

UNITED WISDOM

Who Am I When the Familiar Role Is No Longer Needed

Human Nature and Inner World

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Who Am I When the Familiar Role Is No Longer Needed

> *“Who is it that can tell me who I am?”*
>
> *William Shakespeare, King Lear, Act I, Scene 4, spoken by Lear. Text from the Project Gutenberg #100 edition.*

What this article is about

A hypothetical example: in the third month of retirement, a former head of department notices that every morning they open a work mailbox that no longer exists. It is not necessarily longing for the job: the hand reaches for the place where the day used to begin, where it was clear who to be. The role has ended — and it has become visible how much rested on it.

This article is not about the experience of loss but about what the self-image stood on before it: one role or several, merging with the role or performing it. We draw on Shakespeare, Montaigne, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, the Bhagavad Gita, Laozi, Zhuangzi and the Analects, the Letter to the Philippians and the Book of Job, and on studies of retirement from work and from professional sport and a study of how the complexity of the self-image is measured. The data concern only retirement and sport; we draw no conclusions about other roles. The practical steps at the end are the authors' argument, not a tested method.

I. The role a self-image stands on

A self-image can rest on roles in different ways; the question of this article is not whether it rests on them, but how.

"I am a doctor", "I am a coach", "I am head of the department": the description of the role and the description of oneself can coincide, and in everyday life this goes unnoticed. The difference shows when the role departs: in retirement, after sport, after leaving office. Then a structure appears that was invisible before. Did the self-image rest on one role or on several? Did the person perform the role or become it?

These two ways of relating to a role deserve precise names. To perform a role is to do the work fully, meeting its demands, while remembering that one is not reducible to it. To be the role is when the recognition given to the position is felt as recognition of oneself, and the successes of the work become the main measure of one's own worth. From the outside the two can look the same: both people work well. The difference shows on the day the role ends.

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It is important to say at once what is not here. The experience of transition, grief over a lost position, support in loss are the subject of neighbouring articles in the series on transitions after a loss of status and on the end of the parental role. Here the subject is structure: what the self-image stood on and how this can be seen in advance. And one more boundary: the data we rely on concern retirement from work and leaving professional sport. What happens to the self-image when, for instance, the parental role or a marriage ends, the open studies we read did not examine, and we will not carry conclusions about retirement over to those cases.

The traditions we turn to differ in how to treat a role: some advise separating oneself from it, others performing it as a duty, still others see leaving the role as the completion of the work itself. We begin with someone who gave the role away but still expected the recognition.

II. Lear: the role given away, the recognition still expected

Shakespeare's tragedy begins with a king dividing his power among his daughters, keeping for himself only the name and honours of a king — and almost at once learning what a name without a role is worth.

Giving away the crown, Lear states it plainly: the sway, the revenue and the execution of the rest pass to his heirs, while he retains the name and all the additions to a king (King Lear, I.1). But in Goneril's house he is no longer treated as a king, and in the fourth scene he asks: “Doth any here know me? This is not Lear; Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?” — and then: “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (I.4). The Fool answers briefly: Lear's shadow.

In our reading, the scene shows a self-image that stood on a single role. Lear gave up the work but counted on keeping the recognition the role had brought — and, not receiving it, finds no one who would confirm who he is. His question is addressed not to himself but to others: he is used to receiving the answer about himself in the form of honours.

Shakespeare has another image of the role. Jaques in the comedy As You Like It says: “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts” (II.7). Here leaving the stage is not a catastrophe but part of the play: roles follow one another.

The boundary of the comparison: Lear is the hero of a tragedy, and his collapse is bound up not only with the role but with decisions, blindness and betrayal; Jaques is a melancholic in a comedy, and his speech belongs to the character, not to Shakespeare's philosophy. We take two images from these passages — a role one has merged with, and a role as one of many — not a teaching.

III. Montaigne: the Mayor and Montaigne

A clear distinction between a role and the one who performs it was drawn by Montaigne, who held the office of mayor of Bordeaux for some years.

