

The Modernistic Aspects of Hong Dae-yong's Axiological View of Nature

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Abstract

Whether nature is believed to have intrinsic standards for good and bad as human beings do, or is merely an object free of a value system of its own, becomes a major criterion for deciding the premodernity or modernity of a philosophy or system of thought. However, a critical issue in this essay is whether the application of the same criterion can do justice to Hong Dae-yong's philosophy.

Hong Dae-yong used the cognitive possibility of the senses as a criterion to deny the presiding force of *li*, and argued that all things in the world come into being and change through *gihwa* ("gi-ization"). He demystified the theory of *yin-yang* and the Five Elements (*ohaeng*) by explaining *yin* and *yang* as different intensities of sunlight and the *ohaeng* as five concrete material elements. *Li* only exists within *gi*, but that does not deprive *li* of its value. As the basis of the identity of all things, it means "nature" (*seong*), "origination, prosperity, advantage, and correctness" (*won-hyeong-i-jeong*) "humanity, rightness, decorum, and wisdom" (*in-ui-ye-sin*); in one word, it means humanity as the "mind-and-heart" (*sim*) with which heaven and earth generate all things.

Hong argued that since even the five moral imperatives (*oryun*) were the lessons that sages of the past took from nature, now human beings had to observe nature more closely and consider their society more carefully to constitute rules and laws that best suited the age. He called for a reflective critique of the imposition of human subjectivity on nature. His ideas took a direction different from that of the reductive view of nature typical of the West.

Keywords: Hong Dae-yong, Silhak, modernity, standard of modernity, axiological view of nature, morality in nature, Joseon, Neo-Confucianism

Introduction

Human beings have been regarded as part of nature, not only in Taoism, which particularly emphasized the affinity, or oneness, between nature and human beings, but also in Confucianism. In other words, Confucianism did not posit nature as an object, separate from the human subject. This Confucian refusal to objectify nature is in accordance with the belief that humans and nature are the same on the axiological as well as ontological level. Whereas Taoism placed special emphasis on the ontological dimension of nature-human relations, Confucianism delved into its axiology, and Neo-Confucianism attained philosophical depth in theorizing the relationship of being and value.

On the ontological level, one can hardly deny that humans and nature interact materially. We can easily ascertain that human metabolism takes place within the metabolic system of nature. However, it remains debatable whether humans and nature share the same axiological standards such as good and bad, vice and virtue, or superiority and inferiority. Especially since the seventeenth-century leap of modern sciences in the West, there has been a growing tendency to separate humans from nature in order to objectify the latter. Also, a criterion for the modernity of a certain theory would be whether the theory in question considered nature valueless or not. By his proposition, “to destroy idols,” Francis Bacon presented a type of cognitive methodology that assumed knowledge can be attained, without any projection of the researcher’s own values or ethics, only through accurate analysis and positive verification. It became the foundation of the modern view of nature.¹

This trend continued as human beings became increasingly intelligent in their efforts to gain independence from nature and accordingly arrived at the idea that the human intellect, in contrast to other life forms, had a trajectory of its own. This implied that the intellectual and mental activities of humans were autonomous from the mechanisms of nature. Human self-confidence kept reinforcing itself as the development of science and technology progressively enhanced the physical capacity of humans. In fact, if the latter should ever come to a point where it can manipulate and create nature at will, there may be attempts to separate humans from nature altogether, on ontological and physical levels alike.

However, such developments took place only after the seventeenth

¹. Bacon (2001, ch. 1); Song (1998).

century, and, accordingly, the tendency to view humans and nature separately does not have a long history. On the contrary, during most of human history, human beings and nature were regarded as one, whether ontologically or axiologically. This view in the West is related to the religious tendency that attributed all things on earth to God's omnipresence. In the history of Eastern philosophy, we might find its counterpart in Dong Zhongshu's theory of "sentimental reciprocity between heaven and humans" (*cheoin sanggam*) or, for a more refined theory, the Neo-Confucian theory of *li-gi*.

The Neo-Confucian theorization of nature did not derive from an interest in nature itself, but rather from a need to establish and justify moral norms for human society. Therefore, a non-axiological examination of nature has had little significance for Neo-Confucians, whose reflections mostly centered on the theory of "the mind-and-heart and human nature" (*simseong*). It was particularly evident in the Neo-Confucian tradition of Joseon.

The problem, however, lies in Silhak (Practical Learning) of late Joseon. Silhak may not have had a huge impact on the material reality of the time. But having sprung from a critique of the limitations of the Neo-Confucianism of the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi, it marks a significant philosophical transition from the existing Zhu Xi's philosophy (Zhuzixue) to a new way of thinking. This turnover reflects the socioeconomic changes of the time and an appropriation of Western scientific knowledge. This change in the view of nature is often understood to have established a remarkable foundation for a new, modern philosophy; modernity in the view of nature meant no less than the human subject's objectification of nature and the refusal to project a feudal value system of humans onto nature.

