Philosophy and Mental Health in the Age of Nihilism

Philosophy and Mental Health in the Age of Nihilism:

Nothing *Really* Matters

By

Lehel Balogh

Philosophy and Mental Health in the Age of Nihilism:
Nothing *Really* Matters

Series: Studies in Modern East Asian Religion and Culture

By Lehel Balogh

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

In loving memory of my Father

May your worries dissolve into Nothingness
May you emerge again on the near side of Emptiness

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In Gassho,
Lehel Balogh
Sapporo, Japan

PREFACE

In our times we live in a neo-liberal world that struggles with the increasingly difficult task of finding meaning in midst of fading values and disintegrating inter-personal relationships. In such a globalised reality guided by almost purely utilitarian principles, the book "*Nothing Really Matters: Nihilism, Mental Health, and the Ethical Floating Point of an Authentic No-Self*" authored by Lehel Balogh represents a significant contribution to the essential and instrumental rethinking of our shared predicament, offering alternative solutions to the value-driven crises of our time. The work is grounded on adeep exploration of contemporary existential dilemmas. It investigates the philosophical groundworks of Nihilism and exposes its far-reaching implications that are linked to our psychological health. These implications are based upon the existential crises which determine the modern human being, on the one hand, and a search for authenticity on the other. In an era defined by fear, anxiety and the unceasing search for the meaning of life and the actual goal of our endeavours, this work challenges us to rethink, once again, our understanding of the human Self, freedom, and the axiology of our existence.

The author offers us a meticulous analysis of nihilism, which is often misunderstood as (or reduced to) a kind of purely destructive power. The book offers a different interpretation of this concept. It follows its development from a mere philosophical idea to a widely spread cultural phenomenon. The text investigates how the dissolution of traditional values and the rise of secularism contributed to a collective sense of meaninglessness, to a social alienation, which manifest itself in a vacuum of sense and values, which can hardly be filled by modern philosophies or contemporary therapeutic practices. Therefore, the present study is by no means solely academic in a strict sense of this word; it resonates deeply with the experiences of those who find themselves uprooted in an increasingly lonely word, which is being torn apart in itself.

In this context, the exploration of the fashionable notion of authenticity is particularly intriguing. In an age where individualism is often equated with self-actualisation, the author questions whether the pursuit of an 'authentic' self is truly liberating or whether it leads to greater fragmentation and

isolation. Drawing on the works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, the book tracks the philosophical ideas that have shaped our contemporary understanding of authenticity, challenging readers to consider whether the ideals of self-sufficiency and independence which are extremely valued in modern thought are not paradoxically contributing to our existential malaise.

In my view, one of the most significant contributions of this interesting text is its examination of East Asian philosophies, in particular the concepts of emptiness and non-self in Daoism and Buddhism. By juxtaposing these perspectives with Western existential thought, the author proposes a radical re-evaluation of the self and its place in the world. The notion of an 'authentic non-self', as opposed to an egocentric self, offers a transformative perspective on personal and social problems. This view not only challenges the Western emphasis on what Henry Rosemont has called "foundational individualism", but also suggests alternative ways leading to a more integrated and compassionate existence.

Particularly interesting (and definitely under researched) are in this context the elaborations on the concept of self-transformation within the framework of Japanese philosophies and psychotherapies, particularly focusing on the notions of nothingness and emptiness (N/E). The text critiques prejudices and simplistic interpretations that portray the Japanese self as lacking individuality, instead highlighting the nuanced understanding of selfhood that incorporates a sense of interconnectedness and mutual dependence. This perspective is central to various Japanese practices aimed at self-cultivation, which seek to transcend ego-centric views and foster a more holistic and integrated sense of self. The book also offers an intriguing introduction of some specific psychotherapeutic practices like Morita and Naikan therapies. The author argues that these therapies, though rooted in Japanese cultural and spiritual traditions, offer valuable insights and methods that can transcend cultural boundaries.

On this basis, the author contends that experiencing an undistorted, egoless vision of reality is not only possible, but also very reasonable. He believes this experience stems from what he terms the "recognised desire of nothingness," or the aspiration for a state of no-mind. In this state, negativity and envy vanish, as there is no ego to harbour such feelings. This perspective emphasises essential human values such as belongingness, unity, altruistic compassion, and well-being. It opposes the dehumanising effects of instrumental rationality and the pitfalls of a self-centred ego. While acknowledging the ego's role in human consciousness, the author suggests

that its excessive self-centeredness should be restrained. In this sense, the crucial message of this work is that we should not strive for the elimination of our individuality but rather recognise our ego as potentially insubstantial, albeit not illusory. Inspired by Japanese notions of the self, the author values an inexpressible core of the self that remains free from objectification. Ultimately, a secure ego is still seen as essential for authentic self-esteem.