In the chapter "Of Managing the Will" he writes that a mask and an outward appearance must not be made into real essence, nor a borrowed person into one's own. He sees people who transform themselves into as many new shapes as they take on new employments, and who cannot distinguish the greetings addressed to themselves from those addressed to their office, their retinue or their mule (Essays, III.10). He states his own rule: the Mayor of Bordeaux and Montaigne have always been two, and the separation between them was very plain (we give this sentence as the key quotation).

It matters that this distinction is not contempt for the role. Montaigne goes on: “an honest man is not accountable for the vice or absurdity of his employment” (tr. Charles Cotton) — and ought not on that account to refuse the calling itself: it is the custom of his country, and one has to live in the world as it is. The role is performed in earnest, but its faults and its honours do not become the content of the person.

In our reading, Montaigne offers a simple test that still applies: can I distinguish the attention paid to me from the attention paid to my position? If I cannot, then leaving the position will take with it what I took to be regard for myself. If I can, leaving will take the position — but not me.

The boundary: Montaigne writes about an elected office held by a private man who could leave it, and about his own character; this is not a rule for every role, nor data on how people experience a role's departure. But the distinction he draws is central to this article.

IV. Marcus Aurelius: not to be dyed by the role

An emperor who could not step out of his role warned himself not about how to live after it, but about how not to merge with it while it lasted.

In the Meditations Marcus Aurelius writes to himself: “Take care that thou art not made into a Caesar, that thou art not dyed with this dye; for such things happen.” (Thoughts, VI.30, tr. George Long). He then lists what he wants to remain: “simple, good, pure, serious, free from affectation, a friend of justice” — and reminds himself to strive to remain such as philosophy wished to make him.

The word "dye" is exact: a role is not put on from outside but soaks in. A person who receives the honours of a position for years may not notice how they have come to think of themselves in its words. Montaigne, by similar logic, demands that an emperor's judgment stand above his empire. And one more detail: in the same entry Marcus Aurelius takes as his model not the

imperial office but a person — his predecessor Antoninus: his constancy, his evenness, his disregard of empty fame, his habit of letting nothing pass without examining it. He wants to learn not from the role but from how another man carried it.

In our reading, Marcus Aurelius's warning matters for our subject precisely because it is spoken from inside the role. The structure that will show at the exit is formed long before it — in the years when the role is performed. One who did not let the role soak in loses the position on leaving; one who was dyed by it loses with it the familiar self-image.

The boundary of this comparison: Marcus Aurelius never retired; his role ended only with his death, and his philosophy is Stoic, with its idea of duty and of a person's place in the whole of the world. He does not describe leaving a role; he describes how to keep oneself inside it. That is why his words here are about preparation, not about the transition.

V. The objection: a role is a duty

The strongest objection to all this runs: to separate oneself from a role is to perform it worse; a role is a calling and a duty, not a costume.

The objection has powerful allies. Epictetus writes in the Enchiridion: “Remember that you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the Author chooses—if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one.” And a little further: “For this is your business—to act well the given part, but to choose it belongs to another.” (Enchiridion, 17, tr. T. W. Higginson). The Bhagavad Gita, in Edwin Arnold's verse rendering, urges: “Find full reward Of doing right in right! Let right deeds be Thy motive, not the fruit which comes from them.” (The Song Celestial, ch. II; verse 2.47 in the usual numbering; Arnold gives a verse rendering, not a literal translation).

But, in our reading, both traditions do not refute the distinction; they refine it. Epictetus demands that the role be played well — and at once separates the actor from the part: the part is given, you did not choose it. The Gita demands action at full strength — and separates the deed from its fruits: the reward lies neither in the result nor in recognition. In both cases the role is performed wholly, but it does not become the person's property and does not serve as the support of their self-esteem.

Hence a refinement of our question. The danger lies not in devotion to the role but in making what the role gives — recognition, results, a place in the hierarchy — the support of oneself. By our reasoning, a person devoted to the role who did not appropriate its fruits loses the work on leaving; a person who lived on the fruits of the role may also lose what their sense of their own worth stood on.

