

# Is the Morality of Human Beings Superior to the Morality of Non-Human Beings?

## *Debate over Human versus Animal Nature in the Joseon Period*

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### Abstract

*Confucian scholars of Joseon Korea carried out a philosophical debate on what they referred to as the original nature of humans versus non-human beings including animals. This debate arose from the correspondence between two followers of the Zhu Xi School in Korea, Oeam and Namdang, in 1709. The main question of the debate was whether humans and other beings including animals have equal natures. Following them, many scholars engaged in the debate, dividing into two groups: Nak-ron 洛論 and Ho-ron 湖論. Nak-ron scholars thought that the original nature of humans and other non-human beings was equal. Ho-ron scholars thought that the original nature of humans was different than that of other beings. According to Nak-ron opinion, animals inherently possessed a morality equal to the morality of humans. According to Ho-ron opinion, animals also possessed a morality; however, because the temperaments of animals were considered inferior to those of humans, the morality of animals was also considered inferior to the morality of humans.*

**Keywords:** humans, non-human beings, morality, superiority and inferiority, *innmulseong dongi ron*, Horak debate

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## Introduction

In the contemporary field of ethology, there are theories stating that animals other than humans also have the capacity for moral judgment. Frans de Waal studied anthropoids similar to humans. He systematically observed the lives of apes and claimed that they possess qualities similar to human morality. De Waal's theory is supported by the research presented in his book *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex among Apes* (first published in 1983), in which he describes apes' reciprocity in granting benefits among each other, their reconciliations after conflicts, and their ability to console members of their groups who were hurt (de Waal 2000).

Marc Bekoff, who studied the psychology of dogs, wolves, and coyotes, has recently claimed that dogs have "moral intelligence" and can distinguish between right and wrong (Bekoff and Pierce 2009). He defined "moral intelligence" as the ability to distinguish between right and wrong actions and behave accordingly. According to Bekoff, not only dogs but other mammals ranging from mice to elephants also possess a "sense of justice." He claimed that even some birds and bees are likely to possess moral intelligence.<sup>1</sup>

Cultural anthropologist Christopher Boehm claimed that morality is not a characteristic distinctly separating humans from other animals. He assumed the foundation of human morality to be an intentional withholding of any unwanted individual behavior that may harm a partnership with other beings. Boehm applied this definition of morality to anthropoids and reached the conclusion that morality is not exclusively human (Boehm 2001).

The question of whether or not morality is exclusive to humans is not a new one. This topic was of great interest to Korean scholars of the past. In fact, the adherents of Zhu Xi's school in Joseon partic-

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1. Associated Press of Korea, "Even Dogs Know What is Right and What is Wrong," *The Hankyoreh*, October 5, 2009, [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/international/international\\_general/380114.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/international/international_general/380114.html) (accessed October 11, 2010).

ipated in what became famous as the “debate over whether human nature and animal nature are identical” (*inmulseong dongi ron* 人物性同異論). One group of scholars insisted on the similarity between the moral nature of humans and animals (dogs, cows, horses, etc.). Their school of thought was named Nak-ron. The other group of scholars, belonging to the Ho-ron faction, thought that while non-human beings, such as dogs, cows, horses, etc., possessed morality, it was different from the moral nature of humans.

This debate on the morality of humans and other beings was generated by the continuous development of Zhu Xi’s school of thought. The theories of Zhu Xi’s school originated in China but were elaborated in Korea. While the school of Zhu Xi declined in China and the state orthodoxy became represented by the school of Wang Yangming, the teachings of Zhu Xi, especially the “theory of the mind-heart and nature” (*simseong ron*),<sup>2</sup> received great attention in Korea and were scrupulously studied. Other examples of scholarly debates of interest include the “debate on the four beginnings and the seven emotions” (*sadan chiljeong nonbyeon* 四端七情論辯)<sup>3</sup> of the mid-Joseon period, which is also known as the Four-Seven Debate, and the “debate over whether human nature and animal nature are identical” of the late Joseon period.

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2. *Simseong ron* denotes the theory of Zhu Xi’s school which studies in depth the basic human nature of mankind. In China, the doctrines of Wang Yangming replaced the decaying school of Neo-Confucianism. However, Korea was not influenced by such changes and successfully maintained Neo-Confucian ideas adopted from China. In Korea, Neo-Confucianism was researched in further detail, with particular attention to the “theory of heart-mind and human nature.”

3. This academic controversy occurred in the early Joseon dynasty. In the term “Four-Seven Debate,” “Four” means absolute good-natured moral emotions, while “Seven” refers to a different kind of moral emotions consisting of both good and evil. “Four-Seven Debate” was an academic debate on how to differentiate the two emotions and how to accurately establish the four good moral emotions.

## The Background of the Debate

### *Divergence into Ho-ron and Nak-ron*

The Horak debate arose unintentionally from the correspondence between Oeam Yi Gan (1677-1727) and Namdang Han Won-jin (1682-1751). The scholarly debate between Oeam and Namdang was then taken up and continued by other Joseon scholars. The position of Oeam<sup>4</sup> was supported by the scholars mainly from the Nakha area, namely Seoul and the province of Gyeonggi-do, hence its name Nak-ron or the school of Nak. The position of Namdang was supported by scholars from the Hoseo area or Chungcheong-do province, and thus received the name Ho-ron or the school of Ho.

