Relation and Property in Wŏnhyo’s Buddhist Thought

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Ancient, medieval and modern Western philosophy can be regarded as a process of seeking identity based on the philosophical concept of “substance,” no matter whether that identity is centered on “idea” (ιδεα), “God,” or “the self” (ego). However, after Nietzsche, contemporary philosophy began to recognize and investigate “inter-relatedness” as a process of change rather than as an essence of permanent substance. Contemporary philosophy regarded substance as an “event” and paid more attention to the concept of difference than to identity. Eventually this trend boiled down to “seeking authentic property in inter-relatedness.”

In Buddhism, this trend appeared early-on in the ancient philosophy of great Korean Master Wŏnhyo 元曉 (617–686 CE), in his pursuing an “intuitive understanding of self-nature” (性自神解) in the Dependent Arising (縁起) phenomenon. This paper aims to explain the similar basic structures of both traditional Korean Buddhist and contemporary Western philosophy, on the topic of inter-relatedness. In order to accomplish this purpose, first of all, I would like to describe the overcoming process of the substantial philosophy in the twentieth century.

1. Beyond the Substantial Philosophy

1.1. From Substance to Event

The fundamental methodology of the Western philosophy is “eros” driving transcendence from the world of phenomena as changeability and mortality to the world of the noumena as unchangeability and immortality. They intend to accomplish such a transcendence through grasping the logos [God’s words, humanity’s reason, law of nature], and after that, to overcome the phenomenal world with the logos as the
weapon, by dominating and managing it from a contrary stance. The concept which is created in order to see all things from this position is “substance” (ousia, substantia).

Substance, if we define it like Aristotle, is the independent individual (the first substance) and the universal essence (the second substance), and if we define it like Descartes, it is “the being that exists independently” (ens per se existens). In other words, the substance is that which has its own eternal existing essence and the exclusive nature of independence, discriminated from other things. Here the exclusive nature of independence indicates “the self being” of the first substance while the eternal essence implies “the enduring being” of the second substance. Therefore “the self being” of the first substance secures the possibility of division through the independence of the individual, and “the enduring being” secures unchangeability through the permanence of the essence, respectively.

When “the self being” of substance becomes an exclusion of “other,” the “individual being” becomes an “isolated being” and brings about the severance of the relation, and the “enduring being” becomes a “fixed being” and bears the negation of changing. To overcome this substantialism-based thinking hidden in modern philosophies, contemporary philosophies would now understand things not as “substances” but as events, based on the thinking of the doctrine of inter-relatedness. “The event” as the concept for overcoming the problem of the severance of relation and negation of changing that substantialism has, indicates a situation in the process where various elements are making mutual relations and changing incessantly. The situation that every element has its own authenticity according to its functional position in the net of interdependent relation and this authenticity is revealed as it is, as just an “event.”

It is Heidegger who showed this concept of event most properly. When he says “Being appears as an event,” the event is Ereignis as the revelation (er) of authenticity (eigen), and means the co-belonging that exists before the divisions of Being and humanity and Being and thought. In other words, it means the event which permits (lassen) and reveals (sich zeigen) the original authentic forms (Eigenes) of things, bringing work (erbringen) to the authenticity (Eignen); that is, the process where everything becomes unique and revealed as co-belonged at once. Therefore, in such a event the original co-belonging of Being and human “happens,” functioning as co-belonging of Being and thought. Thus because the event of the co-belonging of Being and human
thought is the fundamental situation before the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity arises in the metaphysical operation of representation, in such an event even nature at last comes to be revealed not as an object at humanity’s disposal but as original authenticity as it is. In short, when we see a thing not as a separated substance but as an co-belonging event, we can perceive beings as the authentic being-ness without making them things that can be dominated by representational thinking.

