Philosophy and Psychoanalysis:

Re-vitalizing Contemporary Living

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This talk will be a weaving together of autobiography and theory, a narrative in which my own encounters with philosophy and psychoanalysis anchor a discussion of how these two strange, socially shunned, modes of inquiry have the power to free the human spirit and soul, such that we are not doomed by either the excessive discursive forces of society or the traumas of our personal pasts. While it is the task of all other disciplines to establish a stable body of knowledge and correct procedures of practice, this is not true for either philosophy or psychoanalysis, for their aim to free persons from conceptual and personal constrictions such that they might achieve a full aliveness of spirit, a complexity of soul, and a singular authenticity of self.

On the surface, philosophy and psychoanalysis appear utterly different. Philosophy concerns the critical enquiry into the logic of concepts while psychoanalysis is a medical field dealing with psychological illnesses. The one aims to develop a rational clarity of a mind while the other deals with debilitating psychological symptoms brought on by emotional turmoil. And yet the separation is not so easy if one goes back to the birthplace of philosophy in ancient Greece. Socrates and all the Hellenistic schools understood philosophy as a remedy for souls that had fallen into fragmentation or had lost their way following false values. That is, both philosophy and psychoanalysis have "soul cure" as a primary mission; both envision a soul that can act freely on the basis of a profound and honest self-knowledge.

Philosophy frees the soul by inquiring into the crucial conceptual presuppositions around which we organize our lives: concepts concerning what is most real, how it is best to live, and how to determine what is true. Psychoanalysis attempts to free souls suffering from unconscious personal constrictions by engaging them in a dialogical process in which a theory-knowledgeable analyst

empathically listens to the depths of a person's soul and helps them achieve a transformative self-understanding.

However, both of these soul-liberating disciplines are shunned by contemporary culture. Philosophy is seen as useless, and psychoanalysis is proclaimed to be a pseudoscience, no more worthy of attention than phrenology or astrology. Why the shunning? Because these disciplines have the power to expose the fundamental presuppositions of contemporary economic culture as being dangerously destructive of human vitality and dignity. That is, contemporary culture's widespread non-acceptance of philosophy and psychoanalysis reveals that it does not want to be questioned concerning its certainty that the values and forms of life it has generated are the best ones, along with a sureness that the kind of human being it is generating is the healthiest, most productive, happiest human being ever to live.

Indeed, modern economic culture could put forth a reasonable claim that it hardly needs re-vitalizing, as it has produced the most exciting and liveliest form of life ever constructed by humans. The modern socioeconomic world is simply wondrous in its unprecedented production of material goods, instantaneous communication, educational institutions, scientific medicine, personal services, travel, and opportunities for personal, professional, and recreational explorations. Indeed, these goods and opportunities are so valuable that very few of us would choose to live in a non-modern culture.

However, the cost of buying into this form of life is high, for it seems to commit one to replacing being alive with making a living, affirming a form of existence in which a huge subset of human beings are unjustly doomed to lives of drudgery and insignificance, and agreeing to be constructed in such way as to identify oneself with a socioeconomic role—that is to identify oneself as a cog helping the machinery of economic life run smoothly, thereby relinquishing any source of singularity or originality.

These critiques of modern economic culture are hardly new.   It has been almost two hundred years since Marx revealed--acutely and accurately--the incredibly de-humanizing powers of capitalist culture both for the successful

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individuals running the show and for the masses of humans it commits to grinding labor, social degradation, and psychologically anesthetized existence. Thinkers as different as Emerson, John Stuart Mill, and Nietzsche arose in the 19th Century to proclaim as loudly and brilliantly as they could that this new economic culture was generating such powerful socio/discursive forces that any kind of genuine individuality was in danger of being annihilated.

These problems are so significant that even many, if not most, of the inhabitants of modern economic culture suffer from what Thoreau calls "lives of quiet desperation."   The excitement of modernity is typically surrounded by a penumbra of depression. Thoreau also found modern persons to be riddled with anxiety; and, indeed, this seems to be even more true today, as the stakes in the economic competition get higher and higher. When I inquire of my students how many of them feel anxious about their lives, I almost always get a 100% response combined with a despair that it could ever be otherwise.   Anxiety is the most debilitating of emotions as it destroys psychic coherence, forcing one to adopt psychological defenses against feeling vulnerable, thereby generating persons with protected personalities and narrow horizons, persons who are desperate to abide by the social codes so that they will not be losers.

