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<div align="center">A Phenomenological Exploration of the Modern Person:</div>

<div align="center">The Self and Ego Dichotomy</div>

When Western philosophers discuss notions of free will, morality, and authenticity, they are doing so within a larger framework that is the Ego. When Eastern philosophers discuss notions of enlightenment, emptiness, and non-duality, they draw on aspects of the Self. In this paper, I will demonstrate a dichotomy between what I call the Ego and the Self. Moreover, it is the Self that enables the construction of the Ego in the first place. In what follows, I will first use Kenneth Baynes' *Self, Narrative and Self-Constitution* to demonstrate that the Ego is a modern, metaphysical construction that represents a particular person's selfhood. Then, I will use Kasulis' *Zen Action: Zen Person* to show that the Self represents a phenomenological, fundamental account of our existence and provides the ground for which we experience the world, and it is this ground from which the Ego is constructed.

For the purposes of this paper, I describe the modern person as having both a 'Self' and an 'Ego'. The common notion of the word 'ego' is usually interchangeable with 'self'. However, I draw a distinction between the two so that they may map onto differing modes of consciousness. What I mean by 'mode' of consciousness refers to a particular way in which something is experienced. A mode of consciousness colors the world in a particular way and reveals or hides certain things from perception. I argue that the mode of the Ego is the primary mode that we as humans occupy on a daily basis. The Ego-mode reveals things in reality that matter to us and hides things that do not. The Self-mode, on the other hand, reveals everything and hides nothing. To detail how this works, I first introduce the concept of the Ego.

Ego

The Ego is a metaphysical construction that represents a person's selfhood, which may include identity, desires, intentions, or decisions. It also represents their values, judgments, or any other faculties that require one to reflect on the world in order to affirm

or negate a position. This is because the Ego is that which reflects. Theorist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin states that reflection is "the power acquired by a consciousness to turn in upon itself, to take possession of itself *as an object* endowed with its own particular consistence and value" (Teilhard, p. 165). This objectifying of oneself extends to things outside of oneself as well. The Ego objectifies things in the world through reflection and thus produces a subject-object orientation about the world, in which the Ego is the subject and everything else is an object. But this Ego-subject is really a different kind of object; an object that stands against other objects. And so, upon reflection, the world can be divided up into objects, categorized into different kinds of objects, and evaluated on the basis of which objects matter the most to a person's own Ego.

Different things may present themselves as more valuable based on the one's short-term and long-term desires, for the Ego is always goal-directed. This means that, in the Ego-mode of consciousness, a person will see objects from a standpoint of utility, or how an object can be used to benefit oneself. This standpoint asks, "Of what use is this thing? What purpose does it fulfill for myself?" And thus we give objects meaning by asking this question. The Ego is that which gives meaning to things by seeking a purpose behind them, a deep cause that may connect the object with our lives. The Ego creates webs of meaning that span the many objects it collects, including objects in the form of identities. Identity is an object that the Ego gives meaning to, more so over other objects. Identity is a complex and dynamic structure that holds objects in itself as well. These objects range from values and beliefs to relationships and conceptions of 'who one ought to be.' The Ego, then, is like a warehouse of many different storage rooms with objects contained *within*. These objects, combined with the objects *without* (or outside of) the Ego, can then be used to invent new objects, give meaning to these objects, and therefore further constitute itself *as* Ego, reinforcing the metaphysical structure of one's life. This reinforcing is a constant interpretation of oneself and their place in the world. The Ego, therefore, is a self-interpreting construct.

Ego as Self-Interpreting Construct

In his article *Self, Narrative, and Self-Constitution*, Kenneth Baynes defends Charles Taylor's thesis that humans are self-interpreting animals, or "beings who exists only in

self-interpretation" (as cited in Taylor, 1985). Although Baynes goes into great length to explain this thesis and its different parts, including the constitutive and narrative aspects, he never explicitly explains what is entailed in the act of interpretation. What does it mean to interpret something? The Oxford English Dictionary lists the definition of 'interpret' as, "to expound the meaning of" (Oxford). In fact, many definitions of this word have something to do with meaning, in either the seeking of meaning or the establishment of meaning. Interpretation, then, seems intimately tied with the Ego since the Ego is a 'meaning-machine', in that it seeks meaning behind things and establishes meaning where there may be none. If reflection is a kind of objectification of the world, then interpretation is a step further in that it ascribes meaning to the objects that are created. And if interpretation involves a creation of meaning in objects, then self-interpretation involves a creation of meaning in one's own life.

