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The Primacy of *Li* (Principle) in the Neo-Confucian Philosophy of Zhu Xi: *Significance for Contemporary Korean Society*

Hansang A. KIM

Abstract

Among the Confucian and Buddhist philosophical heritages of East Asia, Zhu Xi's school of nature and principle (lixue 理學 *in Chinese, seongnihak* 性理學 *in Korean), with its philosophy of the primacy of* li *(principle), provides valuable resources for a new universal ethics due to its rationalistic metaphysical characteristic that goes beyond instrumental or functional reason. The defining traits of lixue involve a metaphysical philosophical thinking that places importance on the making of distinctions in the levels of being. The distinctive characteristic of Zhu's metaphysics is connected invariably with his philosophy of the primacy of* li*, which gives precedence to* li 理 *over* qi 氣 *('material force' or 'psycho-physical matter'). By positing the objective existence of a normative truth embedded in* xing 性 *(seong in Korean; 'moral [human] nature'), the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi seeks to secure the moral basis of not only human society but the entire ecosphere. Zhu Xi's philosophy of the primacy of* li *may serve to reinvigorate the ethical foundation of contemporary Korean society, which despite current materialistic-physicalist tendencies is marked by manifestly deep Neo-Confucian spirituality and religiosity.*

Keywords: *li*, *qi*, rationalism, metaphysics, levels of being, *xing*, inherent moral basis of human society and the ecosphere

Hansang Andrew KIM is an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Myongji University. E-mail: andrewfr@mju.ac.kr.

Introduction

Contemporary Korean society with its rampant consumerism and materialistic culture has not been immune to the hegemonic world-view of modern times characterized by "scientific materialism," which dominates one axis of the Western mode of thought. Such a world-view implicitly denies the objective existence of moral truths or of an inborn moral human nature as traditionally held by Confucianism and its metaphysical offspring, Neo-Confucianism of the Song (China) and Joseon (Korea) dynasties. Such a view has, more often than not, been summarily dismissed as anachronistic and unscientific by adherents of mainstream physicalist Anglo-American philosophical circles.

Yet many conscientious intellectuals and thinkers in East Asia have pointed to the ethical vacuum in East Asian societies, and renewed calls to reexamine the resources inherent in the traditional philosophies of East Asia to serve as the foundation for a new rationalist ethics for the modern world. In their view, in order to do this in a judicious and non-prejudiced way, it is necessary to make an attempt to construct "a coherent, logical, and necessary system of the general ideas that can interpret all of the elements of our experiences," to use the words of Alfred North Whitehead (1979, 3).

Among the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions of Northeast Asia, the Neo-Confucian metaphysics of Zhu Xi (1130–1200) represents a paramount example of such an attempt to construct a coherent, logical, and necessary system of general ideas that can interpret all elements of human experience. It does so through the framework of abstract concepts such as *taiji* 太極 (supreme ultimate), *li* 理 (principle), *qi* 氣 (material force or psycho-physical matter), *xin* 心 (mind or the heart-mind),[1] *xing* 性 (moral [human] nature), and *weifa* 未發 (the pre-intentional and universally-oriented state of the mind before the feelings are aroused). While these terms seem abstruse and undecipherable to modern East Asians, they contain complex insights regarding nature (*yi* 易, the world of change) and the human realm of the heart-mind, or *xin* 心, within a comprehensive

1. Throughout this essay, *xin* is referred to interchangeably as "mind" and "heart-mind."

system of philosophy that resonate with the shared cultural background of East Asians.

It must be admitted that there exist diverse interpretations on the character of Zhu Xi's metaphysics.[2] However, the metaphysical propositions that appear in the ontology and the theory of self-cultivation in Zhu Xi's philosophy can be read in a relatively consistent manner of organization, if they are explained and solved by centering on *li* (principle). This paper seeks to argue that the merit of Zhu Xi's metaphysical system for a renewed ethics in East Asia and beyond lies in its dualistic and rationalistic character that accords a primacy to *li* over *qi*.

Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism Seen from the Horizon of Western Rationalist Philosophy

As pointed out by the celebrated Chinese philosopher Fung Yu-lan at an earlier opportunity, Zhu Xi's metaphysics possesses a certain similarity with the metaphysical premises of what continental European philosophers refer to as "objective idealism" (Fung 1953, 2:537). This is basically the position that has been maintained and developed by the mainstream traditional rationalist philosophies of the West that have their provenance in Plato. Zhu Xi recognizes the existence of objective truth and the possibility of human cognition and reason to grasp it. It has been suggested that Zhu Xi's methodology for attaining objective truth may be comparable to the traditional method of understanding in the West regarding the attainment of objective truth that is the legacy of the entire rationalist tradition from Plato to Kant and Hegel.