At the same time, a closer look into the view of nature propounded by late-Joseon scholars of Silhak will reveal that their view, though clearly different from that of Neo-Confucians, was hardly free of the existing value system. This is why there has been a ceaseless debate about whether to evaluate the view of nature in late-Joseon Practical Learning on the basis of Western modern sciences.² But advancing this debate is not a facile matter due to the complexity of questions--the validity of "modernity" as a Western standard in the

² This is mainly raised in the theses that address the philosophies of Hong Dae-yong and Choe Han-gi, most likely because these two scholars most profoundly expounded the view of nature in late-Joseon Silhak. Son Byeong-uk and many others have unfolded a bold discussion of Choe Han-gi, whereas studies of Hong Dae-yong have yet to go beyond the problem-raising stage. See Yi (1993); Son B. (1993); Kim M. (1995); Kim Y. (1995); Son and Jeong (1998).

view of nature on one hand, and the necessity to succeed to and critically develop the Eastern philosophical tradition, including Neo-Confucianism, on the other. In hopes of contributing to the advancement of this discussion, this essay focuses on Hong Dae-yong.³ Hong, as one of the central figures of the Bukhak (Northern Learning) School that exemplified Silhak of late Joseon, was deeply interested in nature and developed the philosophical discussion of the Bukhak School to an utmost profundity.

Li and Gi as Objects of the Senses

Hong Dae-yong organized quite clearly his viewpoints on major issues of Joseon Neo-Confucianism including theories of “*li* and *gi*,” “four beginnings and the seven emotions” (*sadan chijeong*), and “human/animal nature” (*inseong mulseong*). In contrast, the other two scholars of the Bukhak School troika, namely, Bak Ji-won (1737-1805) and Bak Je-ga (1750-1805), did not leave traces of an in-depth philosophical reflection, in comparison with their works on literature, art, and social economy. Bak Ji-won rarely paid extra attention to the controversial issues of Joseon Neo-Confucianism.⁴ Bak Je-ga dismissed them as empty discourses,⁵ whereas Hong Dae-yong systematically critiqued the existing philosophical discussions and produced a unique theory of his own. As his philosophical reflection unfolded by appropriating concepts of traditional Neo-Confucianism, his writings are valuable materials that help trace the developmental trajectory of the ideas of the Bukhak School and examine their philosophical foundation.

Due to Hong Dae-yong’s conspicuous position in late-Joseon Silhak, and especially in the Bukhak School, previous research on Hong has focused on how his theory both inherited and further developed Korean philosophy, and

³ I have elsewhere examined the *li-gi* theory of Joseon Neo-Confucianism as a combination of ontological dualism and axiological binarism. See Kim H. (1996). This essay on Hong Dae-yong is an extension of the aforementioned dissertation, insofar as it investigates how this issue is received and/or overcome in late-Joseon Silhak.

⁴ Among the extant writings by Bak Ji-won, “Dap Im Hyeong-o ron wondo seo” 答任亨五論原道書 (An Answer to Im Hyeong-o’s Discussion about the Fundamental Truth) is the only piece that enables us to learn to an extent how his philosophical thinking took shape. But it also attests to the relatively unorganized state of his philosophical standpoint. Other than that, only a few fragmentary comments remain, such as in “Hojil” 虎叱 (The Rebuke of a Tiger). For Bak’s philosophy, see my paper (Kim H. 1996).

⁵ Bak Je-ga (1961, 41-42).

how his thoughts differed from the established Joseon Neo-Confucianism. Hong studied for ten years in Seoksil Private Academy of Kim Won-haeng (1702-1772) before he built his scholarly foundation, therefore we cannot overlook the fact that he was basically a faithful student of the Neo-Confucian tradition. Accordingly, in this section, I will examine his ideas from the viewpoint of the succession to and development of Joseon Neo-Confucianism, with a focus on the *li-gi* theory that is its theoretical base.

First of all, following Hong's discussion and starting from his concepts, we can see that, by clarifying the definitions of *li* and *gi*, he tried to criticize Joseon scholars' partiality towards *li*. According to Hong, "the same is *li* and the different is *gi*."⁶ In other words, he argues that "*li* is metaphysically same and *gi* is phenomenally different" (*idong gi*), which finds in *li* the basis for fundamental identity, and in *gi* the basis for phenomenal diversity. Such is what Joseon Neo-Confucians frequently believed. But when it comes to the roles of *li* and *gi*, the characteristics of his *li-gi* theory becomes evident.

In general, one who speaks of *li* says unfailingly, "*li* exists, without shape/form (*hyeong*)."[Then] if "*li* does not have form," what is it? If "*li* exists" already, how can we say that it is without form? Largely, we say that if there is a sound, something exists; that if there is a color, something exists; that if there is a smell and a taste, something exists. That these senses are not present means that there is neither shape nor spatial extension; then what is it that we call "to be"? And, although one says, "it is without sound or smell, and becomes the backbone for creation and transformation (*johwa*) and the base for all things," how does one know that it makes the backbone and the base, since it has no "doing" (*jagwi*)?⁷

The above quotation is taken from the beginning of "An Inquiry into the Mind-and-Heart and Human Nature," which deals with the mind-and-heart and human nature, and the question of good and evil. First, Hong questions established Joseon Neo-Confucians' thought that *li* is formless, yet provides the basis for the generation and transformation of all things in nature, and that it is purely good. If it is not perceived by such senses as sound, color, smell, and taste, it is formless; but without form, he argues, it cannot be the basis or presiding force for all things. For most Neo-Confucians, the formlessness and non-activity of *li* guaranteed its completeness, purity, and universality. In

⁶ "Simseongmun" 心性問 (An Inquiry into the Mind-and-Heart and the Human Nature), in Hong (1974, 1:2a).

contrast, Hong questions *li*'s existence and function, using the perceptive capacity of sense organs as the critical criterion.

