

UNITED WISDOM

“Always” and “never” in the story we tell about ourselves

Human Nature and Inner World

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Epigraph

> *“still possible”*
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> *David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, IV.21; excerpt concerning the contrary of a matter of fact. This is a philosophical distinction, rather than a promise of personal change.*

What this article is about

Someone arrives late and says, “I always ruin everything.” A minute later, the conversation is no longer about the meeting. Past failures lie on the table, the future has been outlined, and character has received its verdict. Yet yesterday they completed difficult work, helped someone close this morning, and brought the required materials to the meeting. These events did not disappear from life. They disappeared from a sentence now claiming to describe life as a whole.

“Always” and “never” can be accurate. They express promises, rules, boundaries, and logical conclusions. Sometimes they are ordinary emphasis: “never do that again” conveys a request's seriousness. The task is therefore not to ban two words, but to understand the scale they give an account and the action they permit or cancel. We will follow how an episode becomes a personal eternity, why an exception does not remove actual pain, and how to describe repetition without making it fate. Precision leaves room for responsibility: it helps repair something specific instead of proving a right to exist before an endless list of our mistakes.

I. One word changes the size of a claim

“I missed the deadline today” describes a limited event. “I often miss deadlines” reports supposed repetition. “I never finish anything” extends to every task and all time. The difference is more than emotional force. Each sentence needs a different basis and implies a different task. The first calls for addressing one obligation; the second for comparing episodes and conditions. The third effectively declares that no completed action ever existed in our life or will ever appear.

Usually the speaker does not intend such a strong claim literally. They express disappointment, shame, or fatigue and choose words matching the experience's intensity. Afterwards, however, the sentence may operate as a literal description. “I never finish anything” becomes grounds for declining a new task, or for avoiding help: I will spoil it anyway. We can utter a hyperbole and then live by its strict meaning. Notice that transition without scolding yourself for a familiar conversational form.

Clarification should preserve what the sentence attempted to communicate. Merely replacing “always” with “sometimes” may be insufficient: the person has really encountered a similar result many times. A more precise revision is: “During the last month, I delayed three tasks after accepting a deadline without checking my workload.” Frequency, unpleasantness, and responsibility remain. An area for examining differences also appears. The words can no longer automatically extend the observation to abilities, relationships, and the whole remaining biography.

Ask which set you are talking about: every meeting this month, every relationship, all your time in a company, or life as a whole? Without a named set, a strong word can change its size freely. First two projects, then any task, then personality. Specifying scale restores a subject to discussion. It does not necessarily soften the assessment. “Each of the last five reports contained the same error” is stricter than “you always make mistakes,” because it names a verifiable repetition and requires a specific response.

II. Remembered episodes do not equal a verdict on personality

After difficulty, the past is often reconsidered through the current sentence. In the imagined late-arrival scene, the person recalls school, a forgotten call, and a broken agreement. Every episode receives the same caption: me again. Yet a shared caption does not establish a shared cause. At school they depended on adults; the call was forgotten on an overloaded day; the agreement was poorly coordinated. Differences do not automatically excuse an action. They prevent us from explaining repetition only through the same person's presence in every case.

Ask what the events share beyond an unpleasant result. Were requirements, resources, interlocutors, deadlines, or skills alike? What repeated: a late start, an excessive promise, an unclear task, or a missing resource? If no common feature is apparent, retain separate episodes. We need not immediately find a hidden mechanism before repairing the nearest one. History becomes more useful when it preserves differences rather than simply collecting accusations under one stable name.

“I am always like that” turns an event into evidence of an essence. Late means irresponsible; refusal means selfish; confusion means weak. Yet a label communicates less than a specific action. It does not reveal a realistic deadline, wording for a refusal, or knowledge needed in a

conversation. The person may also defend themselves against the label instead of addressing the consequence. “I am not irresponsible” replaces a simple acknowledgment: another person waited today, I did not warn them, and I need to clarify the next agreement.

A precise account is therefore not necessarily supportive in the usual sense. It can include discomfort: I saw the reminder and postponed anyway; I agreed while knowing I lacked time. It also preserves the capacity for another choice. A specific mistake permits a specific correction. A mistake declared evidence of immutable nature makes every correction look like pretence in advance. We are not proving character nonexistent. We decline to use an excessively broad label as the episode's only explanation before examining its actual conditions.

