JEONG DASAN'S INTERPRETATION OF MENGZI: HEAVEN, WAY, HUMAN NATURE, AND THE HEART-MIND[1]

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Abstract. This essay offers an introduction to Jeong Yakyong's (Dasan's) ethical philosophy as revealed by his commentary on the *Mengzi*. Following Mengzi, Dasan insisted that the Confucian Way was grounded in the will of Heaven but looked back to early views about the Lord on High and described ethical life in terms of an everyday, natural order decreed by the Lord on High. Not only did he see a wide range of human emotions as indispensable and central to the good life, he also insisted that Heaven and the Way must be understood in terms of their manifestations in this world.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jeong Yakyong 丁若鏞 (1762–1836), more commonly known by his pen name Dasan 茶山, is widely regarded as one of the towering intellectuals of the late Joseon period.[2] He is greatly admired for his work

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2 For an excellent introduction to Jeong Yakyong's philosophy, see Mark Setton, *Chong Yagyong: Korea's Challenge to Orthodox Neo-Confucianism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997). For a study which explores his personal and philosophical relationship with Catholicism in great depth, see Shin-ja Kim, *The Philosophical Thought of Tasan Chŏng*, Tobias J. Körtner and Jordan Nyenyembe, tr. (New York: Peter Lang, 2010) and Don Baker, "Thomas Aquinas and *Chŏng Yagyŏng*: Rebels Within Tradition," *Tasan Hak* ("Journal of Tasan Studies"), 3:2 (2002): 32-69. For an insightful and concise introduction to Dasan's philosophy that helpfully locates it within its historical context, see Michael C. Kalton, "Chong Tasan's Philosophy of Man: A Radical Critique of the Neo-Confucian World View," *Journal of Korean Studies*, 3 (1981): 3-37.

on philosophy, science, and politics as well as for his government service and poetry. This essay focuses on his ethical philosophy as revealed by his comprehensive commentary on the *Mengzi* 孟子 (K. *Maengja*).[3] Dasan sought to rescue Mengzi's philosophy from what he saw as the metaphysical excesses of Song-Ming neo-Confucians, whose interpretations of this and other Chinese classics had become orthodox in Jeoson Korea, and return to the letter and spirit of Mengzi's original teachings.[4] As will be clear from what follows, much of what Dasan argued for can be understood as, in some sense, a more naturalized account of ethics, and such an account offered a dramatic alternative to the orthodox view. While such a description is helpful for understanding Dasan's philosophy, we must avoid misrepresenting the nature, aim, and extent of his naturalizing tendency. His system of thought clearly differs in important ways from most contemporary forms of naturalism; it offered an alternative to the highly abstract metaphysical system of orthodox neo-Confucianism and not supernaturalism. Like Mengzi, Dasan insisted that the Confucian Way was grounded in the will of Heaven 天 (Ch. *tian*; K. *cheon*); he looked back to even earlier classical precedents and argued that the Way originated from and consisted in the will of the Lord on High 上帝 (Ch. *Shangdi;* K. *Sangje*). And so his "naturalism" was grounded in a deeper theological vision; he saw ethical life as expressly and intimately dependent upon and inseparable from the tasks of discovering and fulfilling an everyday, natural order decreed by Heaven. He advocated a decidedly this-worldly religious vision, one that bears important similarities to familiar forms of deism.[5]

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[3] Dasan's commentary, entitled *Maengjayoui* 孟子要義, is available as volume 7 of Chŏngbon Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ 定本與猶堂全書 (Seoul: *Tasan Haksul Munhwa Chaedan*, 2012). I have also benefitted from consulting Yi Jihyoung 李篪衡 ed., *Dasan Maengjayoui* 茶山孟子要義 (Seoul: *Hyundaeshilhaksa* 現代實學社, 1994). I use only Korean Romanization for all Korean proper names and sources and only *pinyin* for all Chinese proper names and sources. I provide both *pinyin* and Korean Romanization for all terms of art.

[4] This quality of Dasan's thought is also seen in contemporary thinkers in both China and Japan. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see my "New Old Foundations for Confucian Ethical Philosophy: Itō Jinsai 伊藤 仁斎 (1627-1705), Dai Zhen (戴震) (1722-1776), and Jeong Yakyong (丁若鏞) (1762-1836)," Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies, 11.1 (June 2014): 77-133.

[5] Like Western deists, Dasan thought people could come to see and appreciate the role of God in the world using the capacities with which they were endowed. Like deists, he did not believe God acts directly in the world nor did he seek to have a personal relationship with God. Moreover, like deists, Dasan was led to posit Shangje's existence

As a result, not only did he see a wide range of human emotions as playing an indispensable and central role in the good life ordained for human beings but he insisted that Heaven and the Way 道 (Ch. *dao*; K. *do*) must be understood in terms of their manifestations in this world. I shall return to Dasan's conceptions of Heaven and the Way in my conclusion after I have presented his views about human nature 性 (Ch. *xing;* K. *seong*) and the heart-mind 心 (Ch. *xin; K. shim*).[6]

II. DASAN'S INTERPRETATION OF MENGZI'S PHILOSOPHY

One of the most prominent themes in Dasan's writings about human nature is his criticism of the orthodox view that human nature itself is principle 理 (Ch. *li; K. i*), which in its original state is absolutely pure, good, and unitary. This claim about the original state of human nature is the central feature of the extravagant metaphysical claims that Dasan criticized and rejected. He raises objections to this view throughout his writings and his criticisms are clearly laid out in his commentary on a famous passage from the *Mengzi,* 7A4, which says,

> The myriad things are all here within me. There is no greater joy than to reflect upon oneself and find integrity. Nothing brings one closer to benevolence than exerting oneself in the effort of sympathetic concern."[7]

Dasan begins by noting the interpretations offered by two prominent neo-Confucian commentators.

> The *Collected Commentaries* (compiled by Zhu Xi), says, "This passage talks about the original state of principle. Every one of the great and minute normative principles is present within one's allotment of nature." Cheng Fuxin (1256-1340) says, "Within any thing one can find the principles of all the myriad things."

