

UNITED WISDOM

Traits, states, and circumstances: three scales of description

Human Nature and Inner World

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I-22-N01 · EN

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Epigraph

> *particular judgment*

Michel de Montaigne, Of the Inconstancy of Our Actions, Essays II.1. Charles Cotton, edited by William Carew Hazlitt1877, Gutenberg3589, displayed line84; the Russian version is our translation of a short fragment of the author's prose. A philosophical question about an action is not turned into a contemporary psychological method.

What this article is about

A colleague usually considered sociable said almost nothing during the morning discussion. Afterwards, they talked animatedly with two acquaintances. An observer was surprised: the person seemed to have changed character within half an hour. Yet the account already mixed three scales. A general impression of the colleague, behaviour at a particular meeting, and the conditions of two conversations became one piece of evidence. The distinction in this imagined scene becomes visible once we name the subjects separately: what we usually notice, what happened now, and what we know about the circumstances. The causes have not yet been explained; a more accurate note can begin simply by ceasing to substitute these questions for one another.

Here, a trait will mean a general description of a tendency; a state, a description of what happens within a limited moment or period; circumstances, the conditions under which we consider it. This is a working distinction for reading our own note, not a new personality test. We will compare selected primary texts by Montaigne and Epictetus with parts read of Fleeson's original paper. Their genres and grounds differ. They can help pose a question about the scale of description while retaining the option of saying I do not know where causes, another person's inner experience, or a stable pattern have not been established.

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I. A general word already moves between cases

Sociable seems a short, comprehensible word. Applied to the person generally, however, it implies more than one conversation. The reader imagines a series of cases without always being able to name them or their observational conditions. Perhaps they often met the colleague among acquaintances and rarely saw them in other tasks. A generalisation can serve as a provisional description if its origin is known. Its breadth, however, does not arise from the grammar of an adjective. One word can sound more confident than the information we have actually gathered permits.

We can clarify the scale without abandoning ordinary language. I often notice them starting conversations with our acquaintances. This is a comprehensible sentence with a named observational circle. It promises neither identical behaviour at every meeting nor knowledge of another's inner desire or clinical status. If the task concerns the morning discussion, it helps to set aside the general word and record what the person did there. They listened, answered one question, and offered no proposal. These details still need accuracy, but they can already be related to a particular event.

A general description may retain a purpose of its own. For example, someone wants to understand which conversations they usually find easy to start. They turn to several cases, noting similarities and differences. Generalisation need not become a fixed essence or verdict. It can act as a question for the next case: does what I noticed recur, and under which conditions? The scale remains connected to its grounds. A new scene need not immediately destroy the earlier description, but it can show that the description was narrower than it seemed.

It matters to distinguish a name's convenience from a conclusion's accuracy. A familiar word sometimes suffices for a short invitation. Explaining refusal, assigning work, or assessing another's capabilities requires corresponding information. If we expect a sociable colleague necessarily to represent the team before an unfamiliar audience, we carry the description into a new task. It helps to ask about willingness and conditions rather than treating consent as already contained in a trait. A general word creates neither a promise, a speaking skill, nor the right to speak for someone who did not authorise it.

II. A present episode does not reveal the whole inner state

At a meeting, we can observe an action and hear a person's account of themselves. These are different kinds of information. They are silent describes visible behaviour in our account. They are anxious is already a conjecture if they did not report it and other grounds are absent. They say they wanted to hear the explanation through records their account of an intention. That matters, but it does not become complete access to inner life either. An honest note can preserve each detail's origin: I saw, I heard, or I suppose. Confidence then does not hide behind an identical sentence form.

In everyday language, a state may concern a feeling, mood, or present way of acting. A particular study defines its meaning through its measurement method. One meaning cannot automatically transfer to another merely because a familiar word appears. Our note about morning silence describes a limited episode for now. It does not measure every feeling the colleague had or determine a level on a scale. We can ask what the person wishes to communicate, but they are entitled not to explain private circumstances for the completeness of another's observation.