The two traditions respectively may amount to a precious commonly

2. This paper is limited to dealing with the metaphysical dimension of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism with possible implications for modern society and does not engage in a sociological or historical analysis of Korean Neo-Confucianism during its often tumultuous 500-year history. The shortcomings inherent in such an approach have been pointed out by anonymous reviewers of this essay. The author is grateful to the reviewers for their poignant, probing criticisms and suggestions, and resolves to address them earnestly in a future project.

held asset of universal humankind, in the face of postmodernism which argues for the relativity of truth. Among East Asian philosophers at home and in the diaspora, various students and modern-day followers of Fung Yu-lan are at the forefront of the academic research into a renewed analysis of Zhu Xi's ethical theory from the viewpoint of objective rationalism.[3] These scholars are in agreement that the foremost mark of Zhu Xi's philosophy lies in its emphasis on the primacy of *li* over *qi*. In contrast to postmodern ideology which has suppressed reason, they suggest that the crisis of modern times—extending to democracy, the environment, the market economy, and religion—can instead be overcome through the reinstatement of a new rationalism that takes into consideration the spiritual values inherent in human existence.

Zhu Xi posits the autonomy of the human being that is a result of the presence of a moral human nature. According to objective idealism, the laws of nature, the laws governing human thought and moral norms are not the invention of human beings. Objective truth exists a priori, and is "discovered,"—not constituted,—by human beings. Although the tradition of German Idealism extending from Kant to Hegel had at one time been so influential to the extent of being regarded as modern Western philosophy par excellence, the influence of German rationalist philosophy became very much diminished in the latter half of the 20th century. Such philosophy of objective idealism continuing the Western rationalist tradition, which posits the existence of objective truth, seems to have lost its prominence amidst a culture of moral relativism and a rejection of moral realism in academic circles. Recently however, in Europe, the United States, and some Asian regions, namely Korea and the Chinese cultural sphere, there have been numerous indications of a movement to reinstate objective truth through reason in academic circles as the paramount task of philosophy. Such stirrings include the Frankfurt School in Germany, social philosophers like Axel Honneth and Ulrich Beck, advocates of a reinterpreted objective idealism such as Vittorio Hösle, Anglo-American political philosophers

3. These include Chen Lai and Li Zehou in China, and Yeongsik Son and Hyeongjo Han in Korea.

who adhere to the Kantian theory of justice of John Rawls, and members of the so-called "Pittsburgh School"[4] in the United States, who continue the tradition of the systematic philosophy of Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Rudolph Carnap in a land where the analytic tradition reigns supreme. All these scholars share a viewpoint that is fundamentally different from the postmodern ideology that is skeptical of the objectivity of reason. These scholars and movements are actively engaged in reevaluating the normative potential of not only the Western rationalist tradition, but also the rationalist tradition in East Asia, namely that of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism in particular. This essay seeks to examine Zhu Xi's philosophy of the primacy of *li* in more detail, so as to ascertain whether such claims can be corroborated in a more scholarly light.

Dualistic *Li-Qi* Metaphysics in Neo-Confucianism and Privileging the Primary Level of Being in Mencius

The central component of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism can be characterized as "the presence of *li* (principle) and *qi* (material force or psycho-physical matter), the dualistic metaphysics that strictly distinguishes between human nature (*xing* 性) and the human emotions (*qing* 情), and the dualistic theory of self-cultivation that makes a distinction between the level of 'reverent mindfulness' (*jujing* 居敬) and the level of 'the pursuit of principle' (*qiongli* 窮理)" (Son 2007, 62). In a now classic explanation Fung Yu-lan, in his *History of Chinese Philosophy* (1953), proposed a definition of *li* as principle, a rule of operation, a law governing existing things, and *qi* as material stuff, matter, and phenomena. This explanation is in a way akin to Aristotle's account of form and matter. Read in this way, *li* and *qi* represent different ontological categories and not divisions on the same phenomenal level. *Li* is the metaphysical principle and *qi* is the realm of the physical, each belonging to its own distinct category.

4. Composed of Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, and Robert Brandom.

The problem is that expressions that seem contrary to the above formulation are also found in the language of Zhu Xi. When discussing things in the natural realm, the problem of priority between *li* and *qi* is not an issue. With regard to the moral theory of self-cultivation in human beings, however, Zhu Xi divides *li* and *qi* into adversarial camps, in opposition to one another. Here *li* and *qi* are not simply two different categories of existence that together explain the makeup of the natural realm, but two dichotomous tendencies within human beings competing for hegemony. What is most interesting is that Zhu links *li* and *qi* to the notions of the "mind of the Way" (*daoxin* 道心) and the "(all too) human mind" (*renxin* 人心) in the *Book of History* (*Shujing*), to Mencian notions of the "greater part of the self" (*dati* 大體) and the "petty part of the self" (*xiaoti* 小體), to the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhang Zai's concepts of the "original human nature" (*benran zhi xing* 本然之性) and "the nature influenced by one's psycho-physical endowment" (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性), and lastly to the Mencian Four Beginnings (*siduan* 四端) and the notion in the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*) of the seven emotions (*qiqing* 七情), respectively. Zhu Xi's claim in all of these above dichotomies is that one of the two has priority and is the more fundamental. It involves "giving priority to an ontological ground; privileging one level of being as primary or creative" (Hall 2004, 573). It is clear that with regard to the dualistic *li-qi* scheme, Zhu gives priority to *li* and upholds it as being the primary or creative level of being, and from this it follows that the mind of the Way, the greater part of the self, the original human nature, and the Four Beginnings have priority in their respective dichotomous models and represent the more fundamental level. Thus, the above cases show that *li* and *qi* may be interpreted in terms that are more familiar to Western philosophy, both as *form and matter*, and *reason and emotion*, in a manner of speaking. This strikes many scholars as being incongruent, although the two schemes represent an attempt to signal integration in the physical realm of nature, and division and conflict in the ethical realm of humans (H. Han 1998, 209–243).

