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HUMAN NATURE IN CHOSŎN NEO-CONFUCIANISM GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Scholars from around the world gathered on the campus of Keimyung University in Daegu in November, 2016, to spend two days discussing Confucian concepts of human nature. Four papers from this Academia Koreana International Conference on Korean Confucianism were selected for publication in this special issue of *Acta Koreana*. Those papers were chosen to both reflect the diversity of approaches used to address this important philosophical topic as well as demonstrate the global nature of this conference. The first paper is by Roger Ames, who has moved from the University of Hawai'i to Beijing University. The second paper is by Vladimir Glomb, who is based at the Free University of Berlin. Yoo Weon-ki, the third contributor, teaches at the host institution of Keimyung University. And the fourth contributor, Don Baker, teaches at the University of British Columbia in Canada.

The question dominating discussion at this conference was "what is a human being?" This is a problem which all philosophies which attempt to define the position of human beings in the cosmos, what their status is in the hierarchy of beings, must address. Chosŏn dynasty Neo-Confucians paid particular attention to this question in the second half of that dynasty, debating among themselves how human beings differ from other sentient beings such as dogs and cats. In particular, since Neo-Confucianism defined human beings primarily in terms of their ability to act ethically, they debated whether human beings were the only sentient actors able to act ethically. This was often framed as the question "Is the nature of human beings the same as the nature of animals or is it different?" To answer this question, Confucians first had to answer another question: "what does it mean to be fully human?"

Since Confucians tended to define human beings normatively, more by what they should do than by what they actually do, mainstream Confucians refrained from describing someone as fully human until he or she had displayed the ability to consistently act appropriately in his or her interactions with other human beings. In other words, they assumed no one is born a complete human being but he or she can become one.

In his contribution, Roger Ames applies this process-centered understanding of human beings to challenge the standard explication of the Confucian understanding of human nature. Focusing on what he considers to be a common misunderstanding that Mencius (372–289 B.C.E.) said that human nature is good, Ames insists that Mencius argued that after they are born, human beings can evolve into moral actors through appropriate interactions with their fellow human beings. If human nature refers to what human beings are when they are fully human, human nature should not be understood as something human beings possess innately but as what human beings can learn to do.

Ames goes on to argue that, to understand the Confucian understanding of what a human being is, we have to focus our attention on its assumption that human beings are born with tendencies to act appropriately, and that those tendencies require cultivation in order to be fully activated. This is a biological rather than a static concept of human nature. Confucians thought of human nature as something that is not simply there from the beginning, any more than a seed can be called a tree, but as something that must be cultivated to grow into what it should be. Human nature was cultivated with an attitude of deference and a recognition of interdependency in interpersonal interactions, since human beings become fully human only through interacting appropriately, in other words respectfully and selflessly, with their fellow human beings.

Drawing on the writings of the modern Confucian philosopher Tang Junyi (1909–1978), Ames points out that human nature is very different from the nature of animals, since human beings, unlike animals, can choose to grow into a complete human being by seeking out those interactions which help them grow. This is what Ames calls an "intrasubjective" concept of human beings, since it assumes that human nature does not exist in a social vacuum but can only emerge in interactions between one human being and another.

Vladimir Glomb puts aside the question of whether Confucians believed that human nature is essentially good or believed instead that human beings need to become good. He focuses instead on how Neo-Confucians explain the goodness they find in human nature. In particular, he is interested in how one eighteenth-century Korean Confucian, Im Sŏngju (1711–1788), challenged the notion that human nature is *li*, and only *li*, and therefore, since *li* is by definition good, that is the reason human nature is good.

Li, which Glomb translates simply as "principle," is the name Neo-Confucians gave to the moral principles that define and direct appropriate interactions in the universe. This broad definition of *li* allowed Neo-Confucians to identify human nature, which they understood normatively as the ability to interact appropriately, with *li* and therefore to make the identification of *li* with human nature the basis for the assertion that human nature is good. There is a philosophical vacuity in this argument, however. The two statements that human nature is good and *li* is good are tautological in this context and do not reveal anything not already assumed.

Im was less concerned with the philosophical vacuity of this assertion than he was with its, in his view, incomplete depiction of what makes a human being a moral human being. Im took issue with the founder of his school of Korean Neo-Confucianism, Yulgok Yi I (1536–1584), because Yulgok assumed that when human beings act as they should act, that was because their thoughts and actions were directed by *li* and *li* only. This, to Im, was an unrealistic conception of human beings, who must operate within a world of objects composed of *qi* (K. *ki*) and do so with a body and mind which are also composed of *qi*.

Qi refers to the matter-energy that everything in the world is formed from and that also animates things so they can interact with each other. That means that both the arena essential for moral action to take place, and the dynamism that makes such action possible, depend on *qi*. Therefore, Im argued, *qi* plays an essential role to making it possible for human beings to be moral. If human nature is to be considered good, then both *qi* and *li* must share the credit for that goodness.

