

UNITED WISDOM

Actual and Ideal Selves: When a Guide Becomes a Verdict

The Person and the Inner World

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

I07 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Actual and Ideal Selves: When a Guide Becomes a Verdict

Epigraph

> *“virtue is a kind of mean”*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.6, translated by W. D. Ross, MIT Internet Classics Archive. An exact clause, retaining the lowercase fragment rather than presenting a complete sentence. In context, a mean relative to the person differs from an arithmetic midpoint. The Russian version is this article's own translation.

What this article is about

An image of who we want to become can help us choose a next step. It can also become a condition: until I match that image completely, I am unacceptable. The difference is especially visible when an expectation sounds admirable. We want to be knowledgeable, attentive, or brave; quietly, a requirement never to hesitate, tire, or make mistakes gets added. A guide then stops pointing a direction and starts issuing a general verdict. E. Tory Higgins's self-discrepancy theory distinguishes representations of actual, ideal, and ought selves, along with the standpoint from which they are represented. Aristotle examines an appropriate measure; James considers selected pretensions; Kant offers a separate moral foundation for dignity. These are not components of one measurement system. We will consider how to describe a discrepancy, examine a requirement's origin, and retain room for growth without assigning every unfinished attempt the task of proving the whole person unacceptable.

I. A Tour and an Unexpected Question

In an invented scene, Olga leads her first public tour of a small exhibition. She prepares a route, checks labels, and selects works for detailed discussion. A visitor asks about the technique of a painting outside her prepared route. Olga does not know and says she will check. The meeting continues, but afterward she concludes, “A real guide never hesitates. Because I hesitated, I cannot explain anything.” The statement combines an event, an image of a professional, and a broad conclusion about her ability. The question itself has not established the connections between them.

Another description is available: prepared information was explained, one answer was unknown, and a promise to check remains outstanding. This does not prove that the tour was flawless. The question might have exposed an important gap; other passages might also have

confused visitors. Further information is needed. Yet the image of someone who answers everything immediately also needs examination. Who set that condition? Did it apply to this meeting? What if a confident answer is inaccurate? The absence of pauses cannot establish the quality of an entire tour. A performance criterion needs a purpose as well as an observable feature.

We distinguish a direction from a condition of acceptability. “I want to know more about these techniques” identifies learning. “Until I know everything, people cannot accept me” adds validation of the whole person. The first can be translated into information, actions, and checking. The second demands indefinite completeness before acknowledging the value of a present attempt. No study of the fictional Olga was conducted. The scene examines a transition that someone can consider in their own wording without declaring it the universal structure of every ideal. A worthwhile aspiration need not always carry that extra condition.

II. The Actual Self Is a Representation Too

In Higgins's article, actual self concerns a representation of attributes someone believes a person possesses, from a specified standpoint. This boundary matters: the term does not provide direct access to the entire factual person. Olga might describe herself as unable to explain; someone else might see her as prepared but inexperienced with open questions. Both descriptions need grounds. Distinguishing representations permits their relationships to be studied without automatically establishing which is true. The everyday expression “real self” therefore requires qualification here: it means a representation of present attributes, not a final statement about the person.

In the selected definitions, ideal self concerns hoped-for or desired attributes. Ought self concerns represented obligations and requirements. Olga's wish to explain vividly can be an ideal guide. Checking facts before asserting them might be experienced as something she ought to do. “I must know every answer,” however, can describe a perceived requirement that has not been justified. The psychological description “I believe I ought to” does not itself establish a moral or occupational obligation. Its presence and its validity are different questions.

Specific content helps with every label. Which present attributes are represented: choosing a route, knowing five works, or answering a follow-up? Which desired quality is named: clarity, broader knowledge, or open discussion? What requirement concerns which action? Without such content, actual and ideal Olga become two total figures whose discrepancy cannot be specified. Naming a skill leaves room for checking and change. It can also expose an overly broad account of the present self. Not knowing one technique does not establish the absence of every guiding skill. A representation can be questioned without assuming its opposite must be completely true.

III. Whose Standpoint Is Represented?

Higgins distinguishes one's own standpoint from a represented standpoint of a significant other. Combined with actual, ideal, and ought domains, this yields six possible forms of representation. The distinction is not an instruction to fill all six boxes about oneself. The author explicitly does not expect everyone to possess all guides. For Olga, a simpler question helps: “Do I want this attribute, or do I believe someone else expects it?” She can then ask whether the expectation concerns a wish, an obligation, or a description of what she already possesses.