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for primarily theoretical or explanatory reasons – specifically, in order to provide a metaphysical foundation or basis for the Confucian Way. Western deists also wanted to explain the origins of the universe and the existence of natural laws; while these were not a primary concern of Dasan's he did, as we shall see below, argue that without God we could not explain the orderly structure of the world. Thanks to Michael R. Slater for discussions on this topic.

[6] I translate *xin/sim* consistently as "heart-mind" in order to bring out Dasan's particular use of this term to refer to an innate human capacity and tendency not only to cognize but to evaluate actions and states of affairs. The same term often is translated as "mind" or "heart."

[7] For the passage and Dasan's commentary, see *Maengjayoui*, pp. 231-2.

These prominent neo-Confucian commentaries present the orthodox view, according to which each and every thing – no matter how simple or complex, how noble or base – contains within it all the myriad principles of all the things of the world, just as each drop of water can reflect the image of the moon shining in the heavens. All things share this common and complete set of principles as their original nature本性 (Ch. *benxing*; K. *bonseong*) and are differentiated as the particular things they are by their different material endowments of 氣 (Ch. *qi*; K. *gi*). As we will see, Dasan takes issue with just about every aspect of the orthodox view, but in this passage he takes special aim at the idea that all things share a common set of principles, what I elsewhere have referred to as the "all in each" view.[8] Immediately following the two neo-Confucian commentaries quoted above, Dasan remarks,

> One need not take "the myriad things" in the extravagant way these commentators do. The principles of the myriad things within Heaven and earth are in each of these things themselves. How could all these principles be inside of me? Dogs have the principles of dogs. Oxen have the principles of oxen. These clearly are not in me. Why should we force an exaggerated interpretation of the phrase "are all here within me"?

Rather than taking the passage from the *Mengzi* as making a metaphysical claim, Dasan interprets it as presenting claims about the moral psychology of human beings and relates it to other well-known Confucian teachings from the *Analects*.

> This passage talks about the one thread of conscientiousness 忠 (Ch. *zhong*; K. *chung*) and sympathetic concern 恕 (Ch. *shu*; K. *seo*). I like beauty and so know that other people like beauty too. I like owning property and so know that other people like owning property too. I like peace and ease and so know that other people like peace and ease as well. I dislike being lowly and disgraced and so know that other people dislike being lowly and disgraced. I like to be in the lead when walking on the road, entering a gate, ascending a platform, or taking my seat. In winter I like to be the first to be warm; in summer I like to be the first to be cool. When hungry I like to be the first to eat; when thirsty I like to be the first to drink. The desires that arise in response to the myriad things and affairs we encounter in our everyday lives *are all here within me*. I do not have to inquire into the feelings or examine the expressions on the faces

[8] "The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate," in *Philosophy East and West*, 65:2 (April 2015): 401-29.

> of others in order to know that other people are the same as I am ... This is what Kongzi called the "one thread." He meant that he could thread together the mad variety of the myriad things with a single word: *shu/seo* ("sympathetic concern").[9] The learning of Kongzi and Mengzi is as plain and familiar as this but former Confucians[10] described Kongzi's teaching about the "one thread" and Mengzi's understanding of the "myriad things" in excessively extravagant terms, offering high-blown theories about principles permeating throughout Heaven, earth, and the myriad things and being fully present in every mote of dust. Vague and vast, [their explanations] are boundless and without end, causing those in subsequent times to be confused and not know where to put hand or foot. Is this not regrettable!

Dasan makes the apparently quite sensible but important point that the myriad things are not "in me" in any literal sense, but I can understand my ethical relationships and obligations to the world by consulting my empathetic and sympathetic abilities and using these to develop proper moral judgment.[11] In the last line of the passage above, Dasan makes clear that the metaphysical excesses of earlier Confucians have led people to ignore their natural moral sensibilities and thereby left them bereft of the resources needed to engage in the work of moral cultivation. Dasan continues his commentary in a way that makes clear that the moral obligation to care for or show benevolence toward others does not extend beyond our fellow human beings, which is to reject the common neo-Confucian claim that we share principle with and therefore are morally related to and responsible for all things in the universe.

> Those who reflect upon themselves and find integrity are conscientious (*zhong/chung*). If I can find the things I bestow upon others within myself and am in every case conscientious, there is no greater joy than this. Benevolence [always] involves two people. [The relationship between] father and son involves two people; [the relationship between] ruler and minister involves two people; [the relationship between] a person and his superior involves two people. The "myriad things" referred to earlier do

[9] *Analects* 4.15. Cf. 15.3.

[10] The reference here is to neo-Confucians of the Song through Ming dynasties, such as the two cited above.

[11] Dasan offers a complex and subtle account of *seo*, which entails using it to empathize and sympathize with others in ways that help to extend, curb, and shape one's own standing beliefs and feelings so these are more in accord with the Way. See my "New Old Foundations for Confucian Ethical Philosophy."

> not lie beyond the relationships between human beings, and so Mengzi concludes by saying that nothing brings one closer to benevolence than exerting oneself in the effort of sympathetic concern.

Dasan presents an outline of his conception of human nature and what it means to claim, as Mengzi famously did, that human nature is good, in his commentary on *Mengzi* 3A1, which describes how Mengzi taught Duke Wen of Teng about the goodness of human nature by invoking the examples of the sage kings Yao and Shun.[12] As is often the case, Dasan begins by quoting earlier commentaries and then goes on to present his own view.

> The *Collected Commentaries* says, "*Nature* is the principle that human beings receive from Heaven at birth. It is purely and completely the highest good and contains nothing bad."

Dasan begins by sorting out different aspects of the self.

