

UNITED WISDOM

Why several witnesses can seem to see different people

The Person and Inner Life

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

I-04-N03 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Why several witnesses can seem to see different people

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut · United Wisdom

Epigraph

> *“See what a man does.”*

Confucius, *Analects* 2.10, translated by James Legge. The Russian article translates this short sentence from that English version. Verified text.

What this article is about

Suppose three people describe a colleague after the same meeting: decisive, rude, bewildered. He says he spent the hour trying to keep the discussion together. Each account sounds convincing; together they suggest that different people occupied the room. It is tempting to choose the witness closest to us and dismiss the other accounts. Understanding what each person could know, and which question each was actually answering, takes more work.

This article explores disagreement without promising a final personality portrait. Observation, personal experience, recollection and judgments of character rest on different foundations. We consider why one action can invite several readings, when feedback reveals something missed, and why group agreement does not establish accuracy. Philosophical and religious texts offer ways to examine judgment; personality research supplies limited empirical evidence. Bringing them into conversation can help people answer for their actions while retaining the right to question someone else's account of who they are.

I. Every witness observes an episode from somewhere

Several observers do not necessarily observe the same thing, even when they share a room. Their position means more than a viewing angle: each has a task, a relationship to the participants and an available history. One watches the deadline, another notices whether the newcomer gets to speak, a third looks for a decision. These questions select different parts of a shared conversation. Before discussing incompatible portraits, it helps to clarify what was actually observed.

In a hypothetical example, a manager abruptly interrupts a presentation. The client sees time being saved; the presenter hears a refusal to listen; a colleague notices that the manager

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

missed a warning about risk. If a recording confirms the interruption, that action is common ground. Its appropriateness and presumed cause remain separate questions. No role automatically makes its observer impartial. Yet none of these experiences can be dismissed by saying that everyone is too subjective.

The word “witness” also needs care. Someone may have witnessed a sentence, experienced its consequences or observed years of behavior. Those are different foundations. A person who saw one conflict can report what happened in their presence. This does not entitle them to describe every future conflict with confidence. Someone who has known a participant for years has more material, but may also keep looking through an old image after circumstances have changed.

Try replacing “Who knows the real person?” with “What could each person observe?” Disagreement then stops being a competition for access to someone's essence. It becomes a matter of bringing information together: which accounts concern the same action, which concern different periods, and where an explanation has already entered the account. This does not cancel uncomfortable criticism. It helps identify the part of criticism for which someone can answer concretely, without putting their whole character on trial indefinitely.

II. Action, impression and character are different claims

“He closed the document before the discussion ended” differs from “I found it hard to continue” and from “He does not respect people.” The first describes an action, the second reports an experience, the third proposes an enduring explanation. They may be connected, but the connection needs examining. When they are fused, someone must either accept an entire unfavorable portrait or deny an evident action. Both responses lose information the situation offers.

In a hypothetical conversation, a friend says, “You are cold.” A specific episode may lie behind this: an important message received a brief answer with no question. It is possible to ask what response was expected and what happened. Perhaps the recipient was traveling; perhaps they avoided the subject; perhaps they thought the sender wanted only information. These are alternatives, rather than excuses. None should be accepted before the conversation merely because it sounds sympathetic.

Separating levels helps the speaker too. “I felt abandoned” need not prove someone else's intention to deserve attention. But it does not automatically establish that the other person intended to withhold support. Conversely, an account of a helpful intention does not erase an inadequate response. Two responsibilities meet here: responsibility for an accurate explanation and responsibility for the effects of an action. They can be discussed together while remaining distinct.

A precise description may sound less dramatic than a label, but it offers a direction for change. “Yesterday you began speaking twice while I was still explaining the problem” allows the event to be checked and another conversation arranged. “You are always like this” closes many questions with one phrase. An individual episode need not be an accident: when similar actions recur in different situations, there is more reason to discuss a habit. Repetition needs to be shown rather than conveyed through tone. Character remains a hypothesis about a pattern, not a visible object on the table.