Clarifying time changes meaning too. Did not speak in today's discussion differs from did not want to communicate all day. One scene may support the first; the second encompasses events and intentions the observer did not see. We need not compile a detailed diary to notice the jump. It suffices to ask where observation began and ended. If the person talked with two acquaintances afterwards, that is a new episode with its own conditions. It does not prove there was a hidden mood at the earlier meeting that we have now deciphered retrospectively.

The distinction is equally useful in our own writing. I can report feeling tense and separately recall my actions. Perhaps I answered calmly outwardly; perhaps I interrupted someone. The feeling does not automatically establish either action, and an action does not fully describe the feeling. If the task concerns a promise or conversation, available information and gaps both deserve naming. This is not a demand for continuous self-observation. It is an option for making one note more accurate when a broad statement obstructs understanding of the chosen case and a suitable next step.

III. Circumstances answer a question of their own

Many things could have differed between the conversations: participants, topic, allocation of speaking turns, and available time. We can name these conditions in the initial scene without assigning causal force to each. During the morning discussion, a facilitator explained a new arrangement; afterwards, two acquaintances exchanged impressions. These are details of the situation. They were silent specifically because of the facilitator requires further grounds. Conditions' presence and proof of a cause are different outcomes. Clarifying circumstances expands description without automatically supplying the single explanation for why someone acted that way.

In the selected Enchiridion §4, Epictetus proposes considering the nature of an undertaking through a bathing scene. This is philosophical guidance about intention and conditions of action, not an experimental test of environmental influence. We can relate it to our question about the situation while preserving the genre boundary. This reader's comparison promises no control over people and establishes no cause of present silence. A historical text offers a form of reflection; information about a contemporary meeting still needs to come from the meeting and available participant accounts.

A circumstance can sometimes be checked directly. For example, the discussion provided no time for responses, whereas the conversation afterwards was open. We need to establish the arrangement or examine a recording, if one exists and is accessible on appropriate terms. The conclusion remains limited: opportunities to speak differed. It does not yet establish whether a particular person wanted to speak. But it may help change the next meeting by naming a place for questions beforehand. This action concerns conversation's organisation and requires no explanation of all participants' behaviour through one inner cause.

Some conditions remain unknown to an observer. A private message, unfinished work, or a person's preference may be inaccessible. It helps to leave such details unknown rather than fill a gap with a plausible conjecture. Not knowing circumstances authorises no medical conclusion, yet does not force an assumption that conditions were identical. We can limit description to available details and ask only what the present agreement requires. A person need not provide a complete account of their day to discuss whether they will speak at the next work meeting.

IV. Research keeps variability alongside generalisation

Fleeson's original 2001 paper considers repeated self-reports of trait-related behaviour. The abstract and discussion read distinguish variation in individual states from stability in characteristics of their distributions. Neither cancels the other in the data considered. This is a research conclusion under described conditions rather than a promise to predict everyone's every remark. It lets us avoid deciding in advance between total invariability and the absence of any general pattern.

Selected parts of the primary text were read, including methods for the second and third studies and self-report limitations; not the entire text, tables, or all underlying studies. The methods name students and repeated ratings, while the discussion considers wording's features. This article's exercise was not tested by that research. A personal note is therefore not presented as replicating its procedure, and a group result does not become a diagnosis of our colleague. The boundary preserves a source's usefulness precisely where its author's task is visible.

In ordinary writing, we can retain a similar question without claiming measurement: do my episodes differ, and what generalisation actually describes them? For example, I start conversations readily in a familiar task but rarely do so while still trying to understand the arrangement. This version allows differences without turning every episode into an accidental exception. For now, however, it is my interpretation of selected scenes. A stable relationship between conditions and behaviour requires corresponding information; an explanation's elegant connection of two cases does not itself ensure its truth.

The subject of stability matters too. We may compare an average description across periods, a particular action, or a way of rating ourselves. These are different things. If a person several times called themselves talkative, repetition of self-description is what we know for now. If they actually often started conversations under chosen conditions, that is different evidence. Both materials can be interesting, but neither should substitute for the other. Naming the comparison's subject clearly leaves fewer reasons for surprise when a broad word fails to match one morning's event or another participant's answer.

