

CHAPTER 7

THE DIFFICULTY OF “I”

These days people advocate the “self” and “self-awareness” and so on, as if a person were allowed to do whatever he or she pleases, and some of their ideas are certainly questionable. They declare their intention to follow the dictates of the self in all things, but seem not to care a whit about the self of others. I firmly believe that anyone who professes to follow the principle of fairness and believes in the concept of justice cannot but allow for the freedom of others while developing an individuality for the sake of personal happiness.⁷⁴

—Natsume Sōseki

The reader may recall how children of a certain age express the wish to be someone else: “If only I could be Jane (or Jack or Shane, etc.)” or “Why do I have to be me—can’t I be somebody else?” And a child who suffers from teasing and bullying at school feels what it is like to be without a “place” to belong in the world. Children who enjoy the firm embrace of their parents’ love and protection are the happy ones indeed.

When children ask such questions, what do they mean by “I”? In Japan children often identify themselves at first the way their parents do, calling themselves by their own names “Maya-chan” or “Kazu-kun,” and later they shift to the use of a first-person pronoun (of which there are several to choose from). As they pass through adolescence, they develop an independent identity; in other words they become aware of themselves as the independent individual they recognize as “I.” Surely this must be a process not limited only to human beings. Dogs and cats, even birds, for example, become independent from their parents’ protection at a certain stage of growth and thereafter have to survive by their own intelligence and instincts. Any dysfunction of their intelligence and instincts will cost them their lives.

Of course, domesticated animals like cats and dogs, which rely upon their owners for food and shelter, cannot be called completely autonomous. Human beings, too, are not truly autonomous, and this is notable in the recent increase in the number of adults

⁷⁴ Sōseki 1986, pp. 123–24. See also Rubin 1979.

who are dependent on their parents' household long after becoming mature members of society. It is time we asked this question anew: are we ever truly independent of others?

Modern philosophy thus far has made the presumably autonomous individual the model of study. The often-cited example of the ideal individual has been Robinson Crusoe. After being shipwrecked on a deserted island, the protagonist of Daniel Defoe's novel builds his own house, grows grain, and establishes an independent life based on his own powers of reasoning. It was believed that if individuals like Crusoe—self-reliant and capable of making appropriate decisions independently about everything related to their daily lives—came together and created a society, it would be an ideal society. This idea, which became the basis of the “social contract” theory, was widely propagated in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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Social contract theory did not thrive just on the level of ideas, but went on to become the foundation of the ideal of what a modern, independent human being ought to be. It was embodied in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution and established in the idea of human rights. That all people are entitled to equal rights is even today the principle at the very core of the formation of society. Ideas of society centered around the individual as a rational entity, in tandem with the advancement of science, led to the rejection of philosophies and religions of the past as superstitious and helped propagate the ideology that came to be called Enlightenment thinking centered around modern, rational human beings. Taking its most radical form in France, Enlightenment thought had a very strong influence on philosophers like Kant and Hegel.

From the viewpoint of philosophy in the West, however, the idea of the individual as an independent entity is not something that emerged only in the modern period. In the previous chapter, I discussed Plato's concept of the idea of things in which the world of ideas is thought of as another world different from our phenomenal world. In contrast to Plato, his successor Aristotle was more practical. According to Aristotle, it is only individual entities that exist, and they are what reality is made of. Individual entities consist of a form (*eidōs*) and matter (*hylē*). Matter is the physical element that becomes the raw material and is amorphous, but by applying *eidōs*, which is equivalent to Plato's notion of *idea*, it becomes defined, and the individual comes into being.

This Aristotelian view of the individual was maintained during the Middle Ages, but the medieval-age individual was seen as the creation of God and the notion of the duality of spirit and the flesh became firmly established. The material body would perish and decay but the spirit as *eidōs* was eternal and would be either taken up to heaven or cast

into hell. In either case, the spirit as an individual entity was thought to be maintained. Today this rigid duality of spirit and flesh is no longer maintained, but the thinking emphasizing the individual who stands before God became established with the work of Søren Kierkegaard and is basic in both Christianity and Judaism.

