

Dasan's Metacritique on the Seongni Debate in Joseon Neo-Confucianism*

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Abstract

This article defines Dasan's view on the Seongni debate as "metaphilosophy." Metaphilosophy is often dubbed the "philosophy of philosophy" or "second-order philosophy." The word "meta" has Greek origins, meaning "after" or "beyond." A metaphilosopher stays outside of an ongoing philosophical debate or problem and conducts a second-order review of its nature, purpose, and method, instead of being directly involved in the debate. If a metaphilosopher is defined as such, Dasan, then, can be regarded as the first and foremost metaphilosopher in the Neo-Confucian history of Joseon. Instead of engaging in the intense Seongni debate of his time as a participant, he remained outside the debate and criticized its nature, goals, and methodology from a second-order perspective. As a metaphilosopher, Dasan employed methodological tools, such as linguistic analysis. This article analyzes Dasan's metaphilosophical stance on the Seongni debate and concludes that his metaphilosophical perspective provided a turning point in the history of Joseon Neo-Confucianism.

Keywords: Dasan Jeong Yak-yong, Seongni debate, metaphilosophy, metacritique, Joseon Neo-Confucianism

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Introduction

This article explores Dasan Jeong Yak-yong's (1762-1836) critique on the Seongni 性理 (literally, "human nature and principle") debate in Joseon Neo-Confucianism from a metaphilosophical standpoint. Metaphilosophy is often dubbed the "philosophy of philosophy" or "second-order philosophy." The word "meta" has Greek origins, meaning "after" or "beyond." A metaphilosopher stays *outside* of an on going philosophical debate or philosophical problems, and examines its validity from a second-order perspective in regards to its nature, purpose, and methodology, instead of engaging directly in the discussion.

If a metaphilosopher is defined as such, Dasan, then, can be regarded as the first and foremost metaphilosopher in the history of Joseon Neo-Confucianism. Instead of engaging in the heated Seongni debate of his time as a direct participant, he stayed outside of the debate and criticized its nature, goals, and methodology from a second-order perspective. As a metaphilosopher, Dasan employed methodological tools such as linguistic analysis. This article examines his metaphilosophical critique on the Seongni debate of his time, based on this linguistic analysis method.

Dasan's Depiction of the Condition of the Seongni Debate

From the time that Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584) began criticizing Toegye Yi Hwang (1501-1570) two years after his death, the academic community of Joseon was split into two camps, divided by ceaseless, intense conflicts. The Seongni debate continued for an extended period of time, but the two schools never managed to reach an agreement on their views or produce new collaborative knowledge. Disciples of the two schools were stuck in a quagmire in which no consensus could be foreseen, due to several factors such as communicational difficulties from working with different semiotic frames,¹ misunderstandings and confusions from polysemic Neo-Confu-

1. For prior research that approached the Seongni debate in Joseon Neo-Confucianism based on the factor of different semiotic frames, refer to Lee (2012a, 2012b, 2012c).

cian key concepts, and absurd interpretations of colloquial Chinese idioms such as *liyǒu* 理有 (“there is a reason why”) and *lǐdào* 理到 (“full of reason”), combined with the fierce rivalry between members of the opposite camps. Dasan described the condition of the Seongni debate, which had spawned so many groups and positions opposing each other during the second half of the Joseon period, as the following:

Today, Neo-Confucians blurt out tens of thousands of different arguments concerning the relationship between *i* 理 (principle) and *gi* 氣 (material force), *seong* 性 (nature) and *jeong* 情 (emotion), *che* 體 (substance) and *yong* 用 (function), *bonyeon* 本然 (original nature) and *gijil* 氣質 (temperamental nature), *ibal* 理發 (manifestation of *i*) and *gibal* 氣發 (manifestation of *gi*), *ibal* 已發 (the state where thoughts and emotions have already been aroused) and *mibal* 未發 (the state where thoughts and emotions have not yet been aroused), *danji* 單指 (single appellation of *i* and *gi*) and *gyeomji* 兼指 (simultaneous appellation of *i* and *gi*), *idong gi* 理同氣異 (*i* is identical but *gi* is different) and *gidong ii* 氣同理異 (*gi* is identical but *i* is different), and *simmu seonak* 心無善惡 (mind has no good or evil) and *simyu seonak* 心有善惡 (mind has both good and evil). They dig into the tiniest bit of detail and claim that only their views are valid and reject all others. They are engrossed in what they study in utter silence and then suddenly they get worked up and bustle out as if being awakened to some lofty logic of the world. Charging to the east and attacking to the west, they pick at what others say and ramble on incoherently. Each literati group puts up a flag and each academic family entrenches a bastion. Even if they fight until the end of the world, they will never figure out right and wrong and the next generations will only inherit such resentment without reconciling their differences. Those who belong to the same school are revered like masters, whereas those from opposite groups are despised like servants. People who hold the same opinion are admired and people with different views are verbally attacked in public. Each side thinks that only they possess a valid logical ground for their argument. Is it not very childish??

