Chapter 3
What is “I”? 
Everyone seems to be having fun, don’t they?

They do.

At times like this I always wonder...

What is “I”? Yes?
I’ve been waiting for this question.

Let me ask you...

Where is your “I”?

OK

It’s right here!
Where, exactly?

In my brain, I guess.

Alright then, let’s take a look.
“I” is nowhere to be found.

It’s the same in my case.

“İ” can’t be found anywhere.
In other words, it isn’t like this.

It’s very strange.

Even though “I” seems to exist so vividly,

we cannot determine exactly where it is,

and we can neither see nor touch it.
You should think about it like this!

A-san’s “I” is attached to A-san’s brain like a balloon.*

A-san’s “I” is a “mind,” so it has neither place nor form.

* This is called “epiphenomenalism.” In this view there is a one-way transmission of information from my brain to my mind.
That is indeed one way of thinking about it. And it's a way of thinking that is quite close to "common sense."

If we adopt this view, however, several difficult problems emerge.

To begin with, it becomes impossible to know whether or not other people have minds in the first place.

I can know only my own mind, and I become completely alone.
It’s not like that!

A-san’s mind  B-san’s mind
The contents of A-san’s mind  The contents of B-san’s mind
Me

If I were to connect myself to another person’s brain, I would know every part of their mind.
That is indeed an interesting idea.

But consider this as well.

A-san

Me

Ouch!

When A-san feels a pain in his foot, I feel it too,

but I presumably feel this pain as if it were a pain felt in “my own foot” that is extended to the place of A-san’s body.
When A-san sees an apple, the image of the apple seen from the position of A-san’s eyes is projected onto my field of view, but I presumably perceive this as an image of an apple seen through “my own eyes.”
In other words, if there is a one-way connection to another person’s brain, “my mind” instantly extends to the place of that person’s body, but the content of what I experience there is only “my own perceptions, feelings and thoughts.”

No matter how much “my mind” extends and expands, it can never reach “another person’s mind” itself.
Even if I managed to create a one-way connection to the brains of 100 people, this would only amount to the creation of an “I” with perceptions, feelings, and thoughts to go with 100 brains.
All of these perceptions, feelings, and thoughts would swirl around in “my mind” like a storm.

Unable to weather this storm, I would probably go mad.

These perceptions, feelings and thoughts I cannot control would become no more than just another part of “my mind.”
Now then, let’s return to our original topic.

What we have learned from our discussion so far is that even if “other people’s minds” exist whenever I try to know them they will always be converted to “my mind.”

I am therefore unable to ever know “other people’s minds” themselves, and I will never be able to know whether or not such minds themselves exist.

That makes sense.
Why is this the case?

Because everything I experience becomes “my” experience.

Take visual perception, for example.

The curtain that appears to me
The cloud that appears to me
The building that appears to me
The apple that appears to me
The flower that appears to me

Everything takes the form of “the ~ that appears to me.”

* In philosophy “experience” includes seeing, hearing, and feeling.
No matter what sort of thing we are talking about, the moment I see, feel or think it, it becomes “my” experience.

Why does everything I experience become “my” experience?

Why does this “my” always stick to it?
Here I’d like you to think about “comparison.”

The opposite of “I” is “other.”

Black – White
Right – Left
Exists – Does not exist

Black

Comparison

In other words, in order to be able to call what I have experienced “my experience,”

experience that is not mine,

namely, “another person’s experience,” must be posited.
Impossible for me to experience another person’s experience.

I can view everything being experienced on this side as “my experience,” as long as I can think of another person’s experience as existing on the other side of that person, like the balloon in the diagram.

Of course, it is impossible to prove that “another person’s experience” exists on the other side of that person.
Nevertheless, however, in practice I live my life with the conviction that “another person’s experience” must exist.

Based on this conviction, another arises: “Everything being experienced on this side must be ‘my experience.’”

It must be correct to call what is experienced on this side “my experience.”

“Another person’s experience” must lie hidden over there.
Let’s examine this a bit more closely.

“Another person’s experience” has two meanings.

One is a bundle of sensations, emotions, and thoughts that could presumably be experienced as “my experience” if a connection to another person’s brain were established.*

I live my life assuming that this bundle of sensations, emotions, and thoughts exists in the brain of A-san I see in front of me.

* This is called “counterfactual experience.”
However, “another person’s experience” also has another meaning.

When I connect my brain to A-san’s brain, the sensations, emotions and thoughts that must exist in A-san’s brain are converted to “my experience” and experienced by me.

This means that even if I were connected to another person’s brain, I would never be able to know what “another person’s experience” itself had been like before it was converted.
This means that not only will I never be able to know the “content” of “another person’s experience” itself, but I cannot even empirically “understand” what exactly “another person’s experience” itself is in the first place.

Another person’s experience ①
...... a bundle of sensations, emotions, and thoughts that could be known if a connection to the person’s brain were established.

Another person’s experience ②
...... Another person’s experience itself, which could not be known even if I were connected to that person’s brain, and which cannot be empirically understood. This is a mysterious being that is thought to exist bound to the other person’s brain.*

*This is called an “other mind” (“alter ego” in Husserl’s phenomenology).
“Another person’s mind” can be thought of as a phrase that includes both another person’s experience ① and another person’s experience ②.

Let’s think a bit more about the nature of another person’s experience ②.

No matter how we connect to the brain and try to know it,

this is something that consistently evades these efforts and escapes further and further to the other side.
This can only be described as a being of incomprehensible mystery staring back at us from the other side forever separate and unreachable.*

All we can do is viscerally “have the conviction” that this kind of mysterious being exists on the other side of another person.

We can never “prove” that such an entity exists.

* This is also called the “equiprimordial subject.”
Well then, why does this visceral conviction arise?

Because it makes it possible for us to live in relationships with other people.

To live in relationships with other people is to sincerely worry about, be grateful to, get angry at, and feel love for others.
For this, the existence of merely “another person’s experience ①,” which could be known if I could connect to their brain, is not enough;

I must also have the conviction that behind this lies “another person’s experience ②,”

a mysterious being that is staring back toward this side.

If I were unable to have this conviction...
I wouldn’t be able to love other people.

This conviction is a core part of what makes me “human.”

Loving other people

Conviction in the existence of a mysterious being

Living together in relationships
So what happens when we don’t try to live together in relationships with each other?

In such cases, our conviction that there is a mysterious being behind other people presumably weakens,

and we may begin to think there is no mysterious being of any kind hidden behind other people, and that everything experienced is neither “my” experience nor “someone else’s” experience.

In a world of experiences that do not belong to anyone,

flowers, clouds, people, pain, and sounds simply exist

—— this is presumably the only kind of scenery that unfolds.
Going back to what you said earlier, “another person’s experience” has a meaning ① and a meaning ②, right?

So when it comes to “I,” isn’t there also a “my experience ①” and a “my experience ②”?

That’s a great question!

Let’s think about it carefully.
Chapter 1 What Is Time?
   Part 1
   Part 2

Chapter 2 What Is Existence?
   Part 1
   Part 2

Chapter 3 What Is “I”?
   Part 1
   Part 2

Chapter 4 What Is Life?
   Part 1
   Part 2

The entire book PDF (76MB)

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http://www.lifestudies.org/