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Inner Voices: Embracing all the Parts of our Personality

by [John Kent](#) ([more info](#))

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This article describes the theory of the **Psychology of Selves** and the **Aware Ego** process, and its practical application in **Voice Dialogue**.

The Voices of our Personality

Have you ever heard yourself say something like...

A part of me wants to read this article – but another part of me can't be bothered and wants to watch that programme on TV.

Whenever I upset someone I feel guilty and then I beat myself up for being insensitive.

Most of us go through life under the illusion that we are consistent, singular personalities or Is. But implicit in the statements above is the realization that we are made up of many different Is – also called selves or parts – each of which has a different perspective and voice. To ask, “Who is the ‘I’ that wants to read and who is the ‘I’ that doesn’t?” or, “Who is the ‘I’ that is insensitive to others and who is the ‘I’ that beats ‘me’ up?”, is to begin an incredible journey of self-discovery – or more precisely, ‘selves discovery.’ So, where do these selves come from?

Primary Selves

No matter into which culture we are born into, we all share a common human experience: vulnerability. The human baby is born vulnerable and must be taken care of by others in order to survive. This means each of us has to develop a personality that will get our essential needs met from the adults around us. These

needs can be summarized as:

- **Attention** – notice me and take care of me;
- **Approval** – show me that you like and accept my way of being and doing;
- **Affection** – love me.

The three ‘As’ never go away. Our Vulnerable Self remains with us our entire lives, and much of our adult behaviour is unconsciously driven by its core needs. Just think how you would feel today if you walked into a room and nobody noticed you; or if people told you that they disapprove of your behaviour, style, or way of being; or if someone said that they don’t care about you or even hate you! Ouch!! Your vulnerability is hit and this can cause you to feel intense emotional pain.

To handle our vulnerability and get these basic needs met we begin to develop a personality made up of a group of protecting selves. These dominant or primary selves look around and notice what behaviour is rewarded and what is punished. They figure out the rules of our specific family, environment and culture, and have us behave in ways that are most likely to get the adults around us to satisfy our needs.

Our primary selves – which can shift and change as our life circumstances change – are unique to each

About John Kent

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of us. However, generic examples might be:

- **Pleaser:** “*You must always be nice to others*”;
- **Pusher:** “*You must work hard to succeed*”;
- **Responsible:** “*You must act appropriately*”.

These primary selves – each with its own voice – form a powerful operating system. They run our lives and determine our values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. As we grow up, they colour the way we see others and also how others see us. They determine what we like and dislike and what we judge and don't judge. For most of us our operating system is us. We are identified with it. It is who we think we are. But that is only half the picture.

Hidden Selves

There is no up without down, no fast without slow, no happy without sad. Life is full of these dualities. So for every primary self that we identify with, there has to be an opposite self that we have hidden away, buried, or disowned. Opposites of the above examples would be:

- **Selfish:** “*You must put your own needs first*”;
- **Easy Going:** “*Relax, kick back, things will take care of themselves*”;
- **Rebellious:** “*Don't do what is expected of you*”.

The more strongly we identify with a particular primary self, the more deeply we have to bury its opposite energy. Remember: the job of our primary selves is to protect our vulnerability. They are terrified that their opposites will come out and cause problems. Their worst fear is that people around us will see these disowned selves and withdraw their attention, approval and affection from us. People will say for example, “*How could you be so selfish / lazy / disrespectful?!!*”

Using Attraction and Judgement to Learn about Our Selves

Most of us are so identified with the primary selves that run our lives that we have no idea that these opposite selves are alive and well and living somewhere inside us. Imagine a woman who has developed a very strong Pleaser self. She always feels driven to be nice to other people, help them in any way she can and make sure that they are happy. This was what was demanded of her as she grew up in her original family. If ever she was not nice to other people and put herself first she felt the intense negative judgements of the adults around her.

Typically she might meet a man who is the opposite of her. He will be more self-centred and able to say ‘no’ to the demands of others. He will be able to set clear boundaries and be able to ask people to do things for him without worrying about their feelings all the time. She may be irresistibly and mysteriously attracted to him. Or she may feel very judgemental towards him for being so selfish, self-serving and insensitive to others. She may even marry him and spend her life alternating between attraction/love and judgement!

What is going on in this example? There is an old proverb that says, “*When we point the finger of judgement at another person there are three fingers pointing back to us.*” Judgements come from our primary selves. It is the woman's Pleaser self who judges those ‘selfish’ people. Whenever we feel a judgement towards another person we need to pay attention to the particular trait or traits that we are judging, because this will tell us what selves we are identified with and what selves we have, therefore, disowned.

Through Voice Dialogue we can learn how to separate from our primary selves and find out the rules they have for running our lives. We can learn and understand their demands, hopes and anxieties. This means that we need no longer be overly influenced by their default attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours. Only then are we able to become more aware of the opposite disowned selves within us, and find a space to stand between them where we can exercise conscious choice. This space we call the **Aware Ego**.

