

UNITED WISDOM

Being Yourself Among Others

The Person and the Inner World

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Being Yourself Among Others

How to find your self without becoming locked inside it

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> *“The exemplary person acts in harmony with others, but does not seek to be the same as them.”*
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> *Confucius, Analects 13.23. Editorial rendering of the archive’s Russian quotation, which was based on Robert Eno’s English teaching translation, 2015.*

What This Essay Is About

We are concerned here with how, at a particular moment, a person relates to themselves and to what is happening—not with sorting people into types. Our focus is the whole configuration: accumulated experience, circumstances, inner state, relationships, and available support. The question is therefore not “What kind of person is this?” but “What is happening for this person now, and where does the possibility of change remain?”

Imagine a family dinner. Twenty years ago, a father defended his right to choose a profession against his own parents’ wishes. Now his daughter announces that she does not want to continue his business. He hears her refusal as though she has rejected his entire life. She hears his anxiety and immediately recognizes a prohibition. Both are defending the right to be themselves. Yet the table seems to have room for only one self.

Perhaps growing up continues at precisely this point: when the separateness we have achieved must be joined with the capacity to live among others. How can we remain ourselves without requiring someone close to us to give up who they are for the sake of our peace of mind? And how can we acknowledge their freedom while retaining our own right to disagree?

I. The Separateness We First Need to Find

Before a person can participate freely in relationships, they need the possibility of speaking in their own name. Otherwise, agreement is difficult to distinguish from fear of losing approval, and care from an attempt to earn the right to remain close.

It begins with ordinary things. A child dislikes an activity their parents enjoy. A teenager chooses friends the family does not entirely understand. An adult woman notices for the first time that she visits relatives every Sunday not because she wants to see them, but because imagining a refusal is more frightening than living through another weekend that belongs to

someone else. In these hypothetical examples, separateness emerges as the ability to distinguish one's own experience from an expectation placed upon it.

Calling this the emergence of an ego from nothing would be inaccurate. In his work on early self-awareness, Philippe Rochat describes forms of differentiation between self and world long before adolescence. A coherent account of one's life and an early sense of self belong to different levels. In this essay, "ego" means a developing understanding of oneself: who I am, what matters to me, what others can expect of me. We do not use it as a synonym for consciousness or selfishness.

Adolescence is indeed important for identity development. Yet Susan Branje and colleagues' review shows stability as well as change, and differences across areas of life. Someone may feel confident in a career choice while remaining unsure how to be themselves in intimacy. Research by Wim Meeus and colleagues likewise begins from the understanding that adolescents approach identity exploration with existing attachments and commitments, not with a blank inner page.

Someone who has finally said "This does not work for me" is therefore not immediately obliged to demonstrate the next stage of spiritual development by withdrawing their no. It may be the first statement in which they are fully present. They still need to learn to hold it without endless justification and without having to attack.

Separateness has a quieter side, too. It allows you to admit that you like the same things as your parents, that you need advice, or that a family tradition matters to you. If you must always choose the opposite, another person's will still determines your route—only the direction has been reversed. A choice becomes your own when both agreement and refusal are available.

II. When Our Picture of Ourselves Becomes Too Small

An established sense of self helps us find our bearings as long as it remains spacious enough for new experience. Difficulty arises when every detail of the self-portrait must be defended as a condition of continuing to exist.

Consider another hypothetical example. A manager has grown accustomed to thinking of himself as someone who can find a way forward. That confidence has supported him for years. Then an employee proposes a better solution. He could feel a moment of irritation, examine the idea, and accept it. Or he could hear an exposure of his inadequacy: if someone else has proved cleverer, he is no longer the person he must be. A discussion about work quietly becomes a defense of his right to lead.

Clarity about oneself is not, in itself, the problem. Jennifer Campbell and colleagues studied self-concept clarity: how clearly defined, consistent, and stable a person's understanding of

themselves is. The concept does not require infallibility. A confident understanding of one's values can include knowledge of one's limitations. "I can make mistakes and correct them" can itself provide a stable footing.

A sealed-off self works differently. The strong must never need help. The caring must never feel irritated. The independent must never ask. A good parent must never admit to misunderstanding a child. Each formula excludes a part of living experience. To preserve the image, a person must either hide what is happening from others or stop noticing it themselves.

