into night and
confusion.” Philosophical Writings, 150, 54.
84 It goes without saying that this is an unsympathetic reading of Epicureanism.
85 By ‘Moderns,’ Mendelssohn is clearly referring to the lineage that begins with
Spinoza, through Leibniz, and on to himself. Obviously, many of his contemporaries
would disavow perfection as the highest principle.
perfection, but transforms it. Perfection is not a property of individual bodies, as it is in neo-classical aesthetics, where bodies appear in isolation, with nothing ‘inner’ or ‘unfinished’ about them.\textsuperscript{86} Instead, perfection is the harmonious inter-relation between singulars. What separates Mendelssohn’s vision of the Moderns from the Stoics is that the latter sought harmony within a limited field (nature)\textsuperscript{87} whereas perfection, as a drive [\textit{Triebe}] has no obvious field—the drive operates in any field available to it, including ‘inner,’ ‘social’ and ‘religious’ arenas.

So, to return to the first hierarchy (from harmony to unity) the first stage is directly accessible to God, but to us only as a postulate. The ‘Stoic’ appeal to harmony is based on a confusion, and limits harmony to nature (which we can ‘see’). For the ‘Moderns’, human reason and sensation occupy the middle position but are driven to elevate themselves to the first.

\textsuperscript{86} Bakhtin, whose relation to Buber is all but unstudied, holds that the primary alternative to a monological aesthetics is a dialogical, or grotesque aesthetics where the principle of identity ‘A=\text{A}’ no longer holds. One notes with interest that Mendelssohn, while not a partisan of the grotesque arts, certainly gives ugliness its due, at least theoretically. Mendelssohn’s aesthetics seeks a balance: individuals need to be real, and not reducible to substance, but neither can they be autarchic. M. M. Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 330

\textsuperscript{87} Hans Jonas addresses the limits on this seemingly unlimited position in his excellent section on ‘cosmos piety’: this piety, the seeking of harmony with nature is a retreat “insofar as its appeal was addressed to a human subject that was no longer part of anything except the cosmos.” This invites a part/whole dynamic where the whole is always ‘better’ than the part: “according to classical doctrine, the whole is prior to the parts, is better than the parts, and therefore that for the sake of which the parts are and wherein they have not only the cause but the meaning of their existence.” Mendelssohn, with his concern for singularities and persons, requires a notion of harmony that is not composed of individuals that can be combined into a (prior, better) universal. Hence the immanent solution I will propose, between a harmony and singulars. Hans Jonas, \textit{The Gnostic Religion : The Message of the Alien God \& the Beginnings of Christianity}, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 247,8. (first citation, emphasis in original; second citation, emphasis added)
By separating aesthetics off from the highest principle (harmony in-itself) Mendelssohn gives aesthetics much needed autonomy: otherwise artists would be confined to merely replicating perfection in their work.

Thus, I can tentatively suggest the following:

1) The aesthetic generates pleasure; pleasure is initially found in beauty, this is expanded to include ugliness as Mendelssohn’s theory develops.
2) Pleasure is an index of increasing perfection
3) Perfection is expressed in and as harmony
4) Harmony is the (impossible to achieve) goal; it both undergirds us, and we seek it insofar as we are free.

Aesthetics thus has its own independent part to play in the economy of increasing perfection. What is important is that it does so on its own terms (pleasure). Much as the ‘illusion’ of the face reflected in water is perfect on its own terms, and is imperfect only when we make false judgments from it, so aesthetics is perfect on its own terms, provided we do not seek in it the principle of harmony, or assume that harmony is aesthetic. Art is perfect when it fulfils its own aim (pleasure), and this pleasure is grounded in a sensuality that is driven towards perfection. Pleasure is thus prior to beauty, and the aesthetic must not sacrifice the former to the latter. Sometimes it must do the opposite.

otherwise than beauty: an interesting mixture

Mendelssohn’s notion of mixed sentiments appears in the first edition of the Writings but is really only developed in the addendum to the second edition (the Rhapsody). Mixed sentiments are those that combine pleasure and displeasure to achieve aesthetic depth.

The addendum to the dialogues, the Rhapsody—not in dialogue form—develops a theory of mixed sentiments after Mendelssohn’s encounter with Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful. Burke’s text was
viewed by Mendelssohn as incomplete, because Burke did not understand the supposedly ‘basic’ psychological fact that intuitions of perfection are ‘by nature’ pleasurable. This is a somewhat charitable misreading: the Sublime operates in Burke (and later in Kant) as precisely the figure that cannot be dealt with rationally: Burke’s intention was no doubt to split the sublime from the beautiful, such that the irrational aspects of the passions could be articulated, and employed in opposition to the rationalist world view. For Mendelssohn, it was out of the question for an area of sensuality as significant as the sublime be considered irrational. Much of the text is spent exploring terror, ugliness, and the sublime as part of a rational and harmonious world.

It is for this reason that ugly sensations are explored, not because of the quality of their affective intensity, but for a much more banal, almost mechanical, reason: they keep us interested. The function of mixed sentiments is first and foremost to allay boredom or ‘tiredness.’ The psychological grounding for this ability is Mendelssohn’s theory of simultaneous sentiments, which is equal parts Leibnizian Rationalism and English Empiricism: “When [the soul] cannot distinguish two sentiments which it has simultaneously, it combines them into one phenomenon which is distinct from both and has almost no similarity with them.” Unlike Leibniz’s waves, the mixture of sentiments is not additive: the mixed sentiment is not the sum of all the waves together into one big wave. Neither, however, is it merely associative, where one sentiment experienced alongside another leads to an associative, or ‘Pavlovian’ connection between them. Instead, the mixture of sentiments creates a ‘third’ that is, if not greater than the sum of its parts, is certainly quite different from them. This works much the same way as the

88 Mendelssohn, Philosophical Writings, 146.
89 Philosophical Writings, 141.
beautiful object in Mendelssohn’s earlier thought: an object that is more than the sum of its particulars. As with the earlier theory, the act of appropriation generates the third out of the mixed sentiments, this time seen under the aspect of ‘interest’ rather than beauty.

Mendelssohn uses very similar language in the *Rhapsody’s* treatment of mixed sentiments as in the first edition’s analysis of limitation and beauty. Mixed sentiments occupy us longer than pure sentiments. Much as beauty is produced by a limitation that causes us to go ‘back and forth’ between the particular and the singular, the mixture of the sentiments engrosses while we move between pleasure and disgust.

The *Rhapsody* opens with a somewhat self-effacing explanation for the turn to mixed sentiments:

> In the *Letters on Sentiments* I assumed with Monsieur Maupertuis the following nominal definitions: *The pleasant sentiment is a representation which we prefer to have than not to have; the unpleasant, on the other hand, a representation which we prefer not to have than to have.* In this definition, however, there is a small error that deserves to be noted[:] on the basis of the content of the definition, we would have to despise every unpleasant sentiment and wish to see it purged from our soul and destroyed. If we pay attention to ourselves, however, we notice that, in the case of some unpleasant sentiments, our disgust is not always directed at the representation but very often at the object of the representation. **90**

The *Rhapsody* reduces the importance of pleasure while the import of representation increases. Mendelssohn splits the representation off from the object represented, with pleasure flowing towards the former and our disgust the latter. Mendelssohn in this way seems to tame the role of displeasure, separating it off from the art work and directing it towards the represented object, while pleasure is directed towards the representation.

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**90** *Philosophical Writings*, 131. (emphasis added)
What is important is that, in the case of mixed sentiments—where both the pleasant and unpleasant are present—the representation establishes two gaps: one between the representation and the represented object, the other between the representation and the representing subject. The space of representation, or at least this type of representation, lies between the subject and the object. This representation that splits and unites the two terms of the relation—designed by Mendelssohn to deal with an aesthetic problem—is a major contribution to the intellectual trajectory that finds fruition in Buber’s notion of the in-between.

Here a reading of an extensive selection from the *Rhapsody* is in order. While many readers of Mendelssohn have noted the importance of representations of mixed sentiments, none have, so far as I know, examining their mechanism.\(^9\)

The mixed sentiments have the peculiar property of not being as gentle as pure pleasure, of course, but of penetrating deeper into the mind and appearing to sustain themselves there longer. What is merely pleasant quickly leads to a point of satiation and ultimately tedium. *Our desire always extends further than our enjoyment* and if it does not find complete fulfillment, the mind longs for change. By contrast, the unpleasant mixed with the pleasant captures our attention and prevents us from being prematurely sated.

Here we see the function of desire—which, as usual, aims at perfection and harmony—reach beyond pleasure, the index of increased perfection. Desire is, in this sense, more important than ‘gentle pleasure,’ because it reaches further, and there less danger of ‘prematurely’ resting in enjoyment (as the Epicureans supposedly did). With mixed sentiments one is less likely to confuse the index (pleasure) for the thing indexed (perfection).

\(^9\) The same is the case for the above notion of beauty being generated by the back and forth between the singular and the universal.
For Mendelssohn, mixed sentiments are intended to explain how and why people crave representations of the (seemingly) less-than-perfect. The answer is simple: mixture is more interesting. I lose interest in a plain sweet flavour, and when I am grieving, simple cheer seems false: “Nothing is more gratifying to an angry person than his indignation”. But it is not the case (for Mendelssohn) that I strive for pure displeasure. The sensual drive instead aims towards a mixture, where the unpleasant sensations increase the power of the pleasant.

It is readily apparent to everyone that [anger] is a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant sentiments…[A]nger is composed of the discontent over an insult that has been received and the desire to avenge it. These images reverberate together in an enraged mind and produce completely opposite movements as first one, then another [nachdem bald diese bald jene] image gains the upper hand. Blood soon rushes into the extremities of an angry person, the eyes protrude and become fiery, the face turns red as he stomps his feet, swings his fists in the air, and raves like a madman; these are the tell-tale signs that the desire for revenge is in control. The blood quickly returns to the heart, the wild fire in his eyes dies out as they sink back into their sockets…and his external limbs hang powerlessly at his side; these are the unmistakable signs that his discontent over the insult now prevails…. Anger accordingly belongs to the mixed sentiments, and hence the powerful attraction which an irate mind finds in it.  

As with beauty, the mechanism for mixed sentiments is a back and forth—‘first one, then another’—between two images (retribution and discontent). At first glance, both of these may seem unpleasant, but this is not the case because the former sentiment is active (and therefore pleasant), the latter passive (and therefore unpleasant). Here activity and passivity are illuminated physiologically, in the blood. The ‘back and forth’ between the two images occurs not on an equal plane, but rather inward (passive) and outward (active); ‘first this, then that,’ one centring the other disorienting the subject in a very literal way.

92 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 144.
The in- and out-flowing of blood operates in a manner that is, in terms of direction, analogous to the ‘swinging’ between the peripheral particulars and the central singularity, the limbs and the heart. The inability to sate oneself with either term is the same, as is the fact that the moving between the two constitutes the affect in question. Maintaining the very analogy I am developing here, the *Rhapsody* immediately moves on to sublime objects:

An immense object that we can *contemplate as a whole but cannot comprehend* likewise arouses a mixed sentiment of gratification and its opposite, a sentiment which initially sets off a trembling sensation and, if we continue to contemplate it, a kind of dizziness. This immenseness may consist in an extended or unextended …magnitude; but the sentiment in each case is the same. The unfathomable world of the sea, a far-reaching plain…the eternity of time, every height and depth that exhausts us … Who can continue to feast his eyes upon them without experiencing a pleasant sort of dizziness? This sentiment is composed of gratification and its opposite. The magnitude of the object affords us gratification, but our inability to comprehend its boundaries adds a certain degree of bitterness to this gratification, making it all the more alluring.  

Sublime sentiments are also presented in terms of the ‘to and fro’ mechanism. Not between singular and the particular, but immensity and our inability to comprehend this immensity. These two sentiments, unmixed, would be rather flat: that there is something ‘very large’ is in itself uninteresting, as is the fact that there is something I cannot comprehend. Mixed together, an intoxicating fascination results, found in neither of the two original terms. Here the ‘back and forth’ could be viewed as being between the (finite) subject and (unlimited) object, but it is only in the back and forth, or mixing, that the finitude of the former and the infinitude of the latter become palpable. Mendelssohn, 

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93 Mendelssohn’s description of the sublime suggests Kant’s later work. However, their treatment of the mind’s appropriation of the sublime is obviously very different. A thorough treatment of the sublime in their work is still wanting.
however, quickly returns to his prior pattern, and the developing subject/object contrast is found to once again hinge upon our swinging between the singular and particulars.

If the large object, in regard to its immensity, presents us with no multiplicity to contemplate (as in the case of a placid lake or a fruitless plain that is not punctuated by any objects), the dizziness ultimately changes into a kind of revulsion at the monotonousness of the object, discontent gains the upper hand, and we must turn the confused look away from the object. This conforms perfectly to the theory of sentiments, and it is quite amply confirmed by everyday experience. By contrast, the immensity of the structure of the world, the magnitude of an amazing genius or of sublime virtues are as differentiated as they are enormous, as perfect as they are differentiated, and the discontent bound up with the contemplation of them is grounded in our feebleness. Thus they afford an inexpressible pleasure of which the soul can never get enough.

Mendelssohn has thus safely grounded the sublime in the beautiful, as one of its sub-species. If the sublime object does not have the particulars/singular swing that constitutes beauty, the play between the finite subject and sublime object cannot sustain itself. The limitation that constitutes the sublime (I cannot grasp the immensity of this object) is grounded in the prior limitation that constitutes the beautiful (I cannot grasp singulars and the universal at the same time). It is this, prior, limitation that I can never ‘get enough of’.

Nowhere is this clearer than with the absolutely beautiful/sublime ‘object,’ God:

What soulful sentiments surprise us when we consider the immeasurable perfection of God! Our inability accompanies us on this flight, to be sure, and drags us back into the dust. But the ecstasy over that infinity and the displeasure with our own nothingness blend together into a holy trembling, a more than rapturous sentiment. After a brief pause we try a second and a third time, and the source of pleasure is as inexhaustible as before. No sense of tedium or revulsion, no discontent with this or that side of the object intermingles with our sentiment here, and we would be happy if our entire life could be an uninterrupted attempt to grasp the divine perfection.  

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94 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 143. (emphasis added)
God is only beautiful, or sublime, for-us. As has been mentioned, there is no beauty for God, because God can perfectly grasp itself. Not so us: our limitations mean that God is available only as a beautiful/sublime object, incomprehensible not because it is undefined, but because it is the most defined, and yet most harmonious, ‘thing’. Simply put, God, as the most perfect and incomprehensible object is the least tiring object. God will never bore us.\textsuperscript{95}

**ugliness and representation-in-itself**

God is a limit case for Mendelssohn’s aesthetics, and thus a confusing point from which to understand the representational space, and the singularities this space opens up. It is instead in artistic representation of ugliness that we find the most compelling articulation of both pure representation and aesthetic singularity. Ugliness is the most extreme case of a normal sensation that does not belong to a universal, while remaining perfect. Ugliness, for Mendelssohn, is radically contingent, and can only show up under a universal through its difference from it (as, say, a deformity). But, viewed autonomously, and not in relation to any standards of beauty, ugliness possesses its own perfection. So it is with singularity: seen under the aspect of a universal, a singularity is seen only in terms of the lack (or excess) that differentiates it. Seen in itself, it is perfect.

We have seen that our necessary failure to represent perfection is the impetus for Mendelssohn’s aesthetics of swinging between particulars and the singular. This in turn

\textsuperscript{95} This notion of God is radically different from the God of Maimonides. There is something almost blasphemous about the fact that God is available to us as the most mixed sentiment. Not only does this bring God into sight of violence and anger (they too are pleasant only insofar as they are mixed), but God’s unity—for Maimonides, God’s definitive characteristic—exists for us only insofar as God is infinitely variegated.
leads to the philosophical recognition that ‘failure’ is the generative power of the aesthetic. Specific failures, as long as we do not extrapolate falsely from them, are themselves powers. Developing this, we can say that the forever incomplete relation to a singular, and not the accurate representation of a singular, is the power of the aesthetic. It is not the case that a more discerning sensual being could reach a representation of perfection.

The failure that engenders beauty thus opens the door to an aesthetics expansive enough to deal with singularity. Once we have recognized the necessary failure of beauty, it becomes possible to consider representations of ugliness as themselves failed perfections, or perfect failures. This deposes beauty as the ‘obvious’ goal of art: the limitation that engenders beauty is more important than beauty itself. While he himself struggled with this result, it lies at the heart of what makes Mendelssohn’s aesthetics so compelling.

Ugliness, more than beauty, allows us to clarify what representation is in-itself, and this for both metaphysical and psychological reasons. The psychological reason Mendelssohn gives is deceptively simple, and seemingly wrong. He claims that if we see an accurate representation of a beautiful object, one that could very well mimetically ‘stand in’ for its object: “the recollection… that we are viewing art and not nature, conveys something unpleasant since we would rather see the pleasing paradigms themselves than see replicas of them.” Mendelssohn appears to be saying that if I see a completely accurate representation of a bowl of strawberries, I will be upset when I realize it is a representation, because I want a real strawberry. Read more sympathetically (and more literally) what Mendelssohn is claiming is that a

96 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 173.
representation which could stand in for its paradigm *conveys* something unpleasant, because it is not properly being what it is (a representation, and not the thing represented). For all its naïveté, this observation, articulates what makes photo-realism so disgusting: the representing is so ‘good’ that it hides the fact that it is a representation. It is the ugly object that draws attention to the representation itself.

Here is the above quote again, with what follows it:

The recollection…that we are viewing art and not nature conveys something unpleasant since we would rather see the pleasing paradigms themselves than see replicas of them. However, the imitation of paradigms that in nature are unpleasant produces a far more mixed sentiment. The representation of them is, in and for itself, *unpleasant in relation to the object*, but is mixed with some gratification *in relation to the sketch of them*…[T]he moment this deception brings the objective reality too much into relief and begins to become unpleasant, we have the benevolent recollection that we do not have the original image itself before our eyes, and, by this means, the pleasant character of the experience becomes dominant and completely masters the soul.⁹⁷

The mixed sentiment is more visible as a *representation* than a mimetic copy of a beautiful object. With ugly objects we see the representation in and for itself; the representation is (at least) bi-directional, pointing towards the object and pointing towards itself as a representation. The former is unpleasant, the latter pleasant: the pleasure of the representation lies in the way it draws attention to the ‘gap’ in perception between the representing subject and the represented object. The gap is the space of representation itself, which opens between the subject and the object. If the gap is ever in danger of closing, and the object seems about to stand-in for the representation, we have the ‘benevolent reflection’ that we are not dealing with the fearful object itself. While this discussion concerns ugly objects, it is important to remember that, when dealing with

⁹⁷ Ibid.
art objects, the representational gap protects us from both ugly and beautiful objects, as with the above example of photo-realism. What matters is that a properly artistic representation maintains the gap by leading us to focus on its bi-directional quality, the ‘twofold relation’.  

Mendelssohn works out his notion of the ‘twofold relation’ within the realm of art, because the independent status of representations is clearer with art objects than with mental representations, even if there is no principled distinction between them. I can see a painting, or representation, and so its independence of the subject representing and the object is obvious. The painting is a clear third, mediating, term. Thus the art work clarifies and develops the space that is neither subject nor object. It may seem that this move requires that artistic representations have a defined object, and so is not applicable in an age dealing with the trauma of non-representational art. This problem is more apparent than real: while Mendelssohn uses examples with well-defined objects, his theory is meant to apply to music and other forms of art without defined objects. “The essence of the fine arts and sciences consists in an artful, sensuously perfect representation, or in a sensuous perfection represented by art.”  

The ‘object’ of all art is sensuous perfection, with all the ambiguity this implies, and is not restricted to ‘nature’ or concrete objects—art’s only restriction is sensuality. In any case, no matter the object, the art representation occupies a median space between a subject and an object, and in so doing, illuminates the autonomous nature of things encountered in this in-between space.

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As Mendelssohn’s seems intent on justifying the philosophical worth of sensuality and art, it is hardly surprising that the concept of representation he develops is positioned in an autonomous zone ruled over by neither subject nor object.

Where Mendelssohn provides the aesthetic/epistemological articulation of the need for this space, and provides a mechanism for it, Buber will eventually provide its metaphysical grounding. Thus, this twofold space will play an increasingly significant role as this project proceeds. The space Mendelssohn introduces differs greatly from conventional understandings of space and reference, because aesthetic objects do not have a clear referent and stand in between the whole subject and any given object, including subjects taken as objects (portraits and sculptures), nature or the cosmos (landscapes and cosmological drawings,) and ‘objects’ that are so intangible that they lose their status as objects (music). We are thus dealing with a spatiality that is quite different from three-dimensional, or mathematical space.

More important, for this project, is the fact that the twofold space is neither subjective nor objective; it is only in such a neither/nor space that singularities can thrive. Here, again, a comparison with Baumgarten is instructive. Baumgarten seemingly divides aesthetic pleasure into either subjective or objective: the former is admiration for the artist (as subject,) the latter for the object of representation; both should be operative in the same work. The subject here is not the person encountering the art object, but the actual artist, who we admire much like an object. Aesthetic perfection does not arise out of the interplay between the subject and object, but occurs independently on both the subjective and objective side: perfection of the artist’s skill and the perfection of the object itself.

As Guyer writes: “Baumgarten’s conception of the perfection of sensuous cognition
clearly comprises perfections on the side of both represented content and its
representation.” While Mendelssohn’s work is full of passages in which we admire the
skill of the artist in the representation or art work, the artist is chiefly admired for their
ability to construct a twofold space: the ‘subjective’ component is squarely on the side of
the viewer invited into this space, not the artist. And, to iterate, it is exactly this spatiality
that is ‘neither subject nor object’ which allows Mendelssohn to treat ugly objects as
suitable for aesthetic representation.

Aesthetic objects that lose this space, collapsing into either the subject or the object,
cease, for Mendelssohn, to be aesthetic. This is why Mendelssohn distinguishes
between representations which are bi-directional (images, and their like) and those that
are non-relational (such as pain). Mixed sentiments that collapse into the subject are
abjected. Without the gap, there is no relation, and without the relation, the
representation overwhelms the subject in an unpleasant manner:

[T]he imperfect, evil, and deficient always arouse a mixed feeling that is
composed of an element of dissatisfaction with the object and satisfaction
with the representation of it. Considered as a whole, such a representation
will be pleasant or unpleasant, depending upon whether the relation to the
object or the relation to us is weightier, becomes the dominant relation, and
obsures or even suppresses the other. If the object gets too close to us, if we
regard it as a part of us or even as ourselves, the pleasant character of the
representation completely disappears, and the relation to the subject
immediately becomes an unpleasant relation to us since here subject and
object collapse, as it were, into one another…Sensed pain is of this sort.

100 Guyer, "Mendelssohn’s Theory of Mixed Sentiments," 189.
101 Intriguingly, religious representations are in an analogous position: representations of
God as subjective are pagan, those that represent God as a pure transcendent object are
philosophical. In neither case are they strictly ‘religious’ (religion meaning monotheism,
or, following Assmann, ‘counter-religion’) “One has exaggerated either the sublimity of
the divine being, or its condescension, at times excluding God from all collaboration in
human affairs, other times so entangling him in them that he necessarily also shared in
human frailties.” Mendelssohn, Morning Hours : Lectures on God’s Existence, 127.
Insofar as its object is the body from which we are not able to separate ourselves, the distinction between the relations, noted above disappears. This is simply a more dramatic version of a motif Mendelssohn returns to many times: all aesthetic objects stand in a “twofold relation,” a relation that comprised of the finite subject, the representation, and the infinite object. Finite beings—us—inherently mix together perfections and imperfections. Our goal is to avoid imperfections (hating imperfection is itself a perfection) but imperfections are realities, and thus, on their own terms, perfect. The aesthetic space allows us to deal with, or redeem, imperfections without becoming imperfect; imperfections, in the space of neither subject (pain) nor object (evil) are perfect, because in this space they engage our positive powers:

Evil... is unpleasant from the side of the object, considered as the original picture [Urbild] outside us, because in this connection it consists in a deficiency, a negation of some sort of content. However, considered as a representation, a picture within us that engages the soul's capacities of knowing and desiring, the representation of what is evil is itself an element of the soul's perfection and brings with it something quite pleasant that we by no means would prefer not to feel than to feel.

This is by no means an incidental thought of Mendelssohn’s: but is found in his very last works.

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102 Philosophical Writings, 134. (emphasis added)
103 Philosophical Writings, 132.
104 Mendelssohn writes in a letter to Lessing: “The ability to love perfections and hate imperfections is a reality, and, therefore, a perfection. Exercising it is, hence, bound to afford us pleasure. What a pity that this fine observation was not available to me when I wrote my letters One The Sentiments.” Cited in Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn, 61.
105 Mendelssohn, Philosophical Writings, 134.
106 it is this dynamic that underlies his faculties of approval and disapproval in Morning Hours, faculties that explain our desire to know of imperfect things (the Lisbon earthquake). On a ‘higher’ level, this notion of representation implicates God’s creative powers (the choice of the best possible world). For instance: “Representation, combined with approval or participation, is vital knowledge and vital knowledge in the highest degree is the spur to activity, the striving to bring forth, to express power.” God creates by affirming the best representation, even though this representation involves elements
Representation affirms imperfections through the gap. This is, strictly speaking, a human power: God affirms everything unequivocally and without gaps; in ‘nature,’ there is no gap between subject and object. In nature: “signs are identical with the things themselves,” there are no natural signs that point beyond themselves. 107 Positioning human beings betwixt God and nature is by no means an interesting idea. What is interesting is that, in Mendelssohn, this position of human beings gives them powers that are not found in nature (as one would expect,) but also not found in God, precisely because they are products of human ‘incapacity’: the gaps created in representation, the ‘to and fro’ that constitute representations (beautiful or otherwise), these are abilities that are not available to angels or beasts.

**sign language**

Before completing this chapter, it might be helpful to see how these ideas of the twofold aesthetic space and singularity play out in the domains of signs (including language), ritual, and politics. Freudenthal's excellent book explores Mendelssohn’s entire oeuvre through a semiotic lens. He builds off Julius Guttmann’s claim that Mendelssohn’s understands paganism as a failure of critical semiotics: paganism is the confusion of the sign and the thing signified, and thus a distortion of natural religion—it is, instead, more like non-human nature. 108 Freudenthal has deepened this claim to show that

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108 Guttmann, "Mendelsohn's Jerusalem and Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise," 375. As Freudenthal aptly notes, “natural religion is a kind of “natural theology” but not a religion. All these names refer to beliefs, not to a social institution or to practices or
Mendelssohn’s comparative studies of religion—which appear throughout his work—are based on a semiotics of practice, so as to avoid emphasizing theological claims or beliefs as the locus of religiosity.\footnote{He summarizes his position as such: “Mendelssohn’s perspective is semiotic, and he concentrates on religious practice. Concentrating on religious practice is an alternative to the focus on theology on the one hand and on belief on the other…Mendelssohn excludes from his discussion all codified confessions of faith, as well as the beliefs of the practitioners. These are all attempts to fix in precise formulas something that by its very nature is allusive and changing in time…Concentrating on religious practice from this perspective means that Mendelssohn studies religion as a symbolic system. Semiotics, so I argue, is also the foundation of Mendelssohn’s general philosophy” \textit{No Religion without Idolatry : Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment}, 2.}

Mendelssohn’s ‘semiotics of religion’ is founded on the idea that the symbols and representations of religious practice need not be, and arguably, cannot be, adequate to their theological referent: God necessarily escapes any finite symbol; it is enough for religious symbols to be adequate to the human response to the infinite.\footnote{No Religion without Idolatry : Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment, 15.} Here there is an obvious analogue to Mendelssohn’s idea of beauty, constituted by the (in)adequacy of the human attempt at representation.\footnote{I wish Freudenthal spent more time on Mendelssohn’s notion of mixed sentiments, and the signs (and aesthetic representations) that correspond to this. While Mendelssohn almost exclusively deals with images of a benevolent God, there are darker ways of representing the infinite, which his philosophy (if not his personality) is quite able to accommodate. \textit{No Religion without Idolatry : Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment}, 203-05.} The necessary distance of sensuality from perfection engenders beauty, much as the gap between the performative employment of religious symbols and the thing symbolized by these symbols (God) engenders religious communities and histories. In both cases the ‘imperfections’ of the representing has a productive power (although the mechanism is different).\footnote{We will see this notion of, return in Buber.} The gap formed by sensual

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\footnote{Freudenthal, \textit{No Religion without Idolatry : Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment}, 136.}
representations is bi-directional (between the subject and object); the gap formed by religious practice is lateral, formed between a community around a central object (God,) but remains bi-directional (the finite and the infinite). For Mendelssohn, this central object is always inadequately represented. This, is directly taken up by Buber, and finds expression in the claim that the singular other is always ‘nothing,’ and the idea that religious communities mobilize around imperfect images, or pictures [Bilder] of an unimagable You, that, for all that, must still be pictured again and again. For both, the responses to God, as an absolute singularity, are more important than the accuracy of any description or depiction.

For Mendelssohn’s semiotics of religion, affirmation and negation are more important than description. But these affirmations and negations are closer to the affect driven space of aesthetics than they are to technical propositions: “One should understand me to be speaking here of genuine affirmations and negations, not of such that consist merely in words…” ^113 Language, seen as such, is by no means always a twofold space. Technical languages that seek a one-to-one correspondence with objects and to eliminate ambiguities, because it seeks to reduce the interference of the engaging subject, is not twofold (or tries not to be). But language can allow for the presentation of an in-between space, by pointing towards it or implicating itself in it, in a sensual manner; this is the case with aesthetic, ritual, and day-to-day language. ^114 Indeed, for Mendelssohn, this is the proper function of language. As Goetschel writes:

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^113 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 132.

^114 Freudenthal’s definition of indexicality is different than mine; for him, an index is causally implicated in what it indexes, whereas I use the notion of indexing (pointing) in a more Buberian manner. Our difference hinges upon which element of Peirce’s theory
Because of the substitutive glitch that defines the linguistic signs as originally mimetic but also arbitrary, it is only in rephrasing, i.e., in reconstructing meaning again and again, that meaning can be communicated. For Mendelssohn it is thus not so much the ordinary language that poses [a] problem but the terminologically fixated hold of scholarship.\textsuperscript{115}

In a proto-Hegelian way, Mendelssohn considers technical languages (and the possibility of a universal language) as necessarily incomplete and incapable of approaching their objects. Technical languages, like all languages, are unable to encapsulate their referent, but they deny this; more importantly, technical languages do not allow a properly creative response to their referent, but are supposed to be followed mechanically.\textsuperscript{116} It is this that makes pure technical languages inadequate for any development of the idea of the in-between, which involves an adequate response to an object that cannot be adequately articulated because of its singularity. Whereas Mendelssohn’s notion of sensual language, which employs the sensual aspects of language and ritual as a way of pointing towards real singularities, is an excellent leaping off point.\textsuperscript{117}

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\textsuperscript{115} Goetschel, “Writing, Dialogue, and Marginal Form: Mendelssohn’s Style of Intervention,” 27.
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\textsuperscript{116} Freudenthal very helpfully contrasts Mendelssohn’s view of language with Maimon’s opposing theory; both distrust natural language because of the conventional nature of signs, but whereas Mendelssohn believes we are consigned to this, and that truth is found within conventional sign systems (through translation, repetition, and development) Maimon holds that an adequate sign-system can be built from the ground up; this explains Maimon’s radical scepticism of all empirical claims. Freudenthal, \emph{No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn’s Jewish Enlightenment}, 17.
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\textsuperscript{117} It is here that I must part ways with Freudenthal. Freudenthal considers Mendelssohn’s semiotics to be philosophically primary. And they are, as regards philosophical dispute. But, I believe aesthetics are a better way of illustrating
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Jerusalem, or the political critique of universals

For Mendelssohn, individuals, as autonomous singularities, open up onto the harmony (and hence not as windowless monads, but sensual beings). This is an essential component of his political theory, both as regards political organization, where politics is the opening up of the singular into singular communities, and the communities into the state, whose function is to protect the harmony of singulars. A universal political system is thus, by nature, tyrannical, because rather than facilitating the harmonious development of singulars, it seeks to contain individual persons and communities within a frame.

Mendelssohn’s rejection of political universality in favour of a harmony of singulars demonstrates that Mendelssohn’s notion of an open singularity—a singularity that opens into a twofold space—is not confined to his aesthetic thought, even if it is developed there. It is also an important precursor to Buber’s utopianism, where singularities open up into dualities that in turn open up into pluralities. Much as particulars are opposed to (and part of) universalities, singulars are opposed to (and part of) pluralities. There is a distinction to be drawn here. While Mendelssohn simply posits the singular as a starting point, and the twofold space as a way of reaching it, Buber grounds singularity in the twofold space itself. In this way, Buber develops Mendelssohn’s implicit rejection of windowlessness (a function of his aesthetics) into an explicit metaphysical claim (that the in-between is prior to individuality, both particular and singular). Buber’s category of the

Mendelssohn’s thinking, because it is only through sensual signs that we are capable of approaching existents. For Mendelssohn philosophical argumentation is a means of returning from scepticism back to ‘common sense’ grounded in sensuality. Ultimately, my divergence Freudenthal is more a matter of emphasis than anything else: he emphasizes social convention, I emphasize sensuality.
singular is more thorough than Mendelssohn’s, if only because he was forced to respond to Kant’s critique, and therefore was able to take far less for granted.

Mendelssohn’s political critique of universals that seek to contain singulars is found in his Jerusalem, a book that is in many ways the foundation of liberal Jewish political thought, and continues to annoy conservative commentators to this day. Jerusalem is a rich and well written book, so much so that its sophisticated arguments escape the casual reader. Most famous for re-introducing, and transforming, Spinoza’s notion of Judaism as a religion of revealed legislation (and not revealed metaphysical facts), Jerusalem also contains Mendelssohn’s most explicit semiotics of religion, a theory of rights and obligations, a critique of ex-communication, an argument that Judaism is singular (but not exclusive), and a theory of education.118 All of these concerns are linked to the problem of authority, and in large part, Mendelssohn’s concern is to limit authority such that it facilitates the harmonious development of singularities, rather than merely punishing ‘aberrant’ particulars. A case in point is his blanket theory of education and the state: “Under all circumstances and conditions…I consider the infallible measure of the excellence of a form of government to lie in the degree to which it achieves its purpose by morals and convictions; to the degree, therefore, to which government is by education itself.”119 In every instance his move is more or less the same: to replace universal structures of authority with harmonious pluralities that immanently develop their constitutive singulars without coercion.120 The power of these pluralities, or

118 See, for instance: Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism, 97, 94.
119 Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism, 42. (emphasis added)
120 Freudenthal makes a convincing case that this notion of authority only applies in pre-messianic times. It is not clear what a post-messianic theocracy would look like; it
harmonies in miniature, is found not in their auto-immune functions (such as banishment) but in their development of mutuality: “[Humans] cannot become perfect except through mutual assistance, through an exchange of service and reciprocal service, through active and passive connections with his fellow man.”121 Here we see a practical application of his notion of harmony: singulars are ‘contained’ and organized nor by universal laws, but by harmonizing, pragmatic, systems.

This notion of power explains the disdain of authoritarians (most obviously Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss) for Mendelssohn’s politics as much as it explains Hegel’s affection for it.122 Pluralities are not sovereign, nor are they grounds for decision. Again, to quote Goetschel, who perfectly summarizes the theory of the obligation and the state articulated in Jerusalem: “Redesigning the contract as a legal instrument for arbitrating rather than transferring or engaging in transactions about claims or rights themselves, Mendelssohn defines the state as the interface rather than the foundation for the interplay of political forces.”123 The ideal state operates like the harmony that encourages the perfection processes of singulars: its goal is to develop harmonious differences rather than impose unity (or worse, sameness). In a much quoted section, Mendelssohn makes his agenda very explicit: “Brothers, if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence…a union of faiths is not

seems that it too would be essentially pluralistic: “[I]t should be clear that the messianic vision of Jerusalem at the end of days perfectly fits Mendelssohn’s own views: the direct reign of God as in the time of the Mosaic constitution (for the Jews) and pluralistic monotheism for which he pleads at the end of Jerusalem.” Freudenthal, No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn’s Jewish Enlightenment, 245.

121 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism, 47.
122 Goetschel, "Mendelssohn and the State,” 476.
123 "Mendelssohn and the State," 478. (emphasis added)
"tolerance". The ideal state assists this ‘plan of providence’: the state is the plurality into which we are opened, and which opens us upon each other, not a regulative universal that legislatates particulars.

Goetschel tries to explain this feature of Mendelssohn’s ideal state in the unfortunate language of universals and particulars. He writes that “Jerusalem argues that universalism in modernity is only an option if it is conceived as open ended towards the future. Its messianic quality refuses any control or determination by any one particular over another, be it in the disguise of the claim of the universal or an elected particular.”

I believe that Mendelssohn’s mechanism for this openness is better viewed as the relationship between singularities and a plurality, and not as particulars and universals. The difficulties of Goetschel’s terms are apparent when he writes that “Mendelssohn’s concept of universality rests on the vision of the relationship of the particular and the universal in terms of a relationship of continuous reciprocity, or more precisely of the correlative relationship of the two concepts”. I suggest that this notion of reciprocity is needlessly fuzzy. A plurality that harmonizes singularities seems to be both more precise, and more in line with the trajectory of Mendelssohn’s thinking. That said, Goetschel’s paper is indispensible for understanding Mendelssohn’s critique of universalities: all universals are really only disguised particulars that seek domination. Much as technical languages pretend at a consistency they cannot achieve, and are really only cauterized natural languages, the universal state is never

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124 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism, 138.
125 Goetschel, "Writing, Dialogue, and Marginal Form: Mendelssohn’s Style of Intervention," 34. (emphasis added)
really universal, but really just one ‘large’ particular that disguises itself as universality, and from this position seeks to dominate weaker particulars.

