BOOK DISCUSSION

Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life in Asian and Western Thought. By Leah Kalmanson. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Philosophy as a Transformative Practice: A Review of Leah Kalmanson's *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*

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Leah Kalmanson's *Cross-Cultural Existentialism: On the Meaning of Life in Asian and Western Thought* develops what the author calls 'speculative existentialism' by challenging the metaphysical assumptions behind the existential inquiry in the West. The author turns to East Asian thought—Ruism (also known as Confucianism) in particular—questioning the "problematic understanding of subjective interiority" that remains in European existentialism despite its efforts to subvert subject-object dualism. The author writes, "my book is ultimately about the radical existential vision of Ruism, a tradition that has, in general, received less attention than Buddhism in comparative existential work."[1] A revised existentialism via Ruist thinking is sought not only theoretically but also through practical techniques for mental cultivation, self-transformation, and existential realization. This journey pushes the existential inquiry not only beyond dualist assumptions but also beyond the human condition in its engagement with a *qi* 氣 cosmology that emphasizes the continuity between humans and environments.

The author uses the term 'speculative' in a specific sense: "a mode of speculation that grants us access to reality beyond the constraints of the ordinary subjective experience."[2] The term comes from Quentin Meillassoux's "speculative realism," a call for a renewed realism that reclaims access to mind-independent reality, renounced by post-Kantian philosophy (including phenomenology) that accepts the distinction between phenomena and noumena. Meillassoux critiques the tendency prevalent in post-Kantian philosophy to understand a reality limited to our own perceptual and cognitive abilities—what he calls a 'species solipsism.' In her invention of 'speculative existentialism', Kalmanson redefines speculation itself, "not as the interior rumination of a subject looking out on the world but rather as a *dynamic activity that transforms both selves and their environments*."[3] By putting the key concepts of European existentialism—anxiety, absurdity,

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alienation, authenticity, and freedom—in conversation with Ruist virtues, the author shows that key existential concerns are rooted in a limited, solipsistic view of the world that underlies Western thought, and that they could be better addressed through the practical techniques and strategies of Ruists' that ground us in the world.

I have appreciated the author's inventive ideas, not as an expert in classical Asian philosophy, but as a social/political philosopher trained in what is known to be the 'Continental tradition' with an interest in decolonial thought and early twentieth-century East Asian philosophy. I believe the creativity of this book lies in (1) its 'cross-cultural' method, (2) its radical reframing of our existential condition, and (3) its reflection on philosophy as a transformative practice. In what follows, I discuss these three aspects in detail after presenting a brief overview of the book.

Overview

The first chapter begins with the Wolf-Cahn debate on whether the idea of a meaningful life is based on an objective value or a subjective reality, which the author views as a version of the idealism-realism debate in the history of philosophy. Showing how both positions are unsatisfactory, the author claims that the premise that generates the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity itself, namely subject-object dualism, should be questioned. After reviewing the philosophical lineage of attempts to overcome the dualistic assumption—Nietzsche's condemnation of the metaphysical subject, Beauvoir's take on the human condition, and the recent critique of phenomenology—Kalmanson concludes that Western philosophy keeps returning to the anxiety of Cartesian solipsism. This is due not to the lack of theoretical tools for a non-dualistic existential investigation but to the lack of practices to reframe and re-habituate existential questions.

The following two chapters explore ways for "The Creation of New Values" in the Buddhist karmic economy and the *qi*-based Ruist cosmology. In the second chapter, Kalmanson first turns to the karmic economy and examines the proliferation of karmic merit as a mode of existential meaning-making. Here we meet the Korean Buddhist nun Kim Iryŏp, whose existential thought is informed by Mahāyāna non-dualism. Iryŏp maintained that meditative practices enable our creativity as it conducts a potent energy throughout the karmic network that sustains the shared existential and social condition. Her idea of *saengmyŏng* 생명 (life-energy) cultivated by meditation leads us to the concept of *qi* 氣, translated in this book as the 'matrix of matter-energy.' The third chapter teaches us the key terms for our existential inquiry in Chinese philosophy: *qi* 氣, *li* 理, and *de* 德. In the matter-energy matrix of *qi*, our heart-mind is not simply a faculty of the individual mind but a capacity to interact with the *qi* of the outside world and the minds of others. We thus learn about various techniques of self-

