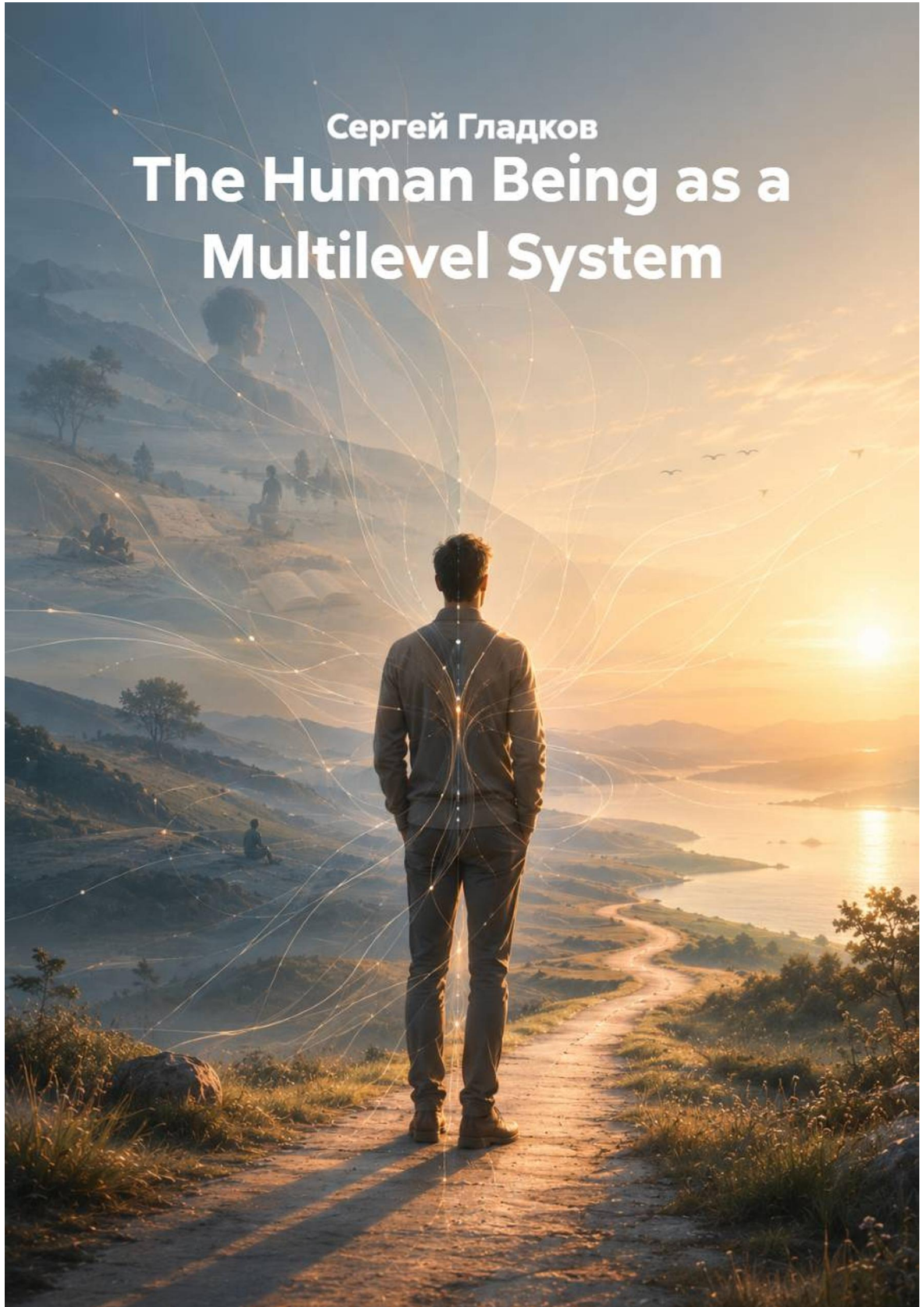


Сергей Гладков

The Human Being as a Multilevel System



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**The Human Being as
a Multilevel System**

«Автор»

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This book proposes a restrained philosophical model of the human being. It does not begin with a hidden observer, an immutable center or an immortal self. Instead, it asks what remains if unnecessary inner entities are removed from the usual picture of the person. The central idea is simple: the human being is not a fixed essence, but a multilevel system for stabilizing experience. The subject is described as a process that keeps experience coherent enough for memory, action, self-recognition, change and relation to others. Book A is the recommended first philosophical-psychological entry into the general theory. It is not a medical method, not psychotherapy, not an esoteric teaching and not a scientific proof of a completed theory.

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Содержание

Content	6
Manifest	7
How To Read This Book	8
1. Doubt About the Familiar Picture of the Human Being	10
Introduction	10
The Most Familiar Picture	12
The First Mismatches	14
Doubt	16
What Exactly Begins to Doubt	18
Three Inner Conflicts	19
A Small Historical Example	20
The First Question	21
2. The Illusion of the Center	22
Why We Are So Sure	22
Trying to Find the Observer	24
The Center as an Effect of Assembly	26
The Observer Paradox	27
Three Objections	28
The Error of Intuition	29
A Counterexample and a Limitation	30
A New Question	31
3. The Human Being as a System for Stabilizing Experience	32
After the Center Disappears	32
Systems Do Not Always Have a Center	34
A New Hypothesis	35
Why This Matters	37
Everyday Examples of Stabilization	38
Objection: If There Is No Center, Who Makes Decisions?	39
A Limitation of the Concept	40
The First Central Formula	41
4. How Personality Arises	42
If Personality Is Not Given	42
The Feeling of Constancy	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

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The Human Being as a Multilevel System

Sergey Gladkov

The Human Being as a Multilevel System
The Human as a multilevel system
of experience stabilization

2026

Content

Manifest

How To Read This Book

1. Doubt About the Familiar Picture of the Human Being
2. The Illusion of the Center
3. The Human Being as a System for Stabilizing Experience
4. How Personality Arises
5. Fragmentation and Reconfiguration
6. Unfinished Patterns
7. Attention as a Mechanism of Stabilization
8. Meaning and the Holding of Continuity
9. The Distributed Subject
10. Mutual Stabilization
11. Meta-Personality and Distributed Continuity
12. The Minimal Model of Experience

Glossary

Limitations

Afterword

Appendix. History of the Development of the Model

Manifest

This book appeared

not because

one more theory of the human being was needed.

It appeared out of doubt.

What if the familiar picture:

the inner observer

->

the unified self

->

the center

is not a description,

but a feeling?

This book does not try to destroy the human being.

It tries to check carefully:

what remains

if we remove what is unnecessary.

Not a new dogma.

Not a new cosmology.

Not esotericism.

But an attempt to build

a minimal explanatory model.

How To Read This Book

This book does not need to be read as a system of ready-made answers.

It is better to read it as a sequence of careful checks. Its task is not to replace one final picture of the human being with another final picture. Something else matters here: to follow a path on which familiar explanations gradually lose their obviousness, and a more restrained way of thinking about oneself appears in their place.

At first it may seem that the book is about dismantling the familiar image of the human being. But this is not so. The book does not try to prove that the human being "does not exist", that personality is an illusion in a simple sense, or that inner experience can be reduced to a mechanism. It asks a narrower and more difficult question: which elements of our picture of the human being are truly necessary, and which do we accept because they seem natural?

The main caution of this book is that it does not begin with an essence. It does not presuppose in advance a hidden observer, an immutable center, or an immortal self. Instead, it looks at the processes through which experience maintains coherence: attention, memory, language, meaning, continuity, fragmentation, reconfiguration, external structures, and relations with other people.

For this reason, it is better to read the book slowly. Not because it requires special preparation, but because many of its steps are directed against answers that arrive too quickly. If an inner objection appears at some point, this is not a mistake in reading. On the contrary, such objections are part of the book. When the reader says, "but I do feel unified", "but I sense an observer", "if there is no center, who makes decisions?" - the work of thought begins precisely at those places.

There is no need to agree at once. And there is no need to argue at once. It is enough to hold the question a little longer than usual.

Each chapter is arranged as a movement from a human situation to a philosophical question. First there is a scene: inner conflict, a strange action, repetition, loss of meaning, a sense of change, a conversation with another person. Then doubt arises about the familiar picture. After that a question appears, and only then a hypothesis.

This order matters. If one begins with the formula, it becomes dogma. If one begins with experience, the formula remains the result of a path.

Many concepts in this book are used carefully. For example, the word "subject" does not mean a separate essence inside the human being. It denotes a process of maintaining the coherence of experience. The word "stabilization" does not mean immobility. It means maintaining connectedness within change. The word "distributedness" does not mean a mystical departure beyond the body. It means that some of the processes that support experience can use external structures: language, notes, objects, relations, and the social environment.

The chapters on the distributed subject and meta-personality should be read with particular caution. There the book approaches areas where it is easy to reintroduce a hidden essence under a new name. But that is not its task. Meta-personality here is not a soul, not a field, not a proven object, and not a new cosmology. It is a philosophical hypothesis about distributed traces of continuity and unfinished patterns that can remain in relations, in the memory of other people, in texts, in actions, and in consequences.