The ethical implications of these philosophical explorations are profound. The book argues in favour of a 'floating' ethics, a flexible and context-sensitive approach to moral decision-making. This ethical framework rejects rigid principles and instead advocates an adaptive, compassionate stance that recognises the complexity of human experience. It invites readers to reflect on how embracing emptiness and non-self can lead to greater compassion, reduced anxiety, and a more authentic connection with others. Throughout the book, it becomes clear that the development from nihilism to an authentic no-self is not just a philosophical exercise, but a practical path to healing and wholeness. The author suggests that by confronting emptiness and embracing the fluidity of existence, individuals can overcome the despair that often accompanies nihilism. Here, it is important to note that such transcendence is by no means an escape from reality, but a deeper engagement with it that allows for a more meaningful and fulfilling life.

In conclusion, *Nothing Really Matters* is a timely and thought-provoking work that questions conventional wisdom about self, authenticity, and ethics. It engages us with deep philosophical insights and highlights their practical implications for mental health and social well-being. This book is not just for philosophy or psychology students but for anyone dealing with the fundamental questions of existence in an uncertain world. It serves as a resource for those seeking to approach the complexities of modern life with wisdom, compassion, and a renewed sense of purpose.

Jana S. Rošker
University of Ljubljana

INTRODUCTION

Different ages call for different values. Achilles, in the pre-Homeric times of ancient Hellas, could pompously hold up his heroic pride as the foremost value which dictated his actions. Some eight centuries later, in the blossoming Classical Period of Greece, Socrates could, with equally strong conviction, maintain that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. When he found that the only way to remain loyal to his moral ideals was to choose death over life, he did not hesitate to take the hemlock which, naturally, necessitated considerable courage on his part. In other words, Achilles, a hero often considered to be the most courageous Greek warrior that has ever lived, the *par excellence* embodiment of the Homeric heroic virtues (Ahrensdorf 2014, 134 ff.), did, in fact, refuse to exercise his defining virtue— courage—in the name of what he regarded as central to his morality: his pride. On the other hand, Socrates, the prototype of the rational, dispassionately reasoning philosopher had, indeed, evinced extraordinary courage by following, to the very end, the value he thought indispensable to good life: the love of wisdom. Since philosophy was of utmost importance to him, he sacrificed his own life on the altar of the pursuit for wisdom.

Let us consider two other major historical figures, but this time from another tradition: India. Siddhārtha Gautama, who has come to be known as the 'Awakened One' or the Buddha, viewed life as an endless cycle of suffering whose goal, and therefore central value, was the cessation of the origin of suffering. The cessation could be reached through several means, but essentially it entailed the realisation of one ultimate insight: that the higher self of the individual called *atman* did not, in actual fact, exist.[1] The Buddha's teachings went against the grain of the Hindu Upanishads which maintained that the *atman*—the innermost, essential core of one's being— is either identical with the *Brahman* (the Ultimate Reality) or is a crucial part of it; consequently, it was posited to be imperishable (Brazier 1995, 35.). For the Buddha, the *atman* was not only perishable but utterly non-substantial to begin with. If we take a look at another prominent Indian spiritual thinker, however, we find a different idea in operation. The Hindu

---

[1] The *atman* had been previously postulated by the teachings of the priestly classes in India to operate *beyond* the everyday self of the individual as though it were an immortal soul substance.

thinker Shankara of the eighth century CE is arguably the most famous proponent of the *Advaita Vedānta* ('non-duality') school of Hindu philosophy. He taught that the realisation of the unity of *atman* and *Brahman* was the principal purpose of human life. Over the centuries, down to our present days, Shankara's teachings have influenced innumerable advocates of the idea of unifying the individual's supposedly immortal soul with the 'world soul' of *Brahman*. These two teachings—the one which sees the substantiality of *atman* as illusory (Buddha), and the one which claims that *atman* and *Brahman* are, in fact, neither illusory, nor separate (Shankara)—represent two metaphysical extremes which conceive different life goals for the individual and which, as a consequence, value different— albeit somewhat similar—attitudes and behaviors to reach those goals.

Having lived approximately in the same historical period, Socrates and the Buddha had radically challenged the *mores* of their respective communities and had instigated transformations in human history whose magnitude could only be defined as epoch-making. Their landslide impact swept away and buried some crucial aspects of the *ethos* of their contemporary cultures, while seriously challenging some others. Moreover, they have had a lasting impact on the axiological landscapes of the ages that had followed them. There have been only a handful of ethical reformers of similar caliber who could alter the cultural development of humankind to an equally colossal degree: only the likes of Jesus Christ or Confucius, Muhammad or Luther could be counted among these select few. Was there, however, anything in common in the *values* that these illustrious innovators of human behavior and morality held dear? In other words, could one conceivably detect a *common core* among the central values of different ages and different cultures?

