

# Chapter 3

## What is Korean about Korean Confucianism?



Don Baker

### 1 Introduction

Korean Confucianism was firmly rooted in the Chinese Classics. Moreover, Korea paid close attention to developments within Chinese Confucianism over the centuries, and, as a result, Korean Confucians debated many of the same issues Chinese Confucians debated. However, that does not mean Korean Confucianism was a carbon copy of Chinese Confucianism. Koreans made Confucianism their own and felt free to use the tools Confucianism provided to address issues that were of particular interest to them.

One of those issues, particularly salient during the Chosŏn dynasty (朝鮮 1392–1910), was the contradiction between the assumption of human moral perfectibility and the recognition of human moral frailty. A related concern was the psychology of self-cultivation. Koreans delved much deeper into moral psychology than Chinese Confucians normally did. They did so out of a desire to find a way to overcome the human moral frailty that Chinese Confucianism told them should not be a major problem, but Koreans recognized as a strong barrier to developing the ability to consistently think and act appropriately.

The search for an explanation of human moral frailty, motivated by a search for a way to eliminate frequent moral lapses, lies behind many of the twists and turns in Chosŏn dynasty Neo-Confucian thought. Korean Confucians revealed their distinctive approach to Confucianism in the Four-Seven debate, the debate over how human nature compared to animal nature, and the way they responded to Catholicism in the late eighteenth century, all of which are discussed in greater detail in later chapters. We can also identify distinctive characteristics of Korean Confucianism in

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the Confucian contribution to Tonghak thought, and how that relates to the problem of human moral frailty.

Before tracing the contours of the course of Confucian thought over the five centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), we need to first take note of a point of tension at the heart of Confucianism from its beginning, a tension that Koreans showed particular interest in and sought to resolve in distinctively Korean ways.

That tension is the tension between the assumption that human beings are innately virtuous and the recognition that consistently acting virtuously is not always easy. The Confucian assumption that virtue is innate is not the same as saying that acting virtuously is easy. The statement that virtue is innate in human beings is simply another way of saying that all human beings are capable of developing a virtuous character, and virtuous habits, through their own efforts. It does not mean that human beings are born acting virtuously. It simply means that they do not need external assistance, such as help from a supernatural being, to become virtuous. All they have to do is cultivate their natural virtuous tendencies.

This is evident even in the *Analects* when Confucius makes clear his belief that virtue is definitely not something far away and unobtainable. Confucius states, of supreme virtue, “Is Goodness (*ren* 仁, *in K.* 仁) really so far way? If I simply desire Goodness, I will find it is already here” (Slingerland 2003: 74). Yet he also states that, though it is not far way, it is also not something obtained without effort. He confesses that he set his mind upon learning at the age of 15 but it was not until he was 70 years old that he could “follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety” (Slingerland 2003: 9). Moreover, there is a reason for the difficulty human beings encounter on the road to virtue. He pointed out that “I have yet to meet a man who loves Virtue as much as he loves female beauty” (Slingerland 2003: 92). In other words, according to Confucius, human beings appear to care more for sexual pleasure than for moral rectitude, even though human beings are innately virtuous.

There is, therefore, an ambiguity in the Confucian assumption of innate virtue, a lack of clarity that gives rise to tension within Confucianism, particularly among Confucian practitioners who took seriously the moral demands Confucianism made on individual motivation and behavior. That ambiguity arises from the overlapping of not only the “is” and the “can be” but also of the real and the ideal, the assumption that what we are in our essential core, that which defines us as human beings, is what we should be. In other words, at the heart of the Confucian vision of the relationship between human beings and human virtue is a collapse of a clear-cut distinction between the “is” and the “ought.” Human beings can be said to be virtuous by nature since they both can become and should become virtuous, even though most human beings are not actually virtuous all the time or even most of the time.

We can see this blurring of the boundaries between the “is” and the “ought” even in the more technical philosophical terminology of Neo-Confucianism. For example, *ch’e* (C. *ti* 體) and *yong* (用), often translated as substance (or essence) and function, are more closely intertwined than that standard translation suggests. In Neo-Confucian discourse, they usually refer to unactualized potential (*ch’e*) and that potential actualized (*yong*). In other words, our *ch’e*, our essence, is our

potential to act in certain ways, and our *yong*, our function, is that potential realized in concrete behavior. However, there is a normative overtone to that pair of concepts. Our *ch'e* is our potential to act properly. It is not our *ch'e* to lie, to steal, to murder a fellow human being. It is our *ch'e* to be able to cooperate with our fellow human beings, be filial to our parents, be loyal to our government, be trustworthy with our friends, and so on. Similarly, *yong* refers to the actualization of our virtuous potential. Our *ch'e* as human beings turns into *yong* when we actually cooperate with our fellow human beings, act as good sons and daughters, loyal subjects, trustworthy friends, and so on.

The tension arising from the confusion of the ideal with real was exacerbated by the Neo-Confucian understanding of who we are. Human beings are defined by Confucianism as social beings. In fact, that is one of the reasons Confucians say that human beings are endowed with virtue at birth. They are born to interact with their fellow human beings, and proper interpersonal interaction is the very definition of virtue. Moreover, as those infants grow up, they remain defined by the sum total of all their interrelationships. Who a human being is, is defined by the roles that human being plays in society: parent, child, subject, student, official, friend, etc. Outside of the roles they are supposed to play and the interpersonal relationships those roles entail, human beings have no specific identity. It is therefore in the very nature of human beings to interact properly with everyone and everything that surrounds them, since it is those interactions that give them their identity as human beings. However, and this is where the tension arises, they are also individuals (since each particular nexus of inter-relationships constituting a human being is distinct from every other such nexus) and as such often act at odds with their social responsibilities.

Virtue in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism means at core to interact harmoniously with our social and natural environment, to play our assigned roles within the larger community no matter what our individual proclivities might be. We can see this in the importance placed on the Five Relationships (the five most important pairs of human interactions, between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, older sibling and younger sibling, and friends, and the virtues that govern them) as well as on the virtues of *in* (benevolence or being truly human C. *ren*), *ch'ung* (fulfilling our responsibilities in society C. *zhong* 忠), and *sō* (treating others as we ourselves want to be treated C. *shu* 恕). In other words, to be virtuous means to always think and act as a member of a community rather than as an isolated individual. We should always take into account the impact of our actions on those around us, because those who surround us and interact with us actually define who we are. Yet at the same time Confucians recognized that it is specific individuals, not groups, who are the actual actors. Therefore they had to find some way to reconcile the individuality of actors with the social nature of those actors and their interactions. They had to navigate between the inevitability that it is always an "I" that acts and the ethical imperative that we should always act as a "we."

The sophisticated metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism gives us terminology to clarify that tension. Our hearts-and-minds are identified with *li* (理), which means that we are one with the universe, or at least with the all-encompassing cosmic

network of appropriate interactions (that is how *li* in Neo-Confucianism should normally be understood). But at the same time we can only act as specific configurations of *ki* (C. *qi* 氣) within an environment formed by other specific configurations of *ki*. *Ki*, since it is the stuff out of which all things in the universe are made, can serve as a unifying force but, since it coagulates into separate and distinct things, it also serves as a divisive force. We see the emphasis on *ki* as a unifying force in the statement by ZHANG Zai (張載 1020–1077) in his *Western Inscription* that “that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.” (De Bary and Bloom 1999: 683) We see the emphasis on *ki* as a individualizing force in the famous statement by Yulgok Yi I (栗谷 李珥 1536–1584) that “*li* is universal, pervading everything, but *ki* is limiting in that it forms into separate and distinct configurations,” (*It’ong-giguk* C. *litong qiju* 理通氣局) (Yi I 1958: 10: 26a).

