

# John locke's and william shakespeare's views on identity and diversity

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## **On Personhood: I Am We, Not Me**

What makes me the same person I've always been? Is it the way I talk, who I know, possibly my ridiculous hairstyle? It could be something far more innate, as John Locke's "Identity and Diversity" and William Shakespeare's Measure for Measure both suggest. In this essay, I will compare Locke's claim that a person is made the same by a continued consciousness and set of memories to Shakespeare's argument that personal identity is based on self-perception and the perceptions of others. I will show how, when combined, these two claims define how we see justice and dispense punishment for crimes.

John Locke distinguishes between a "man" and a "person" to ultimately assert that a person remains the same over time so long as he maintains the same consciousness, which is defined by his memories. Locke begins by defining principles of individuation for three categories of natural things: atoms, aggregates, and organisms. The distinction between the last two is particularly important to Locke - by his definition, an aggregate is only the same as long as all of its component atoms are the same: "if one atom is removed from the mass, or one new one added, it is no longer the same mass" (Locke, 113). An organism, or organized system, is much more like a plant, animal, or human; it is "one cohering body partaking of one common life" (114). As long as a group of parts is working towards the same purpose over time, they make up the same organism. Herein, Locke defines the same "man" - he remains the same as long as he has "participation in the same continued life" (114). In comparison, Locke sees a person as something that

is able to reason and think of itself, and “ What enables it to think of itself is its consciousness” (115). For Locke, the consciousness is the key to both being a person and being the same person - as long as a person's consciousness is maintained, then they are truly the same person that they were previously. The consciousness is rooted in the memory: a person remains the same “ as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought” (115). These are important distinctions to make - in cases of dementia and mental illness, a man can become a different person, and in cases of reincarnation or soul transfer, a person could become a different man. They are two distinct and separate concepts, and Locke states conclusively that personal identity rests in the continued consciousness - as long as I remember what I did in the past, I remain the same person as I was in those memories.

Angelo, in Shakespeare's play, displays a completely different identity in public than he does in private and recognizes these identities as different individuals, suggesting that Shakespeare believes that what makes a person the same is a matter of how he perceives himself or how others perceive him. In Act 4, Scene 4, Angelo reflects on the sins and crimes he has committed, remarking that his lechery and murder “ unshapes me quite” (Shakespeare, 4. 4. 18). Angelo has lost all faith in himself thanks to the magnitude of these crimes; he no longer recognizes himself. The use of the words “ unshapes” and “ unpregnant” suggest that Angelo has lost morals and self-assurance that he once had (4. 4. 18-19). He soon after refers to himself as “ An eminent body that enforced/The law” (4. 4. 20-21). He does not refer to himself in the first person while discussing his past sins and

crimes – the Angelo who is speaking with a sense of justice doesn't even seem to recognize his lecherous self as a part of him. Angelo's language is still that of a moral authority, and he speaks of Isabella's night with him as a "tender shame" and "maiden loss," but he doesn't seem to tie the version of himself that deflowered Isabella with the version of him that is currently speaking (4. 4. 21-22). His use of first-person pronouns only appear when talking about his public self – "she might tongue me," but "my authority bears so credent bulk/That no particular scandal once can touch" (4. 4. 24-25). Angelo associates himself with his public face; his reputation and authority are his, while the lecherous crimes and murderous backstabbing are the fault of some other Angelo. He even calls his trespass "this deed," referring to it as a separate entity (4. 4. 18). The speech ends with Angelo lamenting that "our grace have we forgot" – while he once had principles, and possibly part of him still does, they have been lost and a new Angelo has subsequently emerged (4. 4. 31). Angelo uses the pronoun "we" to apply his situation to all humanity, certainly, but also to suggest a duality in his character. The Angelo that seduced Isabella is so different from the upright and moral Angelo that it is like one person inhabiting two bodies. Through Angelo's duality of self, Shakespeare shows us how our actions, which change both our self-perception and the perception of others, can turn us into a completely different person.

