

## *Philosophical Practice and the Matter of Everyday Life*

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MELISSA ANNE-MARIE CURLEY

Ohio State University, USA (curley.32@osu.edu)

Leah Kalmanson, *Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life in Asian and Western Thought*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. ISBN-10: 1350140015, ISBN-13: 978-1350140011, 190 pages. \$39.95.

*In her first book, Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life in Asian and Western Thought, Leah Kalmanson draws on a wide range of Asian ritual and philosophical repertoires in making a case for the role of practical exercises of self-cultivation in the work of existential inquiry. This review considers some of the ways in which Kalmanson's selection of sources is consonant with the intervention she seeks to make, and suggests some possible avenues for beginning to think in a similarly expansive way with and about western traditions.*

**Key words:** Existentialism; Ruism; Kim Iryŏp; comparative philosophy; Buddhism; Zhu Xi

In *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, French philosopher Pierre Hadot laments the medieval reduction of philosophy to a “handmaid of theology” (Hadot 1995: 107).<sup>1</sup> Where for ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, he writes, “doing philosophy meant practicing how to ‘live’” (with an attendant interest in “practical exercises, intended to create habits”), medieval and modern philosophy is tasked only with supplying theology with “conceptual—and hence purely theoretical—material” (Hadot 1995: 86, 107). This tendency toward abstraction, Hadot suggests, takes centuries to overcome: “Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being” what it had been for the ancient Greeks and Romans: “a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world” (Hadot 1995: 108; Kalmanson 2021: 98). Leah Kalmanson’s *Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life in Asian and Western Thought* offers a gentle but pointed rejoinder to Hadot’s claim. “Undoubtedly,” Kalmanson writes, “the attention to concrete, everyday experience is a key feature of existential philosophy, but I am hard-pressed to identify explicit instructions for ‘spiritual exercises’ in the style of the ancient Stoics anywhere in existential writings” (98). Kalmanson argues that this absence is at the heart of an impasse that has so far proved insurmountable: despite its best theoretical efforts, existentialism “repeatedly sees the reemergence of subject-object dualism and all of the attendant problems, because it lacks a clearly articulated plan of practice for enacting its own non-dualistic theoretical insights” (32). This lack, she proposes, is born out of the pernicious and enduring influence of “a problematic understanding of subjective interiority” (2) that insists again and again on a “split between inner experience and outer world” (14), grounded in the same body-mind dualism that existentialism wants to refuse.

Kalmanson seeks to overcome the impasse by looking to East Asia, where she maintains we can find “discourses that approach the phenomenon of subjective interiority differently [...] traditions [that] not only include robust theoretical articulations of the nature of inner life but also offer a range of practical techniques for mental cultivation, self-transformation, and existential realization” (2). Her turn to East Asia—which she sets in contrast to Hadot’s return to ascetic exercises “rooted in the very metaphysics of (spiritual) subject and (material) world that existential philosophy otherwise resists” (99)—signals “a sharp exit from the binaries that covertly, or overtly, shape discourse about the human condition in continental philosophy and critical theory” (14), while insisting on the generativity of these materials for western philosophers. *Cross-Cultural Existentialism* here comes into focus as exemplifying what Ralph Weber has characterized as that stage in comparative philosophy in which we see thinkers “trying the cross-cultural enterprise the other way”—that is toward, rather than only from, the west (Weber 2021: 215).<sup>2</sup>

