


UNITED WISDOM

# Competence in One Area and Judgements about the Whole Person

The Person and the Inner World

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## Epigraph

> *“The virtue of a thing is relative to its proper work.”*

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, VI.2, W. D. Ross translation. Complete sentence; virtue here concerns excellence in a function, rather than a person's dignity.

## What this article is about

A success at work can quietly become proof that someone is good at everything, while one mistake becomes proof of general inadequacy. Several steps intervene: from one performance to a lasting ability, from a familiar task to a new one, from professional quality to moral quality, and from an action to the person as a whole. Each step needs its own grounds. This article examines them through an invented case involving someone who produces a good catalogue and then faces a different task. We ask what was checked, how conditions mattered, where the assessment became too broad, and why specific responsibility remains after a global verdict is rejected. Aristotle distinguishes producing a result from acting well; William James considers a personally significant domain; a modern review examines personal worth made dependent on success. The subject is the structure of an inference. A more precise description preserves justified trust alongside room for honest uncertainty.

## I. Name the work first

Nina prepares a small exhibition catalogue. Following agreed rules, she checks one hundred records for the work's title, the artist's name, the year, and the inventory number. In this invented case, ninety-eight records are correct and two need correction. The coordinator says she has done a good job on the catalogue. So far, the object of the assessment is reasonably clear. A colleague then asks her to chair a public discussion with the artists: someone who works so confidently should manage that too. Nina hears recognition in the invitation and agrees before asking about the meeting's format. An assessment of completed work has already started travelling into an area that nobody has checked.

For this discussion, competence needs a limited working meaning. It is a supported judgement about which tasks someone can perform, under what conditions, and by which criteria a result can be assessed. That description requires an object after the verb: can check records, conduct a particular conversation, explain a rule, or notice a discrepancy. “Can do anything”



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leaves the object open. Even a professional title does not settle it automatically. A catalogue compiler may be good at checking information without experience of organising public discussion. Naming a boundary does not diminish an achievement. It tells others what they can trust and what they still need to ask about before making another arrangement.

At the beginning of Book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle argues that a general appeal to the correct rule needs the standard itself to be specified. For our case, this invites questions about a good catalogue rather than reliance on the word quality. Are names written consistently? Have disputed dates been checked? Can an amendment be traced to its basis? These are the article's questions for an invented task, rather than an ancient list of professional requirements. Their purpose is to bring assessment back to something observable. Until the object is named, praise and criticism can concern different qualities while both use the same apparently clear description: a capable professional.

## II. What a number shows

Ninety-eight correct records out of one hundred give ninety-eight per cent correct records in this set: divide 98 by 100 and multiply by 100. The calculation is exact but narrow. It does not tell us how difficult the cases were, whether the result will recur in the next catalogue, or whether Nina can respond to a dissatisfied participant. If most records were straightforward, the percentage concerns that kind of set. If a colleague supplied some information, the outcome describes work with that assistance. Such questions leave the number useful. They prevent a clear statement about checked records from being replaced by an undefined promise about every future activity, including activities absent from the assessment.

The content of mistakes matters as well as their proportion. Suppose one incorrect record contains an extra space and the other credits a work to a different artist. Both count as incorrect in this calculation, so each reduces the result by one percentage point. Their consequences differ. The space can be corrected unobtrusively; incorrect authorship affects recognition of someone's work and calls for informing that person. Assessing those consequences requires a separate, stated criterion, rather than silently changing the meaning of the existing percentage. Nina can retain the correct calculation while recognising that one error is particularly significant. Accurate description does not require hiding a consequence or treating different kinds of harm as equivalent merely because they share one category.

We also need to distinguish the absence of a detected mistake from the opportunity to detect it. Someone seeing only the final file may confirm agreement with available information without knowing the whole work process. If a disputed record has not been checked against a reliable basis, correct remains conditional: it means matching the inventory used. Our example explicitly provides rules and verification so the arithmetic is transparent. In an actual assessment, information about the procedure belongs to the grounds for trust. Asking what

was checked concerns the scope of a conclusion. It need not express suspicion of dishonesty. The same number can arise through different procedures and answer different questions about a result's readiness.