The boundary: in Epictetus the Author of the play is providence distributing roles; in the Gita the subject is the warrior Arjuna's duty within a particular teaching about action and its fruits. These are different metaphysics, and we do not reduce them to one formula.

VI. Leaving as part of the work itself

Three Chinese texts — the Tao Te Ching, the Analects and the Zhuangzi — offer, in our reading, a view of a role's end not as defeat but as part of the form of the work itself; from three passages we do not judge whole traditions.

The ninth chapter of the Tao Te Ching says: “When the work is done, and one's name is becoming distinguished, to withdraw into obscurity is the way of Heaven.” (ch. 9, tr. James Legge). Withdrawal here is neither failure nor exile but the completion of a path: work that will not let go of its doer is not finished.

Confucius draws the boundary of a role from the other side: “He who is not in any particular office, has nothing to do with plans for the administration of its duties.” (Analects, VIII.14, tr. James Legge; the saying recurs once more in the Analects). The saying does not speak of leaving office directly; in our reading, it also applies to one who has left: the affairs of the office are no longer theirs. For the department head in our example, opening a non-existent mailbox every morning, this sounds almost like advice.

The Zhuangzi goes further. Its first chapter says: “The perfect man ignores self; the divine man ignores action; the true Sage ignores reputation” (Chuang Tzŭ, ch. I, tr. Herbert A. Giles). And the hermit Hsü Yu, declining the throne that the Emperor Yao offers him, says: “To you, sire, belongs the reputation: the empire has no need for me.” (ibid.). In our reading, the self-image here does not stand on position at all. Hsü Yu explains his refusal this way: reputation is only the shadow of reality; the tit, building its nest in a vast forest, occupies a single twig, and the tapir drinks from the river only enough to fill its belly. We read this as measure: to take more from a position than the work requires is to burden oneself with what is not one's own.

The boundary between these voices is substantial. Daoist withdrawal is a cosmological ideal in which a person follows the way of Heaven; the Confucian line concerns the ordering of duties in society; Zhuangzi's sage is not a retiree but an image of freedom from position. We take from them a shared motif: a role has an end, and that end can belong to the work rather than bring down the person.

VII. Paul and Job: a person before and after titles

The biblical texts give yet another angle: a self-image deliberately taken off former titles, and a person before and after all roles.

In the Letter to the Philippians the apostle Paul lists his former grounds for confidence: “Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:5–6, King James Version). And he says: “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.” (Philippians 3:7, King James Version). In our reading, this is not simply a loss of roles but their revaluation: the former titles cease to be the ground of who Paul takes himself to be; in the next verse he says that for Christ he has given up all things (3:8). And the revaluation leaves no emptiness: later in the same chapter Paul writes that, forgetting what lies behind and reaching forth to what lies ahead, he presses toward the mark (3:13–14). The former, in our reading, no longer sets the direction.

The Book of Job gives a formula that has become proverbial: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away” (Job 1:21, King James Version). We take from it only this formula — a person before and after all roles — and do not touch the theme of suffering to which the book is devoted.

In our reading, Paul and Job's words have what Lear lacks: a self-image that does not wait for confirmation from a former position. For Paul it is a decision of faith; for Job, the acknowledgement that everything given can be taken. In both cases the person is not reduced to their titles.

The boundary: these are religious texts — a letter of an apostle, for whom the new ground is Christ, and a book about God and the suffering of a righteous man. They yield no psychological recipe to "give up roles"; what follows is that the tradition knew a self-image not standing on position, and knew that position can be taken away.

VIII. Retirement and sport: what the data on several supports show

Studies do not tell us the right way to relate to a role, but they show what is associated with how people go through its departure.

Niklas Steffens, Jolanda Jetten, Catherine Haslam, Tegan Cruwys and Alexander Haslam (Frontiers in Psychology, 2016) surveyed 171 retirees in Australia, on average 67 years old and about three and a half years into retirement. Each named up to six groups important to their sense of self — separately for before and after retirement. The more such groups a person had after retiring, the more satisfied they were with retirement and the better they rated their health and quality of life. Groups before retirement were associated with satisfaction with retirement and with health (with quality of life only marginally), but stopped being significant once groups after retirement were taken into account. And when both kinds of support were considered,

the association was statistically mediated by the support a person gave to others, not by the support they received.