2. “今之爲性理之學者，日理日氣，日性日情，日體日用，日本然氣質，理發氣發，已發未發，單指兼指，理同氣異，氣同理異，心善無惡，心善有惡，三幹五樞，千條萬葉，毫分縷析，交噴互嘍。冥心默研，盛氣赤頸，自

Dasan's portrayal of the condition of the intellectual community of the time, in which scholars entangled in the Seongni debate challenged each other indiscriminately, is graphically vivid from his description, "charging to the east and attacking to the west." This allows us to imagine the degree of severity and level of fierceness of the bickering and confrontations between scholars based in the east region (Yeongnam School) and those in the west (Giho School). The phrase "pick at what others say and ramble on incoherently" illustrates that the participants in the debate had strayed from the true Confucian goals of the cultivation of character and the refinement of personality, and instead busied themselves by pouncing on others' words and launching meaningless attacks. The expression "each literati group puts up a flag and each academic family entrenches a bastion" describes the milieu of the day: that the Seongni debate was not confined to only two opposing schools, and that assaults were launched indiscriminately at anyone espousing different opinions, regardless of academic lines and affiliations.

Dasan made a pessimistic assessment that the dispute over *i* and *gi* would never come to a conclusion, even if it continued till the end of the world, stating that "[e]ven if they fight until the end of the world, they will never figure out right and wrong and the next generations will only inherit the resentment without reconciling their differences." This was a DNR³ order. Issuing a final DNR order on the Seongni debate, he turned himself to the philological study of the Four Books and the Six Classics in pursuit of the true purport of Confucianism.

Dasan's Understanding of the Seongni Debate: *The Process and the Background*

While Dasan cast a cynical look at the heated Seongni debate of the time,

以爲極天下之高妙，而東振西觸，捉尾脫頭，門立一幟，家築一壘。畢世而不能決其訟，傳世而不能解其怨。入者主之，出者奴之，同者戴之，殊者伐之。竊自以爲所據者極正，豈不疎哉？” (“Ohangnon” [Critique of the Five Scholastic Methodologies], in *Simunjip* [Verses and Essays], vol. 11).

3. DNR, a medical term, is the acronym for “do not resuscitate.”

he probably had the most poignant understanding of the reasons for the ensuing debate among all self-claimed Neo-Confucians, thanks to his background and various circumstances through which he obtained sharp insights into the nature of the debate.

As a student at Seonggyungwan (National Confucian Academy) at the age of 23 (1784), he agreed with Yulgok Yi I's premise that "while *gi* is unfolding, *i* supervenes upon it" and rejected Toegye Yi Hwang's position that the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings originate from *i* and *gi*, respectively. When King Jeongjo inquired about the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings, Dasan replied:

I have long had doubts about Toegye's position of assigning the Four Beginnings to *i* and the Seven Feelings to *gi* I dare say this: in a nutshell, the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings occur when *gi* is unfolding and *i* supervenes upon it, so there is no need to divide them and assign them to *i* and *gi* separately. There is nothing in the world that this principle does not apply to, from the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings to a growing plant or tree to a flying bird and a running animal.⁴

This shows that Dasan leaned towards Yulgok's notion of *seongni*, despite his Namin (Southerners) factional tendencies. He believed that not only human psychological events but also all other events in the world of existence (such as plants, trees, birds, animals, etc.) could be explained by the single thesis that *gi* is unfolding and *i* supervenes upon it. But Dasan later changed his view on Toegye's notion of *seongni* through his friendly association with Yi Byeok,⁵ who was a Catholic. Dasan recollects how Yi

4. "臣於四端屬理發七情屬氣發之說，有宿疑焉 . . . 臣妄以謂：四端七情，一言以蔽之曰「氣發而理乘之」，不必分屬於理氣也。不但四七，卽一草一木之榮鬯，一鳥一獸之飛走，莫非氣發而理乘之也" (*Jungyong ganguibo* [Supplement to the Discussion on the *Doctrine of the Mean*]).

5. Yi Byeok (1727-1817), who was a brother-in-law of Jeong Yak-hyeon, Dasan's eldest brother, was affiliated with the Namin faction as well. Introduced to Catholicism by reading books on Western Studies imported from China, he became Korea's first Catholic. He played a leading role in diffusing Catholicism in Korea, gathering Namin followers and *jungin* (literally, "middle people") for study meetings held at Cheonjinam Buddhist hermitage in Gwangju, Gyeonggi-do province.