III. Access to oneself also has limits

People have access to experiences an observer cannot share; this does not make them the sole reliable author of every description. You may know your apprehension before a presentation and barely notice how often you interrupt. You may accurately report an intention to help without noticing that help was never requested. Internal and external information can complement one another when each retains its place.

In Simine Vazire's 2010 study, 165 participants rated themselves and were rated by friends and strangers. Judgments were compared with selected behavioral criteria. Advantages differed across the traits examined. This was an initial test of the Self–Other Knowledge Asymmetry model, SOKA, rather than a ranking of who always understands someone best. A US college sample, a limited selection of traits and task-specific criteria constrain its application to daily life.

The practical implication proposed here is narrower than “Others see you better”: different questions call for different information. “What did you feel?” calls for self-report, which appearance cannot replace. “How often did you let someone finish?” may benefit from observation or a recording accessed lawfully and with consent. “Why did you do that?” may need both kinds of information, and sometimes the answer remains incomplete. A confident story need not fill that gap.

There is an uncomfortable counterexample. Someone may explain a sharp response through tiredness, while another person notices that this sharpness appears only with subordinates. An outside perspective has opened a checkable question about how behavior is distributed. It has not yet proved a concealed wish to humiliate. A person can acknowledge repetition, examine its conditions and change the action without acquiring final knowledge of every motive. Incompleteness does not prevent responsibility; it keeps responsibility closer to what actually happened.

IV. The same person behaves differently across relationships

Different descriptions may reflect different behavior, rather than merely different observer errors. In a hypothetical example, someone argues readily with an old friend and hardly speaks before a manager. The friend calls them assertive; the manager calls them indecisive. If both describe their own encounters, the contradiction is only apparent. It arises when either account becomes an exhaustive property of personality in every setting.

We should not escape into the opposite simplification, as though no enduring tendencies exist and situations create everything. A recurring way of behaving may exist too. The questions are where it appears, what supports it and which exceptions are known. “Usually challenges others when confident in their professional competence” is more informative than opposite labels. It is a working description open to refinement, without reducing a person to roles and erasing their history.

A relationship also changes the cost of an action. Open disagreement with a manager may threaten employment; disagreement with a friend may bring temporary discomfort. Silence in these settings need not have one cause. An observer who ignores the difference in consequences can mistake a constraint for a trait. Real constraints nevertheless do not excuse all behavior: caution with a manager does not authorize taking irritation out on a dependent colleague. Context explains conditions without automatically assigning the right to either side.

When talking about oneself, it helps to examine transitions: with whom does ease appear, where does someone hold back, and what condition makes another way of acting possible? The answer need not reveal a “true self” hidden behind masks. Sometimes these ways all belong to one person and require different assessments. Clarity may mean acknowledging: “This happens to me in this setting; others experience this consequence; my next step depends on whether I can change the conditions or my action.” That is more precise than choosing the most agreeable portrait and calling it authentic.

V. Group agreement and accuracy are different things

If several people give the same assessment, there is more reason to consider it, but agreement does not establish its truth. Independence matters. Five retellings of one event are not five separately observed events. A shared reputation may direct attention well before the next encounter. We therefore need to ask what firsthand material supports each report.

Imagine a hypothetical workplace where a newcomer is introduced as “difficult.” After the first meeting, one person reports an argument, a second repeats that report, and a third simply agrees with the characterization. There are formally three voices. Substantively, there is one observation, one retelling and one endorsement. If the employee later does obstruct work, that

does not retrospectively turn the initial vote into a good method of checking. Sometimes a correct conclusion is reached by a poor route.

The reverse situation matters just as much. One person reports an action others did not see. Lack of support does not make the report false. Public courtesy, for instance, can coexist with humiliation in a private conversation. This is a hypothetical possibility, not a finding about every private conflict. It shows why credibility cannot be decided solely by counting supporters. Information relevant to the event needs examining, with attention to participants' safety and access.

