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What I Call Myself: A Name, a Story and the Right to Change

Human Nature and Inner World

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> *“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet”*
>
> *William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene 2, spoken by Juliet. Text from the Project Gutenberg #100 edition.*

What this article is about

A hypothetical example: after a divorce, a woman returns to her former surname, but for a year colleagues keep writing to her under the old one. She already calls herself differently; the others do not. Whose name is it now — hers, or that of those who address her?

The article separates three words that usually merge: the name a person was given, the word others use for them, and the word they use for themselves. We follow the question through Confucius and Epictetus (a name as an obligation), the biblical renamings and the story of Naomi (a name given from above and a name taken by oneself), the objection of Juliet and Hermogenes (a name is a convention), the Daoist distrust of names, and papers on naming, surname change and records. The article maps what the right to call oneself differently consists of and where it meets other people's speech. The open studies we read did not measure what a name change does for the person; the closing steps are therefore the authors' argument, not a tested method.

I. Three words about oneself

A self-name is not the same as the name received at birth, nor the same as the word other people use. It is a third word, with a standing of its own.

The given name is chosen by parents, a community, sometimes the law; a person receives it before they can agree or object. The word others use is wider than a name: it can be a nickname, a job title, the “one who…” of someone else's conversation, or an entry in a document. A self-name is how I introduce myself, how I sign, what I call myself out loud: a new name, a former surname, a word of belonging or of role. While the three words coincide, the difference between them goes unnoticed. It shows when they part, as in the opening example: the passport already carries one surname, the work mailbox still another.

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This distinction splits the question “can I call myself differently?” in two. Can I change my own word about myself? Yes, that is in my power: I can think and speak of myself in a new way without anyone's permission. Can I make others use the new word? Here my power is not enough: other people's speech, habits and records do not belong to me. In our reading, the right to change named in the title has two parts: freedom in the first case and a justified claim in the second — to ask, to explain, to insist, while counting on a response.

The traditions we turn to look at different words among these three. The Analects and Epictetus tie a name to what is to be done; in our reading, a name binds. The Book of Genesis is about a name given by the highest authority. The Book of Ruth offers a case of a person asking to be called otherwise. In Shakespeare and Plato the strongest objection is voiced by Juliet and Hermogenes: a name is a mere convention. Changing one's path in life is the subject of a separate article in the series (catalogue ID P11); here we deal only with the word a person calls themselves by and whether others recognise it.

II. A name binds: Confucius and Epictetus

Two ancient texts, the Analects and the Discourses of Epictetus, in our reading see a name not as a label but as a promise: to name is to take on what is expected under that name.

In the Analects (Book XIII, ch. 3), the disciple Tsze-lu asks Confucius what he would do first if the ruler of Wei entrusted him with the government. The answer is unexpected: “What is necessary is to rectify names.” (Analects, XIII.3, tr. James Legge). Tsze-lu thinks this far-fetched, and the Master explains: if names are not correct, language does not accord with the truth of things; then affairs cannot succeed, rites and music do not flourish, punishments lose their measure, and the people are left not knowing how to act. So the superior man makes sure that the names he uses can be spoken appropriately and that what he says can be carried out. The subject here is the state and the order of words in society, not a personal self-name. But, in our reading, the mechanism is close: the word must fit the matter, and what is said must be something that can be carried out.

Epictetus moves this mechanism inside a single life. His discourse II.10, titled in George Long's English translation “How we may discover the duties of life from names”, opens with the words: “Consider who you are. In the first place, you are a man” (Discourses, II.10). Then come citizen of the world, son, brother, senator, youth, old man: each such name, if examined, marks out its proper duties. To someone who blames his brother, Epictetus says that he has forgotten who he is and what his name is.