A represented standpoint is not a recording of another person's thoughts. Olga may believe an experienced colleague expects immediate answers to everything. Until checked, that remains her representation of his expectation. Perhaps he values accuracy and acknowledgment of uncertainty more; perhaps he does expect greater preparation on this topic. Both possibilities need conversation or other sound grounds. The distinction respects a relationship's significance without turning an imagined assessment into an already received requirement. It does not automatically make the expectation false; it clarifies its status in the argument.

Her own wish can have a complicated origin too. She may admire a particular guide, adopt a former teacher's rule, or choose clearer explanation independently. Origin alone cannot establish relevance. What matters is whether she accepts the content now and what task it serves. Even a verified expectation from a colleague is not necessarily the only valid measure. We need to know who sets this tour's conditions, what visitors were promised, and what qualities the action requires. “Whose voice?” and “Is the requirement justified?” remain different questions. Separating them preserves relationships while leaving room to examine each represented standard.

IV. A Guide Points to a Next Step

A guide becomes a growth direction when it can be translated into action. “Know the exhibition better” is broad. “Check the techniques of two works, find reliable descriptions, and plan how to explain their difference” identifies work. It can be partly completed, examined, and continued without first becoming an ideal guide in every respect. Today one explanation can be more accurate while other questions remain. Incompleteness does not make the step meaningless. A direction can acknowledge improvement without promising a final state in which no question will ever be unknown.

In James's historical argument, people select possible aspects of themselves as particularly significant. Failure in a selected domain matters differently from ignorance in a domain on which nothing has been staked. This raises a question about why immediate resourcefulness became Olga's central mark of the profession. Perhaps she values lively conversation and

wants to develop it. Lively conversation also involves hearing a question, distinguishing knowledge from uncertainty, and avoiding invention in place of an answer. Refining the chosen quality can change an action without abandoning the value of conversation itself.

Growth also needs checking conditions. If clearer explanation is the aim, Olga might ask a listener what they understood or compare two versions of her explanation. These are proposed actions, not a validated psychological procedure. Their object is limited: the comprehensibility of a particular message. Feedback can indicate a further correction without establishing her whole worth. Within that boundary, an unsuccessful attempt can provide information for continuation. Without it, even a useful correction may sound like proof of general inadequacy. The difference concerns what the check is being asked to establish, rather than a demand to feel calm about every criticism.

V. When Direction Becomes a Condition

A condition of acceptability can appear in a short addition: “otherwise I am nobody,” “only then can I be respected,” or “until then, nothing I have done counts.” These are illustrative formulations, not diagnostic signs. Their logical feature is attaching a whole-person judgment to achieving one attribute. If Olga cannot answer immediately, all her prepared information disappears from the assessment. A gap can be real while its scale ceases to be discussed. Instead of showing what to learn, the guide decides whether the present person can be acknowledged at all.

A prohibition on intermediate achievement may follow. Olga wants knowledge of art, yet each new question makes improvement “insufficient.” What does sufficient mean for this meeting, and is there a completion condition for a stage? Continuing to learn indefinitely can be interesting. The condition considered here creates another problem: until every possible question is known, it refuses to acknowledge demonstrated limited competence. Growth and existing ability then become incompatible by definition. Every remainder of ignorance cancels all knowledge. The issue is the purpose of the standard, not the mere fact that there is more to learn.

Higgins's theory helps distinguish the content of guides and self-representations. It does not establish an individual cause of feeling from these phrases or classify someone's condition by a type of discrepancy. The selected discussion retains open questions about action, attainability, and life domains. Here the added condition is examined as an argument. What is the outcome supposed to validate? If it is all entitlement to respectful treatment, that moral topic should be distinguished from learning. If it is a particular skill, specific evidence is needed. This precision promises no immediate relief. It gives the inquiry a more definite object without denying that the feeling may remain.

VI. A Mean Is Not an Arithmetic Average

In book II, Aristotle distinguishes an arithmetic midpoint from a mean relative to the person. Between two and ten, six is equidistant: each distance is four. The calculation answers a precise numerical question, not which measure suits an action. If our invented programme allocates five minutes to an explanation, six does not become suitable merely because it lies between two and ten. This is an editorial illustration of different questions, not Aristotle's rule for exhibition scheduling. The calculation is correct while its application still needs grounds.