The book does not require belief in this hypothesis. It requires only one thing: to distinguish the status of claims. There is the canonical core of the model. There are logical consequences. There are working hypotheses. There is the history of the development of thought. If these levels are mixed together, the book becomes too strong where it should remain cautious.

The book should be read as a gradual dismantling of what is unnecessary.

First, confidence in the obvious inner center is removed. Then the feeling of the observer is tested. Then the question arises of what maintains coherence if no center is found. After that, the

human being is considered not as a fixed essence, but as a system of processes that hold experience in a coherent form.

But this dismantling should not leave emptiness behind. Its goal is not to say: "there is nothing". Its goal is to see what remains after unnecessary entities are removed. What remains are attention, memory, meaning, language, continuity, stabilization, fragmentation, reconfiguration, and external structures. What remains is not a thing, but the work of coordination.

If a chapter produces resistance, it is better not to skip that resistance. In this book, the reader's resistance is not treated as an obstacle. It shows where the familiar picture of the human being is especially strong. And that means it is precisely there that one should move more slowly.

This book can be read as a philosophical hypothesis about the human being. Not as a textbook, not as an academic treatise, and not as an esoteric system. Its aim is not to close the question of the human being, but to make the question itself more precise.

Perhaps after reading, there will be less certainty. But if the book has done its work, this loss of certainty will not be destruction. It will become space for a more careful reconfiguration.

1. Doubt About the Familiar Picture of the Human Being

Introduction

He was going to answer calmly.

He had almost decided it in advance. Even before the conversation, he had gone over it several times in his mind: how everything should go, without harshness, without accusations, without the old habit of defending himself before anyone had really attacked him. He even felt a quiet satisfaction with this inner preparation. This time he would be different. This time he would not lose control. This time he would not let the conversation go where it had gone so many times before.

But the conversation began, and a few minutes later he heard his own voice.

Not the voice he had meant to use.

The voice was harder, faster, drier. The words came out almost on their own. He already understood that he was saying something different from what he had wanted to say, but he could not stop. Some part of him seemed to be standing nearby, looking at what was happening in confusion: why am I doing this? I did not want this. I had decided otherwise.

Later, when the conversation was over and the tension had passed, one strange sentence remained:

"I do not understand why I did that."

This sentence seems simple. We say it after arguments, after harsh actions, after strange decisions, after words we had not meant to say. Sometimes it sounds almost ordinary: I did not sleep enough, I was tired, I was emotional. Sometimes it feels heavier: as if, for a few minutes, a person had not quite been himself. Not in a mystical sense, not in the sense that consciousness disappeared, but in a very recognizable human sense: the intention was one thing, and the action became another.

And it is precisely here that the first doubt appears.

Not a catastrophe. Not proof that the familiar picture of the human being is completely false. Not a reason to declare at once that personality is an illusion. For now, only doubt: a small mismatch between how a person usually imagines himself and how he sometimes finds himself in action.

Usually we think of ourselves as if there were some coherent point inside. Someone who knows what he wants. Someone who makes decisions. Someone who observes thoughts, controls reactions, chooses words, and keeps the direction of life. We may call this "I", character, will, personality, or an inner center. The names differ, but the intuition is often the same: somewhere inside there is the one who is me.

But everyday experience constantly brings situations in which this picture begins to tremble.

A person wants one thing and does another.

He decides to change, but returns to the old.

He knows that something is harmful to him, but chooses it again.

He loves a person and hurts that person at the same time.

He says, "I understand everything," and a week later repeats the old mistake.

He looks at his own action and does not recognize himself in it.

Such moments are rarely seen as philosophical. They are too personal, too awkward, too ordinary. But that is exactly why they matter. A philosophy of the human being does not begin only in abstract questions about consciousness, freedom, or personality. Sometimes it begins in a kitchen after a failed conversation, in the silence after a flash of irritation, in a message that should not have been sent, in a decision that was made as if faster than the person had time to ask himself.

There are quieter cases too, cases that do not look dramatic. A person buys something he does not need, although in the morning he promised himself to be more careful with money. He opens an

app for a minute and discovers that forty minutes have passed. He agrees to a request although he wanted to refuse. He stays silent where he meant to say something important. He smiles when he is angry. He puts off a call that another person is waiting for, and he himself cannot explain why this call has become so difficult.

All this can be explained by weakness, habit, tiredness, or social pressure. Sometimes that is exactly what should be done. But when such situations repeat, they begin to speak not only about a particular weakness. They show that a person does not always coincide with the image of himself that appears in calm reflection.

Doubt does not begin when a person makes a mistake. One can make mistakes even in the simplest model. Doubt begins when a mistake reveals an inner mismatch: I thought I knew myself, but in action something appeared that I had not taken into account.

The first question of this book is born from here:

is the human being really arranged as he seems to himself?

The Most Familiar Picture

The most familiar picture of the human being almost needs no proof. From the inside, it seems obvious.

I wake up in the morning and feel that it is I who woke up.

I remember yesterday and consider it mine.

I make a decision, and it seems to be my decision.

I say "I think", "I want", "I remember", "I chose", and language easily gathers all of this around one center. In ordinary life it could hardly be otherwise. If before every simple action we had to clarify exactly which process is now taking part in experience, speech would become impossible. We say "I" not because each time we build a theory of the subject, but because this is how the practical coherence of experience works.

And there is strength in this coherence.

A human being really does experience himself not as a set of scattered flashes, but as someone who continues. He can remember his childhood, recognize himself in a photograph, feel shame for an old action, pride in something done many years ago, and anxiety about tomorrow. His life is not given to him as a pile of separate frames. It gathers into a story.

This is why the objection appears almost at once:

"But I feel that I am myself."

And this objection cannot simply be thrown away. It would be a crude mistake to say: if a person sometimes contradicts himself, then the feeling of wholeness is worth nothing. It is worth a great deal. Without it, it would be hard to act, answer for one's actions, build relationships, keep promises, learn from the past, and plan the future. The feeling of being oneself is not a random illusion that can be removed with one sentence.

But the question is not whether this feeling exists.

The question is different: what exactly does it describe?

When a person says, "I feel like myself," he may mean the stability of a name, a body, memory, habits, a way of speaking, or connections with other people. He may mean a recognizable inner style: this is how I usually react, this is how I fear, this is how I rejoice, this is how I defend myself. He may mean a feeling of continuity: yesterday it was me, today it is me, tomorrow it will probably be me too.

But it does not follow from this that there is a separate unchanging center inside that controls everything else.

Here it is important not to hurry.

The familiar picture is built like this: there is an inner self, and it is the source of coherence. It sees, decides, chooses, directs. Thoughts may change, moods may change, the body may age, circumstances may break, but somewhere deeper than all this there seems to remain the one who passes through the changes.

This picture is convenient. It makes the person understandable to himself. It is supported by language, culture, morality, law, and biography. We ask, "Why did you do that?" and expect one responsible answer. We say, "Get hold of yourself." As if there is someone who must take hold, and someone who must be taken hold of. We say, "I am fighting with myself." As if inside one human being there are already at least two sides, while we still assume that somewhere there is a main owner of this struggle.

Everyday speech is full of such hidden images.

A person "controls himself."

A person "lost himself."

A person "found himself."

A person "betrayed himself."

A person "was not himself."

These expressions are not accidental. They show that our usual model of the human being assumes unity and constantly meets its disturbance at the same time. We speak about ourselves as one, but describe our life as a field of inner mismatches.

And as long as everything goes calmly enough, the contradiction is not visible.

But once a strong conflict appears, the familiar picture begins to fail.

At this point it is important to notice: the familiar picture is not stupid. It has not remained in place for so long by accident. A human being needs to feel that he is the one who can answer for words and actions. Without this, the fabric of everyday life itself would fall apart. It is impossible to begin every morning with the question of who exactly woke up today and to what extent he is connected with yesterday. Ordinary life requires a reduction of complexity.

But reducing complexity is not always the same as explaining. Sometimes it only makes life possible.

When a person says "I", he uses the shortest way to gather many processes into one practical point. This is convenient, necessary, and often quite enough. But the book begins where this is no longer enough. It begins where the practical word "I" starts to present itself as a final description of the inner structure of the human being.

The First Mismatches

The first mismatch appears between intention and action.

A person decides not to check his phone before sleep, but reaches for it again. He decides not to enter an argument, but is already answering. He decides to begin important work in the morning, but by evening discovers that he has done everything except that work. In each separate case, an explanation can be found: habit, tiredness, anxiety, weak discipline. But if we look more carefully, something becomes visible: intention is not an absolute center of control.

It can be strong and still lose.

The second mismatch appears between knowledge and reaction.

A person knows that no one meant to offend him, but he feels offended. He knows that the danger is small, but he is anxious. He knows that an old fear no longer fits the situation, but the body reacts as if it still does. He can explain everything to himself correctly and still experience it differently. This means that knowledge does not always rebuild experience at once. Inside a human being there are levels that change at different speeds.