In our reading, both traditions make a self-name weightier. To name oneself is to make a promise; to change one's name is in some way to revise that promise. The boundary of the comparison is clear: Confucius speaks of government and the general order of words,

Epictetus of a person's conduct in their roles as human being, citizen, son, brother. Neither speaks of changing a personal name. Yet the question they help us ask applies to it as well: which expectations do I take on with a new word about myself, and which do I give up?

III. A name given from above: Abraham and Israel

In the Book of Genesis a new name is given at a turning point, and it folds a whole story into a single word.

God tells Abram: “Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham” (Genesis 17:5, King James Version), and at once ties the new name to the promise of making him a father of many nations. After the night of wrestling Jacob hears: “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel” (Genesis 32:28), and the explanation points to what has happened: in the King James wording, he has had power with God and with men and has prevailed. In the first case the name looks to the future, in the second to the past; in both it does not merely designate a person but says who he now is in the story of the covenant.

There is a detail that is easy to miss. The new name does not displace the old one at once. In the very next chapter the narrator again calls him Jacob (Genesis 33:1), and in 35:10 God pronounces the renaming once more, as if the first time had not been enough. In our reading, even a name given by the highest authority does not enter speech instantly: the old and the new live side by side for a long time.

This gives a first refinement of our question. Renaming is not a switch but a process in which both the one who names and those who repeat the name take part. If that is so with a name given from above, it is all the more so with a name a person chooses for themselves: the habits of those around them and the inertia of a story are not necessarily a refusal to recognise it.

The limits of this material matter too. In Genesis, renaming is a religious act within a narrative of covenant and blessing, not a model of personal choice. We do not carry theology over into psychology: from the fact that God gives Abraham and Israel new names it does not follow that every new name carries a promise or a blessing. What follows is more modest: in this tradition a name is conceived as something that can change along with a person's story, not as a label fixed once and for all.

IV. Naomi, who asked to be called Mara

The Book of Ruth offers an example of self-naming: a person takes a new name from her own story — and the narrator does not take it up.

Naomi left Bethlehem with her husband and two sons, and in the land of Moab she lost all three (Ruth 1:3–5). When she returns, the whole city is moved and asks whether this is she. Her

answer: “Call me not Naomi” (Ruth 1:20), and she asks to be called Mara instead. A footnote in the Russian Synodal translation glosses the names: Naomi as “pleasant”, Mara as “bitter”. In the next verse Naomi herself says why the old name no longer fits: she went out full and has been brought home empty.

Everything that makes up a self-name is here. There is the former name, given by others. There is the story it has parted from. There is the new word the person takes from that story. And there is an address: the self-name is spoken to those who will use it.

Then the book does something that, in our reading, matters more than any conclusion. In the very next verse the narrator reports that Naomi returned (1:22). He goes on calling her by her former name, and at the end of the book the neighbour women, naming Ruth's son, say that a son has been born to Naomi (4:17). Naomi's words are recorded in full, but her new name does not take hold in the story.

How to understand this, the text does not say. One reading: Mara named a state of grief, not the whole woman, and the course of the story gave her back her former name. Another: the people around her kept calling her what they were used to, and the story reflects their speech. Both readings show one thing: a self-name is a request addressed to others, and others have their own reasons to hold on to the former word — habit, affection, hope. The right to call oneself otherwise does not guarantee being called so.

V. The objection: a name is only a convention

The strongest objection to all this runs: a name is an agreement, and a person does not change when the word is replaced.

Juliet put it best, in the words quoted in the epigraph. Romeo, she reasons, would keep everything that makes him dear without that title; his name is no part of him. Romeo agrees at once: let her call him simply love, and he will never be Romeo again (Romeo and Juliet, II.2). The philosophical form of the same objection comes from Hermogenes in Plato's Cratylus. He cannot convince himself that names have any correctness other than convention and agreement: “any name which you give, in my opinion, is the right one, and if you change that and give another, the new name is as correct as the old” (Cratylus, 384d, tr. Benjamin Jowett; the Stephanus numbers follow the usual reference, as the copy we used has none). This is the position of an interlocutor; Socrates then examines it, and we do not recount that examination here. It must not be attributed to Plato.

