

UNITED WISDOM

Being Yourself: What Authenticity Means in Different Circumstances

The Person and the Inner World

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Epigraph

“I do not teach; I only relate.”

Michel de Montaigne, Essays III.2, Of Repentance: the complete closing sentence of the paragraph beginning Be pleased here. Charles Cotton’s English translation, edited by William Carew Hazlitt, 1877; French was not collated. Immediately before this sentence Montaigne qualifies his account as inquiring and doubting, referring resolution to accepted beliefs.

What this article is about

At a family celebration, someone speaks about work differently from a professional meeting. They discuss doubts with a friend but ask a stranger only the necessary question. Such differences do not immediately reveal where the person is “real”. Authenticity is often confused with complete disclosure or immediate expression of every impulse. This article proposes a more particular examination: what someone asserts about themselves, which commitments they accept, why they choose a manner, and what they do when words diverge from action. Montaigne, James, Aristotle and Epictetus supply different questions while retaining their own assumptions. Their texts form no single theory of authenticity. The contemporary scenes and working criterion belong to this article: flexible expression can coexist with honesty when it neither creates a false impression about what matters nor conceals the basis of a significant action. A sincere belief still requires assessment of its content and consequences; private life does not become compulsory public confession.

I. Three similar words ask different questions

Candour concerns how much someone discloses about experience, intentions or circumstances. Spontaneity concerns the immediacy of a reaction and how quickly it is expressed. We will examine authenticity through the relation between significant claims, accepted commitments and action in a particular situation. This is a working distinction rather than the only permissible definition. It helps because the three properties can diverge. Someone can immediately describe an experience at length while withholding a decision affecting the listener. Another can pause, say little about feelings, and honestly identify a limit to their readiness to help.

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Imagine a friend invited to help run a small discussion group. They welcome the idea and do not want to disappoint its initiator. Their immediate yes sounds warm and natural, but they have not checked their schedule. A week later, it turns out they cannot attend regularly. Sincerity of initial delight does not make an accepted obligation feasible. “I like the idea, but let me check my free evenings first” might have connected feeling and action more precisely. A pause is not evidence of concealed deception. It permits a pleasant reaction to remain distinct from a promise on which another person will begin relying.

The reverse is possible too. Someone may rehearse an impeccable phrase about honesty while remaining unwilling to reveal an inconvenient circumstance. A calm tone does not itself make an answer authentic. Examine what is said and which impression the listener receives. Outward naturalness is therefore an insufficient measure. A more particular question is whether the answer corresponds to what the speaker actually knows and is prepared to accept. Authenticity in this examination does not require saying everything, but calls for attention to the meaning of what is said. Spontaneity can accompany honesty, interfere with it, or be irrelevant to the topic; we have no reason to assign it moral superiority in advance.

II. Different manners can preserve one position

A teacher explains a difficult concept to a beginner in simple language and to a colleague in specialist terms. If the content remains, different language does not establish two opposed personalities. The relationship to the listener’s knowledge and the task of the conversation change. This hypothetical case distinguishes expressing a position from the position itself. Flexibility can express attention to an audience. If the teacher promises one person an easy outcome while acknowledging substantial difficulties to another, however, the question goes beyond vocabulary. Why does the first promise omit something important to the learner’s decision?

James describes differing social selves before different circles in Chapter X of The Principles of Psychology. He allows both discord and a division of activity without that conflict. This is historical description rather than approval of every social example he offers. For our topic, it raises a question about the difference’s function. Someone may be serious discussing a shared task and playful in free conversation. We can compare the content of actions without requiring the same expression or length of sentences in every relationship.

At the opening of III.2, Montaigne describes the changing subject of his portrait, attending both to moments and circumstances. Comparison with James reveals two dimensions: change through time and difference across audiences. Neither equals deception by itself. Deception becomes a separate question where a significant claim conflicts with what the speaker knows or where promises are incompatible.

Imagine an editor gently explaining a difficult weakness in a manuscript to its author and discussing the same weakness briefly with a colleague. Accuracy can survive a changed tone. Passing the author's private promise to the colleague without an agreed basis is a different act, which cannot be justified simply by needing to "be different". Authenticity distinguishes these cases rather than choosing between a permanent mask and identical behaviour everywhere. An appropriate manner considers the relationship while preserving truthfulness of the significant message and responsibility for its use.

