

Hamlet, The Affective Roots of Decision, and Modernity¹

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Hamlet is a play so rich in insight regarding human existence, so revelatory and reverberative, that Harold Bloom is justified in calling it a “poem unlimited.”² All of its characters, and all the details of the drama that enmeshes them, contribute to its scope and profundity. But it is principally through the consciousness and hyper-articulate presence of Hamlet that Shakespeare so astonishingly explores the perplexities, challenges, and mysteries of human existence. The character of Hamlet is as vividly “real” and compelling as a dramatic character can be; but his complexity and depths of consciousness reveal to us much that is only partially fathomable about the meaning of existence—which is why his character will never be satisfactorily explained by any single account of who he is, why he does what he does, and why he cannot do what he cannot do.

This does not mean, of course, that aspects of Hamlet's character, including his most obvious personality-defining traits, cannot be identified and described and held up for inspection. One of these, a manifestation of his propulsively self-augmenting consciousness, is his fascination with and imaginative openness to *possibilities*. Hamlet is irresistibly drawn to a consideration of varying and conflicting possibilities regarding—most importantly for the story of the play—motives of behavior in himself and others; moral truths and values; religious facts; and human nature and human destiny. And crucially, his love of possibilities also sanctions his entertaining *simultaneously contradictory perspectives* on matters of existential significance.

It will be worthwhile to examine this aspect of Hamlet's character—his imaginative love of possibilities, with its intrinsically “infinite” of ways of perceiving and being³—as a factor in

¹ Most of this essay's title, and a handful of its paragraphs altered from their earlier form, appeared as the article “*Hamlet and the Affective Roots of Decision*,” by Glenn Hughes and Sebastian Moore, in *Loneragan Workshop, Volume VII*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1988), 179-202. The materials I have taken from that article were the product of my share in its composition, not that of Fr. Moore (to whose memory I dedicate the present essay). It follows that Fr. Moore bears no responsibility for any of the present essay's weaknesses, or for any of its infelicities of expression.

² Harold Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003). See also, Bloom, “Hamlet,” in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 383-431.

³ See Kierkegaard on the relation between imagination, possibility, and infinity: “As a rule, imagination is the medium for the process of *infiniteizing* . . . [I]magination is reflection, is the rendition of the self *as the self's possibility*. The imagination is the possibility of *any and all* reflection . . .”. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto*

his inaction with regard to killing Claudius. In the following, I will first detail various examples of this character-trait. Then I will attempt to clarify the relation between it and Hamlet's notorious "indecisiveness" about killing Claudius by viewing it through the lens of philosopher Bernard Lonergan's account of the structure of human consciousness. Afterward, I will explain how the resulting portrait of Hamlet shows him to be representative of defining aspects of modernity itself—for in his acute exploration of his interiority and love of possibilities, Hamlet symbolizes the break into self-discovery and self-fascination that has liberated modern humans into new self-appropriative capabilities while ensuring their obsession with "infinitudes" of intellectual and technological creation. Hamlet, as I understand him, dramatically foreshadows an existentially disorienting "love of possibility" that is a cultural trait of modernity; and I will conclude by attempting to show how Eric Voegelin's account of modernity includes analyses that are useful for illuminating precisely this point.

Hamlet's Imagination

One of the most obvious and attractive features of Hamlet is his quick and vivid imagination, driven by what seems to be an unbounded curiosity. For example, consider the scene where the Players arrive. Immediately after greeting them, Hamlet urges his "old friend" [2.2.431-32] the leader of the troupe to perform a "passionate speech" [441-41] from a play Hamlet has seen, in which the Trojan Aeneas describes to his lover Dido the slaughter of Priam, King of Troy, by the Greek soldier Pyrrhus, and the consequent lamentations of Queen Hecuba.⁴ With impressive memory and enthusiasm Hamlet recites the opening lines himself [461-75]. The elder Player then continues the long speech, vividly portraying Pyrrhus's actions and Hecuba's anguish—but what is most striking, by scene's end, is the intensity of Hamlet's mesmerized imagining of the speech's character's and actions. Or consider, in the famous "bedroom scene," Hamlet's astonishing, even shocking, imagining of Gertrude in bed with Claudius: their entwinings "in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed," "making love / Over the nasty sty," where Gertrude lets the King "[p]inch wanton on [her] cheek, call [her] his mouse," and playfully enjoy his "reechy

Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 30-31.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Signet Classics, 2nd Revised Edition, 1998). All references to and quotations from *Hamlet* will be taken from this edition.

kisses” and the “[p]addling in her neck with his damned fingers” [3.4.93-95, 184-86]. Or again, consider Hamlet at the grave site in Act V, imagining this and that skull tossed up by the gravedigger as belonging first to a politician, then a courtier, then a lawyer, expounding brilliantly and wittily on the irony of the “revolution” of their achievements into mere bones to be tossed about [5.1.76-119]. Or, later in the same scene, consider Hamlet displaying how “imagination [may] trace the noble dust of Alexander till ’a find it stopping a bung-hole”—an exercise that taxes even Horatio’s patience with Hamlet’s indulgence in speculative imagination [204-214].

Hamlet’s far-reaching and perfervid imagination not only enables him to place himself emotionally in the lives of others, fictional and real, and to explore possibilities of destiny and causality to a degree that leaves those around him (and us) continually amazed; it also allows him to adopt viewpoints on matters concerning human nature, behavior, and destiny that *contradict* each other, and to adopt, and emotionally inhabit, these contradictory “positions” *simultaneously*. The most famous example of Hamlet’s exhibition of this capacity is his speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about his melancholia, which begins: “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth . . .” [2.2.303-304]. The speech expresses his awareness of the beauty, order, and majesty of the world, but also the fact that this awareness coincides with his experience of the earth as a “sterile promontory” and the firmament as nothing more than “a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” [306-311]. In a similar way, Hamlet’s appreciation of the nobility of human reason, of the divine-like quality of human apprehension, of humans as “infinite in faculties” and “the beauty of the world,” is experientially paired with a disgusted rejection of the dignity of this being, which simultaneously appears to him as merely the “quintessence of dust” [312-18]. Hamlet is *not* stating that the appreciative view of the cosmos and human being is an illusion and the dismissive one correct. He is expressing a simultaneous “inhabiting” of both views and, above all, the *possibility* of regarding them and experiencing them in each manner—even as he acknowledges his (temporary) enthrallment to the emotional undertow of the disgusted and nihilistic view of things (an enthrallment, always unstable, that will have disappeared by Act Five.)