Korean Confucians focused a lot of attention on the individualizing impact of *ki* and therefore were more conscious of the dangers posed by our social and material environment (the *ki* realm) than most Confucians in other countries were. Because of their focus on the hazards entailed by the necessity of operating within the *ki* realm, Korean Confucians felt sharply the contradiction between the assumption of human moral perfectibility (that virtue is innate in human beings) and the reality of human moral frailty (that few, if any, humans are morally perfect). That sensitivity to human moral frailty stimulated the Four-Seven debate, which is often pointed to as the earliest manifestation of Korean philosophical creativity and a distinctive Korean approach to Neo-Confucian philosophy.

## 2 The Four-Seven Debate

The key issue in that famous “Four-Seven Debate,” often misinterpreted as primarily an abstract metaphysical debate, was how best to be virtuous. It arose from different approaches to the struggle to live an ethical life in an often unethical world. Chosŏn dynasty Neo-Confucians were practical men, searching for tools to help them live moral lives. They wanted to know how far they could trust their own feelings and how wary they should be of the world around them. They believed such knowledge would help them choose the most effective methods of self-discipline and moral self-cultivation. The debate over the relationship between the Four Fonts (*sadan* C. *siduan* 四端) and the Seven Emotions (*ch’iljŏng* C. *qiqing* 七情), as well as the later debates over the relationship between human nature and animal nature, were attempts to answer such questions and define key Confucian concepts in order to clarify the process by which men could eliminate selfish thoughts, eradicate immoral actions and foster their inborn tendency to do what was right (C. Chung 1985; E. Chung 1995; Pae 1985; Han’guk ch’ŏrhak hoe 1982; Santangelo 1990).

The divergent approaches to explaining the relationship between the four fonts of virtue and the seven emotions which arose in the sixteenth century shaped the currents and contours of Korean Neo-Confucian thought and practice for the remaining

three centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty. Both the questions Korean Neo-Confucians raised and the answers they proposed for those questions in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were often variants of and elaborations on the questions and answers first introduced in the sixteenth. Many of the differences in philosophical orientation as well as in spirituality among Korea's Neo-Confucian yangban elite in the second half of the Chosŏn dynasty had their origins in the dynamic generated by the original Four-Seven Debate late in the first half. When they made the decision to pursue sagehood, to cultivate the moral character to which all Confucians were supposed to aspire, Chosŏn dynasty Neo-Confucians after 1600 often had to first decide which stance they would adopt toward the relationship of *li* and *ki* to the four fonts of virtue and the seven emotions. In other words, they had to decide whether they were followers of T'oegye Yi Hwang (退溪 李滉 1501–70) or of Yulgok Yi I.

This split between pro-T'oegye and pro-Yulgok camps lasted as long as it did partially because both sides could draw on textual support from ambiguities in the Neo-Confucianism imported from China in which they both were rooted. More significant, however, was the relevance of the Four-Seven debate and the issues it addressed to Korean Confucian moral concerns. As early as the sixteenth century, those moral concerns had developed in two contrasting directions, one manifested in T'oegye's moral pessimism and analytical approach, in which he focused on differentiating between the Four Fonts and the Seven Emotions and their roles in stimulating human behavior, and the other in Yulgok's ethical optimism and preference for synthesis, displayed in his preference for viewing the Four Fonts and the Seven Emotions as intertwined.

T'oegye's philosophical pessimism and Yulgok's philosophical optimism generated differences in the ways those two Neo-Confucian scholars understood and explained the concepts of *li* and *ki* and how they believed those two primary Neo-Confucian formative forces of the cosmos were related both to each other and to the human quest for moral perfection. *li*, sometimes translated as "principle," and *ki*, sometimes translated as "material force," have a much wider range of reference than any single English translation can encompass and therefore leave themselves open to a wide variety of readings and interpretations.

When *li* first appeared in ancient Chinese writings, it referred more to patterns than to metaphysical principles (Chan 1963: 260–61). However, by the time the Song philosopher ZHU Xi (朱熹 1130–1200) wove his foundational Neo-Confucian synthesis in the twelfth century, *li* had become the fundamental normative force in the cosmos, serving as both those moral principles by which human beings should guide their lives and as those invisible directive patterns of interaction which defined, generated, and sustained all appropriate activity within the human community as well as within the natural world. *Ki* underwent a similar transformation. At first more a medical than a philosophical concept, *ki* originally meant the air that sustains life and gives it energy (Veith 1973). That term gradually expanded in meaning until, in the hands of the Song founders of Neo-Confucianism in the twelfth century, *ki* became the fundamental stuff out of which everything that



existed, including both the mind and the body and all material and immaterial phenomena, were formed into distinct entities and processes by *li* (Chan 1963: 634–38).

The Neo-Confucianism that gave *li* and *ki* such philosophical import represented more than an attempt to merely understand the cosmos and the place of human beings within it in terms of the interaction of *li* and *ki*. Neo-Confucianism was a philosophical response to the centuries-long Buddhist challenge to China's traditional values and ethical standards. As such, it represented an attempt to provide a moral metaphysics, a philosophical grounding for morality in which the Buddhist claim that the world of human experience was unreal was countered by the claim that it was the world of human relationships, formed and governed by moral obligations, which constituted ultimate reality. In a philosophy as focused on morality and ethics as Neo-Confucianism was, *li* and *ki* could never be merely abstract metaphysical or ontological concepts but necessarily carried moral import as well. It is this moral import of *li* and *ki* that generated the divisions between the T'oegye school and the Yulgok school in the Four-Seven debate. Both T'oegye and Yulgok, and their followers, read into *li* and *ki* their particular assumptions about the moral character of the universe and of the human beings who lived within it.

### 3 The Moral Rationale for T'oegye's Analytical Approach

T'oegye and his followers had a strong sense of humanity's moral frailty, of how difficult it was to consistently adhere to the high Confucian standards of selflessness and self-control. They tended to emphasize the gap between *li*, seen as the normative pattern governing human interactions within the human community and with the natural world in general, and *ki*, seen as the physical world that sometimes hinders the smooth operation of *li*. This *li-ki* gap led to corresponding gaps between the four fonts and the seven emotions, between a human being's moral mind and a man or woman's human mind, between human nature and physical nature, and between the mind in the pre-activated state and the engaged mind. In each case, the second half of each paired term represented the greater influence of *ki*, and therefore greater potential moral danger.

Consequently, followers of T'oegye stressed quiet sitting, "abiding in reverence" (*chugyŏng* C. *zhujing* 主敬), as a way to steel the *li* of the mind for the encounter with the world of *ki* outside (Kalton 1988). T'oegye and his disciples assumed that "abiding in reverence," cultivating calm mindfulness before confronting the dangers the body's *ki*-generated selfish emotions as well as the stimuli of the *ki*-generated external world posed to appropriate interactions, was the most effective way to keep selfish thoughts or emotions from leading them astray. This led them to focus more on *li*, the patterns defining appropriately selfless interactions, than on the *ki*-generated entities and events they interacted with. Over the centuries, because of their distrust of the *ki* realm, their ethical principles came more and more to resemble a form of asceticism, with a strong stress on the control of desire, which they

understood as generated by *ki*. They are sometimes known as the “*churip’a*” (*C. zhulipai* 主理派), since they emphasized the priority of *li* over *ki*, a priority often expressed in practical terms as the need for the moral mind to rule the physical body.