Accordingly, Baynes describes Taylor's thesis of self-interpretation in a similar way: "we constitute ourselves through evaluative judgments about what are matters of significance or importance for us" (Baynes, p. 443). This aspect of self-interpretation is known as the narrativity thesis because we, as selves, construct narratives about who we are and what matters most to us, and we determine these narratives through evaluative judgments. But what is an evaluative judgment? Taylor describes humans as 'strong evaluators' who "do not simply assess which of the competing preferences that confront us is stronger or weightier; rather, we attempt to discern which among the competing values and ideals are the ones that we care most about and the ones that genuinely command our allegiance" (Baynes, p. 454). In other words, we evaluate which objects, be it values or ideals, matter the most to us on the basis of our personal desires. For example, if I desire world peace, then I may evaluate which values, ideals, or practices maps onto my version of world peace the most. If I think a worldwide dictatorship is the best chance of world peace, then I may evaluate violence as an ideal that matters to me. If I think peace can be attained best through a common and educational understanding of each other as humans, then I may evaluate non-violence as a practice that matters most to me. Either way, we identify ourselves with these objects of desire and thus constitute ourselves with more objects that may represent or help to achieve this desire. What we end up with is a web of objects connected to each other. We end up with a structure that

represents our life[1].

However, Baynes argues that this structure is not wholly constituted through our self-interpretations, or at least is not constituted by our *personal* self-interpretations. His argument is:

> We are constituted via our self-interpretations but, again, these self-interpretations are not wholly up to us; rather they take place in what Taylor calls a "web of interlocution" and so what we take ourselves to be is both shaped and constrained by what others take us to be and this process is "dialogical" in that there is a dynamic relation between our self-interpretations and those that others make of us. (p. 443)

It can be argued, then, that the web (or structure) that I mentioned above is simply a web within a larger web that is the social imaginary. This means that the personal structure that is one's life is part of a larger structure of society. As Jürgen Habermas puts it, "Individuals reproduce the lifeworld through their various interpretive acts, even while such action always takes place against the background of a symbolic lifeworld that makes this action possible" (Baynes, p. 455). And it is within this lifeworld, or within this structure, that we can view others "as accountable agents who bear responsibility for their choices" (p. 456). There cannot be a self outside of this dynamic between the individual and society (of other individuals). This is why Taylor identifies community as being constitutive of the individual, for self-interpretation is only possible in what Baynes calls a 'space of reasons', or a sphere of social and causal influences (p. 456). When a human is born in the modern day, then, they are already set in a backdrop of historical and societal conditions that favor the self as a self-interpretive process in which the subject emerges.

What Baynes describes as the self (which is constituted through its self-interpretations) can be reframed as the Ego (which is also constituted through its self-interpretations). Not only is the self tied to a person's identity, but it also acts as the subject of the person to which everything else is seen as objects. One can then give meaning to different objects on the basis of how much it matters to oneself or one's

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[1] In his article, Baynes makes the distinction between a core self and a self concept. Later, he argues that such a distinction should be avoided on Taylor's account. The structure that forms from the web of objects is best represented by the self-concept, however the core self (subject of experience) can also be an object within this structure.

identity. This is what it means to evaluate. One can then take these objects and other objects given by the backdrop of society and interpret them in a new way and make them his own, therefore inventing new objects with new meaning. This authentication is a reinforcing of one's life. As stated previously it is a reinforcing of the metaphysical structures of one's Ego, in general.

Ego as a Metaphysical Construct

So far, I have described the Ego as a construct of self-interpretation; it is that which represents our identities and desires. The Ego represents who we think we are. And it is here I emphasize 'think' for it is the Ego that thinks. This is because thinking is a kind of reflection. Reflection in its most basic form is a knowing that one knows. Thought, although there is no actual consensus on its phenomena, seems to be a highly abstracted and evolved form of reflection that is able to form conceptual objects of the things one knows.

If metaphysics can be defined as any attempt to account for "what is", then to reflect on the world involves a constant questioning of "what is?" By evaluating and interpreting, one is always imposing this question onto the world. This is because evaluation and interpretation require objects to evaluate and interpret. As argued previously, one experiences the world as full of objects through reflection. In order to see certain objects *as* objects, one must ask, "What is this object?" Following this, the standpoint of utility can be affirmed and questions of "What is the purpose of this object?" can be asked.

Furthermore, questions of "what is" may not be asked consciously in order to understand a particular object or phenomena. At some level in reflection, these questions may have already been answered either by previous experience or from societal knowledge. Thus, they are assumed from the beginning. Take the example of hearing an airplane pass overhead. If one resides in a primitive tribe, the sound of the jet engine would be so foreign, thoughts and questions would rise to make sense of the sound. "What is that sound," "What is that thing in the sky," "What is the sky," etc. The only question that may be assumed from the beginning, for a primitive tribesman, is "What is sound?" In contrast, a person who lives in an industrialized country may hear the roar of the jet engine and, because the sound already makes sense to him and he has heard it

multiple times before, may ask just one question: "What is the time right now?" It may seem he has pre-reflectively taken the sound of the airplane as just another airplane. But this pre-reflective taking-as may have come about from previous reflective experiences in which reflection played a role in habituating the person to the sound of airplanes. Even if this knowledge was given to him by society, somewhere in history someone had to reflect for the pre-reflective habit to form and thus be absorbed in society.