The scholars who triggered and actively participated in the Horak debate were the followers of Yi Yulgok of the mid-Joseon period or the Noron faction<sup>5</sup>; thus, the Horak debate can be described as reflecting a division within the Noron faction. Prominent scholars of Nak-ron, in addition to Oeam, included Samyeon Kim Chang-heup (1653-1722), Doam Yi Jae (1680-1746), Yeoho Bak Pil-ju (1665-1748), Giwon Eo Yu-bong (1672-1744), Yeokcheon Song Myeong-heum (1705-1768), Miho Kim Won-haeng (1702-1772), and others. The leading scholars of Ho-ron, in addition to Namdang, included Byeonggye Yun Bong-gu (1681-1767), Bongam Chae Ji-hong (1683-1741), Unpyeong Song Neung-sang (1710-1758), Jonjae Wi Baek-gyu (1727-1798), and Jeongam Yi Hyeon-ik (1678-1717)<sup>6</sup> (Choi 2009, 189).

The Horak debate was such a massive-scale debate that lasted over a half century. Studies show that the number of Ho-ron group

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4. Two scholars, Oeam Yi Gan (1677-1727) and Namdang Han Won-jin (1682-1751), constantly appear throughout the article. Their pen names, Oeam and Namdang, respectively, are used, while real names were used for other scholars.

5. The Noron faction, a political faction which led the Joseon dynasty, was the largest political power at the time and was composed of scholars with academically conservative inclinations. During the Joseon dynasty, politics were not separated from learning.

6. Yi Hyeon-ik is a student of Kim Chang-heup of Nak-ron who ended up changing allegiances and accepting the position taken by the Ho-ron group.

scholar Yun Bong-gu's students reached as high as 235. In addition, the key issues addressed in the Horak debate remained major discussion topics in Neo-Confucian philosophy for over 200 years in the late Joseon period (A. Lee 1996, 381).

Many topics were discussed within the larger context of the Horak debate: whether human nature and animal nature are identical, whether the mind contains only good prior to external arousal, and whether sages' and commoners' minds are alike. The topics of the goodness of the mind prior to arousal and sages' versus commoners' minds both relate to the theory of mind-heart and are sometimes considered as one discourse (Moon 2006, 7; Cho 1997, 75). Considering this, one might claim that the Horak debate consists of the two topics of human versus animal nature and the mind before arousal (Bae 1985, 64; Yoo 1998, 321). This paper will focus only on the debate over human versus animal nature in the context of morality.

### *Original Human Nature and Physical Human Nature*

According to the school of Zhu Xi, the universe consists of the "principle" called *li* 理 and the "material force" called *qi* 氣. *Li* forms the fundamental basis of beings and *qi* composes them. *Qi* force is endowed into beings during the process in which *li* composes creatures.<sup>7</sup> *Qi* divides into *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 and the five elements of wood (木), fire (火), earth (土), metal (金), and water (水),<sup>8</sup> forming all beings. Individual entities composed of *qi* are called *qizhi* 氣質 (temperament). *Li* always exists within these individual entities.

In the school of Zhu Xi, *li* is only called *li* while it exists outside of temperament. When existing within temperament, *li* is called *xing* 性 (meaning "nature"). When temperament ceases to exist, nature

7. "氣以成形而理亦賦焉" (*Zhongyong*, ch. 1).

8. The school of Zhu Xi considers *qi* the material which forms every creature and believes that *qi* is composed of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, which divide again into Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行). The Five Phases are wood (木), fire (火), earth (土), metal (金), and water (水). Zhu Xi scholars believed that the Five Phases form every existence in the world.

reverts to *li*. Temperament is differentiated when applied to individual beings due to the clear and turbid, pure and impure categories of *qi*. Differences in *qi* also account for the differences in the temperaments of humans and non-human animals such as dogs and cows. Zhu Xi scholars believed that humans possessed the most eminent temperaments among all creatures.

Nature, when existing within the individual temperaments of beings, is discussed in two ways. When nature is discussed independently of hypothetically eliminated qualities of temperament, it is called “original nature” (*benran zhi xing* 本然之性). When nature and temperament are considered together, it is called “temperamental nature” (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性). Zhu Xi scholars believed that only original nature was to be considered nature and that temperamental nature could not be considered an authentic category of nature.

Temperamental nature varies according to the temperament of each creature. Original nature, which is identical to *li*, is fundamentally good. When Mencius, the early Chinese philosopher (372 BC—289 BC), claimed that human nature was inherently good, he was referring to original nature. Temperamental nature contains all of the clear and turbid, pure and impure qualities of *qi*. Temperamental nature contains both good and evil. Therefore, temperamental nature should not be considered identical to *li*.

Original nature is also explained as the Five Virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity.<sup>9</sup> The Five Virtues refer to original nature in terms of temperament. Mencius explained

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9. Neo-Confucian scholars typically use *ren-yi-li-zhi* 仁義禮智 (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom) and *ren-yi-li-zhi-xin* 仁義禮智信 (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity) interchangeably. *Xin* 信 (fidelity) belongs to *tu* 土 (earth) in the Five Phases, while it belongs to *zhong* 中 (center) in bearings. If there are four directions of north, south, east and west, center naturally exists as their point of reference even though it is not specified. Neo-Confucian scholars understand *tu* and *xin* in accordance with *zhong*. In other words, *tu* and *xin* are considered to be already presented although only *mu-huo-jin-shui* 木火金水 (fire, metal, wood, and water) and *ren-yi-li-zhi* are mentioned. For further reference, see “Gongsunchou (I),” in *Mengzi* (Book of Mencius) with commentaries by Zhu Xi.

that humans possessed a moral nature that included benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity.<sup>10</sup> In the case of benevolence, if one traced the origin of an external expression of pity for others, one would find benevolence to be present in the moral nature of humans.<sup>11</sup> The Zhu Xi scholars agreed with Mencius, believing that all humans possessed a moral nature encompassing benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity. The nature discussed in the debate over human versus animal nature is original nature. The original nature is also referred to as “pure nature” as well as the “nature of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity.” The scholars engaged in the debate carried forward an in-depth discussion on the differences between the original nature of humans versus that of non-human beings such as dogs, cows, and horses. The debate can be approached from a moral perspective and deeply contemplates whether humans should be placed above non-human beings in terms of moral capacity.