cultivation as a process of manipulating the *qi* of the heart-mind. Techniques, including breathing, physical exercises, and meditating, are aimed to achieve the heart-mind's alignment with the 'order' or self-organizing tendencies of the cosmos (*li* 理) and to attain the transformative effects of power (*de* 德) that allow the effects of self-cultivation to reach larger social and environmental contexts.

The last chapter reimagines existential values from the perspective of *qi*-based philosophy. In this new set of existential vocabulary, we find: solicitude (*you* 憂) paired with anxiety as existential vulnerability; seriousness (*jing* 敬) as the weight of our value-laden existence in place of absurdity; the cultivation of stillness (*jing* 靜) for the daily renewal of the mind's power, which replaces alienation; and sincerity (*cheng* 誠) and spontaneity (*zhiran* 自然) as a creative enactment of authenticity and freedom. While introducing practices and techniques associated with each of these terms, the author develops possibilities to re-habituate familiar modes of existential thinking.

Cross-Cultural Thinking and Decolonization

Cross-Cultural Existentialism presents a subversive comparative method that allows us to reframe existential questions and to reinvent philosophy as a transformative practice. In this section, I situate the author's cross-cultural method in the larger context of decolonial thinking. Decolonial thinking/practice as a critical discourse analysis informs one of the contributions of this book: questioning the underlying assumptions of European existentialism.

Before we look at the 'cross-cultural' thinking presented in this book, I should note some problems with related terms like 'multicultural', 'trans-cultural', or 'global' that are often used to describe research methods, educational strategies, or intellectual exchanges. In an institutional setting, these terms are often adopted to promote 'cultural diversity', which tends to be a DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiative that supports rather than tackles the system of white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism that fundamentally conditions any intellectual exercise. The banners of 'global education' and 'multicultural approach' conceal the subject of knowledge, by and for which different worlds and cultures are brought together. Those who embody white, European, heteropatriarchal values have historically been the silent referent for institutional knowledge production. Achieving cultural diversity without critical reflections on colonial history and power reaffirms white domination.

Philosophy, especially professional philosophy, is no exception. Recent attempts to diversify syllabi and revise the philosophical canons have prompted increased interest in non-Euro-American philosophies. As many have shown,[4] the history of philosophy as a colonial construction has limited the discipline of philosophy to the Western European tradition, establishing Euro-American thought as a universal measure for what is

considered philosophical. Asian philosophies, along with African, Latin American, Native American, and Indigenous philosophies, have historically been denied recognition as philosophy or system of thought. Inclusion of these traditions in the discipline has largely been predicated upon their perceived compatibility with and translatability into Euro-American philosophical language.

So, how does one conduct cross-cultural thinking in a way that disrupts the coloniality of knowledge production? How can one bring together two systems of thought given the asymmetry of power between them? Kalmanson's cross-cultural inquiry presented in this book is derived from such concerns around the decolonization of philosophy. Elsewhere[5] she has suggested decolonial strategies for comparative philosophy, one of which is "subversive categorization." For instance, instead of categorizing Confucian thought as philosophy or religion, she suggests that we keep the term 'Ruism' so that it is considered within its own category. She also notes how non-Western traditions are considered as objects of study, but "the research methodologies and theoretical frameworks remain Eurocentric."[6] Instead of using Western research methods such as analysis, hermeneutics, or phenomenology, she develops a Ruist "ritual methodology" that emphasizes daily practices and thus offers a critical intervention into European existential philosophy.