> Spirit and form mysteriously join together to form a human being. Spirit is without form and moreover without name. It is without form, and so we refer to it by borrowing the name "spirit" (which is the "spirit" of "ghosts and spirits"). The heart-mind is the storehouse of blood and acts as the pivot or axis for the mysterious joining [of spirit and form], and so we refer to it by borrowing the name "heart-mind" (the heart-mind originally refers to one of the five viscera like the words liver and lungs). With death spirit leaves the form and thereupon is called the soul. Mengzi referred to it as the Greater Self;[13] Buddhists refer to it as the Dharma Body; in written sources it has no single name. Former Confucians[14] called it nature, but their use of the term is confused and unclear. People today continue to be confused about it and misunderstand its meaning. When one is alive we call it nature; when one is dead we call it soul. Really, though, nature and soul are different. Nature is not a perfectly appropriate term for the Greater Self of we human beings.

Here we see Dasan working to distinguish the special senses of core Confucian terms of art. He is particularly interested in describing how people often use terms such as nature or heart-mind as rough and ready ways to refer to the Greater Self of human beings and how these refer

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[12] For the passage and Dasan's commentary, see *Maengjayoui*, pp. 89-96.

[13] Dasan is using a term from *Maengja* 6A15, the Great Self 大體 (Ch. *dati*; K. *daechae*) to single out the morally disposed part of the self, which, as we shall see, he goes on to describe as consisting of a variety of innate inclinations or sensibilities.

[14] Cf. note #9.

specifically to the *embodied state* of the human soul. He continues this passage by making clear his use of the term nature.

> What I call nature is primarily desires and preferences. For example, it is said that Xie Anshi[15] liked music. Duke Zheng of Wei[16] liked frugality. Some like mountains and rivers. Some like books and paintings. These examples all show that desires and preferences constitute the nature; the meaning of the term nature originally was like this. And so, when Mengzi talked about human nature he did so in terms of desires and preferences. He said, 'The mouths [of people] show shared desires in regard to tastes; their ears show shared desires in regard to sound; their eyes are pleased by the same beauties.'[17] These examples are all used to make clear that the nature shows a shared preference for what is good. Is the basic sense of nature not concerned with desires and preferences? All people prefer wealth and beauty; they all prefer comfort and ease.

With the proper meaning of the term nature clearly in view, Dasan moves on to describe and illustrate what Mengzi meant by his claim that human nature is good. The basic idea is that human beings have a complex innate sense of what is good and an inherent tendency to prefer what is good.

> What does it mean to say that human nature is good? Mengzi used the example of Yao and Shun to make clear that human nature is good. I will use Jie[18] and Zhi[19] to make clear that human nature is good. A thief bores through your wall and makes off with your possessions; he is happy and satisfied. The next day, though, when he runs into his neighbor or sees an upright official he will feel deeply ashamed. The old expression has it that even a thief can become good; this supports the claim that human nature is good. In one place there was the son of a certain Mr. Yin who became a robber; when I persuaded his brothers to proclaim benevolence and righteousness to him, this robber began to sob freely. In another place there was the son of a Mr. Zheng who was a bad man. I caught a fish in a stream and had him chop it into minced meat. After doing so, Zheng prostrated himself upon the ground, blushed, and began

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[15] Xie Anshi 謝安石 lived in the Jin Dynasty; his ancestral home was Yang Xia 陽夏. He was born with and became famous for possessing a kind of spiritual vision, which he later cultivated by living an ascetic life.

[16] Duke Zheng of Wei 魏鄭公 is the main figure in a book of admonitions written by the Tang Dynasty author Wang Fangqing 王方慶.

[17] *Mengzi* 6A7.

[18] Emperor Jie was the last ruler of the Xia Dyansty and was renowned for his cruelty.

[19] Robber Zhi is a famous, unrepentant thief and robber.

> to enumerate his transgressions saying, 'I am a bad man; I am a merciless killer!' There are innumerable cases like these. If human nature were not good, how could there be such cases? (This is to use the 'heart-mind of shame and contempt'[20] to make clear that human nature is good.)

The idea here is that human beings have an innate sense of shame and if they reflect upon what they do will feel contempt toward certain actions and states of affairs. This is one of the four sprouts 四端 (Ch. *siduan*; K. *sadan*) that constitute the Greater Self. If properly developed, it becomes the virtue of righteousness, roughly the disposition to avoid acts and deplore states of affairs that are dishonorable. Dasan goes on to offer other, further illustrations of the Greater Self.

> In a village there was a son who was not filial. When people who didn't know this praised him for being filial he was pleased. He was pleased because in his heart-mind he knew that it is good to be filial. In another village was an adulterous woman. When people who didn't know this praised her for being chaste she was pleased. She was pleased because in her heart-mind she knew that it is good to be chaste. Greedy officials or corrupt government servants skim the tax revenues, engaging in all manner of illicit activity, but when some crafty villain commends them for being pure and honest they are pleased. Flattering officials or smooth talking ministers perpetuate falsehoods and deceptions, engaging in all manner of illicit activity, but when some crafty villain commends them for being loyal and upright they are pleased. In all such cases their heart-minds delight in the good and are ashamed of what is bad; even though they know they do not deserve to be commended, they still take pleasure in hearing such praise. What is called the goodness of human nature is just this. If it were not true [that human nature is good] then clearly all the people in the world would find following what is bad as easy as sliding down an embankment while following the good would be like climbing up it. Mengzi's teachings about the goodness of human nature would be empty talk; would anyone believe it? The *Book of Poetry* says, 'The natural disposition of human beings is to love this admirable virtue.'[21] In this line, 'natural disposition' refers to human nature. Since it makes a point of talking about *loving* virtue, doesn't this show that the meaning of human nature concerns desires and preferences? The disposition of human nature is to love the good just as the disposition of water is to flow

[20] One of the "four sprouts" Mengzi claimed constitute the core of our good nature. See *Mengzi* 2A6.

[21] *Mao* 260.