Not every disagreement requires an investigation. If people disagree about liking a joke, different reactions can be acknowledged. If an assessment affects a position, a relationship or an allegation of harm, error carries a greater cost and its foundations deserve closer consideration. Between unconditional trust in a majority and endless doubt lies a workable approach: identify the origin of each report, mark what is confirmed, and avoid treating a shared emotional climate as independent evidence. Feedback can retain its force without becoming a collective claim to define another person's personality.

VI. An ancient examination of action and a modern examination of judgment

In *Analects* 2.9, the pupil Hui's silence initially looks like a shortcoming, but observing his behavior afterward changes the assessment. The neighboring 2.10 directs attention toward actions, motives and what sustains a person. James Legge's translation preserves this sequence. This is Confucian reflection on moral character and learning, rather than an ancient protocol for scientifically measuring personality. It raises a question about the basis of judgment without confirming an experimental model.

The difference matters. The Confucian teacher judges within a conception of worthy conduct and proper relationships. Modern research may test how assessments relate to a chosen criterion without deciding moral worth. Shared language about observation does not establish a shared purpose. The comparison nevertheless reveals a useful turn: an initial impression can be revised when different relevant information becomes available.

In a hypothetical example, a quiet participant sends a precise solution after a meeting. The first impression, “They did not engage,” now needs refinement. This does not prove that silence always conceals deep understanding. Next time the person may indeed be unprepared. The present result, however, challenges treating one form of participation as the only measure. Active speech likewise need not mean contribution: the task and the substance matter alongside how noticeable someone is.

The contemporary application proposed here is to keep a portrait revisable. It helps to identify in advance what observation could change it. If no action can influence the assessment, the conversation is already defending a reputational label. This applies to accusation and admiration alike. A person considered exceptionally caring can still act in ways requiring examination. Revision need not betray the relationship. It may allow us to remain in relation to a living person who does different things, instead of maintaining a characterization created once and for all.

VII. An examining gaze also needs examination

An observer does not stand outside the conversation: their expectations and ways of judging may also need consideration. In Matthew 7:1–5, the image of the beam and the mote directs attention to the judge's hypocrisy. In its Christian setting, this is moral teaching tied to accountability before God. It does not prove that every criticism arises from a similar fault in the critic. That extrapolation would itself create an unsupported diagnosis.

For a present-day conversation, we can propose a limited analogy: before assigning an enduring quality, examine your criterion. In a hypothetical example, an organizer considers any refusal to respond in the evening unprofessional. But the availability agreement covered only working hours. “Unreliable” then contains an unspoken expectation. The organizer can discuss a need for another arrangement; they cannot treat earlier silence as a breach of an obligation never accepted.

Sometimes this examination cancels nothing. If someone promised a document and failed to send it, a request for delivery may be justified even if the requester sometimes misses deadlines. Their own inconsistency matters, but it cannot make the missing document present. Moral self-examination and checking an event do different jobs. Confusing them can turn every discussion of harm into a countercharge: “Become faultless first.” Faultlessness is not a condition of the right to report what happened.

A useful question to oneself is therefore concrete: what did I see, what did I expect, was the expectation agreed, and do I apply the criterion consistently? One can also ask what the assessment is for: preventing repetition, obtaining acknowledgment of an experience, defending status or deciding on further cooperation. The answer does not establish a hidden “real motivation.” It helps choose a form of conversation. Examining one's perspective should strengthen precision and fairness rather than silence a person until all their own shortcomings disappear.

VIII. Freedom from reputation does not mean refusing to listen

Someone may depend more on another person's portrait than on their own action: spending hours trying to prove they are kind, intelligent or strong instead of examining an episode. In Epictetus's *Enchiridion*, §1, reputation belongs among things beyond our power. This is part of a Stoic distinction and conception of moral freedom. It should not be read as a scientific claim of complete voluntary control over experience, or as an instruction to disregard the consequences of actions.