In addition to the reality of the individual, the other major issue of debate in the modern era concerns consciousness as self-awareness. This is the basic principle of Descartes’s statement “I think, therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*). I have already discussed the Cartesian principle of *cogito* as the problem of epistemology (see Chapter 2). Here I would like to focus our attention on how awareness is placed at the center of the “I” (self). In the Western Middle Ages view of the world all things including human beings were created by God, so from the viewpoint of God, we are seen by God from outside, as it were. When the authority of God as a basic principle was questioned, what appeared to take its place was the consciousness of “I” from within. The function of being aware and affirmative of the self through one’s own thinking was the clearest truth. In the West, the medieval idea of the soul was reborn in new form as “consciousness.”

What is to be noted about the principle of *cogito* is that consciousness is something that only the individual can corroborate; no outside person can verify what is in the consciousness of another. This means that “I” might certainly exist, but the existence of others is uncertain. This is solipsism, and if we try to be thorough with regard to the principle of verification, we arrive at the ironic result of excluding the Other. This is where the big issue of the Other—which has taxed the brains of Husserl, Wittgenstein, and many others—looms. Thoroughgoing reflection of the principle of self-validation in action ushered in the egotistic individual of Max Stirner (1805–1856), who held that following the dictates of one’s own self-interest without being swayed by anything outside the self was the right way to act.

Self-consciousness, as seen above, is supposed to be absolutely clear and self-evident, without any room for doubt. In other words, it is assumed that the “I” is completely transparent and rational: I have a complete understanding of myself and nothing is unclear. Since that is the most certain principle, all truths including those of science must base themselves upon the self-evidence of the self.

If that is the case, it does not stop with the scope of the individual, but extends vastly beyond. Another ironic result, then, is created when that unique “I” as an individual becomes a universal principle.

In Descartes, the self-evidence of the self is followed by the argument that God, too, is self-evident, bringing the problem back to the knotty question of God, whereas in Kant, we find that beneath the individual entity of the self is a transcendental self, and it

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is thought this transcendence is the source of infallible truth. So “I” is dualistic because of at once being an individual “I,” and a transcendental “I,” the latter being the authentic “I” that reveals truths.

In German idealism, this transcendental self was further enlarged to become the operating principle from which the entire world unfolds. In Hegel it becomes the “world spirit” (*Weltgeist*). In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel explains how the world spirit begins with consciousness, then proceeds through self-consciousness, reason, spirit, and religion, and finally arrives at universal and absolute knowledge. The constant change of this world is the self-evolving that becomes absolute knowledge of the world spirit. Thus in Hegel the conflict between the outside and the inside is sublated and the “I” as an individual is absorbed into the absolute spirit. Here again, we are brought to the paradoxical result that the greatest expansion of the self is when it becomes one with the world and is extinguished.

In this way, among the features of Western philosophy concerning “I” (the self) is the tradition of individualism that has continued since antiquity. In modern times the individual is emphasized as the basic unit of the structure of society. Another feature is the centrality of consciousness-centrism beginning with Descartes and the ballooning of the self in the process of its development. That development is of course unique to the West and cannot be said to be necessarily universal. Even within the scope of the West, the sort of contradictions described above may emerge, and the principle is not consistent. Although Hegel’s philosophy appeared to have unified everything, in fact it harbored contradictions, and in the process of its dismantling, doubts about the theory of the modern rational self bred new philosophies, such as those of Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.

When we look at other cultural spheres, the individual is not conceived in such robust terms. In India, for example, the ideal of the Ātman, which is the individualistic self, is sought in its union with Brahman, the absolute spirit pervading the universe. This idea of the individual self being absorbed within the Absolute Being is characteristic of mystical thought, and the same idea can be found in Christian mysticism. Hegel’s philosophy shows evidence of the influence of such a paradigm.