### Human and Non-Human Beings Share the Same Nature

A group of scholars upheld the opinion that all beings including humans were equally endowed with *li*. They believed *li* to be the original nature of all beings and identical to original nature and the Five Virtues. Their opinion that the Five Virtues were inherent in all beings led to the conclusion that all beings possessed an identical moral original nature.

Oeam Yi Kan was one of the main initiators of this position within the debate, and scholars who continued the debate frequently referred to both Oeam and Namdang. In the next section, I will discuss the position of Oeam and his supporters.

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10. Scholars of Neo-Confucianism consider original nature, pure nature, and the nature of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity as same nature.

11. “Gongsunchou (I),” in *Mengzi* (Book of Mencius).

### *Oeam's Position in the Debate*

Oeam thought that the Five Virtues, the Great Ultimate (*taiji* 太極),<sup>12</sup> and original nature were all different names for the same idea: *li*, when it is considered without the differentiations of beginning and end, part and whole, or big and small.<sup>13</sup>

Oeam had a viewpoint that the *li*, or the Great Ultimate, was established as original nature in the midst of temperament, and that this original nature is no other than the Five Virtues. The Five Virtues is a term that carries moral connotation in that it refers to the pure nature. In sum, Oeam believed that *li*, the Great Ultimate, was the concept of the Five Virtues with a moral connotation.

Oeam talked about original nature from the perspective of “one source” (*yi yuan* 一原)<sup>14</sup> meaning “origin.” Zhu Xi discussed one source and its manifestations using the analogy of the moon and moon’s reflection in rivers and lakes. “There is only one moon but the moons reflected in the rivers, lakes, and streams are different.”<sup>15</sup> Although the view of moon is manifested in numerous ways in different rivers and lakes, there is only one moon in the sky. The moon in the sky is not divided into pieces.<sup>16</sup> The moon in the sky is the one source.

If the moon in the sky is a full moon, the reflections of the moon in rivers and lakes would be full moons. If the moon in the sky is a half moon, the reflections of the moon would be half moons. The moon in the sky and the moon reflected in rivers and lakes are in the same form. In regards to the moon in the sky, the moon reflected in rivers and lakes is identical to the moon itself. In order for this perspective to remain relevant and sustained, the state of each river or lake cannot be considered. The presence of wave ridges on the surface

12. The most ultimate and original element in composing the world.

13. “五常太極本然，名目雖多，不過此理之隨指異名，而初非有彼此本末偏全大小之異也” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 4).

14. “本然者 一原也” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 7). In the school of Zhu Xi, “one source” (一原) refers to something that is not yet appeared in detail.

15. Recited from *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism*, edited by Wing-tsit Chan (University of Hawaii Press, 1986), p. 66.

16. “如月在天，只一而已。及散在江湖，則隨處而見，不可謂月分也” (*Xingli daquan*, vol. 3).



of the water or the murkiness of the water can influence and damage the sameness of each moon. Considering the state of each river or lake can make the moon in the sky different from its reflections.

Oeam maintained that the moon in the sky and the moon reflected in rivers and lakes were one and the same. This view extended to his explanations regarding the likeness of the Five Virtues, the Great Ultimate, and the original nature. Oeam views them to be the same in assuming the moon in the sky as the analogical reference point, albeit his interpretation transcends the differences caused by the physical state of each body of water.<sup>17</sup> Oeam discussed the Five Virtues and original nature based on this perspective of one source.

From the point of view of one source, the Five Virtues transcend the concrete form. Thus, there is no differentiation of “part and whole” between human and non-human beings. This is called original nature.<sup>18</sup>

The word “form” indicates individual temperament, which can be likened to the physical conditions of rivers and lakes. Human and non-human beings (dogs, cows, horses, etc.), notwithstanding differences of form (individual temperament), equally possess the Five Virtues which are their original nature.

The term “Five Virtues” has moral implications. Oeam’s belief that the Five Virtues are inherent in the original nature of all beings regardless of individual temperament can be interpreted as signifying that all beings have the same morality regardless of individual temperament. Oeam believed that people who were evil, such as Daozhi, had the identical original nature as those who were pure and good, such as Emperor Sun.<sup>19</sup> Original nature was also identical in human

17. “元在一處，故無彼此本末，元只一物，故無偏全大小也。而亦初非牽聯比屬，而謂之一原也。只一物故謂之一原也” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 4).

18. “以一原言則天命五常俱可超形器，而人與物無偏全之殊，是所謂本然之性也” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 7).

19. In Confucianism, one’s morality is considered dependent on the individual temperament that one possesses from birth. Daozhi is a typical person who was born with bad individual temperament; and Emperor Sun is a typical person who was born with good individual temperament.

and non-human beings.

Originally, the nature of Daozhi was identical to the nature of Sun, the nature of non-human beings is identical to the nature of humans. . . . Does not it indicate the original nature that exists amidst temperament?<sup>20</sup>

The fact that all beings, regardless of their individual temperament, inherently possess an identical original nature indicates that humans and other beings have an identical level of morality.