The first of the book’s four chapters, “Meaningful Dilemmas: Existential Inquiry in the Western Tradition,” sketches the terms of ongoing debates within western philosophy around the question of meaning in life, with an eye toward demonstrating the narrowly dualistic confines within which these debates have taken place; Kalmanson focuses especially on Nietzsche’s notion of value-creation and Simone de Beauvoir’s treatment of facticity and freedom. Even these most robust accounts of meaning-making leave us, Kalmanson proposes, with the question, “How do we *do* any of this?” (36). The second chapter, “The Creation of New Values, Part I: Karmic Transformations,” suggests Buddhist practices of merit accumulation and transfer as one path toward learning to act with “extravagant” compassion (50-1). This chapter puts the French intellectual Georges Bataille in conversation with the Korean intellectual Kim Iryŏp; in Iryŏp’s account of emptiness as a “life energy” that can be “utilized” by an awakened being to create worlds, transforming “the conditions around her” (64-5). Chapter Three, “The Creation of New Values, Part II: Cosmic Correspondences,” continues in this vein, reading Iryŏp’s emptiness in terms of *qi* or a “matter-energy matrix” (68), and reviewing a set of practices for clarifying and refining this matrix, particularly reading, memorization, and recitation, as discussed by the Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi, and divination practices drawing on the *Yijing*. The book’s final chapter, “Rituals for Existential Re-habitation,” seeks to match—or make a generative “mismatch”—the dilemmas of western existentialism with some key terms from what Kalmanson calls *qi*-philosophy: where European discourses give us anxiety, absurdity, alienation, authenticity, and freedom, let us replace them, she proposes, with attitudes cultivated through ritual and contemplation and ideals to guide their enactment: solicitude (*you* 憂), seriousness (*jing* 敬), stillness (*jing* 靜), sincerity (*cheng* 誠), and spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) (96). (I do not want to miss the opportunity to admire the pleasing alliterativeness of this list. The more idiosyncratic of these translations are discussed and ably defended in the chapter. Making the case for *you* as “solicitude” rather than the more obvious “worry,” Kalmanson points us to the distinction drawn in the *Liji* between *you*, a disposition that the exemplary person cultivates, and *huan* 患, also translated as worry, a disposition that the exemplary person experiences not at all; one way of making sense of this distinction, Kalmanson suggests, is that *you* is a more capacious kind of worry involving others as well as oneself, and so includes the aspect of “caring concern” indicated by the English “solicitude” (105).) A brief conclusion brings readers back to Bataille and Iryŏp, with Bataille’s “inexhaustible desire for the ‘beyond of being’” (133)—his drive toward death—positioned against a “*qi*-based model” in which “there is no total loss

to nothingness [...]. Formlessness is always already the beginning of new forms” (137). Although she is on guard against a misreading of her book as a self-help guide, Kalmanson does end with the hope that the ideas discussed here might energize readers who have grown “exhausted in the face of persistent existential uncertainties” (142).

Kalmanson’s intervention is made possible by her control of the two areas of European existentialism and East Asian religious thought; her book should be of interest and use to readers in either one. Kalmanson’s ability to elegantly summarize concepts from both Asian and western intellectual traditions is a great gift for readers wading into the task of comparison from either side, and the book’s many concrete examples of meaning-making practices will bring the book’s arguments to life in classroom contexts. Likewise, her thoughtful positioning of the thoroughly modern Kim Iryŏp as a key interlocutor will work to bridge some of the distance between readers grappling with the modern existential moment and the ancient and classical Asian sources represented here. The book might find a valuable place in an undergraduate course on existentialism or phenomenology, but one might also pair it with primary sources as part of a course on Asian philosophy or Asian religions, or bring it into productive conversation with current work in microphenomenology and embodied cognition.

Given the book’s expansiveness and ambition, it is to be expected that readers might also find room to quibble with some of its arguments, particularly perhaps where those arguments relate to their own comparatively narrow interests. This reviewer took appreciative notice of Kalmanson’s emphasis on concepts and practices drawn from the Confucian—or, to use the term Kalmanson prefers, the Ruist—repertoire; this is exciting material in its own right, but particularly so as a contribution to comparative treatments of existentialism and phenomenology that have “largely focused,” as Kalmanson notes, on Buddhist sources (126). It strikes me, however, that the impulse to lift Ruism out of Buddhism’s shadow occasionally leads Kalmanson to identify ideas that circulate as common sense across East Asian intellectual traditions as the property of the Ruists. When Iryŏp writes about “life energy” (*saengmyŏng* 生命) and the creative use thereof, for example, Kalmanson notes that this language is “not particularly Buddhist,” drawing as it does on “long-standing and pervasive assumptions about life, energy, and the cosmos in traditional Chinese thought” or what Kalmanson sometimes refers to as *qi*-philosophy (67). She goes on, however, to associate this language with those “strands of Ruist thought that reject the metaphysical plausibility of utter nothingness” (68). Similarly, Kalmanson proposes that Iryŏp’s “commitment to the social and political value of meditation aligns her existential thought with broadly Ruist concerns” (125-26). Here Kalmanson seems to me to be drawn into treating a Ruist critique of Buddhism—namely, that it tends toward nihilism and toward quietism—as descriptive rather than polemical. In the process, she loses sight both of Iryŏp’s East Asian Buddhist sources, distinct from the Indian Buddhist materials Kalmanson discusses elsewhere in the book, and of the ways that Iryŏp’s thought is also fed indirectly by a wellspring of European vitalism that circulated throughout Korean and Japanese intellectual circles in the early twentieth century, producing “new conceptual keywords” like *saengmyŏng*, or vitality (Lee 2015: 85).<sup>3</sup> Given the richness and interest of the many unimpeachably Ruist materials discussed in the book, it is not obvious to me what the advantage is of framing Iryŏp’s most compelling ideas as Ruist, rather than making concerted use of Kalmanson’s own less-vexed category of *qi*-philosophy.

