

UNITED WISDOM

A Life Story and the Events That Do Not Fit It

Human Nature and Inner World

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> *"I did that," says my memory. "I could not have done that," says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually--the memory yields.*
>
> *Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, ch. IV, § 68, tr. Helen Zimmern: Project Gutenberg #4363.*

What this article is about

A hypothetical example: someone who considers themselves reliable once failed to come to a friend on the friend's hard day. Years later, they tell the story in two words: "couldn't make it". The phrase is convenient — it leaves the story about oneself intact. But what should one do with an event that does not square with the person one knows oneself to be?

The article distinguishes three moves: fitting the event into the story, rebuilding the story around the event, or leaving the event as an unfinished fact. We follow them through Nietzsche, the Gospel of Matthew and the Second Book of Samuel, Confucius, the Qur'an, the Dhammapada, Augustine and Montaigne, and through experiments on memory for one's own actions, studies of central memories and a meta-analysis of writing about difficult experience. The article shows the cost of each move and what the data say about the first of them. The open studies we read did not test which move is better over time, so we present the second and third moves as arguments, not findings.

I. An event that does not fit

A story about oneself rests on generalizations — "I am reliable", "I don't do that" — and an event that contradicts them ends up on the border of the story.

Such a story does not list everything: it selects and connects. How that selection works is the subject of another article in the series, "The story I tell about myself" (I03); here the subject is different — what happens at the border of the story. While actions match the generalization, it goes unnoticed. An exceptional event makes it visible and forces a choice: either the generalization is wrong, or the event "doesn't count".

Augustine, reflecting in Book X of the Confessions on memory as a boundless storehouse, remarks: “nor do I myself comprehend all that I am. Therefore is the mind too strait to contain itself.” (Confessions, X.8.15, tr. E. B. Pusey; the chapter number follows the usual Latin

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division, as the copy has none). In our reading, a simple point follows: the story about oneself is always smaller than the person, and events that do not fit it are inevitable. This is not a malfunction but a property of any story.

Psychologists measure how much an event matters to the story by its centrality. In the study by Justina Pociunaite and Daniel Zimprich (Frontiers in Psychology, 2023), centrality was rated on a scale asking whether a memory had become a reference point or a turning point in a person's story; one of the scale's statements reads “This event permanently changed my life”. An exceptional event may stay on the margins, or it may become such a reference point.

Hence the three moves this article discusses. The event can be fitted into the story — forgotten, softened, explained by circumstances. The story can be rebuilt around the event. Or the event can be left as an unfinished fact, without deciding at once what it means. These are not steps along one correct path but different decisions, each with its own cost.

II. The first move: memory yields

The least noticeable move is to fit the event into the story so that the contradiction disappears; Nietzsche compressed the formula of this move into the three sentences of the epigraph.

Memory says: I did that. Pride says: I could not have done that. And memory yields. It matters that in Nietzsche it is neither conscience nor reason that yields, but memory: the event is not denied in an argument — it quietly changes shape. This is an aphorism, not an observation of people, and it describes no mechanism. But it names the direction precisely: when the self-image collides with an action, the memory adjusts to the image.

In the opening example, "couldn't make it" works this way. The phrase moves the event from the realm of choice to the realm of circumstance: the person does not deny not being there that day, but changes what it means. The story "I am reliable" stays whole. Fitting takes different forms: the event is forgotten, softened, explained by someone else's fault or by chance, and sometimes honestly acknowledged as an exception.

This move has real merits. Not every event should rewrite the story: sometimes a person really could not come, and the generalization "I am reliable" holds despite one day. A story revised after every failure loses its shape. So fitting is in itself neither a lie nor a weakness. The difference lies elsewhere: open fitting is spoken aloud as an exception — "that was unlike me, and here is why" — while hidden fitting changes the memory itself, so that the exception no longer shows in it.

The cost of the move lies elsewhere. If the event has been fitted without the person noticing, they cannot ask whether it was an exception or a sign. In our reading, this is where fitting becomes a risk: it removes the chance to learn about oneself what the event was saying.

