London Review of Education
Vol. 7, No. 3, November 2009, 271–281

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Monologue or dialogue? Stepping away from the abyss in higher education

Julian Stern*

York St John University, York, UK

This paper investigates the possibilities of the use of dialogue, and the dangers of the use of monologue, in higher education in the early twenty-first century, in a period facing a number of smaller- and larger-scale crises – each interpreted as an 'abyss' of some kind. How does higher education contribute, positively or negatively, to personal relationships and the risk of isolation and paranoia, institutional approaches to their own permanence, and broad economic-environmental problems? Each of these abysses is analysed in terms of dialogue, and a dialogic approach in higher education is put forward as a way to help us step away from each abyss. Crises and conflicts throughout the twentieth century might have led to a decline in confidence in dialogic approaches in and beyond educational institutions. However, the opposite was the case, and Martin Buber analysed dialogue in the midst of conflict, rather than simply when conflict was concluded. His mid-twentieth century analyses are used, here, to theorise contemporary dialogic higher education.

Keywords: dialogue; higher education; Martin Buber; crisis; paranoia; environment

Introduction

This paper enjoins a dialogic rather than monologic approach for higher education in a context of various crises. Writing about dialogue, however, is open to immediate criticism. The written word has a tendency to be monologic, it attempts to freeze meanings. Even academic 'dialogues' such as those of Plato, are neither spontaneous conversations, nor realistic as imaginative renderings of possible conversations. Yet they are still dialogic, and that is a characteristic that is – or should be – shared by academic writing in general. Just as Bakhtin (1981) described the novel as essentially dialogic, the same can be set as an expectation of our work in higher education. This is most important for a higher education system in the face of, and wanting to step away from, an abyss – an abyss at times 'devoid of public dialogue', as Arendt described totalitarianism (Power in Arendt 2004, x).

Of all periods, the last hundred years would seem to be unlikely times in which dialogue would be promoted. The conflicts and upheavals of wars and genocides throughout the period might have been expected to have led to a decline in confidence in dialogic approaches, and the development of weapons of global annihilation in the second half of the twentieth century might have been expected to make dialogue even less likely. However, the opposite was the case, and dialogue in the midst of conflict, rather than simply when conflict was concluded, was newly theorised. The philosopher Martin Buber is the perfect example of, and is himself the leading theorist of, dialogue in the face of the abyss. He worked in Nazi Germany until 1938, as director of the Center for Jewish Adult Education, and from that time until his death in 1965, Buber lived and worked in Jerusalem as a university professor. His dialogic principles were therefore forged

*Email j.stern@yorksj.ac.uk

ISSN 1474-8460 print/ISSN 1474-8479 online

DOI: 10.1080/14748460903336505
http://www.informaworld.com

and tested as an educator in the midst of shattering conflicts. This paper investigates the possibilities of the use of dialogue, and the dangers of the use of monologue, in higher education. Higher education is conceived of primarily as the institutions of higher education (universities, colleges, institutes and so on), but should also include the broader networks of academics connected, for example, through the publishing of academic journals. In the early twenty-first century, higher education faces what may be called the 'regular', cyclical, abysses of economic uncertainty and political conflict or wars, and also its own 'additional', unique, abyss of environmental crisis. These abysses need further explanation.

The abyss we face

We live in an age of repeated warnings of an abyss, including Buber's 'new anthropological dread' (Buber 2002, 173). 'We live in a moment of utmost precariousness, a time unlike other times, when particular cultures, nations, and groups are at risk, but when the entire civilization and planet confront the possibility of extinction', according to Purpel, writing in 2004 (Purpel and McLaurin Jr 2004, 116). The dour warnings of both Buber in the 1930s and Purpel in the 2000s are accompanied by a call to education to bring us away from the abyss. This paper joins them in calling for a dialogic approach in all forms of education, and specifically in higher education, to help us step away from each abyss we face. Starting from the various interpretations of the nature of the abyss – personal, communal, and global economic political or environmental – and the relationship of these to dialogue, the paper goes on to analyse how higher education in particular can help. Do we face an abyss, as Buber and Purpel say we do, or are we currently simply the latest Chicken Littles, saying 'the sky is falling'? Why should the latest economic, social, or environmental abyss be any more the end of the world than the previous thousands of years of patently unfulfilled promises of the world's ending? Higher education has a specific responsibility to investigate and help people understand the nature of a crisis, going beyond scaremongering. There are three distinct approaches to answering this question, representing three distinct if overlapping abysses.

