

Chapter 13

Space/Time, the Eternal Now, and the Enigma of the “I Am”

Scientific research, the knowledge it uncovers, the method it uses, and the philosophies it inspires all require the concepts of space and time. Post-Einsteinian physics views the whole of nature as a vast sequence of space/time events beginning with the Big Bang of beginning and then unfolding toward an equally surprising future. Biology also views life on this planet unfolding (evolving) through space and time. Each life is seen as a space/time journey from birth to death. Sociology and history also create their wisdom for us within the story of space/time movement. Psychology likewise sees our lives as a development through space and time. The art we call “music” symbolizes our feelings as movement through time. The art of poetry unravels some eventfulness within the movement of time. Even painting, which might be said to stop time, draws space as space is being experienced in some temporal era of history.

With regard to the inward gaze of consciousness upon consciousness itself, the sense of time and space is different from the notion of time that we take for granted in the sciences. “Contemplative inquiry” takes place in only one time – *Now*, and only one space – *Here*. Nevertheless, in our contemplative inquiry we can notice an *event quality*: feelings change, thoughts change, inward experiences come into being and go out of being. In this way, we experience in our inward gaze a quality of flow that we can also call “time.” But this flow of time is flowing through the *Now* where consciousness lives. Contemplation takes place in the *Now* and only in the *Now*. For consciousness, the past is only a memory in the *Now*, and the future is only an anticipation in the *Now*. Consciousness as consciousness knows only one time – *Now*.

We also experience this inner flow of time as taking place within an inner expanse we typically call “space.” But, inner space is different from the external space that science explores. In our contemplative inquiry we experience ourselves as a solitary subject viewing our own subjective experiences. We watch our mind developing its images and symbols, its sentences and paragraphs, its paintings and music. We watch our body having its sensations, desires, and emotions. We watch choices being made and body muscles moving. And we experience our enigmatic “I” becoming aware of itself. We might hypothesize that the observing “self” is not viewing itself, but only a memory of itself from a few milliseconds before. But when we are pursuing the contemplative approach to truth, the time is always *Now*: so there are no “milliseconds before”! Memory happens in the *Now*. Anticipation happens in the *Now*. Consciousness is viewing its memories and anticipations *Now*. So we have the impression that consciousness is viewing itself in the only time there is – *Now*. And by “impression” I mean “experience.” Inward experience is impressions made on the *Now*-existing core of consciousness. I experience a flow of impressions – impressions flowing from memory impressions through the ever-present *Now* to anticipation impressions. These qualities of inward experience violate a commonly accepted notion that there is always a subjective observer that is observing some object. When we are pursuing the scientific approach to truth, we do deal with “objects” being observed by an observing “subject.” And the scientific approach to truth is not illusory. The objective world is encountered as an otherness (object) impacting or presenting itself to me (subject). But when we are pursuing the contemplative approach to truth, the “experience” is different. In the contemplative approach to truth we are the subject that is attending to our own subjectivity. We may attend to that subjectivity truthfully (in that sense, *objectively*), but *there is no scientific-type object involved*.

The very notion of a truth quest in which a subject is observing its own subject provides a shock to the taken-for-granted assumption that is operative in the scientific approach to truth. But every assumption of the mind is just an idea created by the mind. Every assumption is therefore open to doubt, or at least to a limited scope of relevance. Perhaps "limited scope" is the correct consideration in our attempt to differentiate the approach of contemplative inquiry from the approach of scientific research. The mental picture of a subjective conscious viewing its own subjective consciousness is a also picture made up by human minds. This picture has a scope of relevance that is not present within the scientific approach to truth. We have two mental pictures: (1) a subject viewing objects through a passage of time and (2) a subject viewing itself in the ever-present Now. Which of these two pictures applies best to our inner experience of Reality? "Subject viewing subject" is my answer. But this does not nullify the first picture (subject viewing object), which applies best in our experience of Reality as an external environment.

The answer to any question about which rational picture is best for picturing some specific reality can only be found by looking to see what we see in our ongoing experience. I want to strictly maintain this *commitment*: experience precedes thinking about experience. Of course, we are always thinking something before we experience our experiences, so we tend to see our experiences through the screen of what we already think. Nevertheless, contemplative inquiry includes becoming a watcher of our mind and of our mind's products and activities. We can watch the mind using its current screens and we can watch new screens come into being. We can be aware of consciously occupying a sort of gap between the old and the new screens. The "I" of consciousness is like a mysterious gap between the last screen of thought and the next screen of thought. Indeed, it is consciousness that is creating the new mental screen. A new screen of thought does not arise from the old screen. It arises out of a type of nothingness – the abyss of consciousness itself. So on the basis of our experience, is it plausible that the existing "I" can notice itself in the existing Now, not the self of a few milliseconds before, but in the Now – remembering, anticipating, and choosing on the basics of memories and anticipations a next direction for thought and action?