Buddhism rather more radically rejects the notion of the eternal existence of the self in its theory of *muga*, or the non-ego. The simplest way to explain the theory of the non-ego is by the idea of the five aggregates (Sk. *skandhas*). A sentient being is conceived as an aggregate of five *skandhas*: form (the material body), sensation (the capacity of the senses), conception, volition, and consciousness. Death occurs when the aggregate breaks down, but the breakdown leaves no entity that can be called the spirit of the self. Since Buddhism admits the idea of reincarnation, however, the question remains then “what is it that is reborn?”—making the aggregates explanation rather elusive.

The clarity and rationality of self-consciousness is not entirely reliable either. Sigmund Freud’s discovery of the unconscious revealed that while the consciousness may appear to be clear and rational, in fact beneath that surface lies suppressed a vast irrational unconscious. Carl Jung took that a step further with his theory that the workings of the unconscious go beyond the framework of the individual, extending into the realm of the collective unconscious. This idea, too, is not limited to the West, but reminds us also of the idea of the *ālaya-vijñāna* (“store-consciousness”) of the Yogācāra (Consciousness-Only) school of Mahayana Buddhism. According to the “consciousness-only” theory, of the eight consciousnesses, the human mind is only aware of the first six that make possible sensory perception (via the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind). Meanwhile, as the underlying basis of those types of perception, it is thought there is a realm of the unconscious in which the results of perception are stored. That is what is considered to be the eighth or *ālaya-vijñāna* consciousness. The seventh consciousness is the one that causes feelings of attachment to the *ālaya* consciousness, which is self-consciousness. Buddhism by tradition regards self-consciousness as negative.

When we gaze out over the spectrum of thought in the world, we see that the self is not all that absolute and unassailable. Far from it, some doctrines such as those in Buddhism call for the dismantling of the self, denouncing self-consciousness. In that adversary context, the modern West embraced the self-conscious, individualistic self as representing the very core of thought, but already in the nineteenth century, the strength of that embrace was being shaken. The trouble is, however, that the notion of the modern Western self would not be shaken off easily; on the contrary, it spread beyond the boundaries of the West and the demand emerged that it be accepted as the universal principle of a modern, democratic society. Even today democracy based on the principle of individualism continues to hold the status of the ideal political system. The countries trying to follow in the path taken by the West, the countries that seek to modernize themselves, need to first establish the ideology for forging individual subjects in order to achieve that goal.

“I” in Modern Japan

For Japanese modernization, too, the acquisition of this Western-style view of the individual was a matter of urgent importance, along with mastery of the natural sciences, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834–1901) realized the importance of the individual very early on and labored hard to enlighten his countrymen on the subject. Under the laws limiting Japan’s contact with the West beginning in the early seventeenth century and in force until the mid-nineteenth century, the only channel for importing knowledge from the West had been through the Dutch trading center in Dejima, and what could be brought in was limited. After the opening of the country in 1853, Fukuzawa became one of the first Japanese to study Western scholarship mainly

in English, rather than Dutch. Later he traveled in the United States and Europe as a member of delegations sent in 1860 and 1862 by the *bakufu* government to observe the West, and he became active in disseminating knowledge of the West in Japan, beginning with his book *Seiyō jijō* (Conditions in the West). The Meiji government launched in 1868 dismantled the apparatus of the previous feudalistic regime, and at least in form sought to realize the equality of all people of the long-established “four classes” (samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants) of society. Fukuzawa, who was a leading educator, journalist, and writer of Japan’s modernizing age, argued in his *Gakumon no susume* (An Encouragement of Learning), that education of the individual, which opened people’s way forward in life, was the ideal for building a new nation. His translation into Japanese of “all men are created equal” became the slogan of the new era, inspiring the ambitions of the young to study hard and improve their position in society.