III. An exception limits a word without cancelling harm

If you say “nobody ever listens to me” and someone immediately recalls one attentive conversation, you may feel even less heard. Logically, an exception limits the claim's universality. Humanly, it does not solve the problem: important people may regularly ignore your requests. Checking language and recognising experience should therefore go together. We can clarify a word while preserving the seriousness of repeated events. “Not literally nobody; my requests to this person often receive no answer” already provides a workable basis for action.

An exception helps when it reveals different conditions. Where were you heard? What differed in the request's form, the circumstances, or the listener's attitude? Perhaps you spoke more clearly; perhaps the other person was more attentive or had more resources. None of these options should automatically transfer blame to you. Comparison may show that the problem concerns a relationship or environment rather than your general speaking ability. Changing expression then cannot replace a question about the quality of contact.

One exception also does not remove a persistent risk. If a partner broke an obligation ten times and kept it once, the problem cannot be declared gone. The universal “never” became inaccurate, but “usually fails to follow through” may still justify ending collaboration. Precision does not demand balancing bad and good into attractive symmetry. It demands actual proportions and significant consequences. We need not maintain a relationship merely because we can recall one good day.

Exceptions must not be used against someone else's pain. “I always have to manage alone” can receive a question about particular tasks instead of a list of services you once performed. The speaker may be describing an unequal distribution of current work. Help a year ago does not solve today's issue. Noticing hyperbole is insufficient; learn what it is trying to make visible.

Precision serves contact with experience rather than victory over an inaccurate word. The person retains the right to clarify both their formulation and your response.

IV. The past supports expectations, rather than logical eternity

In Hume's Enquiry, IV.20–23 and V.36, experience supports expectation rather than the future's logical necessity. This philosophical argument promises no personal change: rejecting eternity does not cancel the past.

Imagine a task you postponed several times. History supports preparing for repetition: reduce the scope, check conditions, or set an intermediate deadline. Pretending yesterday did not exist would be strange. But "therefore nothing else is possible now" adds a necessity observation itself did not establish. Between naive confidence in change and complete immobility lies a workable position: repetition is likely based on experience; an available alteration can be tested; the outcome is not known in advance.

In Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, II.1, Ross translation, moral virtue develops through habituation in actions. This is normative philosophy, not testing an exercise. One new deed does not establish a stable quality.

Hume and Aristotle cannot be merged into a theory. One examines expectation's basis, the other moral development and virtue. Comparing them yields two questions for "I am always like that": how strong a conclusion does history permit, and which actions do I keep reinforcing? These questions do not remove circumstances limiting choice. They distinguish forecast from verdict and practice from a promise of instantaneous transformation. Adult work with repetition begins in this interval: the past is considered without presenting the future as already lived.

V. "Never" can be a boundary or a promise

Not every absolute word describes statistics. "I never share private correspondence without consent" may be a chosen rule. "I will never accept that format again" may establish a boundary after actual experience. Testing these sentences against earlier exceptions is insufficient: they address future action. Clarify what is promised, to whom, and under which conditions. Absoluteness can be necessary when it concerns an unacceptable action rather than the person's whole identity.

A promise nevertheless does not testify to a completed future. Someone can accept a rule and then break it. They must acknowledge the violation, consequences, and a way to restore trust. This does not establish that they never intended compliance; we may not know that. Performance differs from declaration. Preserve both records: an obligation was accepted, and

it was not fulfilled in this episode. This permits assessing reliability without a theory of complete inward hypocrisy.

A boundary can also have a specific scope. “I do not participate in conversations where I am insulted” is clearer than “I will never speak to anyone again.” The first names a condition for leaving and permits other forms of contact. The second extends one case's consequences to every relationship. Perhaps the person genuinely needs temporary distance from communication. They can name that distance now without a duty to comply forever with words spoken during an intense experience. Changing a decision need not mean the earlier pain was insignificant.

Some promises are too broad to verify: always be strong, never upset loved ones, always understand another person. Fulfilment depends on meanings, circumstances, and others' experience. Someone can care conscientiously and still cause upset. A more definite obligation is to warn of delays, discuss important decisions, or avoid humiliating language. It promises no emotional perfection but gives participants something to discuss. Precision does not lower an ethical standard; it makes the standard into an action for which someone can answer.

VI. A positive eternity can also constrain

“I always cope” sounds better than “I always ruin everything.” Both can deny permission to see a new fact. Someone who must always cope delays asking for help, conceals overload, or accepts an unsuitable obligation. A difficult episode threatens both the task and their self-image. Preserving that image may then cost more effort than solving the problem. This is a possible logic in an imagined example, rather than a cause to attribute to every confident speaker.