The small abyss of paranoia

One response is to say that those who believe they are facing an abyss are suffering from something like paranoia. That is the 'small' approach, focused on an individual. What counts as paranoia (and other schizophrenic-like conditions) is in part defined as a dialogic failure (a failure to communicate) leading to a failure to *be* (an existential failure). As is powerfully argued by Salmon, forms of schizophrenia are not 'individual' conditions, but relational problems often the result of 'a prolonged experience of invalidation'. To develop personal identity, she says, 'the pronoun You is prior to that of I'. Salmon quotes John Shotter saying that 'the thou is older than the I in the sense that the capacity to be addressed as a "you" by others is a preliminary to being able to say "I" of oneself' (Salmon 2004). Young children learn to be, through the use of the word 'You'. This approach to understanding personhood has a staggeringly long history. Sacks describes the Biblical significance of 'You' or rather the more personal 'Thou'. Adam, seeing Eve for the first time, is described as saying 'This is now bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman [*ishah*] because she was taken from man [*ish*]' (quoted in Sacks 2003, 150). Sacks explains that the term 'adam', 'of the earth', signifies humanity as a biological species (as Adam is described as having previously been a merely material thing, a 'golem'), but that 'ish', used for the first time in this phrase, 'means roughly the same as the English word, "person"', so the implication of the text is that 'Adam must pronounce the name of his wife before he can pronounce his own', and therefore 'must say "Thou" before he can say "I"' (Sacks 2003, 150–1).

That move from other to self, along with the significance of the act of naming, is there in the rest of the narrative (in the naming of creatures), and is reflected in the mystical processes involved in 'animating' a golem – a mere object, an automaton or robot-like figure created out of clay, long described in religious and popular literary writing in Jewish and more recently in Christian cultures. Words are put in the golem's mouth, and this animates the creation; words are withdrawn from the mouth, and this deanimates the golem. Destroying the golem can therefore mean reasserting the human ability to be in dialogue, with this taking priority over artificially created technologies. Paranoia is therefore a personal abyss, one that could be faced by Adam only after he became a person, only after he was with Eve.

Unable to be in dialogue, whilst able to talk, leads to monologue. Monologic talk of the paranoid, and others described as schizophrenic, can take the form of 'talking to yourself' or of talking at other people whilst not listening to them. In some senses, the 'rambling' of people who might be called schizophrenic is familiar to everyone. What is less often recognised is the ability of people to be monologic whilst not exhibiting – and not suffering from – the other characteristics of schizophrenia. Buber divided communication into three types of dialogue: technical dialogue (roughly, exchanging information), real or genuine dialogue (which for Buber has existential and religious significance), and 'monologue disguised as dialogue' (Buber 2002, 22). The life of real dialogue involves a 'strengthening sense of reciprocity', whilst one of only monologue 'will not, even in the tenderest intimacy, grope out over the outlines of the self' (Buber 2002, 24).

Higher education can suffer from monologic tendencies, as the temptations of high status disciplinary 'expertise' can lead academics and even students to believe they have no need to listen to others. Of academic disciplines, Buber commented on philosophy's tendency to monologue. Although generally categorised as one of the great twentieth century philosophers and writers on religion, Buber was somewhat outside the academy, working initially in journalism and then elsewhere in higher education, as an adult education specialist and then as a university professor of sociology – having been refused a chair in religion. He wrote (in 1961) that 'many modern – and that means often de-Socratizing – philosophers have fallen, with the totality of their thought world, into a monologizing hubris' (Buber 1998, 103). This may help explain Buber's self-identification as a poet, rather than as a philosopher, as reported of a conversation with Macmurray: 'I see no difference between us', Buber said, 'it is simply that you are the metaphysician and I am the poet' (Costello 2002, 322). 'Real' conversations are similar to 'real' lessons or tutorials, and must involve dialogue, just as real embraces and, surprisingly, real duels. All involve that same existence in the between. In a 'real conversation' (spontaneous not preconcerted), a 'real lesson' (neither routine nor whose outcomes are known in advance), a 'real embrace' (not habitual), and 'a real duel and not a mere game', Buber says:

> … what is essential does not take place in each of the participants or in a neutral world which includes the two and all other things; but it takes place between them in the most precise sense, as it were in a dimension which is accessible only to them both. (Buber 2002, 241–2)

Although it may seem strange to include duels in this list of real dialogic encounters, it recognises the importance of conflict – conflict itself, not its resolution – in bringing people together. What would be unhealthily monologic would be the absence of any conflict, or the assumption that all conflict would be 'resolved' through dialogue. So it is not simply the rambling monologues that are problematic. Rambling is easily recognised. The more dangerous monologues are those of people who think that all should agree with them (or with 'vision statements' or some other expression of a single point of view), or that all conflicts can be resolved. These dangers – of both rambling and univocal monologue – are undoubtedly recognisable in higher education.

The intermediate abyss of parochial deaths

A second response to the question 'abyss? what abyss?' is to say that, in some senses, worlds have already ended: people have died, countries and cultures and civilisations have been destroyed, epochs have ended. That is the 'intermediate' approach, saying that part of the world is ending. Notwithstanding religious views on the immortality of the soul or the prospect of reincarnation, it is reasonable to propose that human beings die. And notwithstanding expectations of political or cultural 'immortality', political systems and cultures disappear. Shelley's sonnet *Ozymandias*, for example, describes well the expectations of a 'king of kings' now represented only by a decayed wreck of a statue. There is a tendency within higher education for people, their systems and institutions, to treat themselves as permanent and immortal. As a consequence, for example, of the institutionalisation of particular intellectual positions, staff and students may be recruited who follow the position of the institution's 'leading lights'. Positions in economics, in anthropology, in psychology, or in cultural studies, may be embedded in an institution, in ways that give the impression that there is no alternative. The leading lights may then be tempted to regarded their high reputations as ever-lasting, and can end up saying to rivals, with Ozymandias, 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair'. Fallen intellectual edifices are all too numerous. The post-death declines of Cyril Burt, Bruno Bettelheim and Margaret Mead were particularly striking, although in all cases there was later something of a recovery.

What is the significance of recognising that we will die, or that our 'systems' will disappear? There are responses of fear, of frozen inaction, and of acceptance. With respect to death, the Scottish philosopher Macmurray writes that a human being 'knows that he is alive, and consequently knows that he must die', and this knowledge 'is the first inevitable consequence of being a person' (Macmurray 1935, 37). 'The fear of death isolates man from the world', he continues, and 'isolates man from man, breaking the bonds between friends and kinsmen, and forcing the individual into the isolation of his own existence' (Macmurray 1935, 37), yet at the same time it 'reveals the intimate dependence of man on nature and upon his fellows' so that, 'unless this consciousness of death were overcome, human life would be paralysed' (Macmurray 1935, 37). It is worth noting that overcoming the fear of death is not achieved by denying it, or by denying its unpleasantness, but rather by recognising how the fear of death would restrict life: 'the person who lives on the defensive is really seeking death, seeking to escape from life', and this applies to 'most of us', who 'wake up late in life to discover that we have never really lived at all' (Macmurray 1996, 144). So the fear of death can restrict life, can neutralise life, and the response to the fear is to 'wake up' and to take part in life. This is done with other people – for Macmurray, other people in community, i.e., people we treat as ends in themselves and not as means to other ends. Macmurray wrote extensively of the community nature of educational institutions, from his experiences of both schooling and higher education. As communities, there were implications for how people acted together within the institutions, and there were implications for the public expectations of the purposes of those institutions. Higher education is like schooling, for Macmurray: 'universities are educational institutions, as are schools' and 'their business is not primarily to produce scientists, or historians, or philosophers, but through the sciences and the humanities, through discussion in their societies or through games in their athletic clubs, to educate men and women' (Macmurray 1968, 142). 'Education, from the standpoint of its victims', he says, 'is learning to be human' (Macmurray 1968, 142).