However, although Oeam claimed that human and non-human beings equally possessed the Five Virtues, he did not simply overlook the matter of differences in human and non-human nature. He acknowledged that the differences in their nature were due to the differences in their individual temperament. Oeam discussed the differences between human and non-human beings and the differences between individual humans, as caused by their different temperaments.

Regarding the temperament of beings, human beings are endowed with upright and continuous *qi*, while other beings are endowed with contorted and discontinuous *qi*. Upright and continuous *qi* can be pure and clear or impure and turbid; contorted and discontinuous *qi* can be more or less continuous or completely blocked. This brings about endless differences among human and non-human beings. Considering such individual differences in temperament, the nature of a dog differs from the nature of a cow and the nature of Daozhi differs from the nature of Sun.<sup>21</sup>

Oeam thought that human beings were endowed with upright and continuous temperament, while other beings were endowed with

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20. “語其本然，則不惟跖之性即舜之性也，物之性即人之性矣。 . . . 非即此氣質，單指本然而言與” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 8).

21. “以氣質言之，則得氣之正且通者爲人，而偏且塞者爲物，而正通之中，又有清濁粹駁之分焉，偏塞之中，又有或通全塞之異焉，則是人物異體之有萬不齊者然矣。是故論其氣質，則非惟犬之性非牛之性也，跖之性非舜之性矣” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 7).

contorted and discontinuous temperament, these factors wherein lie the fundamental differences between human and non-human beings.

When the physical conditions of each river and lake are taken to consideration, the moon reflected in each river and lake is different. Oeam compared the differences between rivers and lakes to the differences between the temperaments of beings. When considering the specific conditions of each river and lake, he believed that each reflection of the moon was different. Thus, the moon as reflected in each river or lake—a metaphor for the Five Virtues—was different insofar as individual differences were acknowledged.

Oeam thought that non-human beings, endowed with contorted and discontinuous temperaments, possessed contorted Five Agents (*wuxing* 五行), which in turn contorted their Five Virtues. But human beings, endowed with an upright and continuous temperament, possessed upright and complete Five Agents, and therefore their Five Virtues were complete.<sup>22</sup> Oeam thought that non-human beings with their contorted Five Agents could not sufficiently express and use the Five Virtues because their *qi* was contorted and discontinuous. But humans, who possessed the complete Five Agents and whose *qi* was upright and continuous, could freely express and use their Five Virtues.<sup>23</sup> Oeam named the individual differences distinguishing the temperaments of human and non-human beings,<sup>24</sup> which the followers of Zhu Xi did not consider true nature. He viewed that, due to the differences in the temperaments of human and non-human beings, there existed differences in their Five Virtues. This led to a conclusion that, in regard to temperament, humans were morally superior to non-human beings. However, since Oeam thought that this moral superiority or inferiority did not lie in the original nature of beings, human and non-human beings were equal to each other in terms of

22. “朱子曰仁義禮智，物豈不有，但偏耳。又問人具五行，物只得一行，曰物亦具有五行。只得五行之偏者，又問性具仁義禮智，曰此猶是說成之者性…雖尋常昆蟲之類皆有之，只偏而不全，據此數段，則物亦得五常之理，” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 4).

23. “同是五常，而正且通故能發用，偏且塞故不能發” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 4).

24. “以異體言，則天命五常，俱可因氣質，而不獨人與物有偏全，聖與凡之間，又是千階萬級，而偏處性命俱偏，全處性命俱全，是所謂氣質之性也” (*Oeam yugo*, vol. 7).

original nature.

Namdang criticized the position of Oeam. Namdang stated that Oeam emphasized the theory of one source too much, for Oeam claimed that not only principle but also the Five Virtues were contained in the concept of one source.<sup>25</sup> Namdang was against considering the Five Virtues as the one source. Namdang argued that Oeam's claim that human and non-human beings equally possessed Five Virtues was unsupported by theory in ancient writings. Namdang said that if the theory of Oeam had been supported by ancient writings, Oeam surely would have cited them. The fact that Oeam did not include any such citation in his writings indicated that such theoretical grounding did not exist.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Division into Ho-ron and Nak-ron and the Discussion on Li*

Following the debate between Oeam and Namdang, numerous Joseon scholars divided into groups who supported Oeam and those who supported Namdang. The group of scholars who, like Oeam, thought that human and non-human beings possessed the same original nature took the name of Nak-ron, whose representative scholars are discussed in the following paragraphs.<sup>27</sup>

Kim Chang-heup (1653-1722) contended that such contorted nature as the benevolence of tigers and wolves or the righteousness of bees and ants were not original nature.<sup>28</sup> He thought that the principle of the Great Ultimate, the true original nature, existed within every being as the Five Virtues in their perfect forms, regardless of the completeness of that being's temperament.<sup>29</sup>

Eo Yu-bong (1672-1744) stated that pure principle, when not

25. “巍巖之見，過主乎一原，故因太極之爲一原，而遂以五常亦爲一原” (*Namdangjip*, vol. 40).

26. “古人 . . . 纔說仁義禮智，便以爲不同，未有說仁義禮智而謂之同者，若有之，則公舉必能言之” (*Namdangjip*, vol. 28). Refer to Hong (2007, 24).

27. Refer to Hong (2009, 154-157).

28. “虎狼愛其子，而於物則殘暴。蜂蟻有君臣，而孝則無聞. . . 卽此偏處，便非本然，何以偏者全者等爲本然乎?” (*Samyeonjip*, vol. 21).