## III. From performance to ability

Nina has genuinely made a good catalogue under the specified rules. A completed catalogue and a lasting ability are nevertheless different objects of judgement. Records and amendments provide evidence about this performance. An ability judgement adds an expectation that the person can perform relevant tasks again. To support it, we can ask how decisions were made, how unknown information was handled, and which actions can be repeated without an accidental prompt. This need not become an endless examination. Grounds proportionate to another similar assignment may be enough. But when one success is made to establish ability in every task, the unsupported addition becomes much larger than the initial check that was actually carried out.

Imagine Nina explaining a date correction. She noticed disagreement between two documents, asked the artist to clarify it, and recorded the decision's basis. This account supplies more than a bare percentage: it describes a particular way of handling ambiguity. The method cannot automatically be transferred to every subject. Confirming a date and settling a disagreement about exhibition arrangements are different actions. We can ask which part of the familiar method might be useful in the new task. Recording the basis of decisions may help with meeting preparation, for example. Chairing the discussion itself requires further information: how roles are agreed, who watches the time, and what happens when participants disagree about the proposed arrangement.

In Chapter X of The Principles of Psychology, William James contrasts domains that matter differently to his selected sense of self, including psychology and Greek. This historical example separates personal significance from the reach of evidence. If the catalogue matters greatly to Nina, a mistake may affect her more than an unfamiliar task would. The force of that experience does not expand the facts about her work. Conversely, indifference to a task does not turn poor performance into good performance. Two questions need to remain distinct: how important is this work to me, and what does the available information actually support about my ability to do it? Each can matter without answering the other.

## IV. Conditions belong in the description

For the catalogue, Nina had agreed rules, three working days, and someone available for questions. For the discussion, she is offered forty minutes, an unfamiliar audience, and a general request to make it interesting. These conditions differ as features of the tasks, rather than excuses made in advance. When an invitation relies on previous success, we need to identify the element being carried across. Perhaps the coordinator needs someone who can examine documents, in which case Nina suits the preparation of a reference sheet. Perhaps a chair must share time between participants who disagree. The catalogue gives little direct information about that action, even when nobody questions its quality or Nina's contribution to it.

Descriptions of conditions can be concise and useful. “I checked records against prepared rules and could clarify the information” differs from “I am good only when others help me.” The first describes an observed process; the second turns assistance into a general judgement of weakness. Acknowledging an available tool also differs from discounting one's activity. A searchable inventory does not remove Nina's role in choosing a query, recognising a conflict, and checking the answer. For a new assignment, it matters whether a suitable tool will remain available and what changes without it. The boundary of competence then becomes a subject for discussion, rather than an argument over who deserves all the credit for a shared result.

Suppose the coordinator changes the format. Participants submit a question in advance, Nina prepares the reference sheet, and an experienced colleague chairs the conversation. This uses a supported part of her experience while arranging the unsupported part differently. It is a decision by an invented team, rather than an established way to increase confidence. It illustrates how a precise boundary can generate options. Between unconditional agreement and complete refusal lie roles, conditions, and joint preparation. Nina may still want to try chairing. That wish remains possible. It can be described as new experience needing agreed support and criteria, rather than as an exercise of an already established universal ability whose grounds remain unspecified.

## V. A good product and a good action

In VI.4–5, Aristotle distinguishes making from acting: productive skill and practical judgement concern different objects. This helps us ask another question about the catalogue. Someone might format a document flawlessly while deliberately removing the artist's name. The formatting ability remains; the treatment of another person's work needs its own moral assessment. The reverse is also possible. Someone sincerely tries to credit an artist but lacks the ability to check information and makes a serious error. Good intentions do not correct the record. In each case, product quality and responsibility remain connected to specific actions. They cannot be settled by one general designation that merges all the questions about the person.

For Nina, distinguish deliberate substitution from an unintended incorrect credit. If the cause is unknown, “the wrong name is listed” is more accurate than “Nina took credit for someone else's work.” Finding a mistake does not itself disclose intention. Yet uncertainty about intention does not prevent correcting the record and informing the artist. We can begin with a known consequence while investigating the cause separately. This preserves fairness towards the person being judged and attention to the person whose interests were affected. “Only a technical mistake” may also be too narrow if it is meant to remove the obligation to correct it. Classifying a cause and deciding what correction is needed answer different questions.