T’oegye couched his moral vision in cosmic and metaphysical terms because his cosmos was a moral cosmos and his metaphysics was a moral metaphysics. Appropriate interrelationships (*li*) were for him the ultimate reality. Human beings existed only in interactions with the people and the world around them. To be fully human, they had to ensure that in those interactions they put thoughts of personal interest aside and instead played their proper roles in the overall social and natural order. Ironically, T’oegye and many of his followers limited their participation in government, though that was usually considered the proper role of a Confucian scholar. However, their distrust of factions and other manifestations of what they perceived as the influence of *ki* over politics led them to often prefer withdrawal from public life in order to cultivate their moral character in the peace and quiet of their home villages instead.

T’oegye discovered that, even for those who withdraw from the *ki*-dominated political arena, moral cultivation was no easy task, since human beings always and everywhere were ensnared in a material web (*ki*) which countered the universalizing tendency of *li* by separating one human being from another and human beings from nature. If the cosmic moral pattern T’oegye envisioned is seen as a checkerboard of dynamic alternating black and red squares, T’oegye could be said to emphasize how the color of a black square separated it from its red neighbors. The material structure of the pattern thus contained the seeds of individualism and selfishness.

Yulgok and his followers, on the other hand, focused on *ki*’s role in providing both the arena and the tools for moral struggle. If they, too, had seen the moral cosmic pattern as a checkerboard, they would have stressed the interdependency of both red and black squares in creating that pattern. They insisted that *li* without *ki* was empty, just as *ki* without *li* was shapeless. Emphasizing *li*’s functions within *ki* rather than the differences between *li* and *ki*, they were less inclined to see *ki* as the root of all evil and more inclined to play an active role in the *ki*-filled world of politics and government. For this reason, they are often known as the “*chugip’a*” (*C. zhuqipai* 主氣派). In their eyes, “exhausting principle” (*kungni C. qiongli* 窮理), doing your utmost within the arena constituted by *ki* to act in accordance with the moral patterns identified with *li*, was more important than quietly abiding in reverence and contemplating those moral patterns (Yi I 1958: XIX–XXVI).

Yulgok and his followers de-emphasized the divisions within the mind which T’oegye’s followers had highlighted. Though they too saw the need to keep selfish desires under control, they recognized that human beings had to operate within the moral arena *ki* provided. They downplayed differences between the Four Fonts and the Seven Emotions, between the moral mind and the human mind, between human nature and physical nature, and between the quiescent mind and the activated mind, differences that tended to stress the dangers inherent in the physical and social environment in which people lived, acted, and interacted. Yulgok and his followers feared that T’oegye drew too sharp a line between morality and reality, resulting in

an over-emphasis on quiet sitting and ascetic practices that could lead to withdrawal from society and an abdication of moral responsibility.

Despite differences of emphasis, both approaches shared a common language and common assumptions. Both agreed with ZHU Xi and other orthodox Chinese Neo-Confucians that *li* and *ki* were the fundamental forces creating and sustaining the universe. Both agreed that *li* in human beings represented a universalizing tendency, a disposition to work within the normative cosmic pattern, and that *ki* represented its opposite, an individualizing tendency to work against and outside of that pattern. Both associated *li* with impartiality, cooperation, and unity. Both associated *ki* with bias, selfishness, and differentiation. And both agreed that debates over the relationship between *li* and *ki*, and over human nature, were essentially debates over how to be moral, and therefore should be decided on ethical rather than logical grounds.

The moral concern at the heart of both T'oegye's and Yulgok's philosophies is reflected in their respective formulations of the relationship between *li* and the Four Fonts of virtue with *ki* and the Seven Emotions. The Four Fonts are those instinctive human tendencies of commiseration, shame, modesty, and moral judgment that Mencius pointed to as evidence of humanity's innate goodness (Van Norden 2008: 149). The Seven Emotions are those fundamental feelings ascribed to human beings in the *Book of Rites*: joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, hatred, and desire (Legge 1967: I: 379).

T'oegye drew a sharp line between the Four Fonts and the Seven Emotions in order to distinguish between those sentiments which can be trusted and those feelings which can lead people astray. In a famous letter to KI Taesŭng (奇大升 1527–72), T'oegye penned the often quoted and often debated lines, “In the case of the Four Fonts, *li* issues them and *ki* follows them, while in the case of the Seven Emotions, *ki* issues them and *li* mounts them” (Yi Hwang 1980: 16: 32a; Lee et al. 1993: 627).

This standard translation of those lines obscures the implications for moral cultivation of that formula. Only those who understand that T'oegye is talking about *li* as the dynamic normative force that directs men away from the pursuit of individual self-interest into their proper roles in society can understand why he insists that it is *li* rather than *ki* that generates the Four Fonts. Only those who know that he is talking about *ki* in terms of its individualizing impact that separates human beings from one another and encourages them to pursue their own selfish self-interest can understand why he insists that it is *ki* rather than *li* that generates the more self-centered Seven Emotions.

A paraphrase of T'oegye's formula might make clearer what he was trying to say:

*The Four Fonts are generated by the human tendency to act in accordance with the cosmic pattern of appropriate interrelationships [li] but, when those instinctive feelings are generated, the tendency to act for oneself rather than as part of the whole [ki] follows behind. The Seven Emotions are generated by the individualizing tendency to pursue one's self-interest apart from that cosmic pattern [ki] but the universalizing tendency to act in accordance with that pattern [li] rides along.*



T'oegye did not link the relationship between *li* and *ki* to the differences between the Four Fonts and the Seven Emotions merely to make a philosophical point about the ultimate nature of reality. He was offering practical advice to Kŏ Taesŭng, encouraging him to beware of feelings such as joy, anger, love, or hate which reflect self-interest and to cultivate instead feelings such as commiseration and shame which show a regard for others. T'oegye asserted that "In the case of the Four Fonts, *li* issues them and *ki* follows *li*" in order to warn his friend to beware of selfish desires lurking in the back of his mind even when he is primarily motivated by moral impulses. At the same time T'oegye did not want Kŏ Taesŭng to become too pessimistic about the possibility of acting morally, adding to his warnings about selfishness being able to contaminate the noblest of motives the consolation that "in the case of the Seven Emotions, *ki* issues them and *li* mounts them." In other words, even when people were moved by less altruistic emotions, they could still direct those emotions to the common good.