Distinguish acknowledging experience from a duty to repeat it under any conditions. “I coped with something similar before” preserves the past as support. “Therefore I must cope without help now” adds a rule the experience did not establish. Conditions may have changed, earlier independence may have cost too much, or the task may now be shared. Success does not require reproducing its cost indefinitely. We can use our skills while checking resources, requesting help, or declining a load without declaring past achievements invalid.

The same applies to a moral self-image. “I am never jealous” may obstruct acknowledging an unpleasant comparison. “I am always kind” may prevent noticing sharpness. Honest people need not expose themselves publicly. But inward permission to describe a particular action is more useful than guarding an immaculate name. I can value kindness and speak rudely today; respect someone and feel disappointed about their success. Acknowledging this does not

define the entire person as bad. It makes room to decide how to handle the action and experience.

The task is therefore not replacing negative eternities with positive ones. “I can never do anything” does not become more accurate as “I can always do everything.” Both promise more than is known. A specific history may offer steadier support: what we learned, completed, got wrong under particular conditions, and found helpful. It is less spectacular than a slogan, but usable for choice. Readers retain the right to consider some qualities stable without requiring their complete presence in every minute and context of life.

VII. Time in a story can remain alive

In Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, KJV, different activities have different times. This is religious poetry, not a behaviour model or instruction about when the reader should speak. Comparison preserves the religious context and human limits.

Adding time changes an account. “I cannot agree now” differs from “I am incapable of agreement.” “Trust has been difficult in recent months” differs from “I will never trust anyone.” The first forms promise no automatic change. They merely avoid presenting a current period as all existence. The period can still be long and the difficulty persistent. “Now” must not reduce seriousness. It gives an accurate place in the calendar to what is actually happening.

Distinguish the time of action from the time of assessment too. Today you call past work a failure because you learned new circumstances. During the work, different information was available. This does not cancel consequences; it changes the basis of responsibility. We can acknowledge a decision's unsuccessful result without asserting that we knowingly chose an already identified mistake. Our account is more honest when the past is not rewritten entirely through today's knowledge. History retains development: information available, events, and the moment the need for change became clear.

Living time also permits incompletion. A person can learn, try, err, and return. “It hasn't worked yet” guarantees no later success, but describes an unfinished process more accurately than a final “never.” Sometimes ending the task after attempts is reasonable. Completion then takes the form of a decision: I no longer choose this path. It need not prove general incapacity. Time permits closing one undertaking while preserving other directions that one failure has no authority to cancel.

Distinguishing time also helps compare different tasks. Someone completes small everyday activities while repeatedly postponing long work projects. “I never finish anything” conceals differences in scale and form. Completed work can be noticed while a persistent difficulty is taken seriously. This does not invite comfort in small things instead of fulfilling an obligation. It selects a precise subject: what does a long project need that a short task does not? Perhaps

intermediate results, another agreement, or several people’s participation. While the answer remains unknown, the difference remains a question. It already prevents using successes to deny a problem or using the problem to erase every success.

VIII. Revising an account needs observation rather than an incantation

Suppose you replace “I always miss deadlines” with a precise description and start checking workload earlier. The first deadline is still missed. This matters without proving every change useless. Perhaps the chosen step was insufficient, the cause different, or conditions changed. Distinguishing options requires information about that attempt. Precision shows itself in the ability to revise an explanation, including acknowledgment that the original hypothesis was wrong.

The second task is completed on time. Notice the exception and conditions without declaring the problem permanently solved. What helped: smaller scope, clear instructions, no additional workload, another person's involvement? If the answer is unknown, preserve success as success without invented causality. Every lucky outcome need not be attributed to a special inward transformation. Environment and resources can affect outcomes. This view helps repeat useful conditions rather than demand repetition of a good mood or willpower.

A record of several comparable cases helps more than an endless argument about “always.” One limited task and consistent observable signs are enough. Life need not become a table of every experience. If recording serves accusation, stop and restore its purpose. It should answer something specific: which deadline to choose, which load to accept, where help is needed. Accumulating data for another personality verdict simply transfers the old eternity into a more detailed document without creating room for action.

Precision permits an unpleasant conclusion too: the repetition is persistent, available measures failed, and another approach or changed conditions are needed. This does not make “I am always like that” correct in every respect. It may have identified a problem while overstating its scale and misidentifying its cause. We can accept a persistent limitation without extending it to every ability. Honest wording permits seeking support and changing an environment without promising limitless growth or making rejection of the inaccessible into defeat of the entire person.

