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Socrates Wants You to Tidy Up, Too

What reading an ancient Greek dialogue can tell us about the Marie Kondo craze.

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These days, it appears that nobody is immune to Marie Kondo fever.

Kondo, an organization expert who first commanded international attention with her best-selling 2014 book, “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up,” recently solidified her status as a lifestyle icon thanks to her popular new Netflix show, “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo.”

But while the “KonMari” method, which has resonated with millions of readers and viewers who seek to take control of their lives by taking stock of their possessions, is having a contemporary cultural moment, it is not entirely new. Readers of ancient Greek philosophy may already have encountered aspects of it in the work of Xenophon, an Athenian soldier turned philosopher who was a student of Socrates.

Plato may be the most famous author of Socratic dialogues, but Xenophon, too, wrote several works that depicted this guru thinking out loud. “Oeconomicus,” which takes good estate and household management (“economy”) as its subject, is one of those works. It consists largely of Socrates reporting advice that he picked up from a gentleman-farmer named Ischomachus, and that advice includes tips on how to educate your wife about systematically organizing your home. In other words, Ischomachus sells Socrates on the life-changing magic of tidying up.

Despite the large cultural and temporal gaps that separate the KonMari and Xenophontean tidying methods (let’s think of the latter as PhonMari), the two share some remarkable similarities. That is no more than a coincidence, but approaching Kondo with Xenophon in mind can help us to see some of the ethical principles, and problems, that underlie the KonMari method.

At the beginning of “Oeconomicus,” Socrates puts forward a thesis: True wealth exists only in the form of possessions that are beneficial to their owner. Likewise, Kondo famously tells her clients to keep just the objects that “spark joy.” If you own a flute but don’t know how to play it, both Ischomachus and Kondo would see it as superfluous to your life and advise discarding it.

They would also agree that space and objects have a kind of life of their own. Kondo likes to begin her sessions by greeting the house that she’s about to tidy up. Ischomachus channels his inner Kondo when he tells his wife that when something is not in its proper place, the empty space will cry out. Items that want mending will tell you so with a look. He compares a series of well-organized objects to a dancing chorus; even serving dishes have an elegant “rhythm” when properly arranged. Kondo teaches us that underwear hates being crumpled and that a gentle tap rouses long-unread books from their slumber. As she writes in her book “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up,” “Possessions that have a place where they belong and to which they are returned each day for a rest are more vibrant.”

Some of Ischomachus’s narrative reads like the script of a “Tidying Up” episode, minus the drama of discarding — although even Kondo reminds her clients that “elimination” is not an end in itself. Ischomachus and his wife begin organizing their house by collecting all of their possessions. Adhering to the cardinal rule of the KonMari method, they sort their stuff not by room but “kind by kind,” that is, by category: clothes, books, papers, “komono” (miscellaneous) and sentimental items for Kondo; vessels, clothing and armor, crockery, etc. for Ischomachus. Another bit of Kondo advice is to store everything so that it’s visible in “one glance” and easily accessible. Ischomachus recommends the same to his wife, explaining that disorder is for foolish farmers who store all of their harvest crops in the same bin and can’t find anything when they actually need it.

What can Xenophon tell us about the Marie Kondo craze? For one, “Oeconomicus” makes explicit the philosophy that underlies KonMari: Household organization is a matter of ethics. People who live in messy homes lead messy lives, while people who live in well-ordered homes lead well-ordered ones. On “Tidying Up,” clients seem not just weary of the mess that they’ve accumulated but ashamed of it. Kondo dangles in front of her adherents the hope that they can discard their vices along with their pilled sweaters: “Isn’t it wonderful,” she writes, “that tidying your house can also enhance your beauty and contribute to a healthier, trimmer body?”

Ischomachus could be the poster child for KonMari. When Socrates admires his health, wealth, strength and ability to survive warfare, Ischomachus credits his strict daily schedule — his ability to regiment time mirrors his ability to impose order on space. While displaying his mastery of household management, he exposes the foundations of his orderly self.

Despite the success of Kondo’s show, some aspects of it have come under scrutiny. Critics have homed in on its dramatization of ageless gender stereotypes and divisions of labor: The men can be imperious, the women submissive; the garage is often the domain of the husband, the kitchen the responsibility of the wife.

At the end of the tidying process, Ischomachus reminds his wife that going forward, it will be her duty to maintain order. He assures Socrates that his wife did not resist but reacted “joyfully, like someone who’s found a path out of a difficult spot.” (“Spark Joy” is the title of Kondo’s second book.) Socrates is impressed. “My goodness!” he exclaims. “What a masculine intelligence you’ve described in your wife!” Yet his wife’s “masculine intelligence” is really the ultimate proof of her feminine submission.

In Ischomachus’s household, it’s not just each object that has a proper place and becomes more vibrant when it is kept there — the wife does, too. Both Ischomachus and Kondo believe that to be in control of your life, you must be in control of your house. But control is limited for women in Ischomachus’s world, and little has changed in that regard.

The comparison also prompts us to consider the notion of control itself. What does it say about the desires of neat freaks? The KonMari method puts forward a tempting bargain: If you organize your possessions, the rest of your life will magically fall into place. Xenophon’s characters seek even bolder rewards in “Oeconomicus,” which is often considered an allegorical blueprint for military success and good statesmanship. A city needs guardians in the same way that a household needs an overseer (i.e., a wife). Order among armies and on warships makes for a sight that is “fearsome to enemies and splendid to friends.” While Kondo focuses on individual desires and Xenophon on the well-being of society, they both think of tidying up as a way for a person to become someone greater and more powerful than their current self.

Could there be something a little sinister to the lovable guru and her life-changing magic? Kondo skeptics may be interested in the “ironic” readings of Xenophon’s dialogue. These often see the domestic failure that Ischomachus puts right by “educating” his wife as a mark not of her incompetence but of his. In other words, the fantasy of perfect control that household organization offers may appeal most to those of us who feel that we need to have control over every aspect of our lives, even those that resist simple storage solutions. Perhaps the biggest mess is not in our closets but in our minds.

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