T'oegye's main point was that it is essential that emotions (the Four Fonts) which move us to act properly be clearly distinguished from those emotions (the Seven Emotions) which can mislead us into putting our individual interests ahead of the interests and needs of others. In that same letter, he told Kŏ,

*If you feel uncomfortable with such analysis and prefer to stress commonality over differences, then you will be guilty of what men of old called 'swallowing a large piece of fruit in one gulp.' This is no small error. Before you know it, you will make the serious mistake of treating sŏng [human nature C. xing 性] as though it were nothing more than ki. This will lead to a disastrous situation in which you confuse li with base human desires. (Yi Hwang 1980: 16: 23b; Lee et al. 1993: 619)*

Since human nature to T'oegye took the standard Neo-Confucian meaning of the natural human tendency to respond appropriately and selflessly in both social and natural environments, and *ki* referred to the individualizing force which encourages people to pursue their own self-interest, Toegye's concluding sentences might be read as warning Kŏ against risking:

*making the serious mistake of treating the natural human tendency to respond appropriately in both social and natural environments [human nature] as though it were the same as the individualizing tendency [ki] which draws people away from acting properly. This could lead to a disastrous situation in which you confuse the cosmic normative pattern that encourages you to act as you should act with base human desires that have the opposite effect and instead encourage the pursuit of individual self-interest.*

T'oegye used the conceptual tools of analysis and division to highlight the dangers that lurk along the road to virtue. Yet the ultimate objective of Neo-Confucians remained that of overcoming division in order to act in unison with the cosmic moral pattern of appropriate interrelationships. Yulgok feared that T'oegye's analytical scalpel would hinder more than it helped moral progress, since once fissures are introduced, unity is difficult to restore. In Yulgok's view, T'oegye's focus on the dangers of the world of *ki* undermined an energizing vision of underlying unity and made moral union with that world a more elusive goal.

## 4 The Ethical Reasoning Behind Yulgok's Differences with T'oegye

Yulgok agreed with T'oegye that *li* was a unifying centripetal force pulling the various elements and processes in the cosmos into cosmic harmony, while *ki* played more of a centrifugal disjunctive role, generating separation and fragmentation. In a phrase often cited by his disciples, Yulgok wrote that *li* is universal, penetrating everywhere, but *ki* is limited and limiting, forming specific individual configurations (Yi I 1958: 10: 26a). That does not necessarily mean the *ki* is always the cause of disharmony and evil in this world, however. In Yulgok's view, T'oegye is wrong to assert all that is good is a result of movement ("generation" 發) by *li*, and all movement by *ki* is dangerous.

If *li* can be found in every nook and cranny of the universe without discrimination or favor, then it is incapable of movement, for movement implies movement from one place to another and *li*, since it is everywhere, has no place to move. How could a universal, all-comprehensive pattern move? All movement that occurs must be movement within the pattern rather than movement of the pattern. Since that pattern is nothing other than a dynamic network of appropriate interactions, the pattern determines what moves and what direction and orientation movements should take. But the pattern itself, as pattern, is unchangeable and therefore immovable.

Consequently, Yulgok rejects T'oegye's suggestion that the Four Fonts are generated by the universalizing tendency (*li*), with the individualizing tendency (*ki*) following behind, and the Seven Emotions are generated by the individualizing tendency, with the universalizing tendency going along for the ride. He writes instead that all human emotions, whether the Four Fonts of Virtue or the morally ambiguous Seven Emotions, are generated by *ki*, though every time *ki* generates such an emotion, *li* rides along to provide direction. In other words, all human emotional responses to the social or natural environment are generated by the individualizing tendency of matter and energy to form finite and specific configurations and interactions (*ki*), though in every such case the universalizing tendency to act in accordance with the cosmic pattern of appropriate interactions (*li*) rides along to provide direction (Yi I 1958: 10: 26b–27b).

How successful *li* is in providing direction is what determines good and evil. Movement that is in accordance with the normative pattern, for example any emotion that resonates with the cosmic network of harmonious interactions, is good. Movement contrary to the normative pattern, any emotion that works against that web of selfless harmony, is evil. But, since it is *ki* that moves in both cases, it is a mistake to declare, as T'oegye does, that good is generated by *li* and evil by *ki*. In Yulgok's view, T'oegye's singular focus on the pattern of appropriate relationships as defining what is good causes him to forget that it is the appropriate interaction of individual elements within that pattern, elements composed of *ki*, that constitutes that pattern.

Yulgok thought T'oegye made a dangerous error when he drew his sharp line between a person's innate inner goodness (human nature, their natural tendency to

act in accordance with *li*) and their physical responses to their environment (generated by their physical nature, which is composed of *ki* and can encourage separation from, rather than integration into, the normative network of appropriate interactions). Such a separation splits not only the Four Fonts from the Seven Emotions but also severs a person's moral mind from their human mind, their human nature from their physical nature, and their pre-activated mind from their engaged mind.<sup>1</sup>

Warned Yulgok,

*T'oegye's approach splits a person in half, putting his original nature in the east and his physical nature in the west. If we accept his analysis, we would also have to separate the moral mind from the human mind, saying that the moral mind originates in the east and that the human mind originates in the west. Does that make any sense? ....Such wild talk, at odds with the way things really are, can only led to behavior equally off the mark. ... Positing such a split in human nature actually makes it much more difficult to act appropriately in our relationships with our fellow human beings.* (Yi I 1958: 10: 29b–30a)

Yulgok's refusal to divide either human beings or the universe into antagonistic components of *li* and *ki* led him to adopt a different approach to moral self-cultivation than that espoused by T'oegye. He was not afraid of the world of individuals and differentiation and disagreed with T'oegye's prescription of "abiding in reverence" (quiet sitting) as the best way to discover which moral patterns should guide a person's behavior. He argued instead that the patterns that should govern a person's life, the *li* that should guide a person's interactions with his fellow human beings and with the world around him, are best sought in the material world outside, rather than in the mental world within. Reaching out to the world in order to cultivate sincerity (the practice of appropriate selfless interactions 誠) was Yulgok's prescription for self-control (Pae 1974: 99–101, 114–117).

True to the moral pragmatism of his Neo-Confucian tradition, Yulgok offered concrete examples of the moral efficacy of the *ki* world of differentiation and individuals. He pointed out that the virtue of loyalty is a response to the difference between a subject and his ruler. Likewise, filial piety is a response evoked by the distinction between a son and his parents. Without the differences between subjects and rulers and between children and parents, the virtues of loyalty and filial piety could not exist. Therefore these virtues are not only generated by the universalizing pattern, as T'oegye would have it, but are also enabled by the differences created by the individualizing force of *ki* in the physical world, without which they would not be possible (Yi I 1958: 10: 6a–b).

On such ethical grounds, Yulgok rejected the *li-ki* moral dualism of T'oegye for a vision that placed *li* within *ki* rather than outside it. He believed that it was not by sheltering themselves from the temptations of the world but by searching that world

<sup>1</sup>The locus classicus for the moral mind/ human mind distinction is the phrase in the "Counsels of Yu" section of the *Book of History* (Legge 1972: 61) that is usually translated as "the mind of man is precarious: the moral mind is subtle" (Chan 1963: 623–26). The pre-activated mind/ engaged mind distinction refers to the mind before there are any stirrings of emotions and the mind once those emotions have stirred, as mentioned first in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Plaks 2003: 25). The human nature/physical nature distinction is elaborated upon, and made an important philosophical distinction, by Zhu Xi and other early Neo-Confucians.

for appropriate guidelines to moral action, and then acting in accordance with those guidelines, that people would be able to engage in selfless and harmonious interaction with the peoples, things, and processes around them. In other words, human beings could become sages only if they stayed within the world, not if they withdrew from it. Yulgok revised T'oegye's Four-Seven formula in order to make this last point clear and help his disciples avoid the enhanced difficulties for moral cultivation that he believed following T'oegye's advice would bring.