29. “虎狼之仁，蜂蟻之義，則是偏也。而曰仁義則是本體也” (*Samyeonjip*, vol. 21).

considered in relation to temperament, existed within every being and was, in fact, the original nature.<sup>30</sup> When separated from temperament, the original nature of human and non-human beings could not but be identical. Eo Yu-bong wrote, “When human and non-human beings are born, there is an innate partiality in the completeness of their temperamental nature; but as to their original principle, human and non-human beings possess the complete Five Virtues.”<sup>31</sup> He believed that this idea was well-represented by Zhu Xi’s commentary in the phrase “What Heaven confers is called nature” (*tianming zhi weixing* 天命之謂性) in *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean).

Ho-ron scholars including Namdang contended that tigers and wolves possessed the contorted virtue of benevolence and bees and ants possessed the contorted virtue of justice. But Eo Yu-bong stated that on the grounds of similarity between human and non-human nature, tigers and wolves also originally possessed righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity in addition to benevolence; bees and ants originally possessed benevolence, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity in addition to righteousness.<sup>32</sup>

Yi Jae (1680-1746) thought that human and non-human beings were equally endowed with the *li* of the Five Virtues regardless of their upright and continuous or contorted and discontinuous temperaments. However, non-human beings, because of their contorted and discontinuous temperaments, could not completely preserve this *li*.<sup>33</sup> Yi Jae cited the commentary on the *Zhongyong*, which says that “human and non-human beings from birth are endowed with *li*, this is the Five Virtues.”<sup>34</sup> According to Yi Jae, this idea also applied to animals and plants. Therefore, he wrote, “Animals and plants are endowed with *li*, and this *li* is their nature. It means that animals and

30. “就氣質中，不雜氣質，而拈出理一邊曰，是本然耳” (*Giwonjip*, vol. 14).

31. “人物稟生，固有偏全之不同，而若其理之本體，則在人在物，莫非健順五常之全，故章句說如此矣” (*Giwonjip*, vol. 14).

32. “在虎狼為父子之仁，而所謂義信禮智，初未嘗不在其中矣。在螻蟻為君臣之義，而所謂仁信禮智，亦未嘗不在其中矣” (*Giwonjip*, vol. 14).

33. “人物同得健順五常之理，而由其氣之偏塞，故物不得全耳” (*Doamjip*, vol. 21).

34. “於是人物之生，因各得其所賦之理，以為健順五常之德” (*Zhongyong*).

plants possess benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity.”<sup>35</sup>

Yi Jae criticized Yun Bong-gu (1681-1767) and Namdang, who insisted that human and non-human nature were different. Yi Jae agreed with and praised the scholar Bak Pil-ju (1665-1748), who thought that human and non-human nature were similar and that original nature was not separated from *qi* but was not limited by it.<sup>36</sup> Yi Jae thought that although original nature existed within temperament, it was not limited by it.

Kim Won-haeng (1702-1772) thought that original nature was related to the concept of one source and discussed it as removed from temperament and being only pure *li*. This was why all beings equally possessed the original nature of the Five Virtues regardless of their human or non-human, contorted or complete characteristics.<sup>37</sup>

Hong Jik-pil (1776-1852) followed Oeam’s theory of one source. Hong Jik-pil said “original nature is another name for one source. There is no original nature outside the one source. Individual differences are differences in the temperaments of human and non-human beings. Although they are different, because the mysterious original nature is present everywhere, the temperamental nature is called individual differences and the original nature is called one source. This principle cannot be changed.”<sup>38</sup> Hong Jik-pil also agreed with O Hui-sang (1763-1833), who interpreted the phrase “Life is what is called nature” (*sheng zhi weixing* 生之謂性) in *Mengzi* (The Book of Mencius) as discussing the temperamental nature of dogs, cows, and humans. Hong said, “What Mencius says about the difference in the nature of dogs, cows, and humans is temperamental nature. This is a clear and deep insight. This is in accord with the knowledge I have accumulated during all my life. When I read it, my eyes and my

35. “所謂物者，統禽獸草木而言也。禽獸草木亦稟是理而爲性，則其有仁義禮智信明矣” (*Doamjip*, vol. 18).

36. “高明所論，明白痛快。．．．性囿於氣一語，已是大段做病。盛喻雖不離於氣，而亦不囿於氣云云，可謂癩撲不破，似此是非固易曉然” (*Doamjip*, vol. 10).

37. “自本然而言之，則萬物一原，人也有健順五常，物也有健順五常” (*Mihojip*).

38. “竊嘗以爲本然者，即一原之異名，而一原之外，更無本然。異體者 即指人物氣質不同者言。雖則不同，而其本然之妙，無所不在，故曰以氣質之性而謂之異體，以本然之性而謂之一原，茲乃不易之定理” (*Maesanjip*, vol. 5).

heart rejoice.”<sup>39</sup>

As explained above, after the debate between Namdang and Oeam, scholars who supported the Nak-ron opinion thought that all beings equally possessed original nature (which is identical to principle) and when nature was discussed in conjunction with temperament, it referred to temperamental nature. These ideas were in line with Oeam’s theories on original nature and temperamental nature. The Nak-ron opinion that human and non-human beings possessed a similar original nature can be understood to mean that human and non-human beings possessed an equal level of morality.

### **Human and Non-Human Nature are Different: On the Moral Superiority of Human Beings**

Scholars who upheld the position that the nature of human and non-human beings was different thought that although all beings including humans were endowed with a basis of *li*, the original nature of each being was different. In the following section, I will examine the argument of these scholars, focusing especially on the theory of Namdang, the leader of the Ho-ron faction.

