

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH: TASAN CHŎNG YAGYONG'S UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE

By DONALD L. BAKER

Tasan Chŏng Yagyong (1762–1836) used terminology borrowed from the mainstream Neo-Confucian tradition to construct a philosophy of human nature that was very different from what is seen in the writings of Neo-Confucians who preceded him. He agreed with them in ranking human beings as morally superior to animals. However, his reason for doing so was not the same as theirs. He argued that human beings, unlike animals, are endowed with a heart-and-mind capable of penetrating insight, which allows them to choose how to act. Moreover, their decisions on how to act are influenced by two conflicting propensities, one for acting morally and one for acting selfishly. That meant human beings were not virtuous by nature. It was as natural for them to act selfishly as it was for them to act appropriately. In another break with Neo-Confucian tradition, he argued that above human beings there existed another category of sentient beings. Unlike human beings, they were spiritual beings, in that they were not composed of *ki*, the matter-energy both human beings and animals were made of. They were spirits, conscious immaterial beings. When we examine how Tasan defined human nature and how he compared it to the natures of other material beings as well as to the natures of totally immaterial beings, it becomes clear that, for Tasan, human beings were between heaven and earth, neither lowly animals nor pure spirits. They were simply human beings, with all the advantages and disadvantages that entailed.

Keywords: human nature, heart-and-mind, propensities, penetrating insight, free will

What is a human being? That question has fascinated philosophers for millennia. In the West the answer has tended to focus on the mind as a thinking faculty. Human beings have generally been distinguished from other beings primarily by their ability to reason. Human beings are thus defined as thinking beings. Christianity refined that definition by focusing on the notion of the immortal soul, which came to be seen as the true self since only the soul was believed to survive

the death of the body. For over a millennium, when Christianity was dominant in European culture, Westerners were told it was their immaterial mind, of which their immortal soul is a core element, that should be given credit for giving them their personality and in so doing defining who they were. In other words, according to the hegemonic Christian tradition it was the immaterial component of a human being rather than the material component that was the real self. Moreover, the mind was believed for centuries to be the site of not only reasoning but also choosing. The choices human beings make, especially the choice to act appropriately or to act inappropriately, are choices made not by our material bodies but by our immaterial minds. Though our material bodies, especially the emotions they generate, influence our preferences and choices, it is the immaterial mind which the hegemonic Christian tradition awarded the credit, or assigned the blame, for the decisions we made. Since, according to this tradition, our choices in life were believed to define us, the mind, including the soul, was considered to be the real self.

East Asia has had a different tradition. In Buddhist philosophy, there is no real self. In Buddhism, only that which is eternal and not dependent on anything else for its existence is truly real. Traditional Buddhist philosophers taught that the self is only a transitory phenomenon created by a mind that clings to the appearance of permanence. Moreover, as most Buddhist philosophers saw it, the mind is actually created by its interactions with the world around it. It creates an illusionary inner permanent core, the self, in order to give itself the comforting illusion that those transitory sensations are connected to something that is not transitory and therefore is real. Rather than conceiving of human beings as primarily rational beings, Buddhist philosophers have preferred to view them as illusion-generating illusions. Human beings in mainstream Buddhist philosophy are defined more by their ignorance than by their reasoning power.

Confucianism, particularly in its more metaphysically grounded version called Neo-Confucianism, had its own distinctive approach to defining human nature and the self. Neo-Confucians did not share the Western preference for defining human beings as primarily rational beings. Nor did Neo-Confucians share the Christian belief that inside every human being was an immaterial core that would live forever. Instead, Neo-Confucians agreed with the Buddhists that human beings were created by their environment. In the Neo-Confucian world view, however, that environment was seen primarily as a social and moral environment. Human beings were defined as human beings by the roles they played in society. Since in Neo-Confucianism the descriptive and the normative overlapped, human beings were actually defined by the roles they *should* play. Someone who looked human but did not act appropriately and therefore did not play his or her assigned

roles as they should be played was not fully human. In a sharp difference from Buddhists, however, Neo-Confucians assumed that human beings, though they had no separate stable inner core but instead were constantly being created and recreated by their interaction with other human beings around them, were nonetheless real. That real existence came from their social existence and the moral demands it imposed on them. Society was real and therefore so were the human beings who constituted it.¹

It is this Neo-Confucian concept of the human being that Tasan Chǒng Yagyong (1762–1836) learned when he first began studying the Confucian Classics. It is also the concept that he challenged when he began developing his own philosophy as an adult. As is always the case when someone challenges a core philosophical or religious concept, his challenge was shaped by what he was challenging. Tasan challenged the traditional Confucian understanding of what a human being is, but he did so with terminology and concepts inherited from Neo-Confucianism. To understand Tasan’s thought in all its complexity, we must recognize that he was a Confucian challenging some of the core assumptions of Confucianism.