Because he emphasized action within the world over preparation for such action, Yulgok emphasized sincerity over reverence. Sincerity (*sŏng C. cheng* 誠) means much more than the way it is often understood in the West. It doesn't mean merely saying what you mean and doing what you say. In the Neo-Confucian world, sincerity means to be appropriately responsive and unselfishly cooperative in every situation. In other words, it means to think and act in all interactions as a responsible member of the human community rather than as a self-centered individual.

When a human being interacts with another human being, he or she is not sitting quietly but instead is active. An active human being is a human being energized by emotions, both those urging selfless actions and those urging selfish actions. Yulgok, who insisted that all our emotions are generated by *ki*, assumed that our heart-mind could nonetheless distinguish between selfless and selfish emotions by observing where they were leading us. Our heart-mind, since it embodies *li*, can steer us in the right direction, enabling us to behave with sincerity. That is why Yulgok argued that, though *ki* generates all our emotions, *li* can ride along to provide direction (Ro 1989).

Both T'oegye and Yulgok, as well as most Chosŏn Neo-Confucians who followed them, evaluated ideas primarily in terms of their ethical implications and whether they helped us counter our own moral frailty and act in accordance with our own innate moral tendencies. If an idea or assertion appeared to promote selflessness and self-discipline, it merited further consideration. It was also important to determine if that idea contradicted the Classics or not, since agreement with the Classics was important, and whether it was logical or not, since irrationality was rejected. However, the most important criterion was its behavioral impact. How belief in that particular assertion affected the behavior of those who believed it was their primary concern. Moral pragmatism was the favored epistemology of Korea's Neo-Confucian scholars (Baker 1999).

As a twentieth-century Korean scholar has noted, for T'oegye, truth was "basically subjective practical knowledge that is directly related to moral conduct"<sup>2</sup> (Yun 1990: 31). The same could be said of Yulgok, as can be seen in his rejection of T'oegye's analytical approach to moral psychology as untrue because it would make "it much more difficult to act appropriately in our relationships with our fellow human beings." Sŏngho Yi Ik (星湖 李瀼 1681–1763), one of T'oegye followers, placed the same priority on pragmatic ethical considerations two centuries later

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<sup>2</sup>Yun adds "the kind of truth that was T'oegye's main focus is the kind of practical knowledge or truth needed for the practice of morality rather than the objective sort of truth that is truth for the sake of truth" (Yun 1990: 46).

when he wrote that, in judging the beliefs of others, it made no difference whether those people were “orthodox” or not if they did not do what they were supposed to do. (Yi Ik 1982: 371–72). Sŏngho’s own disciple AN Chŏngbok (安鼎福 1712–1791) made a similar point, writing to a friend in 1783 that he should not rely on verbal arguments alone in deciding what to believe but should instead test the practical applicability of ideas in order to determine their acceptability (An 1970: VIII: 28b).

This pragmatic ethical criterion for truth meant that philosophical positions were often interpretations of personal moral experience. In the generations following the debate between T’oegye and Yulgok over how safe immersion in the world was, Chosŏn Confucians grew increasingly frustrated with their inability to achieve the sagehood which Confucian texts told them lay within their reach. Their heightened awareness of moral frailty expressed itself philosophically in an increased sensitivity to metaphysical, psychological, and moral tension between the realm of *li* and the world of *ki*, leading to more frequent and more urgent calls for rigid control of the emotions by the mind. Within T’oegye’s *churip’a*, there was increasing insistence on the primacy of *li* and the asceticism that implied. Within Yulgok’s *chugip’a*, there was growing awareness that *ki* might pose more of a moral threat than Yulgok had acknowledged. As a result, a dispute over human nature arose among followers of Yulgok.

## 5 Ethical Optimism and Moral Tension in the Yulgok School

In the world as seen by Yulgok’s followers, in which universalizing (*li*) and individualizing (*ki*) tendencies intermingled on the same plane, there was a weaker sense of moral tension than in the world conceived by T’oegye, in which universalizing and selfless *li* stood above, apart and hopefully insulated from individualizing and selfish *ki*. To Yulgok’s disciples, the mind, the body, and world outside were all *ki*, all configurations of the individualizing force of matter and energy. Yet they all were also informed by the universalizing network that governed appropriate interactions. Since *li*, with its directive power, was everywhere and within everything, there was no need to fear emotions or to avoid involvement in worldly affairs. To be moral, all a person had to do was to follow the patterns of unselfish appropriate interactions which they could find within their own mind and within the world around them. This optimistic approach to sagehood implied that to be virtuous was natural. While the pursuit of moral perfection required some effort, self-discipline consisted more of the mind uncovering *li*, recognizing the moral network and allowing its natural directive power to operate unhindered, than of the mind asserting control over a recalcitrant body in a perilous world.

Some in the Yulgok school found such a sanguine depiction of the cultivation of a virtuous character unrealistic. Frustrated by their own inability to eliminate selfishness from their lives, they saw that moral frailty as evidence that the gap between *li* and *ki* was greater than they had been led to believe. One such pessimist, HAN



Wŏnjin (韓元震 1682–1751), was still within Yulgok's camp, so he did not push *li* and *ki* into separate realms, as T'oegye had done. Han allowed room for moral tension by focusing on the universal intermingling of *li* and *ki* which meant that no place was safe from the selfish tendencies *ki* could generate.

Han originated the dispute over the uniqueness of human nature which split Yulgok's followers in the eighteenth century. He asserted that human nature was unique, and not the same as the nature shared by animals and other sentient beings. He argued that, while human beings are endowed with a superior *ki* and thus have the potential to be fully virtuous, lesser beings receive only a partial endowment of *ki* and cannot be expected to display humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom (Han 1976: 19: 6b–9b). Moreover, Han found that only sages are born with such high quality *ki* that their *li* easily shines through. For most of us, to be virtuous is not easy. We must rise above the rest of the material world and resist the pull of our animal nature if we are to maintain self-control and live moral lives.

To do that requires strenuous effort. Han even provided a four-point program for such an effort: (1) make a firm decision to do what is right, (2) comprehensively discern the normative pattern, (3) discipline yourself in accordance with that vision, (4) exert effort to consistently and ceaselessly maintain a reverent attitude and act without any thought of personal gain. At part of their effort to live moral lives, Han contended, human beings must work to control and conquer their physical desires (Kim 1980: 196–220).

That task is made more difficult by the compound character of human nature. People are not pure good within, Han argued. Since the mind is a mixture of *ki* and *li*, of both selfish and selfless tendencies, rather than pure untainted *li*, it is a mistake to see the mind as free from selfishness when left undisturbed by the outside world. He disagreed with T'oegye's followers that there is a moral mind, separate and distinct from the human mind, to which men could retreat. He did not accept the notion of a pure and untainted quiescent mental state preceding the activation of the mind (Han 1976: 30: 1a–7a). For HAN Wŏnjin, there was no sanctuary from the battle against evil. Everywhere and at all times, people had to be on their guard against *ki*, whose tendency to break the cosmos up into individual and distinct fragments hindered the universalizing and unifying influence of *li* and made it more difficult for people to engage in the harmonious cooperation with their fellow human beings that was their moral duty.

HAN Wŏnjin did not believe evil arises because people choose to be selfish. Rather, he argued that evil arises because people allow the particularizing and alienating effect of *ki* to raise barriers to the integrating and harmonizing effect of *li*. Given how strong a barrier to selflessness *ki* can be, people had to exert constant effort to remain free from selfishness so that they could spontaneously act in accordance with *li*, the universal network of unselfish harmonious interrelationships. Without continual self-restraint, *ki*, and with it individual self-interest, would triumph.