Other signs that this culture psychologically devastates its inhabitants are everywhere. One can hardly walk anywhere in a contemporary city without encountering homeless persons whom our callous society refuses to take responsibility for—many of whom have serious mental illnesses. It is reported that over half of Americans feel an intense sense of loneliness, and almost half say that their relationships are not meaningful.   The statistics are worse for the young, those in their 20's.

The excruciating sense of inner emptiness that contemporary people feel is further revealed in the devastating widespread addictions ravaging our populace— addictions to opioids, other drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, shopping, and eating. These compulsive self-destructive behaviors arise for many reasons, but it is difficult to imagine otherwise perfectly psychologically healthy human beings allowing themselves to be destroyed by an addiction. The inner emptiness of these

people is so devastatingly painful that they need extreme forms of excitement or mood-altering drugs to make life bearable.

The symptoms that I have listed are not conceptual abstractions but experienced realities. Although I could not conceptualize them when I was growing up in the 1940's and 50's, I not only experienced them ravaging my family but suffered the anguishing consequences of their presence. I grew up in a privileged home, which proceeded to get wealthier as my father moved up the corporate ladder. We lived in a glorious Tudor mansion in a boutique suburb outside of New York City, vacationed for a month each summer on Cape Cod, and had other successful families for friends. Yet, despite having the goods and statuses that modern culture promised would make us happy, the opposite was true. My father was so driven by his work that he often had to stay overnight in the city, depriving his children of paternal nurturance but also providing him convenient opportunities to have affairs. My mother became lonely and enraged, and fell into a depression so deep that she could not produce meals for her children. We attained some notoriety for walking around the neighborhood in search of food. Both she and my father were so full of sexualized rage that they severely abused their children. My father died of alcoholism and my mother's depression helped lead to an early death. I knew in the depth of my being that modern culture was lying about its claims that socioeconomic success would automatically produce happy, content souls.

I didn't know what to do with the horrifying knowledge both of what had been done to me and how the society had lied, and so split my soul in two. Part of it knew the duplicity of modern life and the trauma it had caused me, while another part longed to be successful in it. The great psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott would say that I had split a true self from a false self and sent the true self with its deep grasp of reality into hiding. I accommodated to society by doing very well in school, all the while keeping my dark injured self hidden from myself and the world. I went to Middlebury College expecting to major in economics in preparation for a career in business, but instead found philosophy, and was saved. In this incredible discipline I discovered the art of critical questioning, the refusal to accept embedded cultural values, and visions of reality and what it means to be human that were entirely

different from the conceptualizations that ruled the world into which I was born. I found the road out of that world as new, wondrous possible ways of envisioning life and reality appeared. Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, and others offered the nourishment my soul longed for, as they freed me from the conceptual prison that had invisibly enclosed me. I thought in the depths of my soul that I had been given a life sentence by society, never to be released from its oppressive values. And then philosophy came along with its magical keys, unlocked the door, and set me free. It was such a profound gift that I decided that I would commit my life to giving this gift to others.

And, as the Fates would have it, a position opened up at CC just as I was completing my Ph.D. in just the area in which I had some expertise: American Philosophy. It was a perfect marriage of professor and place, for CC students are wondrous in their ability to engage ideas—to take ideas as existentially important. They affirmed me and I loved them and have loved them for half a century. When CC and I found one another, I was sure my life could never be derailed. But I was wrong.

In the year I finished my Ph.D. at Vanderbilt and started teaching at CC—that traumatic year of 1968 with its assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy and the riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago—I also got married. I had decided to turn a recent relationship into a marriage—with much suddenness and un-sureness, but with a firm conviction that even if problems arose, I, with my vastly superior mind, could solve them.

But I couldn't solve them, because I had no idea who I really was. I might have been great in the classroom, but I had such problems with intimacy, that my marriage eventually fell apart. As I was later to learn, deep psychological problems can be covered over rather easily except in intimate relationships when one's real self must appear rather than some fantasy ideal figure of who you think you are. As my marriage disintegrated, so did I. I descended into such a deep depression and fragmentation of soul that I could barely shine in the classroom.   Luckily, I was teaching Greek History and Philosophy with Marcia Dobson at the time of my marital collapse, and she, noticing my deep depression, suggested that I might try

some psychoanalytic psychotherapy. I laughed and said that if I had problems I would solve them myself. Within the month, I was in therapy and two years later I was married to Marcia.

