

The Distinction Everyone Possesses

Michael Richard Haimes | Philosophical reflection and critical examination | Expanded edition
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“Being the best is an attribute applied only very rarely. In fact, the only time it is applied for almost everyone is that they are the best at being themselves.”

The original observation above is preserved as stated. The discussion that follows clarifies its intended meaning, tests its reasoning, and places it beside related ideas. The central insight is that a person need not win a contest to possess a distinction no other person can take: being that very person.

What “best” means here

The intended comparison is unrestricted by an arbitrarily small social group. Being the best nutritionist in a room of four people does not establish being the best nutritionist in the world. Likewise, being the best cook in one household, the best chess player among friends, or the best mathematician in a classroom establishes only local superiority. Those examples do not contradict a claim explicitly concerned with worldwide standing.

“Best” still requires a specified respect: best at a task or according to a standard. The claim does not require one individual to be superior in every possible respect. Its decisive respect is *being the particular individual one actually is*.

Being yourself is not becoming your potential

Here, “being yourself” means being the actual person, not being an ideal version of that person. It is not a test of authenticity, confidence, achievement, or fulfillment. A person who is confused, unsuccessful, changing, or imitating another remains that person. Improvement can change how someone lives without making another individual better qualified to be them.

The central argument

1. Each person is that particular person.
2. No distinct person is that same individual, however closely they resemble or imitate them.
3. Therefore, no other person can surpass someone at satisfying the condition of being that individual.

Conclusion: Under this explicit meaning, everyone is unsurpassable at being themselves.

Calling this “being the best” expresses complete and exclusive fulfillment of that condition. Its force rests on identity, rather than on a hidden talent or an undiscovered future achievement.

Support, attacks, and defenses

Support: the distinction does not depend on recognition

An unknown person is no less themselves than a celebrated person. Neither applause nor a ranking creates the identity at issue. An actor can portray someone convincingly; a biographer can understand aspects of that person unusually well. Neither accomplishment makes the actor or biographer that individual. Representation, understanding, and identity are different relations.

Attack 1: “Only” does not automatically mean “best”

Objection. Being the sole individual who is you establishes uniqueness. Ordinarily, excellence requires a meaningful standard of better and worse. A sole entrant does not thereby demonstrate exceptional ability. Calling identity a victory might simply redefine the contest.

Defense. The argument specifies its standard openly: actually being that person. Under that standard, the person fulfills the condition and every distinct person does not. “Best” is defensible in this limited sense of unsurpassable fulfillment. The objection nevertheless identifies a real limit: this is not a proof of superior skill or merit. A reader who reserves “best” for graded achievements can accept the identity conclusion while preferring “uniquely” or “unsurpassably.”

Attack 2: someone may fail to be their “true self”

Objection. Fear, conformity, or self-deception can prevent someone from being themselves, while another person might understand their character better.

Defense. This substitutes authenticity or self-knowledge for identity. Those are important subjects, but they are not the stated task. One can misunderstand oneself while remaining oneself. The argument does not depend on possessing a perfected personality or superior self-understanding.

Attack 3: local champions are counterexamples

Objection. A household’s best cook, a friendship group’s best chess player, and a classroom’s best mathematician are all best at something besides being themselves.

Defense. All three statements may be true locally. None establishes worldwide supremacy in the relevant pursuit. Once the original comparison is explicitly worldwide, substituting a smaller comparison group changes the claim. These examples expose an ambiguity in the unqualified wording, but they do not refute the clarified scope.

Attack 4: identity is automatic, so the insight is trivial

Objection. If everyone necessarily satisfies the condition, nothing has been achieved. The claim appears to say only that each person is themselves.

Defense. Its logical simplicity is compatible with reflective value. It redirects attention from competitive distinction to a distinction that needs no competition. The practical suggestion is that lack of a world title need not erase one’s sense of individuality. That suggestion should not be confused with a deduction that uniqueness alone establishes moral worth.

Testing the wider observation

Attack 5: rare winners do not imply almost nobody wins

Objection. A single winner in each activity does not show that almost everyone is never best at any activity. Different people may lead in different fields, at different times, or under different standards. There may also be ties. The number and definition of the activities matter.

Defense. This is a valid limit on the inference, but it does not itself show that most people hold a worldwide distinction. Local victories cannot settle a worldwide claim. The broad observation is plausible when understood as a reflection on recognized worldwide excellence in established pursuits. Nevertheless, no population measurement is offered here to establish “almost everyone.” The identity argument does not depend on that estimate being correct.

Attack 6: a category can be tailored to anybody

Objection. If categories are unrestricted, one could invent a highly specific combination of tasks, circumstances, and biographical conditions in which a particular person comes first worldwide. The literal claim that almost everyone has no other distinction would then become difficult to sustain.

Defense. A fair interpretation distinguishes established pursuits with independently meaningful standards from categories constructed merely to produce a winner. This clarification makes the intended observation intelligible. It is an interpretive boundary, not evidence of a numerical result. The argument should not pretend to have surveyed every possible human activity.