Aristotle's moral argument concerns circumstances, choice, appropriate time, object, and manner. A suitable measure is not produced by averaging arbitrary wishes. Thus “ideal Olga knows everything, actual Olga knows nothing; choose halfway” does not follow from the epigraph. Her present representation may be inaccurate. Knowledge of a technique cannot be acquired by dividing a total self-image. Without naming the task, the supposed mean lacks a purpose. An accurate answer about a material requires checking; reducing the degree of inaccuracy does not substitute for correct information. Mathematical simplicity cannot settle the content of the action.

The neighbouring passages read here explicitly limit generalization: not every action admits a right mean. Aristotle does not propose finding a moderate amount of every wrong act. Nor can his position establish that a compromise between requirements is always right or useful. The connection with an ideal concerns attention to the particular case and the grounds of a measure. Attainability and permissibility remain separate. A narrower promise may be more honest than an unattainable one, but “narrower” does not certify moral quality. We still need to consider what is promised, to whom, and how it will be pursued.

VII. The Desired and the Required Can Diverge

Olga wants to answer easily and without pauses. She also considers it an obligation not to present unchecked information as established. A visitor's question reveals the difference. A quick guess might preserve fluent appearance while compromising accuracy. Acknowledging uncertainty and checking later may fail to match instant resourcefulness while meeting another condition. This invented case does not claim that ideal and ought guides always conflict. It shows why their content should be named before every discrepancy becomes one general failure. Different requirements can concern different features of the same moment.

Higgins's ought refers to represented obligations rather than a finally justified moral duty. If Olga perceives “never say you do not know” as an obligation, that perception needs examination. What supports it? What does the organizer expect, and what was promised to the visitor? Kant's argument about dignity and moral legislation belongs to another level. It does

not turn every internal “must” into a law or validate a requirement through the intensity of its feeling. The sources separate questions rather than giving one scale several different names.

Some genuine obligations constrain wishes. If the task requires marking the limits of knowledge, wanting to appear omniscient does not remove the condition. Yet the rule should remain within its task: it concerns accurate communication rather than perpetual acceptability. Someone can admit and correct an inaccurate answer without first matching every ideal. The distinction retains the seriousness of a requirement without making it a complete portrait. Kantian dignity is considered here as a separate moral foundation for treatment, not a promise of a pleasant feeling after choosing duty. Confidence, obligation, and the relationship to a person need not change simultaneously.

VIII. Content Matters More than an Attractive Label

“Confident,” “knowledgeable,” and “good” can conceal different tasks. Olga might call someone confident if they never stumble; another definition might involve acknowledging uncertainty and continuing the conversation. Until content is named, identical words do not establish identical guides. In the selected methodological passages, Higgins uses individually supplied attributes rather than one predetermined universal list. This is a feature of a research instrument in his programme, not permission to diagnose oneself using a few words. The source's method has a particular purpose and context.

Aristotle's selected transition to particular cases also emphasizes specificity. His moral argument and individually supplied content in psychological research are not the same procedure. Their connection nevertheless encourages caution with general labels. For the tour, “knowledgeable” could become “checked the selected works' labels” or “can explain two materials.” The condition then identifies an action and information. It may still be excessive or insufficient, but it can be discussed. “A good guide,” without content, does not tell us what has been done or remains. It can express admiration without functioning as a working criterion.

Time matters as well. Learning material before the next meeting differs from already possessing it at the first. Information about an ability belongs to a particular moment. If learning is part of the work, present ignorance cannot automatically count as refusing to learn. Means, time, and help need consideration. This boundary does not excuse a promise made without preparation; it makes the promise specific. What will be checked, when, and how? Someone can decline a sweeping promise without abandoning growth. Specific content distinguishes a stage's limits from rejection of the direction itself.

IX. Several Roles Need Not Produce One Figure

A person can have different guides for different actions. Olga wants to lead clearly, investigate sources carefully, and talk freely with friends. These qualities need not operate identically in every episode. Informal discussion allows a question or a shared guess; public explanation requires distinguishing a guess from established information. Changing manner is not necessarily inconsistency with oneself. It can follow from the subject and the promise. If all requirements merge into a figure who is always rigorous and always spontaneous, the guide itself may contain uncertainty. Naming the context helps us see what each quality means there.

Higgins's distinction between standpoints and kinds of guides permits represented requirements to remain plural. James's selected aspects of self also leave a question about which domains matter particularly. This comparison establishes neither universal inner conflict nor an equal number of roles for everyone. It allows us to ask whether a condition for one action has been transferred to all others. Carefully checking information during a tour may be appropriate. Speaking only after complete checking in a friendly discussion of possibilities has different consequences and requires separate justification.