The third mismatch appears between values and actions.

A person considers himself honest, but in a concrete situation avoids the truth. He considers himself attentive, but does not hear someone close. He considers himself free, but again does what is expected of him. After this he may feel guilt, shame, or irritation with himself. But the very fact of this experience shows that inside there is no simple line from belief to action.

The fourth mismatch appears in time.

What seemed important yesterday may become indifferent today. What seemed impossible in youth may later become ordinary. A person may look at an old photograph and recognize himself, while also thinking: "How could I live like that? How could I think like that? How was that even me?" He is not completely foreign to himself, but he is not completely the same either.

The fifth mismatch appears in relationships.

With one person we become softer, with another harder. In one environment we speak with confidence, in another we lose our voice. At home a person may be one way, at work another, with parents a third, and alone a fourth. Usually we do not take this as proof of a multiple personality. But it shows that the coherence of a human being depends not only on an inner center. It is supported by situations, roles, expectations, the memory of relationships, and the reactions of other people.

The sixth mismatch appears between the image of oneself and the view of others.

A person may be sure that he is calm, while those close to him have long known that on certain topics he instantly becomes sharp. He may consider himself independent, while from the outside it is visible how strongly his decisions depend on approval. He may say, "I am not offended," but his silence, tone, gestures, and delays in answering tell another story. Other people sometimes notice in us what we ourselves do not include in our picture.

This is unpleasant. It feels as if we are being deprived of the right to inner truth. But the point is not that another person always knows us better. The point is that self-access is not absolute. A person is given to himself from the inside, but not completely. Others see external repetitions that he may not notice, because each time he experiences the situation as new.

The seventh mismatch appears between decision and time.

At the moment of decision, a person may be sincere. He really wants to begin again, stop repeating the old, leave a destructive connection, write a book, change profession, learn to speak more honestly. But after a week, a month, or a year, it turns out that the decision has not become a stable form of life. It was real, but it could not stabilize. This means that the sincerity of a decision is not yet the same as a reconfiguration of the whole system of experience.

These examples do not prove that there is no center.

They do something smaller, but more important at the beginning: they show that the usual confidence in a center is not enough.

If there is one controlling source inside, why is it so often not the only participant in what happens? Why can a person argue with himself? Why can an action begin before a decision becomes clear? Why can a reaction contradict knowledge? Why can a past self seem both mine and foreign? Why do different situations call out different versions of a person?

One can answer: because the human being is complex.

That is true, but too general.

To say "the human being is complex" is to admit the problem, but not yet to explain it. Complexity must be described in such a way that it is not reduced back to one small controlling center that, for some reason, keeps failing to cope.

This is where a more delicate task appears.

Not to destroy the idea of the human being.

But to check which elements of this idea are truly necessary.

Here a second objection appears:

"But are all these mismatches not explained by ordinary psychology? Why make a philosophical question out of them?"

This objection is fair insofar as it protects us from premature metaphysics. Indeed, much can be described psychologically: habits, defensive reactions, traumas, impulses, social roles, cognitive distortions. This book does not cancel such explanations and does not try to replace them with one large formula.

But the philosophical question appears in another place. A psychological description often says which processes take part in behavior. Here we are also interested in why we keep imagining the human being as if all these processes should come together in one inner center. Why, with such clear multiplicity of levels, are we still so sure of simple unity? Why does it seem to us that behind all changes there must stand one unchanging owner?

This is what makes the question philosophical.

Not that a person sometimes makes mistakes.

But that the familiar model of the human being itself may be too simple for the experience it tries to explain.

Doubt

Doubt about the familiar picture does not arise where a person simply makes a mistake.

Mistakes can be explained by lack of information, chance, or external pressure. Something else is much more important: a person sometimes discovers that he is not fully transparent to himself.

He may not understand why exactly that word hurt him.

Not understand why he avoids a conversation.

Not understand why he repeats the same scenario.

Not understand why he cannot do what he considers necessary.

Not understand why in a certain situation he seems to become younger, weaker, sharper, or more helpless.

In such moments, a person does not simply meet an external difficulty. He meets the fact that his own experience is organized less simply than it seems.

One can imagine a human being as a room with a manager standing in the center. He sees all the screens, receives all the signals, makes decisions, and gives commands. This metaphor is familiar, even if we rarely formulate it openly. But real experiences are often less like a control room and more like many processes trying to coordinate with one another.

Some processes hold past experience.

Others react to threat.

Others support the image of oneself.

Others orient themselves toward the expectations of other people.

Others pull toward the habitual way of acting.

Others try to build a new line of behavior.

In a calm situation, all this may look unified. But in tension, coherence becomes visible precisely because it begins to break.

Inner conflict is one of the simplest entrances into this problem.

"I want to leave, and I am afraid to leave."

"I want change, and I want to keep the old."

"I want to tell the truth, and I am afraid to destroy the relationship."

"I want to be free, and I want to be approved."

"I want to begin again, and I hold on to the old version of myself."

If the human being were a simple center of decisions, such conflicts would be a strange error. But they do not look like an error. They are too regular, too recognizably human. They show that different lines of stabilization can act inside experience at the same time.

One line holds safety.

Another holds meaning.

A third holds belonging.

A fourth holds the image of the future.

A fifth holds the link with the past.

And when these lines diverge, a person experiences himself not as a clear center, but as a tension between possible ways of being himself.

Here another objection appears:

"But the conflict still happens to me. So there is an I who experiences all this."

This objection is important. It shows why the familiar picture is so stable. Even when a person says, "I am arguing with myself," he still says "I". Even when he says, "I do not understand myself," he still assumes some connection between the lack of understanding and himself. Even when he says, "I was not myself," he says this on behalf of the one who restores coherence to himself.

But from the fact that experience gathers into the form "with me", it does not follow that inside there is a separate unchanging essence that stands behind everything that happens.

Perhaps "with me" is not a pointer to a hidden owner, but a form of maintaining coherence.

For now this is only a possibility. Not yet a conclusion. Not yet the central formula. It is too early.

At this stage, it is enough to see this: the familiar model of the inner center does not explain everything. It describes the feeling of unity well, but it explains inner mismatch, automatic actions, contradiction between knowledge and reaction, change of personality over time, and dependence of behavior on relationships less well.

Doubt does not destroy the picture.

It turns it into a question.

What Exactly Begins to Doubt

The doubt discussed here is not the same as lack of self-confidence.

This must be separated at once. A person may doubt himself before an exam, before a conversation, before choosing a profession, before beginning a relationship. Such doubt is connected with an estimate of strength: can I manage, am I acting rightly, do I understand the situation well enough? But this chapter is about something else.

Here doubt is directed not at a person's ability, but at the picture of the human being.

The one who doubts is not the one who says, "I am weak."

The one who doubts is the one who begins to ask: "why do I imagine myself as one center at all, if my experience so often shows mismatches between intention, reaction, memory, body, language, and relationships?"

This doubt does not humiliate the human being. On the contrary, it may be more respectful than too simple a confidence. When we say to a person, "just get hold of yourself," we sometimes address a simplicity that does not exist. We assume that inside there is already a ready-made controlling center, which only needs to press the lever harder. But if the human being is arranged in a more complex way, such a phrase does not help us understand what is happening. It only adds guilt.

A more exact question sounds different:

what exactly failed to cohere?

which level of experience holds the old reaction?

which memory continues to act?

which meaning has come under threat?

which connection with other people supports the old way of behaving?

which attention returns again and again to the same place?

For now these questions are not yet a model. But they change the direction of thought. Instead of searching for a guilty center, there appears an attempt to see the structure of the mismatch.

And this is already another way of relating to the human being.

Not softer in the sense of indulgence.

But more exact.

Three Inner Conflicts

The first conflict can be called the conflict of safety and change.

A person says, "I want a new life." He may be sincere. He is tired of the old work, old relationships, the old way of staying silent or agreeing. He sees that the former form of life narrows him. But as soon as the possibility of real change appears, another line turns on: do not touch it, do not risk, stay with the known. The old may be heavy, but it is familiar. The new may be better, but it has not yet been stabilized.

If we look at the human being as a simple center of decisions, this conflict looks like weakness. You decided, so do it. But if we look more carefully, we see this: one part of experience holds the image of the future, another holds safety. Both have meaning. Both protect some form of coherence. The problem is not that one is "real" and the other "gets in the way." The problem is that they are not coherent with one another.

The second conflict can be called the conflict of truth and belonging.

A person wants to say what he really thinks. But he knows: the truth may change the relationship. He may not be understood, may be rejected, blamed, or no longer considered convenient. Then he chooses silence or a half-truth. Later he is angry with himself for weakness. But inside this silence there may be not only fear. There may be an old memory that connection was preserved at the price of yielding. There may be experience in which honesty led to a loss of warmth. There may be the language of a family where a direct word was treated as an attack.

Here again it is not enough to say, "he simply did not dare." We need to ask what coherence the silence was holding. Sometimes a person is silent not because he has no center, but because several ways of being himself require incompatible actions.