Byeok understood Toegye's argument on the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings:

According to Yi Byeok, if we are discussing the original meanings of the letters *i* and *gi* in mind, it can be said that this conception⁶ is quite similar. But based on the analysis of the cases that Neo-Confucians often refer to, *ibal* means that the mind is activated from the spirit, and *gibal* means that the mind is activated from the body. If we follow this logic, we can see that Toegye has a very precise understanding.⁷

Interestingly, in the above passage, Yi Byeok interpreted Toegye's theses of *ibal* (manifestation of *i*) and *gibal* (manifestation of *gi*) as activation from spirit and activation from body, respectively. Here, the term "spirit" is a translation of *anima*, the Latin word that means "soul" in medieval scholasticism. In *Lingyan lishao* 靈言蠡勺 (Humble Attempt at Discussing Matters Pertaining to the Soul) written by Franciscus Sambiasi (Chinese name: Bi Fangji 畢方濟), a Jesuit missionary to China, *anima* is transcribed as "亞尼馬" based on its pronunciation. Yi Byeok tried to understand Toegye's doctrine on *seong* (nature) and *i* (principle) from a religious, theological standpoint by interpreting it as activation from the soul (spirit) and activation from the body (physical form).

Yi Byeok's influence on Dasan in regards to the interpretation of Toegye's doctrine on *seong* and *i* has less to do with the dichotomy of mind and body than with his linguistic insight in literary interpretation. According to the above passage, Yi Byeok classified the arguments of Toegye and Yulgok into the contextual analysis of individual cases versus public discourse. For him, "public discourse" meant universal discourse for which only the formal meaning of a sentence was pursued, without taking into account the speaker's intention or the context of dialogue. Meanwhile, contextual analysis is based on examples referred to as a prag-

6. This refers to Yulgok's premise that while *gi* is unfolding and *i* supervenes upon it.

7. "李德操曰：若就理字氣字之原義而公論之，則此說固近之。若就性理家所言之例而剖論之，則理只是道心，氣只是人心。心之自性靈而發者爲理發，心之自形軀而發者爲氣發。由是言之，退溪之說甚精微" (*Jungyong ganguibo*).

matic method of understanding the meaning in context, with due consideration of the speaker's intention and communicational circumstances. Through his association with Yi Byeok, Dasan, who had dwelled on metaphysical universal discourse on *i* and *gi* as a young student, came to broaden his view of the pragmatic understanding of the intention and context of speech concerning Toegye and Yulgok's doctrines on *seongni*.

At the age of 35 (1795), Dasan attended a study meeting at Bonggoksa temple in Onyang, Chungcheong-do province. Convened for the publication of Yi Ik's (1681-1763) posthumous book, it lasted for approximately ten days with thirteen scholars participating. The arguments Dasan presented at the meeting indicated a substantial modification of his earlier negative view of Toegye's doctrine on *seongni*. At the study meeting, the main point of his arguments was that Toegye's and Yulgok's doctrines on *seongni* held different legitimacies in accordance with discursive contexts. He later discussed his arguments from the meeting in a report entitled "Seoam ganghakgi" (Report of the Meeting at Seoam to Discuss Philosophy).⁸

Specialized Discussion versus General Discussion

Dasan went into exile at his age of 40 (1801) for his implication in the Catholic Persecution of 1801, also known as the Persecution of 1801 (Sinyu Bakhae). During his exile in Janggi, he refined the content of "Seoam ganghakgi" and produced an article titled "Ibal gibal byeon" (A Thesis on the Manifestation of *I* and *Gi*). In the writing, he defined the difference between Toegye and Yulgok as the former providing a specialized discussion, and the latter, a general discussion:

What the two scholars refer to by *i* and *gi* are actually identical in letter but different in meaning, that is, specific versus general. Toegye discusses his own idea of *i* and *gi* and Yulgok does the same; it is not that

8. On this, see Kim (2005).

Yulgok picks Toegye's *i-gi* theory and gets tough with it.⁹

Toegye divided human emotions into the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings and traced their origins back to *i*, representing moral disposition, and *gi*, representing appetitive disposition, offering a specified explanation focusing on humans specifically. In contrast, Dasan defined Yulgok's *seongni* theory as a general explanation. He construed that Yulgok gave a general or universal explanation for existence in general, including humans.