III. A truthful claim does not mean a complete account of oneself

Asked about professional experience, someone can identify completed work and say where they remain a beginner. This does not exhaust their biography but answers the conversation's subject. The problem arises if they take credit for another person's achievement or create an impression of competence they lack. Aristotle examines claims about one's qualities between exaggeration and affected understatement in Nicomachean Ethics IV.7. He separately distinguishes this from keeping agreements, a matter of justice. The passage should therefore not be presented as a complete code of all obligations, although it supplies a precise question about how one presents oneself.

A hypothetical participant at a creative gathering says, "I led this project", although they performed only a small part of shared work. They can sincerely feel proud of their contribution while conveying inaccurate content. Another says, "I can do nothing", concealing a real skill to avoid expectations or obtain reassurance. Affected modesty can also change a listener's understanding. This does not establish that every brief understatement is malicious. Clarify the phrase's function: does it identify a limit to knowledge, use a polite convention, or prompt another person to accept an inaccurate picture? The criterion concerns a particular statement and circumstance rather than the overall volume of self-presentation.

Extent of disclosure and accuracy of what is disclosed are different questions. One can say, "I do not want to discuss this part of my life", without inventing a false story. A boundary does not itself equal deception. If a withheld circumstance affects an accepted shared decision, however, the other person's need for significant information calls for separate consideration. Readiness to participate in work does not establish a right to the participant's entire biography, but does include available time. Authenticity here calls for an honest answer about fulfilling an accepted part, rather than endless candour about all experience. One requirement cannot replace the other by calling every inconvenient practical clarification a secret.

IV. A private boundary differs from a created impression

At a friendly gathering, someone is asked why they declined a trip. They can give a general reason: present circumstances prevent it. If others do not depend on the details, this answer can be sufficient. A fuller account may concern another person's private circumstances, which the speaker cannot disclose simply because they wish to seem open. One person's candour sometimes becomes another's unwanted disclosure. "Am I sufficiently real?" therefore needs a further question: "Whose information am I about to share?" Examining relationships matters more here than counting personal details spoken aloud.

In the selected paragraph of III.2, Montaigne speaks truth to the extent he dares. This recognises a limit to his literary undertaking rather than providing a contemporary rule permitting every convenient omission. Comparison with Aristotle's question about truthful self-claims distinguishes the amount said from its accuracy. Our practical distinction concerns what the answer creates. It may mark a limit to discussion or deliberately direct a listener towards a false conclusion. Few words are used in each case, but their functions differ.

Suppose someone misses a shared event because they also accepted another invitation. "I cannot come" may be an ordinary brief refusal if no exclusive commitment was required. "I have no choice" presents the situation differently, denying a decision existed. If an earlier promise has already influenced others' plans, the change needs direct discussion rather than a convenient image of compulsion. Someone can preserve a private boundary while acknowledging their share of responsibility. A more accurate answer need not be longer: "I changed my plan; I understand that I gave late notice." Its meaning lies in clarifying a significant relationship rather than displaying an entire inward life.

V. A pause does not always turn a reaction into a mask

During a disagreement, someone wants to answer sharply at once. They pause and express their objection more calmly. This transition is sometimes treated as lost sincerity, as though the first reaction necessarily contains the deepest truth and every later revision is artificial. Yet a first thought may concern one aspect of a situation while overlooking another. Annoyance at a suggestion can coexist with recognising the other person's right to offer it. Choosing words that preserve an objection without unnecessary humiliation need not conceal a position. It can express more accurately what someone is prepared to answer for after the outburst ends.

Chapter 33 of Epictetus asks the reader to prescribe a character maintained alone and in company. His particular ancient instructions belong to a different social and moral framework; they need not be transferred wholesale. What matters here is the relation between a guiding intention and a momentary expression. Discussing private conduct in III.2, Montaigne distinguishes life without spectators from the public staging of virtue. Both passages let us ask

whether restraint serves only an attractive image or concerns a manner of action acknowledged away from the audience too.

Our hypothetical disputant might speak calmly on stage and mock the absent speaker afterwards, despite having publicly promised respectful exchange. The question then concerns divergent actions. If they maintain their objection after the meeting without humiliation, calmness was not an empty performance. This examination does not require identical emotions inwardly and outwardly. Someone can feel annoyance and choose another way to express it. Authenticity concerns the action they acknowledge as their own, its consequences and correspondence with a significant promise, alongside the feeling that appeared first. A pause guarantees no honesty; immediacy is not sufficient proof of it either.