When reading Locke and Shakespeare at the same time, questions naturally arise – the two views of what makes a person the same over time directly conflict with each other in seemingly irreconcilable ways. Locke would argue that Angelo remains the same person over the entire length of Measure for

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Measure - he never experiences a mental shift that causes him to lose his memories, so his consciousness remains consistent. Locke says that the "present self that now reflects on it is the one by which that action was performed," and Angelo is clearly reflecting on past actions (Locke 115). He refers directly to his deed and the "unflowered maiden" - he remembers the sins he has committed, and so Locke would argue that he must be the same person (Shakespeare 4. 4. 19). When we see Angelo with multiple identities, we are willing to forgive him some of his transgressions. He is straining against a different self he cannot control. He exclaims, in regards to Claudio, "Would yet he had lived!" (4. 4. 30). This makes us willing to accept his pardon at the end of the play - obviously, the good Angelo has triumphed and the lecherous Angelo has been banished. However, under Locke's principles, Angelo is at fault for all of his actions. It doesn't matter if he distances himself from his lesser aspects, they are still a part of his single consciousness. This interpretation makes the ending of the play much more ominous. Though the Duke says that Angelo's evil "quits you well," there is no correctional punishment for him besides - his unified conscious still contains those elements that drove him to sin and lechery seemingly apropos of nothing, and that may resurface at any time (5. 1. 499). Angelo, despite not being placeholder Duke anymore, is still a very powerful man and continues to roam free, suggesting a far more ominous future than when the play is read with Shakespeare's interpretation of identity.

Shakespeare, in turn, heavily complicates Locke's ideas with the concept of absolute and relative identity. Shakespeare's entire play contrasts things that are absolute with things that are relative. The absolute truth of the

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matter is that Angelo has slept with Mariana and not killed Claudio, but he believes that he has deflowered Isabella and killed Claudio. In relation to absolute truth, what has really happened, the latter statements are false, but they are true in a relative sense to Angelo - he has no reason to disbelieve them. In this way too, we can see Angelo's divided personhood. Absolutely, Angelo is a single person, bound by one continuous and uninterrupted consciousness. In a relative sense, Angelo is at least two different people - not only based on his self-perception, but his control over himself. He states in Act 2 that "my invention, hearing not my tongue/Anchors on Isabel" (2. 4. 4-5). Much like Angelo believes that his relative truth is absolute, he believes that his relative personalities are absolute because he can't seem to control his lustful self. Small nuances bring Shakespeare closer to Locke. Locke says that a person should disregard memories that he cannot "square with or join to the present self" (Locke 121). Not only is a person changed by forgetting, they can consider themselves different from a past self if the memories they have seem false or unlike the current person. Angelo certainly has the memories of his crimes and sins, but they don't seem to match who he is. We see, then, that a person's relative perception of himself can alter his personhood. Locke's theories remain consistent while discussing a person who sees himself as having a certain set of true memories, but when the person relatively perceives his memories to be false or non-compatible, his personhood changes, allowing him to become multiple people based on what set of values and impulses he is acting on at the current moment. Locke's view is subsequently widened to allow a series of cases like multiple

personalities and changes in self-perception and personhood brought about by how an individual relatively regards their memories.

We have found a clear combination of Shakespeare and Locke's views - a person is made the same through his consciousness, but that his single absolute consciousness can have various different relative identities.

Through this we can especially evaluate our conceptions of justice - how do we judge and forgive people based on their identity? As seen in my application of Locke to Shakespeare, forgiveness for wrongdoing often seems to come from whether their criminal qualities remain intact. If we consider Angelo as one person, we want him punished because we still see flaws in his character that have never been addressed. He remains lecherous and perverted and nothing has been done to correct this. If we see Angelo as two relative people, we are more willing to forgive him. We accept that the good Angelo was simply unable to control the lecherous one, but now has returned to power. There is no need to punish the person who is not responsible for these evil deeds. In real life, we let men like Oscar Pistorius off with lighter sentences and allow schizophrenics to plead insanity - we are lenient towards those who seem to have a self that they cannot control. This may run contrary to Locke's views - that a "man," not a "person," should be punished due to how easy it is to lie about personhood - but it is quite obviously how our modern justice system works. Personhood is closely tied to both our justice system and the way that we judge the behavior of people on a day-to-day basis.