The third conflict can be called the conflict of the image of oneself and the living reaction.

A person considers himself kind, calm, reasonable. This image matters to him. He has built it for years. But suddenly envy, irritation, rudeness, a wish to punish, or a wish to disappear from contact rises in him. He does not want to recognize these reactions as his own, because they disturb the image. Then he either suppresses them, justifies them, or projects them onto the other person: it is not that I am angry, it is that you drove me to it.

But a reaction that a person does not include in the image of himself does not disappear. It may return by indirect routes: sarcasm, tiredness, coldness, sudden outbursts. So another doubt appears: perhaps the familiar "I" is not the whole human being, but only a more coherent, more acceptable part of his experience?

And again it is important not to draw the conclusion too quickly. The point is not that the "real" is hidden in dark reactions. That would only be another romantic mistake. The point is that the human being is wider than his image of himself. This means that the image of oneself cannot be the final center of explanation.

A Small Historical Example

Sometimes something similar happens not only with a person, but also with whole pictures of the world.

For a long time it was natural for people to think that the Earth was motionless and everything else moved around it. This matched immediate feeling. The ground under one's feet does not go away. The sun rises and sets. The sky moves. Everyday experience seemed to confirm what was obvious.

But gradually mismatches accumulated.

Some movements of the planets looked strange. To preserve the old picture, it became necessary to add more and more complex explanations. The obviousness itself did not disappear at once. A person still saw the sun pass across the sky. But it became possible to ask: perhaps what seems to be a direct description of reality is an effect of our position inside the system?

This example is not needed for a direct comparison between the human being and the cosmos. It matters more carefully: sometimes what seems most obvious turns out not to be a lie, but a perspective.

The feeling of a center may be as strong as the feeling of the motionless Earth.

But the strength of a feeling does not yet prove the structure.

It shows how the system is given from the inside.

And if we want to understand the human being, we need to distinguish two questions:

how does a person experience himself?

and

how are the processes arranged through which this experience becomes possible?

The first chapter does not answer the second question fully. It only opens it.

The First Question

Now we can return to the opening scene.

A person wanted to answer calmly, but answered harshly. After that he said, "I do not understand why I did that."

The ordinary explanation might sound like this: he simply failed to hold himself back. But what does "failed to hold himself back" mean? Who was supposed to hold back? What exactly fell out of coherence? Why did the decision made in advance not hold the action? Why, at the moment of the conversation, did another reaction turn out to be stronger?

One can say: emotions defeated reason.

Sometimes this is a useful description. But it too is too rough. Emotions are not an external force that attacks a person from the outside. Reason is also not a separate ruler sitting above them. And if we simply replace one inner manager with another, the problem remains.

One can say: the person has weak will.

Sometimes this explains part of the situation. But not all of it. A person may show enormous will in one area and be almost helpless in another. He may endure great external difficulties, but break down again and again in one type of relationship. He may be disciplined at work and chaotic in closeness. This means it is not only a matter of the general amount of will.

One can say: a habit worked.

This too is true in many cases. But habit is not a final explanation. It itself requires a question: why did this way of acting become fixed? What did it once stabilize? What anxiety did it reduce? What coherence did it hold? Why could the new attitude not replace the old one at once?

Each simple explanation turns out to be useful, but incomplete.

And then the first question becomes more exact:

is the human being really arranged as he seems from the inside?

Perhaps the familiar feeling of one center is an important part of experience, but not its original cause. Perhaps unity is not simply given in advance, but is constantly maintained. Perhaps personality does not stand motionless in the depths, but gathers through memory, attention, language, meaning, body, relationships, and repeated ways of reacting. Perhaps when we say "I", we name not a hidden thing, but the result of complex work of coherence.

For now this is not yet a statement.

It is a direction of the question.

And in this direction the first chapter should stop. Not because there is nothing more to say, but because the next step requires a separate check.

If the familiar picture assumes an inner center, then we need to ask directly:

can it be found?

Not as a word.

Not as a feeling.

Not as a habit of saying "I".

But as a separate center that observes, controls, and remains unchanged behind all changes of experience.

This is the question that opens the next chapter.

Where is the inner center?

2. The Illusion of the Center

Why We Are So Sure

Before sleep, thought becomes especially audible.

During the day it is muffled by tasks, conversations, messages, movement, the need to answer, choose, and keep up. But late in the evening, when the light is already off, the body lies still, and external affairs let go for a while, the conversation inside still continues.

A person remembers what he said wrong. Imagines tomorrow's conversation. Argues with someone who is no longer there. Answers more strongly than he answered during the day. Corrects the past. Invents the future. Explains to himself why he acted exactly that way. Then he notices that he has gone into thought again, and tries to stop.

And at some point a strange question appears:
who is thinking all this now?

Not in the sense of a name, biography, or passport. That much is clear. The question is more subtle. Who is the one before whom thoughts pass? Who notices that a thought has appeared? Who says, "I am thinking about this again"? Who looks at the inner monologue as if it were unfolding before him?

It seems that the answer is obvious: I.

But if we stay with this answer a little longer, it stops being so simple. The word "I" does not explain here; it only points. It places a mark on the experience, but does not yet show what exactly has been found.

The feeling of an inner center is very strong. Sometimes it seems like the most immediate fact of experience. One can doubt one's memories, motives, decisions, or the judgments of other people. But it is hard to doubt that there is someone who doubts. It seems that deep inside everything that happens there is a point from which everything is perceived.

This certainty does not appear by accident.

First, experience is almost always given from some perspective. The world does not simply exist before us as a neutral map. It is given from here: from this body, this position, this history, this mood, this pain, this anxiety, this memory. Even when a person tries to be objective, the attempt itself happens from some point of experience.

Second, language gathers scattered processes into the form of the first person. We say, "I thought", "I felt", "I noticed", "I decided". Language does not have to clarify each time exactly which level of experience took part in the reaction. It creates practical coherence. But this coherence gradually begins to look like proof of an inner center.

Third, memory creates a line of continuation. In the morning a person remembers that in the evening he thought, doubted, and worried. He links these states into one story. It seems to him: if all this happened with me, then there must be someone who remains the same through all these states.

Fourth, attention creates the impression of observation. When a person notices a thought, the thought seems to become an object. And if there is an object, it is easy to suppose a subject-observer. A thought is seen, so there is someone who sees it. An emotion is noticed, so there is someone who notices it. The body is felt, so there is someone who feels the body.

This is how a simple and very convincing picture is formed: inside there is a center that observes, chooses, holds itself, and controls what is happening.

In ordinary life, this picture works well enough. It allows a person to speak in the first person, answer for actions, plan, remember, admit mistakes, promise, and explain himself to others. This is

why the book does not begin by rejecting this picture as foolish. It would be too easy and too crude to say: the inner center is only an illusion, so there is no need to think about it.

On the contrary, we first need to recognize its force.

If the feeling of a center were weak, it would not have held our picture of the human being for so long.

But the strength of a feeling is not the same as proof of structure.

In everyday life, this strength appears almost invisibly.

A person says, "I made myself get up." This phrase already contains a hidden duality: who made someone do it, and who was made to do it? He says, "I did not let myself lose control." Again, there appears the one who holds back, and the one who needs to be held back. He says, "I observed my emotions," and it seems as if somewhere above the emotions there really is a separate point of observation. He says, "I made a decision," and the decision looks like the act of an inner ruler, although before it tiredness, fear, memory, habit, the expectations of others, bodily tension, and a random phrase heard in the morning may have been working quietly.

There is no need to forbid such expressions. They are convenient and often accurate for communication. But if we take them literally, language begins to suggest metaphysics to us. It draws a manager where perhaps there is a coherence of processes. It draws an observer where perhaps there is a change in relation to the content of experience. It draws an inner center where perhaps there is a temporary form of assembly.

This is precisely where the second chapter begins.

Where is the inner center?

Trying to Find the Observer

One can carry out a simple inner experiment.

No special preparation, complex technique, or special state is needed. It is enough to stop for a few minutes and look at what is found in experience.

There are thoughts.

They appear as words, images, broken phrases, inner remarks, plans, memories. Sometimes a thought looks like a sentence. Sometimes like an instant understanding. Sometimes like a repeating fragment: I should have answered differently, I must not forget, what if everything goes wrong, why did he say that, what is happening to me.

There are emotions.

Anxiety, irritation, tiredness, tenderness, shame, expectation, boredom. They may be clear or vague. Sometimes a person knows at once: I am angry. Sometimes he needs time to understand what tension is being held inside. An emotion may be strong, may be barely noticeable, may change the whole tone of perception even if the person does not name it.

There are bodily sensations.

Pressure in the chest, heaviness in the head, warmth in the hands, tightness in the stomach, breathing, pulse, posture, tiredness, the movement of the eyes under closed eyelids. The body is not simply a shell that a separate center observes from somewhere inside. It already takes part in how experience is given.

There are images.

Faces of people, rooms, routes, possible conversations, scenes from the past, versions of the future. Sometimes they arise deliberately, sometimes as if by themselves. A person may try not to think about something, but the image still returns.

