

Human Nature and Animal Nature: The Horak Debate and Its Philosophical Significance

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ABSTRACT: Philosophical investigation of human nature has a long, distinguished, and multifaceted history. In the East some of the most heated philosophical disputes pertaining to issues concerning moral self-cultivation centered on disagreements about human nature. Within the Neo-Confucian tradition that developed out of Korea, issues concerning human nature took center stage in a dispute now known as the “Horak Debate” that began in the eighteenth century. In this paper I seek to introduce the Horak Debate to contemporary philosophers by (a) historically situating the debate within the tradition of Korean Neo-Confucianism, (b) providing an outline of the Horak Debate and identifying its central points of contention, and (c) demonstrating the debate’s philosophical significance by revealing how some of its key issues are rooted in disagreements that continue to concern contemporary philosophers.

THAT THE CENTRAL AIM of Neo-Confucian philosophers was to *live* a virtuous life rather than to gain *knowledge* about the virtuous life has become well-established among scholars of Neo-Confucianism. But acknowledging this point could mistakenly lead some to see Neo-Confucians as unconcerned with truth-tracking beliefs or good arguments. Although self-cultivation and the achievement of sagehood were always at the forefront of their pursuits, obtaining a *correct* understanding of the world and our proper relationship to it was also a genuine concern for many Neo-Confucian philosophers.¹ Perhaps nowhere is this concern more apparent than in the series of debates that unfolded among Korean Neo-Confucians during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). The intensity and seriousness with which participants in these debates argued for their respective positions reveal the extent to which they were deeply concerned with the truth of their views. Even a cursory look at their writings should dispel the notion that East Asian thinkers are “not concerned with arguments.” For these reasons it seems plausible to think that the arguments and debates carried out by the Korean Neo-Confucians deserve more attention, especially from a philosophical perspective, than has been given to them in the English-speaking world.

Fortunately, within the past twenty years or so, there has been a growing interest in the works of Korean Neo-Confucian philosophers, especially the writings of Yi

¹Of course, one reason why they were concerned with the truth of their views was that correct views were instrumentally related to obtaining sagehood. But this fact does not imply that they did not value truth for its own sake.

Hwang (T'oegye, 1501–1570) and Yi I (Yulgok, 1536–1584),² with much attention to their participation in what has become known as the “Four-Seven Debate.” This debate has been widely considered by East Asian scholars to be the most significant dispute in the history of Korean philosophy.³ The chief disagreements centered on the relationship between the four innate feelings or “sprouts” (*duan*) of goodness (compassion, shame, deference, approval and disapproval) found in the *Mengzi*, and the seven emotions (desire, hate, love, fear, grief, anger, and joy) found in the *Book of Rites* (a canon of early Confucianism). It also concerns the way in which both sets of feelings are connected to “principle” (*li*) and “material force” (*qi*) as constituting the core of Neo-Confucian metaphysics.

But although much of the work on Korean philosophy within the past few decades has focused on these two eminent philosophers and the Four-Seven Debate, a number of other significant debates developed after T'oegye and Yulgok left their scholarly imprints. One such debate was the “Horak Debate,” which began in the early eighteenth century through the correspondence of Yi Gan (Oeam, 1677–1727) and Han Wonjin (Namdang, 1682–1751) and continued into the early twentieth century.⁴ The term “horak” is derived from the two factions (Ho-ron and Nak-ron) to which Han Wonjin and Yi Gan belonged, respectively, with the “ho” group being based in the Chungcheong province and the “rak” group being based in the Gyeonggi province.⁵ Although the debate touched on a number of different questions, it primarily centered on issues pertaining to human nature. Like most philosophically significant issues, it developed out of an ongoing tradition of thought, in particular, the Cheng-Zhu form of Neo-Confucianism that came to dominate Korean intellectual culture and society.⁶

²Although I will stick to the McCune-Reischauer system for the names of T'oegye and Yi (since it has been generally preferred by scholars), for other Korean names I will use the Revised Romanization system.

³See Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963); Julia Ching, “Yi Yulgok on the ‘Four Beginnings and the Seven Emotions’” in *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, ed. William Theodore De Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 283–303; Philip J. Ivanhoe, “The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate,” *Philosophy East and West* 65 (2015); Michael Kalton, *To Become a Sage* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988); Young-Chan Ro, *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi Yulgok* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1989); and Weiming Tu, “Yi T'oegye's Perception of Human Nature: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Four-Seven Debate in Korean Neo-Confucianism” in De Bary and Haboush, pp. 283–303. When I write of a “growing interest” in the works of Korean philosophers, I mean to restrict my claim to those in the English-speaking world since their works have been much more carefully studied within Korea and other countries in Asia including China, Japan, and Vietnam.

⁴The fervor of the debate, however, declined as early as the late nineteenth century. See Sung-san Cho, “Discursive Structures and Cultural Features of Nak-ron Thought in Late Joseon Korea,” *Korea Journal* 51 (2011): 42–71.

⁵There is some scholarly dispute, however, whether Yi Gan was a member of the Nak-ron faction as traditionally believed, or a scholar of the Ho-ron faction. Some believe that this uncertainty casts into doubt whether the term “horak” is even the right label for the debate. See Young-jin Choi, “The Horak Debate in Eighteenth Century,” *Korea Journal* 51 (2011): 1–13 and Suk-yoon Moon, *The Formation and Development of the Horak Debate* (Seoul, Korea: Don-gwa Seo, 2006).

⁶As I will note below, the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism developed out of the thoughts of the Cheng Brothers and Zhu Xi. Its most significant rival, the Lu-Wang school, was founded on the views of Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming.

In this paper I seek to introduce this historically significant debate to the English-speaking audience as a debate with philosophical significance. To do this I will examine three central questions that constitute the heart of the Horak Debate, with a special focus on this question: Is the nature of human beings and the nature of other animals the same or different? Through an exploration of these questions I will provide a roadmap for the debate, to show what was at stake in the debate and the philosophical implications of competing positions. Examining this debate will reveal that it is not an obsolete dispute centering on esoteric questions but a debate rooted in deep and pervasive philosophical issues that continue to challenge contemporary philosophers.

In the first section I will briefly explain the debate's historical background and context, including the Four-Seven Debate. One of the points that will emerge is that the Horak Debate can be seen as developing out of certain unresolved difficulties of the Four-Seven Debate, especially issues concerning the proper understanding of human nature within the framework of Neo-Confucian metaphysics. In the second section I will focus on the content of the Horak Debate itself by outlining and reconstructing the core arguments offered by the opposing camps and examining the three central questions, with a focus on the issue of how and why human nature is different from the nature of other animals. My contention will be that the disagreement is rooted in complex metaphysical and normative issues, centering on a dispute about the role that "nature" should play within the Neo-Confucian metaphysical framework. In the third section I will show how the Horak Debate is related to several significant philosophical issues that continue to be contested by contemporary Western philosophers. Despite a terminology and a metaphysical system that are alien to contemporary Western philosophers, the key issues of the Horak Debate bear interesting ties to contemporary debates in philosophy and can provide new resources.