Professional success is sometimes treated as permission for any behaviour towards others: a specialist is so valuable that conduct must go unexamined. Conversely, a moral objection can become a denial of all the person's abilities. Each extension needs examination. A good file does not establish considerate behaviour; a specific breach does not establish the absence of document skills. Holding both descriptions can be awkward because they give no single overall sign. They do make appropriate decisions possible: correct a result, discuss an obligation, redistribute roles, or retain trust in a particular skill while limiting another assignment. These decisions need facts within their own domains. One universal ranking of a person cannot supply all those grounds.

## VI. Where a judgement about the whole person appears

The generalisation often appears in an added sentence: “I credited the wrong artist, so I am a worthless person.” The catalogue can test the first clause. The second changes the object and scope: the whole person is now assessed, with no stated criterion. A checkable observation and a global verdict are connected by so, as if the inference were already established. Examining this step does not require disputing the feeling itself. Nina can be upset and still ask what new fact appeared between the clauses. Without new information, the broad conclusion depends on a hidden condition: all my worth depends on doing this work without mistakes. That condition needs its own description, separate from the error.

Jennifer Crocker and Lora Park's review, The Costly Pursuit of Self-Esteem, considers general self-worth made contingent on outcomes in a domain. It examines validation goals, rather than only a person's usual level of self-evaluation. The framework helps formulate a question about an additional condition. It does not establish why this particular Nina used this particular sentence: Nina is invented, and no reader has been assessed here. A possible connection should remain distinct from other explanations, such as concern for the artist, tiredness, losing an important commission, or disagreement with one's action. Identical words do not establish identical causes. The framework opens a question for the case rather than closing it through a label.

Positive generalisation follows a similar pattern. “The catalogue is good, so I am always right” adds an unsupported step too. A deserved success does not supply grounds for deciding what every participant needs. If Nina hears a suggestion about the meeting's format as a threat to her professional standing, the objects can be separated. Is her ability to check records disputed, or is someone suggesting another arrangement for the conversation? Sometimes a discussion genuinely includes an unfair general attack, which can be named. A specific proposal about a role need not assess the whole person. Naming the questions precisely helps preserve recognition of completed work without requiring it to endorse every later position.

## VII. Transfer needs grounds

Using previous experience is possible and ordinary. New tasks are often entrusted to someone because they resemble familiar ones. The question is which connection can be shown. If Nina has found discrepancies between inventories, there are grounds for discussing another inventory using similar rules. If she has explained the checking process to colleagues, that provides a concrete reason to ask about preparing instructions. Changes still matter: a different volume, unfamiliar terminology, or no access to a confirming document. A useful justification names significant similarities and differences. Reputation may suggest whom to ask first. The assignment itself concerns particular work and therefore calls for discussing that work, alongside the specialist's name and reputation.

For the public discussion, the main resemblance is that both tasks belong to the exhibition. That does not make their actions identical. A catalogue's checking sequence can be repeated; a participant in conversation may change the subject, refuse an answer, or ask an unexpected question. Nina may possess the relevant abilities, but the catalogue does not report them. The precise statement is therefore “there is insufficient information so far,” rather than “she cannot do it.” Missing support and supported absence differ. This prevents the opposite extreme: a reasonable limit on inference becoming a prohibition on development, or a belief that every person must remain permanently confined to a single operation already mastered and observed.

If a decision is needed today, the team could choose a limited trial: Nina prepares an introduction and chairs an agreed part of the meeting. The arrangement can specify who supports the discussion and who takes responsibility for the outcome. This will provide information about the particular part performed. Success can support another assignment; an unsuccessful attempt needs its own examination, rather than retroactively destroying the catalogue's quality. The example illustrates accumulating grounds. It does not promise a suitable learning route for every activity. Tasks involving substantial risks or special requirements have their own admission procedures. The invented meeting cannot replace those procedures or certify competence for unrelated work merely because a limited trial was useful here.

## VIII. Feedback with an address

“Be more competent” gives little guidance because it identifies no action to change. Feedback acquires an address when it names the object, an observation, and the expected difference. “The second record credits a different artist; the confirmed list gives this name” allows both a correction and a check of its grounds. “Two participants did not receive their promised time” concerns the allocation of speaking time, rather than the chair's overall intelligence. A complicated situation need not be reduced to one observation, but the speaker can identify what was seen and what remains unknown. The recipient can then address the substance without guessing at a hidden examination of personal acceptability behind the words.