Inside the actual structure of the *li-qi* dualism in Neo-Confucianism, there are seeming similarities to both the integrated naturalism of Aristotle and the axiological and ethical aspects that accompany the division between

noumenon and phenomenon in Platonism (Watson 1978, 149–174). Integration of form and matter concerns science, whereas the division between noumenon and phenomenon concerns ethics. Integration of form and matter deals with the realm of factual existence, while in contrast, the division between noumenon and phenomenon deals with the realm of normative values. Aristotelian integration seeks to explain the physical world while Plato's scheme of division seeks to account for the anthropology of human values. Recently, scholars of Zhu Xi in Korea have sought anew to identify similar elements in Zhu's Neo-Confucian philosophy and attempted various intriguing explanations of how these two elements with differing orientations may coexist within the same philosophical system (Seung-Hwan Lee 2012, 27–56; Sang Ik Lee 2013, 295–327).

In order to understand Zhu Xi's project more fully, it may be helpful to recall that the blind spot of Aristotelianism might consist in its overemphasis on a seamless harmony between human beings and nature, whereas Platonism runs the risk of carving in too great a relief the oppositional elements within humans for the securing of ethics. It can be said that Zhu Xi introduces his distinct philosophy of the primacy of *li* in order to simultaneously address these two kinds of problems. Interestingly, these are concerns not only of Zhu Xi, but also of the contemporary German philosopher Vittorio Hösle, who has spearheaded the movement to refurbish and reinstate the rationalistic tradition of the West through an approach to the field of philosophy known as objective idealism. Hösle has argued for the need to organize anew Kantian ethics in the modern intellectual climate of skepticism and deconstructionism, in order to overcome the many crises of modern society, such as the absence of universal ethics and the ecological crisis (Hösle 1990). Agreeing with Kant, Hösle is adamant that normative pronouncements [*normative Sätze*] cannot be drawn from descriptive sentences [*deskriptive Sätze*]. However, he does not favor a dualistic ontology in which the world of fact is separated from the world of norms. Hösle argues that in the case of such an ontology, the empirical world—including nature—would lose its inherent dignity. Between the monism regarding existence having its provenance in Aristotle and the dualism of fact and norms that characterizes Kant's philosophy, Hösle argues for a third way.

This third way presupposes that the law of morality serves as the normative principle for the empirical world. The law of morality is seen to belong to its own unique, idealistic world. Hösle emphasizes that one must adhere steadfastly to this point by opposing all forms of Aristotelianism along with Kant. At the same time, Hösle notes that the law of morality is not something that is radically different ontologically vis-à-vis the natural world. In actual fact it is the ground [*Grund*] of the natural world. Insofar as human spirit represents the apex of development in nature, it can be said that the ideal world exists within nature. Thus, nature itself is seen to possess value in and of itself [*Etwas Werthaftes*] (Hösle 1990).

The distinct characteristic of Zhu Xi's metaphysics lies in its consistently *li*-centered theory that places a primacy upon *li* as opposed to *qi*. Zhu Xi's theory on *li* was responsible for opening up a mode of "modern" rationality in East Asia from a comparably early period in world history. *Taiji*, or the great (supreme) ultimate, and *li*, which are central concepts in Zhu Xi's school of Neo-Confucianism, amount to the norms and moral laws of the human sphere rather than the laws of nature. The core proposition of Neo-Confucianism, which declares that "human nature is in fact nothing other than *li*" (*xing ji li*) shows that *li* is not a physical law governing nature, like the laws of Newtonian mechanics. *Taiji* refers to the collective totality of all the *li* in the world. *Taiji* is bestowed on individual things in the universe, and amounts to the nature (*xing* 性) of each and every individual thing. In contrast, it would be awkward to say that such laws of nature as the law of gravity and the law of conservation of mass have been given to each individual. In this way, in a manner that is different from the way laws of nature are applied, the *taiji* or the *li* is given to the individual as his or her *nature*, and whether or not it is actualized depends on the endeavor of the individual. This *li*, or the mechanism/program/structure of human nature, which includes the notion of one's station in life or one's distinct duty and working role in the human and global community setting as ordered by Heaven (*tianming* 天命), must be put into practice by the conscious and autonomous effort of each individual in order for it to be actualized (Kinoshita 2013, 112, 186–192). In contrast, the laws of nature take place without any relation to the endeavors of the individual. The theory of self-

cultivation of the individual is established based on *li*. If yin-yang and the Five Elements are a conceptual device used for explaining things in nature which do not possess willpower, *li* is a conceptual tool that is necessarily used when accounting for moral action by human beings who possess subjective willpower.

