

Affective Appraisal and Dialogical Encounter

Magda Arnold and Martin Buber on Human Flourishing

Ana Fernández Núñez

Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, Italy

ana1212fernandez@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4390-8575>DOI: [10.17421/2498-9746-12-14](https://doi.org/10.17421/2498-9746-12-14)

SUBMITTED: 25.03.2026 – REVIEWED: 25.06.2026 – ACCEPTED: 04.07.2026

Abstract

This article explores human flourishing through a dialogue between Magda Arnold's psychology of emotion and Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy. It argues that dialogue is not merely beneficial but constitutes a *sine qua non* condition for authentic human flourishing, grounded in the recognition that human beings are fundamentally dialogical beings. The article examines Buber's dialogical anthropology, focusing on the I-Thou relationship and encounter (*Begegnung*), revealing how personal identity is constituted through authentic dialogue. It then explores Arnold's appraisal theory, which positions emotions as evaluative responses to perceived reality. The synthesis demonstrates that appraisal occurs dialogically rather than in isolation, as interpersonal experience fundamentally influences how individuals perceive and evaluate reality. Both authors overcome problematic dualisms: Arnold bridges reason and emotion through affective intelligence, while Buber transcends the subject-object dichotomy through relational ontology. Together, they establish emotional appreciation and authentic dialogue as complementary and constitutive dimensions of integral human flourishing.

Keywords: Dialogical philosophy, Appraisal theory, Martin Buber, Magda Arnold, I-Thou, Encounter.

CONTENTS

1	Brief Introduction to Magda Arnold's Concept	207
2	Dialogue for Buber	209
3	Dialogue for Human Flourishing: Arnold and Buber	211

1 BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO MAGDA ARNOLD'S CONCEPT

The concept of Human Flourishing has emerged in both philosophy and psychology as a renewed understanding of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. As it is often defined, Human Flourishing seeks to empower the human spirit in all its greatness, goodness, and capacity for growth, developing human capabilities in a way

that includes individual and communal well-being. Elizabeth Anscombe¹ used this term in the field of philosophy in 1958. She presents Human Flourishing not as an alternative to *eudaimonia* and Aristotelian virtue theory, but as an integration of all Aristotelian ethical elements. Human happiness is not just a goal but a much broader experience. These initial reflections will help us understand Human Flourishing not only as individual but also as collective. The individual can only flourish in society, and vice versa; society needs individuals in constant development for its preservation.

Over the last years, this concept has been a part of a broader discussion on human flourishing. Universities such as Harvard are concerned with the practical applications that these psychological and philosophical theories may have in personality development. Platforms like this seek answers to fundamental questions about human existence: the meaning of life as a whole or in each human situation and activity. It is not something trivial.

These renewed ways of doing ethics imply new ways of thinking about philosophical anthropology. Studying different authors establishes connections that allow for an increasingly deeper analysis of human nature and experience. This paper will bring two seemingly unrelated perspectives into dialogue, Magda Arnold's psychology of emotion and Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy. Martin Buber captures a fundamental aspect of human flourishing that would contribute to Arnold's theory.

Martin Buber does not speak directly about human flourishing, nor even about emotions, which is the central theme of Arnold's psychology. His focus is on dialogue. It is arguable that dialogue not only helps human flourishing, but is a *sine qua non* condition for personal flourishing. Human beings are not only social beings, but also dialogical beings. In this sense, human flourishing can be grounded in the ontological relationality of the I-Thou encounter—where fulfilment emerges from authentic dialogue with the Other. This perspective of the Other is missing in Arnold. She anchors fulfilment in emotional appraisal, as a cognitive process that guides human beings towards what they perceive as genuinely good. However, Magda Arnold's anthropological framework can be expanded if dialogue is directly introduced as understood by Martin Buber. First, some fundamental aspects of Buber's dialogical philosophy will be briefly outlined and then, at the risk of redundancy, put it in dialogue with Magda Arnold's appraisal theory.

¹G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, «Philosophy», 33/124 (1958), pp. 1-19.

2 DIALOGUE FOR BUBER

Martin Buber develops a completely dialogical anthropology. This means that human beings can only be understood as beings who engage in dialogue and construct their own identity through dialogue with others. This vision goes beyond that of Aristotle. Aristotle said that man is *zoon logon echon*, an animal capable of speech. But Buber says that man is a being who understands and discovers himself and others through dialogue. Because it is so constitutional of the person, dialogue must be understood as an essential part of personality development.

For Martin Buber, true dialogue transcends the limits of communication. This means that Buber is not referring to a strategy of words to arrive at the truth or the simple communication of *logos*, but rather acts in which the person gives of themselves and finds themselves completely. Dialogue has specific characteristics. Dialogue occurs “between” human beings. It is in the “between” that what is truly human is constituted, not only to communicate outwardly, but also to understand inwardly. This implies that dialogue is not merely any human action, but one that structures human identity. Through this constitution, human beings encounter each other, thus forming each other. This circle of encounter and identity enhances the role that relationships play not only in the construction of the common good, but also of the individual and the self.