Where is the objection right? The word really does not change the thing: Romeo remains himself under any name, and a change of name does not undo a lived history. There is no ground to expect that a new name will, by itself, change a person.

But the objection leaves something unsaid. Hermogenes' own example: people often change the names of their slaves, and the new name is as good as the old. In our reading, this example shows the reverse side of “convention”: an agreement about names presupposes that someone is entitled to name another. Socrates immediately asks whether it makes no difference who gives the name, an individual or a city, and Hermogenes answers that it makes none. If a name is an agreement, then the question of the right to name oneself turns into the question of who takes part in the agreement.

And the play itself, in our reading, argues with Juliet: the names Montague and Capulet never let the lovers go. The objection does not remove our question but sharpens it: even if the word does not change the person, the question remains how others treat them because of that word.

VI. A name is less than what it names: Laozi and Zhuangzi

Two Daoist texts, in our reading, raise a different objection — not “a name means nothing” but “a name is less than what it names”.

The first chapter of the Tao Te Ching speaks first of the Tao and then of the name: “The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.” (ch. 1, tr. James Legge). It is about the Tao and the origin of heaven and earth, not about human names. Applying this line to a person's name is our analogy, not Laozi's thought.

Closer to our subject is an episode in the first chapter of the Zhuangzi. The Emperor Yao wants to yield the throne to the hermit Hsü Yu, who refuses: “Besides, reputation is but the shadow of reality; and should I trouble myself about the shadow?” (Chuang Tzŭ, ch. I, tr. Herbert A. Giles). The English word here is reputation — a name in the sense of renown, a good name. These are the hermit's words within a parable, not the direct speech of the book's author.

What does this line add? Any self-name, old or new, remains a shadow. The hope that a word will at last be found to express who I really am is, by this logic, unattainable. But there is also a release in it: one can change one's name without demanding of it what no name gives. And one can let go of the former word, as Hsü Yu lets go of renown.

The boundary here is twofold. First, neither Laozi nor Zhuangzi speaks of personal names or their recognition; we take from them only the motif of distrust towards the name. Second, this distrust does not cancel the concern for correct names discussed in connection with Confucius: these are two different answers, and we will not merge them into one teaching.

VII. When others do the naming: nicknames and forms of reference

Another person's word about someone is not neutral: a religious norm forbids defamation and nicknames, and in one experiment the form of reference changed third-party ratings — but not equally for the two groups.

In Sura 49 of the Qur'an, among instructions to believers about life in the community — not to laugh one another to scorn, to avoid suspicion, not to pry — there is a direct prohibition: “Neither defame one another, nor call one another by nicknames.” (Sura 49, verse 11, tr. J. M. Rodwell). In this norm, naming another person is not a neutral act: a nickname can be an injury, and members of the community answer for the words they use for one another.

How far the form of reference changes attitudes was tested experimentally by Sandy Schumann and Hazem Zohny (PLOS ONE, 2025). This is a preregistered online experiment with UK residents: 681 people completed both the pre-test and the main study. Participants rated one group of people, named either in identity-first form (“violent criminals”, “the physically disabled”) or in person-first form (“people who have committed a violent crime”, “people with a physical disability”); the control group rated “most people”.

For people who have committed a violent crime, the person-first form reduced negative stereotypes and negative affect and increased willingness for contact; positive stereotypes and dehumanization did not change. For people with a physical disability, the same form did not change the negative ratings but slightly reduced positive stereotypes and somewhat increased dehumanization. The authors describe the effects in the first pair as small to moderate. For the second pair they offer several explanations: attitudes towards disability were already very positive (a ceiling effect), and the person-first form may itself signal that a group is stigmatized.