I learned more about who I was in the first few sessions of that psychoanalytic therapy than I had in all my years in philosophy. While philosophy had freed me from being captured by social codes, it could not penetrate into my personal history or find the trauma that I had covered over with fantastic defenses, especially the intellectualizing defenses.

Being in an analysis led me to start reading psychoanalytic literature, commencing, of course, with Freud, whose stunning insights into the dynamics of the human soul still thrill me today. However, neither the classical therapy nor the Freudian theory that guided its course proved to be fully successful. Eventually, I went to a female therapist who specialized in re-constructing the selves of women who had been sexually abused. As she started to slowly and carefully repair my self, I started reading more extensively in Heinz Kohut's psychoanalytic self psychology. This theory not only helped me repair what was so deeply injured in myself but gave me to the key to understanding why modern economic society was creating so many injured people, including me. For Kohut, psychological health is all about creating a core self by which to organize one's subjective experience. When a self fails to develop adequately, narcissistic symptoms ensue.

Narcissism is, of course, the quintessential pathology of the contemporary world. We see its symptoms everywhere, from the presidency down to the ordinary person cutting in front of you in line, or becoming enraged at you for driving more slowly than they want to go. One can barely live through a day without being accosted by cheaters—people willing to break the rules because they consider themselves to be special—above the rules.

Commentators, such as Christopher Lasch, who identify narcissism as *the* modern pathology, tend to think of narcissists as moral failures. They condemn narcissists for choosing a self-centered life over a community-oriented life, for always choosing to be out for themselves at the expense of others.   Typically, they locate the cause of narcissism in the extreme individualism advocated in capitalist

economics.   They also tend to associate Nietzsche's godless individualism with narcissistic immorality.

Indeed, it is difficult not to leap to judgments of moral repugnance when one encounters narcissists, such as Donald Trump. However, we know from psychoanalysis that narcissism is a pathology of the self in which the self has been severely shattered or traumatized, rather than being a self-chosen grandiosity produced by being spoiled as a child.   Pathological narcissists were not spoiled, they were deprived, shamed, and/or abused. Rather than having a core self to ground psychic life, narcissistically wounded persons experience a profound sense of worthlessness and emptiness at their core—a void, an icy pit where love dies, a black hole threatening to swirl one into the chaos of insanity.

This narcissistic emptiness is so painful and dangerous, that it must be avoided at all costs, and here the great narcissistic personality and behavioral defenses emerge.   We can attempt to fill the lack of a self by engaging in the addictive activities mentioned above—drowning our pain with alcohol or sex or gambling, or filling the emptiness with food or material possessions. We also can defend against the sense of worthlessness by projecting a fantasy grandiose self, a fantasy-self containing a hugely inflated sense of personal greatness. We then identify with this inflated self and begin experiencing ourselves as super-special, as deserving privilege and as not having to abide by the rules governing the lives of lesser persons, including moral rules. In short, narcissists usually are moral failures, but they are so not out of choice but out of devastating psychological injuries.

Before exploring the question of why modern society tends to create such injured selves, I need to say that the feeling of emptiness that arises from a traumatized self is not to be confused with the feeling of lack or existential emptiness that all human beings must face—the necessity of death, the incompleteness of life, the lack of a final authority upon which to base our lives. If we have strong selves, we can grow deeply and powerfully from dealing with existential despair; it does not drive us to symptoms. But the psychological emptiness we feel when we have a depleted and fragmented self can constrict and symptomize us for our entire lives. It can also keep us from dealing with existential

dread, for the fear of death gets collapsed into a fear that one's self is really nothingness.

So the essential philosophical question we must raise with this psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism is "what are the structures and practices of modern society that lead to such pervasive injuries of the self?" The two great psychoanalytic theorists of the self in the second part of the 20th century—D.W. Winnicott and Heinz Kohut—discovered that a responsive and affirmative social environment is needed for the development and flourishing of the self. For Winnicott if a child's innate and unique self is not acknowledged or affirmed but instead the child is made to accommodate to the demands and needs of the parents, especially the demand that the child be a good boy or girl, that is, that the child renounce his creative singularity in order to fit standardized social codes, then a false self will become the predominate structure in the psyche, while the true self often is left to assert itself in acts of defiance and delinquency.