1.2. From Identity to Difference

If we define, as Aristotle did, that substance is the independent individual (the first substance) and the universal essence (the second substance), then the character of “eternal being” in universal essence can be understood in terms of identity, which is what continuously remains unchanged and dominates all changeable beings. As said, the mainstream methodology of Western philosophies is that “eros” drives a transcendence from the world of phenomenon as changeability and mortality to the world of the noumenon as unchangeability and immortality. Thus the Eternal One has been understood differently as a fundamental idea, according to the changing times. The ideology of identity as the Eternal One appeared as “idea” in Greek philosophy, “God” in medieval philosophy, and “ego” in modern philosophy.

But as identity is characterized by the logic of unchangeability and permanence, identity will exclude inter-relatedness with others. And so identity will result in exclusiveness, obstructiveness and uniformity. In order to overcome these problems, contemporary philosophy adopts a logic of change instead of a logic of unchangeability. This new, modern logic of change sheds light on “difference” which allows everything to have inter-relationship with others and respects diversity, openness and dynamism.

We can confirm the trend of contemporary Western philosophy towards diversity and dynamism in the works of Deleuze and Derrida through the logic of “difference.” Deleuze considers that Plato’s “idea” is the typical theory of the philosophy of identity. The original “idea” is reproduced as an identical one in the copied things. It is just a repetition of the identical one without any real difference. Deleuze criticizes that the repetition of the identical one will exclude the surrounding others. The difference that cannot be reduced to identity is the difference of authenticity of all things in this impermanent reality.

Derrida understands “difference” through the distinctive concept “la différence” (la différenciation)}
2. Wŏnhyo’s Interpretation of Inter-relatedness

Deleuze’s “repetition of differentiation” and Derrida’s difference and deferring together connote that the net of inter-relatedness originally exists and then the authenticity of all beings comes from the diversity of differences. Here, inter-relatedness is emphasized more than self-identity. In conclusion, the trend of contemporary philosophy which is characterized by “from substance to event” and “from identity to difference” boils down to seeking inter-relatedness and authentic property from various inter-relationships. We can find a similar trend in exploration of the philosophy of Korean Master Wŏnhyo, in terms of the nature of Dependent Arising (緣起性) and Original Nature (本性).

Our exploration of inter-relatedness in Wŏnhyo’s thought starts with the concept that the “reality” (実相) comes from the nature of Dependent Arising. There are two aspects in the explanation of “reality.” The positive aspect of “reality” can be explained in dharmatā (法性) that implies the character of Dependent Arising, Emptiness and the Middle Way (中道). On the other hand the negative aspect of “reality” can be explained in terms of tattva. This emphasizes that “reality” is something beyond metaphysical speculation or intellectual frivolity as a means of minimizing language limitations. In order to minimize the limits of language expression, tathatā (真如) that means “such and such” (如如) is used rather than a specific expression such as “this” or “that.” In this respect, suchness that connotes the character of Dependent Arising, Emptiness and Middle Way is a proper expression beyond metaphysical speculation.

Wŏnhyo synthetically provides “the determinacy” (決定性) which embraces both the negative and positive aspects of “reality” or the “real character of all dharmas.” 5 In the Kŭmgang sammae gyŏngnon 金剛三昧經論 (Commentary on the Vajrasamādhi-sūtra), Wŏnhyo comments the verse: “The stage of wisdom of all the Buddhas accesses the real
characteristics, because of the determinacy.” 6) When we read the comment “if it were not a determinacy (若非決定), then it would not be the reality” (即非實相), we know that the determinacy is the essence of “reality.” Here the determinacy as “real Dharma character” (実法相), or “the real character of all dharmas” (諸法実相), is not produced by the buddhas (非仏所作); whether buddhas appear or not (有仏無仏), its nature itself just-so (性自爾). This determinacy is different from mechanical determinism by destiny, or the predestined determinism by “God,” in that the “real character of all dharmas” is not produced by the buddhas; whether buddhas appear or not, its nature itself remains just-so (法住性, dhammaṭṭhitatā). 7)