Insofar as we are in pre-messianic times, there is no universal, or ideal, state. Hence Mendelssohn’s comment about state and religion (and the need to keep them distinct):

“When they take the field against each other, mankind is the victim of their discord; [but] when they are in agreement, the noblest treasure of human felicity is lost; for they seldom agree but for the purpose of banishing from their realms a third entity, liberty of conscience, which knows how to derive some advantage from their disunity.”126 It is not a stretch to say that this ‘third thing,’ liberty of conscience, is the means by which each singularity develops itself (conscience being ‘internal,’ not universal or imposed). Conscience does not lead to a set of ethical maxims or a prescribed moral code, but rather towards the increase of perfection.

While Mendelssohn’s sentiment is far from anarchistic, he does seek to exploit the gaps between false universals (i.e. religion and the state, both of which are particular power structures that pretend to be universal); while the messianic age will, supposedly, inaugurate a world in which religion and the state are conjoined, they will be conjoined not as a universal structure, but a harmonious plurality. But to pretend we have arrived at this utopian form of organization is disingenuous tyranny. Thus, despite the messianic tendencies of Jerusalem (the title alone is messianic) it is a profoundly pragmatic work,

126 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism, 33. (emphasis added) For a study of the ways Mendelssohn sought to integrate the political and the religious under the banner of reason, while maintaining a productive tension between them (commensurability, rather than reduction), see Erlewine, Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason, 49.
not in the sense of *Realpolitik*, but in the sense of continual negotiations between existing
singulars.\(^{127}\)

**onward**

Mendelssohn transforms Leibniz and Spinoza while seeming to merely re-state them, and
in this way begins developing structures that escape the metaphysics of the day. I have
sought to show that in his aesthetic works we find a set of concepts that begin a trajectory
that is taken up by Buber. Mendelssohn’s aesthetics, in combination with his radical
treatment of perfection and harmony, initiate a theory of singularities, a means of
explicating their relationships, a set of mechanisms that seek to explain the means by
which we encounter them, and a twofold space that allows for their autonomous existence
outside the realm of universals. However, all of these ideas are cast in an aesthetic and
epistemological frame. The transcendental grounding of these notions—their constitutive
presuppositions—is left unarticulated. We will look to Martin Buber for this treatment, a
treatment that, if anything, deepens and develops the consequences of Mendelssohn’s
insights.

\(^{127}\) *Jerusalem’s* intriguing description of human temporality suggest that the messianic
era is not a political ‘state of affairs,’ but would require nothing less than an impossible to
conceive of transformation of temporality itself: “it is, in the strictest sense, neither in
keeping with the truth, not advantageous to man’s welfare to sever the temporal so neatly
from the eternal. At bottom, man will never partake of eternity; his eternality is merely
an *incessant temporality*. His temporality never ends; it is, therefore, an essential part of
his permanency and inseparable from it.” The temporal, or finite, aspect of the human
singular is the means by which we enter into the eternal, or infinite. Again, the gap
between the temporal and the eternal is a *productive* ‘failure’ on the part of humans.
Temporality is not an illusion, to be dropped so that we might enter eternity, but
underlies the repetitive structure of human striving. To overcome this gap (between the
temporal and the infinite) would invite tyranny. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on
Religious Power and Judaism*, 39. (emphasis added)
However, to understand how and why Buber does this, it is necessary to examine Kant’s transformation of the philosophical world. While Mendelssohn’s notions of perfection and harmony are appealing, they are no longer available as a foundation for philosophy; Mendelssohn’s thought presupposes too much for contemporary thought. Buber takes up Mendelssohn’s twofold space of singularity, but does so in the midst of a void opened up by the Kantian revolution.
Chapter Two: x Marks the Gap

Kant was an essential figure in Buber’s philosophical education.\textsuperscript{128} There are many important Kantian figures that resurface in Buber’s thought, and many of his more insightful philosophical claims are made in relation to Kant and Kantianism. The limits on the reach of reason, or the ‘space’ of reason that Kant delineates, is essential for understanding Buber’s project and the ways it differs from Mendelssohn’s. It made it necessary for Buber to reach back through Kant’s critique of reason, and recast singularity, harmony, and the twofold space, such that these concepts could adequately respond to the critical philosophy. I will argue that, in so doing, Buber was forced to deepen Mendelssohn’s insights. Unable to lean upon a rationalist metaphysics, Buber was able to see singularity more on its own terms. If only for this reason, an understanding of Kant’s critical philosophy will be helpful in sketching out the trajectory being explored by this dissertation.

But there is a more global reason for placing Kant between Buber and Mendelssohn: Kant was transformative not only for Buber’s thought, but the entire German philosophical tradition (if not all European thought). Articulating the ‘obstacle’ Kant’s thought poses to the idea of singularity, and the process by which Buber sought to overcome it, will help bring this trajectory into dialogue with contemporary thought, much of which owes a debt to Kant, whether admitted or not.

To satisfy both these ends, this chapter will explore Kant’s philosophy in reference to Mendelssohn’s ideas that were sketched out previously. It will then explore what I see as

\textsuperscript{128} So much so that some commentators, in particular, Steven Katz, have suggested that Buber is little more than a Kantian. This position, which I believe is overly simplistic, will be deal with in the following chapter.
the basic Kantian problematic (as regards this project): the fact that, for Kant, we only have access to appearances, and not things as they are independently of their appearing. I will explicate three solutions to this problem that are found in Kant’s work, finishing with the one that I believe is most successful, and most pertinent to Buber’s project: the transcendental x. Throughout the chapter I will draw attention to, and seek to elucidate, the position of the Kantian subject, a notion of the subject that Buber will remodel to make space for his thought.

**some contours**

There are two Kantian contributions that are important for this project. The first concerns the status of appearances. Both Mendelssohn and Kant tried to use representation and its processes to create a space for human autonomy. For both, representation is the space that mediates between the autonomous subject and the world, preventing the mechanical reduction of the person to the world, or the idealist reduction of the world to the person. There is, however, a line, or rupture, that separates the two: after Kant there can be no cognitive appeal to anything beyond appearances.\(^{129}\) As far as philosophy goes, we are stuck with appearances and nothing else. There are many solutions to this ‘problem,’ and any cursory reading of Reinhold, Husserl, Maimon or Fichte, will provide one of them. It is important to see that Buber is part of this set of responses, but he takes his own, singular, route: rather than trying to ‘overcome’ representation, or reduce everything to representation, he positions representation as merely one way of dealing with a more basic problem: the space of encounters; the in-between is one such space. Buber—much as he does with Mendelssohn’s space of sensual encounter—takes over one formulation

\(^{129}\) For Kant, appearance is a type of representation.
of Kant’s space of representation: the space between two transcendental exes, a space which is neither subject nor object. Rather than using this space to solve a problem in the theory of representation, he uses it to explain how we can have a space where two autonomous singularities can encounter each other. Kant’s model of autonomy is useful here, if only it is stripped of almost all content.

The second contribution concerns the status of reason as constituting power. Kant’s new autonomous subject is unsupported by a metaphysics—like Mendelssohn’s harmony—but is constituted by the transcendental fact that the autonomous individual is the bearer of reason. Buber follows Kant’s restricted, almost content-less, subject (x): reason has strict bounds, and we must be wary of speaking about any-thing beyond these bounds, including the subject of reason. In this sense, Buber is squarely within the Kantian frame. But, Buber’s idea of autonomy is not grounded in reason: his notion of autonomy is much more Mendelssohnian; it is founded on relations between singulars. Thus Kant’s understanding of reason as the sole source of autonomy is too restrictive for Buber: it does not adequately allow for singularities, or encounters with singularities, other than rational agents. Thus, Buber is left with the task of re-creating a Mendelssohnian notion of singularity in a post-Kantian framework. This chapter will explicate the way Kant’s revolution placed Mendelssohn’s thinking outside the reach of reason, and then explore the ways Buber brings singularity back into the picture.
two types of autonomy

Kant transforms the philosophical project in a paradigmatic way, and dramatically pares down the number of things that philosophy is capable of dealing with. God, harmony, the soul, the afterlife, and other non-sensual entities and processes are placed outside the grasp of reason. Instead, philosophy must concern itself with the means by which concepts are constructed, starting and ending with autonomous reason.

Freedom from heteronomy is tricky, however, because there is always a danger of confusing autonomy with capriciousness. As we have seen, for Mendelssohn, the autonomous self is a singular rational being that seeks to increase its own perfection; but this singular increases its perfection by engaging in a harmony with other singulars; this harmony keeps the singularity in check, and prevents it from being arbitrary. But, after Kant, harmony is not available as a means to limit singularities. Instead reason is the power that grants autonomy, and, simultaneously, limits, a self. For Kant, the autonomous self is a rational being that gives itself its own laws, that legislates for itself; the source that keeps the self in check comes from ‘within,’ is part of its constitution. Thus for Mendelssohn, autonomy leads to (and from) a harmonious inter-dependence. For Kant, autonomy is a function of obeying your own law: interdependence enters the picture only because the autonomous, law-giving, reason is assumed to work in the same way for each person: we all share in using the same reason.

Thus, despite shared goals, their views of reason radically differ. Both thinkers agree that scepticism and determinism are a result of bad metaphysics, or misapplied thinking. But Mendelssohn assumes that a refined metaphysics, in conjunction with appeals to common
sense, can adequately respond to the sceptic.\textsuperscript{130} Kant claims (and here almost all post-Kantian thinkers are inclined to agree with him) that appeals to common sense are—from the perspective of philosophy—cheating. Where common sense moves quickly towards a conclusion based on what seems appropriate, philosophy is forced to take the long route, carefully moving from one proposition to the next, assuming as little as possible. A philosophical argument cannot be refuted by noting how counter-intuitive its results are. A philosophical argument can only be refuted by another argument. We are thus stuck with the odd phenomenon of a field that determines its own limits through its own method. Simply put, while Mendelssohn seeks to limit philosophy by common sense, Kant seeks to limit philosophy on its own terms.

\textbf{limiting reason}

Both Kant and Mendelssohn limit the domain of reason, but do so quite differently. Kant limits reason by claiming all knowledge concerns the sensual. Claims of reason independent of sensation mean little. But, sensation means dealing only with appearances, so reason is more or less stuck making claims about appearances. But only reason is entitled to arbitrate here.

\textsuperscript{130} What Mendelssohn means by common sense is complicated, and only recently has the literature begun to do justice to his views. By common sense Mendelssohn emphatically does \textit{not} mean ‘what we usually think’; instead, common sense is a kind of proto-pragmatism with phenomenological inflections: pointing towards sensations and thoughts we hold in common. For contemporary treatments see: Paul Franks, "Divided by Common Sense: Mendelssohn and Jacobi on Reason and Inferential Justification," in \textit{Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics}, ed. Reinier Munk (New York: Springer, 2011), and Freudenthal, \textit{No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment}, 21-65. For an older treatment see Strauss, \textit{Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn}, 27.
Mendelssohn, instead, limits reason by common sense. As Franks has noted, for Mendelssohn: “Proficiencies in judgement, then, including bon sens, are important precisely because rationalist metaphysics is an extremely limited science. Common sense marks the limit of rationalism.”¹³¹ For Mendelssohn, good judgment draws on all aspects of human being, including the sensual, the traditional, and the rational. Metaphysics is limited in the first instance by common sense because of their mutual proximity, and because common sense is a sort of flexible combination of the other human ‘faculties’. But the limitation on metaphysics cannot be drawn in a principled (i.e. metaphysical) manner—metaphysics runs up against other faculties all the time, and each time the border needs to be negotiated.¹³² Thus, things that escape metaphysical thought—truths that cannot be demonstrated apodictically—can be pointed to by common sense, sensuality, or some other faculty. This way of reasoning is well illustrated in To the Friends of Lessing:

Nothing, I think, can be more beyond question than that in the visible world that surrounds us, as well as [the invisible world] within ourselves, final causes are realized and purposes are carried out. I cannot possibly believe that any philosopher has ever seriously doubted this….The question that arises in metaphysics and that is deserving of close study is: Is the system of final

¹³¹ Franks, "Divided by Common Sense: Mendelssohn and Jacobi on Reason and Inferential Justification," 209.(emphasis added)
¹³² Of course, each faculty has its own field of excellence, in which it holds sway. The emphasis upon Mendelssohn’s common sense and proto-‘ordinary language philosophy’ cannot detract attention from his explicit comments, such as: “in regard to eternal truths and tenets I admit to no other form of conviction than that which derives from rational argumentation.” In no way could Mendelssohn say, as Kant did, that he limited the reach of reason to make way for faith. For Mendelssohn, there are many limitations on reason, but in no way do they protect faith; they do, however, protect persons. As he wrote at the height (or nadir) of the pantheism controversy: “Lessing is a follower of Spinoza? Oh well! What do speculative doctrines have to do with human beings?”; Mendelssohn, in his fight with Jacobi, made it very clear that neither rational argumentation, nor the limitations we impose on it, should infringe on human autonomy and harmony. Mendelssohn, Last Works, 149,56.
causes *able to be proved* apodictically or not? … Neither in religion nor in our moral doctrine *is the resolution of this problem of any special consequence*. In regard to its practical effects little hangs on how we decide the question of whether our conviction rests upon an apodictically demonstrated truth or upon a near-certain inference.133

Mendelssohn thus uses common sense to point towards freedom; metaphysics, apodictic thought, is held in reserve and used to defend this intuition of freedom when it comes under sceptical attack. Kant proceeds by the reverse course, and mobilizes the aporetic impulse in defence freedom, placing freedom in a zone fenced in by scepticism, a fence reason cannot climb. Simply put, Kant claims that reason must remain sceptical about its ability to directly comprehend things in themselves, including freedom. While the appearances of things—including those in a field as seemingly determinist as physics—may well suggest a more complete determinism, we cannot know that we are *not* free outside these regimes of appearance. To make apodictic claims about God, freedom, or life after death, is to try and scale this fence and speak about things we have no direct acquaintance with.134

Thus their essential difference is that Kant has no problem letting reason determine its own boundaries, even in non-apodictic domains.135 Whereas for Mendelssohn, policing

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133 *Last Works*, 170. (emphasis added)
134 This is hardly the full extent of Kant’s view on freedom, for which he offers positive, moral arguments. What is important to see here is that freedom is positioned in a field of the unknowable, and we cannot know that we are free, not that we are not.
135 Hence the “court of justice” by which reason makes decrees “according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws”. This is the function of the first *Critique*: “a critique of the faculty of reason in general, in respect of all the cognitions after which reason might strive independently of all experience, and hence the decision about the possibility or impossibility of a metaphysics in general, and the determination of its sources, *as well as its extent and boundaries*, all, however, from principles.” (emphasis added) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 101, Axii.
the boundaries of reason is a group effort (hence *common* sense).\(^{136}\) This is the nub of his disagreement with Kant over the relation between a representation and the thing represented. For Mendelssohn, all representations are pictures [*Bild*] of an archetype, or super-picture [*Urbild*]. This is the meaning of his dualism: there is an archetypal real world, of which we form pictures. The *Urbild* is positioned in the perfect harmony, the *Bild* is our appropriation (sensual or otherwise) of this harmony. Thus, the *Urbild* is distinct from our pictures of it, but, as Mendelssohn’s terms suggest, has a deep connection with the images we draw of it.\(^{137}\) Through examining various pictures that various people have made, we can come to have an idea of their archetype. Contrary to this, Kant thought the ‘archetype’ [for him, the *Ding an Sich*] is not accessible, period: while we must assume an appearance is an appearance of something, we can say nothing about that something. This is a direct product of the fact that Kant is concerned with reason as an exclusively individual activity (rather than being a group effort). On this point, their differences are impossible to reconcile. As Dyck writes: “Mendelssohn admits … that, from the point of view of the subject, the question of idealism cannot be settled; instead, traction is only gained on the [Kantian] once the agreement between my representations and those of other representing minds is taken into account.”\(^{138}\) This is very much in line with certain pragmaticist understandings of truth, where the real is the

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\(^{136}\) The very possibility that reason might not be able to do this pains Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, 340, 46, A236, A40. \(^{137}\) Buber will return to this notion of *Bild*, transforming it significantly. He does this in his treatment of aesthetic perfection, in ‘Man and His Image Work’ [*Der Mensch und sein Gegenbild*], referred to in fn. 33. \(^{138}\) Corey Dyck, "Turning the Game against the Idealist: Mendelssohn’s Refutation of Idealism in the *Morgenstunden* and Kant’s Replies," in *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics*, ed. Reinier Munk (New York: Springer, 2011), 167.
point at which multiple investigators converge.\textsuperscript{139} Seen from a pragmaticist perspective, while individuals only have access to their own representations; if these representations agree with those of other investigators, it seems more likely that they refer to some extra-representational object. By contrast, the isolated investigator has no proper means to determine if a representation refers to an extra-representational ‘real,’ because he or she has no one to compare representations with. For better or for worse, Kant begins and ends with the individual subject, and we must deal with the ‘real’ all on our own. We cannot appeal to a community of investigators, and no consensus can let us step over the line between \textit{Bild} and \textit{Urbild} to make claims about how things really are in-themselves.\textsuperscript{140} We are stuck in our own representations. Buber in large part follows Kant on this point. While Buber is interested in the communal construction of images \textit{[Bilder]} and the role this plays in the formation and perpetuation of communities, he is Kantian insofar as we can make no claims about what lies behind the images. The idea of the image he uses to explicate the communal development of images is closer to Kant’s content-less formalism than Mendelssohn’s plenum. A Kantian critical metaphysics is enlisted to protect Mendelssohn’s insights into the importance of shared images.

\textbf{orientation by sense alone}

Mendelssohn’s most lengthy discussion of the relation between representations and prototypes \textit{[Bild} and \textit{Urbild]} is found in \textit{Morning Thoughts}. Mendelssohn begins his

\textsuperscript{139} Under this model “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real” Peirce, \textit{Collected Papers}, CP 5.407.

\textsuperscript{140} In this respect Kant is far more Cartesian than Leibnizian.
‘lectures’ by staging the problem of truth much as Kant does, by politely dismissing the idea that truth can be a simple matter of agreement between thought and a thing:

While this definition is not incorrect, still it does not seem fruitful….untruth in our thoughts is disagreement of thoughts among themselves or with their prototypes, the objects to which they pertain. Now there is no means of comparing thoughts with their objects, that is, of comparing reproductions with their prototypes. We have only reproductions before us, and we can make judgments about the prototypes solely by means of them….One thus sees that, from this side at least, no characteristics are provided for recognizing the truth and for distinguishing it from untruth: let us try another way.¹⁴¹

Like Kant, Mendelssohn’s ‘other way’ requires privileging the ‘activity’ of the human mind. But by ‘activity’ they mean very different things. For Kant, the mind’s activity is found in the conjunction between reason and sensual perception; for Mendelssohn, activity is the cultivation of common agreement (harmony) among different senses and different people. Thus Mendelssohn grounds his account of truth in a proto-pragmaticist appeal to investigation: if multiple investigators say the same thing about an object, we have a better case for saying what the object is objectively: what the Urbild of the Bild is.¹⁴² Consequently, we can use collective reasoning, or common sense, to orient our thinking: the more common the sense, the greater the probability that it concerns something real. Mendelssohn feels comfortable making probabilistic claims about what an object is in-itself. Here these philosophies are irreconcilable: Mendelssohn’s is a metaphysics of probability, whereas Kant (quite fairly) wants absolute answers for certain

¹⁴¹ Mendelssohn, Morning Hours: Lectures on God’s Existence, 10. (emphasis added)
¹⁴² Mendelssohn’s point here is subtler than it appears, and turns on his view of language. The ‘idealists’ accuses the ‘dualist’ [Mendelssohn] of applying sensory categories to the ‘things themselves’ (prototypes). The dualist replies that this is a confusion of language: “It is one and the same, according to language as well as the concept, to be A and be thought as A…We merely say that the representation that we have of material beings as extended, moveable, and impenetrable is not a consequence of our weakness and our incapacity.” Morning Hours: Lectures on God’s Existence, 40.
questions, such as ‘do objects really exist outside of us?’ Thus for Kant, comparing a representation between multiple people shows nothing. Kant wants (and will develop) a thorough, structural account of exactly how the mind actively forms representations. In order to do this, Kant will draw firm dividing lines between things and representations where Mendelssohn is comfortable with a kind of synechism, or continuity, between the two. 143

These differences are in no way abrogated by Kant’s approval of Mendelssohn in his one foray into the pantheism controversy. Kant opens his article as such:

However exalted the application of our concepts, and however far up from sensibility we may abstract them, still they will always be appended to image representations [bildliche Vorstellungen!], whose proper function is to make these concepts, which are not otherwise derived from experience, serviceable for experiential use.144

His approval is limited to employment of Bild as a complement to the properly philosophical study of representation. The image, or picture, [Bild] is a species of representation [Vorstellung] that gives ‘sense and significance’ [Sinn und Bedeutung] to our concepts because of its link to ‘some possible experience’. But the rules of pure

143 Despite Kant’s terminological equivocations, we can say that appearances are, in general, the sensual or intellectual direct intuitions (apprehension) of objects: I see a chair, but I don’t see the chair in itself, I only see it as it appears to me. Appearances are a sub-species of representation. Mendelssohn equivocates when it comes to the terms for representation, but for him the notion of ‘picture’ or ‘image’ [Bild] is close to Kant’s notion of appearance, while the ‘prototype’ [Urbild] is close to Kant’s notion of the thing in itself; as the (German) terms themselves suggest, for Mendelssohn there is a strong link between the two (Bild and Urbild), whereas for Kant and later thinkers, the link between appearance and the thing appearing is, at best, unclear.

144 Immanuel Kant, Religion and Rational Theology, trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7, 8:133. (emphasis in original)
understanding are achieved precisely through abandoning specific images, and exploring “thinking in general”.  

Picture thinking retains its rights only in one domain: it can help orient us in the practical employment of reason. But Kant claims that Mendelssohn makes two serious errors: using common sense to orient us within speculative reason; and, confusing reason’s need for a first cause (God) with a demonstration of this cause. While pure reason must be self-limited, Kant holds that limiting speculation by common sense destroys both speculation and common sense. Orientation in the “dark night” of super-sensible things is necessary, but must be grounded in an individual ethical reason, not pure reason or common sense, both of which make claims that cannot be demonstrated. The presuppositions of pure reason or common sense demonstrate nothing beyond our inter-subjective desires or needs: they are only hypotheses. Whereas the presuppositions of individual freedom are, supposedly, unconditioned, and are therefore postulates. Mendelssohn is taken as confusing these two sorts of requirements, and taking a “felt need” of practical reason for the findings of pure reason: confusing a drive with the law that creates it:

Reason does not feel; it has insight into its lack and through the drive for cognition it effects the feeling of a need. It is the same way with moral feeling, which does not cause any moral law, for this arises wholly from reason; rather, it is caused or effected by moral laws, hence by reason, because the active yet free will needs determinate grounds.”

145 Ibid.
146 Religion and Rational Theology, 10, 8:137.
147 Religion and Rational Theology, 12, 8:139.
148 Religion and Rational Theology, fn12, 8:140.
The ‘feelings,’ or needs, of reason prove nothing. So, while Mendelssohn is correct (for Kant) in requiring a principle of orientation, he is wrong to look for it in the realm of common sense, and wrong to confuse the needs of pure reason with demonstrations. He claims that to do so opens the door for Jacobi-style enthusiasm, and gives permission to find orientation in any number of extra-reasonable sources. Instead, there is only one extra-reasonable source we can trust: individual experience of sensible things. To combat enthusiasm, reason, and its own laws, must provide a frame, and orientation in this frame is provided through experience.  

In a strange way, at least in the examples he draws, here Kant is more Mendelssohnian than Mendelssohn, because orientation is found in our sensual intuitions. Leaving ethics aside, metaphysical or philosophical orientation is found—arguably, against Kant’s wishes—in the domain of aesthetic encounter. For Kant, objective reason is not enough to provide orientation. He uses the example of ‘left and right’: if I map out all of the stars only in their objective relations to each other, I can ‘flip’ the sky from left to right, and their relations all remain the same. The stars themselves will give no evidence of this change; it is only in my subjective relation to them that I can notice the change. This argument about left and right has been contested many times. What is important for us is not the specifics, but the fact that, for Kant, there is for us always a non-objective component in our subjective relations. This non-objective component is grounded in the fact that reason alone is inadequate for expressing actual encounters with things. The ‘concept,’ meaning, the internal relations, of a left handed glove and right handed glove are exactly the same. Only in trying on the glove can I decide which one it is.

149 Religion and Rational Theology, 15, 8:144.
The same goes for existence: Kant famously declares that a complete and coherent concept of a thing is not enough to declare its existence.\textsuperscript{150} I may have a complete and coherent concept of God, even a necessary God, and this is still not enough to say that it exists; similarly, I may have a subjective need for the concept of God, but this says nothing more than that I must hypothesize God’s existence, not that I can demonstrate it.

In the mere concept of a thing no characteristic of its existence can be encountered at all. For even if this concept is so complete that it lacks nothing required for thinking of a thing with all of its inner determinations, still existence has nothing in the least to do with all of this, but only with the question of whether such a thing is given to us in such a way that the perception of it could in any case precede the concept. For that the concept precede the perception signifies its mere possibility; but perception, which yields the material for the concept, is the sole characteristic of actuality.\textsuperscript{151}

Existence can be claimed of something only through my connection to it, not the concept I have of it. One test of this connection is precedence: if I perceive something before I have a concept of it, that is an argument for its existence independent of my concepts. Whereas if I have a concept of something before I perceive it, this is really only evidence that a thing is possible. The point of this is that knowledge of existence does not come from concepts, no matter how delicately engaged.

Thus, we can say that there are types of knowledge we have access to only insofar as we can sense it, point towards it, or engage with it, in a sensual space. The left/right hand argument, and the famous claim that existence is not a predicate, are both driven by a deeper concern with preserving sensuality as an independent source of truths not

\textsuperscript{150} Religion and Rational Theology, 10, 8:137. Critique of Pure Reason, 566, A97, B625.

\textsuperscript{151} Critique of Pure Reason, 325, A225 B73.
available to reason alone. Existence and orientation are both available only through sensual channels.

Strongly linked to this sensual grounding of key concepts (existence and orientation) is the importance of indices and indexes. As mentioned in the last section, an index is a sign, or part of a sign, that points at something, but does not articulate content. There are concepts that can be indexed, but not demonstrated from a third-person perspective. An index is capable of pointing at extra-reasonable, or sensual, things. If I point at a fire (in a sensual space) I can indicate it without having a concept of it, but such a concept is possible. The existence of the fire, however, cannot be invoked except through my indexing it. The importance of pointing at, or indexing, essential qualities such as existence, is an essential element of Buber’s thinking. After Kant, many feel compelled to say that some concepts are inadequate to existence (existence itself is not a predicate). I am trapped on my island of reason and representations, and cannot hope to reasonably represent the world in its entirety, as it is in-itself. Pointing, or indices, step forward to rectify this inadequacy: while I may not be able to conceptually reconstruct or demonstrate certain aspects of existence, I can point at them from my little island.

Buber follows Kant in that neither pure speculation, nor common sense, can orient us; encounters provide orientation. For Kant, it is experience, or the joint effort of sensuality and understanding in encounters with objects, that orients our metaphysics. But Kant limits the orienting encounter to the most basic types of sense experience. Whereas, in Buber, the type of orienting thing encountered—a You—is much more like a Mendelssohnian singularity than a Kantian sense intuition. Again, Buber uses a Kantian structure to re-ground a Mendelssohnian insight.
**a limited aesthetic**

The above differences between Kant and Mendelssohn are grounded in their very different understanding of the relationship between appearance and the thing appearing. Again, for Mendelssohn, a group of persons can collectively refine an ‘image’ such that it is more likely to correspond to its prototype. For Kant, we can say very little about the relation between a representation and the thing represented: more voices add nothing. Kant’s entire philosophy requires that the difference between appearance and appearing thing is an absolute difference of kind, and never one of degree. Hence, Kant’s position that we can’t talk about something as it is in itself, only as it appears to us.\(^{152}\) This odd claim is the ‘good news’ of Kant’s philosophy: precisely because we only have access to appearances, the things we know have a certain structure: the structure of our appearances. And this we can know. Philosophy can learn and makes solid claims about this structure, because we (however unwittingly) bring the structure to the situation. But this solidity comes at a cost: philosophy must study not what we know, but the way we know. This is why the Critique of Pure Reason begins with an aesthetics:\(^{153}\) the basic structure of sensual appearances—the way we can sense anything at all—must be articulated before philosophy can study the ways we should think.

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\(^{152}\) It will be necessary to simplify throughout this section. With apologies to Kant scholars, the intention here is first and foremost to examine the effect of Kant’s thought. I will do my best to present Kant’s thought as it actually occurs (in the first *Critique*) but, in order to not be bogged down in terminological distinctions, several of Kant’s ideas will first be stated crudely, and nuanced as this chapter proceeds.

\(^{153}\) The aesthetics at the beginning of the *Critique* grounds the aesthetics of indexes mentioned above: all appearances take place in space and time. Indexing occurs within this frame.
The aesthetics which open the first *Critique* differ greatly from Mendelssohn’s. For Mendelssohn, aesthetic thought, sensibility, is a type of cognition, whereas for Kant aesthetics is merely the form of intuition—including ‘inner’ intuitions. Thus, where Mendelssohn’s aesthetics concerns itself with beauty, ugliness, perfection, reflections, and other tangible instances of sensuality, Kant’s is more formal. It claims there are only two basic forms of sensuality (space and time,) and describes these basic forms. At the risk of oversimplification: Kant’s aesthetics is the ‘box’ in which all intuitions must fit. This ‘box’ is discovered through a proto-phenomenological exercise: “detach from [empirical intuition] everything that belongs to sensation, so that nothing remains except pure intuition and the mere form of appearances, which is the only thing that sensibility can make available a priori”. Kant holds (incorrectly, I think) that space and time are the two basic forms of sensibility this process always arrives at. He employs these as the aesthetic frame in which all other representations are built.\(^{154}\) He derides older German aesthetics for studying empirical things (e.g. art), considering this a mere “doctrine of taste”: aesthetics should not employ empirical “sources,” but instead articulate the a priori structure of the sensual (what he calls “principles”). Everything we can think is an appearance, and all appearances must appear in space or time. Healthy thinking confines itself to making judgments about these appearances.

**the loss of harmony**

In claiming that all we have access to are appearances, Kant changes the game by no longer focusing upon the objects of thought, but the way thought thinks objects, declaring “objects must conform to our cognition.” This is the essence of the

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\(^{154}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 156,57. (emphasis added)
‘Copernican revolution.’\textsuperscript{155} All we have access to is appearances, and the only theoretically meaningful appearances are those that shape “possible experience”:\textsuperscript{156} We must presume that there is something ‘behind’ the appearance (an appearance presupposes that it is an appearance of something) but there is very little we can say about it. The objects reason can concern itself with, is quite confined. One of Adorno’s lectures articulates this confinement well:

The power of the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} resides not so much in its responses to the so-called metaphysical questions [freedom, God, etc.] as in its highly heroic and stoical refusal to respond to these questions in the first place. What makes this possible for Kant is the self-reflexive nature of reason…I am capable of reflecting on my own reason, and through this reflection I am able to give myself an account of what it can and cannot achieve. …[this] prevents us from going beyond this knowledge [of appearances] and entering into speculations about the Absolute. …The difficulty is that we can enquire, how can reason criticize itself? Does not the fact that it criticizes itself mean that it is always caught up in a prejudice?\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{155} Here is the famous passage in context: “Let us, therefore, try to find out by experiment whether we shall not make better progress in the problems of metaphysics if we assume that objects must conform to our cognition. This assumption already agrees better with the demanded possibility of an a priori cognition of objects-i.e., a cognition that is to ascertain something about them before they are given to us. The situation here is the same as was that of Copernicus when he first thought of explaining the motions of celestial bodies. Having found it difficult to make progress there when he assumed that the entire host of stars revolved around the spectator, he tried to find out by experiment whether he might not be more successful if he had the spectator revolve and the stars remain at rest. Now, we can try a similar experiment in metaphysics. with regard to our intuition of objects. If our intuition had to conform to the character of its objects, then I do not see how we could know anything a priori about that character. But I can quite readily conceive of this possibility if the object (as object of the senses) conforms to the character of our power of intuition. [CPR: B xvi]

\textsuperscript{156} This is a bit of an overstatement, more precisely, one would say: as regards the structure of the understanding the only philosophically meaningful appearances are those that bear on possible experience. The only thing we can philosophically know \textit{a priori} is the structure of appearances. Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 339.

\textsuperscript{157} Theodor W. Adorno, \textit{Kants Critique of Pure Reason}, 1959, trans. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 7. Adorno does not address Kant’s appeal to sensuality as a field that reason employs to limit itself. Kant brings to bear the resources of both so-called Rationalism and Empiricism on his epistemology. One can know \textit{a priori} only
As a consequence of this, many of Mendelssohn’s philosophical figures are no longer admissible in the court of thinking. Despite the fact that Mendelssohn proposed several subtle responses to Kant (which were largely ignored)\(^ {158} \) it is fair to say that harmony and perfection, the glue that bound Mendelssohn’s system together, are no longer valid postulates: I cannot have a sensual intuition of either harmony or perfection, only concepts of them; therefore, I can say that they are possible, but not that they exist. Kant’s fairly convincingly argues that perfection and harmony are inadmissible as metaphysical postulates unless we can experientially verify them. As was argued extensively in the last section, this we cannot do: perfection is by definition beyond the reach of human sensibility.

In this sense, there is a parallel between the perfect harmony and Kant’s idea of the in-itself: representation always fails to grasp them. But where Mendelssohn’s perfect harmony is productively inaccessible—and the evidence for it is seen in those failed productions we call beautiful—Kant’s in-itself is inaccessible, period. For Mendelssohn, the perfect harmony could not be known ‘in-itself’ because it was outside the reach of human comprehension; but the way it was inaccessible left its stamp on human sensuality and production. But under Kant’s model, Mendelssohn’s notions of harmony are no longer available to ground, or produce, other ideas. Harmony is at best ‘regulative’. This means we can arrive at harmony and perfection as possibilities, but we cannot ground that which is possible \( a \ posteri or \). This is not a compromise between the two ‘positions’: it is a radical reconstruction, where reason is limited to thinking about its ‘other’ (sensuality) while retaining its rights as the arbiter of truth.

\(^ {158} \) Many of the arguments against the ‘Idealist’ position in Morning Hours are in fact arguments against Kant, whom Mendelssohn had neither time nor energy to deal with comprehensively. See: Dyck, “Turning the Game against the Idealist: Mendelssohn’s Refutation of Idealism in the Morgenstunden and Kant’s Replies.”
any further claims on them. Again, under Kant, I am not entitled to argue ‘There is a harmony, therefore…’.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this: Mendelssohn required harmony to justify his notion of singularity. Without the support of harmony, singulars become ‘free-floating’. No longer harmonized, singulars run amuck. If each singular its own rules (is not contained by a universal), and there is no harmony to restrain these rules, they can arbitrarily conflict with one another; they cease to be voices in a chorus (however dissonant) and become demonic. Without harmony, it is easy to see how singulars would just end up locked in a battle of ‘all against all’ with other singulars. In the absence of harmony Mendelssohn’s aesthetics cannot redeem ugly objects by placing them into a reciprocal relationship with other objects, and his political theory of a state that furnishes a means for singularities to interact and mutually perfect each other in harmony is no longer grounded.

159 This even though their notions of perfection are diametrically opposed to each other’s: for Spinoza ‘what is, is perfect’, and for Leibniz, ‘what is perfect, is’. But, in both cases, their argumentation drew conclusions from perfection.

160 For Buber, perfection is an ethical limit: it is unfair to ask anyone to do anything more than perfect themselves, because to do so would arbitrarily limit them. No conclusions can be drawn from Buber’s perfection, and indeed, this is part of the appeal the concept has for him. Thus, Buber’s notion of perfection is both a post-Kantian Ideal used to promote an ethics with pre-Kantian elements (perfection, rather than duty, the Good, rather than the Right), and a Mendelssohnian aesthetic move to perfect the relation to the world. This loss of a comforting harmonious container will force Buber and thinkers like him to establish a completely different relation to singularities. The contours of this new relation are formed in light of Kant’s powerful critique. Buber, The Letters of Martin Buber : A Life of Dialogue, 215. ‘Man and his Image Work’ in The Knowledge of Man, trans. Maurice S. Friedman (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 164.
sensual language

So, singulars need a new ground, independent of harmony, or some other third person metaphysical apparatus. After Kant, singulars will need to be grounded much like existence and orientation: through encountering them, having some sort of relationship to them that is not exclusively conceptual. Singularity, like existence, is not a predicate, nor is it composed of predicates. Singularity differs from existence, in that it is a more saturated, or more complicated phenomenon which will need its own methods of expression. For now, however, what is of interest is the ways Kant’s philosophy can help us encounter singulars, this strange form that is beyond predicates and universals. This might seem a tall order, but this is somewhat ameliorated if we remember that we only need to explain how a post-Kantian-subject can encounter singulars, not singularity-itself. Kant’s subject encounters existents, not existence itself, these encounters orient, but provide no access to the grand principle of orientation, and similarly, we encounter singularities, but the theory of singularity is developed in an abstract frame.

This is why, after Kant, Mendelssohn’s aesthetics are more useful than his third-person metaphysical claims. Explicating encounters is better done from the perspective of aesthetics than metaphysics. This because sensuality, especially the sensuality of dreams and imagination, is content with not instrumentally understanding the objects it encounters, reducing them to predicates and universals. In such sensual/aesthetic encounters, we are able to engage a singular “in the moment at hand, unhinged from teleological expectation or predictability.”