When two requirements concern the same action, their content can be discussed without declaring actual Olga bad and ideal Olga good. Clarity and accuracy might coexist through a simple statement of what remains unknown. This is a possible editorial move in the invented scene, not established treatment for psychological conflict. Sometimes requirements cannot be combined under present conditions. Choice, a revised promise, or help may be needed. Incompatibility does not have to establish the person's unacceptability. The conditions can first be examined, and the selected solution's boundary stated honestly. A limited decision remains a decision rather than a final self-portrait.

X. Making a Guide Discussable Again

A discussable guide allows questions about its purpose. Olga can retain the wish to become more knowledgeable while identifying the knowledge her present work concerns. She can check an imagined expectation and learn what her colleague actually considers necessary. She can reconsider always answering instantly if that promise encourages inaccuracy. None of these steps requires declaring the old ideal wholly meaningless. Its use changes: from a final personal measure to a direction for action that can be explained and examined. Something valued can remain valuable while its present demand becomes more precise.

This does not imply that every role is already available. A genuine requirement may remain while a present skill falls short. Learning, a restricted role, or postponing the task until prepared may be needed. A precise boundary permits “I cannot do this yet” without adding “I cannot do anything.” Wanting a goal also does not prove attainability by every deadline. Higgins's

selected discussion leaves attainability and relations to action open. This supports research caution rather than a universal promise that a moderate ideal is beneficial. The content and conditions still matter.

A guide loses its role as a verdict when represented attributes, desired direction, perceived requirements, and moral treatment can be distinguished. This is a proposed reasoning approach, not an established outcome for every reader. Feelings after failure may persist even when the distinctions are clear. Someone can continue a specific inquiry, ask for help, or leave a question open. Incomplete self-knowledge does not require selecting the harshest answer. Between a present description and a possible future lie actions, relationships, and conditions still to be understood. An ideal can participate in that movement without cancelling the person at each intermediate point.

XI. How Self-Representations Are Studied

Higgins discusses theory alongside research evidence rather than everyday examples alone. In the selected methods, participants supply attributes individually, and researchers examine relationships among descriptions. This considers qualities actually named by a person, but individualized content guarantees neither accuracy nor coverage of the entire personality. A self-descriptive word is material for studying a representation, not independent certification of an attribute. Olga's description and factual checking of a painting therefore remain different sources. One tells us how she describes herself; the other concerns information about a specific topic. The distinction matters even if both statements happen to be accurate.

Selected experimental procedures use differing conditions for engaging representations, including guided imagery and prepared tasks; random assignment is described in the passage read. This differs from merely observing two features together: researchers introduce a condition difference to examine its relation to responses. An experiment still has particular definitions, tasks, and limits. It does not authorize assigning Olga's every feeling one cause, especially since she is fictional rather than a participant. An individual conclusion would require further information and another object of inquiry. Matching the words “ideal” and “disappointment” supplies no such evidence by itself.

The general discussion describes initial support and remaining questions. A complete conceptual diagram does not mean research on every possible case is finished. This article uses definitions and selected grounds rather than reproducing all primary findings. Two interests in the source can remain distinct: examining how a researcher constructs and tests an account, and using a distinction for an everyday question. The second does not become an experiment by association with the first. The practice below contains no original questionnaire, scoring criteria, or rules for classifying a condition. Its purpose is limited to naming one attribute, an expectation, and a possible action, while leaving unknown information unknown.

What this means in practice

If you would like to consider a manageable case, choose one attribute you want to develop. Describe it through an action: instead of just “be knowledgeable,” try “explain a particular question using checked information.” Name what you currently can do and the facts supporting that description. Where information is insufficient, identify the unknown. Do not invent a complete picture of either success or inability.

Separately describe the desired direction and the requirement you experience as obligatory. They may not differ, or one may not apply. You need not create every representation described by the theory. If a requirement seems to come from someone else, mark whether that person confirmed it or it remains your representation. A question for clarification can replace guessing an answer.

Finally ask what the next outcome should establish: development of an attribute or acceptability of your entire person? For the first, identify a checkable step and its completion condition. The second requires different grounds and is not automatically contained in that step's quality. If two requirements conflict, name their objects separately without immediately seeking a perfect compromise.