The three-dimensional model developed by Elisabetta Crocetti, Monica Rubini, and Wim Meeus considers commitments, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration. These are research dimensions, not a list of good and bad kinds of people. What matters for our discussion is the possibility of maintaining a decision while continuing to understand it. Reconsideration need be neither constant nor destructive.

The practical question is therefore more precise than "Let go of your ego": what part of myself am I protecting now? The freedom to choose a profession? The right not to endure humiliation? Or a demand that every event confirm my choice as the only correct one? From the outside, these defenses may look equally resolute. The first preserves room for life; the second gradually narrows it to the dimensions of a biography already written.

III. Admitting a Mistake Without Declaring Yourself a Mistake

The capacity to reconsider beliefs rests on distinguishing a person from a particular decision. If every error signifies total inadequacy, acknowledging the facts becomes too costly.

Return to the manager. He can say, "I underestimated the risk. Let's change the plan." Responsibility and the ability to act remain intact. Inside, however, he may have to work through another statement: "If the plan was bad, I am a bad manager; if I am a bad manager, I have no place here." An argument about a calculation becomes a struggle against disappearance. Another spreadsheet rarely helps while every number in it is experienced as an accusation.

Across four studies, Mark Leary and colleagues examined intellectual humility: recognizing that one's beliefs may be mistaken. It was associated with openness and lower dogmatism; in one study, people scoring higher differentiated more carefully between stronger and weaker arguments. This does not require treating every opinion as equally valid. It creates room to assess an argument by its grounds, rather than only by who makes it.

An uncomfortable question remains: if we stop judging ourselves harshly, will the desire to improve disappear? In experiments by Juliana Breines and Serena Chen, responding kindly to oneself after failure could strengthen motivation to improve. The findings concern particular

experimental situations. They do not promise that every form of leniency is helpful, but they challenge the assumption that self-humiliation is the only engine of responsibility.

Marcus Aurelius offers a compact formulation: “If someone convinces me and shows that I am thinking or acting wrongly, I will gladly change” (*Meditations* VI.21, rendered from the archive’s editorial translation based on George Long). The Stoic text proposes a philosophical discipline; it does not report an experiment. Its question remains recognizable: am I holding to my opinion for the sake of truth, or because I cannot bear to yield?

Sometimes the first step is very small. Not agreeing immediately, not promising to become a different person, but saying: “I’m not convinced yet, but I want to understand where I might have been wrong.” A person retains the right to their own judgment while allowing facts to influence it again.

IV. Acceptance That Makes Action Possible

Acceptance begins by acknowledging what is already happening. Within our philosophical framework, it means allowing that reality is larger than our picture of it. But acknowledging a fact, agreeing with an interpretation, and approving what happens are three different acts.

The daughter does not want to work in the family company. That is the fact of her present decision. “She is ungrateful” is her father’s explanation. “She must abandon her plans” is a demand. While these remain fused, the conversation almost inevitably goes in circles: she explains her choice, and he hears fresh evidence that she does not love him. Acknowledging the fact does not make it welcome. It merely allows them to discuss the situation that actually exists.

The father is entitled to feel upset. For years he may have imagined working together as a continuation of their closeness; now he is losing an important picture of the future. Demanding that he immediately feel happy for his daughter would add another obligation: to feel correctly. Acceptance can begin with something more modest: this hurts, I had hoped for something else, and her decision still exists.

In research by Brett Ford, Phoebe Lam, Oliver John, and Iris Mauss, acceptance of one’s thoughts and emotions was considered separately from acceptance of situations. The authors found associations between the former and psychological well-being; the latter measure did not show the same result. Citing this work as proof of the benefits of submission to circumstances would therefore be a mistake. Allowing yourself to feel anger and allowing another person to continue harming you are entirely different decisions.

In the *Enchiridion*, section 5, Epictetus distinguishes things from the judgments about things that trouble us, in the archive’s editorial rendering based on Elizabeth Carter. Within Stoicism

this invites examination of judgments. We do not turn it into a universal explanation of suffering: pain, poverty, violence, and loss have real causes and consequences. Working with perception does not remove the need to change conditions.

Acceptance understood this way leads into action. Recognizing that an agreement has been broken gives grounds to reconsider trust. Recognizing that a relationship is dangerous gives grounds to seek protection. Recognizing that someone wants a different life gives grounds to discuss the shared future again. If reality must first become convenient before we consent to see it, we are forced to act in a world that no longer exists.