There is attention.

It is held on the breath, then goes to an anxious thought, then catches on a sound, then returns to the body, then falls again into memory. Attention does not look like a fixed spotlight that someone confidently controls from the center. Rather, it distributes itself, gets captured, returns, slips away, and gathers again.

All this is found.

But where is the observer?

One can say: the observer is the one who notices all this.

Good. Then let us try to notice the observer himself.

A thought appears: "I am observing." But this is a thought.

A feeling of presence appears. But this is a feeling.

A sense of "I am here" appears. But this is a sense.

An inner silence appears between thoughts. But it too is given as a state of experience.

A direction of attention appears. But the direction of attention can also be noticed.

Each time it seems that we have found the observer, what is found is not a separate entity, but one more element of experience: a thought about observing, a feeling of presence, a bodily localization, a focus of attention, a feeling of continuity, the inner phrase "this is me."

This does not mean that there is nothing.

On the contrary, there is a great deal.

But among this multiplicity, no separate object is found that we could point to and name: here he is, the inner observer, the hidden center, the unchanging owner of experience.

Here it is important not to draw the conclusion too quickly.

One must not say: if the observer is not found as an object, then experience has no subjectivity. That would be a mistake. Experience is indeed given from within. There is experiencing, there is

perspective, there is a difference between what happens with me and what I observe from outside in another person. But the question is not whether there is subjectivity. The question is whether explaining subjectivity requires us to introduce a separate inner observer.

For now, the experiment shows only one thing:

what we call the observer is not found as an independent thing inside experience.

We find thoughts, emotions, sensations, attention, memory, and the feeling of presence.

But we do not find a separate center standing behind them as a hidden manager.

This experiment can be repeated in different states.

In the morning, when a person has not fully woken up, the "I" may be blurred. Thoughts appear slowly, the body is heavy, yesterday's concerns do not return at once. But after a few minutes, name, tasks, anxieties, plans, and familiar roles gather the person again into a recognizable form. It seems that the center has woken up. But perhaps it was not the center that woke up; perhaps the coherence of processes was restored.

In a moment of strong anxiety, everything is the opposite: the center seems to narrow. A person may say, "I have completely turned into anxiety." Attention is captured, the body is tense, the future is drawn as dangerous, memory throws up similar cases. Where is the calm observer here? Sometimes it appears later, when the anxiety has been named and placed into a story: "I had an anxiety attack." But at the moment of capture, a separate observer is almost not found.

In a state of flow, the center may almost disappear. A person plays, writes, drives along a familiar road, works with his hands, listens to music, talks with someone close, and suddenly notices that he was not separately watching himself. The action was happening, attention was gathered, mistakes were corrected, reactions appeared in time, but the inner commentator was silent. If the center is a necessary manager, such states are hard to explain. If the center is an effect of a certain organization of experience, it becomes clearer: sometimes experience is stable without an explicit feeling of an observing "I."

These cases do not prove finally that there is no center. But they show that the feeling of a center changes. It can strengthen, weaken, narrow, disappear from explicit attention, and return. And what changes together with the organization of experience is hard to treat as the unchanging source of that organization.

The Center as an Effect of Assembly

Here a natural resistance appears:

"But I feel the observer."

This objection cannot be dismissed. It is too strong. Many people really do experience something inside that resembles a point of presence: as if there is someone who looks at thoughts, who is silent behind words, who remains when emotions change. If we say to a person, "this is not there," he will rightly feel that his experience is being devalued.

So it is more exact to say it differently.

The feeling of the observer exists.

But the question is what it is.

It may be not a separate entity, but an effect of the assembly of experience.

When many processes are coordinated with enough stability, a feeling of center appears. Memory connects what is happening with the past. Language gathers experience into the form "I". Attention holds a certain area of experience. The body gives a stable perspective. The social environment addresses the person as one and the same individual. Biography connects episodes into a story. All this together can create the experience of an inner center.

In this case, the center is not the cause of coherence, but its result.

Not the source from which all processes spread out.

But the form in which coordinated processes become experienced.

This is like a stable pattern. If we look at a whirlpool, we can say that it has a center. But this center is not a small object inside the water that makes it rotate. It arises from the movement itself. If the movement changes, the center changes. If the movement falls apart, the center disappears. The center is real as a form of organization, but not as a separate thing.

Or we can recall a city square. It seems to be the center of a city. People arrange meetings there, streets converge toward it, maps mark it, transport routes take it into account. But the square is not a secret manager of the city. It is a center because many paths, habits, routes, stories, and decisions are organized around it. Here the center exists as an effect of relations.

The inner center may be similar to this.

It is felt because experience really gathers.

But from the fact that the assembly has the form of a center, it does not follow that inside there is a separate center-entity.

This shift is very important. It allows us to preserve the phenomenon without adding an extra entity. We do not deny that a person experiences himself from within. We do not deny that there is a feeling of presence. We do not deny that experience often gathers around "I". But we carefully change the status of this "I": perhaps it is not the source of the assembly, but its effect.

This is not the final answer.

It is a hypothesis that needs testing.

Here one more example may help.

A musical work has a theme. The listener recognizes it, returns to it, waits for its development. But the theme does not lie inside the music as a separate object. It exists in the relations of sounds, repetitions, pauses, expectations, and the listener's memory. If one note is removed, the theme may remain. If the rhythm is changed, it may become different. If the connections are destroyed, the theme disappears. It is real, but real as organization, not as a hidden thing.

The feeling of a center may be arranged in a similar way. It arises not from one element, but from the coherence of many elements. This is why it is hard to find as an object. We are looking for a thing, but what stands before us is a way of organization.

The Observer Paradox

The observer paradox appears at the moment when we try to make the observer an object.

If the observer is the one who sees thoughts, then how can we see the observer himself?

If we see him, he already becomes what is observed.

And the one who observes him seems to step back again.

One can continue endlessly: the observer of the observer, the observer of the observer of the observer, one more level, one more step back. Intuitively it seems that somewhere there must be a final point, a final "I" that is no longer observed, but only observes. But precisely here a risk appears: we introduce a hidden entity only because it is difficult for us to tolerate the incompleteness of the description.

One can take another path.

Not to search for the final observer.

But to ask what processes create the difference between what is noticed and the noticing itself.

When a person says "I noticed a thought," perhaps this does not mean that a separate observer looked at a separate thought. Perhaps it means that a new organization appeared inside experience: the thought stopped being a complete capture and became content that can be held, named, connected with other states, evaluated, released, or continued.

In other words, observation may be not the action of a hidden observer, but a change of relation inside experience.

The thought was a flow.

Then it became an object of attention.

The emotion was a state in which the person was located.

Then it became a state that he could name.

The reaction was automatic.

Then it became noticed.

In each case, distance appears. But distance does not necessarily require a separate entity that stands outside experience. It may arise as a reconfiguration of experience itself.

This is especially visible in simple situations.

A person is angry and fully captured by anger. At that moment he does not say to himself, "there is anger in me." He speaks sharply, acts from the state, sees the situation through it. But after a minute, an hour, or a day, he may say, "I was angry." Anger has become content of memory and language. It has stopped being the whole field of experience. Distance has appeared.

But where, in this distance, is a separate observer?

We can describe it differently: the organization of experience has changed. The possibility appeared to connect the reaction with a story, name it, compare it, evaluate it, include it in the image of oneself or, on the contrary, see its mismatch with that image.

Observation does not disappear here.

But it no longer requires a hidden observer.

Three Objections

At this point several objections appear, and each must be held without hurry.

The first objection sounds like this:

"If there is no observer, why can I notice my thoughts?"

The answer is not that noticing does not exist. Noticing exists. But it may be not the action of a separate observer, but a new state of experience itself. A thought can be lived through as complete content, or it can be singled out, named, and connected with other contents. In the second case, distance appears. But distance does not yet prove a separate entity located outside everything that is happening.

The second objection:

"If there is no center, why do I feel responsibility?"

This is an especially important question. It seems that without an inner center there disappears the one who answers for actions. But responsibility does not necessarily require a hidden manager. It can rest on continuity of memory, the ability to recognize an action as one's own, participation in relationships, the language of promises, the consequences of actions, and the possibility of reconfiguring behavior. Responsibility may belong not to an entity, but to a system that preserves coherence over time.

The third objection:

"If the center is only an effect, does that mean I am not real?"

No. This is too quick and too painful a conclusion. An effect is not the same as deception. A smile is an effect of muscles, emotions, situation, and social meaning, but it does not become unreal because of that. A house is an organization of materials, but we do not say that there is no house because it cannot be found separately from walls, roof, space, purpose, and life inside. In the same way, the experience of "I" may be real as a form of organization of experience, even if it is not a separate hidden entity.

These objections help clarify the model. It must not destroy subjectivity, responsibility, or the reality of experiencing oneself. It must only avoid adding an extra inner owner if what is happening can be described more exactly without one.

The Error of Intuition

The error of intuition is not that it feels the center.

It really feels it.