Once this capability of Hamlet’s—his ability to imaginatively explore and emotionally entertain opposing views as valid possibilities—is properly appreciated, many supposed “inconsistencies” of Hamlet’s character become intelligible. For example, are women—

specifically Ophelia and Gertrude—ever worthy of love and trust? Or are they intrinsically deceptive creatures, whose susceptibility to impulse (especially sexual impulse) renders them always corruptible, if not already corrupt? In Hamlet’s imaginings, both are true—and we see both attitudes play out with Ophelia and, in a spectacularly condensed manner, in the bedroom scene with Gertrude. For another example: Hamlet’s assessment of his own existential worth, at least in Acts One through Four, is comprised of *opposing* self-images of 1) self-admiration and pride and 2) self-abnegation and self-disgust, both views finding repeated expression. The litany of self-accusation he presents to the startled and confused Ophelia at the start of Act Three (“I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me” [3.1.123-24]), and the disgust at himself expressed in a number of soliloquies (“O that this too too sullied flesh would melt” [1.2.129]; “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” [2.2.560]), are not just counterbalanced but *contradicted* by the obvious pride he takes in his immense powers of consciousness, in his (justified) sense of mental and imaginative superiority over everyone around him, and in the dignity of his own meaning and mystery. He revels in his learnedness, cleverness, and wit (see his out-languaging of Osric in Act Five [5.2.113-125]); he reveals his (superb) abilities as an actor (both in the first scene with the Players and, more importantly, in the putting on of his “antic disposition”); and he knows his self-awareness is too profound to permit him to become anyone’s fool. “Do you think,” he spits at Guildenstern, “I am easier to be played on than a pipe?” [3.2.377-78]. Both the pride and the self-despising are emotionally real, accompanying as they do imaginative self-interpretations that are equally real, and unresolvable, for Hamlet—at least until Act Five.

And then there is the religious dimension of Hamlet’s outlook, his view of spiritual ultimates concerning human destiny, including his own. Hamlet’s *acceptance* of religious views are crucial for his responses to the Ghost’s appearances and commands; for his understanding of what killing Claudius means, both morally and metaphysically; for his convictions about his own existential worth; and his affirmations of his soul’s immortal status. But we find that Hamlet is both a believer *and* a skeptic; a Christian, a pagan, and a nihilist, all at once; that he takes for granted an afterlife and also denies it; that, in sum, he imaginatively entertains all these outlooks as *possibly true*, emotionally inhabiting them all—at least, again, until Act Five, when he manifests a resigned embrace of spiritual mystery that resolves his openness to both belief and disbelief. Any attempt to show that Hamlet (or for that matter the play as a whole—which, after

all, is shaped by and through Hamlet's consciousness) holds a coherent spiritual or metaphysical viewpoint will fail on the basis of the text. One can easily adduce remarks expressing Hamlet's outlook on religious matters that cancel each other out. In the "To be or not to be" speech, of course, he shifts in an imaginative heartbeat from one view to its opposite—"To die, to sleep— / *No more— . . . To sleep, perchance to dream, aye there's the rub*" [3.1.60-61, 65; emphasis mine]—revealing, as best as it can be done in the discursive articulations of consciousness, Hamlet's ability to position himself simultaneously on both contradictory sides of the question of immortality. Both are *possible*; and Hamlet's *fidelity is not to one view or the other, but to his consciousness as the explorer of possibilities*.

And Hamlet is aware of this fidelity, because, as Harold Bloom insists, Hamlet not only thinks more rapidly and deeply than the rest of us, but "overhears" himself thinking, and has an always-augmenting consciousness of his own consciousness.⁵ Thus it is accurate to say that Hamlet is both faithful to and *enamored of* his capacity to explore possible meanings; so enamored by his own powers of thought, and the capabilities of human inwardness generally, that he is drawn to the (very modern) possibility that his consciousness, and human consciousness generally, is the *creator* of the values attached to the meanings that it explores. In his first, friendly sallies with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, when Rosencrantz objects to Hamlet's characterization of Denmark and even the world itself as "a prison," Hamlet replies: "Why then 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" [2.2.245-54]. The thrust of Hamlet's comment goes beyond claiming that a person's *mood* determines the value, worth, or beauty that things appear to have. His inwardness, his awareness and "overhearing" of the creative powers of his own consciousness, has reached the point where *value itself* seems to him to belong to the mind itself as the creator of evaluative perceptions.

This instantly raises the question of God, who by Western tradition is the Creator of value—and we return to the variableness of Hamlet's religious perspective. The supposition that the human mind creates value is not compatible with a Christian, or any other religious, outlook; but Hamlet is only a Christian north-northwest. When the wind of his imagination blows in other directions, he is a Greco-Roman pagan (using the language of Jove, Mars, Mercury, and Hyperion to describe his father [3.4.57-59]), or a fatalist, or a nihilist. The truth is that here, as in other matters, Hamlet cannot cease choosing among possibilities of perspective (even in Act Five,

⁵ Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, 35, 86, 118-19.

Scene Two, before the duel, where Hamlet's articulation of his religious calm is indecipherably Christian and Stoic at once). Hamlet's consciousness is open, it seems, to every inherited metaphysical tradition. As Tony Tanner has commented:

. . . Hamlet's mind, his 'conscience' [i.e., consciousness], becomes a meeting-place, a battlefield, a forcing house, a breeding ground, for the different codes, value systems, religions, cosmologies, which . . . formed the modern European mind—ancient heroism, Roman paganism, and Christian Reformation.⁶

And Hamlet is so aware of himself as the reflective owner of collective and contradictory possibilities that he stands as the first, and still most compelling, *incarnate* dramatic instance of modern metaphysical ambivalence. No wonder he is fascinated by his own consciousness; in its capaciousness, continual augmentation, self-awareness, and ambivalence, it is—as Henry James stated—"the widest consciousness in literature."⁷

Self-Making, and the Structure of Consciousness

But Hamlet's love of possibility, and his indulgence in his uncanny powers of imaginative speculation, have existential consequences that manifest themselves in Hamlet's incapacity to decide who, finally, he is to be or become—including whether or not he will be the man who avenges his father's murder. For his absorption in possibilities of truth and value, possibilities continually entertained and continually undecided among, is, as Kierkegaard has explained, an absorption in the realm of "the infinite."⁸ Possibilities are intrinsically endless, either in the sense that one can find ever-new interpretations of realities or options for action, or in the sense that one can oscillate endlessly between one or the opposite viewpoint and potential decision (the Ghost is to be trusted, not to be trusted; there is an afterlife, there is no afterlife; action is meaningful, action is meaningless). Love of imaginative possibilities springs from and feeds intelligence, the ability to arrive at answers to questions about what things might be or mean—and Hamlet's intelligence is unparalleled in literature—but it keeps reflective consciousness from choosing to become a definite and concrete self, *this* person, when it stalls intellect,

⁶ As well as Catholic Christianity, of course (as indicated, for example, by the Ghost's reference to purgatorial fire [1.5.11-13]). Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 504.