I. NEO-CONFUCIAN METAPHYSICS AND THE FOUR-SEVEN DEBATE

The particular form of Neo-Confucianism that Korea inherited during the Goryeo (918–1392) and especially the Joseon (1392–1897) dynasties was most powerfully influenced by Zhu Xi. Drawing upon the works of his predecessors, he welded together a metaphysical-ethical system embodied in what is now known as the "Cheng-Zhu school" that became the reigning and orthodox interpretation of Confucianism throughout Korea.⁷ The near unflinching loyalty that Korean scholars paid toward the Cheng-Zhu school distinguishes Korea from its nearest neighbors, China and Japan, both of which at one point became swept up by the "Lu-Wang

⁷Zhu Xi was most heavily influenced by the views of the Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao (1032–1083) and Cheng Yi (1033–1108), their uncle Zhang Zai (1020–1077), and Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073). For philosophical introductions of the Cheng-Zhu school of thought, see A. C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers: The Metaphysics of the Cheng Brothers*, revised second edition (La Salle IL: Open Court Press, 1992); Yung Sik Kim, *The Natural Philosophy of Chu His, 11-30-1200* (Philadelphia PA: Memoirs of the American Philosophic Society, 2000); John Makeham, ed., *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

School” that was founded upon the thoughts of Lu Xiangshan (1139–1193) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529).⁸

The Cheng-Zhu school integrated views about human nature and psychology provided in the *Mengzi*, with a distinctive metaphysical picture that centered on the concepts of *li*, commonly translated as “principle” and *qi*, commonly translated as “material force.” To give a brief characterization of the metaphysical system: *li* constitutes the inner nature of everything and provides both the explanation for the existence of all things as well as the normative standards for how everything ought to be; it is fully present in the mind-heart (*xin*) of human beings.⁹ For the Cheng-Zhu scholars this implies that human nature, considered in itself, is already completely good, i.e., fully possesses all the virtues.¹⁰ Now this claim may initially seem to conflict with obvious facts, since a brief look into human history reveals the extent to which the human species as a whole has been far from exemplary, and such a record is not what one would have expected from creatures with perfectly virtuous natures. The Neo-Confucians, however, consistently replied by appealing to the concept of *qi*. For although every human being is endowed with a nature constituted by *li*, and therefore has a fully perfected nature, an individual’s *qi* can conceal and distort (depending on its degree of “purity” or “turbidity”) the underlying goodness of one’s nature, much like a mirror covered over by dust fails to manifest its clear, reflective quality. Here is how Zhu Xi explains it:

It is not the case that there are partial and complete [endowments of Heavenly nature]. It is like the light of the sun or the moon. If one is on open ground, then one sees all of the light, but if one is inside a thatched hut, then some of the light is blocked and obscured, some is seen while some is not. The impurity results from an impurity of the *qi*, so naturally there is obstruction, as if one were inside a thatched hut.¹¹

This view implies that anyone aiming at sagehood (the proper end of all strivings for Neo-Confucian thinkers) would need to undergo a process of removing the imperfections carried by one’s *qi*, so that one could discover the already perfected nature that exists below the surface.

⁸This is not to say that no Korean Neo-Confucian ever questioned the views of the Cheng-Zhu school. Dasan (Jeong Yakyong) offered poignant and powerful objections against the metaphysical system of the Cheng-Zhu school. See Mark Setton, *Chong Yagyong: Korea’s Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1997). For helpful account of three critics of the Cheng-Zhu school, Ito Jinsai, Dai Zhen, and Jeong Yakyong, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, “New Old Foundations for Confucian Ethical Philosophy: Ito Jinsai, Dai Zhen, and Jeong Yakyong,” *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 11 (2014): 77–133.

⁹It is important to note, however, a distinction between two senses of *li*: “universal *li*” or the “heavenly *li*” and the manifested *li* that applies to every particular thing or event. This paper will focus on the latter sense. See Kim, *The Natural Philosophy of Chu His*, pp. 19–21, and David Tien, “Metaphysics and the Basis of Morality and the Philosophy of Wang Yangming” in Makeham, *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, pp. 296–99.

¹⁰As many scholars have acknowledged, the Cheng-Zhu school, under Buddhist influences, transformed *Mengzi*’s view that we are all born with certain incipient tendencies toward goodness into the view that we are already born with fully developed virtues.

¹¹Translation is my own; cf. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 621.

We can see that one significant aspect of the Cheng-Zhu school of thought is its metaphysical foundation for ethics. The program of self-cultivation was based upon the metaphysical view that underlying our imperfect characters is a perfectly formed, virtuous nature. Our practical aim, then, is to recover that innate nature by removing the various impediments that prevent it from fully manifesting itself. Of course, just how we ought to carry out this process of recovery remained a difficult and contentious issue.¹² Furthermore, although the concepts of *li* and *qi* together provided substantial explanations of the natural world, there were still a number of difficulties concerning the exact nature of the relationship between the two notions, as well as their relationship to human emotions. These questions were taken up by T'oegye and Yulgok in what has become known as the "Four-Seven Debate."¹³

While it is outside of the scope of this paper to examine this debate in detail, it will be worthwhile to focus on onetension that lies at the heart of the debate, namely, the relationship between *li* and *qi*. As we will see, this tension also carried over into the Horak Debate. The conflict may be described as occurring between those like T'oegye who sought to defend the idea that *li* is prior to and more fundamental than *qi*, and those like Yulgok who aimed to show that *li* and *qi* are mutually dependent upon each other and must be synthesized in order to develop a coherent and stable metaphysical framework. For T'oegye and Yulgok, obtaining a correct understanding of the relationship between *li* and *qi* is necessary for achieving the right view about human nature, which in turn is necessary for a correct understanding of how best to move toward ethical perfection. For T'oegye, the true nature of human beings is most fundamentally identified with *li*, the transcendental principle that is completely pure and devoid of any imperfections. Although T'oegye ultimately does agree that human beings are also dependent on their *qi*, he seeks to identify what we truly are with what he takes as the *pure* aspect of human nature. This general view, that we are more fundamentally something other than our physically constituted selves, is not unique to this debate. In Plato's writings, for example, there is a strong anti-

¹²A significant disagreement between the Cheng-Zhu school and Lu-Wang school concerned the process by which one could achieve moral perfection, with those in the Cheng-Zhu school advocating a rigorous study of the Classics and Lu-Wang school advocating focused attention on one's own heart and mind to help guide him toward sagehood.