The treaties signed with the United States and the big European powers in the 1850s and 1860s, however, imposed unequal terms on Japan. The drive to modernize the country and gain revision of those treaties was to consume the passions of the leaders of the country for the next 40 years. Fukuzawa, along with Mori Arinori,⁷⁵ Nishi Amane,⁷⁶ Katō Hiroyuki,⁷⁷ and others, led the movement for modern, enlightened thinking in Japan, and contributed greatly to modernization. They founded the Meirokusha and published the *Meiroke zasshi*, an influential journal devoted to introducing the new ideas of the West. Modernization efforts at this stage, however, consisted largely of copying the West, and the development of “civilization and enlightenment” was soon absorbed into the Meiji state’s efforts to “enrich the country and strengthen its arms”; free thinking as a true internal development did not take place.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, four decades after the new government had come into power, people’s attention finally began to shift from the external trappings of political and social modernization to focus more on what inner human nature should be. When the Imperial Constitution was promulgated in 1889, the system of a modern constitutional state was put in place. In the course of the Sino-Japanese (1894–1895) and Russo-Japanese (1904–1905) wars, the country successfully asserted its state power and built up its strength as a capitalist economy. Finally, the unequal treaties forced on it in the mid-nineteenth century were being revised, and with its national strength and ambitions were swelling, Japan joined the major world powers in the invasion and occupation by military force of territories in Asia. When the freedom and popular rights movement arose in defiance of the system wielding such statist power, it was firmly suppressed, and as the apparatus of the emperor-system state became established, all paths to freedom of speech in the political sphere were closed off.

75 Ambassador of Japan to various countries, education minister.

76 Philosopher and bureaucrat in the Meiji government.

77 Scholar, educator, and advisor to Emperor Meiji and the Imperial Household Agency.

The period just after the start of the twentieth century is known as “the era of spiritual anguish.” Against the backdrop of national-scale developments, young intellectuals began to reflect upon what they were experiencing internally. It was also an age of “subjectivism,” when thinkers like Kiyozawa Manshi (see Chapter 5), Takayama Chogyū (1871–1902), and Tsunashima Ryōsen (1873–1907) began to give expression to “spiritual agonies” over their newly created egos and the grim realities around them that would not admit such egos.

The incident that was the symbol of the agonies of this age was the suicide in 1903 of Fujimura Misao, a 16-year-old student of Tokyo’s First Higher School. His suicide note, written on a tree trunk on the cliff from which he threw himself to end his life, goes as follows:

Philosophy on the Cliff

How immense is heaven and earth
 How vast the sweep of time
 With this short five-foot frame
 I dare to measure their expanse
 Horatio’s philosophy as in *Hamlet*
 Doesn’t deserve any authority
 After all, the truth of the universe boils down
 To just one word: Unfathomable!
 Tortured by nagging questions
 I have decided to end my agony with death
 Now, standing here atop this cliff
 My mind is cleared of all anxiety
 Finally, have I realized that great pessimism
 Is identical with great optimism

Fujimura’s expression of the individual’s agonizing struggle to fathom the “truth of the universe” aroused the passions of the youth of his time.

Thus it was in the Meiji era that Japanese suddenly came face to face with the problem of the interior of the individual. Takayama Chogyū, a leading thinker of this period, started as an ideologue of Nipponshugi, or ultra-nationalism and statism. In 1900, on the eve of his departure to study abroad, however, it was found that he had tuberculosis, and he was plunged into hopelessness, but the experience turned him into an advocate of individualism. His first essay on the subject, “Bunmei hihyōka toshite no bungakusha” (The Writer as Critic of Civilization; 1901) takes up Nietzsche’s theory of the “overman” (*Übermensch*). He wrote, “[Nietzsche’s] theory basically rejects the current democratic

egalitarianism, and represents the utmost and the purest form of individualism. It admits only the ‘I’ of each individual—relieved of history, truth, and society. What a contrast with nineteenth-century thinking!”⁷⁸ What Takayama advocated was an individualism that leapfrogged modernism, orienting himself to Nietzsche as critic of modernism. But for him individualism did not mean the establishment of the self as an independent unit of society. Takayama later declared himself an “egoist,” but his affirmation of egoism is not so much Nietzschean as Stirnerian.

In another essay entitled “Biteki seikatsu o ronzu” (On the Aesthetic Life; 1901), Takayama advocated the importance of following human instinct; he later wrote an essay affirming the pursuit of sexual gratification. From our present perspective his thinking was all too simplistic, but at the time, when the bulwark of the emperor-system was rapidly being built and morals were being forcefully inculcated under the Imperial Rescript on Education designed to support the authority of that state, there may have been no avenue for the assertion of the individual other than through egoism and affirmation of instinct. In the world of literature, the tendency of Takayama’s egoism and instinct-affirming ideas developed through explorations of naturalism.