It is Kohut, however, who more than any other theorist, maps out the social conditions we need to develop and sustain core self-structure, and how and why narcissistic symptoms develop when these social conditions are deficient. What Kohut discovered in his clinical work is that all humans are born with narcissistic pressures to attain satisfactory relationships to perfection and grandiosity. The baby's relation to these pressures is simple—it is one of identification: "I am perfect and I am great." Reality, however, soon makes this identification impossible and the baby must journey to find a more mature and sustainable relation to these narcissistic values. The optimal trajectory for the relation to perfection involves a projection of perfection onto one's primary caretakers—usually parents—turning them into divine beings whose fundamental job is to care for oneself. When the child is feeling injured or emotionally out of sorts, they can then merge with the idealized parent and gain the strength and calmness of this figure. Later in the optimal trajectory, the child will re-integrate the sense of perfection by developing a power to form ideals and love them as it once loved its parents. In this scenario the person can say: "I am not perfect, but my ideals are and if I ever achieve them or come close to achieving them, I will feel as wonderful as I did when I was a baby and

monarch of the world." This ability to be motivated by ideals is, to me, the ground for what makes human life both so great and difficult.

The maturational trajectory for grandiosity follows a different path as we need to move from a state of archaic grandiosity to a state of mature and firm self-esteem, an esteem that is based both in a history of accomplishment and a history of receiving a steady supply of empathic mirroring. Both are needed for a firm unconscious sense of self-worth to develop, and for us to feel unthreatened in most situations that we encounter in the world. Feeling special and grand because one has successfully mastered toilet training or going to school for the first time and then mastered all the little tasks that descend on one almost everyday gives a person a sense of confident power—something that is needed if we are to ambitiously assert ourselves in the world. However, receiving empathic mirroring is equally if not even more important for the development of self-esteem.

When we are in the first half-decade of life we need to rely almost constantly on our caretakers for an idealized source of strength and a continuous supply of empathic affirmation. However, Kohut found that we never outgrow our need for these narcissistic supplies from others. As we grow up, we need them less often and can receive them in more mature ways. We might be comforted by a caring word rather than being cradled in a parent's arms, but we still need this psychic nourishment or the self falls into disarray.

In sum, to develop coherent, vitalized selves at the core of our psychological lives, we need others—desperately and constantly at first and then less needily as we mature. Kohut was so impressed by our need for others to sustain self-structure that he invented a technical term for them, "selfobjects" and termed what they give to the self "selfobject supplies."

We can now understand why and how modern economic culture devastates selves, thereby de-vitalizing contemporary living. Self-structure needs to be generated in childhood with intense and consistent empathy and nurturance from one's caretakers, and modern culture is undermining this process in a number of

ways. First, the mobility demanded by economic society has significantly diminished the possibility of having an extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) participate in the difficult chores of childrearing. Second, and most important, it is quite common for both parents to have to work, in part because two incomes are necessary to sustain material adequacy for many households, but mainly because having a position within the socioeconomic world is necessary for one to have an identity—to be "someone." Third, when caretakers do come home from work, they are often exhausted and tense from the hassles of the day and unable to be the source of selfobject supplies either for one another or for their children.   It is not unusual for caretakers to soothe themselves with an alcoholic elixir, making them less able to be fully responsive to the selfobject needs of their children, who all too often disappear into their rooms to electronically network with other desperate children in other homes. In short, if intensive care, empathy, and the presence of calm, strong caretakers are needed in order for selves to come into existence, the typical contemporary Western household is incredibly impoverished.

There is another way in which contemporary economic society fails to sustain whatever self structure might have been developed in adults. Before the last quarter of the twentieth century, it was not uncommon for friendships to develop within the workplace; indeed, for many the workplace came to provide the supportive social connections that the village used to. Two prongs of modern society intersected to significantly diminish the availability of selfobject supplies for adults in the workplace. First, the increasing demand that all decisions about personnel be made on the strict basis of objectively certified competence and objective economic factors rather than "old-boy networks" or friendships significantly increased the insecurity and competitiveness with

one's fellow workers. Second, when women entered the professional workforce in large numbers, there was a tendency of men to sexualize the workplace in an egregious and unjust way. This sexualization had to be eliminated, but with its elimination a certain amount of normal human warmth, care, and concern also left the workplace. In short, the workplace is less a realm of friendship and camaraderie than it used to be, and as such has become an institution less able to give empathic selfobject supplies to adults.