TASAN AND MAINSTREAM NEO-CONFUCIANISM

Before we identify distinctive elements in Tasan’s understanding of human nature, we should first clarify the Confucian assumptions that shaped his thinking, as well as how those assumptions of his differed from the assumptions that guided more mainstream Confucian thought. One important Confucian assumption he shared was that it is much more important to focus on what something does, or at least can do, than on what it is. In other words, he was more interested in something’s function than its existence *per se*. Since he was immersed in Confucian tradition, Tasan was less interested in determining what a human being *was* than he was in defining what someone who was fully human *did*. In fact, for Tasan as well as for many of his fellow Confucians, what someone did determined what they were. If they consistently interacted with their fellow human beings the way they should, they were fully human. If they instead interacted in selfish ways that put their own personal desires ahead of their social obligations, they were less than fully human.

¹ For another version of this argument that in Confucianism human beings are “constituted by their relations,” that they are defined more by their interactions than they are defined as separate and distinct beings, and that they should be seen less as beings than as “becomings,” see Roger Ames, “Theorizing ‘Person’ in Confucian Ethics: A Good Place to Start,” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 141–161, esp. 160.

We will see below how that focus on functions shaped his understanding of human nature, and the relationship between human nature and appropriate human behavior.

A second important Confucian assumption T'asan shared is that everything in the cosmos can be discussed in terms of *ch'e* 體 and *yong* 用. When *ch'e* and *yong* are paired, they are frequently translated as “essence” or “substance” and function.² However, when we translate T'asan's writings, it is better to translate those two terms as “potential” and “actualization,” since T'asan assumed that *ch'e* refers to what someone or something should do and *yong* refers to what it does when it does what it should do. In the sense in which T'asan used those terms, one could not be understood without the other.

T'asan is not alone in using the *ch'e-yong* dyad this way. His Namin predecessor T'oegye Yi Hwang (1501–1570) also defined *ch'e* and *yong* in terms of repose and response, stillness and movement, the unmanifest and the manifest, and human nature and human emotion respectively.³ For both T'oegye and T'asan, as well as for many other Neo-Confucian thinkers, *ch'e* and *yong* refer to two different stages of doing, not to two different stages of being. A human being's *ch'e* is the potential to interact appropriately with his or her fellow human beings. A human being's *yong* is manifest when that potential is realized in appropriate interactions.

However, even though he remained within the mainstream Confucian potential-actualization paradigm, he broke with Confucian philosophical tradition by focusing more on what distinguished one thing from another, in terms of their *ch'e* and their *yong*, than on what united them. Since the ultimate goal of mainstream Neo-Confucianism was to have everything in the universe interact appropriately with everything else to create one all-encompassing cosmic harmony, *ch'e* was sometimes understood as the potential for such universal interaction. When *ch'e* was understood that way, everything in the universe was said to share the same *ch'e*. T'asan disagreed with that claim for a universal *ch'e*. He felt that much of the traditional Neo-Confucian terminology, including the way *ch'e* was often used, was too abstract and tried to embrace too much and therefore was not particularly useful for the Confucian moral project of cultivating a moral character that would be manifest in concrete, individual interactions.⁴

² A. Charles Muller, “The Emergence of Essence-Function (*ti-yong* 體用) Hermeneutics in the Sinification of Indic Buddhism: An Overview,” *Pulgyohak libyu* 19 (2016): 111–152.

³ Yi Hwang, “Sim much'eyong pyōn” [*Ch'e* and *yong* are not separate and distinct in the mind], *T'oegye chōnsō* [The complete works of T'oegye Yi Hwang], 4l: 16b–17b.

⁴ For more on T'asan's preference for the concrete over the abstract, see So-Yi Chung, “Jeong Yakyong's Post Neo-Confucianism,” Youngsun Back and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. *Traditional Korean Philosophy: Problems and Debates* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 111–125.

Moral cultivation, he argued, required a focus on actualizing the particular *ch'e* of the particular individual involved in cultivating a moral character so that that particular individual would act appropriately in situations he or she found himself or herself in. Since every individual human being had a unique set of other individuals they interacted with, and a distinctive set of situations in which they engaged in those interactions, both the *ch'e* and the *yong* of every human being was unique.