¹³The Four-Seven Debate centers on three questions: (1) What is the relationship between *li* and *qi*? (2) What is the relationship between the Four Beginnings (the four sprouts—compassion, disdain, respect, approval and disapproval—that Mengzi marks as evidence for the claim that human nature is fundamentally good) and the Seven Emotions (listed in the Book of Rites as "joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, dislike, and desire")? (3) How are the concepts of *li* and *qi* related to the concepts of the Four Beginnings and the Seven Emotions? These questions were explored through two sets of exchanges. The first set took place between T'oegye and Kobong (1559–1566) and the second set occurred between Yulgok and Ugye, which began in 1572 and ended within a year. For more detailed accounts of the Four-Seven Debate, see Edward Chung, *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi T'oegye and Yi Yulgok* (Albany NY: SUNY press, 1995); Ivanhoe, "The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate,," Xin-de Jin, "The 'Four-Seven Debate' and the School of Principle in Korea," *Philosophy East and West* 37 (1987): 347–60; Michael Kalton, et. al., eds., *The Four-Seven Debate: An Annotated Translation of the Most Famous Controversy in Korean neo-Confucian Thought* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1994); Ro, *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi Yulgok*; Tu, "Yi T'oegye's Perception of Human Nature"; Sa-Soon Youn, "T'oegye's Identification of 'To Be' and 'Ought': T'oegye's Theory of Value" in de Bary and Haboush, *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*.

physicalist tendency and a yearning to view ourselves as something transcendent.¹⁴ Even the empirically minded Aristotle exhibits some tendency to see ourselves as extending beyond our physical constitution:

Such a life [i.e., the contemplative life] would be superior to the human level. For someone will live it not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him. And the activity of this divine element is as much superior to the activity in accord with the rest of virtue as this element is superior to the compound. . . . We ought to be pro-immortal, and go to all lengths to live a life in accord with our supreme element; for, however much this element may lack in bulk, by much more it surpasses everything in power and value.¹⁵

In commenting on this aspect of Aristotle's thought, Thomas Nagel claims that this strain of what he calls Aristotle's "spiritualist" tendency is owing to his uncertainty about what kind of creatures we really are.¹⁶ Although greatly divided by both culture and time, T'oegye would have appreciated this feature of Aristotle's thought, for in struggling to maintain the metaphysical primacy of *li* over *qi*, we may see T'oegye as also motivated by a kind of spiritualist tendency to preserve what we might describe as the *pure unadulterated feature of our nature*.¹⁷

Yulgok, however, by insisting on the absolute interdependence between *li* and *qi*, takes a view of human beings as fundamentally constituted by both principle (*li*) and material force (*qi*). In Yulgok's view, "principle and material force are well mingled without the slightest gap, originally not separated, and so may not be referred to as two things."¹⁸ Unlike T'oegye, Yulgok believes that the psycho-physical aspects of our nature should be considered as much a part of who we really are as the *li*-based aspects of our nature. There is not, for Yulgok, some special element of our nature that we ought to try to separate and elevate from our physical selves. A practical corollary of Yulgok's view is that to achieve the ethically ideal life we must learn to live in a way that integrates both our psycho-physical tendencies with the elements of our nature that manifest *li*.

One lesson that we may draw from this brief excursion into the Four-Seven Debate concerns the important disagreement between T'oegye and Yulgok about how we should think about human nature, and in particular which aspects of our humanity best identifies us as the kind of beings we are. Is our true identity constituted by some transcendental element, categorically distinct from our bodily self, or is our identity inseparable from our embodied nature as physical beings? As we will see,

¹⁴This tendency is best exemplified in Plato's *Phaedo*.

¹⁵Aristotle, 1999, 1177b25–1178a.

¹⁶Thomas Nagel, "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*" in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1980), pp. 7–8, 12–13. This aspect of Aristotle's thoughts suggests that Plato had a deeper and more lasting philosophical influence on Aristotle than is sometimes acknowledged by scholars. I thank Philip J. Ivanhoe for this suggestion.

¹⁷Of course, Aristotle and T'oegye operated from radically different philosophical traditions with distinct ethical and metaphysical assumptions. But such facts do not preclude the possibility that they shared certain philosophical intuitions or motivations.

¹⁸Yulgok, Yulgok chonso, vol. 20, Songhak chibyo 2.

one way to understand the Horak Debate is as a continuation of the debate about human nature that was initiated in the Four-Seven Debate.

II. THE HORAK DEBATE

The Horak Debate arose through a series of exchanges conducted by different followers of the Noron faction, a school of thought that adhered to the teachings of Yulgok. The two central participants in the debate were Han Wonjin (Namdang, 1682–1751) and Yi Gan (Oeam, 1677–1727),¹⁹ and I will focus on the philosophical exchanges that occurred between them.²⁰

We can trace the initial phase of the debate between Han Wonjin and Yi Gan back to the essays that Han wrote between 1705 and 1707. In his seminal work “Explanation of the Original Nature and the Psycho-physical Nature” he claimed that the “original nature,” as discussed by Zhu Xi, already contained elements of *qi* and therefore contained temperamental elements. In 1709 Yi read Han’s writings and criticized his views, thereby beginning a series of exchanges between them that would last until 1724. The debate primarily centered on three questions: (1) What is the nature of the state of mind before it becomes engaged with emotion and thought? (2) Do sages and commoners share the same mind? (3) Are the natures of human beings and non-human animals identical? On all three issues both Han and Yi expressed clear disagreement. Of these three questions, however, the third question concerning the relationship between human and animal nature became the debate’s foundational issue. In order to understand what instigated this debate, we should turn to a well discussed passage in Chapter One of the *Zhongyong* (*Doctrine of the Mean*):

The condition before joy, anger, grief, or pleasure are activated is called equilibrium; after they are engaged and each attains proper measure, it is called harmony. Equilibrium is the great foundation of the universe; harmony is its universal path.

For Korean Neo-Confucians, this passage of the *Doctrine of the Mean* elicited the following question: Is *qi*, which constitutes what Zhu Xi called our “temperamental nature,” present even in an unactivated or unaroused state of mind, i.e., “the state of equilibrium” marked out in the above passage of the *Doctrine of the Mean*?²¹

¹⁹As historians of this debate would be quick to point out, there were many participants who contributed to the debate in different ways. But because my goal in this paper is to focus on the philosophical elements of the debate, I will concentrate on the exchanges between Han Wonjin and Yi Gan. Furthermore, as recent scholars such as Sukyoon Moon have noted, the initial beginnings of the Horak Debate can be traced back much further than the exchanges that occurred between Han Wonjin and Yi Gan. See Moon, *The Formation and Development of the Horak Debate*.

²⁰Here is a brief history of Han Wonjin and Yi Gan’s intellectual heritage. After the death of Yulgok, the Giho School was formed to carry on Yulgok’s philosophical vision, and in 1683 was divided into the Noron (Old Doctrine) faction headed by Song Siyeol and the Soron (Young Doctrine) faction lead by Yun Jeung. One of Song Siyeol’s most prominent students, Kwon Sangha, helped to form the Horon faction. The Horak Debate’s two central figures, Han Wonjin and Yi Gan, were both students of Kwon Sangha.