Zhu Xi formulates the theory of "*Xing ji li*" 性卽理, taking recourse to the theory of Mencius that "human nature is good." The Mencian theory that human nature is good recognizes the dualistic origin in the flow of the mind. One of the flows emanates from the physical body and aims at the profit of the individual (*si* 私). The other has its origin in the original human nature which aims at universal values (*gong* 公). Mencius explains this symmetrically, taking recourse to concepts such as "the greater part of the self" (*dati* 大體) and "the petty part of the self" (*xiaoti* 小體), "the organ of the heart-mind" (*xin zhi guan* 心之官) and "the organ of hearing and seeing" (*ermu zhi guan* 耳目之官) or the sensory organs, and "the honors bestowed by heaven" (*tianjue* 天爵), such as the virtues of benevolence and righteousness, and "the honors bestowed by human beings" (*renjue* 人爵), such as government posts and official positions. In each case, the two terms are linked together to function as an integral unit, but the first term has priority over the second and must have control over and guide the second. Only when the first term is first acknowledged and upheld can the second also find its legitimate place in the proper scheme of things.

> Gongduzi asked, "We are the same in being humans. Yet some become great humans and some become petty humans. Why?"
>
> Mengzi [Mencius] said, "Those who follow their greater part become great humans. Those who follow their petty part become petty humans."
>
> Gongduzi said, "We are the same in being humans. Why is it that some follow their greater part and some follow their petty part?"
>
> Mengzi said, "It is not the office of the ears and eyes to concentrate, and they are misled by things. Things interact with things and simply lead them along. But the office of the heart is to concentrate (*si* 思). If it concentrates then it will get [Virtue]. If it does not concentrate, then it will not get it. This is what Heaven has given us. If one first takes one's stand

> on what is greater, then what is lesser will not be able to snatch it away. This is how to become a great human."[5] (Van Norden 2001, 147)

Thus, in the Mencian scheme of the mind there are two roots: the greater part of the human self, or human heart-mind (*xin* 心), and the "petty" or lesser part of the human self or the emotions and the desires that originate from the physical body. Mencius' point is that for humans to act ethically, there is a proper sequence to which we need to pay attention. One needs to first acknowledge this dichotomy and then place a priority on affirming and reinforcing the "greater part" of the self, and take care not to let the "lesser part" of the self "usurp its place," as D.C. Lau translates the above passage from the Mencius (Mengzi 2003, 259). This dualism is taken up in turn by Zhu Xi, with the Mencian position that "human nature is good" (*xing shan* 性善) being reformulated as the metaphysical expression "human nature is in fact the normative principle *li*" (*xing ji li* 性卽理) in Zhu's Neo-Confucianism. *Li*, which as the normative principle is innately endowed in humans as the *xing* or human nature, amounts to the "greater part" of the self in Mencius. In contrast, *qi*, which comes to represent the emotions and desires of the individual that emanate from the physical body, amounts to Mencius' "lesser part" of the self. Similar to the above prescription that "the greater part of the self ought to have precedence over the petty part of the self" (*xian li hu qi dazhe* 先立乎其大者), there exists the tenet in the school of nature and principle that *li* has an ontological status that occupies a higher status than that of *qi* (*lixian qihou* 理先氣後) (Zhu 1986, ch. 1).

In a further development in line with the above dichotomous distinction between a higher and a lower level of existence, Zhu's Neo-Confucianism posits two kinds of human nature, namely the "original human nature" (*benran zhi xing* 本然之性) and the "nature influenced by one's psycho-physical endowment" (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性). While both are an integral part of the human person, the original human nature

5. "公都子問曰, "鈞是人也, 或爲大人, 或爲小人, 何也?" 孟子曰, "從其大體爲大人, 從其小體爲小人." 曰, "鈞是人也, 或從其大體, 或從其小體, 何也?" 曰, "耳目之官不思, 而蔽於物. 物交物, 則引之而已矣. 心之官則思, 思則得之, 不思則不得也. 此天之所與我者, 先立乎其大者, 則其小者不能奪也. 此爲大人而已矣" (*Mencius*, 6A 15).

represents the a priori moral nature, whereas the nature influenced by one's psycho-physical endowment represents the actual phenomenal human disposition of one's physiological and physical makeup. In addition to the distinction between the two natures, the mind or the heart-mind is also regarded dichotomously as consisting of the "mind of the Way" (*daoxin* 道心) and the "(all too) human mind" (*renxin* 人心).[6] The former represents the moral will to achieve the public good, and the latter the individual will to survive physically (Zhu 2002, 3673). What is important is which of the two levels is activated first so as to gain hegemony. Neo-Confucian self-cultivation focuses on efforts to enable the more fundamental level to have precedence over the other secondary level, and to have the first level guide the second in order for the second and lesser part to find its rightful place, and subsequently for the whole system to gain equilibrium. Likewise, in the domain of the emotions correspondingly, the *siduan* 四端 (four beginnings) in the *Mencius* and the *qiqing* 七情 (seven emotions) mentioned in the Liji are distinguished, with the *siduan* assumed to take precedence (Son 2007, 252).