Accepting feedback does not mean endorsing all its generalisations. Nina can acknowledge the incorrect name while asking for grounds for “you never know how to work with people.” She need not choose between surrendering completely and denying the error. Different parts of a message allow different responses: this fact is accepted; this will be corrected; that conclusion needs examples; those assignment conditions are unacceptable. Such analysis is offered as a conversational possibility, rather than a technique with demonstrated psychological effects. The other person may refuse clarification. The message's uncertainty then remains visible. It does not automatically become a reliable description of its recipient just because the recipient has failed to secure a clearer answer.

It also matters not to extract convenient praise while ignoring its limit. “The reference sheet is accurate, but the chair had to explain it to the audience” can contain two true observations. The first concerns content; the second concerns its use. Nina can retain the accurate sheet and prepare another explanation if that serves the task. The earlier work need not become completely useless. Sometimes presentation belonged to the original criterion, in which case the result is assessed differently; the agreement needs checking. Feedback becomes substantive when it returns to agreed requirements. Continually changing the measure after a result has been presented makes it harder to identify which task and which expectation are actually being discussed.

## IX. Uncertainty in an honest description

In a professional conversation, acknowledging something unknown may feel like losing status. Nina fears that asking about the meeting format will undo the impression of a confident specialist. Silent agreement conveys information too: the coordinator may assume the conditions are understood and experience is already available. Naming uncertainty supplies information for a joint decision. “I have not chaired this kind of discussion; I can prepare the materials, and I would like to discuss the chair's role” preserves a supported ability while identifying another domain. It does not promise a favourable response. Others may assess the admission differently. An accurate message still differs from an attempt to conceal information needed for the arrangement.

The kind of uncertainty matters as well. “I do not know the answer to this participant's question” concerns a particular question. “I understand nothing” covers everything without checking it. A broad phrase may express tiredness rather than an intended literal assessment. If an assignment decision depends on it, the meaning needs clarification. Nina may lack the factual answer while knowing how to record the question and refer it to someone informed. She may know a fact without authority to promise a decision on the organisers' behalf. Knowledge, a method of action, and authority differ. Merging them creates apparent general incompetence where only one particular boundary needs to be clarified for the conversation to continue.

Honest description can include a strength. Some people find gaps easier to name than supported abilities, fearing that confidence will sound presumptuous. “I can check this catalogue under these rules” does not mean “I can master everything.” It contains an object and grounds, so it can be checked and revised if needed. Another person's competence can likewise be acknowledged without handing over every decision. An artist may know a work's history best, an editor the recording rules, and a coordinator the promises made to the audience. The invented team combines information and authority. Their shared work does not require one participant to be best at everything, or respect to depend entirely on a count of mastered operations.

## X. A next step without a global verdict

At the end of our story, Nina corrects both records, informs the artist about the wrong credit, and retains confirmation of the change. She asks about the meeting's format and chooses preparation of materials over immediately becoming its sole chair. Each decision answers a separate question. Correction concerns the result; notification concerns an affected participant; the new role concerns available grounds and willingness to try. None establishes that Nina has permanently abandoned chairing discussions. None makes earlier errors insignificant. The story ends with a definite decision today, while future abilities remain open to experience, conditions, and verification, rather than being settled by a general designation issued before that experience has occurred.

A narrow conclusion need not be a weak one. “One hundred catalogue records have been checked, two errors corrected, and the basis for a disputed date retained” provides enough information to understand this file's status. Another commission needs information about the new task's resemblance to it. Assessing the treatment of the artist requires information about acknowledging and correcting the consequence. The question “am I a good person?” may matter personally to Nina, but the documents cannot answer it exhaustively. Keeping the questions separate leaves serious self-reflection possible. It stops demanding that one result answer everything at once, including matters the result never examined or claimed to assess in the first place.

Competence becomes more precise when the description includes an object, conditions, verification, and limits on transfer. Respect for someone does not require assigning every ability in advance; taking an error seriously does not require denying the entire person. Between these extremes remains work with specific facts and obligations. A reader's next step may be small: identify the work named in a self-assessment and notice where its object changed. An answer can preserve success, recognise a gap, or require further information. Its value is that it directs attention towards an appropriate action. A complete portrait of someone need not emerge before a record can be corrected, a question asked, or a new role agreed.