In particular, Tasan explicitly rejected the Neo-Confucian assertion that “that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body (*ch'e*) and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.”⁵ Since, according to this assertion of an all-encompassing *ch'e*, human beings, like everything else in the universe, are inextricably intertwined with the cosmic network of appropriate relationships that constitutes the universe, human nature is essentially good. In other words, if we accept this assumption, it is in our very nature to act in accordance with the cosmic network that constitutes our innate potential.

Tasan rejected this mainstream Neo-Confucian assumption of an underlying unity because of his own personal experience with self-cultivation. The Neo-Confucian preference for a unified conceptualization of the universe was, in Tasan’s view, undermined by the difficulties he encountered when he tried to overcome his own individuality and interact selflessly with everyone and everything around him.⁶ Tasan, in reflecting on his own attempts to consistently adhere to the moral principles of Confucianism, realized that he interacted with people and the world around him as a separate and distinct individual. He concluded that was the only way he could explain his inability to live up to his own high moral standards. He found it a challenge to coordinate his thoughts and actions with the universal network of appropriate interactions he was supposedly an integral part of. Tasan seized upon the notion of individual existence as a way to explain his own moral frailty and that of humanity in general. Our tendency to act on our own rather than as part of a community suggested to Tasan that we were more separate and distinct individuals than the assertion that “all things share one *ch'e*” implies.

Nevertheless he remained enough of a traditional Confucian philosopher that he should be seen primarily as a moral philosopher. His prime concern was what

⁵ This is from the “Western Inscription” of Zhang Zai (1020–1077), as translated in Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed. *Sources of East Asian Tradition, vol. I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 345.

⁶ For more on how Tasan came to feel that consistently acting appropriately was difficult, in fact much more difficult than mainstream Neo-Confucian assumed, see Don Baker, “Danger Within: Guilt and Moral Frailty in Korean Religion,” *Acta Koreana* 4 (July, 2001): 1–25.

human beings needed to do to become fully human, with fully human defined as acting the way human beings should act in accordance with their *ch'e*. Though he had done some reading of late medieval Catholic Western philosophy (in Chinese translations imported from China),⁷ he did not adopt their definition of human beings as thinking beings. Rather he defined human beings as actors. He was not an epistemologist or a logician. He was not concerned about correct thinking per se. Instead, he was concerned with thinking that led to correct acting.

Once we understand that Tasan accepted the Neo-Confucian notion of human beings as social beings, and that he also accepted the Neo-Confucian notion that it is appropriate behavior in social interactions that determines whether we are fully human or not, we can then appreciate how creative he was with the challenges he mounted against traditional Neo-Confucianism from within it.

REDEFINING HUMAN BEINGS

For example, let us look at how Tasan dealt with an important Confucian debate topic of his day: whether humans and animals share the same basic nature.⁸ His answer was that they did not, an answer others had also come up with. However, his negative reply was grounded in a non-traditional definition of human nature, one which broke with the hegemonic Confucian tradition of his day on two counts.

First of all, Tasan defined human beings, not as ethical beings from birth but as beings defined by the fact that they were naturally pulled in two different directions. He pointed out that human beings have both natural desires for the moral good and natural desires for personal pleasure. “It is fair to say that we have moral tendencies, which are fundamentally good and pure. However, equally natural human desires consistently lead people to sink into evil.”⁹

That led to his second break from the Confucianism of his day. Departing from the traditional focus on cultivating a determination to act appropriately, he emphasized that human beings have to choose whether to act appropriately or not. A focus on determination, he insisted, overlooked the fact that we have to choose which way we will determine to act. He argued that as the only beings who are a

⁷ For more on Tasan’s encounter with Catholicism, see Don Baker, “Tasan Between Catholicism and Confucianism: A Decade Under Suspicion, 1791 to 1801,” *Tasan Hak* 5 (2004): 55–86.

⁸ Choi Young-jin, “The Historical Status of Dasan’s Inseongmulseongron: On the Horak School’s Inmulseong-dongiron,” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 131–152.

⁹ “Chungyong kangūibo” [Lectures on the *Zhongyong*, supplemented], *Yōyudang chōnsō* [Complete works of Tasan Chōng Yagyong] II, 4:3a.

mixture of both material and immaterial elements, human beings have the power to choose to follow the moral path or the selfish path. This made human beings different from animals, who lack free will.¹⁰ It also made them different from spirits, who, as fully immaterial beings, did not experience the pull of the flesh that drew human beings astray. According to Tasan's understanding of human nature, human beings therefore stood between animals on earth and spirits in heaven.