Attack 7: does this praise wrongdoing?

Objection. If everyone is best at being themselves, the statement includes people who behave cruelly. Does it therefore commend their conduct or discourage change?

Defense. No. Being the particular person one is does not establish that one’s actions are good. A person can remain themselves while accepting responsibility and improving. Identity is not moral permission, and unsurpassability in this stipulated respect is not superiority over other people.

What follows, and what does not

The strongest result is universal within the stated account of personal identity: no distinct individual can replace you as the individual you are. It does not require a theory of an unchanging soul, nor does it settle difficult questions about identity over time. It concerns the difference between being a particular person and resembling or representing that person.

The opening statement contains both a broad observation about the rarity of worldwide excellence and a conceptual claim about identity. The latter can be defended directly. The former should be read as the author’s general observation, not as a verified demographic finding. Making that distinction preserves the thought without assigning the argument more work than it can do.

The distinction everyone possesses is this: whatever another person may do better, they cannot be you better than you are.

Individuality before achievement

Historical comparisons | Expanded edition

The following six thinkers illuminate different parts of the idea. Their statements are not interchangeable: self-description, originality, self-trust, poetic affirmation, development, and identity make different claims. Exact excerpts appear in quotation marks; explanations and comparisons are editorial analysis. Full-text links appear in the references.

1. Michel de Montaigne | Of Repentance

Written probably around 1586; first published in Book III of the Essays, 1588. Composition is an estimate. Text quoted: Charles Cotton, revised by W. Carew Hazlitt, 1877, reflecting the later textual tradition. [1]

“every man carries the entire form of human condition.”

Montaigne presents his ordinary life as a legitimate subject of moral reflection. Fame and professional distinction are not prerequisites. He also describes a self that changes from moment to moment: an honest portrait must register movement rather than manufacture an immaculate, fixed character. This gives the present essay an important ally. A person can warrant attention without winning a public comparison, and the actual person need not be replaced by an idealized version.

The difference is equally useful. Montaigne investigates and portrays himself, an undertaking that can be more or less truthful. Haimés’s condition is simply being oneself, which does not require accurate self-description. Montaigne therefore supports the significance of an ordinary individual, but does not establish a worldwide ranking or say that identity itself is an achievement.

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau | Confessions, Book I

Part I is commonly dated to 1765-1767; manuscript chronologies record earlier beginnings and later work. Books I-VI first appeared in 1782; VII-XII in 1789. Quoted English edition: Aldus Society, 1903; translator not identified in the consulted text. [2]

“if not better, I at least claim originality”

Rousseau opens by announcing an unusually candid self-portrait. He insists on his particularity while acknowledging that difference need not mean superiority. He proposes to show both admirable and shameful aspects of his life. The phrase is especially relevant because it separates being distinct from being better: a reader can recognize a particular person without granting that person general excellence.

For Haimés, “best” has a specified object: being that person. Thus Rousseau’s distinction need not defeat the central claim. Someone can be no better than others in moral character yet remain the only individual who is themselves. Rousseau nevertheless supplies a strong warning against sliding from unsurpassable identity into superior merit. His project is a particular autobiographical disclosure; Haimés applies the identity distinction to everyone.

Self-trust and shared affirmation

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson | Self-Reliance

First published in *Essays*, 1841, later known as *Essays: First Series*. The consulted sources establish publication, not one exact year of composition for the complete essay. [3]

“Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.”

Emerson challenges dependence on accepted opinion and borrowed models. He treats one’s own perceptions as something to examine and express rather than discard merely because they lack public prestige. Self-reliance also demands action: the individual must exercise powers and speak with courage. His affirmation is therefore more demanding than a declaration of bare identity.

The affinity is resistance to measuring oneself exclusively through other people’s authority or distinction. The difference is between a practice and a condition. Emersonian self-trust may be neglected; Haimesian identity is possessed even by a hesitant conformist. The present argument can reassure that conformist without claiming they have already achieved Emerson’s ideal. Conversely, Emerson helps explain why retaining one’s identity does not exhaust the work of living well.

4. Walt Whitman | The opening poem of *Leaves of Grass*

First published untitled in 1855; later titled *Song of Myself*. Draft evidence reaches into the early 1850s; no single year of composition is assigned here. The quotation uses the 1855 text, not a later revision. [4]

“I celebrate myself,”

“For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

These two opening lines, separated in the poem by another line, link self-affirmation with the reader rather than confining it to the speaker. Whitman’s poetic self embraces bodies, experience, and other lives. This offers a model of affirmation that need not be purchased by diminishing someone else. The relevant resemblance is the possibility of celebrating oneself while extending recognition outward.