Mendelssohn’s notion of twofold

161 Elliot R. Wolfson, A Dream Interpreted within a Dream : Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination  (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 177.
representation provides a schema for elucidating singulars that remains useful even after Kant has obliterated the harmonious cosmos.

For now, it is enough to note that with the loss of the world-picture we are forced to trade the metaphysical/theological construction of singulars for the idea of encountering singulars. Singulars cannot be known from the third person, without entering into the realm of what Kant calls dogmatism. However being forced to deal with the idea of encountering singularities turns out to be very theoretically productive: being unable to think singularity in the third person forces us to deal with singularity as it appears. The notion of singularity is developed when it leaves the harmony that once protected it, because the encounter with singularity is itself shown to be singular. To risk a horrible phrase: we are forced to think singularity through our singular encounters with singulars.

**three ways of posing a problem**

Kant gives a coherent account of the world in which all we have access to are appearances. But this creates a problem for the idea of ‘encountering singularity’: if I am only in contact with appearances, appearances that I shape, it is hard to see how I can really ever encounter something that is not fully contained by a universal, if only the universal structure of appearances. It seems as if anything I encounter is too determined in advance by the categories I bring to the encounter for me to have access to anything as radical as a singular.

Buber will require that this kind of encounter is possible, and this require a finessing of Kant’s philosophy. In order to be able to encounter a Mendelssohnian singularity in a post-Kantian world, Buber will need to develop a philosophy that allows for encounters
beyond the reach of *pre-structured* appearances. But, this is not a case of merely overcoming Kant, or appending a new relation to his thought. The preliminary work is already in Kant’s work, but in an inchoate form.

Because, when Kant claims that all we have access to is the appearance of things, he opens a series of problems. These problems are not necessarily grounds for dismissing Kant, but rather for expanding or developing his philosophy in ways he could not foresee. For my project, the most important of these problems is the relation between appearances and the things that appear. If we only have access to appearances, and yet, it seems that there are ‘unseen’ things behind the appearing, then the *relation* between the appearance and the thing appearing needs to be explicated. This difficulty was quite clear to Kant, and the first set of philosophical responses to the critical philosophy engaged exactly this problem. I am more interested in Kant’s own solutions to the problem, the ways he tries to explicate the relation between appearing thing and appearance. But there are ‘cracks’ in the various ways that Kant determines the relation between the appearance and the thing appearing, and these cracks will be exploited by Buber’s thought, such that it becomes possible to engage singularities.

There are three primary ways that Kant draws the line between appearances and the things that appear. These can be seen as three different ways of determining what we can and cannot think about. In all cases we are dealing with a delineation of things we have no access to: the appearing thing seemingly cannot be spoken of. However, there is clearly some kind of connection between appearance and the thing appearing. While Kant claims we cannot theoretically express the thing appearing, he does hold that the connection between it and the appearance must be *presupposed*. This is where the three
models differ: each postulates a different presupposed relationship to the unknowable thing that appears.

Kant proposes three models for the relationship between the thing appearing and the appearance: the noumenal/phenomenal, the thing-in-itself/thing-for-us, and, the transcendental object/subject x. In the following, I suggest that the three models for this relationship each represents an increase in sophistication on the previous one. In each articulation, the unknown appearing is more and more implicated in the appearance than the one before. In the more sophisticated model—the transcendental x—the appearing thing is inextricably intertwined with appearance. But, as a consequence, in this model the thing, or ‘x’ is far less robust—closer to a non-thing—than it is in the previous models.

The development of the ‘appearing thing that is a no-thing’ is what recommends this model. If we want to know that it is even possible to encounter a singularity, it must be possible to encounter a thing that is not a ‘thing’ (in the sense of an object composed of predicates that fall under universals). Under the first two models, the appearing thing is still too much like a conventional thing to be of use for this: the noumenal is too much like a ‘world’, the thing-in-itself, is too much an independent object; in both cases, the thing appearing has no obvious relation to its appearance, other than a relation of implication.

Only with the transcendental object x is the relation between the appearance and the appearing close enough (and, I would suggest, accurate enough) to be of use. The transcendental object is the no-thing that is intertwined with the appearing thing, an
intersection that exists only in a relation (and not a pre-existent thing). While the \( x \) is not the same as a singular, it provides a model for the sort of relation by which a singular could be encountered: the \( x \), like the singular, exists only in actual (singular) relations. In the language of Kant: it is constituted by and in the relation. It is this hidden, non-object \( x \) that will be taken up by Buber when he attempts philosophically to articulate the formal structure of the in-between: the transcendental object (and subject) \( x \) acts as an index for the singulars that cannot be directly articulated. In Buber’s hands the \( x \) is the placeholder for the singular ‘thing’ we can talk to, but not about (beyond indexing it as an \( x \)).\(^{162}\) Again, Kant’s philosophy already allows for this in two key areas (existence and orientation) so, to develop the \( x \) such that we can encounter a singular is not a betrayal of his project. Before we go about developing the transcendental \( x \), it will be helpful to quickly explore Kant’s other two ways of dealing with the problem of the relation between appearance and appearing thing.

**the noumenal**

Of the three ways Kant tries to establish a relation between appearance and the thing appearing, the noumenal/phenomenal distinction is the crudest. The noumenal seems to have an almost magic power, to be more ‘real’ than the phenomenal. The standard, pre-Kantian use of the word is ‘things known by pure thought’; this however is for Kant an impossibility, which has led to its countless confused applications.\(^{163}\)

\(^{162}\) For one of his more explicit treatments of the Kantian \( x \), see Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 157.

\(^{163}\) “In the end, however, we have no insight into the possibility of such noumena, and the domain outside of the sphere of appearances is empty” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 350, A255.
Valorization of the noumenal is no doubt opposed to Kant’s intentions. He begins his section on the noumenal with the metaphor of truth as an island, firmly mapped by the critical philosophy, and the noumenal figures that border it as “many a fog bank and rapidly melting [!] iceberg pretending to be new lands.”\textsuperscript{164} The solid island is the employment of the categories of understanding in conjunction with empirical appearance, the fog and shadows result when we use categories to think about the noumenal. “We have an understanding that extends farther than sensibility \textit{problematically}, but no intuition, indeed not even the concept of a possible intuition, through which objects outside of the field of sensibility could be given, and about which the understanding could be employed \textit{assertorically}”.\textsuperscript{165} Meaning: we can (or must) think about the noumenal with these categories, but we can never know if we are on the right track: such thoughts are unstable, and will lead off of the island, into flights of fancy we ‘can never escape and yet also never bring to an end’.

Kant’s definition of the noumenal is derisive: “If, however, I suppose there to be things that are merely objects of the understanding and that, nevertheless, can be given to an intuition, although not to sensible intuition, then such things would be called noumena (\textit{intelligibilia}).”\textsuperscript{166} The noumenal is a product of the (false) belief that I can ‘perceive’ extra-sensual things through thought itself. Thought is, however, not a vehicle for sensation. Thus, the noumenal is an illusion, a false perception that results when we try to use our categories—which are meant to be applied to sensation—upon the extra-sensual. Thus, the noumenal is

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 339, A235.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid. (emphasis in original)
\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 347, A249.
the thinking of something in general, in which I abstract from all forms of sensible intuition. But in order for a noumenon to signify a true object, to be distinguished from all phenomena, it is not enough that I liberate my thoughts from all conditions of sensible intuition, but I must in addition have ground to assume another kind of intuition than this sensible one, under which such an object could be given; for otherwise my thought is empty, even though free of contradiction. 167

It goes without saying that Kant did not believe we have any way of sensing the non-sensual, or could have intuitions without a sensual component.

The noumenal is thus not the world behind the appearances (things in themselves) nor is it the “object to which I refer appearance in general” (the transcendental object x). 168

The noumenal is a limit concept, designed to keep sensibility and thinking in check.

Kant’s claims on the subject amount to this: there might be another world independent of sensibility, but we can know nothing about it. Thus, the noumenal is not the ‘real’ world behind appearances (the standard misinterpretation), nor is it the world graspable by pure thought (the older definition), but merely the postulate that there could be other means of appropriation that we don’t know about, perhaps a super-perception by alien beings, or the songs of angels. 169 As Kant iterates many times, the noumenal is to be taken problematically, as something we must assume to be possible, no more. The noumenal shadows and fog are not the things behind the appearances, but merely the hope of seeing beyond our sensibility.

167 Critique of Pure Reason, 349, A253. (emphasis added)
168 Ibid.
169 In Spinoza’s terms, the noumenal would refer to attributes of God to which we have no access (those other than space and time).
things-in-themselves

The thing-in-itself is a better understood concept, and more influential in philosophical circles. It is sometimes confused with the noumenal because it too is a limit concept, another in-principle unknowable thing. The difference is that we acknowledge the possibility of the noumenal, while we acknowledge the actuality of the thing in itself. The thing in itself is actual because it is (supposedly) necessitated by the concept of appearance: the concept of appearance analytically presupposes that it is the appearance of something. This thing, independent of our perception of it, is a thing in-itself. I can (indeed must) think that the thing-in-itself is real, but I can know nothing else about it.\textsuperscript{170}

Things in themselves are by-products of the above discussed transcendental aesthetic: I subtract all of the determinations of a representation and am left with the \textit{a priori} structure of sensibility. Anything which appears in this framework (space and time) I have access to only as it appears to-me: how it is in-itself is unknown: “What may be the case with objects in themselves and abstracted from all this receptivity of our sensibility remains entirely unknown to us.”\textsuperscript{171} Further, it is emphatically not the case that our perceptions are merely ‘fuzzy’ or unclear representations of things in themselves as it is with Rationalist epistemology. It is not the case that we could see the thing-in-itself, if only we had better eyes: the content of the thing in itself is different \textit{in kind} from

\textsuperscript{170} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 115, Bxxvi.
\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 168 A42 B60.
representation, and we cannot merely clean up unclear representations to arrive at it. We must be content with the content or representations, not the thing being represented.\textsuperscript{172}

Kant employs the division between appearances and things-in-themselves to diffuse certain basic paradoxes, such as the idea of an ‘outside’ to space: there is no way to determine \textit{a priori} if space is enclosed, or infinite. Taking either position seems to lead to a paradox (if space is bounded, what is it inside if not more space? If it is not bounded, how do you co-ordinate things within it?).\textsuperscript{173} But, Kant holds that these paradoxes are merely poorly framed questions; space has no ‘outside’ (nor does it not have one) because space is not real ‘in-itself’. Viewing space and time as objects is a mistake, they are instead forms that structure our intuitions, \textit{a priori} ‘containers’ in which things appear. A paradox results only if we mistakenly apply categories, such as ‘limit,’ to things in themselves, rather than being satisfied applying them only to that which is sensually available. The appeal of this position lies first and foremost in the fact that it rids us of some basic paradoxes, as they can be dismissed as thought going beyond our sensual limits, generating contradictions in the ether of cognition. Buber himself, as an adolescent, was depressed by his inability to think the boundary of space without falling

\textsuperscript{172} Importantly, for Kant at this stage in his career, ‘the right’ is not a representation, and we have immediate access to it. This is the reason why so many post-Kantian thinkers attempt to get access to the real through ethics, avoiding the necessary detour, or cul de sac, of representation. \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 169 A 44 B61.

\textsuperscript{173} This is a somewhat crass restatement of the specific thesis and antithesis, the particulars of which are not important here. See the original discussion in: \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 468, A26, B54.
into contradiction; reading Kant’s transcendental aesthetic (as presented in the
Prolegomena) cured his distress, and permanently impressed itself on his thinking.\(^\text{174}\)

In the first Critique, Kant placed things-in-themselves outside the reach of knowledge to
‘save’ certain intuitions we have about the world (such as freedom) while explaining the
fact that everything is determined by rules (every action I perceive I must perceive as
caused).\(^\text{175}\) The rules are rules of perception: I must appear as caused, but I might really
be free.\(^\text{176}\)

This manoeuvre produced an incredible amount of anxiety: from the Romantics to the
Phenomenologists, much post-Kantian thought has been concerned with getting access to
things in themselves. Many of these responses are concerned with getting access to the
‘real things’ behind the veil of appearances. For the purpose of encountering
singularities, however, the problem is that the thing in itself is still too real, too thing-like.
It is impossible to escape the thought that the thing in itself is the actually—if not
empirically—real, while appearances are merely a collective—albeit universal and
necessary—fantasy.

\(^{174}\) Martin Buber and Maurice S. Friedman, Meetings (La Salle: Open Court Pub. Co.,
\(^{175}\) In the second Critique, things proceed differently. I am aware of the moral law, and
through this, I am aware of freedom and other postulates of reason. Whereas the first
Critique presents freedom as a possibility (I cannot know that I am not-free) the second
presents freedom as a necessary consequence of the moral law. This dissertation is
concerned only with the first Critique for two reasons: Mendelssohn never had the
opportunity to read the second Critique; and, Buber’s work is far more indebted to the
first Critique than the second. Buber’s youthful exposure to Kant was via the
Prolegomena, which is an analytic and popular restatement of the first Critique. Further,
the concept Buber most explicitly takes from Kant (the transcendental x) is treated almost
exclusively in the A edition of the first critique.
\(^{176}\) Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 484, A44, B72.
This is, arguably, a consequence of over-drawing the line between appearance and the thing appearing. Given that we only have access to appearance, if the line between the appearance and the thing is absolute, it seems that we are stuck either in the world of appearances with no access to the ‘real’ things, or, in a world of appearances where the real things don’t really matter. Either the real is on the side of the things in themselves, or, it is on the side of the appearances. Both are undesirable, for reasons articulated by Nietzsche. With the former we are forever cut off from what matters: “The true world—unattainable? At any rate, unattained, and being unattained, also unknown. Consequently, not consoling, redeeming, or obligating: how could something unknown obligate us?”. Or, we take seriously the idea that appearances are all that there is; but if the thing-in-itself is only a postulate of finite human reason, the real disappear, and with it goes the status of appearances as appearances: “The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we also have abolished the apparent one.”177 If everything is appearance, than nothing is appearance, because appearance needs to be an appearance of something. The thing in itself is thus either too real (a non-relational ‘monad’ forever impossible to encounter) or too artificial (a necessary postulate, or mistake, of reason). In either case, an important aspect of Kant’s theoretical philosophy, his notion of the primacy of sensual relation for certain types of knowledge, is lost.

I would suggest that privileging either appearance or the thing in itself is not useful for understanding singularity: whether we are stuck in appearances pining for the things-in-

themselves, or in a world of appearances alone, the world is still a world of things: real and inexplicable, or unreal and vanishing, but things in either case. To explicate an encounter with a singularity we will need to turn to the transcendental object (and subject) X, where Kant does his best to articulate the meeting point between appearances and the things appearing.

**transcendental object X**

Kant’s transcendental object (and subject) x is a confusing, if not confused, concept. The many (vastly divergent) interpretations often serve only to further muddy these already unclear waters. The following interpretation is not an exercise in Kant scholarship, but rather, an explication of a conceptual resource that will be taken up by Buber. The reason Buber takes up this concept is because, out of all of Kant’s varying ways of explicating the difference between appearances and the appearing, this is the one that best preserves the unpredictable and unpredicated encounter with singularity.

Kant himself employs the letter ‘x’ several ways, the intentions of which vary depending upon the context. In all cases, transcendental or otherwise, the x refers to a necessary but unknowable ‘something’; this x does not pre-exist the relation—be it a thought, judgment, or perception—of which it is a part, but rather emerges at the same time as the relation. Kant, as is proper for his critical project, is primarily concerned with the content of the x, or rather, with showing that the x has no content. My concern is different. The x, as it is taken up by Buber and my re-working of Buber is first and foremost an index of encounter. The x, which is the limit of philosophical explication, is for Buber a way of pointing at a thing that has been encountered but cannot be philosophically explicated.
The x can serve this purpose because it is a limit concept, but—and this is important—not just any limit concept will serve as an index. Critical philosophy is rife with boundaries and boundary concepts. Choosing which boundary we try to point beyond is not trivial. In this case, the choice of the transcendental x is dictated both by the historical fact that Buber employed it, and by the non-thingness implied by the concept itself. It is not the limit between an appearance and a real thing, but between a thing that can be judged or thought about, and the something—that cannot be judged—which ‘sustains’ the thing. This allows the sort of relation that singularity requires: one without predicates or universals determining it in advance.

In the A edition of the *Critique*, the transcendental x is the object of appearances:

“[A]ppearances are not things in themselves, but themselves only representations, which in turn have their object, which therefore cannot be further intuited by us, and that may therefore be called the non-empirical, i.e., transcendental object = X”. ¹⁷⁸ This is, however, not the thing in itself, nor is it the noumenal. It is not the noumenal because we can know nothing about it (whereas the noumenal, properly speaking, would have to be known by some special power of apprehension):

The object to which I relate appearance in general is the transcendental object, i.e., the entirely undetermined thought of something in general. This cannot be called the noumenon; for I do not know anything about what it is in itself, and have no concept of it except merely that of the object of a sensible intuition in general, which is therefore the same for all appearances. ¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ In the B edition, Kant downplays the role of the transcendental object. This dissertation uses the A edition because this was the edition Mendelssohn read, and because Buber’s use of Kant leans heavily upon the transcendental object. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 233 A106.
¹⁷⁹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, 349 A253.
In this sentence we also see why the x is not the thing in itself: the x is an object to which appearance is *related* in general, not the specific, hidden, thing behind the appearances. Further, it is the same for all appearances. The problem here is that the x is also the object ‘in general’ of appearances. This could lead one to believe that it is a thing (with content) which is always the same. I suggest that a better reading is that the x is a necessary ‘blind spot’ which at any given time, or any given encounter, organizes appearances around itself.

The x is at its most general when it is the unstated element in a judgment. When I make the judgment ‘this stove is black’ Kant claims that the x is an unstated premise; I am not claiming that a stove is a subject to which predicates attach, but rather presupposing a subject=\(x\), and organizing predicates around it: here stove and black are elements of the same transcendental object x. As Longuenesse writes, “[W]hat is original about Kant’s position is the thesis that neither the concepts, nor the object = x to which they are related, are independent of the act of judging, or prior to it.”\(^{180}\) There is no x as such, or in-itself: the in-itself is a stable entity about which I can know nothing; the x is an unstable entity that only appears in a relation, as a necessary but unknowable part of that relation. Thus, completely unlike the thing-in-itself (and the noumenal) Kant’s \(x\) is a limit that is *only there when implicated by a subject in a relation*. The noumenal and the thing-in-itself exist whether I am there or not.

To return to Longuenesse, the x *in a judgment* is the unstated, unknowable something that predicates organize themselves around; the subject, or the transcendental unity of the

subject, is the source of this x.\textsuperscript{181} If only in this sense, the x is not an objective thing. But, importantly, it is also a \textit{constitutive} non-thing: without it, the object disappears because the predicates have nothing to be organized around. But the x is more than just an organizing principle, it is also the ground of an encountered object’s independence of the subject encountering it: an object without this blind spot is reducible to the subject’s categories; the x is a postulate of a thing’s independence of its relations to me.

Combining these two points, we can say that the x is the singular ‘point’ that holds an object together while maintaining its independence. Predicates circulate around the x, but they can never fully attach to it (because then we would know something about the x). But, more strangely: while the x originates in the subject, it is the x that ensures the subject is relating to something that is independent of themselves. If there was no unknowable x, then there would be no reason to say that I had not just produced the encountered object out of my own categories.

We can say that the x represents the unrepresentable otherness of a thing. Not as a thing-in-itself that is analytically presupposed by the idea of representation, but an essential part of the encounter: the unencountered that opens up the encounter. This seems complicated, but is easier to understand if we think about encountering things in general. When I encounter a thing, some part of it must remain ‘hidden’ from my judgments; if this was not the case, then it wouldn’t be clear that the thing is ‘outside’ me. There will

\textsuperscript{181} Again, Longuenesse: “When expounding the "synthesis of recognition in a concept" in the A edition of the Transcendental Deduction, Kant explained that we strive to find coherence between our representations only if we relate them to a "transcendental object = x" independent of our representations. But, he added, the source of this representation is \textit{the transcendental unity of apperception itself}.” \textit{Kant and the Capacity to Judge : Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 109. Here Kant overstates the power of the constituting subject.
always be something (x) that is part of the thing, and totally inaccessible—to remove this would collapse the difference between it and myself, like a kind of mystical union. So, I can say that in order to encounter things I need to posit some unknown x, the unknown that is part of encounters in general.

Because of his emphasis on judgment, Kant was unable to fully develop his own concept. Hence his unfortunate use of the term “general”. We can make no judgments about the x, so it has no content. It is something, but not a particular thing, and so Kant calls it a ‘general.’ I suggest that this I because, for Kant, if an object is not particular, it is general. Singularity is not really part of his conceptual universe, because singularities cannot be the product of judgments: judgments work through ‘enclosing’ a particular in a universal, which singularity cannot abide. Kant’s writings on this point are confused, but, arguably, for him there is only one object x (in general), meaning that for Kant the transcendental x is not individuated based on the object of intuition, even if it is impossible in the absence of intuition. It is, in this sense, something like an a priori other, the empty form of ‘otherness’ that accompanies all representation.

However, it is not unfair to extend the concept to treat singularity. Think of some singular thing, say, your close friend. No matter how well you know well you know this person there will be something that cannot be part of a representation, something that makes them them, something inassimilable, something that in principle cannot be represented. This something is not some inner ‘essence’ or a really hard to find object. This singular x, like the x in general, is incapable of being represented, but, the representation of your friend requires this unrepresentable thing. The difference between
the singular x and the general x is that the singular x I am referring to is bound up specifically with your friend, whereas the general x applies to all representations.

Aesthetics and phenomenology are important for developing the singular concept of the x, precisely because they are not so infatuated with judgments as critical philosophy. Only relations that are not judgments are capable of encountering singularity. Judgment concerns itself with the application of predicates, which are by nature particulars. However, I would suggest that this non-judgmental perspective is implied by the idea of the x. The invisible point x around which judgments operate indicates something outside the realm of judgment proper. From the perspective of the judging subject, this x is just is the always unseen part of a thing about which nothing can be said. But what is this something of which nothing can be said, if not the ‘part’ of a judgment that is not a judgment?

To depart from Kant’s intentions, I suggest that the x is better seen as evidence of the encounter that precedes judgment. For the judging subject, the x is a mere something of which nothing can be said. For the encountering subject, the x indicates something other that I encounter. Thus, while Kant says we can know nothing of the x, Buber holds that we can claim that the x comes “forward” and “meets us” (otherwise, how would we encounter it?). Our aesthetic sensation is the result of the encounter between myself and the x. Conversely, the aesthetic encounter enables our non-judgmental meeting with the x as something that I do not create, even if I must posit it. “For in all the world of the senses, there is not a trait that does not stem from meetings, that does not originate from
the co-working of the x in the meeting.”182 Thus, Buber is able to drop the assumption that the x is a general function of the subject’s unity of apperception applied within a judgment, but rather, the unknowable point that makes something deeply other to myself, and can thus act as an index of its singularity. The x is the opening to otherness.

I argue that Kant is confused about his own concept because of his emphasis on judgment. Here a comment from Sherover’s seminal paper on the transcendental x is appropriate:

If the transcendental object (the 'some thing' = \textit{Etwas}) is not some particular thing… it also is not 'pure negativity'. It is, at least, a non thing. Obscure as this point seems to be, the peculiarities of the English language seem to augment its obscurity. It is essential to note that the two key German words, \textit{Etwas} and \textit{Nichts}, are not etymologically related as are the standard English counterparts, 'something' and 'nothing'.” 183

The transcendental x is a non-empirical \textit{etwas}: a something that is not a thing [\textit{Ding}], but also not a nothing [\textit{Nichts}]. From the perspective of judgment, I know that I am judging something—meaning, applying predicates to \textit{something}—but this something itself escapes judgment (much as its existence, or element of orientation, does). It is, but it is not a specific thing; perhaps better than some-thing, we could call it an \textit{almost}- thing, the thing that emerges in a relationship which enables the relationship. From the perspective

182 Buber, \textit{The Knowledge of Man}, 157.
183 Charles M. Sherover, "Kant's Transcendental Object and Heidegger's Nichts," \textit{Journal of the History of Philosophy}, 7, no. 4 (1969): 414. Sherover’s article makes a valiant effort to make the transcendental x cohere with the rest of Kant’s philosophy. I would argue that this does not work, because he ends up making the x too substantial, applying it to structures specific appearances; it is “The hidden framework, which supports the surface of the thing as it appears to me, is not a thing within my perceptual experience.”) The x is an object’s vanishing point, not, as Sherover suggests, a structure that could in principle be discovered. It is the appearance of non-appearance.
of the non-judging (aesthetic or phenomenological) subject, the x is the openness to the other object that enables me to judge it.

The x is thus the unknown something that opens me to knowable things. Under Kant’s model, it is merely the necessarily ‘empty’ point of all objects. While the x is something—not Nichts—it’s content is, for Kant, nothing.

Kant, in one of the stranger and more suggestive parts of the first Critique, presents us with a ‘Table of Nothing’. Seemingly grounded on the table of categories—although how this is done is not explained—the table of nothing presents us with four ways in which the object-in-general can be negated.

Figure One: Table of Nothing

The transcendental object x falls under the third of these ways: the “empty intuition without an object, [the] ens imaginarium”. This is explicated as the “The mere form of intuition, without substance…in itself not an object, but the merely formal condition of
one (as appearance)". There are two things to note here. Firstly, the *ens imaginarium* is completely unlike the other three types of nothing, in that it is *not* the negation, or emptiness, of a *concept*, but the nothingness of an *intuition*. It is strictly pre-conceptual, and therefore, not the negation of one concept by another. While Kant is explicit that “Negation as well as the mere form of intuition are, without something real, not objects”—the x is only real in an encounter—it seems clear that the x is not the product of a cognitive judgment (e.g. where I judge that a concept refers to nothing). The other three are functions of a presupposed comparative judgment, much as darkness presupposes light. Kant claims this is the case for the *ens imaginarium* as well, but this seems problematic: only if I am judging an intuition is there a comparative case to be made for the x. This because all intuitions presuppose the x is functioning, even before I judge them: as an empty intuition, and not an empty concept, the x exists even in the absence of judgment. Secondly, the x is not the purely unrepresentable as such: that is the role of the thing-in-itself. The x is not representable, it is hidden, but it is necessary for representation to *function*, whereas the thing-in-itself is merely a presupposition. Thus, rather than view it as being merely the unrepresentable void or surplus (the thing-in-itself) it is the unrepresentable that opens us up to a representation. This is why it is embroiled in the midst of the representative process, as a point around which predicates are organized, that helps generate representation, rather than being a presupposition generated by representation.

Thus, Kant’s notion of the empty intuition that precedes and grounds intuition can be mobilized to play a role much like the ‘dreamer within a dream’ in Wolfson’s *A Dream*.

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Interpreted. Even if it does not lead to “the termination of all modes of representation, including the representation of the nonrepresentable” the object x, precisely because it is the point at which representation and the represented touch, suggests a place where we might be able to stop idolizing the non-representable; this is possible because, at the intersection between the representation and the represented, we do not find a representation of the nonrepresentable, or some non-representable thing-in-itself, but rather, an index of the unjudged intuited that moors in phenomena as such.185

The key to all of these interpretations is, again, that the x is not the ‘impossible’ generated by representations, but the impossible something that makes encounter possible to begin with. It is thus the part of a representation that is pre-representational: the presentation (however inaccessible to judgment or cognition) that grounds the representation. The goal, of course, is not to ‘get back to the x’—we remain stuck in representations—but to recognize that representations are, in part, empty presentations, what Buber will call the ‘nothing as object’. On the one side, the x “lies outside the concept” and is not necessarily fated to be fitted into a universal; on the other side, it is the threshold to perception, it is the something with nothing for its content that is crossed over when any-thing appears.186

Žižek reads this aspect of the x well in his Less than Nothing:

One should not confuse Kant’s Ding an sich with the “transcendental object,” which (contrary to some confused and misleading formulations

185 Wolfson, A Dream Interpreted within a Dream : Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination.
186 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 131 A8. Kant, however, in the section this quote was extracted from, uses the x to ground synthetic judgment. I note this because my reading will proceed in a different direction; I do not believe this section contradicts my reading.
found in Kant himself) is not noumenal but...the void on the horizon of objectivity, of that which stands against the (finite) subject, the minimal form of resistance that is not yet any positive determinate object that the subject encounters in the world—Kant uses the German expression *Dawider*, what is “out there opposing itself to us, standing against us. This *Dawider* is not the abyss of the Thing, it does not point to the dimension of the unimaginable, but is, on the contrary, the very horizon of openness towards objectivity within which particular objects appear to a finite subject.”

Žižek’s overall point—that the x is not an empty abyss, but rather the void that opens up into encounters—corresponds nicely to what I am arguing, even if he over-emphasizes the ‘oppositional’ elements of the *Etwas*. As much as perception tries to reduce objects to individuals contained by universals, there is always some point (or rather, two points) that cannot be so reduced. These points can be used to index singularities—which is what Buber does with them. Thus I suggest we use this *etwas*, the transcendental x, not as a concept of a general, or a general concept, but as an index of the singularity that is available only through sensuality. While this reading departs from Kant’s use, I believe it helps make sense of Kant’s otherwise contradictory claims:

> since appearances are nothing but representations, the understanding thus relates them to a something...but this something is to that extent only the transcendental object. This *signifies*, however a something = X, of which we know nothing at all nor can know anything in general...

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187 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London; New York: Verso, 2012). I would reject the idea that the x is always ‘standing against us,’ or that it is a form of resistance. The x is, rather, standing between representations and the represented; this happens to be over-against us, but this is not what makes the x interesting. Further it does not resist us—I believe Žižek is over-identifying the x with Fichte’s *Anstoss*—but is rather always escaping us in the manner of the opening he describes. Žižek needs the x to operate as an obstacle. As a Hegelian, he will find the ‘thing’ that links the subject and the object in their very resistance to being so linked, and so needs to highlight the antagonistic or incommensurable element that divides and links the two.
This is a surely a strange general object, if we can know nothing of it in general. To make up for this shortcoming, Kant decides it

… is rather something that can serve only as a correlate of the unity of apperception for the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition, by means of which the understanding unifies that in the concept of an object...

That the singular x is a correlate to the I is in keeping with our reading. To claim that the x is used by the understanding to unify an object seems to violate Kant’s own description of the x as general, but works well with my interpretation. Key to this is his next claim, that

…this transcendental object cannot even be separated from the sensible data, for then nothing would remain through which it would be thought.\footnote{Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 348 A251. (emphasis added)}

This is the nub of it: the transcendental x is something that is not a thing, but is always connected to a thing via sensual encounter. It is considered general by Kant because it is not a particular, and yet is always ‘there’ when we encounter something that is not-ourselves. And here we find a very strange parallel between the transcendental object and the transcendental subject. When looking at ourselves, intuiting ourselves, we are in a strange situation: looping back in on ourselves, we encounter our-self as a representation. We are split into three: the thing represented, the representing thing, and the representation of the thing, but all we have access to is the representation. The others are hidden, the represented as an x, the representing as a process elucidated by the critical philosophy, of which we can only see an empty representation (‘I’). While specific thoughts have content, when we think about the thing that thinks these thoughts (the ‘I’) we find something (again, the ‘I’) without content: the “wholly empty representation I, of which one cannot even say that it is a concept, but a mere consciousness that
accompanies every concept.” Meaning: ‘I’ am always there when I think, but I can say nothing about this ‘I’ other than the fact that it is always ‘accompanying’ other, more tangible, thought. This “I, or He, or It (the thing), which thinks…the transcendental subject of thoughts = x” can only be recognized through other thoughts that are (again) its predicates, but (again) not predicates that actually attach themselves to the x.189 The transcendental subject, like the transcendental object, does not appear in isolation. It is always linked to an encounter (the transcendental object x on the side of the encountered thing, the transcendental subject x on the side of the encountering). The above discussion of generality, and why we should not think of the x as a general but as an index of a singular is even more applicable in the case of the transcendental subject x. While we can, in relation to all objects, think about the transcendental object x as a ‘general’ placeholder for the blind spot in all objects in general constituted by the self, the transcendental subject x seems to obviously index a singular, that being me.190

Unlike almost every other aspect of the subject/object relationship, there is thus a strong isomorphism between the transcendental subject x and transcendental object x—both are “wholly empty” and recognized only through their predicates, which do not attach to the empty representation.191 Indeed, they are more or less the same thing: they are the two hidden points in a relation; neither precede the relation, but both are essential for it: they constitute something that they do not precede; on the other hand, they are only intuited by us, or constituted, by this relation. This is why I would reject Žižek’s reading of the x being primarily that which stands over against ‘us’: the x is rather the two points that

189 Critique of Pure Reason, 414 A346 B404. (emphasis added)
190 However, here, exactly as with the object, the x is ‘general’ in that it has no content.
191 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 414 A346 B404.
make the ‘over-against’ possible; the transcendental object [transzendentalen Gegenstände] is, by definition, over against a subject, but the subject they are over-against is also a transcendental x [transzendentalen Subjekte]. Here there is something of a preliminary hermeneutic circle.

Both exes are always linked with real ‘somethings’ (the I, the object) but they are themselves not representable (things for us) and neither are they determinate things existing outside the relationship, or things-in-themselves. They are, instead, the points where representation and the represented cross paths, the empty spaces, or ‘nothing,’ of sensual intuition that precedes and is sustained by judgment and representation. Because the transcendental (subject and object) x can be intuited only in relationship, sustaining the same relationship, we can fairly say that the ‘x’ is neither appearance nor appearing thing. Which is strange indeed. This is why the transcendental x is so useful for articulating the in-between: a chief problem with Buber’s in-between is that it seemingly puts the cart before the horse, presupposing the very things that are supposed to emerge from a relationship. As Heidegger elliptically critiques Buber, the in-between supposedly “colludes unawares with the ontologically indefinite approach[:] that there are beings between which this between as such “is.”\(^{192}\) The transcendental object and subject x help to answer this criticism (which will be developed in the next three chapters). With the x (or exes) we have a way to index the co-ordinates of an in-between space—the ‘almost things’ which the between is between—and, these co-ordinates are themselves irrevocably tied to this in-between.

For Kant, the relationship from which the two exes emerge is always the relationship of representation (the building blocks for all cognition). However, the transcendental x calls the priority of the representing relationship into doubt: there must be some undetermined encounter before representation. It is typical of post-Kantian thought to struggle with overcoming representation in order to get access to things in themselves. The transcendental x is another, more productive way to deal with the inherent problem of representation. It is not the canard that representation presupposes the non-represented or non-representable (thing-in-itself), nor that it has a limit to be superseded by some other, greater form of cognition (the noumenal), but rather that representation presupposes two co-ordinates on either side of the representation. These two points are constituted by their relation to each other, and only then open up the possibility of representation. Thus, the basic space of relation \((x_s \leftrightarrow x_o)\) is presupposed by the more specific space of representation \((x_s \leftrightarrow R \leftrightarrow x_o)\). Buber will proceed to strip down this formulation even further, with \((x\leftrightarrow x)\) preceding \((x_s \leftrightarrow x_o)\).

moving on

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the ways in which Kant’s philosophical revolution dismantles the metaphysical grounds for Moses Mendelssohn’s theory of singularity and the twofold space of encounter. After the erasure of harmony as a metaphysical ground for singulars, we are forced into a position where singulars can no longer be posited, but must instead be encountered. Kant’s specific contribution to the

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developing of the in-between space is that he proposes a formal structure of encounter where the non-cognizable thing constitutes more developed relations of appearance and judgment. This leaves a space for encountering singularities, and allows us to a preliminary model for an in-between space that constitutes the two singulars it is in-between.

The trauma of the Kantian ‘cut’ forces Buber to radicalize the idea of singularity and encounter, such that Mendelssohn’s ‘harmony,’ and Kant’s ‘necessary structure of appearances’ are both only possible ways of interpreting a more fundamental structure (the in-between of encountering singulars). Buber recuperates Mendelssohn’s intuitions in a Kantian frame, bringing to light the importance of aesthetic sensuality for encountering singularities beyond the safety-net of a presupposed harmony, and out-Kant’s Kant by bringing to light the fundamental role encounter and relation play in judgment and representation, without the safety net of a reason that presupposes it is capable of setting its own limits.

excursus: Buber as (mere) Kantian

Before turning to Buber’s phenomenological arguments for the in-between, I would like to make a brief digression from the philosophical trajectory being traced here, to counter a prominent reading of Buber. Steven Katz has famously claimed that Buber’s thought depends upon a Kantian metaphysics. I am sympathetic with Katz’s critique of those who resist any metaphysical analysis of Buber’s metaphysics. 194 It is clear that there are

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194 For instance, Michael Wyschogrod reproaches Katz for (supposedly) exploring the I-You from the perspective of the I-It (because he uses formal, numbered, arguments); Katz retorts that Buber himself engaged with philosophy, and as such, it is fair game t
metaphysical assumptions and claims that run through Buber’s dialogical thinking, and it is “a dis-service to the valuable insights of the philosophy of dialogue to leave it [?] as a philosophy without a metaphysics”\(^{195}\). That said, Katz over-identifies Buber’s metaphysics with a basic kind of Kantianism. Kant’s influence upon Buber is pivotal, but that is not enough to make him a Kantian. Those uninterested, or uninfluenced by Katz’s claim may wish to skip to the next chapter.

Katz takes Buber’s I-You/I-It dichotomy as a mirror of Kant’s phenomenal/noumenal dichotomy: “Buber assumes for his own work that Kant is, in some fundamental way, right. We see this more clearly in his dichotomous account of reality…of I-Thou/I-It which parallels Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction in striking ways”.\(^{196}\) There is some truth to this: it is clear that Kant was an essential figure in Buber’s education—hence this chapter—and further, it is clear that Buber, like Kant, presents us with a bifurcated human reality. Most importantly, Buber, like Kant, assumes that our relation to the world, our ‘attitude,’ shapes the world (for Buber, the converse is also true, which Katz ignores). But this is an opinion shared by Hegel, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and many others.