Different ages may call for different values, but—as Hegel maintained— there has been, throughout human history, a single prominent concept whose gradual actualisation carried within itself the blueprint to all true morality: the concept of freedom. Hegel saw the progress of human history as the ever-advancing liberation of the human spirit. In his view, this continuously unfolding event was essentially responsible for propelling human history forward (Little 2020). Although Socrates and the Buddha appear to be remarkably different in a number of ways, yet, from a Hegelian vantage point, these two thinkers could be understood as a pair of extraordinarily proactive historical agents that had helped setting the liberation of human spirit into an ever-accelerating motion. Albeit their contexts and approaches to the challenges of their times and places destined them to become dissimilar in several non-negligible ways, their central

philosophical and ethical messages are, arguably, nearly identical: the
liberation of the human mind from its ignorance, and the uncompromising
pursuit of understanding reality as it is. The now widespread ethical tenet
that emphasises the seeking of the truth and the doing away with untruth,
no matter how unsettling or unpleasant the consequences of this may be,
can be traced back, I believe, to the teachings of the Buddha[2] and Socrates.
This tenet has as its premise the conviction that it is *morally better*, under
all circumstances, to be aware of the identified and acknowledged truths of
life, and consequently to live according to them, than to live under illusions
and false pretenses (Griffin 2018). The famous Jesusian proverb, which
serves as the motto of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the US, as
well as a number of universities all over the world today, appropriately
expresses this belief: "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). Truth implies
the possibility for liberation and genuine human freedom which are widely
seen as the cornerstones of any moral agency; conversely, untruth is
believed to give rise to slavery to one's passions as well as an evident
decrease in ethicality and human dignity.

One of the most enduring successors of this basic moral stance in our time
is a core ethical value—a philosophical concept which has gradually come
to be an *ideal* of considerable practical consequences—that has been, to a
great extent, governing the ways in which we see ourselves and the ways in
which we live our lives. The spread and solidification of this core value
within our cultures and societies has clearly been a success story akin to
those other historical instances when a revolution in morality took place—
one has in mind, for instance, the Zoroastrian depiction of life as a cosmic
struggle of good and evil forces among which man must take a stand. This
metaphysical and moral vision has left an indelible mark on the ensuing
formations of western ethical thought. Or perhaps one might consider the
moral-philosophical innovations of Confucius that had distinctly reformed
the socio-cultural arrangements of East Asian civilisations. This contemporary
core ethical value that we are to thoroughly analyse in this book knows
almost no competitor as a moral compass for the majority of mankind in late
modernity and postmodernity; it has dug itself so deeply into the
foundations of our cultural structures that, for many, it would be practically
impossible to question its primacy or *raison d'être*. What this ethical value
effectively does is that it provides us with the drive and motivation for
turning to and looking upon our very selves as a legitimate guiding light
which may—ostensibly—illuminate the proper way for personal actions

---

[2] See especially the *Kesamutti Sutta* (also known as *Kālāma Sutta*) which can be
found in the *AnguttaraNikaya*.

and genuine ethical behavior. Furthermore, the ideal has also come to be seen as a guarantor of our mental sanity. This value prompts us, first, to *become ourselves*, and then, in a second step, to *stay true to ourselves*. At the same time, it successfully undergirds and justifies our right as well to pledge allegiance to it. In effect, this ideal creates and upholds a hegemony which favors the *transformation, realisation,* or*actualisation* of one's personal *self*—over and above anything else. This core value of modernity, which is known by a number of names—self-actualisation, self-realisation, even self-fulfillment—is the ideal of *authenticity.*

One might wonder what reason there could be for the remarkable potency of this ideal— whether it differs from the core values of prior times and if so, to what extent. As it is widely recognised, at earlier stages of human history, ethical values were grounded, as a norm, in transcendent or divine entities: in god(s) and other supreme beings, in Nature or the Universe. Knowing one's proper place in the universe of cultural symbols automatically created ample meaning for the individual to live ontologically securely and to thrive on the feeling of this metaphysical/spiritual security. Cross-cultural philosopher Leah Kalmanson cites a pertinent example: "Ruists [Confucians] worry not so much over whether life is meaningful but over the place of human beings within a value-laden universe" (Kalmanson 2021, 111). What was common in pre-modern axiological groundings was that the values that were supposed to decide the rules by which various folks were to live their lives had been claimed to derive from sources *other than* humanity itself. Owing no small degree to the stupendous accomplishments in the arts and thought of Italian Renaissance which extolled the unique place and significance of the human being in the hierarchical order of the Divine Creation—also called as the 'Great Chain of Being'—, this familiar formula for finding ethical values commenced to undergo a momentous shift in early modernity.