Whitman’s speaker is expansive and literary, not a carefully bounded definition of personal identity. Haimes’s statement works in the opposite direction: its distinctive force depends on this particular person being no other person. Both can resist a monopoly on significance by famous achievers, but through different routes. Whitman creates an inclusive poetic experience; Haimes proposes a conceptual distinction that each individual possesses independently of recognition.

A useful separation

One can fail to trust oneself or struggle to celebrate oneself without ceasing to be oneself. That separation prevents a demand for confidence from becoming a hidden entry requirement. It also leaves room for self-examination: recognizing one’s identity does not require believing that every opinion one holds is correct.

Development and uniqueness

5. John Stuart Mill | On Liberty, Chapter III

Initially drafted as a short essay in 1854, then expanded and repeatedly revised; published in 1859. Mill's Autobiography describes the composition and his collaboration with Harriet Taylor Mill. Text quoted: fourth edition, 1869. [5]

"He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties."

Mill argues that independent choice exercises capacities that automatic obedience leaves idle. Individuality benefits both the developing person and a society exposed to different ways of living. His position does not require a person to be the world's best performer before their freedom matters. Yet his focus is cultivation: a life can develop its capacities more fully or less fully.

This makes Mill an ally against treating distinction as the exclusive property of champions, but not a source for equating identity with excellence. His claim concerns opportunities and practices that institutions can protect or obstruct. Haimés's narrower condition cannot be conferred by an institution. The two arguments can coexist: everyone already is themselves, while the conditions under which they live still affect what they can choose and become.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche | Schopenhauer as Educator, Section I

Completed in August 1874 and published in 1874 as the third Untimely Meditation. Quoted translation: Adrian Collins, Thoughts Out of Season, Part II, 1910. [6]

"At bottom every man knows well enough that he is a unique being, only once on this earth"

Nietzsche's opening attacks the tendency to hide behind conventional manners and opinions. Individual uniqueness becomes a reason to resist the crowd and undertake the difficult work of liberation. This is among the closest passages found to the universal uniqueness behind Haimés's claim. It speaks of each person rather than merely celebrating one exceptional author.

But the resemblance has a decisive limit. Nietzsche turns uniqueness into a demand to live differently, with an ideal of a truer self that conformity can obscure. Haimés explicitly excludes that requirement: being oneself is already the case, even when one imitates others. Nietzsche therefore supports the starting emphasis on singularity while challenging the sufficiency of merely possessing it. His passage does not assert that identity is the only worldwide distinction most people have.

What the comparison establishes

The historical record contains substantial precedents for valuing individuality without requiring public supremacy. It also contains strong reasons to distinguish uniqueness from merit and identity from development. The particular formulation examined here combines a competitive word, "best," with a noncompetitive fact, being this individual. That combination is the focus of this essay, not a demonstrated claim of historical firstness.

References and reading guide

Read the quoted passage in its surrounding argument using the links below. The selected historical texts and old translations are public-domain editions in the United States; newer translations and editorial matter may have separate protection. This edition uses focused exact excerpts and explanatory comparisons rather than reproducing whole books. Dates distinguish composition, first publication, and the edition quoted.

1. Montaigne. Essays, Book III, Chapter II, Of Repentance (first published 1588). Cotton translation, Hazlitt revision, 1877. HyperEssays supplies the full text, edition metadata, and the estimated composition date of 1586; its dating follows Pierre Villey.

[Read source](#)

2. Rousseau. Confessions, Book I. English text: Aldus Society edition, 1903. Read the opening paragraphs for the distinction between originality and superiority.

[Read source](#)

Rousseau: chronology. Larousse dates Books I-VI to 1765-1767 and VII-XII to 1769-1770. Rousseau Online records a more detailed manuscript chronology and the 1782/1789 publication dates.

[Read source](#)

3. Emerson. Self-Reliance, in Essays (1841). Read the opening discussion of imitation and the paragraph beginning with the quoted imperative.

[Read source](#)

4. Whitman. Leaves of Grass (1855), untitled opening poem. First-edition transcription preserves the wording used here. The later title is Song of Myself.

[Read source](#)

Whitman: composition context. University of Iowa, WhitmanWeb, Section 21 commentary, discusses early-1850s notebook antecedents.

[Read source](#)

5. Mill. On Liberty (1859), Chapter III, Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being. Edition consulted: 1869. Read the discussion of custom, choice, and the development of faculties.

[Read source](#)

Mill: composition account. Autobiography (1873), Chapter VII: Mill's own account of drafting and revising On Liberty and Harriet Taylor Mill's contribution.

[Read source](#)

6. Nietzsche. Schopenhauer as Educator (1874), Section I, in Thoughts Out of Season, Part II; Adrian Collins translation, 1910. The translator's introduction dates completion to August 1874.

[Read source](#)

Research scope: targeted searches for close formulations of uniqueness, selfhood, individuality, originality, and self-affirmation, followed by checks of primary passages and edition dates. Six relevant thinkers are discussed; this is an expanded comparison, not an exhaustive history of every similar saying.

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