Katz claims too much, and further, misses Buber’s properly philosophical contributions, when he claims that Buber’s metaphysics is exhausted by Kantianism.197 It is incorrect to say that “the ultimate success of Buber’s epistemology, as of his philosophy as a whole, depends on the correctness of some form of Kantian Idealism.”198 I believe that Buber’s thought, while indebted to the rupture opened up by Kant, does not need Kantianism to be ‘correct’ in order to make its own contributions.

Katz holds that Kant’s noumenal is more or less like Buber’s I-You, and that the phenomenal is more or less “the entire basis” of Buber’s I-It.199 I believe Katz is confusing the fact that Kant and Buber are responding to similar problems with the notion that Buber is in some way merely repeating the master from Königsberg. It should be remembered, first off, that such bifurcations are common in theological-philosophical discourse. One need only think of the soul/body distinction, or Maimonides’ super- and sub-lunar realms, or the illusory world of space and time as against the Monads in Leibniz, or even the idea/extension divide in Spinoza. These theorists are concerned to explain the fact that on the one hand we seem to live in a world that operates by determined laws, and on the other, there seems to be phenomena, such as freedom, thought, or encounter, that seem to follow their own rules (if any).

197 Katz’s reading of Buber makes many errors independently of his comparison to Kant. Two errors bear upon this dissertation: claiming that the I-You relation is a relation of subjects; and, his claim that the “symmetry of the relation is a basic premise for the whole dialogical life”. Symmetry in dialogue is an ideal, not a premise, and the I-You is not a relation of subjects (one would have to consider a tree as a subject for this). "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 94. Martin Buber, Philosophical Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich (New York: Holt, 1964), 26-8. I and Thou, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970). 110, BW 1,120 (emphasis added)


Bifurcation is a common solution to this problem, and the very fact that Buber follows Kant in this is not enough to make him a Kantian. Buber does follow Kant insofar as he is concerned with developing a theory of personhood while giving the world of description (I-It) its due; this requires that both ‘worlds’ be somewhat circumscribed. But, it is important to note that for Buber, unlike Kant, which regime holds in the I-It is not really important, as long as it is descriptive, communicable, and circumscribed. 200

It is also true that Buber employs Kant’s transcendental aesthetic at points in his thought. But, I believe Katz seriously over-estimates the importance of this for Buber, and further, mis-reads Buber’s philosophy of space and time. What is essential is that the It-World “hangs together” in space and time. If it does so because of the structure of appearances, the constitution of matter, or straight up enclosure in a universe-sized-box, it doesn’t really matter. The You-world doesn’t hang together in this way, not because, as Katz claims, the You relation is “a-spatial, a-temporal, wholly non-sensual, and non-experiential,” but because it determines, or relativizes, all of these structures through a singular relation: “prayer is not in time but time in prayer, the sacrifice not in space but space in the sacrifice—and whoever reverses the relation annuls the reality.” 201 This does not claim that the prayer-event is a-temporal, only that its temporality is not determined by anything other than the singular event. The encounter with another singularity in the In-Between casts its own structural ‘net’ over the encounter—‘time in prayer’—one that vanishes when it is complete.

200 It is far from clear that the replacement of Newtonian physics with that of “Einstein, Planck, and Heisenberg” changes anything in this regard (Katz himself does not explain how this is the case)."A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 98. 201 Buber, I and Thou, 59, 84. Katz, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 106.
Katz’s over-identification is even more problematic when he claims that the You-world follows the noumenal. Again, there are points of similarity, but the noumenal, for Kant’s theoretical philosophy, is as noted above, only accepted as a possibility; nothing can be further from Buber’s You-world. The noumenal plays a slightly greater role in Kant’s ethics, but even here the noumenal is determined by the structure of universal reason qua ethics: “the form of lawfulness in general”. 202 Again, for Buber, this is not the case: the You-world is a world of singularities, with singular responses, and not universal laws. I am quite certain that Kant would dismiss Buber’s claims about the You-relation as ‘enthusiasm’.

There is in Buber a problem with the relation between the two ‘worlds,’ but this is not a ‘Kantian’ problem, but a problem for all bifurcated systems. Further, when Katz writes that the noumenal and phenomenal are the same thing “known differently” he is making a reading that is fair, but is not something Kant ever makes explicit. Unfortunately, he does not cite this claim. This also applies to his reading of Buber: the same ‘thing’ can be

202 “I grant the mechanism of natural necessity the justice of going back from the conditioned to the condition ad infinitum, while on the other side I keep open for speculative reason the place which for it is vacant, namely the intelligible, in order to \textit{transfer the unconditioned into it}. But I could not realize this thought, that is, could not convert it into cognition of a \textit{being}…Pure practical reason now \textit{fills this vacant place with a determinate law of causality in an intelligible world (with freedom), namely the moral law}. By this, speculative reason does not gain anything with respect to its insight but it still gains something only with respect to the security of its problematic concept of freedom, which is here afforded objective and, though only practical, undoubted reality.” Immanuel Kant, \textit{Practical Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 179, 5:70. (emphasis added)
encountered as an It or a You, but this does not mean that this bifurcation is always the same thing “known differently”.  

Buber explicitly and consistently rejects Kant’s employment of bifurcation to deal with freedom, “to ascribe the existence of a thing so far as it is determinable in time…the law of natural necessity, only to appearance, and to ascribe freedom to the same being as a thing in itself.” Kant here seemingly removes the traumatic aspect of freedom. For Buber, this is a case of a philosophical ‘solution’ to an antinomy as opposed to the religious ‘actualization’ of an antinomy.

Kant can relativize the philosophical conflict of freedom and necessity by relegating the latter to the world of appearance and the former to that of being, so that the two positions no longer really oppose one another… But when I mean freedom and necessity not in worlds that are thought of but in … actuality [Wirklichkeit]…I may not try to escape from the paradox I have to live by relegating the irreconcilable propositions to two separate realms… I must take it upon myself to live both in one, and lived[,] both are one.

Buber does acknowledge his debt to Kant. This concerns, however, not the noumenal/phenomenal distinction, but rather, the x, as the unknowable some-thing [etwas] that remains before and after conceptualization. The clearest statement of this occurs in his reply to Helmut Kuhn, where he writes:

Kuhn also rightly sees that I have not fully liberated myself from Kant. That I have not been able to do so probably lies in the fact that no one has yet been able to explain to me what, for example, the hardness in the bark of a lime tree means independently of my perception the hardness. I simply do not succeed in understanding the existing lime tree as the sum of my perceptions of it. Even the otherwise-useful symbols of the physicist are incapable of helping me here. Now then, the lime tree that became

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203 Bloch makes a similar point in greater detail, which will be treated in chapter 5. Katz, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 90.
204 Buber, The Knowledge of Man. (emphasis in original)
205 I and Thou, 144, BW 1, 43.
known to me only in elaboration through my perceptions, the lime tree that is, that, although it became known to me, yet remains unknown—this I mean when I say x.\textsuperscript{206}

In conclusion, while Buber’s philosophy is very much informed by Kant, to say that Kantianism must be correct in order for Buber’s philosophy to be of use is to say too much. Buber, like many philosophers, took what he found to be of value in Kant, and developed his own philosophy accordingly. His notion of the in-between, to which we will now turn, uses Kantian concepts, but is by no means therefore Kantian.

\textsuperscript{206} Philosophical Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich, 21. (emphasis in original
Chapter Three: Positive In-Between; Space, Presence, Speech

meta-philosophical concerns

The next three chapters explicate Buber’s philosophy out of the trajectory sketched above, and express his own metaphysical contributions to, and developments of, this movement. This ‘development’ does not immanently follow from the above thinkers, but rather, transforms the trajectory through the introduction of a new category: the in-between.

The in-between is one possible means of dealing with the ‘problems’ opened up by Kant and Mendelssohn. The goal of this chapter will be to provide positive philosophical and phenomenological reasons for paying attention to the in-between as something both real and of importance for thinking. This will be done through Buber’s phenomenology of presence and space, his theory of speech directions, and his understanding of singularity.

Because of this approach, one may object that I have made Buber too much a philosopher, binding him to the philosophical tradition in a manner that betrays his entire project. Buberians have reproached me for ‘removing the mystery’ from his thought.

Buber is notoriously ambivalent about philosophy. Clearly enamoured by it, he (like many of his generation) was well aware that some things are simply impossible for it: “The passage from Him to Thou is not "dangerous" for philosophy, it is impossible. I myself feel obliged, when I philosophize, to avoid "invocation," but justified in pointing
to its meaning.”207  But Buber, more often than not, speaks the language of philosophy: philosophy is an integral part of his world picture, and he saw himself as part of the philosophical tradition.208  Responding to the question of whether he was “a philosopher, a theologian, or something else,” Buber described himself as an “atypical man,” whose “communication had to be a philosophical one.”209  Through philosophy he sought to “express what is by its nature incomprehensible, in concepts that could be used and communicated.” With words like ‘express’ and ‘communicate’ it is tempting to assume Buber used philosophy merely as a means of indexing things that lay outside philosophy. This would assume too much: philosophy plays a necessary disencumbering and cultivating role in Buber’s thinking. Hence, a page later in the same set of responses: “I am not merely bound to philosophical language, I am bound to the philosophical method.”210  For all his ambivalence about the limits of philosophy, and his concern to demonstrate (philosophically) that philosophy cannot express all existence because some things are ‘impossible’ for it—Buber’s thought is explicitly meant to be handled

208 This is not to suggest he was a ‘philosopher of religion’. Rather, he was religious, and philosophy was part of his religious world. Even the ‘typical’ philosopher serves a religious role, disencumbering us of idols. After idols have accumulated “comes the hour of the philosopher, who rejects both the image and the God which it symbolizes and opposes to it the pure idea, which he even at times even understands as the negation of all metaphysics…. [this] prayer of the philosophers…is well suited to arouse religious men and impel them to set forth right across the God-deprived reality to a new meeting… the spirit moves them which moved the philosopher.” *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 46. (emphasis added)
210 *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, The Library of Living Philosophers, (La Salle: Open Court, 1967), 690. (emphasis added)
philosophically. Buber is a religious philosopher,\textsuperscript{211} who routinely brings about confrontations between philosophy and its ‘outside’—that which is non-philosophical by nature—drawing lines between philosophy and that which is ‘impossible’ for it. But it is not a betrayal of his project to develop its philosophical ramifications; if anything, it is necessary insofar as our goal is ‘expression,’ meaning, communicating and expanding his work, and developing his confrontations.

However, Buber often restricts himself to ‘philosophical anthropology,’ thus much of his thinking is confined to human being, or, more accurately, person being; other types of being are admitted to thinking only insofar as they are encountered by persons.\textsuperscript{212} Beginning thought outside the person is something he, usually, rejected. Theunissen calls this Buber’s “anthropological restriction,” from which he claims we must “abstract” in order to arrive at “an ontology of the between.”\textsuperscript{213} While I agree with the need for this expansionary move—my desire to use Buber’s work for something like ‘singularity studies’ requires it—I disagree with his justification and the abstract way he does it; more importantly, the in-between is not capable of—nor was it intended to—ground a general ontology. It is a relationship ‘to’ and ‘in’ being.

\textsuperscript{211} Not a philosopher of religion, if by philosopher of religion one means the sub-discipline concerned with proofs of God and theodicy. Philosophy of religion seems to be slowly changing, such that it is beginning to deal with the topic of ‘religion’, and not merely questions of God’s existence and natural theology.

\textsuperscript{212} I take this to mean a thinker who is primarily concerned with using philosophy to understand human beings, and human being to understand philosophy. I would prefer ‘person’ being, rather than the anthrop-. The heavy debt Buber’s early thought owes to sociology and anthropology is detailed in Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, \textit{From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber’s Transformation of German Social Thought} (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

\textsuperscript{213} Michael Theunissen, \textit{The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 272. (emphasis in original)
Theunissen justifies his move with his claim that dialogicism “is at root, and as such, a movement of opposition,” meaning, a movement that defines its project by resistance to its predecessors and contemporaries, as compared to a ‘first philosophy’ that develops from the ground up. More charitably, one could read Theunissen as saying that Buber’s project is ‘anti-metaphysical,’ and his ‘opposition’ takes place against all metaphysical systems—or whatever systems happen to be culturally viable—defining insights against whatever system is at issue. There is certainly something appealing about this move, a move consonant with Rosenzweig’s definition of “apologetic thinking,” which finds this movement of opposition in modern Jewish thought in general. But it is not clear that Buber’s thought is oppositional as much as it is something like an ‘intervention’: speaking to contemporary concerns through a critique of metaphysics, rather than determining itself through this critical response (much as one finds in Bakhtin’s early thought). Buber defines his thought against that of his predecessors, but this is not enough to consider it ‘a movement of opposition’; definition through critique is common in philosophy, even for such a notable ‘first philosopher’ as Aristotle. If anything, the opening of I and Thou is disturbing for how little it responds to previous thought, with its axiomatic presentation of what human being is.

While I fully agree that the in-between is of use beyond the realm of the strictly human, ‘abstracting’ from the ‘anthropological restriction’ is, I would suggest, not the best way

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216 A better example of this would be Bakhtin’s excellent, and Buber inflected thought: M. M. Bakhtin, Toward a Philosophy of the Act, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 1-15.
to expand the in-between’s reach. I would suggest that merely abstracting from Buber’s thought is often unsatisfying, and note that the abstract ontology of the in-between Theunissen arrives at is deemed by him to be a failure of sorts.217

Rather than abstracting from the ‘anthropological’ and applying the structure of the in between to being qua being—administering the formalism of a regional ontology to general ontology—I will attempt to expand the reach of the in-between by explicating and expanding Buber’s understanding of the person. I argue that the ‘anthropological restriction’ is really a restriction to personhood, not the human animal (though Buber does often investigate the material conditions of human beings); and what a ‘person’ is, in Buber, is remarkably open. Arguably, anything dealt with in the second person, is a person of sorts.218 To develop a theory of the in-between, then, I will suggest not that we ‘apply’ Buber’s metaphysics ‘outside’ the realm of person-being—making the in-between into a general ontological principle—but rather, that we extend the notion of person to include non-human-beings, a move already implicit in Buber’s work.219


218 Note that in the afterword to the second edition of *I and Thou*, Buber suggests that, to make his thinking accessible to traditional philosophy, we add a third attribute to Spinoza’s two. This would be personality, or personlikeness [*Personhaftigkeit*] (in addition to naturelikeness and spiritlikeness). Leaving aside the oddness of this reading of Spinoza, it is clear that Buber views personhood as a fundamental way of approaching being, and not a characteristic of certain beings. See: Elliot R. Wolfson, "Imagination and the Theolatrous Impulse," in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Zachary Braiterman Martin Kavka, David Novak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Buber, *I and Thou*, Afterword 6.

219 Buber is very clear that the In-Between is not a fundamental ontological concept—despite the claims of his interpreters. In his argument with Levinas, he writes: “I have never designated the between as "the concept of the foundation and ultimate structure of being"[Levinas’ words]…, nor have I ever understood it thus; I have only pointed out that we cannot do without this category for a full comprehension and presentation of what
For instance, in the realm of ‘nature,’ we find the famous encounters with the mica, the horse, and the tree. It would be foolish to view the tree as a human, but it is clear that it is met. If we consider the tree as a ‘person’ in the encounter, then we can make sense of the fact that Buber considers it possible to say You to it, that “a relation between a human I and a tree You” is possible, that in some way implicates the in-between. Of course, the singular personhood of the tree is not always available, and we will inevitably see it not as a person, but a particular, as part of a species or universal. Part of the structure of personhood is that it is not an always available property of a thing, but a relation that vacillates between presence and concealment.

Within Buber’s more specifically theological discourse, this vacillating personhood is brought to a paradoxical point. Buber applies the idea of personhood to God, but does so in a manner that opens the idea of personhood itself. As Wolfson notes, in the 1957 afterword to I and Thou, Buber insists that if God is neither an idea nor a principle, the ‘designation’ person is indispensible. But it is not enough to say that God is a person; instead, God is ‘also’ a person.

Buber does not shy away from the paradox: God both is and is not a person. The full scope of the discord with a linear logic of non-contradiction is appreciated when we realize that precisely because God is not a person can we speak of God as the "absolute person," that is, the "one that cannot be relativized. It is as absolute person that God enters into direct relationship to us." Emulating the divine, every intersubjective passes between two men when they stand in dialogue with each other.” Buber, Philosophical Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich, 27.

220 I and Thou, 74, BW1, 92.
221 I and Thou, 58, BW1, 74.
A ‘normal’ person thus moves toward and away from singular encounters in a ‘back and forth’ manner such that I relate to the tree as a person at one moment, and an instance of a species the next; similarly, a human may be a person one moment, and the next, one of my employees. God is different: God is always a person, but only because God is also always not a person.

I believe that, rather than to ‘abstract’ from this idea of personhood in order to arrive at a general ontology, it is more productive to delve into the fractured nature of the idea itself, and expand the reach of Buber’s thought beyond the ‘anthropological restriction’ that way. The notion of singularity I have been proposing is one such way. In the language of this dissertation, I can restate the above claims as such: I can relate to a tree as a singular, or as a particular. I can (supposedly) only relate to God as a singular, and never a particular. But, for that very reason, I cannot say God is a singular, only the absolute singular; meaning, all God-relationships are singular, and cannot be fixed in any particular. This, rather than abstracting from the focus on personhood, seems to me the best way to develop Buber’s philosophy. Otherwise we are likely fall into the difficulties presented by Theunissen’s general ontology of the in-between—where the in-between is a part of being qua being—which is unable to “account for the origin of the I purely and simply out of the meeting with the Thou.”

Instead, philosophical analysis is better suited to clarifying and expressing Buber’s thought, using the resources of ontology where appropriate.

222 Wolfson, "Imagination and the Theolatrous Impulse," 468.
back to the trajectory

The goal of the first chapter was to establish an understanding of singularity and representation. Singularity was seen to be a type of individual that is not defined by its participation in a universal, and sensuality, in the broadest sense (including imagination and dreams) was presented as a means for us to encounter these singularities. The second chapter sought to show the effect of Kant on these insights: after Kant, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss singularities from a ‘metaphysical,’ or third-person, perspective, thereby increasing the importance of sensuality as a means of encounter.

Mendelssohn’s rationalist notion of harmony was shown to be inadequate for grounding his insights into singularity: after Kant, the space of philosophy was irrevocably changed. Kant’s work was mobilized to express the conceptual space—what can and cannot be discussed philosophically—that Buber inherited and transformed. However, Kant’s philosophy lacks an adequate theory of singularity. To this end, the second chapter developed Kant’s notion of the transcendental object in a direction that will be employed by Buber to rehabilitate a Mendelssohnian type of singularity in a conceptual space, transformed by Kant’s claim that reason cannot make claims about appearances to which we have no sensual access. Buber will employ this Kantian insight to develop his idea of the in-between, the space where such encounters are possible. This chapter will explore some of the positive aspects of the in-between, paying especial attention to the sort of ‘space’ that is implied by the in-between. In this context, ‘positive’ refers phenomena that are concrete, phenomenologically available, or present.

Again: after Kant, traditional third person metaphysics is much harder, if not impossible. Only that to which we have sensual access can be theoretically explicated without falling
into metaphysical dogmatism. Buber’s metaphysics thus restricts itself to phenomenological data, although the conclusions he draws are very different from Kant’s. Buber took his words from other discourses and thinkers; when choosing between inventing a new term, or re-working an old one, he invariably took the latter route. Generally, he takes over concepts (aesthetics, perfection, harmony, representation, direction, singularity, the transcendental x, etc.) to transform them so they can better index and organize phenomena. The lack of neologisms is part of what makes Buber’s style appealing, and allows his writings to participate directly in general conversations; but neologisms create a fresh conceptual space (however illusory,) while borrowed language retains meanings that might conflict with their renewed employment. Thus, it is not just a conceptual space Buber inherits, but also, specific concepts of space.

I believe it has been demonstrated that Katz, for all his insight, over-emphasized Buber’s debt to the Kantian notion of space. In a volume of interrogations by contemporary philosophers, Peter Bertocci claims that Buber’s concepts are overly indebted to a more classical notion of space, and because of this, the “dominating” problem in Buber’s thought is (supposedly) the “part-whole” relationship. In a rather feisty response, Buber writes:

> Bertocci's objections appear to me to rest in great part on a deep misunderstanding of some of my basic concepts. But that he finds in my thought the idea of an evident all-embracing "unity of an organic whole" or of a "part-whole relationship" I cannot even explain to myself in this way. This completely erroneous conception of my philosophy must have formed itself very early in Bertocci's thinking and then he has apparently

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224 It is true that Buber sometimes seems overly-attached to origins, including the origin of terms, but I would suggest that this is neither essential to his thought (and is more like gematria, used not to draw a connection, but illustrate it) and further, that the older Buber gets the less interested he is in the originary.
understood, that is, misunderstood, this-and-that concept as a confirmation of it. 225

This is an important qualification for the following attempt to explore the In-Between spatially. Moreover, Buber continues “Persons really meet each other, not merely in space, but also, for example, when they think of each other at the same time, therefore in pure time. ‘To participate,’ …is only seemingly a ‘spatial’ concept”. Thus, any thinking about the In-Between spatially (which is only natural, given the word ‘between’) must be done cautiously. Buber is clear that he likes the term ‘participation’ because it is “so much a category of spiritual existence that the primal metaphysical ground of the expression is no longer even perceptible.”226 He acknowledges the term’s metaphysical pedigree, but is pleased that, because the term has so long been used to index a phenomenon, its metaphysical origin has been rendered largely irrelevant. The term thus allows an extra-spatial ‘dimension’ to an object or subject which allows it to exist in space, while being independent of space.

However, despite these cautions, it is clear that Buber does use the language, if not the metaphysics, of space; these terms are taken over from his predecessors, as are their metaphysical implications. It is clear is that Buber is not interested in any kind of absolute space. But he still uses space, extensively, to help illuminate many basic phenomena.

226 Note, contra Katz, the use of the term ‘merely’: the in-between is not a spatial concept because it is not exhausted by space. But that does not mean it is “a-spatial” Katz, "A Critical Review of Martin Buber's Epistemology of I-Thou," 106. Buber, *Philosophical Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich*, 43. (emphasis added)
Elliot Wolfson provides us a much more nuanced approach to Bertocci’s ‘space problem,’ noting that what concerns Buber throughout his development of spatial ideas is the problem of *unity*, which is an spatial action or process, and not a quality of space itself. Unlike Bertocci’s static reading, Wolfson is well aware that “The manner through which the unity was to be established…varied with each stage of his thought.” Unity is always a concern for Buber, but as his thought progresses the ‘frame’ in which unification occurs is destabilized, and in his mature thought it is not a ‘whole’ that is unified, nor space, but rather, an encounter (and not its component parts, which remain parts). Spatiality (the phenomenological access to space) and wholeness are products of unification, or, at the minimum, co-extensive with it. Wolfson explicates Buber’s three stages of unification thus:

In his mystical stage Buber maintained that unity was found in the subjective experience of ecstasy whereby the individual *transcends* the conditional world of space and time. In his existential stage Buber held that unity was not found but rather *created* by the individual confronting the world with all his uniqueness. In his dialogical stage Buber claimed that unity is *realized*—*continuously and never absolutely*—in the "Between," i.e., in the meeting of two beings who nevertheless remain distinct.  

This chapter is concerned with the last of these stages, where ‘unity is *realized*—*continuously and never absolutely*’. The concepts of space, speech, and presence are all treated accordingly, with a continually incomplete process of actualization determining the ways we think about them.

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Again, the idea of space presupposes a great deal. In Buber’s thinking, space’s primary presupposition is distance (pace Bertocci’s claim that “inclusion” is the concept that dominates his spatial thinking). It is distance that underwrites the possibility of a meeting between ‘distinct’ beings: no distance, no meeting. Buber is quite clear in *Distance and Relation* that relationship [**Beziehung**] presupposes distance [**Urdistanz**].

We could thus tentatively say that space is structured by distance, and filled by relation; the first is the presupposition (but not the “origin”) of the second—distance creates the ‘room’ in which relation happens.

This seems an unintuitive concept of space, but, looking at space not as a ‘whole,’ but rather at what it ‘does’ (how it is ‘realized’) it is remarkably coherent. The idea that space is made out of differences is well articulated by Solomon Maimon, an early post-Kantian Jewish thinker. For him, space is not an *a priori* structure, but a way of judging things. Maimon holds (accurately, I think) that space, conceptually speaking, is a function of the non-absolute difference of *objects*: “Space is the being-apart [**Auseinandersein**] of objects”. While Buber’s notion of space is not one of cognitive judgment, he does turn Maimon’s metaphysical insight—that space is composed of differences, and not a container—into a phenomenology. While for Buber, space is not a ‘form of cognition,’ nor the external relations of objects, it is, as with Maimon, is a kind of difference: for Buber space is structured by differences, and, as it were, enacts and

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228 We will later need to address the problems the spatial frame covers up (to wit: the individuation of distinct entities, the generation of the difference we call distance).

229 Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 60, BW 412.

230 These are emphatically not two “aspects of the same event or process” *The Knowledge of Man*, 63, BW 415.

preserves distance. Wolfson notes that Heidegger establishes a congruent idea
phenomenological space, one similarly Maimonian in that the “conception of space [is]
the enactment of alterity—the disruption that opens thought to its own other”.232 Both
Buberian and Heideggerian phenomenological spatiality is first and foremost a field of
difference that preserves the independence of beings which allows for their relations.
How these relations function, however, differs greatly for the two philosophers.

This is not surprising: there are multiple ways to construct spatial functions out of a
phenomenological field of differences. For instance, the index points, but the space it
constructs is neither a ‘physical’ nor ‘absolute’ space. Certain relations or events
generate their own space.233 But, where phenomenological space is at issue, the
emphasis is upon being-apart, or original distance; abstract objects and forms of
cognition come later. In much of what follows we will explore the phenomenon of space
in light of Buber’s notion of the in-between. This space will be illuminated by various
positive phenomena, in particular the encounter with a singular other and speech.

**a few questions**

We have progressed through enough of the background, and defined enough terms, that I
can now advance a series of basic questions that have no doubt been on the reader’s
mind:

1) What is the In-Between?
2) Where is the In-Between? (What is it between?)
3) How is the In-Between different from any other form of mediation (for
   instance, language)?

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232 Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death*
4) What will an theory of the In-Between look like?

To risk answering all four at once, I propose the following: *The In-Between is a relational space between two persons present to each other, without which this presence would not be possible.*

Almost every term in this formulation requires definition. For now, it suffices to clarify four.

**Relational:** this is not meant in a general sense—a general theory of relations—but rather, concerns how some relations must be structured in order to constitute certain basic phenomena; thus, they are arrived at via something like transcendental phenomenology, insofar as it concerns the constitutive presuppositions of presences. Because it is concerned with persons, we will see that Buber’s phenomenology is one riddled with gaps (as are persons). Buber’s phenomenology provides spaces for these gaps, but the ‘content’ of these gaps cannot be determined by phenomenological or metaphysical practice. Hence the importance of phenomenological space referred to above.

**Space:** as discussed above, this is not physical, or absolute space, but space as the *being apart* (outside of each other) of objects, that is also the *relationship* between these objects. Here space is dual: distance and relation. Thus, regarding (4), an theory of the In-Between will ‘look’ much like the Mendelssohn’s aesthetic relation: a relation that is not reducible to the terms it relates. Stronger still: the relation helps create the terms it is relating.

**Persons:** personhood is not restricted to human beings. For now, we can (somewhat circularly) define a person as someone capable of being present to another person. This

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234 This space is needed to constitute an inter-human relation that is *not* grounded in subjectivity. Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, 271.
seeming circularity is necessary, because there is no absolutely individual person: persons become persons in relation to each other (a non-circular, genetic, account of personhood is offered in chapter 5). Negatively, we can say that personhood is not an attribute of any object, but a way of being (or relating) of a singular: a relation it is ‘caught up in’ that (partly) determines what it is. Formally speaking, this notion of person resembles Kant’s transcendental x—a thing constituted by a relationship that escapes this relationship.

Buber’s person has a bifurcated structure, and on account of this, is always ‘dual’ or ‘split’ (a split that runs along the lines between singularity and particularity). A person occupies at least two different modes of existence (there and not-there, revealed and concealed, being and nothing) and thus, two types of relation (I-It/I-You; description/presence; particular/singular). Ultimately, the goal will be to extend this notion beyond persons, and deal with singulars per se.

Presence: presence is a type of encounter, seen in language as speaking-to (rather than speaking about). The term ‘presence’ has become fraught since Derrida’s critique, although the ‘presence’ he critiques differs from Buber’s notion (below). The term encounter, restricted to encounters with singularities, is perhaps a more amenable way of capturing this concept. Figuring out exactly what Buber means by presence is essential to understanding the In-Between, and how the In-Between differs from mediation. As has been made clear by Gumbrecht, presence is not a term that can defined a priori, because presence is not a function of meaning (it cannot be captured by speaking about
We require phenomenological data if we are to understand what Buber means by presence.

**no presence like the present**

Phil Huston’s excellent book *Martin Buber's Journey to Presence* will be our guide in understanding Buber’s ‘presence’. One of the book’s basic claims is that Martin Buber did not really understand relationships until he had worked out a theory of presence. I hold that his idea of presence, or encounter, is closely modelled on the aesthetic tradition (including the sensual). An encounter is better theorized by a tradition concerned with artistic or sensual encounters than one concerned with third-person claims, including sociology. Another important trail beaten out by Huston’s book moves from absence to presence: presence is deeply tied to the notion of absence, and it is through absence that presence becomes available, at the very least intellectually, if not genetically (in terms of personal development). This leads to a strange but powerful claim: absence is part of the development, if not the structure, of a person; in order to *meet* in the In-Between it must be possible to miss-meet.²³⁶ In a basic way, this miss-meeting occurs before any complete meeting.

Absence is also visible in the dialectic of exclusion between presence and knowing-about: each excludes the other, a relationship of presence cannot be a relation of knowing-about, and *vice versa*. For Buber the presence relation of a singular excludes knowledge-about it, and conversely, the knowledge-about relation entails that a singular

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²³⁶ This does not exclude the idea that, *before* the miss-meeting or the meeting, one exists (in some sense) in the in-between.
is not present (in that relation). The presence of one requires the absence of the other. In this, Buber is much like Heidegger, whose work is rooted in a dialectic between presence and concealment. Buber’s work is also not so dissimilar from Derrida’s, except Buber does privilege one half of the dialectic (presence). Neither, however, ‘metaphysically’ primary, nor more true: presence is privileged because Buber believes that in most contemporary cultures, knowledge-about has overgrown and dampened encounters with singularities, and he claims such encounters are necessary for human life to increase its perfection.

But, again, I wish to make a stronger claim: one cannot meet another in the In-Between until one has missed such a meeting. Thus, while formally there is no primacy given to either presence or absence, from a genetic perspective, it is missed meetings that actualize the person (one pole of a relation) who is able to meet. Thus, the problem ‘how does a thing individuate out of the in-between,’ or, ‘how does either of pole (x) of the in-between exist independently of the relation that constitutes it’ will be dealt with through an analysis of miss-meeting, a concept that Buber himself did not adequately develop; it will be further developed in the genetic account of personhood (chapter 5). In the rest of this chapter we will determine approximately what meeting and presence are in

237 Heidegger’s ‘pure presence’ of time is, in fact, the presence of a set of disruptive temporalities, including the past and the future. For an excellent discussion of presence in relation to the present, one that does away with the canard that Heidegger was only concerned with some sort of pure presence that sustains meaning, see: Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death*, 30-34. For a discussion of the way presence and concealment are interlocked in Heidegger’s work, a way ignored by Levinas—and, arguably, Derrida as well—see "Echo of the Otherwise: Ethics of Transcendence and the Lure of Theolatry," in *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes (Boston: Brill, 2012), 268-72.

238 This is treated in the next chapter
order to then explore the less intuitive concepts miss-meeting and absence in the next. This requires the assumption that the actualizing miss-meeting has already taken place, and exists in the background of the formal structures articulated.

Huston’s book, like many books on Buber, is an intellectual biography of sorts. Huston, as with Mendes-Flohr, seeks to explicate and explain Buber’s transformation from an early Romantic thinker of renewal and unification to his later position as a philosopher of dialogue. Such basic divisions are, of course, questionable, and have been questioned, with scholars seeking other periodizations for Buber, or to show that there is continuity between two phases that is (supposedly) ignored by earlier scholars. I would suggest that such work, while valuable, has not seriously transformed the basic insight that, in terms of its relevance for philosophy, there are two primary phases in Buber’s thought which we can divide by the publication of *I and Thou*. Horowitz is correct that the lecture series which preceded *I and Thou* is where Buber himself undergoes this transformation, much as Huston is correct in showing that there are elements of the late thought in the earlier. But the two (philosophical) periods remain. The question that remains is how to best characterize these two phases; I think deciding between Huston and Mendes-Flohr is a mistake: both periodizations are accurate, the choice is a matter of emphasis. To this end, I would add a third periodization, albeit one that follows the basic divisions of Huston and Mendes-Flohr. Mendes-Flohr’s division, from mysticism to dialogue, privileges Buber’s social theory; Huston’s less explicit division, from realization to

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239 I am unconvinced by the attempts to show that Buber’s transformation owes itself to Rosenzweig, which I believe has more to do with Rosenzweig’s current vogue than anything else. For the history of the lecture series, see the preface to Rivka Horwitz and Martin Buber, *Buber's Way to "I and Thou" : The Development of Martin Buber's Thought and His "Religion as Presence" Lectures*, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).
presence, highlights Buber’s concern with the relation between being and personhood (and is more in line with my own concerns); the third division, the one I would propose, from plenum to gaps, is intended to foreground Buber’s metaphysics. This periodization follows Wolfson’s work, where the first two periods are concerned with a transcendent or created complete unity, to one where the realization of unification is shot through with gaps. 240

All of these various divisions are attempts to delineate a fundamental transformation in the way Buber deals with duality, moving from a vitalist overcoming of duality (through ecstasy, and then realization) to a fulfilment in duality.241 The one comprehensive study of Buber’s dualities, Shapira’s Hope for Our Time, is to be thanked for laying out the wide number of dual structures Buber employs, and for emphasizing that Buber “refus[ed] to view opposing (and even contradictory) realms as dichotomies, that is, as mutually exclusive; instead, he saw them as conditioned upon each other. For him polarity is primarily a living, existential experience, from which are derived his hermeneutic methods and philosophical discourse.”242 However, in addition to deemphasizing Buber’s philosophical commitments and religious anarchism—Shapira’s book presents Buber as a well behaved Zionist and Jew—Shapira’s work, in its attempt to

240 Wolfson’s tri-part division is most productive when considering Buber’s religious influences and interests, but as regards philosophy of relations, the first two can be treated as one. Wolfson explains the strong homology between the his first two stages as such “it may be argued that there is a fundamental similarity between the two, namely, the unity which Buber affirms in both cases is realized by the withdrawal of the self into itself…. This is not to say, however, that the other is absolutely dispensable. Indeed, confronting that which is other is the preliminary phase of the unification process”; however, in the third, dialogical phase, the other is maintained in the relation Wolfson, "The Problem of Unity in the Thought of Martin Buber," 431, 35.
transcend the above periodizations, does not adequately explore the ways in which Buber’s commitment to dualism itself changes from one of overcoming of duality through ecstasy and realization, to one of fulfillment in duality through dialogue with what (or who) is present. For this project, I favour any periodization that highlights Buber’s philosophical anthropology, which begins with the dual, or “divided…separated…fallen” person who overcomes duality to re-unite with the plenum, and ends with the fundamentally dual person, for whom unity is found in singular relations, and not by ‘overcoming’ duality. The duality of the person in the second of Buber’s periods is, ontologically speaking (and only ontologically) constituted by the gaps in being. Presence, the unified encounter, is not achieved by ignoring or erasing these gaps: erasing the gap erases the encounter, as there is no relation without distance. It is actualizing, or perfecting, the singular relations to singularities that is the goal, which is what is meant by presence. Rather than unification with fullness, we have the unification of a present encounter.

the state of presence

Presence is a loaded term, one maligned, or ignored in embarrassment, since Derrida’s often iterated (rarely explicated) critique of a ‘metaphysics of presence’. Derrida’s


244 This critique is rooted in radicalizing Heidegger’s philosophy which is concerned, if not obsessed, with the interplay between presence and absence. Both Buber and Heidegger engage with the problems brought up under this rubric, and both are concerned not with replacing the present as the site of thought, but with getting rid of our presuppositions about what the present is, and paying more attention to the phenomenon. Both write movingly about the present as an irreducible space; strangely, it seems one way to prevent the present from being reduced to a quantity—a quantity of ‘time’—is to spatially segregate off the present from the past and the future.
concern is with countering a metaphysics that seeks immediate access to meaning through words or phenomena, where words are intended to make present something absent; meaning here is a function of knowledge (I know what \( x \) means, or is) and Derrida holds that absence is always part of the generation of meaning.\(^{245}\) This type of meaning, or presence, is not Buber’s concern: Buber’s notion of presence concerns the immediate relation to another singularity. While this may be ‘meaningful,’ it is not a datum of meaning: of the interaction, one knows, precisely nothing. Buber’s developed notion of presence is not hermeneutic, and primarily concerns unstable, or temporary, relations and perfections.