This significant change was also reinforced by early European humanist thought which creatively reappropriated the intellectual legacy of Greek and Roman antiquity. Although the Renaissance of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries was by no means an antireligious movement, still, in retrospect, it became manifestly instrumental in the later developments of atheistic humanism. With the advancement of the age of modernity (from the seventeenth century onwards), people, especially from the educated echelons of western societies, began to look upon themselves with a growing sense of self-pride, and were less keen on giving credit for their own achievements to external metaphysical forces. In parallel with this process—mankind's rising awakening to its autonomous powers and its

mounting potential for self-reliance—came along that particular development which boosted the individual's confidence, and sometimes even arrogance, against the demands of the community out of which it originally sprang: the invention of the modern self (Lyons 1978). Against this background did what I called the core value of modernity emerge during the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, owing to the works of a number of exceptional minds of the age: the French *philosophes* and the British thinkers of the Enlightenment, the artists and intellectuals of German Romanticism, the radical literati of Russia, and especially such uncompromising individualist philosophers as Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, SørenKierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

But what is this 'ideal of authenticity' and where does it actually come from? If one leaves aside for a moment the historical prefigurations of the concept, it will be readily noticeable that the modern-day philosophical origins of the ideal are inseparably entangled with that of *existentialism*. Stemming from Kierkegaard's fierce anti-Hegelian philosophy of subjectivity, blossoming in the onto-phenomenological elaborations of Heidegger and Sartre, existentialism as a cultural movement came to the fore in the early to mid-twentieth century, having problematised such existential—that is, pertaining to the individual's personal existence, subjectivity, and inwardness—concerns as death, anxiety, consciousness, choice, freedom, and, notably, *authenticity*. In the *Historical Dictionary of Existentialism*the following description introduces the article, 'Authenticity and Inauthenticity':

> A central tenet of existentialism is that selfhood is not naturally given but must be "won over" from a state of complacency, conformity, and self-forgetfulness. Winning oneself, or authenticity, amounts to accepting one's essential *finitude*, *freedom*, and *responsibility* and applying this insight in one's actions. Losing oneself, or inauthenticity, amounts to "fleeing from" one's freedom and continuing to regard one's *existence* impersonally, as something for which one is not ultimately responsible. (Michelman 2008, 43)

Now, what is apparent from this account is that the self and authenticity are intimately bound together, and that *authenticity is not a natural state of the self*: it is something that must be achieved. According to existentialists, when one is not in the state of authenticity, then, inevitably, one is in the state of inauthenticity. Inauthentic modes of being characterise an individual when one is currently *not* being oneself, when—either unintentionally or deliberately—one avoids coinciding with one's uniquely own, singularly personal way of being. Becoming and *being* authentic, conversely, imply that the individual has learned to find (or create) their singularly personal

mode of existence, sticking to it even in the face of society's external leveling demands and despite their own recurring tendencies urging them to forgo their hard-earned authentic selfhood. In the first approach, then, from an existentialist perspective, it can be confidently asserted that the ideal of authenticity—being true to oneself—is held in high regard because it helps one to recognise one's way of existence *as it is*, without self-deceit and illusions. In this way, it should remind us of the Socratic and Buddhic core ethical values that maintain that knowing the truth and acting in accordance with it are always the morally correct things to do. Furthermore, authenticity in existentialism is construed in a manner which underscores the inherent valuableness of being realistic and sensible with regard to one's unavoidable human limitations. No matter what one's psychological boundaries are, no matter what bodily constraints one might have, one must consciously *own* them and see them for what they are, without self-pity or a will to disguise them. At the same time, to *possess* the courage and poise to comport oneself with one's essential—inescapable—freedom in mind, and to freely acknowledge one's responsibility for one's actions are also of paramount import. Freedom and responsibility are thus inseparable in the existentialist understanding of authenticity.

What do we find, however, if we move to the less philosophical and more popular contemporary portrayals of authenticity in which our culture abounds? How is this somewhat obscure and elusive, yet ever-present ideal represented in the multifaceted outlets of our cultures? Indeed, authenticity can be found virtually everywhere: from mainstream pop culture to niche or highbrow arts, from mental health care to aesthetic pleasure seeking, from motivational speeches to recommended parenting styles, from self-help ideology to leadership. The concept of authenticity is extraordinarily versatile and is highly valued in our contemporary globalised societies. In fact, being authentic is frequently contrasted with being insincere or artificial: an *inauthentic* person is considered to be a fake, a counterfeit, a phony, a pseudo-entity, an imitation, an ersatz, a mock-, or simply: a copy (Varga 2012, 4). To this trend the following brief passage from Carey Scott's popular recent book *Unafraid: Be you. Be authentic. Find the grit and grace to shine* faithfully testifies:

> Most of my life, it felt safer to live fake. In my insecurities, I chose to be phony. Fear told me to be deceptive, hiding the truth of who I really was instead of shining (…) To live the authentic life means we choose to believe we are who God says we are, not who we've been told we should be by other people or cultural standards. It means our words and actions mirror our beliefs and values. (Scott 2018)