The Aware Ego Process

Every time we access and then separate from a primary or disowned self we enter into and strengthen the **Aware Ego**. For example, if you are strongly identified with your **Pusher** and then you separate from

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it, the 'you' that began the Voice Dialogue session is no longer the same 'you', because you are no longer identified with your Pusher. You are then free to go to the other side and access your Easy-going self, understand its motivation and then separate from it. When you come back to centre you are again a new 'you' – one that is now no longer identified with your **Pusher** or with your **Easy Going** self. Resting between these two is the Aware Ego.

The **Aware Ego** is constantly in process – a process of learning to stand in the space between opposites. Since there are literally hundreds of opposite selves, the process is a dynamic one and continually evolving. There is always something new to learn about our selves. It is truly a process of compassion for every aspect of our psyche in which none are judged as good or bad. This inevitably increases our capacity for awareness (the traditional witness position of the meditator), acceptance and appropriate action.

A Voice Dialogue Session

A Voice Dialogue session might take an hour or more. The form is quite simple. The client sits opposite the facilitator and moves his or her chair to different places in order to access the different selves that wish to speak. After talking to a self the client moves back to the starting place – the **Aware Ego**. The facilitator's skill lies in helping the client experience each self fully and then separate from it. In a typical session the facilitator may talk to three or four different selves.

It is important to understand that Voice Dialogue is not a technique for getting rid of any part of us. Rather, it is a natural and inclusive process that enables us to embrace and respect all of the many selves that exist inside us without making any of them wrong. It is safe because we always talk first to the primary self that is in charge of keeping the client secure – for example, a **Protector** or **Controller** self – and get its permission to go ahead with the session. We never try to circumvent or violate the rules of the primary selves. Each session unfolds at the client's own pace.

Having dialogued with a particular set of selves and given them voice, the client is now able to stand between them with more awareness, not flip-flopping and being pulled first in one direction and then the other. Voice Dialogue gives us an opportunity to find a place of calm consideration and discernment, rather than visceral judgement or unconscious reaction. It enables us to step back from our habitual ways of being and doing and, therefore, have more choice in how we handle what life brings us.

Case Studies

A Primary Pusher

David was a very successful self-made businessman. He had worked hard all his life, and had a strong drive to be the best. Now at 55 he had decided to sell his business and take early retirement. He had had some heart problems and felt that it was time to give up the stressful life of running his own business. However, he had some doubts about how well he could handle this life change and came along for a Voice Dialogue session.

First we spoke to the part of him who wanted him to take early retirement. It said that it was happy he had decided to retire, and that it was indeed high time that he stopped his frenetic, workaholic lifestyle. If he did not he was clearly headed for a heart attack. This Easy Going part of him had been left out of his life for too long and wanted him to kick back and relax in the beautiful country house that he and his wife had bought.

We then spoke to the part of him that had had him work hard and be a successful businessman – his **Pusher** self. How did this part of him feel about the change? It saw no problem. It would have him buy all the books he could on gardening and by next year he would have the best garden in the village! There were also a lot of home improvements he could do to the house. It would also have him join the local golf club and ensure that he would practise hard and become one of the best players. Then he would also join the local badminton club.

If David wasn't careful his Pusher would continue to be his primary self and default position in life,

driving him in retirement as it had done throughout his life. Having got some separation from this self, David's task now was to handle it more consciously, and find the right balance between work and relaxation.

A Primary Carer

Alice was considered by all her friends and acquaintances as a wonderful and caring person. They could always call on her for help at any time and know that she would respond. The virtues of selflessness had been instilled into her by her parents. The kind of people Alice just could not stand were those who were inconsiderate, selfish and thoughtless. Interestingly, these types of people seemed to come into her life in the form of colleagues and neighbours, and caused her a lot of grief. She found herself obsessing about one colleague in particular and decided to do a Voice Dialogue session to sort out her feelings.

We started by talking to the **Caring** part of her. This was the primary self that held the judgements about 'those uncaring people'. It gave a fulsome list of their negative qualities and was quite clear that their behaviour was completely unacceptable. Its job was to make sure that everyone liked and respected Alice. Its worst fear was that Alice would be seen as a nasty, selfish person – just like her colleague!

Having separated from this part, we moved over to the other side and spoke to the part of Alice that did not really care about other people and what they thought. This was her disowned **Selfish** part. As we talked to it we found that it objected to being labelled as 'selfish'. It preferred to be seen as the part of her that could take care of her. This meant putting her needs and wishes first rather than always deferring to others. She was in danger of exhausting herself by always doing what others wanted. It was time to take care of number one!

Having separated from these two opposing parts of her personality, Alice could make more conscious choices about her behaviour. It did not mean that she now had to become a 'selfish' person. But being in touch with this self within her gave her the capacity to say 'no' sometimes. And the more she embraced this part of her personality the less judgemental she found she had towards her colleague.

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