#### *Namdang’s Argument for the Differences in the Natures of Humans and Non-humans*

Namdang thought original nature to be like the reflection of the moon, which becomes different in each river and lake depending on the physical condition of each surface. Likewise, the original nature of the Five Virtues is manifested differently in each being, according to the different temperament of each being; each being’s differentiated Five Virtues were considered its original nature.

According to the school of Zhu Xi, humans were born with an

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39. “子所云犬牛人性不同之爲氣質之性，盛解諸說，明白透脫，殆無餘蘊。皆是賤子平生所茹蓄而欲道得者，讀之灑然，心目俱醒” (*Maesanjip*, vol. 5).

excellent temperament that is upright and continuous, while non-human beings were born with inferior contorted and discontinuous temperaments. If the Five Virtues of beings varied according to their different temperaments, then humans possessed Five Virtues morally superior to that of non-human beings, whose Five Virtues were morally inferior due to contorted and discontinuous temperaments.

Namdang explained that differences in nature occurred according to temperament as differences in Five Virtues occurred according to Five Agents.<sup>40</sup> Humans born with upright and continuous temperament were endowed with the eminent and complete *qi* of Five Agents and, therefore, possessed the complete and pure Five Virtues. But non-human beings, born with contorted and discontinuous temperament, were endowed with the contorted and partial *qi* of Five Agents and, therefore, possessed the partial, uneven, and contorted Five Virtues.<sup>41</sup> For example, humans born with upright and continuous temperament received all the excellent *qi* of wood, metal, fire, and water. Therefore, they possessed all of the complete and perfect virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity. But tigers and wolves, born with contorted and discontinuous temperament, received only the *qi* of wood, thus unevenly possessing the virtue of benevolence. Bees and ants received but the *qi* of metal, thus unevenly possessing the virtue of righteousness.<sup>42</sup> From such arguments, we can conclude that Namdang's theory about Five Virtues implied the existence of moral superiority and inferiority among different beings.

In Namdang's theory, the nature of *ingjil* 因氣質 (the nature originated from temperament) is a type of nature built upon discrepancies

40. “就人心，各指其氣之理而名之，則木之理謂之仁，金之理謂之義，火之理謂之禮，水之理謂之智 . . . 人則稟氣皆全，故其性亦皆全。物則稟氣不能全，故其性亦不能全。此人與物不同，而人則皆同之性也” (*Namdangjip*, vol. 7).

41. “五行之氣闕一，則不得生物，故人物之生，雖皆均受五行之氣，物之所受，極其偏駁，故其理亦極偏駁。豈可以此而輿論於仁義禮智之粹然者哉？” (*Namdangjip*, vol. 8).

42. “虎狼之仁，蜂蟻之義之類，是於五行中，亦得其一氣秀氣，故其理為仁為義，而終不能全也 . . . 天地生物，莫不與之以元亨利貞之理，人則受之以正通之氣，故所得之理，皆全且粹，而為仁義禮智之性。物則受之以偏塞之氣，故所得之理，亦偏且粗，而不得為仁義禮智之性。此理甚明，又何疑乎？” (*Namdangjip*, vol. 9).



in humans' Five Virtues that arise from differences in temperament. Namdang's concept of *ingijil* nature corresponded to Oeam's concept of temperamental nature. However, Oeam did not agree with Namdang's theory in which the *ingijil* nature was original nature.

Oeam criticized Namdang's theory which defined the *ingijil* nature not as temperamental nature but as original nature:

How can anything like "original nature limited by *qi*" exist? There is an order of *li* and *qi*, *li* comes before and *qi* comes after. There is an order of the real and the name, the real comes before and the name comes after. Therefore, only when there is *li* of Five Virtues, *qi* of Five Agents comes to be. Only when there is a reality of Five Virtues, the name of Five Virtues comes to be. This is the law that cannot be changed. But now he says that because of the reality of *qi*, the name of *li* comes to be. How is this possible? "Five Virtues are called so because of the temperament" is a theory he developed by himself. This is a mistake created by unnatural philosophizing.<sup>43</sup>

Because of his doctrine on *ingijil*, Namdang was continuously criticized by Nak-ron scholars. However, the South Party remained committed to his view that *ingijil* nature is original nature.

In order to make his opinion clear, Namdang developed a theory that divided nature into three levels.<sup>44</sup> He contended that besides *ingijil* nature, there was also the nature of *chohyeonggi* 超形氣 (nature transcending the appearance of things) and the nature of *japgijil* 雜氣質 (nature mixed with temperament).

Namdang maintained that *chohyeonggi* nature, in addition to *ingijil* nature, was original nature. Human and non-human beings similarly possess the nature of *chohyeonggi*. *Chohyeonggi* nature, corresponding to the concept of original nature in Oeam's theory, transcends temperament. Namdang said that although *chohyeonggi* nature can be

43. "天下豈有氣局之本然哉, 況原理氣先後, 則有理而有氣, 論名實先後 則有實而有名矣. 故有五常之理而斯有五行之氣, 有五常之實而斯有五常之名, 此不易之勢也. 今謂因氣之實而有理之名者, 此甚說話乎, 所謂五常者. 因氣質之名, 此一句八字, 卽渠自得之見, 而實則其鑿孔生穴, 宛轉膠漆之頭腦在此矣" (Oeam yugo, vol. 12).