The limitations matter. This is a cross-sectional survey, and, as the authors themselves write, it cannot establish causality; people reported their pre-retirement groups after the fact. The models with the number of groups before and after retirement explained 6–9% of the differences in these ratings, and the authors allow that part of the association may reflect characteristics of the people themselves — for example, openness to new experience. The title of the paper is stronger than its design: it says that multiple identities enhance health; we write that they are associated with it.

Another group is professional athletes. In an online survey, 194 former Major League Baseball players rated their athletic identity and the importance of six life roles (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026). Groups with weaker athletic identity rated the importance of athletics among their roles lower, but the importance of family, friendships, religion and romantic relationships did not differ between the groups. The authors call a low current level of athletic identity its loss and read the result as follows: such loss appears to concern the athletic role itself and does not necessarily spread to the others. The survey is cross-sectional, the sample is small and consists mostly of white Americans.

In our reading, both studies are consistent with the idea of several supports for the self-image but do not prove it: these are associations, not results of experiments.

IX. Work as self-esteem and work as meaning

The subtlest distinction comes from a Swedish longitudinal study: work has two sides, and they are associated with well-being after retirement in opposite directions.

Sara Hed, Anne Ingeborg Berg, Isabelle Hansson, Marie Kivi and Margda Waern (BMC Geriatrics, 2024) took from a Swedish population study 527 people who retired fully in 2016–2019 and measured their depressive symptoms each year on a questionnaire scale — which is not a diagnosis. On average, in both men and women, symptoms decreased around retirement: they were stable before it, decreased over the transition and remained stable afterwards.

Next comes what matters for our subject. Before retiring, participants completed two short scales about work — of four and of three statements. How far does their self-esteem depend on success at work? And how meaningful and important does their work seem to them? The more self-esteem depended on success, the higher the depressive symptoms after retirement. The more meaningful the work, the lower the symptoms, and in men this association was stronger. Difficulties adjusting to retirement, including the statement “I miss my work identity”, were also associated with higher symptoms.

The authors name the limitations: the cohort is relatively healthy and educated, the context is Swedish, and only those who stopped working entirely were included. We add: the associations are observational and do not establish causes.

In our reading, the two sides of work resemble the two ways of relating to a role. Self-esteem resting on success resembles "being the role": the support departs together with the position. The meaning of the work resembles "performing the role": it is not so tightly bound to the place and may partly carry over into life after work. But this is the article authors' analogy, not a finding of the study.

X. Not only how many supports, but how they connect

If some data say "the more groups, the better", others warn that the matter is not only one of number.

Chaoyang Zhu, Mengmeng Zhu, Xiaoqian Gao and Xiaoyi Liu (Frontiers in Psychology, 2021) surveyed 158 retirees of one Chinese university aged 55 to 92. Each described themselves in five roles — parent, son or daughter, worker, friend, partner — on forty traits. The more the descriptions differed across roles, the lower the psychological well-being and the higher the anxiety and depressive symptoms; the association was partly statistically mediated by a sense of inconsistency of the self, and this mediation grew stronger with age. The authors read strong differences as a sign of fragmentation rather than specialization of roles. This is a one-time survey of educated retirees from one university, and age, as the authors write, cannot be varied in an experiment.

The work of Aleksandra Pilarska and Anna Suchańska (Current Psychology, 2015) adds caution. In three surveys of Polish students and young graduates, different ways of measuring the "complexity" of the self-image and its differences across roles did not agree with one another, and a popular complexity index depended heavily on simply how many traits a person chose. After such confounds were taken into account, the associations of the self-image's structure with the sense of identity and with thinking dispositions turned out to be small, and the authors consider definite conclusions about how the structure of the self-image relates to important life outcomes premature.