As shown above, the metaphysical significance of Zhu Xi's theory of *taiji*, the *li-qi* theory, and the theory of human nature and the heart-mind, consists in their dualistic feature. In this view, for ethics to be possible, fact and value, the descriptive and the normative, the metaphysical and the physical must first be strictly distinguished, at least in the beginning. Zhu Xi is very critical of the attitude in contemporary Chan Buddhism of the Song dynasty that did not distinguish between the metaphysical and the physical, which is revealed in the Chan Buddhist tenet "the process of operation amounts to nature" (*zuoyong shi xing* 作用是性), with its rejection of a metaphysical nature that exists a priori (J. Han 2002).

Significantly, in Zhu's view, making such a distinction between the metaphysical and the physical does not necessarily spell inevitable conflict or division within the self. The distinction does not presuppose a gap or

6. "蓋嘗論之, 心之虛靈知覺一而已矣, 而以爲有人心道心之異者. 則以其或生於形氣之私, 或原於性命之正. 而所以爲知覺者不同, 是以或危殆而不安, 或微妙而難見耳." See Zhu Xi, "Zhongyong zhangju xu" [*Preface to the Doctrine of the Mean* by Chapter and Phrase] (Zhu [1265] 2002, 3673).

alienation between the two, but is rather seen to point to the dialectical possibility of a dynamic internal integration in the human self. Zhu Xi's dualistic *li-qi* structure argues for the inherent existence of a hierarchy of being that serves as means for human beings to pursue betterment in their lives. Following Mencius,[7] Zhu Xi's theory of human nature and human heart-mind deals with the importance of internal integration and unification of the metaphysical and the physical elements within the inner life of human beings.

Inanimate objects can be split infinitely without any loss to their special characteristic or form. In the next phase in the level of being, that of plants, the internal unity is also very weak. Parts of a plant may be cut off, yet continue to live and develop as separate beings. Compared to plants, animals have a very much more integrated existence. Because the higher animal is a unified body, after being separated its parts cannot survive. With regard to their mental aspect, there is nearly no integral unity in animals. Even the highest animal possesses but a very low level of logicality and consistency. The memories of even the highest animals are mostly vague and their intellect weak. The human being, however, is biologically the most harmoniously integrated. even though integration is less perfect on the mental plane and needs improvement through education and self-cultivation (Schumacher 2004, 30–33).

> The degree of integration, of inner coherence and strength, is closely related to the kind of "world" that exists for beings at different levels. Inanimate matter has no "world." Its total passivity is equivalent to the total emptiness of its world. A plant has a "world" of its own-a bit of soil,

7. Mencius claims that every human possesses the desire that aims at physical survival as well as the moral desire that aims at moral value. While the two may at times oppose each other, sometimes the moral desire may even be stronger than the desire for mere survival. In this case, even though the moral desire negates the desires of the body, still it does not become established apart from the physical body. According to Mencius, although the moral desire clearly has precedence over the bodily desires, in forming a part of the holistic desire of human beings, it also manifests itself psychologically and physically. "形色, 天性也. 惟聖人然後可以踐形" (*Mencius*, 7A 38); "君子所性, 仁義禮智根於心, 其生色也睟然, 見於面, 盎於背, 施於四體, 四體不言而喻" (*Mencius*, 7A 21).

> water, air, light, and possibly other influences—a "world" limited to its modest biological needs. The world of any one of the higher animals is incomparably greater and richer, although still determined by biological needs .... But it also contains something more—such as curiosity. …
>
> The world of man, again, is incomparably greater and richer; indeed, it is asserted in traditional philosophy that man is *capax universi*, capable of bringing the whole universe into his experience. What he will actually grasp depends on each person's own Level of Being. The "higher" the person, the greater and richer is his or her world. (Schumacher 2004, 34–35)

Traditional philosophies in both East Asia and the West have argued that human beings represent a small universe in which the entire universe can be experienced. The aforementioned discussions on the greater and the lesser part of the self in Mencius are also based on the understanding that what a person actually grasps depends on the level of being to which one fixes one's attention. When one fixes one's attention onto a higher level, not only does the lower level find its own place, but one's world also becomes greater and more abundant. As E.F. Schumacher has noted, total integration for humans is not given at birth. Although its accomplishment is a lifelong task, it is clear that the human being possesses a much greater internal unity than existences in the lower levels of being. Through education and efforts at self-cultivation, humans can bring about integration in their lives. Here integration meaning "the creation of an inner unity, a center of strength and freedom" so that one's being "ceases to be a mere object, acted upon by outside forces, and becomes a subject, acting from its own 'inner space' into the space outside itself" (Schumacher 2004, 31).

