


UNITED WISDOM

# The Role of the Strong Person: What Becomes Impossible to Ask For

The Person and the Inner World

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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## Epigraph

> *“to act well the character assigned you”*

Epictetus, The Enchiridion, § 17, a fragment of the concluding sentence, in Elizabeth Carter’s English translation.

## What this article is about

A person knows how to make decisions, stay through a difficult conversation, and finish what they begin. Gradually, another expectation joins these abilities: they will always manage. Others may sustain this image, or the person may sustain it themselves. An ordinary request for an explanation, an hour’s cover, or some company can then seem to disprove their entire previous life. Yet an ability, an impression, and the limits of a particular task are different things. We explore this distinction through an invented example, bringing Epictetus, William James, Aristotle, and a selected passage from Galatians into conversation. Their grounds differ: Stoic ethics of roles, a historical account of the social self, a philosophy of friendship, and religious exhortation. They help make a request more intelligible without explaining everyone through one mechanism. The question is what has become difficult to ask for, from whom, and on what terms, while retaining responsibility for one’s own action.

## I. An ability and a promise never to struggle

Imagine Irina helping organize a small community festival. This is an invented case, not a research participant’s story. She knows the venue, remembers agreements, and usually spots problems before others do. Her colleagues’ confidence has a reasonable basis: several earlier events benefited from her care. Before the next festival, however, the team changes, and she does not know the new arrangement for the equipment. She wants someone familiar with it to check her plan. Instead, she rereads it alone several times. The difficulty concerns a particular task; her conclusion about herself becomes much broader. If she needs an explanation, perhaps all that earlier confidence was undeserved.

This conclusion joins claims that should be examined separately. Knowing how to organize an event does not mean knowing every device, new rule, or agreement made by someone else. Reliability can depend on noticing what is unknown and bringing in the appropriate person in time. If reliability means asking no questions, however, the unknown becomes difficult to



@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

name. Irina has no evidence that everyone will be disappointed. She may expect her question to create that impression. Until this is checked, an expectation should remain distinct from an expressed demand. Who actually prohibited questions? What did they say? Which action now seems to violate the role? Even within one team, the answers may differ.

We sometimes use “strong” as though it named one stable quantity. It may refer to stamina, knowledge, composure, readiness to protect someone, or a habit of answering quickly. These abilities do not automatically confer one another. Someone can handle a tense meeting without understanding the equipment, or support a friend without having a free evening. The starting point is therefore not an instruction to abandon strength. It is to identify the ability that genuinely exists and the extra promise quietly attached to it. Never encountering difficulty is a far larger promise than any specific skill. Testing it would require an almost impossible knowledge of every circumstance that might arise.

## II. Whose image of the strong person matters?

In Chapter X of The Principles of Psychology, William James examines the social self through recognition by others. The selected passage describes different images of a person among different groups, distinguishing conflicting divisions from harmonious ones. This is a historical psychological discussion, not a modern measurement of how often people conceal difficulties. Its useful contribution here concerns the audience. Irina might readily ask an old colleague about a technical detail but remain silent at a general meeting. The practical difficulty is the same. The meaning she expects her question to carry changes with the people who hear it and with the relationships between them.

This distinction prevents us from declaring someone incapable of asking for help altogether. One recipient, topic, or form of conversation may be closed to them. Among friends, admitting inexperience may be easy while asking for money feels impossible. At work, requesting a specialist may be acceptable while asking for temporary cover feels difficult. Even “help” can seem too broad, as if it permanently changes the requester’s standing. A more precise request names an event: please check two points in the plan before Thursday. Precision cannot guarantee agreement, but it gives the recipient something definite to answer. A possible action can now be discussed without requiring an immediate judgment about the requester’s entire identity.

James also discusses group-specific codes of honor that permit one action and forbid another. His historical examples establish no present duties for physicians, soldiers, or organizers. The underlying question about a standard remains useful: whom does a person feel they must not disappoint, and what does that group consider worthy? Sanctions can be real; the prohibition is not always imaginary. If a team ridicules every question, changing one person’s inner attitude will not address the whole situation. The conditions of cooperation and

access to a suitable recipient also matter. An image exists within relationships. Revising it can require attention to working conditions as well as to the way someone describes themselves.