The error begins where the feeling of a center is taken as proof of a separate center.

A person feels unity and concludes: therefore, inside there is one entity.

A person notices thoughts and concludes: therefore, there is a hidden observer of thoughts.

A person makes a decision and concludes: therefore, there is an inner manager who chooses.

A person remembers himself yesterday and concludes: therefore, there is an unchanging self passing through time.

Each of these conclusions is understandable. But each adds more than is immediately given.

What is immediately given is the feeling of unity.

But a separate entity is not given.

What is immediately given is the noticing of a thought.

But a hidden observer is not given as an object.

What is immediately given is the experience of choice.

But an inner manager is not given as a separate center.

What is immediately given is the coherence of memory.

But an unchanging self is not given.

At this point, the book's critical rule begins to work: if an entity can be removed and the model continues to work, it should be removed.

But removing an entity does not mean impoverishing experience.

On the contrary, sometimes it allows us to see more. As long as we believe that there is a center inside, we tend to explain everything through it. A person loses control: the center failed to cope. A person changes: the center decided to change. A person contradicts himself: the center is weak or confused. But such explanations often close the question too early.

If we do not introduce the center as a ready-made entity, we have to look more carefully: which processes took part? What held the reaction? What memory was activated? How was attention distributed? What meaning was under threat? Which external expectations supported the habitual action? Why did coherence gather exactly this way?

What was previously explained by the single word "I" begins to open as a multilevel organization.

And here it is important to keep a limitation.

We are not yet proving that the human being is a system of stabilization of experience. That will be the next step. In the second chapter, only one overly strong assumption is dismantled: the assumption that the feeling of a center necessarily points to a separate inner center.

Perhaps the center is not the source.

Perhaps the center is an effect.

This is exactly why the word "illusion" in the chapter title must be understood carefully.

The illusion of the center does not mean that a person is simply mistaken and experiences something nonexistent. Rather, it means that the experience is interpreted too strongly. We feel a center and draw from this a conclusion about an entity. We feel observation and draw a conclusion about an observer. We feel continuity and draw a conclusion about an unchanging self.

The error is not in the experience.

The error is in the added explanation.

A Counterexample and a Limitation

There are cases that do not allow us to speak too confidently.

For example, the experience of attentive presence may be so clear that it seems impossible to call it simply an effect. In meditation, prayer, deep concentration, creative work, the experience of danger, or the experience of strong beauty, a feeling of pure presence may arise: thoughts change, emotions pass, but something remains open, clear, observing.

If the model says too quickly, "this is only an effect of assembly," it will lose subtlety.

The word "only" is dangerous here. It sounds as if an effect is less real than an entity. But this is not necessarily so. A rainbow is also an effect of conditions of perception, light, and water, but that does not mean that it is "not there" in the experienced world. Music arises from relations of sounds in time, but it is not an illusion only because it cannot be found as a separate object between the notes.

The feeling of the observer may be a real phenomenon of experience.

The limitation of the model is that it must not deny this phenomenon. It must only carefully refuse the extra step: turning the phenomenon into a separate entity.

What could weaken this hypothesis?

If the inner observer were found as a stable separate object of experience, independent of memory, attention, language, bodily perspective, and changing states, the model of the effect of assembly would be insufficient. But this is precisely what ordinary checking does not find. We find experiences of presence, forms of attention, the feeling "I am here", but we do not find a separate hidden center.

Therefore the conclusion remains cautious:

the feeling of the observer requires explanation,

but it does not require the immediate introduction of the observer as an entity.

A New Question

Now we can return to the night scene.

A person lies in the dark and notices the inner monologue. Thoughts move, change, return, argue with one another. He tries to find the one who observes all this. But each time he finds only new elements of experience: a thought about himself, a feeling of presence, attention, a bodily point of view, memory, inner speech.

The feeling of the center does not disappear.

But its status changes.

Earlier it seemed to be proof: if I feel a center, then it exists as a separate inner entity.

Now it becomes a question: which processes create this feeling of a center?

This shift can be disorienting. If the center is not found as a separate object, an anxious question appears: who then lives, chooses, remembers, answers, loves, makes mistakes? Does the human being fall apart into a set of processes?

The answer cannot be given too quickly. If we hurry, we will only replace the old center with a new word. So the next step must be careful.

If the center is not the source of coherence, then what holds coherence?

How does experience avoid falling apart every second?

Why does a human being still experience himself as continuing?

Why do thoughts, memory, body, language, relationships, and actions gather into a relatively stable form?

This is the question that opens the next chapter.

If there is no center as a separate entity,
what holds coherence?

3. The Human Being as a System for Stabilizing Experience

After the Center Disappears

Sometimes a person does not change at once, but after an event that for a long time does not look final.

At first, everything still continues out of inertia. He walks the same streets, answers messages, buys the usual food, says the usual phrases. The outer form of life may remain almost the same. But inside, something has already shifted. Work that once seemed part of the future becomes a temporary structure. Relationships in which a person recognized himself no longer give the same reflection. Old goals sound foreign. The words with which he explained his life to himself stop working.

And one day a phrase appears:

"I no longer understand who I am."

It may appear after divorce, moving, losing a job, illness, major success, a child growing up, the death of someone close, or a long inner crisis. Sometimes it comes not after a catastrophe, but after reaching a goal. A person has arrived where he had been going for many years, and suddenly discovers that the goal no longer holds his story. Everything was built around it, and now it is complete, and with its completion an emptiness appears.

This state is frightening precisely because what disappears is not one answer, but the way of connecting answers.

The person still remembers his name. He knows the facts of his biography. He recognizes the face in the mirror. But the connection between past, present, and future becomes weaker. What used to gather life into a recognizable form no longer holds it with the same force.

After the first two chapters, we come to this place with a question that has already changed.

In the first chapter, doubt appeared about the familiar picture of the human being. In the second chapter, we tried to find the inner center and did not find it as a separate entity. We found thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, attention, memory, a feeling of presence, but we did not find a hidden observer standing behind them as an independent manager.

Now a new question appears:

if there is no center as a separate entity,
what holds coherence?

This question cannot be bypassed. If we simply remove the center and offer nothing in its place, the human being turns into a scattering of processes. Thoughts separately, body separately, memory separately, language separately, relationships separately. Such a picture may seem radical, but it explains the main thing badly: why does experience still not fall apart every second?

A person wakes up in the morning and in most cases does not assemble himself from zero. He recognizes the room. Remembers what happened yesterday. Continues unfinished tasks. Understands whom he needs to answer. Keeps anxieties, hopes, habits, intonations, routes, ways of defending himself, and ways of loving. Even if the inner center has not been found, some coherence is clearly there.

So the question must be put differently.

Not: who governs the human being from within?

But: how does experience hold coherence?

This shift seems small, but it changes the whole direction of thought.

As long as we ask "who governs?", we already assume the form of the answer. We look for a face, a center, an inner owner, a hidden point of decision. But if this center is not found, the question

begins to move in a circle: who decided, if not the center? who noticed, if not the observer? who held it together, if not the manager?

The question "how is coherence held?" is built differently. It does not require us to introduce an owner in advance. It allows us to look at memory, attention, language, the body, habits, relationships, external supports, and meaning as processes that may take part in coordinating experience. It does not impoverish the human being, but opens more levels than the model of the inner center.

Systems Do Not Always Have a Center

To move further, it is useful to look at systems that are stable without a single governing center. A city does not have one inner "I."

It may have an administration, a map, a center, a history, borders, transport hubs. But the city is not governed from one hidden point that decides every second where people will go, where a cafe will open, how a district will change, why one street will become busy and another quiet. A city exists as a multitude of coordinated and uncoordinated processes: roads, residents' habits, economic ties, the memory of places, rules, accidents, routes, conversations, fears, expectations, seasonal changes.

And still the city is not chaos.

It can be recognizable. It has a style, a rhythm, districts, repeated paths. A person who returns after a long absence may say: the city has changed, but it is still the same city. Or the opposite: formally it is the same city, but something in it has lost its former coherence.

The stability of the city does not require a hidden city observer.

It arises from the organization of many processes.

An ecosystem also does not have a single center.

In a forest there is no main tree that governs the forest as a whole. There is soil, moisture, light, fungi, roots, insects, animals, seeds, decay, competition, symbiosis, fires, recovery, seasonal cycles. A forest can be stable, but this stability is not like immobility. It changes constantly. Old trees fall, young ones grow, some species retreat, others become stronger. The stability of a forest is not the preservation of every detail, but the preservation of the coherence of changes.

If we look for a center of control in the forest, we will not find it.

But if we conclude from this that there is no forest as a system, that would be strange.

Language is perhaps even closer to the human being.

No one person governs language alone. Language has no hidden observer who decides which words will survive, which meanings will change, which expressions will become familiar. But language is stable. It allows people to understand one another, pass on memory, argue, promise, tell stories, build laws, write books. At the same time, language changes. Words lose old shades, receive new ones, move from one environment to another, disappear, return, become living or dead.

Language preserves continuity through change.

And this continuity does not require a single center.

