



## Joy to/and the World: The KonMari Method, Philosophy, and the Environment

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**Abstract:** Marie Kondo, in her book entitled *The life-changing magic of tidying up*, introduces the KonMari Method as a means to clean one's house, and bring joy and inner peace to an individual. This paper examines Kondo's philosophy alongside the culture of clutter and the culture of consumption –how the KonMari Method can lead to not only a clean house but a life of authenticity and self-discovery, and counter environmental degradation. This paper rethinks various philosophical theories on joy and meaning in order to understand the current trends in consumer culture in relation to Kondo's philosophy. Are clutter and consumption equal to happiness and satisfaction? How is Kondo's philosophy similar to Shintoism, minimalism, and other philosophies of the Western canon? Living simply is recognizing one's joy, it is a dialogue with one's self, and thus increases the power to strive. What one owns is how one lives his or her own life. By knowing what is important, discarding the clutter leads to authenticity and eventually a world less-degraded, a world of joy.

**Key Words:** KonMari, spark of joy, minimalism, authenticity, environment

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Marie Kondo, world-renowned tidying expert and author, writes about the art of tidying up. She explains what the proper process of decluttering is and the spirituality behind such “magical” activity in her book entitled *The life-changing magic of tidying up* (2014). Kondo's work has inspired a revolution, a cult following even, of decluttering all over the world. Particularly famous in first world countries such as Japan, the United States and the United Kingdom, followers have begun the supposed life-changing magic of tidying up their homes. Kondo's main premise is that a person should discard things, stuff, or possessions that do not spark joy within its owner. This is also known as the Japanese art of decluttering and organizing.

Kondo's insights seem to sound simplistic enough –just clean one's house. What this paper intends to do is to prove that the KonMari method which is the main premise of Kondo's ideas, can lead to a person's self-discovery and authenticity and eventually a less-degraded world. This paper hopes to achieve this through a critical reading of Kondo –by trying to explain the fundamental nature of decluttering and organizing against the backdrop of philosophy, culture and the environment. By starting off with consumer culture, her ideas will be clarified by enumerating similar philosophical theories that may be the theoretical bases and grounds for Kondo's philosophy.



## 2. THE KONMARI METHOD

The New York Times hails Henry David Thoreau as the first declutterer. In 1845, he moved to Walden Pond and lived in a home as small as a tool shed. One of his famous lines is actually, “simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!”. He believed that decluttered surroundings lead to a decluttered life and mind. (Heitman, 2015) The main claim of this paper is that the KonMari Method can lead to not only a clean house but a life of authenticity, a dialogue with one’s self and possibly counter environmental degradation. Kondo’s philosophy of decluttering, her KonMari Method which is the process of recognizing joy, the spark of joy –opens various doors toward self-discovery and ecological awareness.

The first step in the art of tidying up is deciding what to get rid of. To get rid of the clutter, one must get rid of things. One should choose what to keep rather than what one wants to get rid of. The selection criterion or the KonMari method, is to “take each item in one’s hand and ask: Does this spark joy? If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it”. (Kondo, 2014) Will keeping a certain object bring one joy? For example, “are you happy wearing clothes that don’t give you pleasure? Do you feel joy when surrounded by piles of unread books that don’t touch your heart?” (Kondo, 2014) If not, then these items must be discarded. Only those that speak to one’s heart must be kept. It is important to note that one decides what to keep not what to discard.

The second step is to once again retrieve those items that have been kept and to ask again whether they really spark joy. The emotion of joy is evident even in the person’s body language. “When faced with something that brings joy . . . decision is usually instantaneous, their touch is gentle, and their eyes shine.” (Kondo, 2014) There is a thrill with the feeling of joy as if the insides of one’s body is affected. (Kondo, 2016) When something does not bring one joy, the opposite happens. There is a pause and usually a frown upon holding a possession.

In her second book, *Spark joy: an illustrated master class on the art of organizing and tidying up*, Kondo (2016), enumerates six basic rules of tidying. She specifies: 1) commitment, 2) imagining one’s ideal lifestyle, 3) discarding first and foremost, 4) tidying by category of objects rather than by location in the house, 5) following the right order of discarding objects, and 6) the criterion of “spark joy”. Items must be discarded in the following order: clothes, books, papers, komono (miscellaneous objects), and lastly sentimental items. Kondo claims that the said order makes it easier for one to discard things.