It was against this backdrop and after much lively debate had more or less run its course that Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) gave his lecture on “My Individualism” in 1914 (published the following year). His critique of “self” (*jiga*) and “self-consciousness” (*jikaku*) in this lecture suggests the influence of Takayama. Sōseki’s assertions may seem quite ordinary and conventional from our viewpoint, but they are the distillation of this historic background and Sōseki’s bitter personal experience.

Sōseki critiqued Japan’s modernization in his essay “Gendai Nihon no kaika” (Enlightenment in Japan Today; 1911), saying that while enlightenment in the West had come spontaneously from within, that of Japan had originated from outside.⁷⁹ Until then, he wrote, Japan had developed from within, but had suddenly lost its capacity to forge its own way and was in a situation where it could not go forward without being pushed by outside forces.⁸⁰ After the end of the Russo-Japanese War, from which Japan emerged victorious, while most were celebrating Japan’s entry into the ranks of the “great powers,” Sōseki was clearly pessimistic. “I have no brilliant plan in mind,” he wrote dismissively, as if washing his hands of the matter: “All I can give is the facile suggestion that we do our best not to succumb to a nervous breakdown and to change ourselves from within as much as possible.”⁸¹

“My Individualism” set forth Sōseki’s sentiments toward the end of his life, but recalling his career since graduation from university, including his study overseas, and

78 *Chogyū zenshū*, vol. 2, p. 693.

79 Sōseki 1986, p. 26.

80 Sōseki 1986, pp. 26–27.

81 Sōseki 1986, p. 38.

explaining how he established his “individualistic” (*jiko hon'i*) standpoint, he maintains that “in order to become individualistic, one has to recognize others.” In fact, Sōseki's later novels grappled with the difficulties of this sort of individualism. In *Sore kara* (And Then; 1910), by making the protagonist a “high-brow idler,” he establishes a setting in which it should be possible to lead an “individualistic” life apart from the constraints of the old-fashioned family system. He simulates the problems of the extent to which individualism is possible in equal relationships such as friendship and love.

Probably the *Sore kara* protagonist was the only hypothetical individual Sōseki could think of to portray the potential for a Japanese individuality that was so vastly different from the Robinson Crusoe-like individual of the West. Given the constraints, the potential for such an individual was obviously limited. In his novels *Sore kara* and *Mon* (The Gate; 1911) he does not draw any clear conclusions, but in *Kōjin* (The Wayfarer; 1914) he confronts the impossibility of understanding the Other. The elder brother of the protagonist, Ichirō, unable to comprehend what is going on in his wife's heart, suspects her of infidelity.

Declaring “I dislike any authority other than myself” and “God is the ego” and “I am absolute,” Ichirō appears on the surface to be a rigorous egoist à la Max Stirner, yet is unable to maintain sufficient toughness and ultimately is defeated. Traveling with his friend, Ichirō points to a lily blooming in the bushes, declaring “I own that,” and pointing to the woods and the valley, “this and that—the whole thing—belongs to me.” But can that be possible? When he inquires of his friend, who is the Other and cannot belong to the self, “how well do you and I understand each other and where are we apart?” his fragile egoism crumbles.

What Sōseki clarified through the intellectual experiment of these novels was the dilemma of individualism in modern Japan of his time, where people could not practice genuine egoism, and their efforts to harmonize with others did not work. The reason for the seemingly so commonsensical individualism described in “My Individualism” was that even such common sense was very difficult to achieve at that time.

Before any sort of “individualism” became established, Japan's philosophers and thinkers were engulfed in the tide of totalitarianism and statism, and in that context individualism came to be seen only in negative terms. Even after the war was over, attempts to revive individualism were not successful and were ultimately rejected. Is it possible that the spirit of “spontaneous individualism” is unattainable in Japan? Today, when even debate about the self in the modern West has reached an impasse, we ought to reconsider the “self,” as Sōseki suggested, without being pressured by “outside” forces.