In *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, Kalmanson is intentional in mapping Western existential thought onto Ruism, not the other way around. Her stance on this matter is shown in the discussion of '*qi*-realism'. She takes caution in translating the *qi* cosmology into the more established language of realism in the Western philosophical context; she writes: "This notion of *qi*-realism is insightful, so long as we understand it as adapting the realist position to a *qi*-based philosophy and not the other way around."[7] This is a refusal to comply with the demand to make non-Western thought recognizable in the language of Western metaphysics. Rather, Ruism should be considered a system of thought in its own right and its own determination. We might call this a sort of 'counter-mapping' because it reverses the direction of the demand for translating one system of thought to the other.[8]

The last chapter illustrates this 'counter-mapping' by replacing or pairing some of the key terms in Western existentialism with those of Ruist ritual methodology. Kalmanson is well aware of the risk of establishing a correspondence between European existentialist terminology and Ruist practices: "[T]here will be a degree of mismatch: the terms I select are taken out of their indigenous intellectual history and used as a lens on the specific dilemmas of European existentialism." Counter-mapping cautions philosophers to pause, for instance, before identifying Heideggerian '*angst*' with 'solicitude' as a productive disorientation in self-cultivation, or assuming 'absurdity' to be a universal affective disposition in the face of an existential crisis. Further, counter-mapping reveals how 'provincial' the concerns of

European existential dilemmas are by redefining the condition of being itself. I will say more about this in the next section.

Redefining the Existential Condition: A Critique of Nothingness

Cross-Cultural Existentialism provides methodological insights on cross-cultural thinking as a decolonial practice, as I see it, but the book itself is not a meta-reflection on the theoretical method. Instead of speaking about it, it takes us through the philosophical journey, where we learn to navigate the Ruist world with some familiar tools of European existentialism in hand. This journey reframes not only existential questions but also the way we think of philosophy—what it is, what it does, and how it is done.

Existential philosophy marks a moment of crisis brought by the solipsistic worldview in Western thought. Its critique of traditional metaphysics was limited, according to the author, due to lack of practical strategies or exercises for existential re-habituation. Kalmanson writes, "[m]y guiding thesis in the book as a whole is that existential philosophy 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."[9] The author turns to Ruist practices to expand the bounds of reflection beyond oneself: the self-cultivation that breaks the habit of a petty, self-centered thinking. She writes: "Issues such as solipsism, subjective idealism, and other apparent dilemmas of subjectivity, which have so frequently thwarted philosophical and existential inquiry in the West, may turn out to be—no offence—only a function of limited (*xiao*) thinking."[10]

Therefore, the key existential question about the meaning of life is resolved through practices rather than answered in this book. Via Judith Farquhar and Zhang Qicheng, the author points out how the question "what is the meaning of life?" can be misleading, in that it makes us think that there is some profound meaning 'out there' to be discovered.[11] This shows how Western habitual thinking places us within the limits of subjective interiority or inner experience. Ruist thinking poses an entirely different set of questions. The author writes, "Ruists worry not so much over whether life is meaningful but over the place of human beings within a value-laden universe . . . . [O]ur every action is weighed down by consequences that reverberate throughout the matter-energy matrix, affecting ourselves and others."[12] What surrounds us is not a bare, disinterested world of "facticity"—"the bare facts of existence as we encounter them, not as conditions of our own choosing but often as obstacles to our will"[13]— but a responsive field of *qi* where any interaction is meaningful. When we understand the world as a place where all things are mutually interdependent, the meaning of life is not to be *sought* but *realized* through practices. We will return to the idea of 'realization' in the next section.

This crucial contribution of the book helps us understand the condition of our existence in terms of interconnectedness or the ability to affect and be affected, as opposed to something like Heideggerian 'thrownness' (into the given condition of the world). The border set between the self and the external world is what grounds not only the solipsistic view of 'inner experience', but also an essential element in Western thought that defines a mode of existence for humans as free, autonomous beings. The etymology of terms associated with human existence is relevant here: 'existence' comes from the Latin *ex-sistere*, 'come into being', which is broken into *ex-*, 'out', and *sistere*, 'take a stand' or 'set up' (Oxford dictionary). The idea of "standing out" indicates that our mode of existence implies a sense of separation and individuation; something comes into being by setting itself apart from all others, the 'external' world, and ultimately *nothingness*. This could be contrasted with the terms 'being' or 'existence' in East Asian thought—存在 or 實存—the root of which is the pictographic character 才, which represents a seed sprouting from the ground. We might speculate that it symbolizes the life-energy of which all beings are a manifestation, and the interdependence by which all beings are sustained and nurtured.