At the same time, it is surely a strength of the book that it focuses so much on texts and practices, Ruist and otherwise, that are not typically taken up in comparative philosophy (2). The western repertoire at play here is comparatively narrow. Kalmanson looks for European existentialist philosophers who provide instructions for ‘daily spiritual exercises’—that is, “concrete exercises that better enact the values and non-dualist commitments of existentialism”—and does not find them (99). This is in marked contrast, she writes, to the “gamut of practices” we find when “we turn our attention to Asian traditions” (99). The presence or absence of these exercises is important to Kalmanson’s argument, explaining the reemergence of subject-object dualism in European thought and, presumably, the overcoming of it in Asian traditions. But if we permit a similar glide from “philosophers” to “traditions” on the western side, some possibilities seem to emerge. Martin Buber, for example, treats prayer as a concrete exercise. Thomas Merton prescribes daily manual labor in the vein of the Shakers. Jean-Luc Nancy’s work at the intersection of philosophy and art seems to describe both drawing and listening as embodied practices of phenomenological inquiry. Emilio Uranga’s existential philosophy of Mexicanness—have we moved too far away now from the philosophical “West”?—centers the practices of everyday life. Eugene Gendlin’s work with psychologist Carl Rogers—have we moved too far away now from philosophy?—inspired Gendlin’s six-step practice of focusing.

Noting these possibilities is not intended as a criticism of Kalmanson’s larger argument; indeed, it hinges on having been convinced by the book’s claim that “effective existential philosophy must be a practice as much as it is a theory” (1). It is rather to wonder out loud about the affordances and constraints of organizing comparative work in terms of an east-west binary, and about what it would look like to bring Kalmanson’s eye for texts and practices not always recognized as philosophy proper to bear on the western sources.

*Cross-Cultural Existentialism* arrives at an interesting moment, in which a certain self-consciousness with regard to the narrow way in which comparative philosophers working in the west have tended to construe ‘Asian philosophy’ has prompted efforts to think more broadly about who makes sense as a possible philosophical interlocutor. Kalmanson’s centering of Ruist thought represents a valuable move in this direction; so too does her reading of Kim Iryōp as an existentialist. I think the boldest move Kalmanson makes, however, is to take ordinary people participating in rituals of merit-making and divination as her imagined interlocutors. Rather than seeking to lift abstract meaning out of these rituals, I see Kalmanson trying in earnest to think with them as embodied, culturally situated practices. This move is consistent with the logic of her analysis, and serves as a model for thoughtful philosophical engagement with everyday life. It has also, it seems to me, played a part in producing a text that is lively and accessible—evoking some of the love of the spontaneous we find in the book’s source materials, alongside their insistence on the importance of seriousness.

**Melissa Anne-Marie Curley** is author of *Pure Land, Real World: Modern Buddhism, Japanese Leftists, and the Utopian Imagination* (University of Hawai’i Press 2017). With Melanie Coughlin and Jessica L. Main, she is currently working on a translation of Keta Masako’s *Philosophy of Religious Experience: An Elucidation of the Pure Land Buddhist World* (Sobunsha 1992).

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

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- <sup>2</sup> Ralph Weber, “How to Compare?”—On the Methodological State of Comparative Philosophy,” *Philosophy Compass* 8, no.7 (2013): 593–603.
- <sup>3</sup> Jae-Yon Lee, “Authors as Creators of Art: The Collaborative Shaping of Literary Writers in *Cb’angjo*,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 20, no. 1 (2015): 77–111.