These examples do not automatically prove that the human being is arranged in the same way. A city is not a person. A forest is not consciousness. Language is not personality. But they help remove one intuitive obstacle: stability does not always require a central manager.

A system can be stable not because there is a chief owner inside it, but because many processes are sufficiently coordinated with one another.

Now we can carefully return to the human being.

There is one more example: an orchestra.

An orchestra may have a conductor, but the music is not located only in the conductor. It arises from the score, the musicians' hearing, the habit of playing together, the memory of rehearsals, the quality of instruments, the acoustics of the hall, the common rhythm, mutual attention. If the conductor disappears in the middle of a simple, well-learned passage, the music will not necessarily fall apart at once. But if coordination between the groups breaks down, even the conductor's presence will not immediately save the sound.

This example matters not because the human being is literally like an orchestra. It shows something else: even where there is a visible center of coordination, stability is often distributed more widely than it seems. This is even more important for the human being, in whom the inner conductor is not found as a separate entity.

A New Hypothesis

If the inner center is not found as a separate entity, but coherence of experience still exists, we can formulate a new hypothesis.

The human being is
not a fixed essence,
but a multilevel system for stabilizing experience.

This formula should not appear as a dogma. It is an answer to the path that has already been taken.

First there was the familiar intuition: inside there is a single center.

Then doubt appeared: a person argues with himself, acts automatically, does not understand his own reactions, changes.

Then there was an attempt to find the observer: there are thoughts, emotions, sensations, attention, a feeling of presence, but the observer is not found as a separate object.

Then a possibility appeared: the center may be an effect of assembly, not a cause.

Now the next step appears: if the center is not the source, coherence may be held by a system of processes.

The word "system" should not sound mechanical here. This is not about the human being as a machine with parts. The machine metaphor is too crude. A person is not simply a set of functions that can be replaced and reassembled without remainder. His experience is living, historical, bodily, linguistic, social, and meaningful. So here system means not a mechanism, but an organization of interconnected processes.

The word "stabilization" also requires care.

It does not mean stopping.

It does not mean immobility.

It does not mean suppressing change.

Stabilization is maintaining the coherence of experience.

Sometimes coherence is held through habit. A person does what is familiar because the familiar lowers uncertainty.

Sometimes through memory. The past connects the present situation with already lived forms.

Sometimes through language. By naming an experience, a person gains the possibility of holding it, passing it on, comparing it, and placing it into a story.

Sometimes through attention. What is held by attention receives more resources and becomes more stable.

Sometimes through meaning. If an event is included in a story, it looks less like a random fragment.

Sometimes through other people. A conversation, recognition, a look, a promise, a conflict, or support can return to a person a coherence that he could not hold alone.

Sometimes through external structures: notes, photographs, schedules, objects, places, rituals, professional roles.

The human being turns out to be not a point, but a process of maintaining coherence on several levels.

We can say it even more carefully: a person experiences himself as a point when this multilevel coherence is sufficiently gathered.

When memory, body, attention, language, and meaning do not diverge too much, a feeling of simplicity appears: "this is me." But in crisis, this simplicity weakens. Then what is usually hidden behind the smoothness of experience becomes visible: the human being is held not by one inner support, but by a network of mutual supports.

This is why the formula does not cancel the experience of "I." It explains why it can be stable, fragile, strong, vague, lost, or restored.

Why This Matters

If we continue to think of the human being as a hidden center, many phenomena look like a simple weakness of the center.

A person did not do what he decided to do, so the center failed to cope.

A person repeats an old pattern, so the center governs poorly.

A person goes through an identity crisis, so the center has lost itself.

A person depends on relationships, so the center is not autonomous enough.

But such a picture often turns complexity into blame too quickly.

If the human being is a system for stabilizing experience, the question changes.

We ask not only: why did he fail to cope?

We ask:

what coherence broke down?

which level of experience stopped supporting the others?

what held the old form?

why has the new form not yet become stable?

which processes are working against one another?

which external structures used to support coherence?

what meaning disappeared?

what memory continues to organize the reaction?

what attention again returns experience to the old place?

This approach does not cancel responsibility. It only makes it less primitive. Responsibility stops being an appeal to a small inner ruler and becomes a question about reconfiguring the system: what needs to change so that a new coherence can be held?

This is also important for understanding crisis.

Crisis does not always mean breakdown. Sometimes it means that the old way of stabilization no longer works. For many years, a person may have held himself through work, relationships, the role of the strong one, the role of the needed one, the image of the successful one, the image of the suffering one, the image of the correct one. Then circumstances change, and the old support stops gathering experience.

Then a person may feel disintegration.

But perhaps it is not the person as an essence that is disintegrating.

It is the old structure of coherence that is disintegrating.

This distinction is very important. If an essence is disintegrating, only fear remains. If a structure is disintegrating, the possibility of reconfiguration appears.

This is exactly why the model of stabilization of experience does not destroy the human being. It tries to see how he is held when he seems unified, and what happens when this coherence is disturbed.

Everyday Examples of Stabilization

The simplest forms of stabilization are almost invisible.

A person puts his keys in the same place. This is not just convenience. It is a small external structure that reduces the chaos of the future morning. Memory does not have to search from zero each time. Space takes on part of the holding.

A person keeps a diary. Sometimes he thinks he is simply recording events. But often writing does more: it connects an experience that was too diffuse inside. While a feeling has not been named, it may occupy the whole field. After being written down, it becomes part of a story. It does not disappear, but it receives a form.

A person returns to a familiar place when he feels bad. A kitchen, a park, a road along the river, a work desk, an armchair by the window. The place does not solve the problem. But it helps experience gather again. The body recognizes the space, attention stops spending energy on uncertainty, memory returns a familiar line.

A person calls a friend and after the conversation says, "it has become clearer to me." The friend did not put a new entity into him. But the conversation helped connect scattered experiences. What was an anxious knot inside became a sequence: this is what happened, this is what frightened me, this is what matters to me, this is what can be done.

A person keeps to a ritual. Morning tea, a walk, the order of preparing for work, an evening note, a short silence before a difficult task. From outside, this may seem like a small thing. But rituals often hold continuity where an inner decision is not enough.

In all these cases, coherence does not come from one center. It is distributed between body, memory, objects, language, space, other people, and repetition.

And this is exactly what allows us to speak of the human being as a multilevel system.

We can add several more tense examples.

After a difficult conversation, a person walks home, although he could have taken transport. He does not "solve the problem" by walking. But step, breath, streets, and the repeated rhythm of movement gradually return experience from chaotic agitation into a more coherent form. Thought stops jumping, the body lowers tension, the words of the conversation become less sharp. Walking here is not just a physical action. It takes part in stabilization.

Another person, before an important decision, lays papers out on the table. Lists, schemes, notes, dates, names. Inside, everything seems too tangled. But when the elements are placed outside, it becomes possible to see connections. Paper does not think instead of the person. But it helps the system of experience hold more than inner memory alone could hold.

A third person returns to an old photograph and unexpectedly understands why the present situation hurt him so much. The photograph is not the cause of understanding. But it connects the present feeling with a past layer of experience. What was torn apart receives a line. Sometimes an external object becomes the point through which experience connects itself again.

A fourth person repeats the same phrase: "I need time." At first it sounds like a defense. Then like a request. Then like an acknowledgement of a boundary. Language here does not merely report a state to another person. It creates a form in which the person himself begins to hold his state differently.

Such examples show that stabilization does not always look like strong will or a clear decision. Often it happens through small forms of coherence.

Objection: If There Is No Center, Who Makes Decisions?

Here an objection appears that cannot be bypassed:

"If there is no center, who makes decisions?"

This is one of the strongest questions. Because without an answer to it, the model may look like an escape from the obvious. We really do choose. We sign a contract, leave or stay, tell the truth or remain silent, begin treatment, change work, answer a message, admit a mistake. We cannot simply say that decisions "happen," as if the person disappears.

But the question can be made more exact.

Perhaps a decision is not always an order from the center.

Perhaps a decision is the moment when several levels of experience gather into action.

Sometimes a decision matures for a long time. A person says for years that he is not ready, and then one day takes a step. From outside it seems: he suddenly decided. But inside, meaning, fear, memory, the image of the future, support from others, and tiredness from the old form may have been reconfiguring for a long time. The day of decision turns out to be not the beginning, but the visible point of assembly.

Sometimes a decision is made quickly. But even then it may rely on already formed patterns. The experience of a doctor, driver, teacher, parent, or musician makes it possible to act almost instantly. Not because a small center calculated the options faster than everyone else, but because the system has already learned to recognize the situation and gather a response.

Sometimes a decision is conflicted. A person chooses, but part of him continues to resist. This does not mean that the decision is unreal. It means that coherence is incomplete. One line of experience has become strong enough for action, but other lines have not disappeared.

In this way we can preserve the reality of choice without introducing a hidden manager.

The decision remains human.

But it is understood not as the command of an essence, but as an event of coordination.

Here one more objection appears:

"But if a decision is an event of coordination, does freedom disappear?"

