

James E. Katz:

Saying Thanks to No One Buber, Kant, and the Case for Apparatgeist

Martin Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It relations remains a standard resource for theorizing how we address other beings: I-It denotes instrumental, functional engagement with objects handled and set aside; I-Thou denotes mutual, presential relation, irreducible to use. Kant, working within a different framework, denies that non-rational beings can be objects of direct duty. He nonetheless holds that we have indirect duties regarding them: cruelty toward animals wrongs no one but the agent, hardening dispositions that later surface in our treatment of other persons.

Both frameworks are increasingly invoked in discussions of human interaction with artificial intelligence (AI), yet neither is sufficient on its own. Many users address generative AI systems with courtesy, apologizing or thanking, while explicitly disavowing any belief that these systems have interests or the capacity to be addressed. Buber's framework struggles to place this behavior: no genuine mutuality is claimed, so it is not I-Thou, yet it exceeds what pure I-It instrumentality would predict, since strict efficiency would eliminate such courtesies rather than preserve them. Kant's account of indirect duty offers a partial diagnosis: it relocates the obligation from the object to the agent. But the account applies equally to any non-rational object, so it cannot explain why AI systems, and not other non-sentient artifacts, have become common sites for this behavior.

I argue instead, drawing on my own Apparatgeist framework and the related concept of perpetual contact (developed with M. Aakhus), that what marks certain artifacts out for this kind of address is not machine cognition but ongoing, one-sided availability: the fact that the artifact is always on hand for interaction regardless of the human's mood, timing, or need. Contact of this kind, sustained over time, explains why some artifacts draw this kind of address and others do not. I close by weighing this account, in which politeness protects the agent's existing

character, against a rival reading drawn from Ubuntu personhood, in which such address instead builds character through the exchange itself. Evidence about when and why users extend or withhold courtesy toward AI systems could help decide which account better describes what is actually happening, even though it cannot by itself settle which account of duty, or of personhood, is normatively correct. Distinguishing those two questions is itself unfinished business for a philosophy of AI.