Toegye's primary interest was in the question of how moral disposition can dominate appetitive disposition, with the two in a conflicting relationship, and activate pure moral feelings.¹⁰ While Toegye consistently took a moral psychological stance in his argument on the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings with Gobong Ki Dae-seung, Yulgok's standpoint was thoroughly ontological in his critique of Toegye.¹¹ While Yulgok was interested in explicating all events in the world of existence within the ontological scheme that *gi* is unfolding while *i* supervenes upon it, Toegye focused on expounding how moral dispositions (i.e. *i*), controlled the appetitive dispositions (i.e. *gi*), resulting in pure moral feelings being manifested in a moral psychological context. Here, it becomes clear that Toegye's approach to *seongni* was specific to human beings while Yulgok's approach was focused on beings-in-general.

9. “余嘗取二子之書而讀之，密求其見解之所由分，乃二子之曰理曰氣，其字雖同，而其所指有專有總：即退溪自論一理氣，栗谷自論一理氣，非栗谷取退溪之理氣而汨亂之爾” (“Ibal gibal byeon il” [A Thesis on the Manifestation of *I* and *Gi*, Part 1], in *Simunjip*, vol. 12).

10. Whether Dasan had no ontological interest is another question. By asking “Without *gi*, how can *i* be manifested by itself?” he denied the possibility of an independent manifestation of *i*. Further, he thought that *seong* 性 could not be manifest by itself and could only be activated through *sim* 心. So, in an ontological context, he steadfastly adhered to the principle of dependency with regard to *i-gi*.

11. Whether Dasan had no interest in value theory is another question. His theory of cultivation by correcting human disposition was derived from the ontological conception that while *gi* is manifest and *i* rides upon it.

Ambiguity of the Concepts *I* and *Gi*

After characterizing Toegye and Yulgok's approaches as human beings and beings-in-general, respectively, Dasan noted how the semantic layers of the two letters *i* and *gi* were changed in the contexts of specialized and general discussion:

Toegye utterly proceeds to human mind and opens it up widely. For him, *i* is original nature, one's moral mind, and public principle as ordained by Heaven while *gi* is temperamental nature, one's earthly mind, and private human desires. The public/private distinction exists in the activation of the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings. The Four Beginnings represent the manifestation of *i* and the Seven Feelings, that of *gi*.¹²

In this passage, Dasan points out that Toegye's approach took aim at human mind rather than existence in general, arguing that Toegye "utterly proceeded to human mind" and attempted to explain its two contrasting dispositions. Although Dasan did not consider the different semiotic frames that Toegye and Yulgok employed respectively, he keenly noticed that Toegye's argument implicitly presupposed a structure of axiological dualism. According to Dasan, Toegye's conception of *i* was designated as original nature, one's moral mind, and public principle as ordained by Heaven, which can be classified as pure moral values while his conception of *gi* was designated as appetitive disposition, one's earthly mind, and private human desires, which could be classified as either good or evil. The contrasting axiological relationship between *i* and *gi* becomes clear when these two signs are arranged horizontally. This lets us easily see that Toegye's conceptual scheme was based on a horizontal frame. Dasan's understanding of Toegye's *i-gi* concepts can be schematized in the following way:

12. "蓋退溪專就人心上八字打開. 其云理者是本然之性, 是道心, 是天理之公; 其云氣者是氣質之性, 是人心, 是人欲之私. 故謂四端七情之發, 有公私之分, 而四爲理發, 七爲氣發也" ("Ibal gibal byeon il," in *Simunjip*, vol. 12).

Table 1. Dasan's Understanding of Toegy's Horizontal Arrangement of I and Gi

I 理	Gi 氣
Original nature (i.e. moral disposition)	Temperamental nature
Moral mind	Earthly mind
Public nature of principles ordained by Heaven	Privateness of human desire originating from the body

Dasan, on the other hand, maintained that Yulgok's *seongni* theory focused on an ontological explanation for "existence in general," including human mind:

Yulgok collates everything from *taegeuk* 太極 (Great Ultimate) to *i* and *gi* and offers a general explanation. For instance, he argues that all existences in the world have *i* even before it is activated, but by the time it is activated, *gi* always precedes it. In discussing the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings, he treats them only as examples of universal cases and, therefore, in his understanding, the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings are what *gi* is in activation. In his conception, *i* is the metaphysical principle of all things and event while *gi* is the constitutive matter of all physical things and events. It is not that he specifically refers to the mind, nature, and feelings of humans only.¹³

In this paragraph, Dasan points out that Yulgok's approach was directed towards the ontological explication for existence in general. In the structure of "existence in general," *i* represents metaphysical "principle" and *gi* represents "constitutive matter." In Dasan's view, Yulgok believed that all existences, including humans, are comprised of two elements, metaphysical principle and constitutive matter. In developing his theory of existence in general, he took up the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings as

13. "栗谷總執太極以來理氣而公論之，謂凡天下之物，未發之前，雖先有理，方其發也，氣必先之。雖四端七情，亦唯以公例例之，故曰四七皆氣發也。其云理者是形而上，是物之本則。其云氣者，是形而下，是物之形質。非故切切以心性情言之也" ("Ibal gibal byeon il," in *Simunjip*, vol. 12).

mere examples and had no intention to expound on human mind, nature, and feelings in particular.