VI. A commitment concerns a role rather than a mood

Imagine a volunteer helping run a library evening. They are friends with some visitors and feel warmer towards them than towards strangers. That difference in closeness need not disappear. However, they promised participants equal speaking time. If only friends receive extra time, the issue concerns a particular commitment rather than the right to have preferences. A personal relationship can coexist with a common rule. If the rule does not suit the task, it should be discussed with participants; quietly replacing it during the event creates a different situation. Authenticity is not achieved by announcing “I always choose my friends”. An honestly stated preference helps explain an action without making it correspond to a promise. Others can assess the act by the condition offered to them, alongside the organiser’s sense of naturalness.

Epictetus’ actor image in Chapter 17 separates the quality of performance from choosing an assigned part. James’s social selves permit consideration of one person’s different fields of activity. These ideas cannot be combined into a requirement to remain forever in any role once received. Our contemporary volunteer can end participation, suggest another host, or agree a changed format. While a commitment remains, however, its content matters even in an inconvenient mood. Being oneself does not mean every fluctuation of feeling automatically changes the other participants’ entitlements. An authentic response can sometimes identify what became difficult and revise an arrangement directly. The role then remains particular: it is performed, discussed, or ended, rather than silently becoming an expression of present desire. The person retains choice; others retain the possibility of understanding what they can rely on.

VII. Approval reveals a response without delivering a final verdict

Someone addresses a group and notices that one part of their account was particularly popular. Next time they might repeat it although they now consider it inaccurate. Gradually, communicating something significant is replaced by maintaining a successful reaction. This is a hypothetical scene rather than a necessary behavioural law. It asks what a changed account serves: clarity for a listener or reproducing approval at any cost? An audience can offer useful information about an unclear explanation. The problem begins when its favour becomes the sole basis of what the speaker is prepared to assert.

James considers recognition as part of the social self. In the selected III.2 passages, Montaigne discusses unreliable outside praise while also attending to friends' comments. Chapter 35 of Epictetus contrasts action based on judgment with fear of mistaken censure. Their purposes differ: description, literary inquiry and ethical prescription. Comparison distinguishes a relationship to evaluation from the grounds of action. It does not establish that all criticism is mistaken or that inward conviction always outranks others' observations. Someone can sincerely miss a significant weakness; a particular comment then deserves attention.

In the speaking scene, one response is to correct the inaccurate passage and explain why the earlier version changed. Approval may decline, but the message becomes clearer. Alternatively, listeners may not have understood an accurate formulation, which should be made more accessible. Authenticity does not automatically select stern language over agreeable speech. It asks whether the content for which someone speaks remains intact. Relationship to an audience matters, but should not silently replace the subject. Giving up convenient praise and accepting a useful correction may express the same concern for accuracy while feeling very different emotionally.

VIII. Correcting a divergence matters more than declaring perfect integrity

Someone assured a colleague that they had read a text completely. Later, it emerges that they looked only at its beginning and missed a significant condition. Even if the original phrase was habitual, there is now a particular divergence. They can defend their general image of conscientiousness by explaining how carefully they usually work. The colleague, however, needs to know what was actually read and what changed in the conclusion. Authenticity becomes practical when someone can identify an inaccurate representation without replacing it with an account of good intentions. A correction's content matters more than its solemnity or the quantity of personal admission. If the colleague has already passed on the conclusion, they need to understand which part requires reconsideration. Admitting an error alone does not establish whether a decision must change or only the description of work completed.

Aristotle's examination of self-claims in IV.7 reveals that exaggeration and understatement can both be inaccurate. The application belongs to this article: identify the read portion without declaring oneself omniscient or generally incapable of work. "I incorrectly said I read everything. I read the first two sections; I have not yet checked the conclusion." Then clarify whether the omission affects the shared outcome and do the necessary work. These acts concern a particular mistake. They do not require the listener immediately to confirm someone's overall moral worth or remove the consequences of an inaccurate message.