²¹Although most scholars have preferred using the terms “aroused” and “unaroused” to discuss the state of one’s mind before and after it becomes affected by emotion and thought, I will use the terms “activated”

In asking this question, they were really asking if the mind before being activated by emotions was completely devoid of any possibility of defect or impurity or if it contained *qi* with its various degrees of imperfections even when unactivated. Han believed that even in an unactivated state the mind contains aspects of temperamental nature, along with features of *qi*:

I am not sure whether in the state before the mind is activated what is called the original nature inheres in something or has nothing in which it inheres. If one says that it has nothing in which it inheres and exists independently on its own, then I have never seen any such strange expression in the classics or commentaries. If one says that it inheres in something and exists therein, then why can't one refer to it together with the *qi* in which it inheres and call it the physical nature?²²

From this passage I believe that we can extract the following argument:

1. The unactivated state of the mind (the “original nature”) inheres in nothing or inheres in something.
2. It cannot inhere in nothing. (Justified by common sense and appeal to the classics and commentaries.)
3. So, it inheres in something.
4. If it inheres in something, then it is reasonable to think of it as inhering in *qi*.
5. So, it is reasonable to think that the unengaged state of the mind inheres in *qi*.

What exactly does it mean to say that one thing “inheres” in another? In another passage Han claims that temperamental nature is a part of the unactivated state:

If we regard the state of unactivated state as the original nature, does it exist by itself or does it rely on something else for its being? If its existence is independent, I cannot but agree with your argument, but if it needs something to rely on, I should label that something, along with its foundation of *qi*, as temperamental nature.²³

From this passage I think we can interpret Han as thinking that for *x* to inhere in *y* is for *x* to *existentially* rely or depend upon *y*. In other words, original nature cannot exist without the existence of *qi*. If this is right, Han is claiming that the unactivated

and “unactivated” since they do not carry some of the misleading (sometimes sexual) connotations that “aroused” and “unaroused” can carry in English. Of course, “activated” is also an imperfect translation as well since it can carry an overly mechanistic overtone. I thank Sungmoon Kim for discussion on this.

²²*Namdang chip* 30:7a–10a. Unless stated otherwise, translations of passages related to Horak Debate in this paper have been arrived at in consultation with Phillip J. Ivanhoe, Eirik Harris, and Xueying Wang. I have also benefited from Michael Kalton’s translations in Peter Lee, ed., *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996) and the translations of Lee Cheon Sung, “Philosophical Implications of the Discussion of *Mibal* in the Horak Debate of the Late Joseon Period,” *Korea Journal* 51 (2011): 97–117 and Hong Jung Geun, “Is the Morality of Human Beings Superior to the Morality of Non-Human Beings?” *Korea Journal* 51 (2011): 72–96.

²³*Namdang chip* 1:1. (Translation adapted from Lee, “Philosophical Implications,” p. 104.)

state depends for its existence upon temperamental nature, which is constituted by *qi*, the psycho-physical stuff out of which everything is made.

The claim that the original nature depends on elements of *qi* was unacceptable to Yi, who believed that the original nature is wholly pure and good:

About this I only have one question for the observers [of this debate], which I propose for careful consideration. Han Wonjin says that when the mind is not activated, the obscurity or lucidity, goodness or evil [already] exists, but that with exclusive reference to principle, there is no problem in seeing it as neither excessive nor deficient, or seeing it as the great foundation of the world. Does this mean that according to his theory one can with a mind of mixed clarity and darkness, good and evil, also be able to “respond to the changing situation of the myriad creatures with the result that in every case the response would be perfect?”²⁴

The last sentence is clearly rhetorical. Yi is arguing that Han’s view, which takes *qi* as constitutive of the unactivated mind, rules out the possibility of achieving sagehood, a consequence that would undermine Han’s theory since the existence of sages was a basic fact within Neo-Confucianism that could not be cast into doubt. Yi’s argument is that if we take the unactivated mental state as already being influenced by *qi*, then we cannot preserve its crucial status as a state of complete purity as suggested by the first chapter of the *Doctrine of the Mean*. In response, Han Wonjin denied that the very existence of *qi* and temperamental nature in the unactivated state somehow ruled out the possibility that the unactivated state was pure and wholly good. On his view, sagehood is still attainable since an ethically perfected life depends not on being wholly unaffected by one’s temperamental nature but on the capacity to channel various emotions so that they are always in alignment with the dictates of *li*. Yi, however, saw human temperament as something that ought to be toned down or perhaps even avoided altogether rather than re-channeled, so that the pure, original state of one’s mind and heart can be fully expressed without being clouded by one’s affections. The disagreement between Yi and Han can be seen as being partially rooted in competing evaluations of *qi* and temperamental nature, with Yi seeing *qi* as intrinsically distorting and with Han seeing *qi* as in itself neither good nor bad.²⁵

The exploration into the nature of sagehood and the unactivated state of mind naturally led to the following question: Is the mind of the sage and the commoner the same or different? The answer to this depended on one’s response to the first question concerning the nature of the unactivated state of mind.²⁶ For Yi, since the unactivated mental state, which constituted the original nature of all human beings,

²⁴*Oeam yugo* 12:29a. (Translation adapted from Lee, *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, p. 256.) The quote in the last sentence is referring to an earlier part of the discussion where Han draws upon a passage from Zhu Xi.

²⁵This difference in views about the normative status of the role that basic emotions should play in our lives can also be observed in the disagreements between T’oegyegye and Yulgok in the Four-Seven Debate.

²⁶These two questions are so closely related that some scholars have considered them as parts of one discourse. See Moon, *The Formation and Development of the Horak Debate*, p. 7 and Cho, “Discursive Structures and Cultural Features of Nak-ron Thought in Late Joseon Korea,” p. 75.

was wholly good, the difference between the sage and commoner was to be found only in the differences in *qi* and not in their original nature:

The difference between sages and ordinary people is the result of whether they are lightly or profoundly bound [by impure *qi*], and because of this their heart is either lucid or obscure, and they are good or bad, respectively. Nevertheless, like [the difference between] a host and a guest or the root and the branch tips [of a tree], the mind itself and the endowment of *qi* are separate and distinct; their difference is perfectly ordered.²⁷

Yi's view that both the sage and the commoner possess an equally pure original nature is not only a theoretical proposition but a claim that is also rich in practical implications. For if the unactivated state is purely good and the only impediments for achieving sagehood are the disturbances of *qi* that originate from the turbulent emotions triggered by contact with the external world, the meditative practice of quiet-sitting, a traditional Neo-Confucian practice, could help (given sufficient time and the right conditions) anybody to obtain the mind of a sage. In fact, Yi Gan was himself an avid practitioner of quiet-sitting, and his personal experience of its restorative qualities likely reinforced his firm belief in the absolute purity of the unactivated state.