## III. A role calls for action, not omniscience

In § 17 of The Enchiridion, Epictetus uses a dramatic image: someone is assigned a part, and their task is to perform it well. Choosing the part and acting within it are distinguished. This Stoic teaching rests on an account of the order of life that cannot simply be transferred to a modern team. A colleague, manager, or relative does not thereby become the author of that order, entitled to assign unlimited obligations. Nevertheless, distinguishing a role's name from the actions it involves is useful. An organizer must coordinate an event. It does not follow that they must personally perform every technical operation or conceal every gap in their understanding.

The performance of a role can be examined through the organization of the work. Who knows the equipment procedure? Who has the current plan? When is an error still repairable? If Irina connects the appropriate people in time, her question can serve the task she accepted. If she remains silent to preserve an impression, the task and the image start competing. This does not make every request appropriate. A person can ask too late, approach someone without the required knowledge, or transfer an agreed obligation without discussion. Evaluating these actions requires a specific basis. Asking alone establishes neither conscientiousness nor weakness. Its relation to the task, timing, and actual agreement matters.

The dramatic image also allows us to consider a limit: a part need not describe the performer's entire life. Irina is responsible for this festival; she need not become a permanent service for solving everybody's difficulties. This is our modern application, not a concealed quotation from Epictetus. It can be tested by naming where the role begins and ends: its duration, tasks, and resources. An indefinite obligation to be strong for everyone offers no way to know when the work is complete. A defined obligation makes completion recognizable. Someone can then turn to another activity without repeatedly proving that they are still entitled to time of their own.

## IV. Why self-sufficiency need not exclude friendship

In Nicomachean Ethics IX.9, Aristotle asks whether a happy person needs friends. The objection is familiar: if someone is self-sufficient, what are other people for? His answer develops within his account of a good life and virtuous friendship. Friends cannot be reduced to instruments for obtaining missing goods. Shared life includes activity, conversation, and thought; happiness is considered as activity rather than mere possession. This challenges a calculation in which every approach to another person indicates a deficiency, while never approaching anyone establishes completeness. The argument does not determine an identical need for closeness in everyone, nor does it turn solitude into a diagnosis. Its ethical framework must remain visible.

Irina might ask someone to check her plan because she lacks information. She might also want to discuss it with a person whose participation matters to the shared undertaking. These are different reasons, and the second need not disguise itself as the first. Sometimes an apparently practical excuse is invented because simply wanting to share an activity seems insufficiently respectable. Yet discussion cannot be fully described as repairing a fault in one participant. Two people may understand the task and still choose to work together to exchange views, coordinate intentions, or enjoy meeting. Here an approach is an invitation to activity, rather than a declaration that the requester is an inferior person.

Friendship should also remain distinct from an obligation to supply a service. A friend can matter while lacking an answer or being busy on the proposed evening. If their value is measured solely by immediate usefulness, a request becomes a test of the relationship with a predetermined verdict. Aristotle distinguishes friendship for utility from friendship in his stricter ethical sense; a modern encounter need not meet every condition of the latter. For this example, we can separate two questions: does this person matter to me, and can they fulfill this request now? A negative answer to the second does not automatically settle the first, though repeated indifference may deserve a separate conversation.

## V. What, specifically, can be requested?

In § 24 of The Enchiridion, a discussion concerns usefulness to friends. The interlocutor mentions money and citizenship. Epictetus asks whether these are within someone’s control and whether a trustworthy, honorable friend counts for nothing. In the same discussion, he explicitly asks friends to help him preserve his fidelity. The passage therefore cannot be reduced to a rule against requesting anything. Its distinctions concern resources, character, and the cost of acquiring external goods. Material assistance can nevertheless be necessary. Moral support does not replace money when a particular expense must be paid, and this philosophical account does not remove the importance of social arrangements.

In our example, “I need help” might contain several requests. Does Irina need a technical answer, another person at installation, or a chance to explain a doubt without rushing? The first needs knowledge, the second needs time and coordination, and the third needs attention. One recipient may be able to offer only one. If the requests are combined, declining installation can mistakenly be heard as refusing to listen. Separating them also makes the helper’s limits visible. Someone might be unavailable on Saturday but willing to check the plan today. That answer becomes useful when Irina identifies which part it addresses and which part of the situation remains unresolved.