And so, the Ego can be described as a 'super-reflection' that reflectively structures the world in a particular way. Through constant questioning, evaluating, and interpreting, the Ego builds a metaphysical account of reality and this account can then give rise to further reflection. Taylor calls this process 'articulation', in that "to achieve self-understanding, we attempt to articulate the inarticulate, to make more perspicuous the values and commitments that have not yet been made explicit, and to assume responsibility for those with which we identify" (Baynes, p. 454). Here, we begin to see a feedback loop on how the Ego constitutes and reinforces itself, thereby continuing to expand. This is remarkably similar to a self that is constituted through its own self-interpretations. Here I turn back to Teilhard de Chardin and his description of how this loop works:

> [The reflective psychic center] centers itself further on itself by penetration into a new space, and at the same time, it centers the rest of the world around itself by the establishment of an ever more coherent and better organized perspective in the realities which surround it... The ego only persists by becoming ever more itself, in the measure in which it makes everything else itself. (p. 172)

This 'new space' that Teilhard de Chardin describes parallels the space of reasons given by Baynes. In his concluding paragraph, Baynes stresses the need to consider what the space of reasons is, how it is shaped by society as well as natural forces, and how it is sustained by interpretive and reflective acts (p. 457). Such a space, I argue, is a metaphysical space in which thought, reflection, and Ego exists. I am inclined to believe that this space extends beyond a singular person's own mind, however such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. For now, I will conclude that thought, reflection, and therefore the Ego, are all metaphysical constructions.

<u>Self</u>

So far, I have described in detail the Ego as a metaphysical construction sustained and enhanced by its own capacities to reflect and interpret its situation. To have an Ego is to have a sense of who one is in the societal world. Yet there are moments in life when this sense of who one is begins to break up or undo itself. Baynes calls this a crisis in identity by which one experiences "moments of incommensurability" (p. 456). What I take this to mean is that during the standpoint of the Ego, which is usually the standpoint of utility, the Ego itself becomes subject of its own questioning. A question of "What is the purpose of my life?" comes to the forefront and many times there is no immediate answer. This then causes anxiety, or a breaking up of the Ego itself. Suddenly, the structures that have sustained one's life and one's place in the world begin to crumble. And if the Ego-structure crumbles, what is left?

It is here I introduce the notion of Self, which is very much different than the Ego. The Self is another mode of consciousness in which the world is experienced in a very different way. Through the Ego, the world is experienced as structured, stable, and orderly. Things show up as meaningful and purposeful. Through the Self, however, the world is fundamentally chaotic, in flux and impermanent. It is experienced as fundamental because, I argue, the Self is more fundamental than the Ego. This is because the Self is not a metaphysical structure or an object that arises out of reflection. The Self comes before reflection. The Self is a process. The Self is brute experience, experience that is unfiltered by a subject-object orientation.

In his book, *Zen Action: Zen Person*, Thomas Kasulis attempts to elucidate the experience of enlightenment as put forth by Dōgen, who is the founder of Sōtō Zen Buddhism. In Dōgen's work, *Shōbōgenzō*, the practice of *zazen*, or seated meditation, is discussed as the practice of enlightenment. To mediate is not a way to achieve enlightenment; rather it is enlightenment itself. Kasulis wants to demonstrate that enlightenment is a mode of consciousness that is fundamental in *all* modes of consciousness (Kasulis, p. 69). Thus, an examination of enlightenment is a phenomenological examination rather than a metaphysical or epistemological one.

It is here that I would like to draw the connection between the enlightened experience and the experience of the Self. To experience the world through the Self is to experience

the world through a Zen Master's perspective. This is an experience of "the presence of things as they are" (as cited by Dōgen, Shōbōgenzō). Dōgen uses the term *hishiryō*, translated as 'without-thinking' to describe this experience. Kasulis explains that when one thinks, one is affirming or negating an idea. And when one 'not-thinks', one is simply negating thinking itself. Without-thinking is a third standpoint that "merely accepts the presence of ideation without either affirmation or denial" (p. 72). In other words, the without-thinking act is an experience of the world without a positional attitude of 'for or against', 'good or bad', 'right or wrong', and so on. Kasulis writes that without-thinking "is a non-conceptual or pre-reflective mode of consciousness" (p. 75), however we know that some actions that are pre-reflective may arise out of previous reflections, as argued previously. Take, for example, the act of handshaking. To Westerners, the motions come pre-reflectively, whereas someone of a different culture may use more reflective capacities to complete the motion. What is important is to recognize that the without-thinking mode of consciousness, or the mode of consciousness of the Self, is without reflection in general, and is therefore without Ego. If Ego is a mode where consciousness turns in on itself (via the power of reflection), then the Self is a mode where consciousness is just itself.