V. Montaigne offers a question rather than a ready modern scale

In the chapter read, Montaigne considers differences between actions and the difficulty of a single judgment about a person. This is a philosophical essay with its own moral evaluations and historical examples, not contemporary psychological data. We import neither its questionable examples into explanations of present behaviour nor a modern trait model into his thought. A limited question is useful here: what gets lost when several different actions are fitted to one description in advance?

Suppose an observer has already decided the colleague is sociable. Morning silence then becomes pretence: the real character should have shown itself differently. Had the original generalisation been the opposite, animated conversation afterwards would have to become an exception. In both cases, the label acquires protection in advance while scenes lose the possibility of changing our understanding. We can instead preserve different episodes and ask what permits their comparison. An explanation may be incomplete; acknowledging that is more useful than assigning someone a hidden purpose to preserve our own word.

Different actions do not automatically imply several independent personalities. Our scene still concerns one person observed in two conversations. We should add no metaphysical or clinical conclusion merely because descriptions diverge. Nor must every divergence become a moral failing. Perhaps we compared different tasks, overlooked an opportunity to respond, or formulated an earlier impression too broadly. These explanations also need checking, but they show what questions can precede a grand account of someone else's inner organisation. A few conjectures' resemblance to an essay does not confirm them.

Philosophical reading can return attention to how we judge. Why do we need a single image of the colleague: to assign a role, predict consent, or soothe our surprise? Each task needs suitable information. For a new role, we can ask about willingness; for an earlier promise, about its result; for personal writing, we can narrow the observational scale. The essay then does not become a dictionary of human types. It accompanies a question about our judgment and helps reveal when we preferred a finished story to a person who has not yet participated in discussing it.

VI. Repetition needs attention to what is compared

Several cases supply more material than one, but their number alone does not resolve every question. Perhaps we recall only vivid conversations and forget quiet ones. Perhaps we observed someone only at celebrations. Perhaps sociable meant something slightly different each time. A small reflection needs only to name these limits rather than turn life into continuous data collection. We want to understand a chosen scene, not obtain a complete observational dataset at any cost. A missing case can remain missing without becoming evidence that an action or intention was absent.

It helps to distinguish comparable and incomparable tasks in a note. A work discussion with an appointed speaker and a free conversation afterwards are not identical opportunities to speak. This does not prohibit comparison but defines its question: how did someone act in different formats? If we instead want to compare similar meetings, we should examine similarities in participants, arrangement, and available time. Even similar conditions ensure no complete match of inner experiences. Accuracy lies in naming known similarities rather than asserting we held constant everything that might have mattered.

We can notice memory's limits too. Sometimes only an impression remains: the person seemed withdrawn. Without exact remarks, we need not invent them to make a note convincing. It is better to retain the status: this is how I remembered it, but I did not reconstruct the action. Later, we can distinguish a recollection of an event from an interpretation of our impression. When a task requires a specific promise or condition, suitable information should be obtained separately. Memory of a general atmosphere establishes neither who agreed to pay rent nor who received a task or accepted a deadline. Different materials do not become interchangeable because they concern the same meeting.

Repeating our own note does not create new external evidence either. If I rewrote one scene three times, these are three versions of my account rather than three observations. A new version can refine meaning, but the material's origin remains the same. This distinction helps particularly when description grows more confident. I can correct an adjective, add an unknown condition, or remove an unsupported cause. The outcome concerns the note's quality; it does not mean a person's stable trait was measured merely because my text became coherent and stopped raising questions for its author.

VII. A changed case is not yet personality change

If the colleague speaks at the next discussion, we can name a new episode. Perhaps the arrangement changed, the topic became familiar, or the person wanted to propose a solution. Causes remain unestablished if we did not examine them. They stopped being withdrawn adds a broader conclusion. First, it helps to ask what exactly changed: the number of remarks, meeting format, the observer's expectation, or a general description across cases. These changes have different grounds. Naming them separately lets us discuss an actual difference without declaring a whole personality renewed after one contribution.