When discussing repetition, name beforehand which fact would change the assessment. A completed stage will not solve everything but confirms that stage. Another missed deadline will not prove immutable personality but requires an answer for timing. This criterion protects conversation from constantly shifting sufficiency, where success is declared too small and error too encompassing. An inability to agree on a criterion is a separate interaction difficulty. It

need not be concealed by always or turned into further proof of general incapacity. Record which expectations differ and what each participant regards as an available result.

IX. Returning from eternity to the encounter

The person in the opening scene is still late. Someone still waited. Revising wording is insufficient to restore an agreement. The event, its impact, and further action must be discussed. Instead of “I am always impossible to deal with,” specific speech becomes available: “I misjudged the journey and didn't warn you; I understand you waited; this is what I can do now.” The answer demands no reassurance from the other person. It restores responsibility to an action that actually occurred between people.

If lateness repeats, the repetition must be addressed. Another time, a margin, fewer impossible promises, or acknowledgment of an unsuitable meeting format may be needed. The other person need not accept new promises immediately. Trust concerns subsequent action rather than the beauty of a precise sentence. Language creates a possibility for change without performing it for us. This boundary protects both the person giving an explanation and whoever encounters its consequences.

Sometimes someone else uses “always” about our action. Before arguing, hear the specific content: which repetition they mean, what remains uncorrected, and what they expect now. We need not accept a verdict on our entire person. A repetition can be acknowledged while excess scale is contested: “I recognise three delays; I disagree that I never complete anything; I want to discuss the delays.” This keeps two tasks in view without choosing between self-defence and recognition of facts.

Freedom from personal eternity does not remove history. Promises, achievements, limits, mistakes, and other people's memories remain. What changes is history's right to speak for every future event in advance. We can answer for the past while considering the next case separately, respect stable qualities without compulsory masks, and end one path without cancelling life. “Always” and “never” return to their place: sometimes an accurate rule, sometimes a strong feeling, and sometimes a word still lacking grounds for such extensive power.

What this means in practice

Choose a sentence containing “always” or “never.” Identify its function first: description, emotional emphasis, promise, or boundary. For a description, name a period and comparable cases. Preserve consequences and your experience. Find an exception only if one is available, rather than inventing one for a positive conclusion. Ask whether it shows a useful difference in conditions or merely limits the word's literalness.

Formulate the nearest task. For lateness, that may be warning someone and recalculating time; for a repeatedly unheard request, changing the conversation or establishing distance. Do not require the new sentence to solve everything. Afterwards record what was done, what changed, and what remains difficult. A persistent limitation should be considered specifically, without a promise to overcome every boundary.

In conversation, acknowledge the actual episode before clarifying the generalisation. Precision must not become evasion of responsibility or devaluation of another person's feeling. Its useful result is a clearer question and an achievable action. Between “I ruined everything” and “nothing serious happened,” an honest sentence has room: “This happened; this is what it changed; this is what I can do next.” It promises no new personality by tomorrow morning. It leaves today's person able to answer for today's action.

If you made a promise using an absolute word, check its conditions separately. A clear rule needs an available action rather than only a strong declaration. After a violation, preserve the history and repair the consequence; a new slogan does not itself restore trust.

Key quotation

> *“Custom, then, is the great guide of human life.”*
>
> *Hume, Enquiry, V.36. The context explains expectations from experience, rather than immutable character.*

Connections between traditions

Approaches	Similarity	Difference
Hume ↔ limiting generalisation	Experience differs from logical necessity	A philosophical argument does not forecast personal growth
Aristotle ↔ concrete practice	Repeated action matters	Normative virtue differs from any arbitrary skill
Ecclesiastes ↔ living time	Different actions have different times	Religious poetry is no behavioural change method
Logical exception ↔ personal history	An exception limits universality	It does not remove persistent harm
Promise ↔ description	Both may use absolute words	A future obligation is no report of performance

Primary sources

• David Hume. Enquiry, L. A. Selby-Bigge edition, PG9662; IV.20–23, V.35–38. Named passages and adjacent reasoning read, rather than the whole volume.

• Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, W. D. Ross translation, II.1. First section of Book II read; an ethical position, not an experiment.

• Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, King James Version. Selected passage read; religious and poetic support.
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Tags

always, never, self narrative, generalisation, exception, memory, time, Hume, Aristotle, Ecclesiastes, habit, character, responsibility, promise, boundary, rule, lateness, repetition, conditions, experience, forecast, action, limitation, language, choice

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