The Fluid Outlines of “I”

Modern discussions of the meaning of “I” have argued that the individual is rational and self-conscious and can be completely understood; it is asserted that the identity of the

self/“I” is established within the context of society. When we think of ourselves, we are apt to take ourselves for granted; we tend to think that we know what we are, but the premises upon which we base that assumption may not be all that self-evident.

Consciousness, like a spotlight, sheds light on parts of ourselves and helps us to understand that part, but it does not illuminate everything.

Few people today would be likely to say they completely understand themselves. We know we have impulses and urges inside us that we do not fully understand, urges that might burst forth quite beyond our control. Then again, we might turn out to have unexpected talents or skills, though they might not be abilities we can freely tap whenever we want. In that sense, we have

within ourselves many Other-like elements that we ourselves do not fully fathom. Or rather, the part of ourselves we can understand as belonging to the open, thisworldly realm (*ken*), may really be quite small.

Given such limits of our understanding of ourselves, it ought to be quite difficult to support the notion, as asserted by Descartes, that the self is “clear and distinct.” Consciousness could be described as a person’s information about his or her self, information that makes it easier to take appropriate actions, but such actions are not necessarily the monopoly of the “self.” Some functions within ourselves are taking place without our being conscious of them. When eating, for example, we eventually feel the sensation of a full stomach, recognize it as a sign we have eaten enough, and stop eating. We are not necessarily conscious of making such decisions. Other animals, too, naturally stop eating when their stomachs are full. What our consciousness does is to facilitate our initiation of subjective, well-defined actions.

Another example is pain, which is a signal mechanism that something is wrong in part of the body. When a dog or cat feels pain, it becomes very still or licks the injury to heal it. Human beings in their primeval state must have responded quite similarly, but by being conscious of pain and observing in what part the disorder lies, we have developed the practice of medicine, and pain can be treated medically. Headaches or abdominal pains are especially valuable sources of information about internal troubles that cannot be detected from outside.

Consciousness, to be sure, is important, but it cannot be the very core of the “I.” A more desirable situation would be if we did not suffer any pain and were not conscious of parts of our body. Consciousness, therefore, is rather like a spotlight, which sheds light on parts of ourselves and helps us to understand that part, but it does not serve to illuminate everything.

Then, what about our individuality? We may think of ourselves as discrete and independent individuals. We see ourselves as a synthesis of mind and body, and probably as clearly separate from others. Even if there are parts of the self we don’t understand or that

lie in the realm of the unconscious, we are nevertheless discrete entities as individuals, and can, to a certain extent at least, be aware of what is going on in ourselves and control it.

Still, one’s individuality is not something of which we are all that certain. For example, we might think: this is my body, my mind—so this must be myself, but does that mean that we can only be ourselves when we have shed all our clothing? Were that the case, it would be impossible to express one’s self-identity by, for example, the way one dresses. That is nonsense. We should think of the “I” as encompassing our clothing, accessories, hairstyle, etc. Taking a more hands-on example, when we drive a car, we drive with an awareness of the breadth not only of our own body but, considering ourselves part of the car, we drive with the width of the car in mind. In that case, when we are driving, the “self” expands to include the whole car.

Let’s think even more radically. Are we really completely integral entities? There are abundant examples supporting the suspicion that we are not. It is quite normal for one and the same person, for instance, to be a company employee while working, a husband or wife in the context of the family, and a mother or father vis-à-vis children. Such a person follows rules differently depending on which of these contexts is involved. Separate as these roles may be, we are not suffering from schizophrenia or split personality syndrome; in today’s society, we are composed of various personalities each of which is geared to a particular context.

One might think that all those personalities are quite normally integrated into each person; and yet isn’t that a strange thing to say? Suppose, for example, I were the foreign minister and I signed a treaty with another country. It would be me who signed the treaty, but it is the country of Japan as a whole that has to conform to the terms of the treaty. I, as the signer of the treaty, am not signing the treaty as the individual me; I am in a situation such that I embody the will of the nation. Perhaps an example closer to home is the salesman who declares to a customer, “we absolutely recommend this product.” In that case, the salesman is representing his company, obviously not stating his opinion as an individual.