The various effects of the fear of death, and the various ways of dealing with that fear, can be applied to cultures and countries and nations. A pretence to permanence may lead to an exaggerated sense of the importance of the present system – the Ozymandias effect. It may, in contrast, lead to a frozen inability to do anything, to political apathy or withdrawal. Both can be illustrated from Germany in the mid-twentieth century. The academic social psychologist

Mitscherlich describes the 'pathological' leadership of Nazi Germany, an attempt to create the Third Reich to last a thousand years (as the first Reich lasted that time), which was destroyed in just over a decade. This was followed, according to Mitscherlich, by a frozen inability to deal with authority at all, leading to the dangers of a 'sibling society' (Bly, in the introduction to Mitscherlich 1993, xiv), where there was an 'inability to mourn' (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1975, title). What was lacking in both Germanies (i.e., Nazi Germany and its post-war successor) was friendship. The Mitscherlichs' purpose was 'to improve the prospects for the "friendly German"' (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1975, xxvii–xxviii). By realising the inappropriateness of an assumed immortality or a frozen fear of destruction, social groups and countries and nations can be healthily 'friendly'. They can have a sense of their own place, the horizons created by historical and social contexts, and they can have the imagination to look at alternative futures.

This view of the need for friendship in an uncertain world was considered by the Mitscherlichs to have implications for educational institutions. Amongst higher education institutions, a university in particular has the temptation, even in its name, to think of itself as universal, permanent, and free from history and context. Recognising the reality of context (or 'horizon') and impermanence is therefore as important for higher education institutions as it is for individual people and for nations. Hence, 'because of the enormous risk of deception – particularly self-deception – education can never be complete' (Mitscherlich 1993, 13). School and higher education programmes may end but education does not, so being 'educated' means having retained a 'youthful receptiveness to the new and the unknown': 'one does not know the truth about oneself, one seeks it, and to the end of one's life the search remains unsatisfied' (Mitscherlich 1993, 13). Education must involve uncertainty, he continues, as 'dogmatic certainty is the end of education (not excluding religious education)' (Mitscherlich 1993, 14). Higher education, as the 'highest' of the sectors of education, is thereby inevitably most tempted to see itself as complete. Such completeness is impossible to achieve, yet remains a temptation.

The abyss of economic, social and environmental end-times

A third response to abysmal questions is to say that this time, we are right, the world is ending. This third, 'end-times', response is the Armageddon approach (the description of end-times in Christian scriptures, Revelation 16:16) or that of Gog and Magog (the description of the battle heralding the end of days in Jewish and Christian scriptures, Ezekiel 38–9, and see Buber 1999, and in Muslim scripture, Qur'an 18: 83–101). And this response can be appropriate even if we are also paranoid. 'Even paranoids have enemies', Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir is reported as having said to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger when accused, in November 1973, of paranoia. Meir's concern for real abysses, even when there was also evidence of 'paranoid' concerns within Israel, is an important lesson to learn. Some of the debate about the environment in the US in recent times has been combined with beliefs about religious Rapture. In that context, carbon emissions are less significant than preparing for an imminent Rapture. For some – including some who believe in Rapture – the two arguments need to be separated, and since the replacement of Bush by Obama, debates on carbon emissions are once again rising up the political agenda. Of course, either might mark the end-times, as might a nuclear holocaust or being struck by large meteor. Which abyss is 'real' is hard to identify, and the confusion of abysses is understandable, and understandably frustrating. Higher education has, and will always have, a vital role in developing an understanding of these issues, and providing politicians and public alike ways of coming to understand what is happening and what should be done. 'It's relatively easy for the academic economist to follow the new research', says environmental economist Constanza, 'whereas the politician, who's running for office on economic growth, will have a harder time breaking out of that paradigm' (quoted in McKibben 2007, 28).

The phrase 'even paranoids have enemies' is used as the title of a book which explores the relationship between paranoia and real persecution. In that book, Lifton (in Berke et al. 2008, chapter 4) explores the relationship between an Armageddon-like event (such as the bomb in Hiroshima in 1945), the theological imagery shared by a group of people which theorises or 'organises' the events, and – for 'clinically' paranoid members of that group – the 'personal Armageddon of psychosis' (Berke et al. 2008, 14, from the editors' introduction). So the end of the world may be imminent, even if it would be unreasonable to trust only to the words of those suffering from paranoia. If it is hard to convince someone to give up smoking tobacco, despite its known effects on health, then what is the chance of convincing people that the world will end? Smoking continues, and those countries with nuclear weapons continue to maintain them in preparation for a nuclear war. Meanwhile, the planet warms and our economic systems – our theories of economics as well as our substantive processes of economic organisation – seem unable to prioritise continued life. We are 'looking into the abyss' (Speth 2008). Speth is currently working on the environmental abyss, but was taught to look abyss-wards by Lifton in the 1960s, who was considering the nuclear abyss.