44. "元震竊疑以爲性有三層之異" (Namdangjip, vol. 7).

defined as nature, it indicated the *li* of the Great Ultimate.<sup>45</sup> Namdang argued that the nature of *chohyeonggi* was pure *li*, not existing within the temperament of the being.<sup>46</sup> *Chohyeonggi* nature is the nature of *li* (the Great Ultimate), considered apart from temperament and thus different from the nature of Five Virtues. In other words, *chohyeonggi* nature is not the real, actual nature, but the assumed, conceptual nature of the *li* (the Great Ultimate) that is similarly endowed in human and non-human beings.

The nature of *japgijil* is related to the temperaments of human and non-human beings. It was conceived as considering the particular differences between individual humans and also those between individual non-human beings. Namdang equated the nature of *japgijil* to temperamental nature. He discussed these terms, considering the concrete differences between individual beings.<sup>47</sup> He said that the nature of *ingijil* transformed into the nature of *japgijil* when united with temperament.<sup>48</sup> In terms of theoretical structure, *japgijil* nature is built on the nature of *ingijil*. The nature of *japgijil* explained the concrete differences in the temperament of beings that could not be explained by *chohyeonggi* or *ingijil* nature.

The original nature of *ingijil* outlined in Namdang's theory corresponded to the original nature of Five Virtues in Oeam's theory. Namdang discussed the original nature of Five Virtues only in relation to *ingijil*. He said that Five Virtues of each being differed according to their temperament. Oeam said that all beings possessed the Five Virtues similarly regardless of temperament.

In Confucianism, quotidian sentiments regarding morality are connected to the original nature of Five Virtues. Compassion, consideration of the feelings of others, is connected to the original nature of benevolence. The feeling of shame about one's own wrongdoings

45. “超形氣而言，則太極之稱是也，而萬物之理皆同矣” (*Namdangjip*, vol. 11).

46. “然理在氣中者，有專以不雜言者... 有言萬物皆同之性者，是則不犯形氣，單指其理而言也，所謂專以不雜言者也” (*Gyeongui gimunnok*, vol. 3).

47. “以理雜氣而言之，則剛柔善惡有萬不齊，此人人皆不同之性也” (*Namdangjip*, vol. 7).

48. “各指其氣之理，故有五常名目不同，亦不雜乎其氣而言，故爲純善無惡之性... 至於氣質善惡之性，則以此性，滾雜氣質而言者也” (*Gyeongui gimunnok*, vol. 3).

and the feeling of disgust about what others do wrong are connected to the original nature of righteousness. Generosity and selflessness towards others are connected to the original nature of propriety, and being able to distinguish right from wrong is connected to the original nature of wisdom. The fact that the nature of Five Virtues is manifested in the form of such feelings implies that a sense of morality is intrinsic to the nature of Five Virtues and can be manifested as moral sentiment. Scholars who believed that the nature of human and non-human beings was identical, including Oeam, insisted that both human and non-human beings had the same Five Virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity. In comparison, Namdang viewed the natures of humans and non-humans to be different: humans with decent temperament had the complete Five Virtues whereas non-humans had distorted virtues in accordance with their temperament.

### *The Argument for the Superiority of Humans*

After the correspondence between Oeam and Namdang regarding the nature of human and non-human beings became known, the debate spread throughout the scholarly society of Joseon. Many scholars joined the Nak-ron and Ho-ron groups and debated their ideas. This section will review the theories of some leading Ho-ron scholars who supported Namdang's ideas.

One of the leading scholars who agreed with Namdang was Yun Bong-gu. Yun Bong-gu thought that humans and non-human beings were alike in common *li*, but they differed in the original nature of *ingijil*. Like Namdang, he considered the nature of humans and animals to be similar at the level of *chohyeonggi* nature but different at the level of the nature of *ingijil*.<sup>49</sup> Yun Bong-gu stated that the original nature of humans could not ever be identical to that of other beings. If *li* and nature are understood as indicating the same thing,

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49. “性理雖本一致，自其異體稟賦而言，不容無別。理字公共之稱，性字因氣之名。以理則雖無人獸之別，以性則烏得無偏全之分乎？” (“*Haengjang*,” in *Byeonggyejip*).

then people would become confused and would be unable to distinguish between humans and animals.<sup>50</sup> Yun Bong-gu said that if Zhu Xi's interpretations of the word "nature" were considered carefully, it became clear that the original nature of human and non-human beings was different.<sup>51</sup>

Yi Hyeon-ik (1678-1717) criticized Eo Yu-bong's theory which asserted that human and non-human beings had similar Five Virtues. Yi stated that human and non-human beings had different Five Virtues and different natures. He cited the words of Zhu Xi, which he considered to have deep meaning and agreed upon: "When the one source of all beings is discussed, we say that *li* is the same but *qi* is different; and when differences of all beings are considered, we say that *qi* is similar, but *li* is completely different."<sup>52</sup> Regarding endowed *li*, Yi Hyeon-ik argued that all beings possessed the *li* of the Five Virtues. However, since this did not take into account the differences between the temperaments of beings,<sup>53</sup> it could not be considered a real manifestation of original nature.

Yi Hyeon-ik said that differences in temperament should be considered when discussing the original nature of human and non-human beings. He believed the original nature of human and non-human beings to be different from each other. He wrote: "Tigers and wolves have benevolence. Bees and ants have righteousness. Foxes and otters have propriety. Seasonal insects have wisdom. Eagles and peasants have fidelity. Because animals possess only one virtue for each, it is impossible to say that non-human beings possess benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity. . . . As non-human beings do not originally possess the perfection of the Five Virtues, their hearts are not spiritual. To say that they possess the

50. "蓋或說以爲仁義禮智之性理也，理一也。仁義禮智，豈獨爲人之性也？昆蟲草木之性，亦可謂仁義禮智。此似一直快說，而誠有所不然。 . . . 今只知理性之爲一物， . . . 理性之無分，而終至於人獸之相混" (*Byeonggyejeip*, vol. 11).