What follows? The formula "the more roles, the more stable the self-image" is too simple. For our question this means that it is worth checking not only the list of one's roles but also whether one recognizes oneself in each of them. In our reading, what matters is that there be several supports and that a person remain recognizable to themselves within them — but this is a hypothesis that the data we read support only in part.

And the main limit. All the data on a role's departure here concern retirement and professional sport; the study of measures of self-complexity was done with students and young graduates

and did not examine a role's departure. What happens when another role ends — parental, marital, the role of a carer — was not studied in the open research we read. So everything said here about other roles remains reasoning.

What this means in practice

What follows are the authors' working criteria, drawn from the argument of this article. These steps have not been tested in research; the data we cite show associations, not the effect of advice.

1. **List your supports.** Which roles and groups now matter for who you take yourself to be? How many of them will remain when the main one ends? In the Australian survey, retirees were asked to name the groups important to them — a simple way to see your own picture.

2. **Montaigne's test.** Can I tell the attention paid to me from the attention paid to my position? How would I describe myself without naming the position?

3. **Separate self-esteem from meaning.** How far does my self-respect rest on the role's successes, and how far on the meaning of the work? In the Swedish cohort these two sides of work were associated with well-being after retirement in opposite directions; this is an association, not a proven cause.

4. **Prepare the exit as part of the work.** Think in advance about how the role will end and what will remain after it. Having left a position, do not meddle in its affairs: this is how we apply Confucius's saying that one who is not in an office has nothing to do with plans for its administration.

5. **Not only receive but give.** In the same Australian survey, the association of groups with well-being in retirement was statistically mediated by the support a person gave to others.

6. **Remember the limit.** The data concern retirement and sport. For other roles these steps are only reasoning by analogy.

When a specialist is needed. If leaving a role comes with a heavy and lasting distress that gets in the way of living and does not ease, it is worth turning to a psychologist or a doctor; the symptom questionnaires used in the studies are not a diagnosis, and a specialist can help assess your state. If thoughts of harming yourself appear, seek help at once; in immediate danger, contact the emergency services of your country.

Key quotation

> *“The Mayor of Bordeaux and Montaigne have ever been two by very manifest separation.”*

> *Michel de Montaigne, Essays, Book III, ch. X, "Of Managing the Will", tr. Charles Cotton, ed. W. C. Hazlitt: Project Gutenberg #3600.*

The sentence gathers the article's central distinction: the role is performed in earnest, but the performer is not reducible to it. It does not follow that the role is unimportant. In our reading, it suggests something else: if the distinction was drawn in advance, a role's departure may take the position, not the person. Montaigne himself says nothing in this sentence about leaving office, and this has not been tested on data.

Connections between traditions

Comparison (side A ↔ side B)	Meeting point (similarity)	Essential boundary
Montaigne, Essays III.10 ↔ Marcus Aurelius, Thoughts VI.30	The holder of an office separates himself from it: “The Mayor of Bordeaux and Montaigne” — and “not dyed with this dye”	A private man in an elected office he can leave, and an emperor who cannot step out of his role and only guards himself within it
Epictetus, Enchiridion 17 ↔ Bhagavad Gita 2.47 (Arnold's rendering)	The role is performed at full strength without being appropriated: “to act well the given part” — and acting for the right deed, not for its fruit	The Stoic Author of the play who distributes roles, and the teaching of action without attachment to fruits within a warrior's duty — different metaphysics
Laozi, Tao Te Ching, ch. 9 ↔ Analects VIII.14	Work and office have a boundary: finished work is left behind, and one does not enter the affairs of an office one does not hold	Daoist withdrawal as the way of Heaven and the Confucian delimitation of duties in an ordered society; Analects VIII.14 does not speak of leaving office directly — applying it to one who has left is ours
Shakespeare, King Lear I.4 ↔ Philippians 3:5–7	The self-image is taken off former titles	For Lear a collapse in which he expects the old recognition; for Paul a decision of faith in which former advantages are deliberately counted loss
Zhuangzi, ch. I ↔ studies of retirement (Steffens and colleagues, 2016; Hed and colleagues, 2024)	A self-image not standing on a single position	The ideal of a sage free from position and correlational data on retirees are different kinds of basis; the data neither confirm nor refute the Daoist ideal

The table compares only the passages named; quotations follow the English editions listed in the sources, and the biblical text follows the King James Version. A similarity of motifs does not mean a shared teaching or a historical link between the traditions. The studies in the last row give sample averages and show associations, not causes.