Higher education has a great deal to do, to understand and provide alternatives to these abysses. The environmental abyss is closely related to the economic abyss, as it is economic systems and activity that appear to be causing the environmental degradation. And the current (2008–9) banking and economic collapse is perhaps the crisis that will lead people to take the environmental crisis more seriously. As Friedman noted decades ago, 'only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change' (quoted in Speth 2008, xv). And it is the economic analysis of environmental issues that is likely to determine the detail of current and future policy. Economics is a value-laden study, yet the economics practiced by governments seems not to be in a position to recognise the 'value' given to other people, to non-human animals, and to environments beyond this. It is difficult, in political and economic debates, to put a value on what are called 'standing global utilities', utilities such as rainforests, biodiversity, or clean air. For example, there is a recognition of the value of rainforests, in environmental terms, yet if a profit can be made by destroying a rainforest, the economic, rather than moral or political, argument seems to stop there. In the same way, in terms of valuing people, economics based around 'supply and demand' is generally based around what is called 'effective demand' rather than 'real demand'. So the price of food is affected not by the hunger and tastes of people in general, but the hunger and tastes of those people with resources (such as money) to make a claim on food. Hence the economist Sen can say, despairingly, that starvation 'is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat', but rather it is 'the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat' (Sen 1981, 1): a matter of entitlement rather than of need. In these ways, economics as practiced can blind people – including politicians and those who elect them – to the 'real' economics, or at least can distract people long enough to allow the end of the world to happen without us quite noticing. Hence we are currently suffering an economic credit crunch and an environmental climate crunch. Both need a better understanding of the value and the place of people in the world, and the world itself as of value in its own right ('as if the world mattered', McKibben 2007), rather than a focus on individuals and possessive individualism (Macpherson 1962) and the related chimera of what is called 'economic growth'.

Higher education escaping the abyss

So there are three abysses we may face, and to walk away from each of the abysses requires dialogue. Higher education has a very distinct role in this dialogue, a very distinct role in helping us walk away from each of the three abysses. Dialogic higher education can generate better

connected people, it can help people escape from parochialism and the hubris of assumed permanence, and it may even help us avoid the end of the world.

Escaping the small abyss of paranoia

The importance of dialogue in educational institutions, schools and adult education, is made clear throughout Buber's writings. As is described above, 'real lessons' will be those in which real dialogue takes place, and in which lessons develop 'in mutual surprises'. If educators are monologic, they will be typical of many contemporary people, as '[t]he mark of contemporary man is that he does not really listen' (Friedman in Buber 2002, xiv). If educators are dialogic, they will be more inclusive. Dialogue involves 'imagining the real' (*Realphantasie*, Buber 1998, 71), an act of inclusion that 'goes hand in hand with remaining on one's own side of the relationship' (Friedman, in Buber 2002, xiv). All such acts are possible in educational institutions, and were vital for Buber in his roles in adult and higher education, as:

> … if we want to do today's work and prepare tomorrow's with clear sight, then we must develop in ourselves and in the next generation a gift… some call it intuition, but … I prefer the name 'imagining the real', for in its essential being this gift is not a looking at the other, but a bold swinging – demanding the most intensive stirring of one's being – into the life of the other. (Buber 1998, 71)

Levinas later emphasises the centrality of this to Buber's philosophy, and he notes how this inclusion (*Umfassung*) 'should be distinguished from the psychological phenomenon of *Einfühlung* [usually translated as 'empathy'] where the subject puts itself completely in the other's place, thus forgetting itself' (Levinas 1989, 68). When being empathetic, 'the I forgets itself, and does not feel itself as a Thou of the Thou', whereas 'in the *Umfassung* the I sharply maintains its active reality' (Levinas 1989, 68).