Im was aware, of course, of the Neo-Confucian assumption that impurities in visible *qi,* by creating ruptures within the universe, blocked the smooth and harmonious operation of *li*. He shared that assumption but added that there was a difference between visible impure *qi* and primordial *qi*. Primordial *qi*, which he defined as "deep, all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*," underlay all phenomena, including our bodies and minds, even after *qi* had also become visible in the form of the myriad material objects that fragmented the universe and made it difficult to interact appropriately and act in harmony with everything we encountered.

A core assumption in Neo-Confucian thought is that unity and cooperation is better than differentiation and competition. According to Yulgok's well-known assertion that "*li* unites but *qi* divides," *qi* could not contribute to the harmonious cooperation that promotes unity. Therefore *qi* could not be responsible for human beings acting appropriately. Im rejected that view by positing the continued relevance of a unified, and unifying, primordial *qi*. Im had a practical reason for adopting that philosophical stance. He was concerned that if we attributed all our appropriate behavior to *li*, and disregarded the role of "deep, all-penetrating, unified, pure, and void *qi*" in supporting proper behavior, we would neglect the cultivation of our *qi*, though he contended such cultivation was essential to the ability to consistently act appropriately. After all, without the dynamism inherent in *qi*, we could not act at all.

Yoo Weon-ki adopts a different approach to analyzing Confucian conceptions of human nature. Focusing on the implications of the mainstream Neo-Confucian assumption that *li* is good and *ki* (*qi*), because it differentiates, is dangerous, Yoo draws our attention to the fact that Neo-Confucians often located the moral orientation of human nature in the mind before it is aroused to interact with the *ki* in the world around it.

The term used to describe the mind before it is contaminated by contact with the *ki* realm is *mibal*, meaning "before thoughts and emotions are active." Though many Confucians considered the *mibal* state to constitute the core nature of human beings, those same Confucians did not always agree on how to conceptualize that unaroused mind. Yoo points out that those disagreements have their roots in the ambiguity of comments Zhu Xi (1130–1200) made on the first chapter of the *Zhongyong*.

Explaining the terminology in that chapter, Zhu Xi wrote that human nature, which he also identified with *li*, refers to thoughts and emotions when they are quiescent. When emotions have been activated, he argued, the term emotions is used instead of human nature. However, as Yoo points out, Zhu also called the quiescent mind the substance (*ch'e*) of the mind, which he identifies with human nature, and the thoughts and emotions generated by an activated mind the function (*yong*) of the mind. To further complicate his explication, late in life Zhu Xi pointed out that the emotions can be harmonious or be disharmonious, but when the emotions have not yet been activated, they should be described as in equilibrium, a mental state he identified with human nature. Zhu Xi therefore provides different but overlapping definitions of human nature: as *li*, as quiescent thoughts and emotions, as the mind before its thoughts and emotions have been activated, and as the emotions themselves when they are quiescent and therefore in equilibrium.

Yoo explains how the ambiguities in Zhu Xi's commentary inspired a debate between Yi Kan (1677–1727) and Han Wŏn-jin (1682–1751) over how to interpret what Zhu Xi wrote. Yi Kan argued that, since *li* is one and cannot be divided up, and nature is *li*, the nature of human beings and the nature of animals is essentially the same. Moreover, although he noted that the mind of a sage is different from the mind of an ordinary person because the mind of a sage is always in equilibrium but the mind of an ordinary person normally is not, that applies only to the mind at a superficial level. At its most basic level, before the mind has been stimulated by any contact with the world around it, it is quiescent and therefore it is in equilibrium. This is as true of animal minds as it is of human minds. Since the quiescent mind is the nature, the nature of human beings and animals is the same.

Han Wŏn-jin disagreed. He argued that, first of all, it was meaningless to distinguish between two different states of a quiescent mind, a superficial quiescent mind and a basic quiescent mind, since a quiescent mind is a still mind and stillness means completely still. Once you have any sort of activity in the mind, whether thoughts or feelings, you no longer have a quiescent mind. Moreover, an unconscious, unactivated mind cannot be said to be good since, by definition, it is not involved in appropriate interactions. It possesses only the potential to do good, to interact harmoniously. And that potential can only be activated through the body. Since *li* and *ki* are inseparable, a human being composed of *li* only is inconceivable. Human beings are a mixture of *li* and *ki* and should be thought of as such. The human ability to act appropriately, therefore, depends both on the mind and on the quality of the physical constitution the mind needs to interact with people and things around it. That is why not only is human nature superior to animal nature (animals have an inferior physical constitution), a sage also has a different nature from the nature of an ordinary human being, since a sage has a mind and a body that work together well to engage in appropriate interactions. Like Im Sŏngju, Han is making a moral point. He is saying that people need to be realistic in defining how a human being can be fully human, how a human being can consistently act appropriately. People need to take into account not only the difference between an unaroused and an aroused mind but also the difference between a favorable and an unfavorable physical constitution so that they can tailor their efforts at the cultivation of a moral character accordingly.