There is also a request for company without a solution. Someone might want to walk together after a difficult conversation or sit beside a friend while drafting a message. This leaves the choice of words with the requester and promises no particular feeling afterwards. Nevertheless, the requested participation can be clear: a certain activity at a certain time. The invitation can leave room for a free answer: would half an hour today suit you, or would another day work better? Asking about timing does not oblige the other person to agree. It recognizes their commitments and their ability to assess what is possible, while leaving the requester free to consider another arrangement.

## VI. A limit to the task is not a verdict on the person

In § 37, Epictetus observes that taking on a part beyond one’s strength can mean performing it badly while abandoning one that could have been sustained. This sharp ethical judgment supplies no medical method for identifying exhaustion. Here its relevance concerns the relation between an accepted role and possible action. A limit can arise from timing, the number of tasks, missing knowledge, or simultaneous commitments. None of these facts by itself determines someone’s worth. If Irina promises both to welcome guests and supervise installation at the same time, the problem may concern the schedule. Doubling a promise does not create another performer or enlarge the same hour.

Requesting assistance changes the distribution of action without necessarily changing its goal. Another participant can welcome guests while Irina coordinates the groups. Any transfer, however, should be visible to the people affected. Concealed transfer preserves an image of strength at the cost of someone else’s uncertainty: a helper discovers that a small agreement has become responsibility for the entire event. A clear handover specifies scope, timing, and necessary information. It also considers what happens if the helper cannot participate. The request then belongs to the actual organization of the undertaking. It is not merely a way to move pressure onto whichever person happens to be available.

Aristotle’s account of shared activity offers another possibility: the work is undertaken together rather than transferred completely. This differs from modern delegation; the connection is our application. Two festival participants might check the installation sequence together before

returning to their separate tasks. Participation has a beginning and an end. Irina may later use the knowledge independently, or another circumstance may require discussion again. Neither outcome must become a test of her identity. The substantive question concerns what participation makes the task possible and how everyone's capacities are considered. It is more informative than a contest over who can remain silent for longest while continuing to carry the same obligation.

## VII. Mutual help and one's own responsibility

Galatians 6:1–5 places mutual assistance alongside attention to oneself. The selected passage begins with gentle restoration of another person and consideration of one's own vulnerability. It then calls for bearing one another's burdens, connecting this with the law of Christ; later, it calls for examining one's own work and bearing one's own burden. This is religious exhortation, not a workplace allocation manual. Without a separate examination of the Greek, we will not build an explanation on distinctions between the two words rendered as "burden." We can nevertheless notice neighboring appeals: participation in another's difficulty does not remove attention to one's own action and responsibility.

Irina can ask someone to check the plan while remaining responsible for deciding how the festival will run. The helper can find a problem, suggest a change, and decline part of the work. Their participation does not oblige them to resolve every future difficulty. Requests have content, and responsibility has several aspects: deciding, acting, informing others, and checking whether an agreement was fulfilled. These can be distributed in different ways, but naming them helps. Otherwise, one participant thinks they offered advice while another thinks they transferred the entire decision. A conflict may arise without anyone lacking goodwill: the people involved could simply have understood one conversation as two different agreements.

For someone attached to an image of strength, asking can appear to mean choosing between complete independence and complete dependence. This hides many intermediate actions. Someone can obtain information and decide for themselves, share execution while retaining their part, or withdraw one promise and fulfill another. They can also decline to discuss personal reasons while requesting specific cover. The amount disclosed need not match the amount of participation requested. Our contemporary use of the religious comparison is limited: mutuality and one's own action can be considered together. The passage does not create an obligation to tell any helper one's whole history or accept whatever judgment that helper offers.

## VIII. What standard defines a good result?

James's discussion of honor draws attention to group-specific criteria for acceptable behavior. The Galatian appeal to examine one's own work begins from a different ground. Historical psychology of social images does not explain the religious meaning of self-examination. Bringing these passages together nevertheless lets us ask how Irina evaluates the outcome. If the festival goes well but someone learns that she needed an explanation, does she consider the undertaking spoiled? If she appears confident but her silence leaves others with an incorrect plan, does she consider herself successful? The answer reveals a distinction between the task's outcome and the preservation of an impression that has become an additional task.

Other people's assessments are not useless. A team may notice an unfulfilled promise, a participant may identify missing information, and a visitor may encounter something the organizer overlooked. Rejecting every outside comment in the name of one's own standard creates another kind of closure. A more precise examination separates information from a sweeping verdict. "Nobody told us that the time changed" concerns a particular action. "You always ruin everything" enlarges the conclusion without specifying its grounds. Irina need not accept both as one inseparable judgment. She can correct the timing message while requesting discussion of the particular event. Correcting an error does not require accepting a verdict on her entire character.