Moreover, if the question extends to the agency of “doing” in a debate about good and bad, the position of *li* as presiding force becomes very precarious. This was a problem that drove Neo-Confucians of Joseon into a dilemma. Following the above passage, Hong Dae-yong writes:

The so-called *li* has it that if *gi* is good, *li* is also good, and that if *gi* is bad then *li* is also bad. This means that *li* does not preside but only follows what *gi* does. If one says that the badness of *li* is not the nature of *li* but the *li* bound by the physical substance (*gijil*) because *li* is originally good, how does one also say that *li* as the basis of all creation and transformation does not purify *gi* but instead puts the world into disorder by generating this impure and distorted *gi*? If it is already the basis for good and bad at once, it changes according to things (*mul*), and therefore is not a presiding force at all.⁸

If bad or evil appears because *li* is obstructed by the material of *gi*, though *li* is fundamentally good, this does not make sense, for it means that *li* as the presiding force that generates and operates all things in nature cannot make *gi* completely good. He argues that *li* does not operate *gi* but only follows its doing after all.

Then, *li* should hand over to *gi* its position as the core, root, and presiding force of the generation and transformation of all things. For, according to the passage quoted above, all generation and transformation originate from *gi*. When the cognitive capacity of sense organs is the criterion, *li*'s position cannot but be extremely limited. In the end, *li* only stays the same; the diversity and multiplicity under heaven comes from *gi*.⁹ However, Hong also writes that, originally, *gi* was not diverse or multiple. *gi* is originally consistent and homogeneous, but obtains multiple characters through its activity; each and every thing takes place according to the clearness or cloudiness of *gi*.¹⁰ But if

⁷ “Simseongmun,” in Hong (1974, 1:1a).

⁸ “Simseongmun,” in Hong (1974, 1:1a).

⁹ “Dap Seo Seong-ji ronsim seol” 答徐成之論心說 (An Answer to Seo Seong-ji on Mind-and-Heart Theory), in Hong (1974, 1:2b).

¹⁰ “Dap Seo Seong-ji ronsimseol,” in Hong (1974, 1:3b).

“what fills heaven and earth is only this *gi* and in its center is *li*,”¹¹ *li*’s consistency also has to depend on *gi*’s consistency, now that *li*’s presiding capacity is denied. That is, when *gi* is clear, the consistency of *li* within it appears as it is; and when *gi* is turbid, the *li* within it appears distorted. Therefore, an explanation of the generation and transformation of all things must prioritize *gi*.

In using the cognition of sense organs for a critical criterion, Hong could not accept *li* as the primal basis that precedes phenomenal cognition. This, on the other hand, does not mean that he advocated “the precedence of *gi* over *li*” (*giseon ihu*). King Jeongjo asked a year before his accession: “If form takes place through *gi*, then *li* is also given; does not this mean that *gi* comes first and *li* comes after that?”¹² Hong answered:

There have been different arguments by Confucians regarding the before and after of *li* and *gi*. But even in the [commentaries to Zhongyong \(The Doctrine of the Mean\)](#) it was not said that *li* is given only after form took place. In my opinion, [if there are *li* and *gi*, if at all, they exist together](#)[무슨 뜻입니까?=>리와 기가 도대체 존재한다면 그것들은 함께 존재하는 것이지, 어느 하나가 먼저 존재하고 다른 하나가 그 뒤에 존재하게 되는 것이 아니라는 의미입니다.], they exist together, and thus there is no distinguishing before and after. Generally, there is nothing without *li* and no *li* without things to depend upon.¹³

Hong Dae-yong said that this view was “not his own creative idea but the teaching of Zhu Xi.”¹⁴ Zhu Xi has said that there is no before and after with *li* and *gi*. But he mainly divided *li* and *gi* as the metaphysical and the physical,¹⁵ and distinguished the “precedence of *li* over *gi*” (*iseon gi hu*) on a logical dimension and the precedence of *gi* over *li* (*giseon ihu*) on a phenomenal dimension.¹⁶ However, what Hong Dae-yong called for was a reconceptualization of the relationship between *li* and *gi*, based on an understanding of nature through observation. Whether logically or phenomenally, it is impossible to posit a non-existent *li* or non-existent *gi*. If so, *li*, which eludes

¹¹ “Dap Seo Seong-ji ronsimseol,” in Hong (1974, 1:3b).

¹² “Gyebang ilgi” (Gyebang Diary), in Hong (1974, 2:37a).

¹³ “Gyebang ilgi,” in Hong (1974, 2:37a).

¹⁴ “Gyebang ilgi,” in Hong (1974, 2:37a).

¹⁵ Zhu Xi (1986, 1: 3).

sensual perception, seems to lose its ground of existence. Almost all the functions that had been attributed to *li* by previous Neo-Confucians of Joseon shifted on to *gi*. Nevertheless, Hong could not dismiss *li*. I will discuss the reasons for this in the next section.