A limited contemporary application is this: we cannot guarantee the image held by every observer, but we can respond to a checkable report. A hypothetical person hears, “You did not let me finish at the meeting.” Instead of defending their entire goodwill, they can acknowledge the interruption, clarify the context and propose another order for the next discussion. The other person may retain an unpleasant impression. That does not make the response meaningless: action and agreement about reputation operate on different timelines and foundations.

Distance from reputation becomes dangerous when it offers an easy excuse: “What people think is their business.” When others suffer from your behavior, more than their opinion is involved. There are consequences and obligations. A public judgment may be inaccurate without erasing the harm caused. Freedom here lies more in declining to replace examination of an action with endless defense of an image than in declining to participate in the conversation.

Sometimes reputation affects access to employment, housing or support. We cannot demand indifference, as though concern about real consequences signified spiritual immaturity. Information can be checked, available correction procedures used and support sought. The Stoic comparison offers a question about limits of control, rather than a universal answer to social conditions. A person can care about being represented fairly while acknowledging that final authority over every conclusion in another mind is unavailable.

IX. Feedback becomes useful through the next question

Not every opinion needs accepting, but a useful opinion can usually be turned into a question about accessible behavior. “You often disappear” can open discussion of which replies were delayed, whether a deadline had been agreed and what the other person needed. This is an approach to clarification proposed by the authors, rather than a diagnostic procedure. Its aim is to obtain information for a decision, not to assemble the most exhaustive possible portrait.

In a hypothetical example, two close people disagree about care. One lists tasks completed; the other says they were left alone with their distress. Comparing the accounts may show that

they mean different forms of participation by care. Averaging their ratings to produce a “moderately caring person” would then make little sense. It is more useful to ask what support is needed, what is available and what each person is willing to agree. Different expectations do not prove equal rightness; they clarify the disagreement's subject.

Questions should remain proportionate. Ask for a single concrete example and what mattered in it. There is no need to demand a complete list of mistakes, survey acquaintances or retain private messages without consent. The more intimate the material, the more voluntariness matters. If someone uses a characterization to humiliate, refuses any concrete foundation or demands acceptance of an unchanging defect, ending the conversation may be wiser than investigating further.

The result should be expressed in words no stronger than the information obtained. “I learned that a short answer is experienced as lack of interest” differs from “I proved I am incapable of intimacy.” A small subsequent agreement can be tried: for example, saying when a calm reply will be possible. Its outcome can show whether the change helps in these relationships. It will not measure the whole personality. Good feedback expands the ability to choose an action and understand consequences; if it leaves only a global verdict, the important transition from characterization to situation may still be missing.

X. A fuller picture preserves differences

Return to the hypothetical meeting at the beginning. We might establish that the colleague quickly proposed a solution, interrupted another participant twice and later reported considerable tension. The first does not cancel the second; the third does not establish its cause. Decisiveness, an unpleasant impact and internal difficulty can coexist. A more precise account need not end with one adjective that reconciles all the witnesses.

This account leaves room for responsibility. If interruption obstructed participation, the conversation's order can change. If the solution was useful, the contribution can be acknowledged. If someone reports tension, that report can be heard without accepting every explanation they offer of other people's motives. Participants may retain different impressions after clarification. The conversation's purpose is then sufficiently clear grounds for further interaction, rather than identical feelings.

Self-knowledge here looks less momentous than discovering a secret essence. It includes willingness to learn how a particular action met another person. That knowledge has boundaries: the observer does not possess the entire inner life, the person does not possess their entire outward impact, and numbers do not make a group omniscient. These boundaries do not make understanding impossible. They show that a question needs to fit its available source of information, leaving room for later revision.

Several witnesses can indeed seem to see different people. Sometimes different actions explain it; sometimes different criteria, error or retelling do. Distinguishing these possibilities is more useful than declaring every portrait equally valid or choosing a final one immediately. A person exceeds the descriptions received without being released from responsibility for their actions. Perspectives meet meaningfully where both sides can say: “This is what I can know; this is what I still do not know; this is what we can check or change.” Limiting the claim in this quiet way can deepen a conversation more than a confident answer about who someone really is.