Buber, distinctively, sees the inclusion in adult and higher education as fully mutual – not equal, but mutual in the sense of involving both parties in listening and in surprise. This is similar to the view of the sociologist Sennett, for whom mutual 'respect in a world of inequality' is the aim (Sennett 2003, and see Stern 2009 for school contexts). Educators are not – should not be – propagandists (Buber 2002, 72), but should help people become what they can be, in mutuality. Here, it is argued that the possibility and the presence of real dialogue is a defining characteristic of learning communities, especially in higher education (where, for Buber, it is fully mutual), and that monologic conversation in higher education is both tempting and harmful. And dialogue is all the more important in an age of 'homelessness', an age when we stare into the abyss, as Buber notes in 1938, pre-dating the Shoah-Holocaust and the other horrors to come in and after World War II. At that time, he said 'man lives in the world as in an open field and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent' (Buber 2002, 150). Yet higher education can itself provide a home, a place of dialogue, as it did for him – working in adult and higher education throughout the worst of the mid-twentieth-century horrors. It can be a place, not where we have 'space to be ourselves', but where our selves can come together to become something else, something more. The small abyss of paranoia, of lost connection, is itself tackled in higher education. It is part of the essence of higher education that it is a home for, a home of, real dialogue.

How higher education fulfils that role, is a matter for a whole book, never mind a paper. Amongst the key messages, it is suggested, are that members of the institution (members, not workers and clients) should *listen* to each other, and that they should, together, *make sense* of the world. For students, part of the art of listening is the ability to listen to the authors of texts, including long-dead people, and take part in dialogue with them. All the issues of attribution and plagiarism are really issues of good listening and good dialogue with texts. For academic staff, part of the art of listening is the virtue of humility, the admission that do not know all the

answers. Of course, academics should have proper pride in their wisdom, too. If academics pretend that they know none of the answers, or that they have no particular qualifications or experience making them more suited to lecturing than to being lectured to, then humility would slip into pusillanimity. Yet humility is needed by academic staff, systematically, for example in the need to accept 'peer review' – as in the peer review process used by journals. As pointed out by one of the reviewers of this article, peer review may at times feel more like a duel than an occasion for mutual understanding, but the 'encounter' of peer review is dialogic – even if there is inevitably some inequality in the relationship. Peer review is not merely a form of gatekeeping: the 'reviewee' can respond and if the article is accepted, the reviewer and reviewee are acting precisely as peers in dialogue.

Escaping the intermediate abyss of parochial deaths

Humility is not simply an individual virtue. Institutions of higher education must also exhibit humility, and must avoid the Ozymandias version of pride. If individual members of institutions can be expected to see their own learning as necessarily unfinished, how much more important is this for the institution as a whole. One of the most problematic of recent policy developments in higher education is the way in which intended learning outcomes are used. Amongst the many positive features of intended learning outcomes, is the way in which these help academics and students alike feel comfortable knowing something about what they might know and be able to do in and as a result of a particular programme of study. Higher education is much more inclusive as a result. It need not be so much of a hidden code, to know what a subject is about, or how we should behave 'properly' in philosophy classes in contrast to gender studies classes or educational studies classes. All is more open. The danger, however, with intended learning outcomes is their use to limit learning. To the extent that all the outcomes of learning are known in advance, to that extent, half of real learning is not taking place: that half involving the students and the academics alike making sense, together, in dialogue. If academics know the answers in advance, then they are not learning any more and cannot be really listening to their students. If students are only learning pre-set knowledge and skills, they in turn are not making sense. They are, in Daniels' description of more strongly-framed school lessons, painting 'what the teacher sees' rather than painting 'what you see' (Daniels 2001, 170).

When intended learning outcomes are used to limit learning, there is a pretence of certainty, and a denial of the particularity of educational encounters. Higher education institutions may, similarly, ignore their institutional particularities. They may try to take themselves out of their contexts, and these contexts include the foundations of the institutions, such as church foundations, civic foundations, and what might be called 'modernist' foundations. Institutions of the first of these types are linked explicitly to religious bodies, with all the beliefs and practices of those organisations. This position may act to exclude people, or may be exploited to generate more inclusive institutions – by, for example, engaging critically and openly in public debates on religion and society. Civic foundations are less ideologically implicated, but have a clear basis in a place and, in most cases, a clear sense of a local and regional mission, perhaps based on the founders of and original donors to the institutions. Meanwhile, modernist foundations may regard themselves as floating free from contexts, generating objective and independent knowledge, and uncommitted to any single ideology or local need or context. This may come at the cost of lack of horizon and the consequent temptation to a non-dialogic sense of themselves as permanent and universal.