⁷ Quoted in Tanner, *Prefaces*, 502.

⁸ See Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 29-33.

imagination, and feeling in the realm of the infinite, and keeps it from attuning itself with finite reality through committed choice and irrevocable decision and action. This is a failure of *self-making*; and Hamlet's failure in this regard is the driving force of the increasingly dreadful burden of his self-consciousness, as the content of his soliloquies makes clear, once fate (through the Ghost) has commanded him to become determinate through action. Staying in the realm of infinite possibility *seems* like freedom; one is still free to choose, to imagine who one might become. But as Hamlet himself at times indicates to us, it is, in a deeper sense, an existential unfreedom that feels like imprisonment, because the experience of *meaningful* freedom arises only from actions in which a choice for existential *finitude* has been made.

The cognitive process involved in Hamlet's failure to move beyond love of possibility to love of defining himself through decision and action, the inward basis of Hamlet's increasingly tormented recognition (through Act Four) that he is failing to turn the workings of fate into self-chosen destiny, may be clarified by viewing Hamlet's condition through the lens of Bernard Lonergan's analysis of the operational structure of human consciousness.

Lonergan's core analysis is as follows. Human consciousness arises from and develops in relation to a dynamic, normative principle, which is an unrestricted desire to know. From infancy, the dynamism of this desire leads consciousness to grow by engaging in repeated sequences of "recurrent and related" operations, acts of the mind that may most easily be organized in terms of three types of question into which the "desire to know" diffracts. First: human experiences of all kinds are inquired into by *questions for understanding*. These questions are answered through insights that make sense of (or: grasp intelligible patterns in) the images through which experience presents itself, insights that yield ideas (interpretations). But ideas may be false or true. So next, *questions for judgment of fact* ask whether or not the understandings or ideas we have thus obtained are true, whether they conform to the way "things really are"; and, when such questions are satisfactorily answered by finding sufficient evidence to support them, they produce *verified* ideas in the form of judgments of fact, transforming mere ideas into *knowledge* of what is *true*. Finally, as human knowing is for the sake of doing, judgments of fact constitute the basis for *questions for deliberation and decision*: questions that concern what one is to do given these facts, and why one should do it, involving one in 1) evaluation of performative

options, 2) the making of judgments of value, and finally 3)—answering the question “what ought I to do?”—a decision on how to act.⁹

But the mental operations on this last “level” of consciousness, where one deliberates and decides, reach their proper term only in *action*—as the self, deed by deed, constructs its performance in the drama of living. Now, when these deeds pertain to the conscious, committed construction of one’s very character—not to what one might choose to do with regard to an incidental matter such as what to eat for dinner or how to pass the evening, but to who one is to *be*—then the repetition and accumulation of such actions constitute the substance of *self-making*.¹⁰ And any self-becoming, human nature being what it is, must be the actualization of a concrete self engaged in reconciling its participation in the realm of imaginative and reflective “infinite” with its participation in the realm of the fated, the finite, and the determinative. Lonergan agrees with Kierkegaard that the human self, being as the latter would say “composed of infinitude and finitude,” only becomes an *actual* self, a self that has *concretized* itself, an “authentic” self,” through venturing to shape its “infinite” possibilities of self-choosing into a finitized, specific, personhood.¹¹ One ironic fact of human becoming is that it is only through continual *self-limiting* that the self can *freely* establish (and build up) its truly authentic existence.¹²

⁹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 4, 9. For an account of Lonergan’s analysis of basic cognitional structure, and its meaning as the foundation of satisfactory method in any investigation or discipline, see *Method*, “Chapter One: Method,” 3-25. For an abbreviated account, see Lonergan, “The Subject,” in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 13: A Second Collection*, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 68-71. For a detailed account of the operations involved in experiencing, understanding, and knowing, see Lonergan, “Cognitional Structure,” in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 4: Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 205-221. On the dynamism of the unrestricted desire’s moving beyond knowing and deciding to loving, see *Method*, 104-105. On the “unrestrictedness” of the desire, see *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 3: Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 372-76.

¹⁰ On “the self-constituting subject,” see *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 18: Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, ed. Philip J. McShane (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 291-94. Conscientious self-making is always a choice of one’s ethical or moral existence, as Kierkegaard also emphasizes, and it “completes” experiencing, understanding, and judging: “We experience and understand and judge to become moral: to become moral practically, for our decisions affect things; to become moral interpersonally, for our decisions affect other persons; to become moral existentially, for by our decisions we constitute what we are to be.” Bernard Lonergan, “Mission and the Spirit,” in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 16: A Third Collection*, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 28.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 29; Lonergan, *Method*, 38, 104-105, 110.

¹² Although I do not treat it here, Lonergan’s analysis of the normative “unfolding” of consciousness includes a goal that transcends responsible self-becoming in deliberative deciding and acting to a *loving* of genuine goods that are

Lonergan also highlights the role that feelings, concomitant with imagination, play in the process of answering questions for deliberation and decision, and in putting decisions into action. It is here where Lonergan's account of consciousness is most helpful for understanding the consequences of Hamlet's love of possibilities. To begin with, imagination is crucial for deciding upon a course of action, because one must be able to *envision* oneself performing the action; Lonergan employs the useful phrase "anticipative imagination."¹³ And Hamlet can imagine himself doing almost anything—he "could be bounded in a nutshell and [yet] count [him]self a king of infinite space," so inventive is his endlessly fertile imagination [2.2.258-59]. But crucially, *feelings* always attend, inaugurate, and are evoked by imagination; the images in the envisioning of action are *laden* with feelings; the stronger and more vivid one's imagining is, the more intense are the feelings that accompany it; and so Hamlet's astonishing feats of imagination are accompanied by intense emotions, often in conflict with each other, making him indeed—and he is aware of it—"passion's slave."¹⁴

To bring Hamlet's character and his story more sharply into focus, it will be useful to explain further two aspects of the importance of feelings with regard to decision-making. First, it is through feelings that, initially, the value of any action (or a person, or any object) is recognized.¹⁵ Values—whether of virtue, or dignity, or beauty, or sheer vital qualities like strength and agility—are not apprehended by intellect until feelings respond to them. As Patrick Byrne writes:

It is not as though we first have a perceptual or conceptual representation of a value in some other way, and then add feeling for that value. We do not first

and might be. Whether this prompt of the innate "unrestricted desire to know *and love*" is followed through on is, again, a matter of normative development.

¹³ Bernard Lonergan, "The Mediation of Christ in Prayer," in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 6: Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1958-1964*, ed. Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 165.