Scott's book is essentially a religious account in the manner of Kierkegaard that supplies personal testimony to the importance of the value of being authentic and genuine in one's search for God. If we take another example from contemporary popular culture though, we might come to find somewhat different attributes regarding the essence of authentic selfhood. Consider for instance Sara Tasker's book titled *Hashtag Authentic* which was written for Instagram users in order to help them find their unique selves and their distinctive creativity:

> Of course, there are no ways to guarantee anything in life, but by staying authentic and connected to our passions, we stand the best chance of keeping momentum, interest and relevance in our work, long into the future. (Tasker 2019, 184)

Tasker's account, in contrast to Scott's, is less concerned with religious truth-seeking and more with authentic self-expression; it promotes finding one's 'true voice' both in everyday life and when creating art. Yet, Tasker's emphasis on 'staying connected to our passions', as we will see shortly, is no less Kierkegaardian than in Scott's case the idea that one should become who one is in the presence of God. Yet another revealing recent pop-culture example is Greg Strattner, Jr.'s volume on the dangers of pornography titled, *A Brand New You.* This book also refers to the superior moral guidance that the ideal of authenticity may provide in dealing, this time, with sexual addictions.

> I believe that each of us, through much mining and searching, have the ability [to] discover our own set of truths. I believe that the only way to make this discovery is to go deep within ourselves, and to seek them out (…) becoming *A Brand New You* is becoming a person who lives life in full expression of their authentic self. This means that you live every moment of every day to the best of your ability, as an expression of who you are at your deepest level. (Strattner 2018, 11–13)

Whether with regard to religious path-seeking, artistic self-expression, or wanting to get rid of deleterious behavioral patterns, the ideal of authenticity is being invoked nowadays virtually as frequently as God was in the olden days. And it does not stop just here. As Guignon reminds us in his excellent little book, *On Being Authentic*, a "burgeoning industry has grown up in recent years with the aim of reforming and transforming people in order to make them authentic" (Guignon 2004, 3). This burgeoning industry is the self-help movement which offers 'unfailing' methods for becoming authentic and a chance to live in harmony with ourselves. 'Self'-help may equally refer to the fact that the self is supposedly in need of help—for it

evidently lacks in authenticity—but it can also mean that this assistance will be given to the self *by the self*: that is, in order to become a better, an authentic self, the self undertakes the enterprise of assisting *itself*. Even so, what can be deemed or defined to be authentic or inauthentic is not such a simple matter. Likewise, whether one actually *needs* to be assisted to become more 'real' and more 'true' to begin with is as dubious a claim as some of the self-help genre authors' true intentions and motivations are. In fact, as professional philosophers have recently pointed out, there is a danger that the unscientific theories of self-help books actually create vague and ill-defined concepts that can be misused and abused for political, religious, or commercial reasons (Altobrando et al. 2018).

Notwithstanding authenticity's ubiquity and unquestionable mainstream appeal in our times, this present book asks the following, crucially important question*: why should anyone want to become authentic in the first place?* Why must we search for more genuine versions of ourselves, instead of just staying the way we already are? The ideal of authenticity seems to suggest that there is an inbuilt value to listening to our unique 'inner voice', to the 'inner man', our 'innermost self' that allegedly already knows the answers to all our vital questions and dilemmas. This, in turn, hints at a deeper conviction that the judgment of the supposed inner core of one's self is completely reliable in matters of practical importance, and can be thus trusted to make decisions in matters of right and wrong, too. Since the imitation of the actions of other, exemplary individuals in terms of determining what a morally appropriate thing to do would be under given circumstances is increasingly ruled out, and hence one is advised to listen to the dictates of their own 'true' selves, it follows that trying to emulate external ideals in general is being discouraged. However, as Guignon warns, if one gets caught up in the pursuit of a chimerical authentic self, there is…

> the risk of slipping into a life so prone to self-absorption and compulsive self-surveillance that one becomes isolated from all but those who share this preoccupation. There is the danger of bull-headed adherence to feelings and beliefs whose sole justification is that one finds through introspection that one feels that way or happens to hold these beliefs. There is the risk of being so carried away by feelings and perceived needs that one turns to actions that are either foolish or monstrous. (Guignon 2004, 76)