Although Dasan was not aware of the semiotic structure of horizontal and vertical frames,¹⁴ he clearly understood that Yulgok's *i-gi* theory was based on an ontological scheme, with the core concepts comprised of principle (*i*) and matter (*gi*). Unfortunately, however, Dasan had no knowledge of the supervenience theory, which espoused that metaphysical principle (i.e., *i*) supervenes upon, rides on, or boards matter (i.e., *gi*). In "Ibal gibal byeon" (A Thesis on the Manifestation of *I* and *Gi*), Dasan presented the final version of his conception of *seongni*, and no verb implying supervenience like "board (*u* 寓), ride (*seung* 乘), or supervene (*seungjae* 乘載)" is found. Nor is a linguistic analysis of the ambiguity of the word *bal* 發, which could be interpreted either as "manifestation" or "movement" in different discursive contexts, found.

Below is a sympathetic reinterpretation of Dasan's understanding of Yulgok's *i-gi* theory from a perspective of supervenience theory:

<i>i</i> 理 (metaphysical principle)
<i>gi</i> 氣 (constitutive matter)

Figure 1. Dasan's Understanding of Yulgok's Vertical Arrangement of *I* and *Gi*

Dasan was correct in his understanding Toegye's *i* and *gi* as original nature (*bonyeon ji seong* 本然之性) and temperamental nature (*gijil ji seong* 氣質之性), respectively; and Yulgok's *i* and *gi* as metaphysical principle and constitutive matter, respectively.¹⁵ The ambiguity of *i-gi* concepts, as Dasan noted, is understood more clearly within the context of communication theory. According to Dasan, the monosyllabic word *i* means "original nature" for

14. On horizontal and vertical frames, see Lee (2012a, 2012b).

15. While Yi Byeok attempted to understand Toegye's argument on the manifestation of *i* and *gi* based on mind-body dualism, Dasan contrasted them as original nature versus appetitive disposition. This shows that in contrast to Yi Byeok's religious and theological stance, Dasan tried to comprehend Toegye's intention objectively and precisely.

Toegye and “metaphysical principle” for Yulgok; and another monosyllabic word *gi* represented “temperamental nature” for Toegye and “constitutive matter” for Yulgok. Although Dasan did not mention it, Toegye and Yulgok used the monosyllabic word *bal* 發 differently as meaning “manifestation” (*balhyeon* 發顯) versus “motion” (*baldong* 發動), respectively. If Neo-Confucians communicated with each other without clarifying the meanings of monosyllabic words, such as *i*, *gi*, and *bal*, without differentiating their multiple semantic layers, how likely would it have been for them to have successfully communicated with one another?

This problem can be formulated as the following question regarding probability: If the word X means x_1 and x_2 , the word Y means y_1 and y_2 , and the word Z means z_1 and z_2 . If person A and person B communicate with each other using the three words X, Y, and Z without distinguishing the multiple semantic layers implicated in each word, what is the probability that they will be able to communicate successfully? If ten people communicate using the same three words, what is the probability that they will be able to communicate successfully?

The answer to the question is as follows: If A and B communicate using the three words X, Y, and Z without distinguishing the multiple semantic layers implicated in them, the probability of their having a successful communication is a mere $1/8$ or 12.5 percent. In other words, 87.5 percent of what they say is bound to be flawed by communication errors, caused by confusion and misunderstanding. The problem gets worse if ten Neo-Confucians engage in a discussion using the three words X, Y, and Z. In this case, the probability of a successful communication is $1/8^9$, or $1/134,217,728$. That is, nearly zero.

These simple equations demonstrate quite clearly why the Seongni debate between Joseon Confucian scholars always ended up only producing difficulties in communication. As shown here, if discussions take place without consideration of multiple meanings of such monosyllabic letters as *i* 理, *gi* 氣, *sim* 心, *seong* 性, *jeong* 情, and *bal* 發, they are bound to end in communication failures. Therefore, monosyllabic letters must be translated in a way that does not cause communication problems. Although he did not prove this using the probability calculation, Dasan vaguely noted

the problem of ambiguity of monosyllabic letters used in the Seongni debate.