To be clear, I think that operating under a code of objectively determined merit is a great improvement over the "old boy networks" and that the workplace needs to be as free of sexual tensions as possible. However, genuine empathy and care for one's fellow workers need not be diminished in any way in order for these values to be achieved. Indeed, empathy counters sexualization by being genuinely concerned for an other rather than being focused on one's desire for that other.

In short, the problem with contemporary society is that is undermines the social conditions necessary for the development and sustenance of selves, thus producing a rampant narcissism.   We should note that it is precisely such narcissistically wounded persons that are best able to run the machinery of capitalist economics and generate the ever-expanding consumer markets it needs to persist. Narcissistically wounded persons will work as hard as they can to attain the statuses and wealth that will seem to give them the sense of self-worth that they internally lack. While no outer goods can ever fill this inner void, the fantasy persists that they can; and so wounded people need to buy more and more and attain higher positions in order to buy the more and more. The culture creates just the kind of persons it most needs: narcissistically injured persons who are driven to work and consume.

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Hopefully, the above explains why there persists such a sense of de-vitalization in contemporary living, despite the presence of endlessly exciting opportunities and adventures. What can we do about it? I do not think that economic society is going to disappear any time soon, but I think we can combat its most destructive practices and conceptual pressures by forming our own values about how to go about living well. How can we do this? Probably in many ways, but, obviously, what I am proclaiming today is the power of philosophy and psychoanalysis to free the soul and spirit. I will not say anything more about the power of philosophy, as I hope to have demonstrated in this talk its power to critique cultural presuppositions and open the mind to other possibilities. I will just say that philosophy classes can be genuinely transforming, as many of you already know.

My second suggestion is not, as you might suspect, to get an analysis, for it is almost impossible to find a genuinely qualified analyst and difficult to afford one without any sociopolitical support. Rather, I suggest that we adopt a psychoanalytically informed way of being in the world. And this involves adopting three primary orientations towards life: first, paying attention to unconscious meanings as they appear in your dreams, symptoms, and mistakes; second, adopting the practice of empathy in your relations with all human beings, and, third, organizing your lives around the spontaneous, irrational erotic eruptions that spring up from the depths of your psyches.

As I want to say a lot about empathy and erotic eruptions, I will only say a quick word about listening to one's unconscious, as important as this activity is. By attending especially to your dreams and your mistakes, you can have a full exorbitant psychic life rather than just the thin psychological existence of a nicely organized conscious day-life.

Every significant transformation I made in my twenty years of therapy began from a strange, compelling dream in which meanings surfaced that revealed truths about myself that I did not know or understand in my conscious life. Marcia and I have shared our dreams since the beginning of our marriage and they have deepened our relationship immeasurably—we have a grasp of what is going on in the unconscious of the other and can help them with our perceptions, interpretations, and empathic acceptance. Being in touch with the unconscious realm of meaning and desire makes one a more complete human being.

Empathy: Empathy is the ability to sense what another subject is internally feeling and mimetically reproducing that feeling in one's own subjective state without identifying with it. I experience Mary's sadness sadly, but it is Mary who is sad, not me. I experience Molly's jubilation jubilantly, but it is her jubilation, not mine. What we learn from recent psychoanalytic practice is that empathic responsiveness is the deepest way to make another feel affirmed and understood. It is a kind of connectivity in which one person is saying to another, "You are so important that I will make myself feel just like you." Empathy confirms the worth of the other's subjectivity by responding to it with a mirroring affirmation in one's own subjectivity.

What is crucial about empathy is the absence of judgment. In empathy I allow myself to experience what you are experiencing just for what it is without judging it as being good or bad. Judgment always conceptualizes and objectifies; empathy simply affirms the other as a subject. If empathy is the psychic food the self needs to develop and sustain its self-esteem, then several current social practices among the young need to

be questioned, in particular, their excessive use of electronic communication and their reluctance to form committed love relationships and friendships.