The Distinctive Approach of this Volume

This book problematises the intricate interconnections of authenticity, anxiety, nihilism, nothingness, and emptiness in western and East Asian (Japanese

and Korean) philosophies, religions, and psychotherapies, arguing for the importance of the elaboration of an ethical floating point of an authentic no-self. To my knowledge, there has not been a monograph so far dedicated to connect these very topics. Specialist works on East Asian, and in particular, Japanese philosophy, tend to focus either on certain authors and schools (e.g. Nishida Kitaro or the Kyoto School), or on comparative analyses that juxtapose eastern and western trends in thought. For instance, Richard Stone's recent monograph *The Origins of Modern Japanese Philosophy: Nishida Kitaro and the Meiji Period* (Bloomsbury Academic 2024), Takeshi Morisato's work *Tanabe Hajime and the Kyoto School: Self, World, and Knowledge* (Bloomsbury Academic 2021), or Jason M. Wirth's*Nietzsche and Other Buddhas: Philosophy after Comparative Philosophy* (Indiana University Press 2019) faithfully follow this trend. Similarly, the works on Eastern psychology or Japanese psychotherapy either highlight the ways in which these approaches differ from their western counterparts, or they limit themselves to presenting and interpreting their respective approaches within their own disciplinary contexts. Examples for such works include Manu Bazzano's*Zen Therapy: Heretical Perspectives* (Routledge 2017); VelizaraChervenkova's*Japanese Psychotherapies: Silence and Body-Mind Interconnectedness in Morita, Naikan and Dohsa-hou* (Springer 2017); Michael Slote's*Between Psychology and Philosophy: East-West Themes and Beyond* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

This present book offers an innovative interdisciplinary study that brings together original research in cross-cultural philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, and the medical humanities. It provides a methodologically rich approach that combines the results of recent empirical research in evidence-based sciences with theoretical speculation and philosophical synthesisation. It draws attention to and builds upon the works of less widely known East Asian thinkers as well as on the latest research done in the west on philosophies and practices that originated in East Asia. The novelty of the present endeavor lies in its synthetic quality that draws together and contrasts positive psychology with existentialist philosophy and psychotherapy, the mindfulness movement with Morita and Naikan therapies, the philosophies of important Korean and Japanese thinkers with those of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. By doing so, the book provides a superb ground for various players to enter into conversation with one another concerning the problems of nihilism, nothingness, and authenticity not only from diverse eastern and western intellectual traditions, but also from such different disciplines and domains as philosophy, religion, psychology, mental health care, and ethics. I believe that the volume's unique approach and the combination of a handful of key topics could be of

interest to more than just a select few readers or specialists in East Asian and Japanese philosophy. The manner in which the material is presented warrants interest from students and researchers who specialise either in comparative philosophy and ethics or in the interface of philosophy and the psy-disciplines (medical humanities, etc.) *as well as* from more general audiences. By the same token, the book aims to be instructive and thought-provoking for those clinical professionals and therapists who are motivated to see and understand connections between eastern and western approaches to the self and psychological healing across cultures.

Chapter Summary

The book is divided into two main parts. *Part One* comprises five chapters that take the reader from the initial discussions on the ways in which nihilism and authenticity have been inextricably tied together in our postmodern situation of constant cultural crises to deeper analyses of the concept of authenticity in the works of leading thinkers in the existential-phenomenological tradition. These chapters reveal the manners in which the ideal of authenticity in its many guises have been influencing how we live our lives and struggle for health and a good, ethical way of living. *Chapter One: Nihilism, Nothingness, and Anxiety in the Age of Authenticity* introduces the reader to the main players and categories of the book that form the backbone of the exposition: the historical and philosophical development of nihilism, its various interpretations of and connections with the ideal of authenticity as well as with anxiety, and the notion of nothingness alongside its frequently overlooked potential for offering a way out of the nihilist conundrum. *Chapter Two: The Movement of Nihilism and the Pathologies of Self* draws on renowned Kyoto School philosopher Nishitani Keiji's analyses regarding the relevance of nihilism in Japan and the ways in which a revitalised Buddhist standpoint could give new meaning not only to the categories of emptiness and nothingness but also to their experiential basis in transforming the ego-centered modern self into an egoless subjectivity. The second part of the chapter connects the historical development of nihilism with mental health, thematising the pathologies of the modern and postmodern self, and also delineating connections between the struggle for authenticity and the endemic mental health problems of our age.

Chapter Three: The Concept of Authenticity in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche proceeds to take a deeper look on the development of the ideal of authenticity in western intellectual and cultural history through providing a close reading of Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's ideals of authenticity. These

two prominent nineteenth century thinkers considerably influenced the subsequent conceptualisations of authentic selfhood that had been articulated during the twentieth century by philosophers, psychologists, and psychiatrists, alike. *Chapter Four*: *The Concept of Authenticity in Heidegger and Sartre* continues the deep analysis of the movement of the ideal of authenticity through close readings of the works of Heidegger and Sartre, for it is arguably these two towering existential-phenomenological philosophers whose literary output and professional as well as politico-cultural influence have shaped the ideal to the greatest degree during the last century. Finally, in Part One, *Chapter Five: The Postmodern Situation, Nihilism, Authenticity, Pathologies* summarises some of the major points regarding the development of authenticity and describes the process by which existential-phenomenological philosophy found its own voice in psychiatry and psychotherapy through the works of such pioneering figures as Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss, Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, Ronald D. Laing, and Irvin Yalom. The chapter points out the crucial characteristics of their approaches to mental illness and health, and then highlights the criticism that may be expressed against employing the ideal of authenticity as the *de facto* measuring rod of mental health as well as the central value guiding one's ethical life.