<u>Groundless Ground</u>

It is true that an experience of the Self can operate without the Ego. But it is not true that the Ego can operate without the Self. This is because the Self acts as the ground for which the Ego is built on. Kasulis argues that, "the without-thinking act supplies the raw material out of which the later reflective, thinking act develops" (p. 76). My argument is an extension of Kasulis': the Self supplies the raw material out of which the Ego develops. It is the Self that is the fundamental mode of consciousness that provides an experience of everything without a conceptual overlay[2]. From these experiences, the Ego selects and picks out the things that matter to it and constructs the reflective experience, as well as itself. Kasulis describes this phenomenon in detail below:

> When it occurred, the pre-reflective experience was already self-contained
> and full; it was only upon *reflection* that it seemed lacking in some way, in

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[2] A conceptual overlay is similar to a metaphysical structure. To conceptualize is to think abstractly about a certain object or idea. When this idea is overlaid onto the experience, it structures the experience in a certain way.

need of clarification and enhancement by more reflection. In other words,
by retrospectively objectifying the contents of pre-reflective consciousness
(by making them into noemata for thinking), one may lose sight of the fact
that without-thinking – as experienced – makes no objectifications at all
and, therefore, literally leaves nothing (no-thing) to be clarified, analyzed,
or enriched. (p. 77).

This lack of objectification can be difficult to describe through the mode of consciousness of the Ego. This is because the Ego constantly sees things as objects that stand against it. The Self, by contrast, sees that "these are not merely things in my experience; they *are* my experience. My self does not relate to these things; my self *is* these things... self and object are subsequent abstractions arising out of that originally unified experience" (Kasulis, p. 90). To relate to things, therefore, is a capacity of the Ego that seeks meaning and purpose behind an object so that a relation can be established between the Ego and the object. This creates a web of meaning, as mentioned previously, that acts as a sort of ground for those who believe their life is full of meaning. When this ground breaks up, the groundlessness of one's existence is revealed. I argue that it is the Self that is this groundlessness. This would mean that, through the mode of consciousness of the Self, meaning, purpose or a deep cause does not arise in objects. This is because one sees the world as empty of meaning. There is nothing deep behind the phenomena of the world; everything is just as it is.

Such a realization can be very startling for people who are habituated into an Ego-mode of consciousness. Many fall into nihilism in which the world becomes endlessly meaningless. It does not have to be this way, however. One can still continue to authenticate one's life by infusing one's personal meaning into the world, all the while realizing that the world is fundamentally meaningless. This works by experiencing the world as it is without worrying about the consequences; in layman's terms, it is a way of not taking things too seriously. An element of 'play' is introduced in one's life and obsessions with certain objects that may have constituted one's identity before are seen in a new light. One can still lead a meaningful life in a fundamentally meaningless world.

Real Fiction

To establish one's own meaning in a world devoid of meaning may sound like a paradox. But it is this paradox that characterizes the human as human. If the Self provides the fundamental and full experience of everything at a given moment, the Ego is that which directs those experiences in a way so that it gives it meaning. Truly, this direction arises out of nothingness, yet is real in a sense. It arises out of nothingness because nothing is an aspect of the Self[3]. However, it is real in that "it is a fiction that becomes more than fiction as the individual self gradually comes to assume greater responsibility for his self-descriptions and himself" (Baynes, p. 455). The Ego, then, is a construct that has made itself more real as it continues to self-ascribe meaning to it and the world. And this is true in the everyday sense: we do not walk around and see people in the same way we see walls. Rather, we see people as other Egos with their own identity and experiences. At times, seeing them as 'other' can stand in the way of compassion and altruism. But with an awareness of the Self and Ego dichotomy, one can see a person as 'other' while at the same time realizing the oneness that connects them all.

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[3] It is difficult to describe what the Self actually is, because to describe it is to use the capacities of the Ego. We can only talk 'around' the Self and use vague words such as nothingness, presence, or consciousness. This is why, for centuries, thinkers have employed 'negative theology' to describe the Self. This means that, in order to get at what the Self really is, we must describe what it is not. By doing this, we exhaust the Ego and its intellectual capacities and bring in a brief experience of the Self in its fullness and presence.

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