Peer review has been used to exemplify dialogic escape from paranoia, but it can also help with institutions more broadly. Academic peer review is review from within a community. It is not necessarily – or usually – democratic, as those who are invited to be peer reviewers are

generally more experienced and senior in their positions. The best modelling of peer review is that of Lave and Wenger, whose description of learning communities is of communities with more 'central' participants and more 'peripheral' participants, and with a movement from the periphery to the centre, such that the 'old-timers' are gradually replaced by the 'newcomers'. Such learning communities are cyclical, rather than dyadic. Hence:

> … the diversified field of relations among old-timers and newcomers within and across the various cycles, and the importance of near-peers in the circulation of knowledgeable skill, both recommend against assimilating relations of learning to the dyadic form characteristic of conventional learning studies. (Lave and Wenger 1991, 57)

Within academic life, even becoming a member – a 'legitimate peripheral participant' – is typically a matter of dialogue, in the doctoral *viva voce*: the one point in the modern UK examination system that institutionalises dialogue. The viva is a conversational examination whose outcome is not known in advance, and whose participants all – typically – take part in the conversation. Again, as with peer review, it is of course dialogic without being democratic.

The approaches to 'surprise' in learning, and the cyclical nature of dialogue in peer review, both indicate ways in which academics must be working to replace themselves. Then, as they approach the abyss, if they fall in, they will have left others behind, this side of the abyss, somewhat the better for having been educated.

Escaping the abyss of economic, social and environmental end-times

Buber wrote of the 'homelessness' of humankind in 1930s, quoted above. How prescient was Buber? He was not simply concerned with deaths, but rather with the state of living humanity. A 'secure' present and future had been sketched by Hegel, a century and a half previously, who 'compulsorily combined the course of the stars and of history into a speculative security' (Buber 2002, 172). A more tortuous but eventually secure future was described by Marx, who 'confined himself to the human world, ascribed to it alone a security in regard to the future, which is likewise dialectic, but has the effect of an actual security' (Buber 2002, 172). However, 'to-day this security has perished in the ordered chaos of a terrible historical revulsion'. He continues, 'a new anthropological dread has arisen', as '[n]o dialectical guarantee keeps man from falling; it lies with himself to lift his foot and take the step which leads him away from the abyss' (Buber 2002, 172–3). It is to be noted that Buber was an intellectual at that time heading for a professorship in Jerusalem, and was referring back to the academic Hegel and his academically-trained successor Marx. Buber continues, 'the strength to take this step cannot come from any security in regard to the future, but only from those depths of insecurity in which man, overshadowed by despair, answers with his decision the question about man's being' (Buber 2002, 173).

It is not that Buber was depressed by this vision of the presence of the abyss. He worked tirelessly throughout his life, seeing dialogue as the basis for strength in decision-making. And yet the abyss was there, with 'the peculiarity of the modern crisis' being 'man's lagging behind his works' and unable to 'subdue and render harmless the golem he has created' (Buber 2002, 187). Three examples are given of the creation of such a golem – a monstrous inhuman creation – from industry, economics and politics. In industry, machines 'were no longer, like tools, an extension of man's arm, but man became their extension, an adjunct on their periphery, doing their bidding'. In economics 'it is as though the business of the production and utilization of goods spread out beyond man's reach and withdrew itself from his command'. Finally, in politics:

> … in the first world war, and on both sides, man learned with ever greater horror how he was in the grip of incomprehensible powers, which seemed, indeed, to be connected with man's will but which threw off their bonds and again and again trampled on all human purposes. (Buber 2002, 187–8)

Conclusion: dialogic higher education

That the abyss was made by if not entirely under the control of human activity was indeed prescient of Buber. The distinctive abyss of the half century since his death has been environmental degradation, and this – an extension of Buber's economic golem – is of particular importance to higher education. The economics within higher education is freer to investigate (as Constanza, quoted above, suggests), without being as restricted as politicians are to the short-term and promises of growth. This will be needed even more, the closer the world is to an economic-environmental abyss. Economists like Sen, McKibben and Constanza, following the lead of Schumacher (1973), may help create a 'durable future' (McKibben 2007, 177). The environmentalist Speth quotes Friedman again, in saying that when a crisis occurs, 'the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around', and that therefore the jobs of economists and by implication others in higher education, is 'to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable' (in Speth 2008, xv). 'Forces for change', Seth concludes later in his account of the possibility of sustainability or 'the bridge at the edge of the world' (Speth 2008, title), include:

> … social movements… [which] are all about raising consciousness… the world's religions… [as] the potential of faith communities is enormous… [and] last, there is the great importance of sustained efforts at education … in the largest sense as embracing not only formal education but also day-to-day and experiential education. (Speth 2008, 215)

Education in general, and higher education in particular, it is argued here, has a central role in the world facing an environmental abyss.