¹⁴ On feeling's role in making decisions and self-constitution, see *Method*, 30-41. On the imaginal/symbolic apprehension of possibilities of self-realization in the context of a treatment of the function of art, see *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 10: Topics in Education*, ed. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe, revising and augmenting the unpublished text prepared by James Quinn and John Quinn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 215-22. Patrick Byrne has described Lonergan's viewpoint on the relation of feelings, imagination, and decision-making in a way that helpfully illuminates the mental operations underlying Hamlet's indecisiveness: "Our *feelings* will respond freshly to . . . newly conceived and *imagined* courses of action. . . . These feelings [may] arise in tension with . . . other feelings and values . . . Our *feelings* contribute to whether we will pursue this possible course of action further, or seek further insights into other possible options. . . . These, too, will be played out in our *imaginings*, raising further pertinent questions and further *feeling responses* that intend other values." Patrick H. Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment: Lonergan's Foundations for Ethics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 183 (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Lonergan, *Method*, 37-38.

have perception of a value, or first logically argue ourselves into a conviction that something is valuable, for which we do not yet have any feeling. . . . We do not have consciousness of *any* value *qua* value prior to feeling it.¹⁶

Thus feelings *reveal* the value of any course of action. But their importance does not stop there. Because—secondly—for a decision to remain *compelling* to the decider, and for willing it into action to take place, the relevant, value-revealing feelings must *remain present in the psyche* or become even stronger to sustain commitment to the envisioned action—to give “mass [and] momentum” to the intention and then the follow-through of performance.¹⁷ If the feeling that apprehends an action’s value fades away—or, more pertinently to Hamlet’s case, finds itself contradicted and confused by an *opposing* feeling, which pulls the self toward a different action (or toward inaction) due to the revelation, by feeling, of an *opposing* value—then the sense of the rightness of the originally envisioned course of action will likewise fade. One will become “disillusioned” regarding its value, and the decision to perform that action may draw back into indecision.

Let us try to illuminate the interior mental dynamism of Hamlet’s indecision and inaction regarding killing Claudius, now, through the application of Lonergan’s analysis of consciousness. The value of an action (avenging the Ghost by killing Claudius) is apprehended by powerful feelings; a judgment is made that this action is good; and a decision to perform it is reached. But then imagination suggests a contradictory alternative, and strong feelings that apprehend a value in *not* performing the action erupt in the psyche. These imaginings and emotions “undo” commitment to the original decision, leading baffled consciousness to turn back to reconsider the judgment of value upon which it was based. That judgment of value depended on certain feelings; and those feelings were in turn based upon *knowledge of the situation* calling for action, the “truth of the matter,” the truth established through *judgments of fact*. Reconsideration of the validity of the original judgment of value leads, then, to a reconsideration of its underlying judgments of fact; so that intellect finds itself visiting again *possible interpretations of the situation*, in the effort to establish, once more, what is true and what is not. The self returns then, necessarily, to the beginning of the thinking process, to the level of imaginative speculation, examining various *ideas* by which the situation may be understood (asking *questions for understanding*). Then, it builds back toward decision by seeking evidence that would verify an

¹⁶ Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment*, 143.

¹⁷ Lonergan, *Method*, 30.

interpretation of the situation as *knowledge* of what is true (answering the *question for judgment*). Re-arriving at factual judgment about the situation allows it to, again, grasp what the right thing to do is (answering the *question for deliberation and decision*), through affective apprehension of the value of an action and subsequent judgment of value, and then to *again* reach decision—until, that is, *contradictory imaginings and emotions undermine the process yet again*, and the cycle starts once more.

The foregoing analysis describes well, I think, Hamlet's mental actions during the course of the play with regard to his indecisiveness about killing Claudius. And because this particular decision facing Hamlet is profoundly existential in nature—since through it, as he is fully aware, Hamlet will be determining his character, his destiny as a person, moreso than through any other decision he will ever make—his inability to hold on to his (repeated) decision to kill Claudius, and follow it up with action, is a torment to him. It is plausible to conclude that he increasingly suspects that his love of possibility and imaginative speculation, his delight in remaining in the “realm of the infinite” and avoidance of self-limiting through the kinds of existential choices involved in authentic self-making, have rendered him *characterologically incapable of the kind of unconflicted emotional commitment* required to kill Claudius and to become the concrete, specific self who will have defined himself by doing so (or: by once and for all deciding *not* to do so). It is plausible too that Hamlet becomes increasingly oppressed by a self-conscious sense of imprisonment in the realm of the infinite and the possible, and thus of failure to properly become the author of himself—even though “[his] fate cries out” [1.4.81].

Such an explanation—or partial explanation, as any must be—of Hamlet's central mystery, his indecisiveness about killing Claudius, raises the question: is it first of all Hamlet's ability to *imagine* different and contradictory courses of action, attended by the emotions that these envisionings must involve, that initiate his indecisiveness? Or is it first of all the pull of *emotions*, and the affective apprehension of the value of contradictory courses, that propel him into the imagining of opposing alternatives, leading to indecision? Imagination and emotion feed each other: so in the case of Hamlet's indecision, a vicious circle of both imagination and emotion undermining decision may be concluded to be at work. But Hamlet's brilliance of imagination and his love of possibilities would seem to be the more important causal factor in that indecision; though Hamlet is passion's slave, more important is the fact that he is a prisoner

in the realm of the infinite and existentially indefinite through his love of imaginative possibilities.

This isn't to deny that there are a range of emotions which we cannot fully understand playing a part in Hamlet's inability to kill Claudius. Do some of them derive from his being too spiritually mature to be genuinely convinced that revenge is morally good and that he should commit murder? Do some of them flow from sensitive recognition that, as there are no police and no laws in the universe of the play, except what laws Claudius as King declares valid, that he himself must "give the law" in this profoundest matter of capital punishment through his own moral decisions and actions? Are some bound up with a semi-Oedipal identification with Claudius as the murderer of his father and a mother who draws Hamlet's imagination far too easily to erotic considerations—so that to kill Claudius would entail, in a symbolic sense, killing himself? There cannot be any conclusive answers here. What can be asserted is that it is not cowardice or any other straightforward "flaw" that keeps Hamlet from his deed. As Algernon Swinburne insisted, "[t]he signal characteristic of Hamlet's inner nature is by no means irresolution or hesitation or any form of weakness, but rather the strong conflux of contending forces"—specifically, contending imaginative and emotional forces.¹⁸

Death's Dream Kingdom, and Hamlet's Gaining of a Self Through Dying

Let us now examine some of the existential ramifications of this fact for understanding Hamlet and the outcome of his story.