Transformation of *Gi* and the Equality of Humans and Things

All things in the universe share identity and difference. Depending on one's point of view, it may appear otherwise, but there is no denying this ambivalence. All things, whatever they may be, share a material identity in that they exist within the space of the universe as part of the metabolism of the entire universe, and possess a certain regularity in that they come into being and change in harmony. Each thing maintains a certain amount of autonomy phenomenally (to different degrees, that is), and this allows it its physical, principal difference.

A theory of universal generation and change must be able to account for this ambivalence. The Neo-Confucian tradition seeks to do so through its theory of *li* and *gi*, the gist of which is “that *li* is metaphysically same and *gi* is phenomenally different” (*idong giri*), that is, “*li* is one but its particularizations are diverse” (*il bunsu*), or “*li* is penetrating and *gi* is limited” (*itong giguk*). As discussed above, Hong Dae-yong explained the sameness and difference of all things, with the view that *li* is metaphysically same and *gi* is phenomenally different. *Li* remains the same; the difference and multiplicity of all things are due to *gi*.

Here, two questions arise. First, if phenomenal differences originate from *gi*, how does *gi* create these differences in and of itself? Secondly, what is the reason that *gi* should exist at all? I will attempt to answer these questions in turn.

Gi can be the root of differences because *gi*, which is entirely pure and completely empty, ascends and descends to acquire multiple characteristics. But Hong Dae-yong does not proffer a clear explanation as to what initially drives *gi* into ascension and descension. This seems to be a result of his pragmatic method of thinking, for he believes that one cannot and need not know what cannot be proven.¹⁷ He refuses to speak of what cannot be proven

¹⁶ “An Answer to Liu Shuwen” 答劉叔文, in Zhu Xi (1996b, 46:26a).

¹⁷ In “Uisan mundap” (Dialogue on Mount) 醫山問答, in answer to a question from Heoja (虛子), who

for truth. But what remains certain for him is that the entire universe is full of *gi*.¹⁸

How *gi* begins its activity is left unexplained. Since *li*'s presiding over *gi* has been refuted, the reason for *gi*'s ascension and descension is found in *gi*'s immanent ambivalence, i.e., *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang*, however, as Hong points out, are not the concepts that refer to two disparate kinds of *gi*. As Hong says, it is only the assumption among the later scholars that "there are two different *gi* as *yin* and *yang* between the earth and heaven, which sometimes appear and sometimes hide, finally to preside over the creation and transformation at will."¹⁹

Before Cheng Yi attributed to *li* "the succession/alternation of *yin* and *yang*" (一陰一陽),²⁰ it was written in "Xici" (Appended Remarks), in *Zhouyi* (Book of Changes), where no concept of *li* was posited, that *yin* and *yang* were none other than the two characteristics of *gi*, and that the regular inter-crossings of light and dark were *dao* (*tao*). The understanding of *yin* and *yang* as two different *gi* took place later when *yin* and *yang* came to be considered real entities rather than mere concepts. For Hong, *yin* and *yang* referred to the strength and weakness of sunlight. But sunlight for him was more than mere light and heat. In the sun he found the root of *gi*'s dynamic force that fills the universe.

The liveliness and activity of human beings and all things in the world derive from sunlight. Should the sun disappear one day, all the world would freeze over and all things would melt away and disappear. . . . Therefore, it is said, "the earth is the mother of all things, the sun the father of all things, and heaven the grandfather of all things."²¹

The sun is the origin that endows *gi* with the characteristics of *yin* and *yang*. The appearance of *yin* or *yang* depends on the intensity of sunlight, and *yin* and *yang* symbolize the intensity of life force that originates from sunlight. This life

wanted to know the shape and circumstances of the world, Hong Dae-yong speaks thus: "I can know neither how many eons had passed before I came into this world, nor how many eons will come after I am gone. Therefore, you cannot know the shape and circumstance of each world, and need not know, either. I cannot say, and need not say either." Hong (1974, 4:23b).

¹⁸ "Uisan mundap," in Hong (1974, 4:19a).

¹⁹ "Uisan mundap," in Hong (1974, 4:30a).

²⁰ Cheng and Cheng (1979, 4:10a; 16:26b).

²¹ "Uisan mundap," see also Hong (1974, 4:31a).

force can manifest itself only through *gi*. Criticizing the Five Elements (*ohaeng*) theory, Hong maintains that “the creation and transformation of all things cannot be achieved if any one of the three elements of *gi* (氣), fire (火), and earth (地) are missing,” as “heaven is only *gi*, the sun only fire, and the earth only water and soil.”²²

That *gi*, unlike mere matter, can shape diverse things is because *gi* performs its activity based on the life force from sunlight. The delicate yet unprovable mysticism of the existing *yin-yang* and the Five Elements theory is thus done away with; yet, its explanation is still valid when applied to the manifestation of life force derived from sunlight. Of course this explanation is Hong’s reinterpretation of it.²³ Always in the background of creation and transformation is the universal plenitude of *gi*. He called *gihwa* the natural process in which *gi* forms all things.²⁴

We should now move on to the second question. If *li* is only something that is within *gi*, not only diversity but identity relies on *gi*. But according to Hong, *gi*’s monopoly of the root (樞紐), base (根柢), and governing functions (主宰) does not render *li*’s existence meaningless. From his viewpoint, *li* has an important function of differentiating Confucianism from Taoism or Buddhism. If one were to speak of *gi* excluding *li*, one is likely to fall into the Taoist emptiness (虛無) or the Buddhist nirvana (寂滅).²⁵ The validity of *li* lies in its role as the principle or standard for the harmony and unity of all things. If “the same thing is *li* and the different thing is *gi*,”²⁶ whether in human beings or animals or plants, knowing the sameness of *li*, he claims, is crucial in the study of Confucianism.