## What this means in practice

If you want to clarify a judgement of your ability, choose one recent task. It need not be a painful event. Name the specific object: what was done, and which requirements applied? Separate available observations from expectations about the future. If a number is involved, state its denominator and how it was obtained. “Eight correct answers out of ten in this task” is more precise than “I am eighty per cent capable.” Add conditions that genuinely influenced the work, such as tools, time, assistance, or unknown information. Naming them describes the task without assigning all credit or weakness to the person as a whole.

Then look for a move towards another domain, an intention, or overall worth. For each move, ask what separate grounds support it. Where information is missing, leave a question open rather than replace it with the opposite verdict. Choose an action suited to what is known: retain a useful method, correct a specific error, request clarification, or discuss a new assignment's conditions. This analysis is not a competence test, a diagnosis, or an established method of changing self-esteem. Stopping after one precise sentence is possible. The practical result sought here is a clearer description of what was checked and what remains insufficient for the next inference.

## Key quotation

> *“making and acting are different”*

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, VI.4, W. D. Ross translation. Exact clause, retaining its lowercase beginning. The distinction concerns productive skill and the capacity to act; it does not establish a modern personality scale.

## Connections between traditions

**1. The object of assessment.** Aristotle relates excellence to a thing's proper work (VI.2); James distinguishes psychology and Greek within his selected sense of self (X, printed p. 310). Together these passages invite questions about what is assessed and why it matters. Changing the object and changing its personal significance are distinct operations. The sources supply no common measurement scale.

**2. Outcome and self-worth.** Aristotle's distinction between making and acting (VI.4–5) can be compared with Crocker and Park's question about overall worth made contingent on domain outcomes (pp. 392–394). The connection separates a product criterion from an additional validation demand. The ancient ethical distinction is not empirical evidence for the research review.

**3. A standard needs grounds.** Aristotle requires the correct rule to be specified (VI.1); Crocker and Park call for more direct testing of inferred goals (Conclusion, p. 407). A general description does not replace grounds for a specific conclusion. A philosophical standard and an empirical examination of motivation remain different procedures. They yield no diagnostic checklist.

**4. A particular domain of skill.** Aristotle's example of a particular art (VI.7) and James's selected domain of aspiration (X, pp. 310–312) retain an assessment near its object. Skill and personal importance can be recognised without establishing competence in a different task. This is a logical comparison, rather than a modern experiment on skill transfer.

**5. Ability and purpose.** Aristotle distinguishes deliberate error in art from its assessment in practical judgement (VI.5); Crocker and Park distinguish outcomes from goals of validating the self (pp. 392–394). The comparison allows separate consideration of producing a result and the purpose served. It creates no professional exemption from accountability and does not make every wish for recognition a breach.

**6. A decision in a particular case.** Aristotle emphasises particulars in action (VI.7); Crocker and Park limit the universality of proposed costs and discuss alternative goals (p. 407). The connection returns a general thesis to information needed for a next step. It does not establish a particular reader's motives or demonstrate the effectiveness of the suggested exercise.

## Primary sources

1. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, VI. W. D. Ross English translation, MIT Internet Classics Archive; exact print edition unverified. VI.1–7 and selected additional VI.8–13 context were read, rather than the complete work; Greek was not collated. Used for distinctions concerning tasks, productive skill, and practical action. Historical medical and age examples are not adopted as current facts.

2. William James, The Principles of Psychology, Volume I, Chapter X. Original English, 1890, electronic transcription with printed page markers. Genuinely read selected passages concerning social selves, domain importance, and success relative to pretensions, especially pp. 310–312, are reused. The whole chapter and book were not read. The historical formula is not a personality measurement instrument.

3. Jennifer Crocker and Lora E. Park, The Costly Pursuit of Self-Esteem. Psychological Bulletin 130(3), 2004, pp. 392–414, primary laboratory-hosted PDF. Previously read opening passages, selections on alternative goals, and the complete Conclusion on p. 407 are reused. This is a conceptual research review; most middle sections and underlying experiments were not read. Limitations concerning inferred goals remain explicit.

## Tags

competence, ability, self-esteem, self-worth, personality, generalisation, criterion, task, working conditions, result verification, mistake, accountability, feedback, professional role, experience transfer, uncertainty, acknowledged boundaries, trust, authorship, purpose of action, productive skill, practical judgement, Aristotle, William James, Crocker and Park, result and person, particular circumstances, precise description, shared work, next step

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