Whether fitting can happen without a conscious lie is something the experiment we now turn to lets us judge.

III. An experiment: how memory improves one's own conduct

Experiments by Ryan Carlson, Michel André Maréchal, Bastiaan Oud, Ernst Fehr and Molly Crockett (Nature Communications, 2020) showed that people tend to remember their money decisions as more generous than they actually were.

The scheme was the same in all five experiments. A participant decided five times how to split money between themselves and an anonymous partner, and later took a surprise memory test: how much had they given on average? Accurate answers were paid. Overall, participants recalled giving more than they had given in reality. In the second and third experiments, each participant stated beforehand what share they considered fair. Those who gave less than their own standard of fairness overstated their generosity; those who upheld it showed no such shift towards generosity. The shift persisted even when the accuracy bonus shrank with every percentage point of error.

The last pair of experiments is the most telling. A second group of participants had to repeat exactly the same decisions as a participant from the first group, and were told explicitly that they were not responsible for the choices. In this group as a whole there was no memory shift. But those who, despite the instructions, still felt responsible again overstated their generosity, while those who felt no responsibility did not. The authors conclude that the distortion arose when violating one's own standard threatened one's self-image — that is, when a person saw themselves as responsible for the action.

The authors discuss the limits themselves. These are small anonymous decisions about money; more serious transgressions, they allow, may on the contrary be remembered well. The mechanism has not been established: the shift could arise when the choice was stored or when it was recalled. The alternative — a conscious overstatement of one's generosity — the authors consider less likely under their conditions, but they discuss it. One more caveat: those who did and did not feel responsible were separated not by the experiment but by their own answers, so, the authors warn, they may have differed in other ways as well.

For our question a cautious conclusion follows. The first move can take place without a conscious lie, and the condition under which it was observed resembles an exceptional event: one's own standard has been violated, and the responsibility is one's own. Carrying this over from money decisions to life events is our analogy; the experiment did not test it.

IV. The second move: Peter, who remembered

The Gospel of Matthew shows the opposite case: the event is not fitted, the story about oneself breaks, and memory does not yield.

On the night of the arrest, before it happens, Jesus tells the disciples that all of them will be offended because of him that night. Peter answers: “Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended.” (Matthew 26:33, King James Version). This is a story about oneself spoken aloud: I am not like everyone else. Jesus foretells that this very night Peter will deny him three times. In the high priest's courtyard Peter denies three times: first he says he does not know what is being said to him, then, with an oath, that he does not know the man, and the third time he curses and swears the same. The cock crowed, and Peter remembered what had been said to him, went out and wept bitterly (26:69–75).

There is no "couldn't make it" here. There is no explanation by circumstances, though one was at hand: the courtyard, the servant girls, the danger. In our reading, the gospel narrative records not the rebuilding but its beginning: the event is acknowledged as one's own, and the former story about oneself — "I will never" — no longer holds. What Peter did with his story afterwards, this scene does not say, and we will not speculate.

Another tradition gives the same move a different turn. In the Analects, Confucius's disciple Tsze-kung says: “The faults of the superior man are like the eclipses of the sun and moon. He has his faults, and all men see them; he changes again, and all men look up to him.” (Analects, XIX.21, tr. James Legge). These are the words of the disciple, not of Confucius himself. The fault here is not hidden, and the change also happens in plain view.

The boundary between these scenes is substantial. Peter weeps in a story of faith and repentance; Tsze-kung speaks of the bearing of the superior man in public life. What they share, in our reading, is one thing: the second move begins when the event is not removed from sight — neither one's own nor other people's.

What is missing here are data on how rebuilding the story affects a person over time. The open studies we read include no such longitudinal research; we therefore describe the second move as an argument, not as a tested path.

V. When someone else brings the event back: Nathan and David

A fitted event can return to the story through another person's word, and the Second Book of Samuel offers perhaps the sharpest example.