Text and Context

As we have seen above, Toegye's argument is that of specific explanation and Yulgok's is that of general explanation. In this vein, the question of which argument is correct becomes irrelevant. In fact, this question might be inappropriate, given there are specialized theories that are applicable only to the human realm and general theories that concern all existences, including human beings. The former include ethics, aesthetics, value theory, moral psychology, and so on while the latter include biology, chemistry, physics, ontology of being in general, and so on. Both the specialized explanation and the general explanation acquire legitimacy depending on the varying discursive context; therefore, one cannot be right or wrong. Below Dasan points out that Toegye's specialized explanation and Yulgok's general explanation are legitimate in different contexts:

Toegye's argument is relatively dense and detailed while Yulgok's is relatively loose and brief. They are different in their main intentions and what they refer to in their arguments, but we cannot say that one of them is wrong. Neither is wrong but people say one is wrong and the other is right. This is the cause of all the controversy and this is what makes it difficult to establish a reasonable understanding.¹⁶

Toegye's argument is effective in the context of moral psychology, which identifies two types of dispositions in human mind, while Yulgok's argument is effective in the context of explaining the being in general, including humans. Recognizing this, Dasan concludes that we cannot say one is correct and the other is wrong. In the above passage, Dasan states that Toegye and Yulgok are "different in their main intentions and what they

16. "退溪之言較密較細, 栗谷之言較闊較簡. 然其所主意而指謂之者各異, 卽二子何嘗有一非耶? 未嘗有一非, 而強欲非其一以獨是, 所以紛紛而莫之有定也" ("Ibal gibal byeon il," in *Simunjip*, vol. 12).

refer to in their arguments.” Linguistically speaking, what Dasan notes as “main intentions” and “what they refer to” corresponds to the speaker’s intention and referent, respectively. In assessing the arguments of Toegye and Yulgok, Dasan does not focus on the lexical meaning of words; rather, he tries to read the meaning referred to in the context of speech act, even including the speaker’s intention from multiple dimensions. In terms of linguistics, this assessment method surpasses simple semantics and encompasses pragmatics. A semantic approach to a sentence focuses on a formal understanding of its literal meaning, whereas a pragmatic approach angles it from the contextual meaning of a speech act. The latter takes into account various factors in a comprehensive manner, including the speaker’s intention, the meaning that the speaker wants to deliver to the audience, the perlocutionary effects generated by the speech, and the contextual meaning referred to in the discourse arena by vocabularies used in a sentence.

Previous Neo-Confucians, in reading Toegye and Yulgok’s arguments, stopped at interpreting the literal meanings of the texts and overlooked the speaker’s intention and the speech context, while Dasan tried to read them in a pragmatic fashion with due consideration of both. Because the same words may mean different things in different speech contexts, if one reads a text with only its literal meaning in mind and disregards the speaker’s intention and speech context, one cannot possibly figure out the true meaning of the speech. Dasan’s pragmatic understanding of the Seongni debate between Toegye and Yulgok can be presented in an argumentation format as the following:

1. Major proposition: The meaning of a word changes depending on the respective contexts of the speech.
2. Minor proposition: The speech contexts of Toegye and Yulgok are different.
3. Conclusion: The meanings which are referred to by the words used by Toegye and Yulgok (*i* and *gi*) are different.

Did the Seongni Debate Accord with the Original Goal of Neo-Confucianism?

Dasan's metacritique on the Seongni debate did not conclude by saying both Toegye and Yulgok were right. In "Ibal gibal byeon i" (A Thesis on the Manifestation of *I* and *Gi*, Part 2), Dasan cast a metaphilosophical look at the on going and controversial Seongni debate in Joseon in view of the true goal and social function of Neo-Confucianism. What was the essential purpose of the intellectual genre named Neo-Confucianism? What were the social functions and desired effects for which Neo-Confucianism was aimed? Did the Seongni debate, rampant in Joseon, align with the essential purpose of Neo-Confucianism? To any extent were the functions and anticipated effects attained?

A man of virtue keeps and nurtures his original nature when consciousness is not activated (*jeong* 靜). When consciousness is activated, he reflects and introspects on it. If a thought occurs to him, he immediately reflects on it with the utmost care and checks it closely and earnestly, asking himself, "Is this thought from the public consciousness based on heavenly principle or from a private human desire?" and "Is this state of mind the moral mind or a human desire?" If the state of mind is from the public consciousness based on heavenly principle, he should encourage, nourish, and develop it. If it is from a private human desire, he should block, suppress, and overcome it. That is the very reason why the wise man¹⁷ defends his notion of the manifestation of *i* and *gi* with such devotion until his mouth dries up and his tongue wears out.¹⁸

Here Dasan discusses the fundamental reason and objective of Toegye's investigation of the state of mind along two dimensions, the manifesta-