But did Han Wonjin deny, against Yi Gan, that the nature of the mind of the sage and that of the commoner were the same? In one sense yes, and in another no, for Han believed that we needed to distinguish between three senses of "nature":

There are three levels of nature. There is the nature that is shared by all human beings and other creatures (for example, Chapter 22 of the *Zhongyong* says, "The nature of human beings and other creatures is my nature"); there is the nature that is different in human beings and other creatures but is shared by all human beings (for example, the Collected Commentaries on the "Gaozi" chapter of the *Mengzi*, says, "From the perspective of principles, if we talk about the endowment, of benevolence, dutifulness, ritual propriety, and wisdom, how could other creatures attain these completely?" and the Introduction to the *Daxue* says, "When Heaven gave life to human beings, how could it not have endowed them all with a nature consisting of benevolence, dutifulness, ritual propriety, and wisdom!"); there is the nature that differs from person to person (for example, the *Analec*s says, "By nature people are close to one another"). It is not that nature has these three levels and each is not the same as the others; it is simply that depending on how people look at nature, there are these three levels.²⁸

Let us call the first level of nature, which is shared by all things, *universal nature*, the second level of nature, which is shared by only creatures of a particular kind, *species-specific nature*, and the third level of nature, which varies among humans, *person-relative nature*. Armed with these distinctions, Han can claim that Yi is correct that the nature of the sage and commoner is the same so long as we are

²⁷*Oeam yugo* 12. The analogies of the host and the guest, and the root and the branch tip were widely used in the Neo-Confucian tradition, and are here being called upon to note the way in which the mind and *qi* are clearly distinct with sharply demarcated roles, while remaining connected on some deep and less evident level.

²⁸*Namdang chip* 7:2b–3b.

talking about either *universal nature* or *species-specific nature* (or in this case, human nature) but incorrect if we are discussing *person-relative nature*. In this way, Han can agree with Yi that the commoner can also achieve sagehood since both the commoner and the sage enjoy the same *human (species-specific) nature*, which, in itself, is wholly good.

Han's method of distinguishing the three different levels of nature became a catalyst for the central question of the Horak Debate: Is the nature of humans and the nature of other animals the same or different? Unsurprisingly, Han and Yi offered diverging answers to this question, with Yi adamantly claiming that the nature of both humans and non-humans are the same and with Han arguing that they are different.

According to the metaphysical framework adopted by the Korean Neo-Confucians, original nature, which is identical to *li* and is purely good, is constituted by the five virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and loyalty.²⁹ This aspect of their thought originates from their particular reading of the *Mengzi* in which Mengzi proposes that human nature is good by arguing for the existence of moral sprouts (*duan*) that, when developed and filled out, become full-blown virtues. Zhu Xi and later Neo-Confucians, partly as the result of Buddhist influences, understood the sprouts not as incipient tendencies needing to be developed but as expressions of fully formed virtuous natures inherent in all things.³⁰

Yi Gan takes this position: "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."³¹ On Yi's view, all creatures, by containing within them the heavenly principle (*li*), also share the same original nature and are therefore in full possession of the five virtues. Yi's view that the virtues are common to both humans and animals can be taken as a consequence of the commitment to his conception of the *li-qi* metaphysical framework of Neo-Confucianism. But here Yi's position appears to conflict with the common-sense observation that other animals (even those with more developed capacities like apes or dolphins) simply lack the capacity to manifest any of the virtues.³² Yi responded to this objection by recognizing that the differences among humans and other creatures were real but not absolute; moreover, they were the result of differences in temperamental (rather than original) nature. While human beings are endowed with "upright" and "continuous" *qi*, according to Yi, other beings possess "impure" or "turbid" *qi*. By appealing to the distorting effects of *qi*, Yi aims to maintain the view that by being solely constituted by *li*, the nature common to all things is absolutely perfect.

²⁹As those who are familiar with the *Mengzi* will notice, loyalty was not one of the virtues attached to one of the four moral "sprouts" that Mengzi argued for in claiming that human nature is good.

³⁰For a lucid and concise account of how Buddhism influenced Zhu Xi's views, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).

³¹Oeam yugo 7. (Translation from Hong, "Is the Morality of Human Beings Superior," p. 80.)

³²Of course, even if one agrees that no other animals besides human beings have the capacity for full blown moral actions, one can believe that other animals, especially those that are much closer to us phylogenetically, do have certain moral emotions that allow them to act morally. The degree to which such emotions or actions resemble moral emotions and moral actions exemplified by human beings is an extremely controversial issue. I will return to this issue below.

At this point one might begin to wonder whether the disagreement between Yi and Han is merely terminological. For couldn't Han, with his distinctions concerning the different levels of nature, agree with Yi that regarding *universal nature* but not *species-specific nature* or *person-relative nature*, humans and non-human animals all share the same nature? Is there really a substantive disagreement here?

I think that there is. The deeper issue is about which of the three levels of nature that Han distinguished should occupy the most fundamental role within the Confucian moral framework by serving as the metaphysical basis for moral self-cultivation. What, in other words, is the *true* or *real* nature that we need to follow in order to achieve sagehood? For Yi, our true nature should not be identified in any way with physical elements (*qi*), which can only block or distort the underlying goodness that every entity possesses, but with the transcendental or spiritual element (*li*), which is wholly pure and good. Yi remarks: "Even though nature is differentiated into the original and the physical, what should be given more emphasis is the original."³³ Here Yi expresses the kind of metaphysical yearning that we earlier observed in T'oegye: a desire for an immaterial, transcendental basis for our nature.

Han, however, seeks to avoid a sharp separation between *li* and *qi* and to maintain a unified outlook that always aims to see human beings as organic wholes, as an integration of both *li* and *qi*.³⁴ From this synthetic perspective, to understand the natures of both humans and other animals, one must consider not only the *li* that shapes and informs them but also their physical makeup. So for Han, the level of nature that should serve as the metaphysical basis for moral self-cultivation is *human (species-specific) nature*, which is constituted by both *li* and *qi*.

Viewing the nature of an entity as partially constituted by its physical makeup naturally led Han to the position that the natures of humans and other living entities are indeed different. For Yi, on the other hand, since nature properly refers to the *universal nature* that is shared by all living beings, the nature of human beings is the same as the nature of other animals. And since this implies that all creatures also fully possess *li*, the metaphysical foundation for the virtues, all non-human animals equally possess the virtues as well.

We are now in position to see that the disagreement between Han and Yi regarding human nature did not center on conflicting beliefs about observable facts. As it will become clear in the next section, they both agree that the behaviors and activities attributable to humans and other animals are clearly different. But for Yi, these differences are the products of different material constitutions (*qi*). They do not lead to differences in the natures of humans and other animals since nature, for Yi, is solely constituted by *li*. Thus, their disagreement is rooted in diverging metaphysical views about the proper conception of nature, with Yi advocating the universal, purely *li*-based conception of nature while Han endorses the species-specific conception of nature that includes both *li* and the material constitution (*qi*) that differentiates

³³Oeam ego 7:18b (Translation from Sa-Soon Youn, "The Korean Controversy over Chu Hsi's View on the Nature of Man and Things," p. 572 in *Chu His and Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wing-tsit Chan (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986).

³⁴This is an outlook that was also deeply embedded in the metaphysical system of Yulgok. See Ro, *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi Yulgok*.

one species from another. Because both Han and Yi see nature as playing a pivotal role in their metaphysical framework as the ultimate source of normativity, a mere terminological shift would not resolve this deep philosophical conflict. What we see in the Horak Debate, therefore, is a continuation of the same fundamental tension that lay at the heart of the Four-Seven Debate, between the propensity to identify ourselves with what transcends our physical constitution and the desire to understand ourselves as fully embodied beings with temperament and emotion.