One further conclusion helps: a description has a period of applicability. If we discussed someone during overload, that condition belongs in the conclusion. If the assessment concerns the last few meetings, it need not silently spread to childhood or future relationships. Specifying time does not devalue an observation. It allows us to return after circumstances change and ask whether the earlier difficulty persists. Feedback can thereby become information available for further work, rather than a lifelong characterization.

What this means in practice

For an ordinary, sufficiently safe disagreement, choose one episode and record the observed action, your own experience and the proposed explanation separately. For example: “The answer came two days later; I felt unimportant; I assumed the person did not care about the conversation.” The last part remains an assumption until clarified. Missing information need not be filled by a convincing story.

Then consider the basis of someone else's assessment: firsthand observation, retelling or general impression? Clarify the expectation and the agreement. Compare periods and circumstances. Ask what concrete change could help next time and whether it is feasible. The result may be acknowledgment of a mistake, a new agreement or a decision to end unsuitable cooperation. Agreement among every assessment is not required.

This practice is unsuitable for forcing acceptance of a portrait, publicly examining intimate history or obtaining proof through pressure. Threats, humiliation and serious disputes about harm may call for support and appropriate procedures rather than another exchange of impressions. After a small change, observe one further episode: did agreement become easier, or a specific difficulty diminish? This checks an action's usefulness under particular conditions. It does not measure dignity, establish an entire biography or determine final character.

Key quotation

> *“...turn inwards and examine ourselves.”*

Confucius, *Analects* 4.17; shortened excerpt, James Legge, Book IV, Chapter XVII. The Russian version translates this passage for the article. The context concerns encountering a person of contrary moral character. This is moral self-examination rather than a requirement to deny another person's confirmed action. Text and locator.

Connections between traditions

Lines compared	Similarity useful to this article	Significant boundary
SOKA research and Confucian observation	An initial impression is insufficient; the foundation of judgment matters.	A research behavioral criterion does not establish Confucian moral virtue.
Confucius 2.9 and the authors' account of participation	Silence can be assessed differently when other information appears.	A pupil's story does not prove that all quiet people understand more than talkative people.
Matthew 7:1–5 and Confucius 4.17	Examining others is connected with examining oneself.	Christian accountability before God and Confucian cultivation of character have different foundations.
Epictetus §1 and the authors' feedback practice	It helps to distinguish action from reputation beyond complete control.	Stoic moral freedom does not cancel social consequences or obligations to repair harm.
Personality research and self-report	Different perspectives can supply different relevant information.	Observed behavior does not reveal every feeling; self-report does not establish every causal account.

Primary sources and research

• Simine Vazire. *Who Knows What About a Person? The Self–Other Knowledge Asymmetry (SOKA) Model*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2010, 98(2), 281–300, DOI 10.1037/a0017908. The model, method, results and limitations were read, rather than every work cited. Author's PDF.

• Confucius. *The Analects*, translated by James Legge. Book II, Chapters IX–X, and Book IV, Chapter XVII were checked (2.9–2.10; 4.17). The short Russian quotations were translated for this article from this English version. Electronic text.

• Matthew 7:1–5, King James Version. The passage on judgment, beam and mote was read; it is used as Christian moral teaching rather than a psychological experiment. Verified passage.

• Epictetus. *The Enchiridion*, translated by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, §1. The section and electronic edition metadata were checked. The Stoic distinction is used within stated limits; the historical introduction is not accepted as independent evidence. Text.

Tags

another perspective, witness, observation, personality, self-knowledge, self-report, feedback, action, impression, character, reputation, interpretation, context, relationships, expectation, agreement, responsibility, motive, uncertainty, independent information, group consensus, checking, revision, Confucianism, Stoicism, Christianity, SOKA, Simine Vazire, dignity, life episode

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 coauthor 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.