Similarly, in Zhu Xi's philosophy, there are prescriptions for the establishment of a center of moral force and autonomy within the inner space of humans by basing oneself on *li*, the metaphysical moral principle. This is done by a process of the cultivation of the heart-mind similar to Mencius' *concentration or thinking* (*si* 思), whereby one exercises an agency in the inner space of one's mind instead of yielding one's autonomous subjectivity to outside forces. Mencius maintains that this is possible

because the heart-mind is not a vacuum, morality being present not only as the object of a natural, strong desire on the part of humans, but also an exclusive, special feature of the human heart-mind. Following this conviction of Mencius, Zhu Xi lays down in metaphysical terms that the first phase of this integration—meaning the creation of an inner unity, a center of strength and active agency—involves making the distinction between the metaphysical and the physical and the separation between the descriptive and the normative. Afterwards, this gap between the two levels comes to be unified within the practical life of the ideal autonomous human being, wherein the continuity and the organic unity between nature (the physical) and morality (the metaphysical) is restored in its entirety.[8]

The stance involving the recognition of the hierarchical order according to the levels of being clearly differs from the stance of materialism and physicalism, which regards all phases of existence as having an ontological parity and does not distinguish the metaphysical and the physical. In systems of metaphysical dualism such as the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi, priority is given to a higher privileged primary or creative level of being. In Zhu's school of nature and principle, this higher privileged primary or creative level of being is referred to as *taiji*, *li*, and the original human nature.

The Role of *Li* in Enabling Self-Cultivation for the Integrated Person

The reason for Zhu Xi's emphatic assertion of the concepts of *li* and *taiji* is ultimately connected to his program of self-cultivation for the purpose of achieving Confucian sagehood (*shengren* 聖人), which is the Neo-Confucian equivalent to the integrated person discussed in the above section. In Zhu Xi's philosophy, *li* and *taiji* appear as the a priori principle to show that although the human ideal of the law of morality is not unrelated to the tendencies of nature (*tiandi*, or 'heaven and earth'), it is not something that can be subordinated to nature. For order or value to exist, some constraints

8. Confucius famously mentioned that at age 70, he could "follow what his heart desired, without transgressing what was right." "七十而從心所欲, 不踰矩" (Analects 2:4).

and limitations must be placed on abstract possibilities. Value can only be experienced when prior limits or standards exist to guide its evaluation. Principle or *li* in Zhu Xi's metaphysical system exists in tandem with the material world, but claims a logical priority to it (Zhu 1986, ch. 1). Zhu Xi claims that the four virtues of nature (*yuan heng li zhen* 元亨利貞) and the related virtues in the human sphere of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom (*ren yi li zhi* 仁義禮智), which represent the more specific applications of *taiji*, are naturally prior to the material universe, and that these are in turn present in human beings as a heaven-ordained reality in the form of human nature. It is incumbent on each individual person to expend moral effort in order to bring about the dictates of this human nature. This claim can be considered the foundation for the objective existence of ethics in Zhu Xi's philosophical system.

That *li*, which bestows order to the world, exists as the nature responsible for human moral agency indicates that human moral, rational, and overall capabilities can be developed. *Li* is endowed in human nature in advance and exists a priori. Based on this realization, every human being needs to apply him or herself to the individual effort of self-cultivation in order to achieve integrated personhood. This makes one associate *li* with the following two basic propositions in Greek philosophy. The first is, "Everything has a beginning and an origin." The second is that "Wherever a beginning takes place, there is always an existential break or a leap" (Imamichi 1987, 13–14).[9] Beginning implies a source, a ground, and a fundamental principle. The *li* of Zhu's Neo-Confucianism also functions as just such a beginning point. The a priori principle acts as the source of strength that enables the individual to make the leap or to make a certain break from physiological nature, and thus from physical necessity. In this way, principle can come to denote origin or beginning.

For Zhu Xi, the existence of *li* (the innate, moral principle) in each individual is linked to the presence of an active cognitive and moral

9. In Greek, "origin" or "beginning" is *arche* [αρχῆ]. In Latin, αρχῆ is principium. East Asian languages in turn have translated this as "principle." Although the word "principle" conjures up such notions as fundamental ground and theory, Imamichi Tomonobu points out that the original meaning of arche and *principium* is "beginning."

consciousness (*zhijue* 知覺), and moral agency. The ability of the mind to preside in action is due to the active cognitive and moral consciousness that enables the perception of *li*. In possessing the active cognitive and moral consciousness the individual person is able to perceive and put *li* into practice, and thus come to exercise control over his or her actions, thoughts, and emotions, by the appropriate rational response to all things and events that are encountered in everyday life. In order for the presiding moral agency to be smoothly exercised, the perception of *li* must first take place without fail.