Like Mendelssohn, Buber’s concept of perfection is concerned with the whole person or singularity, irreducible to any specific kind. However, for Mendelssohn, perfection is a harmonious combination of the human faculties. That there are faculties he shares with Maimon and other metaphysicians. Mendelssohn’s difference from Maimon lies in that he does not privilege the cognitive faculty above the other faculties (sensual, moral, etc.). Buber’s concept is more radical: perfection is not merely a holistic concern, but rather, one that negates any partiality, or individuality. Perfection is always singular, and a singular is not a sum of particular ‘parts’.\(^{246}\)

Thus, Derrida’s critique of presence as a means of establishing philosophical or cognitive stability does not apply to Buber: encounters with singulars are anything but stable. But, something of his critique does in fact stand. In a recent volume on the history of French


\(^{246}\) Or ‘singular singulars’. Unification, in Buber’s late stage, is more a matter of ‘singularification’. Unity is a kind of shorthand, for the singular encounter of singulars. Thus, at the risk of self-parody, I could say that ‘Perfection is always singular singulars, and a singular…etc.’.
philosophy, Schrift writes: “Insofar as Jacques Derrida’s philosophical project began as an attempt to deconstruct logocentrism as a metaphysics of presence which invariably privileges the temporal present, reflecting on time, history, and the event has also been a recurring theme throughout Derrida’s writings.”247 Buber, like Heidegger, does privilege the moment over the temporal series.248 For Buber, both the moment and the series are ‘real,’ but they exclude each other: the moment is not an atom of time, but, a type of time that relativizes and restructures serial time. This privileging of the moment is alien to Derrida’s approach—Derrida’s work generally rejects such moves—and is very much linked to the general critique of Buber for privileging the I-You at the cost of the I-It, and ‘ignoring’ the relationship between the I-It and the I-You. This shortcoming is, however, more a matter of emphasis than anything else. Buber’s concern is to establish a qualitative distinction between the It and the You, and he leaves explication of the

248 However, as has been pointed out to me by Elliot Wolfson, the ‘moment’ that Heidegger privileges is directed towards the future, at least as regards “understanding,” in which the dialectic of revealment and concealment is clearest (“attunement” is in the past, “falling prey” in the present). This is seen in his concept of the ecstatic nature of temporality, and the importance of ‘being towards death’. Thus, while both Buber and Heidegger favour the moment over the series, the Heideggerian moment is fractured differently than Buber’s. Buber’s moment is fractured between the present (the moment) and the relativizing of all time in the light of this moment (the new meaning of the series); for him, the present without relation and encounter, if viewed as an ‘atom’ in a series of atoms, is not really present. Heidegger’s moment is fractured between the past and the future, with the present being the point of this fracture. “The conception of time’s linearity, buttressed by the vulgar or commonsense experience of coming into and departing from the world at particular temporal junctures as well as by the historicist predilection to interpret the past from the prejudices and idiosyncrasies of any given moment, is challenged by the disruptive effect of the ecstatic unity of temporality. In this state, the ‘future is not later than the having-been, and the having-been is not earlier than the present. Temporality temporalizes itself as a future that makes present, in the process of having-been.”” Wolfson, Alef, Mem, Tau : Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death, 167, 202n338. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 321.
relations that occur between these distinct forms to others.249 A critique would need to demonstrate not that Buber did not explain these relations, but that they are impossible for Buber’s thought. Thus, Derrida would no doubt fault Buber for ignoring the ‘context,’ however deconstructed, of presence.250 But it seems that the focus of Derrida’s critique—a presence that stabilizes content—is not what Buber intends by presence. Indeed, Derrida’s most expansive definition of ‘communication’ bears many similarities to what Buber means by encounter [Begegnung] with presence [Gegenwart].251

In any case, presence, as an encounter with a singular, must not be seen as an act that directly facilitates cognition. From the perspective of ‘knowledge’ (in the sense of knowing particulars, knowing-about, knowing x as y) the singular is, strictly speaking, nothing; its cognitive value is ‘nothing’. Meaning that the singular cannot be grasped as a particular thing (an ‘it’) whose content is determined by its belonging to a universal or general group; this means that third person metaphysical claims must by and large leave singularity untouched, except to note that the ‘content’ of singulars is (for such a metaphysics) ‘nothing’. But, Buber’s gamble is that we can point at this nothing, at singulars, even if our pointing can never be direct. With singulars, the index trumps

249 Arvidson uses the less loaded term ‘encounter’ in the place of ‘presence’ “In encountering You, the I is the thematic context. You and I are materially relevant to each other, but with You as the focus in attending. The gestalt connection between the You as theme and the I as thematic context is a unity by relevancy. The theme establishes the lines of relevance for all items that are co-presented in … have called the sphere of attention” See P. Sven Arvidson, The Sphere of Attention : Context and Margin, Contributions to Phenomenology (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 155-7.

250 “What takes place, in this sense, what is transmitted, communicated, does not involve phenomena of meaning or signification. In such cases we are dealing neither with a semantic or conceptual content, nor with a semiotic operation, and even less with a linguistic exchange.” The question of this ‘communication’ outside of ‘linguistics, a problem which disturbed Buber’s followers, will be treated in chapter four and five. Derrida, Limited Inc, 2.

251 Limited Inc, 1.
evocative description, even if descriptions can serve as indexes. The singularity of a presence can be indexed, but not known as a set of particulars.

**back to Huston**

Huston has made clear through her work that we must understand Buber’s first ‘conceptual addition’ to phenomenology—his idea of presence—before we can arrive at the in-between as something other than differentiation between two existent objects. It is only through presence or encounter that we will be able to understand the singular-singular relation that Buber brings to the table, because it is the phenomenological basis for his claims. The difficulty is figuring out how we can index a singularity without turning it into a thing, or an ‘it,’ while maintaining with equal diligence the fact that ‘something’ or ‘someone’ is encountered (but not encountered, or confronted, as a thing). In this sense, the phenomenological formula that we ‘think x as y’ needs to be resisted: an encounter with the something [*Etwas*] ‘x’ that precedes our thinking ‘x as y’ must also be possible.

This resistance to the ‘as’ explains the numerous mis-readings of Buber (encouraged by his own occasional sloppy formulations) that claim Buber (a writer!) intends to present us with an ‘unmediated’ reality, untarnished by language. This is not the case, if only because the idea of unmediated reality assumes some sort of ‘third’ reality that encompasses mediated and unmediated reality. Instead, for Buber, reality is ‘split’: there is reality, of which mediation is a part: mediated reality is still real. Claims about mediate reality: when I say I know x about y, I have mediated one concept with another.

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252 This ‘gamble’ is not an unpopular one. Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Pascal, Montaigne, and many others share in it.
But speech—which, as with forms of address, is not always about anything—can still be real. Language, in some sense, is an essential part of reality for Buber. And language does mediate.

Avnon is perhaps the worst offender here: “Buber struggles with the paradox of using words in a manner that would transcend language, as vehicles of seeing and of listening; seeing and listening in the sense of a direct relation to what is present, an attitude to being that is prior to, and unmediated by, language”. Here a legitimate insight—the difficulty (not paradox) of using language to point at encounter with extra-linguistic singularities—is tied to an unacceptable simplification of Buber’s thought as ‘unmediated’. 253 If romantic nostalgia for the unmediated is all Buber has to offer, he deserves to be forgotten. The unmediated is part, but not all, of Buber’s idea of encounter, much as the transcendental x is part, but not all, of a relation. Avnon’s position directly contradicts Buber’s own claims about the importance of language for human relation—which is the relation he is most concerned with—“life with men: here the relation is manifest and enters language [die Beziehung offenbar und sprachgestaltig]. We can give and receive

253 Theunissen (as always) provides a good corrective here when he (somewhat oversimplifying) claims that Buber’s ‘immediacy’ is a negative concept; this is certainly true of the word he uses [unmittelbar]: “what is negated is the means” ‘means’ has two meanings: “means to an end” and, means as a medium. “The medium is, however, nothing other than the horizontal space with which I surround beings in their objectification. In theoretical comportment, such a medium is that conceptuality that fixes beings with a determinate sense and orders them into the system of unified signs…The meaning of "means" as medium is, however, the more comprehensive and even includes within itself the meaning of means as the correlate of an end. For even the means-ends connection is a mode of the medial project.” This should be supplemented by the observation that immediacy as concept is negative, but to say that immediacy is itself ‘negative’ is to apply a concept to the aconceptual. Dan Avnon, Martin Buber : The Hidden Dialogue (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 3. Theunissen, The Other : Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, 275. (emphasis added)
the You.” Not only is language a chief means of human actualizing human encounter with singularity—even if actualization interrupts the presence of singularities—Buber is quite clear that relation is capable of entering into some forms of speech. One cannot subtract actualization from encounter without leaving it (literally) open-ended. But, encounters always end, even while they leave traces in language.

Actualizing, while interrupting the unity of presence, is required if we are to respond to presence, rather than passively bask in the glow of singularities. But Avnon’s mistake is useful for us, because it calls attention to an area of Buber’s thought that requires clarification: how does the In-Between differ from mediation? Here it suffices to note that the In-Between, because it negates particulars, is not mediation in the usual senses of intercession, division, or re-presenting in a different media. It is neither subject to mediation processes, nor does it exist to mediate: the in-between not some independent meeting place that exists without the singularities, intended to mediate them. Again, at issue is the fact that “presence is not the presence of a thing,” nor two things meeting; this would require a medium.

Presence is further clarified by examining its dialectical counterpart: absence. One function of presence is that it answers the need of absence. Arguably, for persons, absence is prior to presence, at least, articulated presence. Huston notes that for the

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254 On the importance of language for Buber, see his description of the second ‘sphere’ of relation. A better translation here might be ‘forms speech’ rather than ‘enters language’ Buber, I and Thou, 57.

255 Actualization is defined in the next chapter. Roughly speaking, it means making the encounter actual, or public/communicable, the ‘nothing’ of an encounter: transforming the call of the singular into a particular response.

256 Jochanan Bloch, "The Justification and Futility of Dialogical Thinking," in Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume, 55. (emphasis added)
young Buber, absence—a product of the separated or ‘fallen’ self—is overcome by a mystical union, a union which negates particular things. The young Buber’s insufficiently dialectical position seeks a transcendent unity that leaves absence in its wake. There is no absence because the (supposedly) unified being is self-present, much in the manner of a panentheistic god. Buber explicitly disavows, or rewrites, this position in the preface to the 1923 edition of his *Three Addresses*. Instead of unity as the means to sidestep absence, “absence is overcome by presence, not unity.” Unification with the other is supplanted by the presence of an other, will to unification is replaced by openness to encounter.

There are theological implications to this: for the early Buber “God is not, but only comes into existence through the becoming of the world.” This becoming God/Nature is replaced by the Creator in Buber’s later work; creation not in the sense of a demiurge’s work, but creation in the sense of the emergence of the new, an emergence out of encounter and presence. Buber is not concerned with creation in the grand sense, a once-and-for-all-time occurrence that lies irretrievably behind us. His concern is with creation as we are acquainted with it: childbirth, art, new forms of life or thought. Such creation, the entry of the *new*, cannot be another instantiation of an already given universal. It is reasonable to assume creation must come from either a transformative mixture or rupture in what already is, or an encounter with something different. In either

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259 Buber, *I and Thou*, 59, BW 1, 82.
260 Creation is, for Buber, as much phenomenological—concerned with the structure of the creative act as it appears—as theological. Most, if not all, theological categories are transfigured in this thinking to phenomenological ones.
instance, for us, creation requires exposure to something that escapes our current framework, and this exposure is a kind of presence. Hence Buber’s seemingly grandiose claim that “Man no longer recognizes an origin or a goal because he no longer wants to recognize the midpoint. Creation and redemption are true only on the premise that revelation is a present experience.”

This theological hyperbole is another way of expressing the fact that the human cannot comprehend creation from the outside, but must risk exposure to presence, or revelation, in order to create.

This inversion of a standard theological sequence (first creation, then revelation) forced Buber to abandon his Boehmean conception of a will that precedes being: “the Ungrund, the groundless Godhead… ‘a dark primordial will to self-revelation’, which in order to know itself must unfold itself in the process of reality.”

The model of a god (or artist) who first ‘has an idea’ and then ‘creates or instantiates’ this idea ex nihilo through an act of will is undercut if creation is grounded by revelation. There is an obvious analogue here to the idea that meeting in the in-between precedes the actualization of the singulars doing the meeting. Placing creation posterior to revelation means that one does not encompass creation; one encounters and (then) co-creates.

Where the young Buber overcame duality by unification—which in principle requires no intentional object, except as a catalyst—the old Buber holds onto an intentional ‘object’;

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261 In this sense, revelation is not a “fixed point,” but a type “perception” where “I am there,” or, in other words, presence as encounter. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Scripture and Translation, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 90, 94. (emphasis added)

262 Huston, Martin Buber’s Journey to Presence, 40, 43.
but, as should be clear by now, this ‘object’ is not a particular.263 Presence, or encounter, is the chief, if not the only, means of opening us up to objects that are not particulars: presence is not just a spur to anamnesis; new forms are developed when I encounter the singular itself; the call to develop these forms is part of this singularity, even if their actual development requires the resources of particularity. Presence is the relation that gives *access* to singularities which cannot be constructed by cognition alone, the much noted ‘inspiration’ that precedes creation. Hence Huston’s (correct) claim that Buber did not really understand relation until he understood presence.264

*speaking*

20th century Jewish thought, insofar as it can be considered post-modern thought, has almost univocally committed itself to three ideas: following Scholem and Derrida, textuality and hermeneutics as a primary form of thinking; following Levinas, an ethics of suffering;265 and, following—but arguably misinterpreting—Rosenzweig, the belief that revelation is contained in the structure of language.266 Buber stands outside of all three concerns: he engaged in extensive textual work, but his philosophy of presence requires that there be a limit to the reach of textual thinking, especially as regards

263 There are, of course, intonations of this concern with others throughout Buber’s early work (especially *Daniel*); in that respect, this division is somewhat overstated.
264 Huston, *Martin Buber’s Journey to Presence*, 56.
266 For the source of these Levinasian miss-reading of Rosenzweig, see Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other : Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 17, 152.
ultimate concerns and access to singularities; his ethics is built on an ideal reciprocity and a mutual striving for perfection, not amelioration of suffering; and, while language is inextricably linked to human revelation, revelation as presence, the in-human or a-human element of revelation, always escapes (precedes and follows) language.

Language is a tricky issue in Buber. As seen above, Avnon’s reading of Buber as someone seeking to disavow language is impossible to maintain: not only for the simple fact that Buber was a prolific writer, but also because human encounters require language for realization. On the other hand, the In-Between is not itself linguistic; language is rather a way of bringing person-being into an actualized relation. Language consolidates the In-Between, but cannot be identified with it. Language is only capable of giving us access when it either ‘regresses’ to pointing, or via what Kierkegaard called ‘indirect communication,’ employs rhetoric to seduce the reader into occupying the position of a subject outside of a system of expression.

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267 As Aschheim writes: “Buber…feted especially during the 1950s, now appears (however unfairly) too pious and pontificatory…insufficiently “textual” (indeed, his reputation was sullied in no small measure by Scholem, and to some degree as well by Benjamin on these grounds).” Steven E. Aschheim, Beyond the Border : The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 89.


269 Again, see I and Thou, 57. Buber here explicates three different ways that relation and presence can relate to language.

270 Kierkegaard uses both techniques (see Søren Kierkegaard, The Point of View for My Work as an Author; a Report to History, and Related Writings, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper, 1962), 143, 32fn.) but is justly more famous for his indirect communication, which he explicates in Søren Kierkegaard and Alastair Hannay, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 545-55. For Buber’s (inept) reading of Kierkegaard (which, arguably, was intended to attack the rise of Decisionism in Germany) see The Question to the Single One in Martin Buber, Between Man and Man, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002).
Rosenstock-Huessy and Benjamin, rejects the notion that language can provide a stable ground for ‘invoking’ a presence, hence his repeated claims that the Bible bears witness to a revelation, rather than being a revelation.

While Buber’s poetic flourishes and descriptions are part and parcel of the indirect approach—as are, arguably his Hasidic stories—it is in pointing, and the indexical, that Buber’s strength lies. However pointing, unlike Gumbrecht’s deixis, does not stand alone outside of a dialogue, or the conversation around an indexed object; there is a ‘back and forth’ between indexing a singular, and constructing a particular, mediating, discourse that actualizes the singular.

I have employed Peirce’s concept of the index throughout this work: “the index, which like a pronoun demonstrative or relative, forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it”.\(^{271}\) The index is distinguished from icons (which resemble their object) and symbols (which describe or interpret). The index is like a pointing finger. Buber is pointedly not interested in a general semiotics, but continuously employs this basic semiotic notion: indices cannot be captured by symbols.\(^{272}\) Bloch has helpfully shown that, as a consequence of the indexical method, Buber sometimes indicates phenomena that differ from his descriptions and employment of them: “the reality which we attain if we follow Buber’s pointing [may] exceed in its factual

\(^{271}\) Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 1.369. (emphasis added)

\(^{272}\) Peirce would claim that symbols presuppose, and build upon, indices (which, in turn, presuppose icons).
existence Buber’s intentions and descriptions.”273 It is precisely this that allows us to develop Buber’s philosophy in ways he himself did not foresee.

In Buber’s work, pointing is primarily reserved for demarking I-You relations. “When I say ‘person,’ I point to the underivable [the singular]…What addresses you, not in the said but in the saying, is the underivable person, the now living new creature.”274 Each pronoun has its own direction and relation to presence.

The second person assumes a present interlocutor, and points directly ahead; obviously, you are not directly present to me right now, but even merely writing ‘you’ brings me (at the very least) into a position where I am imagining you (or ‘a reader’) and you are present in that limited sense.

The third person has no necessary relation to presence, and aims away from the interlocutor to point at something. When I speak to you, I am, however faintly, pointing to you. When I speak about ‘a’ or ‘the’ you, I am talking-about, pointing ‘at.’ Writing ‘the You’ or ‘a You,’ as this sort of metaphysics requires I do, is a way of discussing the second person in the third person.

The first person is, unsurprisingly, dual. There is a first person associated with both a third person and a second person.275 After I and You, the I is, more or less as an item of

274 Buber, Philosophical Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich, 34. (emphasis added) Of course, He, She, or It can be present, but they are not necessarily present, and therefore not part of the necessary structure of the pronouns; ‘I’ and ‘You,’ in standard use, require their object to be present. Pointing is thus reserved for I-You relations.
275 For the later Buber, the first person ‘in itself’ is a difficult, if not impossible, problem to address. The question of the ‘link’ between the two types of ‘I’ is a difficult one. Seeking a kind of medium that contains, or a being that precedes, these two types of ‘I’
dogma, considered only in relation to either the second or third person, and what the I is depends on the tense, or the basic word it is implicated in: “the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It.” I am either speaking to you, or speaking about he/she/it, and what ‘I’ is differs for each case.

speech directions: -about and -to

Buber famously begins I and Thou in an axiomatic fashion, presenting two “basic words” [Grundworts] that are word pairs [Wortpaars]: I-You and I-It, the former being the form of a relation to presence, the latter an instrumental relation. These are partly explicated by two ‘speech directions’: speaking-to and speaking-about, with the former being the one associated with presence. Bloch, in his excellent paper, summarizes the speech directions as such: “What Buber calls relationship is demonstrated in the second person of language, in the speaking to. On the other hand, our relation to Being as to a thing, something the I-It—finds its linguistic form in speaking about.” The two speech directions (‘speaking about’ and ‘speaking to’) roughly correspond to what Buber calls the “Basic words [that]…establish a mode of existence [Bestand]”. These ‘basic word

is, for Buber, a mistake. Many interpretations break on this point. Rather than seeking a third point that grounds the ‘I’ independent of the second and third person, I believe it is more productive to try and understand the mechanism of the ‘to and fro’ that switches between them. The third point, the ‘I in itself,’ does not exist except as a construction out of the other, more basic, senses of ‘I’.

276 Buber is very explicit in the first paragraph of I and Thou that the I-You relation concerns only the first and second person; He and She are just types of It. Buber, I and Thou, 53, BW 1, 79. Werke, 3 vols. (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1962).
277 For a detailed analysis of the specific relationship that holds between Buber’s basic words and these two ways of speaking see Theunissen, The Other : Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, 300.
278 Bloch, "The Justification and Futility of Dialogical Thinking," 50. (emphasis added)
279 Buber, I and Thou, 53. One of the most common misinterpretations of I and Thou is that of these relations is structurally prior, or ‘better’ than the other. Hilary Putnam’s text
pairs’ draw an explicit connection between metaphysical structures and speech. These speech directions are very helpful for understanding what Buber means by presence. It should be remembered that language overlaps with presence, but is not identical with it. ‘Presence,’ ‘I-You,’ and, ‘speaking-to’ differ from one another in fundamental ways, especially where non-human, or non-linguistic, partners are concerned. That said, all three are implicated in each other—each one (more or less) building upon the previous in terms of formal complexity; as each one comes ‘closer’ to actualization, human activity, its structure becomes more distinct. Speaking-to is the last, but clearest, of these structures.

Buber’s phenomenology makes the conventional division between relations to objects, as things available to experience and use, and relations to persons, who are present. This is not because there are two types of objects, but rather because there are two types of relation. Neither, however, are we entitled to say there is one kind of object that has a relationship ‘added’ to it: I cannot transform something from an ‘available thing’ into a ‘present no-thing,’ an It into a You, by merely adding a relation to an object, or forcing it. Buber’s many references to the ‘spontaneity’ necessary for dialogue, or the need for a combination of ‘will and grace’ for an It to become a You, are ways of expressing this fact. Speech directions, are, however, capable of being understood in the absence of this ‘spontaneity’ or ‘grace’. They are the most dependent upon activity, and therefore, can be somewhat forced into view, if only through examples.

is one of the most recent, and clearest, attempts to quash this misreading. Hilary Putnam, Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Lévinas, Wittgenstein (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008), 62-5.

This would turn the relationship into a predicate, which would destroy the very notion of singularity: a singularity cannot be what it is merely by contrast to other entities.
The directional structure of speaking *about* is associated with the standard knowledge relation: I talk about a glass of water, I talk about your hair. This is the structure of knowledge claims (What is x? x is y, I know y *about* x, etc.). The directional structure of speaking *to* is associated with the personal relation: I speak to you, or I speak with you. Knowledge, under this structure is not that of knowledge claims, but is closer to presence: when I say ‘I know Jacob’ I do not usually mean ‘I know x about Jacob’ but rather, I have met Jacob, he has been present to me. Contrariwise, when speaking *about*, the object is rendered visible, and universally accessible, by the relation: I can speak *about* your hair colour, and express this colour in a symbolic system; whether you have met Jacob or not, I can express his hair colour to you with varying degrees of precision. If you don’t speak my language, I can translate for you. In general, all of your particular characteristics can be reduced to I-It data: your hair colour, your date of birth, your genome, your economic position, etc. The I-It, or speaking about, is the realm of *predicates* or attributes determined by their belonging to a general or universal kind or set. But, for Buber, early and late, this collection of predicates misses what is expressed in the speaking-to relation (and vice versa); specifically, it misses Jacob.

Wolfson notes that ‘overcoming’ the subject as a set of attributes is a continual theme in Buber’s concern with unity.281 The young Buber was concerned with a self that unifies with the world (thus ceasing to be a set of attributes,) a unification that overcomes the division between subject and object. The mature Buber was interested in a relation with another person as a singularity that negates, or ‘ignores,’ attributes. This is a more

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limited claim: attributes, speaking-about, always misses the singular; the singular is thus a kind of remainder left over by the process of attribution.

Suppose that it were possible for someone to take a psychosomatic inventory of his or her person in such a way as to dissolve it into a sum of qualities; suppose it were also possible to trace developmentally each of these qualities and the process of their confluence back to their most primitive forms; suppose finally that such a seamless genetic analysis of a given individual, of his derivation and etiology, were in fact to be carried out....At the end of it, the person, this unique, incomparable, singular being—the countenance such as was never found, the voice such as was never heard, the bearing such as was never seen—this ensouled body would still be there, the intact remainder, altogether underived and underivable, there and nowhere else but there.  

For Buber, in all of his periods, a person’s essence (what makes them them) eludes attributes: speaking-about misses the point. A list of these attributes, claims-about, no matter how comprehensive, is by necessity not able to encompass what makes you singular. For the young Buber, the content of singularity was only available during ecstasy. For the old Buber, at least in terms of speech directions, the ‘content’ of the singular is unveiled in speaking-to. But what is this content that cannot be spoken about?

As an example: if I were to hand you a list of Jacob’s every predicate (he is 5’7” tall, he went to a public school, when he was 7 he went to this school, his genome is...). You read the list and memorize it. If you were to ask, ‘do I know about Jacob,’ I would reply with a yes. But, if you were to ask, ‘do I know Jacob?’ I would be inclined to say no; even though you now know everything about him, you have never met him, and he has

282 Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 12.
283 The above paragraph is concerned not with relation, but creation. However, in the piece Buber is explicit that we cannot approach this idea of creation (of singulars) without first encountering the central, or middle point: the relation of revelation. The Singular is found in the middle, which points backwards at creation.
never been present to you.\textsuperscript{284} The completion of the list is not the issue: even if Leibniz’s God were to write the list, a complete list, it would only be a list of predicates, things that can be spoken-about, and would miss the speaking-to.

This is tricky, because the word ‘know’ is a homonym. You do not know Jacob, but do know about him, because we are using the word ‘know’ in two different senses: you have fulfilled the conditions of knowledge-about, but not knowledge in the ‘biblical’ sense, as intercourse. The former sense follows the German \textit{wissen}, whereas the latter is more like the German \textit{kennen}, (or the obsolete verbal form of the English ‘ken’). To speak with the Jerusalem/Athens stereotypes, Buber usually employs the term knowledge in its ‘Greek’ form, where knowledge is intellection, or ownership of an experience. But, Buber does not use a technical vocabulary (where, say, \textit{wissen} means knowing-about, where \textit{kennen} means knowing in Hebraic sense). Instead, he uses the same words for both senses of knowledge, differentiating them through the content of their objects: the content of ‘Greek’ knowing-about is a things and properties, whereas the content of speaking-to is nothing [\textit{nichts}], or everything [\textit{alles}]—and in his very late writings, it is \textit{Wesen}. It is nothing or everything depending on how you approach it:

—What, then, does one experience [\textit{erfährt}] of the You?
—Nothing at all [\textit{Eben nichts}]. For one does not experience it.
—What, then, does one know [\textit{weiß}] of the You?
—\textit{Only} everything [\textit{alles}]. For one no longer knows particulars [\textit{Einzeln}].\textsuperscript{285}

\textsuperscript{284} Even if you were to claim you did know Jacob, it seems safe to say that you would know Jacob \textit{differently} after encountering him, and the source of this difference would not be part of the list of prediates.

\textsuperscript{285} Note that experience is a function of the I-It; it follows analytically that one cannot ‘experience’ the You; however, Buber is here not drawing an analytic connection, but trying to show that his axioms hold Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 56, 61.
So, again, with Jacob: when I speak-to him, I am, in some sense, taking an object. This object’s content does not look like a ‘thing with attributes.’ It is, instead, nothing (in that it isn’t there to be experienced or recorded), or everything (it overwhelms the kinds and types needed for experience and record). The plausibility of this phenomenological exercise rests on its appeal to our general intuitions: the speaking about/to division is a common occurrence, one easily accessible (speaking to a person, their presence). The object of this common occurrence, is, however, very strange. When asked to speak-about what it is that escapes the list of attributes, that extra thing I encounter when I meet Jacob, there is nothing to be said. Once this has been established it becomes much easier to take the ‘nothingness’ of presence seriously; it is a being hidden.\textsuperscript{286} Everything is not arrived at by adding up all the things: add everything up, something is still hiding.

\textbf{the priority of basic words over speech directions}

However, things are not simple even for speaking-about. Another quote from Bloch is appropriate:

\begin{quote}
If we reflect on these ways of thinking, it becomes clear that there is no speaking-about, there is no statement with specific content, without speaking-to. That is: the statement of content exists only in the address to someone…The speaking-about is always influenced and wrought upon by the presence of the “to”. But especially this makes it clear that the speech with addresses, creates a presence which is not an object and which I cannot turn into an object. I cannot know it, if “know” means to attain through any concepts or images.\textsuperscript{287}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{286} Once we are comfortable with the presence of hidden objects, finding a place for the hidden God is much easier: God is neither the sum total of Yous nor the power that ‘supports’ the existence of the You (either of these would be things, or It-structures); God is the absoluteness of the You, the very fact that the You cannot be revealed but is nonetheless present when we encounter another. \textit{Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy}, 67.

\textsuperscript{287} Bloch, "The Justification and Futility of Dialogical Thinking," 50.
This requires careful consideration: we must be careful not to reduce Buber’s insights to a trick of language. The fact that there is (supposedly) no speaking-about without a speaking-to shows how deeply Buber’s insights are embedded in the very structure of addressing a person (about something). The addressee is an aporia, or gap, in any about-statement that, if we take this seriously, cannot be filled by another ‘about’ statement. As long as we grant that all speech has an addressee, there is no pure speaking-about. There is, however, a kind of ideal we can imagine, an infinite set of records, an effete Deist God, a computer endlessly working out an equation, that approaches pure speaking-about. So, to weaken Bloch’s point, I would say that when speaking-about, the addressee is implied by the structure of language, but is very possible that the addressee is in no way present. However, this pure speaking-about does not seem ‘real,’ even though in our hyper-recorded culture, it certainly seems to exist.

Presence is less important in speech-directions than it is in the basic ‘words:’ the structure of language follows the structures of the basic words, but not vice-versa. For Buber, presence is in some respects prior to existing language, at least with non-linguistic beings (this is the reason Buber can discuss “life with nature” as a complete relation); language is, instead, the place where the relation to presence is “manifest,” or obvious [offenbar]. Of course, it should be remembered that, for us, silence is sometimes linguistic.

Buber’s pointing and his allergy to the third person, are deeply connected. Buber’s philosophy requires us to hold that there are certain ‘things’ whose essence—what makes them what they are—requires they not be viewed as composite wholes. The ‘You’ is one

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example, as is our common-sense notion of a person (dead persons complicate this somewhat). The basic issue is this: Buber thinks there are things that can only be pointed at: to view them as totalities, from a third person perspective (a gods-eye view,) to view them as a list of predicates, is impossible. This is not an epistemic claim: it is not that we could in theory look at a person from a third person perspective if we overcame our limitations. The claim is, rather, that there is certain content, or certain relations, that can only appear to a first or second person perspective. This is, of course, debatable. Further, any evidence adduced in favour of Buber’s position must be explored from a third-person perspective; at best, one can show the necessary problems and gaps in the third person perspective, and then point into the gaps.

where are we now?

We have combined Huston’s reading of Buber’s presence with Bloch’s reading of Buber’s Speech Directions to come up with something like the chart below. The left column (with the exception of the ‘strange object’) corresponds with what we can call a standard descriptive view of the world. It is certainly a non-problematic world: there is, in principle, nothing unknowable, and knowing consists of coming up with an exhaustive list of predicates for any particular thing (a description of an ‘it’). This is only slightly complicated by the fact that ‘nothing’ is, in this world, unknowable. The world of descriptions is quite comfortable not knowing ‘nothing’.
Figure 2: Table of Worlds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>World of Description</th>
<th>World of Encounter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech Direction</td>
<td>Speaking-About</td>
<td>Speaking-To</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groundword</td>
<td>I-It</td>
<td>I-You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strange Object</td>
<td>Nothing/Everything</td>
<td>Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designation</td>
<td>Exhaustive Predicates</td>
<td>Index/Pointing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontology</td>
<td>Sub Specie Aeterritatis</td>
<td>In-Between</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Buber’s philosophy can be fairly seen as a series of attempts to get us to think the right column, the world of encounters. It is important to note here that Buber, despite countless miss-readings, does not seek to replace the left column by the right. Buber’s point is that the world is (for the human, at least) dual through and through: neither of the two worlds, or half world, has metaphyscial priority (although the world of encounter is genetically prior). This is not a ‘hard’ dualism, where one side is entirely independent of.

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289 One of the most common misinterpretations of I and Thou is that these relations exclude each other, that one is ‘better’ than the other. Hilary Putnam’s text is one of the most recent, and clear, attempts to quash this misreading. Putnam, Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life : Rosenzweig, Buber, Lévinas, Wittgenstein, 62-5.
the other: both domains are different ways of being (meaning, composed of different relations); but they cross-over each other (next chapter).

I have employed Huston and Bloch to articulate the positive reasons for looking to the right side, the world of encounter, as something both real, and of importance for thinking. Buber’s phenomenology of presence, and his notion of speech-directions, are positive reasons to switch our attention to the right handed column: these are common phenomena, that cannot be explained by the left side. However, positive claims, by themselves, do not provide enough motivation for accepting the In-Between, and are unlikely to convince those who do not wish to be convinced.

So far as philosophical argument is concerned, the positive motivation to deal with the right column must be complimented by a negative presentation, showing the aporias of the left. This requires we find the ‘gaps,’ or impossibilities that riddle the left side, the side of claims-about, which will force us to take the right side seriously. A negative argument would seek to show that the ‘exhaustive list of predicates’ presumed by the descriptive world view is either incomplete or incoherent. The list of predicates is exhaustive, but only as regards a certain type of relation. Thus, the argument for the In-Between is nothing less than the claim that *there are relations that expose us to certain objects* (i.e., persons), *that, because of the type of object that they are, cannot appear* Sub Specie Aeternitatus. To see them outside of time, as a list of attributes, is to see them as something-else, something other than they are, which really means: to not see them. The person is not some ‘extra thing’ hovering above the list, some kind of motivating ‘soul’; the person is, strictly speaking, nothing. But how is this possible, and what does this mean? This is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter Four: Negative In-Between; Nothing, Gaps

Basic words parallel basic worlds. So far we have treated them as intentional attitudes, meaning, relations taken towards objects. But there is a pairing between an attitude and a world, illustrated by the table at the end of the previous chapter. The world is twofold, the self is twofold. This does not mean that there are two selves, or two worlds, nor that the duality of worlds causes the twofold self, or vice versa. Beginning out of the middle means recognizing the duality, and not seeking to solve it, or fix it, but rather to recognize and respond to it. Duality is almost axiomatic for Buber. While the last chapter sought to illustrate this duality with positive phenomena, this chapter will attempt to explicate the specific structure of duality through an analysis of the role ‘nothing’ [Nichts] plays in Buber’s work. The Nichts is not only a negative reason to take the in-between seriously—because there is no ‘nothing’ for the descriptive attitude, and here it seems to lack something—but is also a key mechanism for Buber’s philosophy, explaining both the transitory nature of the singular relation, and the way in which this transitory relation is able to relativize the world of description from a position of complete autonomy. The in-between space is, within the world of description, ‘nothing’; but it is a no-thing capable of relativizing the world of things.

This chapter will show the way no-thing operates differently in the worlds of presence and description. Two sets of differences are integral to this project. The first concerns the structure of appearance and meaning: in the world of description, the singular appears as nothing, whereas in the world of presence, the singular relativizes the world in light of it being a no-thing. The second concerns the constitution of objects in the world: particulars are determined by their differences from, or extrinsic relation to, other
particulars, whereas singulare have an intrinsic Nichts that does not differentiate them, but ensure that all encounters with them are transitory. Again, the in-between is inexplicable without an understanding of the Nichts in Buber’s thought: the way that the Nichts constitutes certain types of beings—singularities—is key to understanding how singulare can encounter each other in the in-between. It is thus an essential ingredient of any future theory of religious singularities. While a complete articulation of the in-between will be impossible to achieve in a project as modest as this, it is hoped that the exploration of the Nichts in Buber’s thought will provide both reasons to take it seriously and an explanation of how such a space is even possible.

Buber’s account of the In-Between is rife with the negative in a strict sense. Buber’s two worlds and attitudes are constituted by the different role the negative plays in each. In the world of presences the gaps run through each singular, founding its autonomous spontaneity and its character as a transitory presence that relativizes everything else. In the world of descriptions, the gaps separate beings into distinct things. To construct the metaphysics corresponding to Buber’s theory of singularities and our singular encounters in-between, it will be necessary to do more than show positive examples of the duality. It will be necessary to show the exact ways the gaps constitute different orders of being. Here I will complement the positive approach of the previous chapter—an analysis of specific positive phenomena that can be used to argue in favour of the in-between—with a negative account, that deals specifically with the role negation plays in Buber’s theory of the in-between.

The world, or ‘worlds,’ are shot through with nothingness, with gaps, with distances, absences, and meetings that are missed. These absences are not a form of privation.
These are constitutive gaps: they are part of what makes things what they are. Despite his fulsome prose, Buber’s ‘world,’ in all his stages, is never a *plenum*. There is always a ‘negative’ that plays a creative roll, but the role it plays changes. For the young Buber, it is a immanent creative destruction in the manner of Nietzsche—one is tempted to call it a transcendent immanence; for the elder, it is a constitutive nothing linked to an immanent transcendence.

**creative destruction: principles of formation**

*Hostile to the human: all this teaching about the One and Plenum and Unmoved and Complete and Permanent.*

As Mendes-Flohr has shown, the young Buber was committed to an immanent form of becoming that could manufacture transcendent states, states of ecstatic unification; the value of dynamic immanence is, in this Nietzschean world, itself almost transcendent as a value. Under this model, nothing is outside of the world, and transcendent moves and entities are products that emerge *from* unifying movements of immanent beings. This almost pantheist vision is easy to square with pure positivity, or a plenum, but Buber never made this move, except perhaps as a transitory goal of unification. As discussed, human beings—or, at least, Jews—in the world of the *Three Speeches* and *Daniel* are divided against themselves, or fallen, and in this lurks a fundamental negativity that is overcome through acts of mystical unification.