The authors name the limitations themselves: only two groups, a UK sample that was highly educated on average, and above all these are the ratings of third parties; how members of these groups respond to such forms the study does not show. In addition, 95 participants did not recall which form had been used for the group, and their data were excluded. For our question the conclusion is modest: in this experiment the form of a word changed how third parties rated the named group — but not always in the expected direction, and not equally for the two groups.

VIII. Norms of naming change

The word by which it is customary to call a person is a norm, and it can change noticeably within a few decades: one corpus study of English expressions for people with various health conditions shows this.

Jiyoon Kang, Naomi Baes, Amy Wu and Nick Haslam (PLOS Mental Health, 2026) traced, in two large corpora of English-language texts, how the balance between the simple forms “X person/people” (identity-first) and “person/people with X” (person-first) shifted for 15 conditions, 11 of which concern mental health and development. The Google Books corpus covered 1980–2019, the NOW news corpus 2010–2025.

In books the share of the identity-first form fell markedly: for plural expressions from about 0.62 in 1980 to 0.32 in 2019, for singular ones from 0.81 to about 0.51. Towards the end of the period the decline slowed, and in the news of 2010–2025 there was no longer an overall trend. The conditions diverged: in the news the identity-first form rose for alcoholism, autism and dyslexia and fell for obesity, depression and anorexia. And in both corpora the identity-first form was used more often of an individual than of a group.

The authors connect these movements with advocacy, editorial guidelines and scholarly debate: first the person-first form was promoted as destigmatizing, later for a number of conditions there was a move towards the identity-first form as an affirmation of identity. This is their interpretation, and for the differences between conditions it was, as they themselves write, made after the fact. Moreover, the data describe how expressions were used in books and news, not the preferences of people with these conditions, and cover only simple forms in English.

For the question of self-naming, something important follows. The word a person uses for themselves lives inside a language whose norms drift. The same form can be promoted as respectful in one decade and contested in the name of identity in another. In our reading, in choosing what to call oneself, a person partly joins one side of a current debate — and these data do not provide a universally “correct” form.

IX. Law and the record: where self-naming meets institutions

Self-naming meets not only other people's habits but also laws and records that keep the former name.

An example of law is the married surname. As a 2021 study describes it, under Article 187 of the Turkish Civil Code of 1926 a married woman must adopt her husband's surname; since 1997 she may keep her own surname before her husband's, and to bear only her own she must win the right in court. Maria Chayinska and colleagues (Frontiers in Psychology, 2021)

conducted three cross-sectional surveys: 118 women in Turkey who identify as feminists, 131 female students at a university in Ankara and 140 at a US university. In all three samples hostile sexism was associated with greater support for a woman changing her surname on marriage; in the first and third studies this association was also statistically mediated by justification of the gender order, while in the second no such mediation was found.

The authors limit their conclusions: the design is cross-sectional and does not show causality; the samples are small convenience samples; the results are culturally specific. And they caution that a woman's willingness to take her husband's surname should not be treated as a direct indicator of her views on gender hierarchy; citing qualitative research, they note that a change of surname can also be a public sign of a union. The study measured support for a practice, not anyone's own choice of name or its consequences. In our reading, it illustrates something else: the married surname sits where law, custom and beliefs meet; who decides it was not measured.

An example of the record: a scientist's publication history. In an opinion piece, Leo Chan Gaskins and Craig McClain (PLOS Biology, 2021) write that respecting a transgender person's chosen name is “a matter of dignity and safety”. As they describe it, someone who changed their name after publishing chooses among three equally unacceptable paths: leave the former name in the record, stop acknowledging earlier work, or ask each journal for a correction that points to the former name. The authors propose “invisible” name changes through a single ORCID-based mechanism, without legal documents, and note that this would also help people who change their surname on marriage and women fleeing domestic violence. This is the authors' argument, not a finding: the piece has no data of its own.

X. The limit of the conclusion: what a change of name does for the person

The open studies we read do not answer the main personal question: what a change of name or self-name does for the person who makes it.