David took Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and had Uriah killed in battle; all of this was done in secret. The prophet Nathan comes to the king with a parable: a rich man had many sheep, a

poor man had a single ewe lamb that he raised with his children; the rich man, receiving a guest, spared his own flock and took the poor man's lamb. David, in anger, says that the man who did this deserves to die. And then: “And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.” (2 Samuel 12:7, King James Version). Nathan names the king's deeds directly, and David acknowledges that he has sinned against the Lord (12:9–13).

In our reading, the scene is built with precision. In David's story about himself there was room for such a deed only as someone else's crime — and he judges it with full force while it concerns another. The event came back to him not through memory but through another person's story, constructed so that it could not be fitted in advance.

The Qur'an shows the same structure in the story of Moses, to which we return below: the day after a killing that Moses acknowledged and repented of, one of the men he runs into again in the city reminds him of the day before (Sura 28:18–19). The event lives not only in the memory of the one who committed it — others remember it too.

Hence a second refinement of our question. In our reading, the first move is made alone, and that is its weakness: a fitted event is vulnerable to another person's word. In our view, those close to us take part in the story we tell about ourselves, and sometimes their question may keep memory from yielding; our basis contains no data on this — it is the authors' argument. But the limits of this material are also clear: Nathan speaks as a prophet in the name of God, and his rebuke is part of sacred history, not a model of conversation between friends. We take from the scene only its structure.

VI. Central events: what the data show

Studies of memory do not say which move is right, but they show which events become anchor points of the story about oneself.

The study by Pociunaite and Zimprich mentioned above involved 356 German-speaking adults aged 18 to 92. Prompted by twelve cue words — six positive and six negative — they recalled events more than a year old and rated each one: how central it was to their story, how emotional and vivid, how often they thought and talked about it. In all, 3,979 memories were collected.

Emotional memories — positive and negative alike — turned out to be central; on average positive ones were rated as more central (2.89 versus 2.73 on a five-point scale). Centrality was most strongly linked to the intensity of the experience and to how often a person thought about the event in private. A tendency to reflect was associated with higher centrality of memories, while a tendency to ruminate — to go over unpleasant things repetitively — was not. The authors stress that the data are cross-sectional and correlational and say nothing about causes; the cues may have influenced which memories came to mind.

Another study, by Yi Wang and Jefferson Singer (Frontiers in Psychology, 2020), compared the "self-defining" memories of 60 American and 60 Chinese students. In both groups such memories were rated as very important and recalled often, and the more important, the more often. Chinese students more often described memories of guilt and shame (18.3% versus 10%), frequently connected with academic stress. The sample is small, and the authors themselves call the findings preliminary.

Little follows from these data, but something important does. A difficult event can become a reference point for a person; memories rated as more emotionally intense and more often thought about were also rated as more central — which is cause and which is effect, these data do not say. Whether this is good or bad, these studies do not show: they record which memories are central, not what happens to a person when a difficult event becomes central.

VII. What the data do not show

The main question of the article — which of the three moves is better for a person over time — is not settled by the open studies we read.

The experiments by Carlson and colleagues describe the first move, but in small anonymous decisions about money. The studies of central memories show that difficult events can become anchor points, but they do not follow people over time. The meta-analysis of writing discussed below measures the effect of writing about difficult experience, but not which move it supports. Our basis contains no open longitudinal study of whether rebuilding the story around a difficult event — or keeping it unfinished — is associated with a better or worse state years later. We therefore do not claim that any move is better.

What remains in place of data? An argument — and we label it as one. In our reading, each move has its cost. Fitting preserves the story cheaply but can deprive a person of knowledge about themselves — and, as David's story shows, it is vulnerable to another person's word. Rebuilding is honest towards the event but requires giving up part of the former story, and the scene with Peter shows what that costs. Leaving the event unfinished gives it a place without a ready-made meaning but requires bearing uncertainty.

There is also a practical consequence of this ignorance. If no move has been shown to be best, it is more useful not to look for the right one but to understand which move is being made — and whether it is being made by choice. The experiment by Carlson and colleagues suggests at least one thing: the first move can happen without a conscious lie — in small anonymous decisions about money; carrying this over to life events remains our analogy. So the first task is to notice that it is happening; after that, the person chooses.