Tasan's vision of the constitution of human beings was very different from the traditional Neo-Confucian view. In mainstream Neo-Confucianism, human beings are a mixture of *li* 理 and *ki* 氣. *Li* referred to the dynamic patterns defining and stimulating appropriate interactions with both our social and our natural environment. *Ki* was understood as the energy and matter that provided the stuff *li* needed for its interactions but also, because of its 'lumpiness', could hinder the proper operation of *li*. Since *li* determined what we should do, and what we should do defined what we really were, human nature was seen by mainstream Neo-Confucians as *li* and therefore as essentially good.

Neo-Confucianism is called in Korean Sōngnihak 性理學 for a reason—its two core elements are the assumption that *li* determines appropriate actions both human and otherwise, and the assumption that *sōng*, human nature, is nothing other than *li* as manifest in our thoughts and actions. Tasan challenged those assumptions, stating explicitly that *li* is not human nature. Moreover, he demoted *li* from its normal position of superiority in the Neo-Confucian universe. He wrote, "*Ki* is something that exists on its own. *Li*, on the other hand, is always attached to something else. Anything so dependent is contingent on that which exists on its own."¹¹ That is a radical departure from a fundamental assumption of Neo-Confucian thought that *li* is superior to *ki*. Since, as expressed in the well-known phrase of Yulgok Yi I (1536–84), "*li* unites but *ki* divides,"¹² *li* is what underlies cosmic unity and *ki* is responsible for cosmic diversity, Tasan is here reaffirming his preference for a pluralistic rather than a syncretic view of the universe.

Tasan agrees with mainstream Neo-Confucians that human beings are a combination of two different elements. However, he disagrees over what those

¹⁰ Tasan may have acquired his notion of free will from his youthful reading of Catholic writings. See Young-bae Song, "On the Family Resemblance of Philosophical Paradigm: Between Dasan's Thought and Matteo Ricci's *Tianzhu Shiyi*," in Anselm Min, ed. *Korean Religions in Relation: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity: Essays in Honor of Professor Wi Jo Kang*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016), 119–151.

¹¹ "Zhongyong kangūibo," *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 4: 65a.

¹² 理通氣局.

two different elements are. In his commentary on the *Heart Classic*, he wrote that human beings are formed from a union of the spiritual and the material. That union is called, he notes, “a person” or “the self.”¹³ In a sharp break with Confucian tradition, instead of *li* and *ki* coming together to form a human being, he sees human beings as a mysterious combination of *ki* with something spiritual.¹⁴ That “something spiritual” is the mind, defined as that which is capable of penetrating insight, in other words, that which constitutes intelligence. However, he points out that it is difficult to find one word only that points to all the various functions of that spiritual core of human beings. Because of its different functions, it is sometimes called the mind-and-heart (心), sometimes called spirit (神), sometimes called intelligence (靈), and sometimes called the soul (魂). The most comprehensive way to refer to it, he says, is to call it our “greatest potential” (大體).¹⁵

Tasan points out that the character used for the mind-and-heart also indicates the physical organ, composed of *ki*, that generates our physical emotions.¹⁶ Because of this dual nature of the mind-and-heart, Tasan rejects the mainstream Neo-Confucian claim that, first of all, our mind-and-heart, properly understood, is essentially nothing more than a container of *li* and therefore human beings, by their very nature, are moral. According to mainstream Neo-Confucian thinkers, human nature is good because our hearts-and-minds are informed by the principles [*li*] that tell us how to behave properly.¹⁷ Tasan argued instead, if we understand the heart-and-mind, and human nature, properly, we will understand that human beings are potentially moral but they are also potentially immoral (because our heart-and-mind generates physical emotions, which can be selfish rather than moral) and therefore it is a mistake to say that human nature is essentially good.

Tasan noted that “even though our potential for penetrating insight (*yöngmyöngjich’e* 靈明之體, another term he used for the heart-and-mind) resides within a material form (*hyönggi* 刑氣), it maintains its purity and is not contaminated by anything material.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, he argues, even though our penetrating intelligence, which is spiritual, and our body, which is material, co-exist without being intertwined, we cannot say that human nature is innately moral,

¹³ “Simgyöng milhöm” [Personal Experience with the Heart Classic], *Yöyudang chönsö* II, 2:25a–b.

¹⁴ “Maengja yöü” [Essential Points in the Mencius], *Yöyudang chönsö* II, 5:19a.

¹⁵ “Simgyöng milhöm,” *Yöyudang chönsö* II, 2:25.

¹⁶ “Maengja yöü,” *Yöyudang chönsö* II, 5:32a.

¹⁷ Ch’en Ch’un, Wing-tsit Chan, trans. *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained (The Pei-hsi tzu-i)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 46–61.