When we ask questions about the meaning of life and why anything exists, we are making our existence and that of this world *contingent*. The notion of nothingness is at the heart of European existentialism, where being is always haunted by nothingness (Sartre). Here I take a slight detour to look at the discussion of nothingness in Henri Bergson, a figure mentioned in this book as one of the few thinkers who view philosophy as a 'way of life', but who is not explored much.[14] According to Bergson, the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is a false problem. He writes,

> There are pseudo-problems, and . . . they are the agonizing problems of metaphysics. I reduce them to two. One gave rise to theories of being, the other to theories of knowledge. The first false problem consists in asking oneself why there is being, why something or someone exists . . . . It will never, in fact, be solved, but it should never have been raised. It arises only if one posits a nothingness which supposedly precedes being.[15]

Bergson argues here that nothingness is a concept derived from being by suppression but mistaken as logically prior. There is more intellectual content in the idea of nothingness than in that of existence, but we think the opposite to be true. For Bergson, it is the linear conception of time that subjects us to such a misconception that from nothing something comes about.

In a similar manner, Ruist thinking challenges the (existentialist) notion of nothingness as a source of primordial alienation between the self and the external world. In the section "The Impossibility of Nothingness" in the concluding chapter, Kalmanson writes that sheer emptiness is metaphysically implausible and that there are only the tendencies of matter-energy (*qi*) to

relax and disperse, echoing Jeeloo Liu's claim that there was no primordial absolute nothingness in classical Daoist and Neo-Confucian thought.[16] This is in line with the position of Zhang Zai and Hu Yuan, the commentators of the *Yijing* introduced in this book.[17]

If this is how the world is, why are we prone to see it in a dualist lens? Why do we have those creeping thoughts that everything in life is pointless, or that we are all alone in the end, or that the universe is disinterested in our well-being? For Bergson, it is due to the habits of our intellect. Most of the time we are occupied by practical interest and unable to see reality in an unmediated manner. The intellect tends to understand things in a spatial way, as discrete and discontinuous entities. It is our propensity to perceive things as static, even when we know the ever-changing, processual nature of life and the world.

This tendency of the mind explains why *Cross-Cultural Existentialism* puts so much emphasis on the process of (re)habituation and continual renewal through rituals. A key step to transforming the heart-mind and calming the surrounding *qi* is daily rituals and scholarly practices. Since it is easy for us to be caught up with self-centeredness, we need techniques to train our mind and allow it to work to its potential. In this regard, Kalmanson writes,

> [R]itual is a way to address existential vulnerability by ordering our actions to account for their inescapable efficacy, or a way to rein in, as it were, the possibility of unforeseen consequences; and seriousness, the manner in which we conduct ritual, is a way to align the mind and thereby attune ourselves to the gravity of our microcosmic-macrocosmic interconnectedness in every given moment.[18]

Given the preceding reflection, I'm curious whether the term 'existentialism' (*ex-sistere*) as a philosophical inquiry would still hold if we immerse ourselves in the "radical existential vision of Ruism." As the author notes, European existentialism in the twentieth century came out of the loss of faith, in doubting the existence of God and losing confidence in the *telos* of progress associated with Enlightenment thought.[19] This specific intellectual context is not shared by East Asian thought. If we are expanding existential inquiry beyond Western thought, and thus beyond the solipsistic and dualist assumptions through Ruist rituals and techniques, what would this revised existentialism look like? Wouldn't key existential questions be fundamentally reconstructed, if not resolved, under a "speculative existentialism" that understands the human condition radically differently through *qi* cosmology?