V. Other People Do Not Exist to Confirm Who I Am

The next turn begins with a simple thought: if my separateness matters, another person's cannot be merely an obstacle. Otherwise, the right to be oneself becomes a privilege operating in only one direction.

We readily recognize this contradiction in others. A parent demands independence until the child makes an independent decision. A partner admires a strong character until it appears as disagreement. A boss asks for initiative but takes offense at an initiative he did not invent. It is harder to recognize the same logic in our own words: "I just want you finally to understand." Sometimes "understanding" means a very specific outcome: the other person must feel, choose, and explain everything exactly as we do.

In *Analects* 13.23, harmony is distinguished from mere conformity. Confucian thought is rooted in an ethics of relationships, ritual, and cultivation; this is not an ancient declaration of individualism. That makes the question no less valuable: can people live in harmony without becoming identical? In our contemporary circumstances, it invites us to coordinate different wishes without first requiring difference to disappear.

A person's experience can be acknowledged without endorsing every conclusion they draw. "You are afraid we will become distant" does not mean "My leaving is therefore a betrayal." "You are angry" does not mean "I am therefore to blame for everything." Conversation becomes possible when feelings can be heard and claims can be examined.

In Carl Rogers's 1957 paper, empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard are discussed as conditions of therapeutic contact. This is a specific professional framework that cannot be transferred wholesale to every family disagreement. It nevertheless helps distinguish attention to a person's inner world from an obligation to share all their judgments. Understanding where an accusation came from does not require accepting it.

The father needs to hear that his daughter is choosing for herself rather than against him. The daughter may be able to notice loss and anxiety beneath his pressure, if she has the safety and

energy for that conversation. Neither owes the other the decision being demanded. Yet both have a chance to see a whole person behind an unwelcome remark—someone whose life is not exhausted by their role in the other's story.

VI. The Boundary Between Freedom and Control

Another person's right to want something does not automatically create an obligation to provide it. This is where talk of separateness faces a practical test.

One partner wants to live abroad; the other is not ready to leave. Both wishes may be serious and sincere. It does not follow that a compromise without loss must exist. One person may reconsider. A temporary arrangement may emerge. The relationship may end. Recognizing freedom does not guarantee compatibility; it allows incompatibility to be discovered without having to declare one person bad.

It helps to distinguish a boundary around one's own participation from a claim to govern another person. "I am not prepared to remain in a relationship under these conditions" states a limit. "You have no right to want another life" attempts to cancel another person's inner world. Grammar alone guarantees nothing, however. Even a sentence beginning with "I" can function as a threat. Proportionality, the options actually available, and whether dependency is being used as pressure all matter.

In their review of psychological control, Bart Soenens and Maarten Vansteenkiste examine pressure through guilt, shame, and conditional affection. Their subject is parental behavior, not the diagnosis of all relationships. A useful distinction lies between regulating behavior and intruding upon experience: rules can be established without requiring another person to experience them as their own wishes.

Equal recognition of separateness also does not mean identical powers and duties. Children need adults to ensure safety. Managers carry responsibility for decisions. Partners may have obligations toward children and one another. A changed wish does not silently cancel a promise; it must be considered alongside consequences, agreements, and the people affected.

Maturity is therefore not measured by the number of concessions a person makes. Sometimes it appears in the ability to withstand another's displeasure and end a conversation containing threats. Sometimes it means admitting that our own "That's just who I am" has excused rudeness for years. Freedom to be oneself does not remove responsibility for how we treat others. Respecting another's freedom does not remove our right to protect ourselves.

VII. Going Beyond the Ego Does Not Mean Disappearing

Spiritual language becomes imprecise when different meanings of “self” quietly replace one another. Letting go of a familiar image, becoming less preoccupied with oneself, and surrendering the right to make one’s own decisions are not the same thing.

In the Buddhist *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, SN 22.59, the body, feelings, perceptions, volitional formations, and consciousness are considered changeable and not fully subject to command. The repeated formula is rendered in the archive as “This is not mine; this is not I; this is not my self,” following N. K. G. Mendis. The teaching of not-self, *anattā*, concerns liberation from attachment. It is far more radical than advice to update one’s professional self-image, and it is not a psychological theory of adolescent development.

We can find here a question about appropriating experience: must every thought, role, or emotion be treated as our final definition? But an answer from a Buddhist text cannot automatically become a demand to have no boundaries. If someone is told to endure humiliation because there is supposedly no one to feel hurt, a metaphysical claim has already become a means of interpersonal pressure.