This can be an especially freeing question for ourselves. I asked one question although I usually stayed silent at similar meetings. We can acknowledge the action's significance without promising always to speak from now on. We can also consider what helped this case: prepared material or allocated time, if those conditions are actually known. This does not cancel personal effort. It makes the effort specific and leaves the next episode open. A small outcome needs no guarantee of complete transformation to matter to someone who wanted to clarify one question.

A convenient image of a permanent trait sometimes explains impossibility: this is how I am, so nothing is available to me. The opposite image demands continual variation: unless I change in every case, I am not developing. Both can obscure the present task. Better to name what the person wants now and which conditions are known. Perhaps they need to prepare two sentences, decline a role, or agree to a written response. Choice need not follow from an obligatory character narrative. A concrete agreement requires suitable information,

possibilities, and the person's participation rather than a complete resolution of their invariability.

Distinguishing scales does not prohibit discussing long-term changes. It helps determine the material they require and what remains unestablished. If the question concerns a stable description across periods, one successful evening may contribute material without providing the whole basis. If it concerns a particular promise, we can check its corresponding result. A new task need not wait for a final conclusion about a trait. We can act under named conditions and reconsider when new information arrives. An open description should not become an endless delay in matters already possible to resolve specifically.

VIII. Explaining conditions does not cancel responsibility

Suppose someone promised a question list but did not send it. We can consider circumstances and a present state if they wish to describe them. The promise and its result remain a separate subject. We need not choose between condemning the whole personality and erasing the duty completely. We can clarify what happened, what is possible now, and how the agreement needs amending. Conditions help us understand the case; they do not retrospectively establish that the list was delivered. Such accuracy allows consequences to be discussed without declaring someone permanently unreliable or entirely released from a commitment.

If an action affected another person, their account matters separately. An observer cannot replace another's experience with an explanation of their own mood. I was tense reports something about me. Someone says they received no answer reports an outcome for them. Both can coexist and require different next steps. We can acknowledge the missed message, clarify conditions, and propose a suitable correction. Agreement with a general character label is unnecessary, but rejecting the label does not automatically repair what happened. Describing personality and restoring a concrete agreement are different tasks.

When discussing another person, we should consider access boundaries. A personal note requires neither collecting private messages nor secretly observing every conversation or assigning an explanation of private life. We can choose material we are entitled to use for the named task. If consent to a role or information about available time is needed, we can ask about that. If someone declines to discuss an inner feeling, the gap remains a gap. It confirms neither our chosen cause nor a suspicious character inferred from inaccessible private details. A suitable question can be substantially narrower than an observer's curiosity.

A personal exercise can also have a simple stopping point. I named the observation, separated conjecture, and identified an unknown condition; that suffices for the present note. We need not continue until we have explained ourselves completely. If an external decision is required, the next step concerns it: clarify time, prepare a message, or reconsider a promise. This

voluntary editorial exercise claims no therapeutic effect. It proposes neither continuous state monitoring nor self-assessment at every behavioural change. The option of ending preserves the task's scale rather than turning three descriptive distinctions into a new obligation to investigate personality continuously.

IX. Three scales can remain in one clear note

Return to the observer. A new version might say: I usually saw the colleague start conversations among acquaintances; during the morning discussion they hardly spoke; afterwards they chatted with two acquaintances. The formats differed, as far as I know; I did not establish their inner reasons. There is no complete profile, but fewer unsupported transitions. If the task concerns the next presentation, willingness and conditions can be asked about separately. The note need not decide which behaviour was genuine and which concealed character. Both episodes retain a place in the description.

This accuracy may change our surprise too. We expected a general word to appear identically under different circumstances and then saw a difference. That prompts refinement of an expectation rather than necessarily a search for a hidden breakdown in the person. Yet the new version is not final either: perhaps information about the meeting's arrangement is wrong, or the colleague wishes to add their account. The option of correction belongs alongside established details. Uncertainty about causes does not cancel an observation, and an observation does not cancel uncertainty about causes. Holding both makes the note suitable for further discussion of the actual subject.