51. "細玩，則朱子性字之釋，人物各異，豈不明白丁寧乎?" (*Byeonggyejeip*, vol. 11).

52. "朱子曰，論萬物之一原，則理同而氣異。觀萬物之異體，則氣猶相近而理絕不同。此語極精且完" (*Samyeonjip*, vol. 21).

53. "主天命賦與處言，則謂人得健順五常，物亦得健順五常可也" (*Samyeonjip*, vol. 21).

Five Virtues is absurd and without basis.”<sup>54</sup>

Chae Ji-hong (1683-1741) said that although some scholars always cited the commentary on the phrase “What Heaven confers is called nature” from the *Zhongyong* to insist the similarity of human and non-human original nature, this was only the result of their biased obsession with this commentary. He built his theory that human and non-human beings have different original natures based on Mencius’s commentary on Gaozi’s maxim “Life is what is called nature” in *Mengzi*.<sup>55</sup> He wrote:

From the perspective of one source, *li* as endowed by Heaven is similar within non-human beings and within me. But from the perspective of different bodies, the nature of non-human beings is partial and differs from being to being. . . . What distinguishes human from non-human beings is that humans possess the complete nature of Five Virtues. The nature of humans contains Five Virtues because humans are endowed with pure and clear *qi* of the Five Agents. Flying, running, and unmoving beings are endowed with contorted and discontinuous *qi*. How can they possess a nature equal to humans, when humans are endowed with the pure and clear *qi* of Five Agents and are the supreme creatures among all creatures?<sup>56</sup>

Chae thought humans and other beings were similar in terms of the *li* endowed by Heaven. However, when considering the nature of the Five Virtues, humans, who possessed the complete Five Virtues, should be distinguished from other beings, who did not possess these Five Virtues.

54. “虎狼之仁，蜂蟻之義，豺獺之禮，候蟲之智，雉鳩之信，只各得其一，則謂物之具仁義禮智信不可. . . . 於物之元不得五行之秀，而其心不能虛靈者，亦言其中具得仁義禮智信，則為架虛之說，而為無根蒂底道理” (*Samyeonjip*, vol. 21).

55. “人物各得五常之說，論者每以口中庸口首章注為證，此恐太泥。朱子嘗曰，在人在物，雖有氣稟之異，理則未嘗不同。此即所謂論萬物之一原，則理同而氣異者也。孟子集注亦曰仁義禮智之粹然者，豈物之所得而全。此即所謂觀萬物之異體，則氣猶相近，而理絕不同者也。豈可執一於此，而有若摸象於暗中乎？” (*Bongamjip*, vol. 5).

56. “自其一原處而論之，則天賦之理，物我雖同。以其異體者而觀之，則物受之性，偏全各異. . . . 以其全五常之性也。性之所以該五常者，以其稟五行精秀之氣也。彼飛走動植之受氣偏駁者，豈可與稟五行精秀之氣而為衆物之靈者，均一性？” (*Bongamjip*, vol. 5).

Namdang's ideas insisted that the original nature of humans was superior to that of non-human beings. All of the scholars who agreed with Namdang thought that humans and other beings had different original natures of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity. Their ideas and theories led to the conclusion that humans and other beings had different levels of morality, placing the superior morality of humans above that of non-human beings.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Confucian scholars of Joseon Korea partook in a philosophical debate on the original nature of humans versus non-human beings. This debate arose in 1709 out of the correspondence between two scholars of the Zhu Xi school of Joseon, Oeam and Namdang. The debate later spread nationwide and long continued to engage philosophers. Some scholars continued this debate even at the beginning of the twentieth century. This debate was mainly concerned with whether humans and other beings had similar original natures.

Nak-ron scholars thought that humans and non-humans shared a similar original nature while Ho-ron scholars believed their original natures to be different. The debate focused on the Five Virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity. Nak-ron scholars discussed the Five Virtues without considering the different temperaments of beings, contending that humans and other beings had similar Five Virtues. Ho-ron scholars discussed the Five Virtues, taking into account the temperament of beings. Ho-ron scholars thought that the Five Virtues of each being were manifested according to temperament. Humans, endowed with upright and continuous temperament, possessed the complete Five Virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity while other beings, endowed with distorted and discontinuous temperament, had distorted and discontinuous Five Virtues.

Original nature, or the Five Virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity, is expressed in daily life as

moral feelings of compassion, shame, selflessness, and distinguishing between right and wrong. Mencius believed in the inherent goodness of mankind and Neo-Confucian scholars adopted this idea.

Both Ho-ron and Nak-ron scholars believed that every human being is born with good original nature represented by the Five Virtues. They did not question whether non-human beings had morality, but rather held in-depth debates on whether non-human beings had the same level of morality as humans did. Korean Neo-Confucian scholars called this debate *inmulseong dongi nonjaeng*.

When placing the main focus on moral sentiment, the Korean debate over human and animal nature can be interpreted in the following way. The Nak-ron position, which argued that humans and other beings possessed similar temperament, can be said to argue that humans and other beings had a similar level of morality. The Ho-ron position, which argued differences in human and non-human temperament, was that humans and other beings had different levels of morality. Animals, albeit they possess morality, are morally inferior to humans due to their inferior temperaments.

The debate between Ho-ron and Nak-ron scholars over human and animal nature was a debate of the past. However, recent debates questioning the morality of humans and animals have rekindled interest in the Joseon debate.

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