> downward or the disposition of fire is to climb upward. When human beings were first born, Heaven decreed that they have such a nature, and even though they are greedy, licentious, cruel, and murderous, engaging in all manner of illicit activity, nevertheless, this nature does not change. If they see a loyal minister or filial child they admire them as good; in this all people are alike. If they see a greedy official or corrupt government servant, they hate them as bad; in this all people are alike. (This is to use the 'heart-mind of approval and disapproval to make clear that human nature is good.)[22]

In the passage above, Dasan provides examples that show people have an innate sense that disapproves of bad actions or states of affairs and approves of good actions or states of affairs, their own or those of others. His aim is to show that even people who engage in immoral or illicit activities know in their heart-minds that what they do is wrong; moreover, they disapprove of other people doing or promoting what is wrong and delight in seeing the good. This not only shows that they have an innate sense of moral approval and disapproval but also makes clear that this sense is a kind of *desire* and not merely a cognitive ability, something that inclines or disposes us in the direction of the good and makes us uncomfortable to do what is bad. Nevertheless, one must attend to and engage the morally good inclinations that are part of our nature. Recognizing that we also have less laudable desires and inclinations, we must choose and hold fast to the good. It is delusional and dangerous to proclaim that our natures are purely and perfectly good; this is mistaken and will lead us to ignore the important role of choice, the difficulty of commitment, and the hard work of cultivation.

> If they accord with and activate this (i.e. the good) aspect of their nature, then even greedy, licentious, cruel, and murderous people can suddenly be moved to righteousness. Could they do this if human nature were not good? It is now firmly established that when discussing human nature we must be referring primarily to desires and preferences. If, when discussing this tenuous, spiritual, formless thing, we claim that it only consists of the highest good and is without the slightest trace of what is bad, then what do we say about a new born infant, which only knows how to cry and wail, seeks to be suckled, and wants to be held; can we stubbornly insist that it is purely good? If we talk about it in terms of

[22] One of the "four sprouts" Mengzi claimed constitute the core of our good nature. See *Mengzi* 2A6.

> its capacity for autonomous choice, then we can say that it can become good or it can become bad. Yang Xiong[23] took this to be human nature and so declared it to be a mixture of good and bad. If we talk about it in terms of the self-centered desires associated with its physical form then not only can it become good or bad but also it is difficult to become good and easy to become bad; following the good is like climbing up an embankment, while following the bad is like sliding down one. This is not exaggeration. Xunzi[24] took this to be human nature and so declared it to be bad. The teachings of both Yang and Xun do not claim existence for what does not exist nor do they malign white by calling it black; nevertheless, it is important to be clear that what they focused on was different from what Mengzi did. The Buddhists teach about 'enlightening the mind and seeing the nature';[25] they praise and laud this conception of nature in a variety of ways. And yet, the basic idea of their teachings is very different from what Mengzi talked about with his teaching about the goodness of human nature. What they talk about is the tenuous, spiritual, and mysterious nature of the thing itself; what Mengzi talked about is the way in which people delight in the good and are ashamed of the bad just as water is disposed to flow downward. How could they be taken as talking about the same thing?

Further along in this same section of commentary, Dasan invokes the well-known distinction between the Heart-mind of the Way 道心 (Ch. *daoxin*; K. *doshim*) and the Human Heart-mind人心 (Ch. *renxin*; K. *inshim*) but conceives of them differently than what was common among neo-Confucians.[26] For thinkers like Zhu Xi, the Heart-mind of the Way essentially consists of all the pure and perfect moral principles;

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[23] Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) argued for such a view in work such as his *Model Sayings* (Fayan 法言).

[24] Xunzi 荀子, whose courtesy name was Qing 卿, was the third great Confucian philosopher of the early phase of the tradition. His dates are around 310-219 BCE.

[25] This kind of view is most famously represented by the four-line description of Chan, traditionally attributed to Bodhidharma but actually composed sometime in the Tang dynasty:

A separate teaching, outside the tradition;
Not residing in words or letters.
Directly pointing to the mind;
See one's nature and become a Buddha.

For a discussion, see Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, Volume I: India and China* (New York: MacMillan, 1988), pp. 85–86.

[26] These terms first appear in the "Declarations of the Great Yu" chapter of the *Book of History* (書經). See Legge, *The Shoo King*, p. 61.

it is our original nature or heart-mind. For Dasan, the Heart-mind of the Way is not a complete or perfect repository of moral principles but our Heavenly endowed, nascent moral conscience, a real but difficult to describe aspect of humanity, a spark of the divine among our all-too-human inclinations.[27] In contrast, the Human Heart-mind is the readily recognized corporeal heart-mind with all its sundry thoughts and desires.

> If the nature includes both good and bad and Mengzi talked only about human nature being good, then he did not understand human nature. If Mengzi did not understand human nature, then who did? Based upon the claim that 'The nature of righteous principle is the basis for the good, while the material nature is the basis of what is bad; when these two natures are combined we have the complete nature.' [If we accept this] then Yang Xiong's theory that human nature is a mixture of good and bad is the correct view. If we just talk about the material nature, then Xunzi's theory that human nature is bad is the correct view. In this case, the tradition of Kongzi and Zisi is found in Xunzi and Yang Xiong; why then do people look to Mengzi as the true inheritor of this tradition? The classics say, 'The Human Heart-mind is precarious; The Heart-mind of the Way is subtle.'[28] People today take the Human Heart-mind to refer to the material nature and the Heart-mind of the Way to refer to the nature of righteous principle. They do not understand that the words heart-mind and nature refer to different things. The word nature refers only to liking and disliking. How can one take the heart-mind to be the nature? It is the nature of deer to like mountain forests. It is the nature of pheasants to dislike being raised in captivity. If these creatures unfortunately end up in captivity, to the end of their days, their heart-minds will like the mountain forests. If they catch sight of a mountain forest they will immediately feel an overwhelming longing to be there. This is what is called nature. Heaven endowed these creatures with this nature when it gave them life and caused them to follow this nature in fulfilling their particular ways of life. If human beings did not have the particular nature

[27] One can compare Dasan's view with the theological concept of the *imago dei* if one understands by the latter the idea that human beings, and in Dasan's case only human beings, are endowed with a special quality (their Greater Self or Heart-mind of the Way) that allows God or God's plan to be manifest in the world. Dasan's view is like Calvin's idea that God's eternal law is inscribed upon our heart-minds. Thanks to Michael R. Slater for noting this comparison.