¹⁸ “Maengja yöü,” *Yöyudang chönsö* II, 6:29a.

since there is both a spiritual and a material side to human nature. That is why, he insists, it would be a mistake to identify our heart-and-mind exclusively with our moral nature. Instead, he says, our human nature consists of our desires, our propensities, and those desires come from both our minds-and-hearts as well as from our bodies.¹⁹

Tasan writes,

there are three different ways our ‘spiritual potential’ [靈體] can be described. When it refers to our desire for what is good and aversion to what is not good, it can be described as the human nature which Mencius describes as innately good. When we talk about our ability to discern the difference between acting appropriately or acting inappropriately, and yet act either appropriately or inappropriately regardless of what our discernment tells us, that is talking about human nature as a mixture of good and evil... And when we talk about how difficult it is to do the right thing and how easy it is to follow the easy path that leads to personal benefit, then we are talking about human nature as evil... A complete description of human nature must encompass all three tendencies.²⁰

DISTINGUISHING HUMAN NATURE FROM THE NATURE OF ANIMALS

It is our penetrating insight, our ability to see how we are supposed to behave rather than just blindly behaving in a certain way, that makes us superior to animals.²¹ Animal nature also consists of propensities. It is the nature of an animal to want to eat, drink and stay alive. That is their nature. However, that has nothing to do with any ability to have “penetrating insight.” Tasan adds that there are two types of propensity. One is the desire for something pleasurable, like a bird wanting to fly up a hill or a deer wanting to graze in a field. The other is the desire for something needed for the realization of something’s full potential, like millet needing a dry field or rice sprouts needing water. Since acting appropriately in our interactions will help us become more fully human, acting morally is the most appropriate way for human beings to behave, just like a paddy field is a more appropriate place for rice plants to grow and dry land is a more appropriate place

¹⁹ “Simgyōng milhōm,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 2:25b–26a. Tasan did not start defining human nature as desires until he was living in exile and had a lot of time to study, and ponder over, the Confucian Classics. See So-Yi Chung, “Jeong Yakyong’s Post Neo-Confucianism,” 123, n9.

²⁰ “Simgyōng milhōm,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 2:28a.

²¹ “Chungyong kangūibo,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 4:2b.

for millet to grow.²²

It is natural for everyone to prefer that which is good, just like it is the nature of water to flow downhill and the nature of fire to flame upwards. It is this innate preference for the good which is given us at birth and which the first chapter of the *Zhongyong* refers to as that which heaven has decreed for us. It is precisely this tendency to prefer the good which we are referring to when we use the word “human nature.” This does not mean, however, that we are born good. Tasan asks rhetorically, can you say that an infant who only knows how to cry for milk and a hug is displaying his innate goodness?²³

In fact, Tasan argues that not only are we not born instinctively acting appropriately, despite the standard Confucian equation of virtue with human nature, even as adults we cannot be said to be virtuous until we have actually acted appropriately. He insists that such labels for virtue as ‘benevolence’, ‘righteousness’, ‘propriety’, and ‘wisdom’ are applicable only to behavior, not innate tendencies.

Only after you have acted in a benevolent manner, acted righteously, acted politely, or acted wisely can you be said to be benevolent, righteous, polite, or wise. Such ways of acting are concrete displays of ethical virtuosity, not innate characteristics... However, we can say that those four basic ethical inclinations are all rooted in the unique capacity for penetrating insight every human being is endowed with.²⁴

Tasan agrees with mainstream Neo-Confucians that human beings have only one human nature. However, as noted, because the spiritual ability of human beings is intertwined with their physical constitution, we cannot say human nature is essentially moral, that human beings are moral from the minute they are born. Mainstream Confucian scholars use the term “nature” with two meanings, one referring to the “original nature” and the other to “physical” nature. They are not positing the existence of two separate human natures in one person as much as they are distinguishing two distinct objects of human nature (desire), the moral and the pleasurable. However, some Neo-Confucians, influenced by Buddhism, did talk as if there was a pure human nature separate and distinct from the physical nature. Tasan prefers to point to the one mind-and-heart having a propensity to do what is right and therefore being ashamed of doing wrong. However, that mind-and-heart also has a propensity, a desire, for what is

²² “Simgyōng milhōm,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 2:25b–26a.

²³ “Maengja yōi,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 5:33a–b.