In his Kŭmgang sammae gyŏngnon Wŏnhyo comments regarding the following prose: “Because the conditions alternate successively (緣代謝故), these conditions are generated, but there is no production (緣起非生); these conditions decay, but there is no extinction (緣謝非滅). Whether hidden or made manifest, they are formless (隱顯無相). Roots and stems are calm and extinct (根理寂滅). There is no place where they abide (在無有處), nor is there seen anything that abides (不見所住), because their natures are determinated (決定性故).” 8) This text says as follows: even though conditions arise, there is no production (非生); even though conditions cease, there is no extinction (非滅); this is because these conditions alternate successively. When it comes to a growing tree, whether hidden or made manifest, they are formless. The reason for this is because their natures are determinated. Here the meaning of “determinated nature” is as was explained by Wŏnhyo before; the determinacy is “real Dharma character” (実法相), and “the real character of all dharmas” is not produced by the buddhas; whether buddhas appear or not, its nature itself remains just-so.

Hence it refers to the nature of Dharma-abiding (法住性) of the principle of Dependent Arising (緣起法). This principle of Dependent Arising is the essence of determinacy or determinated nature in terms of Dharma-abiding (法住). Also it must be the nature of successive alteration (代謝性) in terms of the mutual inter-action of cause and effect. As the various conditions called cause and effect, both primary and secondary, continuously interact, so we cannot call them “production and extinction.” Also they cannot be hidden or un-hidden, and cannot stay with special characteristics. The principle of Dependent Arising characterized by no production and no extinction (非生非滅) and no form and no abiding (無相無住) which existed even before the
Buddha was born is the nature of determinacy. So we can understand that Wŏnhyo’s “successive alteration” and “determinacy” both refer to the principle of Dependent Arising.

3. Exploring Property in Inter-relatedness

The determinacy of reality, which is also called Dependent Arising, is sometimes described as the successive alteration, and also understood as original nature in terms of Dharma-abiding which has always existed as it is. Especially, when “no arising and no distinction” (不生不滅) is understood as “such as it is” (自然) in terms of original human nature, the determinacy as original quiescence (本来寂静) is connected to original enlightenment (本覚) and One Mind (一心). And then the determinacy is “thusness” (真如, things as they are) when it is understood that its “nature itself is just-so.”

The above explanation can be summarized as follows: One Mind is defined as the original event before subject (主) and object (客), and defilement (染) and pureness (浄) are differentiated. It is also the basic locus where man and world meet together without division, in terms of human nature experienced as a holistic integration. That locus can be interpreted as “store consciousness” (阿梨耶識, ālayavijñāna) in terms of original human consciousness. Also it can be termed “the womb of Tathagata” (如来蔵, tathāgata-garbhā; the Buddha-nature inherent in all beings) from the perspective of enlightenment and non-enlightenment.

Accordingly, thusness and arising and distinction co-belong in One Mind; while defilement and pureness co-belong in store consciousness. On the other hand enlightenment and non-enlightenment co-belong interdependently in the “womb of Tathagata.” As these co-belongings are not substantially compatible, even though one restores purity through the practice of enlightenment, the defiled world of non-enlightenment, of arising and extinction, never disappears. It is instead reborn as the locus of compassion, to save all sentient beings through the immeasurable virtue of the Buddha.

Wŏnhyo especially emphasized that “As the essence of One Mind is originally quiescent, it is the stage of the determinacy.” 9) With the medium of original quiescence
(寂静性) and original enlightenment (本覚性) as inherent mind, the connecting of the determinacy as the nature of Dependent Arising directly to One Mind in Wŏnhyo's philosophy is an attempt to locate a human original property in the interdependent relations. And this is quite similar to the basic direction of contemporary philosophy in terms of seeking authentic property in inter-relatedness.