[28] See note 26.

> they do, though they wanted to perform even the slightest good act, to the end of their days they would never be able to do so. Since Heaven has endowed them with this nature, they always are able to awaken and manifest it. Whenever they entertain the thought of doing what is bad, it is because they vacillate between allowing [self-centered] desires to come forth and blocking and preventing [them from coming forth]. It is clear that the ability to block and prevent [self-centered desires from coming forth] is part of the original nature that they received as Heaven's command.

So human nature simply refers to the distinctive set of desires and preferences human beings are endowed with and experience. There is nothing about these desires and preferences that could justify calling human beings good; these simply define our natural appetitive and affective state. What justifies calling human beings *good* is that they find it easier to embrace and develop their good inclinations and more difficult to follow what is bad. This is something they realize only if they regularly reflect upon what they do, if they exercise the heart-mind in its proper function. Following good inclinations leads people to more satisfying and happy lives; giving into and pursuing their bad inclinations leads to being dissatisfied and haunted by the inner voice of conscience. In Dasan's view, people can never simply abandon themselves to wickedness; they can never be truly evil, for by nature they are creatures who cannot make wickedness their good.[29] They will always feel responsible for the choices they make, for unlike every other animal they have morally sensitive heart-minds and are free to choose what to do; given their nature, they will either enjoy the satisfaction of having chosen well or suffer the dissatisfaction of knowing that they have chosen and acted against their better nature.

> Heaven has bestowed upon human beings the power of autonomy; if they desire to do what is good, they will do good; if they desire to do what is bad, they will do bad. [What they do] varies; it is not fixed or predetermined; the power [to decide] lies within each person. [In this respect] humans are unlike other animals, which have heart-minds that are fixed and predetermined. And so, when human beings do what is good it really is to their credit and when they do what is bad it really is their fault. This power of the heart-mind [to choose] is not human

[29] In this respect, Dasan's view is not wholly unlike Kant's claim against the possibility of radical evil as presented in *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*.

> nature.[30] Yang Xiong mistakenly thought this was part of human nature and as a consequence he said our nature is a mixture of good and bad; it is not that we originally lack such and he simply made it up. Bees are creatures that cannot but protect their queen, but those who describe such behavior don't take them to be displaying *loyalty* because their heart-minds are fixed and predetermined to act in this way. Tigers are creatures that cannot but visit harm on other creatures, but those who enforce the law don't prosecute them according to the statutes because their heart-minds are fixed and predetermined to act in this way. Human beings are different; they can choose to do what is good or choose to do what is bad; the control rests within them; their actions are not fixed and predetermined. And so, when they do what is good, this is to their credit; when they do what is bad, this is their fault. If the possibilities of doing either good or bad are from the start mixed together, then it seems as if the culpability [of those who do what is bad] should be mitigated. The reason one cannot escape responsibility for the wickedness one has done is because human nature is good. Since it is truly the case that it is human nature to delight in doing what is good and to be ashamed of doing what is bad, if one works against this nature and does what is bad can one escape one's responsibility?

For Dasan, one of the worst consequences of the orthodox neo-Confucian view is that it encourages an evasion of moral responsibility. It seems to say that whatever is bad does not truly belong to human nature, but instead is a consequence of the grosser material form within which our nature unfortunately is lodged. For Dasan, this is to ignore the fact that human nature includes both good and bad and that it is *up to us* to engage our heart-minds, reflect on what we do, and exercise our Heavenly endowed power of free choice to promote the good. The only way to do this is to resist following what is bad and instead work out of our good inclinations and endeavor to promote the good in our actual everyday lives. If we persevere in this way to develop ourselves, we will discover that a life of moral endeavor is the most satisfying, natural, and happy life creatures like us can enjoy. While Dasan insists that such a life follows a divine plan designed by Sangje, he did not see any role for sanctification or grace in this process, which distinguishes him from

[30] Human nature is simply our unselfconscious natural dispositions; these have no power to steer themselves. In contrast, the heart-mind is aware and has the power of choice.

thinkers like Aquinas with whom he shares many similarities. Heaven's gift was given to human beings at birth and this alone is sufficient for their moral and spiritual fulfillment.[31]

For Dasan, another related and equally objectionable feature of the orthodox view is that it fails to distinguish human beings from other creatures and things. We have seen hints of this criticism already in Dasan's arguments about the distinctive existential stance of human beings. Unlike mere things or other creatures, humans cannot avoid responsibility for themselves and what they become.[32] Dasan made this point repeatedly and in different ways throughout his commentary on the *Mengzi*. For example, consider his interpretation of 4B19, which says, "The difference between human beings and the birds and beasts is ever so slight. Common people abandon this difference; cultivated people preserve it."[33] Dasan comments on this by saying,

> The *Xunzi* says, "Water and fire have *qi* but lack life. Grass and trees have life but lack awareness. Birds and beasts have awareness but lack [an understanding of what is] right. Human beings have *qi*, life, awareness, and [an understanding of what is] right." What this says is that when it comes to the different natures that things receive, in general, there are four classes, and human beings and birds and beasts are the closest to one another in kind. In having ears that hear and eyes that see they are no different. In having noses that smell and tongues that taste they are no different. In having desires for food, sex, peace, and ease, they are no different. The only difference between them is that [only human beings] possess the Heart-mind of the Way and yet the Heart-mind of the Way is something without physical form or substance. It is exceedingly minute and subtle. (The *Book of History* says, "The Heart-mind of the Way is minute and subtle.") If you depart from this and abandon it, then you are like the birds and beasts; how then could you distinguish yourself from them? This is why we should clutch Mengzi's most pertinent warning tightly to our breasts![34]

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[31] In these respects, as well as others, Dasan remains firmly within the Confucian tradition. He believed that concerted effort of the right kind would eventually transform a person into a perfectly moral being.

[32] Dasan's claims here bear some significant resemblance to Sartre's contrast in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* between things that are in themselves (*en soi*), like tables and chairs, and those that are for themselves (*pour soi*), like human beings, and his accompanying notion of bad faith.