When his father's Ghost first confronts him, Hamlet is ready and resolute. Of the circumstance of his father's murder, he demands of the Ghost:

Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge [1.5.29-31]

But after the Ghost's departure, reflection begins to marshal forth possibilities: it would be better to "put an antic disposition on" [1.5.172] in order to further assess the situation; later, it would be better to check the Ghost's authenticity by seeing how Claudius reacts to a play in which his crime is pantomimed and paralleled. Through these actions Hamlet explores possibilities of truth,

¹⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare* (San Bernardino, CA: no publisher cited, 2017; reprint of original text of 1880), 47.

motive, and value, although a part of him condemns himself for doing so—for there is an existential price to be paid for dallying in the realm of the imaginative and possible.

As the days grind on, Hamlet has more and more opportunity to appreciate his love of possibilities and consequent inaction and their effects on his soul. He is introspective to a self-sickening degree, and therefore, by virtue of Shakespeare's insights and eloquence we get Hamlet's brilliant, if often indirect, diagnosis of his own condition: that of a man paralyzed in a sort of reflective hysteria, unable to penetrate to the source of the *aboulia*, the failure of sustained decision and action, that is keeping him from becoming the concrete self fate has demanded he become—from turning *fated* situatedness into self-chosen *destiny*.

The diagnosis reveals what we have already described: Hamlet's inability to resist the endless shadow-play of the possible; his treasuring, above all other capacities, his incomparably developed powers of speculative imagination. As he tells us: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" [2.2.258-60]. Hamlet *is* king of the infinite, since possibility is infinite; his bad dreams will be examined momentarily, along with the fact—which escapes Hamlet—that it is his love of the infinite that *gives* him bad dreams. And Hamlet's continual envisioning of possible ways of perceiving, judging, and being keeps his very *self* variable, changeable, unsettled-upon: he appears now as expansive, now as withdrawn, now as trustworthy, now as a trickster. And, self-aware of these existential inconsistencies, he sees it as part of his character to assure others that they cannot count on him to be consistent of character. Meanwhile, everything he looks at reveals possibility: he sees Alexander the Great in a bit of grave dust [5.1.199-200], a future adulteress in an honest young woman [3.1.136-42], myriad shapes in a single cloud [3.2.384-90], persuasive proofs and dissuasive evidence for any single conclusion. "How fares our cousin Hamlet?" asks Claudius, as they await the performance of the play within the play. He replies: "Excellent, i' faith, of the chameleon's dish; I eat the air, promise-cramm'd" [3.2.94-96]. The play's potential impact on Claudius is indeed full of promise; but the statement is more broadly revealing: Hamlet's world is chock-full of promise, both for good and evil; he is possibility's spy.

As far as the duty to kill Claudius goes, however, Hamlet from the time of the Ghost's appearance has no real *need* to explore possibility; he knows all he needs to know to have grounds for revenge. But his desire to exist always within the realm of the possible, which allows him to continue to see himself as "nothing and everything," as Harold Bloom succinctly puts it,

keeps him from being committedly decisive about killing Claudius.¹⁹ It is his *loyalty to possibility* here that translates into inaction. Hamlet being Hamlet, he does of course struggle to discover *why* he can't proceed to action ("Am I a coward?" etc. [2.2.582]). But he never clearly diagnoses his "illness" in terms of his addiction to possibility's infinitude—to continual existence in "Pyrrhus' pause" between *thought* and *action* in the slaying of Priam, as described in the Player's marvelous speech—although he expresses his awareness of this aspect of himself in his most extreme self-inspection, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. The question of whether or not it is nobler to "suffer" fortune, whatever it brings—to passively remain the product of what fate makes of one—or to "take arms" against one's "troubles" (which does *not* signify suicide, but a "taking up of arms" that *might* lead to death) leads Hamlet directly to a consideration of the fact that reflection frequently paralyzes action, "resolution" being undone by the "cast of thought" [3.1.56-88]. Here Hamlet comes as close as he ever does to identifying the source of his own *aboulia*, without recognizing or articulating its full existential implications.

It should be pointed out, however, that Hamlet is not a person who can *never* make up his mind in order to act. His use of the travelling players, the stabbing of Polonius, his execution of the betrayal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his confronting of Laertes in the graveyard scene, all bespeak a tendency toward *rash* decision, not indecision. Such rashness often accompanies introversion and an imaginatively reflective temperament. When thought's habitual function is to explore the endless proliferation of possibilities, action tends to become the prerogative of the passionate moment. Hamlet can act cleverly and quickly in important and dangerous situations; but avenging his father would require decision and action sustained by corroborative emotion uncoupled from the conflicting emotions attached to the imagining of contrasting truths and contradictory values, which in turn would require a yielding up of existence in "infinite possibility" to concrete existential specificity regarding the essence of his own identity.

Hamlet's delight in the whirlwind of possibility, then, results in him lacking sufficient autonomy to make *self-constitutive* decisions—decisions that would concretely and irrevocably establish the chosen real and the chosen good through acts of self-determination. And this aspect of his character, though productive of the melancholia that already burdens him at the start of the drama (which he attributes, not quite convincingly, wholly to his mother's hasty marriage to Claudius), becomes the occasion of a nightmare existence once it plays itself out in the wake of

¹⁹ Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, 146.

the Ghost's command. Refusal of limitation, a curse sprouted from temperament and habit, produces the presence of the "bad dreams" of which Hamlet complains. The principal content of these bad dreams, these images that haunt and torment him, are indicated in the twin obsessions of Hamlet's imagination during the drama: gross sexuality and meaningless death.

The language Hamlet uses in his crucial encounters both with Ophelia (in the "Get thee to a nunnery" scene of Act Three, Scene One) and with Gertrude (in the "bedroom scene" of Act Three, Scene Four) reveal a significant degree of sexual loathing.

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty . . . [3.4.92-95]

These images he uses with Gertrude, like those Hamlet uses in referring to sexuality elsewhere, present sexuality as bestial. It is language that bespeaks a failure of integration between the finite and the infinite elements of the self, between the bodily-sensual and the ideal-reflective. When the decision for finitude has not been able to penetrate the psyche and integrate its finite and infinite dimensions, the self in its identification with infinite possibility sees in sex—an essential determinant of finitude—an enemy, an alien (and thus alienating) power that debunks and humiliates the aspirations of spirit. Therefore Hamlet rails against female beauty and virtue as dissembling masks that cover up the truth of sexual bestiality, the latter of which gives the lie to love and romance. Hear how he speaks to the undeserving Ophelia:

. . . the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. . . .
[W]ise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. . . . I have heard of your paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourself another. You jig and amble, and you lisp; you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriage. [3.1.111-14, 140-41, 144-50]