Correction also changes relationships through time. Earlier words may already have influenced another person's decision, so a new inward intention alone is insufficient. Someone can communicate the clarification to those who received a significant inaccurate claim and explain its practical meaning. This is not a universal procedure for every private thought; it responds to a particular impression created. Correction may remain uncomfortable: authenticity promises neither ease nor agreement. Yet correcting known divergences offers a substantive alternative to a cult of perfect integrity. An honest person need not be incapable of error; what matters is how they handle a known mistake and the expectations of those affected.

IX. A position can change without rewriting the past

Imagine someone who previously preferred working alone and now chooses a collaborative project. They might say "I have always been a team person" to make the new role seem more natural. That erases the earlier position. A more accurate account allows change: solitary work previously suited their tasks; now they recognise value in shared labour. Neither period must be declared the home of the only real person. Ask what changed, which new ground emerged, and which earlier decisions still have consequences. Flexibility becomes understandable when the transition remains distinguishable.

Montaigne describes a changing subject and differing circumstances of narration in III.2. This does not permit inventing a convenient past on each occasion. Attention to change instead raises a question about when a statement was made. “I thought that then” differs from “I never said it”. If an earlier record survives, its content can be acknowledged alongside new understanding. Changes do not all have the same depth: a belief may change, or its expression, or a practical possibility. Authenticity distinguishes these cases so that another person understands the basis of the present relationship.

Reconsideration also differs from a convenient shift before the next audience. Someone can defend incompatible versions simultaneously without informing those concerned. A reference to development does not explain everything. Identify the position accepted now and which earlier commitments remain. In our hypothetical collaborative project, changed preferences do not cancel a deadline for previous work. The work can be completed, transferred, or discussed again. Authenticity preserves temporal responsibility: acknowledging the past without requiring someone to remain there forever. An unchanging portrait matters less than a truthful description of change and a practical response to its consequences.

X. Sincerity does not make every position good

Someone can honestly acknowledge a belief that causes substantial harm to others. “That is simply how I am” explains a self-description without settling assessment of behaviour. If a participant sincerely considers humiliating newcomers acceptable, an absence of pretence does not make humiliation acceptable to everyone else. Our working criterion concerns the relation between words and action; justice, care and the grounds of beliefs remain separate questions. Confusing them distorts a conversation: every request to reconsider an act then seems to demand abandoning oneself. The person retains a voice, while others retain the right to discuss consequences and the boundaries of shared space.

In Nicomachean Ethics IV.6, Aristotle distinguishes pleasant interaction from conduct appropriate to different relationships and consequences. He does not require acquiescence for another’s pleasure. Chapter 24 of Epictetus examines usefulness to a community alongside preserving fidelity and character. These are ancient normative constructions rather than one contemporary doctrine of authenticity. Their comparison recalls that a personal position and participation among others may need consideration together. Being useful does not mean yielding everything; being faithful to oneself does not automatically cancel the question of how actions concern another.

Authenticity across circumstances can therefore be examined as particular honesty in practice. A person clarifies a claim, accepts or revises a commitment, chooses an appropriate manner, and acknowledges a significant known divergence. They need not display the same reaction to everyone or disclose every inward detail. Flexibility should nevertheless avoid

silently creating incompatible promises or false information. This approach allows growth, private boundaries and discussion of shared work. It supplies no outward sign by which authenticity can be identified at a glance. In place of a final label, questions emerge that can be answered through words and action within a particular relationship.

What this means in practice

Choose one role in an ordinary situation: a participant, teacher, friend or colleague. Identify what is actually expected and distinguish it from wishing to impress. A host, for example, promised everyone speaking time but did not promise equal intimacy. This distinction permits a personal relationship alongside checking a shared condition's fulfilment. If a duty was never agreed, note that; every outside expectation need not become your commitment.

Examine one significant statement about yourself: experience, readiness to help, or an accepted decision. Ask what the listener learns and whether the phrase creates an impression you believe inaccurate. You can disclose little about feelings while naming available time precisely. You can openly establish a boundary to discussion while retaining the clarity needed for a shared task. Neither revealing another's circumstances nor explaining an entire biography is necessary to correct one inaccurate claim.

Compare two ways of answering. One may be warm and expansive, another brief and formal. Identify the content that should survive both. Changed language for the audience is one difference. Changed significant promises require a decision about compatibility and whether affected people know about the change. If a divergence emerges, formulate a specific correction instead of a general declaration of authenticity: "I agreed too quickly; I can participate only in the first part."