If these reflections create in you a feeling of shock, it is probably because you want your mind to make better sense of all this. For example, this question may arise: which view of space and time is correct, the one we employ in scientific research or the one we employ in contemplative inquiry? If neither are fully true, where are we? And if both are true, how are they related? And if both are true, can we ever create a consistent and meaningful philosophy? Following is my attempt to provide a bit of further clarity on this topic:

Contemplation and Science

From the viewpoint of contemplative inquiry, the scientific view of space and time is only an idea in our minds. It is a very useful idea, it permits all the assembled knowledge of our minds to be organized for our practical use. But "I," the user of this assembled knowledge, do not exist within the past-present-future timeline of scientific research and knowledge. I exist Now and only Now. The infinitesimal point called "present" on the past-present-future timeline of scientific knowledge is not the same as the "Eternal Now" in which I exist. I am calling this Now "Eternal" because it does not move into the past. The subjective "I" endures through all the comings and goings of my experience.

In the practice of science, this "I," is not observable. "I" is not an object; so "I" cannot be an object of scientific knowledge. Many scientists acknowledge the presence of this "I"; they admit that this subjective observer is assumed in the scientific method. These scientists sometimes say, "We have made an agreement not to explore the 'I,' but

to be silent about the 'subject' in our scientific work. Scientific work is about being objective, so we must exclude subjectivity from our scientific work." Other scientists and philosophers of science (those of a positivist leaning) tend to be uncomfortable with the notion of a "subject" that is beyond the scope of scientific knowledge; they hold that this subjective observer is not an "independently real" entity, for such an unobservable entity would disturb the ability of science to build an inclusive view of reality. So these philosophers tend to explain our inner sense of "I" as merely an epiphenomenon of our chemical-electrical-biological mechanics. "Epiphenomenon" means a secondary phenomena in parallel with phenomena that are primary. Such use of the term "epiphenomenon" allows the positivist thinker to say that consciousness is not a primary phenomena, but merely an attendant feature of the primary phenomenon of science.

So, if we want to affirm both scientific knowledge and contemplative wisdom, how do we bring order to this discussion? As I have already pointed out in Part Two, consciousness can be viewed as a force in the cosmos – a force that is as independently real as gravity (that is, not an epiphenomenon). Such a view is contradicted by no experience. And if we do not consider consciousness as a primary reality, we reduce our intimate relations from person-to-person relations to it-to-it relations. Also, social reality is seen as a closed system not interruptible by the freedom of an "I" that opts for uncaused choices. It is true that many, perhaps most, of our actions are *caused* by a complex array of genetic coding, social conditioning, and neurotic patterns to which we are habituated. But if we experience ourselves as making even one act in a manner not caused by any other factor than "I" the conscious chooser, then we are experiencing consciousness as a primary force, not as an epiphenomenon of chemical, electrical, or quantum phenomena.

In order to honor the essential freedom that we interiorly experience, we need to make the contemplative approach to truth one of our lenses for viewing Reality. Through the contemplative lens we can view even the scientific approach to truth. In the contemplative approach to truth, we view the human mind and all its products as finite processes. The scientific approach to truth is one of those finite games that the mind plays. It is a very important game; we have no objective knowledge of the environment without the scientific approach to truth. No amount of contemplative inquiry can arrive at our certainty that dinosaurs walked this earth millions of years ago. We can and must view the vast scope of human scientific understanding as wondrous and in its own way true. In addition, we can hold the view that Reality is more vast and wondrous than either science or contemplation will ever be able to comprehend. As good scientists we know that scientific knowledge is approximate and is always open to further emergence. Good contemplative thinkers can have a similar humility about their explorations of inner subjectivity.