Gi, in its extreme purity and immeasurable mysteriousness, becomes the mind-and-heart (心) of the human being or the animal, has *li* in it, and controls all things.²⁷ He of course admits “nature is *li* (性即理)” but he pays more attention to the mind-and-heart. It is difficult to conclude that the mind-and-heart is either *li* or *gi*, as it “can be called neither *li*, for it has traces and

²² “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:30b).

²³ Hong Dae-yong has not distinctly established the relationship between *gi* and *yin-yang*, as he explained *yin* and *yang* as different intensities of sunlight, thereby demystifying them. This is in the same context where he criticized and demystified *ohaeng* theory, by explaining *ohaeng* as concrete matters. But if what fills up the universe is *gi* and that *gi* accumulates to shape all things, we should understand *yin* and *yang* as symbolic of the circumstances and procedures in which sunlight as the original life force is projected on to *gi*.

²⁴ “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:34a-b).

²⁵ “Simseongmun,” in Hong (1974, 1:23a).

²⁶ “Simseongmun,” in Hong (1974, 1:2a).

²⁷ “Dap Seo Seong-ji ronsimseol,” in Hong (1974, 1, 1:3b).

uses, nor *gi*, for it is not seen or heard.”²⁸ Because the mind-and-heart is one among all things, and also one of five organs, he says that it is only *gi*, in the middle of which is *li*. He writes: “It is not that *li* does not exist, but as for its body, it is *gi*; *li* exists, but we cannot go so far as to admit that *li* is the mind-and-heart.”²⁹

However, if “the same thing is *li* and the different thing is *gi*” as Hong maintains, what is the content of *li*, which has its same existence in the mind-and-hearts of human beings and animals?

It is called *li* in relation to heaven, and “nature” (*seong*) in things; “origination, prosperity, advantage, and correctness” (*won-hyeong-l-jeong*) in relation to heaven; and “humanity, rightness, decorum, and wisdom” (*in-ui-ye-ji*) in relation to things. But in fact they are one.³⁰

To summarize all this in one word, *li* is humanity (仁).³¹ Since the old times, “humanity” has been considered to be in overall control among the principles of “humanity, rightness, decorum, and wisdom.” What we need to examine closer is the meaning of “humanity.” It has been known to mean originally “the mind-and-heart of all living things between heaven and earth.”³² This in turn refers to the quality that allows all things in the universe to exert their dynamic energy, and Hong Dae-yong observed that the activity of life originates from sunlight. In other words, that *li* is “humanity” means that *li* symbolizes the dynamic liveliness of *yin/yang* and *gi*. This self-referential relationship between the mind/heart of heaven and earth producing things (天地生物之心), “humanity,” and *li* applies equally to all things. Hong thus goes on to argue that “human beings and all things are equal” (*inmulgyun*), based on such a notion and the logic of *gihwa*.

Hong’s view is in line with the theory of the Nakhak School, which maintains that human beings and animals share the same nature (*inmulseong dongnon*), and that not only humans but also all things have Five Moral Principles (*osang*). The entire universe abounds with *gi*, and all things are formed by *gi* as well as share their identity by sharing *li*. The theory of the Nakhak School established itself as a stronger theory of the sameness (同論) by

²⁸ “Dap Seo Seong-ji ronsimseol,” in Hong (1974, 1, 1:2b).

²⁹ “Maengja munui” 孟子問疑 (Questions about Mengzi), in Hong (1974, 1:23a).

³⁰ “Simseongmun,” in Hong (1974, 1:1b).

³¹ “Simseongmun,” in Hong (1974, 1:1b).

³² “Kezhaiji” 克齋記 Zhu Xi (1996, 7:4034).

reinforcing the identity of *li* and the theory of *gihwa*, and further proclaimed the equality between humans and all things in the universe.

Nature and Human as Moral One[Nature and Human Beings as Moral Entities=> “도덕적 일체로서의 자연과 인간”이란 의미입니다.]

In Hong Dae-yong, a change in the view of nature takes place in the process of overcoming human-centered ways of thinking, through an urgent realization of the incompleteness of general human society including Joseon as an ideal Neo-Confucian society. Motivated by the introduction of Western civilizations, this change manifests in two aspects--through an overcoming of a Sino-centric worldview and an overcoming of a geocentric view of the universe. And this change in his thinking is condensed in the notion of “viewing things in the perspective of nature” (以天視物).³³

An examination of his overcoming of an anthropocentric view, as expressed in “the equality of humans and things,” seems necessary here.