III. HORAK DEBATE, NATURAL GOODNESS, AND MORAL NATIVISM

In this section I want to draw upon resources found within contemporary Western moral philosophy. I will do this by showing how the debate is connected to two live philosophical issues that remain hotly contested. I will first discuss Philippa Foot's ethical naturalism, as developed in her book *Natural Goodness*, which claims that the determination of certain qualities or characteristic traits *as* virtues is established by facts about the kind of life-form that human beings instantiate. To help set the stage for discussion of Foot's position, I will discuss Peter Geach's distinction between predicative and attributive adjectives, as used by Foot to motivate her naturalistic framework. I will contend that Foot's framework offers greater support of Han Wonjin's view than Yi Gan's view concerning the relationship between human and non-human animal nature. Second, I will draw upon *moral nativism*, the view that moral faculties are innate, genetically inherited features of human beings. I will argue that one of the arguments in favor of moral nativism and accepted by a number of contemporary evolutionary biologists and primatologists, the *proto-morality argument*, relies upon a claim that was widely accepted by the main participants of the Horak Debate, namely, that non-human animals exhibit a variety of behaviors that resemble human moral actions. On this issue the Korean Neo-Confucians held beliefs closer to our contemporary knowledge of ethology than the views held by many modern philosophers. In part this is a result of the Neo-Confucian conception of the relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Employing the resources of contemporary philosophy will inevitably involve the danger of anachronistically attributing alien thoughts to thinkers who belonged to a radically different philosophical tradition. But as long as we proceed carefully, such comparative analysis can be helpful for getting us to appreciate the Horak Debate as centering on significant philosophical issues and to move us beyond seeing the debate as merely a quaint discussion from a bygone era. Moreover, taking up the debate from a contemporary perspective may help us to achieve a better grasp of the debate itself, and perhaps even allow us to more accurately evaluate the merits of the debate's arguments and positions.

III.a. Natural Goodness

In his seminal article "Good and Evil," Peter Geach distinguishes between predicative and attributive adjectives.³⁵ Predicative adjectives are those that operate

³⁵Peter Geach, "Good and Evil," *Analysis* 17 (1956): 33–43.

independent of the noun to which they are attached. So, for example, “red” is a predicative adjective since the criteria by which we judge whether something is red does not depend upon the nature of the object in question. The redness of a book or a car does not change because in one case we are talking about a book and in another case a car. Attributive adjectives, however, do depend upon the nature of the entity for their operation. So “tall” or “large” are attributive adjectives since to judge that something is tall or large does require one to consider the kind of thing one is talking about. A professional basketball player may be “tall” even though he is shorter than a “short” oak tree. Or a mouse might be “large” even though it is smaller than a “small” elephant. Another way to grasp this distinction is by seeing that a statement involving a predicative adjective, e.g., “x is a red car,” can be broken down into: (a) “x is red” and “x is a car.” But statements involving attributive adjectives cannot be similarly broken down since we cannot infer from the statement “x is a large mouse” that: (a) “x is large” and (b) “x is a mouse.” Employing this distinction, Geach claims that “good” is also an attributive adjective. That is to say, whether the statement “this is a good x” is true depends on the kind of thing x is. A man can be a good thief, but it would not follow that he is a thief, and that he is good.

In *Natural Goodness* Philippa Foot draws upon Geach’s distinction to claim that the goodness or defect of living organisms depends upon their species-specific natures.³⁶ When we say that a withering plant has defective roots because it is unable to sufficiently absorb nutrients from the soil, we are making a judgment based upon the kind of life-form that plants instantiate. An owl that cannot see in the dark is defective, because owls are nocturnal creatures. They need to see in the dark to hunt their prey. Similarly, Foot claims, what counts as virtues, those characteristics that are needed for a successful human life, are also dependent upon facts about the kinds of lives that are characteristically human and the qualities necessary for human flourishing. Courage, for example, is a virtue in humans because we experience fear and the capacity to overcome fear is a necessary characteristic for a flourishing life; courage is a quality that human beings in general need.³⁷ So, just as what determines whether certain qualities count as good or defective in plants and other animals is dependent upon their particular species-relative form of life, what determines whether certain qualities in humans count as virtues also depends upon facts about the kind of life that is distinctively human.

As we observed earlier, one of the main points of contention between Yi Gan and Han Wonjin was whether non-human animals also possess the five virtues that constitute original nature, with Yi maintaining that they did and Han arguing that they did not. Here Foot’s point that what marks certain qualities or features of an entity as “good” depends upon the kind of life-form that the entity exemplifies, seems to speak against Yi’s position. For if we were to examine the characteristic

³⁶For Foot’s discussion of Geach’s distinction, see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 2–4.

³⁷Philippa Foot sees virtues as correctives that help us to combat desires that can lead us astray. See Philippa Foot, “Virtues and Vices” in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002).

life-form of other animals such as ants, bees, horses, apes, or dolphins, it is clear that the qualities that they need to develop and become mature, properly functioning instances of their species kind, simply are not the kinds of qualities (i.e., the virtues) that human beings need in order to achieve a properly functioning human life.³⁸ Of course, they may have qualities that resemble certain virtues that are proper to human beings, but it just does not look plausible, for example, to maintain that ants and horses need the virtue of benevolence (*ren*) in order to flourish; they simply lack the necessary equipment. So, if the nature of a living being (i.e., its characteristic life-form) determines facts about what is necessary for its flourishing, then the “good” or “virtuous” characteristic traits (i.e., traits conducive to flourishing) are fixed by the particular nature of individual entities. In other words, if x and y share the same nature, then they both need the same set of character traits to flourish. So, contrary to Yi Gan’s view, the nature of humans and other animals are different, since the characteristic traits necessary for flourishing vary across species-kind.

One important as well as contentious aspect of Foot’s view about natural goodness is that one’s species-specific nature generates certain normative facts about the kinds of qualities or features that a particular living organism *ought* to have. On this view, the claim that A is a characteristic feature of the nature of B is to claim that B *ought* to possess or exhibit A.³⁹ Because owls are nocturnal creatures, they ought to be able to see in the dark. This view about the intrinsic normativity of nature is a view that was shared by Korean Neo-Confucian thinkers since they believed that one’s nature was something that should be followed. For support, scholars like Han Wonjin appealed to the first few lines of the *Doctrine of the Mean*: “What heaven decrees is called “the nature”; to follow the nature is called “the Way”; to cultivate the Way is called “instruction.”⁴⁰ Since the Way or *dao* for the Neo-Confucians is the ultimate source of normativity, this passage is claiming that one ought to follow one’s nature since following one’s nature is constitutive of following the Way, as exemplified in the following argument by Han Wonjin:

Now, if one says the myriad things all are fully endowed with the Five Virtues as their nature, but do not follow the *Dao* of the Five Virtues in the course of their actual lives, then these things are incapable of following their nature, and the *Dao* is not grounded in their nature. This means that there are aspects of the nature that cannot be followed. But how can we call a nature that cannot be followed “nature” and how can we call a way that is not grounded in nature the “*Dao*”?⁴¹

³⁸This does not preclude the possibility that other animals exhibit tendencies that are not conducive to their flourishing that closely resemble characteristic traits that are counted as virtues for human beings. Such tendencies, however, by being disconnected from their flourishing wouldn’t properly count as virtues for them. I thank Eirik Harris for this point.