HAN's friend YI Kan (李柬 1677–1727) argued against Han's pessimistic turn. YI countered that, since human nature was *li*, it was the same as the nature of animals

and all other beings. He focused more on the common moral pattern of appropriate relationships that bind all existing things together than on how human beings differ from animals and other objects (Yi Kan 1990: 12: 10b–14b). He also insisted that the mind was pure and clear in its quiescent and pre-activated state and that this essential goodness carries over into the activated, engaged mind. Otherwise, he worried, without that spillover from our innate reservoir of altruism, how could our selfish tendencies be brought under control? (Yi Kan 1990: 12: 14b–25b).

Yi Kan saw evil originating from selfishness due more to a failure to recognize that *li*'s universalizing effect touches everything than to *ki*'s functioning as an individualizing force. Underneath the superficial differences and divisions that separate one human being from another and human beings from nature, Yi Kan believed there was an underlying fundamental unity. This *li* was present wherever individual configurations of *ki* were found, so how could *ki* be inherently dangerous? More optimistic than Han, Yi Kan concluded that self-discipline required only that the *li* within *ki* be allowed to play its natural role of commander, so that commonality would overcome fragmentation. Rather than blaming *ki*, Yi concentrated instead on letting *li* function unhindered. He feared that Han's approach would limit the realm in which *li* reigned and would make self-control seem too difficult and unnatural.

## 6 Tasan and the Search for Supernatural Assistance Against Moral Frailty

A few decades after Han and Yi engaged in their debate over the relationship between the nature of human beings and the nature of animals, another Korean Neo-Confucian approached that question from a different angle. Tasan CHŎNG Yagyong (茶山 丁若鏞 1762–1836) was a member of the school that looked more to T'oegye than to Yulgok for direction. He also was influenced by Catholic writings when he was a young man. Being part of the T'oegye school gave him a particularly strong sense of human moral frailty. Ideas he picked up from Catholic missionary works published in China suggested to him novel (for a Confucian context) approaches to overcoming that moral frailty.

Responding to a question from King Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800) about the exchange between Gaozi and Mencius on whether or not human beings and animals share the same basic nature (Van Norden 2008: 145), Tasan says that it is true that human beings and animals have something in common: they both have a physical nature. However, he noted, unlike animals, human beings also have a moral nature. That is why we often have conflicting desires. We human beings often want something that we know we should not have or want to do something that we know we should not do. That makes us different from animals, which automatically follow their physical desires without any second thoughts. To say that humans 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 (Chŏng 1989: II: 6, 18b–19a).

In his commentary on the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Tasan clarifies his understanding of human nature. He writes that the line in the *Mean* “what heaven has ordained is called human nature” should be interpreted in light of how Mencius uses the term “human nature.” Tasan says Mencius clearly uses that term to mean “human desires,” both moral desires and desire for physical pleasure (Chǒng 1989: II: 3, 2b). Tasan points out that those two desires, the desire for the good of morality and the desire for the good of physical pleasure, are often in conflict. For example, he pointed out that if someone offers us a gift that could be interpreted as a bribe and therefore we know it would be wrong to accept it, we are torn between a desire for the pleasure that gift would give us and the desire to act appropriately and decline it. Similarly, if we find ourselves in a difficult situation but we know we should deal with that situation, we nevertheless are tempted to simply flee and abdicate our responsibilities (Chǒng 1989: II: 6, 19a).

This conclusion that human beings, though they have only one human nature, are often conflicted leads him to the logical, though non-orthodox, conclusion that human beings are not naturally virtuous. In fact, he argues, no one can be called virtuous until he or she acts in a virtuous manner. Only after you act benevolently toward another human being can you be called benevolent. Only after you entertain a guest with proper etiquette can you be called polite. Only after you act properly can you be called righteous. And only after you show that you can distinguish between right and wrong, and then act accordingly, can you be called wise (Chǒng 1989: II: 5, 22a–b).

The most we can say, he argues, is that human nature includes an instinctive attraction toward the moral good. In his commentary on the first chapter in the third book of Mencius (Van Norden 2008: 63), Tasan explicitly rejects ZHU Xi’s claim that human beings are endowed with a nature that is innately good without a trace of evil in it, a notion Tasan insists is based on ZHU Xi’s misreading of Mencius. Instead, Tasan points out, human beings are composite beings, formed from an intermingling of inseparable material and immaterial elements. Since that results in a natural desire for the moral good co-existing with a natural desire for the good of personal pleasure, Tasan says that we cannot say that human beings are naturally virtuous. However, since human nature includes an instinctive attraction toward the moral good, we can say that human nature is good. But we have to be aware that we also have a natural attraction for what is pleasurable, even if that goes contrary to what the moral side of our nature tells us is right (Chǒng 1989: II: 5, 32a–35b). Our heart-mind can recognize the difference between moral and immoral instincts, Tasan believed, but we have to choose (Tasan, unlike earlier Confucians, believed in free will) to make an effort to ensure our actions are guided by our moral rather than our immoral instincts. Tasan’s two-fold theory of human nature, a departure from centuries of Confucian orthodoxy, is clearly his attempt to explain the human moral frailty which he, and many other Korean Confucians, were very much aware of, and very much concerned about.

If human beings are not naturally virtuous, as Tasan concluded, then is it possible nonetheless for human beings to live moral lives? Tasan is still Confucian enough to answer in the affirmative, though he notes that living a moral life is not as easy as

mainstream orthodox Confucians would have us think. He points out that consistently doing the right way and sticking to the moral path is as difficult as climbing up a steep hill. Unfortunately, following our preference for physical pleasure is as easy as rolling down that same hill (Chǒng 1989: II: 5, 33a).

Tasan points out that the main reason we cannot say we are born virtuous is that, unlike animals, human beings, as noted earlier, have been endowed with free will, the ability to choose to do the right thing or to do the wrong thing (*chaju ji kwǒn* C.zizhu zhi quan 自主之權). Tasan goes on to elaborate that those who debate whether human nature is innately good or bad are ignorant of the fact that human nature is essentially defined by conflicting desires, and the ability to choose among them. It is what those desires are desires for, and whether they are nurtured or disregarded, which determines whether a person becomes virtuous or not. If we desire a moral good, and act in accordance with that desire, we become virtuous. However, if we let a selfish desire for personal pleasure or benefit guide our behavior, then we will become evil.

If human beings were born virtuous, as Neo-Confucians claim, 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, heaven has endowed human beings with 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 is what makes human beings different from animals. And that is what makes living a moral life an accomplishment. That is also the reason we condemn those who act immorally (Chǒng 1989: II: 5, 34b–35a).

Departing somewhat from the usual tendency of the T'oegye school to put all the blame for human immorality on the individualizing tendency of *ki*, Tasan warns against an oversimplified picture of what leads human beings toward a virtuous life, and what draws them down into vice. He decries the 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's our pride, based in our minds, that causes us to get angry in such a situation (Chǒng 1989: II: 5, 35a–b).