²⁴ “Chungyong kangūibo,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 4:39a.

pleasurable. As a result, a human being, even though he or she is aware of the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior, nevertheless sometimes chooses the moral good but other times chooses to act in a pleasure-seeking selfish manner. These competing preferences create a very perilous situation which does not allow us to relax for a minute if we want to be consistently moral.²⁵

He points out that mainstream Confucians who interpret the statement that “the human mind is dangerous and the moral mind is difficult to discern”²⁶ to mean that the human mind is the physical nature and the moral mind is the human nature grounded in righteousness and principle do not realize that the mind and human nature are not the same thing. The word “human nature” refers only to liking or disliking something. How can that be the same as the mind? It is the human mind that decides whether to act in accordance with a desire for the moral good or act in pursuit of the good of sensual pleasure.²⁷ That is not something we do naturally, since we have conflicting desires. That is why, he argues, it is a mistake to confuse our minds, with which we weigh alternatives and make decisions, with our essential nature, which comprises our innate propensities.

Late in his life, when he wrote an autobiography he called his “tombstone inscription,” he further distinguished our mind from our basic nature. He asserted that the fact that we can choose to do good or do evil should be called an innate ability. The fact that it is easy to act inappropriately but hard to consistently act appropriately is the situation we human beings find ourselves in. Our nature, however, is only our preference for the good over the evil, since that is natural and does not require any human effort.²⁸ To act in accordance with that preference for the moral rather than in accordance with the preference for physical pleasure, however, is not natural in the sense of something we do naturally. Acting appropriately requires effort. We have to choose to behave the way we know we should behave, and work hard to follow through on that choice, despite one side of our nature telling us to do otherwise.

Tasan’s insistence that relying on our human nature alone is not enough for us to act appropriately led him to challenge the mainstream Neo-Confucian assumption that human nature is virtuous, in other words, that human beings can be described as innately virtuous. Mainstream Neo-Confucians assume that

²⁵ “Simgyǒng milhǒm,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 2:26a–28a.

²⁶ *Book of History*, “Counsels of the Great Yu” (II, 2,15); in James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena and copious indexes*, vol. III (reprint. Taipei: Wen Shih Che Publishing, 1972), 61.

²⁷ “Simgyǒng milhǒm,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 2:25b.

²⁸ “Chach’an myojimyǒng” [An epitaph for myself], *Yōyudang chōnsō* I, 16, 17b

human beings, when the *li* they believed constituted human nature was able to operate freely without interference from *kei*, would always act appropriately. For them, virtue and human nature were synonymous. Tasan disagreed, distinguishing human motives from actual human behavior to point out, first of all, that wanting to be virtuous is not the same thing as being virtuous and, secondly, pointing out that there needs to be an intermediate step between desiring to act virtuously in general to making a decision to act appropriately in a specific situation and then actually implementing that decision. He divides into three something mainstream Neo-Confucians, in Tasan's view, blurred into one.

It is this innate ability to choose to act appropriately or inappropriately that is for Tasan the most obvious difference between human beings and animals. People are unlike animals in that they can do what is right or what is wrong. It's up to them. Animals cannot choose what to do. They simply automatically follow their physical desires.²⁹ To say that human and animals have the same nature is to insult human beings. And to imply that animals have a moral nature is to lift animals above their rightful station.

In one of his commentaries on the *Zhongyong*, Tasan notes that

When we talk about something's basic nature, we are referring to three different levels of natural endowment. The nature of grasses and trees is to be alive but to lack the ability to be aware of their surroundings. The nature of birds and beasts is to be alive and also be conscious of their surroundings. The nature of humans is to not only be alive and be conscious of our surroundings but to also be able to have insight into the proper way to interact with everything they come into contact with.³⁰

These three levels are clearly distinct and not the same. One is the lowest, one is in the middle, and one is superior to the others.... How could we expect a horse, cow, sheep, or pig to show love for its parents and respect for its elders, feelings that are natural for human beings? ... Has anyone ever said that we could teach animals proper behavior the way we teach human beings how to behave?³¹

²⁹ "Maengja youi," *Yöyudang chönsö*, II, 5:34b–35a.

³⁰ Similar divisions of things on earth into these categories can be found in the writings of both the ancient Chinese philosopher Xunzi and the Catholic missionary Matteo Ricci: *Xunzi: The Complete text*, translated by Eric L. Hutton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 76; Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, translated by Thierry Meynard, Douglas Lancashire, and Puter Hu Kuo-chen (Boston: Boston College Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2016), 119.

³¹ "Chungyong kangüibo," *Yöyudang chönsö* II, 4:47a–b.