Philosophy as a Transformative Practice

Throughout the book, there is a sense in which the cultivation of the self is continuous with social changes. As noted above, the author aims to redefine 'speculation' itself as a transformative activity that extends beyond subjective interiority. In her account of Kim Iryŏp, the author states that Iryŏp's

"monastic practice itself is a force for social change" because it can affect the entire karmic network that sustains societal conditions.[20] The way meditation is understood in the karmic economy informs the workings of the (Ruist) heart-mind, which carries the transformative power not only for self-cultivation but also for affecting others and their surroundings. Transformations at one level can reverberate throughout the matter-energy matrix up and down microcosmic and macrocosmic levels:

> [W]e see many points . . . converging: the importance of a luminous and calm mind, the daily renewal of one's power, the belief that a practical program of moral self-cultivation is accessible to all, and the confidence that changes at the microcosmic level of the mind will palpably impact larger social, environmental, and cosmic structures.[21]

Reading about the radiating, transformative power of the heart-mind, I, as someone working in social and political philosophy, grappled with the following questions, although they may be beyond the scope of the book: If our existential condition is defined not by isolation and alienation but by cosmic correspondences in the matrix of responsive matter-energy, how would sociopolitical conditions be understood? How would our responsibilities for systemic injustice be defined through radical interconnectedness and non-duality between self and other?

Kalmanson's attention to the notion of *zhijue* 知覺, often translated as 'perception', seems relevant to this point. She explains how the mind-*qi* is not restricted to one's own mind or body by drawing on Eiho Baba's reading of *zhijue*. Baba translates it as 'realization' in the sense that it is not a passive seeing of a predetermined reality, but a "participatory determination of the world through cultivated appreciations and realizations."[22] In the context of *qi*-based philosophy, perception is a process of manifesting and constructing reality, and in this sense it is itself a realization: becoming aware of something while making it a reality.

I wonder how *zhijue* as an activity of the heart-mind would help us connect self-cultivation with social and structural changes. Take for instance systemic racism, which shapes our pattern of perception, behavior, and relationships in a divisive and isolating fashion, often without our knowing. Perhaps it could be characterized as a persistent restraining of the mind-*qi* from transforming the surroundings by sticking with a particular organization of the matter-energy—for example, white supremacy. If each act of racial violence is a continuous *realization* of a social order that devalues the lives of bodies of color, could it be categorized as a 'petty' way of being, trapped in a narrow vision and self-absorption? The author reminds us that "not all people attain such access beyond the perspective of their own limited awareness. The Chinese tradition defines petty and 'small' people (*xiaoren* 小人) as those who barely understand themselves, let alone the outside world and other people."[23] Then how can we rid ourselves of the petty way

of being so that we can see ourselves as an agent (as well as a product) of cosmic transformations? Kalmanson leads us to *de* 德 in the *Guanzi*, the transformative power of learning cultivated through techniques to align the mind with the tendencies of *qi* by eliminating "the accumulated beliefs that render it [the mind] inflexible."[24] The idea is that a flexible heart-mind would recover its natural ability to affect and be affected, and to realize the self-organizing tendencies of the matter-energy matrix through a fully enabled *zhijue*.

Lastly, I would like to note that a *qi*-based philosophy's emphasis on practices of self-cultivation might be sustained through institutional reforms. Jung-Yeup Kim's analysis of the role of *li* 禮 (ritual propriety) in Zhang Zai's philosophy of *qi* explains how an institutional arrangement could generate a condition for a state of vital affective harmony within community. Kim points out that in implementing the well-field system (井田制度) as a way to distribute the land, economic equity itself is not a goal but a means to produce and sustain a vital 'affective ecology' among the members of the community.[25] We might say that a system can be transformative, not when it is forcibly reinforced, but when it motivates our communal, affective vitality, as do ritual practices that sustain our *xing* 性, the capacity to resonate with others and with all things in nature.