Consider what each of them measured. The 2025 experiment (Schumann and Zohny) — ratings by third parties who answered questions about one of the named groups. The corpus study (Kang and colleagues) — frequencies of expressions in texts. The surveys (Chayinska and colleagues) — support for the practice of changing surnames. The piece by Gaskins and McClain — the authors' position without data of their own. None of these works asked people who had changed their names how their well-being, relationships or sense of self had changed. We therefore claim neither that a new name improves well-being nor that it worsens it: such a conclusion would require other studies, and our basis contains none.

What remains if we gather what has been said? The right to call oneself otherwise has several layers. Within my power is to change my word about myself and to stand by it. That word is addressed to others and, as with Naomi, it may have weighty grounds, but there is no guarantee that it will be taken up. Its recognition depends on a language whose norms change and on institutions — law, documents, records — for which a change of name can be a long procedure. In our reading, every name has a limit: it is less than the person — an analogy we drew from the Daoist texts — and it binds — as we read the Analects and Epictetus.

The objection of Hermogenes and Juliet stands in one respect: the word does not change the thing. So there is no ground to expect a new name to change one's life by itself. Whether it changes relationships, the studies we read did not measure. Our argument is more modest: a new name can change how a person is addressed only if others accept it. That is why the question of self-naming always turns out to be a question not only about me but also about those who address me.

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; this is not a method and not a guarantee of results.

1. **Distinguish what is changing.** A name, a surname, a nickname, a word of role or belonging are different words with different audiences. A new name requires a request to people and possibly a procedure in documents; a new word about oneself may require no one's consent.

2. **Connect the new word with your story — at least for yourself.** Naomi explains why the old name no longer fits. Explaining to everyone is not necessary, but a clear reason helps to tell a lasting decision from a word that names an acute state — and to admit honestly when it is the latter.

3. **Say plainly what to call you, and allow time.** Even the narrator of the Book of Ruth keeps calling the heroine by her former name. It helps to distinguish a slip of habit, disrespect and a refusal to recognise — and to respond to each differently: with a reminder, a conversation, sometimes distance.

4. **Documents and records are a separate path.** Laws on surnames differ from country to country; a former name may stay in publications and registers. It is worth learning the procedure in advance and understanding what in it depends on you and what on the institution.

5. **When naming others, ask what they call themselves.** A nickname does not become a name without the consent of the person so called. The form of reference can change attitudes, but not equally for different groups, and the data we read offer no universally correct form, so it is better to ask than to guess.

6. **Do not expect from a name what no name gives.** A new word can name more accurately what has happened and change how others address you. It does not replace the life it refers to.

When a specialist is needed. If the question of a name is bound up with severe distress, harassment, a threat to safety or a protracted conflict with people close to you, it is worth turning to a psychologist or a doctor, and for documents to a lawyer. If thoughts of harming yourself appear, seek help at once; in immediate danger, contact the emergency services of your country.

Key quotation

> *“why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?”*
>
> *The Book of Ruth 1:21 (second half of the verse), King James Version: Project Gutenberg #10.*

One question holds the whole structure of a self-name: the former name, the story it has parted from, and an appeal to those who will do the naming. From the next verse, where the narrator again uses her former name, it does not follow that a self-name may be disregarded; it follows that it remains a request.