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291 Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber’s Transformation of German Social Thought*. 
His youthful writings contain a generative form of the nothing: not a negation that merely forces the positive into action, but a creative destruction that is itself action. Scholem was the first to draw attention to this, and presented it as a battle between the principles of form and formlessness; his view is overly polemic, coming long after he had fallen out with Buber (over Buber’s support for WWI) and after Benjamin had further turned Scholem against Buber (for reasons that are unclear).\textsuperscript{292} Scholem’s reading of Buber has merit nonetheless, even if he was unable to see that Buber’s philosophy changed as he aged. It was during his formative years that Scholem was influenced by, and then turned against, Buber. Opinions developed during formation are often recalcitrant, and so Scholem never really believed in Buber’s transformation.\textsuperscript{293}

Scholem describes Buber as having two principles “the formless and the formative…that which has been formed [\textit{das Geformte}] never remains pure form [\textit{Gestalt}], and again and again the formless [\textit{Gestaltlose}] breaks in and breaks up the form [\textit{Form}]”.\textsuperscript{294} Here we seemingly have an immanent dynamics: the world is a closed system constructed by the development and destruction of forms. But this is not enough to express what is


\textsuperscript{293} Scholem viewed Buber as a thinker who continually orbited around the principle of creation, and as someone who never left his mystical world view. There is some truth in the first claim: Buber was always concerned with creation; but, what constituted creation changed in lock step with the shifts in his philosophy. The second claim is dubious: Buber always has sympathy for the mystical tradition, but his own relationship to mysticism transforms completely; from a position of total affirmation (in his early writings) the mystic falls until he or she becomes an archetype of a world-denying person. \textit{On Jews and Judaism in Crisis} (New York: Schocken, 1976), 131, 71.

\textsuperscript{294} \textit{On Jews and Judaism in Crisis} (New York: Schocken, 1976), 136, 52.
happening here. As Braiterman has noted, for Buber there is a *normative* distinction between two types of form: *Gestalt* has an affirmative, productive, valence, while *Form* is seen as detrimental to life (much in the manner of *Lebensphilosophie*). Thus, we have a two types of distinction: the distinction between *Form* and *Gestalt*, and, within *Gestalt*, we have a battle between the formative (*Gestaltende*) and formless (*Gestaltlosen*) principles, in which dead *Gestalt* is constantly washed away—the formative struggles against the formless, but both ‘work in league’ to “undermine the kingdom of rotting *Gestalt*.”295 The distinction between *Form* and *Gestalt* is between passive and active form, and the distinction within *Gestalt* is the distinction between two types of activity, formative and formless. The formless (*Gestaltlosen*), as an active principle, is the position of the creative nothing, or negative, in the early Buber’s work.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3: Early Dynamics of Creation**

Here we have the origin of many of Buber’s early sociological views, as well as his theology. The passive form is, by and large, ‘bad’: religion, ossified culture, these are forms that have emerged from the ‘internal’ battle of Gestalt, and have been *mistakenly*

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taken as permanent, “the most miserable slavery for the habitual inheritors who inhabit it.”

The real, transforming life, is on the side of Gestalt. Here we find religiosity, sociality, the “unique relation to the unconditioned.” This leads to a number of Buber’s early and unsatisfying dyads. What is interesting here is that the principle of motion for the ‘good’ half of the dyad is the formless [Gestaltlosen]—as Form, it is nothing; this position privileges active destruction over passive repetition. While Gestalt is the creation and destruction of forms, Form is the recording and dogmatizing of these forms. Form is thus, strangely, also a type of ‘nothing’—it is a false existence—meaning that there is a ‘good’ nothing that spurs movement through its formlessness, and a ‘bad’ nothing that arrests movement through reification. Thus, while Scholem is surely correct in stating that for the early Buber, the watchword is “not the forms but the forces,” these forces, precisely insofar as they are creative and affirmative, are motivated by the formless principle, that which has no explicit content.

This early philosophy does exist in the latter, not as a metaphysics, but as a dynamics. When Buber tries to explain certain actions (such as artistic creation, the emergence of a tradition) he sometimes draw on his earlier dynamics. Further, the shape of the Gestalt and Form disjunction finds a strong echo in the disjunction between the world of encounter and the world of description. But there are two essential differences between the models. Firstly, the late philosophy employs his early dynamics to explain certain social and artistic creations, but stands without it; the late thought—grounded in being, not becoming—can countenance a number of other dynamic models. Buber’s specific

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description of the dynamics of artistic creation, or the development of new social forms, could be removed without seriously damaging his late work. Secondly, the nothing changes its position: in his later thought, the nothing is not a force of creative destruction intended to keep the wheels of becoming turning, but rather a principle immanent to the structure of singular encounters. The nothing is instead an ontological principle that reflects an essential aspect of how the world of encounter ‘works,’ and is the point of intersection between the two worlds. There is a difference between the two worlds, but that difference is ‘a’ nothing, or a minimal difference. The nothing is, in his late thought, less ‘substantial’: it is one means of expressing existence.

Nothing thus remains as a principle of activity, but not because it is destructive, nor because it spurs forward—it is instead the principle of intercourse without description: from the perspective of description, an encounter is nothing; all I can say-about what I speak-to is ‘nothing.’ What is Jacob beyond the list of his attributes? The Jacob I speak to? From the perspective of speaking-about: nothing. But this is not only an epistemic limitation. Epistemologically, the encounter is described, talked-about, as nothing, but formally this nothing is a function of the encounter, ensuring the openness of the descriptive world to the world of the encounter, as well as ensuring that the world of encounter will empty out into the world of description. So, what ‘is’ nothing?

nothing/something

Buber’s concept of the negative cannot be interpreted through a technical analysis of his language. Buber eschews technical language. Not that he avoids difficult words: his texts are rife with archaic forms and philosophical idioms. But, he does not use a
technical language—where each term would always refers to the exact same thing every time. Thus, it is important to delineate his quasi-technical employment of the term—employment that can be formalized—from his rhetorical uses of the word. The word ‘nothing’ [Nichts] has an affirmative and a derogatory sense; only the affirmative is conceptual, the derogatory sense is rhetorical, suggesting meaninglessness or falsity.\(^{299}\)

Leaving aside the derogatory instances, we find that the term ‘nothing’ has two formal functions: it refers to the manner in which presence appears in the world of description—again, I can say ‘nothing,’ or make no claims about a presence—and, the transitory absoluteness of singular encounters with singulars. Presence, seen under the aspect of description, the world of Turing computation, appears as nothing (meaning, it cannot be known as a particular through its participation in a universal). When I think metaphysically about the world of description, the nothing is a gap in the otherwise ‘full’ world of it-being; presence occurs in the gaps that are found in this world of describable things. In this sense, ‘nothing’ refers to the object of an intentional attitude, an object that is not-a-thing. Here Jean-Luc Nancy’s description of the nothing, given in a series of children’s talks, is a good place to start: “Nothing is the something of that which is no thing. Hence it is not something. And yet it’s not nothing.”\(^{300}\) This echoes Kant’s transcendental object/subject x, the \textit{etwas} that is neither a thing nor nothing. This idea of the substantive nothing refers to the fact that “I am not limited to all those relations I have with things of the world, or even with all the beings of the world. It suggests that there is

\(^{299}\) As an example of a rhetorical, derogatory, sense, total alienation in the world of “faceless digits” leads “only to nothingness [\textit{nur der ins Nichts}]”.\textit{I and Thou}, 75.

something else, which I will here call the ‘opening’. While Buber would likely not use the word ‘opening’ because of its transcendental character, there is a deep parallel here between their works: the nothing refers to ‘something more’ than the relations sketched out in the world of description. To repeat: the nothing is both the inaccessibility of this ‘something that is not a thing,’ and, the way this not-thing disrupts and relativizes the world of description. This is not a trivial matter: without this constituting nothing, there is no way the ‘I’ can emerge out of the In-Between.

My intention is to show that what has often been seen as a ‘problem’ or contradiction in Buber’s thought—the instability of the world of presence—is in fact one of its strengths, and allows us to go a long way towards solving two difficulties in Buber’s thought: the genesis of the ‘I’ out of the relations that precede it (covered in the next chapter), and, the way in which human being is dual, and, given that half of this duality concerns its relation to singulars, is therefore not absolutely limited by its properties. The supposed impossibility of explaining the I’s emergence is one of the most common complaints of Buber’s philosophically minded interpreters. And the transitory structure of encounter is too often dismissed as an ungrounded romanticism. Buber’s occupation with the “melancholy [Schwermut] of our lot” is not, as Kaufmann suggests, merely a psychological ‘generalization’ of a romantic mind, but rather, a fundamental metaphysical principle, without which Buber’s dualities do not make sense. First we will explore the constitutive power of the ‘nothing’ as it appears in I and Thou, then the

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301 God, Justice, Love, Beauty: Four Little Dialogues, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 13. (emphasis added) I have somewhat distorted the exact terminology of Nancy’s text in line with and his and Buber’s shared meaning.
subject of melancholy in the same text. It is hoped that these analyses of concrete
employments of the concept will help elucidate the concept in a more general sense.

**What is nothing?**

There are many difficulties in speaking about nothing, or *Nichts*; these difficulties have
been both embraced and dismissed, with ‘nothing’ considered everything from a
fundamental concept to a linguistic confusion. Heidegger has famously pointed out the
problem with asking what nothing ‘is’: “every answer to this question is
impossible….For it necessarily assumes the form: the nothing ‘is’ this or that.”303 This
seemingly de bars the term ‘nothing’ from entering into any complete and coherent
discourse, unless we are content to speak in paradox and riddles. With all due respect to
the paradox, things are not so gloomy as that. ‘Nothing’ is only contradictory in the
world of description: in the world of things, a no-thing seems nonsensical: “thinking,
which is always essentially thinking *about* something [*wesenhaft immer Denken von
etwas*], must act in a way contrary to its own essence when it thinks of the nothing.”304
But, as a presence, or an intentional object, this is not necessarily the case. In both cases
‘nothing’ is neither a predicate nor a thing. But here Buber and Heidegger’s thinking
diverges. Heidegger takes anxiety—an intentional relation with *no object*—as the place
where nothing is open to analysis. Whereas for Buber the nothing is a point where one of
the two worlds punctures the other.

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303 *What is Metaphysics*, in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell,

304 *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell, Rev. and expanded ed. (San Francisco:
Harper, 1993), S12. (emphasis added)
The nothing is *both* the appearance of presence in the world of things—I can say nothing about it—and the fact that the world of presence cannot be seen from within the world of description as a ‘world’ at all: the world of presence does not ‘hang together’ in any way we can speak-about. While Heidegger wants to enlist ‘nothing’ as a fundamental ontological concept, for Buber the ‘nothing’ is really only important within a theory of persons (his philosophical anthropology): it is how persons as such are spoken-about, and enables people to leave the world of speaking-about and instead speak-to. For Buber, ‘nothing,’ like Kant’s transcendental x, is the invisibility of a relation—from the third person—that is visible only in a relation. Both have no predicates, although, in Kant’s case, predicates circulate around the x, whereas for Buber, the *Nichts* is a non-object and has no predicates whatsoever.

Determining the differences between the *Nichts* and the x will help us understand Buber’s (non-technical) use of the nothing. To recapitulate: the x is an *Etwas* (something) that is not a *Ding* (thing), nor a *Nichts* (nothing). It is a general concept, about which we can *know* nothing, to which predicates—which we can know—attach; the x occurs in between representations and the represented, the gap between the unknowable and the known where the former reaches into the latter.

Kant’s emphasis upon relation, as that which precedes knowledge, is what Buber takes from him. The transcendental x is meant to solve problems inherent to the relation of representation, in particular, dealing with the gap that opens up in perception between the representation and the represented. Buber takes this space of representation, as a space in

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305 In the two worlds we have sketched, the world of description is filled with particulars, while the world of presence is full of singulars
which relation occurs, and transfigures it. Combining aspects of the Mendelssohn
tradition (representation as a bivalent space) and the Kantian tradition (where the space is
constituted by relation itself) he ends up with something like the In-Between. But the In-
Between is not a space of representation: it merely has a similar shape. Representation
leads to too many problems and aporias, and ends up with a Subject whose connection
with other Subjects is either that of shared categories (Kant) or endless mediation
(Mendelssohn). Neither of these are capable of accounting for the presence of singulars.

To deal with presence, or meeting, seems to require an unmediated encounter. But the
unmediated encounter must encounter mediation at every turn, unless it is to be ‘other-
worldly’. The trick is to do this without reducing the unmediated to a form of mediation,
while still giving mediation its due. This is accomplished through the idea of exclusive,
but alternating temporalities. The world of presence, the singular relation to a singular, is
a moment doomed to pass. The world of description, or the cognitive relation to
particulars, hangs together, but is interrupted by the present moment that can open up
onto the world of presence. The world is the shared space of these alternating worlds.
Importantly, language plays a part in both worlds. Language is not always a mediating
force, but is sometimes part of presence itself. Hence Buber’s two worlds: the mediated
world is the world of description, where I speak-about particulars through mediating
concepts; the unmediated world is the world of presence, where I speak-to, or meet-with,
singulars that cannot be fully captured in concepts. However, the alternation between the
two worlds is not fully mechanical, it is asymmetrical. While the particular may turn into
a singular, the singular must give way to the particular.\textsuperscript{306} Where the objects of the descriptive world can be taken up in the world of presence, the latter \textit{must} (for reasons enumerated below) fall back into mediation. The \textit{Nichts} plays two roles here: it is the manner in which presence appears in the world of description, and it is the reason why the unmediated always returns to mediation.

I suggested in chapter two that Kant’s $x$ is presented as a general, but that it would be better read as a gap that establishes the singular, or unique, aspects of subjects and objects. Buber’s \textit{Nichts} is an attempt to do exactly this: to retain the relational space of representation. But he is allergic to reducing encountered objects to their kinds. The problem with Kantian representation is that the constituting subject is too powerful, and determines everything around the $x$ through the categories \textit{I} constitute $x$ by.

Contrariwise, the problem for many idealist commentators (especially Maimon) is that Kant’s constituting subject is also too passive. Maimon and others fairly suggest that this leaves Kant with two kinds of representations (active and passive) and that Kant is incapable of bringing them together in a satisfying manner. Buber proceeds in the opposite direction: to insist that there is no way to cognitively bring together the active and passive, the constituted and unconstituted, the thing and the person, without destroying the latter. What Buber develops as an alternative is an in-between space that is not constituted by me, or by an other, but, insofar as it needs constituting at all, would be done by both of us (and which, conversely, constitutes us).

\textsuperscript{306} It is possible that God is an exception to this. However, \textit{our} relation to God is not exempt from this asymmetrical movement.
Here it is useful to turn away from the philosophical debates that Buber is engaging with, and turn to *I and Thou*. The first important instance of the *Nichts* occurs early on, when Buber is explaining what sort of ‘object’ we have when we ‘say You’: the strange object that results when talking about a presence.

Whoever says You does not *have* something for his object [*kein Etwas zum Gegenstand*]. For wherever there is something there is also another something; every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others. But where You is said there is no something [*ist kein Etwas*]. You has no borders [*Du grenzt nicht*]. Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing [*hat kein etwas, hat nichts*]. But he stands in relation.\(^\text{307}\)

Buber here treats the world of description and the world of use as much the same. One speaks-about, and uses, things. The object of the I-You relation is not the empty *Etwas*, but *Nichts*: one has, describes, nothing. This is perhaps an even more radical move than the one made by Kant. In an obvious sense, this is the old ethical move away from treating persons as things. I can read this as suggesting that the You relation has no ‘object,’ or that the You relation does not objectify. But here, if we take Buber’s language strictly, even the word ‘person’ is probably still too much of a some-thing.

Rather than the ethical injunction to not treat people as objects, we have a strange relation that has nothing as its object. This is why I favour the term singularity over person: in addition to not having the humanist baggage of the word ‘person,’ the singular is, from the standpoint of description, nothing. Even viewed on its own terms, in the world of presence, the singular is, as regards its content and its borders, no-thing. Thus we are not dealing here with the ethical problem, where there is one type of thing (the human) that is not to be viewed only as a thing. Nor is it the Heideggerian problem, where we have two

\(^{307}\) Buber, *I and Thou*, 55. (emphasis added)
types of objects, one good [Ding], one bad [Gegenstand], one facilitating close relations, the other merely erasing distance.\[308\] Instead we have two relations, one with some thing as its object, the other with nothing. This makes it very hard, if not impossible, to determine in advance what sort of object is ‘appropriate’ to the You relation. The field is open for people, trees, totems, house pets, plastic, gods and God. This indeterminate opening is, I would suggest, the reason why ethically determined thinkers (like Lévinas) take issue with Buber, but also, precisely why his thought is useful for religious studies, where the objects of singular relations often surprise the unprepared outsider. The object of singular relations is not a special object that we shouldn’t turn into a thing, it is the object that is not a thing.

The rupture of the world of things by the nothing is complete: “You has no borders”. The nothing does not appear ‘in’ the world of description as another object, as if one could pick the nothing out of a line-up of somethings, or as a special kind of something.\[309\] And neither is it a space in the world of description. Instead, the You is not a thing at all: it occupies the entire relation, unbordered.

But relation to a You does not ‘destroy’ the world of things. Instead, as Theunissen notes: the transcendentally constituted world (the world of things) operates in parallel to the world of presence, and is relativized by it.\[310\] Meaning that insofar as one tries,


\[309\] Buber’s understanding of cognition is one where things are established and understood by their differences from other things: “wherever there is something there is also another something; every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others”. Buber, *I and Thou*, 55.

retroactively, to take the You as a something—to ‘have’ it—it is nothing. To employ the categories of speaking-to and speaking-about: I can, retroactively, speak-about someone I spoke-to, but when I speak-about someone as someone spoken-to, I speak-about nothing. Ultimately, as suggested in the previous chapter, even these categories are inadequate here: speech directions are an excellent positive means of pointing towards the You relation, but, even speaking-to presumes too much about our interlocutor. When I speak-to, I am still too much in charge, I am still overly determining my partner by my concept of what an acceptable interlocutor would be. When I speak-with, I give up even this much.\textsuperscript{311} Thus, while speaking-with is not useful as a way of using language to illustrate an intentional attitude—because it does not posit anything as an object to which to be directed towards—it is very useful as an illustration of what a relation with nothing as its object might look like.

This exclusive You that relativizes the world of description is not an annihilating nothing, but a gap that recontextualizes the world of things.

When I confront a human being as my You… He is no longer \textit{ist er kein} He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. \textit{Not as if there were nothing \textit{nichts} but he; but everything else lives in his light.}\textsuperscript{312}

This re-contextualization is not a function of the strength of a You: the You is not some sort of ultimate signifier which re-defines other things the way one thing defines another.

\textsuperscript{311} ‘With’ is not meant here in the famous sense of Heidegger’s mit-sein. For Heidegger, mit-sein is a category of sorts. With Buber, ‘with’ is being used to point at a specific relation, one that is fragile and need not exist. The ‘with’ in ‘being with you’ is not the same as ‘being with others’, which is more of a pre-existent condition. Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 160, 62.

\textsuperscript{312} Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 59. (emphasis added)
For Buber, *particular* things define each other by their proximities and differences; I can imagine picking out one thing, and then defining all other things by differentiating them from this yardstick, even an absent yardstick. This is not what the You does. The You brings about a completely different relation to other ‘things’ by making them less thing-like. This occurs because the relation to a You ‘forces’ an entry into the world of presence where the ‘whole’ is not composed of parts:

> Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines—one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity—so it is with the human being to whom I say You. I can abstract from him the color of his hair or the color of his speech or the color of his graciousness; I have to do this again and again; but immediately he is no longer You [nicht mehr du].”

313 Here is a strong parallel to Mendelssohn’s notion of beauty as a ‘whole’ composed not of particular parts, but as a harmony of singulars. The key difference is that for Mendelssohn the harmony is given by the absolute: harmony is grounded in God, who backs the cheques written in the name of harmony. Rather than employing a third-person harmony to give a place to singularities, Buber proceeds in the opposite direction: one accesses singulars *only* through a singular relation to a singular. This singular is a whole not composed of parts (or particulars). Such a being cannot appear in a world that is itself composed of parts, but rather, the world is reconfigured by this relation to the singular.314 This change in tactic results directly from the Kantian revolution: harmony, as a metaphysical postulate, is no longer directly accessible to thought; it is transcendent, has no corresponding intuition, and so is invalid as a premise in an argument. Claims

313 Ibid.

314 This is not to suggest that Buber assumes a plurality of harmonies; such a view would not necessarily contradict Buber’s thought, but he himself did not hold it.
about existence, orientation, and singularity will have to emerge out of an encounter that is, at least in part, sensual.\textsuperscript{315}

Buber recognizes that singularities find their place not in a fully ordered world (which would reduce the singular to a particular). In part because of his distaste for disorder, Mendelssohn employed a Leibnizean harmony as a means for allowing singulars to relate to each other without arbitrariness. But both the harmony, and the singulars that compose it, are inaccessible to apodictic thought. Buber thus turns to an anarchic phenomenology. Through his phenomenology of presence, and the metaphysics he builds from it, Buber can convincingly claim that our access to the non-discursive world occurs through the You—that the You is our chief singular object. Only after encountering presence can we—if we desire—postulate harmony, or something like it.\textsuperscript{316}

In any case, my access to singularity must proceed through encounter with a You, and not through a postulated harmony:

\begin{quote}
The form [\textit{Gestalt}] that confronts me I cannot experience nor describe;\textsuperscript{317} I can only actualize it. And yet I see it, radiant in the splendour of the confrontation, far more clearly [\textit{klarer}]! than all clarity of the experienced [\textit{erfahrenen}] world. Not as a thing among the “internal” things, not as a figment of the “imagination,” but as what is \textit{present}. Tested [\textit{geprüft}] for
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{315} In Buber’s hands, the sensual is absorbed into any singular relation. Buber, \textit{Between Man and Man}, 190.

\textsuperscript{316} It is, of course, theologically possible that some other being would not have this limitation; Spinoza, Leibniz, and Mendelssohn all postulate a sort of God that has immediate and absolute access to the harmony \textit{and} its singular components. But after Kant this postulate loses its argumentative force: one can no longer argue from harmony, but only to harmony.

\textsuperscript{317} Buber, because of his antipathy towards the \textit{Lebensphilosophie} of his day, considers experience and the discursive as one piece. His valuable insights into experience and its limitations have been aptly discussed elsewhere. As mentioned, contemporary neo-Straussians and romantic Buberians both ignore this aspect of Buber’s thought and disfigure him, leaving him as a sort of new-Age Romantic Vitalist.
its objectivity, the form is not “there” at all [ist die Gestalt gar nicht »da«]; but what can equal its presence? And it is an actual [wirkliche] relation: it acts [wirkt] on me as I act on it.318

Note the use of Mendelssohnian rationalist language of aesthetics: the singular confrontation is klarer (also translatable as ‘more vivid’) than the clarity of experienced or discursive things. The phenomenology of a ‘present nothing’ follows the contours of aesthetic vividness. At the risk of reducing Buber’s phenomenology to an aesthetics, we can say that the You is seen more in terms of vividness than distinction. The vivid You—the singular that occupies our attention and through its not being a thing reconfigures the discursive world—cannot be ‘tested’.319 Tested for its position in a web of objects, the You is nothing.

arguing about nothing

Given the complicated twofold structure of the nothing, and the even more complicated way it is intertwined with Buber’s theory of the in-between, it has, unsurprisingly, generated several different interpretations. Discussing Michael Theunissen and Jochanan Bloch’s debate about the status of the nothing, Mendes-Flour rather modestly writes: “The divergence of opinion between these perhaps two most significant Buber scholars of our generation is an indication of the exegetical difficulties presented by Buber’s thought.

318 Buber, I and Thou, 61. (emphasis added)
319 ‘Tested’ has both scientific and theological nuances, of which the former dominate here. The theological nuance implies that we cannot ‘test’ a You in the same way it can ‘test’ us; if Abraham was to ‘test’ God, he would find nothing, whereas God’s testing [Gott prüfte Abraham ] of Abraham demonstrates the veracity of Abraham’s “here I am”. [In Buber’s Bible translation: Da bin ich] In the above quote from I and Thou, Buber puts the word ‘there’ [»da«] in quotation marks to differentiate between two types of ‘there’: in the ‘scientific’ sense of an object in a context, distinctly defined by surrounding things; and, in the sense of a presence that is ‘there’ precisely because it is also ‘here,’ or seen from here. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Die Schrift (Berlin: Schocken, 1934), Gen. 22.
These difficulties are, paradoxically, compounded by the relative simplicity and non-technical character of Buber’s discourse. Again, there is a danger in treating the term Nichts as if it is a technical term with an unvarying meaning and a one-to-one relation to a concept. Keeping this in mind, Bloch and Theunissen’s debate bears examination, if only because of the critical acumen they bring to the question of the role ‘nothing’ plays in Buber’s thought. They both radicalize the position of the nothing; Theunissen begins this process by positing Nichts as an intentional object, while Bloch makes the problem self-reflexive, by splitting Nichts into two principles.

To recapitulate: emphasizing the term ‘Nichts’ is intended to demonstrate that Buber’s thought is run through, and enabled by, gaps. These gaps appear in the world of description as ‘nothing,’ but they directly enable, or constitute, the world of presence (even while they ensure its transitoriness). This prevalence of gaps in both worlds, as well as the gap between them, means that each world lacks something that the other provides. The world of description is ‘incomplete’ as regards meaning. But, viewed as a world, a ‘state of affairs’ “extended substantially beyond the realm of the observer,” the world of description is complete. In this sense, the world of presence does not hang together, conceptually, as a world. It is a world of ruptures, or events, but not events determined by their extrinsic relations to each other. We are forced by Buber’s philosophy into a position where the world of description is complete and consistent, but

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320 Mendes-Flohr is an equally significant figure Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 239.
321 As much as Nancy refers to the nothing as an opening into a world like that of presence, one can also say that the nothing opens the world of presence into the world of appearance.
322 Buber, The Knowledge of Man, 60.
intrinsically meaningless, whereas the world of presence is incomplete if not incoherent, yet does have intrinsic value. As he writes, almost point-form:

The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude… The It-world hangs together [Zusammenhang] in space and time. The You-world does not hang together in space and time. The individual You must become an It when the event of relation has run its course. The individual It can become a You by entering into the event of relation. These are the two basic privileges [Grundprivilegien] of the It-world. 323

The world of description is thus only apparently incomplete: instead, we, when engaged in the world of description, are incomplete, while it coheres in a strict sense. When engaged in the world of presence, we are complete, while the world is full of holes.

“[E]ncounters do not order themselves to become a world…[t]hey have no association with each other, but every one guarantees your association with the world. The world that appears to you in this way is unreliable, for it appears always new to you, and you cannot take it by its word”. 324 Thus, as regards completeness, there is an asymmetry between us and the world we are engaged in. 325

The two words and worlds are linked on both sides: on one, they are linked by the word ‘I’ which occurs in both word pairs; on the other, they are linked by the fact that both worlds are the world. As regards the I: the word pairs share one term, the ‘I’; but, the ‘I’ is different in each relation—“The I of the basic word I-You is different from that of the

323 I and Thou, 85 BW 1, 100. (emphasis in original)
324 Here, the fact that the world of presence opens onto the world of description, is stated more emphatically, less melancholically than below; here it provides a sense of security I and Thou, 84 BW 1, 100
325 This position is articulated in his claim that: “The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one’s whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being.” I and Thou, 54.
basic word I-It” in that the former is a singular person, the latter, the ego as object.\textsuperscript{326} There are two different ways for the I to be constituted by gaps: on the side of the person, the gap occurs within the person and its relations (melancholy and the transitory nature of the person relation being the best examples); on the side of the ego, the gap occurs outside the person, establishing a discrete relation to a world of discrete things. The two different ‘I’s are absolutely different in terms of their relation to the world, but, the distance between them is vanishingly close.

The world, while twofold, is held in common, and unified in that sense: “The world is twofold [\textit{zwiefältig}] for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.”\textsuperscript{327} The way the world is dual is connected to the duality of the person, but it would be hasty to say that the duality is a ‘projection’, or way of ‘carving up’ the world. The intentional attitude is as much a function of the encountered as it is a function of the ‘I’. The world is the world on account of it being shared, but ‘two worlds’ because the shared world is twofold for all the persons sharing it.

Both Bloch and Theunissen are interested in developing Buber’s philosophy beyond the description he gives of it. Theunissen’s work, developed before Bloch’s, engages Buber against the background of transcendental phenomenological thought. Not because Theunissen thinks Buber belongs to the transcendental phenomenological tradition, but because he believes dialogicism is formed in opposition to it. Theunissen’s interpretation follows Lévinas’ paper “Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge, although Theunissen is a more sympathetic reader.. In a footnote, Theunissen writes:

\textsuperscript{326} \textit{I and Thou}.  
\textsuperscript{327} \textit{I and Thou}, 53, BW1, 79.
I agree with him [Lévinas] not in his criticism, to be sure, but in the general tendency of his interpretation of Buber. Even Lévinas tries to see Buber in the context of the philosophical endeavors of the twentieth century. However, he brings dialogic back too closely to fundamental ontology and does not distinguish sharply enough between Buber’s attempt at an overcoming and Heidegger’s attempt at a grounding of intentionality.328

It is unfortunate that he does not spell out exactly what ‘general tendency’ he is following; I can only assume he is referring to Lévinas’ claim that the in-between is Buber’s “foundation and ultimate structure of being”—a claim Buber emphatically rejected. Buber makes almost no general ontological claims. And, insofar as he does develop an ontology, he is quite clear that the in-between is ontologically preceded by the more primitive Urdistanz. Urdistanz is the “anthropological presupposition” of the I-You (and the I-It); the I-It is the remaining within and refining of the Urdistanz, while the I-You crosses over the Urdistanz and establishes relation. The in-between comes into the picture to ground the I-You.329 In terms of ontological hierarchy, the in-between is hardly originary: it is too fragile to be fundamental; arguably, it is not an ontological concept, but rather, one point of access to ontological thought.

While it is far from clear that Theunissen himself does not bring Buber’s thought ‘back too closely’ to general ontology, his implicit move towards grounding the in-between in Nichts is a definite improvement on Lévinas’ interpretation. Theunissen was the first serious thinker to propose that, while the ‘nothing’ is the way in which presence must

328 Theunissen, The Other : Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, 405 fn 27.
329 This is all expressed in a rather heated response to Lévinas. In the same text, but in a different response, Buber notes that the life of dialogue does not have “general supremacy,” but is of special importance for “personal existence of man” Buber, Philosophical Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich, 27, 40. (emphasis added)
appear in the world of description, the nothing (or something like it) is also, and more importantly, the ‘engine’ or event that drives Buber’s metaphysics, allowing the in-between to occur in the first place. Theunissen blocks the merely epistemic reading of ‘nothing’ when he writes that: “the Thou [presence] is, in Buber's sense, experienced as nothing and not characterized as nothing only for lack of adequate expressions.”

The difficulties begin when he suggests that Nichts is a transcendent concept, and that in introducing it, Buber violates his supposedly transcendental project. These two (similar seeming) terms have, after Kant, very different definitions: transcendental deals with the a priori constitutive conditions of thinking; the transcendent refers to objects beyond the reach of standard human cognition. Theunissen holds that the Nichts is, despite appearances, secretly transcendent rather than transcendental. This because it is intended to reach beyond the world of appearances.

[T]he something is certainly the noematic correlate or the intentional object of perception, sensation, representation, willing, feeling, thinking, and, in the end, speaking about. Nothing, however, is "not something," and therefore not an intentional object. Whoever speaks Thou has nothing for this very reason, that he has nothing for an intentional object.

The important, and, I believe, correct part of this is that in an I-You relation I have ‘nothing’ as an intentional object; this is not the same as having ‘no object,’ but suggests that this intentional object is Nichts. However, Theunissen reads the rupture of the Nichts as a complete rupture, meaning, one that completely abandons the world. Thus Theunissen writes that the relation to presence “is also nothing from the standpoint of

\[330\] Theunissen, The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, 322.
\[331\] The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, 316.
experience because I cannot go to it straight away as existing, but can only approach it by suspending that which initially forces itself upon me as existing.”332 If this is true, it is a problem, because it relegates presence to the non-existent, or, at least, an existence that is only visible once I clear the ‘world’ out of my way: the world of description, of things, is in this sense always an obstacle to realizing a relation to presence.333 And there is no doubt that Buber’s sometimes derisive descriptions of the describable suggest this.

However, there is another way of dealing with the problem of having Nichts as an intentional object. Rather than seeing—or positing—a contradiction with Buber’s supposed commitment to transcendental/anthropological restriction, one can interpret the word ‘Nichts’ more expansively. This is Bloch’s move. Bloch interprets Buber’s employment of concepts (such as Nichts) as moves to engage the intellectual culture of his day. Buber, on this reading, is more concerned with illuminating a ‘mystery’ pulled from Judaism (in particular, the Hasidic tradition), and not concepts of transcendental philosophy. Theunissen can then be accused of reading Buber too much as a transcendental philosopher. This is certainly true, at least in part. Buber self-consciously employed philosophical language to point at things he felt philosophy could not deal with.334 But, arguably, much as Theunissen makes Buber too much the transcendental philosopher (and finds him wanting), Bloch makes Buber too much a sage, for whom

332 *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, 322.
333 Oddly, as concerns the Nichts, the opposite that is the case: the nothing prevents access to individual things.
entry into philosophical dialogue is always an intervention aimed at bringing thinking to 
the threshold of a mystery. This neglects Buber’s above claim that he is not just bound to 
philosophical language, but also, to its method. The important thing is to read Buber as a 
philosopher, but not necessarily as a transcendental philosopher. Buber is not a 
philosopher with a technical language, or system, and Bloch is surely correct to resist 
reading a term in a technical manner when the reading contradicts claims Buber makes 
repeatedly. But, even though we need to avoid Theunissen’s reading of Buber as a 
transcendental thinker, it is important that we maintain Theunissen’s key insight: the 
Nichts and its analogous concepts (the ‘gap,’ the ‘invisible’) serve a philosophical 
function beyond their phenomenological role (the appearance of the singular in the world 
of description). 335

Where Theunissen uses Buber’s language in a technical manner, resolving apparent 
contradictions through transcendental structures, Bloch follows Buber’s 
phenomenological experiments (“pointing”), and if the thing (or person) pointed at seems 
to belie Buber’s descriptions, Bloch proposes an alternate phenomenology with a 
corresponding metaphysics that tries to do it justice. 336 This ensures that Buber’s 
philosophical explications are kept within the phenomenological frame for which they are 
intended.

335 Buber often employs ‘being’ in his later work in much the same way he employs the 
word ‘nothing’ in his earlier work; For instance: “In any case, it can be reported here, as 
the repartee of reality, what befell me several times in my youth: I wanted to fix an 
object, to compel it, as it were, in order to find through so doing that it was "only" my 
conception; but it refuted me through the dumb force of its being.” Philosophical 
Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, 
Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich, 36.
Bloch suggests Theunissen's overly transcendental interpretation draws from a transcedent notion of God—and a theology of ‘absolute otherness’ that accompanies this—that is illicitly applied to the You relation. This leads to a reading where the Nichts has to do all the work required to both preserve the absolute otherness of God or You, and, to bring them back into the picture. This, in turn leads to an overly ‘analytic’ reading of Nichts, as a form of metaphysical negation.

According to Buber the Thou is “not” an existent thing. Theunissen concludes from this that the “Thou” frees itself from the existent thing and transcends it. To this I reply that the “not” of the Thou is not a “not” in the logical sense which belongs to the domain of existent things; in other words, it is not the “not of the It”. Since it is not the “not” of the It, it does not negate the existent thing as one existent thing negates another. Hence it is possible that the Thou is identical with the being of the existent thing.

This is on point. Arguably, however, Bloch goes much further, reading Buber not as a thinker of transcendence, but immanence, where the ‘nothing’ is always identical with an object it negates (and does not in any way point beyond the immanent field of existence). This is too strong a reading, and overly privileges the way presence negates things, and ignores the way in which presence—through its transitory character—negates itself to open onto the world of things. Buber’s philosophy commits itself to neither transcendence or immanence; both are heuristics, and do not describe things ‘in-themselves’ or methodological rules. But Bloch is important if only because he tames Theunissen’s reading. Where Theunissen focuses our attention upon the Nichts as a

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337 Buber did not have a Lévinasian theology. God is not the absolutely other, but the absoluteness of the other—and this absoluteness is not the essence (or “quintessence”) of the other. Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy*, 67.

338 Bloch, "The Justification and Futility of Dialogical Thinking," 57. (emphasis added)
(supposedly) essential building block in Buber’s ontology, Bloch expands the Nichts by interpreting it in light of Buber’s dualities.