Notes

1 – Kalmanson, *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, p. 8.

2 – Ibid., p. 12.

3 – Ibid., p. 5.

4 – See, e.g., Enrique Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity," in *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 65–77; Aníbal Quijano "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580; María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2008): 196–198; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Peter K. Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780–1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013); David H. Kim, "Alterity, Analectics, and the Challenges of Epistemic Decolonization," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 57 (2019): 37–62; Grant Silva, "Comparative Philosophy and Decolonial Struggle: The Epistemic Injustice of Colonization and Liberation of Human Reason," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 57 (2019): 107–134.

5 – Leah Kalmanson, "If You Show Me Yours: Reading all 'Difference' as 'Colonial Difference' in Comparative Philosophy," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2015): 201–213.

6 – Ibid., p. 207.

7 – *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, p. 91.

8 – Ibid., p. 96.

9 – Ibid., p. 32.

10 – Ibid., p. 12.

11 – Ibid., p. 95.

12 – Ibid., p. 111.

13 – Ibid., p. 35.

14 – "Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and seeing the world" (Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase [Oxford: Blackwell, 1995], p. 108; cited in *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, p. 98).

15 – Henri Bergson, "The Possible and the Real," in *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Dover Publications, [1946] 2010), p. 78.

16 – "If we want to answer the question 'Why was there something rather than nothing?' We may reply that there is *something* exactly because there was never *nothing* . . . . [I]n both classical Daoist and Neo-Confucian conceptions, there was no primordial absolute nothingness" (Jeeloo Liu, "Was There Something in Nothingness? The Debate on the Primordial State between Daoism and Neo-Confucianism," in *Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*, ed. JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger [New York and London: Routledge, 2014], p. 181; cited in *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, p. 134).

17 – The author writes, "Zhang Zai resists interpreting the *Yijing* in terms of interplay between nothingness (*wu* 無) and existence (*you* 有) . . . . This echoes Hu Yuan's interpretation that *wu* and *you* are best understood not as nothingness and existence per se but rather as formless and formed states of *qi*" (*Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, p. 87).

18 – Ibid., p. 112.

19 – Ibid., p. 127.

20 – Ibid., pp. 61–62.

21 – Ibid., p. 89.

22 – Eiho Baba, "*Zhihue* as Appreciation and Realization in Zhu Xi: An Examination through *Hun* and *Po*," *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 2 (April 2017): 311; cited in *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, p. 74.

23 – *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, p. 75.

24 – Ibid., p. 78.

25 – Jung-Yeup Kim, "Economic Equity, the Well-Field System, and Ritual Propriety in the Confucian Philosophy of Qi," *Philosophy East and West* 64, no. 4 (October 2014): 856–865.

Existential Rehabituations from a Latinx Perspective: On Leah Kalmanson's *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*

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> . . . philosophy must be a practice as much as it is a theory.
>
> Leah Kalmanson, *Cross-Cultural Existentialism*, p. 1

In the face of the sheer quantity of life's uncertainties, Leah Kalmanson's *Cross-Cultural Existentialism* provides more than a novel take on existential theory (although it does that); following the mantra of European existentialists that "philosophies are meant to be *lived*," *Cross-Cultural Existentialism* introduces the reader to a series of practices central to the Ruist tradition (the intellectual lineage known in the West as Confucianism) required to make philosophy "a concrete attitude, a way of life" (pp. 1, 2). Kalmanson's turn to the East Asian tradition is largely motivated by her assessment that the European existential tradition lacks a robust engagement with practical strategies like meditation, ritual memorization and recitation of texts, and merit-awarding ceremonies. "If we are looking for a systematic account of daily practices . . . that relate to enacting the vision of trans-egoic meaning-making expressed in existential theory, we will not find it within existential writings themselves" (p. 14). Without concrete strategies for existential rehabituation, Kalmanson warns, the Western tradition remains trapped within an understanding of subjective interiority problematically entrenched in subject-object dualism.