[33] For the passage and Dasan's commentary, see *Maengjayoui*, pp. 144-5.

Dasan goes on to explicitly and clearly distinguish his interpretation from the orthodox view, which was derived from Song and Ming dynasty neo-Confucians.

> Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming all take nature to be principle. And so, the *Collected Commentaries* says, "When human beings or other creatures are born they all equally receive the principles of Heaven and earth as their nature." This is the so-called "original nature"; original nature admits of no differences or gradations of greatness or smallness, loftiness or meanness; such differences and gradations exist only because endowments of material form and substance can be pure or impure, one-sided or correct. And so, once principle is lodged in *qi* it cannot but follow that things are not the same. This is what the *Collected Commentaries* means when it says, "Among all creatures only human beings receive correct and proper physical form and *qi* and so differ in this minute way from the rest." If one considers this claim, then what makes human beings different from birds and beasts is *qi* and not nature or spirit. Common people abandon their form and *qi* while cultivated people preserve their form and *qi* – how can this be taken as the main idea of Mengzi's teachings? The form and *qi* are bodily and material. They flourish when one is alive and decay away after death. How could common people alone succeed in abandoning these? Neo-Confucians say, "The way in which the original nature lodges in form and *qi* is like the way water takes on the shape of the vessel into which it is poured. If the vessel is round then the water becomes round; if the vessel is square the water becomes square." This clearly takes the nature of human beings and the nature of other animals as a single thing. It is only because of its furry hide that one becomes an ox, because of its feathered frame that another becomes a chicken, or one's naked skin that one becomes a human being.[35] Mengzi, though, argued that there were both similarities and differences between the natures of dogs, oxen, and human beings, and he defended this view vigorously in his battles with Gaozi.

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[34] The phrase about "clutching (it) tightly to one's breast" is from chapter eight of the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Kongzi said of his disciple Yanzi, "Whenever he got hold of one good thing, he *clutched it tightly to his breast* and never let it go."

[35] The idea is that the pelt of the ox, the feathers of a chicken, and the naked skin of a human being serve as the different vessels that shape the common nature poured into all of them.

Dasan develops his views about the Heart-mind of the Way and how it distinguishes human beings from all other creatures and things in his commentary on *Mengzi* 4B28, which says, "The difference between cultivated people and common people is that the cultivated maintain their heart-minds."[36] Contrary to what many neo-Confucians claim, Dasan insists that in this passage, Mengzi is not encouraging us to maintain or preserve some original, pristine state of mind but rather to never lose sight of and hold fast to our nascent moral sense in the midst of an ongoing struggle to avoid the bad and pursue the good.

> Maintaining the heart-mind in ancient times was different than in contemporary times. In ancient times, *maintaining the heart-mind* meant to protect the heart-mind when it was about to be lost. In contemporary times, *maintaining the heart-mind* means to make a concerted effort not to forget. An earlier passage[37] says, "The difference between human beings and the birds and beasts is ever so slight. Common people abandon this difference; cultivated people maintain it." Whenever Mengzi talked about maintaining the heart-mind he was talking about maintaining what is *ever so slight*. In an even earlier passage[38] it says, "Those who are great do not lose their child-like heart-mind." This is talking about maintaining what is *ever so slight*. A later passage[39] says, "What one does throughout the morning and day fetters and destroys the [good effects of the] evening *qi*." This is talking about destroying what is *ever so slight*. What is *ever so slight* is the Heart-mind of the Way. If some part of the Heart-mind of the Way is maintained, one is a human being; if no part of the Heart-mind of the Way is maintained, one is a bird or a beast; if the Heart-mind of the Way is fully maintained and never forgotten, one is a sage. As for whether it is maintained or not, the struggle is over this alone [the Heart-mind of the Way]. If you want to maintain this then whenever you serve your parents, elders, or ruler, whenever you are with your friends, caring for the people, or teaching others, do your utmost to be conscientious and trustworthy and do not allow even a trace of deception or insincerity to come into play; only then can you say that you have not lost it. To "maintain" it means to protect it when it is about to be lost. [The word "maintain" should be

[36] For the passage and Dasan's commentary, see *Maengjayoui*, pp. 156-7.
[37] *Mengzi* 4B19.
[38] *Mengzi* 4B12.
[39] *Mengzi* 6A8.

> understood in the way we understand "King Huan of Qi maintained the state of Wei."[40]] In later times, people talk about maintaining in the midst of stillness and maintaining in the midst of silence and about having no thoughts or deliberations, not speaking or laughing, closing the eyes and collecting the heart-mind and focusing one's gaze on the *qi* and images[41] before they have come forth, all in order to make the original state of the heart-mind tenuous, clear, and transparent and without a single speck of defilement so that one can find what is "vigorous and lively."[42] This is the difference between ancient times and the present.

We must maintain and follow the Heart-mind of the Way as we pursue the path of cultivation and resist the temptations of the Human Heart-mind, which often blindly follows short-sighted, self-centered desires. For Dasan the Confucian Way was a struggle between conflicting desires and the key to winning lies in attending to and holding fast to the former. Dasan believed that the Human Heart-mind does not first evaluate and then freely choose to follow what is bad; it simply is led along by things. If we exercise the Heart-mind of the Way to evaluate the different desires that move us, Dasan thought we would reject the bad and cleave to the good. The key to success lies in consistently exercising our moral minds, what he called following *Mengzi*, "this heart-mind."[43] He makes these points clearly in his commentary on *Mengzi* 6A15.[44]

> The Greater Self is spiritual and luminous; it is without form. The Lesser Self is the physical body; it has form. Those who act in accord with the Greater Self follow their nature; those who act in accord with the Lesser Self follow their desires. The Heart-mind of the Way always wants to nurture the Greater Self; the Human Heart-mind always wants to nurture the Lesser Self. Those who delight in Heaven and understand fate succor and nurture the Heart-mind of the Way. If one can "overcome

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[40] In 658 BCE, King Huan of Qi came to the rescue and defended the state of Wei from attack by barbarians.