This argument can be tested only by studies we do not have. Until they exist, it remains what we call it: a working hypothesis of the authors, not a conclusion drawn from data.

VIII. The third move: leaving the event unfinished

The third move is to acknowledge the event as one's own, without fitting it in or rebuilding the whole story around it, and to leave the question of its meaning open.

The Qur'an tells how Moses, already a grown man, took the side of a man of his own people in the city: “And Moses smote him with his fist and slew him.” (Sura 28, verse 15, tr. J. M. Rodwell). Moses calls what happened a work of Satan and at once prays: “O my Lord, I have sinned to mine own hurt” (ibid., verse 16), and God forgives him. The event is not denied and does not become the last word: the story of Moses continues, and the next day, as we have seen, others remind him of it.

The Dhammapada, a collection of sayings from the Pali canon, says the same thing differently: “He whose evil deeds are covered by good deeds, brightens up this world, like the moon when freed from clouds.” (Dhammapada, 173, tr. F. Max Müller). The evil deed is not erased — it is covered by what was done afterwards.

What do we mean by unfinished? The event remains a fact: "I did that". But no final meaning is attached to it — neither "it doesn't count" nor "this is who I really am". In our reading, both traditions hold on to precisely this double movement: the deed is acknowledged as one's own, and the person is not reduced to it. And we read Augustine's thought that the mind is too strait to contain itself as an argument for this move: if a person is larger than their story, then not every event has to receive its place in the story at once. Augustine himself is speaking of memory and self-knowledge, not of a story about oneself.

The boundary of the comparison matters especially here. In the Qur'an, forgiveness is given by God; in the Dhammapada the subject is deeds and their fruits; our "unfinished event" is a secular reading, not the teaching of these traditions. And, as with the second move, our basis contains no data showing that this move is more helpful than the others: it is the authors' argument.

IX. Montaigne's objection: not repenting of having been oneself

A strong objection to all three moves at once came from Montaigne: a whole person has no need to rewrite themselves because of a mismatch with themselves.

In the chapter "Of Repentance" he repeats that he very rarely repents and that “my conscience is satisfied with itself, not as the conscience of an angel, or that of a horse, but as the conscience of a man” (Essays, III.2, tr. Charles Cotton). He adds at once that he speaks as one inquiring and doubting and defers to commonly accepted beliefs. And nearer the end of the chapter, refusing to pass off the infirmity of old age as virtue, he says: “Were I to live my life over again, I should live it just as I have lived it”.

Where is the objection right? A story revised after every mismatch turns into an endless trial of oneself. Repentance can be false: Montaigne does not want a late weakness to refute his healthy years after the fact. And the first move is sometimes simply fair: the event really was accidental, and the generalization about oneself is true.

Where does the objection stop? In our reading, Montaigne speaks of the form of his life as a whole, not of defending a particular harm done to another person: in the same chapter he acknowledges that a genuine vice offends sound judgment. His objection is aimed at repentance as a ritual, not at acknowledging a deed. It also touches the third move: an unfinished event easily turns into a case that stays open forever, to which a person returns again and again. Montaigne reminds us that one can settle accounts with one's own life without repentance — by admitting that one lived as one lived.

Montaigne and Peter are two answers to the same mismatch with oneself. One does not repent of having been himself; the other weeps bitterly. We will not smooth over this boundary: it shows that the choice of move depends not only on the event but also on how a person sees themselves and their life as a whole.

X. Writing the event down: what the data on writing show

Writing an event down is, in our view, one way to keep it from quietly changing, though our basis contains no data on exactly this; what is known about the effect of writing about difficult experience is best seen in a meta-analysis, but with caveats.

Yeseul Lee, Dongil Kim and Jung-Eun Lim (Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2023) gathered 29 Korean experimental and quasi-experimental studies of expressive writing in Pennebaker's tradition — writing about one's thoughts and feelings connected with stress or difficult experience — that included a control group. The overall effect was g = 0.33. But the distribution of results was asymmetric, which points to publication bias, and after correction the effect fell to 0.16. The studies differed from one another.