The five moral imperatives³⁴ (*oryun*) and the five behaviors³⁵ (*osa*) are the propriety of human beings; crowding around and letting one another feed are the propriety of the animal; prospering in blooms and abundance is the propriety of the plant. From the human perspective, human beings are precious and things are lowly; from the perspective of things, things are precious and human beings are lowly. From the perspective of nature, human beings and things are equal.³⁶

Animals and plants as well as human beings have their own ethics and morality, but human beings depreciate other things because they regard the world from their own perspective. He said that in all things alike the most clear of *gi* becomes the mind-and-heart and retains *li* within it.³⁷ This is not to disregard the distinctly different functions of human beings, animals, and plants. The difference between human beings derives from the difference in *gi*, whereas the

³³ “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:19a).

³⁴ 五倫: 父子有親, 君臣有義, 夫婦有別, 長幼有序, 朋友有信

³⁵ 五事: 貌曰恭, 言曰從, 視曰明, 聽曰聰, 思曰睿

³⁶ “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:18b).

³⁷ “Dap Seo Seong-ji ronsimseol,” in Hong (1974, 1:3b).

difference between humans and other living things derives from the difference of form (*hyeong*).³⁸ But it is not a fundamental difference either, for all things are created from clear and pure *gi* and have the mind-and-heart and *li* within it. Moreover, the ethics and morality that human beings take pride in are, after all, what they learned from things in nature.

All kinds of social systems and technology, as well as human ethics and morality, were learned from all things in nature, and what the sages taught people had been all learned from nature.³⁹ Despite their different uses and phenomenal shapes, the realities of the sages and the ordinary people, or even of human beings and animals or plants, are all the same. It is because the reality, subject to *gi*, does not lose its basis.⁴⁰ He thus overcomes an anthropocentric way of thinking and considers the human as a part of nature, and all things as beings that should live and learn from nature.

Furthermore, Hong Dae-yong breaks away from Sino-centrism and geocentrism.

China is located as far as 180 degrees longitude from the West; but the Chinese think that China is the right place and the West the opposite, whereas the Westerners think that the West is the right place and China the opposite. However, it is all the same to carry heaven above and walk on earth.⁴¹

Since the earth is round, any place on earth may be its center, and there is no reason why China should be the center of the world. The theories that “human beings and things are equal” and that “they share the same nature” make meaningless the cultural division between Chinese and barbarian (*hwai, huayi*). Further, since the earth is only another planet, there is no reason why it should carry a special significance in the universe.⁴²

Before he went to the capital of Yanjing, China, at the age of 35, Hong Dae-yong used to subscribe to the Sino-centric view and prioritized China over the rest of the geological world. Sino-centrism presumed that the central part of China contained the best *gi*; the further from the center, the cloudier *gi* becomes,

³⁸ “Dap Seo Seong-ji ronsimseol,” in Hong (1974, 1:3b).

³⁹ “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:19a).

⁴⁰ “Dap Seo Seong-ji ronsimseol,” in Hong (1974, 1:3a).

⁴¹ “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:21b).

⁴² “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:22b).

affecting local people and produce alike. Such ideas were common among contemporary Neo-Confucians in Joseon, who used them to justify Sino-centric cultural differentiation, even scientifically. But Hong overcame geological Sino-centrism by accepting the theory that the earth is round and revolves, and by breaking away from anthropocentrism.⁴³

Hong Dae-yong thus breaks away from the contemporary Neo-Confucian view that imposed a human value system on nature, and comes to regard humans as one part of the universal totality. In doing so, he viewed humans not only as a material part of the universe, but also in an axiological sense in terms of *gi*, *li*, and the mind-and-heart. Unlike Francis Bacon's thoughts, where human beings are set apart from nature in order to reduce the status of nature, his understanding of "nature" was a wide and encompassing one, which puts one on guard against human arrogance and subjectivity and subsumes humans within nature. Only when a wider, inclusive notion of nature is posited the question of human morality can be discussed within the context of nature. He could not dismiss such a question as long as he gave up Neo-Confucianism altogether.

The History of *Hyeonghwa* and the Task of Overcoming It

Hong Dae-yong's philosophical reflections, ranging from *gihwa* through the equality between humans and things to an escape from geological Sino-centrism and earth-centrism, had for their objectives an accurate diagnosis of the problems of reality, and through it, a search for their solutions. As if to allegorize this, *Uisan mundap* (Dialogue on Mount), one of his representative works, begins by satirizing a stuffy Confucian scholar. The narrative wanders throughout the whole universe, finally ending with a critical observation of human history. He suspects firstly that the history of humans and nature, which had continued from "early ancient" times (*sanggo sidae*), began to deviate since "mid-ancient" times (*junggo sidae*).⁴⁴

Early ancient times were the age of *gihwa* (gi-ization), that is, the age

⁴³ For the process of Hong's overcoming of geological Sino-centrism, see Kim Mun-yong's detailed study, Kim (1995), especially, pp. 103-112. Kim argues that Hong's way of thinking underwent three different stages: first, typical Sino-centrism before his trip to China, second, his subsequent criticism of Joseon's Sino-centrism in his debate with Kim Jong-hu, and lastly, a full overcoming of Sino-centrism expressed in "Uisan mundap."