Of course, mainstream Confucians knew that human beings were superior to animals. However, they usually described that difference as being on a spectrum in which human beings received all five basic human virtues as their fundamental nature and animals received only one. Tasan saw a much greater gap between humans and animals. For Tasan, it was not just the greater human ability to act appropriately but the ability to choose to do or not do so that was a distinctive characteristic of human nature.

Neo-Confucians usually talked of a need for people to cultivate the determination to act properly. They did not spend much time talking about the possibility that human beings could be determined to act improperly. Tasan, however, insisted that human beings have free will, the ability to choose to do the right thing or to do the wrong thing (自主之權). If human beings were born virtuous, as mainstream Neo-Confucians claimed, then for people to act appropriately and morally would be as easy as it is for water to roll downhill and for fire to flame upwards. If that were the case, acting virtuously would be no great accomplishment. We would no more praise a person for being virtuous than we would praise a deer for acting in accordance with its nature and living in a forest rather than a village. However, Tasan believed Heaven has given human beings the ability to make their own decisions. If they choose to do what is right, then they can do what is right. But if they prefer to act in an immoral fashion, then they can do that as well. This, in his opinion, is what makes human beings different from animals.³²

To make the task of consistently acting appropriately more difficult, it is not just our bodies, our physical emotions, that can lead us astray. Tasan decries the common tendency to blame all our faults on our bodies and the physical desires for food, sex, and comfort they generate. He points out that our immaterial minds are not completely blameless. If all evil comes from things material, then, he asks, how can we explain the existence of troublesome and even malevolent spirits? Moreover, human beings can be led astray by such emotions as inordinate pride and arrogance. Such emotions come from our minds, not our bodies. We cannot blame our bodies when we get angry because someone has criticized our scholarship or our writing skills. It is our pride based in our mind, he argues, that causes us to get angry in such a situation.³³ And it is the possibility that we can choose to be led by either our body or our mind down an improper path that makes our human nature unique.

³² “Maengja youi,” *Yōyudang chōnsō*, II, 5:34b–35a

³³ “Maengja youi,” *Yōyudang chōnsō*, II, 5:35a–b.

IS THERE NOTHING SUPERIOR TO HUMAN BEINGS?

So far I have presented Tasan's argument that human beings are superior to the rest of material creation. Does he then think that there is nothing superior to human beings? No, he does not. He believes in the existence of spirits. Moreover, unlike mainstream Neo-Confucians, he refuses to see those spirits as composed of ethereal *ki*, as lighter forms of matter. Instead, Tasan states explicitly, "spirits have no bodies. They have no physical constitution. Even the smallest physical object has more mass than spirits do."³⁴

In his commentary on chapter XVI of the *Zhongyong*, Tasan spends quite a bit of ink criticizing the mainstream Neo-Confucian understanding of the meaning of the term "spiritual being."

There are some who suspect that spirits are residual traces of the transformations that generate the visible world and others who suspect that they are nothing more than the natural activities of *yin* and *yang*. This would have them hovering between existence and nonexistence and banish them to the realm of illusion. That would mean the practices of the kings of old of serving the spirits would no longer have any relevance for later generations. As for what is meant by residual traces, they are like the remaining vestiges of footsteps. If we see footprints of large men, we know large men passed this way before. If we see footprints of small children, we know small children have passed this way before. Therefore these residual traces are like footprints. It is certainly unreasonable to consider these left-behind footprints to actually be those large men and small children. So how can we say these residual traces of the transformations that generate the visible world are the same things as actual spirits?

If you say that heaven and earth are nothing more than the way spirits function and you say that the transformations that generate the visible world are nothing more than residual traces of spirits, how can you say those mere residual traces and ways of functioning are the spirits themselves? The "two *ki*" refers to *yin* and *yang*.³⁵ *Yin* is nothing more than a shadow caused by the sun's rays, and *yang* is nothing more than the rays of the sun. Although these two phenomena alternate—darkening and

³⁴ "Chungyong chajam" [Admonitions for myself upon reading the *Zhongyong*], *Yöyudang chönsö* II, 3:16b.