Within these data there are details. In studies with structured writing, in which the topic and format of each session were set, the effect was larger than with free writing. In studies with sessions longer than 15 minutes it was larger than with short ones. These are comparisons between studies, not experiments that varied the form of writing itself. At delayed follow-up the effect was larger than immediately after writing, although in half of the studies the follow-up took place only one to two weeks later. The authors themselves name one limitation: most of the included studies relied on self-reports. All the included studies were conducted in one country, Korea. There were no significant differences by participants' age or between clinical and non-clinical groups. Citing other studies, the authors warn that in severe conditions there may be no effect, and they themselves call the corrected effect not large.

What follows for our question? In these Korean studies, writing about difficult experience had, on average, an effect the authors call medium (g = 0.33) and, after correction for publication bias, not large (0.16). The meta-analysis did not test which of the three moves writing supports, and it does not say that a written event becomes "integrated" into the story. Our own argument, which the meta-analysis did not test: writing may help with the first step of any move — setting down what happened before memory yields.

What this means in practice

What follows are the authors' working criteria. The second and third moves have not been tested in the studies we read; the first has been studied only in small money decisions. This is not a method and not a guarantee of results.

1. **Name the event precisely.** Not "couldn't make it" but "didn't go"; not "it just happened" but what exactly I did or did not do. The basis is an argument by analogy with the experiment in which memory shifted in those who had violated their own standard and felt responsible; this has not been tested on life events.

2. **Separate the event from the verdict.** The event is a fact, not a definition of who I "really" am. The fault as an eclipse in Tsze-kung, acknowledgement and forgiveness in the story of Moses, the evil deed covered by good in the Dhammapada — in our reading, in these passages from different traditions a deed does not exhaust a person; this is a similarity of motif, not a shared teaching.

3. **Choose a move rather than making it by inertia.** Fit the event in if it really was accidental and the story can bear it. Rebuild the story if the event shows something the story missed. Leave it unfinished if its meaning is not yet clear. Which move is better over time, the data we read do not show.

4. **Let someone else speak, but choose the person.** Someone close can bring back what memory has smoothed over, as Nathan brought David's deed back to him. But a rebuke and a conversation are not the same thing.

5. **If you write, write about a specific event and not in haste.** In the Korean meta-analysis, studies with structured writing and with sessions longer than 15 minutes showed larger effects; the overall effect after correction is small.

6. **Do not turn revision into a trial of yourself.** Montaigne's objection stands: not every mismatch with oneself requires a new story.

When a specialist is needed. If the event is connected with a severe experience, with harm done to someone, or with feelings you cannot bear on your own, it is worth turning to a

psychologist or a doctor. If thoughts of harming yourself appear, seek help at once; in immediate danger, contact the emergency services of your country.

Key quotation

> *“And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.”*
>
> *The Gospel of Matthew 26:75, King James Version: Project Gutenberg #10.*

The epigraph describes a memory that yields; here memory does not yield — and the former story about oneself collapses. It does not follow from this verse that every exceptional event calls for tears; in our reading, it shows something else: the second move begins with a memory that has not been fitted.

Connections between traditions

Comparison (side A ↔ side B)	Meeting point (similarity)	Essential boundary
Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, § 68 ↔ Carlson and colleagues, 2020	Memory yields to the self-image: “Eventually--the memory yields.” — and participants recalled their decisions as more generous if they had violated their own standard	An aphorism without observations and an experiment on small anonymous money decisions; the comparison is ours, and carrying it over to life events was not tested
Peter, Matthew 26:33, 75 ↔ Tsze-kung, Analects XIX.21	The fault is visible and not hidden: Peter remembers and weeps, and the faults of the superior man — “and all men see them”	A gospel narrative of faith and repentance and the words of Confucius's disciple about the bearing of the superior man in public life
Nathan and David, 2 Samuel 12:7 ↔ Augustine, Confessions X.8.15	A person does not see all of themselves alone	A rebuke by a prophet in the name of God and a philosophical reflection on the limit of memory and self-knowledge
Qur'an, Sura 28:15–16 ↔ Dhammapada, 173	The evil deed is not denied and does not become the last word about the person: Moses acknowledges his sin, while in the Dhammapada verse evil deeds are “covered by good deeds”; the verse itself has no acknowledgement, and the similarity is our reading	Forgiveness given by God, and evil deeds covered by good in Buddhist ethics of action; these are different teachings about the consequences of a deed
Montaigne, Essays III.2 ↔ Peter, Matthew 26:75	Both respond to a mismatch with oneself	Montaigne does not repent of having been himself, Peter weeps bitterly; the boundary is substantial, and we will not smooth it over