When Buber says that we do not know anything of the Thou, he means that we must abandon not only things, but also noetic knowledge. But then we cannot attain the “nothing” through noetic knowledge… In the statement “one knows nothing of the You’ Theunissen sees a kind of hole punched in the universe of things, through which we can get beyond it. But according to their spirit these words mean nothing more than that a presence has opened up… [T]here is indeed a gap between it and objectivity—but nevertheless this presence is identical with objective reality, though we cannot define this identicalness. 339

In this very rich passage, Bloch clearly expresses the problems with reading Buber as a kind of transcendental philosopher, even one of ‘opposition’. Further, Bloch makes a very compelling case for viewing the Nichts as an opening that leads not out of, but into, the world. But, it is far from clear that the opening to presence must open up to the world of things. Both thinkers can perhaps be accused of making the same error, but in different directions: for Theunissen, the Nichts opens into a transcendent presence, whereas for Bloch, it opens into a presence that is in some way identical with immanent

339 This is also an excellent, if unintended, rebuttal of Woods’ claim that Buber’s idea of the relation to presence is an ‘identity in difference’; despite how compelling this reading is for those of us influenced by deconstruction, ‘identity in difference’ tries to rid us of presence’s conceptual difficulties at the cost of his phenomenology: “Martin Buber introduced the notion of an ontologically prior relation of Presence, binding subject and object together in an identity-in-difference which he termed the I-Thou relation and which constitutes the region of what he calls the Between.” While it is true that the presence relation, the in-between, precedes the categories of subject and object, this insight is extrapolated to the point of being unusable when Wood writes: “This is the paradox of awareness itself: that the mind exists in itself to the extent that it exists outside itself with the Other. But to be with the Other in the cognitive mode is to be aware of otherness and hence to ground the awareness of one’s own distinctness. Awareness is an identity-in-difference.” It is far from clear that the mind is ‘outside itself’ when meeting in the in-between. The in-between is neither in the mind, nor outside it. It is clear that it is intended to call this entire mode of thinking into question. "The Justification and Futility of Dialogical Thinking," 56. Robert E. Wood, Martin Buber's Ontology; an Analysis of I and Thou (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), xii,67. (emphasis added)
things. Instead, I suggest that the *Nichts* is an opening that opens up into a singular encounter, but that to determine in advance the specific relation this presence will have with the world (transcendent or immanent) is premature. Especially if the intention is to mobilize Buber’s thought for the study of religion, it is important that both options remain available. The encounter with a tree might open up an encounter that is in some way identical with the tree itself; it might open up an encounter that dissolves the world of things entirely. In both cases, what is essential is that the *Nichts* opens up a space other than the world of things, and, that it recontextualizes the world of things through this opening. Theunissen assumes that the transitory relation with a singularity requires a space entirely outside the world and its things. Bloch assumes that because singular encounters always end, returning us to the world of things, the singular encounter is in some way identical to the things we return to. I would hold that the transitory character owes itself to the way the *Nichts* constitutes the singular, to express the way a singular encounter is both autonomous and yet able to recontextualize the world of things. The auto-negating, or transitoriness of singular encounters, is better explicated from the perspective of the second person encounter than a third-person metaphysics. Unfortunately, the most compelling example Buber gives of this—melancholy—has been poorly interpreted by one of Buber’s most influential translators, which has had an unfortunate effect upon the transmission of his ideas.

**melancholy of the gaps**

One way the *Nichts* constitutes the encounters of human singularities—and likely others—is illustrated by what Buber call the “sublime melancholy of our lot”. *Die Schwermut* (melancholy) which has little to do with the Freudian concept of the same
name, is an excellent demonstration of the way in which the gaps in the world of presence are a necessary part of its structure.\textsuperscript{340} Melancholy is an engine that helps generate singularity, at least insofar as humans have access to it. Simply put, melancholy is the fact that no relation to presence, no I-You, can last: it \textit{must} disappear, and the world of description, or \textit{Urdistanz}, is always re-entered. Presence cannot sustain itself. This has long been seen as a defect of Buber’s thinking, a romantic excess. Kaufmann puts it thus:

\begin{quote}
Genuine dialogue, as Buber himself knew and insisted, involves duality. . . . But what he failed to see clearly is that genuine dialogue involves a duality not only of two partners but also of feeling and reason and that neither thought nor the perception of details are necessarily melancholy lapses from a genuine I-You relationship. On the contrary, without them there is no genuine I-You relationship but only self-indulgence, self-absorption, self-deception - a romantic dream\textsuperscript{341}
\end{quote}

There is, perhaps, no reason to be depressed by the fact that any relation to presence is destined to end.\textsuperscript{342} However, this depression, or lack thereof, is not really the point of Buber’s analysis of \textit{Schwermut}, and the focus upon it mars Kaufmann’s analysis. The necessary lapses of presence-relations is not some depressing ‘extra,’ or a ‘bad feeling’ we may as well not have. They are, instead, an essential part of the singular’s ability to autonomously recontextualize, or change, the world of description. As we will see, Buber also assigns no less important a term than ‘actualization’ to lapses in presence (when they are productive). Actualization was the lynch-pin of his early thought—the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{340} Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 68 BW 1,89.,
\textsuperscript{342} The fact that Kaufmann considers the relation to presence as one of ‘feeling’ is itself problematic: there are plenty of feelings in the realized world of description, and presence is not allergic to thinking (merely thinking-about). The switch is not from feeling to thinking, but from presence to description, singular to particular.
\end{footnotesize}
moment at which an encounter moves from form to creation. But while actualization was the ecstatic goal of his eager youth, it becomes a painful necessity in his later thinking.

*I and Thou’s* first description of this movement is worth citing in full:

> This, however, is the sublime melancholy of our lot, that every You must become an It in our world. [*Daß aber ist die erhabene Schwermut unseres Loses, daß jedes Du in unserer Welt zum Es werden muß.*] However exclusively present [*ausschließlich gegenwärtig*] it may have been in the direct relationship—as soon as the relationship has run its course or is permeated by means, [*Mittel*] the You becomes an object among objects, possibly the noblest one and yet one of them, assigned its measure and boundary. The actualization [or realization] of the work involves a *loss of actuality* [*Am Werk bedeutet Verwirklichung im einem Entwirklichung im anderen Sinn*]....[T]he natural being that only now revealed itself to me in the mystery of reciprocity has again become describable, analyzable, classifiable—the *point* at which manifold systems of laws intersect.344

I would like to highlight the link between melancholy and realization (or actualization).

The singular relation cannot itself be a thing. Therefore if we do not respond to it, it disappears, overwhelmed by the exigencies of the thing world. But, even if we do respond to it, it is fated to disappear. Responding to the singular requires that we actualize it. Something so simple as the call to change our life, found in many an encounter, requires that the ‘message’ of the singular be actualized in the world of things—my day to day life is almost exclusively composed of things and thing relations—and this actualization in the world of things means that the singularity of the singular disappears so I can go about making actual changes. The singular presence calls for a response, and this response removes the actual presence.

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343 Daniel is subtitled *Gespräche von der Verwirklichung*. This has been translated as both ‘actualization’ and ‘realization’ Buber, *Werke*, 1, 9.
344 *I and Thou*, 68 BW 1,89., (emphasis added)
As mentioned, in the absence of harmony, there is seemingly no way to ‘tame’ singulars. Singulars establish their own, transitory, universals; they do not follow rules that define them in advance and place them as one individual in a collection or set. The difficulty with this position is that, in the absence of a harmony to ensure the singulars all ‘work’ in relation to each other, there is no way of limiting the claims of any given singular.

Singulars are exclusive, and during an encounter, everything else is seen in relation to them. But how is it that exclusive singulars do not just contradict each other, and lead us into a situation of war between the claims of different singular encounters? Revelation is an obvious example here: I have an encounter with a singular (which I call God); this exclusive singular demands that I re-contextualize everything in relation to it. But then, later, I encounter someone else, who has had a different singular encounter, and is also busy re-contextualizing everything in its light. It seems that our different schemes for re-contextualizing and actualizing lead us into an irreconcilable conflict.

Mendelssohn’s solution is compelling: all singulars are in a harmony. Thus we should try to harmonize our claims, not in terms of their content, but their form. This does not mean we believe in a plurality of Gods who are harmonized by some sort of higher synthesis. Rather, we harmonize our claims in light of the fact that each of us has access to singularity only through ‘twofold’ representation. While the object of these representations may well be ineffable and singular, the other ‘half’ of the representation relation, the part that points to us, is anything but. If we are to take the singularity of our encounter seriously, we need to accept that our representations are ‘all too human’ and cannot properly represent this singularity. There is always a space between our response and the singular we are responding to. Therefore our goal is to recognize the intrinsic
limitations of the finite ways in which we respond to the singular, and try perfect our
different positions by bringing them into harmony (which is not agreement).

This solution, while compelling, is unsustainable after Kant: both the harmony, and our
inclusion in it, cannot be anything more than possible ideals, and have lost their binding
force. It is difficult to imagine an argument (other than a pragmatic or aesthetic one) why
we should all agree that harmony is a good ideal; the ‘war of all against all’ can make
equal claim to be a regulative ideal.

Buber’s solution is to hold that there is no way to tame singulars. Encounter is anarchic,
and the in-between is an unregulated zone. There cannot be an a priori normative
structure to encounter. This is Lévinas’ bone of contention with Buber: for Buber, there
is nothing ‘automatically’ ethical about presence. In order to instantiate an ethical frame
that contain singular encounters, Lévinas’ ‘encounter’ is with an other is always ‘already
there’ in an asymmetrical manner, hidden in the structure of language. The asymmetry
prefigures the encounter such that the ‘You’ is always “higher” than the ‘I’. I would
suggest that Lévinas, in forcing the primacy of ethics, disfigures the singularity of the
encounter. For him it is essential that the encounter accomplish something—the
construction of the ethical situation—within the encounter itself. For Buber, and I
believe this is correct, the encounter precedes the ethical, it is the root of the ethical (qua

345 See Lévinas’ questions in: Philosophical Interrogations: Interrogations of Martin
Buber, John Wild, Jean Wahl, Brand Blanshard, Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Paul
Tillich, 24. And his objections in: Emmanuel Lévinas, Proper Names (Stanford, Calif.:
Stanford University Press, 1996), 32. Lévinas holds that Buber all encounters are
symmetrical, and therefore formal. Buber claims that this is a misreading, and that
symmetry is only the ideal of encounter. I would press the attack, and claim that the
problem with any necessarily symmetrical account of relation lies in its necessity, and not
its symmetry. It is thus Lévinas’ necessary asymmetry that is too formal.
response-ability) but it is not necessarily ethical (I can easily imagine an unethical response). The encounter is a gamble, and to determine it in advance by any frame, no matter how elevated, is a mistake. Lévinas’ employment of the (secularized) Protestant concept of the “absolutely other” seemingly ‘frees’ the other, but in fact conscripts You into an ethical project that pre-exists both of us.346

Because conscripting the You in an ethical project would violate its singularity, and because Mendelssohn’s ethic of harmonious perfection is unavailable, Buber allows the singular presence to do as it wishes: it is unconstrained, even by other singular presences. But there is a cost to this. If the singular presence is unconstrained, then, any constrained thing is not a singular presence. This is the limitation of the world of presence: presences are limited by their lack of limitation, hence ‘the actualization of the work involves a loss of actuality’. To do anything, to act, requires limits, and thus an unlimited demand disappears in its execution. Ignoring the chiasmic, rhetorical ring of these sentences, we can (and Buber does) explain very concrete structures, such as melancholy, with this.

So, it is not because of some deficiency on our part that the encounter must ‘become an object among objects’; in actualizing an encounter it is limited, and thereby destroyed. But, to try and simply remain in the presence is to avoid doing anything. This, especially to a contemplative person, may not be a problem. But it is for Buber, because the singular presence addresses us; and to respond, we need to do something, to actualize

346 On Lévinas and cold war Protestant theology, see Moyn, Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics, 12.
something. An unresponsive perpetual openness is inhuman (in a derogatory sense). As Buber writes:

Spirit in its human manifestation is man’s response [Antwort] to his You... Only silence [Schweigen] toward the You... the taciturn waiting in the unformed [ungeformten]... leaves the You free and stands together with it in reserve where the spirit does not manifest itself but is. All response binds the You into the It world. That is the melancholy of man, and that is his greatness. For thus knowledge, thus works, thus image and example come into being among the living.347

Response pulls us away from the presence we are responding to, and back into the world of means, descriptions, and individuals. The unbounded You is limited and bound precisely when we actualize the unbounded demand it makes on us. It is banished by the finitude that drawing lines and acting requires.348 Actualization exchanges the reality of presence for the reality of creation or action; the ‘nothing’ of the presence becomes a ‘point’ (the closest thing to nothing in the ‘manifold systems of laws’).349

Therefore, pace Kaufmann, we can say that Buber well aware that there needs to be a duality of presence and description—what Kaufmann unfortunately calls a duality between thinking and feeling—and that such a duality is necessitated by the ‘nothing’ of presence.350 Presence is limited by nothing. The fact that we can read the previous sentence in two radically different ways is testament to the duality that shoots through the world of persons.

347 Buber, I and Thou, 89, BW 1, 103.
348 Wolfson describes a similar process in Buber’s more explicitly theological thought: “it is only through this distance that man receives his task to unify the world, i.e., to prepare the world for the dialogical relationship. Hence, Buber concludes, revelation is fulfilled only when it takes the form of action in the world.” Wolfson, "The Problem of Unity in the Thought of Martin Buber," 443.
349 Buber, I and Thou, 89, BW 1, 103.
Melancholy is thus in no way a romantic, or hopeless, pining: I do not necessarily mourn the You I once encountered. But, it is fair to be upset that the fullness of presence is doomed to disappear precisely through my being true to it: ‘That is the melancholy of man, and that is his greatness’. Less dramatically, we could say: the gaps within the world of presence enable human response and creation to enter into the delineated world.

Intriguingly, it is speaking with house cats that led Buber to realize this. “No other event has made me so deeply aware of the evanescent actuality in all relationships to other beings, the sublime melancholy of our lot, the fated lapse into It of every single You.” But here the melancholy is rooted in the fickleness of the You: presence requires not only that I open myself to the other, but also that the other deign to meet me. This is the combination of works (openness) and grace (the other meeting me) that Buber often returns to. When the You is God, we have the exact opposite problem, while the effect is the same: “Only one You never ceases, in accordance with its nature to be You for us. To be sure, whoever knows God also knows God’s remoteness and the agony of drought upon a frightened heart, but not the loss of presence. Only we are not always there.”

Here our melancholy is rooted not in the fact that the You might look away, but purely in the structure of the singular object: even the object that is always there for us cannot always be present, because, again, any response requires limitations, and we cannot limit the unlimited without leaving it. But it is in this process of leaving, in this ‘back and forth’ between a singular and an individual, that the twofold person world comes into being: “[An Encounter] lacks density, for everything in it permeates everything else. It lacks duration, for it comes even when not called and vanishes even when you cling to

351 I and Thou, 146, BW 1, 44. (emphasis added)
it... *You cannot come to an understanding about it with others; you are lonely with it; but it teaches you to encounter others and to stand your ground in such encounters.*” 352 

Distance facilitates relation, but relation is itself shot through with distance. The gap is not merely something that must be leapt over into relation, but relation itself is constituted by gaps, hence its ‘lonely’ character.

**nothing doing**

This chapter has sought to explain the role that *Nichts* plays in Buber’s thought through an extensive reading of *I and Thou*. At the very least, it has been demonstrated that the basic dualities which structure Buber’s thinking are expressed by the different ways that the *Nichts* constitutes objects and relations. More strongly, I would propose that, so far as metaphysics is concerned, the *Nichts* not only expresses the dual structure, but actually facilitates it. At the beginning of this chapter, I proposed two sets of differences that run through Buber’s dualities: the first concerned appearances and meaning, the second, the constitution of objects. The first set concerned the way the *Nichts* crosses over between the two worlds. It is the value of a singularity appearing in the world of particularity (nothing), and the means by which the singularity is able to relativize the world of things in light of it being a *Nichts*. The first claim was largely dealt with by chapter three (*Jacob qua* Jacob appears as nothing from the perspective of particulars). The second claim was dealt with here on several fronts, in particular the idea of opening, and the idea of a whole that is not composed of parts. The second set of differences is more formal, and concerns the constitution of objects. Particulars in the world of description are differentiated from each other by extrinsic negations or differences. Singulars are constituted by an intrinsic

352 *I and Thou*, 84 BW 1, 100  (emphasis added)
Nichts, that ensures they are both transitory and autonomous. The first claim was not
dealt with at length, in part because it is a rather conventional way of looking at things,
and, because it is the least important role of the Nichts so far as the philosophy I am
developing is concerned. The second claim was dealt with at length both because it is
unintuitive (how can anything be both transitory and absolute) and because it is an
essential element of the in-between.

Again, a complete theory of the in-between is beyond the reach of a single project. I
instead hope to motivate investigations in it, and explain how such a thing is even
possible. Here, however, I have tried to accomplish a little bit more than that.
Explicating the second claim of the second set of differences will have hopefully helped
articulate the actual way in which meetings between singulars happen, and perhaps give a
feel for what they look like. While I have intentionally avoided concrete examples, the
negative explication of the absolute and yet transitory structure of the meeting with the
singular object is intended to illuminate the contours of what goes on in the in-between.
As mentioned in chapter 3, I wrote that ‘the In-Between is a space of relations between
two persons present to each other, without which this presence would not be possible’. I
believe it is now possible to present this claim within a formal philosophical frame: the
in-between is the absolute and transitory space where singulars encounter each other. It
is thus a fragile space: this is not an ‘always already there’ ontological ground—despite
the claims of Lévinas and Theunissen—but is coterminous with singulars themselves, and
is as delicate as singularities themselves are. It is a space that is enabled by the singulars
themselves, and, in turn, enables the singulars. This chapter should have expressed, at
least in part, how encounters with singulars constitute an in-between space. The more
problematic claim, how the in-between space constitutes singulars, is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter Five: Genesis and Personhood

This dissertation seeks to explicate a trajectory of thought which finds fruition in Buber’s philosophy of the in-between, to propose positive phenomena which indicate its actuality and usefulness as a concept, and to articulate its structure through a treatment of the role the Nichts plays in Buber’s thought. The intention throughout has been to both explicate Buber’s thought in a philosophical key, demonstrating his role in a philosophical tradition, and formalizing his often deceptively simple writings in order to clarify and develop their explanatory and expressive power for philosophical research. All of this has been done in order to articulate Buber’s idea of singularity and the in-between. This, final, chapter, will investigate the role of such ideas for specifically human singularities.

It is hoped that one day these ideas will be developed to the point that they can play a role in the study of religion. It is unlikely that a task of this magnitude can be done by any one person, let alone any one book. I have thus directed my efforts to a more modest task: formalizing and explicating Buber’s basic ideas. To this end, rather than focus upon the category of ‘human being,’ I have privileged the more expansive category of ‘singularity’ in the hope that it allows for a clearer, if perhaps less vivid, presentation of Buber’s philosophy. Scholars of religion often encounter relations where at least one of the participants is not human. Singularity allows us to take seriously the notion of non-human encounter without having to hold a Feuerbachian position, and claim that any encounter with a non-natural being is a case of a misdirected object (what is often called projection). It is possible to philosophically account for encounters with singulars that seem to violate our standard descriptive world view, precisely because all encounters do so. However, it seems likely that at least one of the singularities in a religious encounter
is human. Religion, so far as we know, is a human affair. Thus, in this final chapter I
plan to step back from the formal apparatus I have been developing, and focus upon the
place of the human in Buber’s theory of encounter.

There is a second reason for focussing on the specifically human singularities: I plan to
respond to a criticism which has been voiced in several forms by Buber’s critics: how is it
possible that the encounter with singularities constitute the human person? On first
glance, it seems that a meeting is impossible without two pre-established persons to do
the meeting. A more formal way of phrasing this question is: how is it possible for the
in-between to be coterminous with, or even precede, the singulars encountering?

As I have hinted throughout this dissertation, the answer to this question is found in
Buber’s employment of the negative, specifically the ideas of Nichts and Urdistanz. A
mistake made by several of Buber’s critics is to assume that the in-between precedes all
other categories. This is not the case. This mistake owes itself to a confusion between
Buber’s transcendental claims and his genetic claims (genetic is meant not in the
biological sense, but the logical, meaning ‘manner of formation’). Transcendentally
speaking—meaning, in terms of the a priori of an experience of presence—Urdistanz, the
gaps, the Nichts, precede relation. But in terms of the genesis of a human person,
relation, albeit an undifferentiated relation, precedes distance. Many commentators have
assumed that the genetic model is equivalent to the transcendental model, and thus that
the in-between with which human life begins is also the basic building block out of which
Buber constructs his ontology. If only to help counteract this, I have focussed upon
Buber’s transcendental and aesthetic methods, where the in-between is obviously not the
starting point, but the structure of one set of relations (however desirable). However,
now, in order to help develop this theory for the study of religion, and to explain the origin of many mis-conceptions, I will reverse course, and show the relation between Buber’s genetic account of personhood, and the philosophical model I have articulated.

Here Buber’s employment of Nichts as the presupposition of, and constitutive force within, relation, solves a number of problems, but opens up many more. One difficulty here is that when we deal with persons we deal with something that was once a baby, meaning, something for which the ideas of distance and negation are problematic. The theory of singulars seems to assume an ability to enter into relations that is, if not adult, certainly discrete. Infants—to say nothing of foetuses—are far from being discrete entities, and pose problems for many formal systems. However, these difficulties can act as a spur for thought. The problem of the infant, the ‘primitive,’ or the inchoate individual, when framed well, can aid our thinking because adults themselves are not nearly so discrete as we are sometimes inclined to think. As social beings, adults exist in complicated networks of inter-dependence. But, still, there is an obvious way in that adults have an autonomous I which they are not born with: human persons need to develop or be developed, and a genetic account will need to explain how this is possible.

This chapter will not be engaging any natural scientific, anthropological, or psychological, literature. The intention is to explore Buber’s theories as they relate to the genesis of the person. In order to respond to the criticism that the emergence of the human person out of the in-between is impossible, it need not be shown how this actually occurs, but merely that it is possible. Buber’s analyses of the problems posed by the genesis of the person will provide at least one way that such an emergence can be thought. As regards the application of these ideas to the study of religion, the goal here is
even more modest: I will explicate Buber’s idea of the human singularity as it relates to his broader categories. This will require an excursion into his anthropology, one that is dated, and, in some respects, probably even offensive. However, it is to be hoped that, in addition to clearing up confusions, this excursion will provide construction materials for the future development of his ideas.

**negative anthropology**

Buber’s concerns are both of his time, and specific to his own thought. His concern with relating the genesis of the ‘I’ to an other is very much of his time: certainly his friend Mauthner believed there is no ego, or self, without an other, as did Husserl, Heidegger, and countless others.\(^{353}\) All were concerned with the development of a philosophy that not only grounded the ‘psychological’ genesis of the self, but that answered a serious social problem: are social entities composed of pre-existent individuals (gathered into a whole,) or, are selves individuated out of these wholes? For Buber, the answer is: neither. Both the self, and the collective follow from more primitive relations. As he writes rather pithily: “We may suppose that relations [Beziehungen] and concepts, as well as the notions [Vorstellungen] of persons and things, have gradually crystallized out of notions [Vorstellungen] of relational processes and states [Beziehungsvorgängen und Beziehungszuständen].”\(^{354}\) First there are actual relations as states and processes. From this follows representations of these relations. Then we return to actual relations again, but this time armed with concepts. These are expanded into more complicated social and conceptual networks.

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\(^{354}\) Buber, *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 70, BW1, 90.
Here an obvious question surfaces: how does this concept ridden person emerge out of a pre-conceptual actuality? How do primitive relations develop into more sophisticated social ones? More specifically: how does individuation out of encounter occur? These questions are no trivial. Buber’s thought does not need to answer those who want a properly psychological, biological, or historical account of the emergence of the self out of the in-between, those who, as he puts it “treat the essentially hidden…as something essentially given”. However, a philosophical story, of some sort, is needed. No less a commentator than Theunissen thinks that Buber doesn’t have one.

Let us summarize Theunissen’s critique, because it is repeated, in some form or another, in much of the secondary literature. First, we have his reading of the primary claim of dialogism: “[T]he claim to originality on the part of the philosophy of dialogue finds its comprehensive expression [in the] thesis [that] runs as follows: The event of the meeting, the ‘between,’ is earlier than those meeting each other.” So far, so good. Then, however, his assumptions about Buber become all too Lévinasian. “So the precedence of the Thou over the I… is still only the clothing in which the precedence of the between over the I and the Thou manifests itself to me, the one who is met in the meeting.” This claim is tricky because it combines truth with error. On the one hand, it is true that the in-between is announced in the intensity of the You, as that which can make sense of the encounter. But it is far from obvious that the You takes precedence over the I. And this initial assumption leads to his mis-reading the way that the in-between is prior to the

355 The Knowledge of Man, 149, BW 1, 424.
356 Theunissen, The Other : Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, 365. (emphasis added)
357 The Other : Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, 287.
I. As Buber testily writes to Lévinas: “The ‘asymmetry’ [the precedence of the You] is only one of the possibilities of the I-Thou relation, not its rule, just as mutuality in all its gradations cannot be regarded as the rule. Understood in utter seriousness, the asymmetry that wishes to limit the relation to the relationship to a higher would make it completely one-sided”\textsuperscript{358} What seems a trifling error sets us on a cul-de-sac: from the supposed priority of the You, it is a few short steps to Theunissen’s ‘realization’ that the I is in fact prior, despite what Buber explicitly claims.

Theunissen’s argument that the ‘I’ is secretly prior to the You is founded in his belief that, for Buber, the I is always the centre-point of the world:

The human being engaged by the Thou-I or the It-I occupies the central position to the extent that he is the place at which the destiny of the world is decided. The world, however, no matter whether It-world or Thou-world, surrounds the actual I in concentric circles. Thereby, however, the I despite all Buber’s assurances to the contrary-assumes precedence over the Thou. The disempowering of the between, whose primacy finds its shortened expression in the thesis on the precedence of the Thou over the I, is due to it…Buber, despite occasional indications that lead one to believe in the originality of being addressed (DP 41 ), does, as a matter of fact, demonstrate the I-Thou relationship almost entirely with respect to the model of that relation in which I turn to the Other.”\textsuperscript{359}

What is odd about this is that Theunissen, who if anything over-plays the status of the Nichts, here employs an overly substantial idea of the world, one that surrounds the I in concentric circles. This is one of three significant errors in Theunissen’s reading.

Buber’s ‘world,’ as should be clear by now, is hardly an encompassing thing: it is a dual world, and, one half of this duality is absolutely without shape. It is certainly not the case

\textsuperscript{359} Theunissen, \textit{The Other : Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber}, 294.
that the ‘You-world,’ or world of presence, ‘surrounds’ the I. This mistake, in some form or another, is repeated by many other readers. The most egregious of these mis-readings is found in Avnon, “Buber’s conviction [is] that we lack self knowledge, and that what we consider to be “I” is in fact only a partial representation of our whole selves [this is true]. To know ourselves more completely necessitates an awareness of an element of our being that is attentive both to our unique singularity and to our being inseparable from the one, unified creation [this is not].”

It is telling that, when commentators employ this idea of a ‘unified’ world, they employ no Buberian metaphors or figures to support it.

Theunissen’s mistake is subtler than Avnon’s, and is a product of his reading of Nichts as something outside of the world. If the ‘nothing’ is not part of the world, as a gap, then the world lies in itself, substantial, containing the I, and the Nichts is an escape from this container. Here Theunissen does not seem to recognize that the world of presence is constituted by the Nichts: the Nichts is not an escape. It is neither the I nor the You that are the ‘central point’ of the world of presence; if anything could be suggested for this role, it would be the in-between, the space of encounter.

His second error, already noted, is the idea that the in-between is expressed in the precedence of the You. The You does not even have absolute precedence over the It, let alone the I. The You is an essential aspect of human interpersonal life, but, interpersonal life isn’t everything. Here Buber’s own prose, which lauds the You at the expense of everything else, is likely to blame for this unproductive mis-reading. It is odd, however, to read a philosopher against their express formulations when to do so generates an error.

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The precedence of the You, perversely, is related to Theunissen’s third error: that the I, despite Buber’s protestations, is secretly prior to the You. The second and third mistakes are linked by a shared error: that one of the two terms must be prior. Once this is assumed, it is fair to say (as Theunissen does) that Buber had his priorities wrong. The argument goes as such: the You is primary; the You, by itself, does not have the resources necessary to explain the emergence of the I; therefore, the I is really primary. Theunissen’s approach confuses Buber’s phenomenology with his metaphysics. Phenomenologically speaking, of course the I is prior (I see x as y); phenomenological description always begins from the I. Buber uses phenomenology to point at structures and events, but it is hardly the last word in his metaphysics—it is instead a type of (indexical) evidence.

So, in sum, Theunissen confuses the precedence of the encounter for the precedence of the You (or, in his ‘corrected’ version, the I), and, the phenomenological method for the metaphysics. This leads him to his almost sorrowful conclusion that “[a]fter long hesitation I have arrived at the view that the incapacity of dialogic to account for the origin of the I purely and simply out of the meeting with the Thou attests to a fundamental limitation of the philosophy. The philosophy fails, or so it seems to me, at the extreme point of the doctrine of the originality of the between.”361 As I have already suggested, the self does no emerge simply from the You, but rather (as Theunissen himself suggests in his last sentence) out of the in-between. But Theunissen rejects even this, and this rejection needs to be taken seriously.

It would be a shame to lose the extremely close and rigorous reading of Buber that Theunissen gives us. To avoid this, it should supplemented and corrected by a possible account of the individuation of a self out of, or in relation to, the in-between. Huston’s important book, *Martin Buber’s Journey to Presence* furnishes us with an essential figure for this task: mis-meeting. It is first found in the opening section of Buber’s 1960 semi-autobiographical collection of fragments, *Meetings [Begegnung – autobiographische Fragmente]*, concerning a reunion with his mother: “When after another twenty years I again saw my mother, who came from a distance to visit me, my wife, and my children, I could not look into her still astonishingly beautiful eyes without hearing from somewhere the word ‘Vergegenung’ as a word spoken to me”. Buber writes that this word mis-meeting [Vergegenung] “designate[s] the failure of a real meeting among men”. Huston, however, makes a compelling case for viewing *Vergegenung* as an essential failure, a necessary stage in the genetic account of a person. Much as *Urdistanz* precedes relation, *Vergegenung* precedes realized, or concrete, encounter. It is only when a meeting is missed that the importance of meetings becomes vivid, and a distinction between the participants is drawn. The I and the You, which once operated in an indistinguishable back and forth, develop their independence after the

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362 The first treatment of *Vergegenung* that I know of is in Friedman’s voluminous *Life and Work: The Early Years*. Friedman’s treatment, however, fails to draw conceptual conclusions beyond those given immediately in Buber’s *Meetings*, perhaps because he treats the concept as one of Buber’s youth, rather than a concept culled from it. Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work : The Early Years, 1878-1923* (New York: Dutton, 1981).

363 The locution ‘among men’ is unfortunate, if only because Buber’s mother was likely not a man. Buber and Friedman, *Meetings*, 19.
Vergegenung; before this occurs, encounter is so ‘taken for granted’ that the I is unindividuated.

Huston follows Buber’s claim that his mother’s disappearance is the psychological root of his concept of mis-meeting.\textsuperscript{364} This seems correct, even though it is difficult to truly judge Buber as a biographical character: he was theatrical enough—as witnessed by the pious photographs on the re-printings of his books—that it can never be clear what ‘Buber, the man’ ever really thought.\textsuperscript{365} Nonetheless, the fact that the mis-meeting occurred with his mother, and is the very first of his ‘autobiographical fragments,’ is not trivial, and is clearly a fundamental part of the way Buber saw his own life. Following Huston, I wish to extrapolate from here, and employ the figure of mis-meeting to express a necessary break in the genetic account of the person, an event, however retroactively determined, whereby the negative, or the Nichts enters into a person’s development.

\textbf{youthful indiscretions}

Huston’s work deals with the young Buber, while my work deals almost exclusively with the older Buber. It is my opinion that Buber’s philosophy improves with age, and that the romantic concepts of his youth are re-formed by the dialogical revolution of his middle age, and these concepts are refined and improved upon in his last works. Mis-meeting was what formed the young Buber, but the concept of Mis-meeting is a formed by him as a much older man.

\textsuperscript{364} Huston, \textit{Martin Buber's Journey to Presence}, 4.
\textsuperscript{365} As Bloch notes, Buber never allowed anyone to take his picture without removing his glasses and assuming the pose of “the man with the beard and the large warm eyes”. Interview with Bloch in: Ḥayim Gordon, \textit{The Other Martin Buber : Recollections of His Contemporaries} (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1988), 77.
The young Buber’s notion of the person was, in the manner of Feuerbach, a divine, or divinized, person—not because the person is super-natural, but because the super-natural is a projection of persons.  

To simplify Feuerbach’s position: if you want to know what something is, look towards the objects it takes. “The essence of a being is recognized only through its object; the object to which a being is necessarily related is nothing but its own revealed being.” Because “God is an object of man, and only of man” this means that God is the ‘essence of man’.

God, of course, not in the sense of an independent being, but in the sense of his attributes, once ‘purified’ of myth (attribute like knowledge, benevolence, law, etc.). In Feuerbach’s eyes, theology is misapplied anthropology.

The Hegelian roots of this position should be obvious, and the significant Feuerbachian influences upon Buber explain the often ignored Hegelian notes in his thought. Buber’s belief (which is sustained throughout his career) that the object of the I (be it an It or a You) determines the I comes from Feuerbach, even if Buber’s metaphysics, his notion of the split-self, and his emphasis upon the inter-human, are radically different.

As Feuerbach writes, concerning persons:

The notion of the object is originally nothing other than the notion of another I; thus, man in his childhood comprehends all things as freely active and arbitrary beings; therefore, the notion of the object is generally mediated by the notion of the ‘You,’ of the objectified ‘I’. An object, that

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366 Huston, Martin Buber's Journey to Presence, 53.; the mature Buber blocks this identification completely. Wolfson express this as such: “God addresses, man responds; in the reciprocity of relation the partners retain their irreducible otherness. God does not become man nor man God… Revelation does not obscure but rather highlights the distance which stands between God and man.” Importantly, these wholes are composed not of parts, but the absence of parts. Wolfson, "The Problem of Unity in the Thought of Martin Buber," 443. (emphasis added)


368 See Buber, Between Man and Man, 175.
is, another ‘I,’ is given—to speak in Fichtean language—not to the ‘I,’ but to the ‘not-I’ in me; for only where I am transformed from an ‘I’ into a ‘You,’ where I am passive, does the conception of an activity existing apart from me, that is, objectivity, arise.\textsuperscript{369}

Buber’s closeness to this line of reasoning speaks for itself. Less obvious is the radical distance that separates the mature Buber’s thought from this. To paraphrase Lévinas: where Feuerbach examines the ‘I’ and ‘You’ as objects of relation, Buber calls into question, and reformulates, the relation itself.\textsuperscript{370} This is done, in part, by changing Feuerbach’s story, beginning a ‘stage’ prior: before the child even has a notion of an object, it exists in a strange relational space where the I and You are indiscreetly mingled.

Feuerbach’s anthropology is still a form of transcendental idealism, with the ‘I’ occupying the role of the absolute: the I comes first. The ‘I’ and the ‘You’ are particulars that are given in a ready-made fashion, even though the You is initially confused: the child confuses her own ‘I’ with all other objects. There is no place for singularity in Feuerbach, except, perhaps, in elevated “love and feeling.”\textsuperscript{371} But this feeling takes place ‘in’ the I, or in the community (through the ‘identity through difference’ of its members). Because the divinized ‘I’ (and the ‘not-I’ [Nicht-Ich]) are individuals, the person is the stable centre on which philosophy is erected. Hence Feuerbach feels able to employ his insights into the I-You relation to ‘solve’ several traditional problems of philosophy (such as the mind/body problem). Rather than looking for the singular that undergirds feelings and consciousness in our relations, Feuerbach merely changes the emphasis of traditional philosophy (from cognition to feeling); the I-You relation does not call philosophy into

\textsuperscript{369} I have modified the translation, translating \textit{Du} as ‘You.’ Feuerbach, \textit{Principles of the Philosophy of the Future}, 51, S32. (emphasis added)
\textsuperscript{370} Lévinas, \textit{Proper Names}, 23.
\textsuperscript{371} Feuerbach, \textit{Principles of the Philosophy of the Future}, 53, S33, S34.
question, but rather, provides a firmer ground on which to solve all the old problems. The theological role played by God collapses into Man—through the elevation of Man to God—and the universe remains whole and unproblematic. The stability once provided by God is now provided by Man. Feuerbach’s use of the terms ‘feeling’ [Empfindung] and ‘consciousness’ [Bewußtsein] demonstrate the distance that separates him from Buber: for the mature Buber, neither of these are adequate concepts for dealing with the problematic, singular, person, and neither are appropriate for grounding a model of relations. They are, instead, to be explained by such a model. Feuerbach gives Buber the basic terms of the relation to be thought through, but the way he develops their relations comes from elsewhere.

While the young Buber’s idea of the elevated self owed a great deal to Feuerbach, Huston postulates that mis-meeting with his mother twenty years after her leaving, “put [this] elevation of humanity into question”.372 Rather than viewing the You, and other objects, as projections of a sovereign I, Buber begins to view the I as resulting from its ‘failure,’ or missing, the You. In any case, for the mature Buber, the human is no longer elevated, if by this we mean sovereign, or existing as an absolute ontological fact.

Buber credits not his mis-meeting with his mother, but rather, Nietzsche, for this discovery: “like no other previous thinker, he brings man into the centre of his thought about the universe, and not, as with Feuerbach, man as a clear and unambiguous being, but rather man as a problematic being; and thereby he endows the anthropological question with an unprecedented force and passion.”373 But Buber, in time, came to reject

373 Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 176.
Nietzsche’s ontology of immanent forces and perpetual becoming. While he follows Nietzsche in maintaining the human as the ‘problematic centre’ of his thinking, his understanding of the human is quite different. Where Nietzsche’s human is (ideally) a point in the process over overcoming human (the bridge to the *Übermensch*) for Buber there is nothing higher than becoming a singular person.\(^{374}\) Thus, while Nietzsche’s genetic analysis begins in prehistory, and ends in the overcoming of the human, Buber’s genetic analysis is more modest, and seeks only to explain how something like a person is possible. And for this genetic account, mis-meeting is more important than any Nietzschean concept.

**transcendental versus genetic analysis**

It is important to keep in mind that Buber employs at least two different methods for explaining how something like a person is possible: one transcendental, one genetic. Transcendental is meant in a loose sense: the necessary constitutive conditions for person being, the structure this kind of being requires to be possible. Genetic analysis describes a process, the process by which a person does, or at least could, come into being. Even though the terms employed by each analysis are similar, the differences between them are significant: transcendental structures operate formally; because of this, the structure is static. All the terms can be looked at simultaneously. It is easier to both explicate and contest such an analysis: all one needs to do is show that either the structure does not achieve the desired effect, or, that there is a contradiction within its elements. The genetic is much more contestable, if only because it is difficult to say when the process begins, and when it ends, and—at least with persons—each moment in the process

changes the meanings of the others. The transcendental is articulated through the presuppositions of an adult, whereas actual human life begins with the strange object we call a baby: neither person nor not-person, the child does not have a realized ‘I’; the ‘I,’ after it is achieved through mis-meeting, is retroactively applied to the whole process (I refer to my pre-I state as still being myself).