A philosophical question, research model, and editorial exercise remain different things. Montaigne does not confirm Fleeson's data, and a primary scientific text does not certify every personal note. Epictetus offers historical guidance rather than a way to govern others. Comparing them helps ask how we consider an action, generalise across cases, and account for conditions. We can name a limited result: one description became clearer and a question for the next agreement more precise. A person retains the possibility of acting differently, answering for a specific promise, and exceeding a word an observer once chose for convenience.

What this means in practice

Choose one accessible episode and record an action without a general label. State the observation's time and boundaries. Separately name what you usually notice in similar cases, if that material exists. Do not turn repetition of your account into additional observations or another person's silence into an account of their inner causes.

Add known circumstances and distinguish them from causal conjecture. What differed in the task, arrangement, or opportunity to answer? Which condition is unknown? A person's self-report, your observation, and interpretation have different grounds. If external consent or a condition is needed, obtain the corresponding answer; a complete account of private life is unnecessary.

Name a small outcome and finish when the description suffices for the chosen question. A new remark certifies no whole-personality change, and explaining a state does not automatically repair a missed commitment. This voluntary exercise is neither a test nor treatment and promises no effect. A possible result is a clearer observation and a suitable question for what actually needs deciding.

Key quotation

> *considerable within-person variation*

William Fleeson, Toward a Structure- and Process-Integrated View of Personality,2001, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology80(6),1011–1027; a short fragment of the complete original abstract, printed page1011 / first PDF page, displayed line16. The Russian version is our translation; the fragment concerns studied behavioural descriptions, promising neither prediction nor an exercise effect.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Question	Boundary
Montaigne ↔ an individual action	How does a general word affect judgment?	Philosophical essay, not a modern scale or verification of anecdotes.
Epictetus ↔ known conditions	What undertaking do we encounter?	Guidance, not an experiment or control over others.
Primary research ↔ a series of descriptions	What varies, and what is generalised?	Selected parts, self-reports; not entire text or a reader test.
Observation ↔ an inner account	Who reported what, and what is known?	Behaviour offers no complete access to another's feelings.
Circumstances ↔ commitment	What happened, and what can be corrected?	Explanation replaces neither actual outcome nor another's consent.

The comparison map is editorial and establishes no unified teaching or historical influence. The scene is fictional; clinical, metaphysical, and universal causal conclusions are not drawn.

Primary sources

1. Michel de Montaigne, Essays II.1, Charles Cotton, William Carew Hazlitt1877, Gutenberg3589/Volume09. Header0–44 and the entire selected chapter45–140 actually read; not the complete collection. Authorial prose distinguished from ancient quotations/editorial brackets; questionable historical examples are not present facts or norms. International rights UNKNOWN.

2. Epictetus, Enchiridion §4, Elizabeth Carter. Header/translator and selected§1/§4–17 actually read earlier in this batch; §4 used here, not the entire collection. Philosophical guidance, not a scientific experiment; international copy rights UNKNOWN.

3. William Fleeson, Toward a Structure- and Process-Integrated View of Personality: Traits as Density Distributions of States, JPersSocPsychol2001 80(6),1011–1027; DOI10.1037/0022-3514.80.6.1011. Header/complete original abstract/opening0–150, selected Study2method837–892, Study3premise/method1160–1199, procedure/discussion/limitations1200–1496 actually read; also separate selectedlaterresults1029–1088/1151–1159. Not entire text, every table/calculation, or cited study. Self-reports, students in selected methods, wording/response limitations; causal, clinical, and individual guarantees not claimed. APAcopyright in header; hosting not a licence, international rights UNKNOWN. PubMed11414368 returned one line; its abstract is not claimed read.

Read05October2026; no complete import. Short direct fragments count together across languages/files; different Essays volumes create no independent quotation budget. Sujato/SuttaCentral and mirrors excluded; this editorial exercise is not validated by these sources.

Tags

traits, states, circumstances, personality, behaviour, description, observation, generalisation, episode, context, Montaigne, Essays, Cotton, Hazlitt, Epictetus, Carter, Fleeson, self-report, research, variation, stability, word, time, memory, cause, consent, promise, responsibility, boundaries, question

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