The process of scientific discovery involves the inner creation of theories to be tested. This interior theory-creating process cannot be understood within the scientific approach to truth. Only a contemplative approach to truth can view the process of theory creation in operation. The scientific method is one of the mental contents that the subjective "I" views going on in the mind as the "I" sits in the Eternal Now and watches the amazing mind do its stuff. From the "I" perspective, we can notice how scientific reasoning is true; how scientific thinking is one of the ways that mind works to achieve relative but real objectivity about our temporal surroundings. We can watch ourselves experience sensory inputs, watch ourselves create possible order for these inputs, watch ourselves create tests for these creations of possible order, watch ourselves conduct those tests, watch ourselves conclude whether those guesses were refuted or not, watch our selves guess again if our first guess was refuted or proceed further if our guess was not refuted. Such watching is watching ourselves do the

scientific method. The scientific method is a natural method, one that evolved with the human species. The scientific method reflects a true experience of Reality. Part of my subjective experience is the experience of an encountered objective Mysteriousness that challenges me to think more clearly about what I am up against. We cannot conduct our practical lives without the scientific method. This is true even when people are not clear about the scientific method. In a less sophisticated form, many other species use a trial-and-error mode of learning that is a precursor to our more evolved scientific method of thought. Nothing we say about contemplative inquiry needs to minimize the importance of scientifically developed truth. What we have here is two different approaches to truth. Neither can be reduced into the other. Neither is adequate for all wisdom.

A Further Look at the Meaning of Mind

As a still further clarification of the enigma of knowing anything, it may help to say more about what I am pointing to with the word "mind." "Mind," as I use this word, points to the interior experience by the "I" of the brain's (and nervous system's) functioning. The brain can be scientifically studied. The mind is known only to inward look of contemplative inquiry. Science can study an organism's behaviors and reports, but mind itself is invisible to science. The brain (and the inner mind it supports) comprise a valuable part of our finite biological organism; this brain/mind dynamic has evolved in order to enable us to do what we humans do. Like our feet or hands, the brain/mind is a finite tool for living our temporal lives. When in the typical Buddhist context, we employ the word "mindfulness," we do not mean the functioning of our finite mind, we mean the enigmatic "I" using the finite mind to be attentive to our lives. It is not our brain/mind that is mindful in the Buddhist sense; it is "I" that is mindful. It is consciousness that is mindful. The mind is just a tool for mindfulness. The mind is just a tool for scientific research. The mind is just a tool for contemplative inquiry. Like a screwdriver, hammer, or chisel, the mind is just a tool, a very crucial tool for our conscious living.

Here is another important clarification. What we typically call "artificial intelligence" is not a mechanical augmentation of conscious intelligence; it is a mechanical augmentation of mind. Conscious intelligence cannot be created out of anything but consciousness. So in that sense, artificial intelligence is not intelligence; it is merely the augmentation created by conscious intelligence of some of the machinelike aspects of the biologically evolved tool we call "mind."

The Relation between the Temporal and the Eternal Now

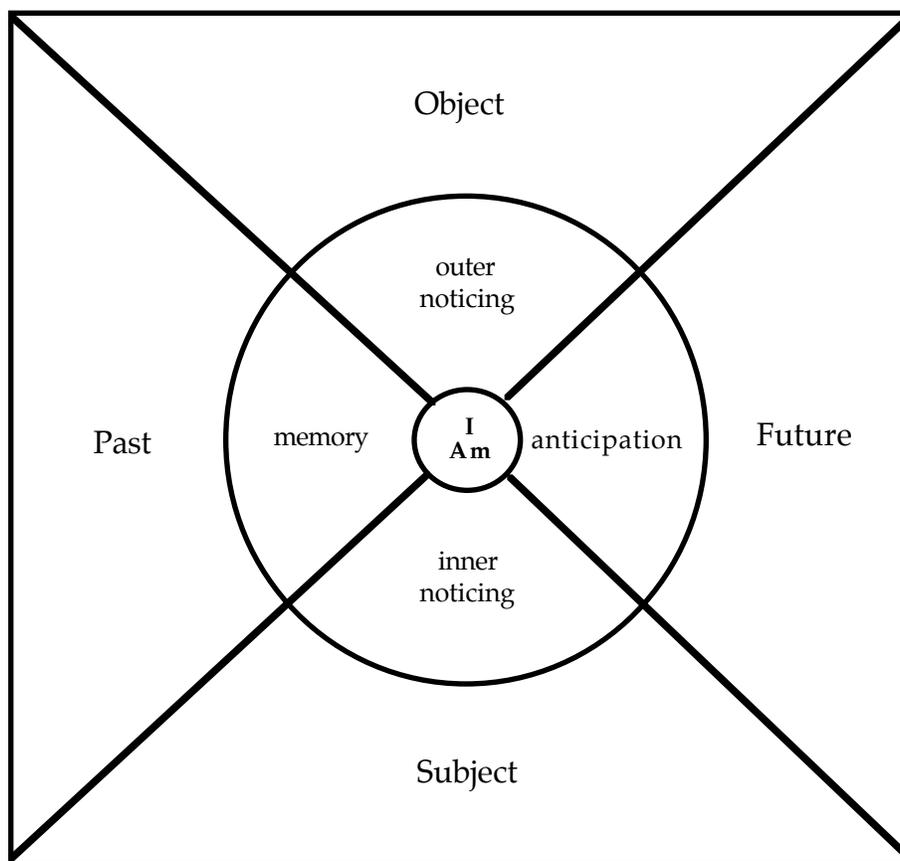
Søren Kierkegaard in the early pages of *Sickness Unto Death* provides us with a way of viewing the essence of the "I" which he calls both "self" and "spirit." "What is the self?" he asks. His question implies a *true* self, and Kierkegaard proceeds to spell out his view of this *true self*. Here is a paraphrase of his assertions:

The self is a relation between the temporal and the Eternal, which relation has the capacity for relationship with itself and in doing so grounds itself transparently in the power that posits it. If this relation is willing to be this temporal/Eternal relation, we experience trust, faith, salvation. But if this relation is unwilling to be this temporal/Eternal relation, we experience despair.

In this his "most perfect" book, Kierkegaard spells out how despair has many forms: it may be hidden in unconsciousness; it may be introspectively contained as a painful inward secret; it may manifest as an escape into sensuality, noble work, or suicide; or it may be defiantly enacted as a self-constructed falsification or as an open rage against our very existence. When we are despairing, it is because we cannot get

away from being this temporal/Eternal relation that we essentially are. So our attempts to get away are experienced as a desperate hopelessness that has no hope of ever realizing the defeat of a Reality that never goes away. Yet, according to Kierkegaard, a different kind of hopefulness is near at hand, for all that is required of us is to surrender to being the temporal/Eternal relation that we profoundly and inescapably are. Kierkegaard calls this “the turn to faith,” the option of trusting Reality rather than despairing over it. It turns out that experiencing our despair opens the door to this different type of hopefulness.

What is interesting to me about Kierkegaard’s basic formula for the self is that it preserves the importance of our temporal experience while also asserting the importance of our Eternal experience. That emphasis is deeply Jewish and deeply Christian, according to the best expressions of these traditions. The best of Islam also supports this perspective. The best of these three traditions view the human as a temporal creature with an Eternal relation. Without ceasing to be a finite creature, humans have an I-Thou intimacy with the Eternal Reality. Our creaturely, bodily, blood and bone being is not negated by realizing our true self. Following is a diagram that attempts to put temporal and Eternal together into one picture.



Notice that I have constructed this chart using a double pair: (1) past and future, and (2) subject and object. I have placed “past” in the west (left) with the setting sun. I have placed “future” in the east (right) with the rising sun. I have placed “subject” in the south (below) symbolizing inward depth. And I have placed “object” in the north (above) symbolizing the Earth, the universe, the cosmos, as well as other persons, animals, plants, fungi, microbes, and inanimate things. These four arenas – past and future, self and other – symbolize **temporality**. The “I Am” in the inner circle symbolizes our experience of that *third term* – the true self or “I Am” living in the **Eternal Now**. The four categories in the larger circle symbolize the relations of the “I

Am" to the four categories of temporality. Memory relates us to the past. Anticipation relates us to the future. Outer noticing relates us to the object. Inner noticing relates us to the subject. The "I Am" is related to temporality in these four ways. Without temporality there is no "I Am," for the "I Am" is a relation with temporality. Without Eternality there is no "I Am," for the "I Am" is a relation with Eternality.

Using Kierkegaard's formulation of the "I Am" as a *third term* existing between the temporal and the Eternal, we can talk about the "I Am" relating to the Eternal and to the temporal. The "I am" is not the Eternal, but "I Am" participates in the Eternal as a life lived in the Eternal Now. And the "I Am" relates to temporality through memory and anticipation and through inner and outer noticing. Memory and anticipation are direct experiences of the "I Am" in the Eternal Now. Past and the future are abstract mental constructions. The infinitesimal point between past and future that we call "the present," is likewise an abstract mental construction. The Eternal Now is not the same as this abstract point of "present" between past and future. When we speak of an infinitesimal point between past and future, we are speaking of an idea in our minds rather than of a factor of our existence. Our existence is not a mere object in the temporal world, but a temporal-Eternal relation that manifests in objective ways in the temporal world and is a relation with the Eternal. The "I am" not the Eternal or a temporal object. The "I Am" is third term capable of relating to itself and in doing so grounding itself in the power that is positing it – namely the Eternal.