To whatever extent Hamlet may here be putting an antic disposition on, his imagery derives from a deep well of fear and hatred. Hamlet's misogyny, his agonized rejection of romance as a deceit (which runs underneath all his dealings with Gertrude), and his sexual repulsion, are part of a larger affective horizon in which sex and death are hidden partners that betray both beauty and meaning. Bestial sex is the moving image of death. Behind the mask of beauty lies not only perverse wantonness but, even deeper, the skull. "Now get you to my lady's

chamber,” Hamlet says to Yorick’s skull at graveside, “and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that” [5.1.194-97]. Death for Hamlet, much of the time, is the jester who mocks all aspiration. Together, death and lewdness render action pointless, ambition futile, turn the earth into a sterile promontory, the air into a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors, turn “man” himself—infinite in faculty, in apprehension like a god—into meaningless dust. Despite his resigned and spiritual acceptance of death in Act Five (and his heroic, traditional dismissal of its significance in light of his soul’s immortality in Act One), death as “the end” haunts Hamlet’s imagination throughout the play:

Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us,
and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but
variable service—two dishes, but to one table. *That’s the end.* [4.3.21-25;
emphasis added]

And it derives, one might conclude, from the same problem as Hamlet’s sexual revulsion: his inability to choose himself in his concrete, determinate, finite being, and his entrapment in the realm of the seductive infinite. But the connection between the self enchanted by possibility and the melancholic vision of death deserves further comment.

The self who identifies with limitless possibility feels godlike, and dreads going beyond this stage, since it is a step into finitude, which *means* death. But death, through this dread, gains a disruptive power over imagination, since it makes an ironic jest out of all human effort. Hamlet’s imagination is often, in the play, steeped in this irony, because of the depressing *possibility* that death is the true and final horizon of the existential struggle. In this imagining, death is treated as external, a threat to the self, *because it has not been appropriated and transcended through the acceptance of finitude in consciously self-constitutive action*. Because the self has not conquered death by existentially and emotionally embracing it as its own limiting term through the reconciliation of “infinite and finitude,” death repeatedly conquers the self’s imagination through threatening to drain purpose from life. Death as the specter of meaninglessness inevitably rules over the kingdom of infinite possibility.

T. S. Eliot, in “The Hollow Man,” describes the self’s will imprisoned in this state: paralyzed between the possible and the actual (reflected in “Pyrrhus’ pause,” when “like a neutral to his will and matter [task]” he does “nothing” [2.2.492-93, 498]):

Between the idea
And the reality

Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow . . .

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response . . .

Between the potency
And the existence . . .
Falls the Shadow²⁰

In the same poem he describes this realm where the Shadow falls as “death’s dream kingdom.”²¹ It is the land of death-in-life, where life and death are both dreams: the first played out in a mirage of existential possibilities not chosen, the second a power that enthralls and annihilates. For Hamlet, Denmark is the “prison” of death’s dream kingdom, where he is both prince and prisoner—and where he has bad dreams.

But Hamlet is an increasingly frustrated and tormented prisoner; he desires to find his true self and true freedom, but he cannot discover how to do it. That is to say: he wants to embrace and appropriate his finitude, his mortality, his own death, but because of his love of possibility’s infinitude, his imagination won’t allow him to bring it about. The death that Hamlet most deeply wants can only be found in the decisions and actions that would let him, through the conscious reconciliation of his infinitude and finitude, create the unwritten poem of his true existence; and to the degree that he suspects or apprehends all this, Hamlet genuinely desires to die to possibility, to die into the finite, into the freedom of finite actuality.

In the end, Hamlet is granted what he most deeply wants. But he does not win it for himself. Hamlet does kill Claudius. The spell is broken. He acts. How? Through being told by Laertes that he is mortally poisoned, that he doesn’t have half an hour to live [5.2.314-16]. This is his tragedy: Hamlet can only act once he knows he has been killed. This knowledge breaks his reflective paralysis, because his consciousness is suddenly released, thrust, into the concrete, the historical, the determinative dimension of itself, as the seductive presence of infinite possibility dissolves. The moment is his transition from death’s dream kingdom to fully authentic existence,

²⁰ T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 83-84.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

which, paradoxically, is only *made* authentic by its being permeated by the awareness that its death is *taking place*, that finitude is in process of making its radical and ultimate claim on it. That Hamlet has desired this authenticity is unmistakable: who can miss, inside the sorrow and the surprise, the *relief* in Hamlet's "I am dead, Horatio" [5.2.334]. All his former torment, and his Stoic resignation toward his still-paralyzed will in Act Five, subside in Hamlet's final moments, as he enters his fading self.

Looking back from the play's end, we can see that Hamlet never fully grasps why he has not been able to act. He dies ignorant of *why* he has littered the court with corpses. But between Act Four and Act Five, nonetheless—between his being sent prisoner to England, and his return to Denmark after his escape—Hamlet is transformed. When we listen to him with Horatio just before the duel, we find a remarkably calm and self-possessed Hamlet, one who is no longer cursing his birth and berating himself, but is accepting a "special providence" even "in the fall of a sparrow" [5.2.220-21]. He has not overcome his reflective paralysis and imprisonment in the realm of infinite imagination, but has an "aura of transcendence" about him,²² a still center, a composure, even as his fury with Laertes at Ophelia's gravesite, and his arousal to amused contempt by Osric, and the sense of "illness" in his heart [5.2.213-14] before the final duel, show us that his quicksilver moodiness has not changed. What is the secret of this transformation?

It would seem that Hamlet has seized the only victory offered him by the circumstances of his character and situation: that of resolutely accepting his inability to overcome his *aboulia*. He appears to have *chosen* himself in his very incapacity to become the fully authentic self who could only be created by making a decision with regard to Claudius and acting on it in a decisive manner. But, cheated of action by his contradictory imaginings and emotions, he wins—through accepting what he cannot alter, through resignation to fate—the victory of dignity. Hamlet's dignity involves, first, his *recognizing* that his true goal in life has been, not to change reality, but to explore his own inwardness through his endlessly brilliant imagination—his discovery, as Bloom writes, "that his life has been a quest with no object except his own burgeoning subjectivity."²³ And second, his dignity lies in his embrace of the truth that, because of his love of imaginative possibilities, he has lived a life of "perpetual dissonance," an embrace that results in his "capitulating to the . . . mysterious, ineluctable processes which he feels to be moving in

²² Bloom, *Hamlet*, 100.

²³ Bloom, *Hamlet*, 96.

and through the unfolding events . . .”.²⁴ Are these processes governed by the Christian God? Are they the workings of some divinely mysterious Fate in a pagan sense? Do they involve a personal afterlife? To Hamlet (as to us) these questions are unanswerable. His dignity rests in part in his embracing this mystery of process, and the mystery of his consciousness’s participation in it.