It would be crass to say that the abysses we face should be responded to, respectively, by psychologists, organisational theorists, environmental scientists and economists. Yet the very value of critical engagement with those and other subjects, in a context of a learning community that is necessarily dialogic and creative, is indeed persuasive of the value of higher education. Dialogic higher education will be able to understand its context and reach beyond itself, chronologically and geographically, without claiming a single universal and permanent place for itself. The alternative is the desperate alienation described by Buber, a vision of failed dialogue, when a person 'shuddering at the alienation between the *I* and the world, comes to reflect that something is to be done', such as:

> … in the grave night-hour [when] you lie, racked by waking dream – bulwarks have fallen away and the abyss is screaming – and note amid your torment: there is still life, if only I got through to it – but how, how?; so is this man in the hours of reflection, shuddering, and aimlessly considering this and that. (Buber 1958, 94)

Let us go beyond that abyss, in dialogue.

Notes on contributor

Julian Stern is Professor of Education and Religion, and Dean of the Faculty of Education & Theology, at York St John University. Prior to his current post, he worked as an academic teacher, researcher, and manager in a number of universities, including the Institute of Education, University of London, the Open University, Brunel University, and the University of Hull.

References

Arendt, H. 2004. *The origins of totalitarianism.* New York: Schoken.

Bakhtin, M.M. 1981. *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin,* ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson, and M. Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Berke, J.H., S. Pierides, A. Sabbadini, and S. Schneider. 2008. *Even paranoids have enemies: New perspectives in paranoia and persecution.* London: Routledge.

Buber, M. 1958. *I and thou.* Trans. R.G. Smith. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
Buber, M. 1998. *The knowledge of man: Selected essays.* New York: Humanity Books.
Buber, M. 1999. *Gog and Magog: A novel.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
Buber, M. 2002. *Between man and man.* London: Routledge.
Costello, J.E. 2002. *John Macmurray: A biography.* Edinburgh: Floris.
Daniels, H. 2001. *Vygotsky and pedagogy.* London: RoutledgeFalmer.
Lave, J., and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Levinas, E. 1989. *The Levinas reader.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
McKibben, B. 2007. *Deep economy: Economics as if the world mattered.* Oxford: Oneworld.
Macmurray, J. 1935. *Creative society: A study of the relation of Christianity to Communism.* London: Student Christian Movement Press.
Macmurray, J. 1968. *Lectures/papers on education.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections Gen 2162/2.
Macmurray, J. 1996. *The personal world: John Macmurray on self and society: Selected and introduced by Philip Conford.* Edinburgh: Floris.
Macpherson, C.B. 1962. *The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Mitscherlich, A. 1993. *Society without the father: A contribution to social psychology.* New York: HarperPerennial.
Mitscherlich, A., and M. Mitscherlich. 1975. *The inability to mourn: Principles of collective behavior.* New York: Grove Press.
Purpel, D.E., and W.M. McLaurin. 2004. *Reflections on the moral and spiritual crisis in education.* New York: Peter Lang.
Sacks, J. 2003. *The dignity of difference: How to avoid the clash of civilizations.* London: Continuum.
Salmon, P. 2004. The Schizococcus: An interpersonal perspective. *Personal Construct Theory and Practice* 1: 76–81. www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp04/salmon04.html.
Schumacher, E.F. 1973. *Small is beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered.* London: Vintage.
Sen, A. 1981. *Poverty and famines: An essay on entitlement and deprivation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sennett, R. 2003. *Respect in a world of inequality.* London: Norton.
Speth, J.G. 2008. *The bridge at the edge of the world: Capitalism, the environment, and crossing from crisis to sustainability.* New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
Stern, L.J. 2009. *The spirit of the school.* London: Continuum.