⁴⁴ "Uisan mundap," in Hong (1974, 4:34a-b).

when generation and transformation occurred in nature as it was. However, *hyeonghwa* (“formation”) took place after “mid-ancient” times. At the historical threshold of *gihwa* into formation *hyeonghwa* lies lust.⁴⁵ Lust signifies humanity’s aberration from the flow of nature. It also means reproduction was no longer a natural function but was instead motivated by individual desire. He says that this historic change is the same with all things as well as humans, but its content mainly concerns the latter. The appearance of formation as propelled by the birth of lust signifies deviation from nature on the one hand and the formation of individual autonomy on the other. Now, as the individual broke apart from the organic unity of nature, it had to suffer the concerns of hunger and thirst, the pains of cold and heat. The individual separation from nature also signifies that the individual desired more than was given to him or her in the course of natural circulation. Now individuals, who have grown dependent on the material aspects of life, fight for possessions and land, to be accordingly divided into the strong and the weak.⁴⁶

Then, was this history of “formation” an inevitability that could not be helped? Fortunately, the link between nature and individuals (people) was not severed. A common principle encompasses nature and all things including human beings. Hong Dae-yong calls it *li*. As cited in one of the passages above, “It is called *li* in heaven; “nature” in things; “origination, prosperity, advantage, and correctness” in heaven; and “humanity, rightness, decorum, and wisdom” in things. But in fact they are one.”⁴⁷ There is a certain principle or rule that applies widely to both nature and human beings, and it is called by various names: “*li*”; “nature” (*seong*); “origination, prosperity, advantage, and correctness”; and “humanity, rightness, decorum, and wisdom.” As long as the entire universe including human beings is made of *gi*, and *li* is the principle of *gi*’s movement, all things in the universe made of *gi* fundamentally follow the same principle or law. But *gi* is not mere matter in the material sense; it retains life within. The life in *gi*, referred to as “humanity” (仁), the will to life (生意), and so forth in the Confucian tradition, implies that an axiological criterion inheres in *gi*, by which the manifestation of life in itself and all things becomes “good” and that which is against it is “bad.” The force of life comes from the sun. *Li* also comes to carry an axiological as well as ontological significance, as the principle and law of *gi*, whose application to nature and human beings cannot be

⁴⁵ “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:34a-b).

⁴⁶ “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:34b-35a).

discriminatory.

Nevertheless, we should not conclude that Hong follows “the theory of humanity and heaven’s sentimental reciprocity.” According to Hong, a common principle and law is shared by nature and humanity, but only to a limited extent. Thus, he argues that rather than proving that the mental or physical activities of human beings influence nature, it is required that people, who are also a part of nature, be cautious in regard to extraordinary natural events, such as solar or lunar eclipses.⁴⁸ The theory of humanity and heaven’s sentimental reciprocity claims that human activity, instead of being just another component of nature, controls planetary movements; it is an example of anthropocentrism overestimating human capacity.

Of course, inasmuch as human beings belong to nature, it would be impossible for human acts not to have any impact on nature. For nature and humans always interact with each other, as both exist within the same system of *li* and *qi*. However, human social and political activities form, in a relative sense, their own autonomous, independent realm. When this autonomy and independence gain a little more confidence, human beings are apt to declare that they live in a world governed by a set of ontological and axiological principles separate from those of nature. Moreover, they proudly assure themselves that they are the only rational beings with moral standards, while criticizing their prior delusional imposition of human moral standards onto nature and henceforth consider nature to be an object lacking in axiological significance. That is, “morality is a possession of the human only.”

But Hong Dae-yong believes that people learn morality from, and share it with, nature. Human beings are too insignificant to be able to instigate natural disasters. They should, he exhorts, always regard themselves as a natural element and as such conform to nature. Then, should they only recuperate those laws and principles the ancestors taught by learning from nature? He thinks otherwise.

To have people conform to the customs of the times is the sage’s way of weighing the circumstances. Generally, peace and harmony, innocence and sincerity are not what a sage dislikes, but if conformity is forced when the times and customs change and the ways of law are

⁴⁷ “Simseongmun,” in Hong (1974, 1:1b).

⁴⁸ “Uisan mundap,” in Hong (1974, 4:27b).

not followed, then the confusion would only worsen. Then the state would reach a point where it could not be helped for all the capacity of a sage. Therefore, it has been said since old times, “trying to revive only the old ways of law will result in disaster descending upon the body.”⁴⁹

A due revision of the law is necessary in accordance with the needs of the time; a stubborn adherence to old ways will only bring greater misfortune. This invokes Bak Ji-won’s saying that what does not change can only perish.⁵⁰ Now that lust cannot be suppressed by force, Hong recommends that people avoid promiscuity through marriage and—now that the materially-oriented human life of dressing, eating, and sheltering cannot be forbidden—refrain only from wasteful luxury and showy grandeur.⁵¹ Without failing to learn from and follow nature, one need not confine oneself to what sages of the past have taught, but to change as necessary. For the sages only learned from nature, and the system of their making is not nature itself but an emulation of nature that reflects the limitations of the time.

Conclusion: The Morality of Nature and the Standard of Modernity

There are at least two decisive factors that contribute to changes in a given era’s view of nature. The first of the two arises if, due to a change in human society, its existing value system imposed upon nature is no longer able to rationalize societal practice. When the existing value system loses its ability to explain and solve social reality, the view of nature built into that value system must also confront a fundamental skepticism. The second factor is the progressive accumulation of the results of studying and exploring nature. This advancing knowledge about nature revises and redresses previous misguided understandings and calls for a new view of nature. These two factors cannot of course be strictly separated. New knowledge about nature brings about social change and disturbs the existing value system; conversely, social change affects society’s desire and willingness for further research into nature.