As we reviewed earlier, Heidegger's “event” (Ereignis) is the revelation (er) of “authenticity” (eigen), which is the event of co-belonging before the division of human and Being, and thinking and Being. This represents the trend of contemporary philosophy to seek authentic property through the inter-relatedness of co-belonging. This trend is similarly found in Wŏnhyo's thought, in his interpretation of the “innately pure mind” (自性清净心) as the human original property and “One Mind” on the basis of Dependent Arising, called the determinacy and successive alteration (代谢). Wŏnhyo explains the innately pure mind and One Mind as the “intuitive understanding of the self nature,”[10] which is the interpretation of the traditional Indian terminology, “the innately pure mind” understood from the perspective of Chinese human-nature theory (人性論). Accordingly, this usage is a highly preferable expression in Sŏn Buddhism to realize the self-nature (自性), Buddha-nature (仏性).

Master Chinul 知訥, who succeeded Wŏnhyo from the perspective of Sŏn Buddhism, interpreted the “intuitive understanding of the self-nature” in One Mind in a more advanced way, as “empty quiescence and spiritual awareness” (空寂霊知).[11] This understanding emerged from his meditational practice, “withdraw and reflect on one’s original nature” (廻光反照), by which he meant to turn one’s attention which is ordinarily directed to external things back into oneself, or to reflect on oneself. If we explain the “intuitive understanding of the self-nature” and “empty quiescence and spiritual awareness” from the perspective of Sŏn Buddhism, they are self-nature as the “original face” (本来面目). This theory of original-nature succeeded to the theory of “Dependent Arising from the Dharma-realm” (法界縁起), which added up to the theory “arising from the original-nature” (性起). He tried to discover authenticity or original-nature in inter-relatedness by combining Sŏn and Hwaŏm concepts.

As reviewed above, Wŏnhyo’s One Mind theory, Chinul’s Sŏn thought form the main features of Korean Buddhism. The development of Korean Buddhism can be defined as the “harmonization of Sŏn and Hwaŏm.” Philosophically speaking in modern times, we
define that it is based upon seeking authentic property in inter-relatedness.

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**Notes**

1) Aristotle’s statement about the nature of double meaning of ousia is clearly made in his *Categoriae* (chap. 5, 2a11–13) and *Metaphisica* (vol. 7, chap. 1, 1028a11).

2) About the infiltration of the Scholastic concept of substance into Descartes’ philosophy, my treatise “Heidegger wa Descartes” (in *Heidegger wa Cheol-Hak-Za-Deul*, ed. Soh Gwang-Hee et al. [Seoul: Cheol-Hak-Gwa Hyeon-Sil-Sa, 1999], pp. 148–153) may be referred to.

3) Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, Gesamtausgabe, Band 65 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1980), p. 30.

4) Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1975), p. 258.

5) Regarding the concept of “the determinacy” (決定性), please refer to Satō Shigeki 佐藤繁樹, *Wŏnhyo eui hwajaeng nonri* 元暁의和諍論理 (Seoul: Minjoksa, 1996), pp. 153–160.

6) Wŏnhyo, *Kŭmgang sammae gyŏngnon*, Han’guk Pulgyo jŏnsŏ 韓国仏教全書 (The Complete Writings of Korean Buddhism), vol. 1, 609c.

7) *Saṁyutta Nikāya*, II. 25.

8) Wŏnhyo, *Kŭmgang sammae gyŏngnon*, Han’guk Pulgyo jŏnsŏ, vol. 1, 625a.

9) Wŏnhyo, *Kŭmgang sammae gyŏngnon*, Han’guk Pulgyo jŏnsŏ, vol. 1, 633a.

10) Wŏnhyo, *Taesŭng kisin non so* 大乗起信論疏 (Commentary on the awakening of faith), Han’guk Pulgyo jŏnsŏ, vol. 1, 741a.

11) Chinul, *Pojo bŏbŏ* 普照法語 (The Dharma talk of Pojo) (Seoul: Pojosasang Yŏnguwon, 1989), pp. 141–143.

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