## 3. PHILOSOPHY AND MARIE KONDO

Aristotle wrote about happiness in the Nicomachean Ethics Book I wherein he identifies happiness, *eudaimonia*, with “the best good” or “the human good”. (Roche, 1992) *Eudaimonia*, Aristotle’s 2000-year old theory of happiness or *summum bonum* is the ultimate aim of human activity—that which all human action is targeted to. It is the “satisfaction or fulfillment of which provides self-sufficient, self-contained happiness... that is alone sufficient for happiness without the need for anything else”, the *summum bonum* implies that “a life lacks nothing”. (Uotinen, 2015)

In Ancient Greece, joy was defined as “a kind of contraction -cowering, cringing, shriveling -joy is an emotion of expansion: ‘joy wells up’, or we feel as though we are ‘bursting’ with joy”. Joy is an outburst compared to happiness that is more solid or settled as a disposition. Joy is sporadic, gone in an instant. Stoics claimed that joy is a good sentiment or emotion, one of the three *eupatheiai*. (Caston and Kaster, 2016) When one experiences joy, it happens in sparks. Joy is an intense feeling or emotion. Kondo’s art of organizing revolves around this concept of joy.

Baruch Benedict Spinoza, also known as the philosopher of joy, defines joy (*laetitia*) as an affect or an emotion that is “the passion one experiences in the transition to an increased power to strive”. (LeBuffe, 2015) Naturally, according to Spinoza, “we strive to promote the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy”. (LeBuffe, 2015) For example, if one imagines that such possession will give her joy, she will desire that joy



and then that possession. Kondo seems to be speaking of the same thing. One should only retain stuff that spark joy as the owner wishes for the joy that will be brought by such possessions. Spinoza also talks of sadness as an affect. Obviously, one is averse towards that which is imagined to cause sadness. So, if an object does not spark joy but sadness or some other variety of affects such as pity, why would a person not discard this object that contributes to the clutter? For example, why would one keep an ill-fitting gown that causes her diminished self-confidence? On the other hand, one experiences joy but one is unaware why one does so. In the KonMari Method's case, one is unaware why a certain object sparks joy within the owner but she experiences such joy nonetheless.

Taking off from Aristotle's definition of happiness as a life that lacks nothing, joy is merely one of the components of happiness. Kondo mentions the word *happiness* in her book numerous times in relation to how things can bring happiness and having a space devoted entirely to stuff that spark joy leads to a happy life. In fact, greater happiness is brought about by choosing things that spark joy, cherishing what is precious in one's life, and being surrounded by what one loves.

#### 4. CLUTTER CULTURE

Kondo defines clutter as the collection of things. Hiding or shoving stuff inside closets is not organizing or decluttering, it merely "creates the illusion that the clutter problem has been solved". (Kondo, 2014) Storage experts are hoarders or organizers that are con artists. Concealing things from sight apparently creates a negative spiral. According to Kondo (2014), one needs to "exercise self-control and resist storing belongings until one has finished identifying what we really want and need to keep". This can help a person break from the ruthless pattern of clutter. Recognizing what one needs and wants makes one's home tidy and thus livable. Clutter affects a person's shelter. Kondo stresses the importance of the basic human needs such as food, clothing and shelter.

A culture of clutter is a culture of consumption. Consumerism "is the belief that personal well-being and happiness depends to a very large extent on the level of personal consumption, particularly on the purchase of material goods". (Wright and Rogers, 2009) What is clutter but an accumulation of material goods? Why do people still have so much stuff? Accordingly, "the Hegelian distinction of good from bad infinity, the Marxist critique of capitalist accumulation, and the Nietzschean attempt to overcome the zero-point of nihilism are all quintessentially modern strategies to undermine the domination of quantity understood as the ground of being." (Botha, 2015)

The endless accumulation of stuff leads to clutter. John Stuart Mill refers to this as "the excessive commoditisation [sic] of everyday life". (Doran, 2017) Consumerism is addicting. In fact, it has now moved to the next level, to pathological consumerism. Unfortunately, most stuff being purchased are not used perpetually, and they just end up in landfills. In the *Story of stuff* (2007), Annie Leonard discusses how the stuff one buys ends up polluting the air, land, and water, eventually leading to climate change. Accordingly, changing consumption habits can change one's environmental footprint. (Jacobs, 2016)