It is in the world of things and in the sphere of the interhuman that human beings live and build a personal identity. In Buber’s universe, the world of human beings is twofold because of the relationships they establish. This is mostly written in *I and Thou*, an essay published in 1923 in which Buber first developed his theory on the self and the knowledge of the other. This refers to what Buber calls the basic words ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’. “Primary words do not signify things, but intimate relations.”² Once words are spoken, they establish an existence: they establish a relationship. The fact that the human self is dual implies that it never exists in isolation. For Buber, the self exists only in relation to others or to things. We perceive the world as a relationship.

When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing, there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds³.

The I-Thou and the I-It are the keys to interpreting the world. Throughout the essay, Buber explains how this interpretation occurs. He often does so in mysterious and poetic language, which also speaks to a possible vindication of different ways of doing philosophy, beyond systematisation and perfect conceptualisation.

²M. BUBER, *I and Thou*, trans. by R. G. Smith, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1937, p. 3.

³*Ibidem*, p. 4.

The basic words have many implications that open up other questions and fields of research. For now, it suffices to understand that relationships are intrinsically constitutive of personal identity.

It is possible to say that human relationality influences all human activity. Moreover, the very way we perceive the world is as a relationship. The world is a distinctly human category. “Man has a great desire to enter into personal relation with things and to imprint on them his relation to them.”⁴ But in addition to the world of things, human beings experience the world of others, the world of human beings. This is what Buber calls the interhuman sphere⁵, which is what happens when people meet.

Having explained what the I-Thou and I-It game consists of for Martin Buber, it is important to discuss three additional indispensable elements of his thought: original distance, entering into relationship, and encounter. These elements function as steps through which dialogue occurs and allow who dialogues to continue to complete the reality and importance of dialogue.

The original distance is the basis of the relationship. It is the situation of human beings in the world I spoke of earlier, where the identification of things takes place. Thus, human beings are prepared for a second step, entering into a relationship. Entering into a relationship refers to this second step that people take in order to possess things and, in the case of people, to get to know them.

Given these conditions, encounter (*Begegnung*) can be understood as the main category for this author’s comprehensive understanding. “All real living is meeting.”⁶ This is the most forceful statement on the subject in *I and Thou*, an intrinsically dialogical work. According to many commentators, such as its translator Ronald Gregor Smith, it is like a poem that must be read more than once. This work establishes the foundational concepts of what Buber would later develop as his dialogical philosophy. He achieves this through several essays that clarify and outline what is mentioned in *I and Thou*.

In *Dialogue*, Buber explains how encounters occur between people. The use of this preposition is key to understanding the metaphysics of encounter. An encounter does not depend on the parties involved; it is something that happens in which both people participate, but do not create. It is a reality that transcends and enriches them. The person must be able to recognise the other in that encounter, to name them “you”:

Only he who himself turns to the other human being and opens himself to him receives the world in him. Only the being whose otherness, accepted by my being, lives and faces me in the whole compression of existence, brings the radiance of eternity

⁴IDEM, *Distance and Relation*, in *The Knowledge of Man*, trans. by M. Friedman, R. G. Smith, Harper & Row, New York 1965, p. 66.

⁵Cf. IDEM, *Elements of the Interhuman*, in *The Knowledge of Man*, cit., pp. 72-88.

⁶*Ibidem*, p. 11.

to me. Only when two say to one another with all that they are, «It is *Thou*», is the indwelling of the Present Being between them⁷.

To name the other “you” is to recognise them as another self, to recognise the self in the other, to use the basic word “I-Thou” and therefore to understand the reality that arises from there. Something happens outside the subjects, a present being that occurs. In *What is Man?* Buber gives an enlightening example. He explains that encounters can even occur between people who do not know each other:

In the darkened operahouse there can be established between two of the audience, who do not know one another, and who are listening in the same purity and with the same intensity to the music of Mozart, a relation which is scarcely perceptible and yet is one of elemental dialogue, and which has a long vanished when the lights blaze up again⁸.

Here, Buber explains how the encounter, the relationship, does not depend on those who experience it, but rather exceeds them, happening despite their presence. All of this is explained using Buber’s ontological categories, which confer a very high status of existence to the encounter. This proposal prioritises the encounter over substances, although it is essential to note that it does not deny the existence of substances.