Take Plato the philosopher, for another example. Plato as we know him is really the works of Plato and the ideas that we draw from Plato’s writings. It is not as if we know Plato as a living, breathing individual. But does that mean that in fact we don’t really know Plato? No, surely those who have read Plato in depth can be said to know him quite well. There is something other than the “self” represented by body and mind.

The “I” might be split among various personalities as seen above, but there are also times when the “I” merges or becomes one with others. One might consider what

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happens during sexual intercourse. Two people come together and take pleasure in their union. In such cases, if the two people remain completely separate individuals, their pleasure is unrelated to the partner and gives gratification only to each separately and is not shared. In that sense, the sexual act is reduced to little more than masturbation, each using the body of the other as a tool. A man who hires a prostitute, for example, is in fact using a woman simply as a tool to satisfy his physical urges.

Back when I was in university, I was surprised to hear a part-time professor who taught philosophy take up this example of the sexual act to explain the solipsistic idea that nothing outside one's own mind exists, and this has long weighed on my mind. It seems that even the sexual act cannot be explained properly by Western philosophy. The pleasure experienced from the sexual act may be separate for each person but surely that is not all there is to it. It is an act in which the wall around the "I" comes down and yields to the union with the other. If that is possible, then it must mean that the separateness of the "I" is not really all that firm and decisive after all. It is possible that the "I" can transcend the framework of body and mind and completely merge with that of the partner.

To give another example, when Hanshin Tigers fans in the baseball stadium are standing together cheering for their team they have put their individual "I" aside and are dissolved into the "totality." A more sensitive example is when, during wartime, people become so totally merged together as the "nation" that they lose their individuality. In such cases, the "I" is all too easily transformed into "we." For the individual, the fewer the walls between the self and others, the lighter is the burden of responsibility and the greater the sense of security.

Then it is also possible to yield not everything of the self but part of it to the other. Simple examples are when you use a car to get yourself places, yielding the function of your feet to a machine, and when you use a computer's memory instead of your brain to take care of part of the information you have to record and remember. We can ease the burden on the "I" across the spectrum by relying on others. Salaried workers in a large company may have to work hard and endure much, but in return they do not have to assume heavy responsibility for decisions. Decisions are made at various levels, and highest-level decisions are left to the president or the board of directors. The organization or communal group lightens the burden on the individual by subdivision of functions and tasks that must be performed.

In modern Western philosophy the image of the "I" was focused completely on the solitary individual, as seen in the "I/Thou" debate, and so discussion never went beyond the bounds of single isolated beings. Indeed, the autonomous individual was idealized, and notions of the union or splitting of the self were rejected. The notion of the "I" becoming one with others or merging with others has long been disparaged in Western tradition as signifying abdication of responsibility and therefore morally impermissible.

For this reason, the viewpoint of mysticism, in which the individual seeks union with the divine, was criticized and labeled as heretical. The individual came to be viewed as absolute and discrete.

As I have pointed out previously, the absolute and discrete nature of the “I” is peculiar to modern Western philosophy and cannot be universalized. Nevertheless, that view of the “I” and the individual is what makes possible the practice of democracy in the modern age, so we cannot make light of it. Natsume Sōseki’s appeal in 1914 for the establishment of a healthy individualism, part of which was quoted at the head of this chapter, was of special note, but even today, it cannot be said that such an individualism has been established in Japan.

We do need to establish a healthy individualism, and yet it is not a good idea to view such individualism as absolute. As the alternative to the absolutism of the self, perhaps we should consider Buddhism’s idea of “non-self” (*muga*) and its censure of clinging to the self. The concept of “I” might be precious and irreplaceable, but yet again, it might not be all that important after all. The self, which splits and merges, expands and contracts like an amoeba, is rather elusive. Only when we firmly recognize that nature of the self, can we humbly face the “Other” within ourselves.

The Western notion of the self as an individual is easy to grasp given the structure of Western languages, which invariably require a subject as the basic element of a sentence. German has its “Ich,” French its “Je,” English its “I,” and so forth, and the first person pronoun does not change, regardless of the situation. Quite clearly, “I” am “I.”