This objection is understandable. If choice stops being an order from an inner center, it seems to become the mechanical result of processes. But this is too poor an understanding of process. Not every process is mechanical. Conversation is a process, but it can be free. Understanding is a process, but it can open new possibilities. Learning is a process, but through it a person changes what once seemed inevitable.

Freedom does not disappear in such a model. It changes place.

It is located not in a hidden point that is miraculously independent of everything, but in the system's ability to reconfigure its ways of coordination. A person becomes freer not when he separates himself from memory, body, language, and relationships, but when he can work with them differently: notice old reactions, name them, create new supports, change the environment, ask for support, hold another meaning, endure a pause.

Freedom turns out to be not the opposite of the system, but the possibility of its reconfiguration.

A Limitation of the Concept

Now we need to stop and acknowledge a risk.

The word "stabilization" may become too broad.

If we call everything that somehow holds experience stabilization, the term will lose precision. It will begin to explain too much, and therefore will stop explaining anything specific. Any habit, any feeling, any thought, any object, any conversation will become stabilization. This will make the model convenient, but weak.

So boundaries are needed from the start.

In this book, stabilization means not every repetition and not every stability.

Stabilization is maintaining the coherence of experience between changing elements.

If a person simply repeats an action automatically, this is not necessarily stabilization in the strong sense. We need to ask: what does this repetition hold? Does it reduce anxiety? Support an image of oneself? Preserve a connection? Close a question? Prevent the collapse of meaning? If it holds no coherence, it is better not to use the word "stabilization."

If a person keeps a habit, this also is not always stabilization. A habit may be the remainder of an old structure that no longer helps, but only reproduces itself. It may once have stabilized experience, but later become a source of fragmentation.

If a person feels calm, this is not always a sign of good stabilization. Sometimes calm arises from avoidance. Experience seems coherent only because an important part has been excluded from attention.

So stabilization cannot be evaluated only by the feeling of comfort.

It must be considered by its function: does it hold the coherence of experience, and at what cost?

This limitation protects the model from blurring.

There is one more limitation.

Not every stabilization is desirable.

A person can stabilize experience through avoidance. Not think about what matters, not open a letter, not tell the truth, not meet the person who reminds him of pain. In the short term, this really does hold coherence: anxiety decreases, the day continues, the familiar form of self is preserved. But later such stabilization may narrow life and deepen the inner split.

A person can stabilize experience through the role of the suffering one. As long as he remains in this role, the world is understandable: I am the one who was unlucky, who was not understood, who was hurt. Such a story can hold coherence, but at the same time close the possibility of a new action.

A person can stabilize himself through control. Everything must be predictable, people must behave as expected, plans must not change. This gives a feeling of safety, but makes the system fragile: any deviation is perceived as a threat.

So the question is not only whether experience is stabilized.

The question is at what cost it is stabilized.

The model must not turn stabilization into a good. Stabilization is a function. It can support life, and it can hold a person in a form that has already become too narrow.

The First Central Formula

Now the central formula can be spoken not as a slogan, but as the result of reasoning:
the human being is
not a fixed essence,
but a multilevel system for stabilizing experience.

Every word matters in this formula.

"Not a fixed essence" means: we do not begin with the assumption of an inner unchanging center.

"Multilevel" means: experience is held not by one mechanism, but by the interaction of body, memory, attention, language, meaning, habits, relationships, and external structures.

"System" means: we are speaking about relations between processes, not about a set of separate parts.

"Stabilization" means: the human being maintains the coherence of changes, not immobility.

"Experience" means: we are speaking about how experiencing becomes coherent, continuing, and able to be recognized as "mine."

This formula does not cancel personality, responsibility, freedom, or inner life. It only suggests that we should not look for them in a hidden essence. It suggests looking at the processes through which they become possible.

But as soon as this formula appears, a new question arises.

If the human being is not given as a ready-made essence, but is assembled through processes of stabilization, then what is personality?

How does the feeling of constancy arise?

Why can a person say: this is my story?

How do memory, language, and other people take part in the assembly of the one we call ourselves?

This question opens the next chapter.

How Does Personality Arise?

4. How Personality Arises

If Personality Is Not Given

An old friend looks at him a little longer than usual.

They have not seen each other in many years. At first the conversation is easy: news, work, families, cities, random memories, names of people who once seemed central and now require an effort of memory. Then a pause appears. The friend smiles, but in this smile there is not only the joy of meeting. There is surprise.

"You have become different," he says.

The phrase is simple. It can be said almost in passing. But it touches deeper than expected.

Different compared with whom?

With the person he was in his friend's memory? With the person he remembered himself as? With the image preserved in old photographs? With the voice that once spoke more confidently, more sharply, more naively, more lightly? If he has become different, does that mean the former one has disappeared? Or does the former one still participate somewhere in the present one, but no longer govern him?

After such meetings, a person sometimes returns home and takes out old photographs.

Here is a face that is definitely his. Here is the body, the posture, the clothes, the look. Here is the room where he lived. Here are the people he was close to. Here is an event that then seemed enormous, and now has almost no weight. He looks and recognizes himself. But the recognition is strange. This is me, and not quite me.

On the one hand, there is continuity. He can tell what happened before and after the photograph. He can remember the smell of the room, the voice of the person nearby, the anxiety of that year, the hope that later did not come true. On the other hand, the person in the photograph thought differently, feared different things, wanted different things, did not know what is known now.

Sometimes a photograph returns not an event, but a whole way of being. A person sees how he stood beside someone, how he held his shoulders, how he smiled, how he tried to look confident, or, on the contrary, how he hid behind someone else's presence. Memory brings up not only "what happened," but also who he then was for himself: what he was ashamed of, what he was proud of, whose recognition he was waiting for, before whom he wanted to prove his worth.

In this case, the photograph does not simply show the past. It reveals the distance between versions of personality. And this distance does not destroy continuity. It makes it complex. A person understands: to say "that was me," one does not need to coincide with the past completely, but one must be able to connect it with the present.

If personality were a fixed essence, such moments would be hard to explain. Why does an essence change? Why can a person be himself and at the same time not coincide with his former self? Why does an old friend recognize and not recognize him at the same time?

After the third chapter, we are no longer looking for a hidden center as the source of coherence. We are considering the human being as a multilevel system for stabilizing experience. Now the question becomes new:

how does personality arise?

Not as a label.

Not as passport identity.

Not as an unchanging core.

But as a process through which changing experience is still assembled into a story that a person can call his own.

The Feeling of Constancy

In ordinary life, personality seems to be something given.

A person says, "I have always been like this." Or, on the contrary: "I have completely changed." In both phrases, some line is assumed, relative to which one can speak about constancy or change. Even when a person says, "I am no longer the same," he still connects his present self with the one he was before. Otherwise the phrase would lose its meaning.

The feeling of constancy is supported by many things.

The name remains the same. The body changes, but does not disappear instantly. The face ages gradually. The voice keeps its intonations. Close people address the person as one and the same. Documents, photographs, messages, objects, places, and habits create an external line of continuation. Memory connects separate episodes. Language allows them to be told as a story.

But constancy does not mean immobility.

Personality is more like a melody that is preserved through changes of sound than like a stone lying inside a person. A melody may sound faster or slower, in another instrument, with another color, but remain recognizable. Yet if too much is changed, recognition begins to weaken. So it is with a person: he can change and remain himself, but this "himself" requires the holding of connections.

The feeling of constancy appears where changes do not completely break coherence.

A person can go through a move and remain himself if new places gradually become connected with his memory, actions, relationships, and meaning. He can change profession and remain himself if the new role is not simply put on from outside, but included in the story: why it became important, what led to it, what had to be left, what was preserved.

But there are situations where coherence is disturbed more strongly.

After a crisis, a person may say: "I do not understand what I have become." Or: "I cannot return to the old one, but the new one is not here yet." This intermediate state shows that personality does not simply lie inside as a ready-made form. It is held, reconfigured, and sometimes temporarily loses clarity.

Here an important distinction appears.

Personality is not equal to the fact of biological continuation.

The body may continue, but a person may experience the loss of self.

Personality is not equal to a set of character traits.

Traits may remain, but their meaning in a person's life may change.

Personality is not equal to a social role.

A role may disappear, and the person will continue searching for another form of coherence.

Personality is the process of continuous assembly of a coherent story.

This formula does not claim that personality is invented. It says: personality is real as a process, not as an immobile essence.

The idea of a connection between personality and story does not appear out of nowhere. It has long been possible to think about the human being through narrative, memory, biography, role, and self-understanding. But in this book another movement is important. Here, story is not simply the ready-made self telling about itself. It is a way of stabilizing experience. A person becomes himself not because an unchanging hero of the story lies inside him, but because different levels of experience again and again receive a coherent form.

Later this can be stated even more carefully: personality does not exist as a continuous thing that simply passes through time. It is held through a sequence of acts of reconfiguring subjective continuity. In each such act, experience receives connection again: attention is distributed, memory selects significant traces, language names what is happening, meaning holds direction, the body and relationships return to the person a feeling of continuation.

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