In the *Zhuzi yulei*, or the *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*, Zhu Xi posits the existence of *xing*, or human nature, that is inherently good, and argues that this nature acts as a norm for, and in turn is subject to, the agency of the mind. Human beings are able to act in accordance with the inherent moral principles that are present within human nature, regardless of any impediments actually presented by one's limited, turbid, and distorted psycho-physical endowment (*qizhi* 氣質) (Zhu 1986, ch. 59, section 113). In Zhu Xi's description of the working of the mind, or heart-mind (*xin* 心), the mind encompasses both the dynamic and quiet phases (*dongjing* 動靜), and is both present in a pre-intentional, universal state (*xin zhi weifa* 心之未發) before the actual feelings are aroused, and manifest in a post-intentional, phenomenal state (*xin zhi yifa* 心之已發) after the feelings issue forth. According to Zhu, even in the *weifa* state, the mind's active cognitive ability does not cease. In fact, the *weifa* state is vitally important for his theory of self-cultivation as this is the venue for the *nurturing* and *growth* of innate moral principle within oneself.

Of the above dual levels of the mind (*weifa* and *yifa*), the pre-intentional and universal realm, or the *weifa* state of the mind, represents the privileged primary creative level that must be attended to first. The mind in its pre-intentional and universally-oriented state is characterized by the fact that specific thought intentions have not sprouted forth, and yet active cognitive and moral consciousness is operative in such a way as to ensure the mind's readiness to react to all possible future situations. Zhu Xi regards the pre-intentional and universal realm (*weifa*) of the human mind as involving the existence of the plenitude of *li*, or principles. As such, the human mind cannot be determined or limited by the material endowment of the body. All human beings possess this mind, which in its *weifa* state is the repository of

all principles, regardless of one's character or psycho-physical disposition. The *weifa* state of the mind is a given condition for all humans without fail, from sages to ordinary people (Zhu 1986, ch. 62, section 115; ch. 97, section 122). The *weifa* state of the mind is also described variously as *silü weimeng* 思慮未萌 (the thought has not yet sprouted forth), *shiwu weizhi* 事物未至 (things and events have not occurred in the mind), and *zhijue bumei* 知覺不昧 (perception of [the *li*] is not blocked out) (Zhu 2002, 1418). In this state, private or selfish motives for action are absent, and a certain impartiality and universality is proffered by the presence of the entire corpus of *li*, which humans need to first imbibe and take recourse to in order to live integrated and fulfilled lives. This is the reason Zhu accords the *weifa* state with the status of the privileged primary level of existence in the realm of self-cultivation.

According to Zhu Xi, moral effort encompassing both the *weifa* and the *yifa* levels of the mind is necessary for effective self-cultivation. In the *yifa* level of the mind, to act in accord with the various *li* in an appropriate fashion, one needs to apply oneself to studies of factual information through everyday exchanges and encounters with other members of the community, and to studies of texts (namely the classics). In the self-cultivation needed at the *weifa* level that has precedence, Zhu stresses the importance of engaging in various exercises of nurturing and keeping the innate principle within oneself (*hanyang gongfu* 涵養工夫), such as quiet meditation (*jingzuo* 靜坐) and the examination and the thorough thinking out of the innate moral principle (Zhu 1986, ch. 12, section 142). These are clearly aimed at strengthening the *weifa* state of the mind in order to ultimately bring about ethical action in the integrated person by subsequently serving as the stable basis for the cultivation of the *yifa* state of the mind as well.

The theory of the *weifa* level of the mind in Zhu Xi as the privileged primary level of the mind is connected to the primacy of *li* in Zhu's philosophy. The original state of the mind is not a psychological condition which is experiential, but is pre-intentional and has meaning as the universal realm in which all *li* are present (Zhu 2002, 2580).[10] *Xing* and *taiji* are to be

10. "鄙意竊謂未發之前, 固不可謂之無物. 但便謂情性無二, 更無虛靜時節, 則不可耳. 蓋未發之前, 萬理皆具."

found in plenitude in the pre-intentional state of the mind, whereas they are only manifested through particular instances in its post-intentional, phenomenal state. *Xing* and *taiji-li* encompass the domain of the principle and of the temporal worlds of actual events and things in life, through the autonomous power of agency of the mind (Zhu 2002, 1566). Principle or *taiji-li* in Zhu Xi's metaphysical system exists in tandem with the material world, but claims a logical priority to it. It is present in human beings as a heaven-ordained reality in the form of human nature, and each individual person needs to expend moral effort in order to bring about its dictates. Zhu Xi's understanding of the mind in the original state encompasses the view that the mind is characterized not only by its cognitive functions, and that it is an active repository of moral nature or moral principles, rather than just a passive reactive entity that responds to outside stimuli. The mind *xin*, despite the impediments posed by the individual psycho-physical endowment of persons, is able in this view to manifest active and spontaneous agency. The agency of the mind is in turn made possible by the objective existence of moral principles, *li*, which are fully present in the mind. Zhu Xi remarks that *taiji* is both "inside" yin-yang and "outside" of it. When situated in the pre-intentional and universal state of the mind, *taiji*/*xing* serves as the fundamental ground of order and the ultimate standard of value.