In the past few years, ethical consumption, a byword for the supposed responsible contemporary consumer, has somehow become a "catch-all phrase" and "umbrella term covering a wide range of concerns from animal welfare, labor standards and human rights to questions of health and wellbeing and environmental and community stability". Consumer culture has taken its ethical turn through critiques on materialism and focus on "environmentalism, anti-materialism and unsustainable lifestyles". (Lewis, 2012) The problem with this *trend* though is that it puts too much criticism on the individual's choices rather than the structures that reinforce such consumption (policies, laws, etc.). In her essay *Ethical consumption*, the question that Lewis poses is how can the good life be recalibrated with consumer culture? (2012)



Leonard, like Kondo, is not against *stuff*. She invites humans to give stuff the respect it deserves. She brings to the conversation extraction, or the fact that prior to the buyer purchasing a cellphone, for example, the metal had to be mined from the earth and assembled by a laborer. For every item one purchases, various natural resources are being extracted or harvested and possibly workers are being exploited. This is the “take-make-waste” system –wherein natural resources are taken, then made into something to be purchased, and eventually discarded to the detriment of nature. Leonard stresses the value of the items bought that contribute to clutter. Rather than talking about the joy these items bring, she stresses the wastage that one makes with overconsumption or continuously buying new stuff. One must refrain from buying new stuff and the life of stuff must be extended as long as possible by providing proper care. Obsession with stuff is what trashes the environment, communities, and people’s health. Leonard proposes policies and shares her vision for such change when it comes to the consumption of stuff. (2011)

## 5. MINIMALISM AND LETTING GO

The authors of the book *Minimalism: Live a meaningful life* (2016) discusses how they had an abundance of stuff yet unfulfilled and unhappy. This led them to become minimalists or people who subscribe to minimalism. “Minimalism is a tool to eliminate life’s excess and focus on the essentials”. (Millburn and Nicodemis, 2016) Minimalism is the opposite of maximalism. Where maximalists possess a lot of things, the minimalist Hiji (one of the very first minimalist bloggers) leaves nothing lying around the house. Minimalists attest that “there is happiness in having less”. (Sasaki, 2017) That is why Fumio Sasaki claims that one should say goodbye to things. (2017) The minimalist lifestyle reduces one’s possessions to the bare minimum that one needs. This type of lifestyle supposedly leads to happiness, for “some of our unhappiness is simply due to the burden of all our things”. (Sasaki, 2017) The unhappiness stems from the fact that one’s identity becomes tied to one’s possessions. The goal of life becomes the continuous acquisition of things. In reality though, no one can really possess everything one desires.

Minimalism is an offshoot of Zen Buddhism, which has its roots in Japan. Incidentally, both Kondo and Sasaki are Japanese. If one reviews Buddha’s teachings on the Four Noble Truths, he emphasizes the importance of letting go of one’s desires in order to eliminate suffering. One clings to impermanent things which do not really satisfy one’s desires. Through Zen Buddhism, simplicity and straightforwardness of grasping reality is cherished and what is important is the action of the here and the now. (Nagatomo, 2017) Letting go leads to happiness. Kondo argues that there are two reasons why one holds on to stuff, even if it does not bring joy: 1) attachment to the past or 2) fear for the future. (2014) One cannot seem to let go of certain objects because it is a symbol from one’s past, a keychain from an old lover for example; or something that can provide security for the future, a pair of sexy but uncomfortable heels that may be used in some imagined engagement dinner in the next few years; or something that connects the present to both past and future. (Kondo, 2014)

The difference between the minimalist and KonMari lifestyles is that minimalists keep everything that is necessary to them. KonMari followers keep everything sparks joy even if they are not necessarily part of the bare essentials. A KonMari follower would still have possessions that he or she does not need, thus, still being surrounded by more stuff than the minimalist. (2014)

## 6. TO DIALOGUE WITH ONE’S SELF

The KonMari Method stresses the importance of appreciating one’s belongings to the point of talking to