³⁹As Foot is carefully to point out, this view does not imply that every B possesses or exhibits A, or even that the possession of B by A is the statistical norm. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, pp. 25–37.

⁴⁰*Doctrine of the Mean* 1:1. Translation is from Daniel K. Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage: Selections from the Conversations of Master Chu* (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1990), p. 110.

⁴¹*Namdang chip* 8:13b–14a.

Han's invocation of the concept of *dao* suggests that he is drawing upon the idea found in the first few lines of the *Doctrine of the Mean* quoted above and appealing to the widely accepted view that nature is normative. Nature provides all things with the proper standards that ought to be followed. With this in mind, I think we can give the following reconstruction of Han's argument:

1. If certain characteristics (e.g., the virtues) are constitutive of x's nature (where x is some kind of living organism), then they ought to be exemplified by x.
2. But if certain features ought to be exemplified by x, then x should be capable of exemplifying those features.
3. Since other animals cannot possess and exhibit the Five Virtues, they cannot be constitutive of their natures.
4. But the Five Virtues are constitutive of human nature.
5. Therefore, the natures of other animals and human beings are different.

If this is an accurate reconstruction of Han's argument above, then he seems to be relying on something like the "ought implies can" principle that, roughly, claims that if x ought to do y, then x can do y.⁴² For if it is not even *possible* for non-human animals to exemplify certain characteristics (i.e., the five virtues), then what could it mean to claim that they nevertheless *ought* to exemplify them? To hold them up to standards that it is not even possible for them to meet would be absurd. I find this argument eminently plausible.

III.b. Moral Nativism and the Proto-Morality Argument

One of the issues within contemporary ethics that continues to generate much heated discussion concerns the origins of our moral faculties, especially our capacity for altruistic behavior, as well as the source of our moral sentiments such as empathy and sympathy. *Moral Nativism* is the view that our moral faculty—the capacity to engage in moral reasoning, make moral judgments, and perceive the world in moral terms—is a basic feature of our cognitive machinery, hard-wired into us rather than generated solely by experience. Perhaps the most frequently used strategy to support *moral nativism* is to draw an analogy with *linguistic nativism*, the view that our ability to acquire a language is genetically inherited.⁴³ According to some philosophers, since *linguistic nativism* is widely accepted by both linguists and philosophers, if *moral nativism* could be shown to be analogous to *linguistic nativism* in the relevant ways, *moral nativism* would also enjoy a high degree of plausibility. But whether

⁴²Of course, the truth of the *ought-implies-can* principle is a matter of great controversy in contemporary moral philosophy. While I doubt that it is universally applicable to all situations, its application to this particular case strikes me as quite plausible.

⁴³The three most prominent defenders of *linguistic nativism* are Jerry Fodor, Noam Chomsky, and Steven Pinker. See Jerry Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1983), Noam Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1988), and Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 1994).

the argument by analogy using *linguistic nativism* to support *moral nativism* is successful still remains a highly contentious point.⁴⁴

Another argument in support of *moral nativism* that has been endorsed by a number of philosophers is what we might call the *proto-morality argument*, which draws upon the existence of various proto-moral capacities that are found in other animals, especially those that are proximate to our own phylogenetic line, to show that our moral faculty is a product of evolutionary processes and therefore rooted in our biological nature. If, for example, apes and chimpanzees demonstrate the capacity for rudimentary forms of altruistic behavior as well as the capacity for empathy, then we have some evidence for believing that our empathic capacities are not solely the products of culture and society but powers that were genetically inherited through evolutionary forces. A number of evolutionary biologists and primatologists who support the *proto-morality argument* have appealed to a wide range of empirical data in support of the argument's premise that non-human animals exhibit a variety of pro-social behaviors that resemble a number of human moral traits. Take an example from creatures that are fairly remote from us on the evolutionary tree: the Hymenoptera, an order of insects that includes bees, ants, and wasps. These insects form highly cooperative social colonies that make use of divisions of labor, coordinated food distribution, and information sharing—strategies that clearly involve genetically inherited pro-social mechanisms. In bees we not only find intricate systems of coordinated behavior but the evolved capacity to perform “self-sacrificing” acts such as the stinging of enemies in defense of the hive even at the cost of their own lives.⁴⁵ The relevant point to draw from such behaviors is that for creatures with a social nature, the ability to cooperate and coordinate behavior through reciprocal exchanges and even the sacrifice of one's own life may be expressions of traits that are products of evolutionary forces.

Within the past several decades there has been a steady accumulation of experiments and observations that appear to show that chimpanzees, apes, and other primates possess fairly complex capacities for proto-moral behaviors, including behaviors that appear to exhibit altruism, empathy, sympathy, perspective-taking, consolation, reciprocity, and even a sense of fairness.⁴⁶ Of course, there are ongoing

⁴⁴The supporters of the analogy between *linguistic nativism* and *moral nativism* include Susan Dwyer, “How Good Is the Linguistic Analogy?” in *The Innate Mind*, Vol. 2: *Culture and Cognition*, ed. Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence, and Stephen Stich (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006); Susan Dwyer, Bryce Huebner, and Marc D. Hauser, “The Linguistic Analogy: Motivations, Results, and Speculations,” *Topics in Cognitive Science* 2 (2009): 486–510. Among the nay-sayers are: Jesse Prinz, “Against Moral Nativism” in *Stich and His Critics*, ed. Dominic Murphy and Michael Bishop (Oxford UK: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 167–89; Kim Sterelny, “Moral Nativism: A Sceptical Response,” *Mind and Language* 25 (2010): 279–97.

⁴⁵I am not implying that bees perform such acts with the intention of giving up their lives, but that such acts can be described as “self-sacrificial” since they require the loss of their own lives.

⁴⁶Although his work remains controversial, Frans de Waal has been accumulating data for the past few decades in support of the existence of various proto-moral affections and capacities in non-human primates. De Waal has been heavily criticized for anthropomorphizing chimpanzee and ape behavior. But for a sympathetic understanding of de Waal's use of anthropomorphic language, see Robert Wright's comments in Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 83–97, as well as de Waal's own response to criticisms of anthropomorphism in Appendix A of de Waal (2006). For a philosophically informed critical discussion of de Waal's research, see Edouard

debates about how we should interpret these different studies and what normative conclusions (if any) we can validly draw from them, but I find it plausible that at least some rudimentary traits found in other animals do count as precursors to our own moral capacities.