Scientific thought helps us to be relatively objective about the past and future, but what such objectivity ultimately means is being objective and orderly about our personal memories of experiences of the "it" or object aspects of our living. We also have a socially common memory, but to talk about common memories we need to develop the concept of commonality which I have earlier spoken about as the We-approach to truth. I will not further develop that topic that now. Whether personal or social, our models of the past are but creations of human minds, not to be confused with the full mystery of our origins. And our models of the future are also creations of human minds that have been built by mental effort from our models of the past and our hopes for continuation or expectations of change in the future. The "future" that will actually "occur" within our living Now will be a surprise, unless we have blinded ourselves to seeing nothing except what we expect. To those who are open to Reality, the future is always a surprise that happens as we are expecting something else. Only if we expect to be surprised are we open to Reality.

Similarly, inner noticing and outer noticing are experiences of the "I Am" in the Eternal Now. Inner noticing means paying attention to the thoughts of our minds; to our body's sensations, urges, desires, and emotions; and to our capacities for choice and muscle movement. Outer noticing involves paying attention to the inputs of our senses and to the naming, ordering, and interpretation of those inputs by the image-using and symbol-using mind. While both inward and outward noticings are direct experiences of the "I Am," the more abstract concepts of "subject" and "object" are creations of the temporal mind. Our "self," as we commonly conceive of it, is a rational model, made up from some portion of our inner noticings. Being a model of the mind, our "self" is an approximation and an outright substitute for the living "I Am" in the Eternal Now. Similarly, the objects in our outward vision of the world are made up from some portion of our outer noticing; and being models of the mind, they are fragmentary, approximate, useful for some things, but over time destined to be misleading and in need of replacement. The "I Am," in order to operate a practical life, must value and use these approximate objectifications and must therefore trust them to some extent, but the "I Am" in order to be true to its own authenticity must trust its own noticing more than any of these mind-constructed objectifications. We need to remain somewhat or very much suspicious of all the objects created by the mind and all the

patterning of those objects and all the interpretations of those objects that the mind has crafted.

To summarize, Kierkegaard defined the "I Am" as a *relation* rather than a *substance*. He clarifies that the "I Am" is a relation between the temporal and the Eternal. The "I Am" is not the temporal, and it is not the Eternal. "I Am" is a "third term." "I Am" is the relation itself, a relation that does not constitute itself but is constituted by the *power* that posits this relation. The Eternal "posits" the temporal and posits the "I Am" as a relation between temporal and Eternal. This relation which is the "I Am" possesses a strange capacity to relate to itself. It can view itself, know itself, describe itself, enact itself. Unlike a normal set of eyes, the eyes of the "I Am" can see the "I Am." And this "I Am," in relating to its own "I Am," grounds itself transparently in the *power* that posits the "I Am." The "I Am," using the mind, can write books about the qualities and journeys of the "I Am." These books can be more or less accurate, and in every case incomplete. I claim no more for this book.

Kierkegaard's reflections are a different way of talking about these matters than the Hindu way of talking that was developed in the Upanishads. In this antiquity of India, we see the concept of "Atman" which refers to a "self" that is deeper than the ordinary self images created by human minds. "Atman" is the realized "I." The Hindu concept of "Brahman" refers to the Mysterious Overallness of Reality (i.e. the Final THAT.) With these definitions in mind, we can begin to grasp the meaning of the phrase: "THAT I AM." This is not a metaphysical statement, but a cryptic pointer to a profound experience. Here is my way of focusing on this experience: I notice that my "Grand I" is just as mysterious as the entire cosmos or Wholeness of Reality. Equally mysterious is the capacity of the "I" to notice the "I" and to notice the "THAT." These two noticings and what they notice are parts of one Reality – "THAT I AM."

Nevertheless, I am not at ease with any implication that the "I Am" is simply a drop in the ocean of the "Whole." And I am especially uncomfortable with assuming that I can identify my Great Self with the whole. I prefer Kierkegaard's way of poeticizing this experience. I see my "I Am" essence as in intimate relation with the Whole rather than as an absorption into the Whole. I am also not at ease with identifying with the Whole, rather than seeing my "I AM" as a manifestation of the Whole.