The table compares only the passages named. Quotations follow the English editions listed in the sources; the gospel text is quoted from the King James Version. A similarity of motifs does not mean a shared teaching or a historical link between the traditions; the experiment in the first row gives sample averages and says nothing about life events.

Primary sources

The traditional texts were read in Project Gutenberg copies (the English translations 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. Nietzsche F. Beyond Good and Evil, tr. Helen Zimmern (Project Gutenberg #4363). Ch. IV, "Apophthegms and Interludes", § 68.

2. The Holy Bible, King James Version (Project Gutenberg #10). Matthew 26:31–35 and 69–75 (Peter's promise and denial); 2 Samuel 12:1–13 (Nathan's parable and David's acknowledgement).

3. Augustine. The Confessions of St. Augustine, tr. E. B. Pusey (Project Gutenberg #3296). Book X, the passage on memory as a storehouse (X.8.15 in the usual division; the copy has no chapter numbers).

4. The Chinese Classics, vol. 1: Confucian Analects, tr. James Legge (Project Gutenberg #4094). Book XIX, ch. 21 (words of Tsze-kung).

5. Montaigne M. de. Essays of Michel de Montaigne — Complete, tr. Ch. Cotton, ed. W. C. Hazlitt (Project Gutenberg #3600). Book III, ch. II, "Of Repentance": the opening of the chapter and the passage on old age near the end.

6. The Koran, tr. J. M. Rodwell (Project Gutenberg #2800). Sura 28, "The Story", verses 14–19 in the usual numbering; Rodwell's edition orders the suras differently.

7. The Dhammapada, tr. F. Max Müller (Sacred Books of the East, vol. X; Project Gutenberg #2017). Ch. XIII, "The World", verses 172–173.

8. Carlson R. W., Maréchal M. A., Oud B., Fehr E., Crockett M. J. Motivated misremembering of selfish decisions. Nature Communications, 2020, 11 (PMC7190661). Five experiments. Read: results, discussion (including alternative accounts) and methods of the full text; CC BY 4.0.

9. Pociunaite J., Zimprich D. Characteristics of positive and negative autobiographical memories central to identity: emotionality, vividness, rehearsal, rumination, and reflection. Frontiers in Psychology, 2023, 14 (PMC10534006). Online study with a correlational design. Read: methods, results, discussion, limitations and conclusion; CC BY.

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study of two student samples. Read: methods, results, discussion, limitations and conclusion; CC BY.

11. Lee Y., Kim D., Lim J.-E. Do expressive writing interventions have positive effects on Koreans?: a meta-analysis. Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2023, 14 (PMC10702225). Meta-analysis of 29 studies. Read: method, results, discussion and limitations; CC BY.

Tags

exceptional event, story about oneself, life story, memory, memory distortion, motivated misremembering, self-image, personal responsibility, fairness standard, self-justification, repentance, penitence, acknowledging a deed, unfinishedness, rebuilding the story, event centrality, self-defining memories, rumination, reflection, expressive writing, meta-analysis, publication bias, Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, Apostle Peter, Peter's denial, Gospel of Matthew, Nathan and David, Second Book of Samuel, Augustine, Confessions, Confucius, Tsze-kung, Analects, Montaigne, Of Repentance, Qur'an, Moses, Dhammapada, Buddhist ethics

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