The standard itself can also be examined. Reliability might mean honoring agreements, reporting changes in time, and identifying what is unknown. Another standard demands unchanging confidence and flawless outcomes under every circumstance. An observer may find this attractive while not having to act under it themselves. Reviewing the standard does not mean choosing the easiest one. Some tasks have serious consequences, and requirements for particular knowledge are justified. The next questions concern who has that knowledge and how it is checked. Approaching a competent participant can form part of meeting the requirement when that approach provides the necessary information before an action is taken.

## IX. When the answer is no

A request begins a conversation but does not control its outcome. A helper may lack time or knowledge, or may not want to participate. A refusal can be clear, vague, or rude; these forms also differ. In our invented case, the technical specialist says that checking the plan before Thursday is impossible. This gives Irina new information about availability. It does not establish that asking was shameful or that she should remain silent thereafter. She now needs another date, another participant, or a smaller event. An answer can be disappointing and useful: it lets her stop arranging the schedule around assistance that has not actually been agreed.

The situation differs when a refusal includes humiliation or is used to demand unrelated concessions. Then the terms of contact matter alongside the requester's inner attitude. Someone can seek another arrangement, limit personal disclosure, or decline assistance whose cost is unacceptable. Epictetus's discussion of fidelity in § 24 reminds us that acquiring a resource does not settle how it should be acquired. This is a philosophical perspective, not a ready solution to every unequal relationship. Where alternatives are scarce, simply advising someone to refuse can ignore real constraints. Those constraints should be identified before evaluating possible action, rather than invoked only after blaming someone for choosing badly.

After one refusal, a person may want to prove that asking was unnecessary. Irina might complete everything herself and convert this success into a new rule: never ask again. Yet a single outcome does not establish that the strategy fits every future task. Timing, knowledge, and the number of participants may change. An achievement can be acknowledged without prohibiting the next question. Accepting a refusal means taking another person's decision into account, not necessarily endorsing their assessment of oneself. Clarifying the request, changing its recipient, or revising the original obligation remain possible. Each requires its own decision; none follows automatically from a reassuring statement about strength.

## X. Asking as part of a chosen way to act

At the end of our example, Irina need not become someone who readily shares every difficulty. A change in one undertaking can be enough: the unknown is named, the needed participation defined, and agreement checked. She can tell the team that she coordinates the event while checking the technical plan with another participant. This joins competence to a limit without demanding a public confession or a demonstration of invulnerability. It describes actual work. If the assistance is not yet agreed, it cannot be entered into the plan as secured. A request and an agreement remain different events, even when the desire for support is considerable and the recipient seems likely to say yes.

Trust can develop gradually as well. Someone asks about a small detail, then notices whether the response respects their independence. Trust may expand, or the recipient may prove suitable only for certain tasks. This does not require instantly assigning the person the role of rescuer or declaring them permanently indifferent. Precision remains possible: today they helped check the plan, while personal conversation was difficult. These are different observations. Mutuality develops through actions and coordination, rather than through an obligation always to understand each other. Someone regarded as strong is also entitled to offer limited assistance, rather than become an endlessly available resource for everyone in their surroundings.

The article's central question can therefore become smaller and clearer. Instead of asking whether one can afford to be weak, ask what participation is wanted here and why the request

seems incompatible with oneself. The answer might identify an actual group rule, an excessive promise, an unclear request, or reluctance to disclose too much. These require different actions: checking a plan, revising an obligation, or finding a more suitable recipient. Strength receives no single new definition here. We retain the value of being able to act while releasing one request from the obligation to prove an entire identity. Its content, conditions, and consequences can then be discussed at the scale of the undertaking that prompted it.

## What this means in practice

**1. Name the closed request.** Choose an ordinary, nonurgent situation you are willing to consider. Write down the action you wanted to request: an explanation of a procedure, a reading of a draft, or cover during a specified hour. Beside it, identify the meaning you expect the recipient to attach to it. Separately record what they actually said, if anything. Missing information need not be replaced by a confident answer. The aim is to distinguish a request, an expectation, and a known condition of the relationship. You may stop at writing and choose not to approach anyone.