My own contribution builds on what Roger Ames said about human nature being a process rather than a preexisting condition, what Vladimir Glomb tells us about Im Sŏngju's insistence that we cannot dismiss the importance of *qi* (*ki*) in moral cultivation, and what Yoo Weon-ki tell us about how Yi Kan and Han Wŏn-jin conceived the relationship between emotions and human nature. I introduce what Tasan Chŏng Yagyong (1762–1836) added to the Confucian discussion of the nature of human nature.

Tasan was one of the most prolific writers in the entire Chosŏn dynasty. He wrote commentaries on each of the Confucian Classics, and, in those commentaries, he addressed all of the important issues Confucian scholars debated. That includes, of course, the question of how human beings should be defined and whether human beings and animals share the same basic nature. His answers, however, moved farther away from mainstream Neo-Confucianism than the answers of Im, Yi, or Han had.

Probably influenced by his reading of books on Catholic philosophy and theology when he was in his twenties, Tasan pushed the boundaries of Neo-Confucian thought farther than any of his predecessors had dared to by dropping *li* from the definition of what makes a human being human. Moreover, he insisted that it is a mistake to say human beings are naturally good, not only because human nature is not *li* but also because acting appropriately is not natural, if by natural is meant what we would do effortlessly if the *ki* in our bodies and our environment did not hinder us from doing so. Instead, he wrote, consistently acting appropriately requires effort because human beings naturally have both the desire to act appropriately and the desire to pursue personal pleasure and individual benefit. People have to choose to act in accordance with their moral inclinations rather than follow their selfish impulses. Even if they make the right choice, he adds, it is not easy for them to implement that decision. The pursuit of pleasure and personal benefit is always easier than following the difficult road of putting the good of others ahead of narrow self-interest.

Rather than using the standard definition of human beings as composed of *li* and *ki*, a definition whose implications Im, Yi, and Han explored, Tasan insisted that human beings are formed from both material (*ki*) and spiritual components. By the spiritual component of human beings, Tasan did not mean immaterial *li*. He used a different term, one that can be translated as intelligence or “penetrating insight.” The possession of this ability to recognize the proper way to behave in specific situations meant that human beings could follow the insights thus acquired and choose to act in accordance with them. However, he argued, human beings could also decide to ignore those insights and act instead in accordance with their selfish impulses. It is this spiritual ability to choose to act properly or improperly, more than any difference in how well they utilized their primordial *ki* or preserved the equilibrium of their quiescent mind, that made human beings different from animals. Free will had not been an important topic in Confucian moral philosophy before Tasan. He made it one of the defining characteristics of human beings.

The other defining characteristic of human beings in Tasan’s philosophy was *ki*. Tasan did not point to human *ki* as significantly different from the *ki* of animals. It was free will, not *ki*, that made the nature of human beings different from the nature of animals. However, he argued, in addition to animals and human beings, there was a third category of sentient beings: spirits. He rejected the traditional Confucian view that spirits were simply attenuated *ki*. Instead, he insisted that spirits were totally immaterial, without one iota of *ki* in their nature. Tasan thus defines human beings as superior to animals because of their free will but inferior to spirits because, unlike spirits, they are composed of both material and immaterial elements. This was a sharp break with Confucian tradition, which did not draw as clear a line between humans and spirits.

If Tasan were alive today, he would praise the argument of Roger Ames that Confucian tradition does not teach that human beings are born good. Like Ames, Tasan read the Confucian classics as saying that human beings cannot be called fully human until they have consistently acted in an appropriate manner in their interactions with their fellow human beings. I do not know if Tasan read Im Sŏngju, but, if he had, he would have appreciated Im's insight that *ki* must be included in any explanation of what makes a human being human. I also do not know if he read any of the debate between Yi Kan and Han Wŏn-jin, but, if he did, he probably would have sided with Han, since Tasan agreed with Han that we need to view human beings realistically, as a combination of both moral and material components, rather than defining basic human nature as the way we want human beings to be.

These four articles provide but a brief glimpse of the depth and breadth of the Confucian exploration of the crucial philosophical question of what it means to be a human being. Confucians across East Asia have been discussing, and debating, how to define human beings and human nature for at least the past 2,500 years. Though that question has been discussed across the globe, Confucians have approached it from the unique perspective that distinguishes Confucian philosophy from philosophical inquiry elsewhere. As Ames points out, Confucians have emphasized the intrasubjective nature of human existence rather than focusing on a separate and distinct individual identity. Glomb shows us the distinctive approach Korean Confucians adopted in addressing the perennial issue of how to link the "is" of physical bodies with the "ought" of morality. Yoo reveals the important role Korean Confucians assigned emotions in defining not only morality but also human nature. And my analysis of Tasan's original answer to the question "what is a human being?" discloses that the parameters within which Korean Confucian thinkers operated were broader than has been commonly assumed and could explicitly embrace even the notion of free will. Obviously these four articles cannot provide a definitive answer to the question of what makes a human being human. It is our hope, however, that these articles will inspire those who intend to continue that discussion to take seriously the contribution Confucianism, especially Korean Confucianism, has made to enriching our understanding of our common humanity.

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