[41] *Qi* (氣) and the images (*xiang* 象) are metaphysical constituents of the universe that exist before there are distinct and discernable things.

[42] Zhu Xi uses this expression in a number of places in his works to convey the lively and vibrant character of the Confucian Way (often in contrast to Buddhism). He uses this phrase to describe a line drawn from the *Book of Poetry* which is quoted in chapter 13 of the *Doctrine of the Mean*, "Hawks soar across the heavens; fish frolic in the depths."

[43] The term "this heart-mind" (Ch. cixin, K. chashim 此心) is first seen in the *Mengzi* but commonly was used by neo-Confucians to refer to the innate moral mind.

[44] For the passage and Dasan's commentary, see *Maengjayoui*, pp. 209-10.

> the self and return to ritual propriety"[45] the Human Heart-mind will be controlled and compliant. This is what determines whether one will be good or bad. It is not correct to talk about the ears and eyes in terms of the Lesser Self. Whenever we come in contact with things, we do so through the ears and eyes. The ears receive sounds and convey them to the heart-mind, while the eyes receive sights and convey them to the heart-mind. These are simply their functions. The ears and eyes simply carry out their allotted functions, but when have they ever had the power to compel *this heart-mind* to follow what they convey to us? If what they convey benefits the Greater Self, then to act in accord with what they convey is to act in accord with the Greater Self; to distance oneself from what they convey would be to act in accord with the Lesser Self. If what they convey benefits the Lesser Self, then to act in accord with what they convey is to act in accord with the Lesser Self; to distance oneself from what they convey would be to act in accord with the Greater Self. This is how things are. Whether one behaves properly when it comes to acting in accord with or distancing oneself depends on whether one exercises the function of the heart-mind, which is to reflect. If one reflects, one will not be able to act in accord with the Lesser Self and distance oneself from the Greater Self, nurture the Lesser Self and harm the Greater Self. If one fails to reflect, one will not be able to avoid indulging one's heart-mind and one will not behave properly when it comes to acting in accord with or distancing oneself. Is not the ability of the heart-mind to reflect a blessing? This is why Mengzi praises it by saying, "This is what Heaven has granted us."

III. CONCLUSION

We have seen how Dasan consistently criticizes the orthodox interpretation of Mengzi's philosophy for imposing an ornate and mistaken metaphysical theory that was never part of his way of thinking. Dasan explicitly traced the origin of this mistaken theory to Daoist and Buddhist sources and blamed earlier neo-Confucians for importing such views into Confucian philosophy and thereby corrupting the tradition and profoundly distorting its message. He makes these and subsequent points in his long commentary on *Mengzi* 7A1, which says,[46]

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[45] *Analects* 12.1.

[46] For the passage and Dasan's commentary, see *Maengjayoui*, pp. 226-9.

> To develop completely one's heart-mind is to understand one's nature. To understand one's nature is to understand Heaven. To maintain the heart-mind and to nourish one's nature is how one serves Heaven. When dying young or living long do not cause one to be of two heart-minds, to cultivate the self, awaiting whatever is to come, this is how one establishes one's true destiny.

Dasan's comments by saying,

> Neo-Confucians of later ages regard principles as the origin of all the myriad things in the universe, whether they are with or without shape, spiritual and luminous or corrupt and benighted. They make no distinction between what is great or trivial, what is primary or secondary. This is their so-called theory of how all things originate from one principle, separate into a myriad of manifestations, and in the end return to unite into one principle. Such a view is no different at all from the Buddhist Zhao Zhou's[47] theory that the myriad dharma all originate from one dharma [of Emptiness]. This is because in their youth, many scholars of the Song dynasty immersed themselves in Chan Buddhism. When they later returned to Confucianism, this influence remained mixed in with their theories about human nature and principle.

Dasan continues by arguing that the neo-Confucian conception of principle not only is not authentically Confucian but also without merit.

> When Zisi wrote the *Doctrine of the Mean*, he said clearly, "What Heaven decrees, this is called nature."[48] Mengzi said, "To develop completely one's heart-mind is to understand one's nature."[49] Now if you take the heart-mind, nature, and Heaven, and refer to all three of them as one principle, then Zisi's claim [would be saying] "What principle decrees, this is called principle"; wouldn't this be trivial?[50] The same would go for Mengzi's claim [which would be saying] "To develop this principle completely is to understand principle; to understand this principle is to understand principle." To bind the myriad things to a single principle

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[47] This refers to Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗, a great Tang Chan Buddhist teacher. See Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, Volume I: India and China* (New York: MacMillan, 1988), pp. 167-8.

[48] This is the opening line of the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

[49] This is the opening line of Book Seven of the *Mengzi*.

[50] Michael R. Slater has suggested that Dasan's argument that the orthodox view amounts to a tautology, which would make moral assertions virtually meaningless, can be understood as analogous to what in the West is known as the Euthyphro Problem.

> and revert to an undifferentiated state leaves one without a way to deliberate about or distinguish among the myriad affairs of the world. All that would remain would be to maintain a vast and undifferentiated frame of heart-mind, silent and without motion, regarding this as the highest and most sublime state of being. How can this be regarded as the original view of the Confucian school? What exactly is principle? Principle is without love or hate; principle is without likes or dislikes; it is vacant and empty, without name or form and yet is said to be the endowment that we human beings receive as our nature. It is hard indeed to regard this as the Way!