17. Here, "the wise man" refers to Toegye.

18. "君子之靜存而動察也，凡有一念之發，即已惕然猛省曰：「是念發於天理之公乎，發於人欲之私乎？是道心乎，是人心乎？」密切究推，是果天理之公則培之養之，擴而充之，而或出於人欲之私則遏之折之，克而復之。君子之焦唇敝舌而慥慥乎「理發」「氣發」之辯者，正爲是也" ("Ibal gibal byeon i," in *Simunjip*, vol. 12).

tion of *i* and that of *gi*. The essential reason for this two-pronged investigation was self-cultivation (*jonyang* 存養) and introspection (*seongchal* 省察). “Cultivation” means to prepare *pre-factum* by keeping one’s original nature in tranquility before the initiation of intentional activities of consciousness, so that the moral mind develops purely and perfectly. In contrast, “reflection” means to check and introspect on the content of one’s consciousness carefully *post-factum* after the start of intentional activities of consciousness. Introspection on the state of mind and the origin of motivation was regarded as a basic quality necessary for all incumbent public officers and those who aspired for public office.¹⁹

As Dasan claims, the true Neo-Confucian goal is to make aristocrats and intellectuals monitor their own state of mind and cultivate a desirable character and personality. If the self-monitoring and self-reflection ceased, public officers would then be trapped in personal selfishness, which would dismantle the public rationality of the state. Recently, it has been observed in the media that many government officers are brought to hearings and disgraced after retirement, or put into jail for amassing huge illegal wealth. This is due to the lack of self-monitoring and self-reflection. A prospective public officer must develop the right character and personality suitable for public office, and further, ceaselessly practice self-monitoring earnestly through introspection.²⁰ This is the true goal and function of Neo-Confucianism.

It was Dasan’s view that the Seongni debate of the time had strayed from the true goals of Neo-Confucianism. The reason “why the wise man [Toegye] defends his notion of the manifestation of *i* and *gi* with such devotion until his mouth dries up and his tongue wears out” was to encourage aristocrats and intellectuals to practice cultivation in tranquili-

19. Neo-Confucianism was meant to be a framework of cultivation of the mind for aristocrats and intellectuals who would later be responsible for public administration in central and local governments through the screening of public service examinations. Dasan’s *Mongmin simseo* (Admonitions on Governing the People) is the equivalent to an introductory ethics textbook for public officers, which details on the code of attitudes and behavior of government officials.

20. See Lee (1998).

ty and introspection in activation. But in reality, by disregarding proper Confucian goals, they only bickered in vain over unsubstantial controversies. This must have made Dasan deplore what he witnessed. His critique that the Seongni debate had strayed from the true Neo-Confucian goal is quite metaphilosophical. Instead of taking side with either of the two opposing schools involved in the Seongni debate, he kept his distance from them and cast an objective look at those in conflict from a higher stance of staying mindful of the true goal and function of Neo-Confucianism. This corresponds to that of an “ideal observer” in metaethics. The ideal observer theory was developed in response to the question, “How can one know whether an act is ethically valid?”²¹ According to the ideal observer theory, an action is right or wrong if and only if it is determined to be right or wrong by the ideal observer. The qualifications of an ideal observer include disinterestedness, impartiality, and being fully-informed of objective facts.

Dasan’s view of the two conflicting schools meets the conditions of an ideal observer. He has all of the traits of an ideal observer, such as disinterestedness, impartiality, and sufficient knowledge of objective facts. Despite his association with the Namin faction, he holds an objective, unbiased view of Yulgok’s argument on *seongni*, shows no personal interest of supporting a certain faction for his own benefit, and is fully aware of the intentions of speech in the statements of Toegye and Yulgok, the context of dialogue, and the ambiguity of the *i-gi* concepts. His stance on the Seongni debate approximates that of an ideal observer, and is thus metaphilosophical.

From Theory to Practice, from Inwardness to Outwardness

Considering the reality that scholars lost sight of their proper Neo-Confu-

21. The ideal observer theory was raised by David Hume, re-enhanced by Roderick Firth and Gilbert Harman, and extensively discussed by Richard Brandt in his writings. See Firth (1952), Harman (1977, ch. 4), and Brandt (1959, chs. 7-11; 1979, ch. 12).

cian responsibilities and indulged in a hollow war of words, Dasan changed the direction of his intellectual exploration to studying theory for praxis instead of studying theory for theory's sake. He vehemently criticized the academic milieu of the time, which was gripped by the never-ending metaphysical disputes on *i-gi*, saying, "What is the use of defending a position, if it is only to know the origin of emotional manifestation?"²² Dasan was jaded by the vain academic preoccupation with metaphysical questions, which resulted in the disregarding of practice, as well as with scholars' abstract attitudes of turning a cold shoulder on questions of function and utility only to indulge in metaphysical explorations.