Part Two departs from the discussion and detailed analyses of the concepts of nihilism and authenticity with the explicit aim of presenting an alternative to the ideal of authenticity. This it does so by introducing the philosophical notions of nothingness, emptiness, and no-self in East Asian traditions to the reader, and links these to such modern-day western cultural developments as the mindfulness movement and positive psychology. *Chapter Six: Nothingness, Emptiness, and Self-Cultivation in East Asian Traditions* familiarises the reader with the philosophical concepts of emptiness and nothingness in Asian traditions, beginning with how Heideggerean thought is indebted to Chinese philosophy and then moves on to Daoist and Buddhist religious thought, along with the eastern ideal of somatic self-cultivation. The works of two outstanding thinkers—one of medieval Korea, one of medieval Japan—are singled here out for in-depth analyses: Dōgen's and Chinul's elaborations on the role of emptiness, nothingness, and self-cultivation are analysed in light of the final goal of Zen Buddhism: the realisation of no-self. *Chapter Seven: Self-Transformation in Japanese Philosophies and Psychotherapies*presents the concept of self-transformation as pivotal to the overall project of such Kyoto School philosophers as Nishida Kitaro and Nishitani Keiji, as well as for another contemporary Japanese thinker, Yasuo Yuasa, explaining why the transformation of the ego-centered mode of the self has been viewed in Japan as an essential

undertaking for philosophers, for religious seekers, and for ordinary human beings, alike. The second part of the chapter introduces two representative modern therapies from Japan, the Morita and Naikan methods, and compares their therapeutic goals with the objectives of the aforementioned philosophers and religious thinkers, thus bringing together issues of philosophy, religion, and morality with those of health care. *Chapter Eight: Nothingness and Emptiness in Therapeutic Practice* further details the operative characteristics of Morita and Naikan therapies, in conjunction with their methodological considerations and their distinct modes of approaching mental illnesses. The chapter questions and examines the widespread assumption whether these two therapeutic modalities are, in fact, complementary and could be indeed brought under the same theoretical umbrella.

Chapter Nine: The Reinstallation of the Self into Its Natural Habitat presents and compares the most popular current manifestations of the western mindfulness movement (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy) with some recent developments in positive psychology, in particular the peak experience of flow in the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The second part of the chapter relates these to traditional Buddhist virtues such as compassion, loving kindness, equanimity, and sympathetic joy, pointing to the possibility for a common ground. At the same time, the chapter also demonstrates how the idea of nothingness and the practice of self-emptying may help overcome nihilistic cultural tendencies by generating positive values, and how a nothingness/emptiness based character ethics could be fostered through the efforts of both positive psychology and the mindfulness movement. As the conclusion of the volume stands the *Epilogue: The Floating Point of an Authentic No-Self* that retraces the trajectory of the entire book, summing up the main arguments and answering the questions that had been left open until then regarding nihilism, nothingness, authenticity and mental health. The summary is followed by presenting the ethical floating point of an authentic no-self, where I argue that the ideal of authenticity needs revision both in mental health care and in our general cultural attitudes regarding morality. This revision, the epilogue maintains, could be brought about by a nothingness-based life practice which could endow the individual with a new, a more wholesome approach to reality and the self.

PART ONE:

NOTHING REALLY MATTERS

CHAPTER ONE

NIHILISM, NOTHINGNESS, AND ANXIETY
IN THE AGE OF AUTHENTICITY

In this first chapter I argue that the ideal of authenticity is not just one among others but is likely to be the most impactful ideal that has been a defining one vis-à-vis the morality of our times. The Ethics of Authenticity is irrefutably interlinked with our prevalent culture of nihilism and narcissism in a profound manner, and this fact has borne therather unfortunate fruit of the proliferation of mental disorders of our period of time; an epoch that has been termed by various authors and commentators as the Age of Anxiety. The first section of the chapter investigates these interconnecting ideas and points out their devastating impact on the subjectivity of modernity and postmodernity. The second section of the chapter, conversely, moves on to foreshadow how an entirely different approach to the self and subjectivity could overturn the logic of nihilism by supplying new values and thus a new way of relating to the world. The source of these new values, I propose, may be found in an attitude that is committed to self-kenosis: that is, the deliberate and habitual emptying of the ego-self and the cultivation of a standpoint of a no-self that results in a mentally more balanced, psychologically healthier and ethically more grounded position for the struggling and confounded individuals of our times.