Philippians 2:4 calls each person to care not only for their own concerns but also for those of others, in the Russian Synodal version cited by the archive. The argument that follows concerns Christ’s example and has a theological meaning. It is not identical to the Buddhist analysis of not-self. For our comparison, what matters is an expansion of attention: another person gains a place in one’s actions, while self-care is not declared logically impossible.

Contemporary psychology offers another distinction. In Kristin Neff’s account, self-compassion includes kindness toward oneself, common humanity, and mindful awareness without complete identification with the experience. Care need not be earned by proving superiority. This is a psychological construct, not experimental confirmation of a religious teaching.

The differences remain substantial. Comparing the approaches nevertheless reveals a shared danger for our subject: spiritual development can itself become another rigid image. “I have already gone beyond the ego, so I cannot be wrong” is the same cramped structure with a more elevated sign above it. The ability to hear a criticism reveals more than a solemn description of one’s freedom.

VIII. Initiation Without a Required Catastrophe

Within this essay, initiation can mean a change in how someone participates in life: they no longer need constant opposition to feel separate. This is our philosophical metaphor for a transition, not a universal stage everyone must pass through in a fixed order.

At first it may be important to separate: to stop acting out someone else's script, withstand disapproval, and learn to choose. Later another task may emerge: returning to relationships without dissolving into them as before. Such a transition need not look like a biographical rupture. Sometimes it takes half a minute between the habitual objection and a question someone genuinely wants to ask for the first time.

This sequence cannot become the only map of growing up. Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama examine the mutual formation of culture and ways of experiencing selfhood. Connection with others is not everywhere understood as an obstacle to overcome first. Our image of two movements is useful where it clarifies a difficulty; it provides no basis for ranking people or cultures by maturity.

In everyday life, room for change sometimes appears through a small step back from the first impulse. In Özlem Ayduk and Ethan Kross's research, spontaneous self-distancing while reflecting on unpleasant memories was associated with less intense reactions and more adaptive reflection. These are bounded findings, not a promise to repair a relationship with one technique. They do, however, support distinguishing immersion in repeated accusation from an attempt to examine what happened between people.

The father does not first have to experience the collapse of his business or a family rupture to recognize his daughter's separateness. He can begin by asking: "What matters to you in this life that I do not yet understand?" Then he can remain with an answer that does not immediately make him happy. The daughter can stop proving her right to live by disparaging his work. Acknowledging its value does not make her choice less her own.

Severe suffering is not proof of unfinished maturity. Sometimes safety, rest, material support, and help must come before philosophical questions. Support is not a reward for the correct attitude toward difficulty. It can itself create the conditions in which choosing becomes possible again.

IX. Contributing Without Losing Room for Your Own Life

When separateness no longer requires constant defense, participation acquires another meaning: I can offer what I know how to do without disappearing into usefulness. In this framework, service becomes a way of expressing one life in relation to another.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.19 calls for performing the action that ought to be performed without attachment, in the archive's rendering based on Swami Sivananda. It belongs to a teaching about action, duty, and liberation, not a contemporary program for psychological comfort. The dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna also prevents the text from being treated as a simple manual for conflict-free cooperation. For our question, what matters is the conjunction of

action with less possessive attachment: participation need not continually return proof of one's importance.

A small example makes this clear. A colleague helps prepare a presentation but is not acknowledged from the stage. Disappointment is understandable. What follows could be a conversation about recognition of a real contribution, a broken agreement, or a demand that gratitude provide a stable sense of personal worth. The first two can be discussed concretely. The last task is too large for any amount of applause.

Across four studies by Netta Weinstein and Richard Ryan, the consequences of helping for both giver and recipient differed according to how autonomous the motivation was. This does not make difficult help wrong or promise pleasant feelings after every freely chosen act. It allows a question: am I participating because I recognize the value of the action, or because refusing would make me an unworthy person in my own eyes?

Ryan and Edward Deci's self-determination theory explicitly distinguishes autonomy from independence. Cooperation, accepting support, or taking on a difficult obligation can all be freely chosen. What matters is experiencing authorship of the action. "I am doing this with you" need not mean "I have stopped being myself."

Reciprocity does not require an immediate equal exchange. A sick loved one may be unable to offer comparable help for a long time. Yet the relationship must retain recognition that the caregiver also has needs and limits. They may seek support, share the burden, and receive care. Separateness becomes a source of contribution when it is not treated as an inexhaustible resource.