A tragic hero must have greatness, and Hamlet’s greatness of soul is proven—if not by the fact of his majestically self-augmenting consciousness, and by the intensity of his struggle to understand himself and conquer his obsessions and *aboulia* through the course of the play—then by his readiness, in Act Five, to face and accept himself as he is, and to embrace the meaning of his fate, whatever it may be. Of the coming to pass of that fate and of his inevitable death, he tells Horatio:

If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. . . . Let be. [5.2.221-23, 225]

In this “Let be,” this affirmation of his character and destiny, we are given Hamlet’s definitive answer to the question, “To be or not to be?” It is an answer that hallows and accepts the self as it is, *not* in passive despair, but in resolute preparedness to achieve *what it can*. This “Let be” of Hamlet’s on the brink of the duel is repeated shortly thereafter, when he is dying:

O, I could tell you—
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead . . . [5.2.338-39]

Hamlet is released, at the end, from his love of ideas, words, and possibilities, from the theater of his quick and ironic imagination, released into the welcome, liberating silence of *these* actions, *this* story.

Modernity

The foregoing has offered an explanation of one aspect of Hamlet’s personality, and one factor helping to explain what he says and does in the play. It does not pretend, of course, to fully account for Hamlet’s “mystery” that he charges Guildenstern with trying to “pluck out,” or all the causes of his behavior during the drama. The complexity of his psyche and, especially, the powers of his imaginative intelligence exceed our capacity to fully explore or explain them, just as they exceed Hamlet’s ability to plumb them (and Shakespeare’s ability to “contain” them

²⁴ Tanner, *Prefaces*, 507, 514.

within the boundaries of dramatic portraiture). We are well advised not to presume that we can provide a definitive interpretation of Hamlet's motives or consciousness: as Harold Bloom warns, "Don't condescend to the Prince of Denmark: he is more intelligent than you are, whoever you are."²⁵

But despite this—or perhaps because of it—Hamlet has come to be seen as representative of the human condition more than any other dramatic character. His existential struggle to come to terms with his fate is expressed with such fascinating detail of inwardness, and with such precision of articulation, that we easily recognize in him our efforts to become ourselves. Also, portraying him, as I have done, as dramatically showcasing affectivity's role in decision and action indicates another reason why so many see themselves in Hamlet: Hamlet is each of us insofar as our imaginations and feelings impede, as they so frequently do, our making critical existential decisions—crucially self-constitutive choices—in our lives.

But Hamlet's condition, as I've tried to elucidate it, is peculiarly representative of something else: of the culture of modernity's fascination with "infinite possibility," and its avoidance of finite limitations. The "infinite possibilities" that mesmerize modernity are those, principally, of intellectual and technological creativity—or the promises of such creativity—which our culture presents as "endless," while "truths" (religious, moral, political, and even scientific) are dismissed as provisional, subjective, or illusory. In terms of Lonergan's analysis of the structure of consciousness, this cultural condition parallels the habits of Hamlet's mind: the culture of modernity manifests a relentless collapsing of the third and fourth operational "levels" of consciousness (judgments of fact leading to *knowledge and truth*, and deliberation and decision requiring solid *judgments of value*) into the second (finding *intelligibilities* that are *possibly* true in the images that represent experiences). The result is truth reduced to mere shimmering significance, and morality reduced to whatever seems good at the time ("there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so").

One may argue convincingly, I believe, that underlying modernity's love of infinite potentiality and denial of the finite constraints of reality's fixed truths and values is its widespread *scotosis*, blindness, toward the *created* dimension of human being: the refusal to recognize that humans are "derived" from a divine origin (to use Kierkegaard's language), and that persons can only be existentially healthy if they embrace and reconcile their "infinite" and

²⁵ Bloom, *Hamlet*, 86.

“finite” dimensions through acknowledging these as grounded in this origin and as bearing a fundamental obligation to it.²⁶ The cover story of modernity, of course, is that humans only “came of age” when we no longer saw ourselves as creatures of God, and were thus able to become self-consciously free for personal and historical self-determination. Dominant intellectual strains in modernity present human freedom and divinely-derived human creatureliness as *alternatives*. It has rejected the traditional wisdom that *authentic* human freedom is only to be found in the self’s affirming and existentially grounding itself in its nature as simultaneously godlike (infinitely reflective and imaginative, free in volition) and mortal (derived, finite, enjoying a *granted* freedom)—and in self-constitutive choices based on this affirmation. We have already examined the avoidance of the finite part of this synthesis, or dialectic, in the character of Hamlet. Hamlet’s imprisonment in “death’s dream kingdom” is, in fact, a representative, predictive symbol of modernity’s spiritual illness in which infinite possibility is loved, the bounds of the finite rejected or repressed, and the divine ground of reality eclipsed—although notably, modernity lacks what Hamlet achieves and incarnates in Act Five: an openness, and composed orientation, to divine mystery.

Eric Voegelin’s analysis of modernity focuses, in part, on precisely this “spiritual illness” that I have argued is represented by Hamlet, and elucidates its character and consequences. Voegelin’s diagnosis explains that one feature of modernity is the release of human imagination from the *obligation* to ally philosophical and political thought with the actual order of being and with unchanging, limiting truths of human nature. Just like Hamlet, the culture of modernity shows a pathological attraction to endless possibility, and resistance to sustained commitment to any truths and values that would oblige the human “project of becoming.” Hamlet’s “spiritual illness” only flirts with the notion that human consciousness is the ground of value, and that creation and the human struggle are intrinsically meaningless. That of modernity derives, explains Voegelin, from a *sustained* imaginative eclipse of divine being as the basis of human existence and a *sustained* imagining of the self as the source of all meaning and value. The representative human of modernity has attempted, he writes, to “transform himself from the *imago Dei* into an *imago hominis*.”²⁷ And this has entailed the imaginative absorption into

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 13-14, 29. “[I]n relating itself to itself [as a synthesis of the infinite and the finite] and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it” (14).

²⁷ Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, trans. and ed. Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell, vol. 31 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 262.

human consciousness of the infinite creativity and power, *potentia*, of the divine being (of which the human mind remains ineluctably aware, even if unconsciously), giving human consciousness a sense of an unlimited capacity to alter the fabric of reality.

The essential dream of modernity, therefore, is one of *transformative* possibilities. It envisions humans being able to shape society into increasingly perfect states, possibly into a utopia, by way of shaping human nature through political, educational, and technological means; and then, after the utopian images lose their glow through reality's recalcitrance to conform to such visions, imagines an endless series of dystopian fantasies based on visions of malevolent human control over history. The common factor is the fascination with possibility, and the unlimited potency of human creativity. Voegelin identifies this dream with that of the magic of alchemy. "In our contemporary world," he writes, "alchemist magic is primarily to be found among the ideologists who infest the social sciences with their efforts to transform man, society, and history. . . . [A]lchemistic conceits survive also in the inspiration of the natural sciences, recognizable in such phenomena as the technological dreams of a new world, or in the biological dreams of producing a homunculus."²⁸ Modern imagination indulges freely—and, it presumes, reasonably—in the notion that computers might one day be created that are *actually* human in their thinking capacities, or that human consciousness can be *produced* through sufficiently sophisticated technologies. It views the order of society and even the natural world as, in David Walsh's phrase, "a field of unlimited manipulation" to do with as it wishes, "divorced from any consideration of the order of reality," since the idea of an order of reality presumes the *givenness* of structures in being and *given* ontological limitations (and ethical strictures) regarding their manipulability.²⁹ Alchemical imagination believes in the human ability to change any and all reality, once the right techniques and formulae are found. The possibilities are endless.