This is a significant change from the usual assumption that our mind-and-heart is, in its inner core, pure and virtuous and therefore should be cultivated so that it becomes strong enough to resist the temptations of the material world. If we are not instinctively virtuous, and if we can't even trust our minds to always tell us the right way to behave, then what can we do to ensure that we lead as moral a life as possible? Tasan again comes up with an untraditional answer, grounded in his untraditional

reading of the Confucian Classics. He says that we need to be shamed into acting appropriately. And the only way we can be sure that we will be ashamed every time we do something wrong is if we keep in mind that, always and everywhere, we are being watched to see if we think and act properly. Who can possibly watch us always and everywhere? There is only one possible answer: God above.

Tasan wielded an analytical scalpel which not only led him to draw a sharp line between human beings and animals but also led to him to argue for the necessity of recognizing the existence of a spiritual realm separate from the material realm, including purely spiritual beings. He found support for that latter assertion, the existence of purely spiritual beings, in his reading of the first chapter of the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

Tasan's assertion of the existence of a supreme spiritual being, whom he called *Sangje* (C. *Shangdi* 上帝), is not based merely on his preference for analysis over synthesis. It is also the result of his search for a tool for overcoming human moral frailty. Tasan interprets the famous opening passage in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, "What Heaven has conferred is called human nature," as stating that Heaven, by which he means the Lord Above [*Sangje*], endows every human being with a tendency to prefer the good over the non-good. That desire for the good is part of our human nature (Chǒng 1989: II: 3, 2b). However, he believes, we need an incentive to make sure that we follow our preference for the moral good rather than the good of physical pleasure.

He argues the Mean tells us what that incentive is a couple of lines later: "The exemplary person is cautious of what he cannot see and apprehensive of what he cannot hear" (Plaks 2003: 25). Tasan goes on to explain,

*What is it that we can't see? Heaven as it really is. What is it we can't hear? Heaven's voice. How do we know that is what this passage means? Because later on in the Doctrine of the Mean we can see the lines "Confucius said: The abundant power of spiritual beings is truly amazing! We look for them but cannot see them. We listen for them but cannot hear them. Yet the fact that they are all around us cannot be ignored. They stimulate the people of the world to purify themselves, and motivate them to wear appropriate clothes for participating in the sacrifices. They appear to be all around us, as though they are above us as well as on our left and on our right." (Plaks 2003: 33) What is it that we cannot see nor hear? It cannot be other than Heaven.*

*There is no human being born on this earth without base desires. What keeps us from following those desires and doing whatever we feel like doing? It is the fear that our misbehavior will be noticed. Noticed by whom? Whose gaze keeps us in a state of constant caution and apprehension? We are cautious and apprehensive because we know there are enforcement officers responsible for making sure rules are followed. We are cautious and apprehensive because we know our sovereign can punish us if we behave improperly. If we did not think there was someone watching us, would we not simply abandon all sense of moral responsibility and just do whatever we felt like doing?...*

*But what makes us behave properly even in the privacy of our own room and make sure that even our thoughts are proper thoughts? The only reason why a superior person is watchful over his thoughts and behavior even in the privacy of his own room is that he knows that there is a Lord Above (*Sangje*) watching him. If we think that the term *Sangje* is nothing by a metaphorical way of referring to li, then we wouldn't be cautious and apprehensive. After*



*all, since li is not a conscious being, it is unable to inspire caution and apprehension.*  
(Chǒng 1989: II: 3, 4b–5a)

Tasan goes on to say a couple of pages later, “Heaven’s numinous consciousness is able to look right into our hearts and minds. There is nothing it cannot see. There is nothing that we do or think that Heaven doesn’t know about. Even the bravest person can’t help but feel apprehensive when he realizes this” (Chǒng 1989: II: 3, 5b). This, for Tasan, provides a strong motivation for behaving properly, an incentive powerful enough to help us overcome our natural moral frailty.

Tasan created his unique theistic version of Confucianism not just because he read some Catholic missionary publications when he was young. After all, those books were read by plenty of Confucians in China and few of them made the same sort of argument for a Confucian God that Tasan made. Tasan’s theism, the reason some Catholic teachings appealed to him and the reason he incorporated some Catholic ideas into his Confucian philosophy, is clearly because he shared the strong Korean concern for human moral weakness and wanted to find a way to overcome it.

## 7 The Confucian Origins of the Tonghak Religion

Despite the obvious Catholic influence on his thinking, Tasan remained a Confucian, albeit a strikingly original one. The same cannot be said of CH’OE Cheu (崔濟愚 1824–1864). Ch’oe is revered today as the founder of Tonghak [Eastern Learning 東學], Korea’s first indigenous organized religion. Tonghak is usually described as a mixture of shamanistic, Daoist, Confucian, and even Catholic elements rather than as a new school of Confucian philosophy. Moreover, unlike Confucianism, Tonghak developed into a full-blown religion, with initiation rituals, sacred writings, regular congregational gatherings for worship rituals, and even a theology or at least more God-talk than is usually heard in Confucian discourse. However, a close look at Tonghak will reveal that it is much more Confucian at its core than is generally recognized and, in addition, it emerged out of the same search for a resolution to the frustrating contradiction between a belief in human moral perfectibility and a recognition of human moral frailty that underlay the many twists and turns of mainstream Confucian thought over the course of the Chosŏn dynasty.

CH’OE himself had a very frustrating life. As the son of a remarried widow, he was barred by Korean law from the high-status career in government that appealed to Confucian scholars. Yet, as the son of a Confucian scholar, he felt he could not simply climb down the social ladder and become a peasant, artisan, or merchant. He therefore sought for some way to make his mark on the world in a manner befitting what he perceived as his rightful social status. He sought to do so through spiritual training that he hoped would give him the insight into society and human nature necessary to be recognized as a sage by others. CH’OE retreated into Buddhist temples for prolonged meditation retreats but was unable to obtain there the spiritual breakthrough he sought (Beirne 2010: 15–35).

Finally, CH'OE tell us, in the fourth month of 1860, he came to realize why the world was in the poor state it was in his day, and how it could be improved. He did not reach this realization on his own. Instead, God (*Sangje*) personally revealed it to him. He learned that, in the days of old, people were virtuous because they “revered heaven and tried to act in accordance with the principles of heaven.” However, in more recent times people had forgotten who God was and instead “tended to do whatever they felt like doing instead of acting in accordance with heavenly principles.” Concerned about this, God decided to intervene directly in the world by appointing Ch'oe to “teach human beings the right way to do things” (Buswell 2007: 455–57).

There are two points in Ch'oe's prescription to right the wrongs of the world that suggest that he was inspired by his own frustration at his inability to obtain through his own efforts the sagehood Confucianism taught him was obtainable, and by his recognition that no one else around him appeared to be any more successful in becoming a sage than he was. The first was his reaching out for divine intervention, his affirmation in the belief in a God who could help us obtain the strength we could not obtain without recognizing God's existence. The second point can be found in one of his prescriptions for cultivating the ability to do God's will.

CH'OE's theism (he clearly believed in the existence of a Lord Above whose existence human beings could confirm through their own personal experience) at first would suggest that he had strayed far from the Confucian fold. In the Neo-Confucianism that dominated Korean philosophical and religious life during the Chosŏn dynasty, any references to a God were metaphorical, used to emphasize the importance of the impersonal cosmic patterns of appropriate interactions that defined right and wrong. Tasan took the theistic language of the ancient Confucian Classics more literally and insisted that Sangje, the Lord Above, was an actual personality. However, even Tasan did not talk with Sangje the way CH'OE claimed he had done.