Returning to the Horak Debate, we might initially suppose that the position of Yi Gan, in identifying human nature as the same as the nature of other animals, better agrees with those who defend the *proto-morality argument* than does the view of Han Wonjin. But as we can see from our earlier discussion of their debate, such an inference would be unwarranted. For the disagreement between Yi and Han is not based on divergent views about the *observable* behaviors or capacities of non-human animals. Both of them, in fact, agree that non-human animals cannot exemplify the five virtues to the degree that human beings can, given the imperfections of their *qi*. But they also agree that different creatures are able to partially exhibit behaviors that resemble certain virtues.⁴⁷ On this point they were undoubtedly influenced by the observations of Zhu Xi (a towering figure in Neo-Confucian thought) who keenly observed various humanlike traits manifested in the behavior of other animals:

As for animals, they too have this same nature [as humans], but it is restricted by their physical constitutions which produce blockage and obstruction that is so severe, it cannot be penetrated. As for the benevolence manifested by tigers and wolves, the sacrifices performed by badgers and otters and the proper social norms followed by bees and ants, these are the few places where they are able to penetrate their innate blockage and obstruction, like a thin shaft of light shining through a crack. As for apes, since their physical form is similar to human beings, they are the most intelligent of animals, only lacking the ability to speak.⁴⁸

Interestingly, what neither Yi nor Han nor the other participants of the Horak Debate doubted was that non-human animals do, albeit to varying degrees, exhibit behaviors that manifest the five virtues. The following statement was made by Yi Yeonik, one of the later participants of the Horak Debate who defended Han's view that the natures of humans and other animals are different:

The benevolence of tigers and wolves, the dutifulness of bees and ants, the ritual propriety of badgers and otters, the wisdom of seasonal insects, and the trustworthiness of ospreys and hawks: since each of these only attains one [virtue] one cannot say that other creatures possess a complete endowment of benevolence, dutifulness, ritual propriety, and wisdom. . . . Since other creatures never attain the excellence of the five types of virtuous conduct and their minds are not capable of intelligent reflection, it is simply groundless

Machery and Ron Mallon, "Evolution of Morality" in *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, ed. John M. Doris (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

⁴⁷This may seem to go against the earlier claim proposed by Han Wonjin that non-human animals cannot possess the five virtues. But Han is only denying that non-human animals fully possess the virtues that are possessed by human beings. Following the thoughts of Zhu Xi, he agrees with Yi Gan that non-human animals do exhibit, to some extent, proto-moral tendencies. Thanks to Eirik Harris for raising this potential objection.

⁴⁸Translation is my own; cf. Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 621.

to say they fully possess benevolence, dutifulness, ritual propriety, and wisdom; this is just contrary to basic reason.⁴⁹

Yi Yeonik, like Han Wonjin and Yi Gan, accepted as evidently true that although the moral capacities of non-human animals are limited, they all exhibit certain virtuous tendencies, a view that is defended by a number of contemporary evolutionary biologists.⁵⁰ Of course, it is doubtful that these Korean Neo-Confucians engaged in the kind of experimentation and analysis that would today count as scientific enquiry. But the Neo-Confucian attitude toward all creatures as fully endowed with *li* and their conviction that all things are interconnected suggests that these Korean scholars possessed a habit of mind that was attuned to the natural world and that their judgments about the various expressions of virtue in other animals was not just the product of abstruse speculation but rooted in careful observations made in the context of everyday life.⁵¹ This attitude may be contrasted with the tendency exhibited all too frequently by modern philosophers in the West, most notoriously by Descartes, who sharply contrasted human beings with animals and understood human and non-human animal behavior as having very little in common. Here it looks like the Korean Neo-Confucians may have something to teach us, by offering us novel ways of looking at our relationship to other animals that better accord with our contemporary ethological understanding and by reminding us of the need to pay closer attention to our relationship to other animals, and more generally, to the natural world.

IV. CONCLUSION

One of the key features of the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism was its dependence on an elaborate metaphysical foundation based on the concepts of *li* and *qi*. Difficulties concerning the relationship between *li* and *qi* lay at the heart of both the Four-Seven Debate and the Horak Debate, and eventually led to substantial criticisms of much of the Neo-Confucian metaphysical system by later Korean philosophers.⁵² The heart of the problem, according to these critiques, is an overly speculative metaphysical conception of *li*, which the Korean Neo-Confucians accepted as the source of all value, despite its inability to play any causal role in the natural world. These ideas led to the view that it was the psycho-physical elements related to *qi* (rather than *li*) that plays the more fundamental role in both our un-

⁴⁹Samyeonip, Vol. 21.

⁵⁰Another philosopher who takes seriously the connections between humans and other animals is Alasdair MacIntyre, who has argued that to fully comprehend our identity as human beings we must also attend to those characteristics that we share with other animals. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (La Salle IL: Open Court Press, 1999).

⁵¹The significance of the sense of interconnectedness that the Neo-Confucians felt with the rest of nature is explored by Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Senses and Values of Oneness" in *The Philosophical Challenge From China*, ed. Brian Bruya (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2012) and David Tien, "Oneness and Self-Centeredness in the Moral Psychology of Wang Yangming," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40 (2012): 52–71.

⁵²See Mark Setton, *Chong Yagyong: Korea's Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 9-51 for an overview of the criticisms of the Cheng-Zhu school by Korean scholars.

derstanding of the natural world and the achievement of ethical perfection. Human nature, on this account, was not to be identified with *li*, but with the various appetites and emotions that are constitutive of human psychology—features that arise out of *qi*. From this perspective, we can perhaps see the Horak Debate, especially the views of Han Wonjin, as a foreshadowing of later criticisms of the Neo-Confucian tradition and as uncovering some of the inherent problems within the Cheng-Zhu metaphysical system. In their worldviews we can see a movement toward paring away metaphysical views that appear to be in tension with observable facts, an attitude that embodies the spirit of ethical naturalism that informs the works of many contemporary philosophers.⁵³ Like such philosophers perhaps Han was also motivated by the need to reign in what he saw as ungrounded metaphysical theorizing by anchoring his own views in a more empirically realistic methodology.⁵⁴

What I hope to have provided in this essay is an outline of the main points of the Horak Debate as well as help in showing how some of the philosophical problems at the heart of the debate remain with us even today. In doing so, I have situated the Horak Debate within the tradition of Korean Neo-Confucianism and demonstrated in what ways it can be read as a continuation of the Four-Seven Debate and as a foreshadowing of future criticisms of Korean Neo-Confucian metaphysics. Because of its historical significance and its connections to important issues that remain unresolved in contemporary philosophy, the Horak Debate remains a rich and fascinating resource that merits deeper philosophical investigation.⁵⁵

⁵³For a recent, vigorous defense of naturalism, see Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong, “Naturalizing Ethics” in *Moral Psychology*, Vol. 1: *The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2008). Of course, neither Han Wonjin nor the later critics of the Neo-Confucian tradition would endorse the kind of naturalism that contemporary philosophers defend, given the importance they attached to finding a consistent metaphysical framework.

⁵⁴This is, of course, speculative since he was also heavily motivated by the need to provide a coherent account of the classical texts within the Neo-Confucian tradition. But I find it plausible that Han’s views were shaped by his observations and experiences with the natural world, and the perceived need to harmonize those experiences with his philosophical beliefs.

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