X. What This Means in Practice

In an actual conflict, it helps first to identify the question that needs answering. We may be protecting a boundary, grieving an expectation, disputing a fact, and seeking recognition all at once. While everything sounds like "You don't respect me," the other person struggles to understand what could possibly be done.

The first foothold is to separate observation from explanation. The daughter said she would not join the company. Her father experienced that as a refusal of closeness. His experience is real, but the meaning he attributes to her decision still needs checking. He can ask directly rather than presenting an inference as an accusation already proved.

The second is to name one's wish and the limits of participation. "I wanted to work with you, and I'm upset." "I've chosen a different direction, and I'm not prepared to abandon it." There is enough clarity here for disagreement. A personal wish need not become a law another person must obey to retain the status of someone who loves us.

The third is to leave room to reconsider a particular part of the picture. What circumstances might change my decision? What explanation have I not heard? And what am I not yet willing to change? In Todd Kashdan and Jonathan Rottenberg's review, psychological flexibility concerns sensitivity to context and the capacity to change ways of acting. That also includes steadiness where needed: flexibility is not measured by readiness to yield whenever pressure is applied.

Finally, the conversation needs a concrete next step. Sometimes it is a new agreement; sometimes a pause. Sometimes it is acknowledgment that the decisions are incompatible and their consequences must now be addressed honestly. People can understand each other without promising to preserve the relationship in its previous form.

Return to the dinner. The father is still disappointed. The daughter is still choosing another profession. They have not found a sentence that removes the difference. Yet he can now ask about her plans, and she can describe them without needing to demean his path. Perhaps that is enough today: there are now two people at the table, each allowed to exist at the same time.

Growing up does not end when we understand who we are. The next task is not to remain locked forever inside that understanding. First we learn to be ourselves. Then we learn to be ourselves among others, without demanding that they stop being themselves. We preserve boundaries, acknowledge the consequences of our actions, and leave room for what we do not yet know about ourselves or the person opposite us.

A Central Quotation

> *"If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?"*
>
> *Hillel, Pirkei Avot 1:14, the first two questions. Editorial rendering of the archive's translation based on the Mishnah and the English text in Sefaria.*

Hillel's two questions do not let us erase either side. Responsibility for ourselves remains. Yet a life enclosed entirely within itself is also questioned. Their proximity holds a tension that need not be resolved by eliminating one of its participants.

Connections Between Traditions and Research

The comparisons below identify questions that the texts allow us to place alongside one another. They do not imply identical teachings or scientific confirmation of religious propositions.

Focus	Comparison	Connection and distinction
Finding separateness	Identity; autonomy; Hillel	A position of one's own matters. Scientific models and religious ethics ground it differently.
Allowing reconsideration	Crocetti; Leary; Marcus Aurelius	Beliefs can change. Identity development and Stoic discipline are not identical.
Acknowledging experience	Ford; Epictetus; Rogers	A feeling can be accepted while a judgment is examined. This does not require approving the situation.
Living alongside difference	*Analects*; autonomy and relatedness	Harmony is possible without sameness. Confucian ethics and contemporary autonomy differ.
Loosening identification	Anattā; Neff; Ayduk and Kross	An experience does not exhaust a person. Buddhist liberation has a different purpose and scope.
Participating and receiving help	*Bhagavad Gītā*; Philippians 2:4; Weinstein and Ryan	Attention turns toward others. Duty, faith, and autonomous motivation remain different grounds.

Primary Texts and Research

The archive identifies twenty-three distinct works and texts used in the essay. Scientific publications, philosophical arguments, and religious propositions have different statuses. It reports that relevant portions of accessible scientific texts were checked and marks cases relying only on abstracts. These are statements about the original article's preparation, not claims that the sources were newly read for this English translation. Short classical quotations were editorially translated using the editions named below. The hypothetical everyday scenes were created for the essay and are not documented cases.

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Tags

United Wisdom, identity, ego, self-concept, separateness, growing up, acceptance, autonomy, personal boundaries, psychological flexibility, intellectual humility, self-compassion, empathy, relationships, family, parenting, disagreement, responsibility, reciprocity, service, contribution, initiation, philosophy, Stoicism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Bhagavad Gītā, self-determination, freedom of choice, reconsidering beliefs

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These links preserve the archive’s reference record; their contents were not newly checked for this translation.

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