Electronic communication seems to have taken over the lives of the young. Messaging reigns—whether on cell phones or social media. But, as far as I can see, the electronic message has incredible difficulties communicating empathic responsiveness. Electronic communication has its important place in our lives, for sure, but its danger occurs when it replaces face-to-face communication or even voice-to-voice communication. When you talk with another person face to face, the words are often the least important communication being offered, as the tone of voice, body posture, and gesture can express complex, powerful non-linguistic meanings, including an outpouring of empathy. We all need a daily feeding of empathy; to spend most of your human connection time in electronic relations is to starve yourself of this essential psychological nutrient.

There is another powerful reason for seeking the faces of others. According to Emmanuel Levinas, it is only in responding to the appearance of the face of the other that ethical existence comes into being and with it, our selves. The encounter with the face presents us with an infinity—a singularity that can never be captured by a set of concepts, no matter how extensive. In coming face-to-face with the inconceivable other, we experience our own singularity, our own inability to be reduced to a set of concepts—Jew, gay, star athlete, pretty woman, professor of philosophy. How can we experience our inexhaustible, inconceivable singularity reflected to us if we are not face-to-face with another such singularity?

Although face-to-face encounters are important, we also need relationships, for more than anything else these will help sustain self-structure by providing a consistent and profound source both of empathy and growth-producing problems. However, sustaining close ties to family, friends, and lovers is extraordinarily difficult these days, given that the culture requires you to not encumber yourself with any baggage that might hinder your ascent to the best socioeconomic position possible. Typically baggage is understood as others—especially love partners, for if you care deeply about them, then you have to take them, and not just yourself, into

account when making decisions about your life. This cultural command to keep yourself unattached is so strong that it governs a great deal of college social life, including the rise of hook-up sex and demise of long-term relationships. Hook-up sex--sexual excitement, adventure and pleasure without baggage! What could be better? Is there a downside?

College is a time, perhaps more than any other time, when one needs to come to know who one really is rather than remaining within a narcissistic fantasy about who they think they are. While lots of lonely hours help, it is incredibly difficult to break through the veils of our narcissistic fantasies without the help of another person with whom we feel safe and with whom we can be honest. These are situations of intimacy. Even in intimacy, social roles can claim us as we play out fantasies of the great lover or ever-caring friend, but if the relation progresses to a place where we feel safe enough—a very rare place—then our injured, shamed selves can come out of hiding and hopefully find themselves empathically affirmed. Also, there is no such thing as an intimate relationship without conflicts—difficult conflicts—and it is in working through conflicts that we most mature our selves. And, finally, intimacy grants more empathy and calls for us to develop more empathy than any other kind of relation.

As important as empathy is, there is one way in which it is highly problematic. Empathy is best exchanged in situations of sameness. In grammar school, boys hang out with boys, girls with girls; in college I see ethnic groups hanging together and people with a common sexual orientation hanging together. This makes great sense since mirroring is a crucial part of empathy and we feel mirrored by those who are the same. However, hanging only with those who look and think like one soon becomes stagnant and repetitive, and this is injurious to the self that always needs to go beyond itself in order to remain vital. That is, the self in order to stay vitalized needs to encounter and interact with that which is other or different in some essential way from yourself—a different race, gender, gender orientation, major, economic class, place—whatever. We grow when we are faced with difference and allow that difference to be different rather than subsuming it into the realm of the familiar.

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There is one last area of empathy that I need to mention. When one lives empathically, they cannot help but feeling the pain of those persons that the society devastates, especially those who suffer from the systematic injustices that pervade this society-- minorities, women, gays, the poor, and the psychotics.   Since we are inextricably embedded in our sociocultural world, these evils cannot be ignored as not belonging to us. Our empathy tells us that do belong to us, and we need to accept responsibility for helping to alleviate these disgraceful social ills. Rising up and fighting against virulent evils can at times seem hopeless, but we get can be energized by the struggle, for rather than living in a world that was thrust upon us by fate, we declare that we will help create a new world--a better world, and this makes the soul feel free.

Erotic eruptions: Finally, let me talk about what is equally important with empathy—our strange, unpredictable erotic eruptions—those wondrous psychological events when something in us springs to life and we fall madly in love. However, it will take a bit of conceptual legwork to understand why I think these events represent the self, for it involves plunging into the unfathomable mystery of subjectivity. Each of us is a subject—a being whose essence is to subjectively experience--to have experiences in which we are not only aware of ourselves as beings in the world but also aware of our awareness. Subjectivity can never be reduced to a set of external objective conditions, such as stimulus/response patterns or the chemical and electrical exchanges of neurons, for it is an interior realm of creative experiencing in which endow our worlds and ourselves with meanings. However, for our subjectivities—our egos—to have organized and meaningful experiences, they must be structured.