This optional practice was devised for the article. It does not reproduce Higgins's instrument, give scores, or establish a person's condition. Its efficacy in changing feelings has not been studied here. You can discuss one question with a suitable person, stop at an unknown, or leave the exercise aside. The purpose is to make a guide's content available for examination rather than prove a correct relationship to yourself.

Key quotation

> *“Not everyone is expected to possess all of the self-guides”*

E. Tory Higgins, *Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect*, 1987, printed page 321, PDF page 3. Exact opening clause before an explanatory dash; line breaks joined. The distinctions are not a compulsory personal questionnaire. The Russian version is this article's own translation.

Connections between traditions

1. A represented wish — a selected aspiration. Higgins's definitions on pages 320–321 distinguish actual and ideal representations; James, chapter X, pages 310–311, considers selected pretensions. The connection names a task expectation before examining discrepancy. Actual self is a representation, not the whole factual person; James's fraction does not calculate Higgins's discrepancy.

2. Whose standpoint — whom a measure suits. Higgins, page 321, distinguishes one's own and represented other standpoint; Aristotle, II.6, distinguishes an arithmetic midpoint from a mean relative to the person. The connection separates an expectation's origin from its relevance to a case. Ancient ethical measure validates neither every personal wish nor a measured psychological factor.

3. Desired and required — a foundation of dignity. Higgins, pages 320–321, describes hopes and represented obligations; Kant's section II distinguishes dignity from relative value. The connection avoids conditioning moral treatment on achieving each represented guide. Higgins's ought certifies no moral duty, while Kantian dignity is not an empirical model of emotion.

4. Individual content — a particular case. Higgins's selected methods use individually supplied attributes; Aristotle's transition in II.7 emphasizes particulars. The connection cautions against a general label without a named action and expected attribute. Instrument development and practical moral reasoning are not identical, and the article copies no questionnaire or scoring procedure.

5. Attainability — justification of action. Higgins's discussion on pages 335–336 leaves questions about attainability and action open; Aristotle's II.6 considers circumstances and actions that have no right mean. The connection asks how a direction becomes an act and whether that act is permissible. A moderate goal is not established treatment for distress; feasibility does not establish moral rightness.

6. Several guides — selected domains. Higgins, pages 321–322, distinguishes possible requirements without attributing all guides to everyone; James, page 310, describes particularly valued aspects of self. The connection distinguishes one unfinished aspiration from demanding perfection in every role. This is editorial reasoning, not proof of identical conflict in everyone or a promise that naming requirements changes feelings.

Primary sources

1. E. Tory Higgins. *Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect*, *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 1987, 319–340. Primary PDF hosted by the author's Columbia department; the title-page affiliation is NYU in 1987. Reading covered title and abstract, continuous selected definitions on pages 320–322, selected methods and experimental passages, a selected discussion of conflicting guides, and continuous general discussion on pages 335–337. The whole article, all studies, and cited treatment literature were not read. The key quotation is an identified exact clause on page 321, with an own Russian translation. Theory and reported evidence are not used for personal diagnosis or efficacy promises; the instrument and scoring system are not reproduced.

2. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, book II, translated by W. D. Ross, MIT Internet Classics Archive. The header and a continuous selected passage covering the end of II.4, II.5–6, and the opening of II.7 were read, including limits on the mean. A print date for the translation is not established by this page; no Greek collation was made. The epigraph is an exact II.6 clause with an own Russian translation. Virtue theory is not presented as psychological research or universal advice to average requirements.

3. William James. *The Principles of Psychology*, volume I, chapter X, Henry Holt, 1890, original English in the York transcription. Genuine reading from this working session is reused, principally pages 310–312 on selected selves and pretensions. The whole book was not read. No additional direct James quotation is used, and his formula is not transferred into measuring Higgins's theory.

4. Immanuel Kant. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Thomas Kingsmill Abbott's English translation in Project Gutenberg 5682. Selected primary reading of section II from this same session is explicitly reused, concerning ends, dignity, and autonomy. The whole work and German original were not read. A bounded moral paraphrase is used; psychological ought-self is not identified with a demonstrated Kantian duty.

Tags

self-image, ideal self, actual self, self-guide, growth, pretensions, E. Tory Higgins, self-discrepancy, desired attributes, ought self, standpoint, others’ expectations, own expectations, Aristotle, mean, particular case, William James, Immanuel Kant, dignity, learning, skill, uncertainty, feedback, professional role, attainability, limits of generalization, criterion, self-knowledge, relationship to oneself, optional practice

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.