Yet, if we examine more carefully the way CH'OE talked about his God, we can see clear signs of Neo-Confucian influence as well as evidence that he used belief in God to offset human moral frailty. We see the Neo-Confucian influence in the fact that God, for CH'OE, is not only transcendent but also immanent (Ch'oe 2009: 88–89). God tells CH'OE “my heart is your heart” (Beirne 2010: 58). This could be read as a theological rephrasing of the standard Neo-Confucian claim that *li* not only directs the entire universe, it is also the fundamental substance of the human heart-and-mind. In other words, God saying “my heart is your heart” is simply a theistic reformulation of the phrase “the heart-and-mind is *li*.”

CH'OE's insistence on using a term that refers to a supernatural personality rather than the impersonal term *li* can be understood as his way of ensuring that the transcendent nature of the moral force governing the universe is not overshadowed by its immanence. This is a reflection of a tendency prevalent in Korean Confucianism. Compared to Chinese Confucians, Koreans have generally shown a greater distrust of reliance on our subjective moral judgments. That is why the call by the Chinese Neo-Confucian WANG Yang-ming (王陽明 1472–1529) for us to look within our own heart-and-mind for moral guidance was condemned by T'oegye and subse-

quently did not win much acceptance in Korea (Baker 1999: 199). CH'OE, sharing the traditional Korean preference for an objective ground for subjective moral decisions, felt compelled to ground his moral principles and self-cultivation practices in an external source, much as Tasan did with his call for belief in personal God who watched our every thought and deed. Moreover, CH'OE also felt that such an external moral force would have more power than impersonal *li* had to inspire us to act properly. Sounding a lot like Tasan, CH'OE wrote in one of his poems, "If we do not have a mind filled with reverence and awe, even if we know everything there is to know about heaven and earth, then we really do not know anything at all" (Ch'öndogyo 1993: 216).

The second sign of Confucian influence, as well as of his recognition of human moral frailty, can be seen in one of his prescriptions for cultivating the ability to do God's will. CH'OE's better known proposals for accessing supernatural power, his sacred talisman and his sword dance, have links to shamanism and Korea's folk religion rather than to Confucianism (Ch'oe 2009: 155–66). However, when CH'OE asserts that human beings need to "preserve our original moral heart-and-mind and rectify our psycho-physical endowment" (*sushim chǒnggi* C. *shouxin zhengqi* 修心正氣), he sounds much like an orthodox Confucian.

There is an ambiguity in Ch'oe's call for us to "*sushim chǒnggi*." For the "su" in "sushim," in his essay on "cultivating virtue" [*Sudǒngmun* C. *xiudewen* 修德文] (Ch'öndogyo 1993: 51, Kallander 165), he uses the character 修 (C. *xiu*), which means to polish, repair, or cultivate. He goes on to say, in his poem on "Virtue and the Way," "how can we in this world avoid being called evil people? Only if we *sushim chǒnggi* can we act in a way that can be called benevolent, righteous, in accord with propriety, and wise" (Ch'öndogyo 1993: 221; Ch'oe 2009: and 140). This implies that we are not virtuous by nature, that we are morally frail and therefore have to train ourselves, have to cultivate a moral heart-and-mind, to become virtuous.

However, though CH'OE wrote this poem in Han'gŭl rather than in Chinese characters, when this poem was printed two decades after his death, someone, probably his successor CH'OE Sihyǒng (崔時亨 1827–1898), placed Chinese characters next to the text which tell us to read "sushim" as "preserve [守] our original pure heart-and-mind" rather than "train our heart-and-mind." (Both 修 and 守 are pronounced "su" in Korean.) This makes it appear that CH'OE Cheu shared the Neo-Confucian assumption that human beings are endowed at birth with innate goodness, the natural ability to perceive and respond to our social and natural environment without any distortions introduced by considerations of narrow personal self-interest. CH'OE Cheu may have shared that belief at times, but he also appears to have believed that human beings needed direct contact with the Divine in order to activate their innate virtuous tendencies. That is clear in the 21-syllable incantation CH'OE Cheu told his followers to chant: "Ultimate Energy being all around me, I pray that I feel that Energy within me here and now. Recognizing that God is within me, I will be transformed."

CH'OE clearly believed that we needed to feel the presence of the divine within, which he sometimes called "Ultimate Energy" (*jigi* C. *zhìqì* 至氣 (Ch'oe 2009:

90–96), in order to be inspired to overcome our own selfish tendencies and act morally. The heart-and-mind CH’OE told us to train or preserve is not our innate human nature but the mind-and-heart we receive from our personal encounter with the divine (Ch’oe 2009: 146).

CH’OE Cheu’s concern for human moral frailty and how to overcome it, though it probably inspired his spiritual quest, was not shared to the same extent by his successor CH’OE Sihyŏng. In his own essay on “Preserving our Original Pure Heart-and-Mind and Rectifying Our Psycho-Physical Endowment,” CH’OE Sihyŏng wrote, “If we human beings are able to keep our heart-and-mind basically clean of contamination and are also able to remove all impurities in the energy that runs through and animates our psycho-physical endowment, then there will be no pollution from the mundane world on our heart-and-mind and we will not have to worry about selfish desires welling up from within” (Buswell 2007: 457). This is a return to the standard Neo-Confucian approach to self-cultivation in which we train or “rectify” our bodies and our emotions while recovering or activating our innate virtuous instincts. Even in the new religion of Tonghak, we can see the oscillation between the moral pessimism that emphasizes human moral frailty and the optimism that stresses innate virtue, an oscillation that fuelled many of the twists and turns in Chosŏn dynasty Confucian thought.

## 8 Conclusion

To understand what is Korean about Korean Confucianism, we have to look at the issues that Korean Confucians debated and identify those issues that seem to have interested them more than other issues, and which issues seemed to attract more interest in Korea than in the rest of the Confucian world. By doing that, we will be able to identify distinctive ways Korean Confucianism evolved, what sort of new schools of Confucian thought and practice it produced.

There are many nooks and crannies in Korean Confucian thought and practice this short survey has not been able to explore. Confucianism in Korea, like Confucianism in China and in Japan, is multi-layered and even contradictory, with different scholars arguing for significantly different interpretations of the Confucian Classics and providing significantly different suggestions for how to apply Confucian principles to the world around them. Nevertheless, in this necessarily incomplete survey of Confucian thinking over the five centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty, there is one distinctive thread that stands out—a concern for moral psychology.

It is that concern, generated by the recognition of the contradiction between the assumption of human moral perfectibility and the reality of human moral frailty, that led to the disputes between T’oegye and Yulgok over what role the Four Fonts and the Seven Emotions should play in moral cultivation and between HAN Wŏnjin and Yi Kan over how much of a sanctuary from evil our basic human nature provided. That same concern led to Tasan borrowing from Catholic writings to create a

theistic Confucianism and inspired CH'OE Cheu to create Korea's first indigenous organized religion. Because their concern over human moral frailty led Korean Confucians to discuss issues that either were not as important or were not discussed the same way in neighboring countries and even led them to develop novel approaches to solving old Confucian issues, we can plausibly argue that one thing, at least, that is Korean about Korean Confucianism is this emphasis placed on the search for an explanation of, and a solution to, the inevitability of human moral failure, of the inability of human beings, no matter how much they study the Confucian Classics and how well they understand them, to consistently act in a selfless manner, to act in the way their Confucian tradition tells them they should and could act.

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