Authenticity, Anxiety, Nihilism

The ideal of authenticity is not just one ideal among others, but is arguably the most brightly shining beacon of morality for our times. It was Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor who first baptised our age "The Age of Authenticity". In his 2007 book *A Secular Age*, which prominent sociologist the late Robert N. Bellah had called "one of the most important books to be written in my lifetime" (Bellah 2007), Taylor noted that there had been a shift, sometime in the middle of the twentieth century, "which has profoundly altered the conditions of belief in our societies" (Taylor 2007, 473). This shift has brought about a new period, the Age of Authenticity, wherein expressive individualism had become a mass phenomenon. The

causes of this change are, no doubt, numerous, yet they are often reduced to only a handful: growing affluence in societies, an excessively consumerist lifestyle, fewer working hours that resulted in more leisure time which, in turn, induced more pleasure-seeking activities and the ensuing increased fixation on the self: individualism, egoism, narcissism.

> Everyone senses that something has changed. Often this is experienced as loss, break-up. A majority of Americans believe that communities are eroding, families, neighbourhoods, even the polity; they sense that people are less willing to participate, to do their bit; and they are less trusting of others. Scholars don't necessarily agree with this assessment, but the perception itself is an important fact about today's society. No doubt there are analogous perceptions widespread in other Western societies. (Ibid.)

In spite of the existence of otherwise noteworthy differences, Taylor's assessment coincides in many regards with cultural historian Christopher Lasch's observations who, already in his 1979 bestseller *The Culture of Narcissism*, claimed that, following the economically prosperous years of the post-World War II era, hedonistic egoism had assumed gigantic proportions in the USA. According to Lasch, the situation had gotten to the point that what used to be abnormal had gradually become the new norm. This development, however, did not change the fact that, though widely accepted, the new norm was still *unhealthy*. As Lasch had warned, by reaching pathological levels, hedonistic egoism had proved to be not only psychologically unwholesome but, in addition, ethically perverse as well. Instead of morally edifying its members, a narcissistic society impoverishes them, meanwhile generating a milieu that is liable to produce more existential anxiety and insecurity than happiness and moral enrichment:

> The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence (…) In a narcissistic society—a society that gives increasing prominence and encouragement to narcissistic traits—the cultural devaluation of the past reflects not only the poverty of the prevailing ideologies, which have lost their grip on reality and abandoned the attempt to master it, but the poverty of the narcissist's inner life. (Lasch 1979, Preface)

Our current times are commonly conceived of as an age that has been witnessing a great deal of loss in ethical values—as well as a distressing omnipresence of existential anxiety in the human soul. For these reasons, similarly to the epithet of 'The Age of Authenticity,' this present age could be just as rightfully described 'The Age of Anxiety'. In fact, this is precisely

how distinguished British-American poet W. A. Auden had characterised our age in his celebrated long poem titled "The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue". The poem was written shortly after the conclusion of World War II, and was instrumental in arousing a host of inspired reactions from receptive and likeminded thinkers, scientists and artists, alike, such as British philosopher Alan Watts, American psychologist Rollo May, German-American Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, and American composer Leonard Bernstein. The poem, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1948, powerfully thematised and displayed modern man's insecurities and search for meaning in the thick of a swiftly changing, alarming reality. In his 1950 book *The Meaning of Anxiety* which quickly became a classic in modern psychology, Rollo May cited, along with Auden's above-mentioned famous poem, the French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus's work as an inspiration for calling our times the Age of Anxiety (May 1950/1977, ix). As May noted, "In a phrase parallel to Auden's, Albert Camus designated this age as 'the century of fear,' in comparison with the seventeenth century as the age of mathematics, the eighteenth as the age of the physical sciences, and the nineteenth as that of biology" (Ibid., 7). Theologian Paul Tillich in his highly esteemed 1952 philosophical treatise *The Courage to Be* goes as far as to declare that "Today it has become almost a truism to call our time an 'age of anxiety'" (Tillich 1952, 35).

Charles Taylor in his 1991 philosophical bestseller *The Ethics of Authenticity*—originally titled 'The Malaise of Modernity'—draws attention to the observation that the entire project of offering the ideal of authenticity to all of our spiritual ailments and mental dysfunctions as a sort of modern-day panacea is, indeed, a Janus-faced solution. Whereas, on the hand, it does provide a vague direction for the path-seeking modern individual, yet, on the other hand, it isolates them from their community while morally corrupting them as well. This modern or postmodern anguished self that is utterly predisposed to overly psychologise its perceived problems, has developed, over the years, an unhealthy habit of turning against itself in an attempt to get rid of the unwanted parts of its psychic arsenal, thus becoming fragmented and torn to the extreme. The vague direction that the ideal of authenticity offers manifests itself in the insistence of the human potential and self-help movements that 'psychic integration' and 'peace of mind' can be achieved by using certain psychological techniques. Nevertheless, these techniques offer scientifically unreliable 'quick-fix' methods that are not only unable to reach the goals they purport to attain, but they also perpetuate the 'culture of narcissism': a destructive *Weltanschauung* that portrays *self-*