Primary sources

The traditional texts were read in Project Gutenberg copies (the English translations and editions named below) and, for the Russian master, in the Synodal translation on azbyka.ru; the studies were read as full texts of articles under the open CC BY licence, obtained through Europe PMC. Biblical quotations in this version follow the King James Version. The hypothetical example at the start of the article was invented by the authors.

1. Shakespeare W. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Project Gutenberg #100). King Lear, Act I, Scenes 1 and 4 (the division of power and the scene in Goneril's house); As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7 (Jaques's speech).

2. Montaigne M. de. Essays of Michel de Montaigne — Complete, tr. Ch. Cotton, ed. W. C. Hazlitt (Project Gutenberg #3600). Book III, ch. X, "Of Managing the Will": the passage on mask and office and the sentence about the Mayor of Bordeaux.

3. Marcus Aurelius. Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, tr. George Long (Project Gutenberg #15877). Book VI, 30.

4. Epictetus. The Enchiridion, tr. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Project Gutenberg #45109). Ch. XVII.

5. The Song Celestial, or Bhagavad-Gîtâ, verse rendering by Sir Edwin Arnold (Project Gutenberg #2388). Ch. II, the passage corresponding to verse 2.47.

6. Laozi. The Tao Teh King, or the Tao and its Characteristics, tr. James Legge (Project Gutenberg #216). Ch. 9.

7. The Chinese Classics, vol. 1: Confucian Analects, tr. James Legge (Project Gutenberg #4094). Book VIII, ch. 14 (repeated as XIV.27).

8. Zhuangzi. Chuang Tzŭ: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer, tr. Herbert A. Giles (Project Gutenberg #59709). Ch. I: the saying about the perfect man and Hsü Yu's answer to the Emperor Yao.

9. The Holy Bible, King James Version (Project Gutenberg #10). Philippians 3:4–8, 13–14; Job 1:21.

10. Steffens N. K., Jetten J., Haslam C., Cruwys T., Haslam S. A. Multiple Social Identities Enhance Health Post-Retirement Because They Are a Basis for Giving Social Support. Frontiers in Psychology, 2016, 7 (PMC5065989). Cross-sectional survey. Read: method, results, discussion, limitations and conclusion; CC BY.

11. Worrell M., Hamilton X. D., Zhang J., Li Y., Lynch T. Beyond the game: athletic identity and post-retirement adaptation of former Major League Baseball players. Frontiers in Psychology,

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13. Zhu C., Zhu M., Gao X., Liu X. How Does Self-Concept Differentiation Work in Chinese Retirees: A Moderated Mediation Analysis. Frontiers in Psychology, 2021, 12 (PMC7930060). Survey of retirees. Read: methods, results, discussion and limitations; CC BY 4.0.

14. Pilarska A., Suchańska A. Self-Complexity and Self-Concept Differentiation – What Have We Been Measuring for the Past 30 Years? Current Psychology, 2015, 34 (PMC4703609). Three survey studies. Read: method, results, general discussion and limitations; CC BY 4.0.

Tags

role, self-image, performing a role, being the role, retirement, leaving sport, professional identity, athletic identity, social groups, multiple identities, social support, work centrality, self-esteem through success, meaning of work, self-concept differentiation, self-complexity, self-consistency, Shakespeare, King Lear, As You Like It, Montaigne, Essays, Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Stoicism, Epictetus, Enchiridion, Bhagavad Gita, action without attachment to fruits, Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Zhuangzi, Confucius, Analects, Apostle Paul, Letter to the Philippians, Book of Job, Daoism, Confucianism

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