In Kierkegaard's view the "I Am" is not the Whole. Nor is the "I Am" simply a part of the temporal world. The "I Am" is a third term, a relation with temporality and with Eternity, a relation that is neither the temporal nor the Eternal. The "I Am" is simultaneously related to temporality and to Eternity. And this "I Am" is not a synthesis of the temporal and the Eternal, but a "third term" capable of being itself or not being itself. Kierkegaard sets up this profound either-or option: a choice between (1) the state of openness and trust or (2) the state of closedness and despair.

This third term (the "I Am") is posited not by itself but by the Eternal, which means that the "I Am" is not a creation of itself but an essential structure of the cosmos posited by the Eternal. Hence our dialogue with the Eternal is inescapable, necessary, ongoing, for as long as the Eternal sustains this relation with the Eternal that I am calling the "I Am." So in the Kierkegaardian view of the "I Am," we live in the Eternal Now as an unavoidable dialogue with the Eternal. The All-powerful Eternal meets us through every temporal coming into being, enduring of being, and going out of being. The Eternal posits the self ("I Am") along with the companion positing of the entire temporal world. The true self is the "place" where relations between temporal and the Eternal manifest.

So, does this dialogue with the Eternal continue after our body goes out of being? This we cannot know, but if it does the Kierkegaardian view requires that a new body be given in which and through which the relationship with the Eternal can be pursued. This is why "resurrection of the body" rather than "immortality of soul" appears in

New Testament literature. Both immortality and resurrection are metaphors for the Eternal relatedness that we can sense in our experience of the "I Am." The immortality of the soul is a metaphor that implies a diminution of temporality. The resurrection of the body is a metaphor that implies an affirmation of temporality as an essential part of any life whatsoever, including any possible life beyond death.

Even if there is not an "I Am" after the body's demise, it is in our best interest to willingly be this "I Am" in this Eternal Now. Herein is our happiness, our bliss, our rest, our peace, our joy, our authentic life. The other alternative is to fight Reality, a fight that we cannot win, a hope for a life that can never happen, a hopelessness, a suffering appropriately named "despair." So we have a deep interest in discovering fully and identifying fully with this enigmatic "I Am." Doing so is our liberation from the suffering of despair. Doing so is "finding our bliss" as so many teachers advise. Doing so is "being ourselves" as we sometimes say we want to do.

So how do we talk further about this "I Am"? Does the "I Am" have various qualities or aspects that we can talk about? Can we "view" these aspects and talk about them? Yes, but it also remains true that the "I Am" is mysterious, quite beyond the reach of rational imagery or symbols. Many Buddhists typically refer to the "I Am" as being "no self." By this they mean that everything we have thought to be our "self" is not the "Self" of enlightenment. The experience of "no self" means experiencing a disidentification with all our self images and personality habits: all these common understandings of "self" cease to be identified as "I." Thereby, the true "I" becomes a great void, a great emptiness, a great spaciousness in which nothing "self-like" exists. Some Buddhists go on to admit that this great spaciousness is the "True Self," but they remain determined to point out that this "True Self" is not the "self" we commonly talk about.

So what sort of poetry can we use to describe this unfathomable actuality of the "True Self"? And who is doing the describing? Obviously it will be "I Am" attempting to describe the "I Am." The describer is seeing and describing the describer. Though I have not experienced your "I Am" experiences, only my own, I am assuming that we humans are alike at this profound depth. I am assuming that who "I Am" you also "Are." This is not true on the temporal level; temporally our bodies are unique. And our personalities are unique – even though we may group personalities into types. And our cultures are also unique, temporal creations. But on the level of our Eternal relatedness, human is human. However mind-blowing this may be to much of our common thinking, all that has been said in this chapter implies the underlying presence of an essential/profound human within every human. "Profound humanness" points to a universal life that can shine through all the temporal variety that qualifies human beings. If we mean something essential with the word "Spirit" or "Holy Spirit," then every human is the same when we are dealing with what Spirit fullness means. Finally, let us caution ourselves to keep aware of the difference between our culture's ideals and the profound/essential human that transcends all cultures. Otherwise our talk of an essential or profound human turns into a tyranny of our culture over the other cultures of the world.

In the following chapter I will describe nine aspects of the "I Am." Other models are possible, perhaps better ones; nevertheless, I discern in my own being these nine aspects of the "I Am." And I suggesting that "You Are," beneath all your unique temporality, these same nine aspects of the "I Am."