What mattered to Dasan was not "what is the origin of emotional manifestation?" but "how to conduct oneself?" Previous Neo-Confucians wrestled with each other over the metaphysical, idealistic question, "what is the origin of the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings?" but Dasan turned to the question, "what constitutes a virtuous action in reality?" Neo-Confucians claimed that the original nature of humans is comprised of traits of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, but Dasan pointed out that the concept of original nature was derived from a Buddhist scripture, *Suramgama sutra* (Scripture of the Crown of Buddha's Head), and was not of Confucian origin.²³ According to him, the qualifications of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom could be assigned only after a person committed a benevolent, righteous action:

The virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are established after the conduct of action and actual work. Therefore, one may be qualified as benevolent only after one commits a benevolent act. Before one commits a benevolent act, benevolence cannot be established. One can call oneself benevolent after making oneself morally good. Before one makes oneself morally perfect and good, the virtue of benevolence cannot be given. After a guest and a master bow to each other on bended knees and bow low, the virtue of propriety becomes

22. "苟知其所由發而已，則辨之何爲哉!" ("Ibal gibal byeon i," in *Simunjip*, vol. 12).

23. "佛氏謂：如來藏性，清淨本然。楞嚴經謂：本然之性，純善無惡，無纖毫塵滓，澄澈光明" (*Simgyeong milheom* [Private Examination of the *Classic of the Mind-and-Heart*]).

valid. After things are distinguished clearly, the virtue of wisdom is established. How can the four twinkling beads—benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom—be kept hidden in one’s mind, like peach or apricot seeds?²⁴

According to Dasan, the qualifications of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom may be assigned after the conduct of appropriate action and actual work. Dasan’s concept of action and actual work is quite similar to Aristotle’s notion of *praxis*. Virtue is not a given substance, like a shiny bead that one is endowed with at birth, but is acquired through practice exerted by humans. Dasan’s position on this perfectly matches the notion of cultivation of character in *Mengzi* (Book of Mencius) and the idea of refining virtuous nature in *Daxue* (The Great Learning). It also exhibits commonalities with the notion of *hexis*, another ethical concept of Aristotle’s:

The appellations of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are, in essence, generated from human action and actual work; it cannot be seen as an evident principle kept in human mind. Heaven only gives us a lucid mind and we put it into use and practice benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. If someone believes that Heaven endows humans with the four beads, he/she is dead wrong.²⁵

Here Dasan refutes the generalized Neo-Confucian belief that “Heaven endows humans with the four virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom.” According to Dasan, Heaven only gives humans a lucid mind and the capacity to practice benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Whether they put it into practice or not depends on what they decide to do. “What they decide to do” means the will of

24. “仁義禮智之名，成於行事之後。故愛人而後謂之仁。愛人之先，仁之名未立也。善我而後謂之義。善我之先，義之名未立也。賓主拜揖而後禮之名立焉，事物辨明而後智之名立焉。豈有仁義禮智四顆，磊磊落落，如桃仁杏仁，伏於人心之中者乎？” (“Gongsun Chou je i” [Gongsun Chou, Part 2], in *Maeng-ja youi*).

25. “仁義禮智之名，本起於吾人行事，並非在心之玄理。人之受天，只此靈明，可仁可義可禮可智則有之矣。若云上天以仁義禮智四顆，賦之於人性之中，則非其實矣” (*Jungyong ganguibo*).

choice, that is, the power to weigh the circumstances and choose goodness by themselves.

While previous Neo-Confucians thought that “the Four Beginnings were the metaphysical realities of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom manifesting themselves in human consciousness,” Dasan says that “the qualifications of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are awarded through the subject’s volitional practice.” While previous Neo-Confucians took an absolutist stance, Dasan’s position is closer to that of a constructivist. In absolutist point of view, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are regarded as metaphysical objective substances endowed by Heaven. Meanwhile, in constructivist point of view, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are nothing but appellations given to benevolent, righteous, proper, and wise actions. They are not metaphysical realities but merely names for classifying virtuous behaviors. This signifies a transition from metaphysical absolutism to constructivism, from metaphysico-theoretical immersion to practice-oriented virtue ethics, and from formalistic semantics to pragmatism. These shifts distinguish Dasan from other Neo-Confucians of his day. In a nutshell, the transition may be characterized as a pragmatic turn from Neo-Confucian fundamentalism.

In conclusion, Dasan may be regarded as Joseon’s first and most prominent metaphilosopher for his notable achievements in defining the nature and methodology of the Seongni debate, which had been ongoing for two centuries, from a linguistic analysis perspective, and for his metaphilosophical reillumination of the true goals and purposes of Confucianism.

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