



Teaching Modern Political Philosophy

with Joshua Gibbs

Lesson 12: Hamlet by William Shakespeare

Outline:

Hamlet

- Shakespeare writes Hamlet several hundred year before the French Revolution.
- Shakespeare is prescriptive, descriptive, and predictive of Western culture as a whole.
- Hamlet is an odd character because he can hear himself talk, he can hear himself think. He is the most dynamic changing character in the play. He is so self-aware that he can hear himself think, believe himself, critique himself, and extrapolate from his own thought deeper or grand speculations about the world.
- Other characters seem to say everything that they hear (Polonius).
- Hamlet ponders his own thoughts. Hamlet is also aware that nobody else can hear themselves. He has an overinflated sense of his own self-worth.
- Hamlet tinkers with other people, with word games.
- He does not have an ability to sense the authentic personality of other people around him because he is so caught up in himself.

Hamlet, Act III, Scene II

- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were Hamlet's friends in his youth and they have been brought back to discern why Hamlet is so erratic in behavior and why Hamlet refuses to get over the grief of his father.
- Everyone is trying to figure Hamlet out.
 - Claudius wants to know if Hamlet is suspicious that his father died by some unnatural cause.
 - His mother wants to discern what the cause of his distemper is. She expects it may be her quick remarriage.
 - Hamlet's friends are being paid by the King and Queen to search out Hamlet.
 - Ophelia does not know why he is suddenly making vulgar jokes and breaks off their affair.
- Hamlet has not let on that he knows that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the messengers of the King and Queen.
- Hamlet is in a jovial but crazy mood. He has slowly lost control of his tongue and he is speaking in bizarre manners.



- Rosencrantz asks Hamlet what causes him distemper.
- Hamlet taunts Guildenstern. How Hamlet's taunt is typically worded in our world.
 - What does Hamlet's taunt boil down to? You don't know me.
 - Why do we say this? What kind of value of the self is implied?
 - Hamlet's conception of identity is curiously modern.
 - Hamlet is likeable and sympathetic. He is at times obnoxious and philosophically unsound and heartbreakingly elegant.
 - What kind of belief about the self is necessary in order for the boast "You don't know me" be a real boast or taunt. What would a man have to believe about himself?
 - For Hamlet, his self is unknowable because it is hidden within the recesses of his person. It is not tied to any fixed place outside of himself.
 - Hamlet conceives of himself as having a super adult like self-awareness that makes him a kind of parent that can toy with and command all the characters around him.
 - Hamlet's self has to be a thing that he can manipulate and view from the outside.
 - His view of himself is so high that he holds it out as an existential exemplar for people to long after.
 - Communicating your ideas was for the Romans the essence of being a man. Not even Christ ever boasts, "You don't know me." Matthew 25 is, "I don't know you."
 - For Odysseus, being known is the chief means of obtaining glory.
 - For a Medieval man to claim, "You don't know me," would also be to admit that that man had no interest in following God.
 - Not only are we leaving a Christian view of glory behind, also leaving a Roman and Greek view of glory behind.
 - This boast has proven powerful into the modern era. "You don't know me" is something that even students say to one another.
 - The flip side to "You don't know me" is the flight from being knowable.
 - After you become known according to the new self that you've invented, because the self is a flight from being known, the immature man simply adopts a new self.
 - A catechized Christian is one who takes great confidence in being able to account for his or her beliefs. Hamlet makes identity out to be pure vulnerability, so a man should hide his true person from others. As soon as a true person is known, you must work to make yourself unknown.
 - This is a very lonely life.



- Hamlet is a remarkable character in presenting the modern view of the self. He is always retreating and hiding. His convictions change rather readily.