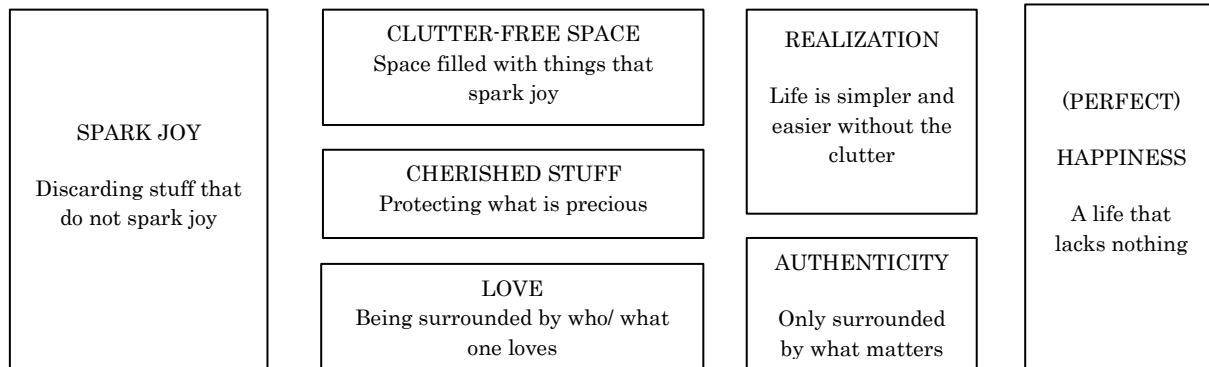
them and thanking them for their service. For example, thanking a sweater for keeping one warm and accessories for making one attractive. Showing gratitude and talking to inanimate objects is a way to treat one's belongings well. (Kondo, 2014) Practitioners of Shintoism show reverence to inanimate objects as well, as they worship and offer gifts to inanimate and natural phenomena but with the belief that the *kami* or spirits reside in them. To let go of things in the past, and to show appreciation for these things, one actually takes better care of the things in life and possibly life itself. (Kondo, 2016)

One vital pronouncement of Kondo is that “tidying up means confronting” one’s self. (2016) One chooses what possessions to keep and these possessions in turn contribute to who the person is. When everything that does not spark joy is discarded, “in the end all that remain are the things that (you) really treasure”. (Kondo, 2014) Joseph Campbell, mythologist and writer, speaks of following one’s bliss. He states that if one does not follow one’s bliss, opportunities will negate him or her. When one follows his or her bliss or the state of perfect happiness, one will not be able to live the life he or she ought to be living. Following one’s bliss ensures that doors open and chances present themselves. Similarly, Kondo claims that if one successfully tidies one’s home and limits his or her possessions to that which brings joy, one will be able to reset life, improve his or her lifestyle and gain happiness. One will “shine”. (2014) If passion is poured into what brings one joy, one will find his or her mission in life that speaks to the heart. (Kondo, 2014)

Tidying is a dialogue with one’s self. Through one’s possessions, one is actually conversing with one’s self. What one wants to own is how one wants to live life. “The process of facing and selecting our possessions . . . forces us to confront our imperfections and inadequacies.” It also forces one to look at the past, present, and future of one’s life. (Kondo, 2014) The will to discard is tantamount to the power to strive. Discarding stuff is a stepping stone to perfecting one’s self. Cherishing one’s possessions is to love one’s fate, *amor fati*, which according to Friedrich Nietzsche is in fact one’s life. Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein*, or there-being is an authentic individual who is always present in the world and present in the present. To let go of objects from one’s past or objects that supposedly secure one’s future is to grasp reality now and to live in the present. To be a *Dasein* is to “dwell”, he or she belongs to the world and is not merely there but is essentially aware of his or her dwelling place. Similarly, “putting your house in order is a great way to discover” one’s self. (Kondo, 2014) After all, Socrates considers knowing thy self as the gateway towards true understanding.

## 7. A WORLD OF JOY

The KonMari Method’s gist is to basically learn how to recognize joy in order for humans to be able to discard clutter that hinder happiness. With the realization that one is surrounded by only that which he or she loves, life becomes simpler and one can be true to one’s self. Eventually, with less “stuff”, there is also less production of stuff and exploitation of natural resources.



Once one has gotten rid of the clutter, the only things that remain are that which one truly treasures. Rather than life becoming more difficult with owning less things, one realizes that life is in fact easier. Life will go on even if one lacks certain things. When one follows his or her bliss, the universe provides more opportunities. Letting go of stuff can be liberating. It is also a dialogue with one's self, "the question of what you want to own is actually the question of how you want to live your life." (Kondo, 2014) Selecting what possessions will remain in the house forces the owner to confront past issues in his or her life. Discarding stuff is owning one's life rather than being owned by possessions.

Living simply is recognizing one's joy, it is a dialogue with one's self, and thus increases the power to strive for perfection. What one owns is how one lives his or her own life. By knowing what is important, discarding the clutter leads to authenticity and eventually a world less-degraded, a world of joy.

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