Buber’s transcendental structure of the person is more or less this: (1) distance [Urdistanz] creates the space in which (2) relation [Beziehung] can occur. Distance is prior in terms of presuppositions, because one cannot have relation without distance, but distance without relation is at least thinkable. Human life, however, requires both—thus, as regards this first set of presuppositions, distance is not prior to relation in terms of “temporal succession” but only transcendental ordering. Even if relation presupposes distance, where human beings are concerned “it is not possible to think of an existence over against a world which is not also an attitude to it as a world, and that means the outline [Umriß] of an attitude of relation.”\(^\text{375}\) Once we add an ‘I’ that can take an intentional object, these first two terms develop into the two basic word-pairs: (3) I-It and (4) I-You. In combination, these two articulate the human world, meaning, the (5) dual world.\(^\text{376}\)

The (6) in-between is a structure that is transcendentally coterminous with (4): Buber’s transcendental argument for the in-between is that: “we cannot do without this category for a full comprehension and presentation of what passes between two men when they

\(^{375}\) Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 62, BW 1,414. (emphasis added)

\(^{376}\) (1) Corresponds with (3), and (2) with (4). (5) is the conjunction of (3) and (4), linked through the ‘I’; the ‘I’ of the I-It differs from the I of the I-You (in terms of completeness) but acts as the point in which the two worlds meet.
stand in dialogue with each other.”377 Here there is something of a circular affirmation: the in-between belongs to the I-You, but the I-You cannot be made sense of without the in-between. The I-You is a singular relation, the in-between is the space in which this relation is possible, one to which we have no direct phenomenological access, but must rather be transcendentally constructed. I can point directly at the I-You, whereas the in-between must be articulated through structures of presupposition. Thus, as regards transcendental priority, the (6) in-between is tied for last place.

Where it comes to genesis, the position of the in-between is inverted. The (6) in-between is first, albeit in an unarticulated manner. As Wolfson writes: “In one sense it is ontologically prior to all relations for it is that which makes all relations possible; in another sense, however, it is continuously reconstituted by, and thus posterior to, the particular events of relation”.378 Analogously, in terms of the genetic approach, the unarticulated in-between is prior to all relations because that is where human persons begin, the articulated in-between is last, because it is formed by singular relational events.

For this reason, the structure of genesis is hard to articulate: the child cannot really be said to exist in ‘speech,’ and thus the word-pairs are gestured towards, but not articulated. The child, like Buber’s ‘primitive human’ exists on the border of a ‘natural’ world, where structures and beings exist without articulation. Here things are defiantly indistinct, as distinctness, a function of articulated distance, comes later, with the entry into language.

In a crude manner, the child exists ‘between’ two parents. This accident of biological structure suggests a basic fact: for the child, having no realized I, the in-between is not a structure transcendentally arrived at to make sense of conversation, but the basic fuzziness of its being, suspended as it is between persons, processes, and things, all of which are unavailable to it as distinct objects. If we could simply reverse the order of the transcendental analysis, many of our difficulties would disappear. Unfortunately, it is not clear that we can do this, because the genetic process seeks to index actual events, and is more complicated than the ideas we use to map it. We must be content with expressing the realization of the ‘I,’ which then performs the above transcendental analysis.

**the emergence of distance**

Where *Urdistanz* is the first presupposition of Buber’s transcendental structure, some form of inarticulate-relation—a relation where the terms are undistinguished—is the first ‘step’ of genesis. The human *begins* suspended in a net of relations—for which I propose the neologism *Urbeziehung*—and is realized through the irruption of a gaps, or distances, which distinguishes the terms. Distance distinguishes the ‘I’ out of *Urbeziehung*, allowing it to enter into articulated *Beziehungen*. But this distinction is never compete, it is a continual process: a completely distinct ‘I’ is impossible, a fantasy of absolute sovereignty rooted.

Distance is needed before words can be spoken: where does it come from? It cannot be transcendentally presupposed, because there is no concrete relation of which it is the presupposition: with no separate terms, we cannot presuppose distance. Instead, the
‘negative’ here is more like the *Nichts* that establishes the exclusiveness of presence. It is easy to be misled by Buber’s (in my opinion, sloppy) claim that “Man becomes an I through a You. [*Der Mensch wird am Du zum Ich*]”

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

In context, this refers to the event of meeting, but not the genetic process by which a person capable of such relations develops. The claim is not flatly wrong, but confused. I find Lacan’s formulation from his first seminar (“The I is born with reference to a you”) to be closer to the mark.

Here we must be very careful: Buber does not claim (and it would be silly to do so) that the I emerges from the I-You; the ‘I’ is already *part* of the I-You; there is no articulated I-You without an I. The I emerges ‘through’ the You, not out of a meeting with it, but a series of mis-meetings, both biological and social, that rupture the fuzzy relation that precedes it. *The failure of meeting is the event where distance enters the genetic process.* It is part and parcel of recognizing the distinctness of the I and the You. Mis-meeting forces the nascent I to realize that the non-object of its hunger for relations is not part of itself, not at its beck and call. This throws the nascent I back upon itself, and begins the process of articulating the I; in this way the ‘failed’ relation lays the ground for realized relations.

This failure does not determine the structure of the relation, but rather, distinguishes its terms, or participants: the I, the You, and the It. I propose that this is what should be meant by the idea that the in-between precedes the I: it is not the articulated in-between of transcendental deduction, but the inarticulate, and originary between of the child. *After* the mis-meeting has initiated the development of an independent I, then relations

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379 Buber, *I and Thou*, 80, BW1, 97.
are cast into the mould of the primary word pairs: the groundwords express the basic forms for the later relations. These are in turn the building blocks for other, more complex relations, those we normally call social (‘we’, ‘they’, etc.).

Before moving to *I and Thou* for textual support and elaboration of this proposal, I would like to add an observation of my own. Buber’s primary concern is to indicate basic phenomena that he feels are too often ignored by intellectual inquiry, basic phenomena that are of the utmost importance for persons. For this reason, he rarely present his ideas in a ‘systematic’ fashion: his understandable resistance to systems (which invariably privilege cognition) makes his work sometimes difficult to understand. That said, what is remarkable is how cleanly his concepts can be presented in a systematic fashion. To this end, I would suggest that what is of the utmost importance in the genesis of a person is the creation of a split world. The genetic emergence of the self is nothing less than the emergence of distinct duality.

*structure and/or event?*

The difficulties with the split that runs through human persons and their world are increased when we take account of genesis: it can no longer be phenomenologically indicated, or transcendentally presupposed, but rather, we must explain how it is possible for such a split being to develop. Buber clearly thinks that there are traces of the relational structures in all human persons, and that this cannot be explained by a revelatory event:

> It frequently happens, indeed, that the I-Thou relation begins with an ‘illumination,’ an ‘awakening’. But I am in no case inclined to understand this manifestation as the rule. I cannot do this because I already find this relation—as I have maintained from the beginning—in the life of the
small child, as in that of the so-called primitive man...I acknowledge, therefore, the significance of ‘being seized,’ but I can see in it no necessary presupposition for the origin of an I-Thou relation.”

The I-You is ‘available’ (even for babies and barbarians) because it is part of the basic structure of person being. But what is the relationship between the event of encounter and encounter as a structure, however inchoate? The idea of genesis is intended to explicate this.

With Buber’s genetic account of persons we must maintain a partial separation between an undeveloped person (who lives in a fuzzy state of relation) and a developed one (who has actualized these relations). As Wood writes: “Buber does not imply that there are no entities prior to, and grounding, the revelation of otherness. He is only [!] claiming that there is no (self-conscious) I and no manifest Other without relation.” Genesis does not need to explain the emergence of entities, but rather, entities that are able to view themselves and others as discrete while still being constituted by relations. What is needed is an account of the movement from Urbeziehung with its indistinct pseudo-structure, to an in-between with a distinct (or ‘manifest’) structure. Wood’s claim helps us see how this is possible.

But Wood goes too far, and posits a kind of continual process of ‘deepening’ that emerges from switching between the two worlds. He confuses a very real insight—that the I and the You are made discrete through actualization—with the idea that the You

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relation is ‘deepened’ through a contrast against the developed It world.\textsuperscript{383} “The accentuation of the distance between the self and the Other makes the possibility of identification more profound, for I-Thou is increasingly capable of being seen in its difference from I-It.”\textsuperscript{384} There is no dialectic between the It and You worlds of this sort the power of the You is not increased by some sort of comparison; if anything, Buber is concerned that the It world—the world of contrast—often overshadows the You. The It world develops through history, passed along like real estate; there is no corresponding development of the You world.\textsuperscript{385} Insofar as there is a dialectic between the It and You worlds which helps distinguish (but not deepen) the I, it behaves as such:

1) The I-You occurs inchoately, without distinct terms; one begins in the Urbeziehung without a detached I; one cannot enter the I-It relation without a detached I. The indistinct I-You predates the detached I, the I-It postdates this I. Buber uses the idea of natality to illustrate this.

2) The I starts to distinguish itself through the body, which is somewhat discreet. This is the space where primary mis-meetings occur (I want something, it is not provided, and I recognize the discreteness of that which may or may not provide for me). The I is forced to realize that it is not part of ‘its’ You. The I remains constant, even as the You-object changes, which is eventually noticed. From the fickleness of the other, grounded in its Nichts, the I becomes aware of the lack of continuity between it and its object.

3) The I achieves its detachment when it employs the language of description. “once the sentence ‘I see the tree’ has been pronounced in such a way that it… [relates] the perception of the tree object by the human

\textsuperscript{383} “[O]bjectification has an important role to play, not only in the development of the practical world, but in developing the Thou-relation itself. The purpose of objectification is the enlargement for the I of the being encountered so as to provoke a more profound meeting.” Martin Buber’s Ontology; an Analysis of I and Thou, 55.

\textsuperscript{384} Martin Buber’s Ontology; an Analysis of I and Thou, 83.

\textsuperscript{385} Buber, I and Thou, 87, BW 1, 102.
consciousness, it has erected the crucial barrier between subject and object; the basic word I-It, the word of separation, has been spoken.\textsuperscript{386}

The I-It relation completes the distinction, or actualization, of the I, but it in no way makes the You more ‘profound’. Insofar as any ‘deepening’ occurs on the side of the ‘I,’ it occurs exclusively in relation to the You: “How much of a person a man is depends on how strong the I of the basic word I-You is in the human duality of his I.” Note that Buber clearly distinguishes two types if ‘I’: the ‘I’ of the person is deepened only in relation to the You. The I of the I-It he calls the ego [Eigenmenschen] which is a severed I [abgetrennte Ich] that in no way ‘deepens’ the other; the I of the person [Person] is, it seems, somewhat independent, but it is defined by the strength of its relations.\textsuperscript{387} The genetic account is intended to express how this dual structure emerges from the undifferentiated Urbeziehung.

Buber uses the odd locution “Ich-wirkend-Du und Du-wirkend-Ich”, two ‘vital’ words [vitalen Urworte,] and not the two ground words, to describe the first stage, or Urbeziehung. He describes the indeterminate I-You as a movement of these vital words, each affecting the other directly such that their discreteness is not at issue. One can imagine something like a continuously bubbling stream, or rotary motion, of vital relations ‘…Ich-wirkend-Du-wirkend-Ich-wirkend…’. In this ‘stream’ of vital words the effective is slowly distinguished from the ineffective, the constant from the inconstant, and objects begin to appear. Out of these, a “third element, gruesomely detached and at times spookier than the dead and the moon, becomes more and more inexorably clear

\textsuperscript{386} I and Thou, 74, BW 1, 94.
\textsuperscript{387} “Das Mensch ist um so personhafter, je stärker in der menschlichen Zwiefalt seines Ich das des Grundworts Ich-Du ist.” The example Buber uses is Jesus, whose ‘I’ is inextricably linked to his ‘father’—this ‘I’ does not derive “its power from itself”. I and Thou, 115, BW 1, 22.
until finally the other partner that always remains the same emerges: ‘I.’” This is Buber’s description of the ‘matter’ which is distinguished—by the entry of the Nichts—into discrete entities, with the I, a seemingly constant term, slowly coming into view. The move to the second stage is a move to this distinct structure, with the You of the vital stream maintained, but transformed into a discrete object.

Rotenstreich, in *Immediacy and Its Limits*, considers the first and second stage to be two simultaneously existing structures. The first he calls the ‘inborn Thou,’ the second the ‘Thou as realized’; the natural association between the two vital words is a structure we maintain, the distinct structure of the basic words enables actual encounters with others. He claims that this leads to contradiction: “if it is said that the I is inborn, it follows that the mutuality can be dismembered, that is to say, there is an I with an inborn Thou and there is an actual or empirical Thou, and there is the realization of that relation within the actual sphere of human existence.” His basic complaint is that, if the You is innate, then actual relation is really just a projection which follows from this innate structure.

Rotenstreich draws attention to a real problem (the possible conflict between structure and event,) but his exact diagnosis is questionable. On the subject of the above-mentioned ‘vital words’ “Ich-wirkend-Du und Du-wirkend-Ich”—translated as “I-affecting-You and You-affecting-I”—Rotenstreich writes: “According to this view, there is a primary wholeness of the I in relationship to the Thou, but at the same time, the

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388 *I and Thou*, 72, BW 1, 92.
particular I is but an result of an isolation from the *comprising wholeness.*"[^390] Here Rotenstreich confuses indistinctness with wholeness. To even call this a unity is too much: there is a fault-line, however unclear, that runs through this relation.

Rotenstreich’s more serious mistake is that for him the ‘I’ emerges from this *Urbeziehung* through *reflection*, rather than alienation or distance. Time and again, his critique of Buber is that the I-You requires a “stable I” grounded “between the human being and nature.”[^391] Rotenstreich conflates the transcendental structure (which begins with discrete entities) and the genetic account (which seeks to explain the emergence of these entities). Once we distinguish these two accounts, we can say that Rotenstreich’s ‘innate You’ comes into play in two different ways: within the structure, it helps explain the hunger for relations that comprise personal existence, for the genetic story, it helps explain how the vital ‘stuff’ from which the ‘basic word’ I-You emerges.

Without the gaps in the world we would float in the inchoate You like amniotic fluid; as it is, the structure of the You, however undistinguished, ensures that a rupture will occur, a mis-meeting or natural distinction that forces us back on ourselves. So, when Rotenstreich writes that: “Without the presupposition of self-consciousness, all relations would split up or dissolve into atomic moments without the continuity of human relations,” he is, in part, correct.[^392] What he misses is that this presupposition follows the instability: we do not ‘first’ have a solid I that *then* enters relations, we have relations, and failed relations, that distinguish the I. The ‘continuity’ of experience he wants is not


[^391]: *Immediacy and Its Limits : A Study in Martin Buber's Thought*, 44.

[^392]: *Immediacy and Its Limits : A Study in Martin Buber's Thought*, 42.
given before the genetic process has reached the point where a qualitative shift occurs, and the I is distinguished from the You (and the It). It is far from clear that a small child does not live in exactly the discontinuous state he is worried about.

What links the ‘before and after’ of the genetic process, the movement from the ‘vital words’ to the ‘basic words,’ the I buried in the Urbeziehung to the dual I, is that at all points the human person is embedded in ‘words’ or ‘speech’. This does not mean language as a symbolic system. “Human existence, even the most silent, is speech; and speech, whether intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly, along with gaining ground and forcibly penetrating, along with sucking and tasting, along with advancing over untried ways, is always address.”393 ‘Speech,’ in this sense, is like a drive [Trieb] that motivates the genetic process to continually re-complete the structure.

We see this in the fact that the genetic account does not end in a stable I-You relation: the distinguished person that results from the genetic process, the emergence of the dual person, has not ‘arrived’ at relation. If anything, relation becomes more tenuous, more capable of being ‘blocked’ by the discrete I’s relation to the it world. What we have after the process is the possibility for ‘actualizing’ the You, communicating it, building with it, in a way the small child cannot. The genetic process provides the distinction of the ‘I’ out of the indistinct in-between, the structure provides an explanation of what happens when we re-enter the in-between such that we are able to actualize it.

What must be avoided at all costs is the Lévinas inspired idea that the distinguished structure means that the person has no ‘need’ for actual encounters (because the structure is complete).\textsuperscript{394} This position assumes that the structure supplants the event.\textsuperscript{395} This (supposedly) Rosenzweigian position\textsuperscript{396} confuses the structures that enable relation with relation itself. Buber is interested in showing that the person’s structure is constituted out of an indistinct vital relation by distinguishing relations (failed relations), and that these structures enable, if not encourage, actualized relations; but structure is not enough. There is no presence ‘within’ the structure of personhood.

**reading**

Buber writes:

> Even if we could fully understand the life of the primitive, it would be no more than a metaphor \textit{[Gleichnis]} for that of the truly primal man. Hence the primitive affords us only brief glimpses into the temporal sequence of the two basic words. More complete information we receive from the child.

\textsuperscript{394} At the risk of over-simplification: for Lévinas the structure of language \textit{is} the revelation of the other “[I]n its expressive function language precisely maintains the other—to whom it is addressed, whom it calls upon and invokes. To be sure, language does not consist in invoking him as a being represented and thought. But this is why language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation; the revelation of the other.” Emmanuel Lévinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity : An Essay on Exteriority} (Boston: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 73.

\textsuperscript{395} Lévinas needs this structure to ensure that the event of encounter is always asymmetrical, founding ethics. Thus the event of encounter is subsumed by the structure of encounter. Rotenstreich is a rare reader of Buber in that he preserves the duality of structure and event, if only as a contradiction. Most commentators reduce Buber to one or the other (usually the event). Confusion about Buber’s genetic account explain this common mistake. \textit{Totality and Infinity : An Essay on Exteriority} (Boston: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 68.

\textsuperscript{396} For an apt critique of the idea that Rosenzweig restricts revelation to the structure of language, see: Moyn, \textit{Origins of the Other : Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics}. 148
To this end, a reading of Buber’s genetic account of the child’s development out of, and back into, the in-between will be the terminus for this chapter. In his language, with the child we are able to see (if, perhaps, not explain) the emergence of spirit from nature: the discrete and actualized from the inchoate and potential. Thus, Buber continues concerning the child:

> Here it becomes unmistakably clear how the spiritual reality [geistige Realität] of the basic words emerges from a natural reality [naturhaften]: that of the basic word I-You from a natural association [naturhaften Verbundenheit], that of the basic word I-It from a natural discreteness [naturhaften Aufgehobenheit].

The relationship between nature and spirit is complicated in Buber—he does not want to suggest that nature is a function of spirit in the manner of a social constructivist (where ‘nature’ is only a social idea). Nor does he want to suggest that human singularity is a ‘natural’ function (in the manner of a natural scientist). But he does imply that the first two terms of the transcendental structure (distance and relation) emerge out of the ‘basic’ associations and separations of natural bodies. After this has occurred, the second task of genetic analysis is to offer a possible explanation of how the vital structure of distance and relation, found initially in the natural sphere, becomes the basic words. Because of the primacy of the I-You for the development of the I, this reading will only focus upon the move from Beziehung (as manifested in the naturhaften Verbundenheit) to the Ich-Du. This requires an analysis of the human person’s relation to nature.

The prenatal [vorgeburtliche] life of the child is a pure natural association [naturhaften Verbundenheit], a flowing toward each other [Zueinanderfließen], a bodily reciprocity; and the life horizon of the developing being appears uniquely inscribed, and yet also not inscribed, in that of the being that carries it; for the womb in which it dwells is not

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397 Buber, *I and Thou*, 76, BW1, 94.
solely that of the human mother. …And as the secret image of a wish, this association remains to us. But this longing ought not to be taken for a craving to go back, as those suppose who consider the spirit, which they confound with their own intellect, a parasite of nature. For the spirit is nature’s blossom, albeit exposed to many diseases...

For Buber, the human person is and is not natural. This does not mean that the human person is a combination of spirit and nature: the person is not a human body with a spiritual head, or a singular that is unfortunately bound to a particular body. Rather, spirit occurs ‘in’ nature, but is not itself ‘nature.’ This sounds odd, but makes more sense if we think of spirit as a Nichts in the natural order, in much the way that a gap can be in a thing, without being part of the thing. This odd position, of being in, but not of, nature, is important for Buber’s dialogical project: it allows dialogue with unspeaking things—trees, cats, mica—which allows dialogue a fundamental place in the world. It is also important for the genesis story: the basic bodily structure needs to be composed with an inclination towards encounter, such that ‘sucking and tasting’ are forms of address, without reducing actual encounter being to a biological function.

The notion that the womb is not solely the mother’s will no doubt raise eyebrows. But, ignoring the political implications, the key here is that the pre-born exist in a strange in-between state. Buber does not posit the child as in-between the two parents, as one might expect. Such a move would place the emerging person in something of a community, if a small one, as the ‘dash’ between the mother and the father. Instead, the person emerges from an inchoate I-You, in this case, the mother’s womb. For Buber, the material process of human development tends towards relation. Again as regards genesis, relation is first.

\[398\] *I and Thou*, 76  BW1, 94.
Every developing human child rests, like all developing beings, in the womb of the great mother—the undifferentiated, not yet formed primal world [vorgestaltigen Urwelt]. From this it detaches [löste] itself to enter a personal life, and it is only in dark hours when we slip out of this again (as happens even to the healthy, night after night) that we are close to her again. But this detachment [Ablösung] is not sudden and catastrophic like that from the bodily mother. The human child is granted some time to exchange the natural association with the world that is slipping away for a spiritual association—a relationship.  

The Goethean figure of the ‘great mother’ indicates the distance of Buber’s genesis story from a properly biological one. This ‘mother’ is never left ‘once and for all,’ as the process of distinction is never complete. Buber maintains this link between the undifferentiated natal state and daily life (or rather, nightly life) of persons, because this maintains the a priori You as a fundamental structure. This ensures that the transcendental structures are not erected ‘above’ nature by an act of mind—but rather draw from it—and, simultaneously, that event of encounter does not bear the burden of relation alone.

Sloterdijk, in his somewhat cheeky writing on ‘negative gynaecology’ (as compared to negative theology) holds that what is at stake in great mother stories is a concept of relationship that is not based on objects: if relation begins before we are ‘outside’ the womb, then the our basic relations are not object relations, but intimate, or ‘placental’.  

The continual re-entry into the space of intimacy (where it is unclear what is I and what is You) establishes a connection between the pre-object relation (…Ich-wirkend-Du-wirkend…) and distinct relations; in both, the object is Nichts, only the distinctness of the terms, and our ability to actualize and respond, changes. If there is a point of conflict

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399 I and Thou, 76, BW1, 94.
400 Peter Sloterdijk, Bubbles : Microspherology, trans. Wieland Hoban, Spheres (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2011), 293.
between psychoanalysis and dialogicism, it is this: the genetic story for dialogicism before birth, and thus object relations are not primary. To counter the psychoanalytic object-relation with a subject-relation is to miss the point: even the subject relation is preceded by a relationship without a non-object, or Nichts.

Buber holds that this natal relation without subject or object develops into a ‘drive to relation’: “The innateness [Ursprünglichkeit] of the longing for relation [Beziehungstrebens] is apparent even in the earliest and dimmest stage. Before any particulars can be perceived, dull glances push into the unclear space toward the indefinite …[this is] not experience of an object.”401 Instead of an object relation, we have a pre-object drive. Rather than seeing the child’s grasping as some kind of pan-psychism [Allbeseelung], where, as in Feuerbach’s reading, the child ‘imagines’ agency on the part of any ‘thing’ encountered, Buber instead suggest that we read this as a drive [Trieb] toward pan-relationism [Allbeziehung].

With the pan-relational drive there is no ‘I’ or ‘You’. The emergence of the ‘I’ out of the ‘I-You’—mis-meeting—follows. Again, Buber does not want this to be ‘unnatural’, while also not wanting to reduce relation to the ‘natural’. This is why Buber builds the access-point to the in-between, the ground of the I-You, out of ‘reflexive’ drives without it being a drive.

…Many a motion [Regung] that is called a reflex is a sturdy trowel for the person building up his world. It is not as if a child first saw an object [Gegenstand] and then entered into some relationship with that. Rather, the longing for relation [Beziehungstreiben] is primary…; and the relation

401 Buber, I and Thou, 78, BW1, 96.
to that, which is a wordless anticipation [Vorgestalt] of saying You, comes second. …

Here the ‘problem’ of the relation between the structure and the event is seen as a confusion of genetic order. The drive is primary in terms of genesis, whereas the event of encounter can only occur after the genetic story has proceeded to the point where objects and relations are possible. The ‘a priori’ You, is not mechanical, but rather occurs because of the original entanglement of entities with each other, of which the womb is an illustration. At the risk of being repetitive: for genesis, relation is prior to distance. From this follows distinction, still rooted in the natural situation. The final stage is inter-relations between distinguished singularities.

inter-subjectivity

Obviously, none of the above reading concerns itself with ‘falsifiable’ claims. While Buber’s insights may well be useful for developmental psychology, the reverse is likely not the case. I have framed this in light of several critiques of Buber, critiques I take to be largely owed to mis-readings. Part of the intent was simply to display ‘what Buber thought’ about genesis, and the ways in which the Nichts is present throughout. There is, however, another idea to be taken from it: what ‘inter-subjectivity,’ the relations between distinct singularities, would mean in a Buberian conceptual frame. This word (inter-subjectivity) has been painfully abused by writers, and its meaning is rarely clear. What is clear is that inter-subjectivity is meant to be ‘good,’ and explains how people relate, relation that is generally supposed to be ethical. For Buber, such a concept is inadmissible. The ethical cannot be pre-supposed, or imposed, upon the genetic process,

402 Ibid.
or the event of encounter. If relation is the ground, it is problematic to say that it is *a priori* good. Not because of a conceptual conflict, but also because it leads to confusion about ‘evil’ actions. To outright deny the relational component of violence and evil will invariably lead to a mis-understanding of violent acts. If one insists upon an ethical reading, one should at least assume that violent relations are perverse or damaged relations, but they are relations for all that.

I would suggest a Buberian definition of inter-subjectivity would be neither Kantian (where inter-subjectivity occurs because we share the same categories) nor a shared set of pragmatic structures that allow the development of a truth, or a world. Instead, it means that persons are genetically structured in relation to other persons: there is no ‘person in itself,’ but *only* persons as a *plurality*—persons that emerge out of a pre-personal structure of relations. Seen this way, the free-standing person is a contradiction. Loosely speaking, persons are made out of these relations. More fundamentally: the person cannot exist without relations to other persons: relation is not an ‘ability,’ it is the stuff out of which a person is made. If this is given, then ‘inter-subjectivity’ would refer to this basic fact: the structure of personhood is constituted by other persons.

From this position it is fair to say that I am ethically *implicated*, in that the ‘ethical,’ loosely speaking, is the stuff out of which I and my world are made. But, just because I am composed out of relations does not mean I must behave well, nor does it mean that when I am being unethical I am not being a person. I could very easily be an inter-subjectively constituted person, who sacrifices children. What one could claim (and Buber does) is that *perfecting* my relations is the source of the ethical. Perfection may be derided as a ‘totalitarian’, a restrictive gesture founded on an illicit ‘totality’. If this was
true, Buber’s inter-subjective person would not even have the potential for ethical action. But, the perfection of singularities concerns no such totality, and while it may be true that the person is without an ethics, this hardly means that there is no place for the ethical in Buber’s thought. It does mean that this ethics is one composed out of relations, unstable singularities that wink in and out of a world that unevenly realizes itself in fits and starts.

**human singulars**

I have spent so much time treating Buber’s genetic account of the person because it simultaneously deals with several criticisms, and showcases the extent to which the in-between is intimately bound up with the being of a person. Most Buber literature either over-plays the in-between, making into Buber’s fundamental ontological principle (which it isn’t) or by considering it a paradoxical space that confuses more than it explains. Clearly, the above genetic account is not a ‘proof’ for anything. But it does show the possibility of a coherent reading of Buber’s idea.

My intention, successful or no, was to demonstrate that the human person can be thought in terms of the seemingly abstract and inhuman categories of singularity and the in-between. To do this I employed some of Buber’s more problematic notions, such as nature and nativity. Obviously, a contemporary account would have to do justice to a wide-ranging deconstructive and feminist literature that has called these very ideas into question. My concern, however, lies with Buber’s own attempt to develop a genetic account of personhood, both to address a series of confusions that plague the secondary literature, and, to show one way in which singularity can be thought in terms of specifically human beings. Again, part of what is promising about the employment of
these ideas for the study of religion is that they allow us to consider relations with non-humans; but, insofar as we are dealing with religion, we are dealing with relations where at least one of the terms is human. Thus, to view the entry of the Nichts through the event of mis-meeting allows us to see the way a transcendental concept of singularity plays a role in human life, a life that does not begin ready-made, does not begin with a clear structure. The same is the case with distance and relation, which are found in the discreteness and associations of human bodies. It is to be hoped that the strangeness of Buber’s early 20th century terminology does not cause the reader to turn away from these ideas. Despite the many problematic concepts he employs (the ‘primitive,’ the shared womb, an unproblematic ‘nature’) I believe his genetic account is of value for explicating his philosophy in light of specifically human concerns.

However, even if the specifics of his account are troubling, this chapter has had another, more technical agenda: to demonstrate that many of the confusions about Buber’s work originate in a confusion of his transcendental and genetic methods. The idea that the in-between is the foundation of Buber’s ontology has, I hope, been refuted. The in-between may well be Buber’s central idea, meaning, his most important idea, or the idea that spurred his investigations. The in-between allows for a theory of singularity and encounter that is, to my mind, of utmost value. But that does not mean it is the basis of his entire ontology: the in-between presupposes other, more basic, ideas, such as distance and relation. The in-between is, for Buber, the beginning, and to a certain extent, the end, of the human person: it is the ground the human emerges from, and the space of singular encounters with singulars that give value to human life. Through the explication of Buber’s genetic account, I have sought to show how the ideas of in-between and
singularity are central to his project, and yet, not the basis of a fundamental ontology. This will, hopefully, put to rest critiques that discount Buber because the in-between is incapable of supporting a complete ontology.
Conclusion

The intention of this dissertation has been the articulation and clarification of a trajectory that runs through German Jewish thought, beginning with the aesthetic work of Moses Mendelssohn, and ending with the philosophical contributions of Martin Buber. This trajectory has sought to explicate two linked concepts: singularity and the in-between. It begins with Moses Mendelssohn, not only because he represents the progenitor of German Jewish thought, but also because he makes a critical move away from rationalism towards a philosophy of encounter essential for this project. It ends with Martin Buber because Buber provides a theory of encounter and the in-between that has—despite its popularity in the 1960’s and 70’s—fallen into an undeserved state of neglect. The trajectory approach was taken in the belief that it would allow these concepts to be presented in a concrete manner. While this work has not concerned itself with chains of transmission, it is not a work of history per se. It has used the resources of history to show the way each thinker’s concepts were intended to respond to the intellectual problems opened by his predecessors, but the concepts—viewed both in and out of a historical context—are its primary concern. This approach makes the pragmatic assumption that concepts are meant to do things, to acknowledge or counter other ideas, and explain things that were previously unexplained. It is hoped that reconstructing a concept in context will aid future employments of the same ideas. To this end, the primary method employed was one of philosophical reconstruction rather than argumentation. This has not meant that argumentation has had no place in this project: argument is an essential aspect of philosophy, and to ignore the arguments Kant makes against Mendelssohn, Buber against Kant, and Buber’s interpreters against him, would
mean ignoring fundamental aspects of the ideas being reconstructed. Further, seeing as
this project operates under the assumption that Buber’s philosophy is of merit for
contemporary discourse, there have been several broad arguments made to both justify
the coherence of his ideas, and to provide reasons for taking his philosophy seriously.
However, even if these arguments fail to convince the reader, the basic project of
reconstruction still stands as a useful contribution to Mendelssohn and Buber scholarship.

The value of Mendelssohn’s thought has long been established by Mendelssohn
scholarship. However, while there has been some excellent work on his theories of
representation, none, so far as I know, have extensively treated his formulation of the
twofold space of representation, let alone shown the ways in which this space antedates,
if not directly influences, later, similar, ideas about the space of phenomena and
encounter. This is even more the case with the idea of singularity, an idea that I have
argued drives the construction of his aesthetic space, and is also found in his ethical and
political thought. The flurry of recent work on Moses Mendelssohn demonstrates that his
philosophy is not of mere antiquarian interest, but is able to speak to several
contemporary philosophical concerns. The idea of singularity has, in all this, been
largely ignored, and I believe will be of use for future work in the field.

While the importance of the in-between for Buber is well established, I believe that the
emphasis upon singularity represents a genuine addition to Buber studies. It has been
shown that the idea of the in-between is able to make sense of singularity—how it is
possible for two individuals undetermined by their differences from other objects are able
to encounter and change each other. Conversely, it has been shown that the idea of
singularity allows us to make sense of the in-between—by explicating the formal
contours of the individuals that the in-between is meant to explain. Where possible, I have deliberately avoided using the figure of ‘dialogue’ as a means for explaining these ideas. While dialogue is, obviously, of the utmost importance for Buber, I believe that at present the notion of dialogue is over-used to the point of abuse, and obfuscates more than it explains. Thus, I have deliberately employed the more formal idea of singularity, in the hopes that the formal structure of Buber’s philosophy can be more distinctly explicated. Further, I believe that the emphasis upon singularity allows us to take account of one of Buber’s more troubling, and overlooked, ideas: that there are encounters with non-human singularities which are of importance for our philosophical anthropology. The idea of dialogue, with its linguistic implications, makes this idea seem confused, if not absurd. The concept of singularity demonstrates how such encounters are possible, and how they can be meaningful.

A similar intention governed my employment of many of Buber’s ‘darker’ concepts: the nothing, melancholy, and mis-meeting. This employment was in part rhetorical: seeking to combat the image of Buber as a benevolent new-age grandfather. There is nothing wrong with this reading (Buber was a grandfather, often benevolent, and his ideas clearly resonate with New Age thinking). But it has dominated the field of Buber interpretation for too long, and has led to the neglect of what I consider to be his more interesting ideas. Further, these concepts allow for the argument in chapter five that many Buber interpreters, including the most sophisticated, have confused his transcendental schema with his genetic account of the human. For all of Buber’s buoyancy and optimism, it is these negative concepts that predominate in his genetic account. And without this
account, the ideas of singularity and the in-between seem to be mired in contradictions that would prohibit their employment in future projects.

There is a great deal of work that remains to be done on the ideas of singularity and the in-between. This project has set itself the goal of clarifying what these ideas are, and indicating possible future employments. In particular, one future employment has dominated this explication: the use of these ideas for the study of religion. For this to be more than a proposition, it will be necessary to research the ways in which the two fundamental concepts of this dissertation are employed by Buber and Mendelssohn themselves in their own studies of religion. I myself hope to set about this task in the near future. However, it is also necessary that these ideas be brought into conversation with contemporary theories of the study of religion. An even more difficult task awaits in the form of specific studies of religion and religious phenomena. Again, I assume that a theory is only so good as what it is capable of explaining, and it remains to be shown that these ideas will be of merit in contemporary research into religion. I am confident that the explication of singularity and the in-between found in this dissertation will help in this task. There are, however, limitations to the method of philosophical reconstruction: this dissertation has, of necessity, largely restricted itself to formal structures, claims, and propositions. It is hoped that future work will not only help correct any mis-alignments in this conceptual skeleton, but also provide meat that can be stretched over its bones.

Despite the unavoidable shortcomings of this reconstructive approach, I believe it is the best way to begin the larger project of employing these ideas in philosophical thinking and the study of religion. I am confident that formal structures provide the most powerful means for the communication of these ideas in all of their specificity. Purely cultural or
historical analyses are of great value, but they generally leave the ideas discussed in their initial context, and do not provide a means for their employment in other fields. Given that the employment I envision will be multi-disciplinary, my intention was to sketch out a structure that can be easily transmitted and reconfigured in other arenas of thought. Conversely, this is the reason I have avoided a purely philosophical analysis. Philosophy is, at present, very much an independent discipline. It is my belief that a strictly philosophical approach would have allowed these ideas to leave the arena in which they were initially developed, but would left them mired in Philosophy departments. Whether this is in fact the case must be left for the reader to decide. Walking the line between philosophy and religious studies has created difficulties for this project, some of which I am not sure I have overcome. The claims and arguments of philosophy departments are not those of religious studies, and this has required a presentation of the ideas that has, perhaps awkwardly, vacillated between the two fields. However, I believe there is one incontrovertible advantage of this approach: even if the ideas developed here do not find purchase in the future study of religion, they will stand as contributions to Mendelssohn and Buber scholarship. These two thinkers are both heavily invested in the tradition of philosophy, and the reconstructive method allows us to read even their non-philosophical work in the light of their philosophical engagements.

While it is certainly possible to view both Buber and Mendelssohn as ‘historical’ persons whose work has been surpassed by their successors, I hold that this reconstruction of the concepts of singularity and the in-between demonstrate their continued relevance. I suggest that both singularity and the in-between are ideas which are interesting in their own right, if only because of the problems they clarify. While I have sought to explore
them with an eye on their use in religious studies, they possess a compelling explanatory power regardless of one’s research interests. This study has sought to provide a rigorous formulation of these two ideas, a formulation I believe to be of value for the contemporary study of religion and philosophy. It is hoped that this explication and formalization of their work both enables productive reading of their own work, and, allows for future developments of these ideas.
References