The transition in the view of nature in late-Joseon Neo-Confucianism

⁴⁹ Hong (1974, 4:35a).

⁵⁰ Bak Ji-won (1966, 14: 7b).

similarly has its cause in two such aspects. The strata system of social status—*literati*, farmers, artisans, and merchants—was falling apart at various points, and the Sino-centric worldview was also losing its ground, because of the increasing power of Manchurians in China and the influx of Western civilizations into the East. In particular, Western books on natural science and technological inventions that were imported through the Qing dynasty provided new opportunities for people to acquire knowledge about nature.

If the existing value system of Neo-Confucianism could not explain changes in social reality, it was only natural that the view of nature it created would be questioned. But a new, alternative view of nature was not necessarily the modern Western notion of nature as a *value-neutral* object like Bacon's theory. Such a notion was, after all, a reflection of modern Western anthropocentrism that regarded humans as the only proprietors of moral judgment. The modern Western view of nature could not be the only alternative to the Neo-Confucian view of nature in late Joseon.

Hong Dae-yong argued that *li* could not possess governing force because *li* cannot be perceived through sense organs. Thus, he thought that all things in the universe were produced and transformed not by *li*'s governing force but by *gihwa*. He demystified the theory of *yin-yang* and the five elements (*ohaeng*) by explaining *yin* and *yang* as the different intensities of sunlight, and the *ohaeng* as five concrete material elements. He also argued that *li* exists only within *gi*. I find Hong's theory progressive in the sense that he demystified *li*, which represents the establishment.

But Hong Dae-yong did not deprive *li* of its whole values. As the basis of the identity of all things, *li* means "nature," "*origination, prosperity, advantage, and correctness*," and "*humanity, rightness, decorum, and wisdom*;" in one word, it means "*humanity*" (*power of life* 仁) as the mind-and-heart with which heaven and earth generate all things. Since the life force of *gi* comes from the sun, *li* also symbolizes the dynamic liveliness of *gi*. This is the case for both human beings and all natural things. *Li*, along with the principle of *gihwa*, supports the idea that humans and all things in nature are equal. All this implies the possibility of overcoming human-centered ideas, through inheriting and reinforcing the Nakhak School's theory that human beings and things share the same nature. Thus, the axiological as well as ontological unity of human beings and nature becomes evident.

⁵¹ Hong (1974, 4:35a).

Taking a step further, Hong Dae-yong distances himself from Sino-centrism and earth-centrism by believing that the earth is round and revolves. For him, the human is only another thing among all things; China, only another part of the earth; and the earth, only another star among the countless many in the sky. This idea was a serious challenge to, and criticism of, the Neo-Confucianism of late Joseon, which projected onto nature its human-centered idea that proudly positioned the human, China, and the earth at the most special place in the universe. He also argued that since even the five moral imperatives (*oryun*) were the lessons that sages of the past took from nature, now human beings had to observe nature more closely and consider their society more carefully to constitute rules and laws that best suited the age. He called for a reflective critique of the imposition of human subjectivity on nature. His ideas took a direction different from that of the reductive view of nature in the West. In taking into account the social changes in late Joseon and reflecting on the existing value system by accepting Western scientific and technological knowledge, he attempted to establish a new value system suitable for a new society--with nature as his main ground for reflection--in order to grow out of the arrogance of anthropocentrism for a fuller understanding of the ontological and axiological connection between human beings and nature.

In conclusion, Hong Dae-yong revealed himself to be progressive in the sense that he overcame Neo-Confucianism, which understands nature from a human-centered perspective. However, his vision has its own limitations, for his conception of *li* was not fundamentally different from that of his predecessors.

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Glossary

Bukhak 北學(派)

Cheng Hao 程顥

Cheng Yi 程頤

cheoin sanggam 天人相感

donggnon 同論

Dong Zhongshu (Ch.) 董仲舒

gi 氣

gihwa 氣化

gijil 氣質

giseon ihu 氣先理後

huayi (Ch.) ► *hwai*

hwa 火

hwai 華夷

hyeong 形

hyeonghwa 形化

i 理

icheonsicheon 以天視物

idong gii 理同氣異

iil bunsu 理一分殊

in 仁

inmulgyun 人物均

inmulseong dongnon 人物性同論

inseong mulseong 人性物性

inuiyeji 仁義禮智

iseon gihu 理先氣後

itong giguk 理通氣局

jagwi 作為

ji 地

johwa 造化

junggo sidae 中古時代 上古時代

idong gili 理同氣異

idong gili 理同氣異

igi 理氣

Mengzi 孟子

mul 物

Nakhak 洛學(派)

ohaeng 五行

osa 五事

osang 五常

sadan chijeong 四端七情

saengui 生意

sanggo sidae 上古時代

Seoksil 石室(書院)

seong 性

seongnijeuk 性即理

Silhak 實學

simseong 心性

wonhyeongijeong 元亨利貞

Xici (Ch.) 繫辭

Zhongyong (Ch.) 中庸

Zhouyi (Ch.) 周易

Zhu Xi 朱熹

Zhuzixue (Ch.) 朱子學

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