In scientific materialism and physicalism, there is no place for *taiji* or *xing*. The terms would be regarded as being merely a locution or a discourse and not an existence. Admittedly, within the theoretical frame of materialism and physicalism, a mechanism for the effective control of raw human desires is absent. Due to inherent limitations in their philosophical premise, scientific materialism and physicalism seemingly cannot furnish an effective strategy for the cultivation of an integrated personhood in human beings. In the face of such a lacuna in modern society, it is worth recalling that the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi has followed Mencius in proposing a viable and even convincing model of human betterment and self-cultivation based on a dualistic metaphysics recognizing the existence of *levels of being*, wherein one level is privileged as being primary or creative. Although this model is unfamiliar to modern-day East Asians, it must be remembered that the highly speculative metaphysical language involved in Zhu's system

was really construed to serve as means for establishing an effective practical method for living integrated, moral lives amidst the humdrum everyday routines of life in the physical world.

Conclusion

By positing the objective existence of truth and of the moral human nature, the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi intends ultimately to secure the moral basis for human society by making possible the building up of integrated personhood in individuals. Zhu Xi views the grounds of the precepts of morality as being independent from human desire or the a posteriori customs that are shared by the constituent members of a specific community. Norms exist a priori, even though they are not unrelated with the human and natural spheres of existence.

At present, in the philosophical circles of the West, more scholars are seeking a new philosophy of rationalism which is inclusive of the spiritual and religious values of humankind. Consensus is being formed in East Asia and the West on the need to go beyond the functional rationality of instrumental reason by bringing to light the normative potential of moral reason as espoused by the Neo-Confucian tradition, by universalizing and globalizing its time-honored tenets. This new, pan-global rationalist tradition can perforce no longer be exclusively Western in character. The task of pursuing normative value in a universal context that can be applied to all of humanity while respecting the cultural and axiological multiplicity of various groups of human beings is one that is long overdue.

How is one to explore the possibility for universal ethics from the autonomous viewpoint of East Asians and on what basis can it be materialized? First, it must be admitted that it will be impossible to establish any universality without taking recourse to the Western rationalist tradition. At the same time, any pretense to universality for East Asians (in the Sinitic cultural sphere of Northeast Asia) cannot be established by leaving the horizons of Confucianism or Buddhism. If one is to accept the notion of comprehensive rationality as a feasible concept and subsequently pursue

universal ethics, the possibility of the universal meaning contained in Confucian and Buddhist philosophies must be examined in depth. In this paper I have argued that among the diverse philosophical inheritances of Confucianism and Buddhism, the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi provides a meaningful philosophical resource for the establishment of a new universal ethics, due to its distinct rationalistic and metaphysical characteristics.

Current Korean society manifests various signs of an ethical anomie wherein the positivism of the linguistic analytic philosophy, which excludes the possibility of an objective testimony regarding values and norms, exists in tandem with postmodern relativism that emphasizes the cultural and historical particularity of various social values and norms. In such a milieu the attempt to reestablish a theory of rationality that puts forward a new understanding of reason that has a moral and spiritual dimension comes to have a very special meaning. From Zhu Xi's philosophy of the primacy of *li*, we can learn that this involves a renewed appreciation for, and an understanding of, the existence of "levels of being," with a primary or creative level having precedence over other lesser ones.

Instead of being mired in materialistic scientism and counting quantitative knowledge as the only viable knowledge, one must be attuned to an understanding of the world that is revealed through human subjectivity, values, and meanings. As Wilfrid Sellars has aptly pointed out, there needs to be a new balance between "the manifest image" of the world and "the scientific image" of the world, if one is not to become alienated from both these worlds, and live a healthy salutary life of meaning (Crane 2008, 33–35). In this era in need of a new metaphysics that can seamlessly connect the two "images," the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi, the successor to the Mencian theory of human nature with its "privileging the primary level of being," seemingly provides many invaluable resources for the birth of a renewed rationalistic philosophy that is more familiar culturally to Koreans and other East Asians.

The distinctive characteristic of Zhu's metaphysics is connected invariably with his philosophy of the primacy of *li*, which gives precedence to *li* over *qi* while not disregarding the import of the latter. By positing the objective existence of a normative truth embedded in *xing*, the Neo-

Confucianism of Zhu Xi seeks to secure the moral basis of not only human society but the entire ecosphere. Zhu Xi's philosophy of the primacy of *li* may thus serve to reinvigorate the ethical foundation of contemporary Korean society, which despite current materialistic-physicalist tendencies is marked by a manifestly deep Neo-Confucian spirituality.

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