**2. Separate participation from decision.** Identify the participation needed and the responsibility you would retain. Include scope, timing, and information the helper would need. Consider the alternative if they decline: another recipient, another date, or a smaller task. This draft lets you examine a request before sending it. Where describing the work is sufficient, a personal history need not be disclosed. This is an author-created reflection exercise, not a tested method guaranteeing agreement or a change in how someone feels.

**3. Review the standard after an answer.** If you decide to ask, first note the actual reply and confirmed agreement. Later compare what happened with what was genuinely promised. What was accomplished? What remains unknown? Do not make one refusal a rule about everyone, or one agreement an entitlement to permanent assistance. You can thank someone for a specific action and clarify future terms. If approaching them does not suit the situation, revising your own plan remains possible. This voluntary practice aims at a clearer decision, not at compelling a display of vulnerability.

## Key quotation

> *“Bear ye one another's burdens”*

Galatians 6:2, the opening clause in the King James Version. The continuation relates the appeal to the law of Christ; the nearby verse 6:5 also speaks of each person’s own burden.

## Connections between traditions

**1. Social image and performance of a role.** James links the social self with recognition by different groups (Chapter X, Social Self). Epictetus distinguishes assignment of a part from acting well within it (§ 17). The comparison asks whether preserving an impression has displaced the task. Group expectations are not identical to the Stoic order of life; this is an application to a contemporary example, not proof that the teachings are one.

**2. Self-sufficiency and another's participation.** Aristotle does not exclude friends from a happy person's life (IX.9). Galatians connects gentle participation with bearing one another's burdens (6:1–2). Both passages make it possible to question an equation of capability with the absence of relationships. Their grounds differ: virtuous activity and the law of Christ. The comparison establishes no identical need for help in everyone.

**3. A resource and a friend's value.** Epictetus distinguishes money and citizenship from a friend's fidelity (§ 24). Aristotle distinguishes usefulness from friendship that includes shared thought (IX.9). This helps specify a request for a resource, an action, or conversation. It does not devalue material need or make conversation a substitute for necessary professional participation.

**4. Group honor and examination of one's work.** James describes different standards of acceptable behavior within social images (Social Self, the discussion of honor). Galatians calls for examining one's own work (6:3–4). Their comparison distinguishes an impression of reliability from an action's outcome. Religious self-examination does not thereby become a modern self-esteem scale.

**5. An excessive part and shared activity.** Epictetus warns about assuming a part beyond one's strength (§ 37). Aristotle discusses activity sustained more easily together (IX.9). This allows the scope of participation to be considered instead of a verdict on the person. The festival application is ours: neither passage studies workplace delegation or promises recovery from overload.

**6. Support and retained responsibility.** Epictetus asks friends to assist in preserving fidelity (§ 24). The neighboring Galatians 6:2 and 6:5 address mutual and individual burdens. Our contemporary question concerns what action can be shared while retaining one's part of a decision. The connection makes no claim about the Greek words and creates no obligation to disclose an entire personal history.

## Primary sources

Epictetus. The Enchiridion, Elizabeth Carter's English translation, Internet Classics Archive. Sections 17, 24, and 37 were read in full for this article. The epigraph is a short fragment from § 17; the Russian rendering is ours through this translation. The Stoic arguments about roles and external goods retain their own basis. No collation with the Greek was undertaken.

William James. The Principles of Psychology, Chapter X, original English, 1890, in the Classics in the History of Psychology transcription. The whole selected Social Self passage concerning groups, consistency of images, and honor was read, along with introductory framing. This is a historical conceptual discussion, not a current prevalence study concerning requests for help.

Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics IX.9, W. D. Ross's English translation. The whole selected section on the happy person's friends and shared activity was read. The comparison rests on its ethical argument; neither the complete treatise nor the Greek original was examined here.

Galatians. 6:1–5, King James Version. All five selected verses were read. The key quotation is the opening clause of 6:2; its Russian rendering is ours. The religious context of mutual help and one's own action is retained. Distinctions between the Greek words were not investigated.

## Tags

strong person, social role, self-image, requests, help, support, independence, self-sufficiency, friendship, mutuality, responsibility, competence, limits, workload, participation, agreements, refusal, trust, personal disclosure, expectations, honor, social self, shared activity, choice, Epictetus, William James, Aristotle, Galatians, ethics, United Wisdom

## About the authors

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

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