But in fact they are not. The self's imagining of itself as ontologically self-contained and having divinely creative power to alter the order of being is a mere dream, and at some level human consciousness is always aware of this fact. But because it is so compelling, so irresistible to the ego, consciousness refuses to face up to its limitations. Instead, says Voegelin, the modern

²⁸ Eric Voegelin, "Response to Professor Altizer's 'A New History and a New but Ancient God?'," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 298.

²⁹ David Walsh, "Editor's Introduction," in Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M. J. Hanak, based on the abbreviated version originally translated by Gerhart Niemeyer, ed. David Walsh, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 18.

self “will put his imagination to further work and surround the imaginary self with an imaginary reality apt to confirm the self in its pretense of reality; he will create a Second Reality . . . in order to screen the First Reality of [open and honest] experience from his view.”³⁰ The Second Realities to which Voegelin refers come in many forms: political fantasies; economic fantasies; fantasies of historical possibility, or of prehistorical societies; fantasies about future technological capabilities; fantasies about the power of the sciences to one day explain everything about everything. What these all have in common is that they derive from a love of unlimited human power that blinds people to truths that are real and unchangeable, along with values that are grounded not in human desires and wishes but in a source that transcends and obliges human decisions.

And because there are so many Second Realities that pervade the culture of modernity, ideologies that compete with each other in their vision of what is politically feasible and worth pursuing, or in their interpretations of what has been “going forward” in history and of how humans should direct its outcome, or of what human beings ontologically are, the notions of political, historical, anthropological, philosophical, and even scientific truth have come to be regarded as provisional—as no more than the “opinions” of the purveyor of this or that ideology. The culture of modernity has become saturated, at least since the late nineteenth century, by “the argument that all pursuit of truth . . . is an operation of imaginative projecting,” that there “is no First Reality; there are *only* Second Realities.” This argument, writes Voegelin, although it feeds the sense of unlimited human control of meaning, is in fact pathetic, because it is “the whimper in which all reality dies.”³¹ It is the abandonment by human dreaming of the order of being as a reality independent of our fantasies, to which we ought to attempt to attune our existential and political self-making.

Thus the modern person who begins by sincerely seeking to know what is true about human nature, about meaningful structure in history, and about the order of being and what is invariable about it, will often react in a predictable way, writes Voegelin, to all of the competing ideological visions and dogmas that make up “the spectaculum of modernity”: he or she will develop a “resistant skepticism that throws them all equally on the garbage heap of opinion,”

³⁰ Eric Voegelin, “The Eclipse of Reality,” in Voegelin, *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, vol. 28 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 112.

³¹ Voegelin, “The Eclipse of Reality,” 135 (emphasis added).

succumbing to the claim that there are no discoverable truths or values in such matters that rise above the level of *possibility*.³² The search for and defense of philosophical, political, historical, social, and cultural truths and values has become nothing more than a game. And it is a game because of the presumption that human imagination and intelligence *devise* these truths and values; that every ideology is a mask that can only be switched out for another mask, each of them presenting itself as the symbolic articulation of the way things are, but none of which induces a sense of genuine *obligation*—because only acknowledgment that existence and reality have a ground upon which they depend, and which cannot be removed or altered by any imaginative operation, would require such obligation. Ideological fantasies only demand a kind of “nonobligatory obligation,” as Voegelin says, since if there are only the truths of human imagination, no truth can be truly binding. “The hiddenness of the ground,” writes Voegelin—the eclipse of the divine being from which all reality derives and human obligation toward it—insures “the superficiality of the game . . .”.³³ The elemental human “experience of obligation,” he says, “arises from the fact that, while “[w]e are thrown into and out of existence without knowing the Why or the How . . . while in it we know we are *of the being* to which we return”—that is, we know of our derivation from a ground of being upon which creation, existence, and meaning depend. But this knowledge can be suppressed; consciousness can pretend it away, as much of modern culture has.³⁴

But this suppression comes at a cost. Existential closure to the divine ground of existence, while it expands the ego with a fantasy of divine infinitude, at the same time contracts the self by excommunicating itself from a felt sense of participation in the truly boundless, truly infinite depth of divine being, mystery, and promise. The boundaries of the human self and its conscious strivings become the imagined ontological limits of its being; and, compared with participation in the majesty of divine plenitude, such existence both is and feels like a prison. Despite the exuberance and excitement generated by indulgence in its projects of imaginative supposition, “[t]he contraction of his humanity to a self imprisoned in its selfhood is the characteristic of so-called modern man,” and a sense of imprisonment underlying the superficial excitements will manifest itself in a general mood of despair (seeking always to relieve itself in entertainments

³² Eric Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 55.

³³ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 263.

³⁴ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume One: Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 43.

and *stupéfiants*) that inevitably accompanies the state of reflectively imaginative hysteria in which one avoids commitment to fixed truth and value, and to self-constitutive decisions based on them.³⁵ And with this observation we have returned to modern culture's foreshadowing in the person of Hamlet: who feels himself to be living in a "prison" although he is both a prince of Denmark and a "king of infinite space" in imagination, and whose sense of imprisonment derives from his being unable to transcend his love of endless possibilities of interpreting truth and value and to reconcile himself to the finite, limiting conditions of human self-constitution.

Hamlet, however, does *come to terms with* his inability to accept the finite and the self-limiting. We see this in Act Five, where his reflective hysteria is replaced by a composure that derives from his acceptance of the fact that his existence moves within the mystery of a process that has divine origins; and that the meaning of his life, and fate, are bounded by the meaning of that wider, mysterious process, and not by his febrile imaginings. The dominant strains in the culture of modernity, however, have been based upon the repudiation of that mystery, on the denial that such a mystery is ontologically or epistemologically real. Hamlet, then, while a forerunner to modernity's infatuation with imaginative possibility and avoidance of the self-limiting that comes with commitment to unalterable value and truth, finally achieves a wisdom of self-recognition based on openness to divine mystery—an openness that is not apparent in the hysteria of imagination that keeps modernity excitedly active within the existential self-imprisonment it insists is true freedom.

³⁵ Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality," 111.