Finally, allow assessment of the position itself. An honestly expressed desire can still be reconsidered through its grounds and consequences. This voluntary exercise is an editorial proposal for clarifying one situation; the selected texts do not establish its effectiveness. It can be reduced to one question or omitted. Being oneself does not require an examination in continual disclosure. What matters more is an intelligible relationship between a significant message, available action and commitments actually accepted.

Key quotation

> *"I speak truth, not so much as I would, but as much as I dare"*

Michel de Montaigne, Essays III.2: the exact first clause before the semicolon of the I speak truth sentence in the paragraph beginning To perfect it. Charles Cotton's English translation edited by Hazlitt, 1877; French was not collated. Montaigne discusses a limit to his self-portrait, rather than a ready permission to mislead another person.

Connections between traditions

1. A changing portrait and different audiences. Montaigne describes changes in his subject and circumstances at III.2's opening. James distinguishes socially recognised images before different circles in Chapter X's Social Self paragraphs. The connection identifies two dimensions of variation: time and audience. Literary inquiry and descriptive psychology form no common doctrine; change does not justify incompatible promises.

2. Limits of narration and accurate self-claims. Montaigne speaks truth within what he dares to disclose in III.2's To perfect it paragraph. Aristotle examines exaggerated and understated personal qualities in IV.7. Comparison distinguishes extent of disclosure from accuracy of what is asserted. The contemporary private boundary is an editorial application, not a complete ancient disclosure code; IV.7 separately excludes agreements as matters of justice.

3. Character without spectators and public performance. Chapter 33 of Epictetus calls for a chosen character maintained alone and in company. Montaigne distinguishes private conduct from staged virtue in III.2's 'Tis an exact life paragraph and following passages. The connection concerns a commitment preserved when an audience disappears. Their moral assumptions differ; this particular comparison establishes no shared authenticity theory.

4. An actor's part and coordinated role differences. Epictetus separates performance from assignment in Chapter 17. James permits both discord and harmonious division of activity in Social Self. Both help examine roles separately from manners. Providential assignment differs from a contemporary agreement and does not prove unfair duties unchangeable; James's descriptive examples are not endorsed wholesale.

5. Appropriate objection and mistaken censure. Aristotle considers closer and more distant relationships and refusing pleasure when substantially harmful in IV.6. Epictetus asks us not to hide a justified act through fear of mistaken evaluation in Chapter 35. The connection leaves action's grounds wider than audience approval. These are normative arguments rather than measured effects; criticism can be useful and is not declared mistaken in advance.

6. Community service and the basis of trust. Chapter 24 of Epictetus examines helping a community without losing fidelity. Montaigne distinguishes personal standards, outside praise and examinable comments in III.2's conscience and Some of my friends passages. Their comparison connects participation with grounds of evaluation. It requires neither rejecting community, considering personal judgment infallible, nor transferring all ancient prescriptions to contemporary life.

Primary sources

Michel de Montaigne, Essays III.2, Of Repentance. The opening, discussion of outside evaluation and private conduct were read with the adjacent end of III.1; the remainder of III.2 is not claimed as read. The carrier identifies Cotton's translation and Hazlitt's 1877 edition. The epigraph is the complete I do not teach sentence; the key quotation is the first I speak truth clause. French was not collated.

William James, The Principles of Psychology, Vol. I, Chapter X. English original on a carrier reproducing the Henry Holt 1918 title edition, with an 1890 preface. The chapter opening and selected empirical-self discussion were read; Social Self passages are used. Neither complete chapter/work nor contemporary verification of its examples is claimed.

Epictetus, Enchiridion. The displayed Elizabeth Carter English translation. Chapters 1–48 were actually read; 17, 24, 33 and 35 are used. Chapters 49–53, the Discourses and Greek were not studied. Prescriptions remain within an ancient ethical framework.

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics IV.6–7. The displayed W. D. Ross English translation. Both used chapters were read completely within a bounded reading of Book IV; neither the whole book nor Greek is claimed as studied. Social appropriateness differs from truthful claims about one's qualities.

Tags

authenticity, being yourself, honesty, candour, spontaneity, roles, self-description, Montaigne, James, Aristotle, Epictetus, social self, private life, boundaries, promise, commitment, responsibility, audience, approval, conscience, truthfulness, self-presentation, exaggeration, modesty, action, change, trust, relationships, feedback, primary sources, ethics, flexibility

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