3 DIALOGUE FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING: ARNOLD AND BUBER

Magda Arnold can dialogue with Buber beginning with her explanation of appraisal of perceived reality. Arnold is particularly famous for offering a theory of emotions integrated with a Thomistic anthropological perspective, in which tendencies and passions are intertwined with intelligence and will, ultimately giving rise to action. For this paper, the important contribution by Arnold is appraisal. Arnold explains it as follows in *Emotion and Personality*:

What we call appraisal or estimate is close to such a sense judgement. In emotional experience, such appraisal is always direct, immediate; it is a sense judgement and includes a reflective judgement only as a secondary evaluation⁹.

When a person perceives an object, before experiencing an emotion or taking action, they assess the situation. They make a kind of sensitive judgment about the known object that already indicates a convenience or inconvenience. In this psychological framework, emotions typically follow appraisal. Thus, emotions are

⁷IDEM, *Dialogue*, in *Between Man and Man*, trans. by R. G. Smith, Routledge, New York 2002, p. 35.

⁸IDEM, *What Is Man?*, in *Between Man and Man*, cit., p. 242.

⁹M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*. Vol. 1: *Psychological Aspects*, Columbia University Press, New York 1960, p. 175.

evaluative responses to objects perceived as good or bad, convenient or inconvenient for the subject. Throughout life, we get to know and appreciate different objects. We do not always value them equally, and previous experience plays a fundamental role in how we do so. What about interpersonal experience?

In Buber's theatre example the perceived object is Mozart's music. It can be assumed that the subject values the object highly and feels emotions of wonder or happiness when listening to the symphony. In this case, the action would be to enjoy the music. Listening with others influences the appraisal. A human activity such as this matters if it occurs with others. It would not be the same to listen to the work in an empty hall, because the fact of being accompanied, even if not consciously, makes the object more valuable.

From all this, one can deduce that the appreciation of objects occurs in dialogue; it is not an innate quality. As said earlier, this is perfected and learned throughout life, and by what other people largely point out about the objects themselves. This is a central point, for example, in the education of children. As a child learns, through individual experience or dialogue, they integrate what they have learned into their capacity for appreciation and action. After repeated emotions are converted into feelings, personality traits are developed. It should be noted that this occurs commonly, in mirroring, and in dialogue. These personality traits are generated by everything that affects us. In human beings, the realities that most influence our personality are the relationships we establish with others, with the world, with ourselves, and with things. We are not isolated beings who perceive the world individually; much of what we experience we also do so through the experience of others, and this constitutes, in Arnold's terms, our personality. Arnold herself accepts in the Preface of her work that "there is no adequate theory of emotion today, that is, no theory that can integrate the psychological, neurological, and physiological aspects of affective phenomena and place emotion in its proper perspective as a factor in personality organization."¹⁰ This means that integration of all human capabilities must be made in order to understand better what is personality, which also involves relation with others.

In many cases, dialogue precedes emotions; in others, it follows. This analysis proposes integrating dialogue as part of the individual appraisal that each person can make. If Arnold's scheme involves perception of reality, appraisal, emotion and action, dialogue can be introduced at any stage of the process. However, it takes on special importance in appraisal, since the experience that others may have of the same reality and how they communicate it ultimately influences each person's appraisal of the same reality, even if that appraisal is completely different.

Both authors complement each other in their integration of reality into

¹⁰*Ibidem.*

human experience. As I pointed out earlier, Buber specifies that all reality is encounter, and it is through encounter that human beings develop themselves. Magda Arnold has a strong realist bent when it comes to appraisal theory. Currently, many psychological trends emphasise individual feelings over the appreciation of reality. If personality is something that is constantly evolving, this does not mean that it is ghostly or ethereal, but rather that it seeks to correlate with reality, with the events that the person experiences, and ultimately, with the truth.

Both theories overcome problematic dualisms: Arnold bridges the gap between reason and emotion by demonstrating affective intelligence, showing that appraisal is an intuitive yet deeply cognitive act; Buber overcomes the subject-object dichotomy by revealing the ontological priority of the relationship. Both reject atomised individualism and reductionist perspectives, proposing that flourishing requires intentional openness: in Buber, towards relational presence, while in Arnold, towards the reflective harmonization of appraisal.

Both frameworks reveal that human growth and personality development are neither purely internal nor purely external but require movements toward others. Emotional appraisal and dialogue are complementary and constitutional dimensions of integral human flourishing, Arnold's way to integrate emotion and personality provides the emotional maturity necessary to sustain Buber's demanding I-Thou encounters. Integrating both theories can help reformulate the human being as an indivisible, relational whole, opening up perspectives on transcendence as the ultimate fulfilment of these affective and relational dynamics.

© 2026 Ana Fernández Núñez & Forum. Supplement to Acta Philosophica



Quest'opera è distribuita con Licenza [Creative Commons Attribuzione - Non commerciale - Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale](#).

[Testo completo della licenza](#)