³⁵ This is a reference to a statement by Zhang Zai. See Ch'en Ch'un, *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained* (*The Pei-hsi tzu-i*), translated by Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 143. There it is rendered as "Ghosts and spirits are the natural manifestations of *yin* and *yang*." Literally, it would be translated as "Ghosts and spirits are the natural manifestations of the two *ki*."

brightening in turn, giving us what we call day and night and which we call hot and cold—as material processes, they lack even an iota of cognitive capability. They are unable to know anything or to sense anything. That means they are far below even the level of birds and beasts, or insects and worms. How could managing the transformations that generate the visible world be something they have the inherent ability to do? And how could they “stimulate the people of this world to fast and purify themselves, and dress themselves in fine clothes in order to offer them sacrifices?”³⁶

CONCLUSION

In Tasan’s universe, human beings are defined quite differently than they are in mainstream Neo-Confucianism. He raised human beings much higher above mere animals than most Neo-Confucians were willing to do. He denied that mere animals shared any of the human virtues Confucian sometimes attributed to animals, since, in Tasan’s opinion, no one or nothing could be considered virtuous unless it chose to act in a virtuous fashion, and animals lacked the power to choose. Moreover, Tasan placed above human beings not some abstract moral principle such as *li*, the impersonal dynamic patterns of appropriate interactions, but actual conscious supernatural beings. He not only believed in spiritual beings, as already noted, he wrote that “the various celestial spirits are essentially immaterial beings and, as such, they are the immediate subordinates of the Lord on High [Sangje].”³⁷ And he believed Sangje was a conscious being who watched everything we thought and did.³⁸

When we examine how Tasan defined human nature and how he compared it to the natures of other material beings as well as to the natures of totally immaterial beings, it becomes clear that, for Tasan, human beings were between heaven and earth, neither lowly animals nor pure spirits. They were simply human beings, with all the advantages and disadvantages that entailed. They could look toward the earth and follow their baser instincts. Or they could look up toward heaven and make strenuous efforts to always and everywhere act appropriately. It is that ability to move up or down the ladder of appropriate behavior that, for

³⁶ This final line is a line from chapter XVI of the *Zhongyong*. This entire passage is from Tasan’s commentary on that chapter in “Chungyong kangūibo,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 4: 20b–21a.

³⁷ “Chungyong kangūibo,” *Yōyudang chōnsō* II, 4:20b.

³⁸ For more on Tasan’s belief in a supernatural personality in heaven above, see Don Baker, “Practical Ethics and Practical Learning: Tasan’s Approach to Moral Cultivation” *Acta Koreana*, 13, no. 2 (2010): 47–61.

him, defined human beings and made human nature a worthy subject for the decades of deep philosophical examination he devoted to it.

Submitted: March 6, 2017

Sent for revision: May 23, 2017

Accepted: June 12, 2017

DONALD L. BAKER (tasanhak@mac.com) *is a professor in the Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.*

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

- Book of History*. In *The Chinese Classics, with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena and copious indexes*. Vol. III. Edited by James Legge. Reprint. Taipei: Wen Shih Che Publishing, 1972.
- Ch'en Ch'un. Wing-tsit Chan, trans. *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained (The Pei-his tzu-i)*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Chŏng Yagyong. *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* [The complete works of T'asan Chŏng Yagyong]. Hutton, Eric L., trans. *Xunzi: The Complete text*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Ricci, Matteo. *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*. Translated by Thierry Meynard, Douglas Lancashire, and Peter Hu Kuo-chen. Boston: Boston College Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2016.
- Yi Hwang, *T'oegye chŏnsŏ* [The complete works of T'oegye Yi Hwang].
- Zhang Zai, "Western Inscription," In *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, Vol. 1. Edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Secondary Sources

- Ames, Roger. "Theorizing 'Person' in Confucian Ethics: A Good Place to Start," *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 141–161.
- Baker, Don. "Practical Ethics and Practical Learning: T'asan's Approach to Moral Cultivation" *Acta Koreana* 13, no. 2 (2010): 47–61.
- . "T'asan Between Catholicism and Confucianism: A Decade Under Suspicion, 1791 to 1801," *Tasan Hak* 5 (2004): 55–86.
- . "Danger Within: Guilt and Moral Frailty in Korean Religion," *Acta Koreana* 4 (2001): 1–25.
- Choi Young-jin. "The Historical Status of Dasan's Inseongmulseongron: On the Horak School's Inmulseong-dongiron." *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 131–152.
- Chung, So-Yi. "Jeong Yakyong's Post Neo-Confucianism," In *Traditional Korean Philosophy: Problems and Debates*. Edited by Youngsun Back and Philip J. Ivanhoe. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.
- Muller, A. Charles. "The Emergence of Essence-Function (*ti-yong* 體用) Hermeneutics in the Signification of Indic Buddhism: An Overview." *Pulgyohak libyu* 19 (2016): 111–152.
- Song, Young-bae. "On the Family Resemblance of Philosophical Paradigm: Between Dasan's Thought and Matteo Ricci's Tianzu Shiyi." In *Korean*

Religions in Relation: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity: Essays in Honor of Professor Wi Jo Kang. Edited by Anselm Min. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016.