Connections between traditions

Comparison (side A ↔ side B)	Meeting point (similarity)	Essential boundary
Confucius, Analects XIII.3 ↔ Epictetus, Discourses II.10	A name is tied to what is to be done: “What is necessary is to rectify names”, or affairs do not succeed — and “Consider who you are”, with a person's duties derived from their names	Confucius speaks of government and the social order of words, Epictetus of a person's conduct in their roles; neither speaks of changing a personal name
Genesis 17:5 and 32:28 ↔ Ruth 1:20–22 (King James Version)	A new name folds up a story: a promise, a struggle, grief	In Genesis God gives the name within the story of covenant and blessing; Naomi names herself, and the narrator does not take up her new name
Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet II.2 ↔ Plato, Cratylus 384d, Hermogenes' speech	A name is a convention, separable from the one named	The drama tests this idea through the fate of its characters, the dialogue through Socrates' examination; Hermogenes' position is not Plato's
Laozi, Tao Te Ching, ch. 1 ↔ Zhuangzi, ch. I, words of Hsü Yu	Distrust of the name: a nameable name is not the lasting one; renown is only the shadow of what is real	Laozi speaks of the Tao and the origin of heaven and earth, Hsü Yu of refusing renown and the throne; neither place speaks of personal names or their recognition
Qur'an, Sura 49:11 ↔ Schumann and Zohny, 2025	Naming another is not neutral: a nickname can defame, and the form of reference changed the ratings of the experiment's participants	A religious norm for the community of believers and an online experiment with third-party ratings are different kinds of basis; in the experiment the favourable effect appeared for one group and was absent or reversed for the other
Ruth 1:22; 4:17 (King James Version) ↔ Gaskins and McClain, 2021	A new name runs into the former one, kept in other people's speech and in records	The Book of Ruth is a narrative about the speech of those around her; the opinion piece on scientists' publication records states the authors' position, without data of its own

The table compares only the passages named; quotations follow the English editions listed in the sources. A similarity of motifs does not mean a shared teaching or a historical link between the traditions. The study in the fifth row gives average third-party ratings in a sample, and the piece in the sixth gives the authors' opinion; neither says anything about how a person who has changed their name experiences themselves.

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. The Chinese Classics, vol. 1: Confucian Analects, tr. James Legge (Project Gutenberg #4094). Book XIII, ch. 3, in full: Tsze-lu's question and the answer about rectifying names.

2. The Holy Bible, King James Version (Project Gutenberg #10). Genesis 17:5; 32:26–29; 33:1; 35:10; Ruth 1:2–6, 1:18–22; 4:15–17 — the renamings and how the characters are named afterwards.

3. Bible, Russian Synodal translation: Book of Ruth, ch. 1 (azbyka.ru). Verses 16–22 with the footnote to verse 20 glossing the names.

4. Shakespeare W. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Project Gutenberg #100). Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene 2: Juliet and Romeo on the name.

5. Laozi. The Tao Teh King, or the Tao and its Characteristics, tr. James Legge (Project Gutenberg #216). Ch. 1.

6. Plato. Cratylus, tr. Benjamin Jowett (Project Gutenberg #1616). Hermogenes' speech on convention (384c–d in the usual numbering) and Socrates' first questions to him.

7. Epictetus. A Selection from the Discourses of Epictetus with the Encheiridion, tr. George Long (Project Gutenberg #10661). Discourses II.10, first half of the discourse.

8. The Koran, tr. J. M. Rodwell (Project Gutenberg #2800). Sura 49, “The Apartments”, verses 9–12 in the usual numbering; Rodwell's edition orders the suras differently.

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10. Schumann S., Zohny H. Does attitude importance moderate the effects of person-first language? A registered report. PLOS ONE, 2025 (PMC12507193). Preregistered online experiment. Read: method, results, discussion, limitations and conclusion of the full text; CC BY.

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13. Gaskins L. C., McClain C. R. Visible name changes promote inequity for transgender researchers. PLOS Biology, 2021, 19(3) (PMC7943012). Opinion piece (Perspective) without data of its own; full text read; CC BY.

Tags

self-naming, name, name change, surname, nickname, recognition of a name, right to change, rectification of names, Confucius, Analects, Epictetus, Stoicism, names and duties, Book of Genesis, Abraham, Israel, Book of Ruth, Naomi, Mara, Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Plato, Cratylus, Hermogenes, name as convention, Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Zhuangzi, Daoism, Qur'an, Sura 49, person-first language, identity-first language, form of reference, text corpora, marital surname change, hostile sexism, system justification, invisible name change, ORCID

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