I will follow Winnicott and Heidegger in saying that we in general can structure our experiences in two ways—either through a false or inauthentic self or through a true or authentic self. We tend to think of a false self as a persona—a mask--that adopt to deal with both inner emotional turmoil and the world's demand that we accommodate to its values and practices. We believe that we can put the mask on or take off at will, but, alas, this is not true, for the false self soon becomes a structure of the ego through which we experience ourselves and the world.   As a

structure of the ego, it soon starts to feel like our normal everyday selves, and when this happens, we have become normalized. By unconsciously adopting a false self as a way of negotiating our being in the world, we soon allow that self to be our usual way to calm our inner worlds and successfully deal with the outer worlds.

Now this is not so bad. We all do it, as it is part of becoming a socialized human being, and this is far better than being un-socialized, far better than becoming a sociopath. But living entirely from the structure of a socialized false self never produces the sense that I am living my own life. It is as though my life had been taken over by an invisible power. While I maybe very successful in my life, something seems missing, something very important seems missing. Namely, me!

Now this is strange, for the normalized ego feels like one's self.   It is one's self, but yet not. We have all had the experiences of not feeling like ourselves, or losing ourselves, or of never really feeling truly ourselves. Now if the ego is our self, then these locutions make no sense. Hence, the true self is not the ego, but a possible structure of the ego. It is when the true self structures the ego's experiencing that we feel most like ourselves. Hence, the ego can be structured around either a persona—a false self--or one's true self—a self that lies in the unconscious and forms the core of who we singularly are.

So the crucial question arises: how do we break out of the false self to locate and establish our true selves as the fundamental structure of the ego? The answer is simple: listen to the voice of the self. For Socrates this voice was daimonic; for Emerson this voice came as a spontaneous whim; for Nietzsche this voice spoke from the Dionysian depths of the soul. I fuse these notions and come to think of the voice of the self as speaking to us in *erotic eruptions*.

Question: What is the best most vitalizing of all human experiences?—it's got to be falling in love!! The paradigm for erotic eruptions is the experience of falling madly, irrationally in love with another person. But we can also fall madly in love with ideas, a discipline, a place, a theory, a work of art, a sport, nature—almost anything. When we feel a spontaneous erotic eruption, we usually feel fresh, un-coded, enlivened. That is, we feel most like our selves, our true singular selves.

However, erotic eruptions are not clear as to what they mean—they are enigmatic signifiers. So we need to form commitments to adventure into the meaning of our erotic eruptions. What did it mean when I fell in love with philosophy as a first-year at Middlebury College—that I should take another class? That I should major in it? That I should devote my entire life to it? As the adventure into the meaning of our erotic eruptions deepens, so do our commitments to them, and with these deepening commitments, a true self begins to emerge. While we might have selves before we establish our most abiding commitments, it is a self only *in potentia;* to actualize our true selves, we need to form commitments around our erotic eruptions and devote ourselves to the paths they unfold before us.

One would think that spontaneous erotic eruptions would quickly fade only to be replaced by others; but this certainly has not been true for me. My love affair with philosophy has lasted six decades. My love affairs with Colorado and teaching Colorado College students are a half century old, and my love affair with Marcia is now in its 40th year. For sure, some of our erotic eruptions do not work out, often causing broken hearts. Sometimes our eros gets infiltrated by destructive forces lying in the dark recesses of our souls, leading us to painful disasters, disasters which make us want to never love again. There are the very real dangers to living erotically. But what fun is a life without dangers, disasters, and the need for courage!

To return to the beginning: what does it mean to live with a free soul and a vitalized spirit? To me it means being able to live a life grounded in what I erotically love and immersed in a matrix of empathy. This does not mean that my society does not impinge upon me and distort my perceptions, nor does it mean that there are not pathological forces at work in my unconscious. I still have labile self-esteem, am overly needy for narcissistic recognition, and feel uncomfortable in many social settings. But I don't much care; for I erotically affirm and love my life, a life granted to me in no small part by my engagements with philosophy and psychoanalysis.