The subject of a Japanese sentence is often implicit and the speaker does not explicitly assert his or her presence into pronouncements, so assertion of the self is less manifest in ordinary speech. One might say “Ninjin wa futoranai” (lit., “carrots won’t [make you] fat”) —a perfectly meaningful, if somewhat abbreviated expression—but one might be a bit confused as to what is the subject and what is the predicate. If “ninjin wa” is the subject, then it means “carrots don’t get fat,” which is unlikely to be the meaning intended. If we rewrite the sentence so as to clarify the subject, it might go, for example: “Ninjin wa, moshi anata ga sore o tabetemo, anata wa futoranai” (If you eat carrots, you won’t get fat/Eating carrots won’t make you fat/Carrots are not fattening.) That kind of Japanese, however, sounds very unnatural. The grammar is such that the subject-predicate structure doesn’t suit it well, although English versions of the same thing will usually have a subject.

In Japanese, too, there are a number of first-person pronouns and each of them has a slightly different nuance and usage so that any one of them cannot always be used for all contexts to mean “I.” Which pronoun is to be used is determined according to the identity of the person being spoken to and the situation involved. Usage of the first-person pronoun is one of those situations in which “relation comes before existence.” To make things more complicated, moreover, such as when speaking to a child, it is

common usage for a parent to use “Mother” or “Father” instead of “I.” For example, “Okaasan wa isogashii no” (I [Your mother] is busy now). Between spouses, using either first names or pronouns (“anata” or “kimi”) was not common; traditionally husband and wife would call each other by their family role name, “Okaasan” (Mother) or “Otoosan” (Father), using the term deriving from the standpoint of the children. In other words, Japanese often see themselves not so much as individuals, but as in the role they play in society, and this can be deeply embedded in their mind-set.

Distinctions between first and second person are not that clearly enunciated. The now rather old-fashioned “wa” or “ware”—both meaning “I”—can also be used for the second person, and the old second-person “na” is sometimes used for first person. In some situations, certain first-person pronouns like “onore” or “ware” might be used to express scorn for the other. In short, there are many complexities of usage; the point to be noted being that the dividing lines between “I” and “you” are not all that strict.

Another feature of Japanese that relates to the fuzziness of the lines defining the “I,” is the ambiguity of plural and singular. Even today, the expression “wagaya” (our house; our family) or “wagakuni” (our country) means not, “my house/family” or “my country” but our house/family or our country with “wa” expressing not “I” (singular) but “we” (plural). In this way, the use of pronouns involving the self and others is called “inclusive person” in linguistic terms and is found in many languages. As this shows, the use of “I” to mean “we” comes fairly naturally.

As these examples are intended to show, the modern “I” is not such a rigid and clearly defined entity, and the boundaries around the “I” are relatively permeable, making the “I” quite fluid. Moreover, a large portion of the “I” is submerged in the realm of *myō*—the concealed, otherworldly realm that is only partially illuminated by the searchlight of our consciousness. There are Other-like aspects to our own selves. The realm of the self of which we are in conscious, rational, and lucid command is quite limited. However, that does not mean that we can make light of the ethics belonging to the realm of *ken*. On the contrary, we want to expand the territory of the known, thisworldly *ken* and clarify what it is all about. It is through knowing thereof that we can identify our ethical responsibility for ourselves. Only by knowing how we are inclined to avoid burdens through abdication of responsibility and union with the other, can we strive to overcome those tendencies and open the way for fulfilling the responsibilities of our “I.”

Considered within the framework of Chinese thought, we can see here the rival and complementary relationship of the Confucianist and Daoist standpoints. In the Daoist classic *Dao de jing*, it is written that the “self” returns to the chaotic state of nothingness of the whole, while the Confucian *Analects* is perpetually concerned with the moral world of the individual. While seeming to be contradictory, neither direction stands on its own; rather, their mutual contradiction and compensation sets in motion the dynamism of *ken* and *myō*—of the visible thisworldly realm and the invisible otherworldly realm.