In addition to making hash of Mengzi's teachings about nature and the heart-mind, the orthodox neo-Confucian account undermines and distorts his original view of Heaven. Dasan continues his commentary by quoting two of the greatest representatives of the orthodox view on this topic,

> Zhang Zai said, "Under the aspect of the great tenuousness, we have the name Heaven. Under the aspect of the transformation of *qi*, we have the name Way. When we combine the tenuous and *qi*, we have the name nature. When we combine nature and sensation, we have the name heart-mind." (Zhu Xi said, "The transformation of *qi* is the creative transformation of *yin* and *yang*. Water, fire, metal, wood, and earth all belong to the great tenuousness. All of these lie within the first circle of the [*Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*].[51]")

Taking issue with them, he offers an alternative view of Heaven, insisting that Heaven is alive, intelligent, bright, and active. Some regard Dasan's views about Heaven as the result of his exposure to and knowledge of Roman Catholic philosophy. There is no doubt that this tradition influenced his thinking, but it is mistaken to regard him as imposing Catholic views onto Confucianism. He was inspired by Catholicism, but he drew upon and his thought very much follows the trajectory of the early Confucian tradition. This is clearly the case in his insistence that Heaven is alive, intelligent, bright, and active; his point is that only such a deity, concerned with human welfare, can serve as the origin of the Confucian moral order. Dead, immobile, and insensitive principle,

[51] The *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* 太極圖 (Ch. *Taiji tu*), as adopted and explained by Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-73), offered a schema illustrating Confucian cosmology. Zhu Xi is claiming that all of the fundamental modes of existence lie within the original and formless phase.

which neo-Confucians claim is the ordering principle of the universe, simply cannot fill the roles of the Lord on High.

> The master of Heaven is the Lord on High. At times he is referred to as "Heaven" in the same way that we sometimes refer to the ruler of a state as "the state." The core idea is that he is someone whose commands cannot be rejected. The "Heaven" that is the blue form [above] is nothing more than a vault-like canopy above us; its nature and status is nothing more or greater than earth, water, and fire. How could *this* be the basis and origin of the nature and Way for human beings? The first circle of the [*Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*] is not found in any of the six classics. Does it contain any creatures with refined intelligence or only those things that lack the capacity to know? Is it a vast, vacuous, and unfathomable realm? Among the world's creatures, those without refined intelligence are incapable of serving as masters.[52] And so if the head of a household is dull, stupid, and lacking in wisdom then the various affairs within the house will be in disarray. If the head of a district is dull, stupid, and lacking in wisdom then the various affairs within the district will be in disarray. How much more extensive would be the disarray if the one principle of the vast and vacuous great tenuousness were the source and origin of the master of the myriad things in Heaven and earth! Are the affairs in Heaven and earth well regulated? The *Book of Poetry* says, "Manifesting bright [virtue] below; glorious and awe-inspiring on high!"[53] It also says, "Vast, vast the Lord on High; governor of the people below,"[54] "The Lord on High in August Heaven, will not allow me to survive,"[55] "Heaven enlightens the people like blowing on a flute or ocarina,"[56] "August Heaven is brightly aware; it accompanies you in all your travels. August Heaven is luminously attentive; it is beside

[52] The following discussion is aimed at showing how only a sentient and powerful Lord on High could serve as the master (*zhuzai* 主宰) of the meaningful and orderly world we observe around us. Dasan is implicitly criticizing Zhu Xi here who insists that principle (li 理), which is neither sentient nor active, is master of the myriad things. For a discussion of some of the ways in which Zhu Xi struggled with this issue, see Yung-sik Kim, *The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi (1130-1200)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2000), pp. 108-21, 307. Thanks to Justin Tiwald for pointing this implicit criticism out to me.

[53] *Mao* 236.

[54] *Mao* 255.

[55] *Mao* 258.

[56] *Mao* 254.

> you when you stray and indulge yourself."[57] Stand in awe of the majesty of Heaven and forever preserve its favor"[58] and "Respect the anger of Heaven; do not fool around or be idle."[59]

Concluding his commentary on this passage from the *Mengzi*, Dasan insists that the interpretation he offers, which understands Heaven as a benevolent deity who endows us with the beginning of moral understanding and inclines us to follow this as the Way, is far more sensible and accessible than the orthodox view.

> When former sages talked about Heaven, it was, as in the examples above, something real, accessible, and clear. When people talk of Heaven today, it is, as in the cases of Zhang Zai and Zhu Xi, something mysterious, vague, and indistinct. How can it be known? The Way is what people go by; what one follows from birth until death is called the Way. What one follows from birth until death is called the Way is like traveling from Chu to Qin is called the way. The *Doctrine of the Mean* says, "The Way is such that you cannot leave it even for an instant."[60] This is like traveling from Chu to Qin, while you are on the way [from one to the other], you cannot leave it even for an instant. In a similar fashion, the Way is not far removed from human beings, and yet Zhang Zai takes the transformation of *qi* to be the Way. Since the creative transformation of *yin* and *yang* and the alternations and movements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth are not what I myself go by, how can they be my Way? If one cites the line about how "the alternation of the *yin* and the *yang*, this is called the Way"; looking at the source (which is the *Book of Changes*), we see that this text talks about the Way of Heaven and not the way of human beings and this line talks about the way of change not the Way of Heaven. How could the Way which directs the nature of we human beings come down to the alternation of the *yin* and the *yang*? The heart-mind is a name for the greater part[61] of we human beings; nature is the desires and preferences of the heart-mind. As for the tenuousness, *qi*, and sensation [that Zhang Zai talked about], I fear I lack a clear understanding of such things.

As is evident from the passages quoted throughout this essay, Jeong Dasan presented his interpretation of Mengzi in the form of

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[57] *Mao* 254.
[58] *Mao* 272.
[59] *Mao* 254.
[60] *Doctrine of the Mean*, 1.
[61] A reference to *Mengzi* 6A15.

a commentary upon this classic text. Moreover, he appealed to the full range of Confucian classics in order to support his reading of the *Mengzi*. In addition to such textual and philological evidence, he crafted careful and powerful philosophical arguments criticizing the orthodox view and demonstrating the superiority of his own account. He regarded his project as an effort to reveal and discard the pernicious influences of Daoist and Buddhist thought that had infiltrated and perverted the original message of Confucianism. His goal was to restore the original sense, methods, and aims of Mengzi's teachings, and in many respects one can plausibly argue that he succeeded in this task. Nevertheless, he also extended and enriched Mengzi's original vision as he sought to defend it in his own unique historical and cultural context. Dasan's distinctive views about human nature and the heart-mind, of Heaven and the Way offer prominent examples of such elaborations.