

THOU AND IT (or, Thou Art Not It)

There is a fundamental distinction between the ancients and modern man: our ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ society sees the phenomenal world as primarily an inanimate ‘It’, in which we observe the actions of ubiquitous, natural ‘laws’ on constant and unchanging material properties. For ancient (and also for primitive) man, the phenomenal world is ‘Thou’¹. Perhaps the difference between these two perspectives can best be explained by comparing it with two other modes of cognition: *the relation between subject and object* – and *the relationship that exists when I say that I ‘understand’ another living being*. The correlation ‘subject-object’ (the actor – and that upon which it acts) is, of course, the basis of all scientific thinking and is the essential prerequisite for scientific knowledge. The way in which ancient and primitive man ‘knows’ the world however, is the kind of empathetic knowledge to which we refer when we say that “I know how you feel”, or that we ‘understand’ the fear, desire, or anger of another.

‘Thou’ has the unprecedented, unparalleled, and unpredictable character of *an individual*: a presence known only in so far as it reveals its qualities and its Will. In other words, *Thou art unique*. Moreover, ‘Thou’ is not merely contemplated or understood but is *experienced directly and emotionally* as part of a dynamic reciprocal relationship. The way in which we imagine (IMAGInE) the world has a profound impact on the way we think – including what concepts are available to our mind – and which in turn, determines the range of explanations that are possible. Primitive man has only one mode of thought, one ‘kind’ of knowing, and therefore only one mode of expression – the personal. Primitive man projects human characteristics onto an inanimate world (anthropomorphism²) because primitive man simply does not ‘see’ an inanimate world.

Primitive societies ‘knew’ the world the way one ‘knows’ another living being: as ‘Thou’. Our ancestors interpreted nature and natural phenomena in terms of their own experience; accordingly, every event and every action was charged with meaning. Things happen because Someone or Something *will*s it.³ The world appears to primitive man, neither inanimate nor impersonal, but resplendent with Life. In human, in beast and in plant, and in every other phenomenon with which he is confronted (the thunderclap, the sudden shadow, the unknown clearing in the wood, the stone which suddenly trips him while on a hunting trip) Life confronts him, not as an ‘It,’ but as ‘Thou’: as intent made manifest. In this confrontation, ‘Thou’ reveals its individuality, its qualities, *and its will*. ‘Thou’ is not contemplated in the abstract or with intellectual detachment, it is understood and ‘seen’ as Life confronting Life – involving man in a reciprocal relationship in which thoughts, no less than acts and feelings, are subordinated to this experience.

Writing about the differences between modern and primitive societies (1933), C.G. Jung wrote:

It is our assumption, amounting to a positive conviction, that everything has causes which we call natural and which we at least suppose to be perceptible. Primitive man, on the other hand, assumes everything is brought about by invisible, arbitrary powers [...] he does not call it chance, but intention.

It is only since the scientific revolution that we have learned to ‘see’ the physical world as an ‘It’ in which all actions are the result of impersonal, ubiquitous forces acting on material properties. Everything we ‘know’ about the world around us is dependant on received knowledge – and on assumptions untested and unsubstantiated by personal experience (How do you ‘know’ that the Earth is round? Certainly not from your direct experience). Everywhere we look, we ‘see’ a world animated by an impersonal ‘It’ – and behave accordingly. In times of stress however, the dominance of our new ‘rational’ mode of thought is readily overthrown, and we revert to our ancestors’ mode of relating to the world. Think back to the last time you desperately wanted or needed something to happen (or *not* to happen); chances are that you tried to ‘make a deal’ with the powers-that-be. This is how our ancestors dealt with the world: believing everything that happens is an expression of Will – and that, if offered the right inducement, ‘Thou’ canst be appeased.

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¹ Like other European languages, English had different pronouns to distinguish the singular and familiar (*thou*) from the plural and formal (*you*). The former fell out of use around the 18th century.

² To give human (*anthro*) shape (*morphos*) to

³ Aristotle proposed that each of the four elements (air, earth, fire and water) had a natural ‘home’ to which they belong: air and fire above, water and earth below. That flames rise and rocks fall, he claimed, was an expression of their ‘will’ to return to their natural domain.